

# ARTFORUM

SLANT

## COSMIC DANCER

Dan Beachy-Quick on Charles Ross's *Star Axis*

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Charles Ross, *Star Axis Star Trails*, 1971-present. Photo: Charles Ross / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**COSMOS IS A WORD UNIVERSAL IN SCOPE**, but hidden inside it, like the intimate drawers of a jewelry box, other meanings are kept. Order: of stars, of world, of self. Pattern: macrocosm, microcosm. *Form. Ornament. Adornment.* The light-year dance of galaxies around one another is cosmic; so is the pearl-drop pendant hanging below the throat. Absolute zero and blood-heat braided together, as is that intimacy between self and universe entire—a fact somehow known before it's learned, forgotten before it's ever been grasped—may well be the fundamental discovery needed to put your foot on *Star Axis*'s first step.

An hour and a half northeast of Santa Fe, out where the New Mexican highlands merge into the plains, sky immense above the almost discernable curve of the Earth, *Star Axis* is first seen from the dirt road that takes you to it, jutting up from a mesa. It is a sight that evokes ancient memory, archetype-deep, of a temple or holy precinct. A feeling of heedfulness, part reverent and part wary, grows as you get closer—a sense of nearing the monumental.

That word fits what artist Charles Ross has spent forty-five years constructing. A student of pure math at Berkeley in the 1960s, he took a sculpture class merely to fulfill an art and humanities requirement, and it altered the course of his life. He began by building prisms; math as a manifestation of fundamental cosmic laws—elegance, order, beauty—is a principle undergirding Ross's work. Solar and stellar light are his primary considerations, a force not merely thought about, but given agency to make its own mark. Ross becomes a maker-medium of a kind, constructing various methods for sun and star to create the art itself. His prisms break white light into rainbow, and the hours let the spectra cross a room. He builds large magnifying glasses that focus the sun's energy into an iridescent point and burn into wood a day's "portrait." But most spectacular of all is *Star Axis* itself. It is comprised of five different components: the Equinoctial Chamber, the Star Tunnel, the Solar Pyramid, the Hour Chambers, and the still-to-be-completed Shadow Field.



**Charles Ross, *Star Axis* Solar Pyramid Spine at sunset, 1971-present.** Photo: Charles Ross / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

To enter the Star Tunnel, you must step through a triangular opening cut at forty-seven degrees into the Equinoctial Chamber. The angle of the tunnel's one-hundred-and-forty-seven stairs is directly aligned with the Earth's axis. Looking up at the large semicircle embracing the lower half of *Star Axis* reveals an arc of the same degree bisected by the tunnel, with twenty-three-and-a-half degrees on either side. That angle corresponds to the wobble of the Earth's axis over its twenty-six thousand year cycle. Such precision isn't pedantic; it's revelatory. The geometry of the Solar Pyramid rising five stories above the mesa is ordained by the element it measures: the angle of the sun at both the winter and summer solstices.

The awe one feels in the presence of a monument is too often mere marveling at the ambition behind it, admiring the refusal of its maker to submit to worldly laws or limits. This is not the same awe one feels before *Star Axis*. One is not awestruck by its sheer mass, but by the understanding—through the body before the mind—that it was constructed around those cosmic realities that exist beyond our perception and provide the fundamental laws by which we dwell in the world. It is a structure in heedful surrender to reality as it most truly is. Its beauty, so unexpectedly, is one of utmost humility—a tool to teach us a lesson so simple that we are bewildered by the fact of it: that we are—macro- and micro-, star and heart, sun and breath—another cosmic braid, an adornment to the whole.

It is this radical tension between the universe, the tool, and the human by which *Star Axis* gains its great power. The structure in the spare elegance of its geometry invokes the ancient temple, pyramid, ziggurat. One cannot help but feel in the presence of something unfathomably larger than oneself, but that larger presence is no God or gods. The chambers of *Star Axis* are not, as the pyramids are, mausoleums. Quite the opposite: Each chamber posits the vital solitary point of one human life as nexus of greatest meaning. Its power is in giving us that potent awareness of the fact not only that "I exist," but also that countless generations have looked up to the stars to discover the same.

We step back into our ancient ongoing condition when we put a foot on the first stair and begin to climb the Star Tunnel. We also step forward in time. Those stairs, and the circular oculus at the top of them, calibrated to both terrestrial time and stellar precession, provide the central axis of Ross's vision. The perimeter marks the North Star's circular path. From the bottom step, the oculus looks to be the circumference of a dime held at arm's length; from the top step, it frames one's entire visual field. The tilt of the earth that gives us our seasons, summer and winter, harvest and dearth, also causes Polaris, the North Star, to abandon its post. But as I climbed the stairs at night, the dark of the stone so much darker than the sky, it was a bright point at the center. To climb toward it is to become its apprentice. The lesson is of time and motion. Each step represents a measure of the North Star's movement across ever-vaster scales—thirteen thousand years in the past, thirteen thousand years in the future.

Holding the stairwell's silver rails, on which the years will soon be etched, one succumbs to the helpless realization that *Star Axis* means to give us as its primary gift: that our present now is the meeting point of vast spans of time both already lived and yet to be experienced, a feeling of utmost poignancy we experience when, at the top of the stairs, Polaris above the Big Dipper and countless stars surrounding, the sound of our own heavy breathing fills the chamber, and our heart pounds from the climb. Against the vastness of the night sky and the dark earth, I felt a bewilderment of existential proportion.

Moreover, I found myself doing what countless humans have done when feeling similarly: looking up, and finding a single shining point to act as my guide.



Charles Ross, *Star Axis Entrance in progress*, 1971-present. Photo: Charles Ross / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

And so I exited the Star Tunnel, walked along the Sun Pyramid's exterior, and up the spiral staircase to the Hour Chamber where, looking out a triangular opening to see Polaris bright at the apex, any given star will take sixty minutes to cross from one side to the other. Should you stay there long enough for the sun to rise, you can step out and walk up the Sun Pyramid to see the shadow of the whole tetrahedron cast to the west, like a sun-dial marking the hours. Your head will be at the top of it, a gnomon and a gentle introduction back into our mortal nature in which—as *Star Axis* tells us—we are given the gift of a life in the spinning world.

—Dan Beachy-Quick