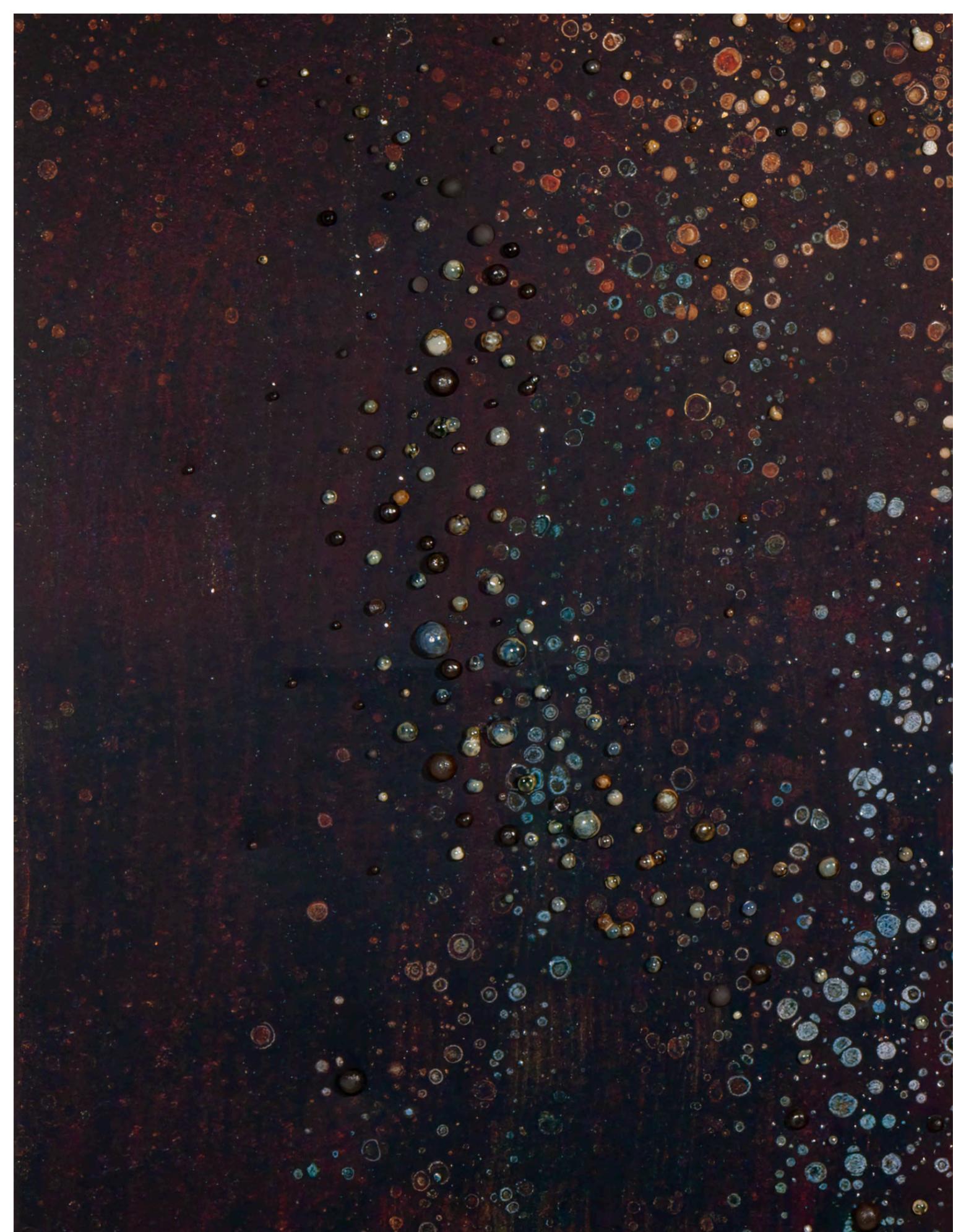


LEILA HELLER.

COSMIC DANCE

by DIAZ & HENGST



“The theory of spheres is a morphological tool that allows us to grasp the exodus of the human being, from the primitive symbiosis to world-historical action in empires of global systems, as an almost coherent history of extraversion. It reconstructs the phenomenon of advanced civilization as the novel of sphere transference from the intimate minimum, the dual bubble, to the imperial maximum, which one should imagine as a monadic, round cosmos. If the exclusivity of the bubble is a lyric motif, the inclusivity of the orb is an epic one.”

—PETER SLOTERDIJK, *Bubbles: Spheres I* *

COSMIC DANCE

The Art of Celestial Fusion *by David Ebony*

Emitting an almost palpable energy, the collaborative efforts by the two artists whose works form the present exhibition, *Cosmic Dance*, might suggest the contained intensity of nuclear fusion. The large composition *Burst* (all works 2023), for instance, a striking wall-hung *assemblage*, nearly six by seven feet, is made of countless elongated, thin porcelain wedges and other elements that radiate toward the edges from a central semi-sphere, a cluster of porcelain filaments, protruding some five inches from the printed fabric surface. The stark, bifurcated background—dark gray-black on the left, and soft white on the right—add to the centrifugal force of the composition, which does, indeed, hint at the explosive energy of atomic fusion—albeit without any destructive volatility.

This work, like most of those on view, imparts a meditative vision of the cosmos—rather idealized, infinite spaces populated with myriad orbs, spheres, and hemispheres—bubble-like formations that in some way correspond to the concept of “the sphere” conceived by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk as “an enlivened space and as the imagined and virtual orb of being.” Both personal and universal, the motif of orbs and spheres in the exhibition harbors a personal meaning for the artists as it effectively serves to convey the epic grandeur of the universe.

The visionary objects and images in *Cosmic Dance* also reflect the artists’ personal journey together. Partners in life for twenty-seven years, and more recent collaborators in the creative process, ceramicist Antonio Diaz, and designer and installation

artist Stefan Hengst, explore space and time in multifarious ways in their collaborative enterprise. Their fresh approach to artmaking encompasses an examination of their own relationship in terms of space and time. Any single-mindedness of aim and vision naturally requires a careful consideration of the daily yin and yang duality—balance and counterbalance—of interconnecting forces in a relationship. Without a high level of cooperation and communication, any collaborative endeavor could easily devolve into a deep misunderstanding, or thrust the entire project into a cosmic Black Hole.

The duo creates mixed-media reliefs featuring Diaz’s ceramic elements affixed to printed fabric that Hengst designed, such as *Birth*. Here, an unruly cluster of highly glazed ceramic orbs and hemispheres in earthy gray, blue, and gold tones, appears to emerge in a convulsive upheaval from the central area of the composition, rising some twenty inches from the surface. The writhing ceramic globes are born of an ethereal space, a horizontally bi-furcated field of misty gray tones at the top and a terrestrial brown hue at the bottom. Wispy, gestural markings printed on the fabric enliven the entire field.

Another large composition, *Cosmic Dance*, the show’s title work, suggests a vast and dark, ethereal space punctuated by clusters of small orbs, shimmering points of light that appear to fan out in graceful arcs and curves like the innumerable stars in the Milky Way. The work entails an interactive component as some of the hemispherical shapes are magnets that can be moved about.

Collection

The viewer could thereby enact a cosmic dance, or create a galaxy of their own, perhaps. They might even imagine a cosmic house like the one Gaston Bachelard describes in his book *The Poetics of Space*.

“Thus, an immense cosmic house is a potential of every dream of houses. Winds radiate from its center, and gulls fly from its windows. A house that is as dynamic as this allows the poet to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit his house.”^o

Expand I and *Expand II* are discreet installations in which the universe can indeed inhabit the home. Each of them features one of Diaz’s free-standing ceramic sculptures of clustered bulbous shapes, with some areas glazed in 24K gold. Each of these objects is placed on a sculpture stand in front of a wall-hung panel covered in fabric printed with abstract designs. Ceramic hemispheres are attached here and there to the cloth. *Expand I* evokes a rich, earthy domain with circular touches of gold and terracotta to suggest a precious mineral deposit ensconced deep in the earth’s core. *Expand II* suggests a celestial or aquatic domain with silvery orbs and semi-spheres gamboling amidst deep blue bubbles and cerulean currents.

In some art-historical context, Diaz and Hengst’s pieces like these would seem to correspond to certain works of Germany’s ZERO Group, especially the labor-intensive, shimmering assemblage pieces and installations by artists such as Günther Uecker and Heinz Mack. In a more contemporary milieu, I could find

Diaz’s and Hengst’s works quite at home with the ceramic assemblage pieces and installations by Spanish artist Miguel Barceló, for instance.

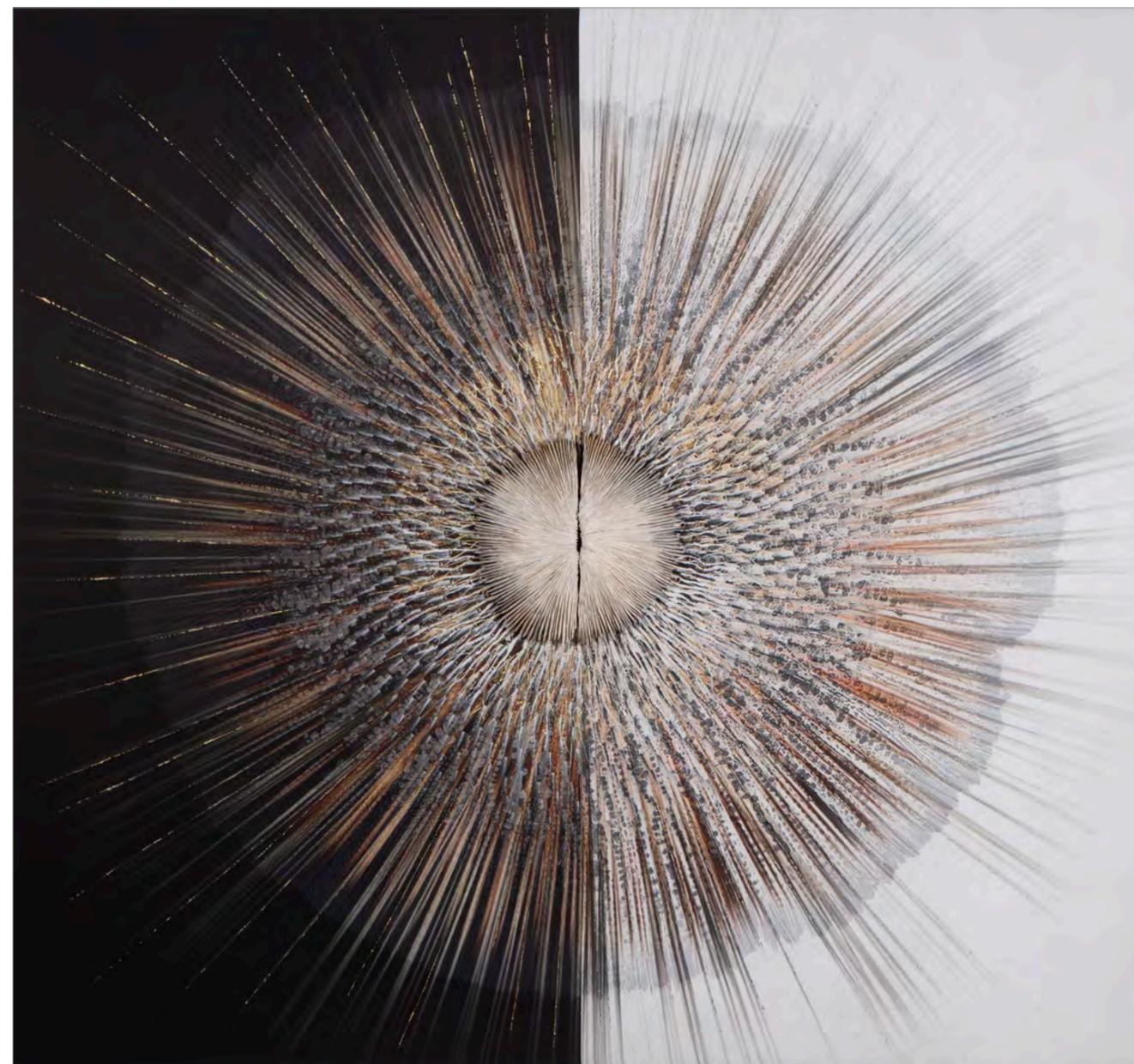
While Diaz and Hengst stay focused on their intergalactic vision throughout *Cosmic Dance*, their uniquely imaginative collaboration in works like *Weightless I* and *Weightless II* conjure, at least for me, hitherto unknown, and even unimagined spaces. *Weightless I*, with perforated ceramic orbs attached to deep blue printed fabric, resembles a view of an ocean floor populated by gently undulating sea anemones and sponges. *Weightless II* features a ghostly white background augmented with fragmented orbs of lacy white that apparently occupy a heavenly realm. This must be a place not yet observable for most human beings despite any significant technological advances. It is perhaps part of another, more inaccessible universe that is far beyond the reach of mere mortals. •

David Ebony is a Contributing Editor of *Art in America*, formerly the magazine’s Managing Editor; he is a columnist for Yale University Press online, and the author of numerous artist monographs. He lives and works in New York.

* Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres I*, Semiotext(e) / MIT Press, South Pasadena, CA, 2011, p. 67

• Ibid; p. 67.

^o Gaston Bachelard, “House and Universe” in *The Poetics of Space*, New York, Penguin, 1964, p. 74.



ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

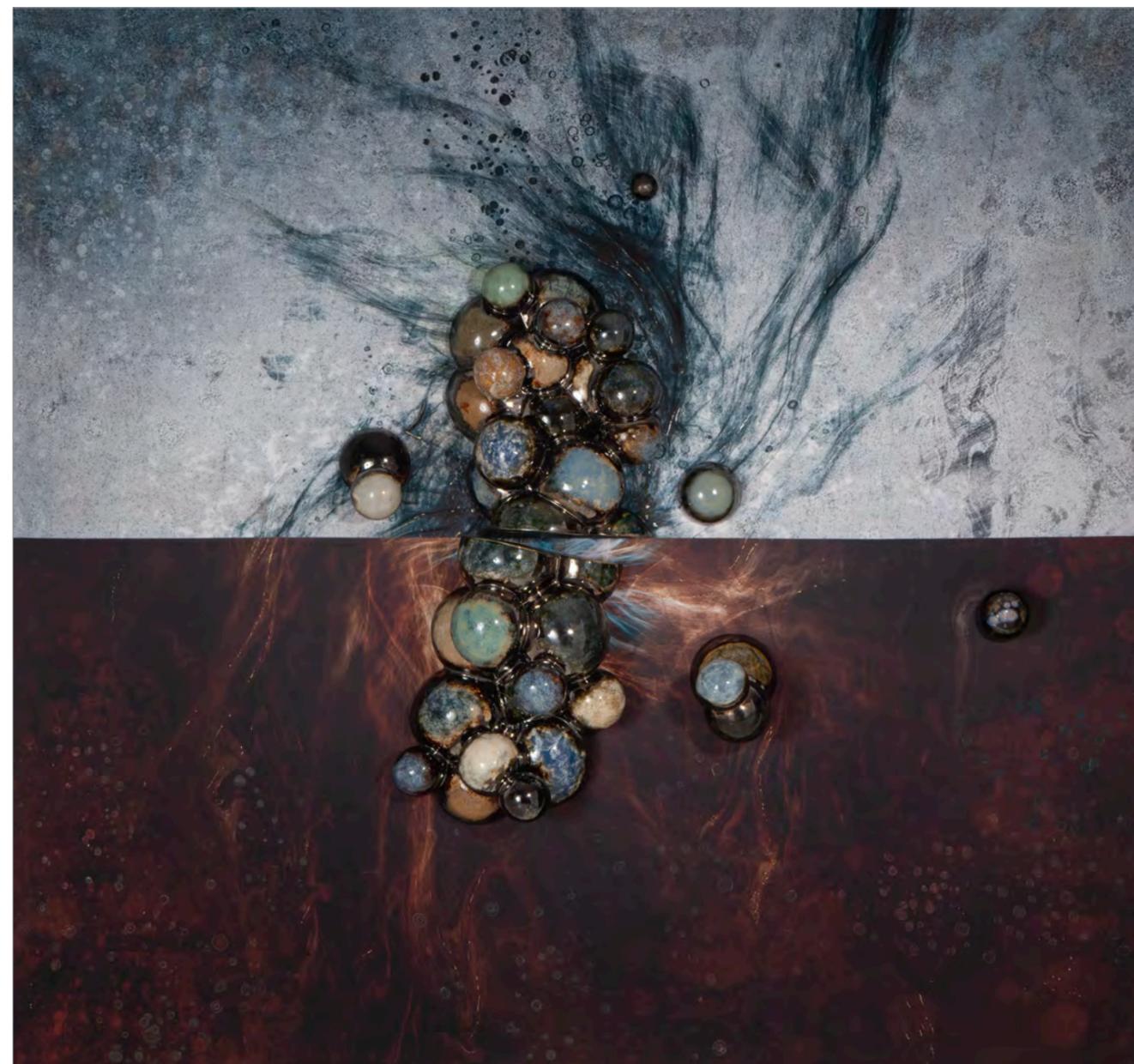
Burst, 2023

Porcelain / Printed fabric and mixed media
212 x 198 x 12.7 cm. / 83.5 x 78 x 5 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

Cosmic Dance, 2023
Ceramics / Printed fabric and mixed media
212 x 198 x 3.8 cm. / 83.5 x 78 x 1.5 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

Birth, 2023

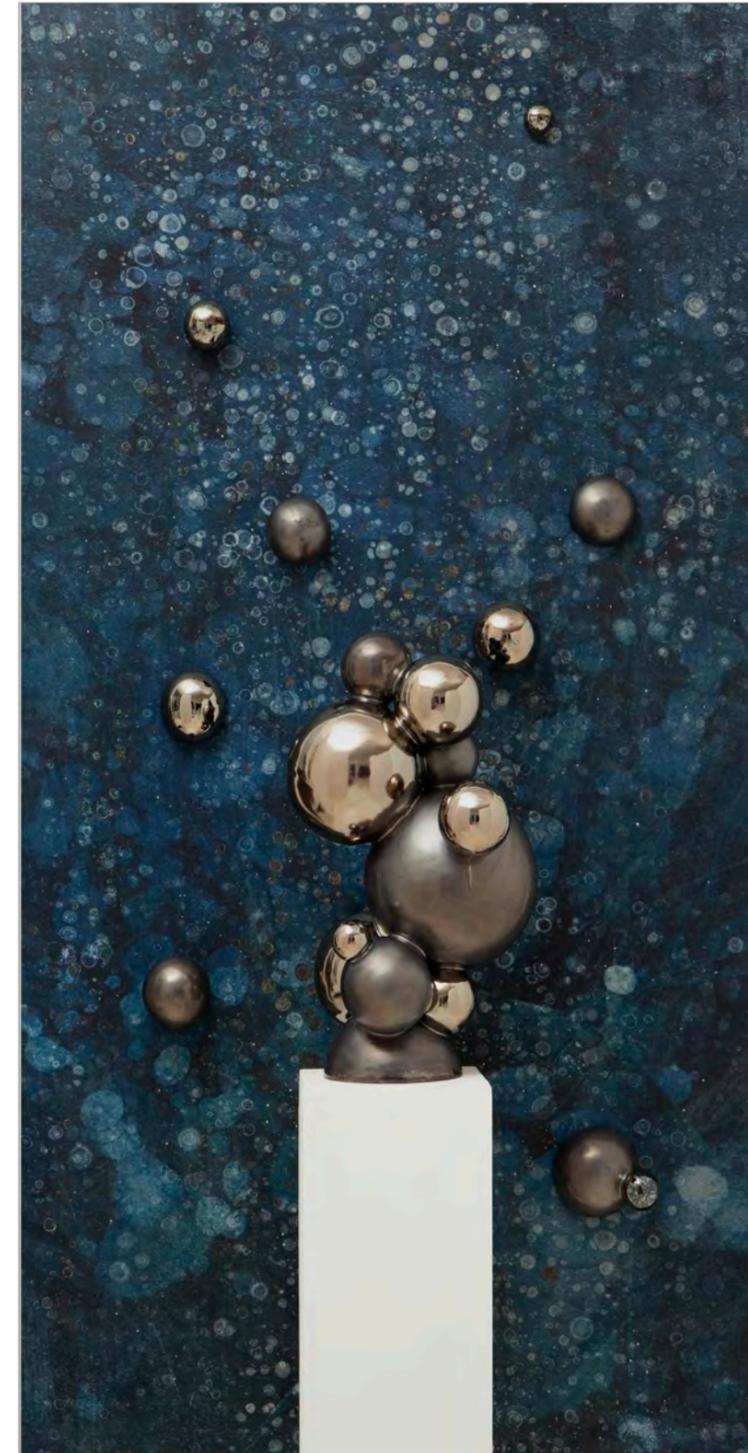
Ceramics / Printed fabric and mixed media
212 x 198 x 51 cm. / 83.5 x 78 x 20 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

Expand I, 2023

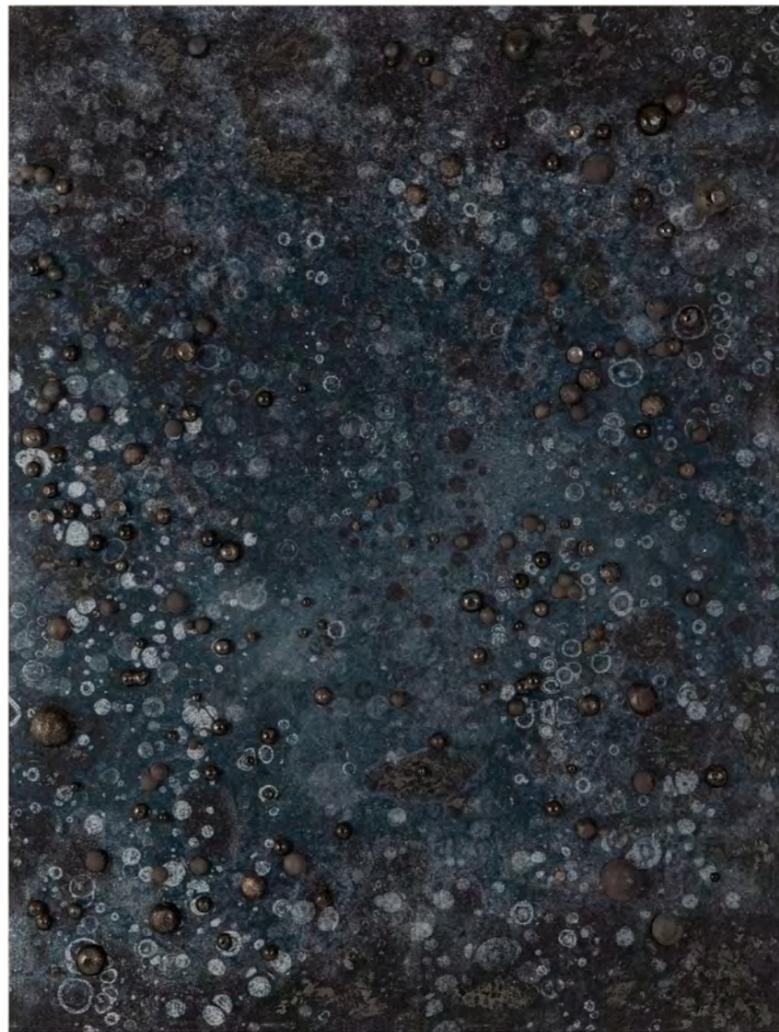
Ceramics and 24K gold (sculpture)
29.2 x 49.5 x 27.9 cm. / 11.5 x 19.5 x 11 in.
Ceramics with 24K gold / Printed fabric and mixed media (panel)
106.7 x 198 x 12.7 cm. / 42 x 78 x 5 in



ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

Expand II, 2023

Ceramics and 24K gold (sculpture)
33 x 58.4 x 34.3 cm. / 13 x 23 x 13.5 in.
Ceramics / 58.4 fabric and mixed media (panel)
106.7 x 198 x 10.2 cm. / 42 x 78 x 4 in



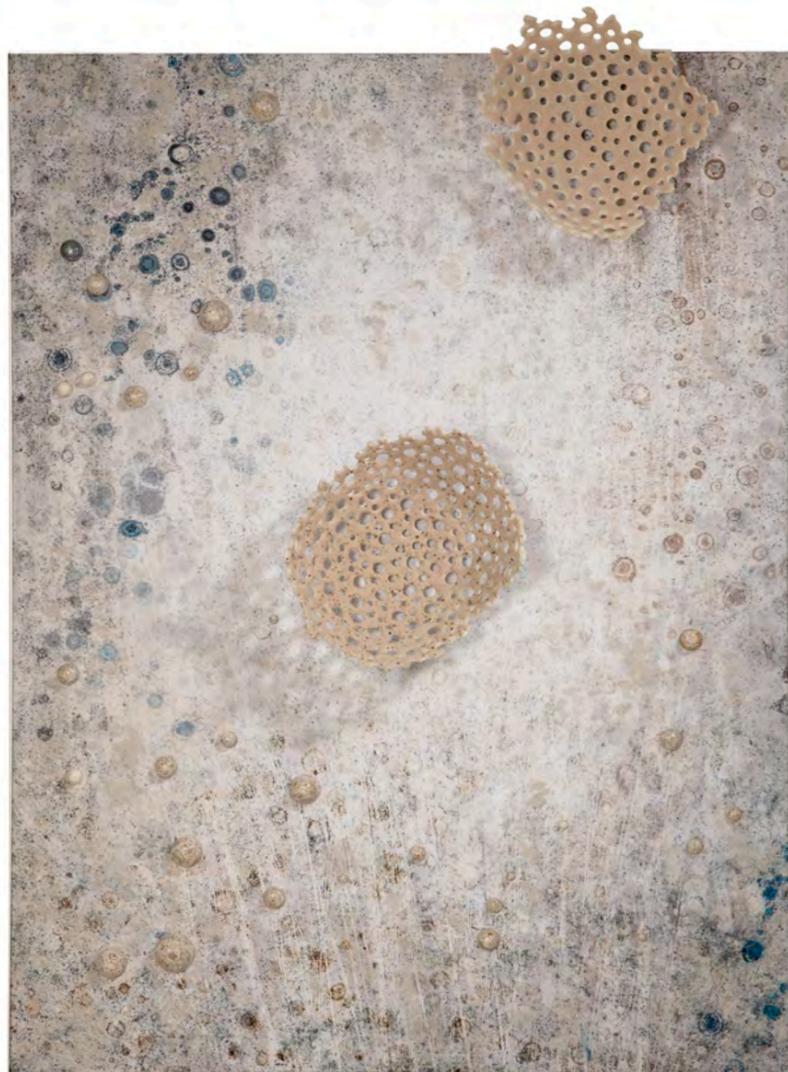
ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

Becalm (I), 2023
Ceramics / Printed fabric and mixed media
76 x 101.5 x 3.8 cm. / 30 x 40 x 1.5 in



ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

Weightless (I), 2023
Ceramics / Printed fabric and mixed media
101.5 x 101.5 x 12.7 cm. / 40 x 40 x 5 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

Weighthless (II), 2023
Ceramics / Printed fabric and mixed media
76 x 101.5 x 15 cm. / 30 x 40 x 6 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ + STEFAN HENGST

Becalm (II), 2023
Ceramics / Printed fabric and mixed media
101.5 x 101.5 x 3.8 cm. / 40 x 40 x 3 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ

Create, 2023

Ceramic (hanging) 22.9 x 21.6 x 19 cm. / 9 x 8.5 x 7.5 in.

Ceramics (standing):

8.9 x 3.8 x 8.9 cm. / 3.5 x 1.5 x 3.5 in.

8.9 x 8.9 x 8.9 cm. / 3.5 x 3.5 x 3.5 in.

23 x 23 x 24 cm. / 9 x 9 x 9.5 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ

Remnants, 2023

Ceramics and 24K gold

51 x 41 x 3.8 cm. / 20 x 16 x 1.5 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ

Connect, 2023

Ceramics

101.5 x 71 x 15.2 cm. / 40 x 28 x 6 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ
Cosmos I, 2023
Ceramic, 23 x 23 x 24 cm. / 9 x 9 x 9.5 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ
Cosmos III, 2023
Ceramic, 23 x 23 x 24 cm. / 9 x 9 x 9.5 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ
Cosmos II, 2023
Ceramic, 23 x 23 x 24 cm. / 9 x 9 x 9.5 in.



ANTONIO DIAZ
Cosmos IV, 2023
Ceramic, 23 x 23 x 24 cm. / 9 x 9 x 9.5 in.

ANTONIO DIAZ

Antonio Diaz is a ceramic artist, working in New York City. Growing up in Barcelona, he was fascinated with shape and form; expressions of sculpture emerged at a young age. After 30 years in the craft of hair styling as a form of sculpture, Diaz is proud to explore a new creative expression, marking a journey back to his original inspiration, and the allure that made him fall in love with sculpture all those years ago.

His ceramic pieces are the synthesis of a life-long relationship with the creative process. They stand as a testament to the journey Diaz takes with his art; the clay, the molecules, the hand-building all remain visible within the texture of each finished product. The esthetic is in the imperfection itself; in the fact that one sets out to create something perfect, but winds up with something even more beautiful.

Every sculpture is a different statement; a different process; a different experience. It's shapes and beauty in a living dynamic, first between the piece and the artist - then between the sculpture and the owner.

Because the clay has a mind of its own, Diaz likens each finished work to a collaborative constellation: part clay, part artist. Diaz works towards an immersive form of creativity with endless expressive potential, from conception to finished piece - ever-evolving and entirely unique.



STEFAN HENGST

As a graphic designer and artist, Stefan Hengst sees objects as shapes, lines, and forms with surfaces upon which to tell stories.

Walls or objects can act like a second skin where we can project images and narratives: whether it is the stark white walls of an art gallery, or a weathered fresco — walls do talk. And when we listen and look past the exterior, we can translate the interior messages and reach a bigger audience.

His installations and murals function as a screen in which personalized ideas are projected and imprinted. Stefan is drawn to architectural and natural textures that invite the viewer to engage with the works. Three-dimensional textures and elements are often added to his work to make them dimensional experiences. It is the possibilities of adding various materials to his prints that lead him in new creative directions.

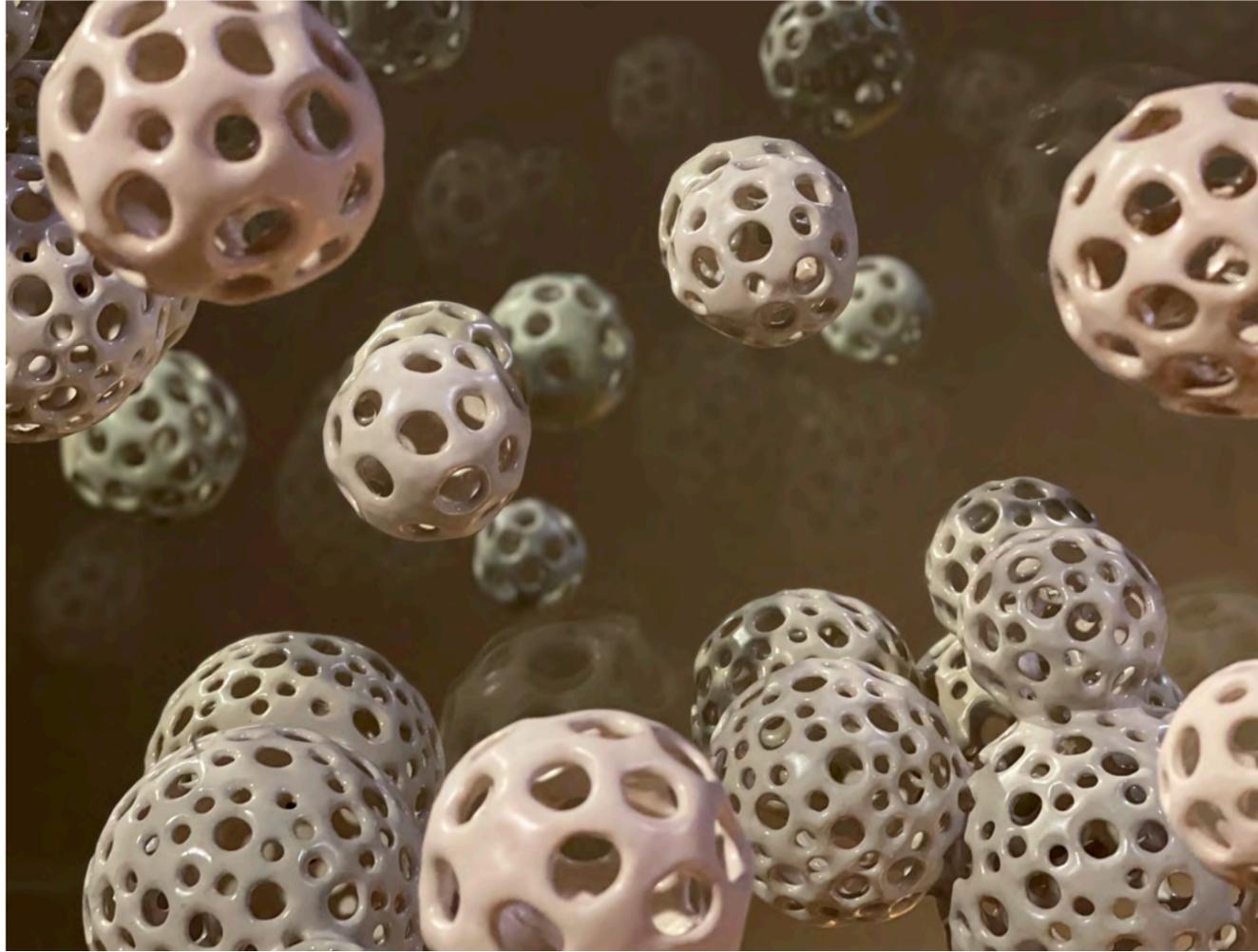
Hengst's work as a designer and artist spans more than 30 years. Dutch-born and raised, he lives and works in New York.



Process











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