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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Masters of Fine Arts

Symbol: Cultural Context and Color

By Luke Dulgar

6/14/00

Approvals

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Date: 7/27/2000

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fig. 1

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Dedication

It is with great pleasure that I finally get a chance to thank those who are really responsible for this work; Those of you, whom I love, who put up with me throughout this whole experience.

For Joan - Words cannot express what you have given to me here and throughout the whole process, and it is amazing to think, you were doing the same thing at the same time. I don't know how we did it, but we made it. I Love You.

For my Father and Melissa - Love and support I could not have done without, I only regret that Grandpa, and Grandma (Dunbar) couldn't have been here with us.

For my Mother and my Brothers - Thank you for always believing in me even when I didn't, as it turns out, glass is the right thing for me.

To all of you who I did and didn't remember here, thank you for being there for me and if I forgot to mention it above, I love you all.

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to my Grandparents, who taught me more than any possible collection of academics ever could, I love you all, near and far.

-Luke Eric Dulgar, 2000

Preface

I began this endeavor to learn more about glass, and got lost in the medium, the people, and the place I was in, learning. But I also learned more about myself and people in such a compact intense state of immersion that I don't think the product is the sum of the separate wholes.

I look forward to new experiences, teaching, making my own work, at a much slower pace, and helping to foster the next generation of glass artists, in the search for all that is new and exciting in glasswork.

Illustrations and Photo Credits

- fig. 1 *Cleaning Panels* - Joan Cunningham, 2000
- fig. 2 Fylfot
- fig. 3a Nazi Swastika
- fig. 3b Buddhist Swastika
- fig. 4a Medieval Heraldic Swastika
- fig. 4b Medieval Heraldic Swastika
- fig. 5 *Prismatic Tile Screen* - Brian Gulick and Chun Lai, 1992
- fig. 6 *Prismatic Tile Screen* - detail - Brian Gulick and Chun Lai, 1992
- fig. 7 *Find Your Own Path* - close up - Joan Cunningham, 2000
- fig. 8 *Find Your Own Path* - focal point - Joan Cunningham, 2000
- fig. 9 *Cache* - Robert Vinnedge, 1996
- fig. 10 *The Hanging Process* - Joan Cunningham, 2000

The work to be examined in this thesis is very conceptual in nature. The primary concept is that symbol, in its many forms and variations, is one of the universal languages used by all humanity. A simple concept on the surface, but a concept which touches such deep, dark, emotional wells within individuals, that it is amazing to observe the reactions that people have while viewing different symbols.

Why use symbol? Symbols which are culturally ambiguous, simple geometric shapes, were chosen because they would be understandable by any viewer, irrespective of their specific background. Because symbol speaks to us of a preliterate time when artists were priests drawing in the sand or on a wall and the images they made, along with tradition and oral history, conveyed the image of god upon their people. It was important to use things that were meaningful which would not compete, but complement the natural properties of clear glass. Thus transparent symbols were chosen. Part of this overall concept is based on the theory that it is usually the color of the symbol which makes the interpretation specific, although it is sometimes the orientation of the symbol or the placement in a larger visual context which allows the viewer to draw inaccurate conclusions about the symbol and its' creators intended message. For example, a *fylfot*, (fig. 2) may easily be interpreted as the *swastika* (fig. 3a) of the bloody Third Reich regime, but if the color is changed or the orientation of the arms is switched, it becomes a Buddhist symbol (fig. 3b) or one of many medieval heraldic blazons which existed long before Hitler's lunacy (fig. 4a & 4b).

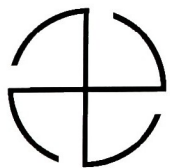


fig.2

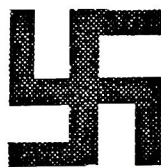


fig. 3a



fig. 3b



fig. 4a

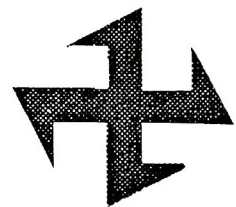


fig. 4b

To the viewer who inaccurately identified the symbol, it may still resemble the Nazi symbol, but is not, and even the uneducated viewer, while reacting to the perceived symbol, knows that something is odd about the appearance of this new, different one, even if they cannot point out the difference. It is similar to the recent reaction of the New York City mayor, Rudolph Guiliani, when he decided that a British artist of African descents' work was blasphemous because it portrayed the Virgin Mary with a ball of elephant dung. In the artists' culture, elephant dung is a sacred object, that is used to adorn only the most holy of things. It is only the mayor's cultural background, as an Italian-American, which leads him to believe that the picture is intended to be negative. He never consulted anyone knowledgeable about the piece before he reacted to the perceived desecration of his primary religious symbol.

Peoples reactions to symbols may be even more intense when the colors change but the symbol itself stays the same. For example, the case of a card for a popular children's game recently printed in Japan. The card depicted a standard scene for the game but in one corner had a blue and gold swastika. This symbol, taken by American parents to be a Nazi symbol hidden in a game, was actually an Asian symbol for good luck. So, even though the color and setting are changed, many times people react as if the symbol was identical to the symbol that offends them within their own cultural context.

It is these reactions, and their pure emotional power, the cultural and experiential motivations, which are the concept that is to be examined through this work with color and symbol. To that end, here are some of the cultural and artistic influences that created the concept for this thesis.

Cultural influences for this artist were an interesting mix of the contemporary and traditional. The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, are about as Midwest conservative as it is possible to find, and yet the metropolitan area is second only to New York City for theatre venues and public contribution to art and artists. It was an excellent place to grow up and be influenced by an amazingly eclectic combination of three-

dimensional objects and two-dimensional images. In this fiercely independent and self-sufficient, traditionally agricultural society, influences of handicraft skill, such as attention to detail and quality were taught as everyday norms, not special things given to valuable objects. People made and used everything they needed here until very recently. If poorly made objects failed after a few uses they were totally useless and the maker devoid of all respect. This function based aesthetic is exemplified by the fact that simple beauty and enduring value are the preferred traits for art objects in much of this area. These ideas helped give this artist a foundation in learning about more advanced processes, such as mechanical, hydraulic, combustion, and organic processes which are everyday necessities in a life quite self-sufficient. Construction, agriculture, science, husbandry, metal work, horsemanship, rope making, and a thousand other skills could be learned just in pursuit of everyday chores. Being the smallest of my extended family and in the way frequently, and asking a lot of questions helped tremendously. Being the youngest of over twenty grandchildren on both maternal and paternal bloodlines provided me with many chances for learning from a great variety of different sources. These influences and early lessons helped to refine and create early ideas and observations, as well as providing this young artist means of creating, objects not seen as sculpture, long before any kind of formal art instruction was sought out by the artist.

In a similar, but seemingly incongruent influence, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, I.M. Pei, and Frank Gehry, were all equally accessible in the Twin Cities. Regularly experiencing the examples of work available locally, their greatness only became apparent after the few years of drafting training they had inspired. That training led to greater interest in art and architecture. This in turn led to observations and consideration of sculptural works at the Walker Art Center and other local public places. The works of Klaus Oldenberg, Michael Aschenbrenner, and others were available for contemplation and observation, albeit sometimes snow covered.

In addition, countless trips hiking, canoeing, hunting and biking led to more complex observations of the intricacies inherent in natural structure and creation. In considering these natural processes, and after dismissing organized religions' assertion that God created the universe, it seemed quite logical that the universe and all creation were God. This spiritual influence appears in the work presented here, as the concept that the universe is continually creative and destructive, and how we as humans, a part of this cyclic process, convert our observations of these manifestations into symbols, both visual and literary. It also relates directly to how different groups interpret things differently based upon their personal and cultural backgrounds. For this reason the work will contain no identifiable reference to any specific significant symbol in any culture, but try to re-create that reverence and solemnity in a new way, free to interpretation and observation. This is to be accomplished by setting forth situations both physically and symbolically, in which people can make their own interpretations and find their own spiritual link to the work. With this as an introduction, perhaps we can better understand the specifics of the conceptualization and the artistic influences behind the work presented for consideration.

James Carpenter's architectural installation (fig. 5) work is an example of the aforementioned influences in the work presented here, as more than just panels of glass in open spaces of buildings and facades for enclosures.

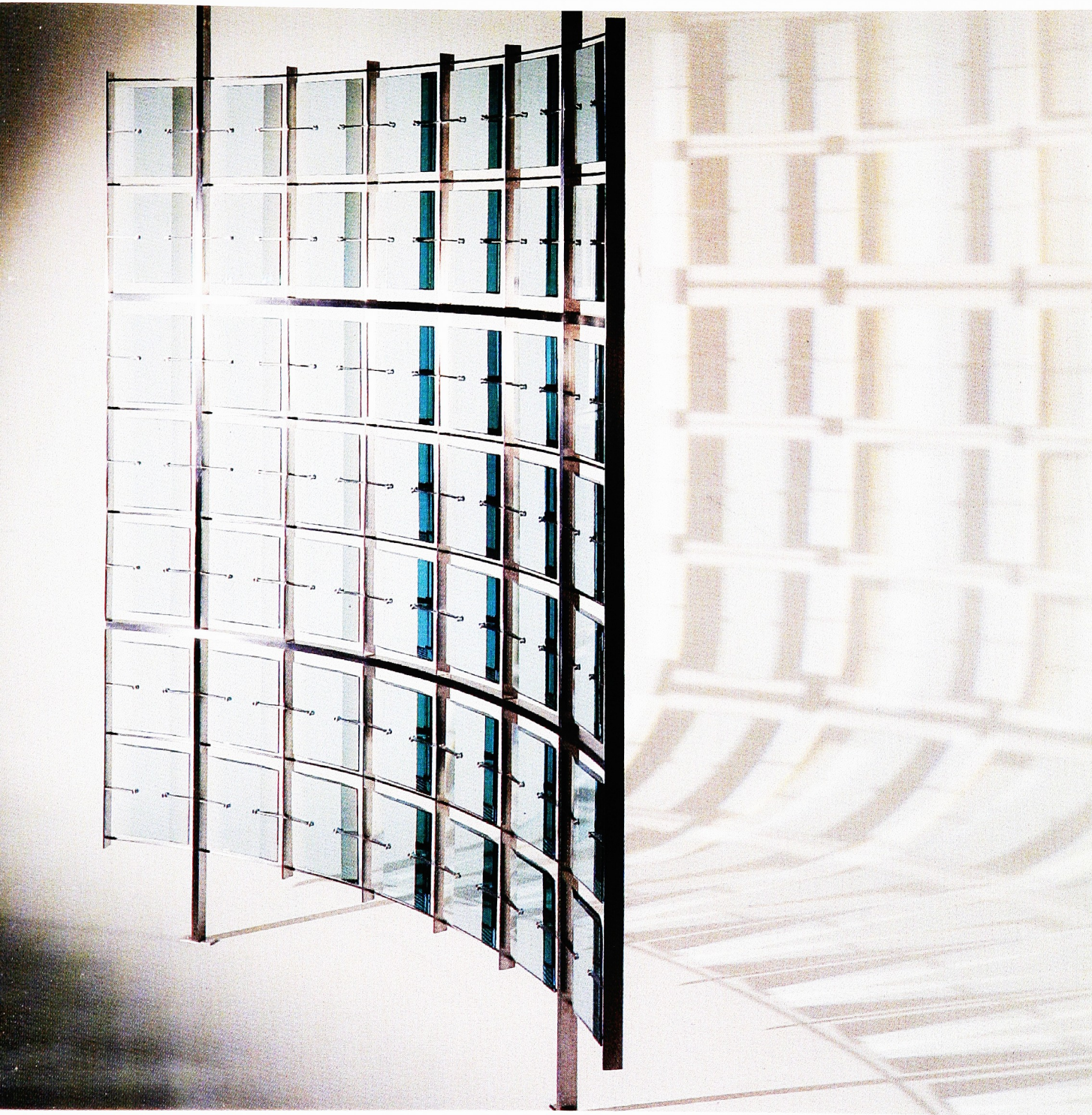


fig. 5

Carpenter's work speaks of much more than just architectural adornment, and good design theory. There is something spiritual about the way that light is integrated into the very being or physical existence of the buildings themselves, thus making the piece, the building, and the light all share the same space harmoniously. Carpenter is using light, sculpted and shaped by his work, as a metaphor for the spirit of the objects they inhabit (fig. 6).

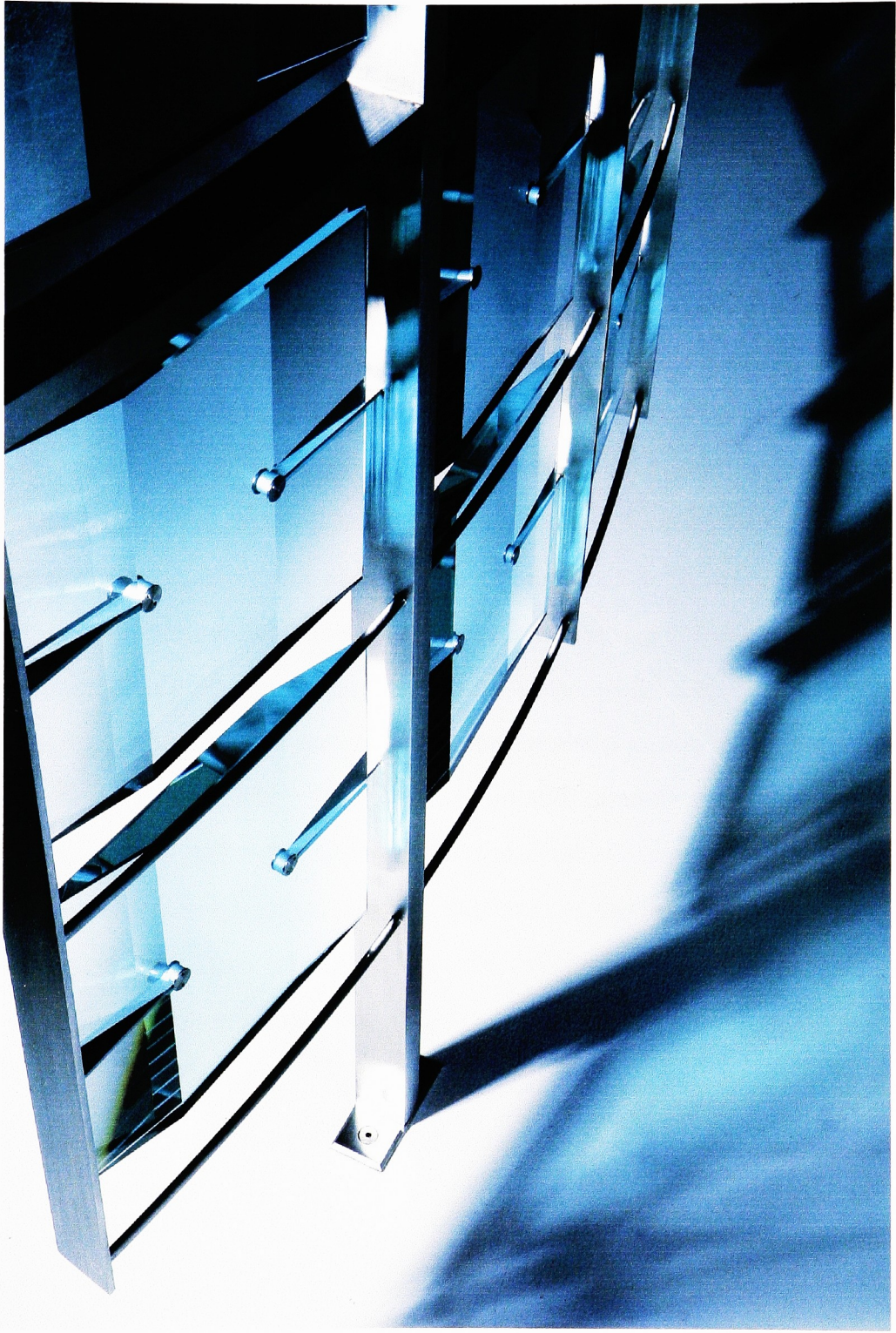


fig. 6

This is the influence which was kept in mind while selecting the placement and construction of "Find Your Own Path", but which was not possible given the limitations imposed by the staff and facility of the Bevier Gallery.

Although Mr. Carpenters work can seem very austere and coldly architectural; on experiential, visual, and conceptual levels, his pieces and the architecture they inhabit seem to be spiritual shrines, akin to Stonehenge, or the Great Pyramids, or the religious architecture of the Inca. This is the type of reverent feeling that "Find Your Own Path" should convey. In Carpenters pieces there is often some alignment of the piece and the sun that creates a temple or shrine of light, differing from the previous astronomically designed comparisons only in that Mr. Carpenter's installations exhibit this phenomenon more than once every four hundred years. In this way, "Find Your Own Path" is similar to Mr. Carpenters work, or the ancient astrological installations. It is very different when viewed from different focal points and lengths, just like these other works. This construction of the feeling of one of these reverent places was one of the essential aspects intended to be inherent "Find Your Own Path". If allowed to be installed correctly and lighted properly, the piece would have appeared as a two-dimensional image of a cross within a circle. Then, upon closer examination, each of the four parts or sections would have its own story and significance. The whole of the piece lays out a sort of story in the sequence and patterns made by the colored geometric symbols (fig. 7).

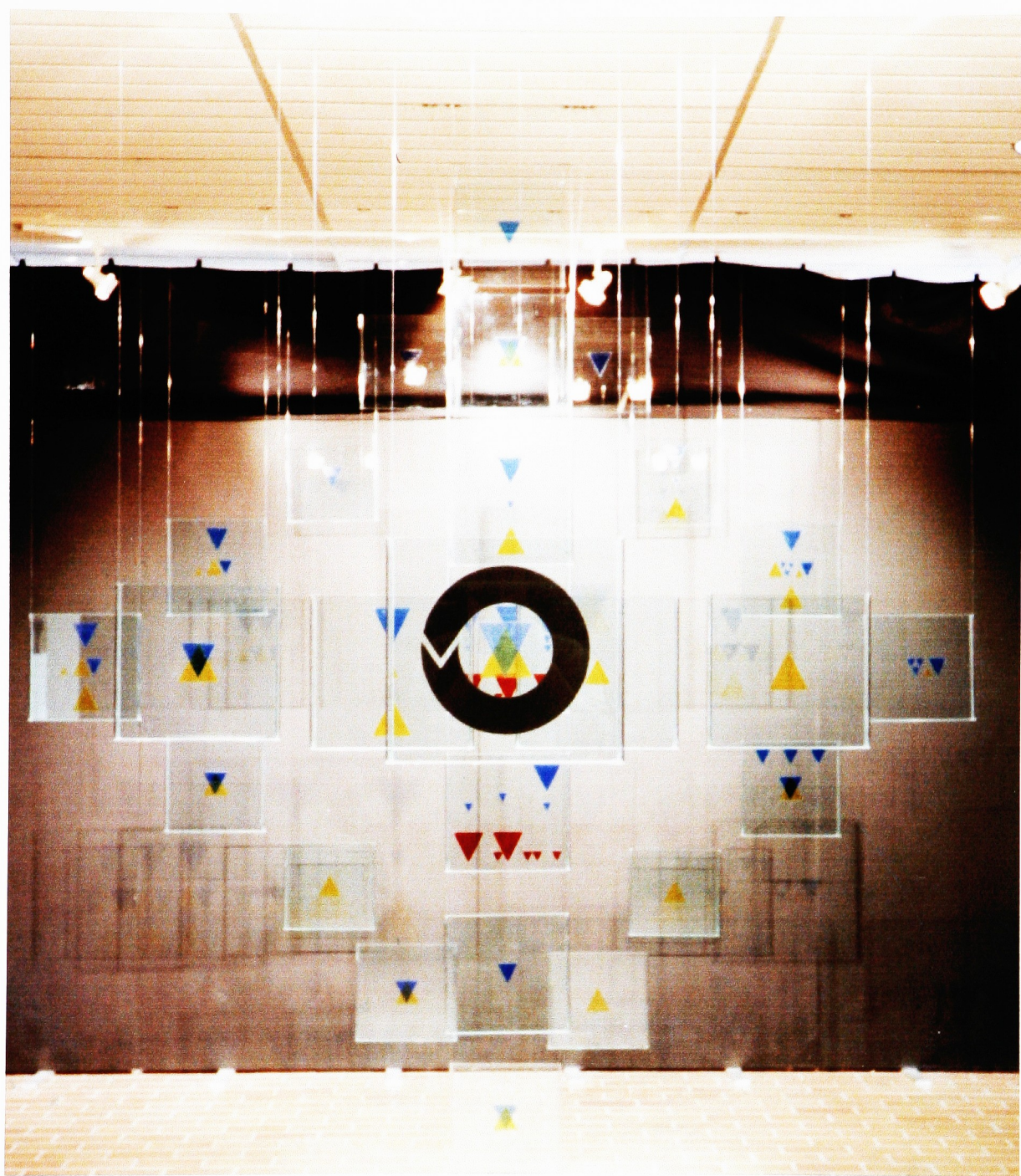


fig. 7

Finally, the whole piece is significant as a piece of architectural installation artwork, a sculpture using light and transparency to create a more complex structure than the simple physical objects of its construction convey. Light, as a tool of the glass artist, is to be considered, manipulated, and integrated into the installation (fig. 8).

Used as a medium light can be anything from a pigment in a graphic image projected from a painted or fused panel, or dramatic contrast in a low- or non-color application, like most of Carpenters' architectural pieces. On a more intricate level, refraction creates depth, while surface, or even interior reflections, define surfaces, and shadows can be used to create and manipulate forms. In "Find Your Own Path" light does all of these things. The refracted light within each individual panel illuminates the symbols on the surfaces, and reflected versions of each panel take their appropriate places in a graphic display painted by light onto the floor.

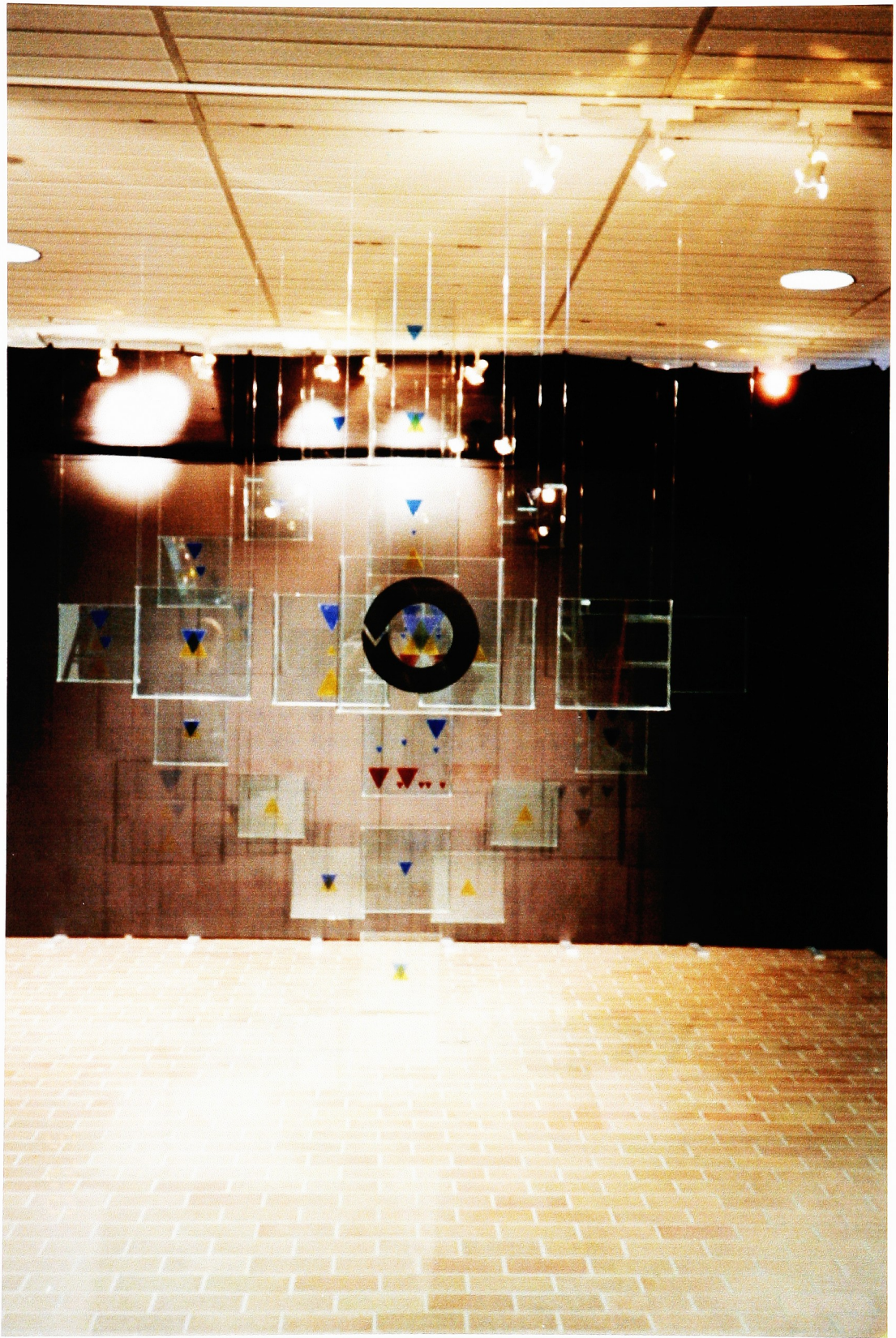


fig. 8

Mr. Carpenter realizes and utilizes the fact that, not only is light refraction and reflection one of the inherent qualities of glass and transparency, but it can make a glass object or installation and its environment come alive, in a spiritual, or at least aesthetic, experience which cannot be achieved by either element alone. In this same way, the other artist who influences the work, William "Billy" Morris, takes glass to an opposite but equally moving level of expression.

Much like the dichotomy in this artists' youthful influences, both contemporary and traditional, Billy Morris takes the viewer of his work to the opposite end of the glass technique spectrum, from the work of James Carpenter. The work is equally if not more contemplative and precise in execution. Where Carpenter is solemn and reflective, Morris is direct, appealing to an undefined primal connection between the symbology of image, and forgotten human emotion, hidden primal memories. In Morris' work, it is not the mechanical precision of construction or the exact angle of a precision ground lens which makes it spiritual, but the visual impact. A core connection to something unidentifiable, yet intensely moving on a base level. Morris' seemingly simple groupings of random objects in installations and museum or collection environments convey the idea that someone arranged these ordinary objects in a way that is most reverent and respectful. Upon reflection and closer examination, it is clear that precision akin to that of Carpenters construction, and canny selection of location can as easily create or destroy Morris' work (fig. 9).



Cache | 5 x 6 x 36" | 1993

fig. 9

This is not to say that there is anything lacking in the abundant craftsmanship of the objects assembled, rather that it is the visual, cerebral, conceptual information which is important, not the demonstrated excellence of craft in the object. "Find Your Own Path" is intended to combine the architectural technique of Carpenter with the visual emotional weight of Morris' objects. The ideal is to have excellently executed pieces that are equally impressive for what they say symbolically. Many people have striven to encapsulate this emotion of nature which Morris captures in glass. A few examples might be Paul Stankard, Louis Comfort Tiffany, Frederick Carder, Daum, Emile Galle, and of course the original William Morris. No one person has captured our own human spiritual link to this reverence in nature quite so well as Billy Morris has in recent years. Beginning with his neo-stone age monoliths and cave drawings and most recently with his installations of canopic jars and other reverent items, Mr. Morris takes his glass to a level of deep contemplative spirituality.

It is this deep spirituality and sense of solemn contemplative serenity which I wish to glean from these influences and imbue into my work. Both of these men, Mr. Carpenter, and Mr. Morris, albeit from different ends of the glass technique spectrum, create environments of spirituality which transcend simple physical technique and construction or arrangement. It is in the execution of the concepts they envision that the magic of their art lies.

Perhaps it is because of these artists' diverse, eclectic influences that a particular technique is not a major consideration in this thesis work, but more importantly that the concept and vision are clearly conveyed.

Whatever concept demanded determined what technique was used, as long as the concept and vision of the artist were conveyed in the clearest possible manner. This is sometimes difficult due to criticisms that it is not the "traditional" or "appropriate" technique. This artist feels however, that it would be worse for the artist to abandon the best and clearest method of communication due to a loyalty to traditional technique. In the same way, loyalty to a concept, especially an intricate one, is integral to these types of complex

and contemplative pieces. Changes in technique and construction may make the piece more acceptable to technicians of glasswork, or sculpture, but what good is that if the message of the piece/concept is destroyed in the process? Are critics going to remember if metal frames threw off their viewing, or are they going to remember that the overall presentation was one of solemn contemplation and serenity? It is presented for consideration here that critics who understand this thesis will not care in the least what construction, as long as it is well done, is the vehicle for this concept.

Surely, Mr. Carpenter could throw light with simple mirrors, and Mr. Morris could probably get more painterly effects in his pieces by painting on the surfaces of his pieces with traditional methods. The fact is however, that they created non-traditional techniques which fit into their concepts, rather than bending their concepts about a rigid technical frame. Their pieces are carried out in a new way, not quite traditional, but conveying their messages exactly and using glass to do it. These methods are perhaps not the "best" techniques as far as glass technique aficionados would be concerned but each technique or approach has proven time and time again to be the best technique for the artists and their concept.

This previous discourse relates directly to the process used to create "Find Your Own Path" in that the method of construction used was not a traditional one. The title of the piece directly describes the intention of the piece, as it relates to the discussion above and also in the fact that it physically tells a story, in a linear construct. There are no definitions or explanations, simply a repeated, progressively complex, geometric pattern, which, depending on the viewer and how they perceive the meaning of the pattern, tell a story. The descriptive or narrative symbols were intentionally left quite ambiguous, to allow people to make their own judgments and assign values, cultural or gender specific or artistic, of their own. The physical existence of the piece is set up in an increasingly complex, geometric and three-dimensional, configuration. This configuration makes each of the six levels (see Layers and Overhead View in Appendix I) an individual

physical element. Simultaneously, the each level is relating to the symbols in four individual and narrative levels, and at the same time comprising part of a two-dimensional graphic image when viewed from a focal point established in the front of the entire installation.

This means that as the viewer sees the piece from focal point, the piece appears as a cross inside a circle, but as the viewer explores the piece further and steps away from the focal point, the piece becomes three-dimensional and more sculptural. As the viewer explores further and sees the individual patterns on each individual piece they will notice that there is a certain story, or graphic code being laid out before them.

In this progression the piece relates to many things, but most of all to the idea of universe and endlessness. The concept could be most easily compared to the complexity of the cosmos. There is the view of our environment, then the atmosphere around us, then the stratosphere, then the earth-moon relation, then the solar system, then groupings of solar systems, and so on, until the ultimate concept of endless universe or multi-verses is reached.

There is not necessarily any starting point until the viewer assigns one so the story may change from viewer to viewer. One viewpoint at any fixed point, seen through specific eyes, is quite different than that very same view from that very same fixed point, seen through another pair of eyes. It is this phenomenon which was to be observed, explored, and incorporated into the concept and the physical entity of this piece. I believe that the piece fulfilled the conceptual demands, at a minimum, and would be much more successful under different installation conditions, but overall, I believe I was successful in creating the environment I set out to create.

PART TWO: TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

When modeling the piece in miniature, it became apparent that the panels were the only necessary focal objects in the installation. Any visible means of support would be confusing to an already very complex visual creation. Thus it was decided, after some discussion, that all means of support would be transparent, clear, and minimal. This decision made the physical object much harder to complete, but allowed the piece to remain true to the simplicity and purity of the concept of "Find Your Own Path".

Once the method of construction had been determined, the piece had to be constructed and installed to conform to the concept. To portray a solemn, contemplative environment in the midst of a sea of graphic and computer design displays that made up the rest of the show seemed almost impossible, so a smaller, secluded environment was selected, and created, as the lesser of two evils. The hardest part in the limited space and organizational parameters of Bevier Gallery was how to make the piece appear reverent and at the same time allow it to be appreciated as three-dimensional architectural sculpture. Some of this was obviously sacrificed at the site. There was barely enough room to establish the front focal point, much less appreciate the individual planes of panels as independent parts of a complete work. Still, people walked through the piece, and commented on the symbols, asking many variations of "So, is this a story of life?" The symbology needed to be ambiguous culturally, but significant visually so that people understood that there was intent and purpose and perhaps even ceremony or worship in the arrangements of the colored geometric symbols. It was also necessary to limit the inherent information on the panels so that people assigned their own meaning to the individuals and made up their own story, or path as the piece became more and more involved and complex. The symbology used was successful, in this aim, and any unclear concepts should have been clarified in the artist statement that gave an overview of the theory behind the thesis concept. To portray a solemn contemplative scene which is open to interpretation but which was obviously an object of reverence, at the same time also creating an object which was

sculpturally interesting from different foci was the physical objective. This private area in the gallery which was created, was successful, if slightly cramped, for a viewing space.

Technically, the process, once the method was decided, was simple enough for each panel, but the sheer number of panels, multiplied by many times that number of symbols, in at least two different colors for almost every panel, made the task of construction immense. An industrial glass lacquer was used to create the images on the panels that make up the piece. The symbols, to be viewed as opposites, are placed on opposite sides of the panels so that they appear to overlap and create a third object, but never physically touch in any real way. So, on pieces that have two or more colors, there were at least two maskings and paintings.

The method of display was much discussed, with everything from piles of earth to fabricated metal stands under consideration. Finally though, in an effort to maintain the original vision, monofilament (fishing) line was chosen. This was the only method available which would work in the space given, to both support the pieces and be as unobtrusive as possible visually.

In addition, it was after long hours of worry and discussion that the method of attaching the monofilament to the panels, which was applying clear Pyrex tubing to the vertical sides of the panels and looping the monofilament through these tubes and across the bottom to create a secure suspension loop, was decided upon. This method meant a great deal more coldworking than simple drilling, as each piece of Pyrex had to be cut, polished, ground and polished on one side, then cleaned and glued into place before any lacquer could be applied to the panels. Drilling was ruled out because it created opaque spots and rough edges and a greater possibility of destroying more panels in the process.

In test pieces it was discovered that although smooth on the outside, the Pyrex cut slightly into the monofilament every time it moved, so the panels would have to be installed and cleaned and walked around very carefully (fig. 10).



fig. 10

This made the installation even more difficult because of the small space and the necessity of installing the piece from the furthest row of panels (closest to the back wall) out to the from focal (front) piece.

In conclusion, it is the concept which determined the process and materials which would be used for the installation. Each decision made it clear what the next step would be, and each successive decision allowed the next step to be planned and materials and processes outlined for each part of the piece. Some things resolved themselves, like the hanging method, as nothing else, besides the Pyrex loop method, that was tested stood up to failure and endurance tests. The piece was successful in creating a physical entity which is loyal to the concept. In the end it was loyalty to the concept that provided the most complete and coherent presentation possible.

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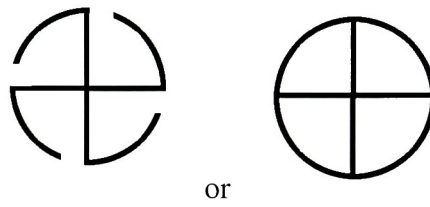
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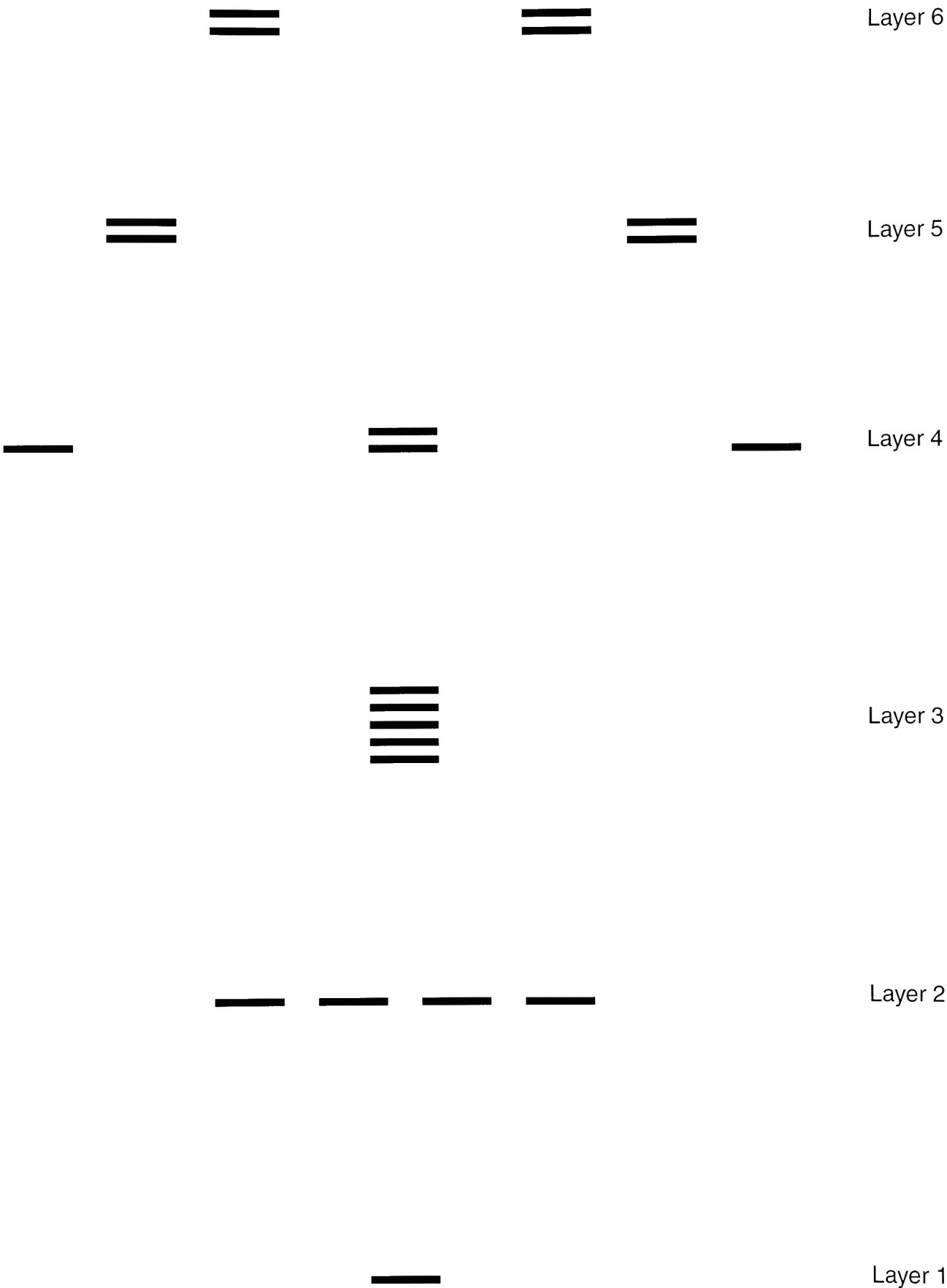
APPENDIX I: TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

FYLFOT: (Sun Cross, Fylfot, Sunwheel) considered a variation of the sunwheel, the fylfot was linked to Thunor by the ancient Heathens and may have been more of a symbol of lightning. A symbol much abused by the twentieth century, it has for most of its history been seen as a token of that which is good. It appears nearly world wide in some form, appearing in Native American and Hindu artwork as well.

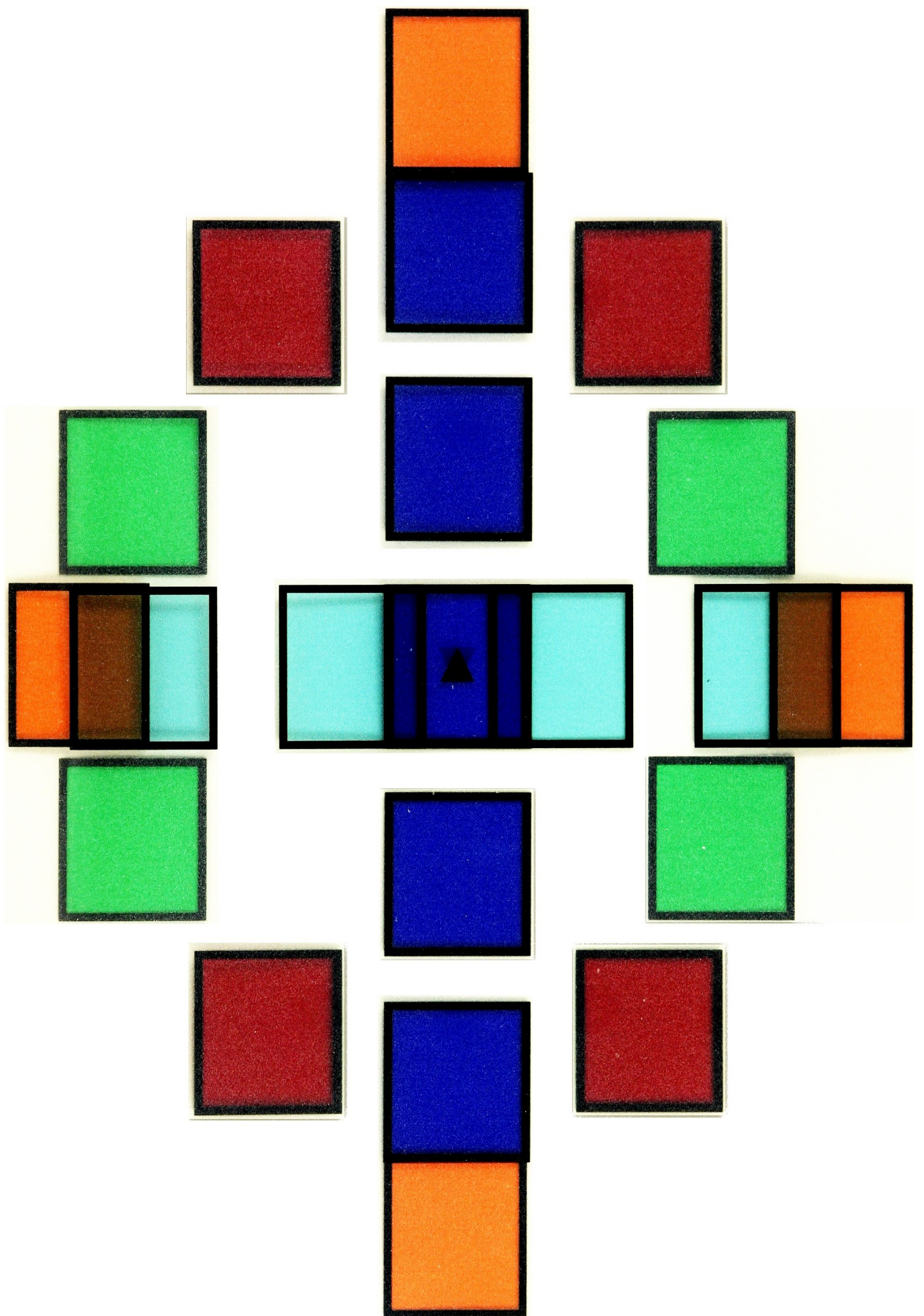


SWASTIKA: A pair of crossed crooked lines that form a broken cross. Ancient northern European symbol for the sun and sun gods, misappropriated later by Hitler's Nazi Third Reich as a symbol. For many millennia the swastika was a symbol of happiness, luck and god. Used throughout the world in different configurations as a elemental, lucky, and spiritual symbol. Used by American Indians, Hindus, Buddhists, Vikings, Greeks, Romans, Celts, Jains, Anglo-Saxons, Mayans, Aztecs, Persians, Christians, Neolithic Tribes and Jews. Associated with Buddha, Thor's hammer, Apollo, Jupiter and Jesus Christ, the emblem of Shiva, and an early coat of arms for Rudyard Kipling. American pilots used it in W.W.I when they fought for the French.

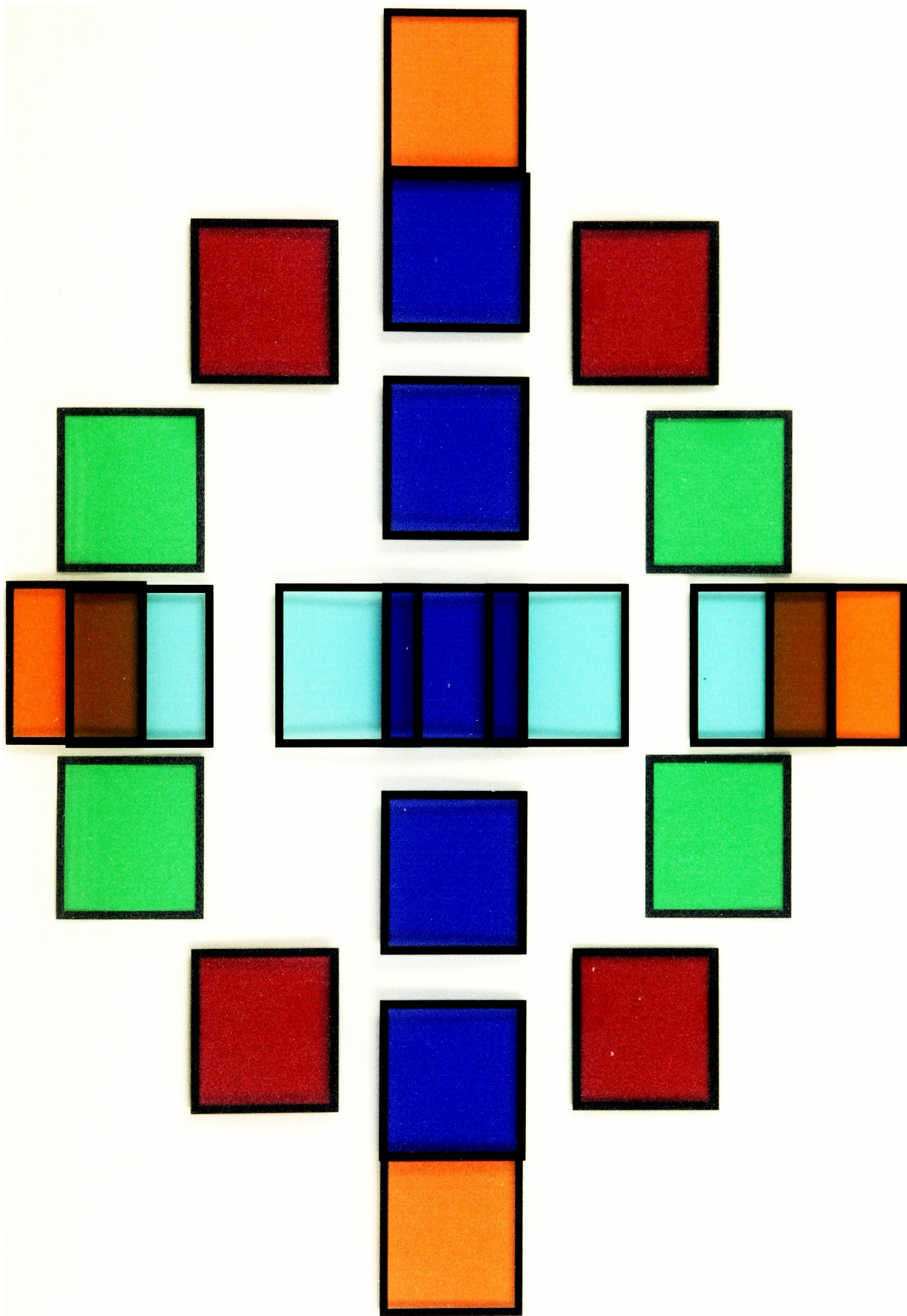




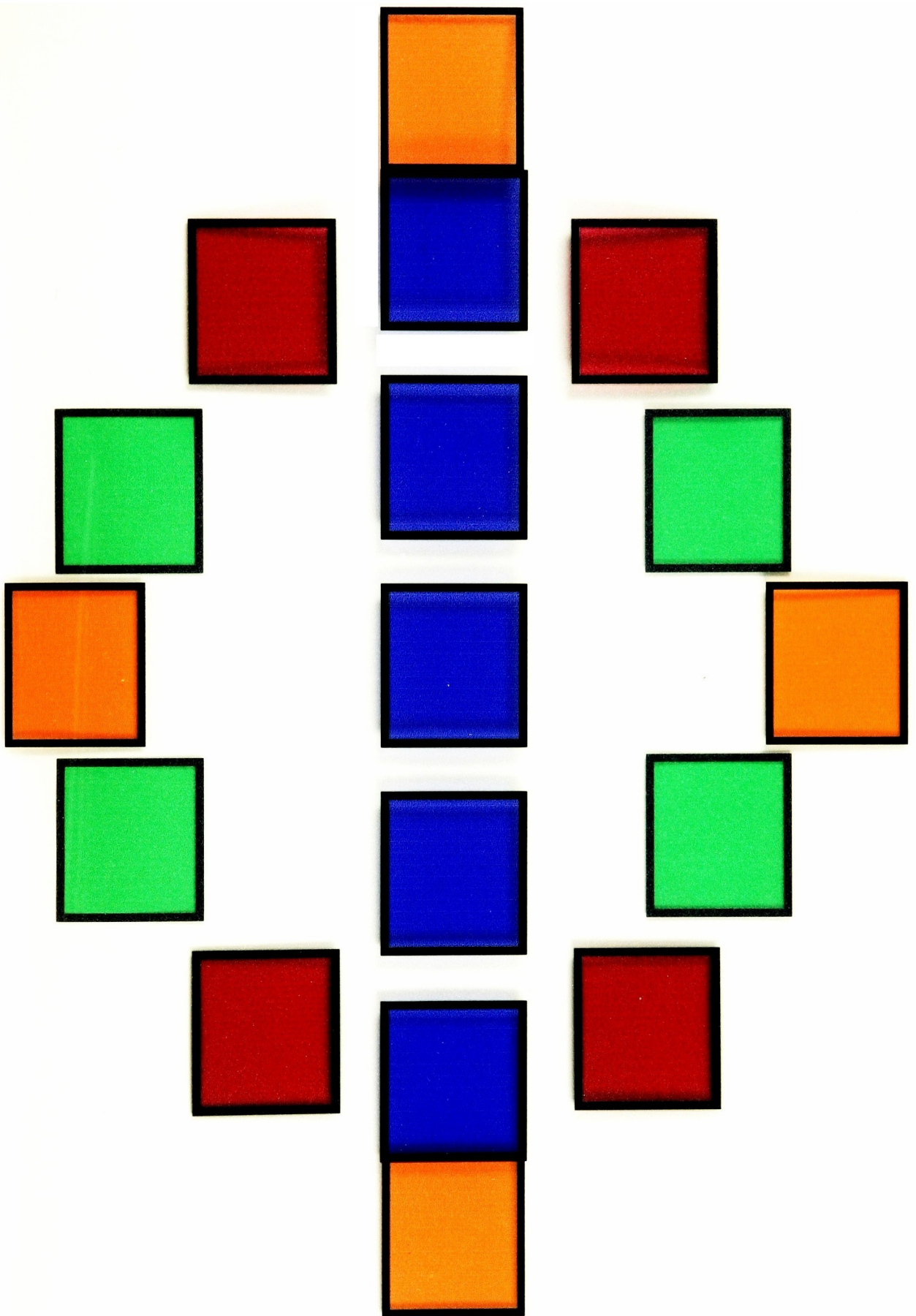
Overhead View



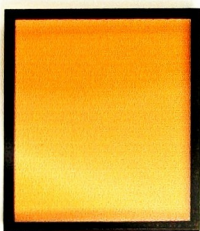
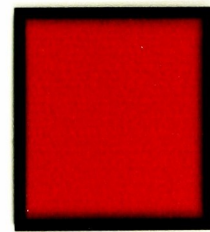
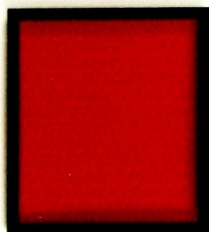
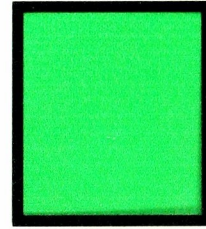
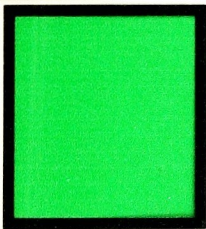
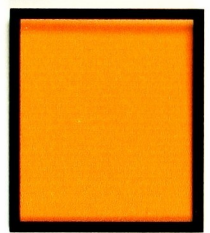
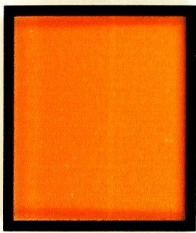
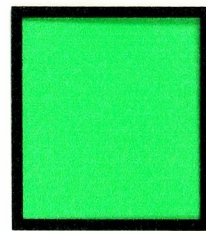
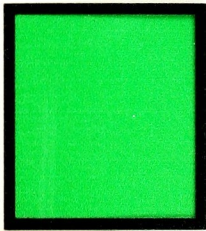
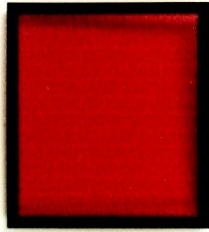
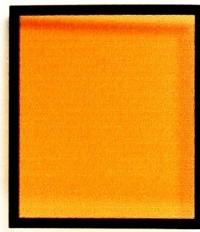
Layer 3



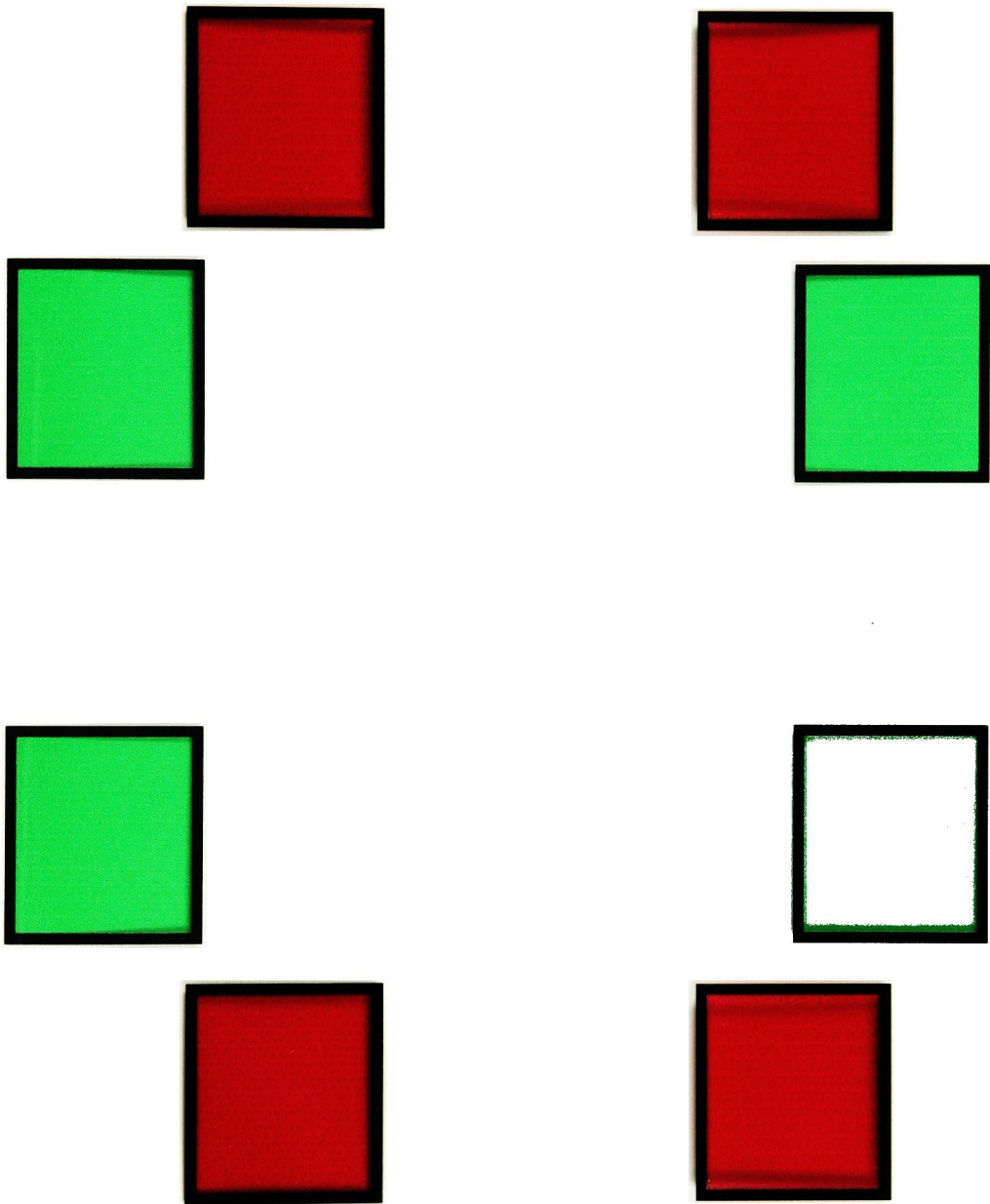
Layer 2



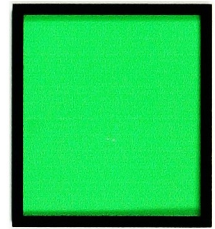
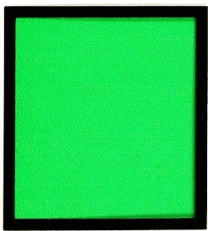
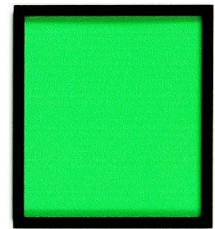
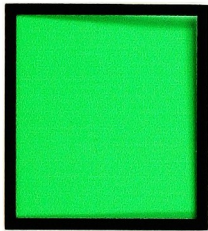
Layer 5



Layer 4



Layer 5



Layer 6