

ABOVE: Charles Ross, *Mansions of the Zodiac* (detail), 1973-76/2012, acrylic paint and collage using Bakelite powder xeroxes of Falkau photographic star atlas images on canvas, 109 x 63.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Curated by Nicole Dial-Kay, Curator of Exhibitions + Collections and Kate Miller, Curatorial Assistant.

SPECIAL THANKS
 Charles Ross, Jill O'Bryan; and to Joel Clark, and Dave Ryan, Preparators; Christopher Albert, Collections Manager; Stephanie Stewart, Collections Associate; and Emily Santhanam.

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CHARLES ROSS

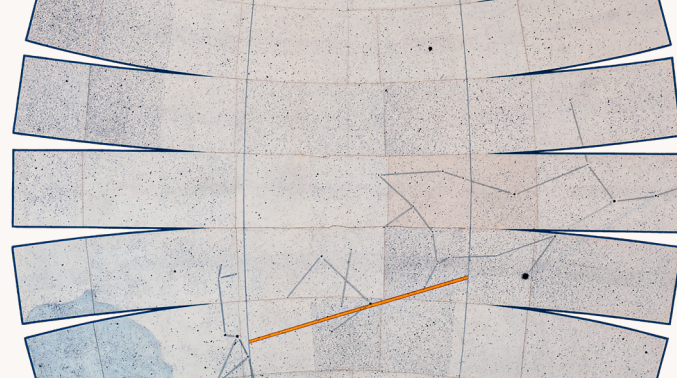
Mansions of the Zodiac

MARCH 15 - SEPTEMBER 7, 2025

CHARLES ROSS

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Charles Ross's artistic journey is deeply intertwined with the celestial, and his works offer profound insights into the nature of light, time, and human perception. Grounded in the dark skies of New Mexico, his artworks provide viewers with a unique lens through which to view the cosmos. In this exhibition, we present three significant works by Charles Ross: *Prism Column* (1966/2022), *Mansions of the Zodiac* (1973–76/2012) from the Star Maps series, and *Sunlight Dispersion* (1972).

Ross discovered his passion for making art while studying mathematics at UC Berkeley, where he received his BA in Mathematics (1960) and an MA in Art (1962). His first solo sculpture exhibit was at Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco in 1961. Ross taught sculpture at UC Berkeley, Cornell University, and the School of Visual Arts. In 1963, he received a year-long fellowship to make art in New York, working with the Judson Dancers to create the theatrical performance *A Collective Event*.

In 1965, while living in a warehouse studio in San Francisco, Ross dreamed of building large-scale transparent prisms, signaling a dramatic transformation in his artistic practice. Moving back to New York, he helped form the first artist co-op building at 80 Wooster Street. Ross exhibited at the Dwan Gallery between 1967 and 1971, where the Minimal and Land Art movements originated, alongside artists like Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, and Sol LeWitt.

PRISMS

Charles Ross's turn to prisms arose from a dream in which he saw the technical details for building these objects. His focus shifted from early lattice columns to prisms, which refract images of their environment, creating a dynamic, cubist-like assemblage. Ross's early prisms, like *Prism Column* (1966/2022), refract light and space into shifting perspectives, emphasizing the relativity of vision.

Unlike Minimalist artists like Donald Judd, who focused on form, Ross used primary shapes to explore how geometry influences perception. His prisms act as instruments for looking, refracting light into vibrant arrays that shift with the viewer's position. Originally exhibited at Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco, *Prism Column* was remade in 2022 and exhibited at Franklin Parrasch Gallery and

CHART in New York. These early works paved the way for Ross's solar spectrum projects, casting rainbows of light onto surrounding architecture and deepening his exploration of light's interaction with space.

SUNLIGHT DISPERSION

Sunlight Dispersion (1972), a film capturing sunlight refracted through prisms, emphasizes Ross's fascination with light, time, and planetary motion. This unique installation showcases the radiance of the solar spectrum as sunlight interacts with prisms, creating dynamic patterns that change with the sun's movement. Owned by the Centre Pompidou since 1975, this will be the first time the film is shown outside its collection.

STAR AXIS AND STAR MAPS

Ross's exploration of light culminates in *Star Axis* and the Star Maps, which bring the earth's relationship to celestial geometries into human scale. *Star Axis*, conceived in 1971, is a monumental earthwork and observatory in New Mexico's remote desert. Its five major elements—Solar Pyramid, Shadow Field, Hour Chamber, Equatorial Chamber, and Star Tunnel—are precisely aligned to celestial geometries. Visitors experience a physical and temporal journey, gaining insight into the intricate dance of celestial bodies and their impact on time perception.

The Star Maps, including *Mansions of the Zodiac* (1973–76/2012), present two-dimensional views of the sky overlaying the passage of time onto the spatial arrangement of stars. Ross's maps employ mathematical precision akin to Renaissance perspective, blending mythology with technology to illustrate cosmic order.

MANSIONS OF THE ZODIAC

The *Mansions of the Zodiac* works meticulously chart star positions, with each map dedicated to one of the twelve zodiac signs. These paintings illustrate how the sky has shifted since Ptolemy's time, transitioning from the Age of Pisces to Aquarius. The twelve Star Maps, created between 1973 and 1976 and reworked in 2012, each measure 109 by 63.5 inches and have never been exhibited before.

The exhibition also includes *Point Source / Star Space: Weave of Ages* (1975/86), depicting the sun's motion through the stars for each of the twelve astrological ages. A selection of these immense Star Maps

paintings was shown in joint exhibitions at the John Weber and Susan Caldwell Galleries in New York and at the Venice Biennale in 1986. This Harwood Museum exhibition premieres *Mansions of the Zodiac*, coinciding with the near-completion of *Star Axis*.

Throughout the series, Ross incorporates 428 photographic negatives from the Falkau star atlas, capturing stars visible to the thirteenth magnitude, far beyond the naked eye's sixth magnitude. These negatives emphasize Ross's focus on tactile, empirical realism; the stars are Bakelite xeroxes of the Falkau star atlas photographic negatives mounted onto canvas. The paintings' black backgrounds are accented by spectrum colors associated with each astrological sign, reflecting Ross's emphasis on geometry and cosmic order.

Ross's works—whether prisms, Star Maps, or *Star Axis*—offer a unique perspective on the cosmos. By exploring light, time, and planetary motion, he invites viewers to contemplate humanity's place in the universe. New Mexico's clear night skies amplify Ross's work, providing an ideal setting for his exploration of celestial geometries.

The exhibition's centerpiece works—*Mansions of the Zodiac*, *Sunlight Dispersion*, and *Prism Column*—underscore Ross's dedication to the interplay of art and science. These pieces highlight the profound beauty and mystery of the universe, reflecting his meticulous inquiry into the connections between light, space, and time.