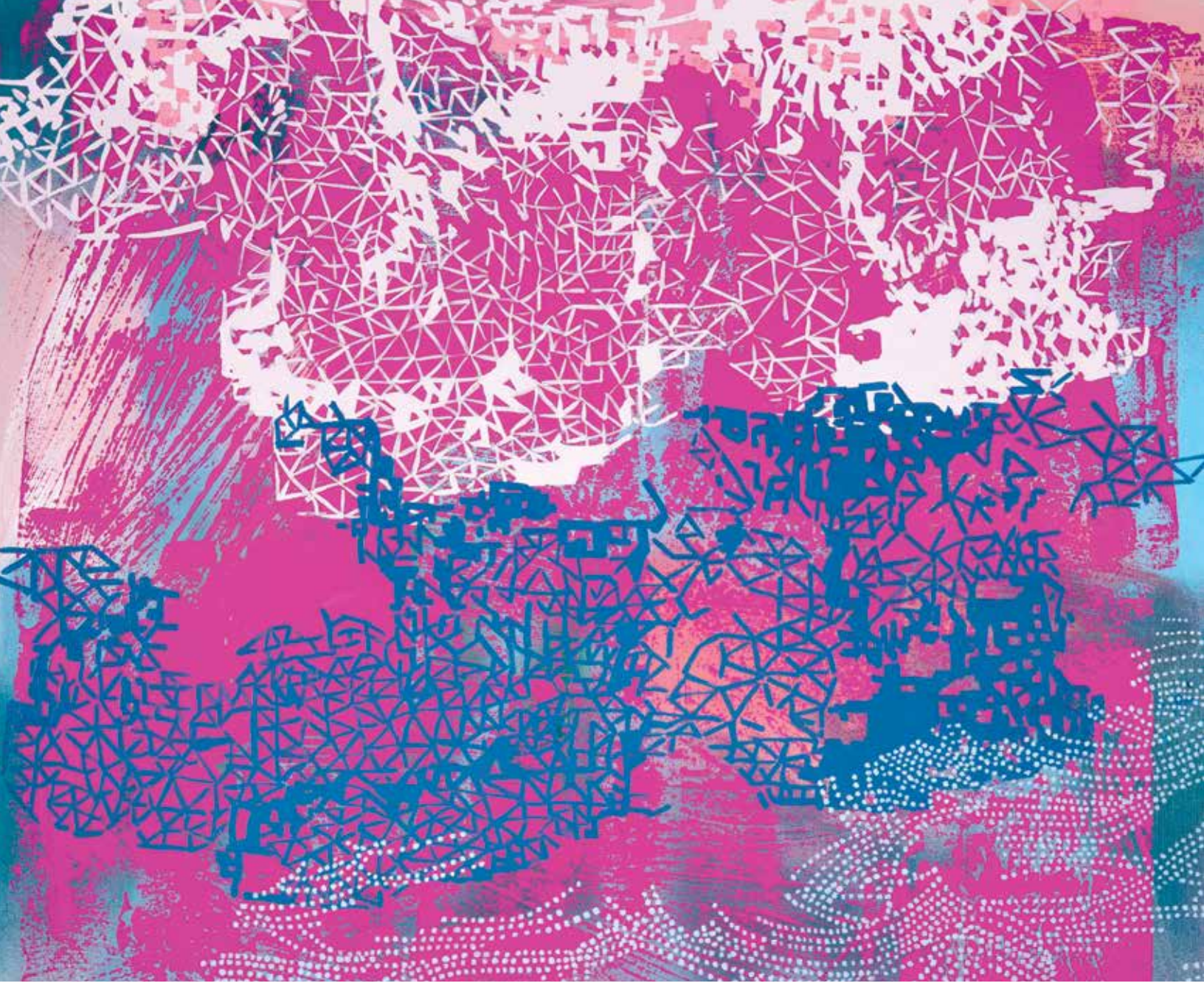

Rebecca Rutstein:
Sublime Nature

ON VIEW March 6–April 14, 2023

Delaware County Community College
Educating Delaware and Chester Counties

Artist Biography

Multidisciplinary artist and part ocean explorer, Rebecca Rutstein works at the intersection of art, science and technology. For over twenty years she has created painting, sculpture, interactive installation and public art inspired by the natural world. Rutstein is passionate about creating visual and immersive experiences that shed light on places and processes hidden from view, to foster a deeper connection with nature in the face of our climate crisis. She has been an artist-in-residence at locations around the world including seven expeditions at sea and two dives to the ocean floor in the *Alvin* submersible. Her work with oceanographers, ecologists, microbiologists, molecular scientists and geologists gives her a unique perspective and broad view of the interconnectedness of systems in the natural world. Rutstein's collaborations have been funded by the National Science Foundation, National Academy of Sciences / Keck Futures Initiative, Delta Airlines Foundation, Schmidt Ocean Institute, Ocean Exploration Trust, and the Philadelphia Foundation along with several universities. She is the recipient of the Pew Fellowship in the Arts, grants from the Independence Foundation, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and Alabama Council on the Arts, and was named an MIT Ocean Discovery Fellow as well as the Delta Visiting Chair for Global Understanding at the University of Georgia. Rutstein has been featured on NPR, ABC, CBS, and in the Wall Street Journal, Huffington Post, Vice & Vogue UK magazines. With over 30 solo exhibitions, Rutstein has exhibited widely in museums and institutions both in the U.S. and internationally, and has spoken at universities across the country about her practice and interdisciplinary collaboration. Her work can be found in over 40 public collections including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Georgia Museum of Art, National Academy of Sciences, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, U.S. Department of State, Yale University, Microsoft and AT&T. Rutstein holds a BFA (magna cum laude) from Cornell University and an MFA from the University of Pennsylvania. She concurrently has an exhibition *Rebecca Rutstein: Blue Dreams* opening at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington D.C. in March 2023.

Rebecca Rutstein: Sublime Nature

OLIVIA GRUBER FLOREK, PH.D.
Associate Professor of Art History, Delaware County Community College

Stretching eighteen feet across the gallery wall, Rebecca Rutstein's paired *Progenitor III* and *Progenitor VI* paintings **(FIGURES 1 AND 2)** engulf the viewer within seascapes very few humans have encountered. Parallel lines twist and weave across each surface; in some areas they overlap into dense networks of graphic lines, while in others they recede to reveal patches of navy and cerulean blue. Exhibited together for the first time in *Rebecca Rutstein: Sublime Nature* at Delaware County Community College, the *Progenitor* paintings incorporate photo microscopy of bacteria present in the hydrothermal vents in the Guaymas Basin in the Gulf of California. Rutstein experienced these marvels firsthand during her own deep-sea dive in the submersible *Alvin* to the ocean floor as part of an expedition with the oceanographer Mandy Joye. *The Progenitor* paintings break down the barriers between the data collected by her scientific collaborators and the public, many of whom will never experience these natural wonders in person. Describing these canvases, Rutstein states, "These visual experiences are meant to deepen one's connection to these unseen places in the spirit of fostering understanding, empathy and conservancy of our oceans in the face of climate change."[1] In building these connections between scientists, the artistic community, and the public, Rutstein emerges as an ambassador whose artwork addresses the most pressing issue of our century.

Cultivating public awareness of oceanic science aligns *Rebecca Rutstein: Sublime Nature* with the central charge of Kimberly Nicholas's *Under the Sky We Make*, Delaware County Community College's 2022-23 Collegewide Reading book.[2] Nicholas spent decades researching and teaching about climate change before realizing that she rarely shared this knowledge outside the scientific community. In *Under the Sky We Make*, Nicholas communicates climate science with the general public, and she calls on her readers to address the crisis: "Each of us can find ways to adapt our particular skills, talents, and preferences to our local context to work toward the principles of protecting people and nature."[3] Rutstein's paintings participate in this mission by connecting the viewer with places and processes hidden from view, thereby transforming the ocean's remarkable processes into tangible experiences.

In titling the Delaware County Community College exhibition *Sublime Nature*, Rutstein evokes the delight of engaging with the ocean. The eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke declared that sublime objects are "great, powerful, vast, infinite, massive, rugged, dark, and gloomy."[4] Any of these adjectives could describe Rutstein's canvases, particularly the *Artist at Sea* series, a group of twelve square canvases Rutstein produced while at sea on several different oceanographic expeditions. In *Salish Series I* of 2019 **(FIGURE 11)**, Rutstein captures the movement and mixing of water and chemosynthetic microbes that congregate off the coast of Washington State and British Columbia. Serpentine fields of emerald, aquamarine, and grays trespass upon each other in a topography that visualizes salty ocean waters upwelling into freshwater systems. *Plume II* from 2016 **(FIGURE 12)** depicts a similar collision of different water sources; here, the plume of the Mekong River disperses into the South China Sea within magenta, orange, and yellow imagery inspired by satellite data. *Guaymas Basin Series I* **(FIGURE 13)** combines undulating pools of blues with a graphic overlay of white gridded sonar data that maps the hydrothermal and sedimented vents on the basin of the Gulf of California. Rutstein's pigments flow across the surface of the canvas, recreating the motion of the ships during her oceanic expeditions.

The *Artist at Sea* series embodies the variety of visual strategies Rutstein employs to represent these topographies. Diatom algae chains float across the surface of *Salish Sea Series X* **(FIGURE 3)**, rendered as graphic white and blue patterns. These geometric forms hover above an organic, painterly background rendered in black with visible brushstrokes of blues. *Salish Sea Series X* represents phytoplankton and microbes Rutstein observed under the microscope, while directly to its right, *Salish Sea Series III* **(FIGURE 4)** records the large-scale movements of the currents. These polarities reappear across her work, such as in *Sublime Nature* of 2022 **(FIGURE 15)**. *Sublime Nature* incorporates Rutstein's observations of how similar matrices happen on different scales in nature, a realization made following her 2021 artist residency at Integral Molecular, a biotechnology company at the UC Science Center in Philadelphia. Though Integral Molecular focuses on antibody research, Rutstein recognized parallels between the way living cells communicate with each other and the interconnectedness of microbial networks in the Salish Sea. *Sublime Nature* combines the gridded patterns of the *Artist at Sea* series with dotted lines that undulate across the base of the canvas. Shifting between micro and macro, atmospheric and graphic, positive and negative, Rutstein's paintings immerse viewers within these dazzling extremes.

Continued on page 6

[1] Taylor Lear, "Out of the Darkness" *Georgia Museum of Art Blog* (blog), *University of Georgia*, September 13, 2018, http://georgiamuseum.org/gmoa_blog/out-of-the-darkness/.

[2] Kimberly Nicholas, *Under the Sky We Make*, (New York: Putnam, 2021).

[3] Nicholas, *Under the Sky We Make*, 91- 92.

[4] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958 [1759, 1st ed. 1757]), 2.1.57. Quoted in Emily Brady, "The Environmental Sublime," in *The Sublime from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 172.

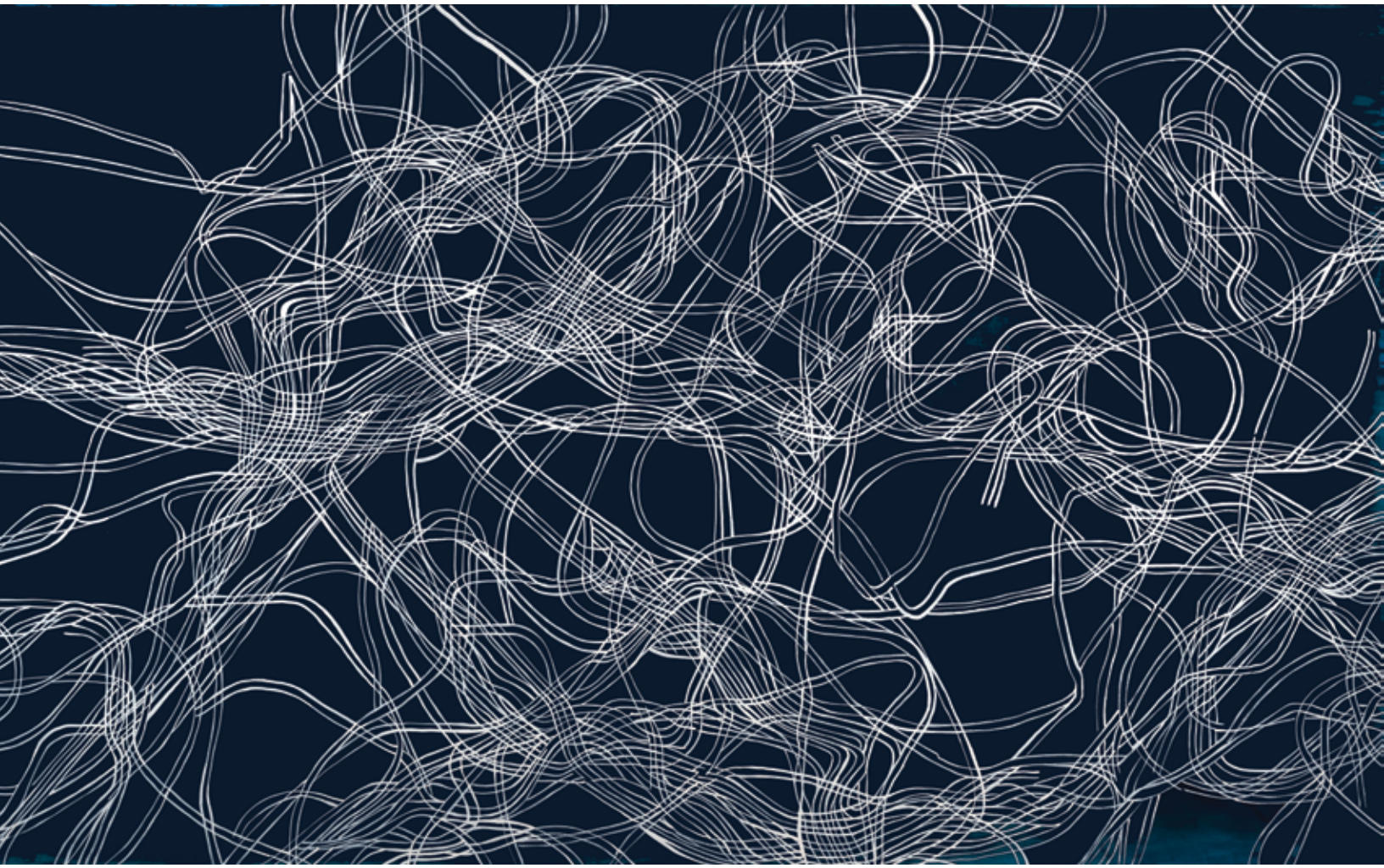

FIGURE 1:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Progenitor III*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 108 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

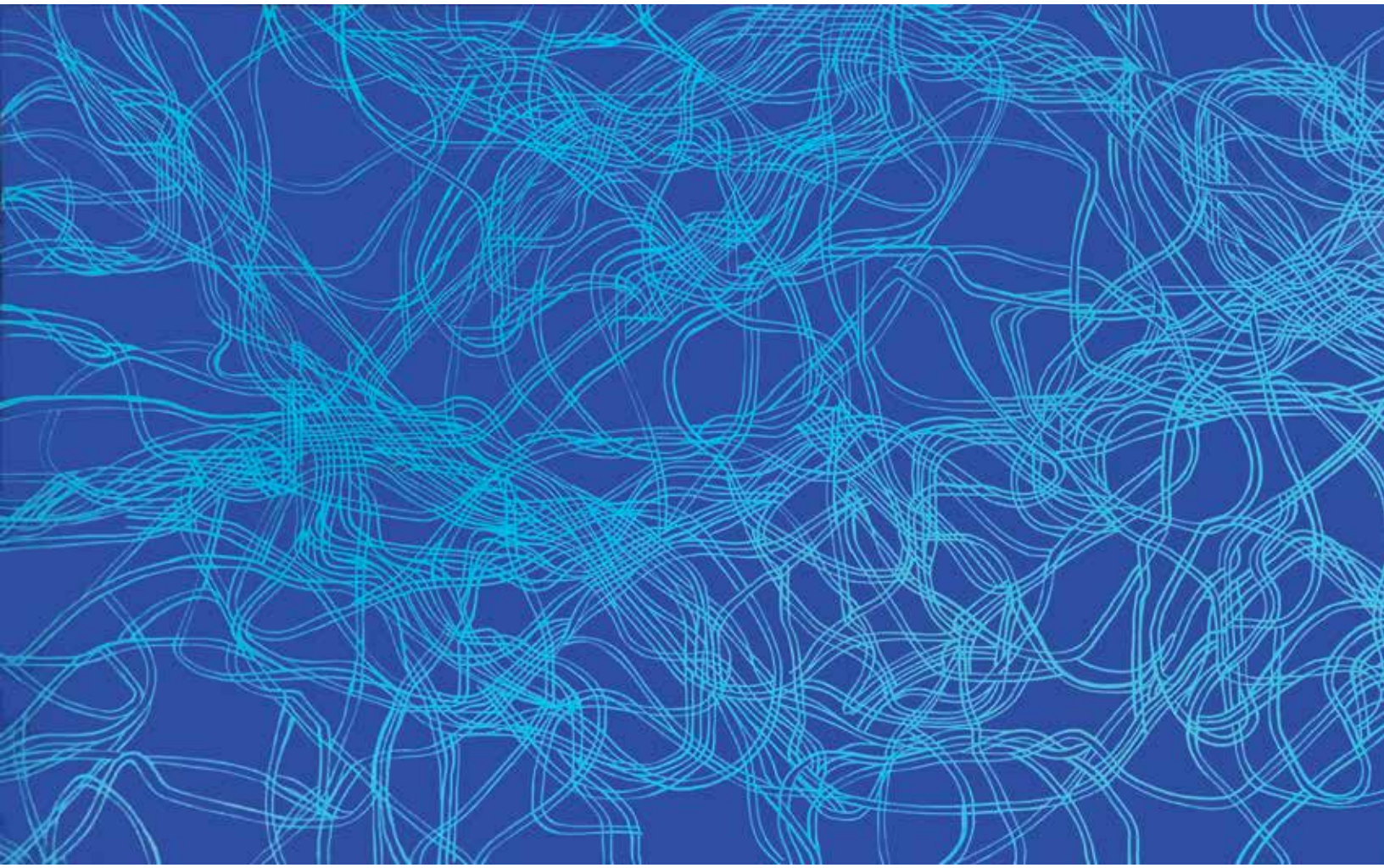

FIGURE 2:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Progenitor VI,* 2020, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 108 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

From left to right:

FIGURE 3:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Salish Sea Series X*, 2021, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 4:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Salish Sea Series III*, 2019, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 5:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Salish Sea Series XI*, 2021, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 6:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Salish Sea Series VII*, 2019, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 7:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Plume III*, 2016, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 8:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Salish Sea Series VI*, 2019, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

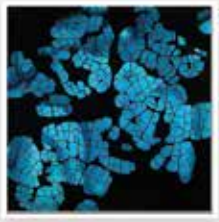

FIGURE 9:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Guaymas Basin Series VII*, 2018, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 10:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Guaymas Basin Series VIII*, 2018, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 11:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Salish Sea Series I*, 2019, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 12:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Plume II*, 2016, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 13:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Guaymas Basin Series I*, 2018, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 14:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Guaymas Basin Series VI*, 2018, from *Artist at Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery

Continued from page 1

In basing her paintings on direct experience of natural phenomena, Rutstein also tackles the constraints of representing the sublime within visual art. Burke, as well as the later philosopher Immanuel Kant, insist that the sublime must be experienced by a viewer firsthand. The twenty-first century environmental philosopher Emily Brady argues that this limitation prevents artwork from expressing sublimity. Brady writes, "Art can only express sublimity through representation, and therefore only indirectly."[5] Rutstein recognizes the "indirect" experience visualized within her canvases is the closest most viewers will ever come to these ocean landscapes. Describing her paintings, Rutstein states, "The works I create are meant to speak on a visceral level but often resonate beyond aesthetics to engage the viewer more deeply with processes in nature."[6] Visitors to *Rebecca Rutstein: Sublime Nature* experience multiple landscapes simultaneously, thereby expanding their understanding of the ocean's processes and the value of preserving them.

The *Artist at Sea* paintings visualize the massive movements of bodies of water in spaces untouched by sunlight and untethered by human-produced boundaries. Nevertheless, human-induced global warming threatens these processes. The same sublime that describes the magnificence of the ocean can also apply to climate crisis. Describing climate crisis, the philosopher Brady writes, "Models predicting changes on a huge scale provide a kind of indirect, representational picture of a great, sublime event on a huge temporal and spatial scale."[7] This catastrophic environmental sublime induces feelings of helplessness similar to Kimberly Nicholas's description of reactions among the general public to climate change: "In the face of this enormity, …so many feel helpless (that you're powerless and don't matter) and hopeless (that no one can help and therefore nothing matters)."[8] Rutstein's paintings combat this attitude by reminding viewers of both the power of the oceans and our relationship to them. Describing this relationship, Rutstein states, "When you start thinking about the ocean and all of its inhabitants as one living and interconnected system… that microbial networks in the deep sea mediate processes on a global scale, generating much of the oxygen we breathe…and that we are dependent on this system for our own survival, it creates empathy and a deeper connection to this vast and hidden space."[9] The emotional connections fostered by Rutstein's paintings lead once again to *Under the Sky We Make*, where Nicholas encourages readers to tap "into the strength of our feelings about what we most fear, grieve, and love" in order to address the climate crisis.[10]

5 Brady, "The Environmental Sublime," 173.

6 Rebecca Rutstein, email message to the author, December 22, 2022.

7 Brady, "The Environmental Sublime," 174.

8 Nicholas, *Under the Sky We Make*, 2.

9 Rebecca Rutstein, email message to the author, December 29, 2022.

10 Nicholas, *Under the Sky We Make*, 7.

FIGURE 15:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Sublime Nature*, 2022, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

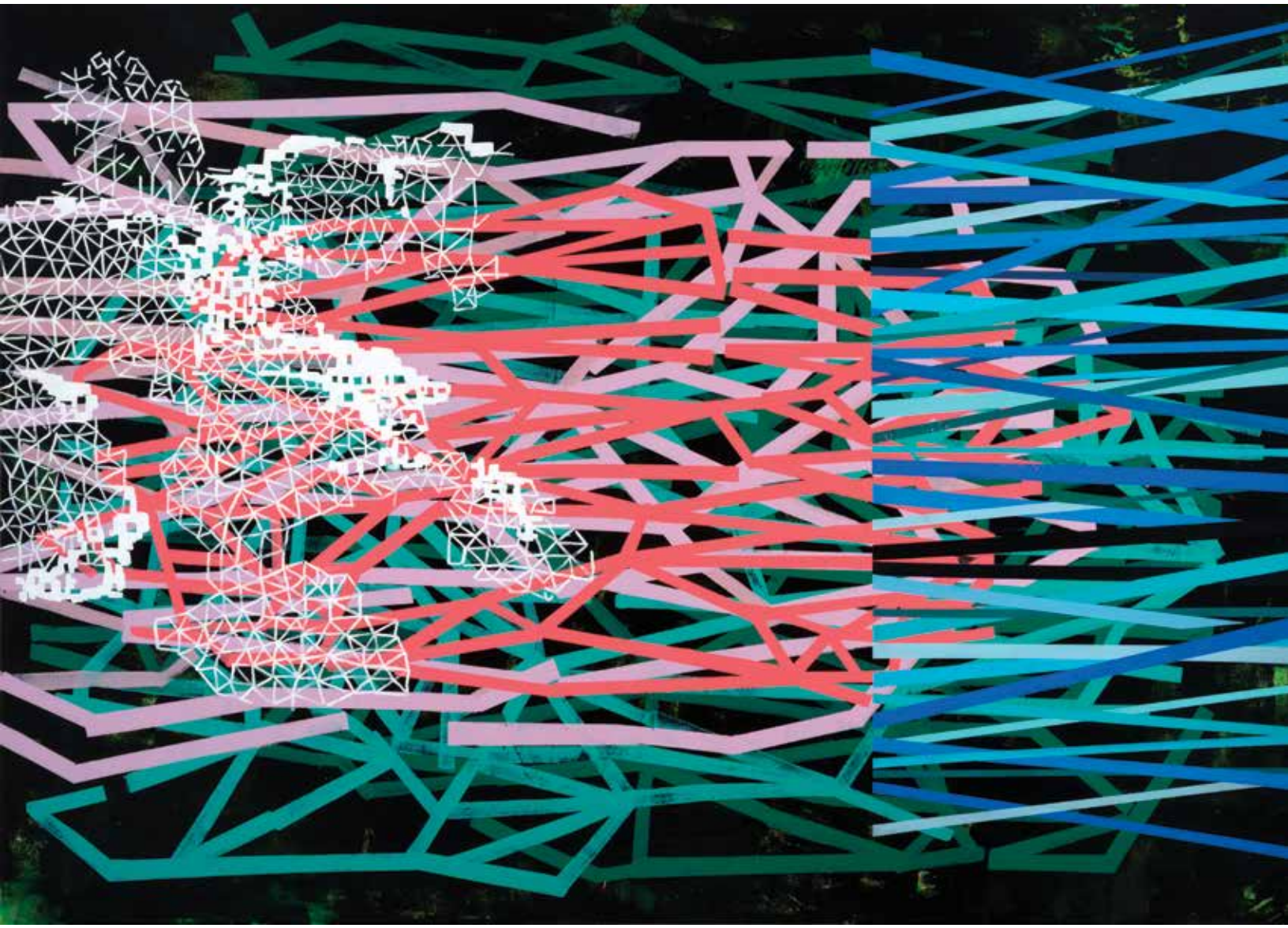

FIGURE 16:
Rebecca Rutstein, *The Matrix*, 2021, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 60 x 84 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

Rutstein multiplies the impact of her paintings by embedding them within networks that are both artistic and scientific. While the Delaware County Community College exhibition focuses on Rutstein's painting practice, the artist also produces sculptures, interactive installations and large scale video projections to further immerse her viewers. Exhibiting in fine art galleries and science centers, Rutstein builds new collaborations between artists, scientists, and members of the public. This is a tactic widely recognized as the only path forward if humanity is to avoid the devastating consequences of global warming. Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator of *Back to Earth*, an ongoing exhibition addressing climate change at London's Serpentine Gallery, states, "We could never say that art can solve this very massive problem. But I think no field can solve this on its own. I think we can only address this extinction crisis if we work together – science, art, politics, all the different fields."[11] Rutstein has pursued this strategy for over twenty years, and it is a great honor to feature her work at Delaware County Community College. It is our hope that experiencing Rutstein's paintings in person will move our students to engage with the realities of climate change and spur them to contribute their own talents toward addressing this challenge.

[11] Frank Rose, "Aiming to Shock Viewers Awake," *New York Times*, July 31, 2022, sec. Arts.

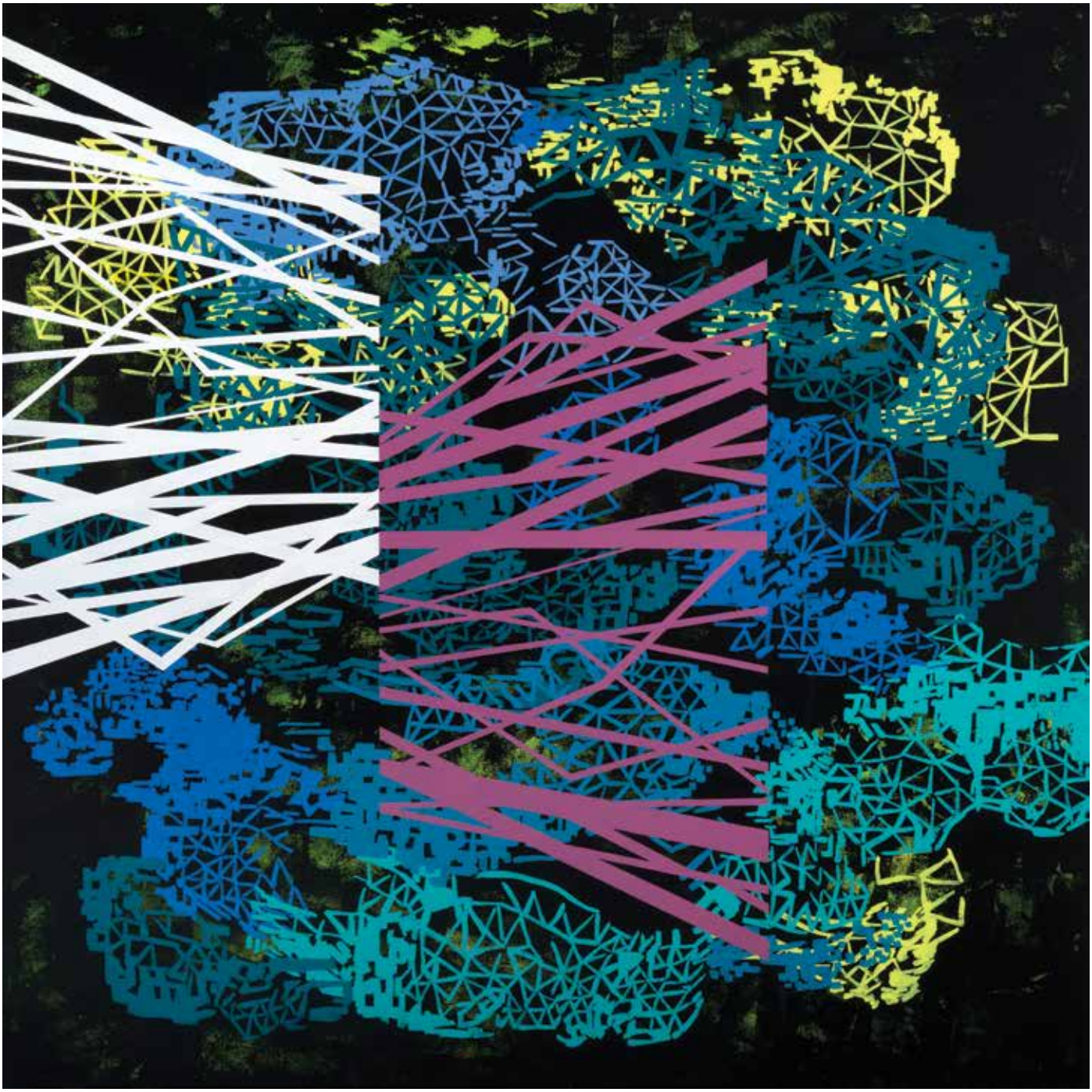

FIGURE 17:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Scaffolds of Desire*, 2021, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

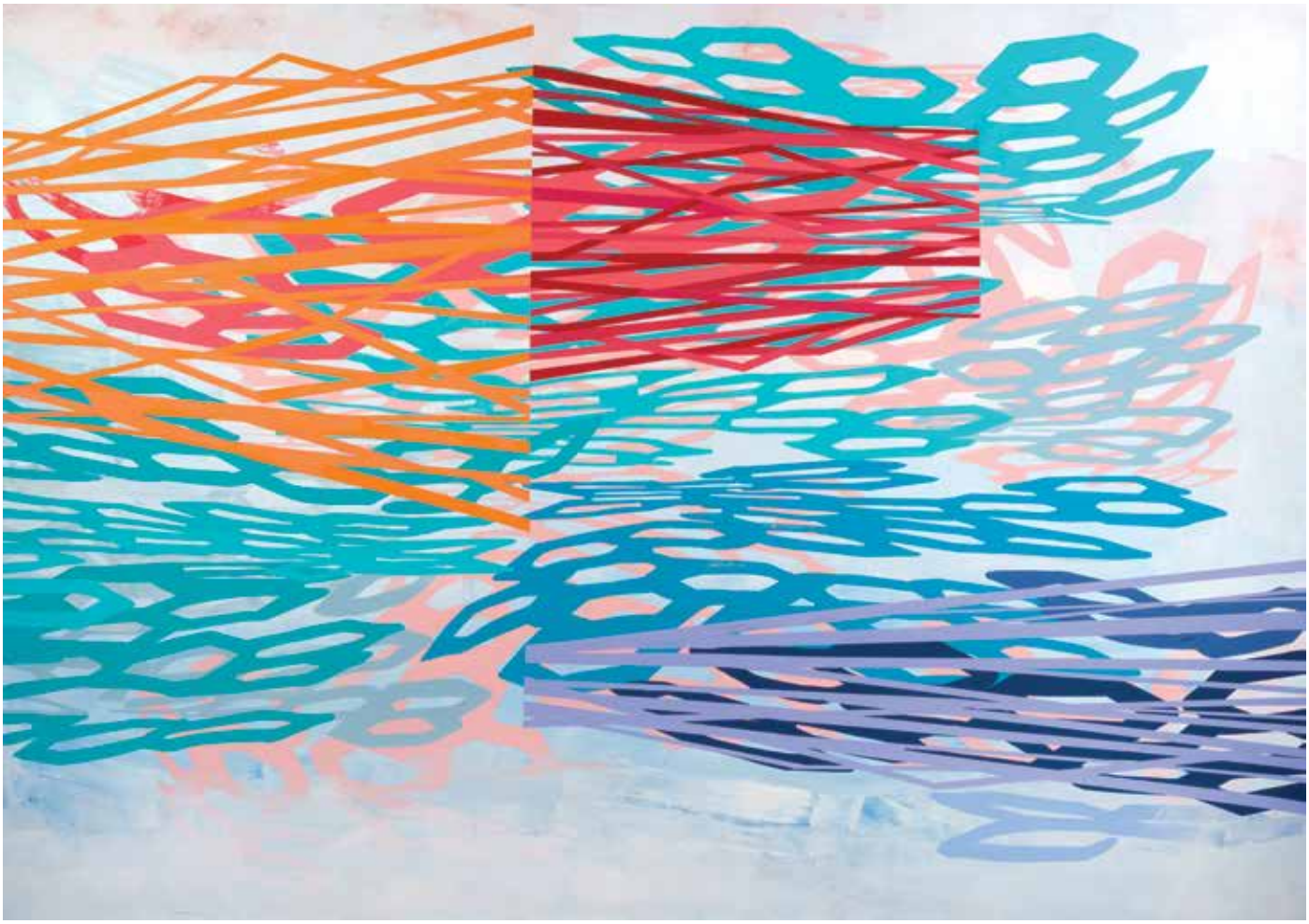

FIGURE 18:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Slanted and Enchanted All Over Again*, 2021, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 60 x 85 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

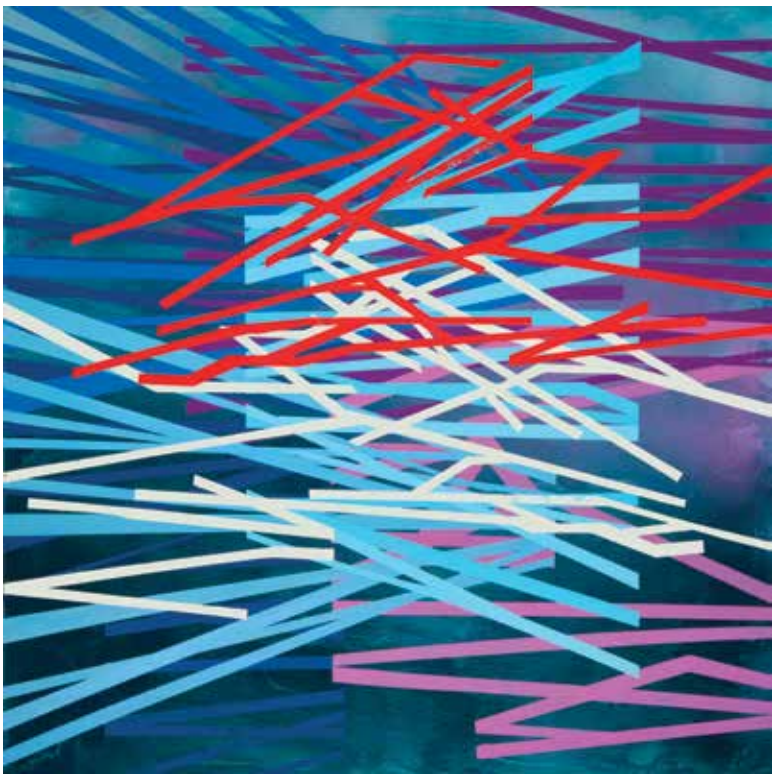

FIGURE 19:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Universal Truths*, 2022, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

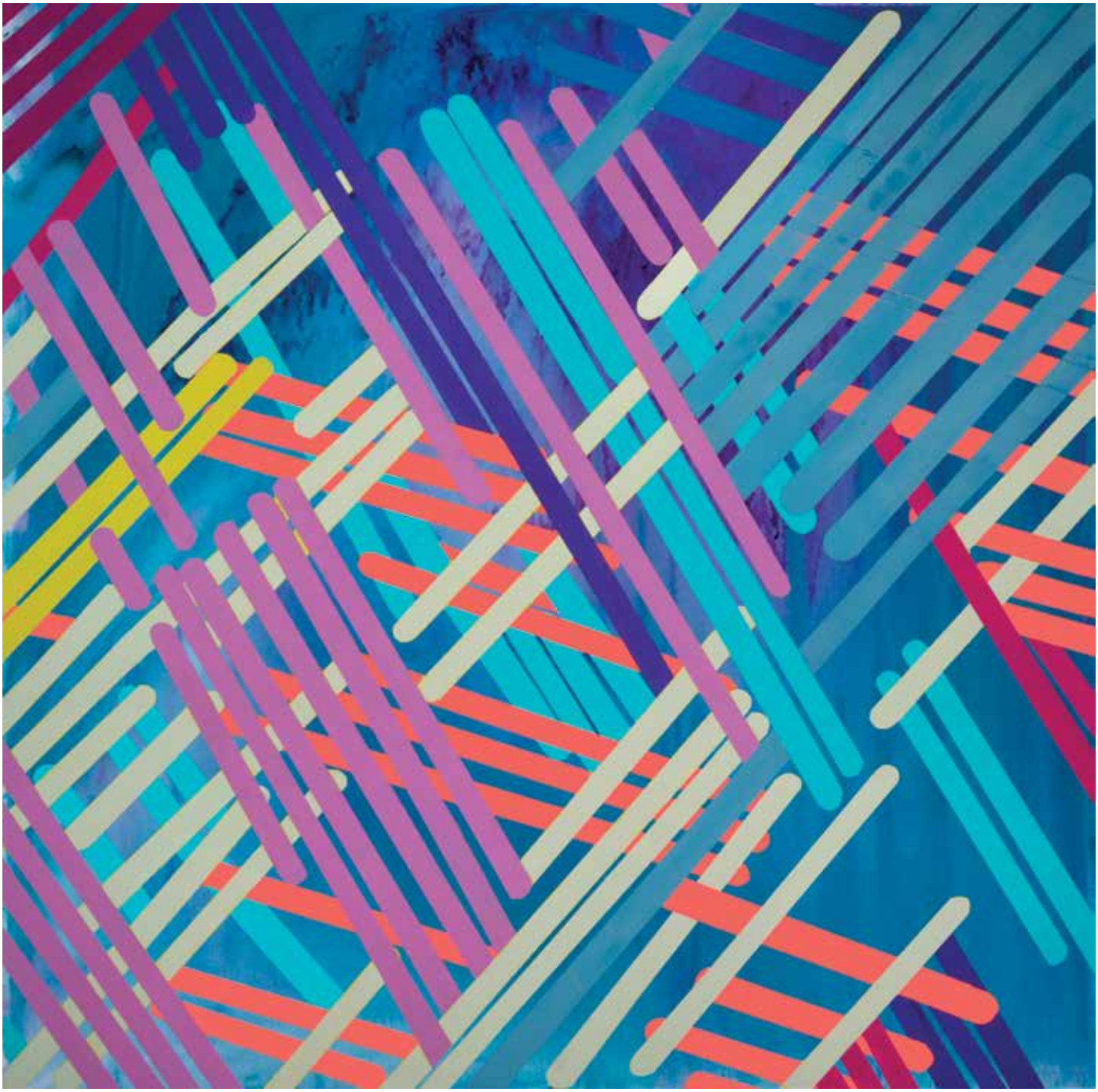

FIGURE 20:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Weaving Histories III*, 2022, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 21:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Fölljokul*, 2022, acrylic and flashe on round wood panel, 24 inches in diameter. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 22:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Mars VI*, 2022, acrylic and flashe on round wood panel, 24 inches in diameter. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

FIGURE 23:
Rebecca Rutstein, *Infinitely Visible*, 2022, acrylic and spray paint on round wood panel, 48 inches in diameter. Courtesy of the artist and Bridgette Mayer Gallery.

Acknowledgments

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Caitlin Flaherty, Supervisor of Arts Administration, and Olivia Gruber Florek, Associate Professor of Art History

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