

Kaleidoscope Pages, 2006. Ink and graphite on antique ledger-book pages, 12½ x 15½ in. OPPOSITE: Despont at work at the Sanskriti Kendra, Delhi.

1 Holding Pattern

Louise Despont's esoteric geometries express the unseen energy of the cosmos.

by Andrea Codrington

The first time I visit Louise Despont's studio in Brooklyn, it is a cold Saturday, and she answers the door dressed for a winter's hibernation. Cocooned in a large sweater layered over what can only be described as a Secessionist union suit, her long dark hair loosely tied back, Despont looks as if she had stepped out of a fin de siècle tableau vivant.

Although she has just moved from Manhattan to this apartment in South Park Slope, it looks as if she's lived here for years. The comfortable warren of rooms composing Despont's floor-through form a compelling cabinet of curiosities. The wood floors are painted barn red and the walls lined with found photographs, architectural prints, natural-history reproductions, dried botanicals, and a series of intricately rendered graphite drawings on antique ledger paper that provides a consistent backdrop to her oeuvre.

"I started collecting vintage ledgers in Providence," says Despont, who graduated from Brown in 2006 with a degree in art

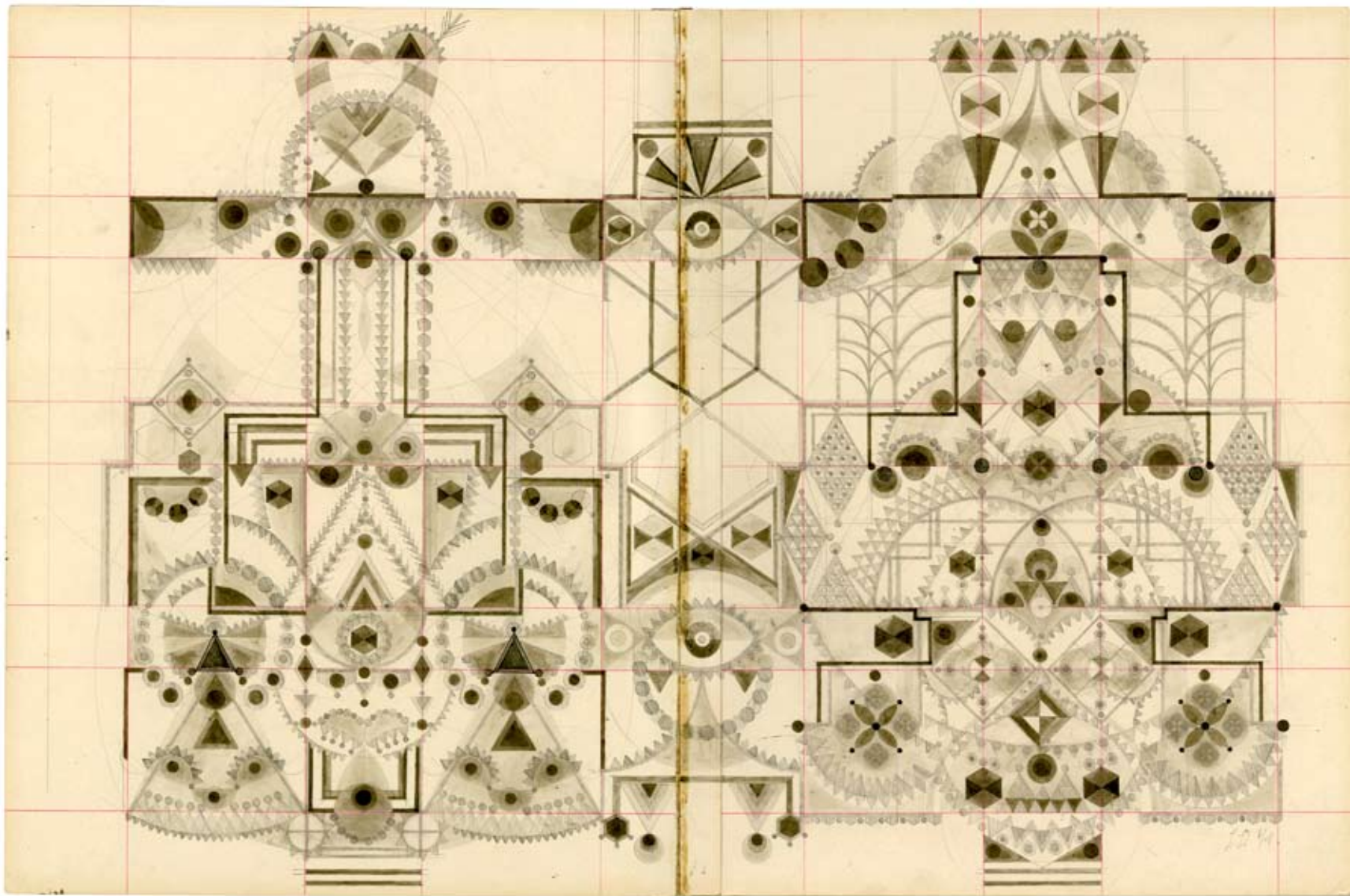
semiotics. "I found an old blank ledger in a mom-and-pop Portuguese market and bought it to keep class notes and visual ideas in." Intrigued by the boundaries imposed by the ledgers' varying hairline rules, however, Despont soon started filling in the pages' negative space with Rorschach-like ink forms and pencil drawings that played off the structure of the page.

Early pieces, such as her aptly titled 2006 *Kaleidoscope Pages*—a ledger spread adorned with symmetrical geometric shapes in subdued shades of gray and brown—are strongly reminiscent of the work of the early 20th-century artist mystics Emma Kunz and Hilma af Klint, and Despont admits to a fascination with both. A postgraduation trip to Switzerland to visit the Musée de l'Art Brut and the Emma Kunz Center intensified the artist's already avid engagement with arcana.

With evocative titles like *The Door*, *The Scale*, *The Hymn*, and *Writing Letters to the Shades*, Despont's work explicitly engages the



LOUISE DESPONT



Correspondence I & II, 2008. Graphite on antique ledger-book pages, 15½ x 23 in.

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idea of art as a channeling and expression of spiritual energy. She comes by her interests naturally: Her mother is a healer who works specifically with the distilled energetic patterns of plants. “My work is all about the process of researching and reading in these subjects,” says Despont. “I have a particular interest in cosmologies—esoteric as well as metaphysical—and am drawn to such works.” In addition to books on Greek mythology and Egyptian art, her apartment is filled with the writings of the 19th-century Swedish theologian and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, whose 1904 *How to Know Higher Worlds* provides her current inspiration, with its meditations on the similarities and differences among animal, mineral, and plant forms.

Despont’s work is far more than Blavatsky-esque automatic writing, however. Her drawings display a rigor and attention to detail that testify to another fundamental influence: architecture. Her father—the renowned French-born architect Thierry Despont—supplied a bracing structural and intellectual counterpoint to the New Age spirituality of her mother. “I’ve always used drawing as mediation between the two influences,” Despont says. “Everything in my work is about balance and shifts.”

Despont creates her painstakingly filigreed drawings using archi-

tectural stencils and a compass—an object that is itself an esoteric symbol, representing a balance between the physical and the spiritual. The artist will spend in excess of 50 hours on a single drawing, building up an accretion of circles, curves, triangles, hexagons, and crenellations until the page is filled to her liking—which, more often than not these days, means asymmetrically.

Although these works are abstract, their ornate marks often take on uncannily pictorial aspects; the 2008 drawing *Tomb* features a softly undulant midsection that recalls breasts, while Swedenborg’s *Index* (2008) offers up a hollow-eyed skull. “I tend to work so closely on these drawings that it’s only when I back up that I begin to see the figurative,” says Despont. “The stencils are amazing tools. They constantly surprise me.”

While Despont’s drawings tend to project distinct—if unwitting—lives of their own, her seven-minute-long film *Experiments in Moving Drawings Parts I & II* (2007) takes things a step further. Set against an eerily resonant soundscape of gear clicks, clock ticks, train whistles, and cello and sitar strains created by Despont and composer Joshua Sullivan, the film’s stop-action sequences artfully animate her drawings in a kind of inkblot ballet of visual effects. Abstract forms proliferate like cells dividing in mitosis; closely spaced

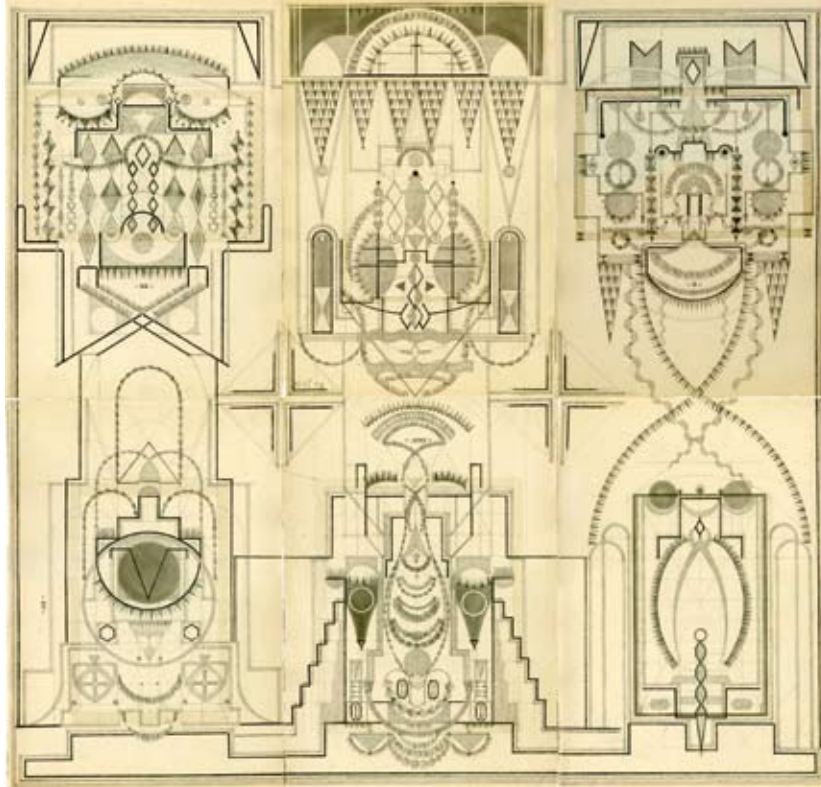
red and black lines glide across the page. Freed from the strictures of stasis, Despont's drawings hint at what Steiner termed "sacred rituals unfolding, before listening spectators, in mighty pictures."

That Despont's distinctive vision would flourish in motion comes as no surprise, given that she spent her years at Brown making experimental films, the last of which, her 16-minute senior thesis *And Lo, Guilharmenia* (2006), was financed by an award from the Princess Grace Foundation. Despont's most formative experience, however, was an internship in Stockholm with Swedish filmmaker Roy Andersson, whose psychologically freighted, chromatically muted features, such as *Songs for the Second Floor* (2000), play against painstakingly handcrafted set designs.

It was from Andersson that Despont learned about the power of color—or its absence. "At a certain point I got rid of color in order to focus completely on form," Despont remarks of her distinctly black-and-white drawings. Having handily mastered the monochrome, however, the artist seems ready to begin experimenting with color again, however tentatively. She points to a wall over a rough-hewn work desk piled high with books, ink pots, and driftwood. "I'm doing these washing drawings," says Despont, motioning to circles of softly blurred blue, gray, taupe, and brick that look like cutaway views of mineral specimens or, perhaps, exotic planets. "They're about alchemy, about the way that water becomes a conduit for color in an altogether mysterious way."

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The next time I see Despont she is sitting on the floor hunched over an expanse of paper surrounded by hundreds of paper scraps. To be truthful, it is a photograph of Despont that I am looking at, and it is almost one year after our first encounter. She is now in Delhi on a Fulbright Fellowship and living in a Jainist artist residence in the southernmost part of the city, working on collages

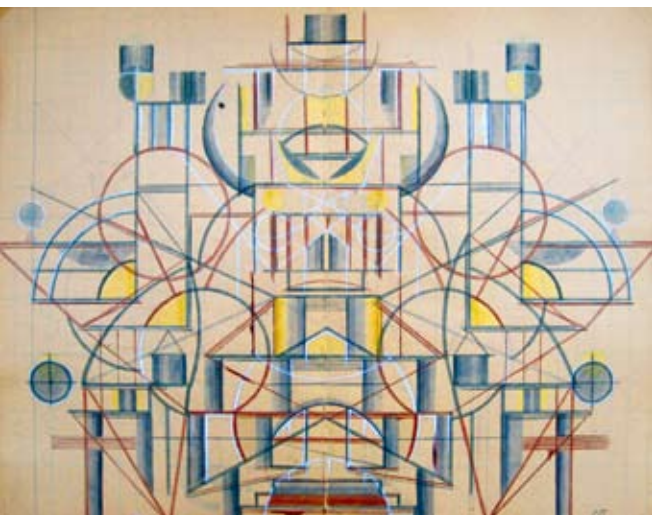


Swedenborg's Index, 2008. Graphite on antique ledger-book pages, 38 x 40 in.

poetic inspiration. "The crazy scaffolding, wood and rope ladders, hand-painted barriers, netting, lights, thick hazy dust, and pollution, topped off by massive staircases jutting into the sky, are both futuristic and strangely reminiscent of the Jantar Mantar observatories I've visited," she says. "They work day and night, and in the evenings they look like insane spaceships aglow with lamps and men and women carrying materials piled high atop their heads."

Despont came to India to study the Warli tribal paintings of Maharashtra, Rajasthani tantric drawings, and the oddly modern astronomical observatories she mentions, built by the 18th-century ruler and mathematician-cum-architect Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh. All three influences can be seen in her current production—outsized collages that depict impossible structures, elemental shapes,

the sun-faded tones and the incredible patterns and prints in the clothing."



Entrance to Emptiness, 2008. Ink, graphite, and gouache on antique ledger-book pages, 14 x 18 in.

to me over the phone. "I'm especially attracted to the sun-faded tones and the incredible patterns and prints in the clothing." Delhi is readying an extensive elevated train system for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, she tells me, and even this suggests

that in their visual language bear little resemblance to her ledger work—apart, of course, from her obsessive attention to detail and a sense of decoration that seems drawn from Gnostic wellsprings.

"Being here is such an amazing lesson in color," she says

and a proliferation of exotic patterns. "I've been spending many afternoons in various libraries and photo archives looking through the endless books on miniatures, wall painting, textiles, and Jain cosmology," she explains. "Mostly I've been working with the materials that are readily available, which are handmade natural-dyed papers from a factory just down the road, inks, and a lot of experiments with the Xerox machine in the main office where I'm staying."

In a few months, Despont will move on to Rajasthan, where she will study with female artisans in Kutch who are known for their extraordinary work with mirrored embroidery, and after that to Pondicherry, in the south, where she will be putting together a final animation and soundtrack inspired by her time in Delhi and Rajasthan and by the master filmmaker Satyajit Ray.

Although India's full impact on Despont's elemental and esoteric work has yet to be seen, one thing is certain: No matter where one is, the soul's secret language speaks to all who care to listen. And whether in northern India or south Brooklyn, Despont, for one, is sure to keep her ears open.

≡ Louise Despont will have a solo exhibition at the Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, in September 2010, nicellebeauchene.com.