

# Arturo Alonzo Sandoval

**A RETROSPECTIVE**

University of Kentucky Art Museum  
Lexington, Kentucky



# Arturo Alonzo Sandoval: WEAVING LIGHT AND AIR

Arturo Alonzo Sandoval was born to the rhythm of the loom: his mother wove sixty blankets while her pregnancy lasted.<sup>1</sup> Several uncles and his grandfather were also active as weavers in the village of Cordova at the time of his birth (February 1, 1942) in Española, New Mexico. He traces his descendants to the Spanish and the now extinct Native American Tano peoples. Like his ancestors, Sandoval discovered his fate in a vision: while in graduate school in 1965, he had a “spiritual” experience late one night working in the California State University Art Department’s weaving studio. “It was strange,” he recalled, “I heard a voice that said that weaving would be important to me. I turned around, and there was no one there. I figured it must have been my grandpa or an uncle or somebody from my past who was a weaver.”<sup>2</sup>

But Sandoval did not come immediately to weaving out of family tradition. He was raised for part of his childhood in a Mexican American barrio in Los Angeles and still thinks of himself ethnically as a Mexican

American, despite his Spanish and Native American blood.<sup>3</sup> He studied mechanical engineering and business administration before discovering the worlds of interior design, surface design, and, ultimately, weaving in art classes at college. After graduation, he served in the Navy as assistant administrative officer to the chief engineer on the USS Kitty Hawk and then as special services officer on the naval base in Yokusuka, Japan, where he designed graphics and taught crafts. Back in California, he resumed his studies, entering the master’s program at California State College in Los Angeles and specializing in on-loom woven sculptural forms that incorporated industrial materials (such as Lurex) and animal hair.

In his M.F.A. work at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan and in the years that followed, Sandoval used

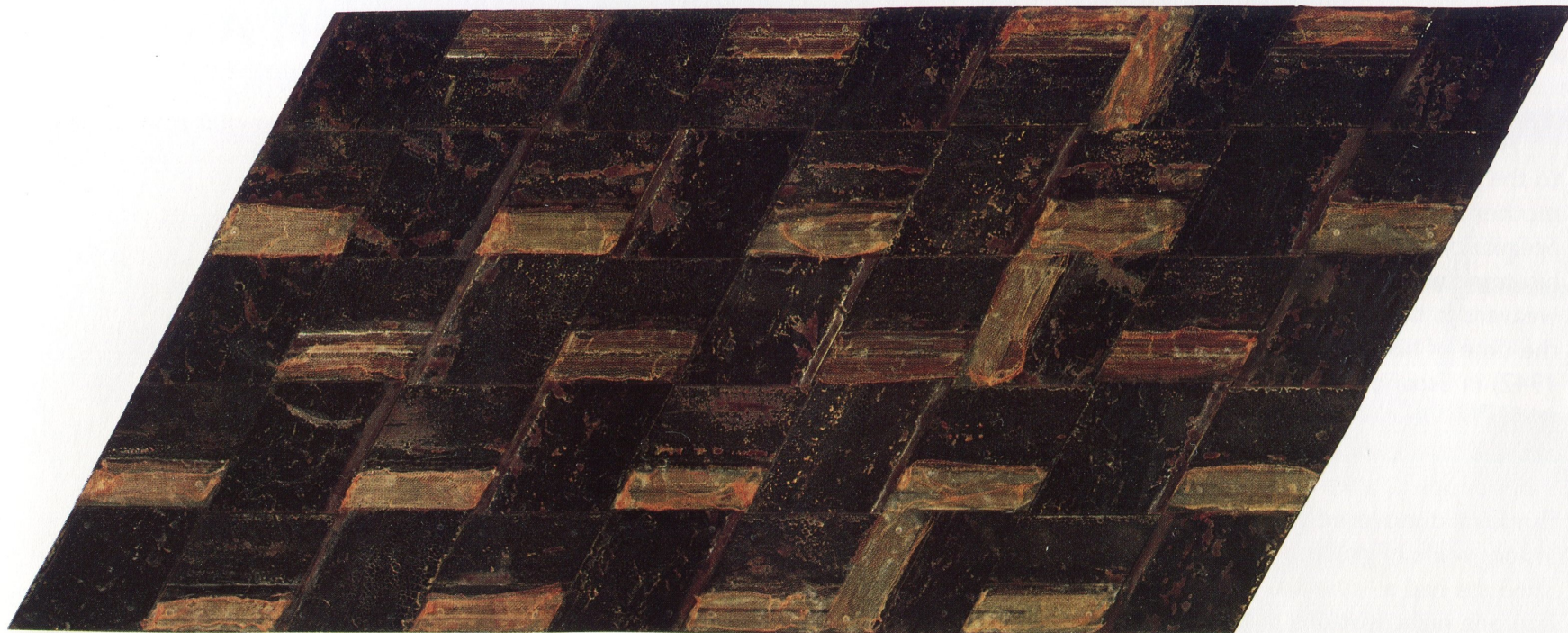
*Massed Clouds*, 1973-1988

Machine stitched vinyl, netting, Mylar, and threads, with paint and between acrylic panels and on a metal stand, 48 x 24 x 3"

Courtesy of Linda Schwartz Gallery, Lexington, KY.







*Kentucky Image: Rhombus*, 1981

Interlaced and riveted leaded tin, metallic pencil, netting, and rivets, sealed with polymer medium, approximately 40 x 90"

Collection of James T. Parker, Jr., Montclair, NJ.

Native American basket making techniques to realize subtle and sometimes abstruse concepts.<sup>4</sup> As he put it, he was "working into [his] Indian heritage, wrapping, coiling, twining, and knotting."<sup>5</sup> In his mummy-like *Ramses* works of the early 1970s, the woven elements were tightly encased in feathers or fur.

By 1973, the emphasis had shifted from death and metamorphosis to transcendence with his *Escape Route Series*, cloud pieces in which ladders reach up to clouds of lustrous, loom-woven high-tech fibers suspended from the ceiling. These, and a work titled *Canned Clouds in Sky Sauce* (1973) in which crocheted

white cloud forms are nestled in a gold-plated sardine can, are prophetic, literal manifestations of a lifelong fascination with clouds and the sky that holds them.<sup>6</sup>

Why an artist chooses so difficult a task as rendering the most ephemeral natural phenomena in the most physical of art mediums is not a question one can ask. Significant art is never made by taking the easy path. Then, too, ever since Impressionism, time consciousness has been an important pictorial factor,





*Pond with Scum*, 1976-1978

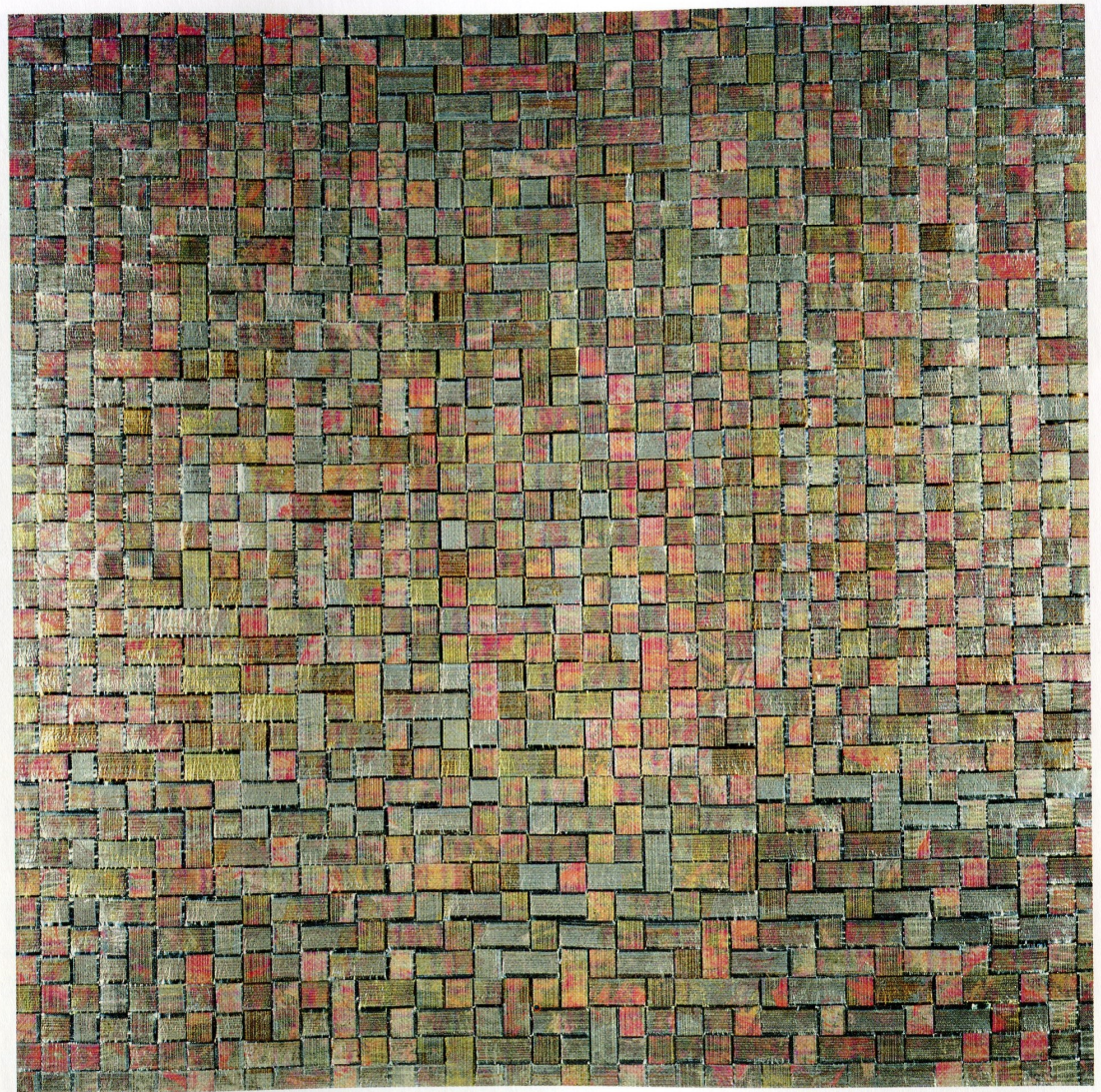
Machine stitched and interlaced plastic, Mylar, paint, colored threads, netting, and velcro, 110 x 111"  
 Courtesy of Linda Schwartz Gallery, Lexington, KY.

and how to manifest it is one of art's most pressing problems. Once Sandoval liberated himself from the limitations of the loom and began machine stitching and interlacing his elements, he was literally layering time into the work.<sup>7</sup> By using Mylar and other reflective and transparent materials, subtle color shifts occur with every movement of the viewer's eye, echoing the sky's constant permutations of light and shadow. Just as you cannot capture the fleeting moments of sky activity, neither can you see Sandoval's *Massed Clouds* (1973-88) exactly the same way twice—you will never be in the same spot at the same time again. Having light filter between the layers of the piece, as it does here and in other three dimensional works, adds even more temporal complexity, the effect being ever elusive—something like a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't holographic credit card logo.

*Sky Ceiling* (1975) seems like a grand restatement of the *Escape Route* theme minus the ladder, but the geometricization and optical effects in *Sky Image No. 1* (1977), Sandoval's woven collage of interlaced and machine-stitched Mylar and netting, points in the main direction he was heading in 1974, after he began teaching at



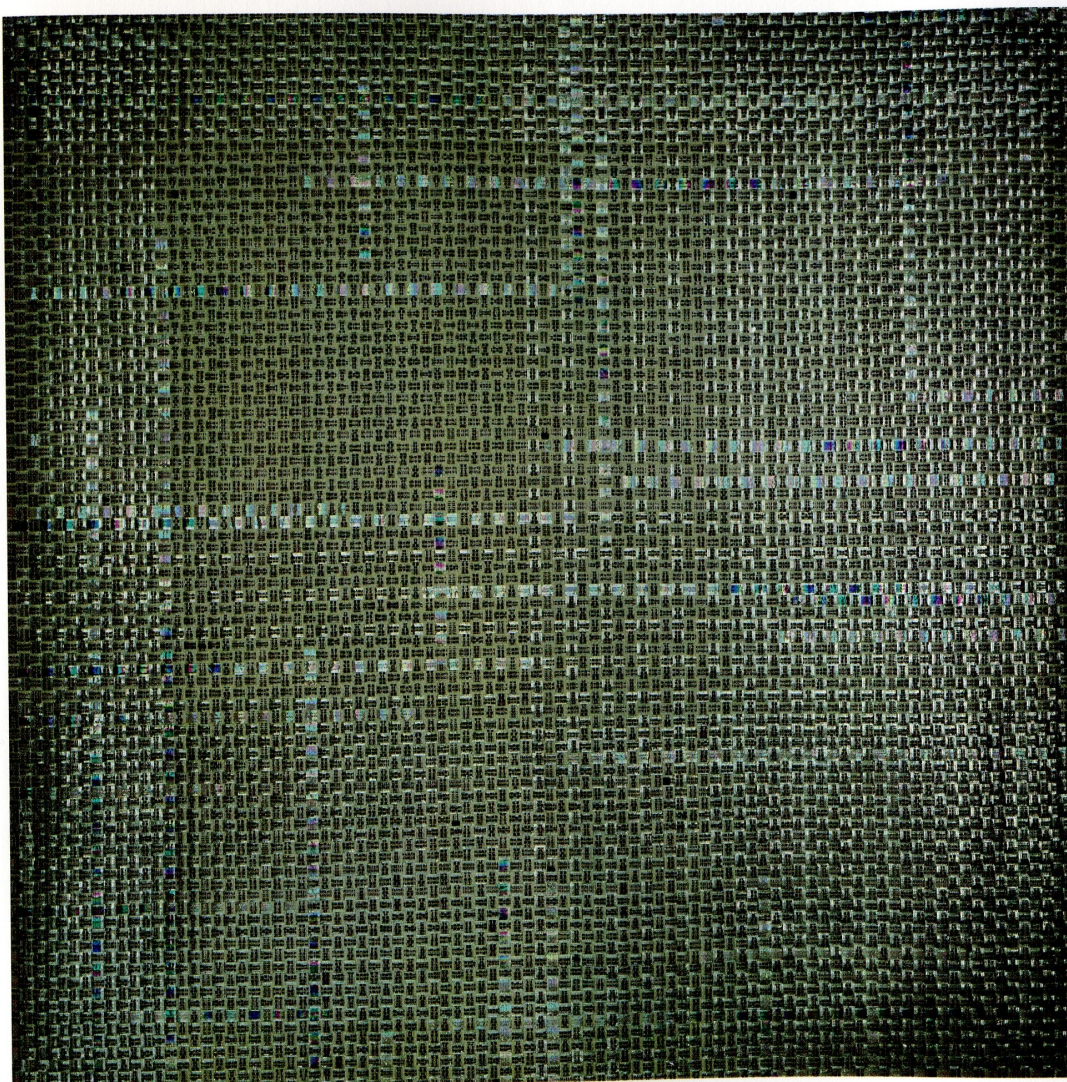
the University of Kentucky in Lexington.<sup>8</sup> Imagery is layered within the dominant grid of the *Kentucky Image Series* (1976-81), the *Cityscapes* (1975-78), and the *Pond Series* (1976-81). It changes with the viewer's movements and the changing fall of light on the component sections. Sandoval's *Kentucky Image Series* derived from the geometry of the Kentucky landscape, its neatly shaped and variously textured fields, ponds, and farm structures, as well as its particular kind of clouded skies. "One of the most beautiful things about the Midwest," Sandoval has said, "is the layering of clouds in a way I never saw on the West Coast."<sup>9</sup> All of these same elements are imagined to be reflected on the water's surface in his *Pond Series*. Later works, such as *Kentucky Image: Rhombus* (1981), are not only images of the beautiful, weathered barn roofs he saw against Kentucky skies and reflected in its ponds, but were literally made out of the leaded tin roofing of Kentucky tobacco barns, cut, interlaced, and riveted together. *Pond with Scum* (1976-78) was a response to the declaration of Lake Erie's "death" by chemical pollutants in the mid-1970s. Ironically, the high-tech materials Sandoval uses are



*Sky Grid*, 1976

Machine stitched Mylar, plastic paint, netting, and colored threads, fabric backed, 84 x 84"  
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. David Cash, Lexington, KY.





*Cityscape No. 2, 1976*  
Machine stitched and interlaced paper, 16mm microfilm, Lurex, Mylar, and threads, coated in polymer medium, 85 1/2 x 85 1/2"  
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Jack Lenor Larsen.  
Photograph © 1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

often polyester-based oil derivatives which are or suggest pollutants themselves and which produce beautiful color effects, like iridescent oil on water.

Sandoval's use of film strips and microfilm began in the mid-1970s with his *Cityscape Series*. Such materials combined translucency and imagery, and he found them easy to sew and layer. The film itself is structurally rectilinear and austere, but the images within the frames can be anything, and are often human beings. Thus they make an ideal visual metaphor for the city in which millions of people are locked into grids, ever diminishing from the overall layout of the city down to the glorified closets its inhabitants call home. Reflections within the grid create the aura of a great city's walls of mirrored glass reflecting other buildings and the activity in the sky. Like experiencing close-up aerial views of midtown Manhattan from a Cessna banking in a U-turn at the Queensboro Bridge to avoid the flight path to LaGuardia, one seems to slide by myriad repetitive windows, some glinting in the sun.

During the first half of the 1980s, Sandoval explored a series of formal

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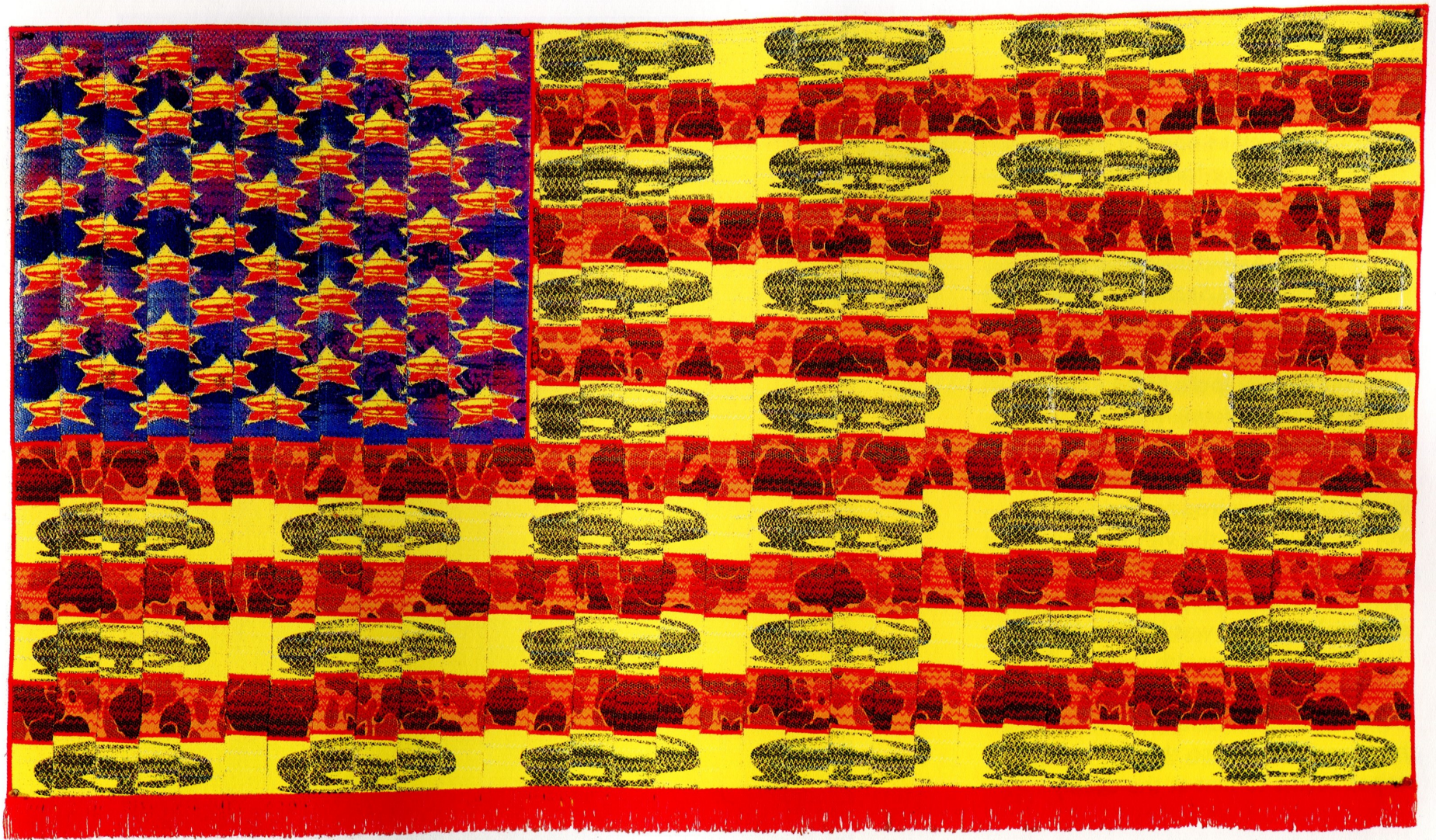


*Spatial Grid No. 3, 1981*

Interlaced Mylar, diffraction grating, 35mm film, 70mm leader film, netting, and eyelets, coated in polymer medium and edged with canvas, 49 7/8 x 87"

Courtesy of Linda Schwartz Gallery, Lexington, KY.





*Post-Nuclear Flag No. 2*, 1989

Machine stitched, embroidered and pieced nylon and poly/cotton fabrics, colored acetate transparencies, colored threads, rayon fringe/cord, painted and fabric backed, with eyelets, 37 x 57"

Courtesy of Linda Schwartz Gallery, Lexington, KY.



problems—such as opening up the woven grid to free-form structural interlacing—and situations peculiar to the fiber medium, like hanging, folding, and draping. As wonderful as the results were in his *Spatial Grid Series* and the *Draped Grid Series*, he began to tire of making purely self-referential art. Listening to Billy Joel's *Nylon Curtain* with its harsh indictment of the horrors that the seemingly meaningless exercise in Vietnam did to human beings, Sandoval was inspired to begin adding words and images the viewer could read to his work. The artist's "tribute" to America's inordinately powerful military industrial complex was his *Post-Nuclear Flag Series*. The greenish yellow of *Post-Nuclear Flag No. 2* (1989) reminds one of the eerie light of nuclear blasts, while the orange shading to the camouflage stripes seems to hint at the deadly

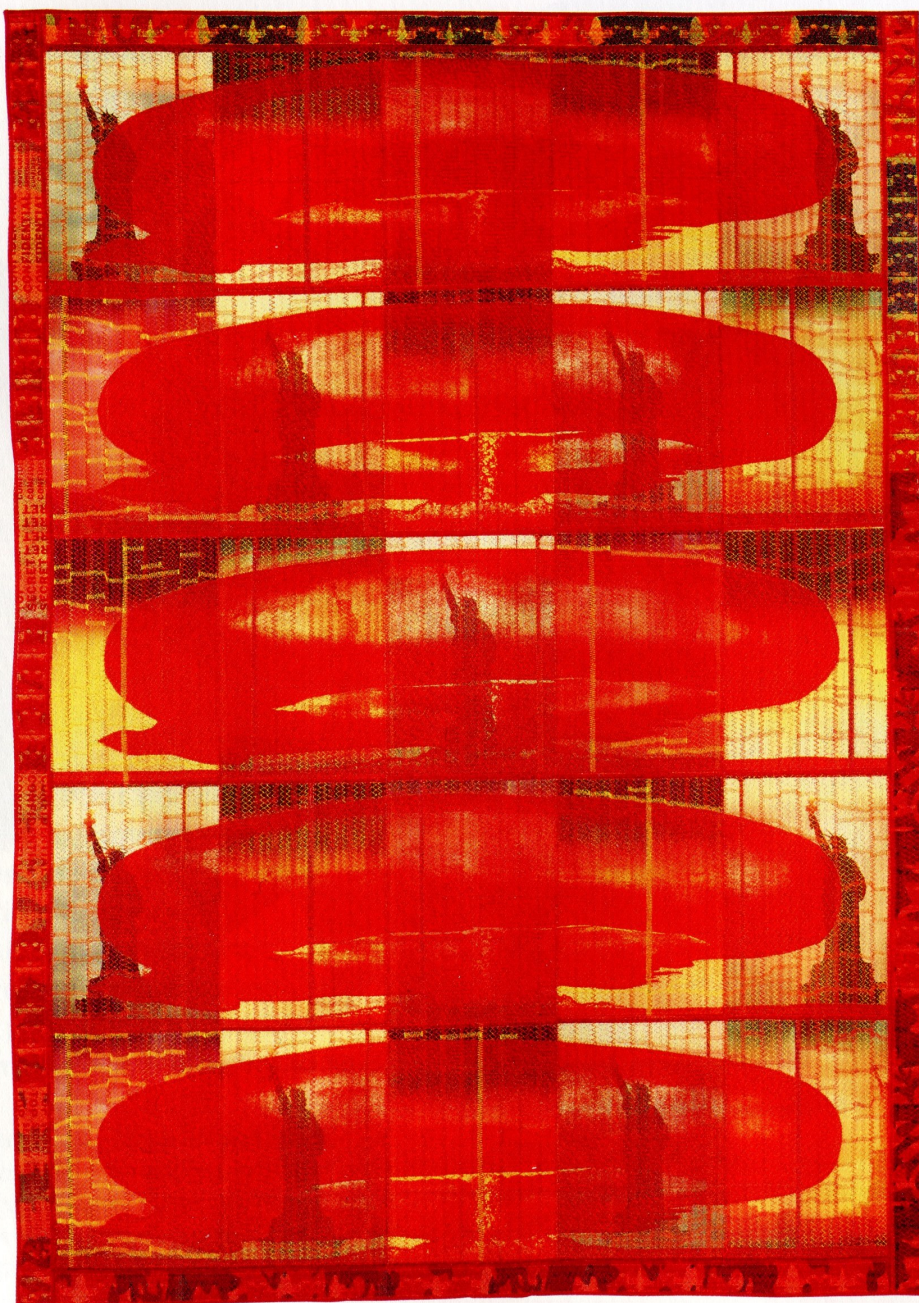
*Flag for the Americas*, 1992

Machine stitched and embroidered cotton, netting, braid, colored threads, and trim, painted and with velcro, 74 x 50"

Collection of the Florida Gulf Coast Art Center, Belleair, FL.







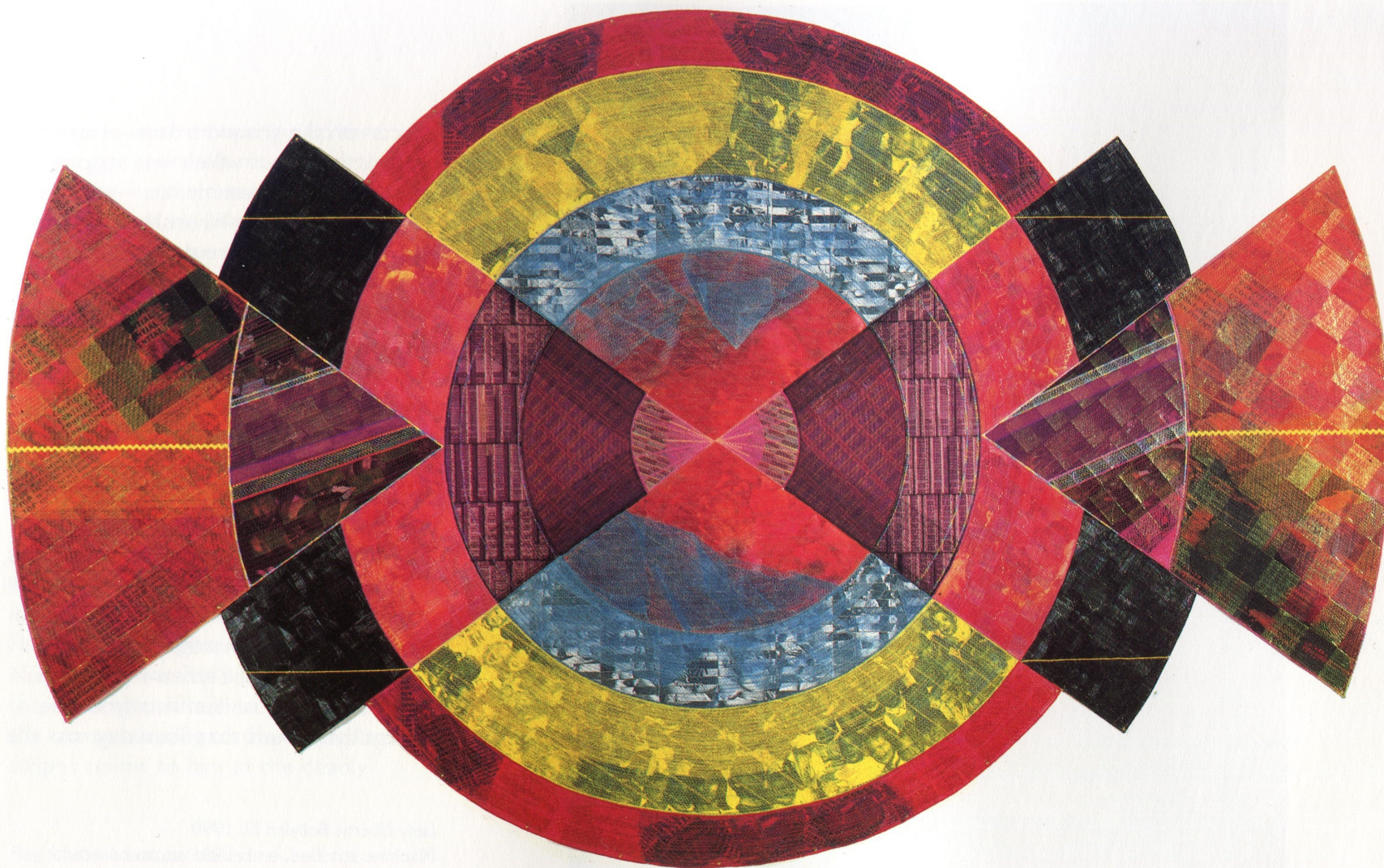
effects on the ground troops of agent orange, the use of which was so long denied by the government.

Secrecy and lies have shrouded the entire nuclear warfare development from the outset. As Sandoval recalled, "I grew up and was around right after the bomb was dropped, and every time there was a new test, it was going to be ten times greater than Hiroshima. I kept wondering what was going to be next. We lived with this fear of nuclear holocaust."<sup>10</sup> Early governmental advice included wearing sunglasses and long-sleeved shirts to protect one's arms in case of an A-Bomb attack, and either building bomb shelters or moving to the country. Throughout the 1950s, the government issued a stream of denials about the potential ill effects from the radioactive clouds that floated across the

*Lady Liberty: Babylon III, 1990*

Machine stitched, embroidered, and pieced Cibachromes, acetate transparencies, webbing, netting, colored thread, metallic trim, and fabric, fabric backed and with velcro, 87 x 61"  
 Courtesy of Linda Schwartz Gallery,  
 Lexington, KY.





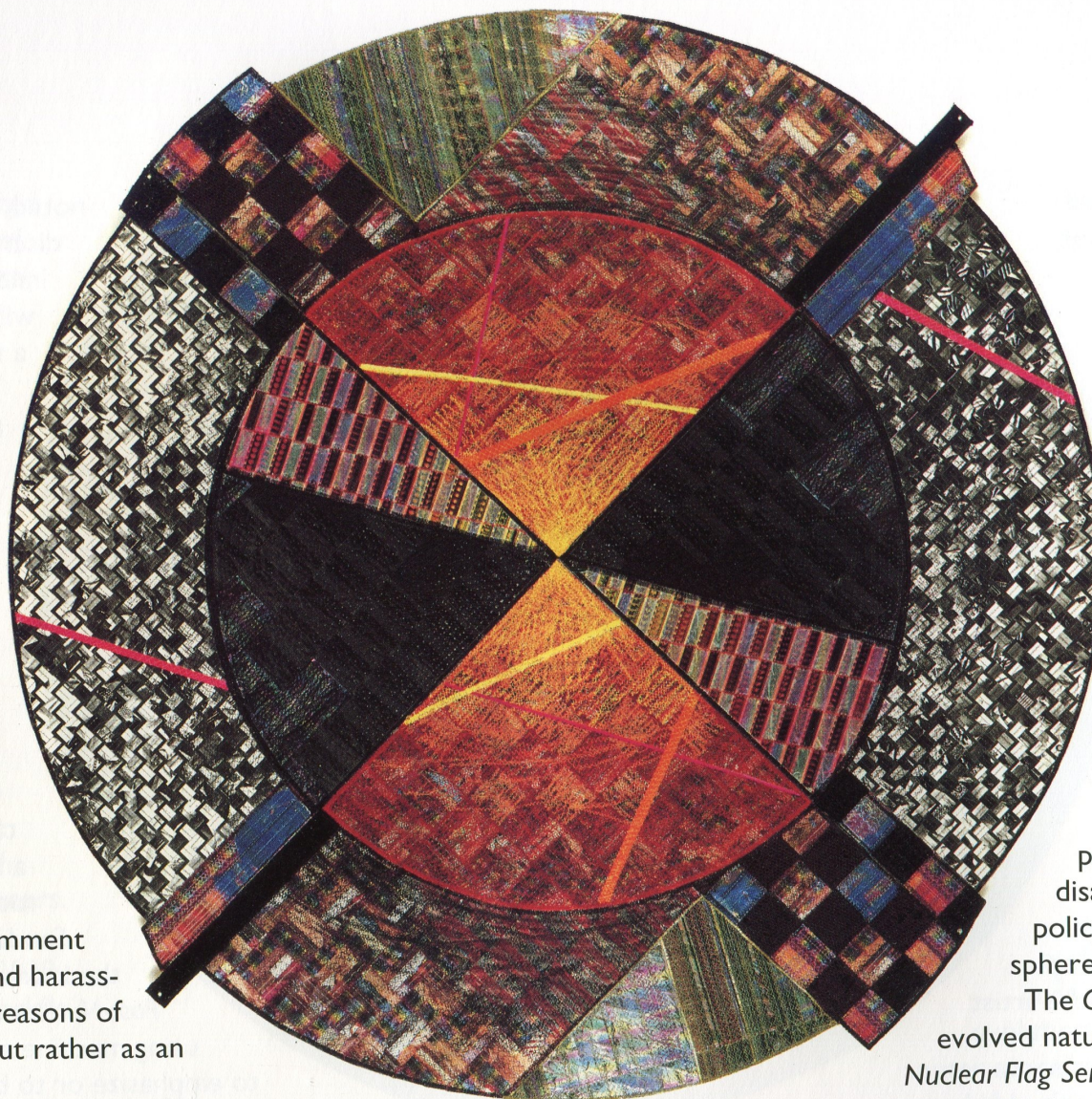
*Ground Zero No. 10 (Target Babylon IV), 1989*

Machine stitched, embroidered, interlaced and pieced film, 16mm color microfilm, , Mylar, colored acetates/  
copy art on rag paper, netting and colored threads, painted, fabric backed, and with eyelets, 96 x 156"  
Courtesy of Linda Schwartz Gallery, Lexington, KY.



United States after every nuclear test in the desert. These effects are still being denied.

Although he acknowledges a formal debt to Jasper Johns (for his early use of the flag in art) and Robert Rauschenberg (for his use of the Statue of Liberty), Sandoval maintains that his interest in patriotic imagery is not to comment on the repression and harassment of people for reasons of sexual preference, but rather as an



*Ground Zero No. 6 (Target Babylon I)*, 1987

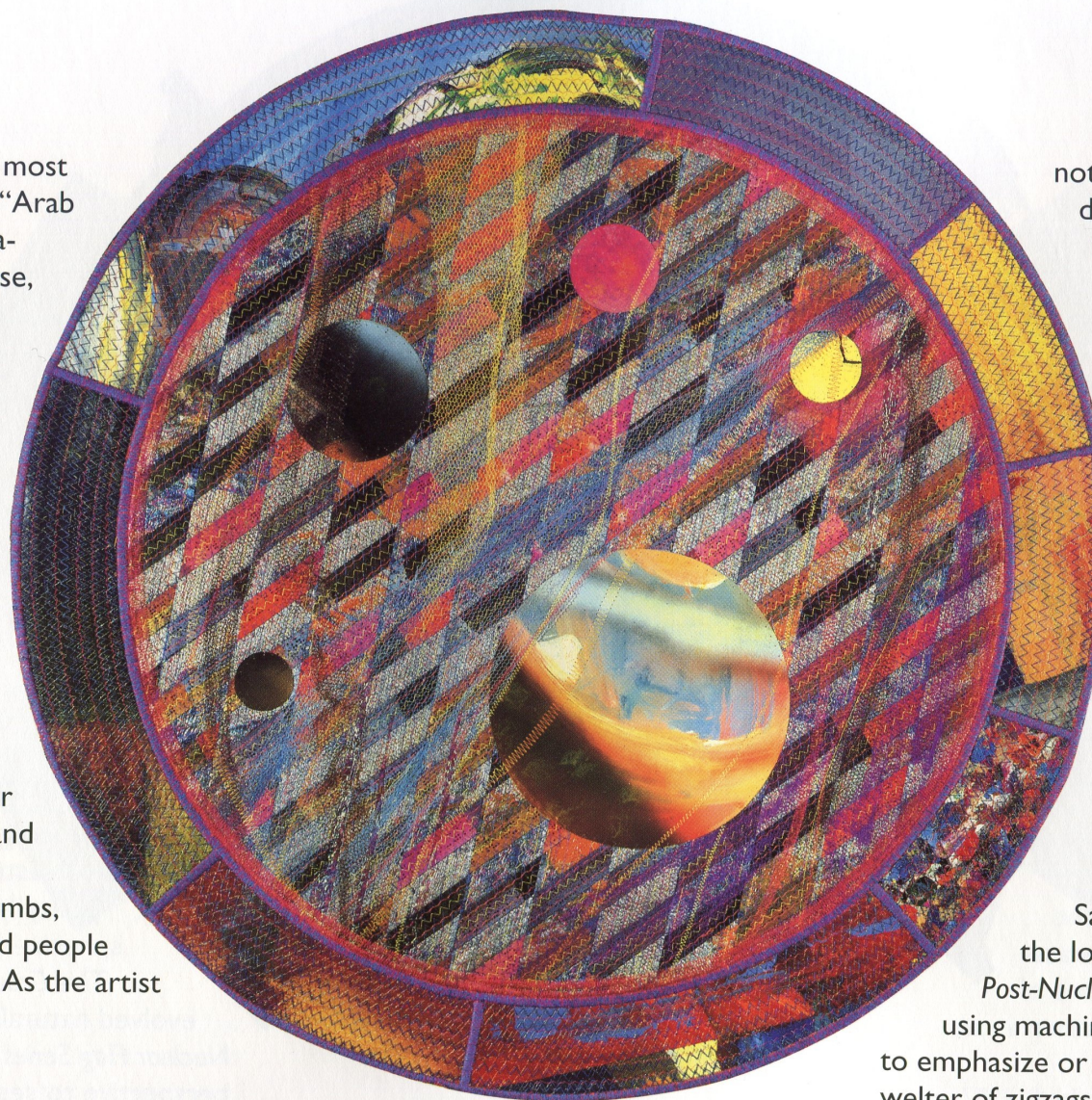
Machine stitched, embroidered, interlaced and pieced film, 70mm leader film, Mylar, copy art on acetate/rag paper, magazine paper, 35mm film, netting, and colored threads, painted, fabric backed, and with eyelets, 53 x 53" Collection of Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI. Gift of the artist. Photograph: Precision Color, Plymouth, MI.

ironic statement directed at the government's foreign policies. *Flag for the Americas* (1992), from the *Columbus Flag Series*, features stars falling from a field of green to sprinkle the stripes, which are black and white bands of skeletons alternating with reds and greens. It is a poignant criticism of disastrous U.S. foreign policy in our own hemisphere.

The *Ground Zero Series* evolved naturally out of the *Post-Nuclear Flag Series* as the artist shifted perspective to see the earth as a target. No longer a potential outcome from a Cold War between two massive powers, the nuclear threat can come from anywhere and target any place on



earth. Assuming the most likely attack from an “Arab Menace” with a fundamentalist religious base, the target will be the new Babylon—New York and perhaps other major American cities—a concept predicted by Nostradamus in the sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup> *Ground Zero No. 10 (Target Babylon IV)* (1989) includes images photocopied onto acetates and rag paper as well as interlaced and pieced film imagery, portraying nuclear bombs, hooded terrorists, and people of all ages and types. As the artist



*Millennium Portal:*

*New Heaven and Earth No. 1*, 1994

Machine stitched, embroidered, and interlaced Mylar, rag-punched computer paper, colored threads, and painted fabric, fabric backed, mounted on masonite, 36 x 36"

Collection of Duane Van Horn, Lexington, KY.

noted, a bomb does not discriminate: “. . . the innocent and the wicked will all be in rapture in a nuclear holocaust.”<sup>12</sup> Willem de Kooning alluded to this nearly a half century ago when he said that the light of the atom bomb “made angels out of everybody.”<sup>13</sup>

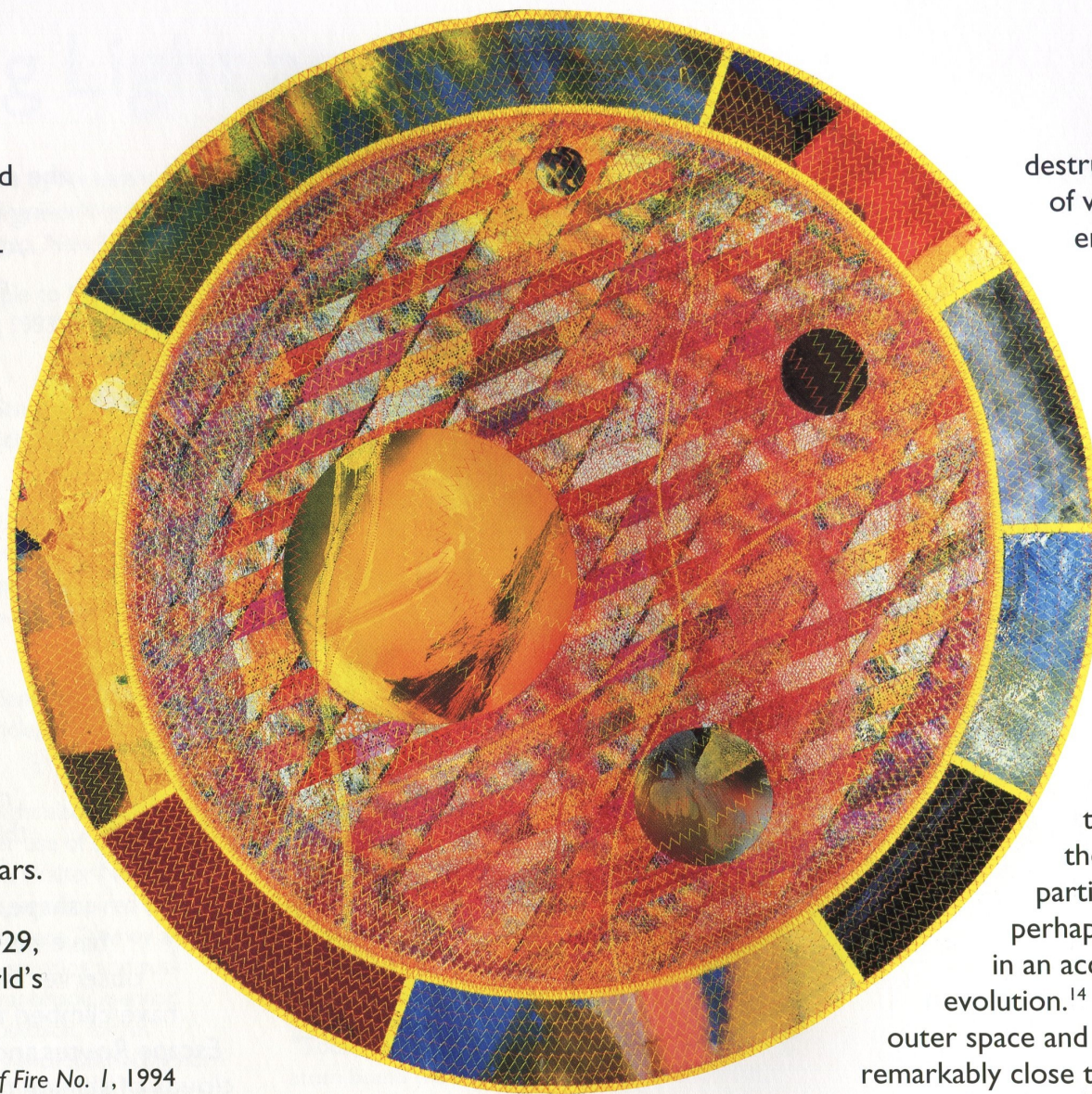
The structure of the *Ground Zero Series* is a combination of a bomber target focusing device and the symbol for radioactive materials.

Sandoval had returned to the loom for six works in the *Post-Nuclear Flag Series* and began using machine stitching expressively to emphasize or to bury images using a welter of zigzags, dynamic elements in themselves. His “gesturing” while drawing with the sewing machine needle continued through the *Lady Liberty Series* (in which stacked rings of nuclear bomb



blasts irradiate repeated images of the Statue of Liberty), and the *Count-down Series*, and into the *Millennium Series* on which he is still working. He now has an industrial grade sewing machine which enables him to vary greatly the thicknesses of his woven collages. But whatever tool he uses, it is still the over and under, the incessant in and out—that rhythm of the loom—that he hears.

According to Nostradamus, after 2029, when most of the world's



*Millennium Portal: Baptism of Fire No. 1, 1994*

Machine stitched, embroidered, and interlaced

Mylar, rag-punched computer paper, colored threads, and painted fabric, fabric backed, mounted on masonite, 36 x 36"

Courtesy of the Wetsman Collection, Birmingham, MI.

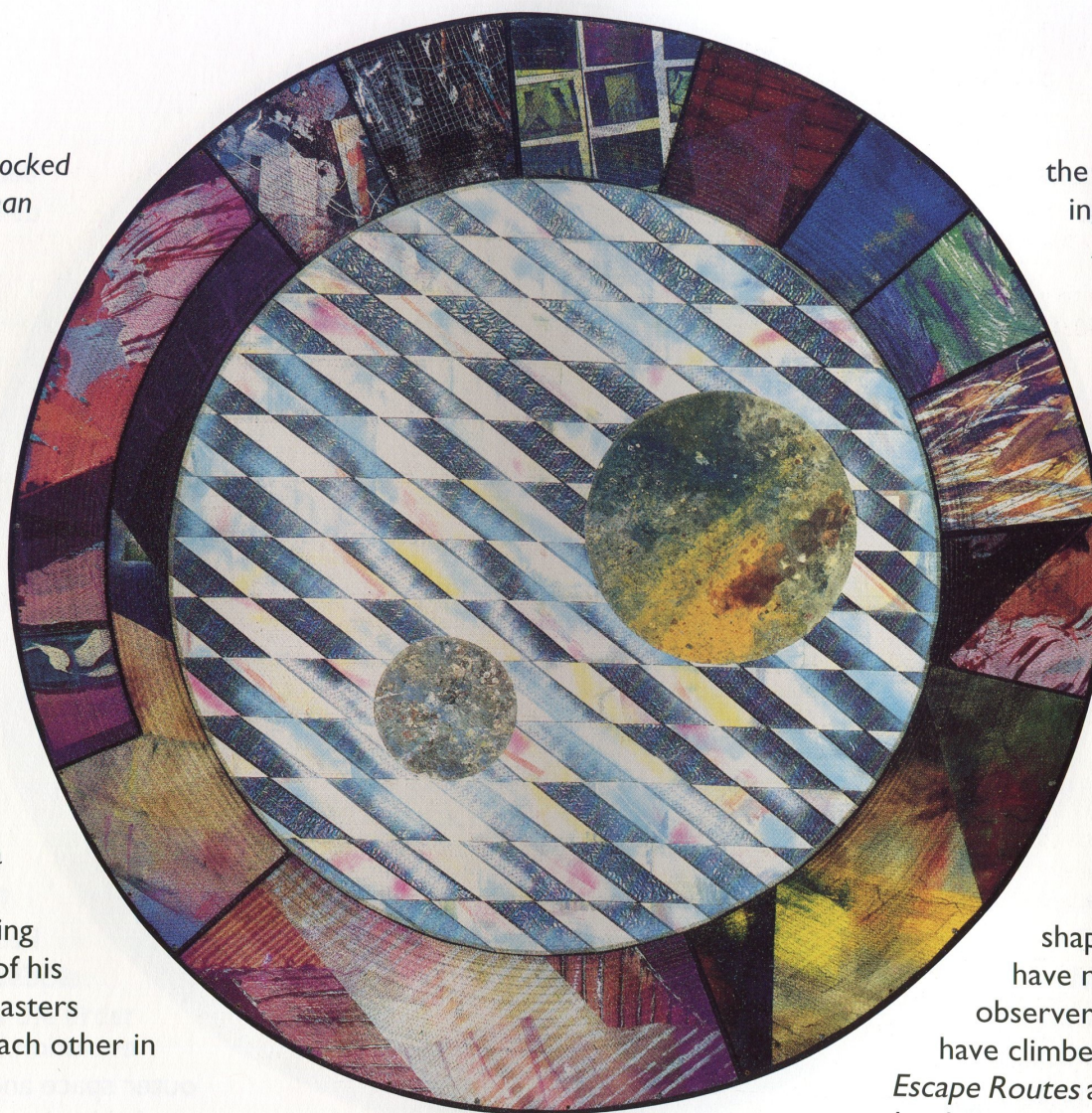
destruction in the forms of war, plagues, and environmental disasters shall have taken place, spiritual recovery begins and scientific discoveries will point the way to humankind's eventual salvation on other planets. But many people today believe that extraterrestrials are already coming to earth in great numbers, preparing those selected for their experiments to participate—physically and perhaps also spiritually—in an accelerated human evolution.<sup>14</sup> Their descriptions of outer space and space travel are remarkably close to Arturo Alonzo Sandoval's:

*I envision the great void of space to be filled with color and light, more beautiful than can be imagined, and I interpret*



eternity as a grid of interlocked time zones from which man passes easily and fluidly through space.<sup>15</sup>

The layers of the grids in Sandoval's *Millennium Series* represent those fluid time zones and the image as a whole is meant to offer "planetary refuges from the devastation of the earth."<sup>16</sup> Motorized "spheres" revolve slowly within this futuristic spatial matrix, in which the figures of a man, woman, and child barely materialize. Having worked through some of his fears concerning the disasters humans may inflict on each other in



*Millennium Portal No. 1*, 1993

Interlaced, machine stitched and embroidered Mylar, painted canvas, colored and metallic threads, and Cibachromes, fabric backed, with eyelets and mirrored plexiglas, on motorized mount, 77 x 77 x 4" Collection of John M. Walsh III, Martinsville, NJ.

the near future by exorcising them in his art, Arturo Alonzo Sandoval has moved to the new heaven and earth prophesied by Nostradamus and St. John for the next millennium:

*I envision our eyes being opened by the unveiling of yet to be given information which will benefit future generations and salvage the hopes of mankind to co-exist in this vast universe.<sup>17</sup>*

Taking a spherical shape, the *Millennium Portals* have no up or down, like an observer in space. It is as if we have climbed the ladders of his *Escape Routes* and are now inside the clouds of shining transparency and glowing color, instead of merely looking up at them longingly from below.

*April Kingsley, New York, 1997*



# Weaving Light and Air: NOTES

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1. This was told to Arturo by his mother who, during her pregnancy, was working for Ortega the Weaver in Chimayo, New Mexico.

2. Ken Chembley, "People to Know: Arturo Sandoval," *Beaux Arts* (Spring 1983): 46-7.

3. "Art is My Lifestyle: Sandoval," [unattributed newspaper article, circa 1971, in artist's biographical archive].

4. Sandoval received his M.F.A. degree in 1971 in sculptural weaving with as minor in photo serigraphy. The latter interest will manifest itself in his incorporation of photo-derived imagery in more recent work.

5. "Art is My Lifestyle: Sandoval," [unattributed newspaper article, circa 1971, in artist's biographical archive].

6. Certain influences might also be cited here: Dorothy Liebes, for her use of shiny, high-tech materials, such as Lurex; Walter Nottingham, for his shrines and death imagery inspired by Native American tribal art; Lenore Tawney and Claire Zeisler, for their free-standing and suspended woven forms; his Cranbrook mentor Gerhardt Knodel; and Ed Rossbach, for his groundbreaking experiments with interlacing non-traditional materials, such as plastic and newsprint.

7. As a result of receiving an NEA Craftsman's grant in 1973 and his subsequent purchase of materials and a sewing machine, Sandoval began to machine-quilt transparent layers

of materials so that the interior of the quilted fabric became as visually active and aesthetically crucial as the surface. By 1985, his weaving was completely off-loom.

8. Also in 1974, Sandoval's *Sky Image #1* was singled out for praise at the *8th International Biennial* in Lausanne, Switzerland, for introducing light into contemporary tapestry.

9. Sarah Lansdell, "Sky-weaving as Three Arts: Painting, Prints, Sculpture," *The (Louisville) Courier-Journal* (March 23, 1975), H12.

10. Barbara Lee Smith, "Arturo Alonzo Sandoval," *Celebrating the Stitch* (Newton, CT: The Taunton Press, 1991), p. 120.

11. Nostradamus (1503-1566) predicted the defeat of Christendom by 1999 under the leadership of an Arab prince he called the "Coiled Snake," a term that has been used in recent times for Saddam Hussein. Peter Memesurier, *Nostradamus: The Final Reckoning* (New York: Berkley Books, 1995), p. 62.

12. Artist's unpublished statement, dated 1986, discussing the *Ground Zero Series*.

13. De Kooning's entire passage reads: "Today some people think that the light of the atom bomb will change the concept of painting once and for all. The eyes that actually saw the light melted out of sheer ecstasy. For one instant everybody was the same color. It made angels out of everybody. A truly Christian light, painful, but forgiving." Willem de Kooning, "What Abstract

Art Means to Me," speech delivered a symposium, February 5, 1951, Museum of Modern Art, New York, in *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 17 (Spring 1951): 7.

14. See Budd Hopkins's *Missing Time* (NY: Richard Marek Publishers, 1981), *Intruders* (NY: Random House, 1981), and *Witnessed* (NY: Pocket Books, 1996).

15. Statement by Arturo Alonzo Sandoval in Katharine Westphal, *The Surface Designer's Art* (Asheville, NC: Lark Press, 1993), p. 146.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.