

Radical Enlightenment: Lawrence Jordan's *Celestial Fantasy*

“Merely pointing out that which is concealed so carefully, means destroying it.” –
Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* iii

The twelve collages that comprise Lawrence Jordan's recent *Celestial Fantasy* series (all works from 2013) are glorious, exuberant investigations into the cosmos. All the same size, roughly 25 x 29 inches, they are scaled for reading, about the size of a large folio of prints. Each is bifurcated straight down the middle, another indication to the viewer that the collages are meant to be read, since they formally mimic the pages of an opened book. The imagery is lush and jewel-toned, particularly in terms of the Renaissance-era rich drapery on so many of its figures, such as a recurrent cherry red and warm, golden yellow. Bodies are present, but so too are all manner of fauna, mostly birds, fish, and butterflies, but also an elephant, a ram (the symbol of the astrological sign Aries) and a fantastical, fanged sea monster. The birds are as varied as they are pervasive, and include, among others, a parrot, an owl, a crane, a peacock, and a hawk. The inescapable, culminating sensation of so many winged creatures (there are also multiple winged *puti*) is one of flight: freedom from this earthbound state, but freedom from one's narrow field of vision, too. The gaze is expansive, moving outward beyond one's self and upward to the heavens—a celestial fantasy, indeed.

The ground of several collages appears to be vintage astrological charts and studies, sliced to fit the parameters of each collage. These pages provide the titles for the collages, which are taken from fragments of Latin phrases strewn across them. They loosely translate as follows: *Lunae Solis* (lunar sun), *Magnitudo Stellarum Primae* (magnitude of the star), *Mensura Media* (measure means), *Orbis Mercurii Venus* (Mercury and Venus orbit), *Polus Arcticus* (Arctic pole), *Regina Circulus Veneris* (Queen Circle Friday), *Septe Capric* (Seven Capric[orn]), *Solis Omnium* (all sun), *Sphaera Armillaris* (sphere Armillaris), *Sphaera Veneris* (atmosphere of Venus), and *Tropicus Hybernus* (tropical Ireland). The charts that Jordan collects and cuts up for his collages map both earthly and heavenly terrain. The visual idiom of the chart is present throughout in arrays of radiating lines and circles depicting, for example, the phases of the moon. Alchemical notations are scattered about—Jordan thinks of himself as an alchemist, and of collage and assemblage as acts of alchemy. One of the most exquisite examples of alchemy and astrology melding is the collage titled *Saphaer Veneris*, whose left-hand side spins colored bands of planetary atmosphere, each given a small alchemical symbol for their corresponding material. The sun=gold, Mercury=quicksilver (or mercury), Venus=copper, the moon=silver, and so on.

Circles proliferate: balloons, fruits and gourds, the planet earth, the moon, astrolabes, and globes. They symbolize the celestial bodies themselves, but also the circularity and connectivity of all things. The multiple astrolabes and globes are instruments of science and reason, tools with which to know, map, and measure the world. They are not alone in this regard, for all manner of devices are imaged here, including protractors, telescopes, and compasses, of the navigational and drafting varieties. The drafting compass is an old tool, made obsolete by computers. It was used to measure distance, but also to draw circles and arcs. A caliper, which looks like the compass's sister, takes the measurements of a sphere. These devices were used in

mathematics and drafting, but also navigation, which was done by the stars. Indeed, the marine compass was invented by an astrologer named Jerome Cardan in the sixteenth century.

Cardan was not just an astrologer. He was also a physician, mathematician, philosopher, and chronic gambler. And here we begin to arrive at a crucial point: Jordan's *Celestial Fantasy* series does not only picture for us another time, a past time, in its use of older printed matter, but also articulates a radically different relationship to encountering the world—not one that might be, but one that in fact *was*. By this I mean the centuries long understanding of scientific systems for knowing the world and cosmos as inclusive of esotericism. To wit, Cardan was an astrologer *and* a physician and mathematician. It was the Enlightenment's programmatic rejection of so-called "secret" or "occult" sciences as wretched and idolatrous practices, even invented by "fallen angels," that set the stage for the modern era's insistently exclusive focus on logic, reason, and scientific method. Revisionist histories of the Enlightenment under the rubric of Radical Enlightenment include such discarded practices. Just as madmen and women were formerly integrated into society and valued as visionary, but in modern life are cordoned off from the general population, so too were the esoteric sciences effectively culled from more acceptable sciences during the Enlightenment. The ridicule heaped on esotericism is perfectly summarized by Voltaire's admonition, "Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy: that is the very foolish daughter of a wise and intelligent mother." As Wouter J. Hanegraaff notes, "the new science succeeded because it supported the theological battle against paganism."¹ And so, he continues, during the Enlightenment, "the traditional *artes* or *scientiae* of astrology, natural magic and alchemy came to be conceptualized as 'secret' or 'occult.'"² But astrology was long considered a scientific system, and was in fact the most representative scientific method the ancient Greeks offered us. I quote science historian David Pingree at length to elaborate this point:

...the supreme attempt made in antiquity to create in a rigorous form a causal model of the *kosmos*, one in which the eternally repeating rotations of the celestial bodies, together with their varying but periodically recurring interrelationships, produce all changes in the sublunar world of the four elements that, whether primary, secondary, or tertiary effects, constitute the generation and decay of material bodies and the modifications of the parts or functions of the rational and irrational souls of men, animals and plants. In other words, ancient Greek astrology in its strictest interpretation was the most comprehensive scientific theory of antiquity, providing through the application of the mathematical models appropriate to it predictions of all changes that take place in the world of cause and effect.³

It is this world that Jordan conjures, a world in which knowledge, exploration, and discovery of bodies, materials, flora and fauna, the earth, and the universe may draw upon a much wider and more familial range of intellectual tools and traditions than

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 156.

² *Ibid.*

³ David Pingree, "Hellenophilia versus the History of Science," *Isis* 83:4 (1992), 560.

contemporary life allows. This is a much more dynamic and expansive worldview, one in which measurement and magic coexist. In each intimately scaled microcosm, the macrocosm of the universe awaits.

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