

# Thelma Appel

Observed/Abstract

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**— Thelma Appel**

**Thelma Appel: Observed/Abstract**

Brattleboro Museum & Art Center

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Curated by Mara Williams

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All dimensions in inches, height x width

Brattleboro Museum & Art Center

10 Vernon Street

Brattleboro, VT 05301

[www.brattleboromuseum.org](http://www.brattleboromuseum.org)

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**Desert Sage**

1973

oil on canvas

75 x 97

*courtesy of the Vermont State Curator's Office*



**Night Fall**

1973

acrylic and oil on canvas

36 ½ x 87 ½



**Champlain Valley**

1977

oil on canvas

33 x 84

*courtesy of the Vermont State Curator's Office*



**Fire Mountain – Jeremiah's Vision of Fire Mountain**

1998-99

oil on canvas

40 x 71



**Exodus by Moonlight**

1999

oil and sand on canvas

57 x 84



**Journey Through Hell**

2001

oil on canvas

30 ½ x 40 ½





**Nebula**

2010

acrylic on canvas

50 x 40

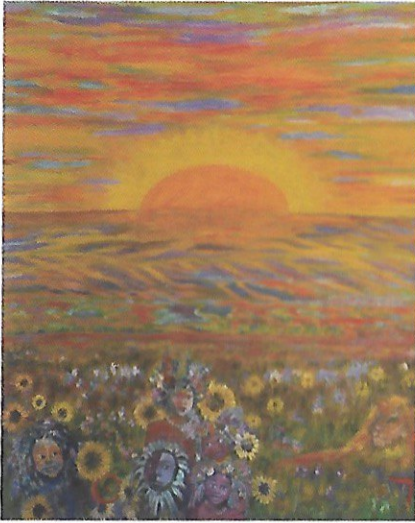


**Tarot Series – The Hierophant (VI)**

2010

oil on canvas

50 x 40



**Tarot Series – Sun (XX)**

2010  
oil on canvas  
50 x 40

**Observed/Abstract** surveys the career of painter Thelma Appel, a founder of the Bennington College Summer Painting Workshop. During the 1960s and 1970s, Appel painted large landscapes imbued with the energy and color of Vermont's fields and forests. Her thick brushstrokes and lavish colors running edge to edge throughout the picture plane create a shimmering, atmospheric quality that captures the way light interacts with form, alternately substantiating and dissolving it.

After 9/11 and a series of natural disasters, Appel's imagery shifted from pastoral to apocalyptic. Looming cityscapes explode; mountains burn; hordes of people flee on roads winding through a vast rocky landscape. The vantage point has changed, too. Whereas Appel's earlier landscapes immerse the viewer in their subject, the later ones place the viewer at a distance.

Appel's tarot cards seamlessly combine contemporary imagery with elements ranging from antiquity to art deco, and they serve as a bridge to her recent paintings of the cosmos—vibrantly colored and patterned canvases, informed by satellite imagery, brimming with the energy of the primordial stew and the wonder of our place in the universe.

— Mara Williams, Chief Curator

**After emigrating from England** to the United States in the late 1960s, I became interested in landscape painting, inspired by the Vermont countryside and the vast expanses of the American West. I wanted to create a sense of visual participation, as if the viewer were engulfed in the middle of a landscape experience rather than viewing a carefully framed composition through a window. I was interested in the patterns formed by light cast on organic forms in the landscape, and I tried to convey, through overlapping strokes of color, a sense of physical connection with the contours of nature.

In my later paintings, I no longer observed the landscape so much as felt it emotionally. For example, it became a menacing background for catastrophic events I imagined, based on reality or informed by my own experience of the September 11 terrorist attacks, during which I lived in lower Manhattan.

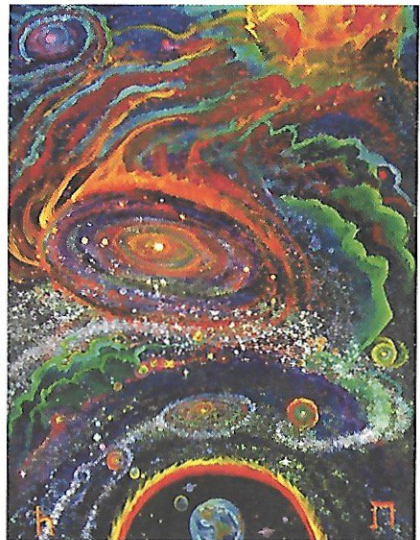
Working through these ideas, I began a series of narrative paintings based upon the 22 major arcana of the tarot, in which each card represents an important milestone of human experience. I composed the archetypal figures to illustrate an allegorical narrative, with nature abstracted to convey a mood or illustrate an experience—sometimes menacing and hostile, other times light and harmonious. For example, in the ancient tarot, the Hierophant is a generic Pope-like figure with the power to unlock the secrets of the universe. I depict the Hierophant

as a specific personage — Albert Einstein, the modern scientist whose theoretical analysis helps unlock the vast secrets of the cosmos.

My tarot images became the beginning of a new series in which I explored my feelings about time and endless space, transcendence and inner joy, while depicting cosmic phenomena. Here, nature is no longer earthbound but is in a constant state of entropy, disintegration, and re-creation.

For me there exists a continuing visual cycle between the past, present, and future. It is poignant and fitting that my work now returns to Vermont, where I first became a serious landscape painter.

— Thelma Appel

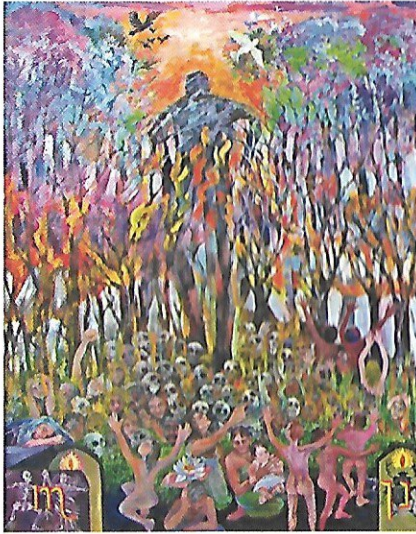


**Tarot Series – Worlds (XXII)**

2010

acrylic on canvas

50 x 40



**Tarot Series –  
Death and Transfiguration (XIV)**

2009  
oil on canvas  
50 x 40

**Thelma Appel** was born in Israel in 1938, raised in India, and educated in England, where she earned a Diploma of Art and Design from St. Martin's School of Art, followed by an Art Teacher's Certification from Hornsey College of Art, London. She immigrated to the United States in the 1960s, settling in Bennington, Vermont.

In 1974 Appel was awarded a Yaddo Fellowship, and in 1976 she received a fellowship to the Millay Colony for the Arts. That year, she and painter Carol Haerer co-founded the Bennington College Summer Painting Workshop, where many distinguished painters of the day conducted master classes.

Appel has taught drawing at Parsons School of Design and painting at Southern Vermont College and the University of Connecticut. Her work has been exhibited at the Bennington Museum, the Berkshire Museum, the Children's Museum of the Arts, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Mattatuck Museum, and the Robert Hull Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont, among other venues.

In 2014 Appel was awarded a solo show by the Chashama Foundation in NYC, and in 2019, in collaboration with Chashama, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey selected work from Appel's *Times Square* series to be exhibited in a one-person show at their Project Find space at the Port Authority Bus Terminal.



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