

Lane Twitchell's art reflects a central paradox of Mormonism. It is both orderly, precise, and rational but also mystical, iconic, and shamanistic. His paintings, like Mormon temples, show an open face to outsiders but contain another meaning entirely to those who have eyes to see.

LANDSCAPE AND THE AMERICAN WEST

THE SACRED, THE SUBLIME, AND THE SUBURBS

By Cherie K. Woodworth

WHAT COULD A MORMON ARTIST HAVE TO SAY in New York City, and more particularly, to the rarified New York art world? What could he depict that would so arrest the hustling, self-preoccupied world metropolis, compelling viewers to stop and look at it and collectors to own it? Lane Twitchell, native of Ogden and graduate of the University of Utah, is coming off his third solo gallery show in Manhattan with an impressive and growing sheaf of reviews and critiques. What grabs their attention?

What Twitchell does is reinterpret the Western landscape—landscape as kaleidoscope, as a quilt made of paper, as a wide-open world refracted in a giant, man-made snowflake. It is the landscape and the heart of the West—its natural grandeur, its history, its modern-day suburbs. Twitchell's landscape is a labyrinthine desert rose blossoming in the midst of Manhattan.

In *This Is the Place or In Our Lovely Deseret* [see facing page], Twitchell has turned images and symbols from Utah's past into a visual puzzle that is both complex and serene. The work is full of details LDS viewers will recognize. The outline of the Salt Lake Temple in each corner frames the cut-paper painting. Moving in, we see an inner ring made of the more mundane—traffic-sign symbols. The “U-turn” and “intersection” signs become the letters UT, a visual joke that provokes teasing questions: is Utah a place where ideas, people, and currents intersect, or a place people reach before turning around in their journey, realizing this is not where they wanted to end up?

The Deseret alphabet is used in the inner square border, a cryptic puzzle that would leave any but *cognoscenti* Mormons without even a clue to decipher it. Although the piece is

overrun with details, these three frames create an overall structure of the work: a circle within the square (within a circle, within a square, and so on), allusions to perfection, and also to the impossible (squaring the circle). Within this microcosm of one “snowflake,” Twitchell depicts the human-constructed world of the square or grid within (or without?) the encircling celestial dome.

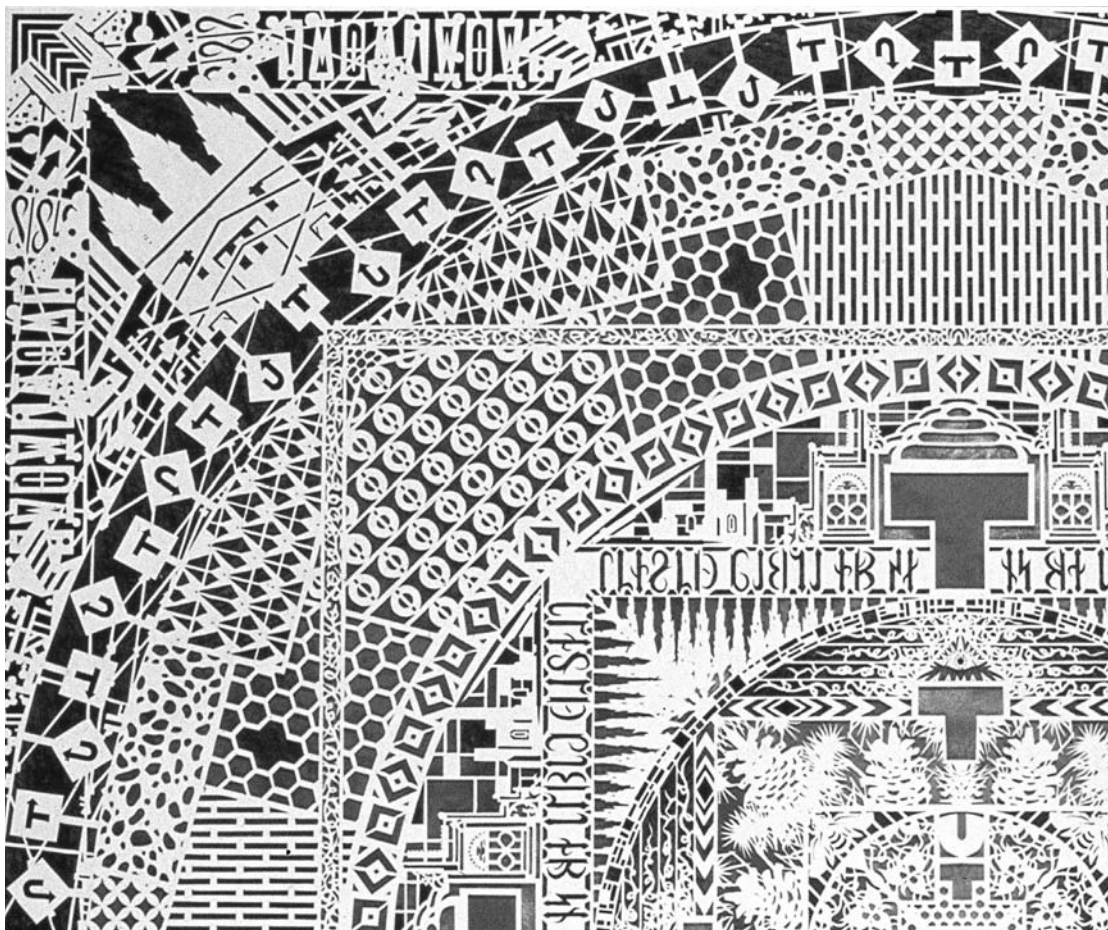
TWITCHELL BEGAN WORKING with enormous, elaborate paper snowflakes several years ago, after completing a series of paintings of suburban tract houses. It was a change of expression, but the underlying ideas were connected. Thinking of the repetitive crystal structure of snowflakes, of their overwhelming, blinding anonymity in masses (despite their proverbial uniqueness as individuals), of their regular, straight lines reminded him of the numbing sameness of tract houses. The landscape of suburbia, gridded and immense, became superimposed and embodied in something tiny, delicate, and fragile. As he turned these ideas into symbolic landscapes, he found that he drew on strange and contradictory traditions—women's work in the folk arts and crafts of lace, doily, and quilt making, the tracery of gothic cathedral windows, bird's-eye-view architectural drawings or photographs of highway cloverleaves, intricate medallions of Native American sand-paintings, and the nineteenth-century American landscape artists of the Hudson River school, who first brought the magnificent views of the wild and unspoiled West to the civilized and urbanizing East.

Bringing these western landscapes to this new audience in a new way, Twitchell draws particularly on two traditions: the historical legacy of Mormons as pioneers who “civilized” the West, and the landscape painting as the depiction of Nature

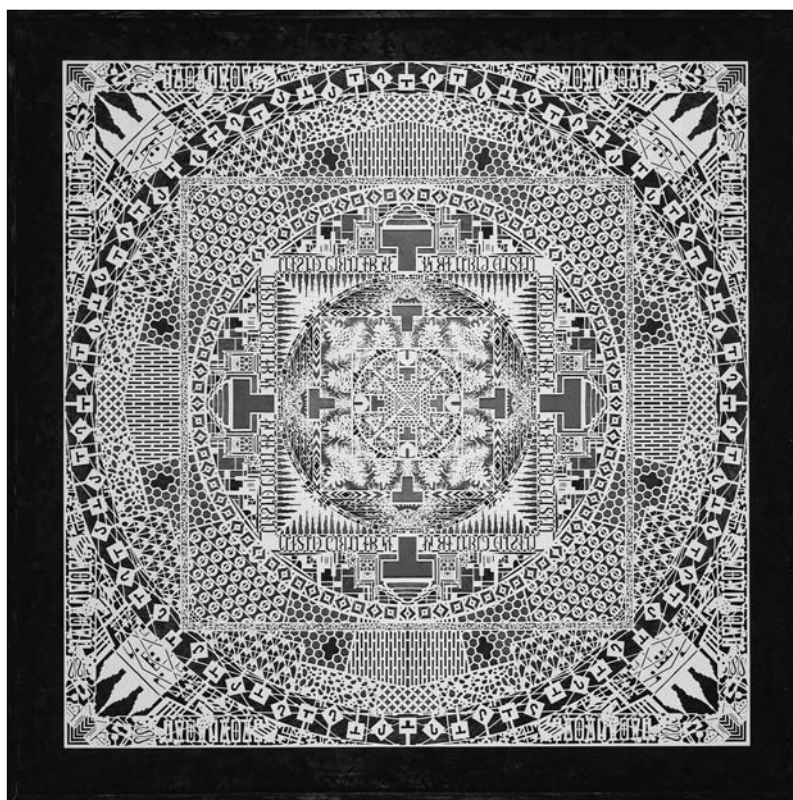
All photographs courtesy of Artemis, Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, New York.



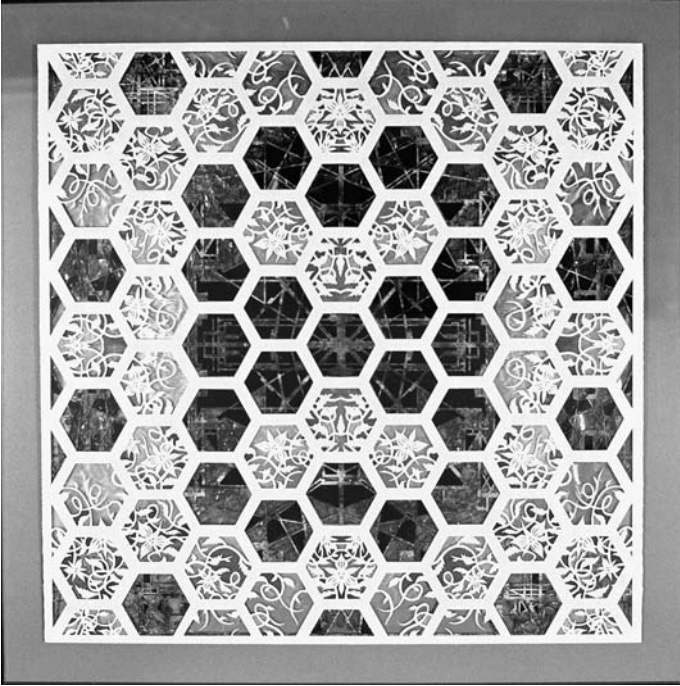
CHERIE K. WOODWORTH is currently visiting assistant professor of history at Wesleyan and lecturer in humanities at Yale where, in 2001, she completed her Ph.D. in medieval history. She lives in New Haven, Connecticut, with her husband, Brad.



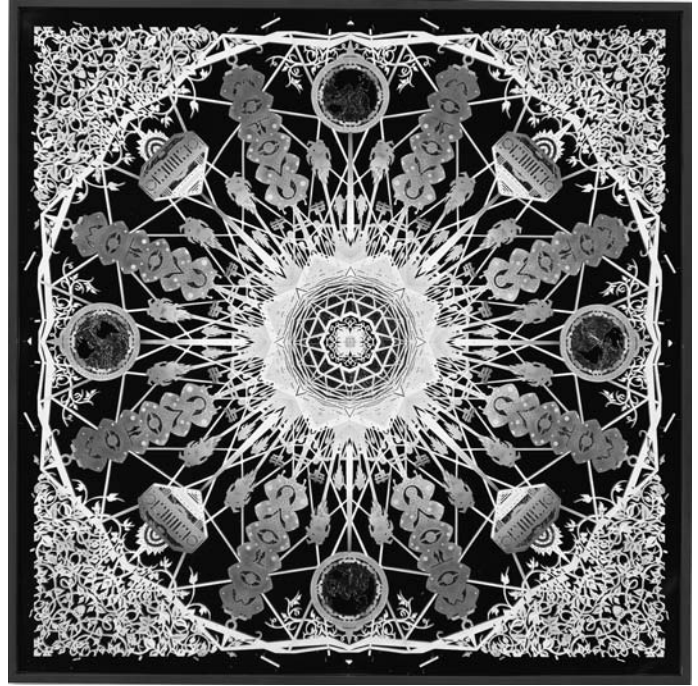
*This Is the Place or
In Our Lovely Deseret*
1999 (left: detail;
below, full image)
Cut paper and pastel
50 x 50 inches
Janice and Mickey
Cartin collection
Hartford, Connecticut



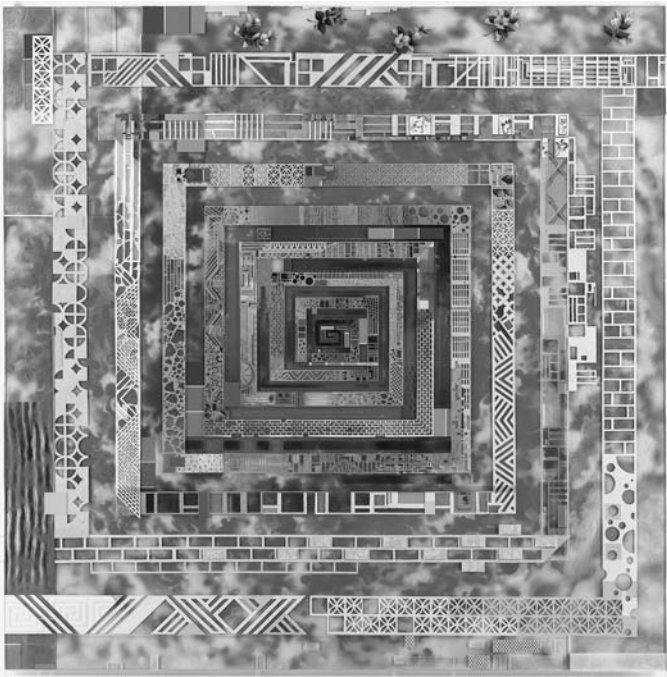
*This Is the Place or
In Our Lovely Deseret*
is inhabited by many Utah and
Mormon symbols and images,
such as the Salt Lake Temple,
the Deseret alphabet, beehives
and honeycomb patterns,
the all-seeing eye, and others.
Three frames of circles
within squares create
the work's overall
structure in allusions to
perfection as well as
to the impossible.



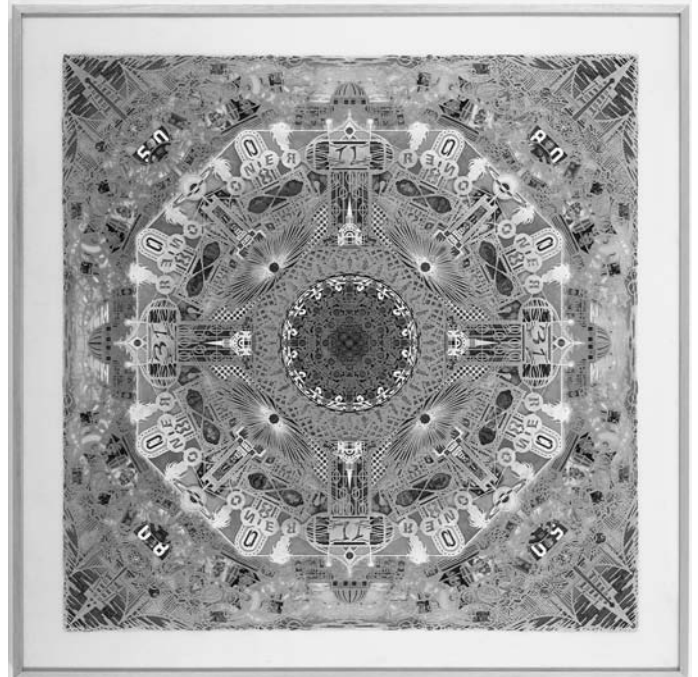
Industry, 1998
cut paper, metallic paper, acrylic, plexiglass.
32 x 32 inches



*Eureka! Stepping Through the Rearview Mirror
One Discovers the Golden State*, 2001
cut paper, acrylic, plastic, plexiglass
52 x 52 inches



The Swirling World of Ersatz Earth, 2001
cut paper, acrylic, plastic, plexiglass
60 x 60 inches
The Progressive Corporation Collection, Mayfield, Ohio



Pluribus: State 31, 1999
cut paper, acrylic, plexiglass
61 x 61 inches
The Goetz Collection, Munich, Germany



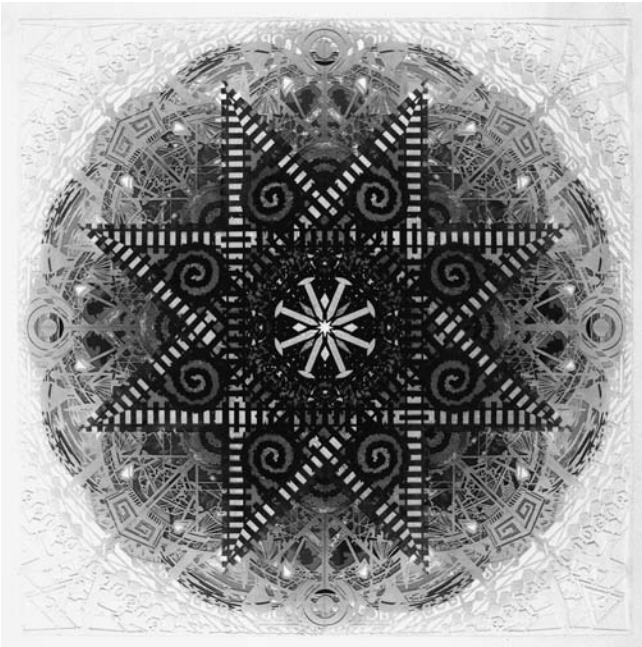
One Nation Under God, Subdivisible, 2001 (detail)
cut paper, acrylic, plastic, plexiglass. 56 x 81 inches

and the Sublime. As with Hudson River school painters Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt more than a century ago, Twitchell shows the natural landscape overpowering man (there are no human figures in his snowflake works), now combined with a more ambivalent, but more suitably modern, suggestion—the man-made landscape also overpowers man, or at the least, individuality.

As for Mormon history in the West, Twitchell uses it to convey the freighted ambiguity of our relationship with the American landscape. For the nineteenth-century romantic landscape artists, the great American wilderness was the locus of transcendence, where a man could be transported beyond himself through Nature as it becomes supernatural. Rays of light breaking through clouds and gilding mountain crags or forest meadows, visual devices which, though now hackneyed and clichéd, communicated in a new way a new concept: the Sublime. But this transcendence occurred when the artist traveled alone into this unspoiled wilderness; when the crowd follows, the wilderness disappears.

When Joseph Smith left the plowed fields of the farm to pray in a grove of trees, he prefigured the later Mormon journey into the wilderness to find a new relationship with God. But like others who later came to colonize the American West, the Mormons transformed the Western landscape, inevitably through their very presence, but also deliberately by their industry. We would not pave over the Sacred Grove to turn it into housing subdivisions, but we have turned the Promised Land into a comfortable suburb, like the Ogden suburb where Twitchell himself grew up. It is the home we love, but the one that also replaces the Lord's own landscape with one of our own making.

It is this ambivalence that comes out in Twitchell's most recent works such as *One Nation Under God, Subdivisible* (2001, above) and *Eureka! Stepping Through the Rearview Mirror One Discovers the Golden State* (2001, page 36), and the slightly older work *Industry* (1998, page 36). These three works are included in a three-person exhibition at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art from October 2002 through May,



Mythic America or How the West Was One, 1998
cut paper, acrylic, pigment, newspaper, plexiglass
48 x 48 inches

Susan and Michael Hort Collection, New York

IN *Mythic America or How the West Was One* (full image left, color detail, front cover), Twitchell depicts a landscape in history. At the center of the star, as in a kaleidoscope, are multiple repetitions of the Golden Spike which tied together the transcontinental railroad in 1869. The two halves of the U.S. rail met at Promontory Point near the Great Salt Lake—one way that Utah became, symbolically, the center of a country now united through the might of industrial transportation. The railroad itself is the most dominant motif of the work, as a black-crossed star that traverses the painting in all four directions.

Within each point of the star is an echo of Robert Smithson's landscape artwork *Spiral Jetty*, built in the Great Salt Lake one hundred years after the golden spike had been driven, and just thirty miles south of Promontory Point. Smithson imagined the jetty as a symbol of endlessly curving eternity. Twitchell contrasts the jetty's curves with the straightforward thrust of the railroad (and the spike itself) as agents of the American vision of endless expansion. Smithson built the jetty of black rocks set against the background of the lake's waters turned red by a bloom of the lake's brine shrimp (see color detail on cover). *Spiral Jetty* was buried by the lake's rising waters; when it reemerged in 1993, salt deposits had turned the black jetty white, and the lake waters had returned to blue. It was submerged again for several years, but Utah's recent drought has lowered the lake's level, and the jetty is visible once more.

2003. The exhibition, "Past Tense: a Contemporary Dialogue," investigates the way history influences the contemporary world and, in Twitchell's case, the contemporary landscape.

In *One Nation Under God, Subdivisible*, the pinwheel pattern from traditional quilt making is superimposed on an abstracted arrangement of the forty-eight contiguous states. Twitchell intends the viewer to take a visual pilgrimage through continental America, as if following a road map. The green dot on the upper, right corner of the image represents Maine, the starting point of the drive. On the bottom left corner of the image, the red dot completes the journey in California, taking the viewer from "sea to shining sea," an indirect reference to Manifest Destiny.

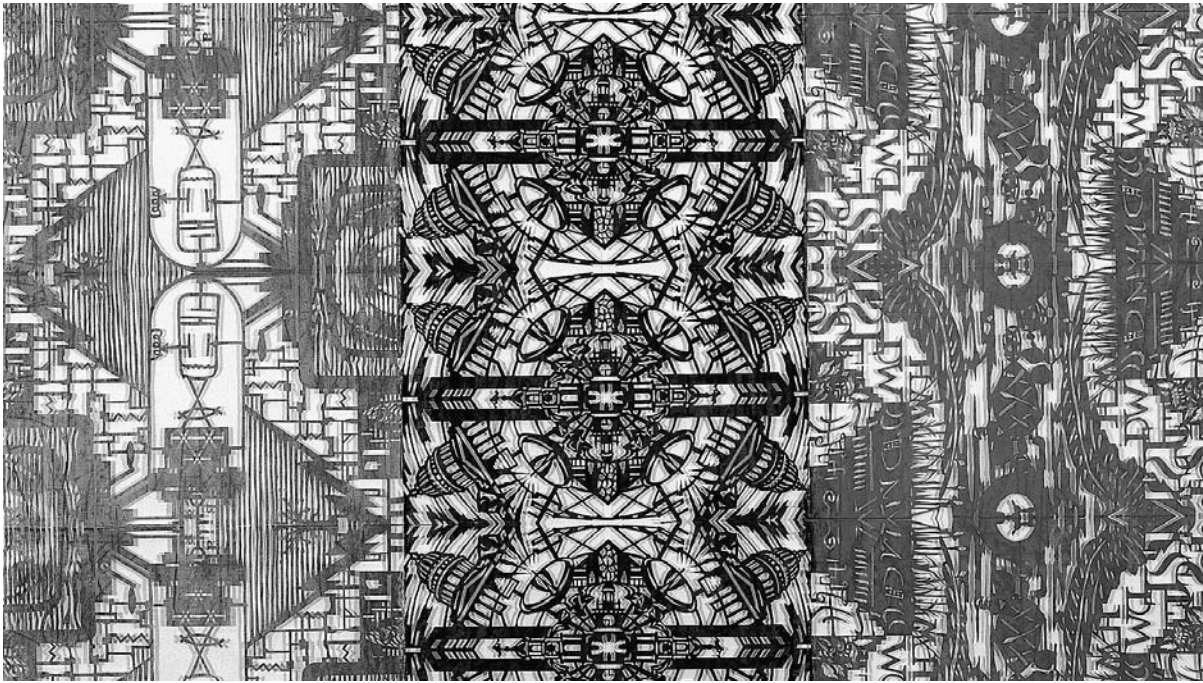
Eureka! is perhaps Twitchell's most ambivalent and consciously sentimental work. As the title implies, it is the reflection of a westerner looking back on the neon-tinted, car-culture landscapes of his youth.

Industry is a honeycomb composition through which are growing sego lilies, the state flower of Utah. Yet breaking through this pastoral field is a tangle of spider-like power lines, invading and irradiating the delicate mountain flower.

With the BYU show, Twitchell's paintings come "home" to the West. While Twitchell now considers himself a New Yorker, critics and commentators there persist in calling him a Utahn and a Mormon. It seems to provide them with an irresistible certainty of place and meaning, a label they think they understand (even though they don't). And they are

right in ways they don't even know because at its core, Twitchell's art reflects a central paradox of Mormonism. It is both orderly, precise, and rational but also mystical, iconic, and shamanistic. His paintings, like Mormon temples, show an open face to outsiders but contain another meaning entirely to those who have eyes to see. And it is not only nineteenth-century American landscape paintings that Twitchell reflects; he reflects also Mormonism's own distinct use and tradition of the sublime in landscape, the landscapes of the early temple murals when the world is God's creation, both Edenic and fallen.

Thus squares within circles, mysteries inside mysteries; the Mormon core inside Lane Twitchell, the new New Yorker, Mormon mysteries infiltrated (by the collusion of the buyers themselves) into the New York art world, and now, soon, a Mormon temple rising in the midst of the great city. From its site on the west side of Manhattan, the new LDS temple will face on one side Lincoln Center for the Arts and on the other, will overlook New York's own green heart of "wilderness," Central Park. Distantly, almost directly across the park, it mirrors another temple, an immense one built to honor Art—the Metropolitan Museum. And within that great temple to Art sits another temple, the ancient Egyptian temple of Dendur. Art turned into a temple, a temple turned into art, a sacred space created by men, a sublime wilderness in the midst of the city—all are, like Twitchell's art, both surface and symbol, an open book that keeps, still, its mystery.



Parallel Lines of Second Sight (Beginnings, Visions, Translations, and the State of the Union)

1999 (detail of the three center bands)

Cut paper, 60 x 84 inches

private collection, London, England

THE SEVEN BANDS of a television test pattern serve as a convenient layout for Twitchell's *Parallel Lines of Second Sight (Beginnings, Visions, Translations, and the State of the Union)*, a visual narrative highlighting similarities in the lives of Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and television inventor, Philo T. Farnsworth. (See full color image showing all seven bands on back cover.) *Parallel Lines* "reads" from both directions, with images relating to Smith working from right to left and Farnsworth from left to right, until they converge in the center band.

BEGINNINGS (the outside bands)

Joseph Smith, Jr. and Philo T. Farnsworth were born almost exactly a century apart—Smith in 1805, Farnsworth 1906—and their lives share many parallels. Twitchell labels the two outside bands of his work, "Beginnings," and each contains images of the state trees and birds of the two men's boyhood homes—Smith's, Vermont and New York (maple leaves and the eastern bluebird); Farnsworth's, Utah and Idaho (evergreen trees and the Rocky Mountain bluebird).

VISIONS (second and sixth bands)

At age fourteen, each man had what could be considered his "first vision." Smith, living in the settled East, had his now-famous epiphany in the close confines of a grove of trees. Farnsworth, growing up in the expansive West, observed the alignment of the rows of a wheat field and conceptualized that electrons arranged in a similar pattern would be able to hold an image (or a vision).

TRANSLATIONS (third and fifth bands)

The next two bands represent the *translations* or the bringing to perfection of the seeds planted in the two men's youthful visions. Through images of Mesoamerican architecture and icons such as a hat, seer stones, and Egyptian characters, the band on Smith's side of *Parallel Lines* represents the translation of the Book of Mormon. Farnsworth's side depicts his first vacuum tubes and the alignment patterns of his early device.

STATE OF THE UNION (center band)

This center band is composed around the motif of an interlocked Utah-style Mormon chapel (with accompanying satellite dish) and the similar-looking spires of the Nauvoo Temple (with horizontal angel Moroni) and Independence Hall, in Philadelphia (where Farnsworth's radio and television company was based). The visions of the two men have truly converged for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints now owns one of the largest privately held broadcasting networks in the world.



Smith's and Farnsworth's lives share many more fun and sometimes intriguing similarities which are now listed on Sunstone's website: <www.sunstoneonline.com>. Follow the prompts to SUNSTONE issue 124, and click on [Smith/Farnsworth parallels](#).