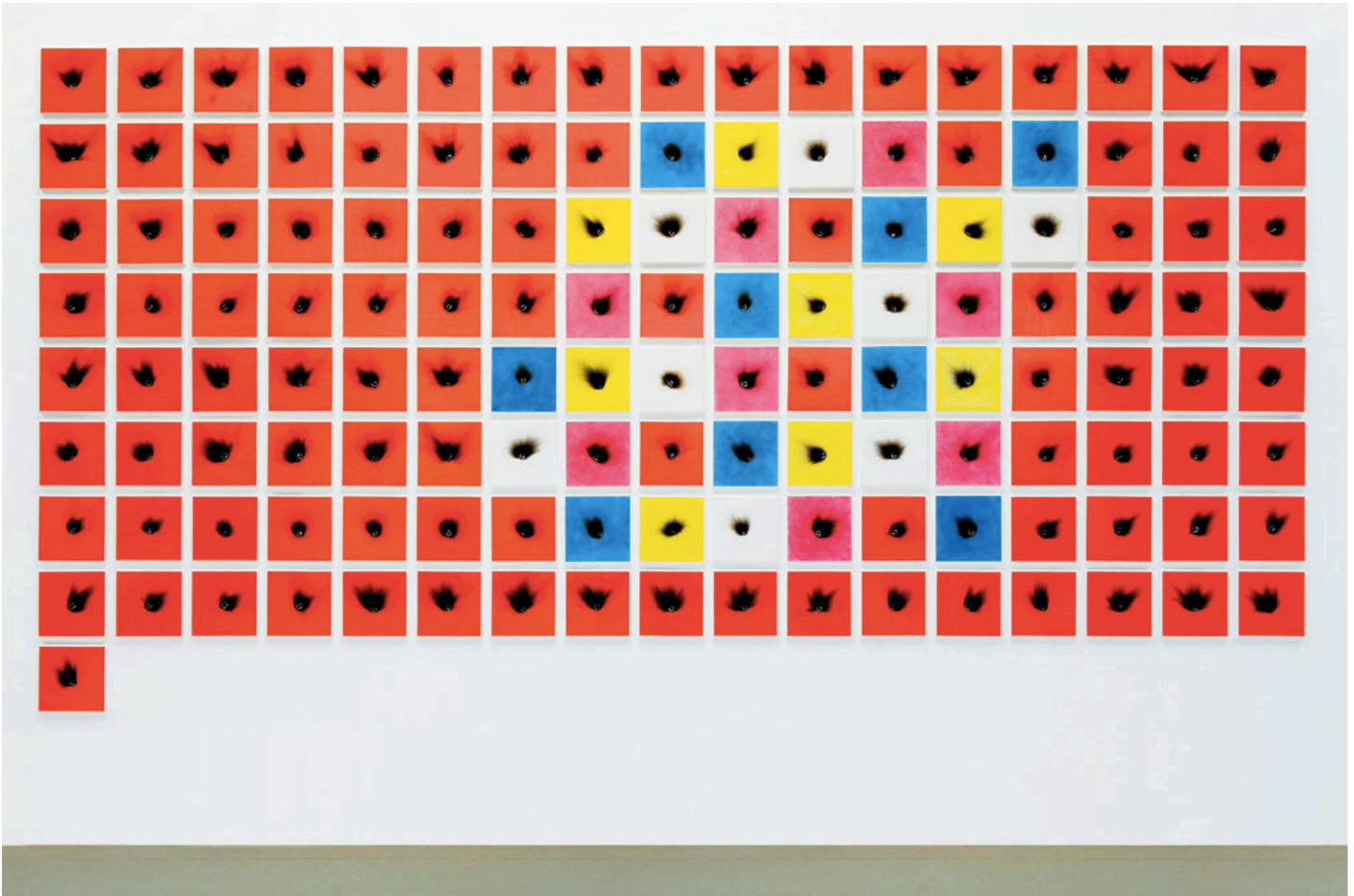




Solar Burns Charles Ross

Jan Ernst Adlmann / October 5, 2012



Charles Ross: 137 solar burns each in the time it takes sunlight to reach the earth, 8 minutes, 19 seconds: vermilion, 2005/2010, 80 by 152 inches overall

Immersion in Charles Ross's exhibition "Solar Burns" had, at least for this viewer, the mesmerizing effect that one might feel upon stumbling into the depths of some strange, outré laboratory, or glimpsing the bowels of that quite incomprehensible Large Hadron Collider. The show consisted of seven works, each composed of multiple wood panels arranged in grids, made between 2005 and 2011, as well as a sculpture. Ross, who has been making the "solar burns" for decades, creates these works by focusing sun-

light through a lens into a single point of powerful heat, so that the beam chars a hole into the panel.

Ross's background is in mathematics; he received his math degree from Berkeley in the early '60s. (It certainly occurred to this viewer that Berkeley and its legendary Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories were fountainheads of experimentation, and that Ross to this day works in the penumbra of U.S. atomic history -



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his ongoing earthwork "Star Axis" rises in the New Mexico desert near the Los Alamos Laboratory and the location of the detonation of the first atomic bomb.) The math and mechanics of the "solar burns" challenge the viewer and can even induce vertigo for some.

Several of the works on display contain 137 panels. The artist's explanation of his choice of the number 137 (in the June issue of THE magazine, available at the gallery) sounds rather like a passage torn from an alchemist's handbook. He writes that 1/137 is dubbed the "God Number" in particle physics, and that 137 is the numerical equivalent of the word "Kabbalah." 137 solar burns each in the time it takes sunlight to reach the earth, 8 minutes, 19 seconds: vermilion (2005/2010) is a grid of 8-inch colored squares with burns in their centers. The title of this piece

perfectly articulates the intersection of "art" and "knowledge," which is the precise, complex translation of the German word for "art": Kunst. Ross refers to the mathematical mystifications at the heart of Albrecht Dürer's enigmatic 1514 engraving Melencolia in Melancholia II: Durer's Magic Square x 4 (2011).

Since the addition of vibrant color to many of the panels did not appreciably enhance their artistic effect, the most impressive works were the 21 panels from the "Solar Burn Week" series. On view were three pieces, each composed of seven full-day solar burns made during one week. Together, this assemblage of charred arcs seemed to translate a purely scientific demonstration of the sun's flaring majesty into a work of abstract, searing beauty.