



# AMÉLIE BOUVIER

*LET THERE BE NIGHT*

November 4 - December 18, 2021

Harlan Levøy Projects 1050

# SERAPIS

During an artist residency at Harvard, Amélie Bouvier made extensive use of the university library archives to examine over a centuries' worth of astrological research. While looking at photographic plates of the night sky taken at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, the artist became even more interested in the plates that were classified as too damaged to be of use. While the data was no longer lisible, these objects still attested to a history of research, and they were not thrown out. Due to flooding and bad conservation, the photographic material was peeling off like shedded snake skin, marking a transition into a new era and new technologies. The conservation of data which was deemed useless led Bouvier to reflect upon how we conserve memories and inherited information. As with these photographic plates, if we care for memories and histories, they will survive, but if not, they will deteriorate.

When, at the end of the 1900s, Edward C. Pickering and his team of female scientists first trained their eyes on the stars, they peered into what felt like a limitless horizon. Today, following centuries of developing ever keener instruments to discern the cosmos, some of these tools now risk eclipsing our view of it. Increasingly, the earth is being blinded by its own electric glare and the glint of satellites revolving above.

The meticulous observations made by Pickering's scientists are also in danger of disappearing. As Harvard's archive of astronomical photographic glass plates becomes digitized, many of the notations they made by hand are being wiped clean so as to better observe the information beneath. Yet others bear the injuries of time, becoming cracked or molded. As stars burst and others are continually born, these plates display a shifting sky. Once damaged, they are consigned to obscurity within sleeves marked by a single purple dot. Those bearing the exculpatory mark are not scanned and rarely, if ever, again consulted.

Amélie Bouvier evokes these vanishing records. In a new series of drawings, she traces the lingering shapes of harm and loss in pigmented ink over veils of gesso and gouache on raw canvas. Using a quill and modified rulers, she fills drawn enclosures with delicate skeins: at times drawing lines that are even and steady, at others letting ink seep across



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*Serapis #4*, 2021  
Gouache, ink, and gesso on canvas, steel  
48.5 x 37 cm - 19 1/8 x 14 5/8 in



*Serapis #2*, 2021  
Gouache, ink, and gesso on canvas, steel  
47 x 37 cm - 18 1/2 x 14 5/8 in

## ROOM ONE *SERAPIS*



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the surface in gentle plumes. Suspended on steel supports, the canvases take on a transparent quality, allowing new shadows to emerge on their back sides, while along the edges, panels of gesso have been used to blot excess ink from her pens. The works are a fitting close to Bouvier's exploration of the Harvard collection, where the erasures of fragile glass plates and their tender notations elide with our own eroding night sky.

To these drawings, Bouvier endows the title *Serapis*, after the pagan god to whom the Serapeum was dedicated in ancient Greece. Known as the daughter of the Library of Alexandria, the magnificent temple was plundered and destroyed by Christians around 391. Contrary to common belief, the Alexandrian libraries were not consumed by sudden and violent conflagration. Their vast, rich holdings were diminished gradually over generations. The lost deity *Serapis* was a harbinger of what becomes of knowledge when it is no longer deemed worthy of preservation or protection. Some lessons when lost are lost forever.



*Serapis #3*, 2021  
Gouache, ink, and gesso on canvas, steel  
49 x 37 cm - 19 1/4 x 14 5/8 in



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ROOM ONE *QUADRIVIUM*



*Quadrivium #1*, 2021  
Steel and wood  
120 x 45 x 43 cm - 47 1/4 x 17 3/4 x 16 7/8 in

# QUADRIVIUM



*Quadrivium #1 (Detail)*, 2021  
Steel and wood  
120 x 45 x 43 cm - 47 1/4 x 17 3/4 x 16 7/8 in



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When Amélie Bouvier first stumbled across hand drawn notations on astronomical photographic plates of the early twentieth century, they struck her as reminiscent of sheet music.

*Quadrivium* is the artist's first foray into garnering sound from images of the stars. The title draws from the final volume of Johannes Kepler's 1619 publication *Harmonice mundi* (Harmonies of the World), in which Kepler tries to grasp the divine music of the spheres using Boethius's principles of the quadrivium, or the combined study of geometry, mathematics, music, and astronomy. In it, he proposes a model of the solar system based on geometrically and musically harmonic proportions. Centuries earlier, Pythagoras had suggested that if objects in motion produce sound so too must planetary bodies reverberate throughout the universe. When Kepler discovered that planets move in elliptical paths and at different speeds, what had once been conceived as a single celestial chord became a song.

Using a telescopic image gathered from the Observatoire Astronomique Antoine Thomas in Namur, Bouvier translates constellations into nodes on the cylinder of a mechanical steel music box that, as it churns, emits celestial notes at times disjointed or jarring. A second, nearly identical music box uses the same parcel of sky, but this time with a satellite cutting a path across its surface. In *Quadrivium*, a single, small object alters the resonance of our entire universe. The notes from Bouvier's music boxes linger like an aural afterimage of an everchanging cosmos.

# POTENTIALLY HAZARDOUS PORTRAITS



*Potentially Hazardous Portraits #9, 2021*  
Drawing ink, graphite, coloured pencil on paper  
46 x 30 cm - 18 1/8 x 11 3/4 in

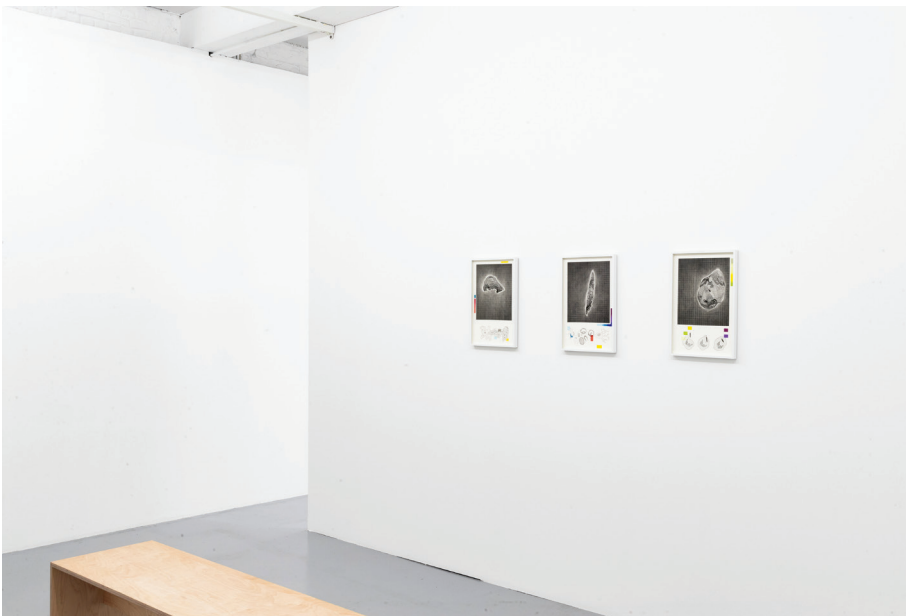
## ROOM TWO *POTENTIALLY HAZARDOUS PORTRAITS*

Far above our heads, celestial bodies barrel around our solar system, many dangerously near to Earth. Called Potentially Hazardous Objects (PHOs), these asteroids and comets have been deemed by NASA and other space agencies capable of immense destruction, or even total extinction of our species, in the event of impact with our Earth. They circle us in a dizzying game of roulette that can come to an abrupt halt at any moment.

Amélie Bouvier's series *Potentially Hazardous Portraits* takes its name from these asteroids. Varying greatly in scale, each drawing renders a speculative depiction of a PHO in India ink, graphite, and colored pencil. Employing her signature method of marking out the perimeters of her shapes and then using rulers and ink to build depth and volume, Bouvier maneuvers deftly between meticulously controlled line work and the ink's unexpected drips, stutters, and vein bursts.

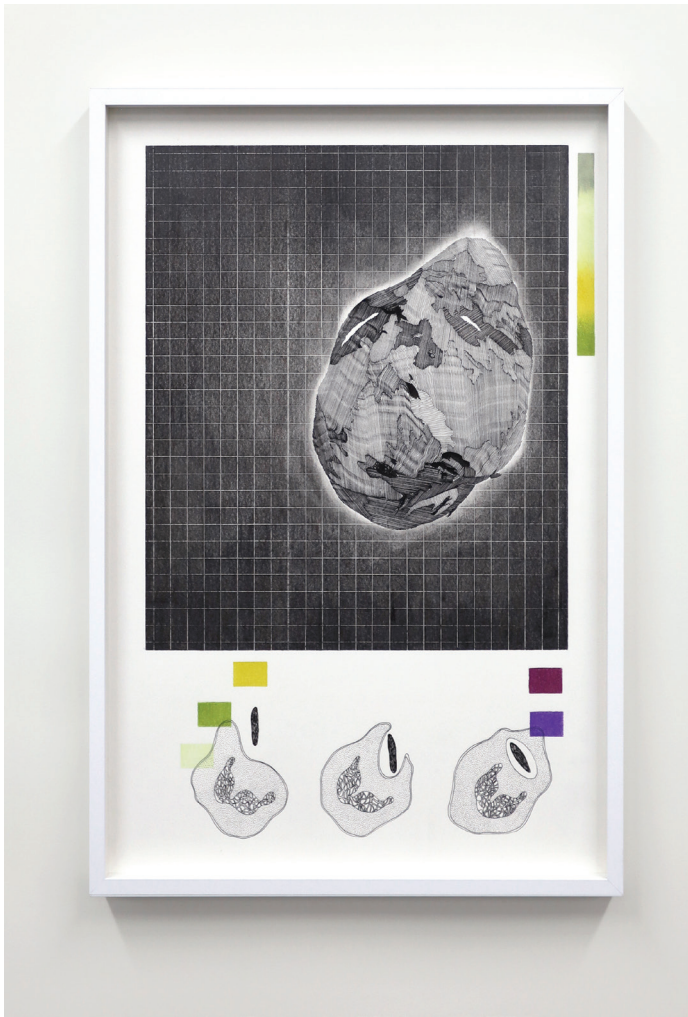
In Bouvier's hand, space rocks become diaphanous creatures. Framed by a white aura against a scored, grey background *PHP #4* and *PHP #5* emit an ethereal glow. Neatly settled within their intimate frames, they contrast with the more expansive *PHP #1*, which seeps across sixteen sheets of paper. At its base, the stony mass dissolves into tiny particles as if ripped by its own velocity. Just below, color-coded bars mimicking tables used to represent temperature or surface elevation mark out a very different narrative. Simulating scientific drawings, Bouvier also zooms into details of the asteroids' surfaces, enlarging them to reveal bacterial blooms in a looser, freer hand. By endowing them with microbial life, we are reminded of our own astral inheritance.

It is telling that Bouvier labels these drawings portraits. *PHP #1*, a portrait of a PHO named Bennu, itself named after the sacred bird of Heliopolis, points to how scientists have long endowed these stones with the status of ancient deities. They are celestial bodies waged in an existential contest with humanity, albeit one that can end only in annihilation. By giving countenance to these stones, Bouvier asks us to peer into the face of staggering terror and breathtaking awe.



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ROOM TWO POTENTIALLY HAZARDOUS PORTRAITS



Potentially Hazardous Portraits #7, 2021  
Drawing ink, graphite, coloured pencil on paper  
46 x 30 cm - 18 1/8 x 11 3/4 in



Potentially Hazardous Portraits #6, 2021  
Drawing ink, graphite, coloured pencil on paper  
46 x 30 cm - 18 1/8 x 11 3/4 in



# EIGHT MINUTES AGO



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It takes approximately eight minutes for the light of the sun to reach our retinas. Amélie Bouvier's two-channel video *Eight Minutes Ago* grapples with this distance between us and the stars. On one screen, NASA sound recordings of planets in our solar system and glass sound effects accompany imagery drawn from or inspired by Harvard's collection of astrological photographic plates. Shots of dust settling in the air, dark shadows emerging on weathered glass, or an archivist wiping clean notations made by hand all convey the tenuousness of our personal and collective heritage. In a scrolling text on the pendant screen, Bouvier's ninety-three-year-old father shares memories of growing up and aging refracted through ruminations on the night. Together the work expresses the belatedness and

fragility of the human experience. As an inscription on Johannes Kepler's tombstone reads, "I used to measure the heavens, now I shall measure the shadows of the earth. Although my soul was from heaven, the shadow of my body lies here."

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