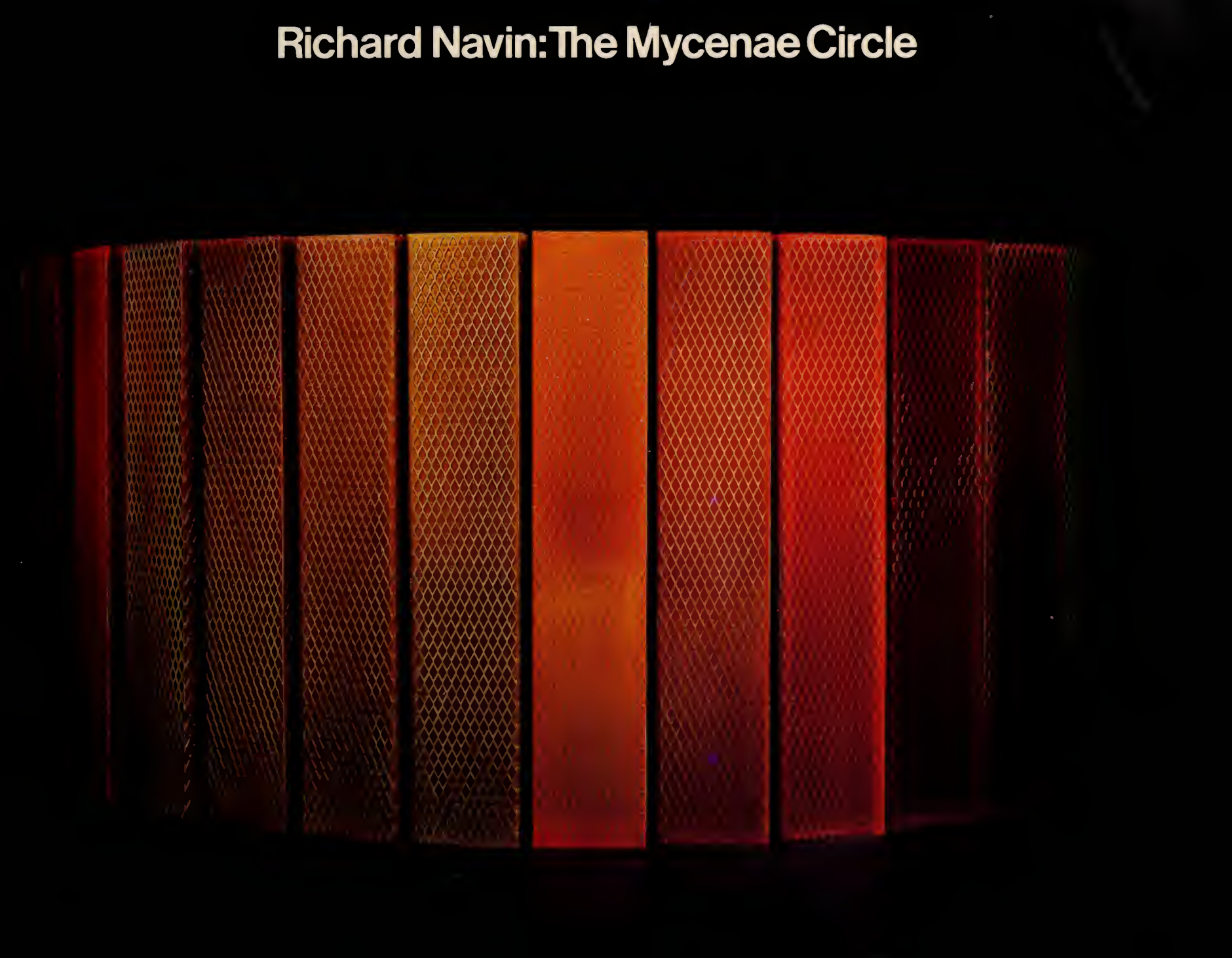
Richard Navin: The Mycenae Circle



Richard Navin
The Mycenae Circle

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

This project is supported by a grant from the Shell Companies Foundation, Inc.

On the Cover:
The Mycenae Circle has a 56′ circumference, 19′ diameter and is composed of 40 stele. Each stele measures 7′ high by 15½″ wide and is 5″ thick. Epon laminate, 1979-80

Acknowledgements

In a project of these dimensions, which took four-and-a-half years to develop and realize, many individuals participated. First and foremost are Joseph and Marie Navin, without whom no career could have been initiated.

My particular guardians at Shell were Randy Woelfel and Rich Hansen, with Rand Shulman and John Petrosky. But guidance started twenty years ago with Jim Carey, without whose technical knowledge and support this project would never have come to be. Through two grants, Ralph Brown and Michael Grasley continued the optimistic vision that seems to characterize Shell Chemical Company. Subsequent major support was provided by Ken Spalding, Jan Oostermeyer, Klaus Mai and Doris O'Connor at the Shell Companies Foundation Incorporated.

Career support—and particularly that endangered species, academic freedom—has been given unstintingly by the City University of New York, Brooklyn College, and my chairman, Morris Dorsky, as well as by that invisible spectrum that lies in pure research under Dean Brian Schwartz and Michael Barnett, with Robert Perlberg at the computer center. Former students Robert Piccollo, Eddie Piccallo, Chris Frassa and Valery Bilder buttressed the effort with hard labor and skills. Serious, thorough readings of this text were given by Martin James, Jack Flam, Francis Kloeppel, Ward Jackson and Ken Emerson. In particular, I must single out Steve Keltner and Eddie Alicea, who often worked extended hours under conditions beyond any rewards just to see the job done.

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My last word of thanks remains for the mainspring, Nancy Earle Navin, and my children Joseph, Sean-Marie, Nicholas and X.

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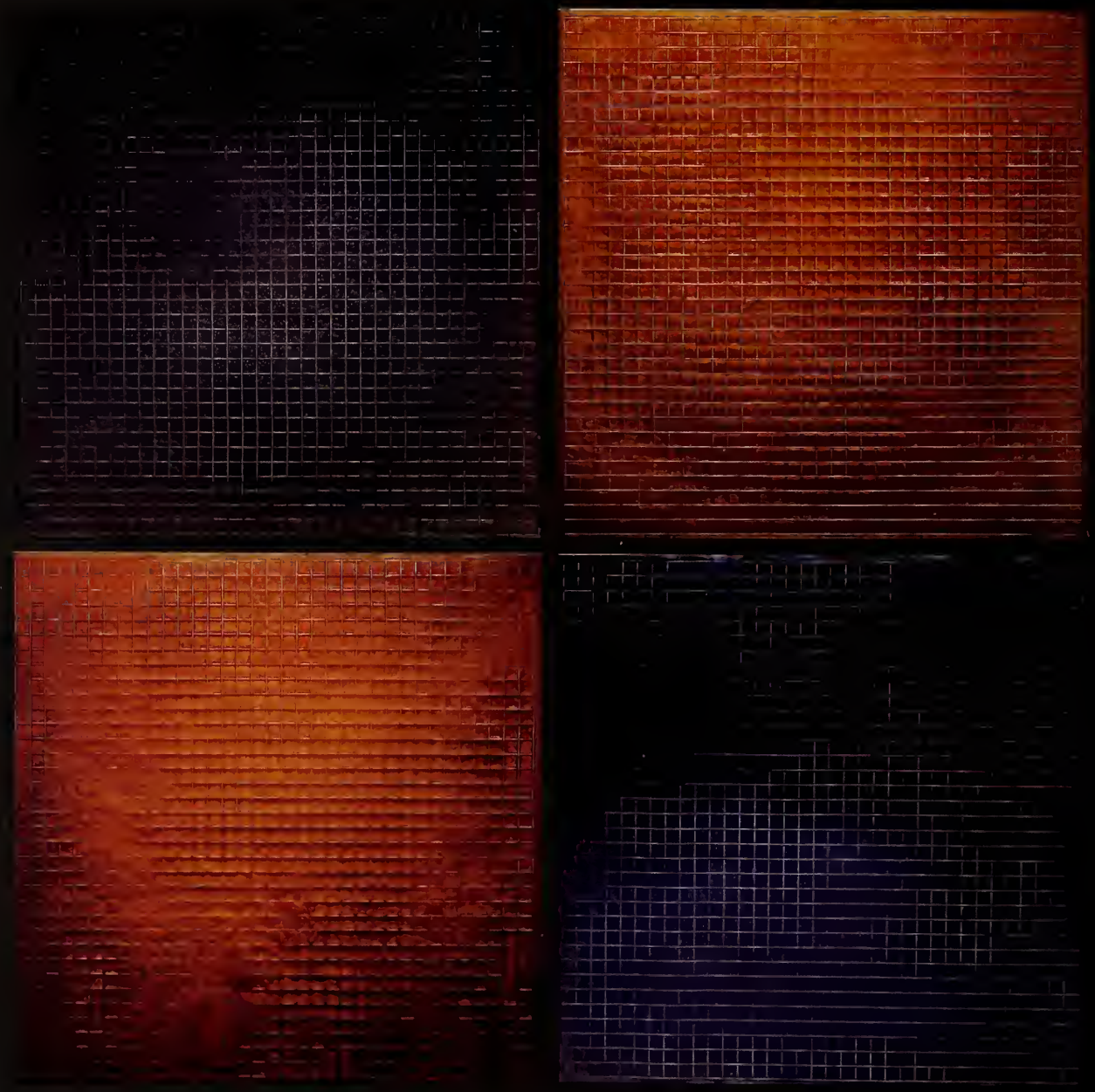
Midsummer Night. 1980
Epon laminate, 4 planes, overall 72 x 72″



Introduction

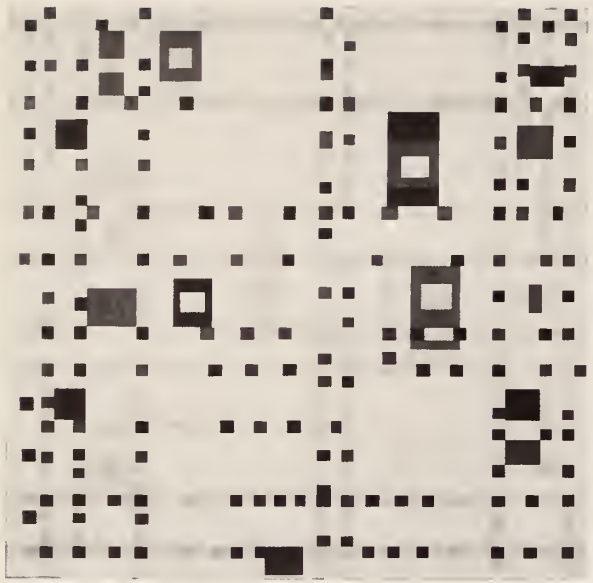
Richard Navin's art is a deliberate search for content that depends upon parallel technical and formal components. The technical aspects are complex, specifically related to Navin's aesthetic aim and original in a scientific sense. Form and content are both goals and results of his preoccupation with color, light, weight, mass and volume and more particularly with the interpenetrations of light and color emanating from laminated surfaces that are themselves superimposed in a carefully calculated ratio of translucency and opacity. Navin himself defines the content of his art with much precision as "light manifested as volume." He sees color as weight and as measure of light.

The artist's concise definitions have bearing upon his working methods and, conversely, Navin's working methods have led him toward his results as defined. Through exhaustive cross-references between his drawing and his sculpture (each pushing the other closer to the final objective), Navin reaches the conviction that "color is a solid dimension arrived at out of an instinct for weight," as he proceeds to convert sequential but separate tubular color blocks into a planar surface free from the disturbing vestiges of separation. From this point his color-light syntheses, ever more freely and spontaneously applied, register upon the retina as unified impressions encompassing width and depth until "denser and denser accumulations of pigment gradually close down on the light."

The Mycenae Circle, then, is quite properly seen as a journal of the artist's search. Because the traces of his labor are vividly in evidence and because his concentration is upon means and procedure, we as viewers are, paradoxically, all the more responsive to the aesthetic dimension evoked by the weighty fusion of Navin's mysteriously potent color-forms.

The relentlessness and consistency of Richard Navin's quest as well as the implications of his inventiveness upon technology prompted Shell Chemical and the Shell Companies Foundation to contribute generously toward the realization of this project. These same qualities as well as the sheer beauty of *The Mycenae Circle* in its preliminary state prompted the Guggenheim Museum to install this work in its Rotunda.

Thomas M. Messer, *Director*
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation



Piet Mondrian
Broadway Boogie Woogie. 1942-43
Oil on canvas, 50 x 50"
Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Given anonymously

Prelude to Color—The Suspensions

There seem to be two aspects through which ideas unfold and become conscious to an artist. The first aspect—very immediate, striking and clear—is born full-blown and disrupts all preceding conventions. The other aspect, more pale, evolves in slow increments between the workbench and the shadow of the hand: gradually the conceptual ground forms, like silt in sedimentary deposits—through experience rather than any presumptive imposition of the concept itself. This journal is dedicated to the ladder of steps that emerges from those occurrences common to the workshop.

Formerly, my work discipline began with a month of preliminary drawing. The process of making sculpture was artificially simulated through a series of drawings. A limited number of colors were continuously worked into a suite of shape/color variations at a rate of ten to fifteen drawings per day.

The guiding influence at this time was the relationship of the lower middle cross bars in Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. I believe I discovered a lead in his work. A hint lay encoded in those cross bars that I felt obligated to follow. For thirty weeks I traveled to the Modern and visited that painting.

Mondrian's use of meter formed by the progression/compression of alternating colors struck me with the direct possibility of building tubular solid series of colors that I would suspend between two standing plates. This new linkage, through Mondrian, dissolved the need for changes in edge that had created an illusion of movement in my previous work. Under the influence of this new mode, my drawings and sculpture ran horizontal, unvarying in upper and lower surface. Therefore, no illusive effects or gestures were imposed on the suite of colors suspended between beginning and end.

Rows of these new drawings accumulated vertically on the studio floor. The clearest drawings were selectively shifted to the base of these vertical columns. After the first 150 or more drawings were completed, an established dialogue seemed to narrow and focus on an exchange of color phrases. The most articulate, specific and concrete group of phrases was collected out of the month's distillation. The residue—drawings not used for sculpture—were saved for the purpose of priming the pump again when the next month's sequence of drawing was resumed. The most complete and clear color phrases, usually about six drawings, became sculpture.

Three to five castings, exact to the proportion of color in the drawings, were then cast on fiberglas tubes—usually 7½ inches in diameter. This dimensionalization of the color reinforced the premise I began with, the basic idea of color as a solid dimension arrived at out of an instinct for weight. After the new group of castings was completed, I went back to the drawing process, where correspondence was sought through drawing—as a freer medium—whose economy of means allowed more ranges of possibility than I could ever cast in any number of months.

This, then, was the basic work process: first drawings, then sculpture, then the assumptions of the sculpture pushed a step forward in more drawings, again sculpture, again drawings—until some ninety suspensions and eight hundred drawings had accumulated.

The suspension, composed of sections of individual colors, still had a trace of illusionism at the interface where each side of the impacted colors touched. Some progress had been made in exaggerating the weight signature of every pigment used in the suspension's series, and this, in turn, gave rise to the sensation that the weight of the full sequence of color was actually an accumulating unity. A clearer phrasing of the full sequence of color was evident as the unvarying surfaces across the string of colors continued to smooth, while the conflicting character of each color was boldly emphasized.

The interface, however, still posed something of a stumbling block.

Drawings

Suspension. 1970
Acrylic and pigment, 7″ l.

Suspension. 1970
Acrylic and pigment, 11″ l.

Suspension. 1971
Acrylic and pigment, 9″ l.

Flag. 1972
Acrylic and pigment, 9½″ l.

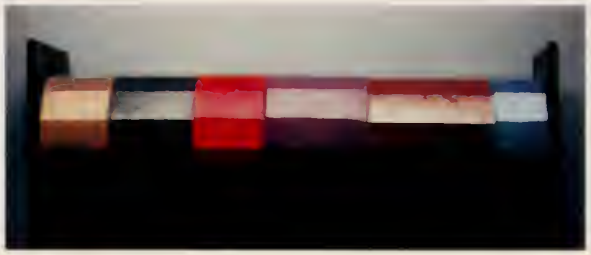
Constructions

Suspension. 1970
Epon, fiberglas and pigment, 8″ d., 27″ l.

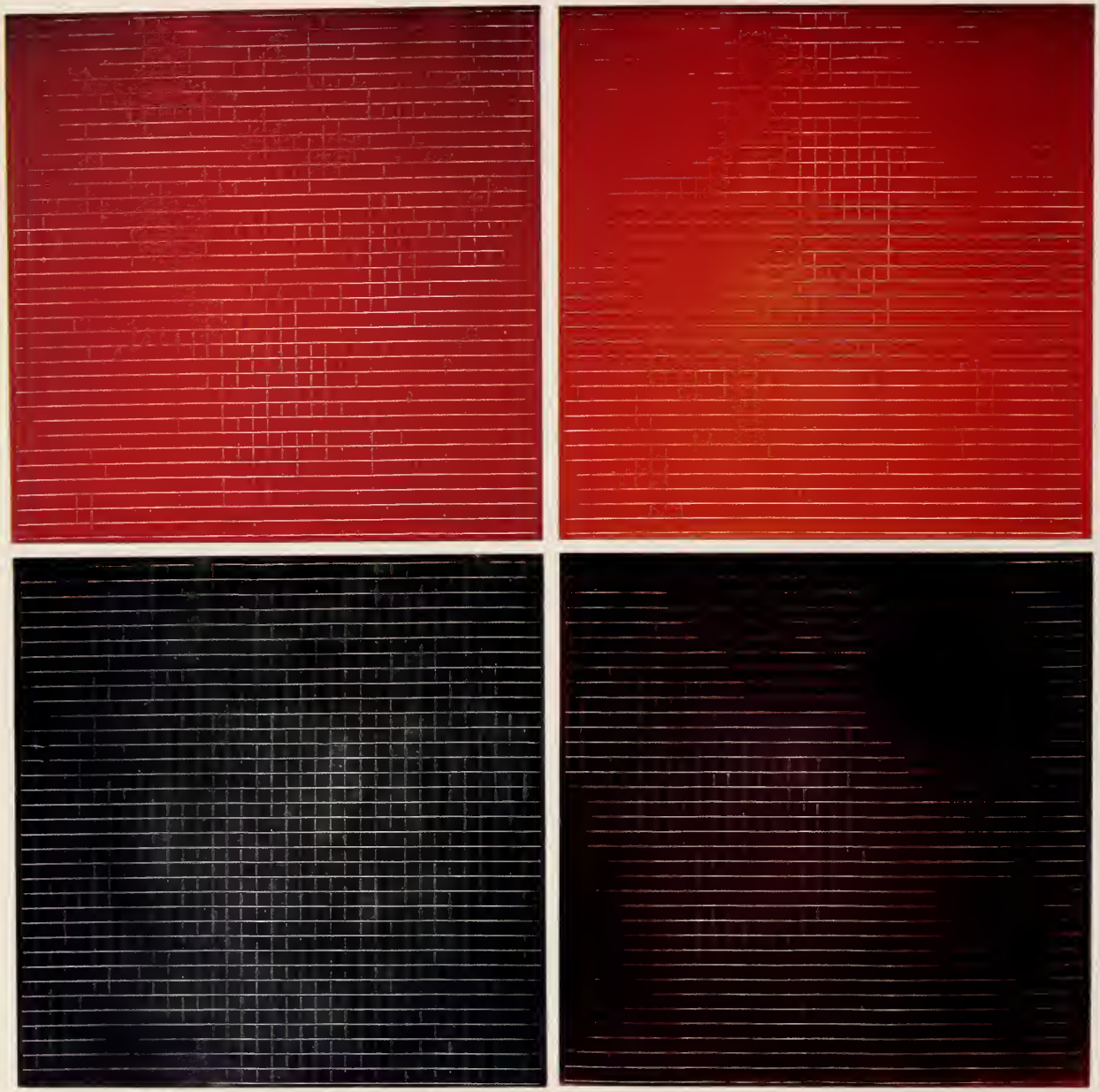
Suspension. 1970
Epon, fiberglas and pigment, 8″ d., 33″ l.

Suspension. 1971
Epon, fiberglas and pigment, 9″ d., 44″ l.

Flag 1972
Epon, fiberglas and pigment, 33 x 56″



Homage to Piet. 1978
Epon laminate, 4 planes, overall 72 x 72"



Planar Structures

Finally, the solution seemed to lie in planar structure. The first group of these works still had a right/left relation to other colors, but the frontal facing toward the viewer's eye seemed to create a balance of increasing importance. Planar structure seemed to add greater weight to each color's unique signature; not only did it accentuate the progression of colors, but its frontality challenged stasis. The hesitance created through the use of stasis seemed to throw the dice directly toward the color and away from the suspension's illusion of lateral motion and the stubborn problem of the interface.

I now became so convinced of the primacy of color as weight that I even wrote, at this time, a lexicon of what I believed to be color's weight dynamics. The discovery was that color in a cubic sense was dictating, more and more, what it should be in and of itself. There was more to learn from color, if only I could open up what was held within the artifice of the drawing/sculpture dialogue.

Color Definition

Color is a solid substance. The artist must recognize this raw fact before attempting to deal with any enveloping shape. Admittedly, this statement lies in counterdistinction to conventional solutions and assumptions inherent in the use of color as a film of opaque paint applied to a predetermined shape. No predetermination of shape can precede what is dictated by a particular color. The backwardness of the conventional approach is even more apparent when the constituents of color—such as pigment opacity, transparency, extension, color's compatibility with analogous hue or its ability to cut against complementary opposites in spectral structure—are reviewed in even the most superficial manner. Even a passing examination of the idiosyncratic aspects of pigment structure versus spectral structure compli-

Nine Notes on Red. 1980
Epon laminate, 9 planes, overall 7½ x 15′

cates and ultimately enriches our perception of the personal signature of color. These phenomenological attributes inherent in color, in and of itself, are of such strength that it becomes very easy to surrender any compositional introjection such as movement, gesture and other illusionisms. It is precisely here, at this combative point between phenomena and mind, that Mondrian's pioneering efforts in *Broadway* and *Victory Boogie Woogie* show the way out for late abstraction.

Color—The Form Within the Surface

The first planar castings achieved an even, dense color throughout the depth, where light easily traversed the surface. Several castings placed together suggested possible mural dimensions.

Immediate concerns about resin-admissible color, however, demanded attention. The actual surface was nearly matte. Deep, low-register color appeared blocked by this matte quality, which contained a pale whiteness much like the "white noise" distortion found in music.

New castings were then made employing a high gloss that opened the depths, extending dark colors that were so luminous they reached down nearly to the edge of black. But these loaded, exaggerated colors seemed to pull apart structure and order, that is to say, two planes, for instance red and green, meeting each other from highly contrasting chroma sources, seemed to deny any authority, pulling apart structure and order when placed side by side.

In addition to these lateral discontinuities in gloss casting, there was a lack of inward balance. Within, the planar distinctness suffered as light penetrated the interior mass. Although this penetration obviously occurred at a gradually diminishing rate, there was no way to check how this happened nor to determine at what rate this absorption took place.

The Retinal/Laminate Axis

It became clear that an index rating light/color penetration inward could also benefit the lateral discontinuities across the assembled group of planes. A solution seemed to lie in defining two roadways: one leading from the viewer's retina straight through the plane; and the other through the lateral axis crossing the surfaces. The instability of pure effect, while a truly beautiful phenomenon, needed form. Cutting the edges would only be manicuring, not solving, the internal problem where denser and denser accumulations of pigment gradually closed down on the light.

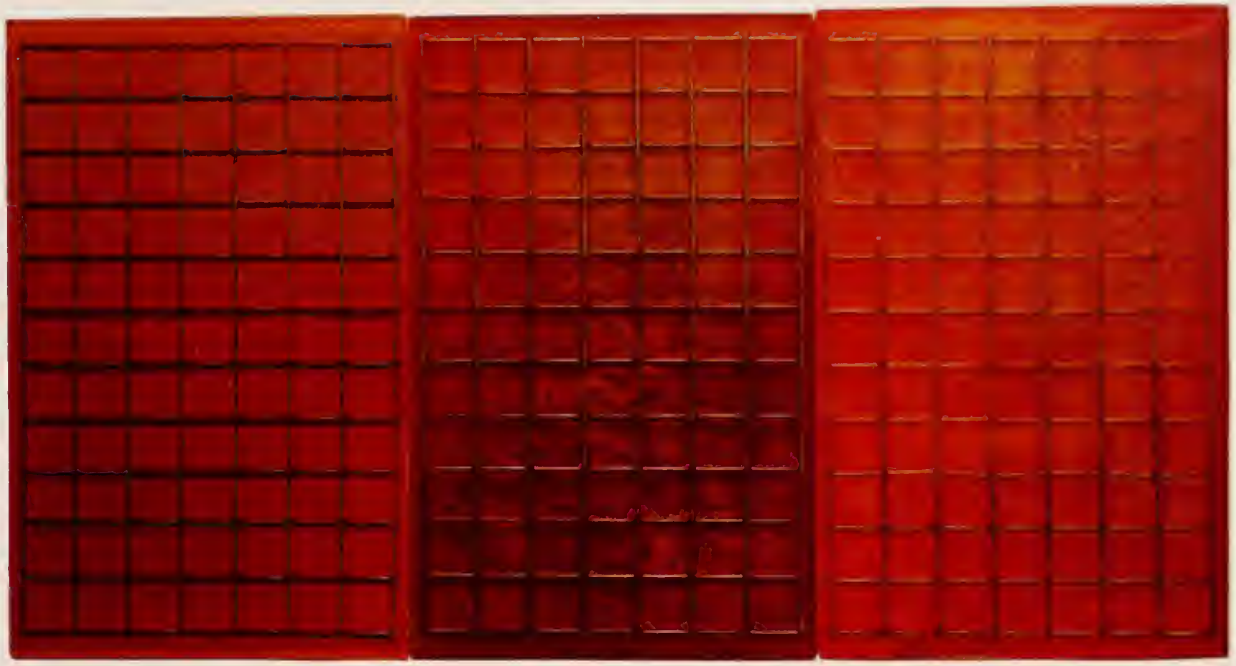
Not creating interior distinctions in the cubic depth of the medium allowed color to remain "pooled." This "pooled" effect left a color with an individuation that did not admit the color next door. These mutually exclusive barriers, one color to the next, were a virtual aesthetic autism.

I began to cast each plane in separate zones, one laminated to the next. The epoxy was unique in its ability to wet and bond one layer to the next with no regard to thickness, thinness or change in temper from thick to thin. The range of pigment widened and metals were often used in the primary zone. Somehow, through apparent electrical opposition, the metal pigments, even in small amounts, traveled, extending throughout the whole surface. A level teaspoon would easily cover eighteen square feet of surface. This apparent ionization created, in the primary lamination, an extremely fine dispersal that was extraordinarily discreet and understated, particularly when one considers the very weak threshold for tint of most anodized metals.

The near nonexistence of the metal established a filter for the following colors and was particularly good in complementary opposition to the next lamination.

The second cast layer, inside the primary filter zone, was the body color. Usually this body color was dominant—the major force—while the filter worked

Saffron—Sketch Series. 1978
Epon laminate, 3 planes, overall 12 x 22½"



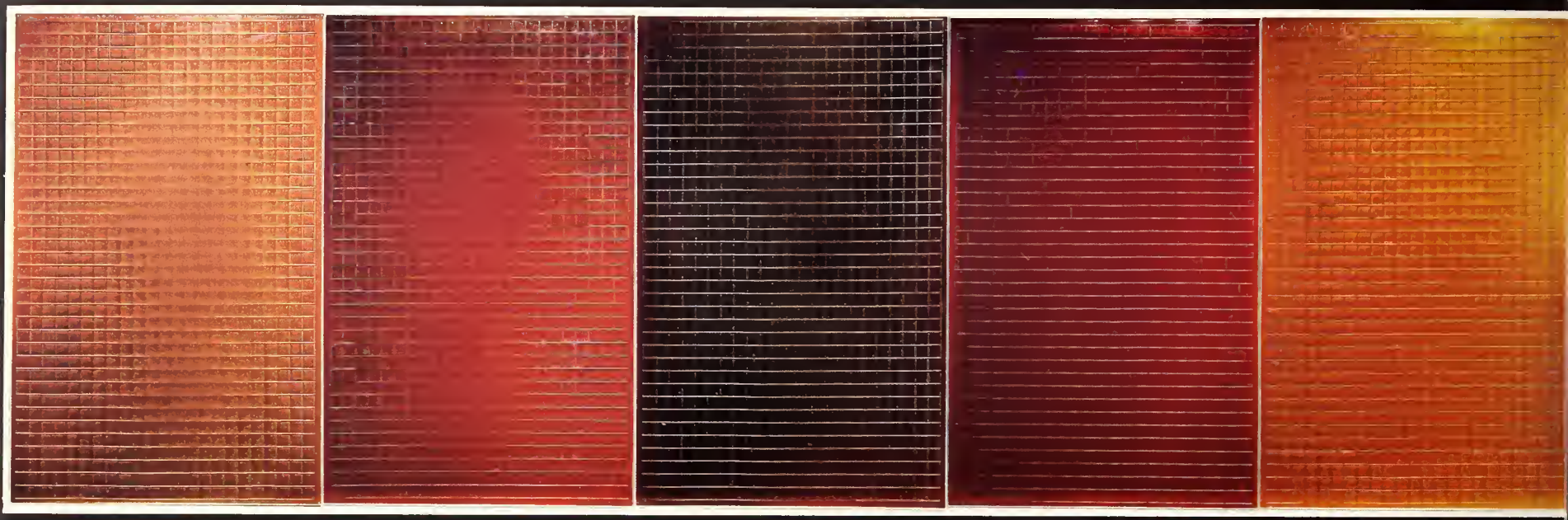
adjunctively. The filter was either analogous in color to the major zone with, for instance, a red-orange filter over a yellow body, or it was in opposition, as with a green, anodized aluminum filter over an alizarine crimson.

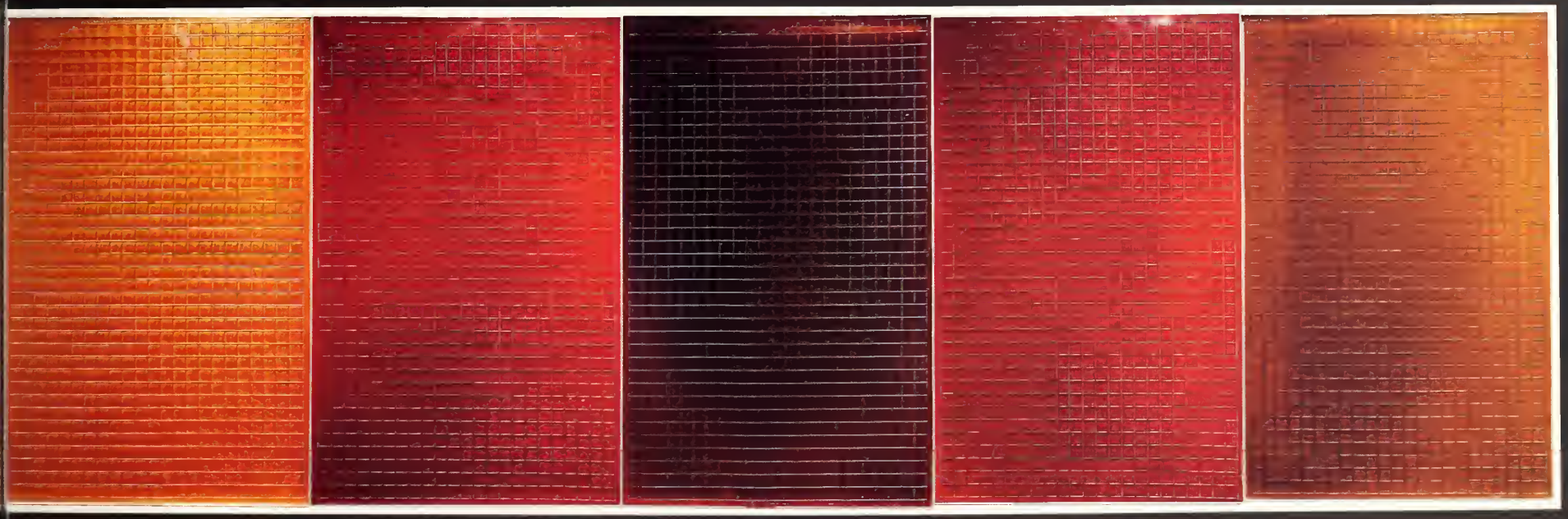
Behind the middle zone was the reflector. The reflector zone threw light back, outward, through the body and filter zones. The filter and body would deflect, harbor and slow down the volume of light reaching through the laminations. When light finally reached the reflector—depending on the color components of the reflector—it would be bounced back out, toward the front surface. On occasion, the reflector would be made weak or passive. In such a situation, light, upon reaching the third lamination, would simply be absorbed or dissipated

The Lateral Span—Composition

At this time, Jasper Johns' series of crosshatch paintings opened at the Castelli Gallery uptown. Johns' work was composed in multiple strokes like a houndstooth pattern. The webs and scans created a complex, fluctuating sense of space that seemed to hold different skeins of light. The very next day after seeing the show, my eyes still attuned to those beautiful webs and scans, I found a roll of very open mesh in a hardware supply store. What had presented itself in Johns' work hovered between the problem of contiguousness across the planes and the suggestion that the neutral color of the mesh would provide one continuous scrim traveling across all the colors. Whatever was exaggerated in the individual pools of

Woodhull Hospital Commission. 1978
Epon laminate, 38″ x 20′; each panel, 38 x 24″
Collection New York State





color could be brought to balance, at least in part of their laminations, by having this mesh woven through inner and outer phrases of the color.

The high gloss surface and multiple laminations first widened the range of color's luminosity, depth and weight, and then created a connectiveness between color and shape through front to back.

For a year the work relied on an equilibrium of performance. Filter and reflector zones were subordinated to the body zone between them. Through testing the stability of this practice, the dimension of individual works expanded considerably.

Toward Whole Walls—P.S. 1

Scale increases seemed dictated by the increasing strength of the inward laminations. Through coordination across the aggregated group of planes, a composition enlarged to fill an entire wall. Drawings can scale up or down and not entirely lose force. Color, however, cannot scale up or down. In 1978, two events, occurring consecutively, enlarged the scope of my research. I acquired studio space at P.S. 1 through a grant from the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, and Shell Chemical Company provided a substantial construction grant. With access to large rooms at P.S. 1, I made five walls, each 7½ by 15 feet.

No earlier work accompanied the move to P.S. 1, and in that wide, bare space I was able to fill all the surrounding walls.

Shell Chemical Company's grant allowed for a sixfold increase in size. This grant freed me from the hesitancy of working in prepared sketches. Now the technical evolution was accelerated by the opportunity to work directly in large planes of wall size.

With the confidence that came from the first completed walls, I eased the strict equilibrium of the formulation. I began to tip the equilibrium at times in favor of the filter, with the second and third zones simply passive, using light-absorbing graphite. In other planes, the quantities of pigment and metal in the first and second zones would be undercut by the third zone, riding through with a brilliant vermillion.

All the problem solving and individual components dissolved into that so-called easy give and take. The nine planes gave way to a wall of light through colors that are conceived of as weights.

The Laminations—Color as Dimensional Structure

Volume, weight and mass usually associated with sculpture have not heretofore been the characteristic aesthetic ground of color. But this aesthetic began to assert itself slowly as I neared the completion of some hundred cast suspensions. It became clear that layer upon layer of resin could be added, one onto the next, in both wide and discrete layers as a direct factor of the sum color. The color's mass began to expose a new conceptual parallel—color as dimensional structure drawn from the phenomena and physics of spectral color and its technical embodiment in laminated resin.

This parallel finally appeared demonstrable in planar structures through the technique of laminating epoxy resin. The reflectivity of the high-gloss surface widened immeasurably the spectral range.

Cobalt violet, alizarine crimson and other deep colors were used at full strength. Their inky darkness was counterbalanced by the light metallics, whose thin dispersal occurred at the farthest perceptible edge of the color spectrum. The metallics' discrete aureole presence, together with the loaded pungent colors, tested the full capacities of the retina-and-mind reflex.

Simply stated, the concept of structured color now seems viable only through suspending color pigments in separate, ordered layers. Hindsight, of course, makes this seem so simple—the essential discovery being that the separation of colors is paramount, since their power to transmit lessens when immersed in compound wave-length mixtures. Be-

Upper left: The Preparation of the Mold Frame
The mold frame and surfaces are built upon a white reflecting table surface. This reflecting undersurface enhances the return of light through the resin and color. It also allows for an accurate reading of the laminate density and chromatic value when the first laminate is laid into the mold frame.

Lower left: The color is cut into Epon resin.

Upper right: The first laminate color is poured into the volume of resin pre-measured to the size of the mold.

Lower right: The second laminate is added to the first filter zone and mesh scrim. Each stage allows for increases in, or reductions of, both chroma and volume.

cause effective use of blue, red or yellow depends on the counter distinction of each color's own volume, weight and mass, clarity in design depends on bringing these particular character shifts into combination while maintaining their individual signature.

These difficulties have fallen away thanks to the design of a resin body whereby light can be transferred clearly and readily, layer by layer, throughout the depth of the material, while still maintaining the counterdistinction of each color layer.

This design capability, fortuitously, was parallel and complementary to the chromatic structures inherent in pigment, in and of itself.

Generally, technique, form and content fuse in the contemporary critical analysis of abstract art. It would also appear that the work at hand has moved toward a further fusing of the usual separation associated with typical painting and sculpture.

The content of this work is light—light manifested as volume. The measure of light is color—color seen as weight. The weight of color defines the volume of light in the midst of its substance. The color, in laminations throughout the planes, is molded into three layered depths.

The color is not illusory, nor is the color coated or painted on a reflecting surface. The color is not a composition of colors taken as relational edges. Rather, the fullest measure is given to light by expanding the threshold where light is caught within a color's depth.

Within each plane, the opacity, transparency or any other personal signature of a specific color models the volume of light entering the plane. This is primarily established by qualifying light at three different levels.

Three Levels of Color (The Laminations)

Filter Zone—This first layer diffuses light by the physical shape of the pigment particle and establishes the quality of light passing into—

The Body Zone—where, through containment and absorption, the volume of chroma in this mediating layer sets the rate at which the light can be absorbed or returned, until—

The Reflector Zone—whose opacity or lack of the same, whose analogous or complementary aspect, acts in concert with or in opposition to the character built through the two outer laminations and finally determines the quality of light returned outward, or its final passage and absorption.

The Casting Procedure—Color Laminations

The casting formulation with table, molds and laminations evolved in a constant parallel to the gradually evolving clarifications in the color laminate's own structure.

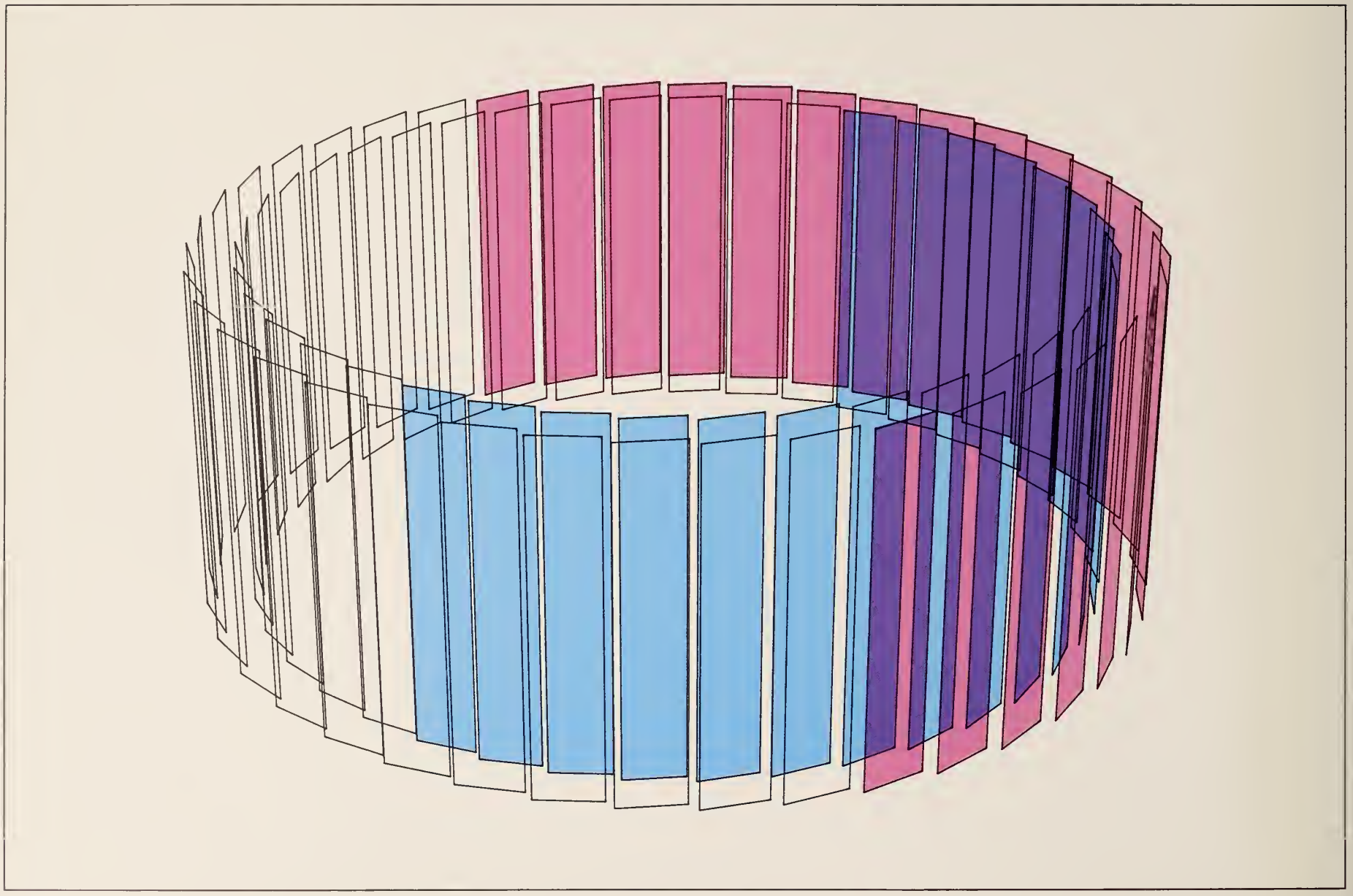
The discipline of resin casting is rigid, because of the extremely stringent tolerances involved in suspending color in resin as one strives for greater clarification between color laminations. The mold itself has become a transparent frame on a white formica reflecting surface. This mold system supports the requisites dictated by close color balance. The system is open, by means of its reflecting surface, to a close, direct analysis of each and every color as it is added incrementally to the compound's final color. This system also provides a relatively high degree of directness, whereas the usual nature of casting is inherently an indirect process.

No one level is fixed in its function. The entrapment, absorption and reflection of light may be enhanced or transferred in close harmony or set in complementary opposition between the layers to the point of stasis.

The length of time it takes light to penetrate levels of color and finally to reemerge varies according to the differences inherent in particular minerals and the precise nature of each and every pigment used.

Nine Planes. 1978
Epon laminate, 7½ x 15′

The Circle, in wire line, demonstrates the compounding of color through overlaps and progressions around the circumference.



The Work Table. The base and top mold combine to reflect light through the laminates, shown as if suspended above the molds.

Deflection

Experimentation with various proportions and surfaces led to a type of mold that employed a pronounced deflection—that is, a gentle bowing of the surface of the mold toward a centralized point where the most weight accumulated during the casting process. Not only did this deflection soften the outer dimension of the plane, but the gentle rise in the finished casting created a slightly denser accumulation of cast color in the center of the plane than would be found toward the periphery.

The temper of this central density could be controlled by shimming or by the temperature of the epoxy color. These were useful means for heightening complementary contrast. Deflection could be controlled to give more prominence to the filter without increasing the ratio of pigment to epoxy. This flexible control of deflection is also a good complement to the halation that is naturally in any color.

In Conclusion

Much of the environment was mirrored on the plane of the first highly reflective surfaces. In addition, the border of the actual physical surface was somewhat extinguished. In some way there are always illusory aspects in color—throughout the day the spectral range of light acts upon embodied color in widely varying fashion. This natural absorption and reflection of light in color is particularly complex when color is contained within cubic volume. The degree to which this radiance extends outward beyond the physical surface—even to what degree this halation radiance event affects the retina—varies tremendously. It varies within every casting as well as through the surrounding influence that corresponding castings exert, in concert, on the field of a composition. It is luminous. It is real. It is living and, like most living things, it is highly subject to change.

Vaga Luna. 1980
Epon laminate, 16 x 16″

5 cv