

# PROOF

## ERIKA BLUMENFELD | NEW EDITIONS 2022



Plate No. 16914 (Small Magellanic Cloud)

One of six prints from *Tracing Luminaries*, a portfolio of gilded intaglio prints with chine collé. These prints were editioned from laser engraved cast acrylic plates, inked with transparent base, and then printed onto a starlight-exposed cyanotyped Okuwara collé on Hahnemühle Copperplate. The image was then revealed with 24 karat gold leaf. 14 3/4 x 17 inches.

The six prints in Erika Blumenfeld's recent portfolio of works, *Tracing Luminaries*, draw the viewer in through their rich blue grounds, glittering gold overlays, and enigmatic inscriptions. Patterns of carefully rendered numerals, circles, lines, notations, and symbols are distributed across their surfaces. Each print exhibits a different design: some animated by webs of entangled lines and speckled fields of dots, while others have condensed areas of lines and arrows. Perhaps the most remarkable is a lone gestural mark—a swoosh—in the paper's center. Each composition invites imaginative speculation, at times suggesting an astrological map, the shorthand of an inventor's notebook, or the impression of shooting stars.

The marks are in fact notations of researchers, hired to analyze photographic images of the night sky taken at the Harvard College Observatory from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries. The meticulous notations were made on photographic glass plates, identifying stars and drawing relationships in space. These were done by a team of largely unheralded women researchers (known as "computers" before the word became associated with machines) whose analyses of tens of thousands of photographic negatives led to many breakthroughs in astronomy. Blumenfeld has transferred the marks without the stars themselves, thereby drawing attention to the human effort in exploring the universe.

The marks are all floating, in multiple senses of the word. Culled from their original context of astronomic research at Harvard, they are put into a new artistic

setting. They also have the sense of floating within an expanse. The velvety blue of cyanotype prints reads as night sky and has a quality of deep space which seems to breathe and move around the delicate notations; the human marks reading like the star constellations to which they originally responded. Made of paper fibers, light-sensitive chemicals and gold leaf, the prints are emphatically physical objects yet they also direct our attention upward, toward the infinite. In viewing, one has the uncanny sensation of simultaneously looking closely and peering far away.

Through her collaboration with Island Press (at Washington University, St. Louis), Blumenfeld has pushed at creative boundaries to bring elements into a potent resonance: image and object, printmaking and photography, digital and analogue, information and imagination. The sensuous beauty and cryptic marks of her prints provide many tantalizing access points to inspire inquiries into the scope of her overall project, revealed in part in her essay accompanying the portfolio. There, Blumenfeld delves into the materials, processes, and chemistry that unfold from the interlocked histories of photography and astronomy. The cyanotype, for example, was invented by an astronomer in 1842 to share his observations

with other researchers. Blumenfeld, in turn, reinscribes the notations of the women computers on this medium, using the cyanotype not for its reproductive function but for its aesthetic expressiveness and resonance within the history of photography. Perhaps most revelatory is Blumenfeld's recognition of the cosmic origins of gold. Generated within the collision of dying stars, it improbably finds its way to the earth as meteorites. The use of gold leaf for the computer's notations thereby joins the touch of the human hand with the star matter that they studied.

Blumenfeld has her feet in two worlds at once, the scientific and the artistic. And, at its heart *Tracing Luminaries*, is animated by the desire to bring together these two aspects of creativity. Increasingly pulled apart in recent decades, the former has been considered more factual and the latter more poetic. Yet, their practitioners share common bonds of curiosity and careful observation, playfulness and painstaking exploration, in their search for order and a sense of importance. Blumenfeld's evocative prints hold many intriguing scientific insights and stories at the same time that they exude beauty and wonder, ultimately deriving their power by echoing and maintaining the fundamental mysteries of our light-filled universe.



*Tracing Luminaries* portfolio containing the six intaglio prints, a text by Erika Blumenfeld about the project, and colophon.

### Eric Lutz, Associate Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs, Saint Louis Art Museum

#### ABOUT Erika Blumenfeld:

Erika Blumenfeld is a transdisciplinary artist whose practice is motivated by the wonder of natural phenomena. She often works in collaboration with scientists and research institutions, and her research-based practice has led her to examine subjects including astronomy, geology, planetary science, ecology, anthropogenic climate disruption, and light in its many forms. Blumenfeld is a Guggenheim Fellow, Smithsonian Fellow, and recipient of a Rauschenberg Foundation Artist-in-Residence, a NASA research grant, and a Creative Capital Award. She has exhibited widely in the United States and abroad and is currently an artist-in-residence at NASA. She lives and works in Houston, Texas.



Erika applying gold leaf to print. (Photo by Jake Eshelman)

## Island Press

CONTEMPORARY PRINT EDITIONS AND ARTIST PROJECTS

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Island Press is a research-based printmaking workshop and publisher committed to education and innovation in contemporary print editions and artist projects. Visiting artists work side by side with the master printer and students in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis. The result is high-quality print editions of technical complexity created in a unique setting where artists and students share skill sets and ideas.

Island Press is project-driven and collaborative, tapping into the place where the artist's creative research intersects with the all of the

possibilities of the print studio. Artist projects include editions with Radcliffe Bailey, Chakaia Booker, Nick Cave, Willie Cole, Tom Friedman, Ann Hamilton, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Nina Katchadourian, Hung Liu, Shaun O'Dell, Dario Robleto, Joyce Scott, Duane Slick, Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith, Beverly Semmes, James Siena, Stephanie Syjuco, and many other great artists.

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