

# BORDERCROSSINGS

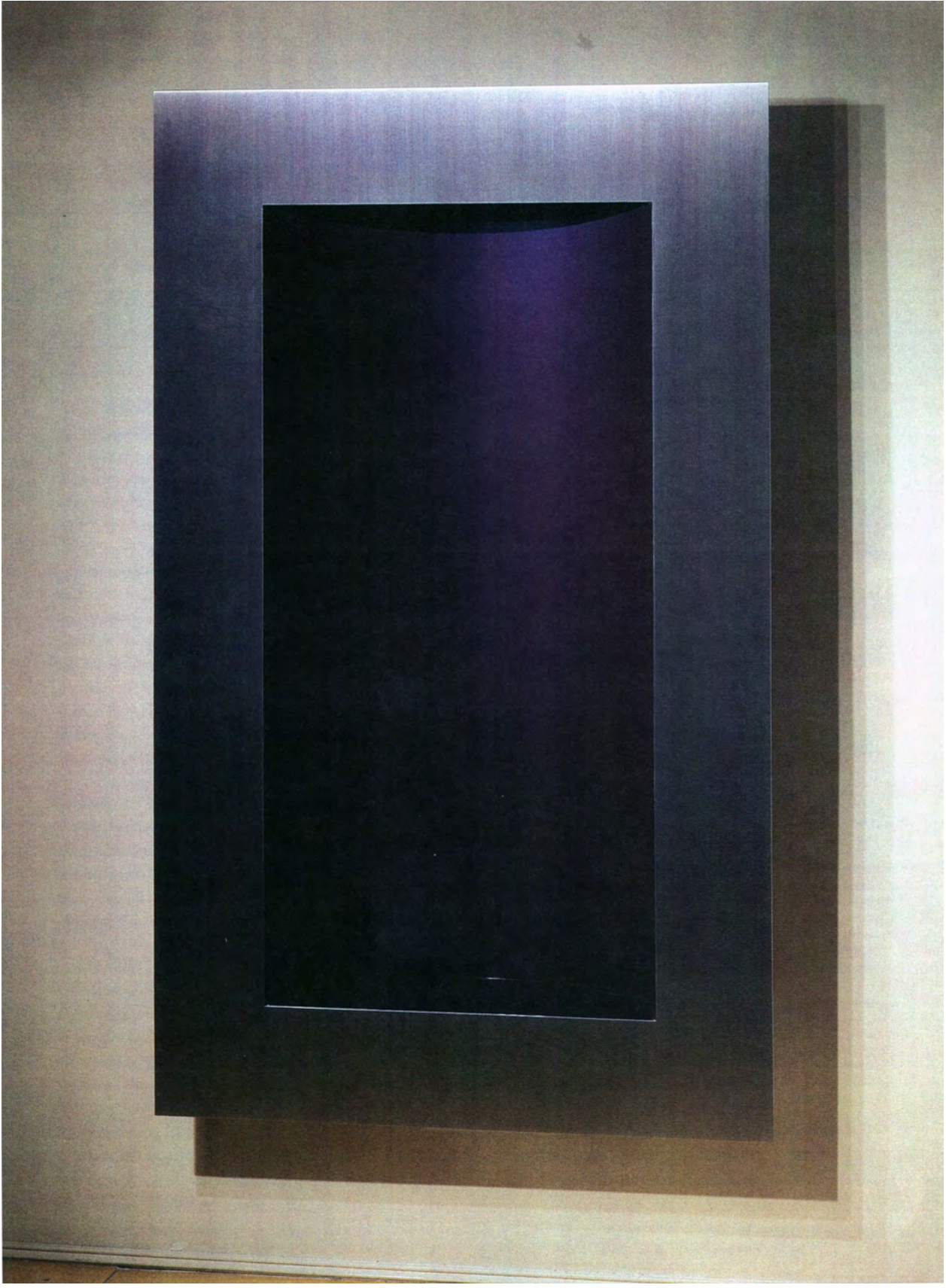


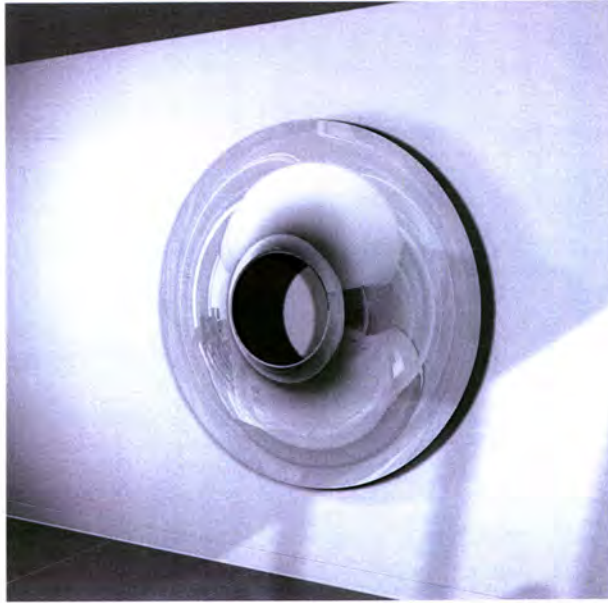
## Radical Beauty

*In a shift of light, surface melts, colour flows and reveals its depth, matter dissolves. These are perceptions generated by a concrete object in front of a beholder. Yet, paradoxically, this object appears to dematerialize.*

The Work of  
Christian Eckart

by Nancy Tousley





This space is magnetic:  
 approachable, observable,  
 pleasurable, apparently touchable,  
 immensely desirable.

preceding pages:  
 left: *Circuit Painting*  
 #2801, 2000, mirror-  
 polished stainless  
 steel, 72 x 4 x 5 1/2"  
 (diameter, front profile,  
 side profile). Private  
 collection, Stuttgart,  
 Germany. Photograph:  
 Christoph Knoch.  
 All photographs  
 courtesy Trépanier  
 Baier Gallery, Calgary.

right: *Large Curved*  
*Monochrome Painting*  
 —Second Variation,  
 2000, acrylic urethane  
 on aluminum plate,  
 81 x 49 x 6". Collection  
 of Mr. and Mrs. Louis B.  
 Cushman, Texas.  
 Photograph: Rick  
 Gardner.

In a shift of light, surface melts, colour flows and reveals its depth, matter dissolves. These are perceptions generated by a concrete object in front of a beholder. Yet, paradoxically, this object appears to dematerialize.

A space opens. The space/colour/light becomes alive. Its energy flows outward, embracing, palpable and erotically charged. The beholder is enveloped by the sense of this space, reflected as though inside its luminous depth, held by it in a state of calm and exhilarating suspension. This space is magnetic: approachable, observable, pleasurable, apparently touchable, immensely desirable. You want to step into it. It shows you yourself engaged in the act of looking. It mirrors your wonder. It redirects the gaze and turns it inward. The object becomes an event, a deeply somatic experience of beauty that moves a contemplative viewer into the space of the inner self and, perhaps, beyond.

left: Working model of *Curved Monochrome Painting—Seventh Variation*, 2001, digital computer rendering. Courtesy of the artist and James Richards, Jitterbug Animation, Montreal.

right: Working model of *Curved Monochrome Painting—Sixth Variation*, 2001, digital computer rendering. Courtesy of the artist and James Richards, Jitterbug Animation, Montreal.

Such a journey can be dangerous. This might be one reason why, despite the revived interest in beauty, in the past decade, still so little serious attention is paid to it in the world of contemporary art. Except by artists, that is. The experience I describe here was induced by an encounter with a precisely constructed object entitled *Large Curved Monochrome Painting—Fourth Variation #L-2001* by Christian Eckart, a Canadian artist born in Calgary, Alberta, who lives and works in New York and Amsterdam. Eckart is known for a philosophical and conceptual project—meta-painting—in which he has explored the mechanisms of the spiritual and the sublime in Western painting, from early Renaissance icons to the monochrome abstractions of 20th-century Modernism. References to this history are incorporated into the design, colour, materials and techniques of the work. The effect has been not only to position Eckart's painting within this spiritualist tradition, but also, as he would say, "to interrogate" it from the vantage point of Postmodernism. The ultimate question pertains to the viability of painting in the late 20th and now early 21st century as the site for an encounter with the divine, the void, the fourth dimension, or that which is invisible, ineffable, unrepresentable.

This question is the engine that drives Eckart's work. Around 1994, he changed direction in a significant way. Where before, his project was about spiritualism and its modes of expression, in a deconstructive and almost didactic way, Eckart moved beyond the discourse of meta-painting to create luminous, transcendental objects.

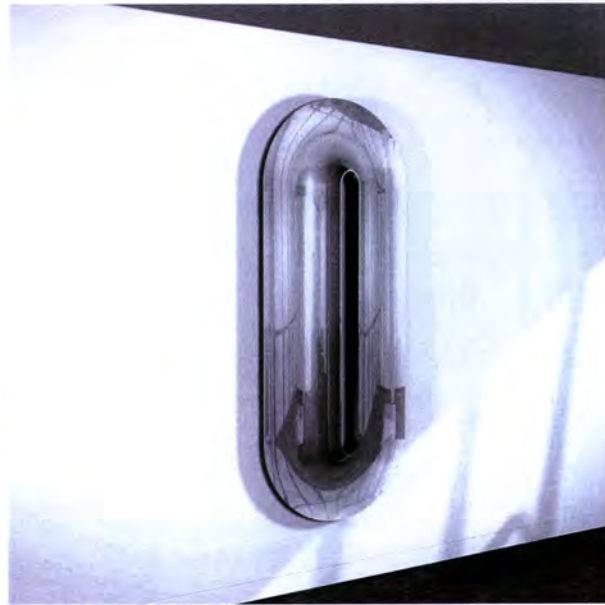
Beauty has always been his work's vital aspect. That has not changed, nor is his project any less interrogative and hypothetical than before. The difference, as Picabia once phrased a similar hypothesis, is that

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Eckart's paintings of the past five or six years "express a spiritual state (and) make the state real by projecting on the canvas (sic) the finally analyzed means of producing that state in the observer." As Eckart himself describes it, his work is "a machine for contemplation"; moreover, one "that reveals and demystifies its mechanics, structure and metaphysics."

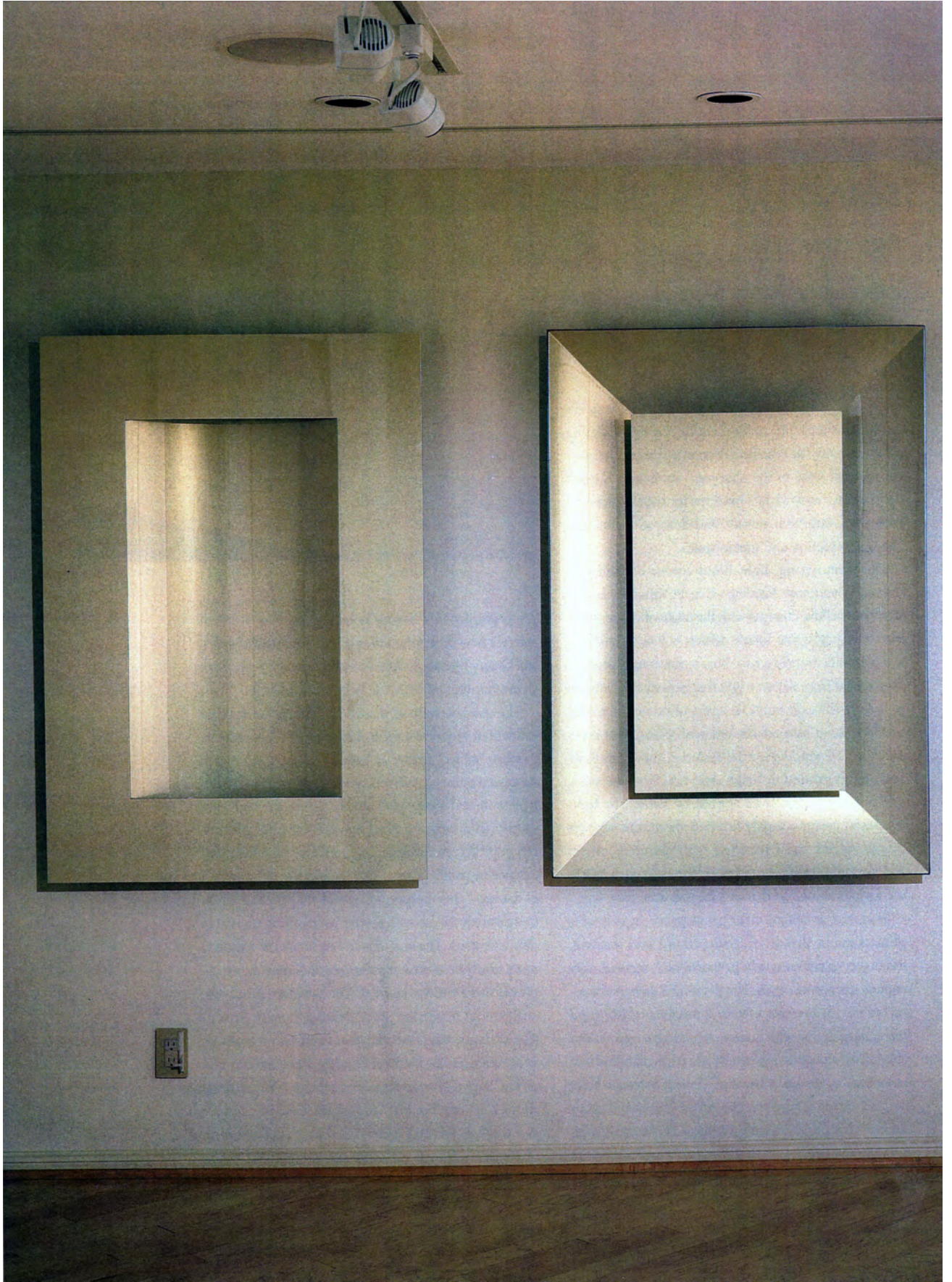
The shimmering, light-filled colour of the *Large Curved Monochrome Painting—Fourth Variation*, a pale, acid lime-yellow, changes with the angle of vision, shifting to an egg-white lustre, which is less a hue than a pearlescent translucency. This surface-cum-space is illuminated from within. Light that penetrates it returns to the eye through multiple layers of primer, automobile lacquer in base colour and pearl coats, clear coats and wax. Depending on the material, the layers have been hand-sanded or hand- and machine-polished. The finish is a clear glaze applied by hand. The flawless result covers a highly finished aluminum support that is shaped into a rectangle with rounded corners and forward-curving edges. Except for its six-inch depth, the form is similar to that of a lacquerware tray.

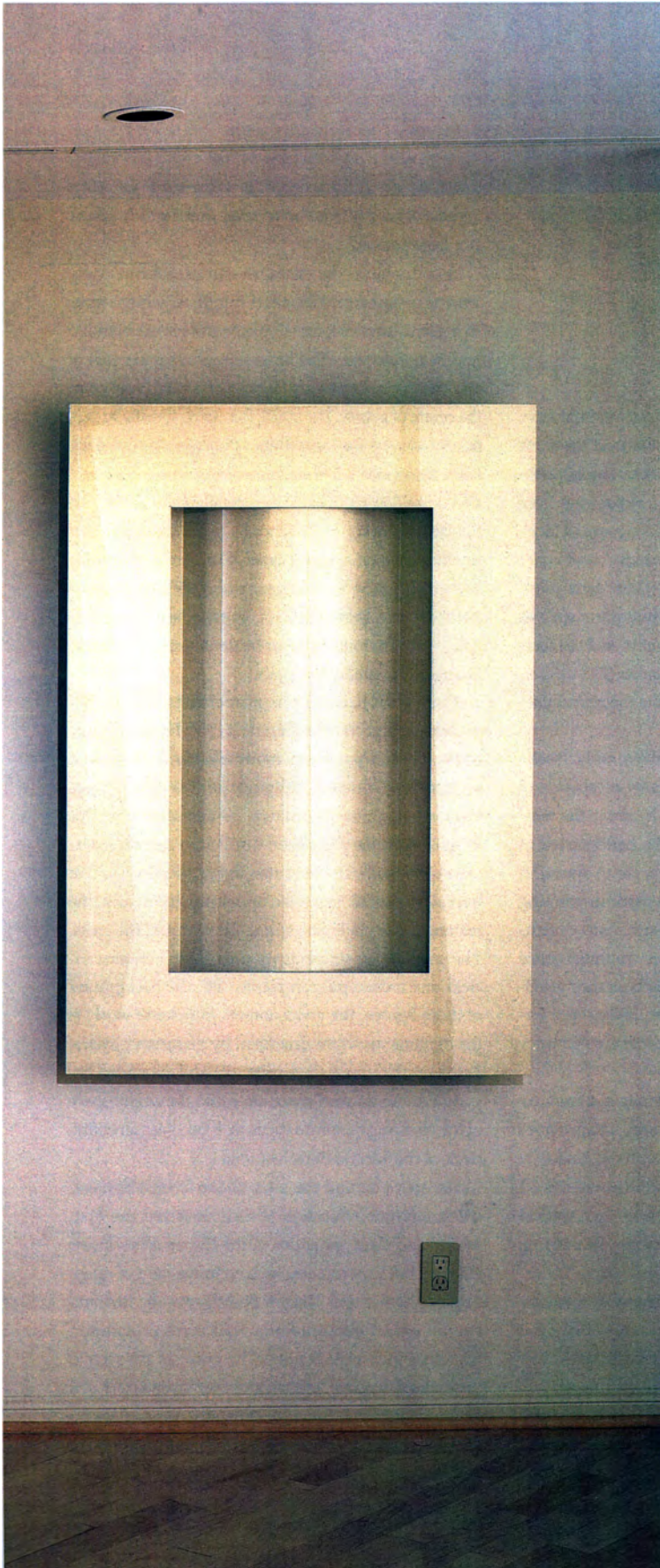
Produced, as Eckart's other paintings are, by networks of artisans in Brooklyn, Switzerland and Austria, the object is voluptuously proportioned, meticulously crafted, glamorous, even. The painting is so hypermaterial, in fact, as to make a fetish of its craftsmanship and materiality, in line with luxury cars, designer goods and *objets d'art*. However, it is beauty of a particular kind that Eckart seeks. He is a collector of Chinese porcelain vases of the Tang to Ch'ing dynasties, whose curves and glazes inform his work. If its radical beauty can be dangerous, it is in part because he understands how beauty can profoundly disturb and change us. Uncapturable by



photography, this beauty is radical because it introduces a new conception of space to painting. It is radical beauty because its function is to mirror a perception of the infinite that is of the beholder's making.

The space of painting, denied by Clement Greenberg's influential Modernist dicta, has gradually become the primary subject matter of Eckart's work. Illusionistic space is a political and epistemological issue as well as a pictorial and formal one. Slowly, during the mid-19th to early 20th century, space was squeezed out of modern painting. According to Greenberg, for whom the essence of painting was "flatness and the delimitation of flatness," this disappearance was the result of a self-critical analysis in which Modernist painting was rid of non-essentials. The goal was to "entrench the medium more firmly in its area of competence." Logic, however, proves this a faulty argument. The same historical self-analysis can be seen to prove that the illusory perception of depth is an essential characteristic of painting, as aesthetician W. Stephen Croddy demonstrates in a recent paper, "Explaining Modernism." The issue is relevant, he says, because "an analysis of our perceptions as a result of seeing a painted image can contribute to philosophy's analysis of the process by which we obtain knowledge through perception."





*Curved Monochrome Painting—First Variation #2001,  
Second Variation #2001, Third Variation #2001, 2000,  
Triptych (left to right). Each painting 51 x 36 x 4".  
Acrylic urethane on aluminum plate.  
Collection of Leslie and Brad Bucher, Houston.  
Photograph: Hester Hardaway.*

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Working from a different perspective, art critic Dave Hickey, in the essay "Prom Night in Flatland" from his book *The Invisible Dragon*, sees the flattening of pictorial space as a change in the gender of painting from feminine to masculine. In the critical language of Modernism, and of Postmodernism, "beauty" and other "feminine" attributes like "harmony" and "generosity" are superseded by "masculine" counterparts such as "strength," "singularity" and "autonomy," and the feminine is excluded from serious discourse. The upshot, Hickey says, is the diminishing of the dialectical possibilities for contemporary art.

Eckart came to this realization in the early 1990s, influenced by Tantrism, with its ancient acceptance of divine femininity, and set about to feminize the masculine Modernist tropes to which he had referred in his earlier paintings. In works that begin to appear in 1994, he expresses the fullness of space in painting and defines it with depth-colour and a two-dimensional feminine curve. These are the two initial series of *Curved Monochrome Paintings*, which, as they develop through several variations, move farther and farther away from the predominantly rectilinear geometry of Modernist art.

The first *Curved Monochrome Painting* is a thin, 69 by 42-inch rectangle made of aluminum, which curves forward at the top, while the whole plane gradually tilts away from the wall, until the top edge extends 13 inches into the room. Imagine this work as a vertical line that is bisected vertically and opened like sliding doors to give onto radiant, colour-filled space. The architectural object hovers above the viewer like a canopy with a threshold, inviting ascension into its limpid atmosphere held as if in the curvature of space-time. The dynamic *Small Curved Monochrome Painting* is a near square, 18 by 15 inches, with a tighter, faster curve that vaults into an energetic curl nine inches into the

viewer's space. In both objects, the curve is a spatial gesture, an indicator of motion and velocity, an axis of time in relation to space from which it cannot be separated.

In both objects the curvatures are also theoretically pure arcs based on Fibonacci numbers, which occur in the structures and growth patterns of nature, in music and in architecture. The long, slow curve is like that of the Fibonacci spirals at the base of a pine cone or in the centre of a daisy. The small, fast curve, like the surfer's perfect wave, is the logarithmic spiral of a nautilus shell. Each object also bears a relationship to the golden section or golden ratio, expressed numerically as .618. In the large painting, the relation is in the ratio of height to width, which approximates .618, while the profile of the small curve fits a rectangle of golden section proportions. The golden section, or ratio, not coincidentally, is an irrational number by definition, infinite and intangible as is limitless space.

Along with harmonious proportions and mathematical expressions of infinitude, Eckart brings together in the curved paintings many elements of art and architecture, science, religious philosophy, music, numbers and popular culture. At the same time, his formal vocabulary has been distilled to a small repertoire of flat and two- and three-dimensional forms that have deep-seated, symbolic resonance: the square, the rectangle, the circle, the spiral, the oval and the cross. The streamlined simplicity of the objects contains ancient and archetypal complexity. Yet, the background of these figures, the given context of Eckart's work, is the dynamic universe described by quantum physics. Based on the uncertainty principle and expanded beyond the curvature of space-time into the empty space of the vibrating quantum vacuum, it becomes an equivalent of the Tantric Buddhist void.

The space behind the altar of San Zeno Maggiore, a Romanesque church in Verona, inspired the first, second and third variations of the *Curved Monochrome Painting*, but they can also be seen in the light of quantum mechanics and Tibetan Buddhism. The first and second variations contain curved vertical planes in flat, eight-inch-wide frames. The curve of the second variation is concave and suggests the open space of a niche or apse, while the curve of the first variation shows the reverse side. It is convex, a shaft that closes off the

space opened by the niche. In the third variation, a flat, vertical rectangle floats like a picture plane at the centre of a frame whose sides curve upward like the Buddhist lotus.

Eckart made a triptych of these variations in 2000. Together they evoke female and male principles; the inside and outside of curved space-time; the event horizon, beyond which no illumination returns to the eye; the mandala, divinity's mansion, afloat on the lotus; and a presentation of the most fundamental icon of the idea of painting. All three objects, each proportioned to address the human body from shoulder to shoulder and from head to genitals, have an intense visceral impact. Their pearlescent colour, in hues from matte putty colour to translucent champagne, speaks of matter and of light. It is as if the triptych presents a hypothesis: painting as a tabula rasa positioned between two poles of possibility, an object that embodies open, curved, feminine space and one that is closed and masculine. The convex first variation of the *Curved Monochrome Painting* is the only one that Eckart will not produce independently of the triptych.

*Curved Monochrome Paintings* exist to date in a series of five variations, the sixth and seventh being virtual computer renderings yet to be put into production. Eckart ceased keeping a studio in 1997. Since mid-2000, he has worked with Montreal computer animation artist James Richards to visualize his new work as virtual renderings. The ability to exchange computer files with Richards from wherever he is suits Eckart's present mode of production and lifestyle. Proposals for commissions can site virtual works in the homes of Eckart's collectors, such as German architect Helmut Jahn, or in the public spaces of corporations, such as the publishing giant Burda Media in Offenburg, Germany, which has recently commissioned a work. Visual ideas can be proven or rejected in the computer, colours or surface finishes can be tested in relation to shapes, proportions can be modified and refined. Imaging the distortion of one shape might lead to the creation of another, say the vertical cross-section of a cylinder stretched and capped at each end with the quarter-section of a sphere to form a lozenge.

This elongated, cupped, four-inch-deep form is the fifth variation of the *Curved Monochrome Painting*. Among other things, it brings to mind the shapes of niches, Gothic church windows, archways, the mandorla or

gloriole that signifies divinity, a capsule, phallus, vagina, lignam and yoni, and the plan views of the naves of monasteries, cathedrals and Buddhist temples. The pearlescent blue and yellow-gold *Curved Monochrome Painting*—*Fifth Variation #2001*, which shines like a celestial portal filled with blue sky and sunshine, recalls the domed space of a Tiepolo ceiling sans clouds and putti, and the "heavenly cunt" (*potta del cielo*) that Hickey cites in "Prom Night." The exact location of its surface is as elusive as that of a lightscape by James Turrell. The object's colour becomes illuminated atmosphere. Blues and golds and reflected hues from lavender to green

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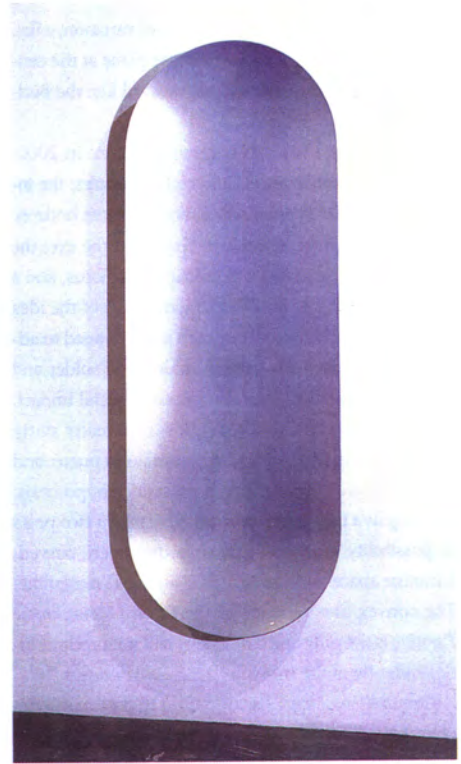
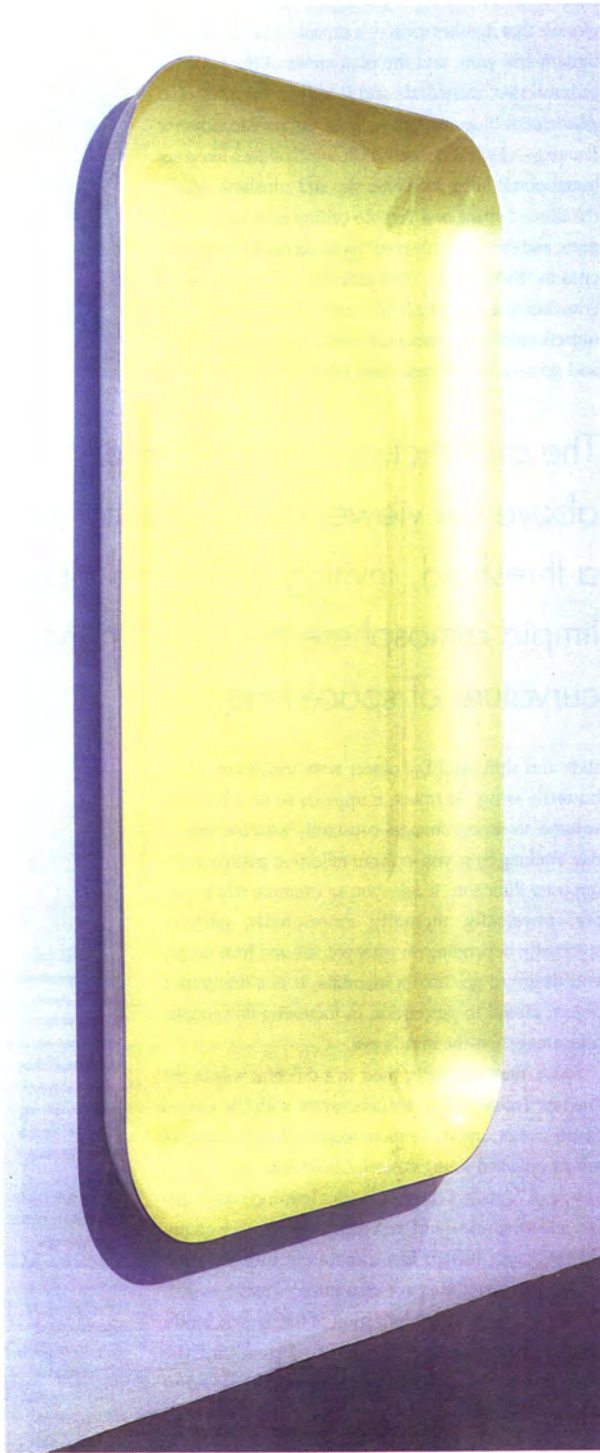
slide and shift, as if the object were iridescent, like a butterfly wing. At times, it appears to be a lustrous volume; its aspect changes constantly with the time of day. Walking by it, you see your reflection passing in the opposite direction. It asks you to examine where you are, physically, mentally, emotionally, perhaps spiritually, depending on what you see and how deeply you desire to go. Like a mandala, it is a meditative object, an aid to perception in focussing its synaptic "afterimage" on the mind's eye.

Space, time and curve meet in a different way in the *Zootrope Paintings*, a series concurrent with the *Curved Monochromes*, and in the more recent *Circuit Paintings* of mirror-polished stainless steel. *Circuit Painting #2801* is a circle of 72 inches' diameter with a four-inch-wide surface and a five-and-a-half-inch depth. The centre is empty, the reflecting surface like a space cut into the wall, giving entry to the space of a mirror-image world. One might see in this a reflection of the Tantric bindu chakra, symbolizing "the source of creation," the vibrating energy of the void, or something as tied to this world as electronic circuits, in turn unimaginable

overleaf left: *Large Curved Monochrome Painting—Fourth Variation #L-2001*, 1999, acrylic urethane on aluminum plate, 81 x 49 x 6". Private collection, Salzburg, Austria. Photograph: Dorothy Zeidman.

overleaf right: *Curved Monochrome Painting—Fifth Variation #2001*, 2000, acrylic urethane on hand-formed aluminum plate, 90 x 33 x 4". Collection of Sydney and Will Pleschel, Calgary. Photograph: Dorothy Zeidman.





without quantum mechanics. The *Zootrope Paintings*—zootrope means “wheel of life”—likewise focus attention on nothingness. These are rectangles pierced with constellations of holes, lens-like spaces in which Eckart visualizes quantum space and reinvents the Modernist grid as a field of circles. In these series, perhaps, the dialectic between the material and the immaterial that fuels his practice receives the boldest presentation.

The experience of the immaterial manifested by the material presence of the work is its crux. The event occurs in the conjunction of light, space and time, not in the painting but in the beholder. It will never be the same event twice. Eckart’s catalytic objects bring it into being in the perceptions of the beholder—one could say the mind, heart, soul and body of the beholder—and hand it over pragmatically as knowledge. Refreshing, generous, it offers a state of grace—an unusual form of painting indeed. ■

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