

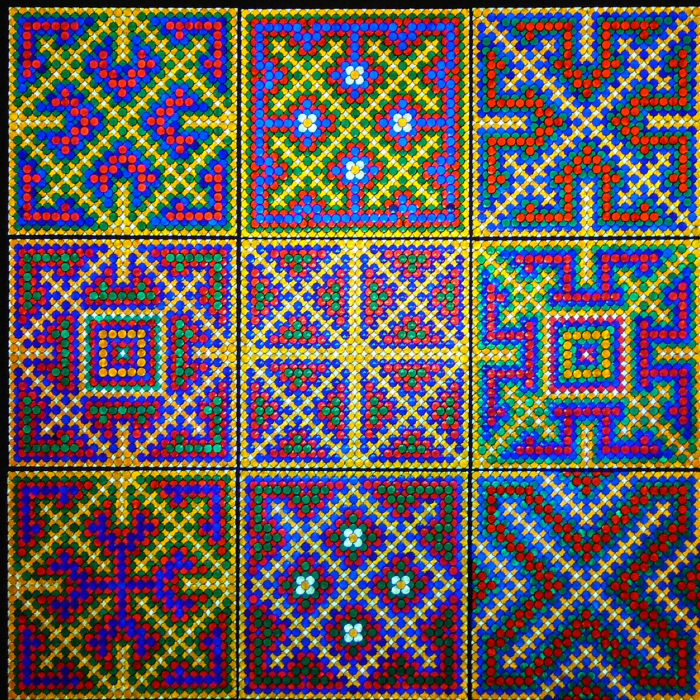
An Infinite Point In Time



The Visually Sensuous
and Emotionally Joyous Art of
RICHARD C. ELLIOTT



untitled neon, ca.1994
neon tube on metal cabinet, 48" x 48"



Meditation Series, Symbols of Radiance, series 24: 4, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20
1999 – reflectors on board, 9 panels @ 32" x 32" = 98" x 98"



An Infinite Point In Time

**The visually sensuous and emotionally joyous art
of Richard C. Elliott**

OPPOSITE:

The Kittitas, A High Mountain Valley from Vanderbilt Cut-Off, 1981
graphite on paper, 42" x 22"

(Elliott was drawing this work when he had an epiphany.)

This paper was presented
at the
Amby Edinger Gallery
February 24, 1999
Ellensburg, WA

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Into the Infinite: The Art of Richard C. Elliott
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Art that goes beyond the conventional comes from a deep well inside the artist's psyche. A defining experience or sudden insight can be the creative source that fills the well, an experience that leaves an indelible mark on the world view carried by the artist for a lifetime. It becomes the center around which visual expression revolves. My epiphany came as I was doing a landscape drawing of the Kittitas Valley. It was during the tenth session, out of an eventual hundred, from a freeway overlook. As I began to notate impressions of the valley floor onto a large piece of paper, I settled into a hypnotic state. This particular day, a gestalt experience of the presence of the living earth greeted me. In the deepest part of my being I felt the breath and pulse of the earth. Everything I perceived was alive and filled with consciousness. The light from the sun was very much a part of the experience, but the main focus was the profound sense

of the earth as alive, breathing, beating, and conscious of all entities encompassed within it. My human awareness was enveloped by this earth's awareness. All other aspects of the earth—rocks, mountains, trees, flowers, birds, all animals and plants, clouds, water and other humans—had their own consciousness and they, too, were a part of this earth awareness that I so profoundly encountered. As I looked down on our valley and saw the city of Ellensburg, the place where our daily lives played out, our mundane human concerns melted into triviality.

The energy I felt that day became the center of my artistic passion. I soon realized the way I was working, as an artist, could not capture these feelings. So, a year later, I set down my graphite and set off in a whole new direction. I really had no idea where I was going. My guide was this internal feeling, left from my day on the hill overlooking our valley. A new art form, with new ways of thinking about imagery, light, time, space, and the human drama emerged.

My inclination as an artist is to express myself using two dimensional illusion. In the early years, my art was traditional, coming from the observation of nature. After my epiphany, I understood that trying to express it by capturing an outer observation would not do it justice. I then set upon a journey to find a vocabulary capable of expressing an epiphany from the inside, how it felt. I do not consider the direction I developed superior to the way I was working before, but it is more effective in expressing what I now wish to say. For clarity, when referring to my current approach to art, I will speak of reflective *paintings*. Like any conventional painter, I am concerned with the creation of two dimensional illusion using pigment mixed in a medium, in my case, acrylic reflectors.

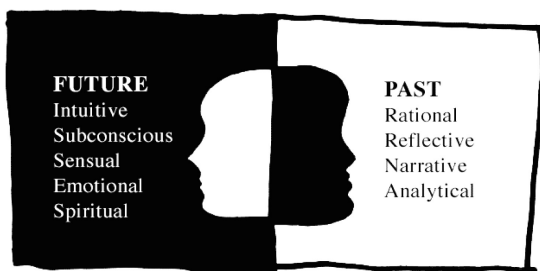
There are contradictions or tension between the ideas we hold about thought and its polar opposites, the sensual and emotionally joyous. In order to give credibility to the sensual, emotional, spiritual, intuitive, and subconscious, one must enter the world of the rational, reflective, and analytical to develop the forms and structures that will communicate the sensual, etc. One may experience an epiphany, an insight that lifts the veil of the mundane, but to develop the forms and structures that will communicate these states of direct revelation, one must re-enter the world of the mundane, manipulate the intellectual structures that we use to create illusions, and use these newly created mental frameworks in such a way that the energy and power of the original insight is re-released.

All visual expressions are contained within perimeters of mental structures. No matter how powerful the emotional or non-verbal experience may be, the visual expression of it depends on underlying ideas, a framework upon which these impressions are hung. Realism, the main form of art in Western cultures for the past 500 years, is a good example. Realism is based upon rules that govern the illusions of light, color, space, and compositional organization. During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, innovations which allow a broader range of expression have been added to these canons. What has driven this expansion is the rapidly changing relationship of the individual to life, society, and earth during this time. The old structures were inadequate when it came to expressing these new world views, so new structures were developed. All art made in Western societies today is compared to and evaluated in relationship to these ideas and canons.

As I began the process of finding a new form that would express the incredible living presence I had encountered that day, overlooking the Kittitas Valley, I knew of no existing forms of expression that I felt were sufficient to the task of capturing this energy. I realized that I would need to discover my own structure. In following my internal feelings, I allowed my intuition to lead. The system I developed to discover and create my canon was based on *intuitive groping*, like a blind man exploring a house for the first time. As I tried new ideas, I reflected on them, observing how successfully they captured my feelings. The process quickly evolved into a system of exploration. Intuition guided me while an analytical reflective side studied and made decisions that would help point the intuitive towards its next creative act. This volley back and forth between the unseen world (future, unknown, intuitive, emotional, spiritual, and unconscious) and the seen world (past, rational, reflective, verbal, and analytical) led to the development of my art style as it exists today. During this twenty year process, I slowly became more conscious of the underlying structures I was developing. In this talk, I will try to explain the thought systems supporting my visually sensuous and emotionally joyous work.

I would like to take a few minutes to develop a visual model. I see myself with two faces. One looks towards the future, the unknown world. This is the face of intuition. The other face looks into the past, the known world. This is the rational and analytical face. To become complete, we need to be aware of both faces, with constant interaction between the two.

Light defines the world. In Western art, light has been used in two main ways. First, it illuminates the painting.



This light exists outside of the bounds of the painting. Its function is to help the viewer perceive the image in a fixed manner. In Western art, the definition of a painting could be *a moment in time that never changes*. This moment is preserved by an arrangement of light-absorbing pigments. When the painting is well lit, the image perceived should always be the same. Creating an illusion of light in space and time is the second use of light in Western art. It is used as an object, another aspect of the picture. There is no real light present. Pigments create the illusion of light emanating from within the painting.

Light is a distinguishing component of reflective painting. The light expressed is not absorbing light, but lively light. The aliveness is imbedded into the very fabric of the piece. The “paint surface” is made with acrylic reflectors creating a living light surface, not an illusion of light. A light-active reflective surface operates quite differently from light-absorbing surfaces generally associated with two dimensional work. The source of the light radiating from the reflectors is outside the reflector painting, but its function is more than just illumination of the painting. It is the primary light source which is captured by the secondary light source (the reflectors) and sent out to the viewer, giving the impression that the painting is plugged in, internally lit. But since it is a secondary light source, it is in constant motion, depending upon the primary light source

and the activity of the viewer. A living light piece has a thousand faces.

One of the major aspects of the universe and our life in it is change. Everything is in a state of constant flux. Western approach to painting can only imply the fluid nature of nature by alluding to it. By transforming the surface of paintings from light-absorbing to light-active, one can simulate the fleeting and ever-changing character of the world. The transformation of a painting from “a moment in time that never changes” into a reflection of the constantly changing nature of the universe is a defining aspect of my work. A reflector painting is not one point in time, but an infinite point in time.

In traditional Western painting, the viewer is asked to be a spectator. One views the finished artwork from an acceptable distance, and the artwork tells him what to see or how to respond. He is not asked to participate in what he sees nor in creating what he sees. He is on the sidelines and the painting is the game. It is a view of life incorporating a schism between the action of life and the viewer. The knowledge is in the painting and not in the viewer.

In reflector art, the viewer becomes involved in creating his own encounter with the art work. The dialogue between the light-active reflectors, the primary light source, and the viewer is interactive. By the viewer’s movement, the perception of the painting changes. This dialogue puts the viewer in the center of the perceived universe. He is not a spectator but an active participant in what he experiences. The knowledge is in the viewer as well as in the painting.

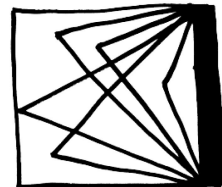
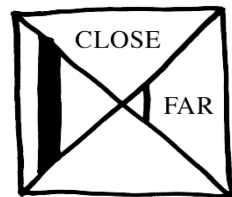
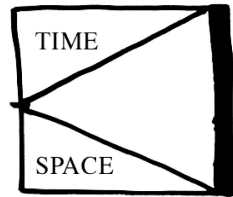
Color is light broken down into its parts. The eye perceives color according to the wavelength of the light. Light containing the full color spectrum is perceived as white. When no light is present, the eye perceives black. White light is broken down into basic colors, the primaries—red, yellow and blue when using paint; with projected light, however, yellow is replaced by green. As these primaries are combined in either light or pigment, all other colors are created. When I worked in paint, I purposely limited my colors to the primaries. Reflectors come in colors of red, amber, blue, green, and white, a limitation that fits my vision. Combining these primaries with each other and with the changing light conditions of the reflectors creates an expanded number of perceived colors. Primary colors also tend to be seen as light or dark; the lights are white and yellow, the darks blue and green. Red is the gray that moves between the light and dark. I compose using the contrasting nature of the primaries. Because the surface is light-active, the perception of the colors in relationship to each other also changes. At times blue or yellow will seem recessive, and, with a different light, they will come forward, seeming to be the closest to the viewer. This push and pull is one of the functions of color in my reflector paintings.

Dots are the principal units that compose my paintings. As the dots are organized on a field, the images emerge. Dots are also one of the fundamental expressions of energy. It signifies a point of radiance. From a distance, a galaxy becomes a dot. Upon closer inspection, the galaxy is composed of millions of stars, each its own dot. A solar system like ours, upon a closer look, is composed of not only a star, but also planets. Each planet is also a dot. As

we explore the earth we find that it is composed of many centered units of life. Each unit—a man, tree, fish, etc.—is a dot of radiant energy. A dot contains many smaller dots, and it is also a part of a larger dot. Points of radiant energy move up and down the scale, macro to the micro.

I organize dots on a field or grid. The basic principle of the grid is that every dot on it is equal to every other dot. No dot is superior or inferior to any other dot. They all express the same magnitude of individual radiance.

The illusion of space is of the utmost importance in Western painting and corresponds to the Western world view of time and space. To visualize a model of this illusion, imagine the picture plane as the present or the window into space. Space and time is like a cube that extends behind the picture plane. A horizon line defines the depth of space. Lines can be drawn from the four corners of the picture plane to a point on the horizon, forming a pyramid that represents time and space as it recedes into the distance. The present is closest to the viewer. As objects or events move further into this pyramid, the more distant in time or space they are perceived. For centuries this illusion was based on a single perspective. By the early twentieth century, in both physics and painting, this single point of view was becoming too restrictive. It did not allow for the ever-changing nature of the universe. The painter Paul Cezanne



started painting a landscape as if he was looking at it from different places. The Cubists expanded on this idea by constructing images from multiple perspective points. They began to express objects as they might look if one was walking around them. This expanded the understanding of time and space, but it was still based on the picture plane being the present, with time and space operating behind it.

By 1950, some of the Abstract Expressionists began painting the space behind the picture plane with infinite perspective points. Painters like Rothko and Pollock created a sense of infinite space, but it was still space that operated behind the plane. Artist James Turrell created the illusion of infinite space by actually filling a cube behind the picture plane with a field of colored light, a contemporary finale to the illusion of pictorial space started by the Italian Renaissance painters.

In the Post Modern era, painters are continuing in their efforts to make pictorial space flatter and flatter. Images are becoming more like pages from magazines, with the flatness of type attempting to eliminate the illusion of space altogether. But type, also a Renaissance invention, reflects the same linear world view of time and space depicted by the early Renaissance painters.

My organization of reflectors on a grid has a similarity to the field painters like Pollock and the flatness of Post Modern painting, but the intent is much different. I see the dots representing points of radiant energy that exist on a plane unrelated to the Western concept of linear time and space. The grid represents the eternal *now*, where events come and go. Events from the past or present are given equal location, none in front of or behind another. Time and space is a radiant unfolding, in which past events, as

well as events in the future, are contained in the now. It is much like the Hopi concept of the *Long Body*. This concept suggests that the body contains all that happens in a lifetime. An old or middle-aged person's body contains experience from childhood through old age and beyond. A child's body contains knowing of the future. The now is the unfolding of those experiences. All humans are part of the Infinite and the Infinite is a part of all humans. The Infinite is contained in each Long Body.

An individual's life is encircled by a wall of the mundane, the personal events that define the individual as an individual, but the individual is connected to all other humans through the *Infinite Self*. This is the self that was present 10,000 years ago, the self that incarnates each body today, the self that will be here 10,000 years from now. The Infinite Self is a part of the concept of simultaneous time and space. It's not that time happens all at once or that space occupies all of the same location. It's that they are a part of the grid of the infinite now, wherein all events are interconnected and related. Linear concepts of time and space are Western mental constructs. They work to explain some aspects of reality but fail miserably with others. Reality is divided into the seen and unseen worlds. The seen world is the world of the physical, rational, reflective, and analytical. The unseen world is the world of spiritual, the subconscious, emotional, intuitive, and symbolic. The now is the seen and the unseen woven together. Western linear thinking has difficulty penetrating the unseen world.

Individual consciousness is separate from, but also a part of, a greater consciousness. There are many layers of consciousness; humans, plants, and animals all have their own conscious planes. The earth's consciousness contains and interacts with all of the conscious beings within her.

In fact, all radiant points (solar systems to rocks) have awareness, and each type represents a conscious plane. Simultaneous thought, space, and time allows for one radiant point of consciousness to communicate directly with any other point. This is done not in the world of the mundane, but in the world of the epiphany, direct revelation, gestalt, and intuitive insight. Much of our life is spent in the world of the mundane. Our mental constructs generally limit our access to an expanded awareness. We all experience times of incredible connection to the infinite but are usually unable to articulate them, express them, or share them with others.

The reflective grid represents a plane of the infinite now. It does create an illusion of space. But, instead of operating behind the picture plane, as in the Western illusion of space, it operates in front of the plane, moving forward towards the viewer. As light interacts with the reflectors and with the push and pull of the colors, an interactive pulsating space is experienced.



The imagery that I put on the reflective grid is concerned with the elemental nature of energy. My imagery is the symbolic representations of the fundamental patterns of energy. The most basic patterns that energy is composed of are the dot, the wave form, radiating concentric circles, radiating spikes (like an asterisk), and the spiral. All patterns of the cosmos are combinations of these forms. These patterns compose all things in the universe, includ-

ing our bodies. I use the word symbolic, for I see these forms acting on the human psyche in an archetypal manner, imbedded into the very nature of our consciousness.

I began organizing these symbols into center-orientated symmetrical geometric patterns. During the past 18 years of study I have discovered many similarities between my patterns and the patterns of cultures as diverse as American Indian, Amish, African, Islamic, Central and South American, Chinese, Japanese, Southeast Asian, Indian, and numerous others. The more I have explored geometric patterning, the more I have become convinced that there is a universal visual language that transcends time and place. Similarities between patterns from diverse cultures are more striking than their differences. This has led me to believe that geometric patterns are an intuitive universal language that is archetypal and bridges the communication barrier in a way that is impossible in either written or spoken languages.

Often my geometric patterns are perceived as mathematically and scientifically derived. Math is the language developed by the observation of nature. Math's purpose is to describe it and to measure it. In its most basic forms, math describes the fundamental patterns of nature. These patterns are arrived at by a conscious, rational, reflective, and analytical process. My geometric patterns and much of the pattern work in other cultures emerges from the intuitive process. Some, like the Gothic and the Islamic, are a combination of both the intuitive and analytical. The end results are surprisingly similar.

Meditating on the incredible similarities of geometric patterns from global-wide cultures, I realized the unifying factor is a deep spiritual connection to a living

presence. The Tibetan Buddhist mandala, the Gothic rose window, Islamic tile patterns, and many folk traditions emerge out of a culture's visual expression of their mystical connections. In addition to their connection to spirituality, I discovered they were often composed of primary colors and light-active materials. These geometric patterns act as doors, windows, and bridges, connecting the individual and group to the unseen world. These patterns act on us instinctually through the symbolic archetypal portal. They act like tuning forks setting up a resonating vibration that brings our soul into its harmonic. Our response to these geometric harmonics is not an analytical act. Our body responds to them organically. Geometric patterning is the universal language of the mystics. Mysticism is about the transcendence of the mundane world, about the transcendence of Western understanding of time and space, and about the transcendence of the barriers between the individual and the infinite.

These patterns do, at times, take on a meaning of signage, with specific meaning that can override the symbolic meaning. The swastika is a case in point. Since these are such basic and important patterns, in time the sign slips away and the archetypal meaning reemerges.

I see myself very much a product of Western society. I came to my stylistic understanding not from following a cultural tradition, such as a Turkish carpet-maker might, but from a process of distancing and reflecting on the world. I feel that I live in a culture that has no traditions that reconnect an individual to the earth and one's ancestors, such as a Hopi Indian would have. As an artist, I continue to build on the Western canon of art that began in the

Renaissance. The new ideas I have developed that enable me to express my epiphany are part of the tradition of the Modernist. Much of the abstraction that has been created in the past 90 years was developed to express spiritual and mystical feelings. My set of intellectual structures are built on top of theirs. What amazes me most about the framework underlying my art is not the similarities to the Modern abstractionist, but the similarities to traditional designs from global-wide cultures. I feel like I have stumbled into something that brings Western thought full circle, back to the source of ancient imagery. I think of the Ouroboros, the snake that swallows his tail, thus completing a circle.

We, in the West, have struggled through periods of alienation and separation from life and the world. Recently science has declared the world alive, as expressed in the Gaia theory. Chaos theory has allowed us to develop a mathematics that incorporates the irrational. We find that which seems random is actually a part of a unified and organized system. We are beginning to understand that if we do not take responsibility to live in a harmonious way with the rest of the world, humans will perish. And we are finally awakening to the fact that the seen world—the world that we can observe, measure, and analyze—is only half of the universe. The unseen world of spirits, premonitions, emotions, and archetypes is equally as real, just harder to see.

Over a 20-year period, these ideas have emerged from my artwork. My current work is arranged in reflector grids of 15 x 15 up to 36 x 36. I use two sizes of reflectors, 1" and 3". By offsetting them in layers, the imagery gains complexity. The large reflector pieces are done in sizes of 4' x 4', 5' x 5', 6¹/₂' x 6¹/₂', 8' x 8', and 10' x 10', using the

3" reflectors as the foundation of the grid. I overlay them with the 1" reflectors, adding another layer of complexity. The smaller reflector pieces are structural studies of basic geometric patterns. When these patterns are done in 3" reflectors, the 1" reflectors that are laid over the basic pattern expand the depth and breadth of the pattern. Since there is less information to work with in the smaller pieces, they force discipline. The larger pieces allow complex explorations of the patterns inherent in the smaller ones.

Getting to this current body of work has been a long evolutionary unfolding. Dots and primary colors were used within the first year of the development of this style. I also did a series of 127 drawings in black and white. These line/dot drawings led to a deep exploration of geometric patterns that became the basis of my imagery. During this time, I painted on rocks and wooden poles as well as two dimensional surfaces. I first started using reflectors because they delighted me. I began by nailing hundreds of them on posts and fences around my house. In time, they were integrated into my paintings on canvas. By 1987, I made a connection with Sate-Lite in Niles, Illinois, the largest reflector manufacturer in the US. Initially, I combined reflectors with glitter, creating paintings that were reflective and refractive. 11 years ago, I conceived the idea of layered reflector paintings and was awarded a US patent.

This year I discovered a new determination and clarity of vision that drives my current body of work. I know that it is a direction I could explore for many years. The perimeters setting this style allow an investigation into the breadth and depth of the ideas and thoughts that impregnate this work.

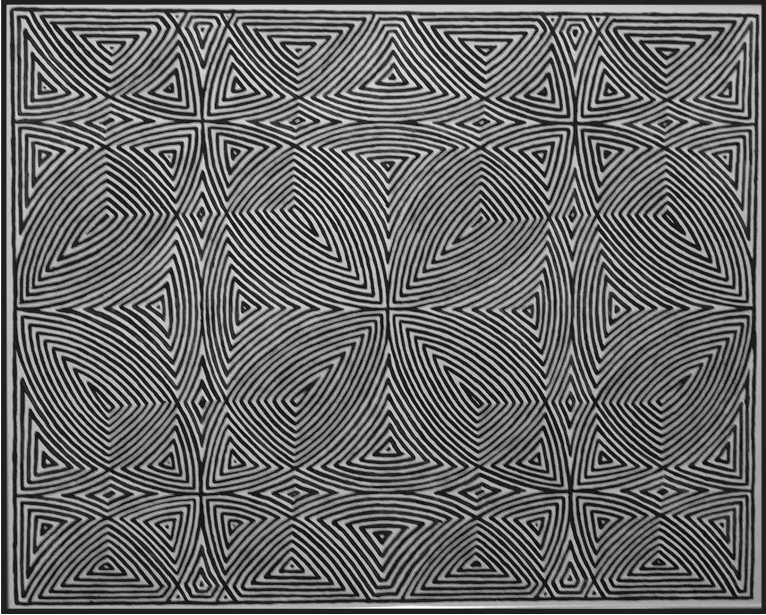
The understanding of time and space in the West has led to linear thinking. Single-point perspective is a perfect visible

expression of a linear mental structure. It represents events that have happened in the past as more distant from the viewer, thus creating a hierarchy of importance. That which is closest to the viewer is thought of as most important. This supports the idea of progress, that we are moving towards an ever-emerging perfect world. It gives the West a sense of superiority. What is happening in our time and space, since it is closest to the picture plane of the now, must be what is important. It makes less of all other human, plant, and animal action, since they are locked into activity that we have long since evolved beyond. This belief that our consciousness is superior is the ultimate expression of the West's alienation from the presence of the living world. When one is connected to the infinite self, the boundaries creating the illusion of superiority are dissolved. We of Western heritage are not superior to, nor inferior to, other human life. We are just a part of the grand family of living forms contained within this incredible thing we call Gaia, our planet, our home.

In some ways it doesn't matter if the ideas that I have shared with you are verifiable or not. What's important is that I take them seriously enough to create this body of work. The ubiquitous nature of geometric patterning is overwhelming. But what is amazing is the fact that Western fine art has ignored this form of visual expression as a source for its inspiration. My contribution to art is to bring the universal language of symbol, embedded in geometric patterning, back into the world of Western art thinking. If geometric patterning is a universal visual language that unites all humans in a mystical grid, causing the West to rediscover this would be gratifying. I envision a time when geometric patterning is as much a part of expression in Western painting as realism. It would speak about a society that is reconnecting with itself, becoming whole.

I see myself as a trail blazer. All artists pursue a trail. Realism is the widest trail for artists of the Western tradition. There are smaller trails like Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism and its many Post Modern variations, Cubism, Impressionism, etc. At the beginning of my trail, I encountered a lot of brush. My process of intuitive groping was like cutting brush in a random zig-zag manner. Occasionally I came across a thinning of the brush, which made me think that it was a previously used trail. I realized that I never encountered any trees. As I my trail grew in depth and breadth, I understood that I was on an ancient trail, one that had carried immense traffic at one time. I was rediscovering a trail that much of humanity has traveled. For some reason, Western society had turned its back on this road, that is why there is so much brush that needs to be cleared.

An epiphany is an **Oh Wow** experience, an experience that slices through the world of the commonplace and allows one to encounter the infinite. My work strives to emulate the **Oh Wow**. It doesn't matter if it is a big **OH WOW** or a small **oh wow**. If the work can inspire and delight, touch the emotion of joy, then it is doing its job. That day, twenty years ago, when I was drawing on the hill, I experienced the valley through all my senses. It was a complete cognitive experience. The rational side that separates me from what I encounter was totally dissolved. It became reconnected not only with my senses and what they sensed, but also with the mysterious sides of my psyche, my subconscious, intuitive, symbolic, and emotional selves. This gestalt experience—the **Oh Wow**—is what my reflective paintings strive to capture and to communicate.



untitled (Primal Op), 2006
oil on canvas, 24" x 30"



Vibrational Field Painting #13, 2008
computer image, size variable



Feathered Serpent, 1987
reflectors and glitter on canvas, 54" x 54"



Richard C. Elliott

Pacific Northwest artist Richard C. “Dick” Elliott is best known for his large and colorful art made out of plastic reflectors. He wanted these works to “inspire and delight” the viewer and communicate the joy of his own “Oh Wow!” experience which inspired them.

He arrived at the use of this unconventional artistic medium in a roundabout way. Born in Portland, Oregon, Dick studied Fine Art at Central Washington University in Ellensburg. He met and married fellow artist Jane Orleman there, and they made Ellensburg their home. (Their house, Dick & Jane’s Spot, has since become a local landmark because of its eclectic, eccentric, often whimsical outdoor art.) Dick’s art at this time was representational, precise, and detailed; his medium of choice was graphite on paper.

Then, in the early 1980s, Dick had an epiphany. It changed the way he looked at the world—and also the way he represented it in his art. His work now reflected his personal understanding of time, space, and human perception. He explored symbols and patterns, creating extensive series, variations on a theme. Gone were graphite and paper; now he worked in glitter, reflectors, neon tubes, and other “light-active” materials. No longer static, fixed objects, Dick’s paintings exude “lively light,” inviting the viewer to participate, not just look.

Always a prolific artist, Dick quickened his pace after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in September of 2007; by the time of his death in November of 2008, he had created more than 100 new works. His last bodies of work, *Vibrational Field Paintings* and *Labyrinth*, were executed entirely on computer.

Dick Elliott’s 1999 essay “An Infinite Point in Time” discusses his epiphany of 18 years before and explores the aesthetic goals and motivations which he attempted to give voice through his art.