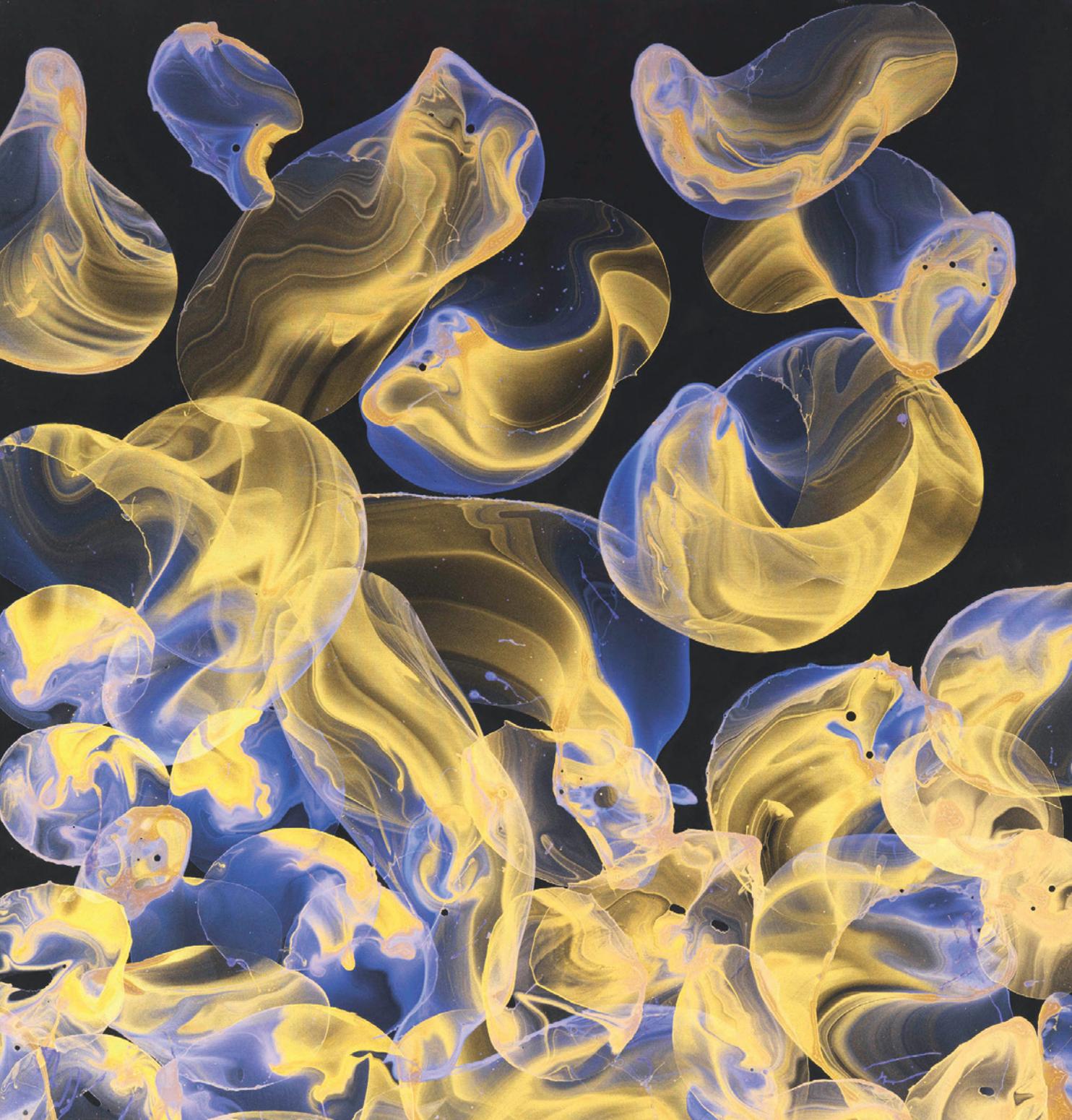


Jiří Georg Dokoupil | Bursting Bubbles

January 24 - July 7, 2017



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So the artist was grateful to the chance that had once brought into his hands a little of this nocturnal wax, whose occasional snow-white flecks on a black ground had irresistibly prompted him to sculpt with lines forming the exact negative of the similarly very white drawings by which he was guided; his reputation owed an extra brilliance to the *pridana vidua* presented, one memorable day, in the botany class.

– Raymond Roussel, *Locus Solus*

Undulating and pulsating, the writhing cellular forms that populate Jiří Georg Dokoupil's colorful, expansive abstractions in the *Soap Bubbles* paintings, are ostensibly alive. These plant and animal hybrid shapes most often appear as amoebas quivering under a biologist's microscope, or translucent jellyfish throbbing in the depths of the sea. To witness this by-now celebrated series of works by the Czech-born artist, is to experience a wholly unique convergence of technical wizardry, conceptual acumen, and a visceral, sensual imagination.

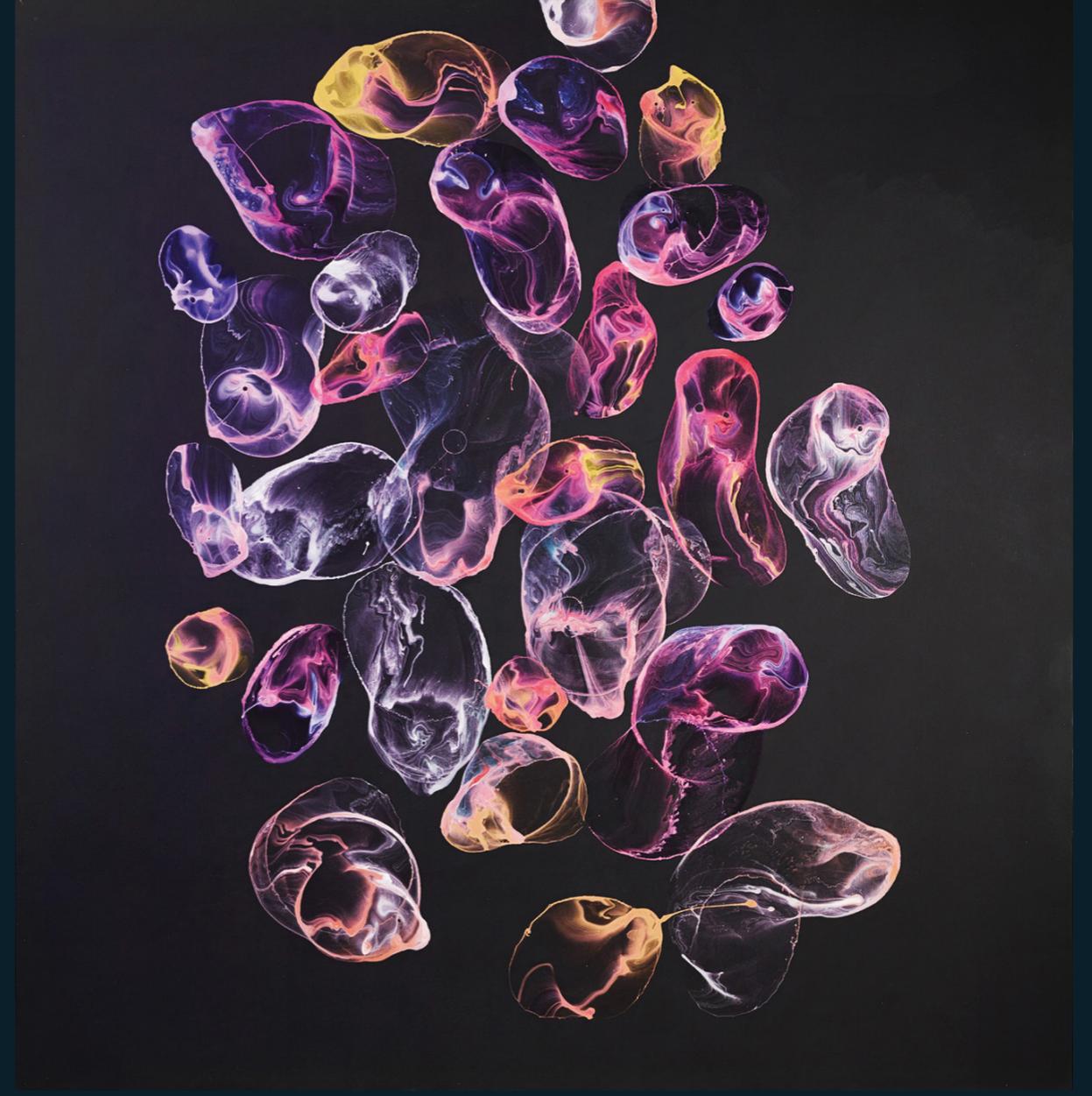
Aficionados of the avant-garde are well aware that Dokoupil is the inventor of more than 100 painting techniques. All of them are eccentric and exclusive. And with considerable aplomb, Dokoupil shifts his focus from one to the other. He ravenously explores novel materials and processes, as well as traverses with seemingly effortless grace the treacherous divide between abstraction and figuration. In the sense of being a peerless conjurer of a breathtaking amalgam of technical virtuosity and fantastic imagery, Dokoupil, at age 62, can now claim a position as a doyen of contemporary painting, and to my estimation, as Sigmar Polke's heir apparent.

As the progenitor of the *Soap Bubbles* works, Dokoupil reminds me of the artist Jerjeck, one of the scientist-artist-inventors in Raymond Roussel's proto-Surrealist novel of 1914, *Locus Solus*. One day, by chance, Jerjeck discovers a strange organic substance, a type of black wax, nocturnally secreted by a *pridana vidua* flower, which he uses to help create precise reproductions of Jean-Antoine Watteau's melancholy harlequin, the subject of the French artist's 1719 painting *Pierrot* in the Louvre. Another portent of Dokoupil's endeavor, at least in terms of imagining his creative process, is the famous *Soap Bubbles* painting (ca. 1733-1734) by Jean Siméon Chardin, a prime example of which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The soap bubbles in Chardin's work allude to the transience of life, and Dokoupil's works similarly address the fluidity of life forces and the unpredictable courses they may follow.

By chance, while Dokoupil was exploring ways to create paintings that would paint themselves – that is, without the artist having to directly manipulate paint on the canvas surface – he discovered that soap-lye mixed with certain acrylic and metallic pigments could create large thin membranes – bubbles, in fact – which, when dragged over a canvas placed flat on the floor, would burst and leave luminous traces of their color and form. Like a modern-day alchemist, only Dokoupil knows the secret soap-bubble formula. The residue also contains evidence of the holes where the bubble burst, which in some works look like tiny round “eyes,” lending the shapes an even more lifelike and phantasmagoric appearance.



Niculisgran, 2014, soap-lye and pigments on canvas, 78 3/4 x 57 1/8 inches



Poble Nou, 2014, soap-lye and pigments on canvas, 98 1/2 x 118 1/8 inches

Bumbumkokila, 2014, soap-lye and pigments on canvas, 96 1/2 x 92 1/2 inches

Dokoupil

The large paintings on view in this exhibition are superlative examples of the *Soap Bubbles* series. All but one of the paintings have black backgrounds, which suggest infinite depth, and enhance the vibrancy of the organic shapes, prompting them to shimmer and glow. *Bumbumkokila* (2014) is a representative composition in which the organic shapes, in translucent tones of purple, gold and silver, seem to cluster together, moving toward the center of the vertical canvas.

The vast and resplendent *Poble Nou* (2014), at approximately 8-by-10 feet, offers a more panoramic view. Covering the entire surface is a tightly packed, pulsating conglomeration of cellular shapes in countless hues of green, red, yellow and blue. It is an awesome sight, and induces a feeling of exhilaration, like that of a nocturnal scuba diver encountering a lively community of deep-sea phosphorescent jellyfish.

In some way, *Poble Nou's* dense and intense all-over composition may be seen as a fine example of Color Field painting. Similarly, *Niculisgran* (2014), with its thin veils of bright blue cellular forms whooshing across the surface against a white background – recalling Sam Francis's *Blue Balls* series from the early 1960s – could be regarded as an heir to Abstract Expressionism. But it would be a mistake to consider Dokoupil's abstract works in such rigid, formalist, art-historical terms.

At heart, Dokoupil is a maverick. Just as he embraces a peripatetic lifestyle, living and working periodically throughout the year in Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, Plovdiv (Bulgaria), and Las Palmas (Canary Islands), he would not comfortably subscribe to any specific school or canon of painting, or style of art-making. Although he has worked on the *Soap Bubble* series off and on since 1992, it has never become an all-encompassing enterprise.

In some of the *Soap Bubble* pictures, such as *Plukasibo* (2014), the condensed shapes, in gold and blue-purple, writhe and pulsate against the black background in the lower portion of the composition, while in the upper area of the canvas, the individual amoeba-like shapes seem to dissipate into ethereal passages of some mysterious gas, liquid, or billowing clouds of smoke. In that way, *Plukasibo* corresponds to another of Dokoupil's long-running series, the *Soot Paintings* (*Candle and Torch*). In those works, the artist creates elaborate figurative compositions, often based on photographs, which he depicts using only the smoke of candle flames or torches. Here again, the human hand is not directly responsible for the image.

Dokoupil's is a distinctive and inimitable approach to art-making that apparently corresponds to an alternate universe. It encompasses an attitude with regard to art and life that seems to transcend even the metaphysical, toward what the writer Alfred Jarry defined as the Pataphysical. In this pseudo-science, profundity and absurdity collide and then collude to establish new sets of doctrines and pathways through art and community. Likewise, Dokoupil has developed and refined his own elaborate system of directives and results. A visionary and alchemist in troubled times, Dokoupil guides us toward a refreshing, hyper-esthetic future.

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Untitled, 2014, soap-lye and pigments on canvas, 98 1/2 x 118 1/8 inches

On Cover: Plukasibo, 2014, (detail) soap-lye and pigments on canvas, 78 3/4 x 57 1/8 inches

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