

ANDREW COWELL

Surface and Depth

Terry Maker's Theology of Matter

WALKING INTO TERRY MAKER'S SHOW at the Fort Collins Art Museum last fall, I was immediately struck by a feeling of entering a sacred space. The rooms were filled with monumental artifacts, many of which echoed Gothic triptychs. More than a collection of individual artifacts, the show was a single, comprehensive work. The more time one spent there, the richer the conversation between viewer and work became.

I was especially struck by two adjacent pieces. *Fracture*, a three-dimensional surface carved in graphite, was placed beside a two-dimensional rubbing of the same piece, *Fracture Drawing (Yellow)*. Where the paper had touched the surface of the carving, it was light yellow-orange; where the carving had deep striations, the rubbings were black, with edges of a slightly different color, giving the slightest three-dimensional effect. It evoked a canvas torn or slashed with a knife. Behind that canvas, in the black nothings, was a world of three-dimensional depth, perhaps holding profound secrets—as if one could glimpse other layers of existence behind the fragile surface of life. Perhaps that tenuous surface need only be rent to reveal what lies beyond.

In contrast, the graphite piece was heavily insistent on its three-dimensionality. A deep, perfectly circular groove was carved around the outer edge—perhaps playfully suggesting a 33 record. (The many circles echoing through the exhibit contributed to the sense of a unified whole.) In contrast to the smooth regularity of the outer circle, the interior is marred by a brutal gash—a straight line that contrasts markedly with the curves that dominated the exhibit as a whole. *Fracture* seems like a retort to the rubbing beside it: the quotidian may be a surface, it says, but it has depth, hardness, and resistance. Reality is no fragile surface we can simply pierce at will to glimpse the revelations beneath; one must cut and dig deep into that hard surface



Terry Maker. *Fracture Drawing (Yellow)*, 2022.
Graphite and Prismacolor on paper. 24 x 24 inches.



music would be so delicately, heartrendingly human as to move one to tears. I do not mean to suggest that Maker intended anything as specific as what I've described, but pop tunes playing millions of years in the future and trillions of miles from earth are a good metaphor for the effect her graphite surface produces: It simultaneously evokes the profound and the trivial, while recognizing that even trivial efforts at human expression are miraculous in their own right—and the physical depth of the carvings in the hard graphite suggests just how much effort such expression requires.

Along with astronomy, Maker's work borrows from biology, physics, chemistry, and—perhaps most importantly—geology. The three images titled *Vinyl (Blue)*, *Vinyl (Blue-White)*, and *Vinyl (Red-Yellow)* initially resemble explosions or supernovas, with rays of color radiating outward from a literal hole in the center of each piece. I'm reminded of the black holes that develop at the centers of massive star explosions. The images feature bursts of rigidly linear light—gamma ray bursts of color—against a black background. Looking more closely, that black background is not smooth: there are raised lines exploding out from the center hole. We discover, on reading the wall caption, that these are in fact made from stacks of old vinyl records glued together, then cut into cross sections with a bandsaw.

Geologists classify metamorphic rock (as opposed to igneous or sedimentary rock, for example) as rock that has been laid down by eruption or explosion, usually in flat layers, then gradually buried under more and more overburden until it is transformed by pressure. Heated, twisted, and chemically transformed, it becomes a different type of rock: limestone becomes marble; granite becomes gneiss and schist; graphite produces diamonds.

Maker's vinyl records undergo a similar process. They are crushed, mashed, and ground into fragments before being incorporated into her work—alongside studio dust, jawbreakers, old shoes, drinking straws, and more. Like metamorphic rock, Maker's work transforms original raw materials into something completely different in form, function and meaning—a powerful physical *mise en abyme* of the artistic process itself.

Happily, the Fort Collins exhibit included video of Maker at her metamorphic work. My wife, on watching it, was amazed at the sheer physical labor involved. One comes away with an impression of human artistic creation as something titanic, gargantuan, almost geologic in scope and effort. The vinyl records are the perfect grist for the metaphor—flat objects, lying one on top of the other like so many layers of sediment, then crushed and congealed by Maker into an extremely hard, rigid medium fit to bear the streaking imprints of cosmic rays.

Just when all this might begin to seem self-serious, one remembers that it's all Barry Manilow and the Bee Gees and Madonna and Buddy Holly and the Monkees. Because as soon as you know it's made of old records, you have to ask, which records? What music is hidden in there? It turns out that Maker sources her records cheaply from thrift stores, keeps what she wants to listen to, and uses the rest—mostly pop

with powerful volition. Only an act of audacious assault by the artist can begin to reach those deeper layers.

Seen in this light, the two juxtaposed pieces—complementary components of the same image—turn out to be in tension, espousing opposite philosophies and conveying opposite aesthetic sensations. Amid this almost cosmic tension, I return to the hint of a graphite record in that round outer cut. The jagged inner cut loosely mimics—in gesture, if not in shape—the tiny sound grooves cut into an LP when seen enlarged. This connection may seem odd, but playful allusions to consumer products in general and records in particular appear throughout Maker's work. The overall effect is of a rapid, delicate, sweeping movement—a harmonic oscillation—between the mundane and the cosmic.

For me, these two pieces, especially *Fracture*, recall the so-called Golden Record placed on the two Voyager spacecraft in 1977 when they were sent to explore the outer solar system and beyond. I share this admittedly far-fetched association because it gives an allegorical feel for Maker's work.

Traveling into the deepest reaches of space in search of the secrets of the universe, the two Voyager spacecraft carry records which, if ever played, will produce the strains of Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode," among other music. Can anything more literally cosmic yet also more trivial be imagined? In the vastness of space, that

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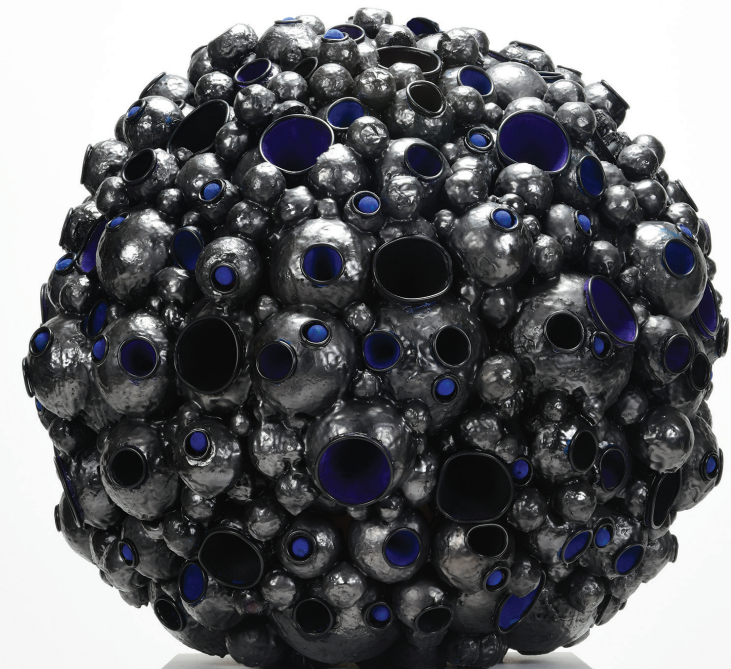
from the seventies and eighties—for her art. Taking this in, the mind makes a series of vertiginous swoops, from hundred-million-year geological processes to bubblegum pop, to wondering how that music fits into the grand scheme of the universe, back to cosmic supernovas, and on to wondering whether any of those records include Elton John’s “Rocket Man” or maybe Gustav Holst’s *The Planets*.

Emotional and intellectual leaps, whirls, rapid expansions and contractions, and unexpected connections are the essence of Maker’s work. Over and over in her art one finds a subtle, ever-shifting balance of reactions and impressions that oscillate between the sublime and mundane—and ask us to think more carefully about the beauty and fragility of that “mundane.” Maker’s art is a powerful example of the cosmification of our own dust: in it, we see our literal and figurative detritus take its place in a vast universe. Viewed properly, the work invites us to contemplate the spiritual dimensions of our own existence, and to rethink and revalue the dust we produce—to realize the heroic profundity of our existence, if only we can see deeply and clearly enough and recognize the potential for metamorphosis that lies around us.

Looking for antecedents, I go back to the late work of Piet Mondrian (one of the most spiritual of modern artists), such as *Jazz* and *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Seen from one perspective, the latter is a purely abstract arrangement of colored squares, deeply monumental and philosophical. Yet as the famous critic Robert Hughes observed, it also looks like nothing less than the streets of New York City from on high, with cars and taxis beetling along, shuffling people to work, grocery stores, and the movies. The mundane and the philosophical intertwine in a way that is both profound and exuberant. With its polar oscillations, Maker’s art, for me, works in this same broad tradition.

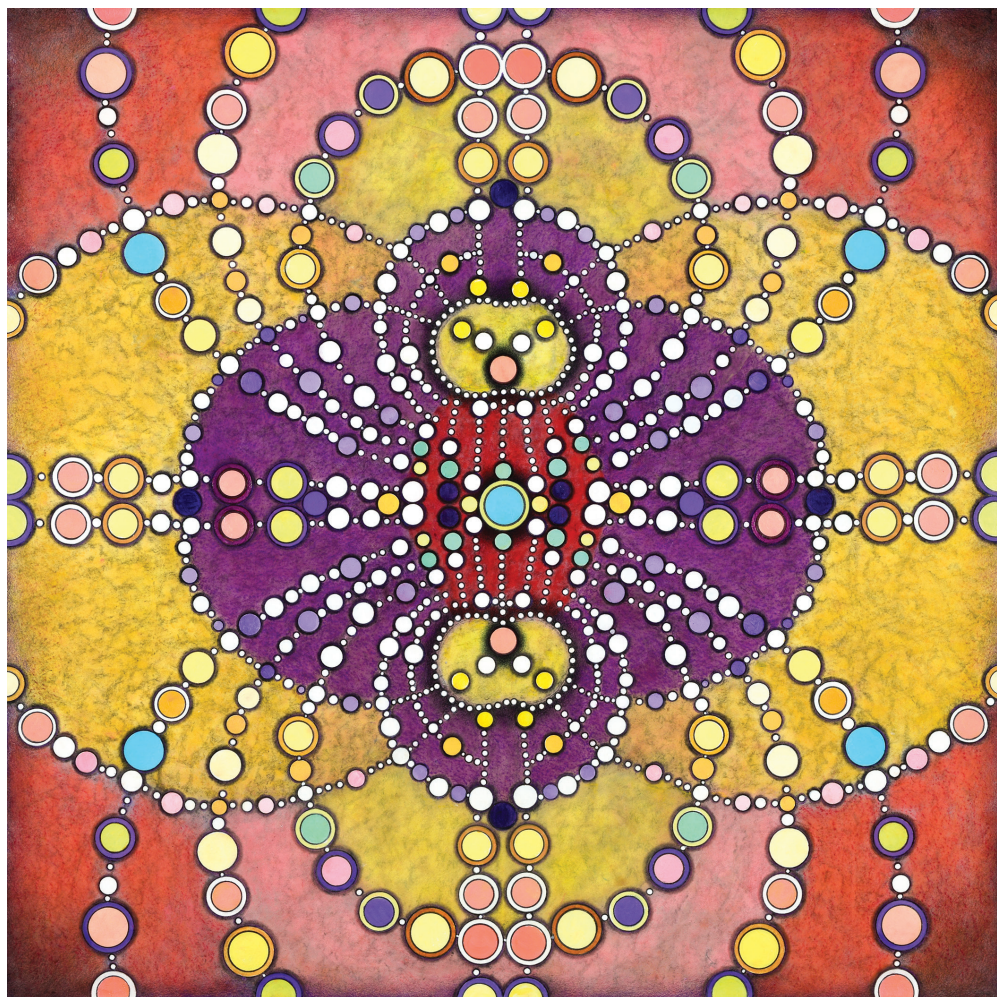
While the dizzying tension and immense philosophical scope of Maker’s art rely in part on the ironic resonance between commercial products and the cosmic scale of geology or astronomy, this is not the only polarity at work. She also borrows imagery from science at a more human scale. A set of works near the entrance of the exhibit—two titled *Gulp* and two titled *Diviner*—are her most explicitly biological. They feature numerous circles of various sizes, many with smaller circles set inside larger ones. They evoke blood cells circulating through the body, or cells and their nuclei and mitochondria. One could also imagine chemical metaphors—atoms and molecules combining. Bubbling and effervescence are—for a moment—the primary effect.

But all of Maker’s art has a stately, monumental quality as well: a calmness, an order. *Field Lines* is a gorgeous series of works whose curved lines in blue, purple, and copper faithfully trace the patterns of electromagnetic fields. This strikes me as a celebration of the invisible underlying forces that shape our world, here rendered visible as dazzling outlines—made of crushed scientific papers, no less. (To make the paper mulch she uses as a substrate, she accepts cast-off documents from scientist friends, who sometimes joke that they can glimpse their work in hers.) The more

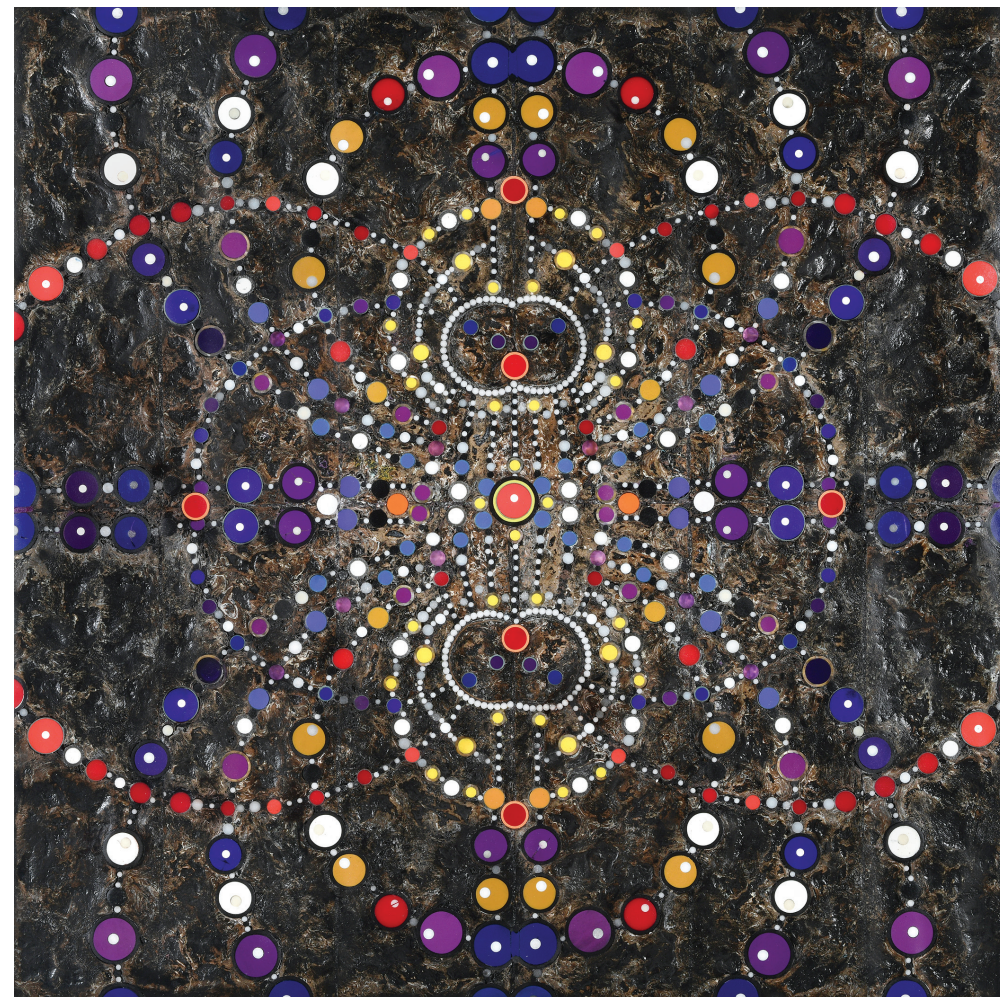


Terry Maker. *Drawn from Dust Cut*, 2023. Acrylic and Prismacolor on paper. 84 x 84 inches.

Terry Maker. *Dust Ball*, 2023. Foam substrate, flocked Dixie Cups, balls. 46 x 27 x 27 inches.



Terry Maker. **Field Line Drawing (Purple)**, 2023.
Acrylic and Prismacolor on paper. 48 x 48 inches



Terry Maker. **Field Lines (Purple)**, 2023. Compacted, shredded science documents, resin, powdered graphite. 48 x 48 x 4 inches.



I M A G E : A R T , F A I T H , M Y S T E R Y

biological works like *Gulp* and *Diviner* are interesting to contemplate next to the field line works. The juxtaposition makes the myriad circles appear galaxy-like—like deep-space pictures from the Hubble space telescope. The attention to forces and fields reminds the viewer, as they turn and look at the bubbling spheres on the opposite wall, that the same laws govern our universe from molecular to galactic levels. The same physics explains everything from the charges on atoms to the formation of stars.

Circles reappear constantly in Maker's work—now evoking atoms, molecules, or cells; now planets, stars, or even the Big Bang; now as literal records, jawbreaker candies, the ends of drinking straws, or glorified spitballs of wadded paper. They are never one single thing, always undergoing transformation, always holding multiple identities—and yet their overall arrangement leaves an impression of sacred potential harnessed within sacred calm.

My favorite piece in the exhibition was *Spiral*, a large image that had a wall to itself. Most of Maker's pieces occur in groups and series, especially triptychs, but *Spiral* is one of a kind. It features a small circle of multicolored rings, surrounded by increasingly larger circles arranged in rings, then tapering down again, then topped off by an enormous circle of vibrant colors. The material is jawbreaker candy of different sizes, all cut to reveal their colorful cross sections. The wall text mentions the problem of desire and patience—the time necessary to work one's way through a jawbreaker. Fulfillment is deferred, and the deferral is turned into a line of waxing and waning jawbreakers.

The overall effect is like that of a main sequence star chart, which shows the varying brightness and color of developing stars. Or perhaps one could imagine the life of a single star, from formation to full burn to burnout, ending in brown dwarfs, white dwarfs, or neutron stars—or, as the uppermost glorious circle suggests, a supernova of massive force and energy. Here as elsewhere in Maker's work, the art evokes a moment of explosion. But explosions are also moments of creation—in supernovae and elsewhere. Likewise, the crushing destruction of metamorphosis is also the rebirth of material in richer and more interesting forms.

Yet, remember, this is all just a bunch of jawbreakers! Whenever Maker's pieces might threaten to become pretentious or tendentious, their materiality intervenes to pull the rug out through irony and humor. And yet the humor does not foreclose deeper layers of meaning. There is more at work here than merely postmodern irony.

Maker reworks mundane material into compositional designs that render them both humane (in the most sympathetic sense of that word) and sacred. It is in this balance and oscillation between the sacred and humane—with both simultaneously visible, thanks to each other—that Maker's work can be seen as fundamentally Christian in inspiration. Just as the divine was and is expressed in human form, and the human bears a spark of the divine, the most cosmic forces of the universe are expressed through dust and detritus, and that dust is sacralized through transformation.

Terry Maker. *Spiral*, 2023. Compacted, shredded science documents, resin, jawbreakers, powdered graphite. 59½ x 36 x 3¼ inches.