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Forward Retrospective

University of Michigan BFA Thesis 2018

Introduction

I have always been surrounded by creation. For as long as I can remember, my home was one big construction site. My parents, both civil engineers, purchased a rundown house to move the family to. When the fifth child was born, it was decided that it wasn't practical to live in a small row house downtown Washington DC. So we moved towards the outskirts and the two of engineers began repairing and updated the century year old home.

As I watched them create, I heard them discuss how it was being made. I was exposed to the math and science involved in making while seeing the works come into existence. I developed a love for these subjects at an early age. The more I learned, the deeper that love grew and the more intense the drive to create became. The more I created, the more I wanted to learn. It was an endless cycle.

Creating has always been a compulsion for me. While learning about the world I exist in, I was compelled to bring my own worlds to life. Science, math, and art continued to overlap and explained one another to me. Further exploration of these subjects revealed even more connections between the fields and they eventually merged into one subject.

I found it frustrating that math, science, and art were all taught separately when a combination of these has given me an awareness that I could not have gained from the subjects individually. Knowledge is gained through making and making gives knowledge. You use known information to create and you gain more information through that making. This provides a more complete understanding of how something came to be and how it functions in the world.

It wasn't until I took an astrophysics course, that I saw this way of teaching. The course was equally split between lecture and laboratory work. In one lab we made a comet. We took everyday substances that contained various elements found in comets to create a miniature version. For example, we used window cleaner for ammonia and charcoal for carbon. We mixed all the elements together with dry ice and packed it tightly like a snowball. When moving the miniature comet around, you can watch the tail as it follow the comet. We used found materials to create something that we may never get to experience or interact with in its natural environment.

This experience heavily influenced my artwork that followed. I continued my own experimentation with materials. Many times I would gather things from around my house and integrated them into my paintings. I often used nail polish, salt, and baking soda in combination with paint made from food dye and water or some other liquid material. I loved seeing the different reactions and recreating bits of the world around me.

I saw my senior thesis as an opportunity to continue this exploration and combine everything that I loved. I focused my research on nebulae, galaxies, and stars, which led to a beautiful discovery. We all come from stardust. I continued to learn about this connection and as I did I began to question, why are humans hurting other humans if we are all the same? My thesis examines the relationship humans have with one another through our origins. We are connected on a quantum level. Through our origins we are linked. My work aims to reconnect us to each other in order to create a mutual respect and understanding. To continue moving forward in this world, we need to come together and recognize that we are all the same and our notion of self must change and expand.

I created a large reflective painting to convey this to the viewer. My painting depicts an image of outer space. The piece uses reflective materials that allows the viewer to see themselves in the piece, reconnecting them to their origin of stardust and cosmic explosions. When multiple viewers are looking at the painting, their reflections intertwine due to the texture of piece. This allows the viewer to connect with another person as their reflections become collaged together with each other and with the piece itself.

Contextual Discussion

My academic research was heavily focused in physics, a science that requires the study of different subject to understand all aspects of matter and energy. While researching I continued to make and pushing my discoveries forward. My artistic research became focused on the body and representing a larger body of people. It was devoted to finding ways to present my research to the viewer in a successful way.

Academic Research

Space has been a continuous exploration. It is a subject that poses many theories, questions, and unknowns but it has also taught us so much. With every new discovery and every new unknown, we are required to look at the information all at once to find cohesion. If there is no unification with the new discoveries, we must adapt our understanding to step closer to the truth.

Charles Jencks, author of *What is Post-Modernism?*, looks at this uncertainty as one that mimics postmodernism. It is almost indefinable. For years scholars have debated on how to classify the age that we are in. Many believe the age should be classified by the negatives in the world and the unfamiliar results that may come from thm. Jencks proposes a different option, “it is a period that should be classified by its catastrophes – mass famines, species extinction, Aids, mass-warfare, environmental pollution – or, to be upbeat it’s striving – The Era of Space Exploration”¹. Jencks asks us to consider what we want to focus on, the catastrophes or advancing forward as a whole.

While trying to determine the Age we are currently in, Jencks acknowledges the negatives, the catastrophes. He suggest that there are so many negative things happening that this time could be labeled The Age of Catastrophes. Uniquely, he follows this with a different suggestion, one of positivity. Are we in an age of striving, The Era of Space Exploration? I find this particularly fitting for my project. I am trying not to focus on the negative. I want my work to be an escape from the catastrophes in this world. What is a better illustration of this than a representative of our perseverance as humanity striving to explore the unknown?

Knowing what age and movement we are in and comes from an understanding of where we have been, how the previous movements and ages came about. Similarly, understanding us as humans requires an understanding on a micro and macro scale. Space presents more than just a note of positivity. It presents real connections between beings and nature. One of these

¹ Jencks, Charles. *What is post-modernism?* London: Academy Editions, 1996.

connections is one of the most underappreciated discoveries of the 20th century, “the realization that supernovas - the explosive death throes of high-mass stars - are the primary source for the origin and relative mix of heavy elements in the in universe”². We all come from the stars. Atoms of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and other heavy elements found in our bodies, were created by cosmic explosions billions of years ago.

In *The Elegant Universe*, Brian Greene discusses Albert Einstein’s quest for a theory that connects everything and the contradiction that it poses. Einstein’s unified field theory is one that is “capable of describing nature’s forces with a single, all encompassing, coherent framework”³. Einstein believed that if he could gain the deepest of understandings of the universe its “truest wonder” would be revealed. Since Einstein first articulated this, physicists believe they have now begun to connect the dots and fill gaps that Einstein was faced with through the development of Superstring Theory. Greene describes were we are in that understanding.

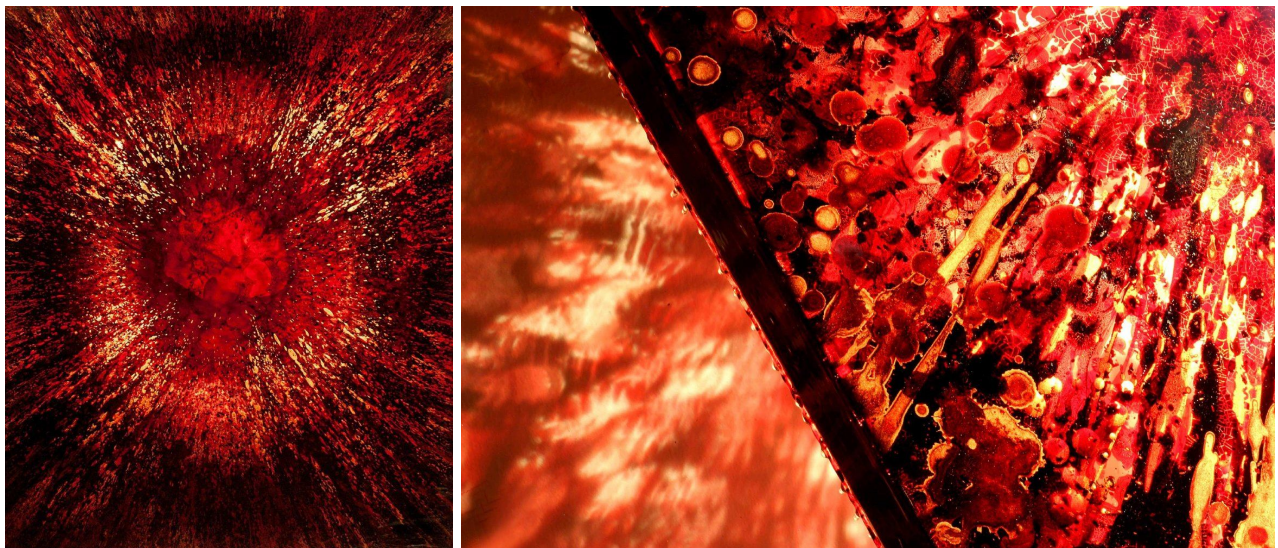
The *Elegant Universe* discusses Superstring Theory and how everything is made up of vibrating loops of strings. It shows that everything at its smallest part is the same. Not only can the world around us be simplified into these loops but so can humanity. We are made up of billions of vibrations. This connection is important to humanity as whole and recognizing that we are all the same and our physical beings are deeply intertwined. With this connection, it is easier to accept that our physical being is not the only contributor to the notion of self and what that encompasses.

² Tyson, Neil DeGrasse. *Death by Black Hole*. W W Norton & Co Inc, 2014.

³ Greene, B. *The elegant universe: superstrings, hidden dimensions, and the quest for the ultimate theory*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.

Artistic Research

My work focuses on the body in its abstract entirety. I looked to artists that dealt with large groups of people as one visual form. One of these artist is Jordan Eagles, the blood artist. Eagles has been using blood in his work for many years. He preserves the blood, typically sourced from slaughterhouses, for the purpose of displaying it. In doing so he emphasizes "patterns, textures, and luminous, glowing shades of red encapsulated in the liquid"⁴. He uses the blood to express the human form in a new way. By exploring the patterns and textures of a microscopic part of the body, Eagles is able to convey a larger being.



URTSBC3, 2012
72"x60"x3"
Blood, copper, preserved on plexiglass, uv resin
Source: Artist's Website⁵

Eagles more recently worked on a piece that used donated human blood for a show titled *Blood Mirror*. The blood collected was from nine gay and bisexual men, who are not allowed to donate blood for medical use. These nine men cover a broad spectrum of the population: "a priest, a member of a transgender couple, an army captain, an identical twin (whose straight brother can donate), the former director of the American Academy of HIV Medicine, a Nigerian gay rights

⁴ "Jordan Eagles's "Blood Mirror" Reflects on Discrimination in the US," Artsy, September 21, 2015, , accessed January 13, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-jordan-eagles-s-blood-mirror-reflects-on-discrimination>.

⁵ "Works." JORDAN EAGLES. Accessed January 18, 2018. <http://jordaneagles.com/selectedworks#selected-works-1>

activist on political asylum in the U.S., both a cofounder and the CEO of Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), and a bisexual father"⁶. The blood from these individuals coexists in a 7ft column constructed by Eagles.



Blood Mirror, 2015-present
84 x 28 x 28"⁷
Source: Artist's Website

Blood Mirror references the human body on a scale we do not usually see. He connects the bodies together in one fluid piece. Eagles manages to simplify the bodies into a single column. Together they are one. They are human.

⁶ "Jordan Eagles's "Blood Mirror" Reflects on Discrimination in the US," Artsy, September 21, 2015, , accessed January 13, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-jordan-eagles-s-blood-mirror-reflects-on-discrimination>.

⁷ "Blood Mirror." JORDAN EAGLES. Accessed January 18, 2018. <http://jordaneagles.com/blood-mirror/#blood-mirror-top>.



Breathing Head, 2002, 60x60"
Leaves, photo collage, acrylic, gouache, resin on wood panel
Source: James Cohan Gallery⁸

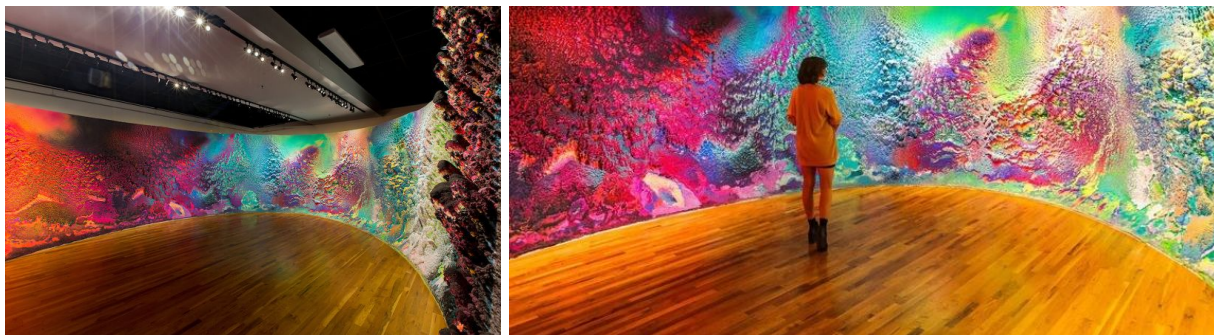
Fred Tomaselli is another artist who often uses representation of the body to create an image. He uses collage to create figures within his paintings. Because these figures are made of images of other figures and body parts, the single figure becomes more representative of an abstract being. They depict a being that does not reference a singular person but rather a larger group of people. In many of his works, Tomaselli is able to achieve a space like quality. He creates entirely new worlds and environments for his beings to exist in.

⁸ "Fred Tomaselli." James Cohan. Accessed April 16, 2018.
<http://www.jamescohan.com/exhibitions/fred-tomaselli2?view=slider#4>.

My interest in Tomaselli's work goes further than his depiction of humans in unique surroundings. In an essay, *Fred Tomaselli*, Gregory Volk talks about Tomaselli's work in contrast with other works at the time that are "issue-oriented art adamant about making some point at the expense of anything sensual". He also contrasts Tomaselli's work with art that moves away from "pleasure and seduction". With this contrast, Volk is drawing the reader's attention to an issue that he sees emerging in contemporary art. The issue is that many artists make work that is so focused on issues that it loses the beauty and visual appeal. It loses the pleasure that art once brought. Volk describes Tomaselli's paintings as an experience of their own and not needing to make a political or social point. Tomaselli is an exceptional painter because he is breaking away from the "art norm" of being issue-oriented. He creates work for people to enjoy.

The way Volk discusses Tomaselli's works, is the way I want people to talk about my work. I am interested in art as the experience. Rather than referencing or trying to recreate an experience, I want to make a work that is an experience of its own. Viewers can come and interact with the piece in however way they feel moved to do so. Although there is an underlying reason to my work and its set up, it is more important that the viewers have their own independent response to the work. My hope is that my work will be the subject of conversation rather than the depressing and many times horrifying current events in the news.

While looking for a way to create an all encompassing painting that would provide an experience of its own, I came across the work of Dylan Gebbia-Richards. *Echo*, a recent piece of Dylan Gebbia-Richards, stood out to me with its unusual and nontraditional shape. The painting is a new type of painting that covers the walls of a room, while extending downwards onto the floor. The piece has physical texture that is enhanced by the lighting. You are able to step into the painting and experience it as something larger than seen.



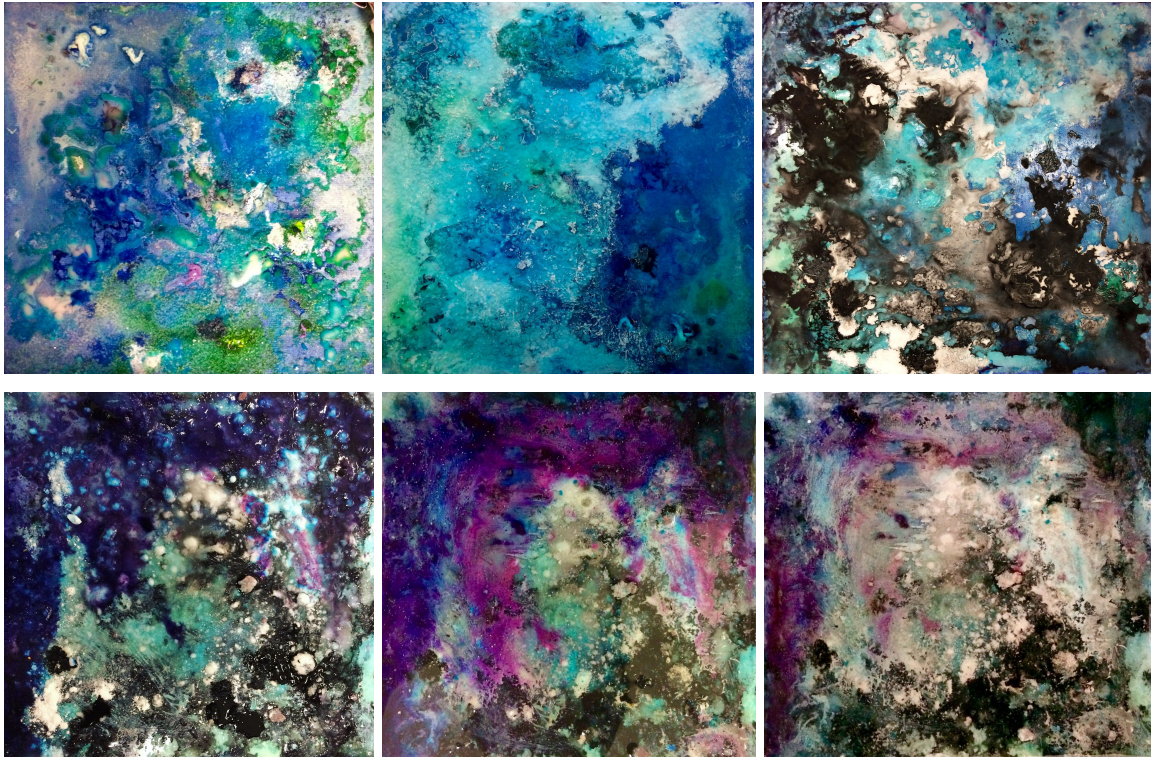
Echo, 2017
30' x 20.5' life-size, textured painting
Source: Danielle Webster Photography ⁹

⁹ Dylan Gebbia-Richards: *Echo* - Pam Campanaro. Accessed April 20, 2018.
<http://cargocollective.com/pamcampanaro/Dylan-Gebbia-Richards-Echo>.

Gebbia-Richards found a way to surround his viewer with one painting. This shape stood out to me immediately. A curved surface could convey the all encompassing scale of my subject matter. Extending the painting past the viewers line of sight, allows the piece to take over.

Methodology

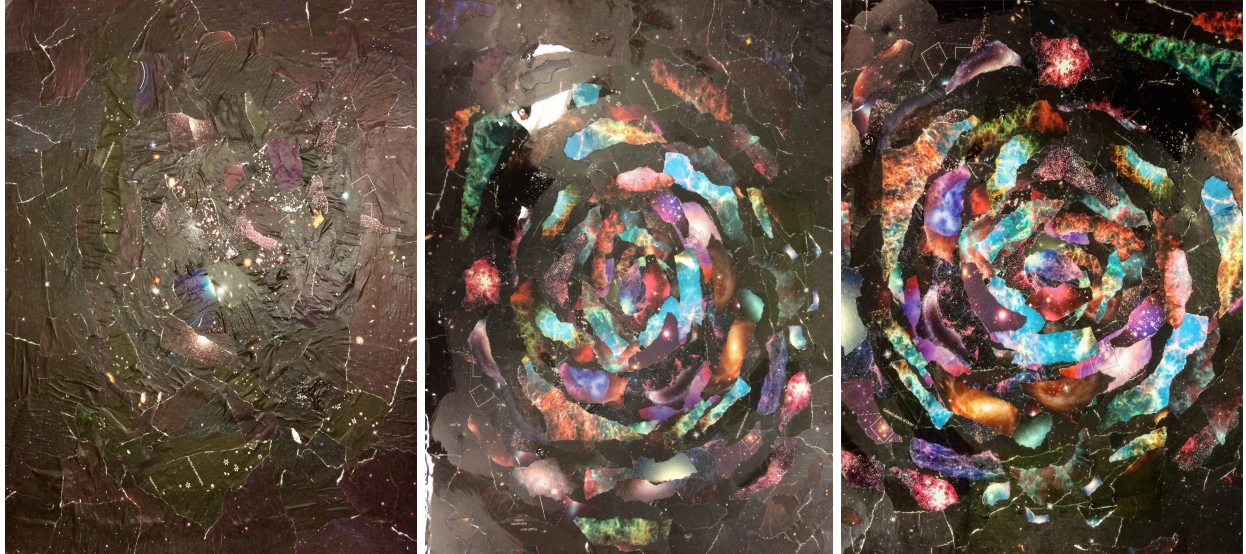
I knew from the beginning I wanted to work with resin. I was drawn to the layering quality it can provide. I used layers of resin and mixed materials to try and create nebulae and galaxy related imagery. My focus here was to create something that you looked into, something with depth. I was working with layers to build up an image.



Snapshots of the different layers used to create one image.

Each layer was a material experiment that I would then preserve with the resin. The next material experiment would be done directly on top of the previous one. Each experiment was done so that it visually interacts with, enhances, or builds upon the layer seen beneath it. I then moved to collage, inspired by Tomaselli's mixed media works. I started with creating an environment. I used torn images of space, galaxies, nebulae, and more to create my own image of outer space.

I used resin in a similar way with my collages. I would piece together a background and then cover it with a layer of resin. Following this I would collage on top of the resin. The collage was more open so you could see the collage behind the resin. I continued adding layers until the piece was built up and had physical depth.



Three different layers of one collage.

I looked for ways to combine the space imagery with the human form in order to visually unite them.



Three collages that incorporate the body in different ways

I looked for different ways to represent the body. I had experimented with plaster and breaking the body apart to disperse it across the spaces I created. My initial piece was going to include a figure.

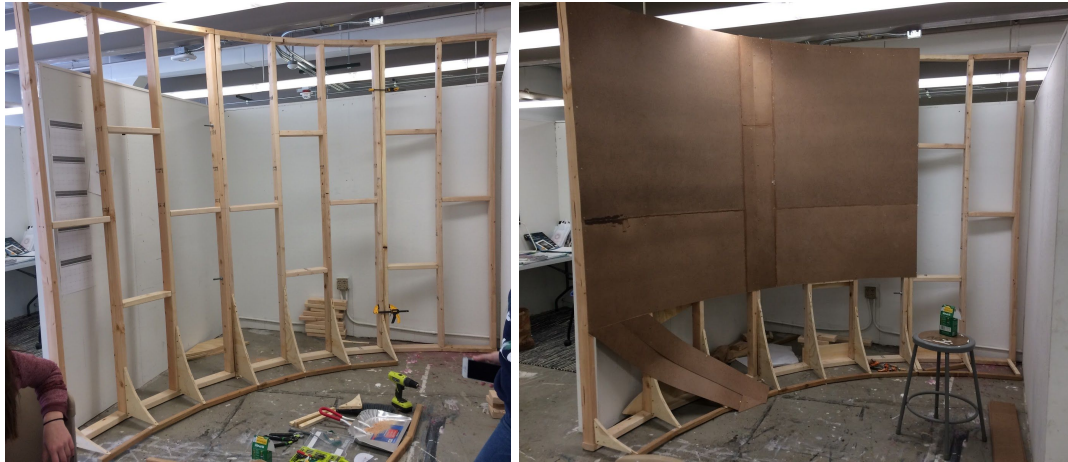


This is a scaled down mockup of the piece I envisioned.



Detail.

The shape of the painting changed before I began construction. The shape was inspired by Dylan Gebbia-Richards's *Echo* and its ability to express a larger subject. I was fortunate to find in process photos of *Echo*. I was able to dissect the image in order to create my own design for a curved structure that fits into an 8'x8'x8' corner.



The frame of my piece.

I covered the frame in tempered board to use as a sturdy canvas. The structure needed to be strong in order to hold the weight of the piece and specifically the weight of the resin. The above image is the state my piece was at during my midterm critique and meeting with guest artist, Jason Ferguson. I was fortunate to meet with Ferguson, an artist that works with the body. We discussed my piece and I showed him a few of the tests and experiments I had done that I intended on including in the final piece. I also shared my mock up and the frame I was building.

Ferguson suggested using the reflective quality of the resin to show the viewer themselves in the piece. This would allow me to get rid of the figure entirely. After researching Eagles's *Blood Mirror*, this was logical jump. I focused on building up the image with resin, paint, paper, and resin tint. In a similar way to my previous works, I build the image up layer by layer. I began focusing on the reflections in the resin and how to enhance those. I also worked with a few different materials that were suggested by Ferguson and Alison Wong, another guest I met with during my midterm critique.

Creative Work

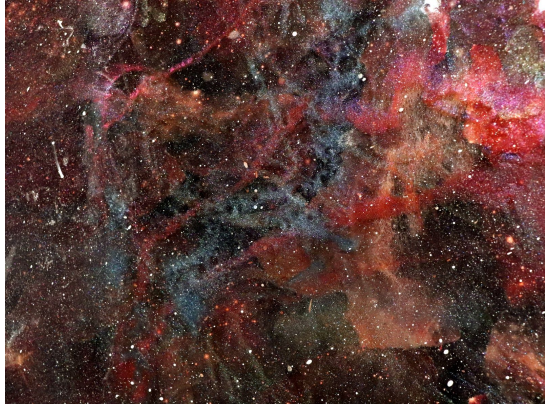
Froward Retrospectives, 2018

12ft x 8ft, mixed media



Image from a distance.

Froward Retrospectives is a large curved painting. It combines collage, painting, and resin tints to create an image representing outer space and what might be found there. The piece consists of layers that interact with one another in order to form an image. The piece changes depending on where it is being viewed from. From further back you see the large shapes and images formed. Standing close allows you to see the details and the tiny dots of the stars. Because of its size, standing close creates an overwhelming image that is difficult to comprehend without seeing the image from further back. The colors also change depending on where you stand. The paint and pigments used shift colors, giving it a holographic effect.



Detail/Close ups

The reflection of the viewer can be seen in the piece. It is a way from the viewer to interact with the work.



Reflection

Conclusion

My interest in such seemingly different fields has given me a unique understanding of how humans came to be. My curiosity in physics steams from a desire to understand how things work from the largest to smallest scale. To understand how something works you have to understand how something was made. Artwork has given me the ability to make and comprehend how a work came to be on every scale. I applied this way of thinking to my research to better understand how humans came to be.

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