

“Specola Vaticana,” *Modern Painters*, May 2013.

MODERN PAINTERS

LAURENT GRASSO

Specola Vaticana

This suite of five images shows the unexpected and intriguing sight of popes and cardinals gazing at the night sky through giant telescopes. Each witty, fascinating, and surprising, the images were garnered from the Vatican archives during a residency there by Grasso. Who would have suspected that the papacy, with its history of persecuting those who questioned the heavens, would have had such a sophisticated observatory, updated through the ages with the latest telescopes? Grasso reinforces this dissimilitude by showing alongside the images a page from Galileo’s 1610 treatise *Sidereus Nuncius* (sometimes translated as *Starry Messenger*) depicting his observations of the stars. He was later sentenced as a heretic and placed under house arrest by his former supporter, Pope Urban VIII.

It is unclear what these images were for and if they were intended to be anything other than private records. Grasso carefully researched the printing method, using a vintage silver plate

technique to blur their historical status. A similar historical mist encircles his closely related series of paintings, “Studies into the Past,” 2010–12 (also on display in the exhibition), for which Grasso engaged Old Master restorers to help create paintings in a Renaissance style. Using composite scenes from earlier works, Grasso introduces spectacular natural phenomena into the landscape, such as a comet or a large swarm of bats. The effect creates a disturbance, a “what if” reinterpretation of history, in which extraordinary things of contemporary familiarity and understanding have been edited back into the past. These things could have happened, but would people have been so shocked that they ignored them? Grasso confronts the past with natural events so vivid and strange that if they had happened they could easily have been dismissed as dream apparitions or signs from above and buried for centuries in a distant collective memory. How curious can we really be without taking a leap of faith outside the known borders of our belief? *MP*



Specola Vaticana (Plus XII Schmid), 2012. Argentic print, 32 1/4 x 30 1/4 in.

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