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SANDRA LERNER

THE PARTICLE AND THE WAVE: METAPHYSICAL LANDSCAPES, TAOISM, AND THE CALLIGRAPHIC IMPULSE

By Aliza Edelman

*Look, it cannot be seen—it is beyond form.
Listen, it cannot be heard—it is beyond sound.
Grasp, it cannot be held—it is intangible.
These three are indefinable,
Therefore they are joined in one.
.....*

*Stand before it and there is no beginning.
Follow it and there is no end.
Stay with the ancient Tao,
Move with the present.*

Knowing the ancient beginning is the essence of Tao.

—Lao Tsu, passage from the *Tao Te Ching*¹

Sandra Lerner's (b. 1936) engagement with Asian art and Eastern ideas and philosophies has framed her artistic practice since the early 1960s. The spiritual dimensions of Taoism have guided her development as a person and as a painter, in particular the revelatory teachings of Lao Tsu, the esteemed ancient Chinese philosopher (and "official archivist") credited with the founding of Taoism. By historical accounts Lao Tsu lived around the same period as some of the greatest classical figures in China, in the sixth century B.C., and Confucius (551–479 B.C.) allegedly consulted with Lao Tsu, who was deemed the older master. The renowned volume of verses, or eighty-one chapters known today as the *Tao Te Ching* (*Daodejing*), was a widely circulated compilation of texts attributed to Lao Tsu conveying the fundamental precepts to attain self-transformation and self-equilibrium in the *tao*—the Way. Of the many spiritual directives offered in Taoism, Lerner has spoken repeatedly of an interrelationship between the "oneness" in the order of the natural world and the multiplicities in our rudimentary existence: "There are multiplicities that we find in everyday life, yet I seek to explore a oneness that permeates everything. I am after this oneness in the universe, whether I am working on a landscape, a thangka, a hanging, or an abstraction. This is the underlying philosophy in my art."²

Lerner's artistic production may be understood, then, as an unfolding spiritual journey expressing her continual encounter and dialogue with models of wholeness and the nature of

reality. By drawing upon this vast Oriental tradition and correlating her own aesthetic syncretism of East and West, Lerner reveals, as if through a door or gate, the metaphysical relationships of our universe with the spatial scope of painting's gestural and calligraphic impetus. Japanese calligraphy—another key influence on Lerner's art—is also in part a hybridized and ancient form of communication that gave visual expression to language and poetry as it was first developed in China and later adopted and transformed in Japan.³ Whether utilized for religious, vernacular, or aesthetic purpose, calligraphy's broader potential to express "dialectical relationships to the past" and at the same time respond to modern times certainly parallels Lerner's underlying approach to her art.⁴ More directly, the calligrapher's spiritual capacity to transcend formal discipline is manifest in the "creative rendering of characters" equally determined by compositional and rhythmic variations, shape, balance, asymmetry, and use of empty space.⁵ Expanding upon these malleable spatial and temporal relationships, Lerner's later abstractions interrogate the synchronicity between the modern theoretical sciences, particularly research in quantum mechanics, and the East's longstanding mystical explorations of the physical and cosmic realms as an undivided universe. Lerner's oeuvre may thus be considered a devoted meditation—a term engaged by the artist to describe her practice—on the rhythmic flux between abstraction's complementary polarities: biomorphism versus geometry; texture versus non-texturality; male versus female; emptiness versus fullness; and science versus spirituality.

On the surface these investigations may seem oversimplified, yet another Western assimilation of Eastern ideas. Rather, Lerner's practice stems from a long and significant tradition in postwar American art and Abstract Expressionism of turning to the East for the sake of exploring spirituality in abstraction. As J.J. Clarke writes on manifestations of difference in the Western interpretation of Eastern texts and religions, "It is thus a way of experiencing ourselves from the outside, as other; a point of departure which can lead to an enhancement of self-understanding."⁶ Indeed, many artists in the postwar era, including Ad Reinhardt, Robert Motherwell, Mark Tobey, and

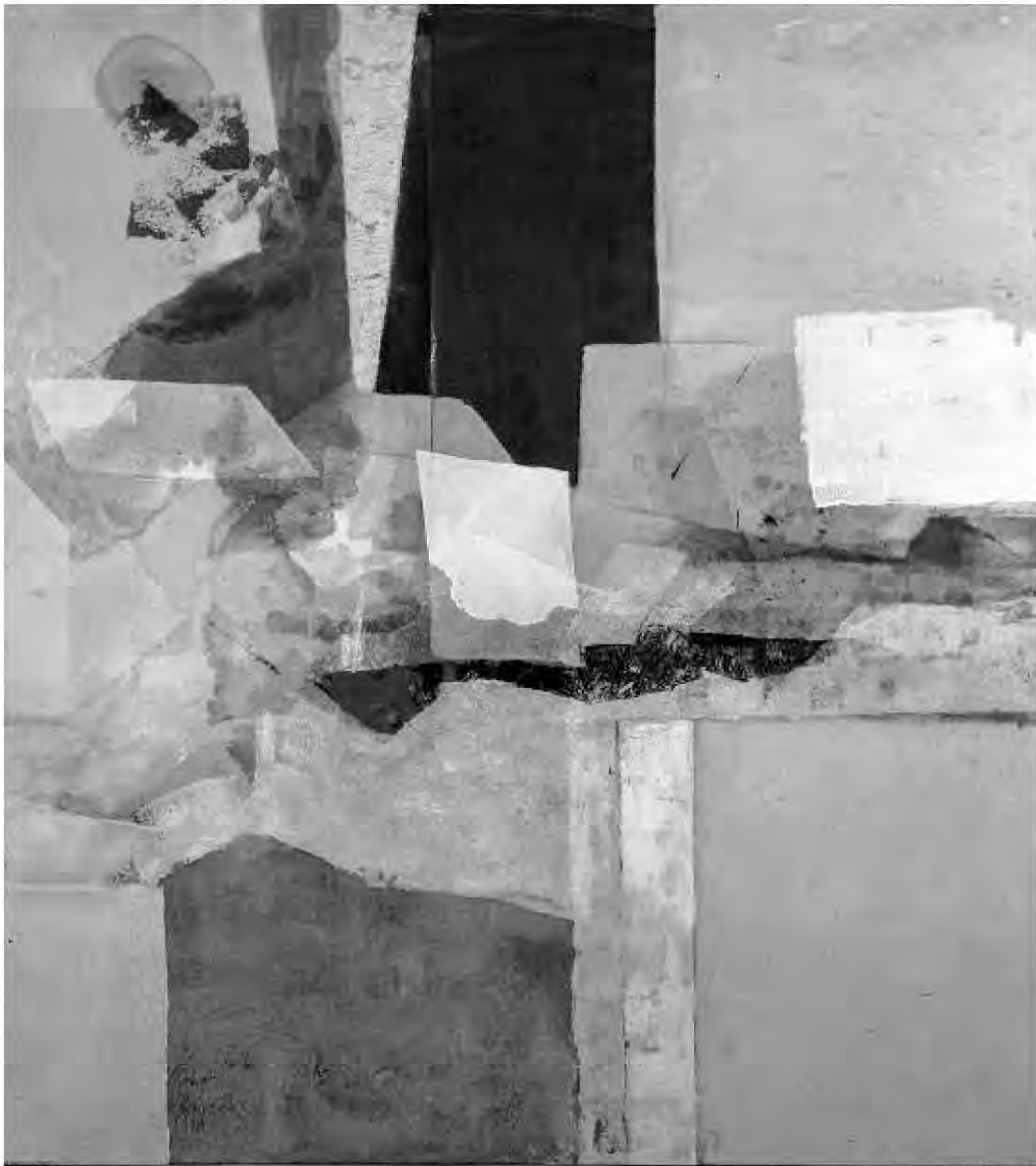


Fig. 1. Sandra Lerner, *Transcendent Landscape* (1972), oil and mixed media on canvas, 44" x 48". Private Collection.

Charmion von Wiegand, readily embraced in a Westernized context the contemporary cultural fluency of Buddhism, Zen, and Jungian theory.⁷ In 1957, von Wiegand proposed that the "centrifugal movement of East and West" brought Western painting closer to the "metaphysical speculations of Oriental thought: Vedantism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism."⁸ The frequented circuit and readings in the fifties included popular lectures at Columbia University by Daisetz T. Suzuki, Zen's Western authority, celebrated books by Alan W. Watts and German philosopher Eugen Herrigel, and the seasoned and playful use by artists, including composer John Cage, of the *I Ching, or The Book of Changes*, an ancient Chinese divination text on the interconnections of nature, chance, and self-realization.⁹ Lerner, along with many of her own contemporaries in the late sixties and seventies, attended seminars by Dr. Fritjof Capra, author of *The Tao of Physics*, workshops on mysticism and shamanism at The New School, intensive journal writing sessions at The Dialogue House with Jungian scholar and depth psychologist Dr. Ira Progoff, and courses in calligraphy at the Japan Society.¹⁰

Lerner's Tao Series is a formative group of small and medium-size collages together with expansive paintings executed throughout the 1970s. For Lerner, then known as Sandra Gross, this was a fertile decade to explore structural and compositional problems on the calligraphic line in relationship to color values, and to experiment in painting on raw and stained canvas. On the compact surface of *Tao Series I* (1973), a rivalry for space entails amongst the aggressive



Fig. 2. Sandra Lerner, *Tao Series XV* (1973), paper and sumi ink, c. 20" x 20".

swatches of jagged forms, with mottled and frayed edges and subtle contrasts of tan and gray swathes; similarly, *Transcendent Landscape* (1972; Fig. 1) integrates a centralized and accumulated mass of rough and smooth brushwork patterns and distended planes pushed to the canvas's edge.¹¹ Lerner's rigorous attention to the surface's intricate construction and layering of diverse materials assumes a morphological expression of the ground or landscape as a deeply rooted and ever-shifting archeological presence. She was greatly influenced by her early travels in 1967 to prehistoric sites in Mexico, where she also studied wall paintings, and a 1971 collecting visit to West Africa. Smaller collages exploit the properties of crumpled papers, sand, thread, spray paint and sumi ink, rice paper, pastels and conte crayons. The ruptured and folded planes of the earlier collages, such as *Tao Series XV* (1973; Fig. 2), fusing wrapping paper, corrugated cardboard, and brown paper bags as well as other found and quotidian materials, appear as decayed and excavated manuscript fragments that have endured the progressive onslaught of centuries. Summarizing the breadth and range of Lerner's Tao Series, critic Malcolm Preston posited a gendered observation based on the technical distinction between the smaller assemblages, considered "strong and masculine, even burned and brutalized, in comparison with the more pastoral paintings," understood here, arguably, as an indirect reference to the more "feminized" calligraphy employed in her large scale canvases.¹²

Displaying her Tao Series in 1975 at the noted cooperative Pleiades Gallery in New York City, followed in 1976 by another exhibition at Central Hall Gallery, a women's cooperative space on Long Island, Lerner presented

typewritten sections on rice paper from the *Tao Te Ching* next to each work of art, with titles corresponding to specific passages called chapters.¹³ For both exhibits the invitation featured the artist in her paint-stained smock standing dynamically in front of *Tao Series II* (1975; Fig. 3). Moreover, the imposing scale of Lerner's *Tao Series*, with paintings measuring over 7 x 9 feet, shifts the artist's priorities to the distribution of space across the surface. In *Tao Series I* (1975), the visual lexicon of free-form calligraphic marks and ink brushwork—sharp curvilinear inscriptions and meandering lineaments—explicitly propel movement across the plane sequentially in counterpoint to the triad of rectangular shapes anchoring the space. Calligraphy, in turn, operates temporally in *Tao Series IV* (1975; Pl. 13) as a historical conduit or carrier bridging time and place—transnationally and transhistorically—to unearth, for Lerner, “echoes and resonances of the universe and other cultures that existed.”¹⁴

Critic John Canaday drew attention to the reverential undercurrents of *Tao Series IV*, noting the presence of “ancient trumpet-shaped Chinese bronze ritual vessels called *ku*, [which] invest the painting with echoes of ceremonial functions,” evoking the methodical concentration of an ancient scribe or religious scholar at work on an illuminated manuscript aged in terracotta washes and stains, “more like a page from a book, in spirit, than the wall-sized composition.”¹⁵ Lerner's capacity to move forward and backward through history, a seemingly cosmic or quantum leap through time and space, takes flight again in *Omega*, *Villa of the Mysteries*, and *Echoes* (all 1989; Pl. 14), on view in “The Sensibility of Transcendence,” her first exhibition with June Kelly Gallery in 1990. Writing on this series, art historian Donald Kuspit stressed the transcendent implications of the material structure itself, veering towards an aggressive reconciliation between surface (matter) and spirituality illustrated in the atmospheric grandeur of *Echoes*: compressed and encrusted rice paper and blockish script foray amongst a ghostly palimpsest of timeworn columns and fans.

More than anything, it is the disciplined application of rice paper on canvas in all of its graphic and haptic materiality—torn apart or fastened on—that furthers this impression of Lerner's paintings permeating the terrestrial and celestial landscapes of ancient cultures, as observed in *Tao Series VI* (1975; Fig. 4). The facture embodied in Lerner's fluid calligraphy, combined with the layered collage of fragile and coarse materials burgeoning off the surface, generates a particularly subversive and feminist voice in the 1970s, and one that may be further understood as a calibrated response to the patrilineal histories of gestural Abstract Expressionism. Certainly, Lerner recognized the extent to which the limited black and white loose renderings of Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and David Smith, among others, insinuated a “calligraphic reading,” whether acknowledged or disavowed, respectively.¹⁶ Yet a calligraphic reading of Lerner's work also presupposes a deeply personal discursive space, one that may in turn suggest an exploration aligned more closely with the authorial feminist ideas of *écriture féminine* taking shape in the 1970s. This approach surmises the artist's own calligraphic



Fig. 3. Sandra Lerner posing in front of her painting *Tao Series II* (1975), 90" x 120", for a gallery announcement.



Fig. 4. Sandra Lerner, *Tao Series VI* (1975), oil and mixed media on canvas, 72" x 96". Private Collection.

insertions in the form of fragmented, decentered, and ambiguous “texts” into the underlying languages of abstraction, expressionism, and East Asian art while simultaneously offering her own metonymic and indexical “sign-language,” one with the implicit purpose to evoke, in the artist's words, “the recall of calligraphy in paintings just short of its actual use.”¹⁷

Lerner further negotiates her own aesthetic relationship with the gestural and the decorative through a physically laborious and technical process that constantly shifts between ground and wall (Fig. 5): laying raw linen canvas directly on the floor, Lerner builds painterly layers via pouring, staining



Fig. 5. Sandra Lerner painting in her New York City studio in 2016.

and spraying, applying sized rice paper and collaged elements as needed, and proceeds to “deconstruct” her process through cutting or *décollage*, reassembling combined sections to hang accordingly. Not only does Lerner conceive her practice as a meditative process in direct counterpoint to Pollock’s assertiveness and directness, but also the ornamental patterning of her surfaces exposes the gender paradoxes of Abstract Expressionism’s purity of vision, or “fuliginous flatness,” espoused by Clement Greenberg.¹⁸

Significantly, Lerner discovered her potential as a visual artist relatively late and had limited contact with the fine arts growing up in Brooklyn, New York. As a child she was exposed to music and trained as a concert pianist. At Brooklyn College she was a philosophy major but, like many of her generation, married young, at age twenty. Interrupting her studies, she joined her first husband on an army base from 1956 to 1958 near Nuremberg, Germany; while in Europe and pregnant, she traveled extensively and was exposed to architectural history and antiquities. Upon her return to the United States, having moved to Long Island, Lerner began formal painting classes, with, among others, Harry Sternberg, Leo Manso (an influential teacher and collagist), and Jerry Okimoto. She raised two children, but found herself in the constraints of a conventional marriage, one that did not encourage her development as an artist.¹⁹ The sweeping cultural changes of the Women’s Liberation Movement and the widespread growth of women’s cooperatives in the 1970s provided fundamental support for Lerner’s incipient career. Likewise, the pivotal friendship and mentorship of artist Dorothy Dehner (1901–94), whom she befriended in 1964, emboldened her progress. Lerner returned full time to New York City after divorcing her husband. Appropriately, Lerner acquired her primary copy of the *Tao Te Ching*, which she still faithfully uses, at Dehner’s gallery, Marian Willard, a formative dealer supporting artists concerned with abstraction and the Far East. In 1978, Lerner eventually completed her B.A. at Hofstra University, where she also took pre-Colombian art classes, and wrote a thesis on the subject of “Parallels in Taoism and Physics.”²⁰



Fig. 6. Sandra Lerner at the Kampo Museum, Kyoto, Japan (1981), as an honored guest of the master calligrapher Kampo Harada.

In 1981, Lerner’s aesthetic maturation was fostered during a four-month residency in the ancient capital city of Kyoto, Japan, where she was the honored guest of Kampo Harada. A master calligrapher and celebrated teacher, Kampo was largely responsible for the postwar dissemination of the art of calligraphy and the promotion of Japanese culture internationally through the development of the Nippon Shuji Educational Federation (now Japan Calligraphy Education Foundation).²¹ Lerner was initially introduced to Kampo in 1971 when he taught his first extensive calligraphy course at the Japan Society in New York. While residing in the old Sumera region near Kyoto, connected to the Kampo Museum (Fig. 6), Lerner participated in classes and earned a distinguished license to teach calligraphy, even as she could not speak the language well or properly read it. This was of little concern to Kampo, whose global teaching methods emphasized not the “meaning” of the letters, characters, and ideographs but rather their pure spirit found in the different stylistic scripts of Japanese brush writing or cursive, as shown in the *hiragana* and *katakana* syllabaries. In the interest of cross-cultural exchange, Lerner lectured on various American art subjects under the auspices of the United States International Communications Agency (USIA). She had solo exhibitions on two subsequent visits: in 1984, at the Kampo Kaikan Museum, Kyoto, and Gallery Don, Fukuoka, Lerner presented three-dimensional screen paintings, such as the sweeping five-screen *View of Southold* (1983–84; Fig. 7), as well as a collaborative painting with Kampo

who applied brush-and-ink calligraphy, and works evocative of ancient hanging scrolls, including the vertical hanging *Tao IV* (1980); and in 1993, she exhibited again at the Kampo Kaikan Museum as part of a fortieth anniversary exhibition. Tellingly, Kampo bestowed upon Lerner a Japanese stamp bearing her name in characters akin to “Great Mountain.”

This transformative experience soon materialized in an important group of paintings titled *The Inland Sea Series*, on view at the illustrious Betty Parsons Gallery in 1982.²² Parsons was an adamant supporter of Lerner’s work and had been an intrepid presence on the postwar New York scene, not only cultivating the careers of many Abstract Expressionists but also Japanese-born artists, such as Kenzo Okado and Toko Shinoda. The title of Lerner’s exhibition was a poignant reference to Japan’s Seto Inland Sea (a historic body of water surrounded by islands), from which Lerner observed Japan’s breathtaking topographical vistas of mountains and sea, trees and sky, from the port at Kobe en route to Miyajima. Such panoramas undoubtedly crystallized in her art the Taoist principles of an all-pervading natural world hinging on the elemental and circumambulatory relationships of heaven and earth. At the same time, she could draw upon her acute knowledge of Taoism as the touchstone of heroic and monumental Chinese landscape painting, as realized by Sung Dynasty painters from the late tenth to the early twelfth century, an influential stylistic period for Lerner.²³ This vital artistic exploration in Chinese painting broadly expressed the “metaphysical basis of heavenly principles” in tandem with the mundane reality of the “principles of things (*wu-li*),” as scholar Wen C. Fong summarized; identifying the natural landscape orientation in hanging scrolls by the eminent Kuo Hsi (ca. 1000-ca. 1090; Fig. 8), for example, the integration of vertical and continuous planes, parallel perspectives, and shifting vantage points “invite the viewer to roam freely through a space that is infinite and evocative because [it is] unmeasured and unmeasurable.”²⁴

The fiery-brown combustive cluster in Lerner’s *Matsushima* (1981; Pl. 15)—a title conjuring the eponymous ancient islands covered in black and red pines—radiates the creative and primordial sources of the world, a “mysteriously formed” and interchangeable realm relating heaven, earth, and man, and the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, on which mutable striations and swift brushwork score the canvas. *Matsushima*’s nebulous body has metamorphosed into an archetypal door, gate, or bypath in *Uji* (1981) and in the epic *Tao II* (1981; Pl. 16), an eternal and unknowable realm unveiled in the *Tao Te Ching*: “The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth / The gate to all mystery” (Chapter 1).²⁵ *Tao II*’s unfolding, centripetal movement embodies the universe’s dialectical tensions on a sharply planar field of action: the lowermost areas of densely inked geometries and spatters ascend to a lightened field of

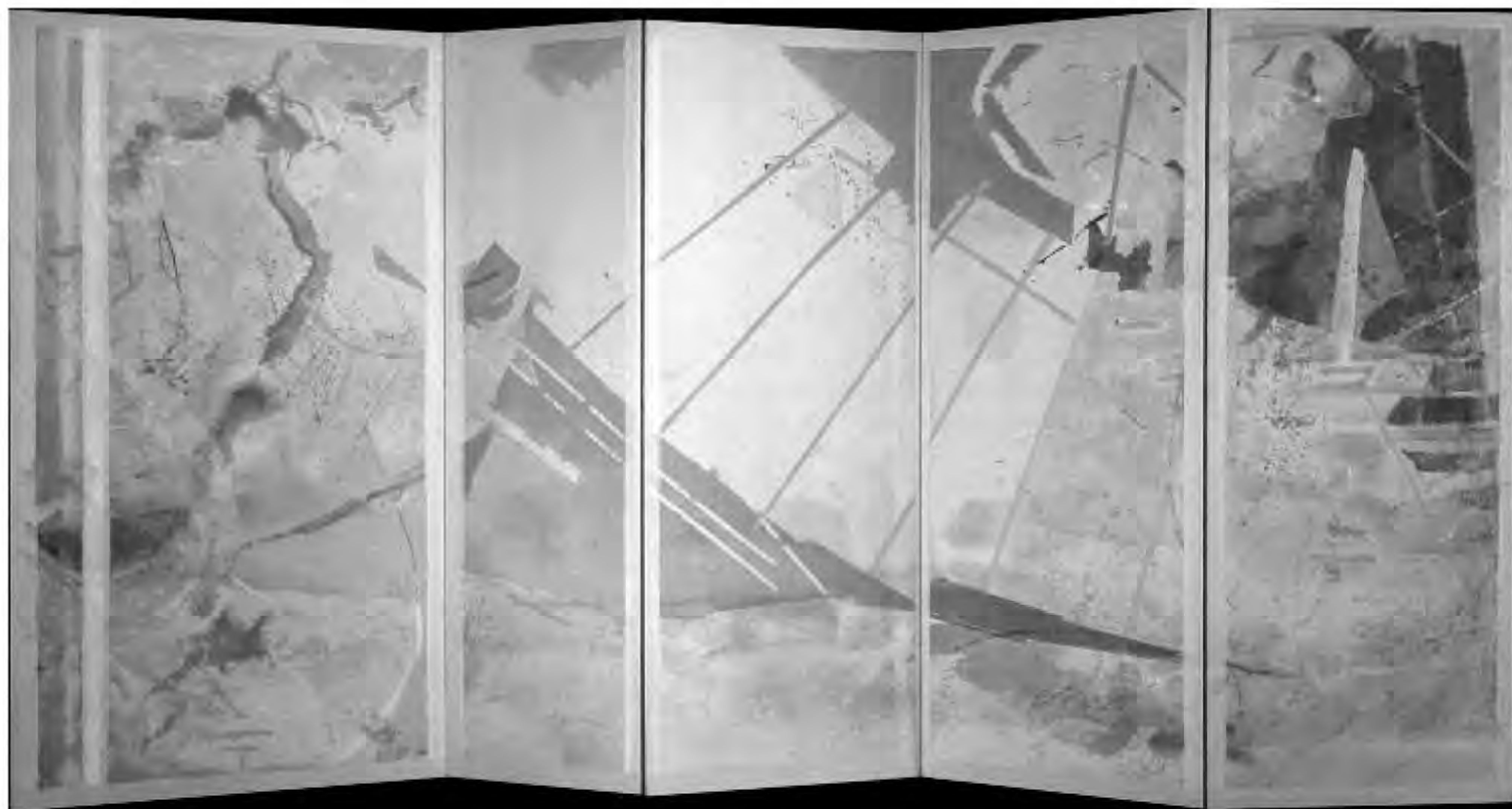


Fig. 7. Sandra Lerner, *View of Southold* (1983–84), five panel folding screen, oil and mixed media on canvas, 79" x 144". Private Collection.



Fig. 8. Kuo Hsi, *Early Spring* (signed and dated 1072), hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 62 1/4" x 42 5/8", National Palace Museum, Taipei.

penciled calligraphies and amorphous patterns on raw and stained canvas. Elaborating, Lerner has described her calligraphy as a “door going into another realm,” inviting the



Fig. 9. Sandra Lerner, *Distant Universe* (2010), oil and mixed media on canvas, 28" x 59".

viewer to transcend individuality toward a universal interconnectedness.²⁶ This painting caught the attention of curator Barbara Rose, who then included it in a major exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1984. In a separate publication, Rose wrote on the relationships between Japanese calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism, in particular underscoring the affinities of postwar artists drawn to the act of so-called "mastering" a non-European ancient tradition while inventing a new "archaic sign language without specific literal meaning."²⁷ In *Tao III* (1980), a painting that hung independently over Betty Parsons's desk in an earlier exhibition, Lerner reversed the image of *Tao II* by placing the architectonic form in the uppermost right section, metaphorically completing the spiral; the symbolic door reappears on the lower right corner in the later *Infinite Realm* (1987), as two centrally-positioned "windows" once again absorb the viewer in empty space while heavy surface impasto accumulates around the painting's edges.

Addressing her own intuitive emanation of creativity in relation to structure and space, Lerner wrote: "I leave untouched the ghost of what was there, but add the reality of the present."²⁸ Here, in *The Inland Sea Series*, and in her later series, *Breath*, Lerner realized the dynamic aesthetic and cosmological relationships underlying the philosophical systems of Chinese landscape painting and Taoism, poetically explained as the notion of emptiness in the semiotic study by François Cheng called *Empty and Full*.²⁹ Cheng's pictorial analysis considers emptiness as an intermediary or reciprocal link between the circulatory poles of nature, or transitional elements and phenomena, such as mountains, waters, or clouds, and as an integral embodiment of the "unifying action of breath-spirit."³⁰ In Lerner's scroll-like *Breath VI* (1999), emptiness's role is akin to calligraphy's engagement as a temporal and spatial conduit bridging floating spheres and

winding lines.³¹ As an active participant, moreover, emptiness's dependency on the rhythmic flux of the yang (light) and yin (darkness), and by extension the active (male) and passive (female) principles, is equally measured by its corollary opposite, fullness. Cheng writes: "Emptiness introduces discontinuity and reversibility into a given system and thus permits the elements composing the system to transcend rigid opposition At the same time, emptiness offers ... the possibility of approaching the universe at the level of totality."³² Yet emptiness is also signified in the Taoist ontological search for origins as a state of non-being or nothingness before the creation of heaven and earth.³³ In its discontinuous and misshapen segments of rice paper and indexical traces of calligraphy, Lerner's *Breath VIII* (1999; Pl. 17) infers the possibilities of an impending journey through time and space. Inextricably formless and imageless, coming into existence and returning to nothingness, *Breath VIII* conjures once more Lao Tsu's *Tao Te Ching* (chapter fourteen, above).³⁴

Lerner's yearning to intuitively communicate the unfolding mysteries of the universe informed her supplementary research into the scientific language of particle physics and quantum mechanics. These theoretical investigations quantify the perception of reality and the order of the universe, from its macrocosmic boundlessness to its subatomic depths, by means of the compelling search for an "unbroken wholeness" in our understanding of time and space relationships, or what scientific philosopher David Bohm designates the "implicate or enfolded order."³⁵ Just as Lerner sought to "recall" the language or art of calligraphy without formally putting it to use (even as she was well-trained in its techniques), Lerner's own comprehension of the language of quantum theory was not explicitly mathematical in nature (although she attended scientific lectures on the subject). Again, Lerner intended her landscapes to extract the underlying ideas in modern physics'

presentation of structural matter—fundamental and universal laws (special relativity and general relativity)—and its complementary dialogues to Eastern mysticism and Taoism. *Particle Dance* (1986; Pl. 18), from the exhibition “Intimations of Infinity,” envisions the complex choreography or waltz of elemental properties or quanta at an atomic and subnuclear scale—neutrons, electrons, protons, quarks and gluons—as a dynamic field of forces, vibrations, interactions, repulsions and, most importantly, probabilities.³⁶ In essence, the term *intimation* broadly correlates with Einstein’s overriding research into a unified field theory of the universe to mutually relate Newtonian laws of the physical world, our predictable, measurable, and controllable observations of external matter and reactions, for example in gravitational force, and the incompatible and contradictory mechanics of structural phenomena on both cosmic and ultramicroscopic realms.

The probabilities, uncertainties or “hidden variables” implicit in quantum mechanics are touched upon in Lerner’s monumental triptych *The Particle and the Wave* (1993–96; Pl. 19), vertically hung as a scroll, from the series Particle Physics. Lerner’s suggestion of oscillating energy traversing separate spatial fields or spheres may be loosely characterized as the dualistic properties of light (photons) as both particles and waves: the motion of light is manifest through an articulation of constantly jostling wavelengths, frequencies and interference patterns, equating the maximum amplitude or height of its peaks, and depths of its troughs. Lerner’s undulating patterns, flat, roughened and exaggerated, animate wavelength’s modulations. Yet the primary mysteries on this subatomic level further intimate that the discontinuous routes or “infinity of trajectories” embodied by particles in motion might be in fact extrapolated as “conscious” behavior on the part of the subatomic elements in response to environmental factors or observation.³⁷ Analogous to Lerner’s interest in the precept of emptiness, such probabilities or “tendencies to exist” relate the metaphysical “study of the structure of consciousness” to quantum physics, correlating our observations of reality and our inability to observe the world objectively without influencing it.³⁸

Lerner’s enduring exploration of the fabric of the universe gave rise to her series Mystic Realms (2004) and Parallel Universes (2010), paintings whose titles and compositions, for example in *Cosmic Realm I*, *Ripple I*, and *Distant Universe* (all 2010; Fig. 9), offer expansive visual models of the vibrational patterns, “loops of energy,” and multi-dimensions encompassing string theory, research which stemmed, partly, from Einstein’s continual search to find an “all-encompassing” framework to express the unified workings of time and space.³⁹ *Regeneration*, *Causation*, *Ultimate Reality*, and *Membranes and Strings* (all 2004; Fig. 10) pensively invoke string theory as it directly builds upon Einstein’s formulation that both space and time warp and curve in relation to the presence of matter and energy, according to physicist Brian Greene, positing a picture of the “microscopic landscape” replete with “distortions,” folded or “tightly curved” strings, oscillating, twisting, vibrating, and resonating, and affecting the “evolution of the cosmos.”⁴⁰ For Lerner, physics provided the

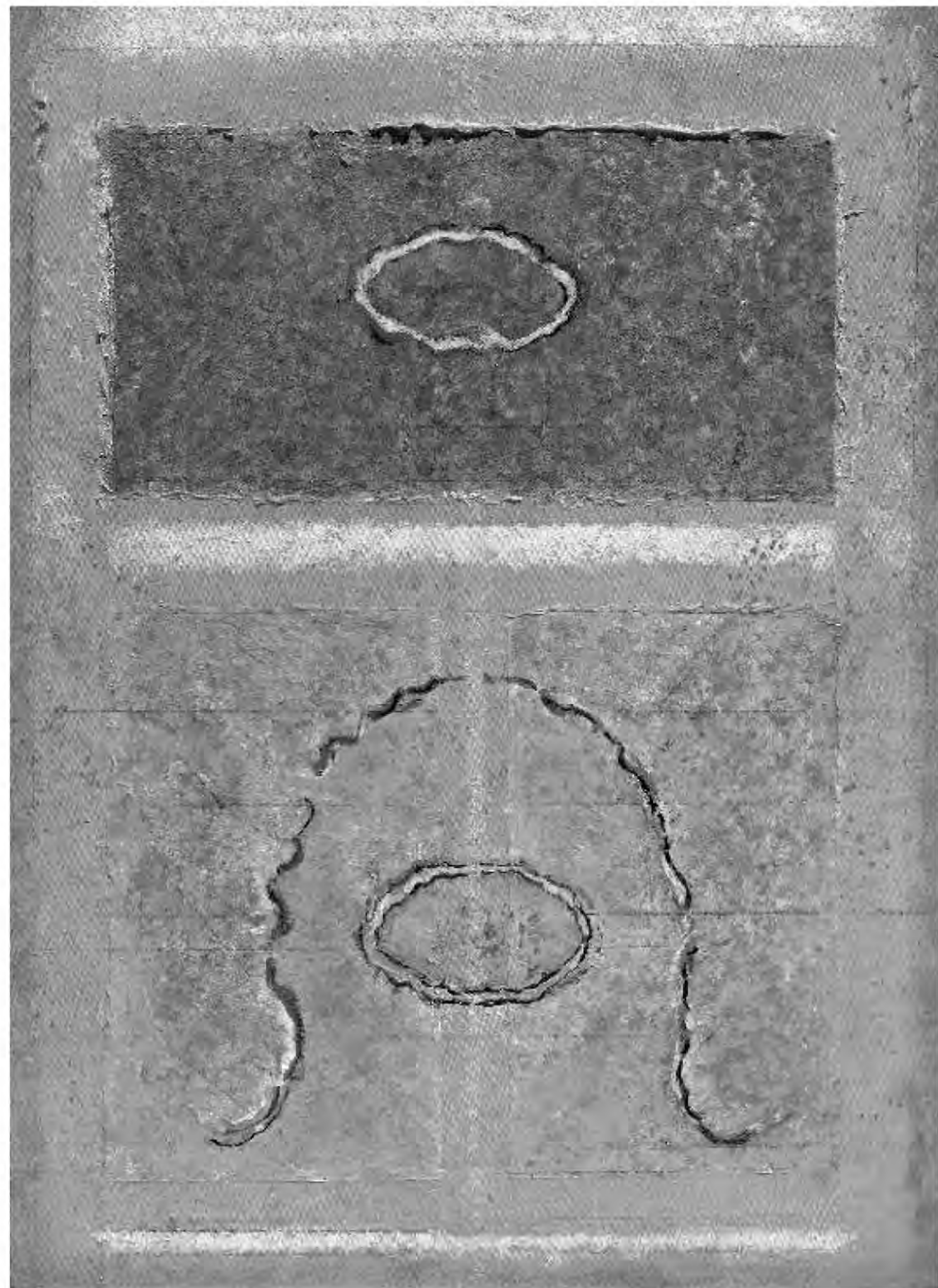


Fig. 10. Sandra Lerner, *Membranes and Strings* (2004), oil and mixed media on canvas, 44" x 32".

theoretical tools to envision time and space as an illusory matrix, without divisions or empty spaces yet filled with parallel universes.⁴¹ Extending these inherent concepts of physics to Buddhist meditational systems, her geometric and architectonic images also mirror mandalic expressions of sacred space, rendering once again her symbolic lexicon of doors, gates, thresholds, fixed points, yantras, and stupas, to achieve a oneness and wholeness of reality through what appears to be an antithetical process of “emptying” everything.⁴²

Lerner’s most recent landscape series Flux/Space (2015; Pl. 20) parallels her own creative flux and that of the universe in its ever-changing patterns, surging waves, and horizontal vistas. She conceives of her art as a journey—spiritual, psychological and physical—that begins with a simple calligraphic line in space; the line develops to take one to a purer realm of being. The viewer’s role is to finish the journey and the narrative. Referring to the repetitive elements in her landscapes as the “mystic spiral,” Lerner’s own hybridized language, merging metaphysics and Taoism, calligraphy and gesturalism, has continually evolved throughout her career. Her singular contribution to abstraction and spirituality that

began with her Tao Series has since developed into a comprehensive visualization on the echoes and resonances of the universe. •

Aliza Edelman worked closely with painter Sandra Lerner to investigate asian spiritualism as it is expressed in Lerner's art. Edelman writes of Lerner's production as "an unfolding spiritual journey expressing her continual encounter and dialogue with models of wholeness and the nature of reality."

Joan Marter and Margaret Barlow
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Aliza Edelman's recent publications include "Departing the Plane: Charmion von Wiegand's Otherworldly Abstractions of the 1950s," in *American Women Artists, 1935-1970—Gender, Culture, and Politics*, edited by Helen Langa and Paula Wisotzki, and artist biographies in *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, edited by Joan Marter (both 2016).

Notes

1. Lao Tsu, "Chapter Fourteen," *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (1972; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1997), np. The *Tao Te Ching* has innumerable translations and commentaries, but Lerner has referred primarily to the earlier version above.
2. Lerner, interview with the author, Jan. 22, 2016, New York. In her discussion of "oneness" and "multiplicity," Lerner was informed early on by the philosopher W.T. Stace, known as a "perennialist," whose controversial writings on mystical experiences across cultures and historical periods was defined through an extrovertive and introvertive approach to achieve pure consciousness and unity in the world. See Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961).
3. Calligraphy arrived in Japan from China in the fifth and sixth centuries, and over time was adapted and expanded to accompany a complex grammatical and phonetic writing system, incorporating forty thousand Chinese characters and two Japanese syllabaries (*hiragana* and *katakana*). Fundamentally, however, there are five basic styles of Chinese script utilized by traditional calligraphers (Seal, Clerical, Standard, Semicursive, and Cursive). Lerner has discussed her interest in the eminent Japanese Zen calligrapher and teacher Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768).
4. See Yoshiaki Shimizu and John M. Rosenfield, "Introduction," in *Masters of Japanese Calligraphy: 8th–19th Century*, exh. cat. (New York: Japan House Gallery and The Asia Society Galleries, 1984), 11.
5. Distinction between artistic calligraphy or *sho* and formal calligraphy is discussed in Aoyama San'ū, "Sho—Artistic, Creative Calligraphy," in *Words in Motion: Modern Japanese Calligraphy*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shimbun, in association with The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (1984), 26–29. In his essay "The Role of Calligraphy in Japanese Society," Stephen Addiss writes, "Although many of the characters were originally derived from a pictorialized shape, they do not have a direct representation function, but serve as abstractions, requiring their own sense of balanced movement within the confines of a predetermined configuration of lines and empty space." *Ibid.*, 30.
6. J.J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformation of Taoist Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 12.
7. See also David J. Clarke, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture* (New York: Garland, 1988); and Alexandra Munroe, introduction to *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: The Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 21–33.
8. See Charmion von Wiegand, "The Oriental Tradition and Abstract Art," in *The World of Abstract Art*, ed. American Abstract Artists (New York: George Wittenborn Inc., 1957), 55–67.
9. See Alan W. Watts, *The Spirit of Zen: A Way of Life, Work and Art in the Far East* (New York: Grove Press, 1958); Eugen Herrigel, with an introduction by D.T. Suzuki, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (1948; repr., New York: Pantheon, 1953).
10. See Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (1975; repr., Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2010). Lerner followed the teachings of religious thinker Jiddu Krishnamurti, and in the 1990s attended courses at the Tibet House with Indo-Tibetan scholar Robert Thurman.
11. Lerner won the Benjamin Altman (Landscape) Prize from the National Academy of Design for *Transcendent Landscape* in 1972, and the Anne Eisner Putnam Memorial Prize from the National Association of Women Artists in 1973.
12. Malcolm Preston, "Review: Tao and cubism," *Newsday* (April 10, 1976), II.
13. See Jeanne Paris, "Review [Pleiades Gallery, NY]: Oriental philosophy inspires artist," *Long Island Press* (Oct. 26, 1975), 20. An earlier exhibition of paintings and collages held at Central Hall Gallery in 1974 was called "The Ambiguity of Subconscious Vision," and included works with titles such as *Primal Beginnings III* (1972).
14. Lerner, interview with the author, Jan. 22, 2016.
15. In his review "It's Spring in Connecticut, and New Talent Blooms," *New York Times* (May 9, 1976), critic John Canaday clearly prized *Tao Series IV* (1975) in the group show "Contemporary Reflections" at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, CT. Consequently, the Aldrich Museum purchased for its collection *Tao Series III* (1976), shown in "Selections from the Collections 1978: New Acquisitions, Gifts and Loans."
16. On the relationships between Abstract Expressionism and Far Eastern influences, see Stanley K. Abe, "To Avoid the Inscrutable: Abstract Expressionism and the 'Oriental Mode,'" in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge: The MIT Press 2006), 52–72; Bert Winter-Tamaki, "The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics," in *The Third Mind*, ed. Munroe, 145–57; and Jeffrey Wechsler, ed. *Asian Traditions, Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945–1970* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, in association with the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1997).
17. Sandra Lerner, "Statement of Plans," unpublished notes, p. 2, n.d., Sandra Lerner Archives. On the ambivalent relationships between women's creativity and authorship in connection to power and sexuality, see Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. B. Wing (1975; repr., Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney and Carol J. Singley, *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narratives by Women* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993).
18. It is interesting to note here Greenberg's rejection of the Oriental mode of painting in Morris Graves and Mark Tobey versus the technical and urban prowess of Pollock arguably derived from Cubism in his "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, ed. John O'Brian (1947; repr., Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), 160–70.
19. The tragic loss of her third child in 1964 was a pivotal factor in her decision to devote herself to her art full-time. Lerner, interview with the author, Jan. 22, 2016.

20. From 1976–86, Lerner advocated for the arts in New York State as a Consultant for the New York State Senate Special Committee on the Arts.
21. In New York City, Kampo Harada established the Kampo Culture Center, a primary resource for students to learn calligraphy techniques and Eastern philosophy. See Kampo Harada and Nihon Shūjikyōiku Renmei, *Calligraphy: The Art of Kampo Harada* (Fukuoka-City, Japan: Nippon Shuji Educational Federation, 1973); and M.J. Sullivan and Kampo Harada, *Japanese Calligraphy: Practice, Learning and Art, A General Instruction* (Kyoto: Japan Calligraphy Education Foundation, 1989).
22. See Lowery Sims, "Sandra Lerner: A Review," in *Sandra Lerner—Inland Sea Series*, exh. cat. (New York: Betty Parsons Gallery, 1982). See also, Valerie Natsios, "Gallery Reviews," *New York Arts Journal*, no. 24 (Jan. 1982); Renée Phillips, "The Artist's Long Journey Into Himself," *Artspeak* 3, no. 15 (Feb. 4, 1982); and David Shirley, "Glimpses of What's Current," *New York Times* (June 20, 1982).
23. Lerner expressed an interest in the landscapes of the Southern Sung painter Ma Yuan (active ca. 1190–1225), in addition to those by Japanese artist Sesshū Tōyō (1420–1526), famous for his use of monochrome ink, who was also influenced by Sung dynasty painting. Lerner, interview with the author, June 15, 2016.
24. As Wen C. Fong writes, "In landscape painting, the governing principle of the universe may be intuited, or divined, through the perception of correlative patterns and archetypal forms." In Fong, "Monumental Landscape Painting," in *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, ed. Wen C. Fong and James C.Y. Watt (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and National Palace Museum, Taipei), 124, 130.
25. As the Daoist scholar Chang Chung-yuan reflected, "When Lao Tsu calls *Tao* the Great, or Mother of All Things, he means that *Tao* is the primordial source of every beginning and every end. It is the realm from which all birth issues forth and to which all death returns. It is all embracing, far reaching, never ceasing, yet it is the realm of the unknown; so it is called nonbeing;" Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 35.
26. Lerner, interview with the author, Jan. 22, 2016.
27. Curator Barbara Rose included *Tao II* (1981) in the important group exhibition "Miró in America," held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (April 21–June 27, 1982). See also, Rose, "Japanese Calligraphy and American Abstract Expressionism," in *Words in Motion: Modern Japanese Calligraphy*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shimbun, in association with The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1984), 39.
28. Lerner, cited in press release, Betty Parsons Gallery, "Inland Sea Series," Jan. 26–Feb. 13, 1982.
29. François Cheng, a Chinese-born, French academic writer and poet, wrote the popular book *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, trans. Michael H. Kohn (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1994).
30. These ideas are formulated in the guiding principles of the ancient Chinese text *The I Ching, or The Book of Changes*, which uses hexagrams and trigrams to express the complex interplay of natural elements and male and female forces. See Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching, or Book of Changes*, trans. Cary F. Baynes, with foreword by C.G. Jung, Bollingen Series 19 (1950; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967).
31. The series *Breath* was shown in the exhibition "Empty and Full" at June Kelly Gallery (Dec. 2, 1999–Jan. 4, 2000).
32. Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, 36.
33. *Ibid.*, 43.
34. Lerner has created large paintings on canvas utilized as sets by the renowned Japanese avant-garde performers Eiko & Koma, whose extensive body of work encompasses dance, theater, sculpture, installation, and video. See Joan Ruthfuss, ed., *Eiko & Koma: time is not even, space is not empty* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2011).
35. David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 1980) was a seminal book for Lerner that discussed scientific parallels between physics and philosophical systems.
36. Lerner's exhibition *Intimations of Infinity* was held at the Peter Fingesten Art Gallery, Pace University (Oct. 6–30, 1987).
37. Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, 12–14. Another important book for Lerner was Brian Greene's *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 110.
38. Carl Jung's articulation of the principle of synchronicity was a new way of "conceptualizing reality" beyond Western ideas that complemented modern scientific theories on relativity and quantum physics, and suggested further parallels to Eastern thought. See J.J. Clarke, *Jung and Eastern Thought: A Dialogue with the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1994). See also the classic book by Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics* (1979; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 31–35.
39. Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*, viii, xi.
40. *Ibid.*, 18, 135, 143.
41. See Donald Kuspit, "Mystic Realms: New Paintings," exh. cat. (New York: June Kelly Gallery, 2004), 1–2.
42. See Martin Brauen, *Mandala, Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, in association with the Arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart, 2009).

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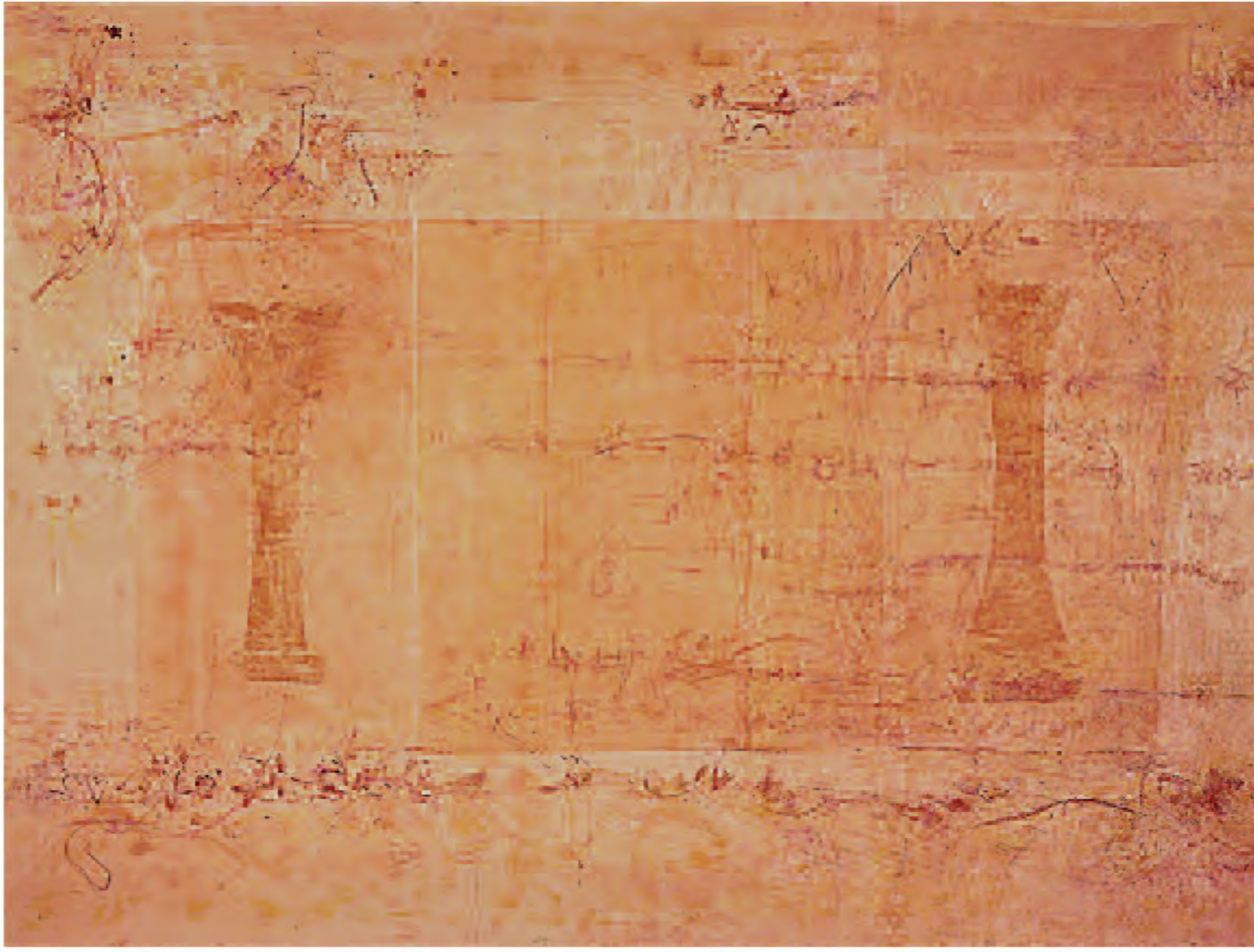
Sandra Lerner is represented by:

June Kelly Gallery

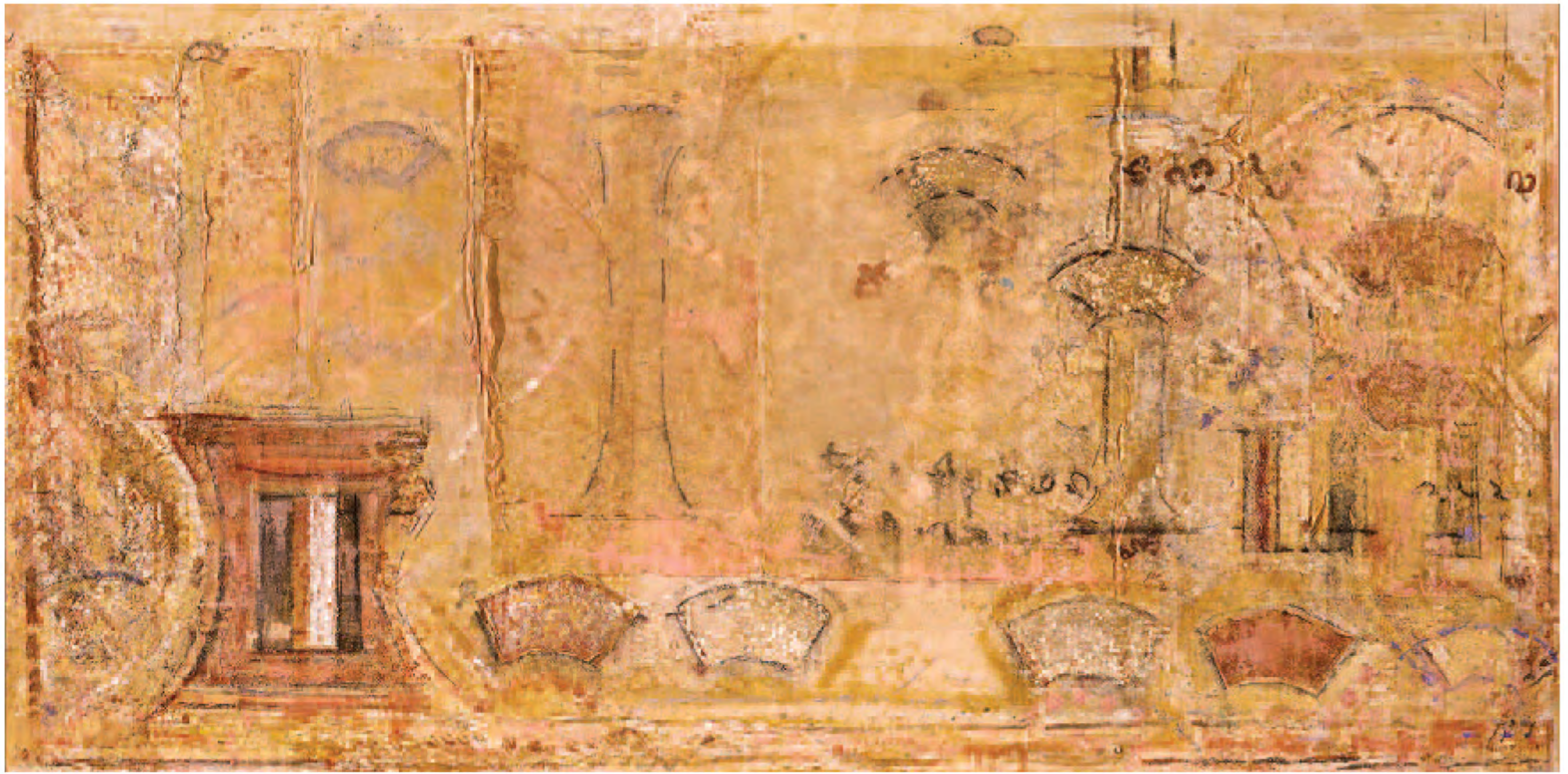
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Pl. 13. Sandra Lerner,
Tao Series IV (1975),
oil and mixed media
on canvas, 90" x 120".
Private Collection.



Pl. 14.
Sandra Lerner,
Echoes (1989),
oil and mixed
media on canvas,
55" x 108".
Private Collection.



Pl. 15. Sandra Lerner, *Matsushima* (1981), oil and mixed media
on canvas, 70" x 70". Private Collection.



Pl. 16. Sandra Lerner, *Tao II* (1981), oil and mixed media on
canvas, 88" x 85 1/2". Private Collection.

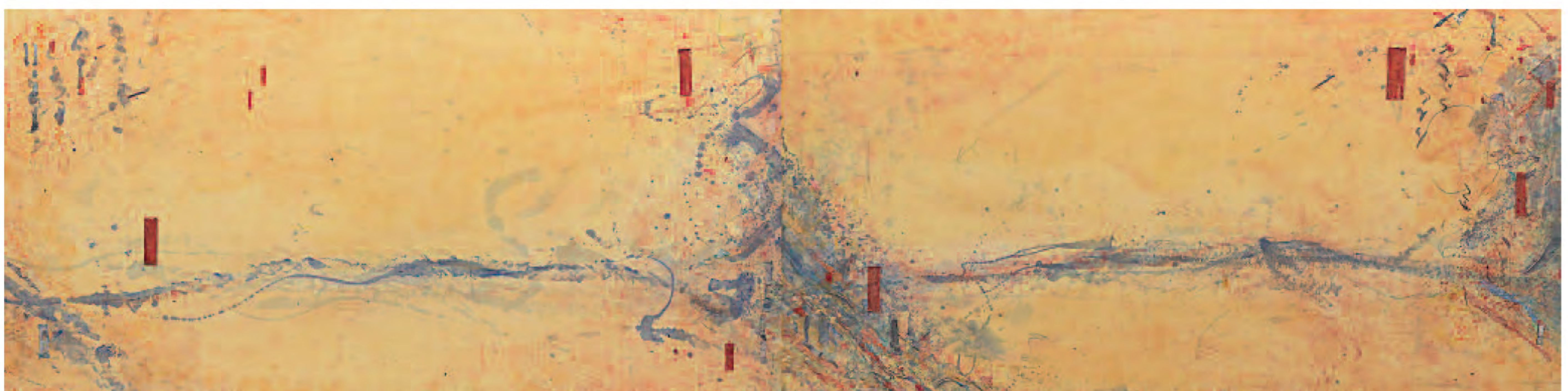


Pl. 17. Sandra Lerner, *Breath VIII* (1999), oil and mixed media on canvas, 78" x 139".

Pl. 18. Sandra Lerner, *Particle Dance* (1986), oil and mixed media on canvas, 72" x 96". Private Collection.



Pl. 19. Sandra Lerner, *The Particle and the Wave* (1993-96), triptych, oil and mixed media on canvas, 84" x 282".



Pl. 20. Sandra Lerner, *Flux/Space I* (2015), diptych, oil and mixed media on canvas, 34" x 134".