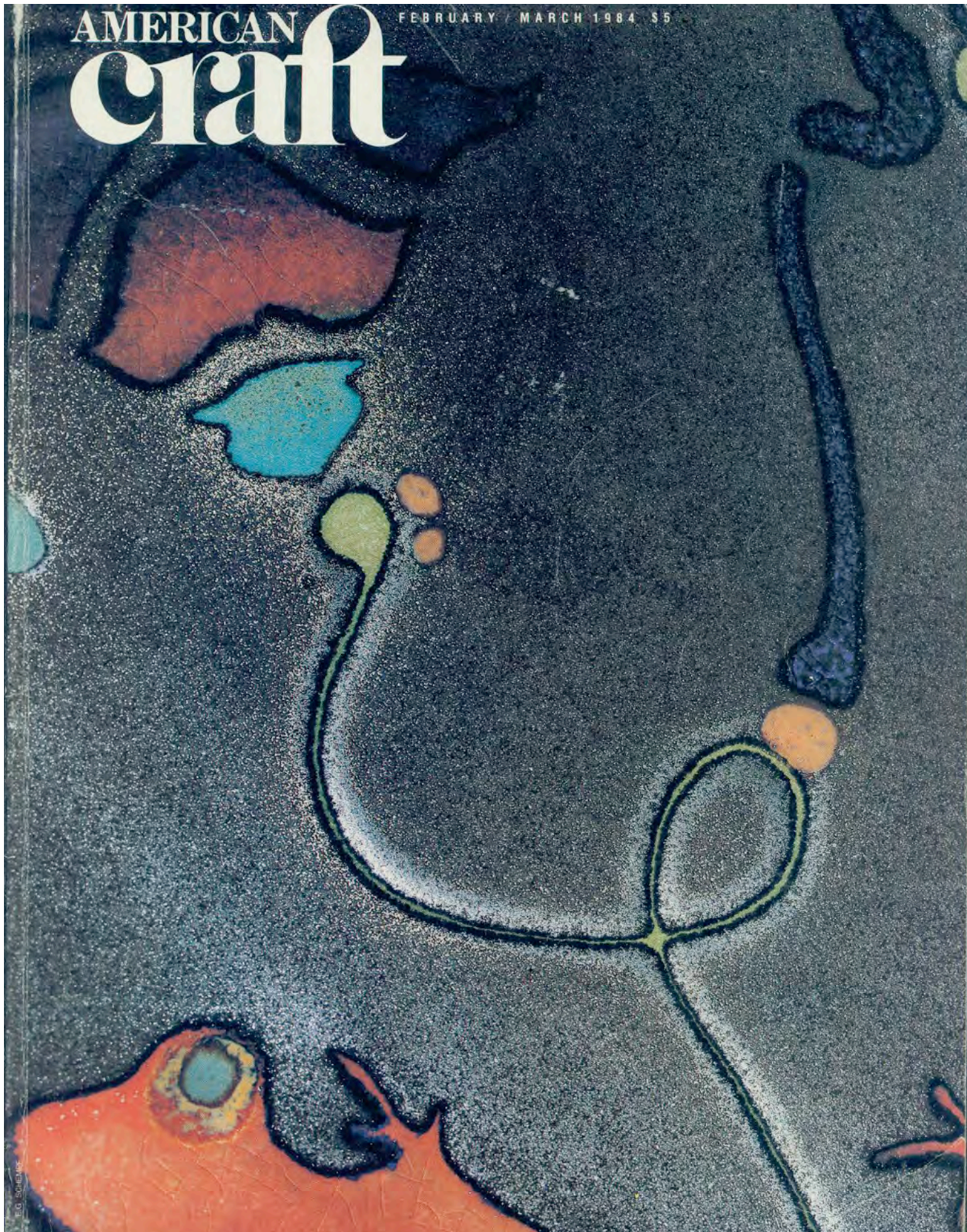
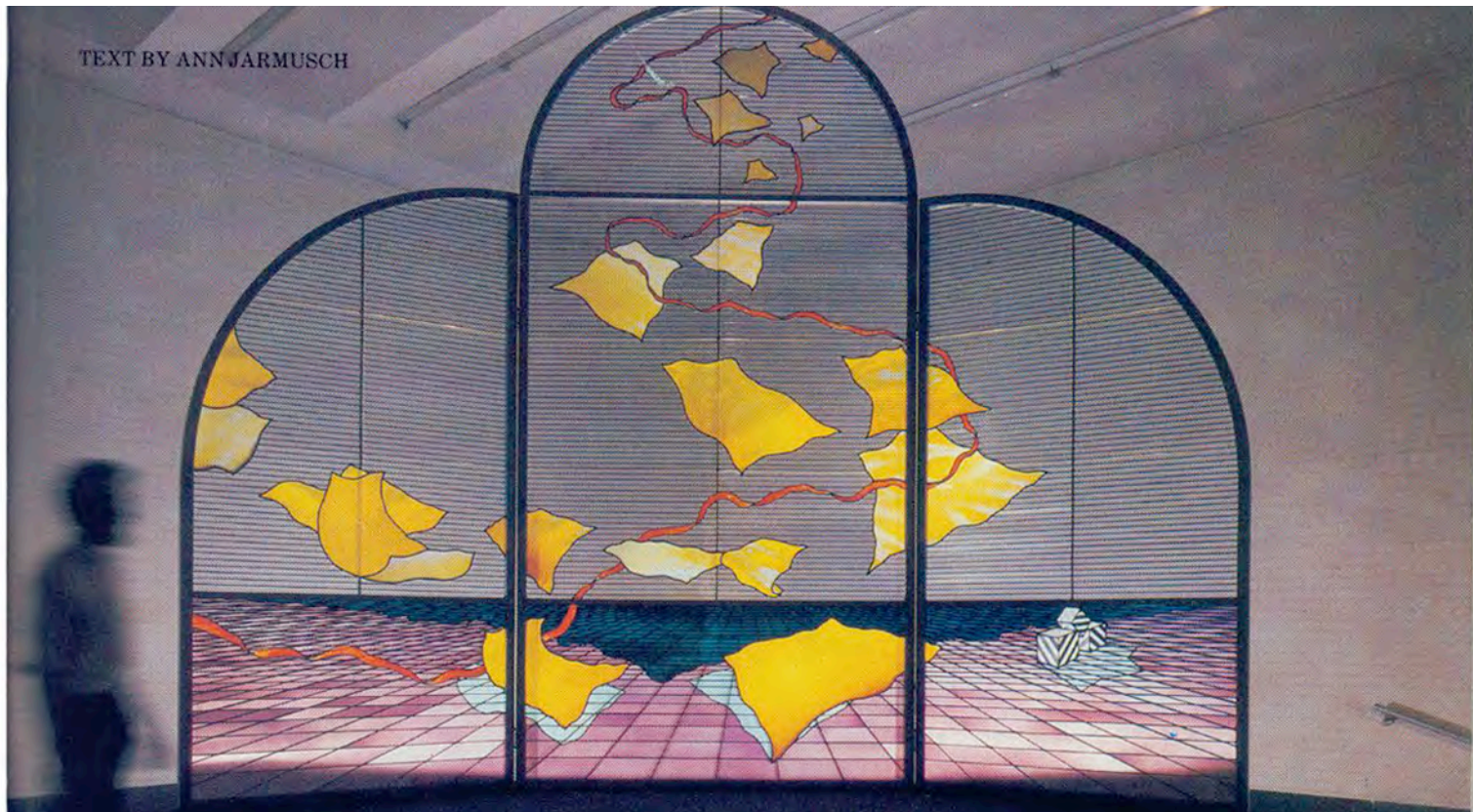


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LIGHT EXPERIENCES

Geometric abstraction, painterly lyricism, mystical landscape, solar projection and jazzy movement are suggested in Ray King's use of glass and light.

ELLIOTT KAUFMAN

Thirty-three years old and intense, Ray King matches his capacity for work with the diversity of his output. Ask him about his latest project and you will find out about half a dozen. Last fall he installed 620 prisms on a sun-roof shading an outdoor paseo in a new federal building in San Jose, California; flew in and out of Orlando, Florida, to complete his anodized aluminum design for an airport wall; experimented with a laser destined for a wall piece in a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, office building; machined a five-and-a-half-foot-long bronze and glass sconce for a couple who had wanted his work for years; mulled over how to improve the lighting system in a recent installation in Washington, DC; and prepared for a solo exhibition in New York and a group glass show in Philadelphia, where he grew up and continues to live.

King never stops working and his prodigious efforts defy classification. One can merely suggest the many styles and moods that glass and its partner, light, have assumed in his hands—geo-

metric abstraction, painterly lyricism, mystical landscape, solar projection and jazzy ornament. During the past year, he has designed one piece to work exclusively with sunlight (the San Jose project), another to be lit only when a switch is thrown (the Washington installation), and a third that makes use of both natural and artificial light (the Orlando commission). King calls all his pieces "light experiences."

Some of King's efforts from a dozen years ago bear a resemblance to the work of the German pioneer of linear abstraction in stained glass, Ludwig Schaffrath, although King claims to have been pursuing a "logic of construction" before seeing his work. Then, in a flamboyant gesture declaring the dominance of artistry over artistry, King set out to make a piece that could not be repeated. His *Jackson Pollock Window* (1972)—actually two windows installed side by side—has amorphous, rounded shapes mottled with paint and etched in the style of action painting.

It wasn't long before King found the technology

ABOVE: *Mistral*, 1980, triptych, etched stained glass, freestanding aluminum frame, brass armature, plywood base with internal lighting, 12' x 15' 3" x 4', assisted by Bob Fuglestad and Charmaine Caire, collection of Anne and Ronald Abramson and Edward Lenkin.

to break free of the traditional rectangle format in stained glass and construct free-floating shaped pieces. These came to him in a dream as kites suspended horizontally. He hasn't yet found an effective way to hang the pieces horizontally, but the early vertical ones nearly sold out at his first solo show at Philadelphia's Rosenfeld Gallery in 1977. Work by King was also included in "New Stained Glass: 10 American Artists" at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now American Craft Museum) in 1978. From that point on, commissions and honors have flowed to King almost as readily as ideas, fueling his aesthetic development, his technical expertise and his appetite, it seems, for more challenges. In addition to stained-glass windows and panels, he has made freestanding glass screens, backlit glass and metal sconces, and etched glass lamps on bronze and slate bases that he calls *Moonlamps*. He has taken glass sculpture outdoors and has invited public, as well as solar, interaction.

When some in the stained-glass community expressed surprise at King's breakthrough in 1978—he cantilevered a stained-glass work 18 inches off a corporate lobby wall—the artist politely explained that he had always considered himself a sculptor who worked in glass. To one who has freely used telescope lenses, periscope prisms, neon and anodized aluminum, categories such as flat glass artist and hot glass artist have little meaning.

Two architectural commissions executed in 1983 say much about King's ability to juggle ideas and materials to suit the setting, the client and himself. *Solar Wing*, bridging the U.S. Courthouse and Federal Building in San Jose, sends rainbows into the daily routines of office workers by means of a simple device. Dozens and dozens of wing-shaped components of anodized aluminum were implanted with bar-shaped prisms and clamped by the artist and his assistant, Mary Pedley, to the open-air roof trusses. The material, placed at 15-foot intervals as high as 70 feet above ground, is minimal. But the effect of the *immaterial* rainbow showers, each spectrum growing to 18 inches and changing position over four to five hours with the sun's daily path, is remarkable. "This piece is *light*," says King. "At dusk there are the prisms, glowing like a dancing group." The artist has ventured into territory charted by the light sculptors he admires—Dale Eldred, Charles Ross and James Turrell.

By contrast, the Orlando airport wall piece, scheduled for completion this year, is a relief made of individual, brightly colored anodized aluminum forms, such as a spiral, a shield and a small "paper" airplane, arranged in a confettilike design across an 18-by-30-foot concrete wall. Glass lenses inserted in certain shapes play a relatively minor role. Here, King is concerned with the color and shape of the aluminum and the shadows cast by the components as the sun moves over the skylight above and when the artificial lights he has designed wash the wall with color.

King's ideas are founded on spatial awareness and art history, scientific calculations and archae-

ology, advanced technology and romanticism. He acknowledges a dichotomy in himself between the "natural or spontaneous" and the "studied or mathematical." In King's best work, the two tendencies merge.

Even by its title, a work like *Solar Wing* reflects King's penchant for both poetry and practicality, suggesting a parallel with illusory, darting birds and at the same time referring directly to the roof's passive solar heating/cooling system. Working with the architectural design of the building, King's piece adds the experience of dazzling light to the otherwise functional sunshade truss spanning the courtyard. Even drivers on a nearby expressway should be able to detect sparks of light sent out by the prisms. (Purchased by King as army surplus, these prisms were originally intended for tank periscopes. "War goods into art," chuckles King, who sold them back to the government in this architectural commission.)

A look at King's early career, a little more than a decade ago, reveals a combination of determination and eclectic experiences that may have enabled him to resist the pitfalls of homogenization for the marketplace. Denied financial aid by a Philadelphia art school, King took an apprenticeship advertised in a newspaper by Marco Zubar, the stained-glass artist and metal sculptor.

If Zubar was unwilling to share many of his trade secrets, King does credit him with emboldening the 21-year-old apprentice to work large. This was in sharp contrast to King's previous experience of model building, a skill made possible by his dexterity and patience, and one that he practices to this day for meticulous project presentations.

Out on his own after a year, King introduced himself to a neighborhood dealer of antique architectural fragments as a restorer of stained-glass windows. As his business grew (among his satisfied customers was Old St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in Philadelphia, which dates from 1733), he found little time to work on his own designs.

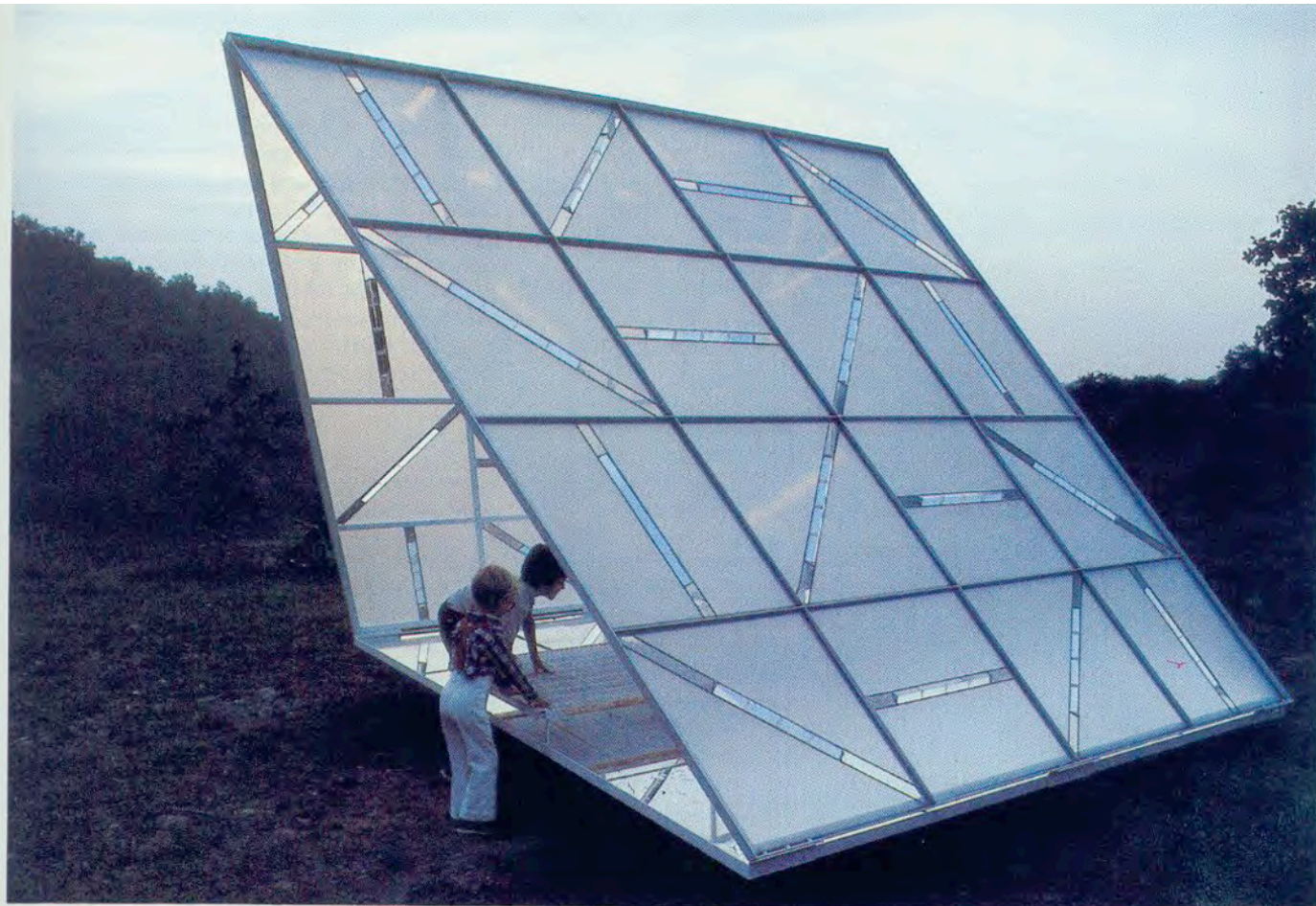
In 1975, hungering for more formalized education to supplement his own reading, museum visits and night courses in color and design, King put down a deposit to study at Burleighfield House in England, which offered an intensive studio and liberal arts program directed by Patrick Reyntiens, the stained-glass artist whom King regards as "a world peer, a Renaissance man." Not until a few days before his scheduled departure for London did King learn that he had been awarded a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation fellowship, which was to finance his stay at Burleighfield House.

Eight years later, King's enthusiasm still bubbles when he describes that art-saturated atmosphere and the class trips to English and French museums, cathedrals and other architectural sights. King found himself climbing the usually off limits cathedral towers and triforia to examine medieval stained-glass techniques at close range. The tour of France included the requisite southern stops to see stained-glass windows by Chagall, Lèger and Matisse. King remembers that



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ABOVE: *Jericho*, 1978, detail, sculpture, colored and clear glass with lead and brass armature, cantilevered structural steel supports, polished aluminum frames, track lighting, 17'x18'x1'6", installed in lobby of One Jericho Plaza Building, Jericho, New York, assisted by Bob Fuglestad and Charmaine Caire. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: *Solar Projections*, 1980, sculpture, frosted and seedy glass panels, crystal prisms, welded steel frame, lead came, 12'x12'x16'6", assisted by Marsha Hall and Artpark interns. BOTTOM: *Nova*, 1983, sculpture, etched and laminated glass fins, glass edge lit with neon, fluorescent lighting, machine bent and welded bronze and stainless steel panels, welded aluminum frame, 6'x9'8"x1', installed in lobby of Washington Square Building, Washington, DC, assisted by Mary Pedley.



ROBERT GROVE

after these excursions he and the other students "hobbled back to Burleighfield House, our minds exploding, reeling."

King's majestic *Solar Projections*, a prism-shaped modular sculpture of sandblasted glass panels inset with crystal prisms and narrow bands of seedy (bubbly) glass, lead and steel, showed that his mind has yet to stop spinning about what glass is and can be. Constructed in 1980 at Artpark, Lewiston, New York, the 12-foot-high wedge was designed to be open-ended and consequently was equipped with a metal walkway across its mirrored floor. During his three-week residency, King erected *Solar Projections* near the Niagara River gorge and far from the other temporary sculptures. The piece faced east-west so that morning light would hit one face and the prisms would shoot their spectra to the opposing frosted glass wall, for a slowly

changing pattern that seemed three dimensional. Against the background of the gridded field of translucent frosted glass panels, the rainbows and narrow white rectangles emitted through the clear, seedy bands were positively ghostly. A similar "light show" occurred in the afternoon. King fixed the angle of the wedge at 67 degrees to correspond with the angle of the noon sun at Lewiston on the last day of his residency.

Physics teachers and art followers alike admired the piece. So, apparently, did the vandal who pried out two prisms, breaking glass panels in the process. When *Solar Projections* was rebuilt two years later, with copper comes instead of lead, for an outdoor sculpture exhibition in Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, it was one of the show's most inventive works. But it also suffered indignities. A bag lady moved in at night; someone disregarded the metal ramp and smashed the mirrored floor; a child tried to walk up the glass side. "I will never put a piece in an urban place again," says King, who once described his interest in using glass outdoors as "a social experiment." He ultimately scrapped *Solar Projections*, salvaging the prisms for future work and donating the 32 sandblasted panels to a local art school.

For a totally different body of work—windows and screens—King was inspired by prehistoric drawings found in Africa. His source, *Pre-Historic Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* (The Museum of Modern Art: 1937), includes renderings of recognizable human and animal figures. Floating above these landscapes are eerie abstract shapes, usually in groups, and dubbed "formlings" to represent, some say, the spirits of the for-

gotten dead. Embracing this concept, King has choreographed his gridded landscapes with his own floating forms, resembling sheets of paper caught in the wind.

In a handsome example called *Mistral* (1980), translucent yellow formlings and a red-orange ribbon dance across the hinged, three-part screen with a grace belying the rigid material. King set the colored forms in narrow, horizontal bands of clear seedy glass, creating different depths of field and heightening the illusion of three-dimensionality. He emphasized the one-point perspective by letting the mullions remain prominent. Owned jointly by the collectors Anne and Ronald Abramson and Edward Lenkin, *Mistral* was on loan during 1983 to the Marriner S. Eccles Federal Reserve Board Building, Washington, DC. Unfortunately, its location in the stately, classically-derived structure robbed the piece of its lifeline—adequate natural light—so King was enlisted to build a base concealing footlights.

Changing direction once more, King is looking toward the future, spurred by his love of science. Some of his newest commissions take the form of large metal wall works glowing with light shining from behind in what he hopes is an unearthly way. These "sconces," with their streamlined shapes that grow upward out of one another, horizontal banding and outlines in neon, seem to take their cues from Art Deco. One such piece is *Nova* (1983). Its highly polished bronze and steel surfaces, 17 fluorescent fixtures (hidden), and almost gaudy combination of red and blue light evoke an early jukebox design that seems somehow out of synch with the pink-and-beige marble interior of the new Washington Square Building in the nation's capital.

Nova's sister-to-be, *Zona*, on the other hand, will be the focal point of a newly restored 1929 building in Philadelphia. Its spire, rising out of overlapping shields, is to be crowned with a red laser. Giddy with his toy, King expects the split beam to transform particles in its path to "flickering light of magic dust." Despite its weight of perhaps 900 pounds, King wants the brushed bronze and glass piece to "float" against its black marble wall, with light sources well concealed.

Concealed not at all is King's genuine desire to reach those who live with his work. A rose window commissioned by eighth graders as a commemorative gift for a Philadelphia church bears one star for each member of the class. *Jericho*, a cantilevered piece that caused a stir in 1978, resembles electrical and engineering parts familiar to users of the building housing it. And King routinely uses full-length photographs of clients, reduced to scale, in his presentation models.

King is quick to display pride in his reputation as a problem solver. Every success he has achieved usually has entailed difficulties inevitable in the life of any artwork released into the world, but especially those on the scale of King's works. There was the time, for example, a congressional procession had the right-of-way where one of King's screens happened to stand. One work was required to pass seismic and wind force tests. Another contract required that the



ABOVE: *Zona*, 1984, presentation model (1/2"=1'), welded aluminum frame covered by bronze panels, perforated and inset with glass lenses, laminated colored glass fins, glass edge lit with neon, laser projected from ceiling and split at tip of piece, 9'x13'x1'8", installed in lobby of 1608 Walnut Street Building, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, assisted by Mary Pedley. OPPOSITE PAGE: Rainbow showers are cast on artist Ray King by *Solar Wing*, 1983, 620 heat-tempered optical glass prisms in aluminum mounts, installed on sunshade bridging the U.S. Courthouse and Federal Building, San Jose, California, assisted by Mary Pedley.

artist carry a million-dollar liability policy on his commissioned piece. A new project must be designed in parts compatible with air cargo size and weight limitations.

Limitations is a word that rarely occurs to King. Now he is making functional, and at the same time sculptural, fan-shaped sconces of punched-out black anodized aluminum measuring 36 and 48 inches wide. Inset with glass elements and perforated colored aluminum shapes, the sconces will "bleed" light. When he shows these at New York's Heller Gallery (April 7-29), Ray King hopes to confound those who still label him a stained-glass artist. □

Ann Jarmusch is the Philadelphia correspondent for ARTnews and the director of exhibitions at Tyler School of Art, Temple University. "Philadelphia Glass," an exhibition including the work of Ray King, is on view at Tyler (February 4-March 2).

