



alyce simon

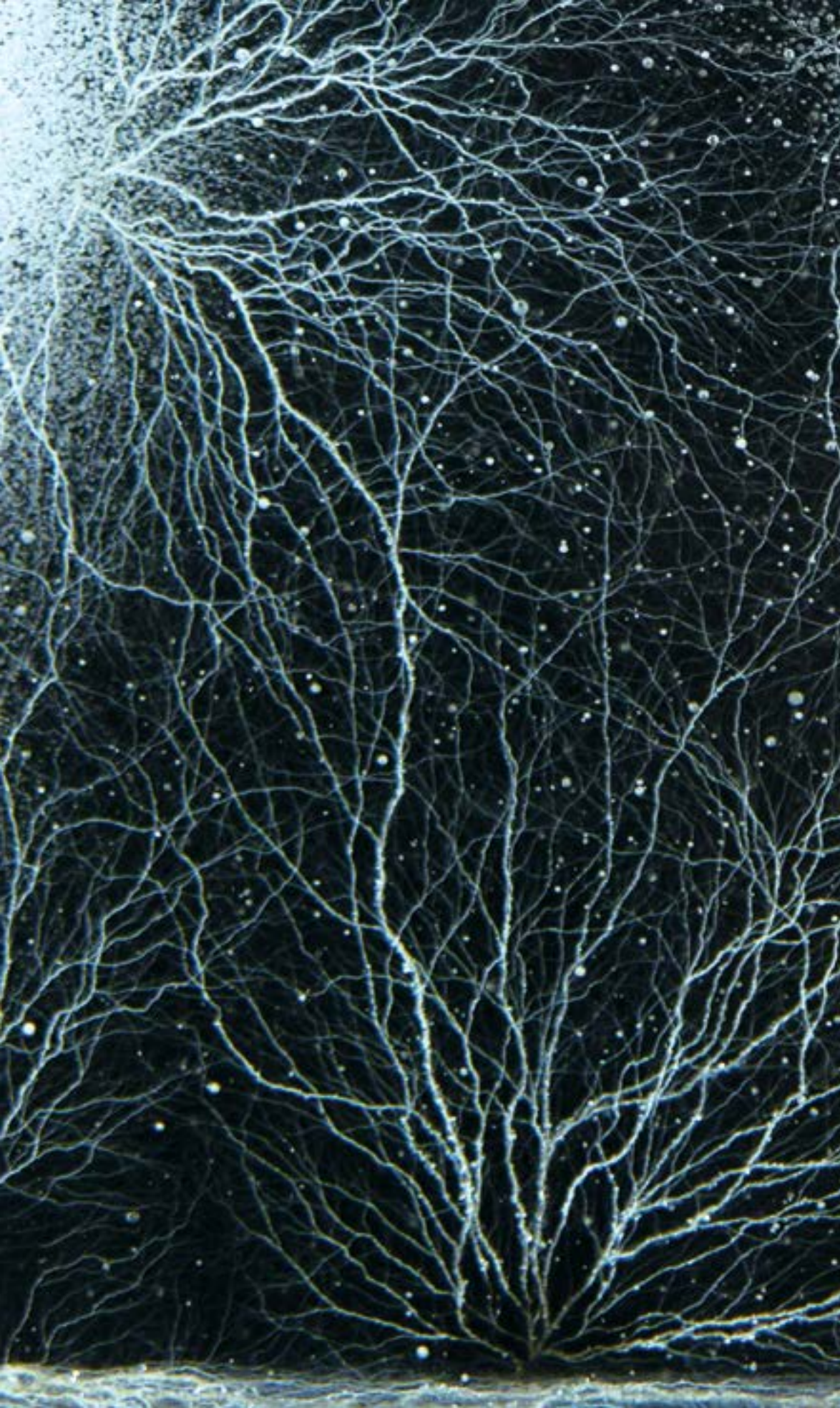
ARTIST

OF

THE

ATOMIC

AGE



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ATOMIC

AGE

introduction by

VICTOR FACCINTO

essays by

BERNARD FINN

JUDITH PAGE

Acknowledgments

I would like to commend the individuals that contributed to the production of this book.

They include: Judith Page for her thorough research of Alyce Simon's history, the resulting essay and chronology, and her invaluable professional management of the project, and Bernard Finn for his research contributions and essay concerning the Smithsonian Institution's acquisition of eight sculptures from Simon's *Tree of Life* series. I would also like to thank Martine Sherrill for the digital transfer and preparation of the visual reproductions; Laura Lu Hedrick for her support and assistance with the Simon Art Collection;

Charles Yuen for his inspired book design; and Stewart Iskow for his suggestions and reviews along the way. A special thank you to Adam Mark Simon and Lisa Simon Pars who searched through piles

of family documents for missing details of Alyce Simon's life.

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Pfafftown, NC 27040
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ISBN: 978-0-615-70020-5

Published by Tree of Life
in memory of Alyce Simon.

Edited by Judith Page

Design by Charles Yuen

Printed by Rolling Press, Inc.

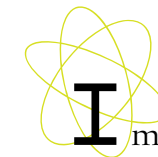
TREE *of* LIFE



Alyce Simon, New York City, c. 1974

introduction

VICTOR FACCINTO



I met Alyce Simon in 1974 at Phyllis Kind Gallery during a stop-over in Chicago on my way to New York City. As I was viewing the paintings on display, she walked up to me, introduced herself, and asked if I was an artist. We spoke no more than three or four minutes, but during our short conversation she learned that I was moving to New York and invited me to visit her once I was settled. I had no clue at the time that this brief encounter would lead to a friendship and business relationship that would continue for more than thirty years.

Several months passed before I traveled uptown to her 30th floor UN Plaza apartment, which also served as a personal art gallery. That night I experienced my first view of the many irradiated sculptures, paintings, and drawings filling her vast glass-walled living space high above the city streets. Walking into the apartment, I immediately felt as if I was entering another dimension, a feeling reinforced by the movement visible in Alyce's transparent acrylic sculptures; they functioned as monitors, reflecting forms, colors, and motion in the surrounding environment. Custom lighting, mirrored columns, glass





Photo Credit: Greg Gelfner

Lightning photographed over Simon's United Nations Plaza apartment, 1986

tables, and shelves all added to this effect. The space was visually alive; every movement I made seemed to elicit a response in the artwork.

The excitement of Alyce's unique space age environment was compounded by the intimate views of her atomic energy sculptures. One of the sculptures I remember viewing during my first visit is *Tree of Life*. She told me about the technical process she had spent years developing, and of her particular fascination with this tree-like pattern of tiny veins growing out from a single point where the streams of electrons entered the acrylic sculpture.

Almost twenty years later, Alyce proposed *Tree of Life* as the name for the non-profit organization we founded. She wished for Tree of Life to become a source of nourishment and support for senior career artists; due to her generosity and hands-on involvement, her wish came true. Today, Tree of Life's development and programs continue to center around this primary mission.

From when she was a young girl taking adult art classes at the Art Students League until well into her eighties, Alyce Simon's focus was her art. Between 1962 and 1986, she produced over one hundred atomic sculptures while in residence at Radiation Dynamics in Westbury, NY.

Eighty of these works comprise Tree of Life's *Simon Art Collection*. In 2004, eight pieces were accepted into the collection of the Smithsonian Institution. In time, the remaining sculptures will be placed in public collections to maintain continuing awareness of this unique artist and art form.

What I remember most about Alyce Simon is her bold and independent spirit. She was in many ways a woman ahead of her times. When she was offered an opportunity to create with a previously unexplored media, she embraced the moment and over time developed a body of work unique in the history of art. Her spirit remains tied to Tree of Life, an organization that will serve others, and in doing so, serve as her legacy.



Tree of Life (detail)

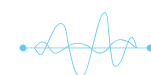
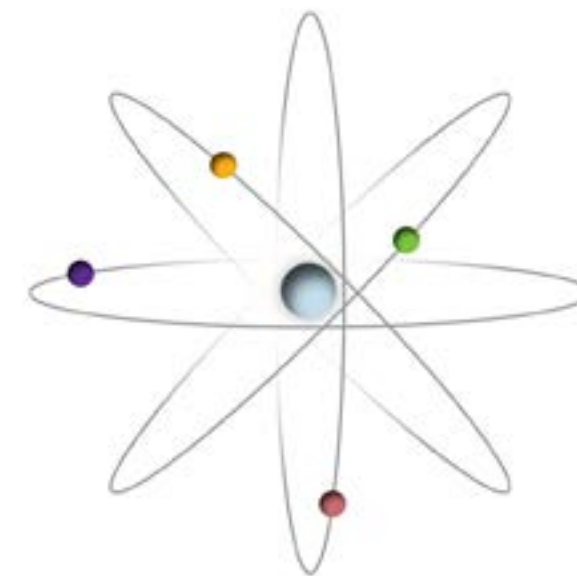


Tree of Life, irradiated acrylic, 10 x 9 1/2 x 2 1/2 in., 1971



Atomic Art: Alyce R. Simon, National Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 1969

Atomic Art: A curator's view



BERNARD FINN

When Alyce Simon's *Atomic Art* was exhibited at the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology (now the National Museum of American History) in 1969, it was sponsored by the Division of Nuclear Energy. More than three decades later, when related objects and documents were offered to the reorganized museum, they were accepted by the Division of Electricity and Modern Physics. I was an interested bystander at the first occasion and the appreciative recipient at the latter. And while both events were in accord with our interest in exploring relationships of technology with society, they also could be classified as somewhat unusual.

Since my curatorial and academic colleagues and I believe that all forms of art (with exceptions in some performance art) depend to a significant degree on technology—from the composition of paints and structural materials to cameras and integrated circuits—surely

we should be interested in pursuing the nature of that dependence.¹ It, therefore, makes sense to collect objects that participate in this interaction, both to be available for public exhibition and to stimulate scholarly research. But there are practical problems, one of the most important being how we, as historians of technology, make judgments about whether a particular work—no matter how ingeniously contrived or how visually attractive—should indeed be considered art. This is important if the decision to collect or to exhibit is to make sense to us as historians. And it is important to the artist, who sees the act as an affirmation by the museum (even a technical museum) of his or her stature.

So what, in fact, is being done? In some subject areas, technical museums have made major commitments to the collecting of art-related objects. Photography is a prominent example, so also are graphic art collections associated with printing. Musical instruments are not as widely supported, but excellent collections are maintained, for instance, by the Deutsches Museum in Munich and the Technisches Museum in Vienna. The musical instruments collection in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History is also very strong, but the reasoning here is somewhat different because the museum is an amalgam of science/technology and social/cultural motivations (recognized in its original name). The primary rationale behind all of these collecting efforts, however, is that the development of the technology is interesting in itself, regardless of the artistic use. Cameras, violins, and even paints and brushes are collected as examples of developing technologies without it being necessary to refer to specific artistic achievements.

If a reference to art is to be made, one way of doing this is to treat the subject historically, where most, if not all, of the artists involved are dead and judgments about their merit have already been established. A good example is American History’s exhibition, *Building a National Collection: 150 Years of Print Collecting at the Smithsonian*, which opened in 1999. But even here the introduction was careful to point

1. It also works the other way around. Prior to the 19th century, it was more often true that art influenced technology. See: Cyril Stanley Smith, *A Search for Structure: Selected Essays on Science, Art, and History* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1981). In this essay, however, we will confine ourselves to the technology-on-art interface.



Alyce Simon with Philip W. Bishop, curator of *Atomic Art*, at Smithsonian Institution, November 1969

out that the museum is “concentrated on the technological history of printmaking—how prints are made,” and that “Other Smithsonian museums collect graphic works chosen for aesthetic reasons.”² Another National Museum of American History example is *Piano 300*, a major exhibition from 2000 to 2003, where the technical evolution was in clear focus and the reputations of the artists had long been established.³ They have a regular program of musical performances featuring period instruments, illustrating in particular how their changing design influenced composers. Examples elsewhere include recent performance-demonstrations at the Vienna Museum and the Norsk Teknisk Museum, each of which featured a “theremin.”⁴

The Deutsches Museum sponsors concerts by established musicians “to highlight unfamiliar instruments and sounds and to present a fresh look at the familiar. The focus is on rarely heard instruments and neglected repertoire.” The closest the museum gets to promoting artists is a monthly series with presentations by students.⁵

2. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/prints/index.htm>, accessed September 18, 2012.

3. <http://piano300.si.edu/exhibitn.htm>, accessed September 18, 2012.

4. <http://www.technischesmuseum.at/ausstellung/macht-musik>, accessed September 18, 2012.

5. <http://www.deutsches-museum.de/en/exhibitions/musical-instruments/concerts/>, accessed October 27, 2012.

Alyce Simon at Radiation Dynamics, Inc. with
Dr. Kennard Morganstern, November 1964



The theremin is worth noting as an instance, actually quite common, of the artistic community’s quick response to a technical development. In 1920, Leon Theremin constructed a musical instrument around recent improvements in vacuum tubes; he varied the electrical capacitance between his hands and two electrical conductors and thus controlled the pitch and volume of the tones generated by an electronic circuit. Another contemporary case is provided by Thomas Wilfred who in 1919 took advantage of newly available 1000-watt light bulbs to project moving shapes controlled by motors and mirrors and color filters onto a screen. He called the product “Lumia” and spent his life developing the concept. One of his later devices found its way into my electrical division, though it was subsequently transferred to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden for an exhibit.⁶

If the artist is still alive and active, the decision to exhibit—or even to collect—is trickier; there is no easy answer. The curator can be clear that the host institution is not an art museum and that the purpose of the exhibition is not to pass judgment on the quality of the art, but rather to show how it makes imaginative use of a particular

technology. But for the artist and the public, the artistic judgment is still implied.

Enter Alyce Simon. As Judith Page notes in the accompanying essay, Simon was made aware in 1961 by Kennard H. Morganstern,⁷ physicist and president of Radiation Dynamics, Inc., in nearby Westbury, Long Island, that a particle accelerator called a “dynamitron,” which the company had recently developed, was able to produce interesting patterns in plastic.⁸ She was allowed to set up a workspace at the plant where she experimented with various materials and a range of energy outputs from the machine (presumably with the help of the technical staff). By the end of the decade, she was comfortable enough with the results to consider an exhibition. She made contact with Philip W. Bishop, curator in charge of the Smithsonian’s nuclear physics collection. The exhibit *Atomic Art*, opened in September 1969 and continued into the following summer. A Smithsonian press release announced it as “A special exhibition of a new and unique art form” illustrating that “Art has entered the age of atomic energy.”⁹

After Radiation Dynamics was sold around 1971, and until at least 1980, Simon enlisted the help of physicists who operated a dynamitron at Electrolyzed Chemicals Corporation in Burlington, VT; they conducted a series of tests, especially on various forms of acrylic. The goal was to determine which materials and what kind of radiation would prove most effective for her purposes. Presumably, the switch to ECC was at Morganstern’s suggestion (as Page notes, the two of them remained close at least into the mid-1980s). Electrolyzed Chemicals was founded in 1944 by Arno Brach, who was experimenting with the effects of radiation as a sterilizing agent. During the course of his work, he discovered that electron beams produced tree-like patterns in plastic.¹⁰ It is speculative, but still reasonable, to presume that Morganstern knew of this work and that it was the source of his initial suggestions to Simon (there is no evidence that she had any direct connection with Brach, though it is conceivable since he died at age

7. Information on Morganstern is sketchy, but in the 1960s he energetically promoted the dynamitron for everything from food irradiation to tracking railway freight cars. “Food Processors Re-Examine a Low-cost Germ Killer,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1963, p. 61; “System Patented for Freight Yard,” *New York Times*, January 18, 1964, p. 28. The company was sold in about 1971 to Sumitomo Heavy Industries (see <http://www.iba-industrial.com/about-us/iba-radiation-dynamics-rdi>, accessed September 18, 2012), at which point Morganstern apparently (judging by the lack of press notices or other publications) ceased to be involved in this technology. He lived until 2007. “Obituary,” *New York Times*, November 4, 2007, p. 35.

8. The dynamitron is a cascade generator, a descendent of the Cockcroft-Walton design of 1932. See E. Cottureau, “DC Accelerators” at <http://cas.web.cern.ch/cas/pruhonice/pdf/dc-accel-DB1.pdf>, accessed September 25, 2012. For a description of a machine being constructed (probably the one that was purchased by the Argonne National Laboratory), see Peter R. Hanley, et al, “The Tandem Dynamitron,” *IEEE Transactions in Nuclear Science*, vol. 16, no. 3 (June, 1960), pp. 90-95.

9. Smithsonian Archives, Record Unit 000363, Box 29, Folder “Atomic Art.” In addition to the press release, the folder contains text and black-and-white photographs from the exhibit.

10. See “Electron Factory,” *Life* magazine, March 10, 1947, pp. 63-66.

6. Kerry Brougher, Jeremy Strick, Ari Wiseman, and Judith Zilczer (organizers), with essay by Olivia Mattis and Ari Wiseman, *Visual Music: Synthaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005). Also, Bernard Finn, “Thomas Wilfred’s ‘Study in Depth,’ Opus 152: An Artist’s Experiment with Lighting Viewed by a Historian of Technology,” ed. Mary Jo Arnoldi, work in press. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press).

Bubble (detail)



53 in 1963).¹¹ During this period, she also consulted with chemists at DuPont on the composition of her samples.¹²

The patterns that Alyce Simon observed were known as Lichtenberg figures, described by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg in 1777.¹³ He caused a spark from an electrostatic machine to flow to a non-conducting plate, thus creating invisible positive and negative areas on the surface. He then sprinkled electrically charged powder on the plate. The particles of powder were attracted to areas with an opposite charge, producing visible patterns.

Such patterns can also be produced when a high-voltage beam is discharged inside a non-conducting (dielectric) material. The electrons from the beam become trapped as long as the accumulated electric charge is not enough to break the bonds of the dielectric molecules. Breakdown can be induced, however, by poking the surface with a sharp probe, introducing a small flaw that allows the nearby accumulated electrons to split the neighboring dialectic chemical bonds. This initial action has the dual effect of releasing more electrons and

providing a conductive path where they can flow. Within a fraction of a microsecond, a network of conduction paths is formed for the flow of electrons, which join together and emerge as a single stream from the host material. The design can be manipulated by adjusting the type of material, its thickness, the location of the probe, and the strength (voltage) of the electron beam. The form of the final work of art was determined by Simon in the way she shaped the irradiated piece of plastic and combined it with other elements. In other words, the work of art was based not just on the machine-initiated aesthetic array, but also on the manipulations of the artist both in her control of the machine and in the way she incorporated the irradiated plastic into a final product.

When Bishop agreed to mount an exhibit, judgment on the degree of Simon's achievement was still in deliberation. The press release for the exhibit provided information on her professional training and noted that she was a "successful artist with eight Carnegie awards for painting and sculpture." Regarding the new art form, it added that she had exhibited at "the National Academy of Arts, The Atomic Fair, Carnegie Institute, and the Brooklyn Museum" and that examples of "atomic art" were in several private collections. In the text for the exhibit, Bishop called the works "interesting multidimensional effects."¹⁴ Such caution was justified, since this was her first solo exhibition of the radiation-enhanced sculptures. As Page notes, however, the exposure here, and at three subsequent venues, was a significant factor in the advancement of Simon's career.

Exposure or validation? From Bishop's standpoint, it was clearly the former, an interesting use of a particle accelerator. But for Simon, it was undoubtedly seen as a measure of the latter, by a Smithsonian museum. What it may have meant to the artistic establishment is at best uncertain.

I am by no means an expert in understanding how reputations of artists are established, especially when they are working with a novel technology. But traditionally it has not been easy. The problem of de-



Bubble, irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox, 26 x 20 x 13 in., 1966-67

14. Smithsonian Archives, Record Unit 000363.

11. "Obituary," *New York Times*, May 5, 1963, p. 86.

12. For contacts at Electrolized Chemicals and DuPont see Tree of Life Archives, ref. SI Acquisition.

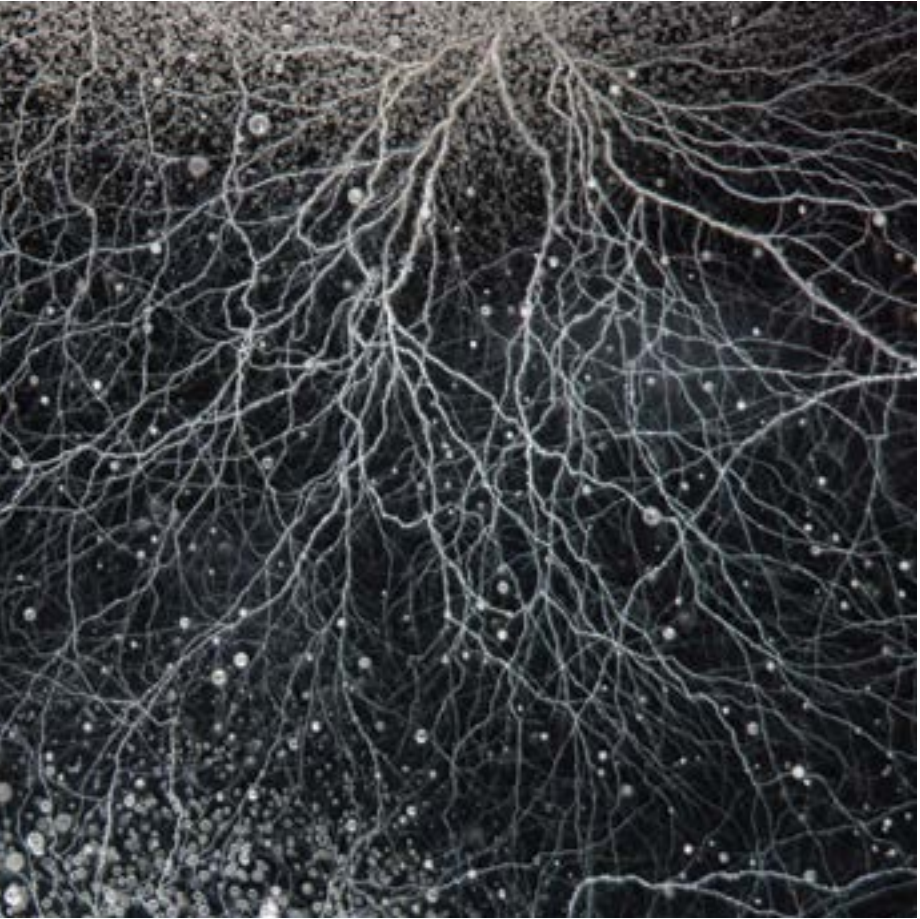
13. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Super Nova Methodo Motum Ac Naturam Fluidi Electrici Investigandi*, Göttinger Novum Comentariorum, Göttingen, 1777.

termining what is art when a practitioner employs a new medium has been the subject of many thoughtful, philosophical, and acrimonious debates over the past century and a half. They were triggered in large part by the invention of photography, which was well enough established by 1840 to attract a wide variety of practitioners. Photography was seen, at first, as merely a mechanical means of recording scenes, different from painting because it avoided the creative and imaginative manipulations of human intervention. Over the succeeding decades, however, some photographers began making those kinds of manipulations—to the point where they could argue that they were, in fact, creating works of art. An excellent short account of the difficulties photographers faced in asserting this claim has been made by Beaumont Newhall.¹⁵ For him, the “first skirmish” in this “burning issue” was an exhibition by the Vienna Camera Club, where photographs were judged as works of art.¹⁶ The first such event in the United States was the *Washington Salon of Photographic Art Exhibition* in 1896, where one section was judged by artists and a second section by photographers. The Smithsonian’s National Museum paid \$300 for fifty entries from the exhibition, “the first recorded museum purchase of photographic works of art.”¹⁷ This was hardly definitive and the exhibitions and debates continued, with museums playing a major role in defining the outcome. In 1910, the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo purchased fifteen photographic prints from an international exhibition for display in a special room.¹⁸ If this was a turning point, as Newhall suggests, a conclusion of sorts was reached in 1924 when the Boston Museum of Fine Arts acquired twenty-seven photographs by Alfred Stieglitz.

For me, an oblique but effective way of illustrating this change of attitude was achieved in a traveling exhibit organized by Eugene Ostroff, curator of photography in our museum. It compared paintings and photographs of the American West in the mid-nineteenth century. Both were used for promotional purposes, to encourage potential settlers. But where the paintings could be seen as highly subjective (artistic, one might say), photographs were objective (mechanical) and

could be believed as showing “the real West.” From the vantage of a hundred years later, Ostroff was easily able to argue that the photographs were also subjective, dependent on selection of view, judicious cropping, and control of the developing process.¹⁹

Other battles continued to be fought, typified by Thomas Wilfred who throughout his life vigorously argued that he had invented a new form of art. By the time Wilfred died in 1968, however, just as Simon was becoming fully engaged in her own special technology, art was in the process of being embraced by the post-modern world. Almost anything can now demand attention, and often receives it. The problem is for the viewer, whether professional critic or ordinary consumer, to dig beyond the intriguing (and frequently off-putting) characteristics of the medium to determine what creative actions the artist brought to the work and whether the results are aesthetically stimulating. An artist’s-eye view of this development can be seen in the pages of *Leonardo*, which was founded that same year, “primarily [as] a channel of communications between artists,”²⁰ according to editor Frank Malina. He went on to state: “Each issue of *Leonardo* will have invited articles reviewing developments in the fine arts; on new materials and scientific techniques for possible use to artists; or on subjects in the fields of physics, psychology cinema, theatre, aesthetics, philosophy, architecture, etc.”²¹ And, one could soon add, computers and computer games.



R1 (detail), irradiated acrylic, 6 1/2 x 4 x 3 1/2 in., 1965

15. Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1819 to the Present* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1964). See Chapter 8, “Photography and Art,” pp. 97-109.

16. Newhall, p. 104.

17. Newhall, p. 109.

18. Katherine Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 173.

19. Eugene Ostroff, *Western Views and Eastern Visions*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service with the cooperation of the United States Geological Survey, 1981).

20. Frank Malina, “Aims and Scope of Leonardo,” *Leonardo: International Journal of the Contemporary Artist*, 1968, p. 1.

21. Malina, p. 2.

The bridge between science and art has made it easier for technology curators in general to collect works by artists, and for me, in particular, when I acquired work by Simon.

In fact, Simon sought and received peer approval through the traditional process of being shown in gallery exhibits. But it is important to note that she, unlike Stieglitz and Wilfred and so many others, was not concerned with establishing a new art form. Perhaps this was

because of the impracticalities involved. But more persuasively, it was because her motivation was more personal. She liked the idea of using the powerful and potentially destructive force of the atom to produce beauty. She was content to demonstrate that with imagination she could convert the output of an unappealing physics machine into art, using her creative instincts as a sculptor to produce works that she and others considered artistically meaningful.

As a historian of technology, where creativity is a critical element, this is something I can understand and appreciate. And collect.

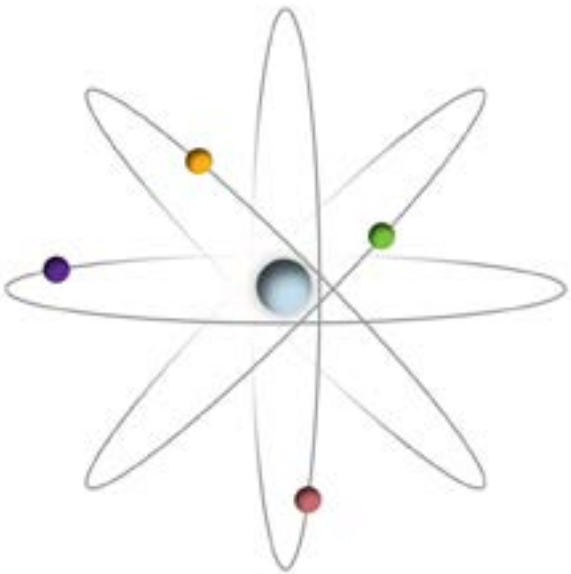


Alyce Simon at Radiation Dynamics, Inc.,
“Shooting Disks,” 1964



Alyce Simon: Artist of the Atomic Age

JUDITH PAGE



Born in 1925, Alyce Rothlein Simon entered the world at the dawn of the atomic era, a time when physicists such as Niels Bohr, James Franck, and Wolfgang Paul were exploring atomic structure and quantum mechanics. She lived through the Great Depression, World War II, and into an era of nuclear optimism—the Atomic Age—when nuclear power was perceived as positive, productive, and modern. To Alyce Simon, an artist grounded in modernism, nuclear power became

Revolutionary

art and

visionary

physics

attempt to

speak about

matters that

do not yet

have words.

LEONARD SHLAIN¹

a vehicle for creating art that anticipated the future while reflecting beauty rather than destruction—a grand ambition that engaged Simon (and much of the world) until the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 ushered in an era of atomic resistance, when the promise of a better world through atomic power began to seem questionable and dangerous. The year that Simon passed away—2011—was also the year of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, a catastrophe that belied Simon’s fervent hope that nuclear power would be harnessed for peaceful and beneficial uses. Simon, however, never gave up her dream that the combined creativity of the visual arts and the sciences would “bring about a more vivid and clear understanding of the world in which we live.”² Her heartfelt desire was to express through her art “a hope for the future;”³ It was the aforementioned optimistic spirit melded with the willingness to take risks (and she took many throughout her long life) that defined Simon as an artist.

Simon began sketching with pencil and pen, and constructing toys from cardboard and wood when she was six years old. By the time she was fourteen, Simon was traveling from her home in the Midwood section of Brooklyn to study at Pratt Institute. At sixteen, she began studying at the Art Students League and in 1943, she was admitted to the College of Fine Arts at Syracuse University. Two photographs from 1942 show Simon in her formative years and foreshadow the Simon yet to come: the smiling lively extrovert, world traveler, and self-promoter, and the introspective artist who once described herself as a loner⁴ and who wrote extensively on the sources and content of her art.



Alyce Simon, 1942

Simon’s formal education ended with her marriage in 1944 to Samuel Simon,⁵ a clothing manufacturer. However, she continued her studies at the Brooklyn Museum Art School where, through the encouragement of her friend Julie Sherman, she studied painting with Manfred Schwartz, or as Simon wrote, “I was reluctantly forced to join a painting ‘class’ whose teacher was Manfred Schwartz, an oil painter of some renown.”⁶ This class came at a critical moment in Simon’s life. Now the mother of two young children and living in the suburban Long Island hamlet of Hewlett, Simon was “unfulfilled, empty, drifting.”⁷ Many years after this class, Simon wrote that “Schwartz’s own style literally drove me to a new freedom of expression on my canvases and changed my depression to enthusiasm—I was not afraid to attack an empty canvas, to use color with total freedom of stroke.

Beyond the canvas, my paintings took on a spatial quality. Was this the forerunner of my explorations into the atomic age—using atomic energy as an art form?”⁸ The freedom that Simon found in her paintings of this period can best be seen in *Flight* and four paintings (*Spring Wind*, *Card Players*, *Corralle*, *Hoola Hoops*) exhibited at Gallery 15 in New York City. Even though the paintings varied in subject matter and style, they were united by Simon’s use of white, which did give them a spatial quality, as if each stroke of paint was applied with abandon to an opaque sheet of acrylic that overlaid a radiating light source—a technique that Simon eventually utilized in her *Spatial Paintings* series.

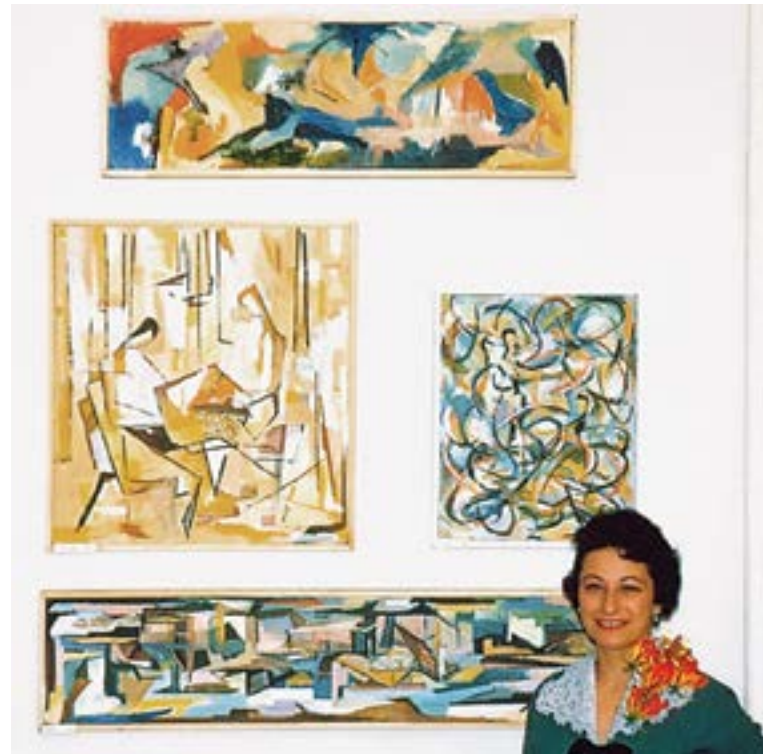
Schwartz’s class, however, was unique in Simon’s existing writings and the one instance where she mentioned

Flight, oil on canvas, 44 x 40 in., 1959



the influence of a teacher or another artist. Simon, living as she did in the center of the art world, visiting exhibitions and museums, instead found her true “mentor” in nature—rugged mountains foregrounded with shimmering trees, the relentless yet sublime movement of oceans, spikey lightning flashes over the East River, and the swirling emotions of man battling beast in a bullfight. These important visual sources, seen in the many watercolor studies that Simon completed during her travels, also reappear in her atomic energy work. For example, the swirling cosmic energy of her *Bullfight* paintings prefigures Simon’s focus on the cosmos in her *Spatial Paintings*, and the trees that Simon painted during a trip to Martinique melded with the drama of lightning viewed from her apartment in the United Nations Plaza undoubtedly influenced her seminal series, *Tree of Life*.

Simon’s art may have continued along a prescribed trajectory—painting with oil on canvas or watercolor and ink on paper—but for a propitious meeting in 1961 with physicist and President of Radiation Dynamics, Inc., Dr. Kennard Morganstern. As Simon tells it, Dr. Morganstern, after having seen her paintings, suggested that she visit his firm, Radiation Dynamics, for the purpose of experimenting with the high-voltage particle accelerators that he manufactured.⁹ According to Victor Faccinto, Morganstern, an art appreciator, was intrigued by the particle accelerator’s “artistic-like” fracturing of various materials and felt that the process had artistic possibilities.¹⁰ Morganstern’s thinking was progressive for its time, anticipating groups such as E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), founded by the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman, and engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer in the mid-1960s to promote collaborations between



Alyce Simon at Gallery Fifteen, New York City, 1959

artists and engineers.¹¹ Morganstern’s prescience and determination eventually produced a collaboration between Simon—artist, experimenter, and visionary—and Morganstern—art lover and physicist—that was unique in its longevity and in the freedom that they gave one another to fulfill the project’s creative potential.

Simon was initially resistant to Morganstern’s offer. “I mulled this over for quite some time, not reacting immediately to the invitation to experiment with atom smashers. I could see no further than my nose as to what this scientific principle had to do with art. However, with time, my curiosity got the better of me and I made a visit to the radiation laboratories. Because of this scientist’s warm and friendly feeling, any fears and doubts I might have had concerning the dangers of radiation were almost wholly allayed.”¹² In 1962, Simon set up a studio at Radiation Dynamics and began testing materials such as metal, glass, wood, fabric, chemicals, and acrylics, and became increasingly aware of the exciting prospects now open to her.¹³

Spatial Paintings was the first series to result from the use of the particle accelerator. As might be expected, there were crossovers from her painting practice, especially in the lyrical use of color, the infusion of space into the composition, and the painting-like format—rectangular and wall mounted. One can view this progression from the oil painting, *Marsh* (1964), with its romantic overtones, soft reflections, and flowing color, to the spatial painting, *Terrestrial* (1966), which looks like a marsh seen from outer space, tough and confident. Simon channeled the luminosity of oil paint, so visible in *Marsh*, and translated it into three dimensions through the new technology to which she now had access. To do this, Simon created the “paintings” in stages: individual layers of clear acrylic were irradiated, then stained with color, and finally assembled in frames or light boxes with a controllable light source.

(top) *Bullfight*, watercolor, pen on paper, 9 x 12 in., 1965

(bottom) *Seascape*, watercolor, pen on paper, 8 3/4 x 10 3/4 in., 1955



Simon created a second group of spatial paintings that had a close relationship to a series of collages she created in the late 1950s, whose most prominent feature was a luminous sphere. *Seascape*, for example, contains layers of torn paper painted in oil adhered to a canvas along with copper sheeting, and a glowing glass orb—a compositional element that became central to the second *Spatial Paintings* series. By cutting acrylic disks into various sizes, then irradiating, staining, and backlighting them so that they appeared to float in space like planets in an acidic sky, Simon was able to translate her original vision for the collages into more expressive and forceful works of art through the use of the particle accelerator. The fracture lines it created within each disk crackled with energy, and suggested a center of powerful forces, both benevolent and dangerous. In reference to these paintings, Simon wrote, “I am seeking the central core of humanity—not isolating, but reaching through the senses to a relevant human experience.”¹⁴

Throughout the period of experimentation and into her more mature phase, Simon became increasingly accomplished at controlling the effects of the particle accelerator. In a simple description of the process,¹⁵ Simon outlined how she “weakened” pieces of Plexiglas in a predesigned way (most often, by drilling tiny holes in the acrylic, which allowed the discharge to enter), and then exposed the Plexiglas to a high-voltage particle accelerator to break down its molecular structure. This allowed her to create fractures with a sharp



Marsh, oil on canvas, 40 x 44 in., 1964



Terrestrial, irradiated acrylic, mixed media in light box, 40 x 52 in., 1966



Seascape, oil, copper, glass on panel, 4 1/2 x 10 x 1 in., 1959

linear quality, “similar to a lightning bolt streaking through the air—only it is not that random.”¹⁶ Simon, thus, progressed from chance images that produced a liberating effect on her imagination to controlled or “institutionalized”¹⁷ chance images, when “chance and intention became inseparable.”¹⁸ Simon, in her essay “Atomic Art Form”, described the transition, “With time, patience, and a lot more knowledge about the atom smasher, I am now able to control the electrons to a much greater degree. Where I first allowed the accelerator to lead me, my new art form, which is spatial and dimensional in concept, is now completely preconceived in theory, philosophy, and construction on my drawing boards before the art form is ever realized.”¹⁹

In 1969, Simon’s first solo museum exhibition *Atomic Art* opened in the Hall of Nuclear Energy at the National Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. It featured eight major spatial paintings including, *Terrestrial*, *Bubble*, and *Gemini*. This exposure was a boon to Simon’s career enabling the exhibition to travel to three additional museums and generating a bonanza of publicity. While her public persona was soaring, in the quiet of her studio, Simon continued to refine her process, culminating in the *Tree of Life* series, a body of work that would occupy her for nearly fifteen years.

Trees were recurring subjects for Simon. From the numerous watercolor studies on paper that she made in her travels to large watercolors on canvas such as *Corkscrew* (1964) to her *Tree of Life* series, Simon understood the iconic presence of the tree and its essential symbolism. She represented trees as nurturing, resilient, and singular entities that “symbolized the infinite and the eternal.”²⁰ When Simon discovered through experimentation that she could create a tree-shaped fracture embedded in acrylic by controlling the entry for the discharge from the particle accelerator, it was a divine meeting of subject and object and the culmination of a lifetime of observation, research, and reflection. From 1970 through 1986, the *Tree of Life* series was her primary focus and her goal for this work, was a “marriage between the visual path that resulted from the discharge and the three-dimensional form of the acrylic sculpture.”²¹

The *Tree of Life* sculptures varied widely in format and included truncated circular disks, large blocks, attached and detached rods, phallic forms, triangles, and orbs. Simon also created wearable sculpture, primarily from orbs of various sizes, sculpture in components that could be assembled in numerous ways, and constructed mirrored enclosures with spinning turntables so the viewer could simultaneously see all sides of the sculpture. Simon’s technique



Corkscrew Willow, watercolor on canvas, 42 x 24 in., 1964

for creating these sculptures was very exacting. Initially, she shaped the acrylic, then created tiny entry points for the discharge and polished the edges so that the form was absolutely pristine; finally, she irradiated the sculpture in the lab. After irradiation, the exterior of the resulting sculpture was untouched; only the interior of the sculpture was transformed, a process that depended on where the discharge entered the acrylic.

Overall, the formal qualities of the *Tree of Life* sculptures were pared down to the essential elements—geometric forms in clear Plexiglas and discharge. The absence of color was a notable change from Simon’s *Spatial Paintings* series, and a seemingly abrupt move on her part. However, Simon had previously completed a large body of work that is a clear precedent to the *Tree of Life* series—a group of watercolors, *Landscape Series*, which Simon painted in the mid-1960s. Her somber palette of black paint was reflected in the subject matter, a harsh and lonely evocation of the landscape, rendered in sharp brush strokes—the work of the introspective Simon. The series developed slowly. When she began working with the particle accelerator and creating the color-infused *Spatial Paintings* series, Simon was also experimenting with the format of the *Tree of Life* sculptures. Gradually, the new series absorbed more of her time, and by the early 1970s, color disappeared from Simon’s art, the *Spatial Paintings* series was abandoned, and the *Tree of Life* series became paramount.

The true power of the *Tree of Life* series lies not in Simon’s technical mastery of the process, but in the intent behind the iconic image that she created. The physical presence of the tree in Simon’s sculpture, on the one hand, was ephemeral—like hair ruffled on a breezy day or an intricate spider web shimmering in moonlight but, on the other hand, it had the toughness of a delicate fossil preserved in am-



Martinique, “The Tree I Painted,” 1955



Lakescape, watercolor on paper,
8 3/4 x 10 3/4 in., c. 1962

ber—a courageous survivor of another time. The irony is that Simon was using the most up-to-date materials and processes in the creation of this work but the results harkened to ancient artists, rather than her peers. From her writings, it is clear that her art had more to do with the timeless symbolism of the tree, which she characterized as “the living spirit,”²² than with the specific concerns of the art and technology movement of her time. The creation of the *Tree of Life* series made Simon feel that “we won’t be destroyed, if out of all these things we know as destructive something this beautiful can be created.”²³

The *Tree of Life* series ended in 1986, when the particle accelerator at Radiation Dynamics was sold and Simon found it increasingly difficult to access other facilities. Despite losing her RDI studio and the use of its essential equipment, Simon blazed forth with new ideas. She renovated and moved to a studio in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn. There she began work on a series of large-scale sculptures from acrylic and plywood that were expanded versions of the component sculptures from the *Tree of Life* series. These sculptures were specifically

NOTES

1. Leonard Shlain, *Art & Physics* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), p. 20.
2. Alyce Simon, “On Atomic Art,” n.d.
3. Alyce Simon, “An Artist of the Present and the Future,” May 5, 1969.
4. Penelope McMullan, “Atomic artist gains particle of success,” *Newsday*, February. 26, 1970.
5. Simon separated from her husband in 1971 and they eventually divorced.
6. Alyce Simon, “Study with Manfred Schwartz Painting,” n.d.
7. Simon, n.d.
8. Simon, n.d.
9. Alyce Simon, “Atomic Art Form,” 1966.
10. Conversation with Victor Faccinto, June 17, 2012.
11. E.A.T. along with visionary artists, scientists, engineers, curators, and gallerists (particularly Howard Wise) created tremendous interest in the possibilities of cross-disciplinary projects, new processes, and materials during the 1960s and 1970s.
12. Alyce Simon, “Atomic Art Form,” 1966.
13. Simon, 1966.

engineered to integrate and balance each component in hundreds of different positions “limited only by one’s imagination.”²⁴ Simon’s intent was for the exhibitor of the sculptures to constantly reconfigure the elements, producing new sculptures at will.

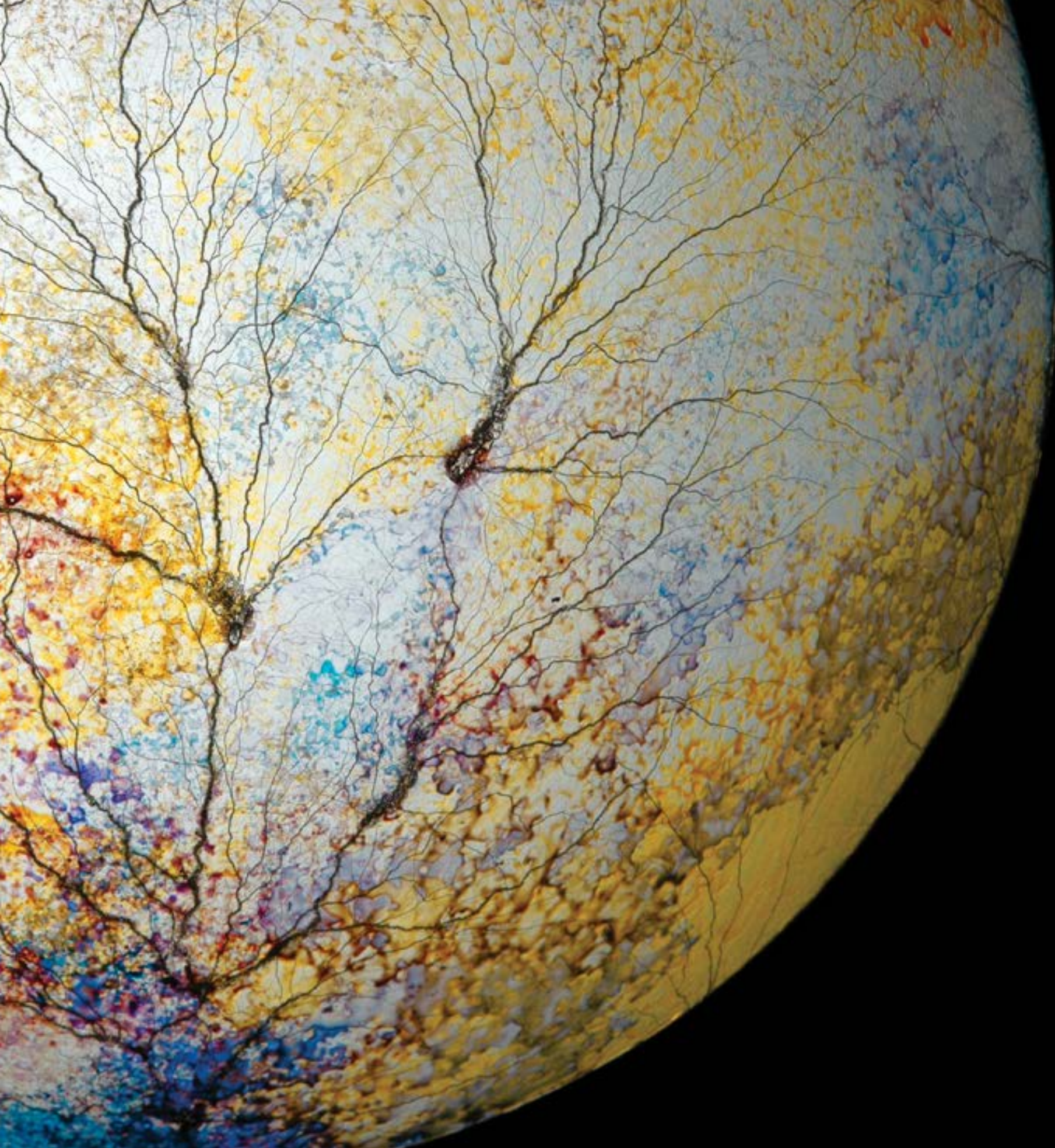
Beginning in the early 1990s, a series of accidents caused Simon’s health to deteriorate and she was eventually forced to give up her studio practice. In 1995, she moved to Santa Fe, NM where she hoped to restore her health and to found a design studio to produce her component sculptures in small editions, not being able to do the demanding physical work herself. In the same year, recognizing her declining health, she established with long-time friend Victor Faccinto, Tree of Life, a foundation to benefit senior artists, with the mission “to encourage talented and late career artists in the pursuit of their ideas and the expansion and perfection of their techniques and capabilities.”²⁵ Simon wrote, “The name, Tree of Life, was chosen because the tree is the very living essence of life on earth. The tree thrives on energy taken from our planet earth. It grows and gives much in beauty and usefulness to those living around it. If it is cut down, all of its parts aid and benefit life on earth. If it dies, the tree has perpetuated itself and continues to nourish the earth’s source of energy. The symbol of a tree is infinite. The tree ‘gives back’ for others to continually share the benefits of earth’s energy.”²⁶

In 2005, Simon relocated to a lakefront home in North Carolina, near the headquarters of Tree of Life, where she spent her final years appreciating and studying the elements of nature that were the source of her art. When she passed away on July 20, 2011, she left an incomparable legacy of artistic achievement and a foundation that will pass on her philosophy of “giving back” to another generation of artists.



#1, plywood, 176 x 16 x 12 in., 1987, installed at the International Design Center, New York City in 1988

14. Alyce Simon, “Background, Narrative, & Career Account,” n.d.
15. A more complete description of Simon’s process is included in Bernard Finn’s comprehensive essay.
16. Interview of Alyce Simon by *National Enquirer* reporter, 1972.
17. Horst W. Janson, “Chance Images,” ed. Philip P. Wiener. *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner’s, 1973), pp. 340-353.
18. Janson, 1973.
19. Alyce Simon, “Atomic Art Form,” 1966.
20. Simon, 1966.
21. Alyce Simon, Letter from Victor Faccinto to Bernard Finn, November 12, 2003.
22. Interview of Alyce Simon by *National Enquirer* reporter, 1972.
23. Penelope McMullan, “Atomic artist gains particle of success,” *Newsday*, February 26, 1970.
24. Alyce Simon, “Morphosis,” 1988.
25. “Tree of Life Working Mission,” December 17, 2006.
26. Alyce Simon, Letter to Victor Faccinto, n.d.



spatial paintings

Celestial

irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox

43 1/2 x 56 1/2 x 7 in.

1966



Pink & Green Eclipse

irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox

26 x 19 ³/₄ x 9 ³/₄ in.

1969



Pink and Yellow Suns

irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox

37 x 20 x 9 ³/₄ in.



Untitled

irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox

58 x 48 x 6 in.

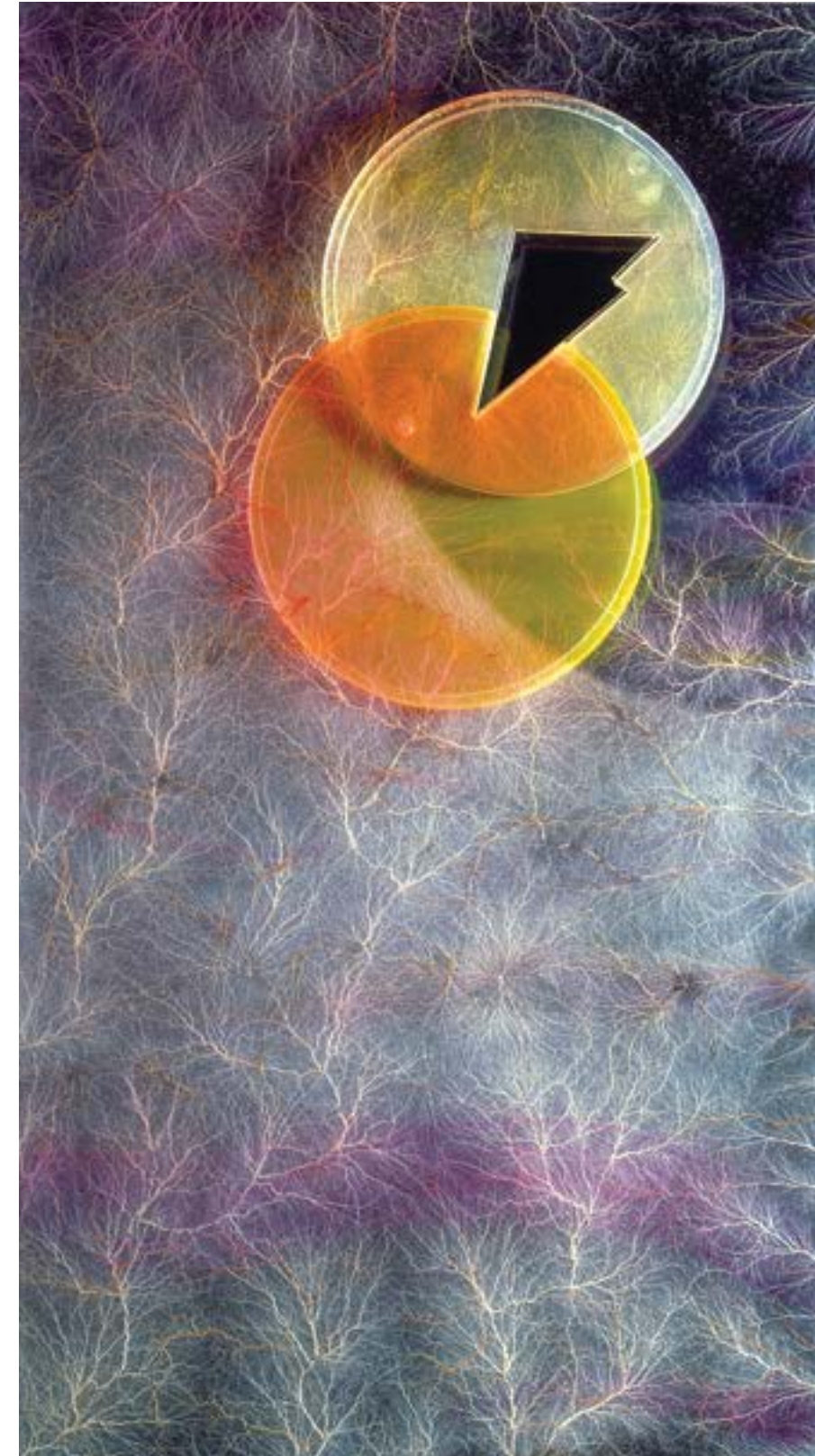


Energy Twins

irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox

46 x 26 x 6 in.

1980

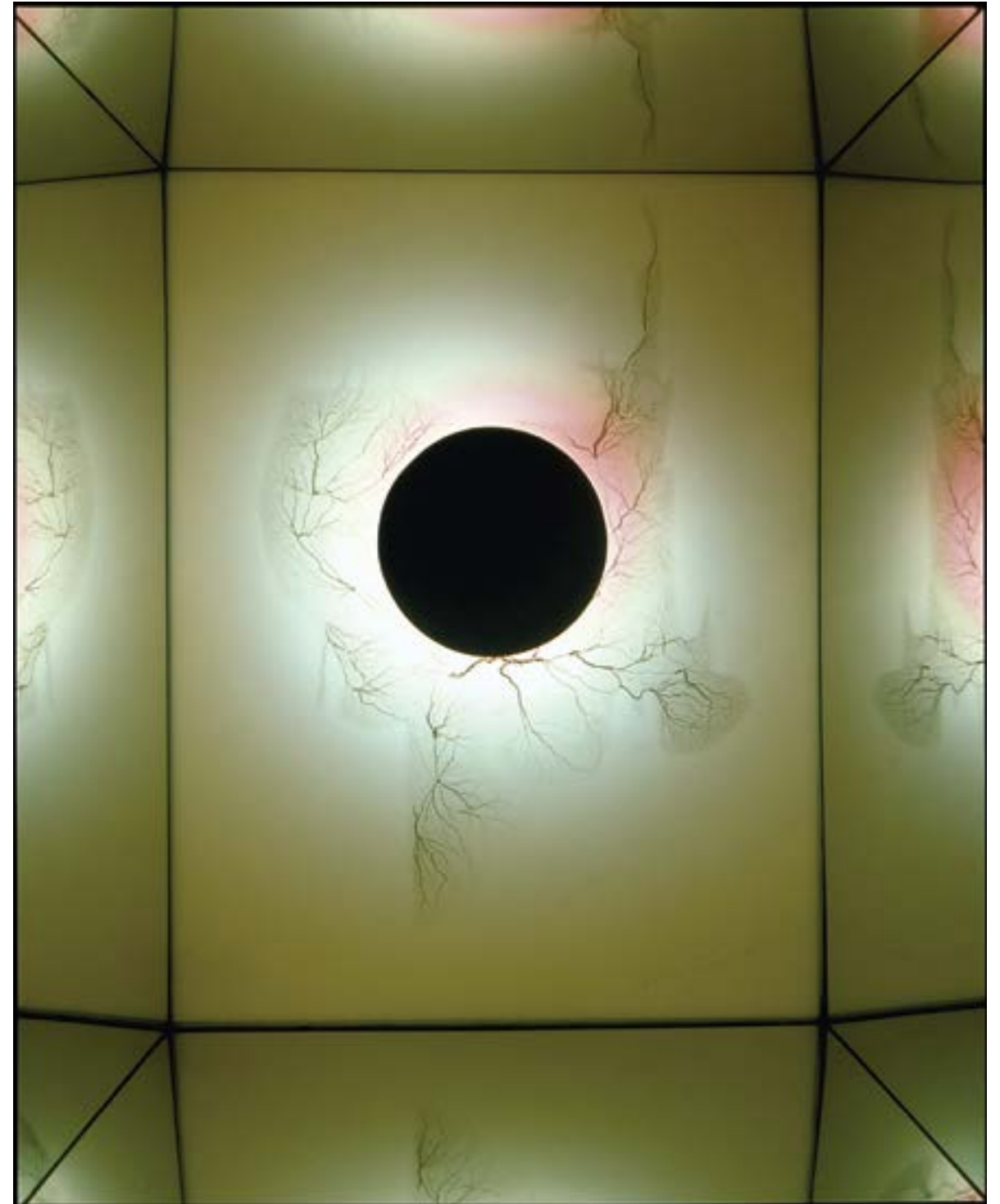


Eclipse Reflections

irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox

34 1/4 x 28 1/2 x 21 3/4 in.

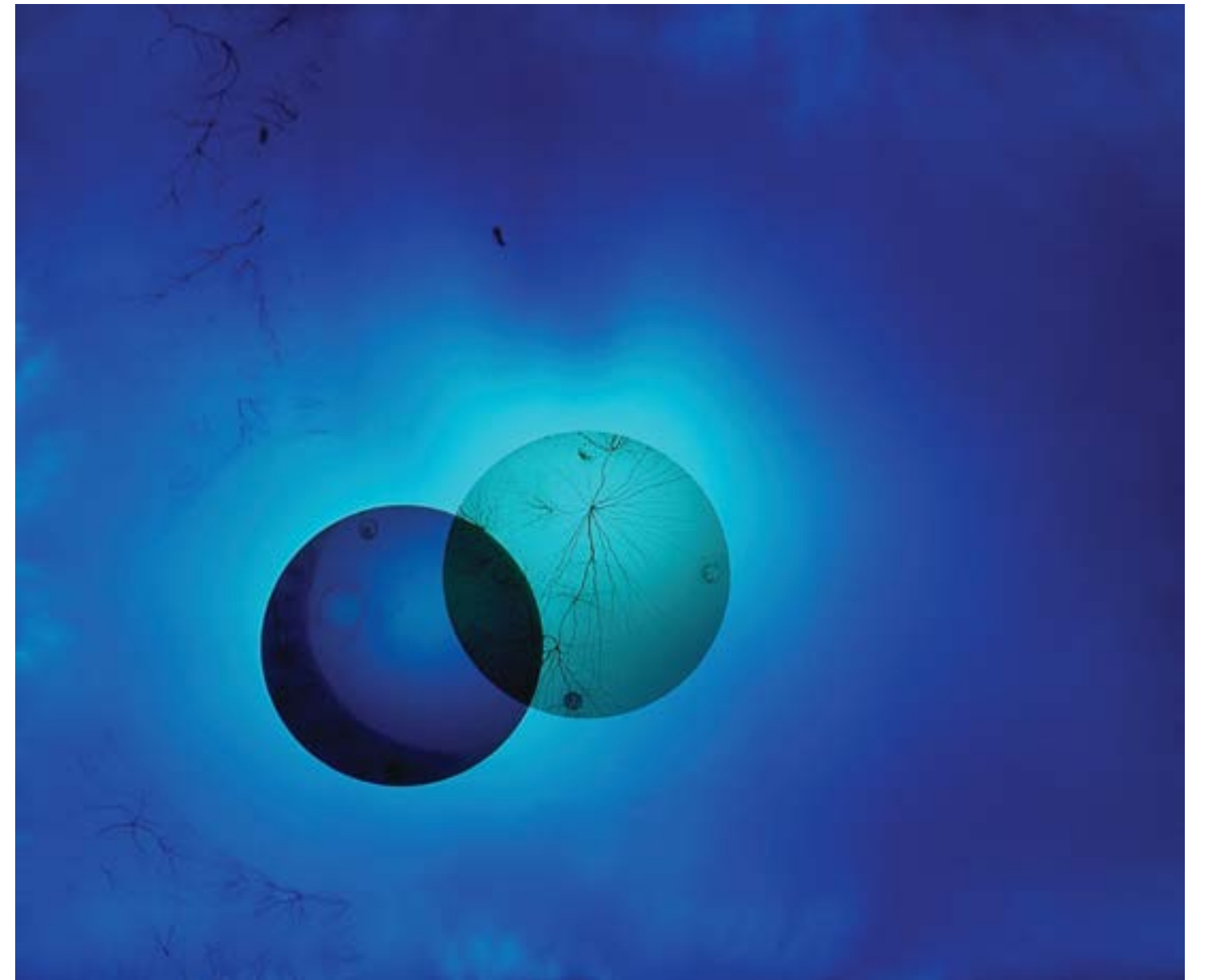
1970



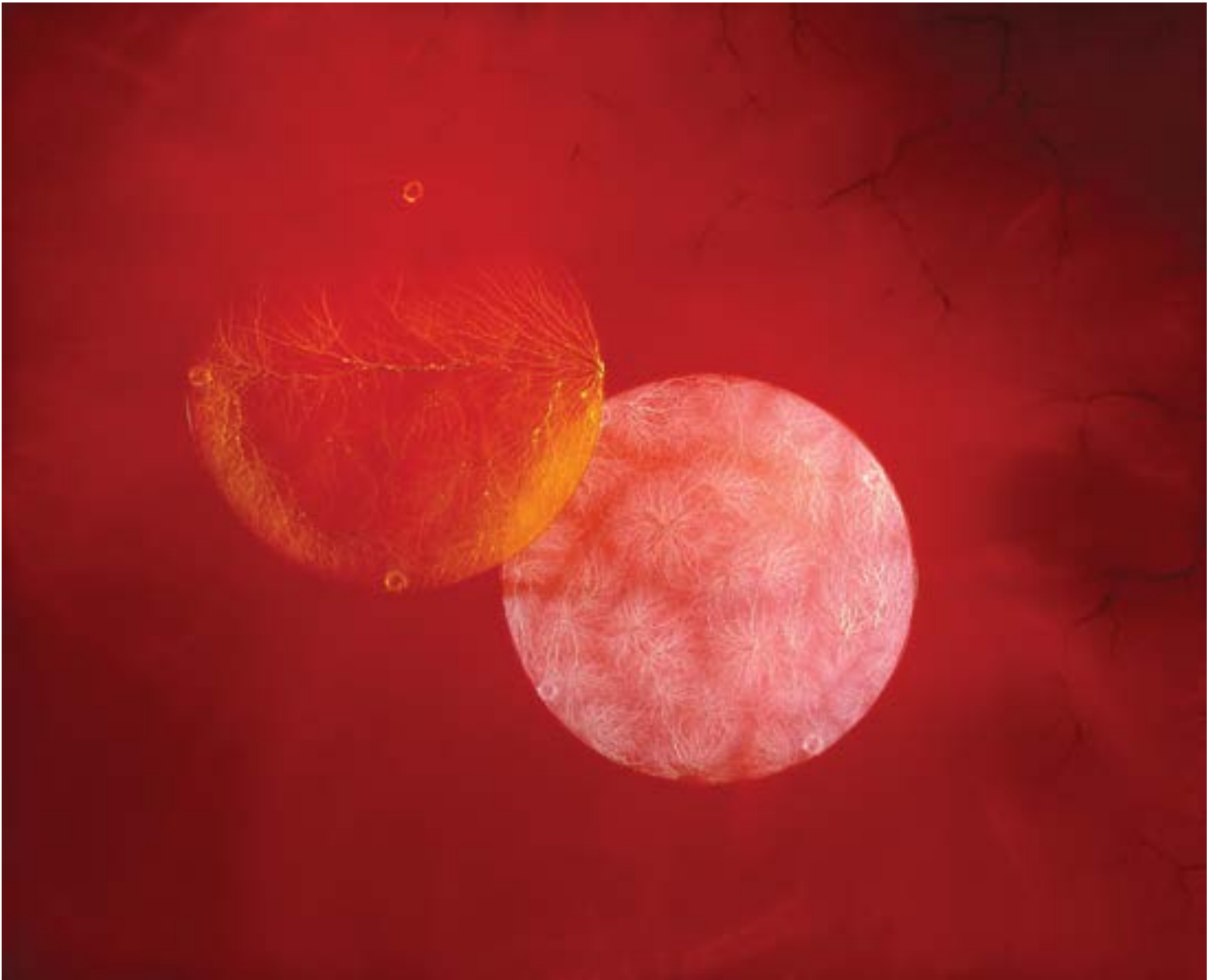
Untitled (Blue)

irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox

35 x 41 x 8 in.



Untitled (Red)
irradiated acrylic, mixed media in lightbox
31 x 39 x 8 in.





tree of life

R3

irradiated acrylic

3 1/4 x 3 1/4 x 2 3/4 in.

1971

Collection of Smithsonian Institution



Tree of Life

irradiated acrylic

10 x 9 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.

1971

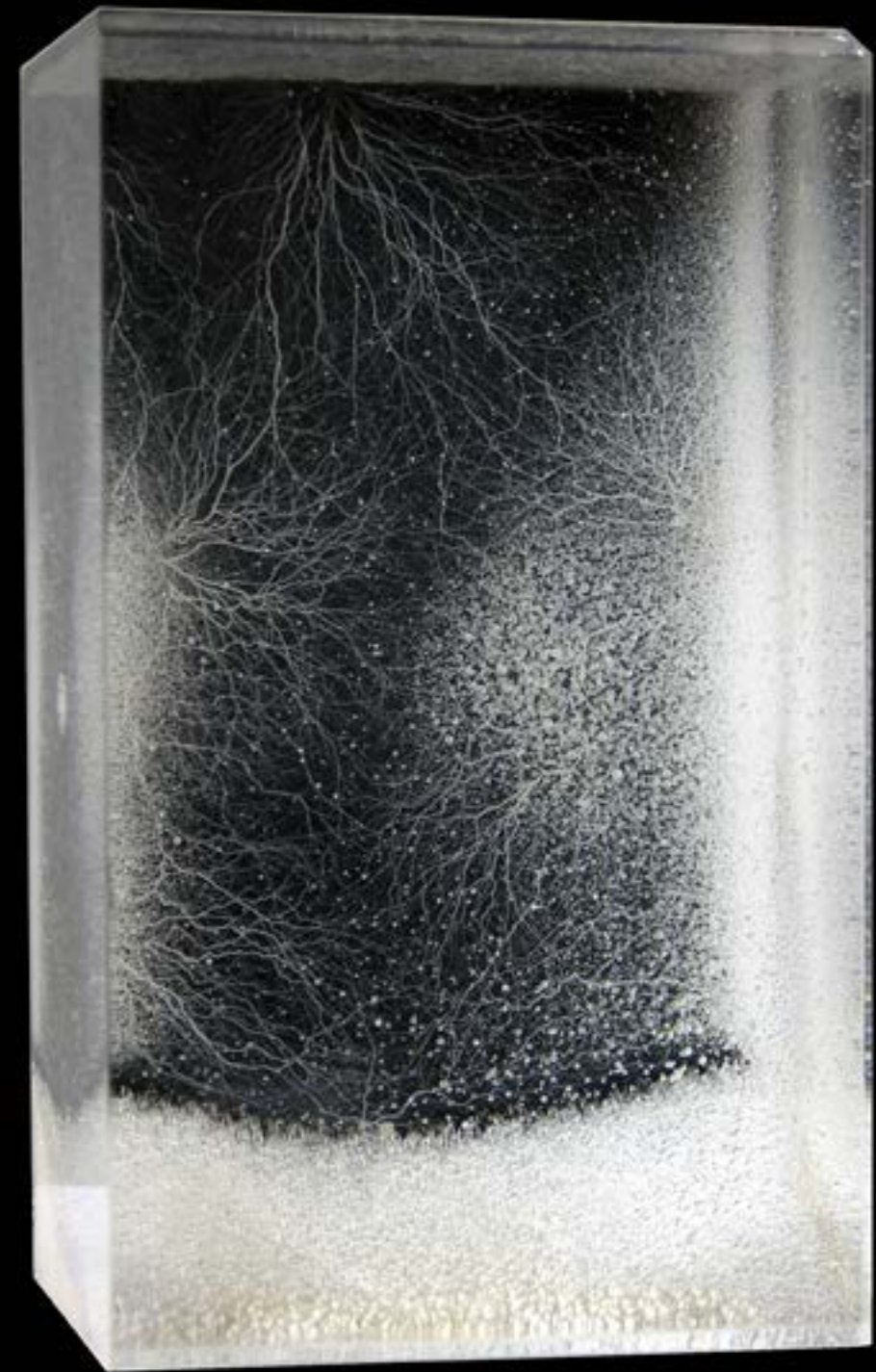


R1

irradiated acrylic

6 1/2 x 4 x 3 1/2 in.

1965



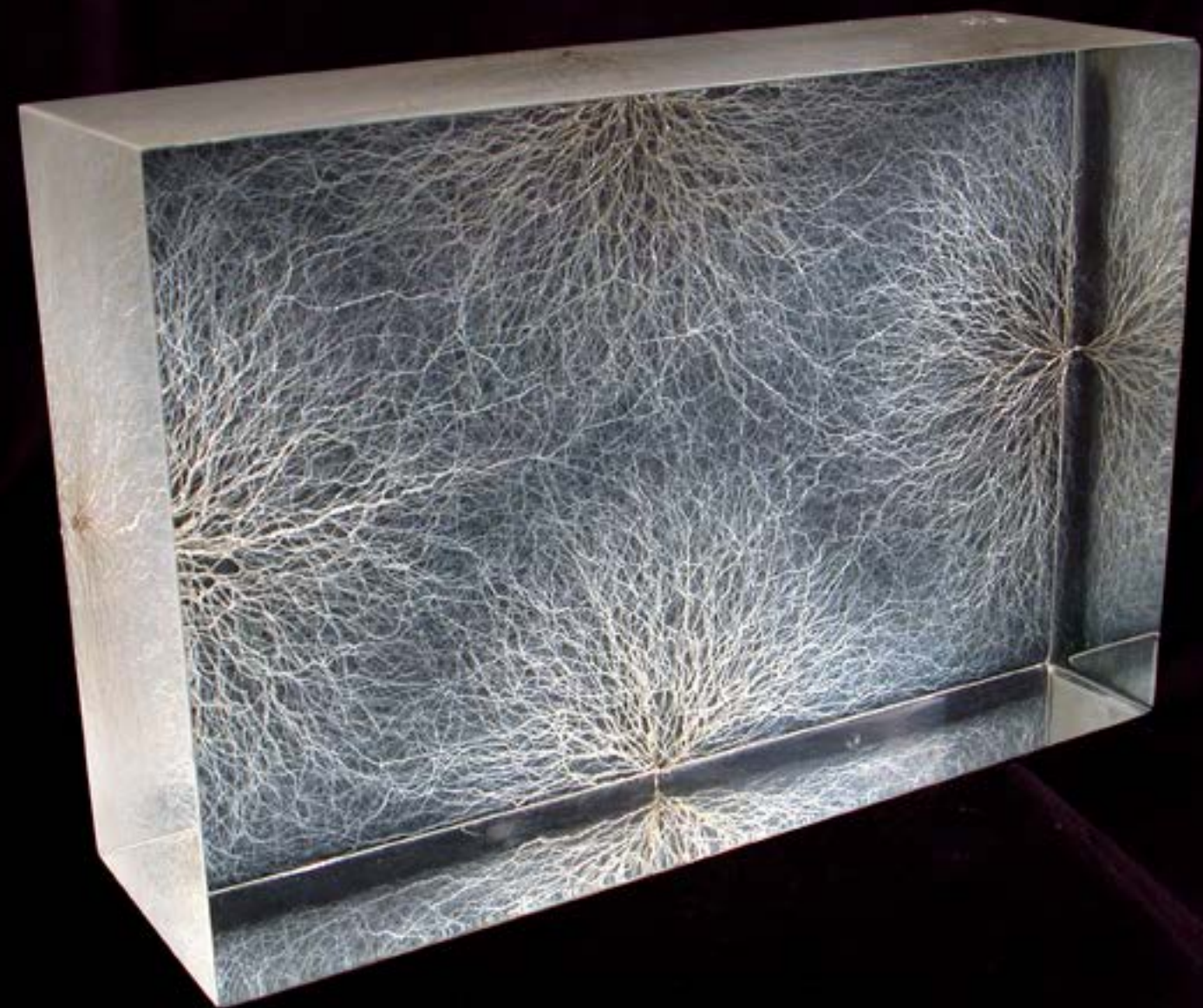
R10

irradiated acrylic

4 x 6 x 1 ³/₄ in.

1968

Collection of Smithsonian Institution



D5 (Peacock)

irradiated acrylic

9 1/2 x 10 x 2 1/2 in.

1971

Collection of Smithsonian Institution



CP5

irradiated acrylic

5 x 4 1/2 x 3 in.



RP9

irradiated acrylic

13 x 5 x 3 in.

1971



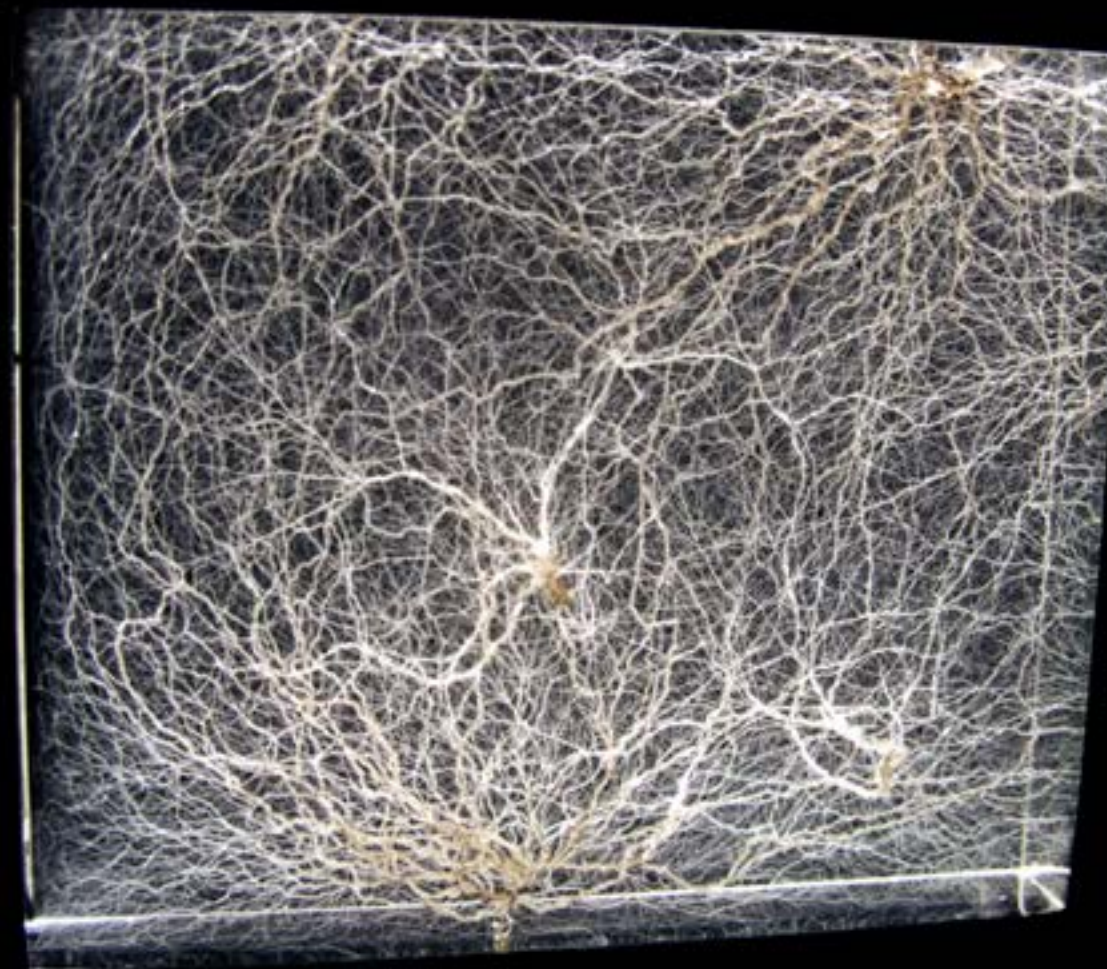
R9

irradiated acrylic

3 1/4 x 4 x 3/4 in.

c. 1962

Collection of Smithsonian Institution



H51 (view A)

irradiated acrylic

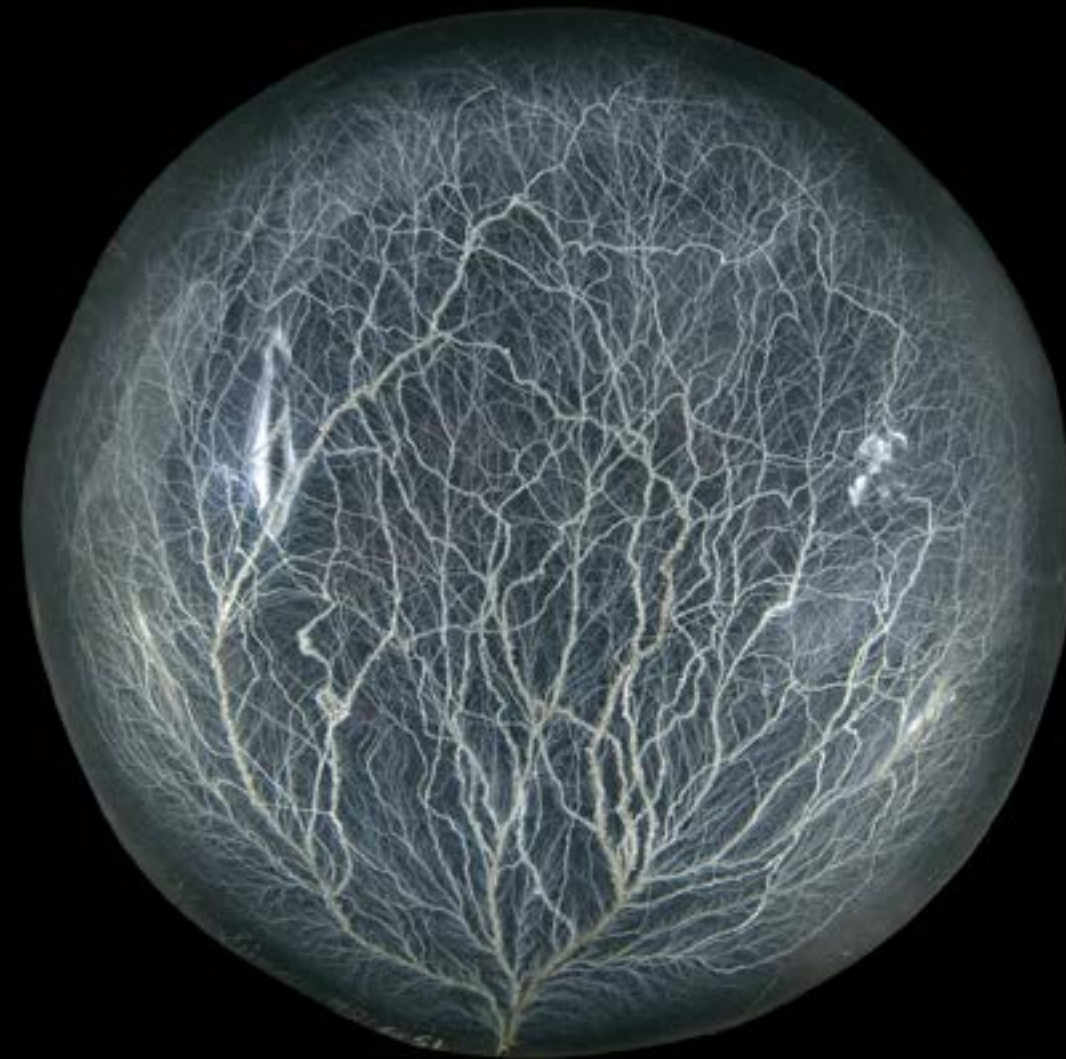
5 in. diameter x 1 1/4 in.



H51 (view B)

irradiated acrylic

5 in. diameter x 1 1/4 in.





- 1925** Born February 25 in New York City to Sophie and Irving Rothlein.
- 1931** Begins making art—sketching with pencil and pen, and constructing toys from cardboard and wood.
- 1939-1940** Studies at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY.
- 1941-1942** Studies at Art Students League, New York, NY.
 - 1941** Wins first of seven first place prizes for art at Carnegie Institute Annual exhibition in Pittsburg, PA. Other awards were received in 1942, 1943, and 1944.
 - 1943** Admitted to the College of Fine Arts at Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY on March 15, and begins studies there in September.
 - 1944** Marries Samuel Simon, a clothing manufacturer.
 - 1945** Michael Scott, Simon’s first son is born.
 - 1948** Russell “Rusty” Roy, Simon’s second son is born.
 - 1951** Moves to Hewlett, NY, a hamlet on the South Shore of Long Island.
- c. 1958** Through the encouragement of a friend, Julie Sherman, Simon studies painting with Manfred Schwartz at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, where her paintings “took on a ‘spatial’ quality.”
- 1959** Travels with husband to Japan where Simon becomes enamored with the landscape, and creates numerous ink wash drawings.
- 1961** Meets Dr. Kennard Morganstern, Chairman of the Board of Radiation Dynamics, Inc., who invites Simon to visit his lab and consider experimenting with high-voltage particle accelerators as an artistic process.
- 1962** Establishes a studio at Radiation Dynamics, Inc., Westbury, NY.
- 1963** Simon has her first exhibition of atomic art at the New York State Assembly in Albany, NY.

- 1968** Simon participates in two important group exhibitions in New York City: *Some More Beginnings* at the Brooklyn Museum and *The Machine Show* at the Museum of Modern Art.
- 1969** Simon’s first solo museum exhibition, *Atomic Art*, opens on September 15 at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

Moves with her husband to a 30th floor co-op in the United Nations Plaza and renovates her apartment to look like a “space platform suspended in the Manhattan sky.”
- 1970** *Atomic Art* travels to Ontario Science Center, Toronto, Canada, and Washburn Gallery, Museum of Science, Boston, MA.
- 1971** Creates seminal sculpture, *Tree of Life*.

Atomic Art travels to Center of Science & Industry, Columbus, OH.

Becomes first artist to have an exhibition at the United States Atomic Energy Commission Pavilion, 4th United Nations International Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy, Geneva, Switzerland.

“Atomic Artist Alyce Simon” is a guest on *To Tell The Truth* (United States and Canada).
- 1971-1972** Simon has exhibitions of atomic art in Geneva, Switzerland at Palais de Exhibition and at the Musée Petit Palais.
- 1974** Meets Victor Faccinto and forges a lifelong friendship and working relationship.
- 1980** Simon has a career survey, *Atomic Energy Art: A Retrospective*, at European American Bank in New York City.
- 1982** Receives City of Reggio “International Award” from International Center of Art and Culture.
- 1985** Receives “Statue of Victory,” World Culture Prize from Accademie Italia, the Committee of the World Culture Prize for Letters, Arts and Sciences.

- 1986** After giving up her studio at Radiation Dynamics, Simon moves it to the Greenpoint waterfront in Brooklyn, NY and begins creating monumental sculptures from wood and Plexiglas.
- 1987-1988** Installs major sculpture at International Design Center, New York.
- 1991** Simon sustains debilitating back injury in a car accident, making it difficult for her to work and resulting in continuing health problems.
- 1995** Simon founds non-profit organization, Tree of Life, with Victor Faccinto.

Simon moves to Sante Fe, NM, where she opens a design business focusing on sculpture editions.
- 2004** Eight irradiated acrylic sculptures are acquired by the Smithsonian Institution.
- 2005** In order to focus her attention on Tree of Life, Simon moves to a lakefront home in Mocksville, NC, near where the organization is located.
- 2011** Simon dies on July 20 in Mocksville, NC.

selected solo exhibitions and installations

- 1987-1988

International Design Center of New York, NY.
- 1980

European American Bank, *Atomic Energy Art: A Retrospective*, New York, NY.
- 1979

Cricket Club Art Gallery, Miami, FL.
- 1977

Weiner Gallery, New York, NY.
- 1976

Cricket Club Art Gallery, Miami, FL.
- 1972

Elaine Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, NY.
- 1971-1972

Palais de Exhibition, Geneva, Switzerland.
Musée Petit Palais, Geneva, Switzerland.
- 1971

Center of Science & Industry, *Atomic Art*, Columbus, OH.
- 1970-1971

Washburn Gallery, Museum of Science, *Atomic Art*, Boston, MA.
Cartier, New York, NY.
- 1970

Ontario Science Centre, *Atomic Art*, Toronto, Canada.
- 1969-1970

Smithsonian Institution, *Atomic Art*, Washington, DC.
- 1966-1967

Hunter College, *Atomic Art*, New York, NY.
- 1966

Allen Funt Gallery, *Atomic Art*, New York, NY.
- 1963

New York State Assembly, *Atomic Art*, Albany, NY.

selected group exhibitions

- 1999

Wake Forest University, *Fusion: Art & Science*, Winston-Salem, NC.
- 1979

Putnam Arts Council, Mahopac, NY.
- 1972

National Academy Museum of Fine Arts, *147th Annual*, New York, NY.
- 1971-1972

Galerie Internationale, New York, NY.
- 1971

United States Atomic Energy Commission Pavilion, *Atomic Art*, 4th United Nations International Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy, Geneva, Switzerland.

1968 Brooklyn Museum, *Some More Beginnings*, Brooklyn, NY.
Museum of Modern Art, *The Machine Show*, New York, NY.

1967-1968 National Academy Museum of Fine Arts, New York, NY.

1967 Audubon Artists, *25th Annual*, New York, NY.

1966 Atom Fair, Pittsburgh, PA.

1965 Englewood Armory Show, Englewood, NJ.

1964 Jersey City Museum, *Painters & Sculptors Society*, Jersey City, NJ.
Ruth Sherman Gallery, New York, NY.

1962-1963 Hofstra University, *13th Annual Long Island Artists Exhibition*, Hempstead, NY.
Art Guild Gallery, *Opening Show*, New York, NY.
East Side Gallery, New York, NY.

1962 Brockton Art Association Annual Exhibition, Brockton, MA.
Madison Gallery, *Painting & Sculpture*, New York, NY.

1961 Five Towns Music & Arts Foundation, Hewlett, NY.

1959 Gallery Fifteen, New York, NY.

1956 Arts Council of New Jersey at Ford Motor Company, Matawan, NJ.
Five Towns Music & Arts Foundation, Hewlett, NY.

1950 Brooklyn Society of Artists Annual Exhibition, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY.

1946 Brooklyn Society of Artists Annual Exhibition, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY.

1944 Annual Exhibition, Fine Arts Galleries, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA.

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1980 “Multiple Dimensions in New Alcyte, Rings / Design, Quality, Influence.” *National Jeweler*, April.

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“Noted Artist.” *People, Places 5 Parties Magazine*, Summer.

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1976 “Alcyte Pendant Set Uses Atomic Energy.” *National Jeweler*, May.

1975 “Handcrafted Art Jewelry Becomes ‘47th’ Phenomenon.” *National Jeweler*, April.
“Atom For Eve.” *Horchow Collection: Houston*, March/April.
Kaleidoscope, January/February.

1974 “Artist Creates Peaceful Expression With Atoms.” *FASST News: Washington, DC*, June/July.

1973 Vincent, Beatrice. “Atomic is the word for this art.” *The Cleveland Press*, October 20.

Woofers, Dick. “Atomic Art.” *The Cleveland Press*, October.

Hirschfeld, Mary. “Tree of Life Sculpture.” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October.

1972 Garnet, Jean. “The Magnificent Impersonals.” *Tibergraf Rome*, July.

The Hampton Bays News, July/August.

The Hampton Chronicle, July 20.

The Southampton Press, July 15.

“Atoms Can Be Beautiful.” *New York Sunday News*, April 30.

“Atomic Art Sculpture.” *New York Times*, April 28.

“Artist Bombards Sculpture with Atomic Particles.” *National Enquirer*, March 5.

1971 “L’art ‘Atomica’ dell ‘americana Alyce Simon.” *Corriere del Ticino*: Lugano, September 11.

“Alyce Simon, L’alchimiste de L’art atomique.” *Tribune de Geneve*, September 7.

Gamet, Jean. “Alyce Simon.” *Haltes des Hommes*, May.

The Citizen-Journal, May 17.

Waldron, Bob. “Energized Art.” *Columbus Dispatch Magazine*, May 16.

Garnet, Jean. “Alyce Simon.” *Haltes des Hommes: Lerna of Lugano*, May.

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“Atomic Art Reflects Beauty Of Radiation, Says Artist.” *St. Catharines Standard*, June 25.

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McMullan, Penelope. “Atomic artist gains particle of success.” *Newsday: Woman/II*, February 26.

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Photo Credit: Martine Sherrill

Alyce Simon, Atlantic City, NJ, 1988



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TREE *of* LIFE

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Alyce Simon and

Victor Faccinto

founded

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