

# THE FRAGMENTED IMAGE

JIM CANTRELL

ELIZABETH GINSBERG

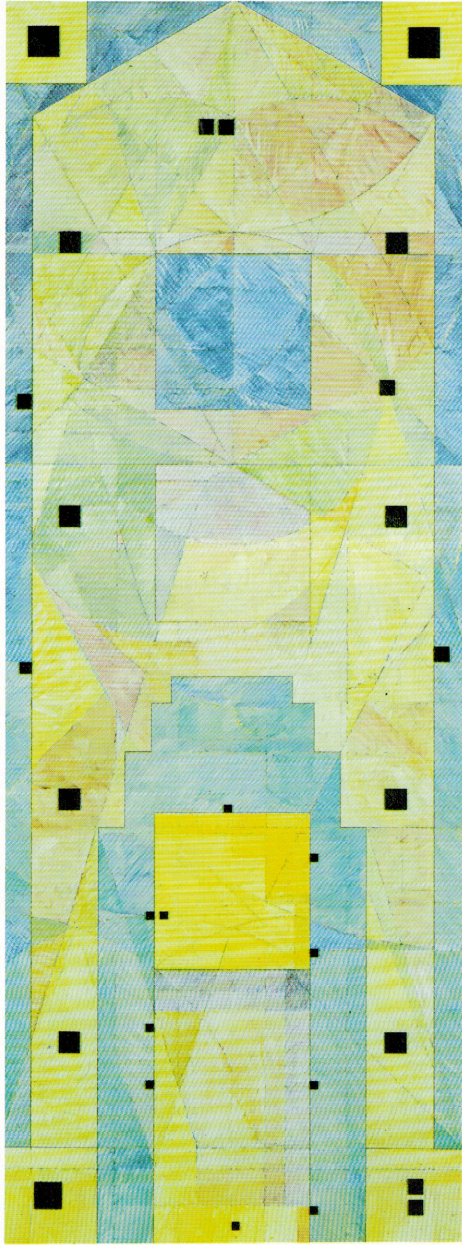
ROBERT KIRSCHBAUM

GEOFFREY LARDIERE

SUMIYE OKOSHI

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National Academy of Sciences  
Washington, DC



Kidron Valley #3  
Robert Kirschbaum oil on wood 1990

# THE FRAGMENTED IMAGE

by Joelle Bentley

Contemporary artists are enamored with fragmentation. Whether sectioned in such a way as to suggest an orderly grid, or more randomly disjoined, their images are vulnerable in one way or another to being split apart.

The precedent for dissecting and transforming the natural world, in art at least, was established by cubism. But the sensibility to do so, and the intellectual foundation on which that sensibility rests, is at the heart of Western civilization. The first to dissect nature were the ancient Greeks. They devised the notion of the atom, that matter is reducible to indivisible units. How these units come together to form a whole is a concern not only for the scientist but for the artist as well.

Perhaps the conceptual framework devised by scientists to understand nature can offer a means to probe the intent of the contemporary artist. In the nineteenth century, the sciences were arranged in a hierarchical order based on elegance. At the pinnacle was mathematics, the discipline most purely guided by the dictates of elegance. Mathematicians will pursue a concern because it is beautiful; only later may the concern find practical relevance. Next in rank were the physicists, whose pristine numbers must be plunged into the muck of the physical world to obtain feedback on how nature actually behaves. As science engages the increasingly complicated, in chemistry then in biology and the life sciences, elegant deductions are harder to find.

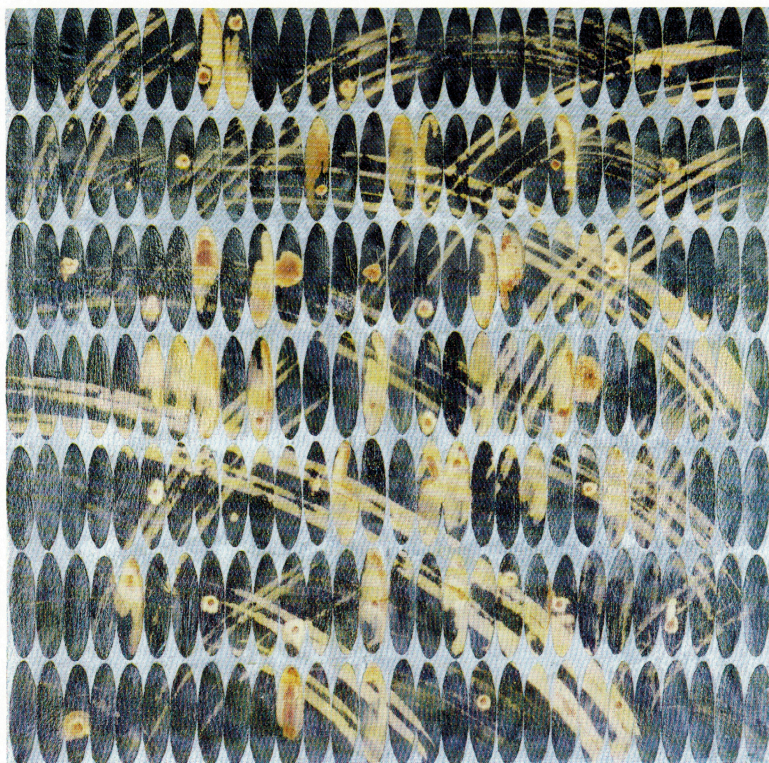
The artists selected by the National Academy of Sciences for *The Fragmented Image* exhibition move somewhat along this continuum.

Robert Kirschbaum takes his inspiration from mathematics, an abstract language that does not exist in nature but which allows us to model nature. His art concerns the generation of forms. In investigating the simple shapes delineated by Euclid—the circle, triangle, square, pentagon, and hexagon—he has rediscovered the geometries that underlie Gothic and Islamic architecture. In the *Portal* series, Kirschbaum works within a tense, narrow rectangle whose proportions are 8:3. Sometimes he dissects the space to give a diagonal thrust to the composition, tracing the path of a hypocycloidal or epicycloidal arch, but in the end verticals and horizontals prevail in his work.

For Kirschbaum, however, mathematics is not only an analytical tool, but one that historically has been pressed into service to probe the divine. He savors ancient mystical texts that speak of divine revelation. The numerological references in these writings, offered up by the world's major religions, form a starting point for his geometric abstractions. In *Kidron Valley #3*, for example, low-relief black squares are affixed to the surface of the painting. They are atonal grace notes whose size, number and placement may correspond to numerological values in the Jewish Kabbalah, but here suggest mathematical scaffolding upon which to reinterpret old texts and construct new relationships.

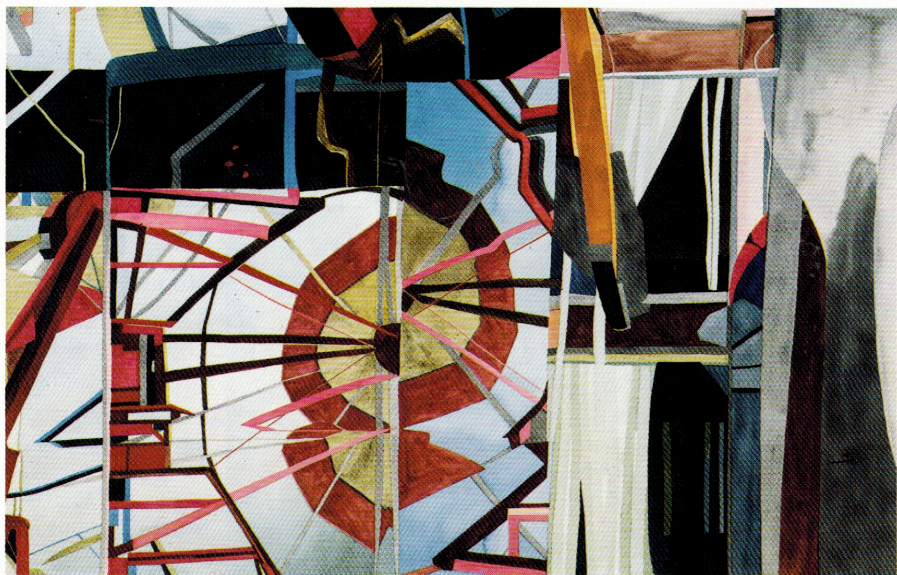
The art of Sumiye Okoshi is based on the right-angle grid, yet moves beyond its mathematical roots to plunge into the physical world. Uniform ovals made of rice paper, cut by hand, are glued in relentlessly ordered rows to a canvas first coated with oil paint. Sometimes stippled and washed with acrylic paint by the artist, sometimes solid color right out of the package, the ovals are at once particles and waves. Like spectroscopic oscillations, they energize the surface yet evoke the layered complexity of nature, hinting at what lies beyond the horizon and below the surface of things.

Much as Okoshi's atomistic arrays may suggest a visual metaphor for the submicroscopic world of modern physics, their genesis is her appreciation of physical forces as they register on the senses. Drawing on her Japanese heritage, New York-based Okoshi takes her inspiration from the sounds of nature, the sounds of wind and waterfall, and most especially rain. Her works shimmer like reflections in water or stars clustered in the vast night sky. They are poetic invocations of nature's veiled structures, perched on the border where the ethereal and the substantial coalesce, and they are offered in gentle, modulated tones. They whisper.



Plenum #31

Sumiye Okoshi *rice paper on canvas* 1988



Vatutara 15

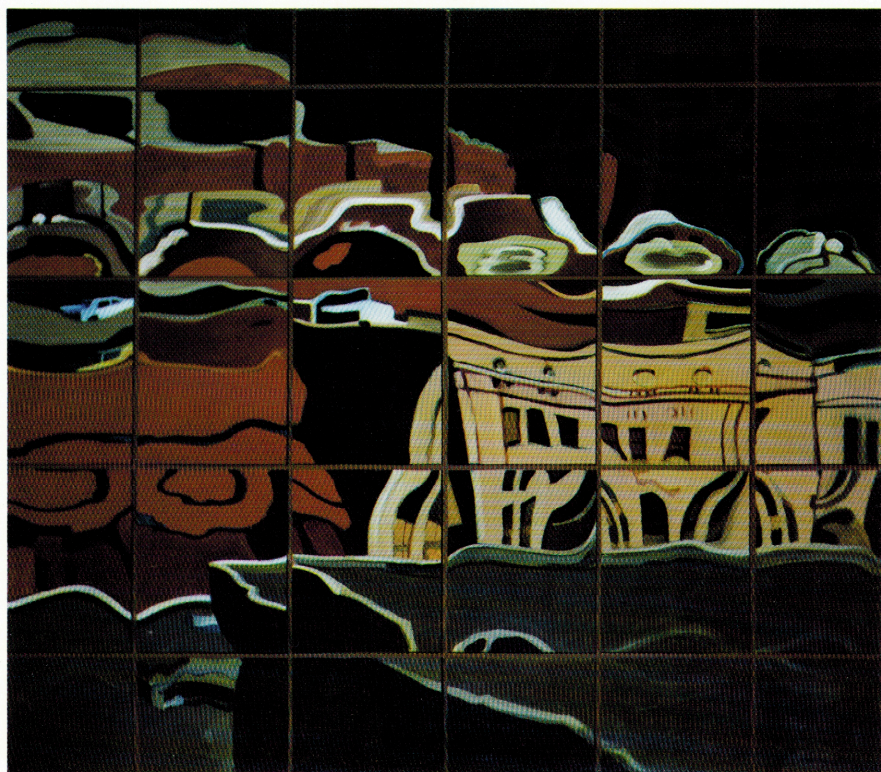
Elizabeth Ginsberg acrylic on paper 1990

In light of the scientific continuum of elegance mentioned earlier, tidy equations do well to describe the physical forces that sustain all of matter. But their simplicity does not apply to the macroscopic world of everyday experience, to the complexity of life systems. Jim Cantrell's work brings us up to the here and now, where exist elaborate artifacts made by the human hand. Like Okoshi's, Cantrell's paintings also rely on the right-angle grid, although the grid is no longer conceptual or theoretical but actual. In *Lexington Reflected*, beaux arts architecture from an earlier time is reflected and refracted in the glass grid of a modernist building. Teetering dream-like between illusion and reality, the emotionally indulgent older form quivers, offering an antidote to the stark geometric purity of the present.

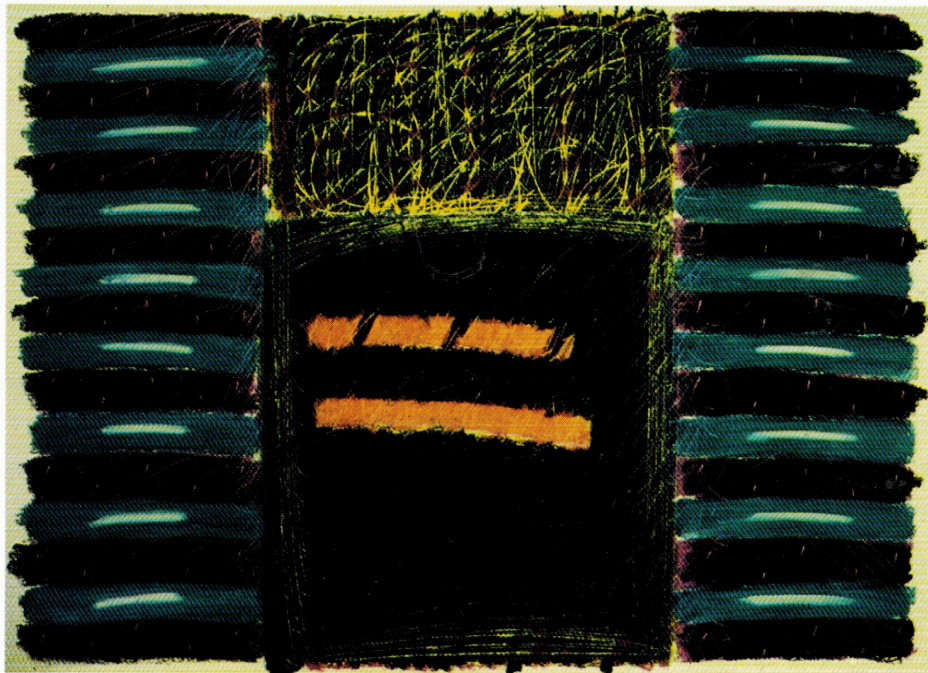
In Elizabeth Ginsberg's work, the image is both fragmented and fractured. Not only are her images subjected to division, but, in the tradition of cubism, they are rearranged and transformed. Ginsberg's images are snippets from the flotsam and jetsam of our modern lifestyle: corners of rooftops, flower petals scattered on the deck of an old boat, abandoned bicycle tires, shiny ferris wheels, and even microchip circuitries and DNA helixes. Her reordered world offers new ways of seeing from different perspectives. Pristine Euclidean geometry gives way to chaos theory.

*Matunuck I* began as a collage of cut apart color photographs Ginsberg had taken of a carnival park. The image was then passed through a laser printer that altered the scale, color, and tonal values of the collage. But the printer had an added capability: it could also distort the image, vibrating and stretching it according to preprogrammed instructions. The result of Ginsberg's photo collage/laser print is a unique image, volitionally manipulated at the same time it is randomly produced. The imagery from *Matunuck I* is cropped and more abstracted in *Vatutara XV*. Now working in acrylic paint on paper, Ginsberg modulates the garish colors so boldly exaggerated by the laser printer. Further removed from their referents in nature, voids intermingle with solids, taking on a formal existence of their own as if scanned by an optical system beyond white light. Strangely familiar yet somehow removed, the image looks like the fossilized remains of things yet to come. What emerges is a distillation of our high-tech, high-energy age.

Abstraction in art has been (and remains) largely inaccessible to popular taste because it has not been understood. The sources in nature from which art is "abstracted" are unseen or obscured. While the greatest of abstract painters have been deeply inspired by those "other realities" that exist beyond the observable world, interpretation of the



White Melody  
Jim Cantrell oil on canvas 1988



Birmingham Study #33  
Geoffrey Lardiere oil pastel on paper 1990  
From the collection of Metro-Dade Art in Public Places.

formal properties of their art—the use of color, line, form, texture—have become ends in themselves. Much 20th century art is a self-absorbed investigation, referring only to itself to the exclusion of nature.

The work of Geoffrey Lardiere exemplifies one position in this formalist debate. After a decade of graphic design work in Los Angeles, Lardiere begins his paintings using rigid shapes—squares and rectangles—then strives for spontaneity. He likens this letting-go process to a spiritual search. His *Birmingham Study* series of paintings has led to the *Evolving Forms* series of constructions, with the older work serving as a point of departure in his search for new formal solutions.

Artists, like scientists, pull matter apart, fragment it, and strive to reassemble it in their restless search for models that will serve their understanding of the manifold mysteries of nature.

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Joelle Bentley, who founded the art exhibition program at The New York Academy of Sciences, writes on how science has informed and inspired the visual arts.

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

JIM CANTRELL, who lives and paints in Bardstown, Kentucky is represented by the Bardstown Gallery, and also by the Capricorn Gallery, Bethesda, Maryland.

ELIZABETH GINSBERG has her studio in New York City. She is represented by the Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, DC.

ROBERT KIRSCHBAUM maintains studios in New York City and Hartford, Connecticut, where he is Director of Studio Arts at Trinity College.

GEOFFREY LARDIERE makes hanging constructions and paints in Tallahassee, Florida.

SUMIYE OKOSHI, whose studio is in New York City, is represented by the Viridian Gallery in that city.

*The exhibition is presented by Arts in the Academy, a public service program of the National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20418. For information: Fredrica W. Wechsler, Director.*

*Plenum 31: Photograph by Craig Sugimoto*