

Eternal Recurrence: String Theory

An Exhibition of Paintings

by

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A thesis exhibition
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

University of Waterloo Art Gallery, April 21 – April 29, 2007

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2007

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

The work in this exhibition is the result of philosophical contemplation and the concepts that followed from these moments. The moment that we find ourselves conscious, the moment in which we inhale or exhale is the focus of this work. Through the materiality and physicality of paint, I explore this moment. Paint thus acts as a metaphor for my body, having set parameters that dictate its cause and effect. The very nature of painting; its essence, is the moment of state change from a fluid material to a solid state. I use the method of process and tools that I invent to help express these concerns of eternal recurrence. I make paintings that make space visible and invisible.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of everyone who had anything to do with the completion of this thesis exhibition as well as those who contributed to my understanding of the world we all share.

I would like to acknowledge Win Shantz and the UW Faculty and Staff for their generous support.

I would like to thank my advisors Cora Cluett and Doug Kirton for all their time, effort and professional advice.

I would like to thank my parents, for all their time, energy and love.

I would like to thank the Stefancic family for all that they are, a wonderful family.

I would like to thank Carmen Galea for her support and effort.

To Robert Linsley thanks for exercising my mind.

To Jean and Lesley, your help was greatly appreciated.

To Colin McGuire thanks for the myriad of discussions we have.

To Dave McNeil and Mike Stefancic thanks for always being there.

To Niall Donaghy thanks for your expertise.

To Jeff Burns your professional attitude still resonates with me.

To Kimberly Palmer thanks for your time and effort in editing

*When I am alive, I should utilize my energy, my existence, for good,
for the benefit of others. That's important. Then I'm finished.
Whether people say good things or bad things doesn't matter....When
I reach Nirvanna, then I will tell everything.¹ The Dalai Lama*

¹ Bunson, Matthew. *The Wisdom Teachings of the Dalai Lama*. Plume Books: New York. 1997. Pg 102

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ETERNAL RECURRENCE: STRING THEORY

'This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live it again and again, times without number; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and all the unspeakably small and great in your life must return to you.'²

Friedrich Nietzsche

My Approach

My painting practice is divided into five main parts: Inspiration, Material, Philosophy, Parameters, and the Apparatus, all of which are important to contextualizing my work within contemporary art. The inspiration for my work originates with the materiality and physicality of the medium of paint. Acrylic paint has boundaries that are inherent within its physical makeup. I intend to highlight the moment of state change in the material of acrylic paint from its original state of a fluid to its state change into a solid. The manner in which I apply paint is also of great interest to me because it symbolizes the intrinsic qualities in the makeup of the material, tool and process, which I use. The properties of nature include the play of forces that interact with my processes that I used to create this body of work; forces such as wind, gravity, centrifugal force, and time. Philosophically, my thesis work is greatly influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Buddhism.

² Hollingdale, R.J. *Thus spoke Zarathustra : a book for everyone and no one / Nietzsche*. Penguin Books: Baltimore. 1969. Pg 19-20

Inspiration

My inspiration lies in the materiality of paint. My interest is primarily attributed to marks made by the human hand that produce any work of art, especially that of painting. The immediacy of the material and the physicality of painting drive my curiosity deeper into the medium. This is not to say that I do not appreciate an artist's ability to render a representation of the visible world, rather I am attracted principally to the physicality of the material. I am especially attracted to the tracing of the artist's hand, which brings immediacy to the work. It is by this very act of pushing paint around a surface that an artist has the ability to render the object of their desire. Whether I look at *Crows in a Wheatfield*, by Vincent Van Gogh or *Marine* by Jean-Paul Riopelle or *Lavender Mist* by Jackson Pollock, it is a fact that these painters manipulate paint on a canvas with a tool of their choice, whether it is a paintbrush, a palette knife or a paint stick. I know that the person who has left their mark on the canvas once lived and breathed as I do now. It is this realization and the immediacy it brings to the painting that intrigues and inspires me profoundly.

The focus of my earlier work was based on experimentation with different applications of paint and material onto a surface. I use many different approaches to handling acrylic paint, from freezing it, to burning it, to repelling

it with oil-based products. This investigation into the materiality of acrylic paint left my work void of content aside from the image that was created. I didn't feel that I could solely ground my work in experimentation with materials. From this point on, I began to search for a more meditative approach to painting. The poetics of creating the work became the focus, while the application of paint became more reflective. This consisted of layering the same brush stroke over and over again on the very same spot on the canvas, creating an image over time. Through my research, I found that my philosophical approach to painting had historical precedence in Buddhism, especially the Zen Buddhist tradition of circular calligraphy paintings named *Enso*. Enso artists would repeatedly and daily create a one brushstroke circle painting, with the aim of creating a perfect circle. I, on the other hand, was applying daily the same brushstroke over and over again on the same line, to create an image over time that became an object. The brushstrokes became a reflection of my mind's inner state, and were a response to a traumatic brain injury I incurred. Karen Johnston a neurosurgeon at McGill University diagnosed me with severe post-concussion syndrome. This condition left me in a state of confusion and pain and lead to a complete life style change. As a result I found that I was unable to visualize anything. Take for instance a coke can; most people know what it looks like and can picture it with their eyes closed. As a result of the injury I lost this abstractive ability for a couple of

years. In many ways, I feel that my experience has influenced the current body of work and is represented through a working schema to produce paintings that make space visible and invisible.

While injured and recovering at home I began to read Gerhard Richter's diary writings, *The Daily Practice of Painting*. Richter wanted to paint daily but did not want to create meaning or manipulate the image; rather, he chose to paint from photographs copying the image exactly. The process of painting was more important for him than the manipulation of the image.³ Unable to visualize ideas as I once had I took Richter's idea of painting for paintings sake. I would repeat the same brushstroke in a circle on the canvass with thick paint, again and again for months until the painting could not support itself any longer. I desired to paint even though I found any sustained action painful and uncomfortable. This meditative and rudimentary approach to my practice of painting helped contribute to my curiosity of what the essence of painting might be. As a result of my injury I lost many neural connections and began to see and experience the world in a profoundly different way. All meaning toward people, places and things became distorted. For example, when I saw my mother I remembered vaguely that I loved her, but could not remember how it felt to love, or be loved. The injury and its effects frightened me but making art was still my goal. I still had the ability to

³ Brit, David. *Gerhard Richter, The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962-1993*. MIT Press: Cambridge. 1995, pg. 161-173

think and I tried to think my way through this tangled mess. The resulting paintings during this time were made from process yet still created an image over time. My approach differs slightly from the process art of the 60's and 70's as these artists used process technique to purge the image from the object. Process layer painting consists of focusing the attention on the essence of a painting and the physicality of the layers. In most traditional paintings the process of painting or making an image is hidden, only to leave the illusionary image. Early process painting abandoned both illusionary image making and the subjectivity of the artist.

My investigation of 'process' painting is directly related to Jackson Pollock as he is described as an "action painter" and as an artist who transformed his canvas into an arena where the battle between human and material unfolds. The idea of process was the most defining feature of Pollock's 'drip paintings'. Pollock dripped and splattered his paint all over his canvas, achieving a crystallographic balance. The finished paintings were the result of decision-making and chance. The final product however, was always subject to artistic will. "I can control the flow of the paint," Pollock contended. "There is no accident."⁴ In my own work I look forward to accidents, as they can reveal secrets and ideas that were not present to me before. Pollock

⁴ <http://www.nga.gov/feature/pollock/process2.shtm>

intended his images. He controlled his images and willed them to his preference, using the method of process as a parameter in which to create his works. A contrast to Pollock is Eric Cameron who used process in painting to make the artist's personal touch disappear. Cameron painted objects such as a piece of lettuce repeatedly until the original image disappeared and its structure became an entirely different object.⁵ Cameron states that, “If there is an interface between human activity and the final context of nature, then what I am doing is sacrificing my own control in the hope of engaging with the largest possible forces that operate through me.”⁶ In my paintings I am in control and make decisions; however, I also employ outside forces such as gravity to help create a more organic composition.

The Material

Acrylic paint is a synthetic resin containing pigment. It cures by the evaporation of water that is in the resin, allowing polymerization to occur. Acrylic paint is a thermoplastic resin, meaning that it melts to a liquid when heated and is brittle when it freezes. I use discarded commercial house paint. The paints I buy are mis-tints and 100% acrylic. Thus, my colour choices are limited by the store’s selection of discarded colours. This conscious decision

⁵ Eyland, Cliff. *Newtons Prism; Layer Painting*. 2003, pg 2

⁶ Eyland, Cliff. *Newtons Prism; Layer Painting*. 2003, pg 3

to be both economical and environmental also functions to limit my aesthetic decisions concerning colour vis-à-vis availability. The surface is always in the square format, in order to avoid the suggestions of a landscape or portrait. The connotations of modernism and the square format such as the grid are not my concern but one of which I am aware. I chose the square because it has equal sides and a circle fits perfectly inside.

Philosophy

I am interested in what makes a painting a painting; in other words, I am curious about locating the rudimentary essence of painting and its meaning. I need to arrive at my own definition of painting and to not rely solely on past explorations in the medium. In essence, I am urged to augment these previous bodies of knowledge for my own edification. Early in this investigation I came to the conclusion that I could not define painting as a universal language. This was not the end to of investigation, but rather the beginning. I deduced that my definition of painting could not encompass the entire history of the medium; for my investigation and my understanding of paint I needed to produce my own terms and relations to it.

In contemplating my contributions to the discourse of painting, I became interested in Schopenhauer's ideas regarding the nature of the will and object. In Schopenhauer's work, *The World as Will and Representation*, he argues that the *will* is separate from object and that the will desires to be separate. This idea proposes that the body is an object while the inner mind or soul would be defined as the *will*. When I applied this notion to my painting practice I realized that the idea behind the created work of art was separate from the art object itself.⁷ The intent and impression of a work of art can have many different interpretations and a myriad of meanings, depending on who is viewing the work. This relative approach to the multiplicity of meaning led me to ponder what painting meant to me and how I could relate to it. Through this research I realized that in all paintings there must be a binder and a pigment, and through the manipulation of paint on a ground with the use of ideas and gestures it all comes to rest. In that moment of rest, in that exact moment when the fluid nature of paint begins to polymerize and begins to change state from a liquid to a solid, is for me the essence of painting. Upon this realization I came to the conclusion that all painting shared the rudimentary process of changing from a fluid (state) and into a solid (state).

In my paintings I employ this discovery of state change by the choice

⁷ Payne, E.F.J. *The world as will and representation / by Arthur Schopenhauer*. Dover Publications: New York, 1969

of paint I use, in that 100% acrylic house paint has a very quick drying time. In reading Nietzsche's idea of Eternal Recurrence, I found a strong correlation to my understanding of the essence of painting and the Eternal Recurrence. Nietzsche states in his argument that time is circular, and that we may be living this exact life over and over again. And if this were true then the daily expression of our actions and the moment in which we live would become very important, as we may live it again and again. Nietzsche states:

“What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: 'This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live it again and again, times without number; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and all the unspeakably small and great in your life must return to you, and everything in the same series and sequence..... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment in which you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never did I hear anything more divine!' If this thought gained power over you it would, as you are now, transform and perhaps crush you; the question in all and everything: 'do you want this again and again, times without number?' would lie as the heaviest burden upon all your actions.”⁸

It is this very philosophical question that I am using to ground my work in and postulate around. In my paintings, I use a circular gesture with a tool I invented to make reference to this idea of eternal recurrence. I make paintings that play on this idea of repetition by repeatedly using the processes I have established, leaving multiple lines behind, which overlap and intersect.

⁸ Hollingdale, R.J. *Thus spoke Zarathustra : a book for everyone and no one / Nietzsche*. Penguin Books: Baltimore. 1969. Pg 19-20

The Parameters

Within my current work I have initiated a set of rules that allow me to focus on devising creative solutions. At first the parameters were simple and consisted of circles on square canvas. I began to pour acrylic house paint directly from the paint cans to the canvas in the same spot every time, using a string from the ceiling to centre the location. Processes, time and repetition were integral to this work, but I also began to employ gravity, force and the fluidity of the material. This led me to develop a tool which consisted of a board nailed to a table with a small hole to pour paint into, which then funnels the paint onto an upside down bowl screwed in the board. The tool allowed the paint to pour from the can into the hole onto the upside down bowl, which then dispersed the paint onto the support underneath it in a circular drip. I repeated this technique as an experiment but ultimately it did not achieve the effect I was searching for. While inventive, this technique lacked the flexibility to allow the greater play and problem solving that I wanted in my work.

The Apparatus

To solve the problem of getting the paint onto the canvas in a circular motion I developed my *string theory* idea. This invention involves attaching a

591ml coke bottle onto a string that I hang in my studio. The apparatus allowed me to pour paint in it and swing the bottle around the support, repeatedly. This innovation provided me with thin, elegant lines that could be overlapped continually without muddying the image. These intersecting lines form multiple planes that make space visible. When I start a painting I have a set format for shape of the canvas (square), but I do not make any sketches, or have any research material in my studio. I work directly onto the canvas priming it with a particular colour to have a ground to work against. I place the square canvas on the floor working from above; this is necessary for the string theory tool to work as it hangs and rotates around my square ground. In the finished paintings you can see the first layers of paint as the resulting lines overlap and intersect forming spatial relationships with each other. I overlap multiple lines, and my choice in colour is always based on complimenting the previous colour I have applied. I repeat my process many times responding to the form and space being created within the composition. In some cases, I have had to paint over images that did not meet my aesthetic intentions. The texture and marks created through each subsequent layer contribute to surprising results.

I conceive of my process as having a direct relationship to ancient Zen calligraphers who used the circle as a vehicle to achieve self-awareness and enlightenment. Even though the process of the string theory device is

relatively simple, the action, gesture and outcome are complex. The motion of the string theory tool is dictated by my initial gesture, too fast or too slow will not produce a clean line, while the angle in which I swing the bottle also influences the outcome. The repeated event of the bottle technique leads to the creation of multiple lines that form complex images from one simple gesture. I believe that a quote by Murray Gel-Mann encapsulates this idea: “surface complexity arising out of deep simplicity.”⁹ Similarly, in *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, Sol LeWitt states, “Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable.”¹⁰ I feel that my work has been reduced to my primary concerns of materiality, physicality and application. From the reduction of my ideas, I am able to explore their nature in depth while opening up new avenues in my painting.

I set up schemata that provide an orderly set of procedures that also allow for chance and chaos. Deviations occur as a result of my gesture or from the wind flow in my studio. In Nietzsche’s, *Will to Power*, he interprets the cosmos as a never-ending ball of energy without beginning and without end, a

⁹ Lewin, Roger. *Complexity*. Macmillan Publishing Company: New York. 1992, pg 14

¹⁰ LeWitt, Sol. *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*. Artforum, New York: Vol.5, no.10, Summer 1967. Pg 79-83

play of forces creating and destroying, an eternal becoming that must return eternally.¹¹ Likewise my string theory tool returns eternally to the natural resting place centered above the canvas. When I spin the bottle it moves with centrifugal force, and eventually returns to its original position.

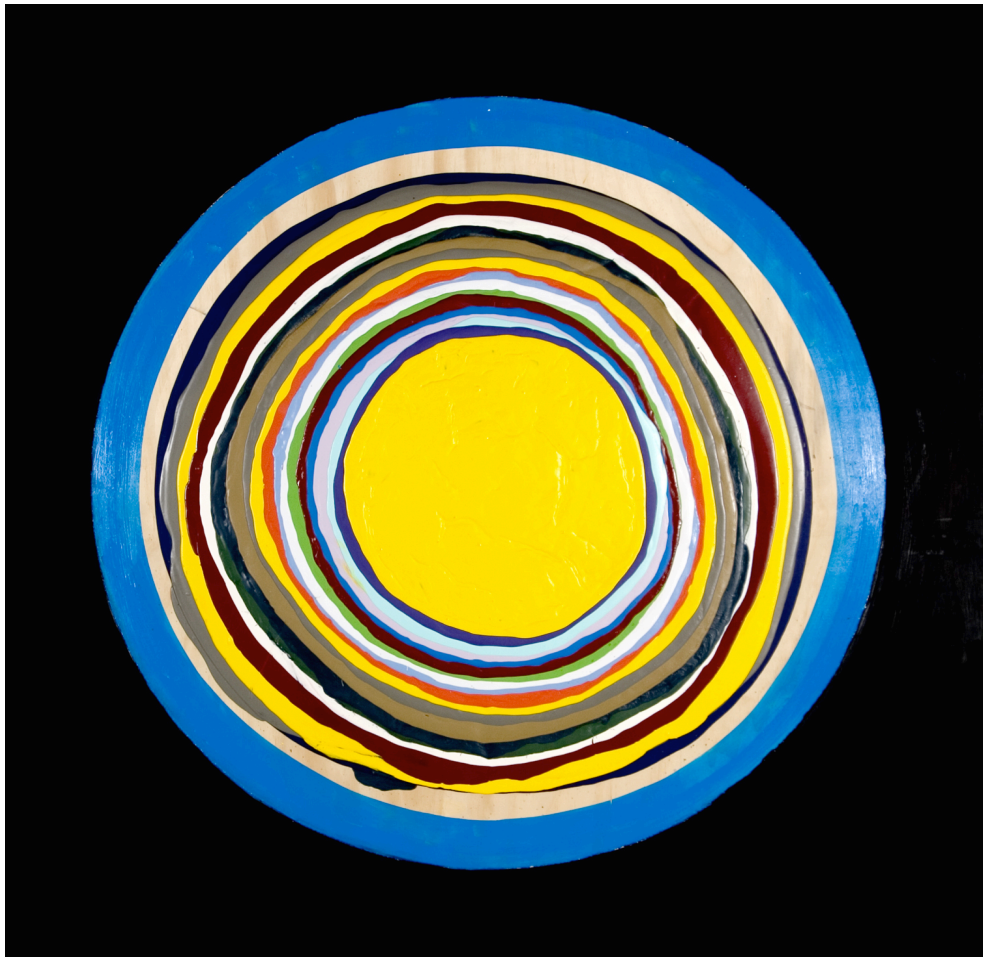
In the painting, *Eternal Return*, I have continued to adhere to my original set of rules of making circles within a square format however; I do not use my string theory tool for this piece. The painting, *Eternal Return*, makes the visible, invisible. I am not making space, but rather my painting is becoming space. I manipulate the viewer's perception by employing the phenomenon of afterimages combined with the physiology of peripheral vision to make the circle disappear. The painting is a neutral gray background with a turquoise ring and when the viewer stares at the centre of the painting, the turquoise circle disappears. A blink or movement of the eyes from the fixed position brings the turquoise ring back. A quote by Edvard Munch illuminates my concerns subtly in the following passage, "Art is the compulsion of man towards crystallization. Nature is the unique great realm upon which art feeds. Nature is not only what is visible to the eye – it also shows the inner images of the soul – the images on the backside of the eyes."¹²

¹¹ Morrison, Robert G. *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities*. Oxford University Press: New York. 1997. Pg. 132

¹² Chipp, Herschel B. *Theories of Modern Art*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1968. Pg 114

The concerns expressed in the body of work entitled, *Eternal Recurrence: String Theory* have used both physical and optical means to explore the complexity of our understanding of space. This investigation has subsequently led to the making of a painting *Eternal Return* in which the visible becomes invisible, a phenomenon that occurs repeatedly and without end: to recur eternally.

1.



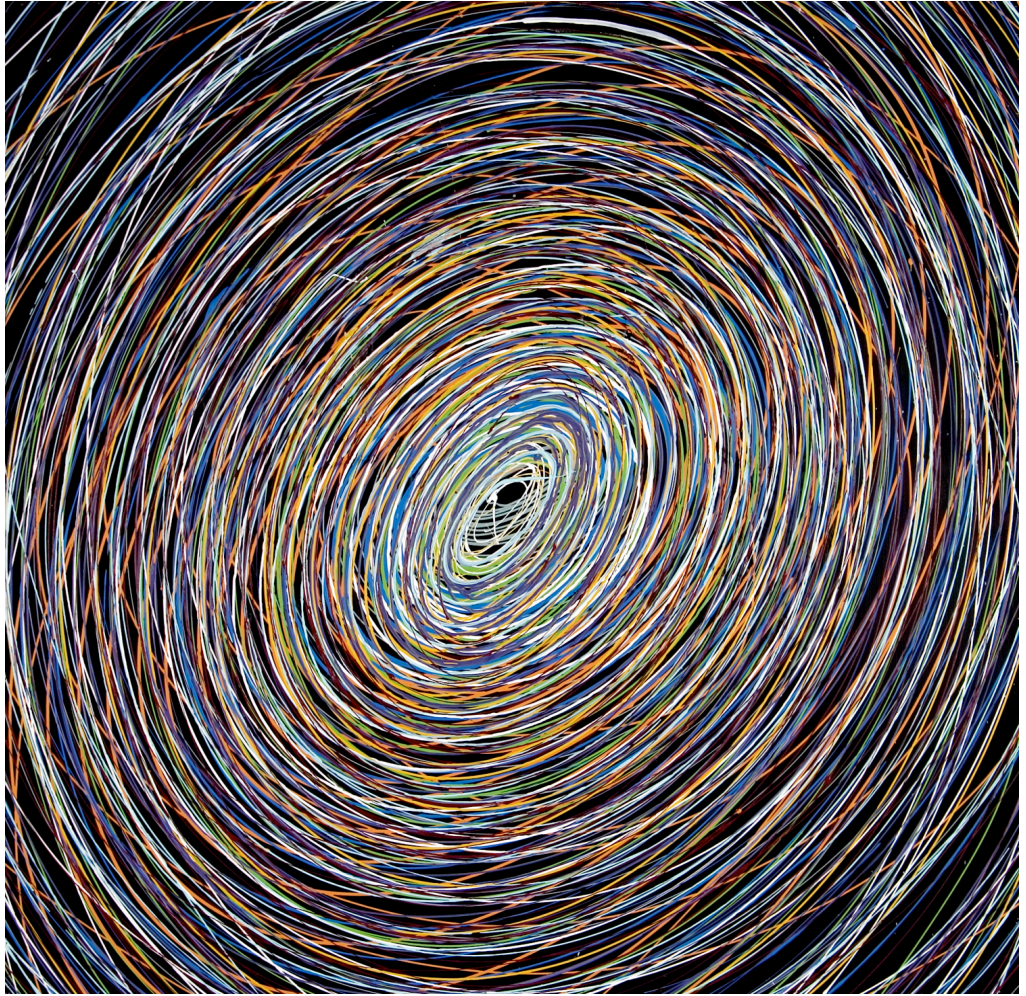
Wait. Acrylic on Birch: 120cm x 120cm, 2006

2.



String Theory i. Acrylic on Birch: 120cm x 120cm, 2006

3.



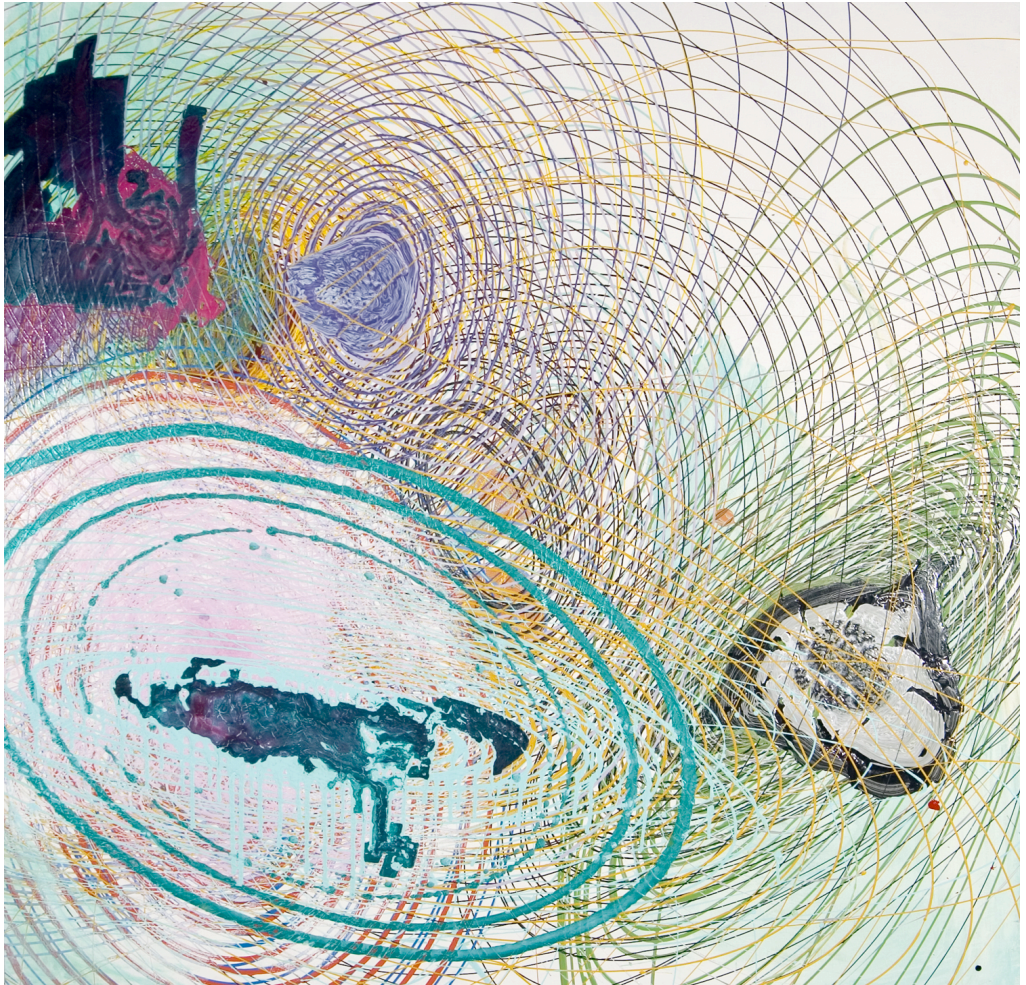
String Theory ii. Acrylic on Birch: 120cm x 120cm, 2006

4.



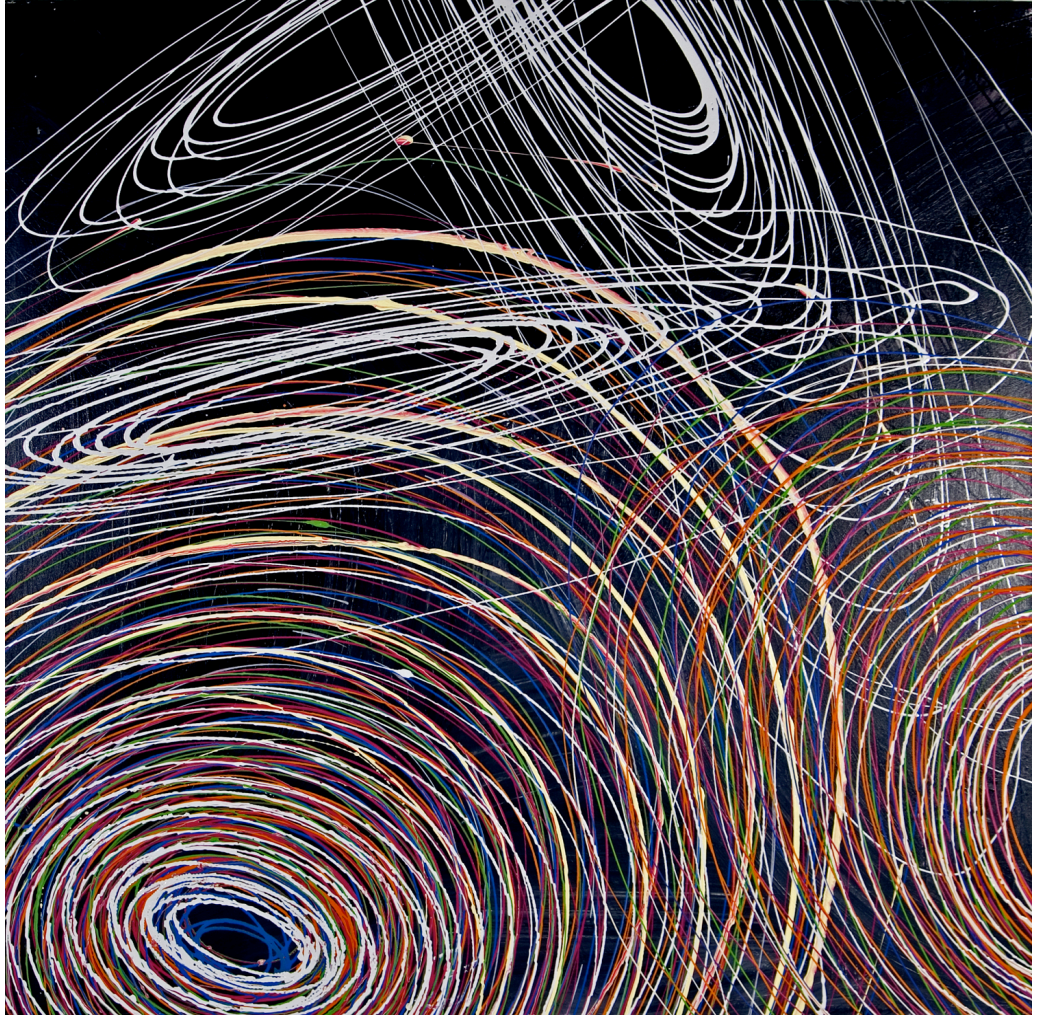
Hot Wheels. Acrylic on Birch: 120cm x 120cm, 2007

5.



Butterfly Effect. Acrylic on Birch: 150cm x 150cm, 2007

6.



XenoSaga. Acrylic on Canvas: 150cm x 150cm, 2007

7.



Hurricane. Acrylic on Birch: 120cm x 120cm, 2007

8.



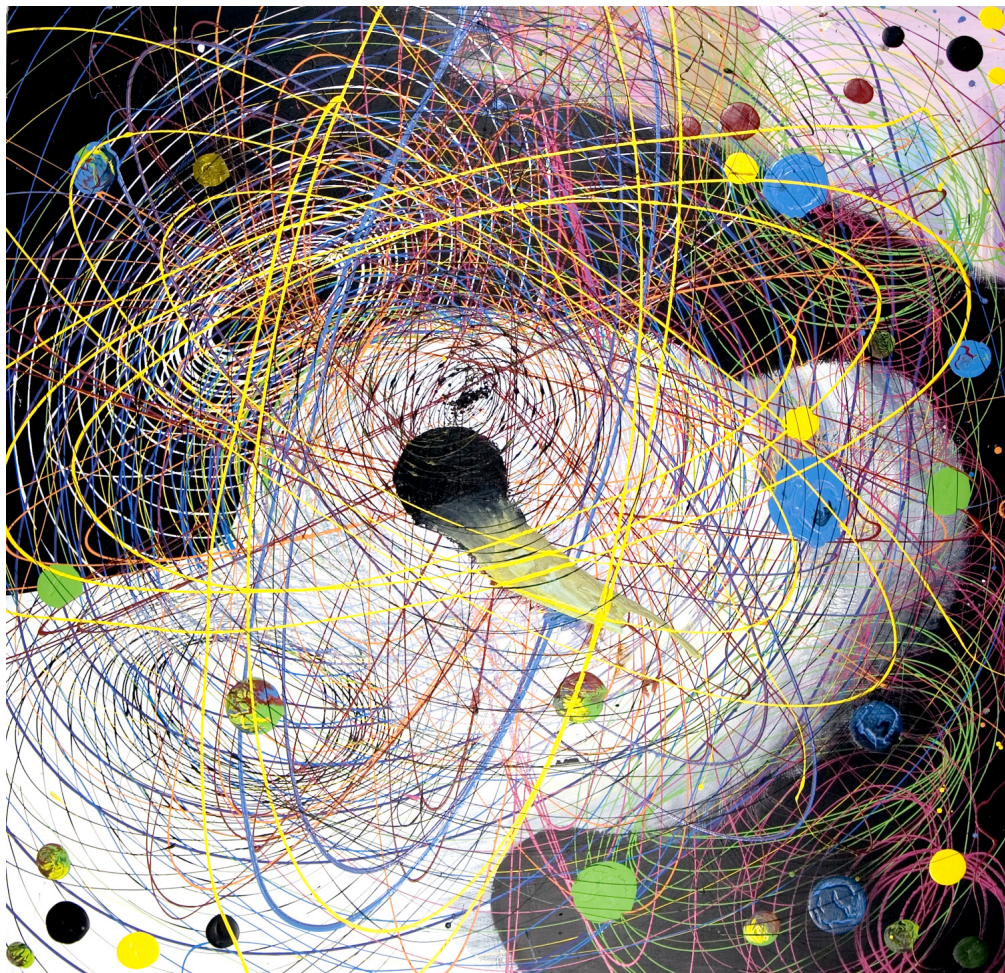
Ouroboros. Acrylic on Birch: 120cm x 120cm, 2007

9.



Mood Tide. Acrylic on Birch: 120cm x 120cm, 2007

10.



Big Bang. Acrylic on Birch: 210cm x 210cm, 2007

11.



Eternal Return. Acrylic on Canvas: 2100cm x 2100cm, 2007

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