

# A Tectonic Language

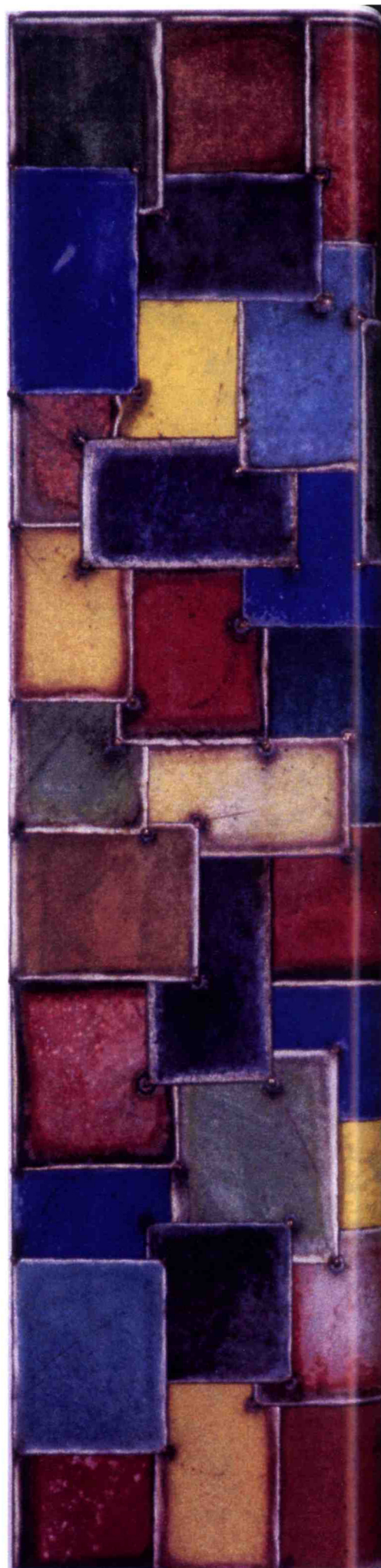
*Nathan Slate Joseph creates abstract compositions of pigmented galvanized steel. He treats metal plates with pigments and acid, then solders the squares together, creating overlapping patchwork designs that unite the formal large-scale energy of Abstract Expressionism with the ease of found-object art. Born in Israel, in 1943, Joseph moved to New York in the mid-1960s, pursuing studies at the Art Student's League, the New School for Social Research, and the Pratt Institute.*

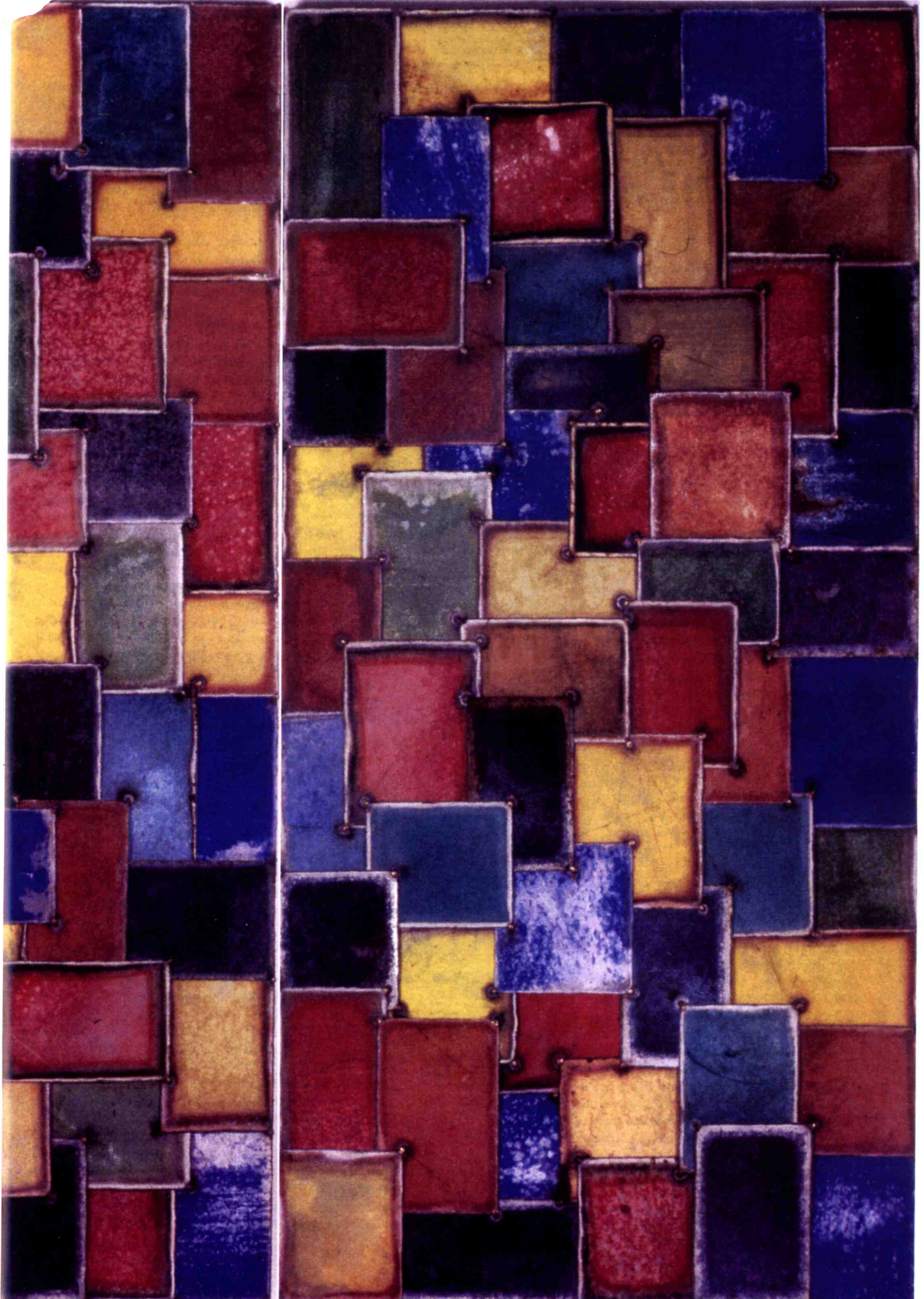
**By Marius Kwint**

Language, for Nathan Slate Joseph, assumes many forms. A reluctant immigrant to the U.S. in his late teens, he says that English words have always had a rather opaque, imprecise, and chromatic quality for him. This impression is rooted, doubtless, in the fact that for many of Joseph's formative experiences he inhabited another tongue—Hebrew—and lived in very different circumstances. In Israel, during the 1940s and 1950s, his was a youth not only of ever-present warfare, of chemical flashes and burning structures in the night sky, but also of improvised refugee camps and settlements; of the ad hoc monuments formed by wrecked or abandoned weaponry and colonies; of air bases, pilot's training, and the visit of a gleaming riveted British jet, perhaps with business to do in Egypt. The legacy of these early impressions is clearly visible in his art, particularly in his layered patchworks of galvanized steel—a material with a notably fiery birth—which bear a cartographic sweep akin to the aviator's view. This legacy is visible, too, in bits of pipe and turbines, which evoke irrigation

and wind power, or the tail fins of missiles and military jets. Joseph's formative structures are buildings, machines, and the earth, and he is intrigued by the interplay of construction and destruction, exposure and shelter, industrial production and hand-assembly, which their making and use entail.

Joseph's position with regard to his past remains ambivalent. On the one hand, he uses the Pollockian phrase "arrested memories" to describe his work; on the other hand, he wants to elevate the particular instances during which these memories were formed to something universal and transcendental—an appropriately Abstract Expressionist desire, and a good enough reason for wishing to have his memories arrested rather than left to haunt the present. "I guess I try to recycle personal history," he says, but, at the same time, "I just want my rights to be who I am." His impatience with partisan ideology has led him to commend the redemptive capacities of his art, not only in the international settings of those who patronize it but also for its blending, through the instrument of color, of Oriental





and Occidental allusions. The salty blooms and ocher depths of many of his steel-relief paintings evoke not only the Mediterranean hub of Western culture but also its spokes, spanning the compass. One of Joseph's most "classic" paintings, *Silk Road* (2004), suggests the sharp, dry light of the high steppe, fringed with pinkish borders that look almost flesh-like—the intermittence, one imagines, of human habitation across much of Central Asia. His mother's side of the family, Joseph tells me, originated from Bukhara, in Uzbekistan, where his uncle had a shop selling Persian carpets. Today, from the textile collections of museums such as the Ashmolean, in Oxford, it is through stitched-together fragments of ancient cloth and the peculiarities of their craftsmanship that we are able to trace some of the patterns of trade and interethnic relations, which often reveal small gestures of affection and hospitality that stretch back centuries along the routes of Eurasia.

Joseph commends, too, the community of artists—Larry Rivers, Willem de Kooning—who suggested and encouraged his self-articulation through a variety of hitherto unconsidered materials, including junk and scrap metal, and who congregated in the saloons and cafés of Greenwich Village in the 1960s and 1970s. To a young man seeking identity, artistry, and adventure away from home, they offered a more congenial avenue than the formal education system. "It was very new and very free," Joseph says. He was thrilled to be exposed to theories of how a free artist can think, though liberty was never easy, and frequently resulted in his "taking two steps forward and three back." The weathered pigmentation of steel in which he specializes has allowed him to "think in color . . . spiritual colors."

**T**he combination of the spiritual, the personal, the geographical, and the historical is apparent in the lyrical titles that Joseph gives his works, which reflect Middle Eastern contexts and Biblical episodes (*Invisible Nile*, 2002; *Parting the Red Sea*, 2002); archaic references (*Shamanic Man*, 2001); friends and family (*Maxi's Red Rock*, 2002; *Chakra Lynn*, 2002); the vicinities of New York (*Hudson Blue*, 2002); and travels to India (*Jodhpur and Me*, 2003) and Europe (*Venezia's Child*, 2000). Joseph's keenly felt experience of language as the means for both creating and overcoming difference, for both separating and linking people, is apparent in one of his more figurative paintings, *Jeremiah's Page* (1999), whose title is a tribute to his then ten-year-old son. Its dancing characters inhabit deep red, rust, and lithographic white fields, and leap out of a rectilinear conformity, allowing one to see the guidelines beyond. They could be the calligraphic script of any language, and the book

from which the page is taken could be any of the mythologies which shape and structure our sense of the world, but which also give us something to question, even to kick against, and thus help us to grow up and distinguish ourselves. A notably sculptural work, *Books and Thoughts* (1988), also suggests Joseph's earlier materialized perception of texts and words, and their association with particular moments and contexts.

It is not only color, however, that allows Joseph to find a cosmopolitan language but the irregular patterns formed by his recurrent grid lines, which constitute a major theme of his work. The grid pattern has a varied and distinguished history in Western art, evolving from largely technical functions as decoration or guidelines for manuscripts and the Renaissance building of perspective illusions, to the analytical fragmentations of Cubism, and emerging notably, in this case, from the Tunisian rooftop landscapes of Paul Klee (1879–1940). The grid was perhaps taken to its most rigorous conclusion by the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) in such dynamic works as *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943) via his more static earlier explorations, including *Compositions with Red, Yellow and Blue* (c.1921). Mondrian and Joseph have a shared interest in deep abstraction and the capacity of rectilinear shapes to transcend spiritual particularities—Mondrian, as is fairly well known, was not so much the advocate of reduced modernist rationality as a disciple of the Theosophical movement, which sought to reconcile aspects of the world's major religions, as they might be revealed in the physical world. However, unlike Mondrian's works, Joseph's grids are not created from the deliberate confluence of lines into a unified structure on a single plane but improvised in three dimensions to produce an exuberant rhythm and flow, like a universal music or text, to be read by anybody, with the eyes moving in any direction.

In Joseph's more layered works, such as *Silks by Jeremiah* (2002), the lines begin to resemble the rectilinear trunks and brackets of some interweaving family tree. The pattern results from the seemingly arbitrary burial of the burnished edges of his metal plates as his collages are fashioned. Our knowledge that this pattern is achieved only by the suppression of a host of delightful detail lends many of Joseph's paintings a faintly restless motility, and perhaps the hint of a controversial archaeology. The grid lines emerge from their sources with an energy that seems to flow out of the picture area, not only sideward but also, because they are essentially three-dimensional structures, outward from the surface of the image, toward the viewer. They are like living relief maps of the earth's surface—topographical microcosms, perhaps with their tectonic plates still heaving—with deserts, mountains, rooftops, terraced fields, and rivers, which yield their riches of new forms at different scales of viewing: some repetitive, some different, some cultivated, some natural, as the eye adopts different vantage points. Joseph's environmental interest is underscored not only by the fact that he makes his paintings by exposing them to, rather than protecting them from, the elements; the natural world is also present in the forms of the paintings themselves. The ironically titled *Man Made* (2001) reveals

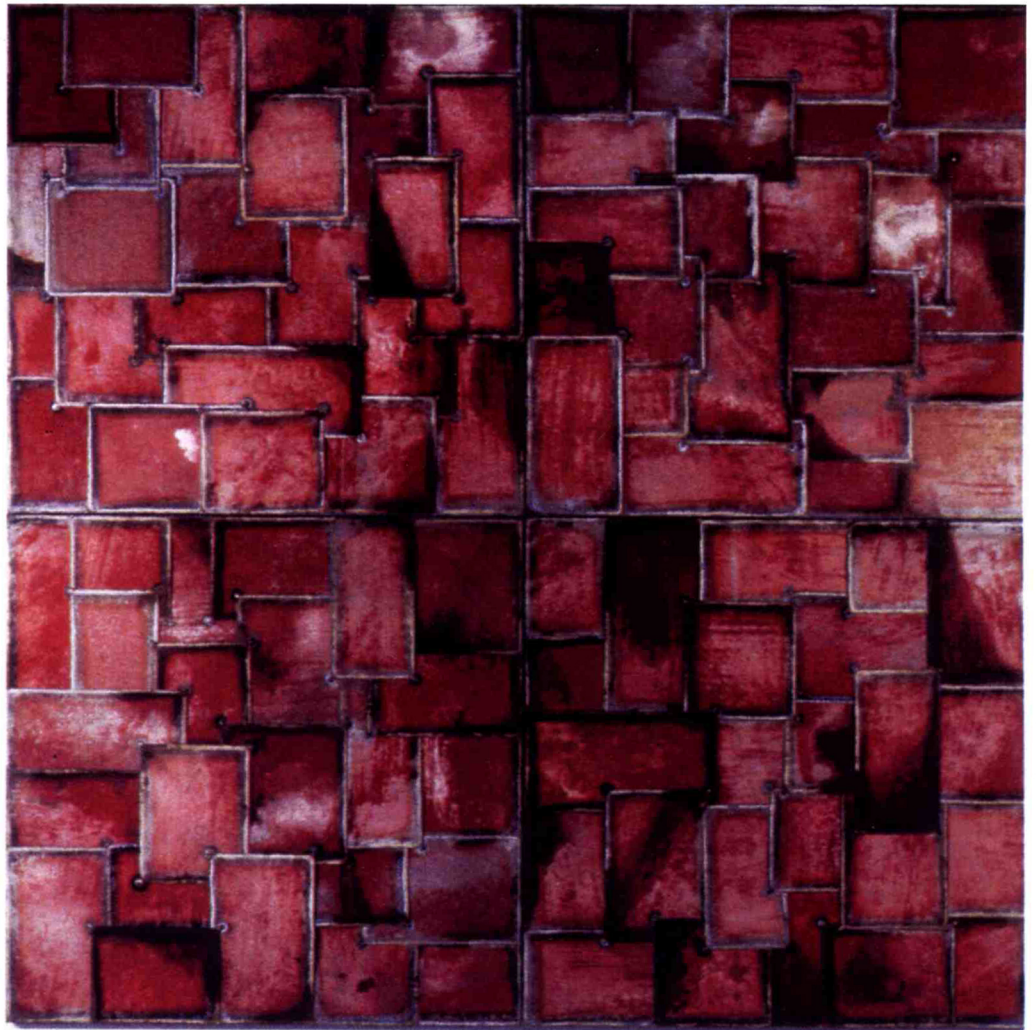


**Above right:** Nathan Slate Joseph, *Night Rush*, 2006, pigment on galvanized steel, 60 x 17 1/2 x 10 3/4".

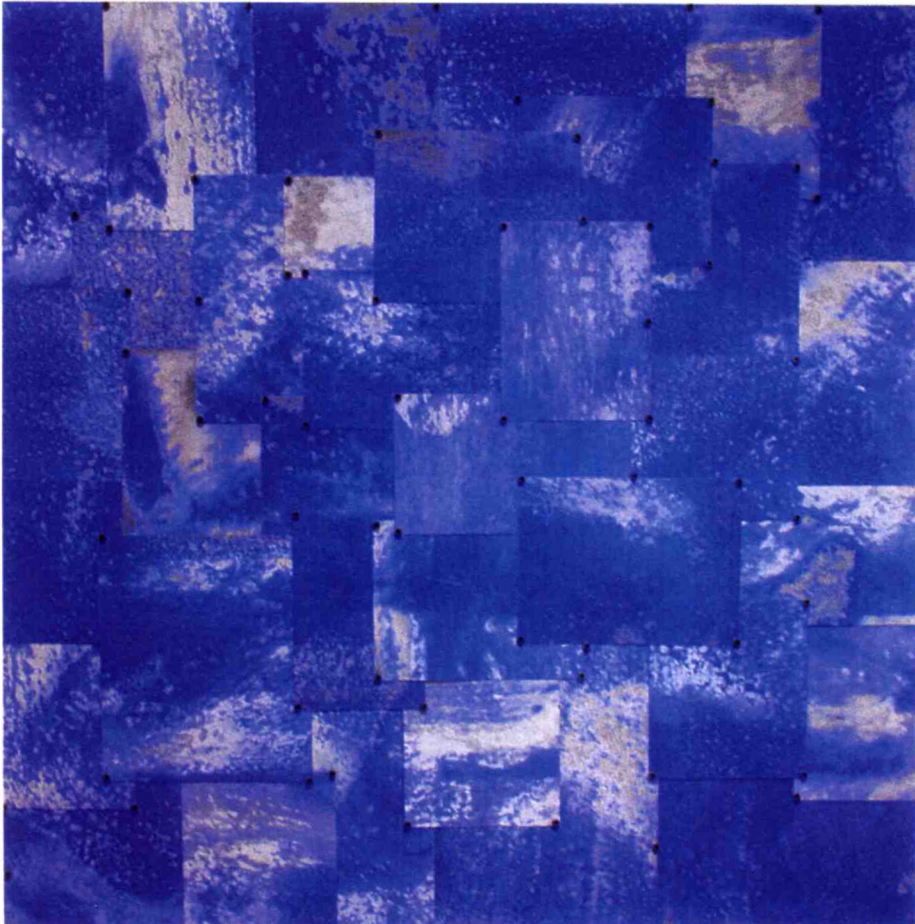
delicate dendritic patterns, vividly formed by the spontaneous aggregation of salts and pigments, which evoke another type of primal network form within its minimal field pattern: the fossilized anatomy of some ancient delicate sea creature, the fanning dunes of a desert seen from the air, or the neural networks of our own brains.

One artist whose grid patterns bear a striking schematic resemblance to Joseph's more complex, layered grids is the Fluxus activist George Maciunas (1931–1978), who drew and wrote intricate historical charts, such as *Preliminary Unfinished Form of the Proposed Index Coordinate Graph* (c.1955–1960). He made these in the graphic attempt to articulate the interrelationship of all things, creating what he called a universal "learning machine" by adopting principles of tabular classification that are similar to Dimitri Mendeleev's periodic table of the elements, or to the Dewey decimal system. Maciunas held that it was possible to devise an irregular grid that accommodated all facts and knowledge, so that their relationships could be viewed creatively and subversively rather than hierarchically.

What links these two artists, who belong to very different intellectual schools, is the attempt of each to submit language,



Nathan Slate Joseph, *Parting of the Red Sea*, 2003, pure color pigment on galvanized steel, 72 x 72".



Nathan Slate Joseph, *Moving On*, 2002, pure color pigment on galvanized steel, 36 x 36".

whether verbal or chromatic, to a bird's-eye view. The picture they both generate corresponds with broadly structuralist arguments that words act as reference points within fields of difference, creating meaning by relating more to each other's position than they do to any external, objective reality. Some aspect of this theory is embodied in Jorge Luis Borges's famous essay *The Library of Babel*, which envisages the cloistered architecture of a never-ending library of all knowledge, with staircases connecting the various chambers. It is as if Joseph had laid out all the books across the floor to propose a universally readable history, but with a personal touch: some books are tiled neatly, some have been vandalized or left out in the rain, and others overlap each other; some have the leaves showing, others just the covers. All, however, have been considerably arranged for the reader. It is perhaps an appropriate impression to bear in mind from an artist who fills his metal pages with the language of color. Δ

Marius Kwint is a lecturer in the history of art at St. Catherine's College, Oxford. He edited the book *Material Memories: Design and Evocation* (Oxford 1999). His latest work has been as originator and associate curator of an exhibition at the Design Museum in Zürich, Switzerland, on the dendritic (tree-like) form in nature and culture.