Claraboia

PORTASVILASECA

Emilia Estrada

Meia-luz

CURATED BY

Ariana Nuala

24 Nov 26 – 16 Jan 27

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Once upon a time, Italo Calvino tells us, the Moon passed so close to the Earth that all it took was rowing out beneath it and propping a ladder against the boat to reach it. In “The Distance of the Moon,” the first story in *Cosmicomics*, people climb up to gather lunar milk, until the Moon begins to drift away and those who stayed on the other side are seen only from afar, in a brightness that can no longer be touched.[1] *Meia-luz* begins from this distance that opens up between a place and those who were once able to reach it. Emilia Estrada travels it in two directions: down into the subsoil of Palestine, where nineteenth-century British explorers crawled with candles between their teeth in search of the stones of a temple, and up into the cavities of the Moon, which space agencies and engineers today dream of turning into property. At both extremes the light is always partial, and what appears depends on who holds it, what they are looking for, and what they agree to leave in the dark.

Born in Córdoba, Argentina, to a family of Palestinian origin, and based in Rio de Janeiro, Estrada takes maps, archives and records of exploration as her starting point and returns them as matter. Her drawings are made in charcoal and dry pastel on linen, often framed by gilded ornamental borders that recall the archives the artist researches. In some works, materials such as pyrite, basalt and brass join the fabric, expanding the materiality of the pieces. Charcoal is what remains of wood after fire, and it is also one of the materials through which archaeology dates the remains found in the earth. On linen, it marks, smudges and settles, lodging itself in the porosity of the cloth. The artist draws cavities with the same substance through which time is read in the ground.

It was during a residency in London that Estrada came across, in the *Illustrated London News* of 24 April 1869, the excavations that Lieutenant Charles Warren was conducting beneath Jerusalem for the *Palestine Exploration Fund*. The newspaper asked that the work be sustained by British diplomacy and by the money of anyone interested in science or in biblical scripture. The engravings came from drawings by William Simpson, who descended into the galleries and drew in the dark, by the light of magnesium wire. Told as an adventure, the excavation became news, and funds to keep digging. In a watercolor by Simpson made beneath Wilson’s Arch, it is an Arab man who holds the magnesium that lights the chamber. In the published engraving, he recedes into the background with a bucket in his hand, and the light passes into Warren’s hands. His name was not recorded, just as those of the many local workers without whom none of those discoveries would have happened were not recorded.[2]

The search for the biblical past guided excavations across many lands throughout the nineteenth century. As the historian Margarita Díaz-Andreu shows, it shaped the archaeology of Egypt, Mesopotamia (located mostly in present-day Iraq), Lebanon and Turkey, as well as Palestine. The search for evidence confirming scripture in the soil paid little attention to what had come before or after it. Diplomats, missionaries and explorers in the service of imperial powers cleared the way for one another, and empire and faith overlapped. The past that was sought conditioned the past that became legible.[3]

In Brazil, the relationship between excavation and devotion took another form. The gold wrested from the mines of Minas Gerais in the eighteenth century, through the labor of enslaved Africans, rose to the altars of Ouro Preto, Mariana and Sabará, and gilded woodcarving made the wealth of the subsoil reappear as sacred light.

In Estrada’s works, the gold leaf can be read in light of this history, and it shares the surface with pyrite, fool’s gold, whose shine deceived those looking for another metal. Biblical archaeology also knew the force of such expectations. The red letters painted on the stones of the Haram wall, reproduced in that same issue of the London newspaper, were taken to be the signature of the Phoenician masons of Solomon’s temple.[2]

A century and a half after Warren, shafts and galleries continue to be opened beneath the Old City of Jerusalem and beneath Silwan, a Palestinian neighborhood at the foot of its walls, in projects associated with the settler foundation Elad and passing under Palestinian homes.[4] Those who go down through them cross the city without encountering those who live above. This present is also one of violence against the Palestinian people, in which massacres and forced displacement are accompanied by the destruction of schools and archives, as documented by international bodies.[5] While a chosen antiquity is excavated and displayed, the archives of the present are buried.

Curatorial text

In the room, the drawings rest on tubular scaffolding that forms corridors, narrow passages and views that open up in parts. The structure recalls the timber shoring with which Warren propped up his galleries and remains in plain sight, like a construction site that was never finished. Alongside it are works commissioned for the exhibition and others from earlier periods of the artist's career. Drawing was for a long time a tool of science, and in Simpson's watercolors the pencil attested that someone had been there. Estrada lends the same meticulousness to cavities that no one has traversed, known only through probes and radar signals, in a kind of naturalist irony in which the instrument of proof turns toward what remains out of reach.

On the Moon, Estrada continues drawing in charcoal. The dark patches visible from Earth are basalt plains left by ancient eruptions, and they were called seas when it was still imagined that they held water. In the cartography published by the Jesuit Giovanni Battista Riccioli in 1651, many of them were given names of moods and climates: Tranquility, Serenity, Rains, Fecundity.[6] The titles *Mare Tranquillitatis Pit* (2025), *Mare Insularum Pit* (2025), *Mare Moscoviense Pit* (2026) and *Southwest Mare Fecunditatis Pit* (2026) overlay the Latin of the seas with the pit of space reports, the dry word with which today's science designates a hollow. On the same map, the Arab astronomers al-Battani, al-Farghani and al-Zarqali survive in Latinized form as *Albategnius*, *Alfraganus* and *Arzachel*, traces of the passage of Arab astronomy through European science.

Lunar cavities introduce yet another fold into this passage to the sky. Lava tubes, formed when the crust cooled while the interior kept flowing, are being investigated as shelter for future missions. In 2024, radar data indicated that the pit in the Sea of Tranquility opens onto an underground conduit.[7] It was in that same sea, hundreds of kilometers away, that Apollo 11 landed a hundred years after that issue of the London newspaper. The surface observed from a distance once again mobilizes the words shelter and occupation. The projects that now reach the Moon are formed on Earth, and the history of space exploration is intertwined with rivalry between powers and the technologies of war. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibits the national appropriation of the Moon, while a 2015 U.S. law recognizes the rights of its citizens over the space resources they obtain, under the conditions set out in the legislation.[8] In the face of this new race, it is worth asking what forms of coexistence and appropriation accompany the promise of an arrival.

For these same tubes, engineers have already proposed storing samples of life on Earth in an ark inspired by the story of Noah, and the biblical repertoire is summoned once again before other cavities.[9] *Permanently Shadowed* (2025), the largest work in the exhibition, takes its name from the polar regions at whose depths sunlight never reaches and which may hold water ice. The basalt that makes up the work is the rock of the lunar seas, and in the face of a shadow coveted as a reserve, the work preserves its share of opacity. Finally, in more recent works, topographic maps wrapped in silver leaf suggest the dimensions and depths of Jerusalem.

Lunar craters and the voids produced by Israeli bombings in Palestine belong to distinct processes and temporalities. On the Moon, cavities are studied as possible shelters; in Palestine, bombings destroy the places where people live. Their proximity in the work interrogates the gaze that turns these surfaces into images, without erasing the history of what opened them.

From the subsoil of Palestine to the lunar cavities, Estrada traces the formation of the images that make a place knowable and the claims to authority that can attach to that knowledge. Her drawings and installations restore thickness to documents and bring into view the labor, matter and imagination that sustain their apparent transparency. Between what an image allows us to see and what it authorizes us to do, her practice opens an interval, and within it arrival at a place can be thought anew, from the relations it establishes and the lives whose continuity it must acknowledge.

Ariana Nuala, curator

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[3] DÍAZ-ANDREU, Margarita. *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
[4] EMEK SHAVEH. *Archaeology and Politics in Jerusalem's Historic Basin*, 2018. [n.p.]: Emek Shaveh, 2018. Available at: emekshaveh.org.
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[6] MUSEO GALILEO. Giovanni Battista Riccioli S.J., *Almagestum novum*. Florence: Museo Galileo, [n.d.]. Available at: museogalileo.it.
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[8] UNITED NATIONS. *Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies. 1967*. Available at: unoosa.org.
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Photo: Renato Mangolin

Emilia Estrada
1989, Córdoba, Argentina
Lives and works in Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

Emilia Estrada's practice examines the ways in which power is inscribed in archives and spatial representations. The artist investigates terrestrial and celestial cartographies as instruments that sustain processes of exploitation, conquest, and territorial appropriation. By bringing together poetic, iconographic, and archival elements, she constructs speculative mappings that expose the arbitrariness of historiography and the symbolic systems that shape territorial imaginaries. In her work, cartography is not reinvented but unmasked: what presents itself as a descriptive tool is revealed as a self-serving fiction. It is within this contaminated terrain, where documentation and imagination have always intersected, that her practice operates. Estrada brings together historical documents, iconographic archives, and mythologies, weaving them into drawings and installations that destabilize inherited narratives and conjure new territorial imaginaries.

In recent investigations, the artist turns her gaze to the sky, taking the Moon as a surface for projection. Celestial cartography — its topographies, compositions, and nomenclatures — is examined as a mirror of terrestrial imperial projects, revealing how science, mythology, and fiction converge in aspirations of possession and control.

Estrada held the solo exhibition *Permanently Shadowed*, Cantadora Gallery, Rome, Italy (2025). Selected group exhibitions include *Forma das águas*, MAM Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2025); *Every Morning, a Time*, HATCH Gallery, Paris, France (2025); *Otra Orilla*, Gateway Exhibition, Manarat Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (2024); *Abre alas 19*, A Gentil Carioca, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2024); *Muamba: Brazilian Traces of Movement*, Ruby Cruel Gallery, London, UK (2023); *Manjar nascente*, Solar dos Abacaxis, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2022); *A parábola do progresso*, Sesc Pompeia, São Paulo, Brazil (2022); *Outras imaginações políticas*, MAM Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2022); *ZIL, ZIL, ZIL*, Centro Cultural Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2022); *Casa carioca*, Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2020); and *Arte aproxima*, MNBA, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2018). She received the FOCO ArtRio Award (2026) and was nominated for the PIPA Prize (2025) and has participated in the following artist residencies: Gasworks, London, UK (2020); Instituto Adelina Residency, São Paulo, Brazil (2020); Aberta Residency, Centro Cultural Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2019); and the Museu da Imigração Artist Residency, São Paulo, Brazil (2019).

Emilia Estrada

Péndulo I, from the series *Andalucia*, 2026
Charcoal, dry pastel, and gold leaf on linen and brass
215 × 128 cm (84 5/8 × 50 3/8 in)

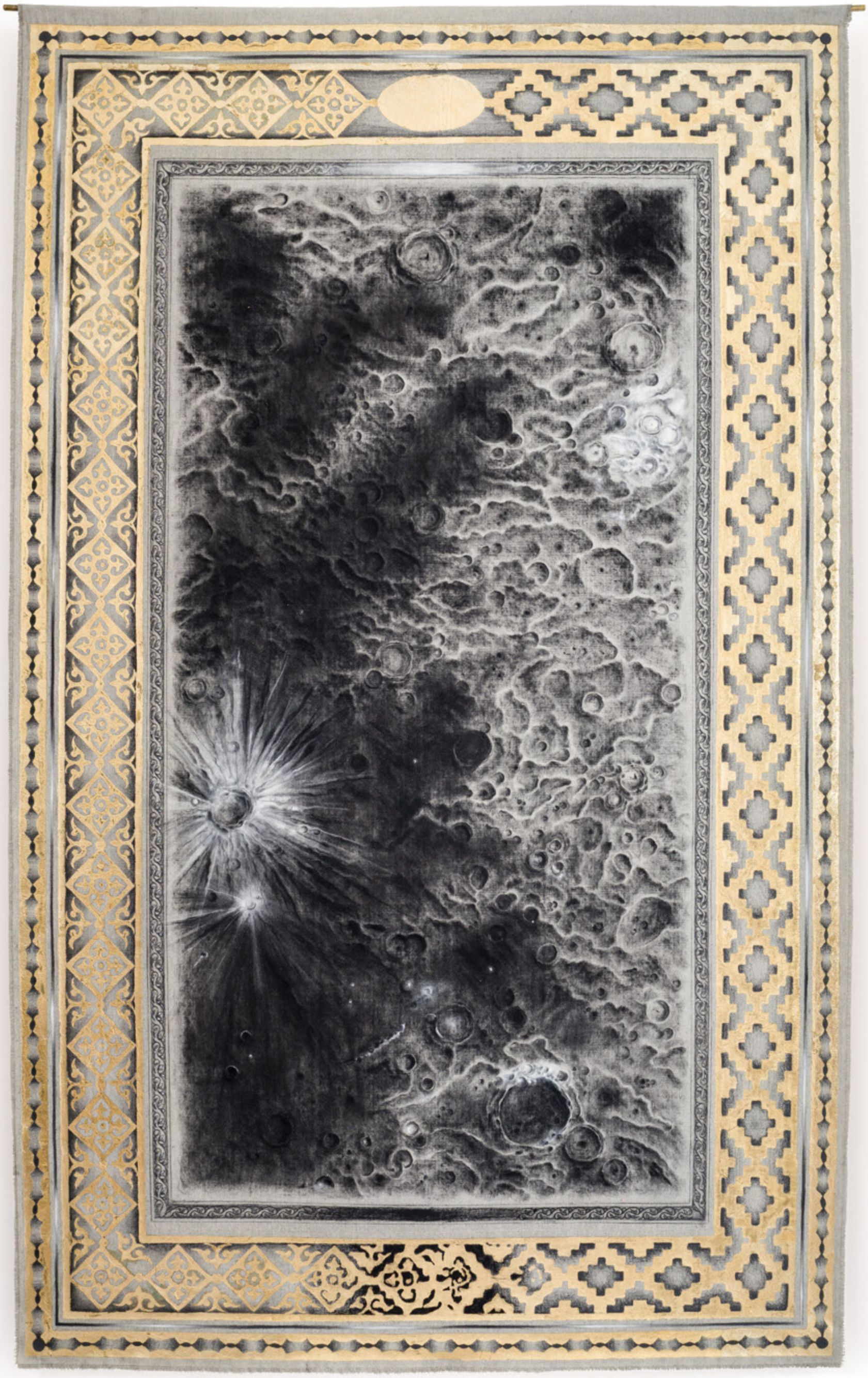


Photo: Thales Leite
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



Claraboia

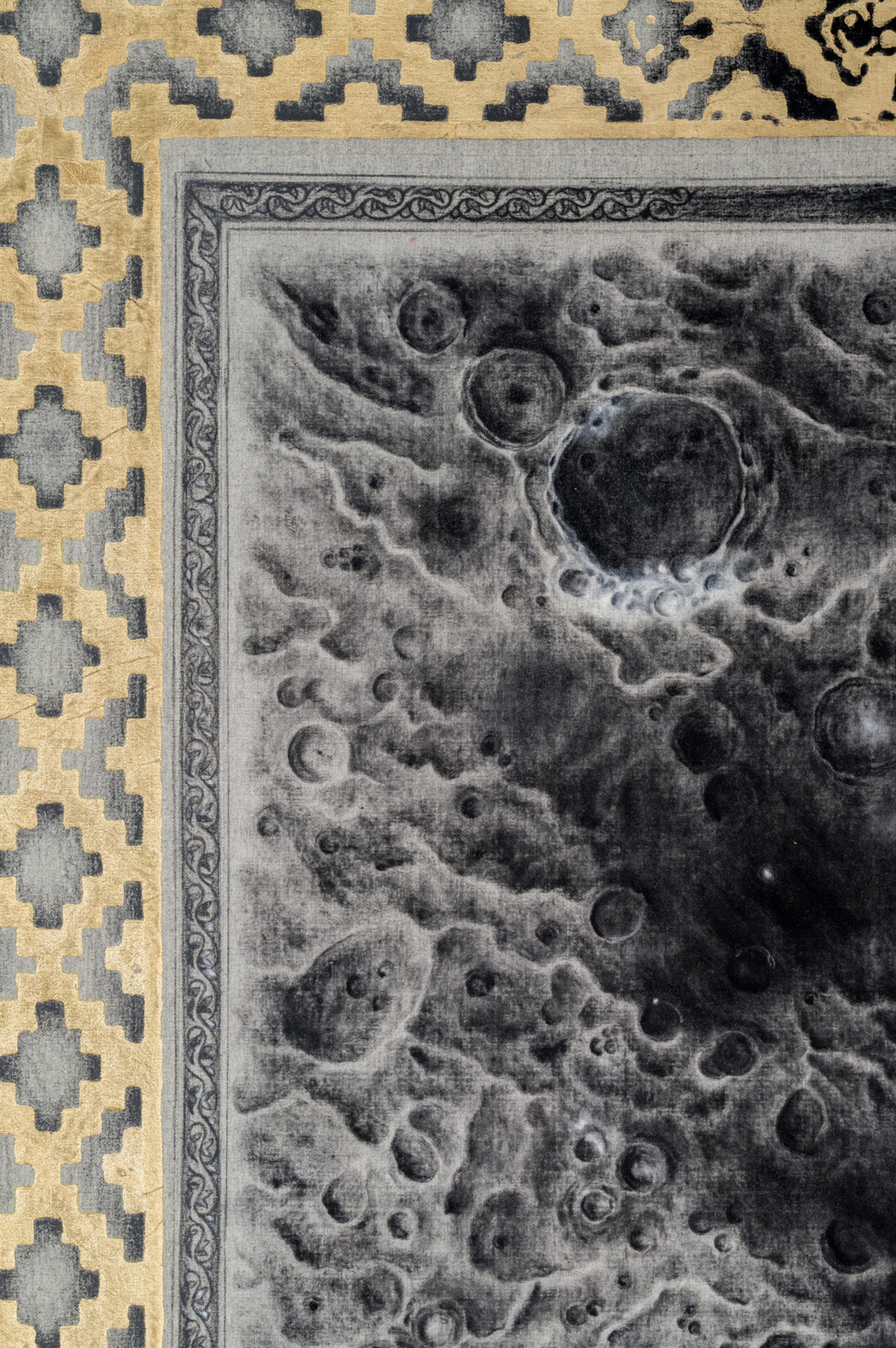
PORTASVILASECA

Emilia Estrada

Péndulo II, from the series *Andalucia*, 2026
Charcoal, dry pastel, and gold leaf on linen and brass
215 × 128 cm (84 5/8 × 50 3/8 in)



Photo: Thales Leite
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



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Emilia Estrada

Limiar, 2026
Charcoal, gold leaf on linen and brass
225 × 165 cm (88 5/8 × 65 in)



Photo: Estúdio em Obra
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante

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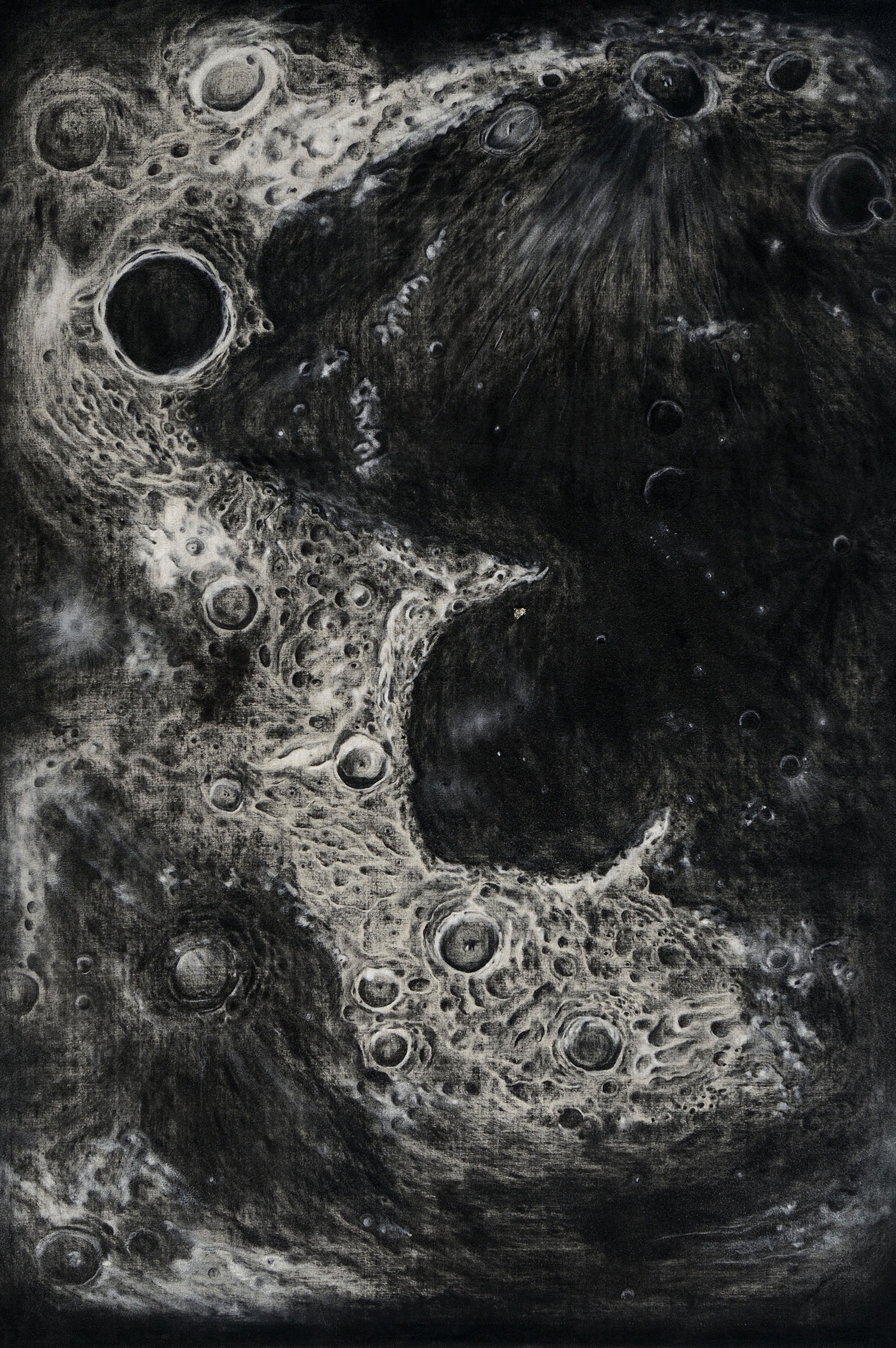
Emilia Estrada

Mare Tranquillitatis Pit, 2025
Charcoal and dry pastel on linen, pyrite, and brass
145 × 100 cm (57 1/8 × 39 3/8 in)



Photo: Roberto Apa
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



Emilia Estrada

Permanently Shadowed, 2025
Charcoal and gold leaf on fabric, basalt and brass
260 × 465 × 40 cm (102 3/8 × 183 1/8 × 15 3/4 in)



Photo: Roberto Apa
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



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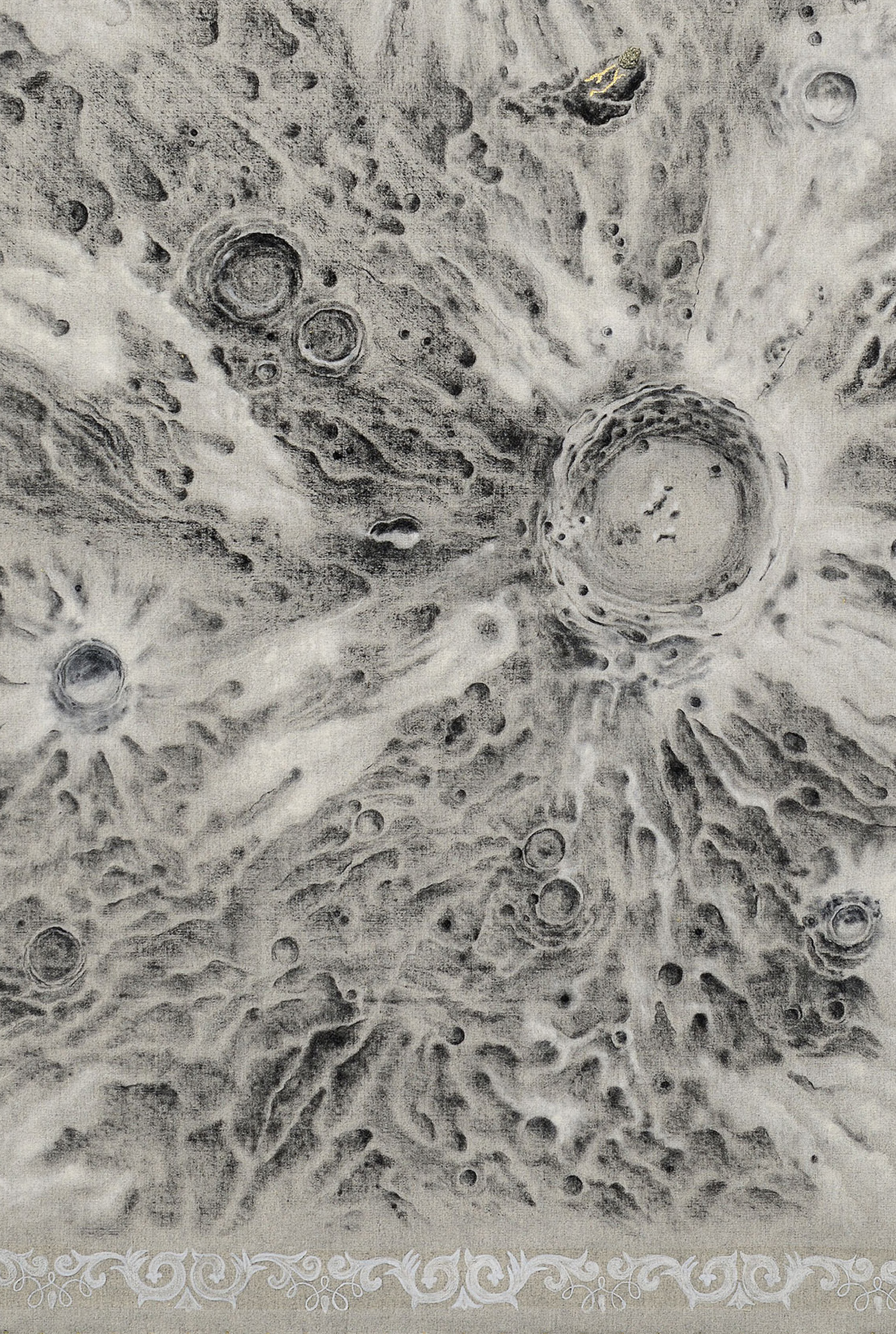
Emilia Estrada

Mare Insularum Pit, 2025
Charcoal, gold leaf and dry pastel on linen, pyrite, and brass
145 × 100 cm (57 1/8 × 39 3/8 in)



Photo: Roberto Apa
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



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Emilia Estrada

Mare Moscoviense Pit, 2026
Charcoal, dry pastel and gold leaf on linen, pyrite and brass
145 × 100 cm (57 1/8 × 39 3/8 in)

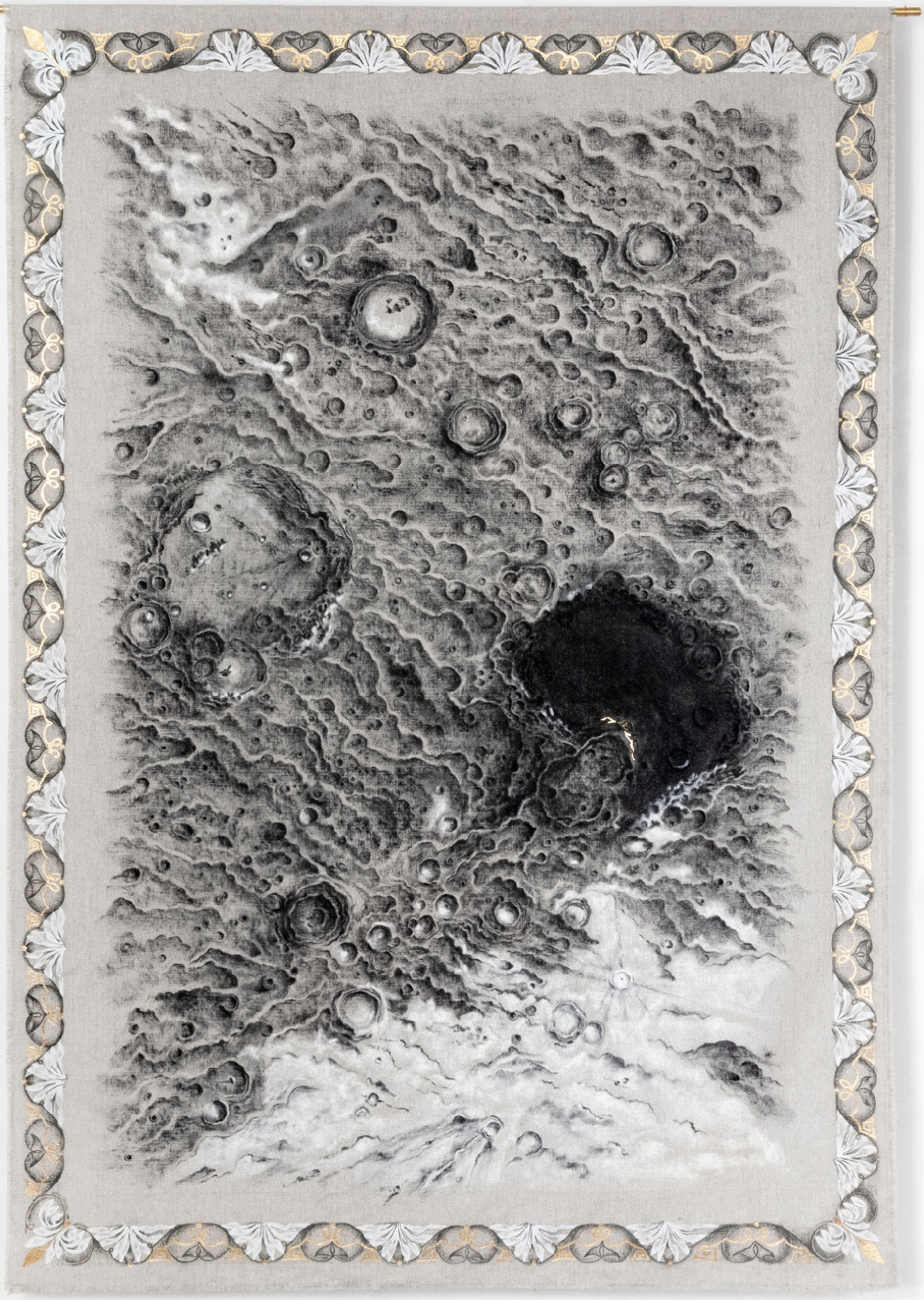

Photo: Rafael Adorján
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante

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Emilia Estrada

The Shaded Part Shows Rock as Now Existing n.1, 2026
Charcoal and silver leaf on linen, velvet, silk, mica, and brass
72 × 58 cm (28 3/8 × 22 7/8 in)



Photo: Rafael Adorján
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



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PORTASVILASECA

Emilia Estrada

The Shaded Part Shows Rock as Now Existing n.2, 2026
Charcoal and silver leaf on linen, velvet, silk, mica, and brass
72 × 58 cm (28 3/8 × 22 7/8 in)



Photo: Rafael Adorján
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



Emilia Estrada

The Shaded Part Shows Rock as Now Existing n.3, 2026
Charcoal and silver leaf on linen, velvet, silk, mica, and brass
61 × 68 cm (24 × 26 3/4 in)



Photo: Rafael Adorján
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



Emilia Estrada

The Shaded Part Shows Rock as Now Existing n.4, 2026
Charcoal and silver leaf on linen, velvet, silk, mica, and brass
61 × 68 cm (24 × 26 3/4 in)

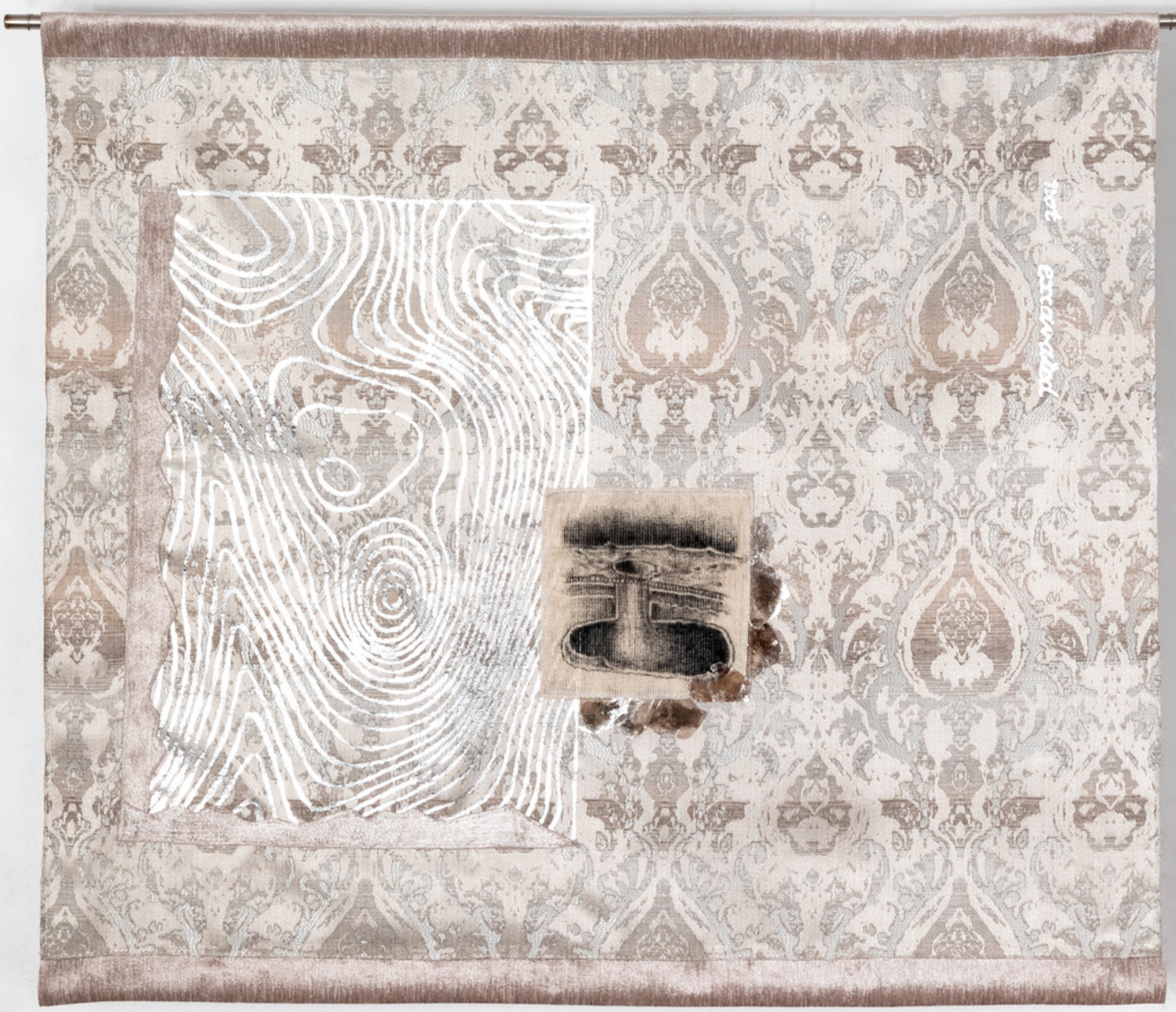

Photo: Rafael Adorján
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



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PORTASVILASECA

Emilia Estrada

Ferrolho, 2026
Charcoal and dry pastel on linen
87 × 67 cm (34 1/4 × 26 3/8 in)

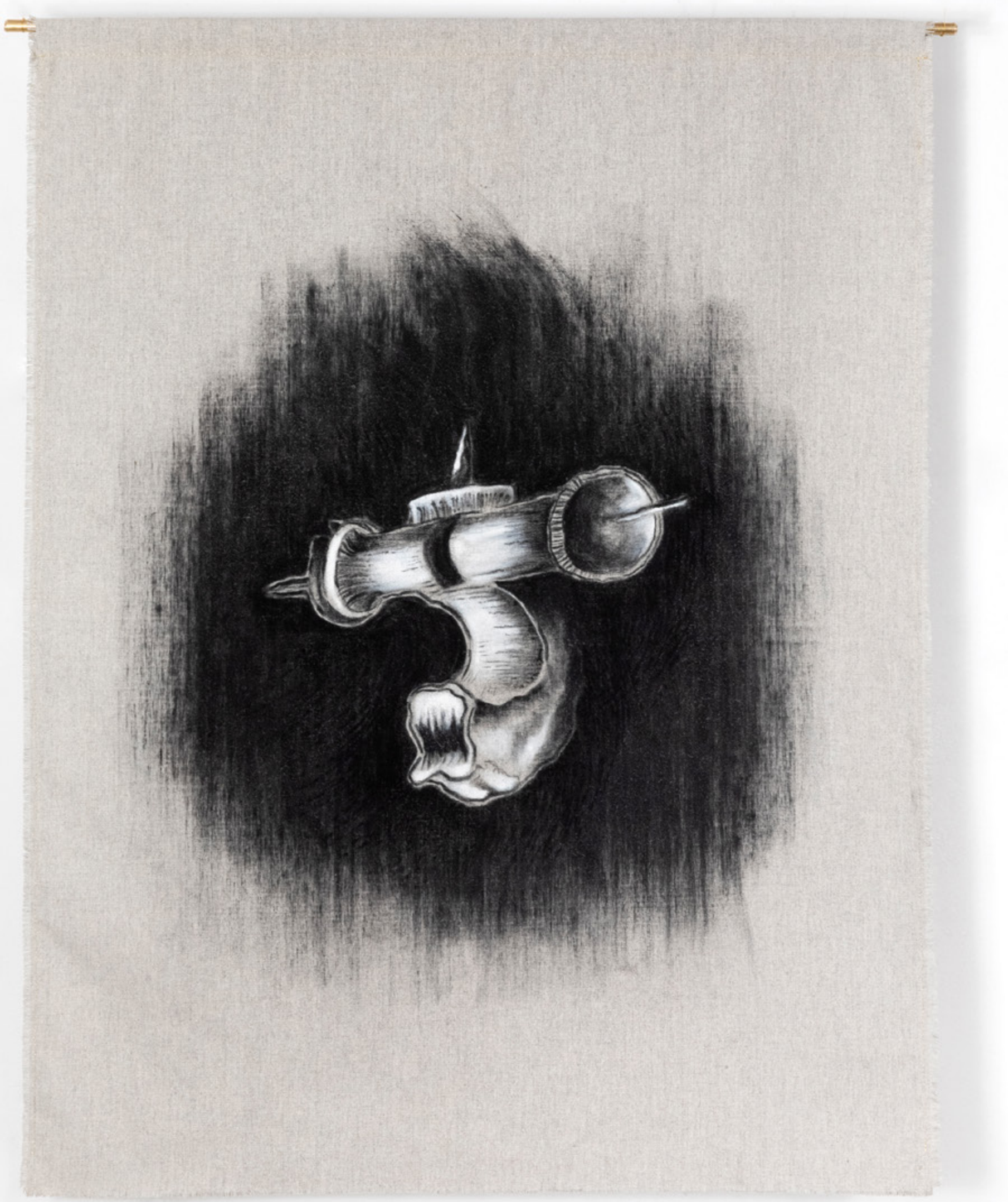
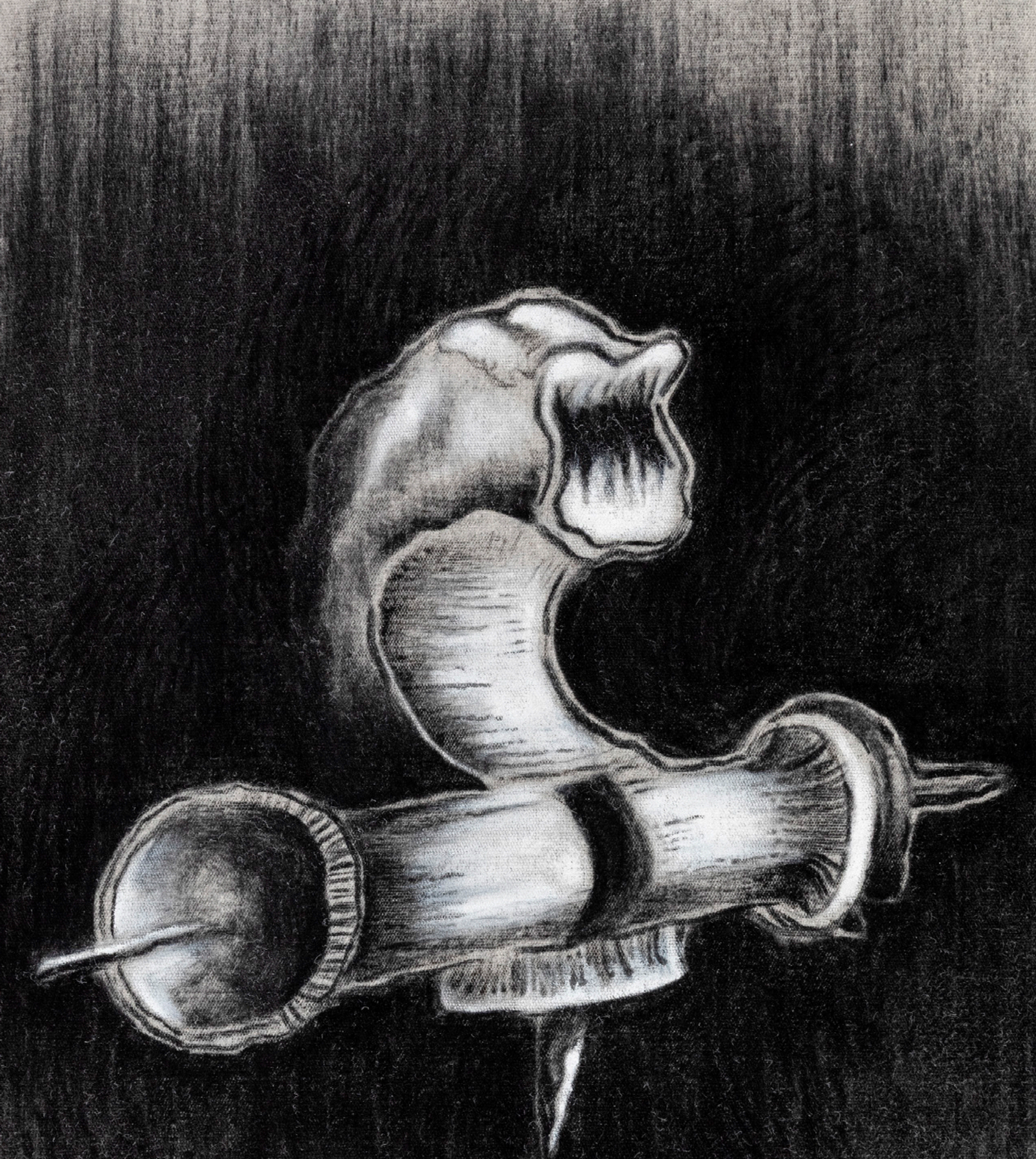


Photo: Rafael Adorján
Studio assistant: Sofia Amante



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