

ELEMENTS OF ALCHEMY:
PRINTS BY PAUL WEISSMAN



Published in conjunction with the exhibition

Elements of Alchemy: Prints by Paul Weissman

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum

September 4, 2007 – January 25, 2008

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum

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Photography: Paul Weissman, cover and pages 7, 9-16;

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ISBN 1-884300-15-4

Printed in the United States of America in 2007 by

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Brookdale Center, One West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012-1186

www.huc.edu/museums/ny

Front cover: Aurum, 2006

Lithograph/screenprint/24kt gold; 28" x 22.5"

ELEMENTS OF ALCHEMY: PRINTS BY PAUL WEISSMAN

Foreword by Rabbi David Ellenson

Essays by Rabbi Norman J. Cohen and Laura Kruger

Edited by Jean Bloch Rosensaft

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION MUSEUM

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York

Foreword

“For me chemistry represented an indefinite cloud of future potentialities which enveloped my life to come in black volutes torn by fiery flashes, like those which had hidden Mount Sinai. Like Moses, from that cloud I expected my law, the principle of order in me, around me, and in the world.... I would watch the buds swell in spring, the mica glint in the granite, my own hands, and I would say to myself: ‘I will understand this, too, I will understand everything...’”

Primo Levi (1919-1987), excerpted from “Hydrogen,”
The Periodic Table (1975, translated 1984).

Inspired by Holocaust survivor Primo Levi’s study of the elements as a lens on human experience, Paul Weissman seeks to understand the world and humanity through the filter of his art as a master printmaker. He observes our planet, constructed of these elemental building blocks and fraught with the consequences of contemporary human intervention – ecological disasters, global warming, consumerism, nuclear proliferation, warfare, radioactive fallout, genetic engineering, materialism, and even vanity-driven plastic surgery.

Utilizing the eponymous elements as his materials, and employing lithography for its elemental, magical process – scratching on stone is a satisfying alternative to the dehumanization of our computer-driven age – he focuses on human error, on the ethics of choice, and on moral enlightenment. The intrinsic uniqueness of each monoprint as well as the fragility of his paper and ink materials speak to human individuality and frailty, alerting us to the lurking destructive forces that endanger survival. The density of his surfaces, diverse print-making techniques, and multi-layered imagery reinforce the complexity of his themes.

Paul Weissman confronts the viewer with the human capacity for both good and evil, for truth and duplicity, for peaceful aspirations and genocide. His works transcend art for art’s sake, and are intended to serve as a call to action and conscience.

Through his work, Paul Weissman evokes the role of the artist as prophet, echoing Judaism’s “prophetic tradition” that seeks to restore a broken world and bring healing to humankind. This mission lies at the heart of our seminary, where we prepare the spiritual, educational, and communal leaders who renew our ethical heritage in the service of human rights, justice, and peace. It is a privilege to present Paul Weissman’s powerful art and vital message.

Rabbi David Ellenson, Ph.D.

President

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Alchemy and Art

Science, alchemy, and art were often viewed as one and the same act – that of creating a valuable compound by combining elements with diverse properties. The goal – wealth, elixir of eternal life, or a medical remedy – followed the same strategies as modern science, namely observation of the natural world, experimentation with known attributes, and basic trial and error. Art was the bridge to science and the by-product of this close connection.

The earliest surviving art forms were created by people trying to understand and control their environment. The physical act of depicting an event by drawing it on the wall of a cave enabled early humans to hold onto a past experience, to refer to an episode without the stress of instant action, to better prepare for another impact. The natural mineral colors were at hand and included ochre (iron oxide), ranging in coloration from pale yellow and deep brownish yellow to red and black carbon, in the form of burnt charcoal. These primitive colors continue through the epochs and are prevalent in the work of Paul Weissman.

Weissman, a master printmaker residing in Hawaii, has combined the aspects of science, social anxiety, spirituality, and complex cultural references to achieve his compelling, layered images. Referring to the Periodic Table of Elements for the structure of this print series, Weissman takes on the ‘virtues’ and attributes of each element actually and metaphorically.

Elements have physical and chemical characteristic properties, including weight, density, color, mutability, and interaction. Philosophers of the ancient world imputed real and magical powers to elements. As scientific information accrued, the Periodic Table of Elements came into being. Credited to Russian chemist, Dmitri Mendeleev (1834-1907), and based on the work of many scientists before and after him, this is a method of classifying chemical elements ordered by atomic weight.

As an artist, Weissman is by way of being a chemist. All artists’ colors are chemically derived and most are found in their raw states in nature. Early artisans created their own paints by grinding natural minerals to powder and mixing the fine residue with various emollients, including oil, egg,

wax, etc. The best blue was from rare lapis lazuli, green from malachite, and the finest and most precious embellishment was gold. Weissman reverts to this practice by actually using natural elements in his eponymous work. However, it is intellectual and compassionate human concerns that invest his work with power.

Intrigued by a book of twenty-one short stories by Primo Levi, *Il Sistema Periodico* (*The Periodic Table*) (1975), Weissman employs a similar process by titling his prints with the eponymous names of elements. For Levi (1919-1987), a trained chemist, brilliant author, and Holocaust survivor, the names of chemicals served as a connective thread of his personal history, scientific concerns, memory, and universal values. Weissman chose eleven elements: Uranium, Carbon, Ferrum/Iron, Neos/Neon, Plumbum/Lead, Aurum/Gold, Bonds/Hydrogen, Caesius/Cesium, Arsenic, Silicon, and Helios/Helium, which overlap with some of Levi’s chapter titles of Hydrogen, Iron, Lead, Gold, Arsenic, Uranium, and Carbon. Other than the intellectual premise there is no connection between Weissman’s prints and Levi’s metaphorical writing. For Weissman, the choice of elements is a warning of impending disaster. Each of them leads inevitably to destruction.

Early in 2007 Weissman was at a point of change in his printmaking technique and began to make large scale prints. Putting aside his meticulous, labor intensive style of engraving and increasingly troubled by heedless ecological havoc, he combined his surge of anger with broad, bold strokes to echo the scale of these environmental calamities. “I decided to follow man’s use of the elements as barometers/mirrors of belief and values,” he said.

The print *26 April 86 + 17* refers to the enormous cloud of toxic radiation hovering over the northern hemisphere seventeen days after the explosion of the atomic energy plant in Chernobyl. Alluding to the element Uranium, the name derived from the Greek god, Uranus, God of the Sky, drawn with delicacy, and printed on fine Japanese paper, Weissman has given it the shape of an Indian ‘dream catcher.’ Devoid of color, starkly neutral black and white, its delicacy belying its fatal trajectory, this is a nightmare and not a dream.

Alchemy and Art *(continued)*

A second 'dream catcher' format, also drawn in a network of black and white, is the domain of *Carbo/Carbon*, Latin for charcoal. Weissman has incorporated aerial street map views of Detroit, Los Angeles, and Dallas, with each of these cities gravely affected by their dependence on oil. War, economic dislocation, global warming, the related melting of the polar ice cap, a drowned world, and epic floods are his dire prediction of the consequences of this fatal dependency.

Neos/Neon continues Weissman's contrasting of the ancient ordering of the cosmos, in which the patterning of the stars oriented people to their earthly location, and the most contemporary mode for conveying information – the bar code. Dividing the print across a horizon line, he depicts the universe in classical terms, the constellations at the Arctic Circle during the 24-hour cycle of the Summer Solstice, with a mythological overlay of legends and explanatory stories. The bottom half, our modern world, is represented by the ubiquitous 'bar code.' Everything has a number, everything has become a commodity. The word *neos* in Latin means new and our new technology floods the heavens with flashing advertising, blinding our eyes to the glory of the sky.

Ferrum, commonly known as iron, has the cruel history of bondage, shackles, chains, helmets, guns. Weissman points out the irony that iron is also required for human life in the form of hemoglobin, hence the delicate tracery of veins, mocking the filigree ornamentation on weapons of subjugation.

Arsenic, its natural color ranging from pale greenish yellow to orange, was the poison of choice for many cultures. Roman Caesars used it with abandon and the Borgia Pope Alexander VI disposed of upstart Bishops and Cardinals with his potent arsenic cocktails. The wallpaper in the background alludes to the industrial use of arsenic as a fashionable color for decorative furnishings during the 18th-19th centuries. In our own times, chemically-treated building materials and home furnishings have frequently caused fatal illnesses.

The many aspects of the element *Silicon* may be the most insidious cause of human grief. Silicon, a non-metallic element that is second to oxygen as the most abundant element in the earth's crust, is used extensively in alloys and electronic devices. Weissman has created a background of myriad faces referring to human networking through the means of cell phones, emails, and blogs but at the cost of personal anonymity, isolation, and depersonalization.

Aurum, on the other hand, is an easy culprit. Although gold does have some intrinsic usefulness, it is greed and false gods that herald its 'glory.' The brazen image of the Golden Calf hovers over the crowd of hand prints reaching to grasp fortune and fame. Anthropologically, hand prints are the first pure mark of humankind. To touch the divine, to leave a mark on a wall, a sacred sanctuary, the ultimate indication of presence in a place, these link humans with nature, a mark of immortality.

Combining thoughtful beauty with outraged prophecy, Weissman has captured the dilemma of the 21st century – how to make peace with the natural world and yet accommodate the growing appetite for more and more needless possessions. In the 14th -16th centuries, wealthy collectors combed the earth for rarities of animal and mineral forms. These were assembled in Cabinets of Curiosities or private museums and frequently paired with a human skull, a *memento mori*, to remind the collector of his own mortality. Paul Weissman's series of powerful prints are a collection of rare, mysterious, dangerous, compelling images, philosophically paired with a clear message of impending disaster. It is not too late to pay proper attention and take action.

Laura Kruger

Curator

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum

Elements of Alchemy: Let Us Choose Life

It is not inconsequential that in the combined Biblical and Rabbinic tradition, the Torah is likened to three substances that are fundamental to human life: a tree, fire, and water. It is referred to variously as “a tree of life (*etz hayyim*),” “a fiery law (*aish da’at*),” and most frequently, “living waters (*mayyim hayyim*).” The main thing that these substances have in common is the fact that each has an inherent duality. Wood from a tree can be used to make implements that help us plant and farm, thereby providing sustenance, but it can also be used to fashion weapons. Even more poignantly, fire can be used to purify, prepare food, and warm us, but frequently it is also destructive. Similarly, water is an essential ingredient in the sustaining of life, but it surely can be a powerfully obliterating force on a very large scale. This dialectic is clearly evident as the Israelites pass through the waters of the Red Sea in Exodus 15, enabling them to cleanse themselves from the slavery of Egypt and move towards the Promised Land, while the very same waters destroy the Egyptian army.

The Torah is understood as the vehicle that will help human beings achieve the messianic. The Jewish tradition, by analogizing the Torah to substances that can bring both life and death, emphasizes that how we as human beings utilize these substances determines the nature of our lives and our universe.

Interestingly, in this regard, Paul Weissman, through his printmaking, has gravitated to the elements of the Periodic Table, examining, as he has written, “our relationship to these basic building blocks of the universe.” In each one of the prints in this exhibition, he recognizes the potential duality inherent in the elements upon which he focuses, and the power human beings have in putting these elements to use for constructive or destructive purposes.

In *Bonds*, for example, Weissman focuses on the chemical bonds that are created with Hydrogen that lie at the heart of the universe. In so doing, the images he creates include both a cumulus nimbus cloud and a mushroom cloud following a nuclear explosion, which highlight our capacities to create as well as to destroy. The use of the black and white color contrast, which is found in many of his works, highlights the dialectic tension between our two sides.

Ferrum, created immediately after the attack on Iraq began, forces us as viewers to struggle in an even more direct way with our penchant for both good and evil. Iron is used to

build our societies, but it is also a fundamental element of war. As in *Bonds*, the background red/orange color also conveys a possible duality – on the one hand, sun and warmth, on the other, conflagration and destruction.

Even more directly, *Carbo* portrays the stark contrast of our two capacities through the simple black/ white contrast. It is meant to capture the two contrasting outcomes of combustion – fueling our economy and making our lives better, yet creating global warming, thereby destroying the planet.

And it all began with Weissman’s response to the Chernobyl disaster, in which he worked with satellite photos of the radiation cloud over the northern hemisphere. Once again, the stark black/white contrast conveys a duality, our antithetical uses of Uranium, and challenges each of us to confront who we are as we deal with the world in which we live.

Paul Weissman wants to challenge each viewer on both a visceral as well as intellectual level. He attempts to force us to face ourselves through his prints and to realize the power we have either to destroy our planet or to ensure its continuity. As we immerse ourselves in the multi-textured levels of his works, thereby coming in touch with our own multifarious natures, i.e., our many-sidedness, we hopefully will gain much personal meaning from his art. And that meaning in part must be a realization of the fragility of our ecological system.

All of art, whether it is literary like the Torah or graphic like Weissman’s prints, is like a mirror – at its most successful, it reflects back to us who we are and who we must become. The moment of engagement with Paul Weissman’s rendering of elements of the Periodic Table brings with it not only an appreciation of his artistry, but more importantly, the responsibility that each of us has to live a life based on a set of values that impels us to utilize the elements of the universe for the betterment of humankind and the world. Like the Deuteronomist (30:15, 19), Weissman calls out to us, saying, “See, I have set before you this day, life and goodness, death and evil....Choose life!”

Rabbi Norman J. Cohen, Ph.D.

Provost

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Paul Weissman

Paul Weissman was born in New York City on April 10, 1948. He entered Yale University as an Oceanography major in 1966, graduating in 1970 with a B.A. in Writing and Sociology. His love of drawing led him to enroll in the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles, where he received his B.A. in Architecture in 1981 and M.A. in Architecture in 1982, including a five-year “practicum” as a general contractor in Eugene, Oregon. Weissman then moved back to New York City to practice as an architect.

Ten years later, when the economics of the East met the call of the Islands, Weissman moved his practice to Kauai, Hawaii. In 2003 he decided to take a two-year sabbatical to pursue a long-time dream of art school. Two years at the University of Hawaii–Manoa, Honolulu turned into three and a half, classes turned into a residency, and student critiques turned into gallery shows. Weissman currently lives in Honolulu and works at both his own studio and at the Honolulu Printmakers.

While greatly enamored of the immediacy of painting, it was the physicality and processes of printmaking that captured him. Stone lithography in particular – the weight and coolness of stone, the alchemical qualities of turning scratches on stone into images pulled from pools of ink and water, the forces of the hand press – still remains his favored medium of expression.

Searching for a way to loosen up his work, which were tight *manière-noire* lithographs involving hours of meticulous scratching through fields of ink, Weissman began to experiment with some very large woodcuts and chose images related to ecological disasters, seeing a correlation between the large-format woodcut’s broad, bold strokes and the magnitude of these disasters’ impact. His depiction of the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear explosion in the work titled *26 April 86 + 17* suggested an elemental aspect to Weissman that was further inspired by Primo Levi’s *The Periodic Table*, where chapters of the author’s life are demarcated by his experiences as a chemist with specific elements. Weissman decided to follow man’s use of the elements as barometers/mirrors of beliefs and values, creating a series of works for this exhibition.

The content of Weissman’s work originates in the desire to share his experience and concerns of being alive. Individual and societal relationships, with each other and the planet, fuel the narratives. Essential to this communication are explorations of how process and image interact to create meaning. He builds his works out of layers of different printmaking techniques, colors, and images to create visually rich surfaces, as well as to articulate the complexity of his subjects and world. The resulting images aim to grab the viewers’ gaze long enough to engage their minds.

Paul Weissman in his studio.

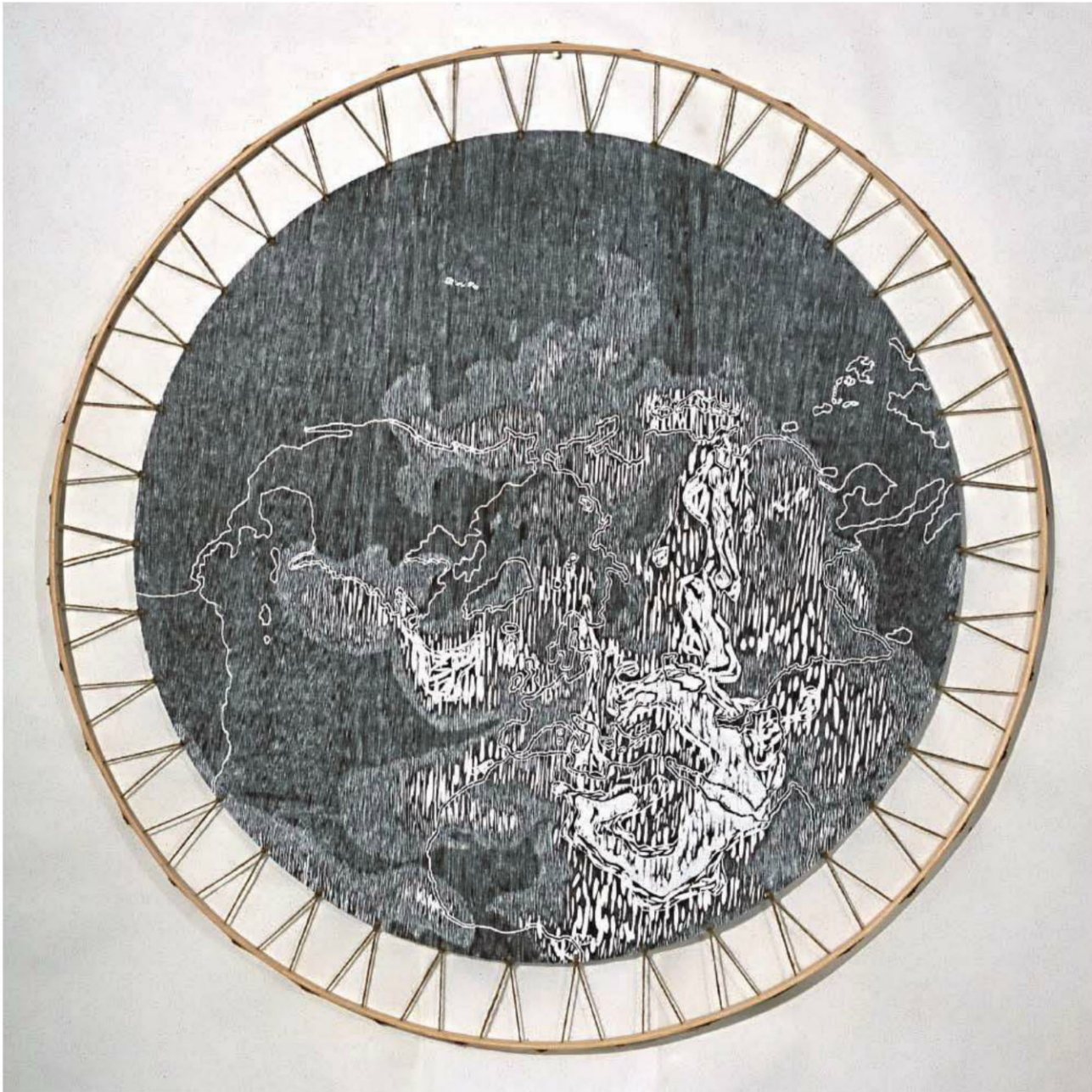
Artist’s Statement

My interest in printmaking is as much about the physicality of the process as it is about communication. To create visually-interesting surfaces, I layer multiple printmaking techniques to texture these pieces, and I juxtapose aspects of content – images with metaphors, the general with the specific, pictorial illusion with elements in real scale – to engage the intellect. The resulting images are aimed at a visceral response, creating pause to then think and reflect.

These works are part of the series “Elements.” Inspired by Primo Levi’s book *The Periodic Table*, each work in this ongoing project deals with a specific element and examines man’s relationship to that basic building block of the universe. The works are meant as mirrors to reflect upon and question humankind’s values and conditions.

Paul Weissman
Honolulu, Hawaii
July 3, 2007

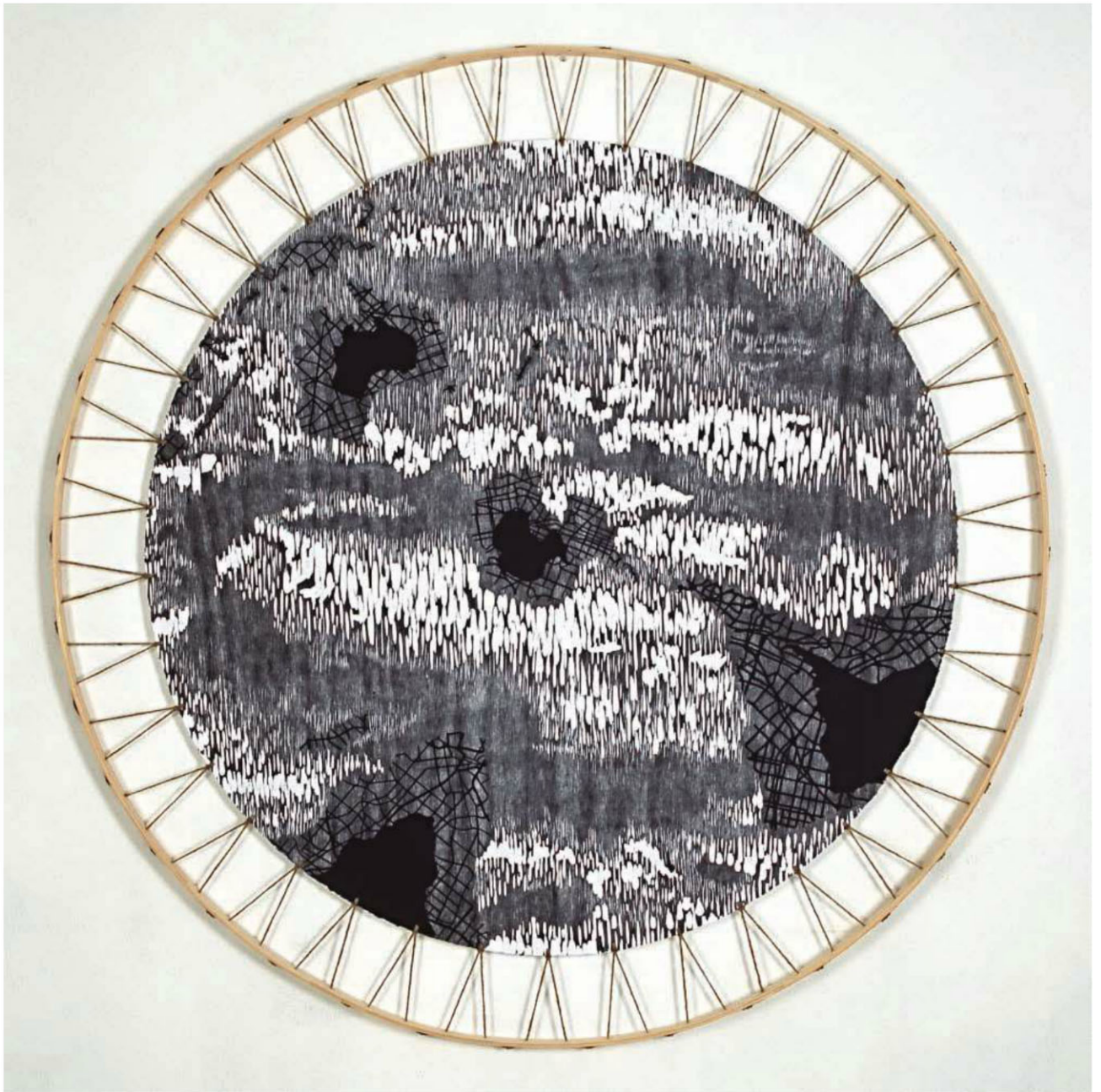




26 April 86 + 17, 2005

Woodcut/jute/wood; 48" diameter

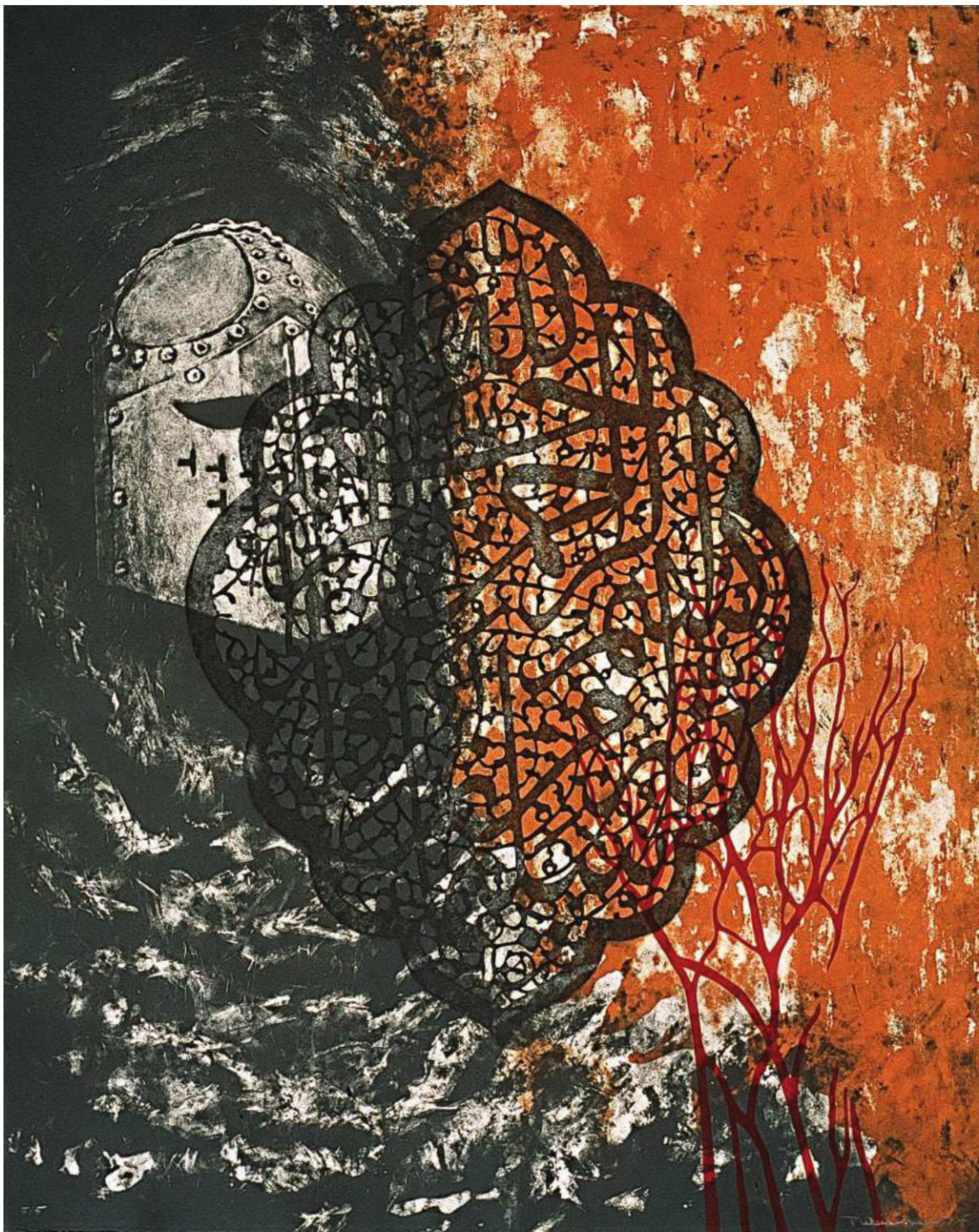
This work depicts a satellite photograph of the dustcloud from the explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Pripyat, Ukraine, and the subsequent radioactive contamination of the surrounding area. The image, taken seventeen days after the disaster, shows the drift of the fallout over the Western Soviet Union, Europe, and Eastern North America. This event sparked Weissman's artistic investigation into the elemental building blocks of the universe and their relationship with the human condition. The element Uranium, from the ancient Greek name of Uranus meaning 'God of the Sky,' is the core component of nuclear energy and warfare. In its natural state it is a silvery-white, very dense metal with the potential to generate vast amounts of energy. This print was inspired by images of the infamous nuclear disaster that were transmitted via satellite and formatted as an infinite circle without boundaries. Its hoop formation resembles the 'dreamcatchers' of the Ojibwa (Chippewa) people, a culture that believes a dreamcatcher filters a person's dreams and allows only the positive ones to come through.



Carbo, 2005

Woodcut/screenprint/jute/wood; 48" diameter

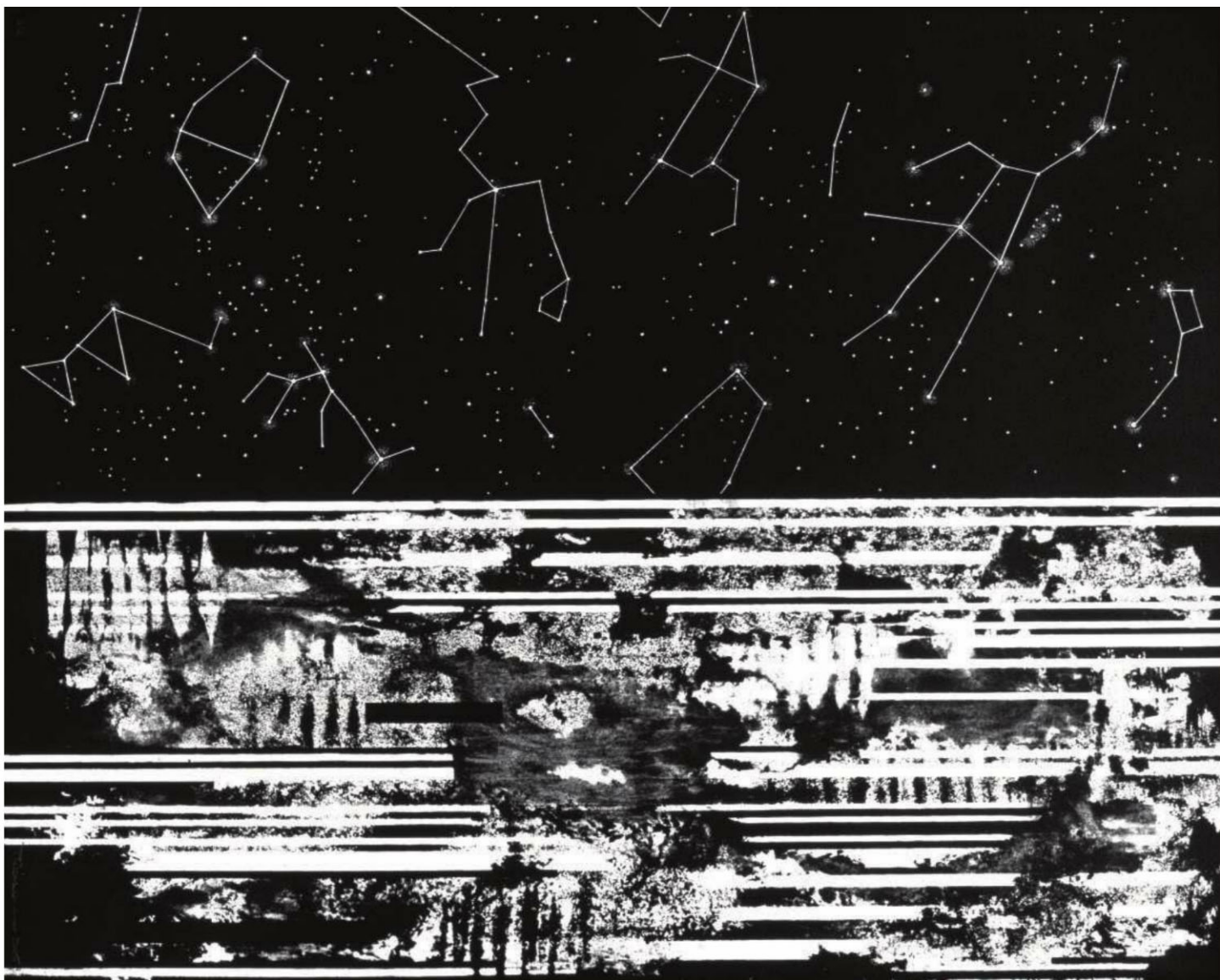
Carbo, the Latin for charcoal, exists freely on Earth as graphite and diamonds. It is a constituent of coal, limestone, and petroleum. Weissman uses it as a metaphor for our dependence on oil and its relation to global warming, melting ice caps, a drowned world. He features aerial views of Detroit, Los Angeles, and Dallas, cities that have been impacted economically, politically, socially, and ecologically by their ongoing oil dependency.



Ferrum, 2005

Lithograph/intaglio/screenprint; 28" x 22.5"

Ferrum, the Latin for iron, was in ancient times a symbol for magic, protection, violence, strength, and war. Weissman features an iron helmet as worn by the Crusader soldiers in their aggression against Islam during the 11th-13th centuries. He contrasts the brute strength of iron with the delicate tracery of Arabic filigree and with the veins of a human hand, where hemoglobin (iron) is an intrinsic component of human blood. The choice of iron reflects Weissman's anti-war perspective and expresses a call to resolve differences by overcoming religious fervor and the forcing of one's perceptions on others.



Neos, 2005

Lithograph; 22.5" x 28"

Neos/Neon, the Latin for 'new,' was discovered in 1898. Although it is the fourth most abundant element in the universe, it is rare in our earth's atmosphere. When contained in a vacuum tube it discharges a reddish orange glow. It is predominantly used when in its gaseous form for advertising signs and refrigeration. Weissman contrasts the pure, clear night sky filled with identifiable stars against that of a smudged, blurred image of bar code stripes. His implication is that in our present era we have obliterated the purity of nature with the blinding, flashing indicator of consumerism and commodification – a form of visual pollution.



Plumbum, 2005

Lithograph; 28" x 22.5"

Plumbum, the Latin for lead, is a true metal, has a dull luster, is very soft and malleable, and is highly resistant to corrosion. Most of all, it is highly poisonous. Its color is bluish-white, but quickly tarnishes to a dull grey when exposed to air. It has been used by humans for more than 7,000 years and is mentioned in the Book of Exodus. Lead, as a soil contaminant, creates a widespread health issue, and as a paint component is responsible for cognitive defects in children. It is a cumulative poison that is stored in the bones. Weissman pairs this element with a female pelvis, linking careless use of lead to birth defects and childrens' vulnerability. This print was achieved by pouring a solvent on a field of ink and 'drawing' across it with a hand-held soft rag. His smoke-colored palette evokes the threat of toxic pollution created by previous generations, cumulatively increasing, and impacting on generations yet unborn.



***Aurum*, 2006**

Lithograph/screenprint/24kt gold; 28" x 22.5"

Aurum (gold), from the Latin *Aurora*, meaning 'shining dawn' (Roman Goddess of the Dawn), has signified beauty, idolatry, preciousness, royalty, vanity, wealth, and power since antiquity. The greenish-gold ground of this print reinforces the theme of idolatry and envy. The image has a background of eleven layers of handprints, including those of the artist, his friends, and colleagues, and surrounds the biblical symbol of the Golden Calf.



Bonds, 2006

Lithograph/woodcut; 28" x 22.5"

The title of this work refers to the fact that Hydrogen is the necessary element that bonds numerous other elements together. Hydrogen, a colorless gas that is highly flammable, gets its name from the Greek 'hydro' meaning water-forming. It was the first element created after the 'big bang,' and it bonds to itself. This 14-layer woodcut lithograph is based on the capability of hydrogen atoms to bond and create the life-supporting characteristics of water, vapor, ice, and the helical form of DNA. The red background refers to the Trifid Nebula (a hydrogen star-bearing nebula), while the cumulonimbus cloud mass and the hydrogen bomb mushroom cloud are further emanations of hydrogen's propensity to bond. Weissman views nature as the duality of creation and destruction with the interference of humankind tending towards the apocalypse.