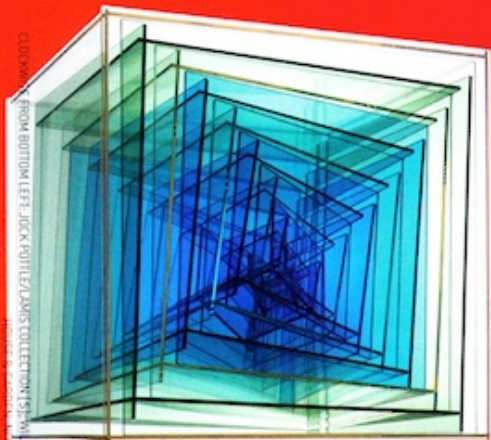
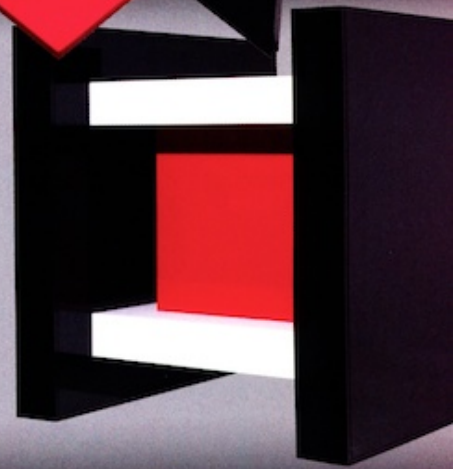
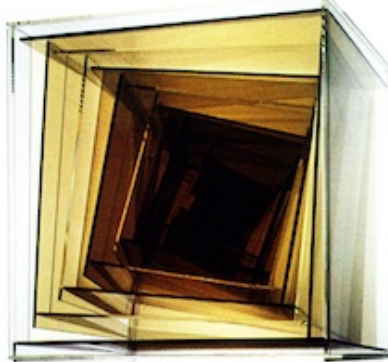
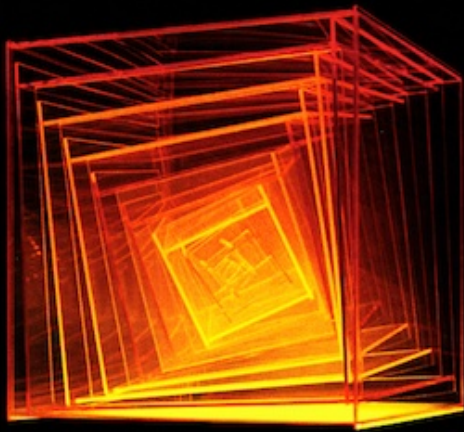


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Opposite, from top: Construction No. 159, a 1968 piece in acrylic. Leroy Lamis in his studio in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1970.

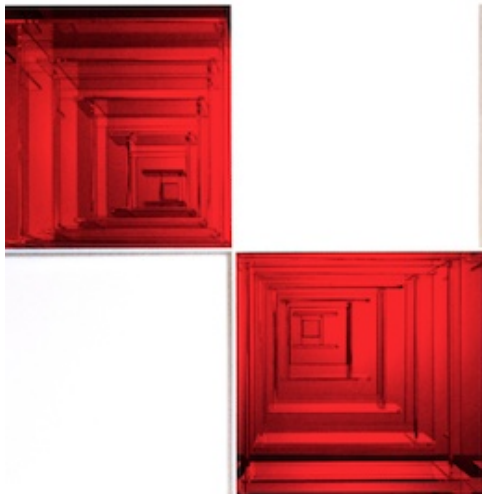
Clockwise from top: Construction No. 204AP in acrylic, 1972. Construction No. 186 from 1970. Construction No. 105, a 1966 column piece, in the New York apartment that Billy Baldwin had designed for S.J. Newhouse, Jr., circa 1969. The 1978 acrylic Construction No. 230. Construction No. 223 from 1973. Construction No. 191 from 1970.



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: JACK POTTER (LAMS COLLECTION) STUDIO, LAND O' LAKES, FLORIDA, 1969

plastic fantastic

Leroy Lamis took an architectural view of sculpture



In the pantheon of 1960's minimalist artists, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin are household names. Leroy Lamis is not. Yet. Back in the public eye two years after his death, his sculptures stood out dramatically from contemporaries when New York's D. Wigmore Fine Art presented "New Materials, New Approaches," exploring the use of plastic in '60's art. Think Judd by way of Josef Albers. And you can add Flavin if you switch on a spotlight. "Light causes movement—I like that," Lamis once said in an interview. "That's pretty much what it's all about."

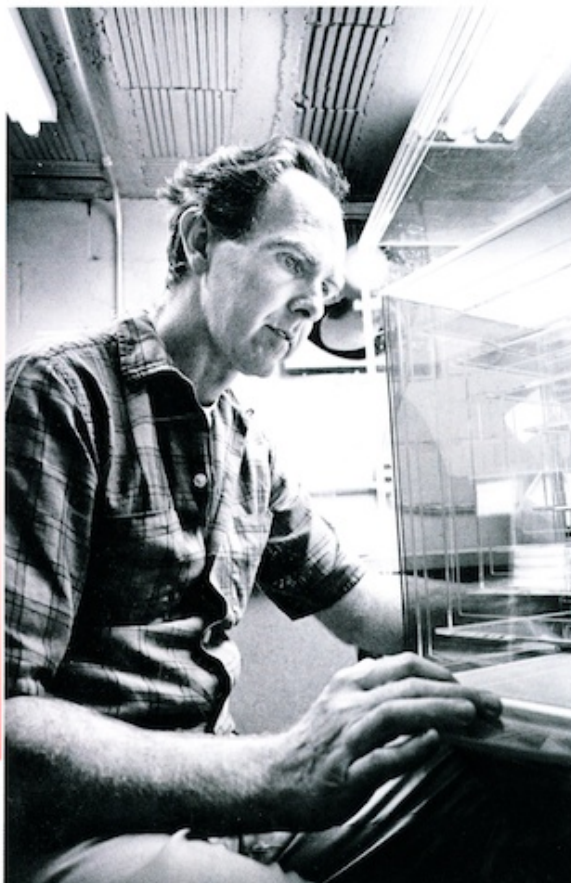
An artist and educator, he painstakingly and impeccably crafted his cubes within cubes in acrylic between 1962 and 1978. These pristine works, influenced by the constructivism of Naum Gabo and the modernism of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, propelled Lamis to the heights of the art world at the time. By 1968, he had been featured in three "Annual Exhibitions" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, "The Responsive Eye" at the Museum of Modern Art, and a one-man show at the prestigious Staempfli Gallery.

His formal art education culminated at Columbia University, but as a teenager he had worked in Hollywood editing rooms. Movies and cars, emblematic of Southern California, proved formative for him, fueling a lifelong enthusiasm for light, motion, and technology, also pillars of constructivism. By 1956, when he moved to Iowa to teach at Cornell College, he was creating abstractions from wood, steel I beams, prisms, and cracked glass. The work in glass, harnessed to motors, was kinetic but clumsily so. Ignored by museums, it proved a career dead end.

He began experimenting with plastics in 1958. Somewhere between then and his first cube, the lightbulb went on. In sheets of colored or colorless clear acrylic, he'd found a material suited to his aesthetic and intellectual aspirations. The hermetic, quasi-architectural volumes, critically acclaimed for their crystalline beauty and elegance, can be read, first, as three-dimensional homages to the square. Then, by orchestrating the way his chosen colors refract and blend, depending on lighting conditions and viewer position, he added layers of complexity to Albers's color theory.

"What I hope to do now," Lamis said in another interview, "is work in the time I live and project myself into the future." That was prescient. In signal ways, the '60's were a plastic decade. A perception of political and cultural malleability corresponded with an explosion in the use of actual plastics, not incidentally in avant-garde furniture and art. Lamis joined a vanguard that included Richard Artschwager, John Chamberlain, and Eva Hesse. Clearly, the work struck a chord.

That chord continued to resonate as Lamis developed spatial solutions with mathematical precision—in all, 230 variations on a theme. Rigorously worked out, the optical effects of his concentric cubes provided a dazzlingly multifaceted visual experience. A standout at D. Wigmore Fine Art's recent exhibition was *Construction No. 191*, one of his few pieces to feature tilted cubes. Fixed yet kinetic, *Construction No. 191* conjures Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, only without the nude. ▶



FROM TOP: JOCK POTTE/LAMIS COLLECTION; COURTESY OF THE LAMIS COLLECTION



Clockwise from top left:
 Construction No. 159 in acrylic,
 1968. Bouquet in steel and
 glass, 1957. The card
 announcing a 1966 solo
 exhibition. Construction No.
 154B in acrylic, 1968. From
 1966, Construction No. 110.
 From 1970, Construction No.
 194. From 1968, Construction
 No. 149. From 1968,
 Construction No. 153.



Lamis considered his constructions islands unto themselves, devoid of overt political content. Still, critics were given to suggesting meanings. The catalog for a 1979 solo exhibition at the Swope Art Museum in Terre Haute, Indiana, posited a correlation between the purity of plastic and the purity of the goals of the New Frontier and Great Society. Perhaps Lamis's cubes in various colors—black, white, red, yellow—spoke to notions of equality and harmony in a

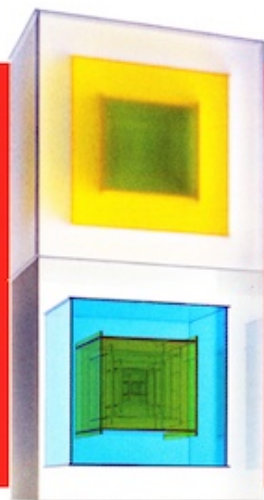
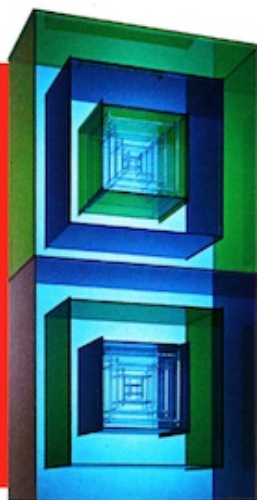
decade of civil rights activism. Surely, his work communicated a fundamental optimism toward technology, a powerful if credulous position after World War II. A transparent open construction, inviting the viewer in to ponder its essence, was the very opposite of the black box.

For all the philosophical possibilities of plastic, however, acrylic proved an exacting material. Cutting, polishing, and gluing the panels without smudges or bubbles, so the cubes appear to float seamlessly in space, required focus and determination bordering on monastic or obsessive. In the studio, Lamis was a loner if not a hermit, performing every aspect of design and fabrication himself, up to 70 hours per piece. A photo of him at work shows a man deeply absorbed—balancing compulsion with pleasure, the artist's drive with the craftsman's joy in the job.

As he once said of his romantic quest for a classical ideal, "Perfection is unattainable. But I have fun pursuing it." That "fun" hints at the other side of his personality. He was a sociable family man away from the studio, according to his son Alexander, a partner at Robert A.M. Stern Architects. (An unsurprising career path, given his father's architectural-minded explorations.)



STAEMPFLI April 28 - May 27, 1968
 47 East 77, New York



The archival work that the son is now doing is sure to spark further interest in the father's career. With a Web site, leroylamis.org, already up and a catalogue raisonné in the works, can a museum retrospective be far behind? —Larry Weinberg

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