

THESIS

REGARDING HUMANITY: INTERWOVEN INTRICACIES OF UNIVERSALITY AND
UNITY

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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In order to communicate, organize and understand the world around them, people from the earliest times have established semiotic language systems, mathematics, social structures and religions. Through layered symbolism, the mathematically driven work discussed here ruminates on these common developments. Each component is individually crafted, bringing value to each unit of the overall pattern. While there are slight variations, as in humanity, these components are all basically the same. This installation is intended to draw attention to the beauty of the whole. *Regarding Humanity* offers my interpretation of these cultural developments and what I view as the fundamental, intellectual needs of people all over the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In this thesis I address four ideas that are universal to all humanity. However, there is another quality unique to humans that I feel is appropriate to address here: selflessness. Developmental psychologist, Michael Tomasello explains that while other animals communicate, humans have the unique ability to collaborate. Although chimpanzees, our closest relatives, do communicate with one another, it has been proven that the chimpanzee receiver of a message has no inclination to respond unless it results in personal gain. On the other hand, humans often respond selflessly. This project is a prime example of such cooperation. In order to complete the work, I had to seek the advice of many people who were simply helping someone in need, not knowing that they were becoming an integral part of my project. There are those who helped through their never-ending emotional support and others who physically got their hands dirty to assist in the fabrication and installation. This work truly embodies the human spirit and the desire to assist others. I wish to thank my instructors, family, friends and all those whose advice I sought for their invaluable contributions.

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Introduction

Years ago I saw The Milestones Project, a photo exhibition that documented common experiences of children around the world. Theoretically, we all understand that each child reaches the same milestones, such as losing a first tooth or taking a first step, but I was profoundly affected by seeing the same expressions on each child's face, regardless of nationality. Jump to present day as I create works of art and attempt to understand my own motivations, which drive me to create large works with repeating geometric patterns. Through the hours of contemplation that accompany my labors, I have realized that—as in the project described above—I, too, am motivated by activities shared by people around the world.

The focus of this abstract is the installation *Regarding Humanity* (figs. 1 & 2). It is comprised of many separate pieces, each representing individual, yet unidentified people from around the world. The unit shape was not initially chosen with any specific intent. However, through the progression of my work I began to realize the subconscious, symbolic references of this shape, which I will discuss below. Since each piece is hand crafted, there are slight differences visible to the discerning eye, but at a quick glance they are all the same. Brought together in a single installation, they represent humanity. To be clear, my intent is not to marginalize cultural differences, nor do I wish to homogenize the world's population. My intent in this work is to bring attention to the shared conditions of humanity. Our common traits are too often forgotten as our fears force attention to our differences.

Symbolism

From the earliest ages—of world history and within a person’s life—the act of mark making has been a means of communicating and expressing ideas. Before written language was developed, humans used charcoal and earth pigments to draw images and illustrate concepts. These drawings, which share common themes and are similar types of presentation, can be seen on cave walls dating back 40,000 years and as widely spread as France, Spain, Australia, Russia, Indonesia and the Americas (figs. 3 & 4). With a similar universality, children who have not yet learned to write can often be found with a mark-making implement creating representations of the world around them. Our ancestor cave-painters may also have been simply depicting their surroundings, but it has been argued that these drawings may have had deeper meaning. Caves may have been ornamented for ritual purposes or other symbolic reasons.

Carl Jung states, “...a work or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning.”¹ Symbols are a way of communicating information to many different people, regardless of their linguistic skills or languages. The difficulty for the artist arises when viewers bring their own background knowledge to a work and the meaning is interpreted differently than intended. As a contemporary artist, I have learned to expect this and do my best to consider different interpretations and how they relate to my work. For instance, I have chosen basic geometric shapes for this installation. The main unit began as a circle, then was bisected and had its two opposing sides inverted (fig. 5). To a seamstress, the resulting shape might be easily recognizable as an “apple core” from historic apple-core quilts (fig. 6).

¹ Carl Jung, M. -L. von Franz, Joseph L. Henderson, Jolande Jacobi, and Aniela Jaffé, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), e-book part 1.

This apple core could be meant to represent growth, as from the seeds, or comfort related to the association with quilts. To someone else, the shape might represent an axe head, which could imply destruction or protection. Ancient Greeks used this same symbol in the ornamentation of pottery, as a shield or even as the body of a soldier (fig. 7).

In many cultures the circle symbolizes unity, wholeness, creation or a religious deity. In order to make sense of the world around them, ancient people devised myths of various gods to explain natural phenomena. Many cultures interpreted the creation of man or passing of time through sun and moon gods, represented by circles. Madhu Khanna explains how the Hindu yantra has a central point which is the “origin of supreme consciousness”; “infinite reservoir of collective energy, from which everything issues and into which everything returns”; and is “Cosmic Unity underlying the physical diversity of the world.”² Using the metaphor of a spider’s web, the yantra is comprised of concentric circles representing growth and contraction, with all points leading back to the central principal.³ Christianity signifies its saints and holy figures through the use of halos. These circular forms, placed above or just behind the head, are often depicted in gold to represent light, another signifier of spiritual presence or enlightenment. While *Regarding Humanity* itself is not religious in nature, it does represent the common aspect of humanity that seeks phenomenal explanation and security through a higher power. As described above, each unit is based on a circle. The pieces are oriented in concentric circles leading the viewer’s eye to the center, which is the most energized area of the work. I have also chosen to weave with threads that are highly reflective to generate the appearance of illumination.

² Madhu Khanna, *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2003), 9.

³ Ibid.

Jung speaks of the diamond as a representation of the Self, and ancient runes use the diamond as a symbol of unity, with each side representing the four elements of earth, wind, water and fire. Each unit in this work is intricately woven with a diamond. As I wove these frames I contemplated my own interpretation of the diamond, a recurring shape in my art (Figs. 9-12). I envision the four elements of these diamonds to be what I see as intellectual attributes unique to the human species. These are: the need to communicate through images as well as through the written and spoken word; the need to organize utilizing mathematics; the need to develop social structures; and the need to explain the unknown through the idea of a higher power. Each of these ideas interweave with others to create the intellectual foundation of every human. While all viewers may not come to these same conclusions, the interlacement of threads as a metaphor for aspects of lives coming together is quite common.

Scale

Mark Rothko and William Turner are both artists who work in grand scale with large, blended fields of color. Works such as these hold me captive with powerful, yet uneasy feelings. The scale of *Regarding Humanity* is intended to consume the viewer's field of vision and invoke the same sense of mesmerization. The frames hang in a receding conical orientation with the widest circle at the front giving the sense of an infinite number of pieces. The concentric-circle orientation again represents the wholeness of humanity, but it also implies social structures.

In every civilization there is some sort of order. To create that order people's activities must fulfill various responsibilities. Often roles may be determined by sex, a division we refer to as gender spheres. For example, in many cultures through time it has been the woman's role to stay home, take care of children and other household duties. This often has included some form

of needle- or fiber work. She may have embroidered items for ornamental or symbolic reasons, or created more functional items, such as blankets and baskets for warmth and storage. Men often have left the home for their job doing whatever they could to support their families, perhaps earning money, perhaps hunting for food. The individual frames I have constructed reference these separate gender spheres. They are circles which have been altered so that half of each circle contour is literally turned inside out. They are welded steel, typically a male-manipulated material, and ornamented with thread, generally associated with women's work. The materials are woven together into a cohesive unit, which at times shows only the color of steel and at other times reflects all colors. There is a blending of traditional gender identifiers within these pieces.

Pattern

To me, geometric forms are a perfect representation of humanity: our awareness of numbers and forms may have begun to develop as long ago as 300,000 years. It is thought that humans became aware of these concepts through noticing differences, such as the difference between a single horse and a herd. Some languages, including Greek, suggest our early ancestors only counted to two. The numbering would be “one, two”; more than two was considered “many.”⁴ In the *History of Mathematics*, Uta Merzbach and Carl Boyer—commenting on Neolithic people—suggest, “their drawing and designs suggest a concern for spatial relationships

⁴ Uta C. Merzbach and Carl B. Boyer, *History of Mathematics*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.) 2.

that paved the way for geometry.”⁵ Here the authors are writing about pottery, weaving and basketry that demonstrate congruence and symmetry. They then speculate, “The concern of prehistoric humans for spatial designs and relationships may have stemmed from their aesthetic feeling and the enjoyment of beauty of form.”⁶ Within my work, I employ these basic mathematical structures, relying on the dual number system. There is only one frame shape employed in the work, but it is oriented in one of two ways with relation to the others: vertical or horizontal. If all of the frames were on a single plane, rather than layered in several vertical planes, the viewer would see that these forms tessellate using quarter-turn rotation. Together these frames are oriented to fill an entire plane without gaps. Each frame is turned ninety degrees in relation to its neighboring units. With this particular form, a pattern reminiscent of basketweave emerges, as seen in this example of a nineteenth-century African block print (fig. 13). Op artists of the 1960s, such as Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely also worked with geometric forms and lines to create exciting mathematical works that “breathe.” I am continually inspired by the ways that their works enliven geometric shapes.

Textile to Steel

There is a pattern to the development of civilizations. Cave drawings, mathematical systems, and creation myths likely were not ideas shared among individuals from opposite sides of the world; they were the result of what is referred to as “parallel development.” Different

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

cultures, with no contact, “invent” ways of doing things in analogous ways. Many cultures have similar patterns of development dealing with the four intellectual attributes of humanity identified previously: communication, mathematics, social structures, and religion. Textiles are a manufactured product common to all civilizations. No matter how technologically undeveloped or advanced a society is, there is need for textiles (woven materials of animal or plant fiber) for functional or decorative uses. Originally, textiles were created by hand and, as the cultures advanced, industrialization occurred. One of the primary products of an industrialized society is its textiles. The steel in this work represents that industrialization, as do the glossy finish and thread. I have attempted to remove the mark of my own hand in the repetitive, assembly-line process of creating these pieces to give the appearance of a manufactured product. However, upon close inspection, one can see that each steel form is fitted with small curved springs that serve to anchor fine threads—in effect turning each form into a small loom. As these threads travel from end to end within each frame, their intersection creates a delicate fabric within the contours of each loom. These woven forms, which can only be made by hand, honor the labor and dedication of our ancestral weavers.

Conclusion

Regarding Humanity represents a convergence of ideas that continue to interest me, including the subjects of invention and parallel development based on the universality of basic, intellectual needs of people. The symbolism of geometric shapes aligns with my interests in metaphor and pattern. This vast work celebrates beauty in unity and reflects my belief that each of us has more in common with others than we realize.

Figures

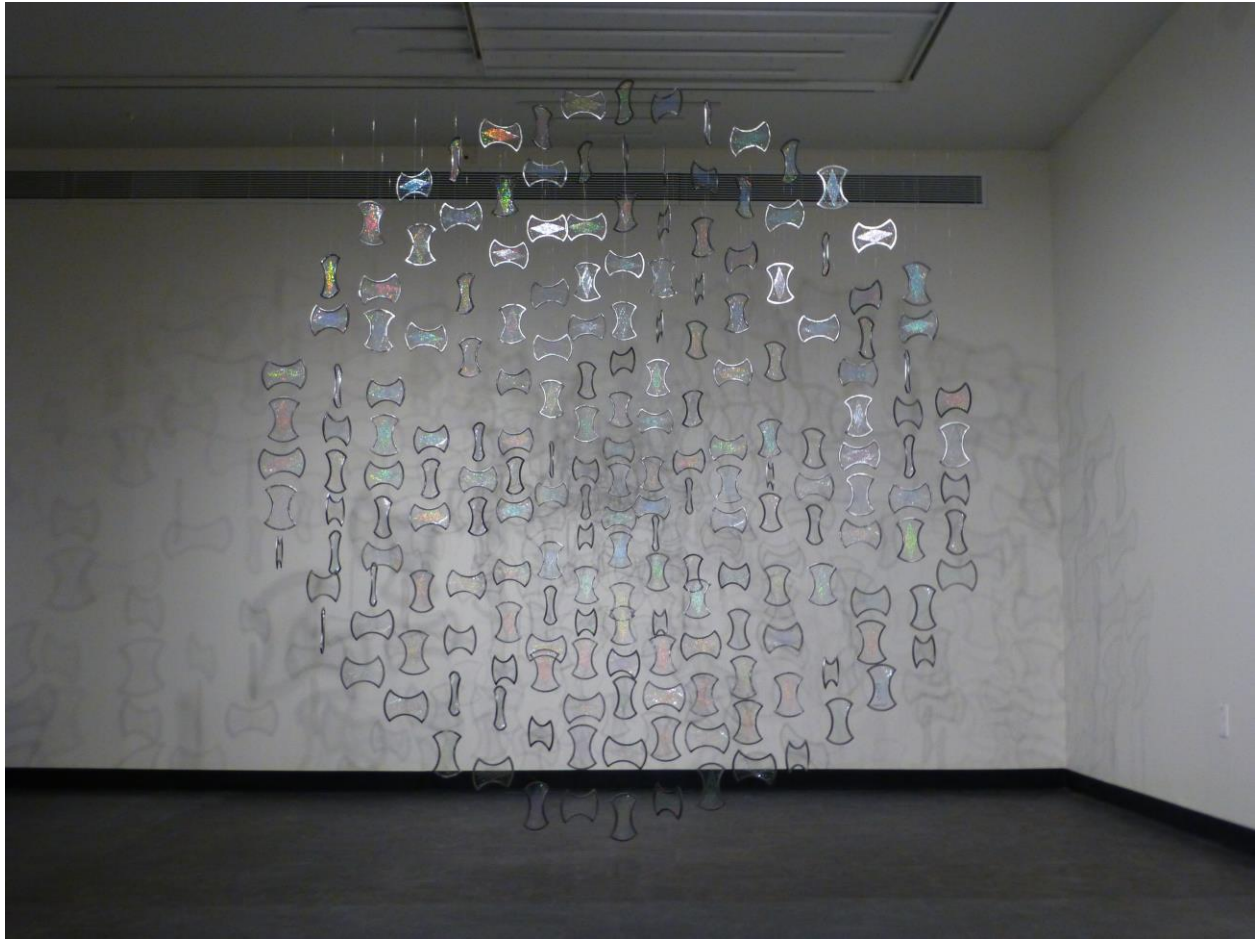


Fig. 1, *Regarding Humanity*, 2012-2013, steel, thread, fishing line, beads, 8'6" x 8'6" x 6'.

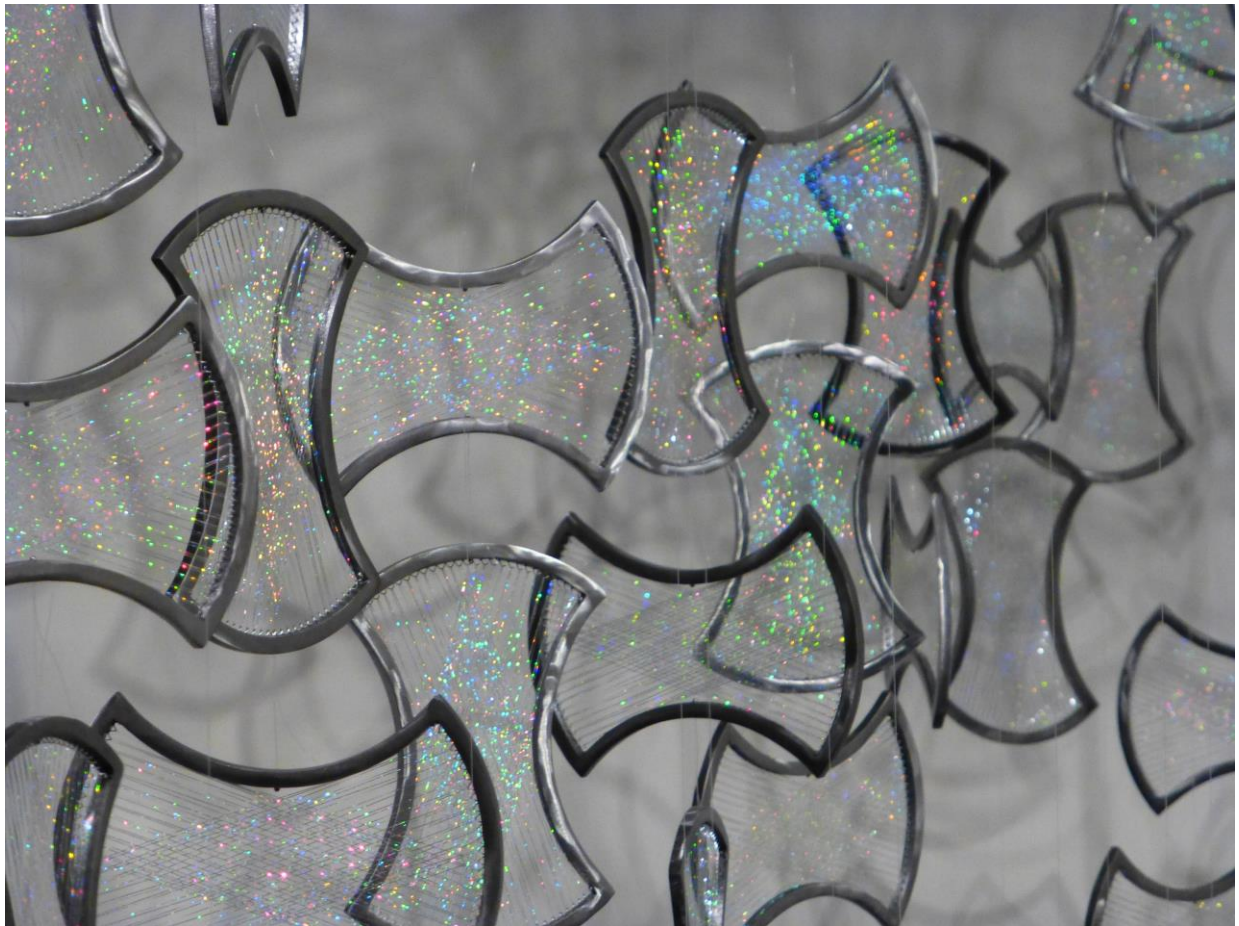


Fig. 2, *Regarding Humanity*, detail.



Fig. 3, *Women and Cattle*, after 5000 B.C.E., rock painting, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria.

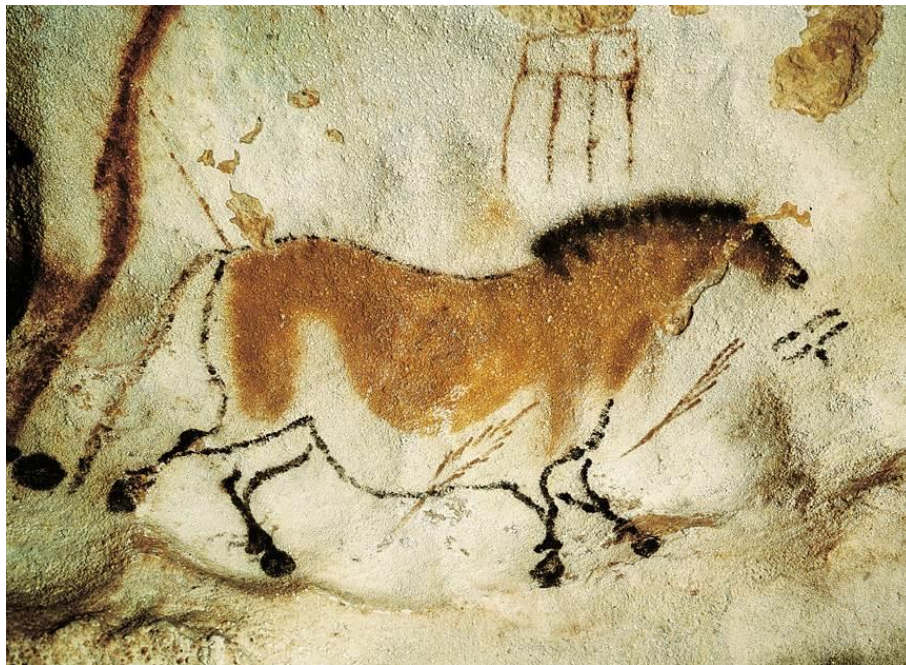


Fig. 4, *Horse and Geometric Symbol*, c. 13,000 B.C.E., cave painting, Lascaux, France.



Fig. 5, *Regarding Humanity*, single frame detail.



Fig. 6, Hirschfeld Workshop (attr.), *Krater*, c. 750-735 B.C.E., terra cotta, height 42 $\frac{5}{8}$ ", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

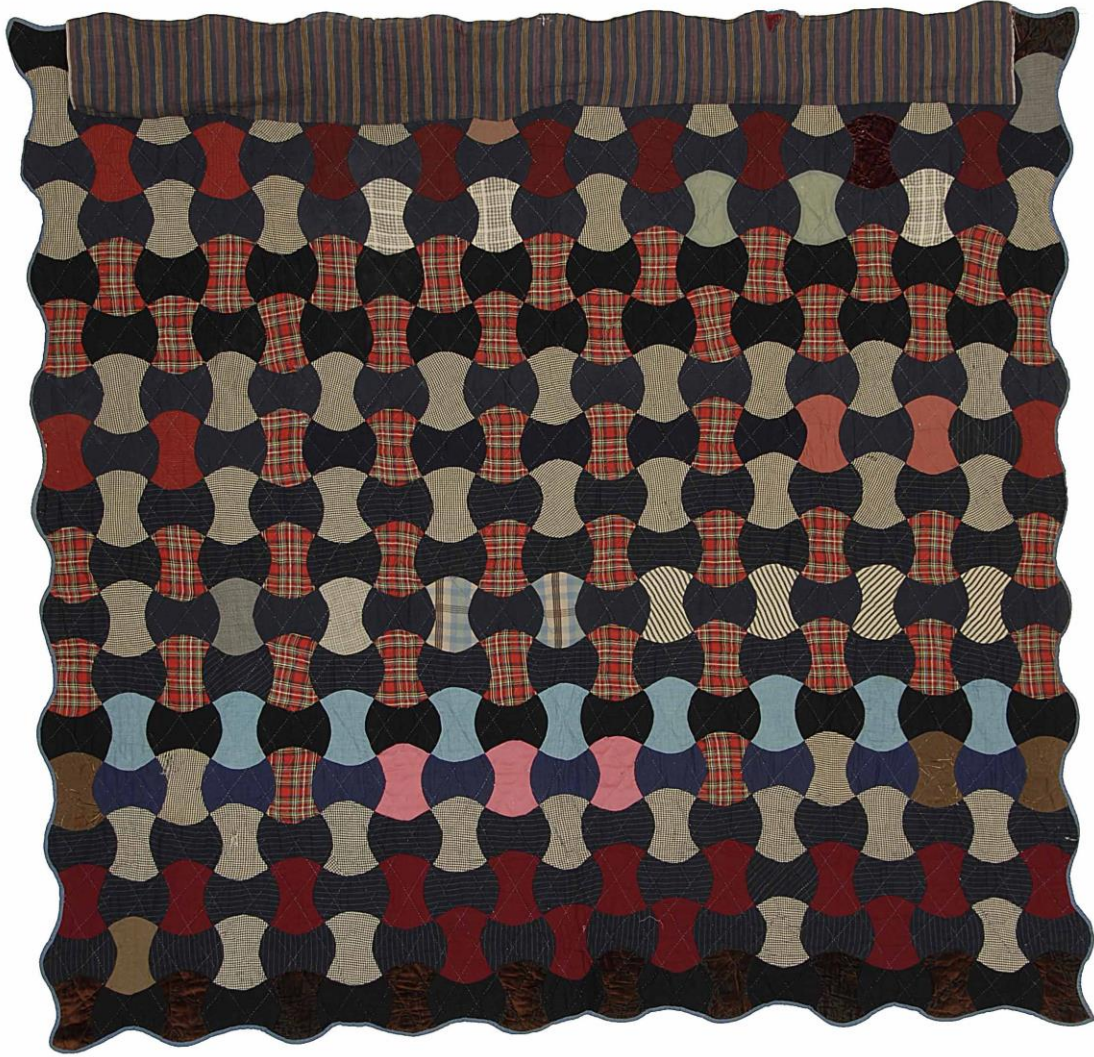


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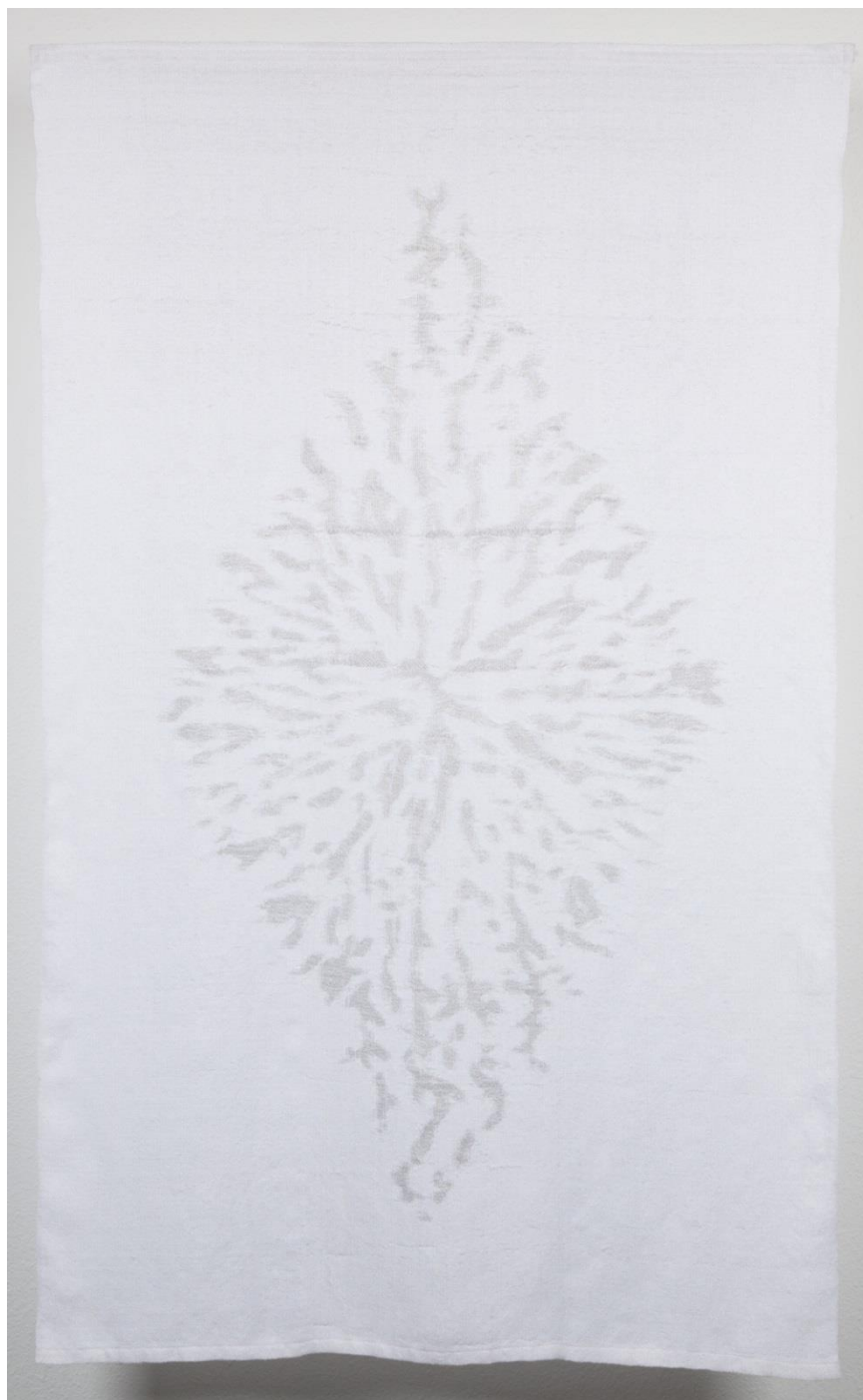


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Fig. 11, *Fairy Tales*, 2012, rayon, polypropylene, thread, dye, and wood, 40' x 16" x 6", artist's collection.

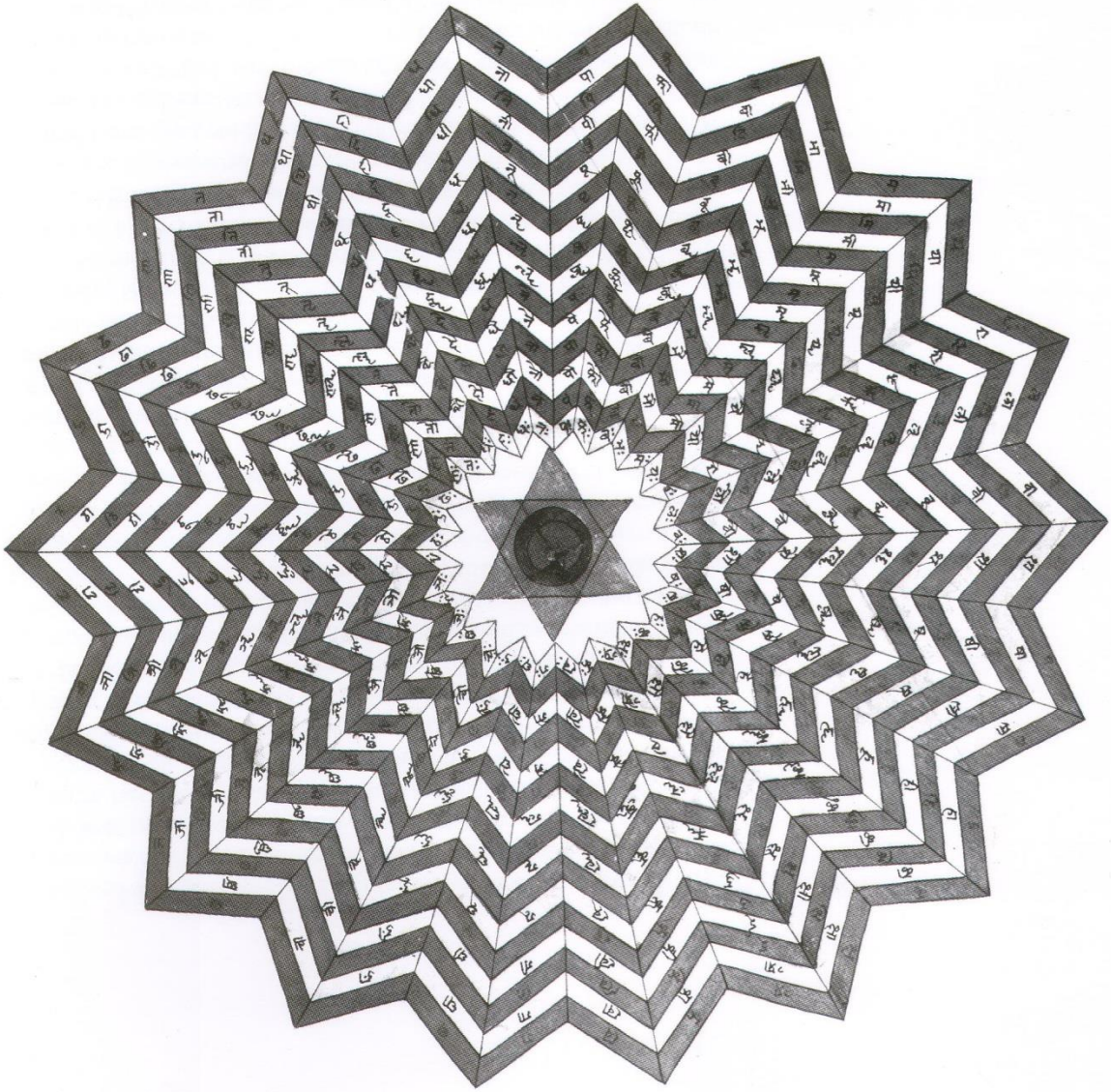


Fig. 12, Rajasthan, yantra depicting evolution and involution of the cosmos, c. 19th century, gouache on paper.

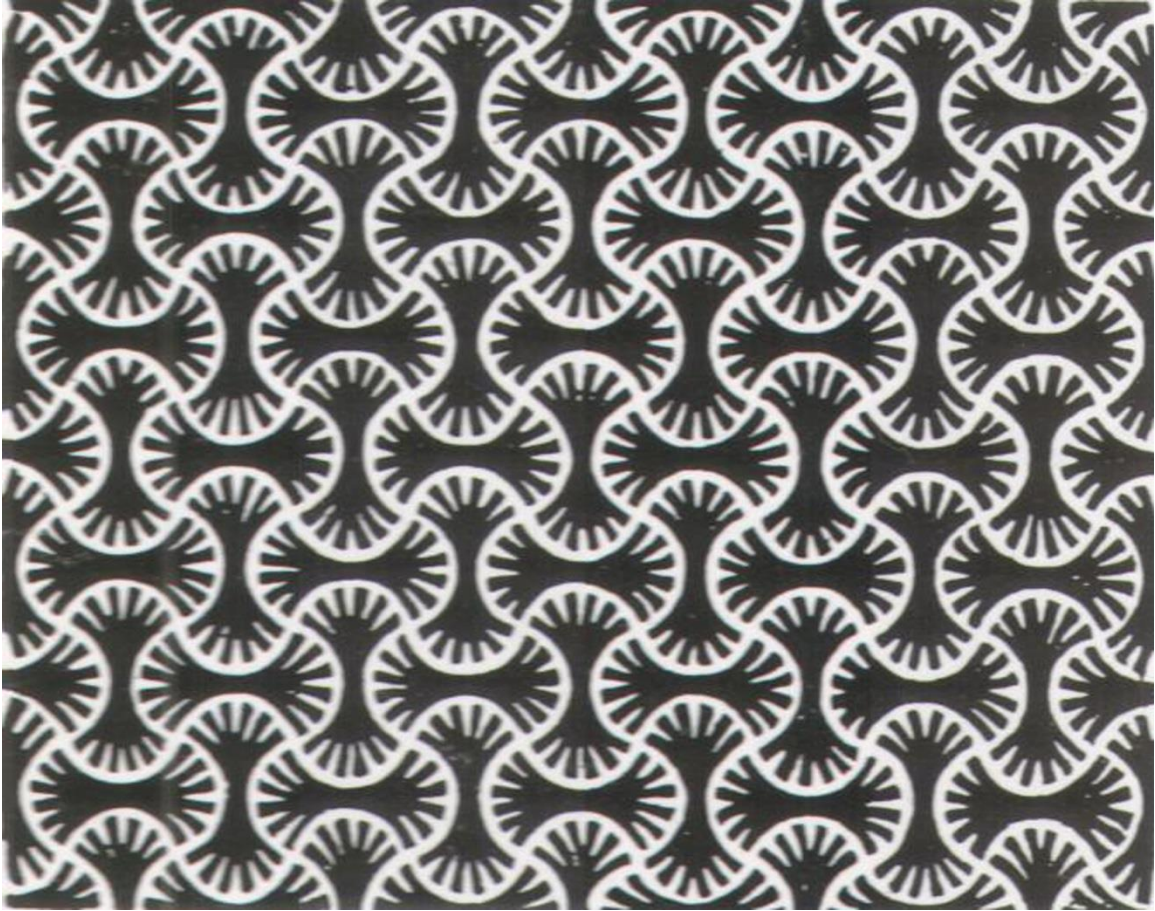


Fig. 13, India, block stamp design for printing cotton, c. 19th century.

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