



K L S | Lewis deSoto

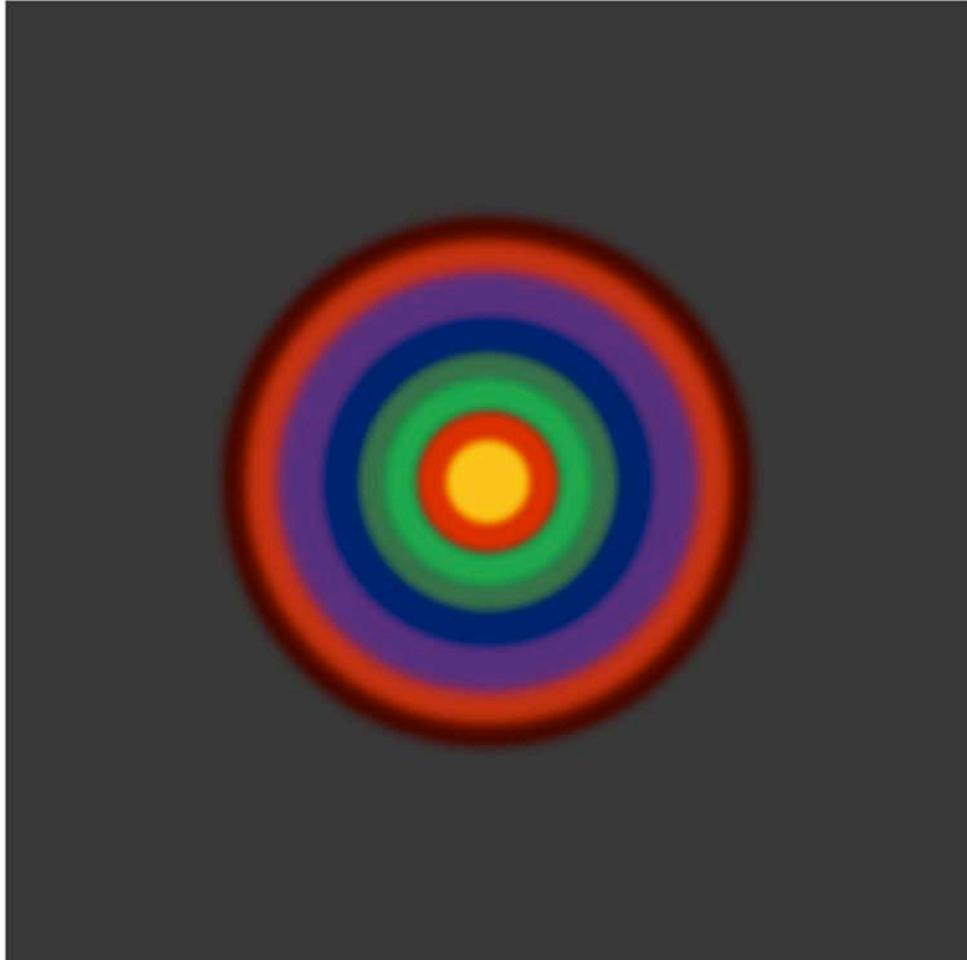
K L S

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Works by Lewis deSoto

Essay by Nick Stone

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## Symphony of Colors

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KLS represents a conversation, a relay of sorts, between three artists: the American Lewis deSoto, noted for his singular talent for colliding media; the German Hermann Hesse, author of classics like *Siddharta*, *Steppenwolf*, and *The Glass Bead Game*; and the fictional Klingsor, hero of Hesse's 1919 novella, *Klingsor's Last Summer*. These are our players: deSoto, Hesse, and Klingsor. The relay, then, takes place as follows: deSoto sampling Hesse writing Klingsor painting Montagnola. Taking Montagnola as a center point and working our way outward, from Klingsor to Hesse to deSoto, a concentric spiral of inspiration and artistic engagement emerges to which KLS provides a satisfying visual counterpart.

We begin in 1919, in the village of Montagnola, part of the the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino in southern Switzerland. Here a middle-aged painter named Klingsor drinks the heady wine of his last days, feverishly painting his natural surroundings and ultimately composing one final masterpiece, a self-portrait, before his death. Klingsor's story is told in seven chapters; despite their linear succession from page to page, their sense of time is more cyclical than linear. Even Klingsor's death is confirmed as an event not in the final chapter, but early in the preface: in a typically masterful Hesse gambit, we begin with Klingsor's end. The novella proceeds, not as a straightforward narrative, but as a symphony of vibrant sensations ranging from the ecstatic to the terrible. The reader experiences a series of impressions from moment to moment which collapse time to reveal a man ceaselessly cycling, passing through a series of interior zones. Within each of these zones exist intense, often contradictory forces presented not as binary opposites, but as a range of values in a particular spectrum. One spectrum ranges from darkest melancholy to intoxicated ecstasy; another between animal corporeality and more abstract spiritual or artistic constructs; still another from the

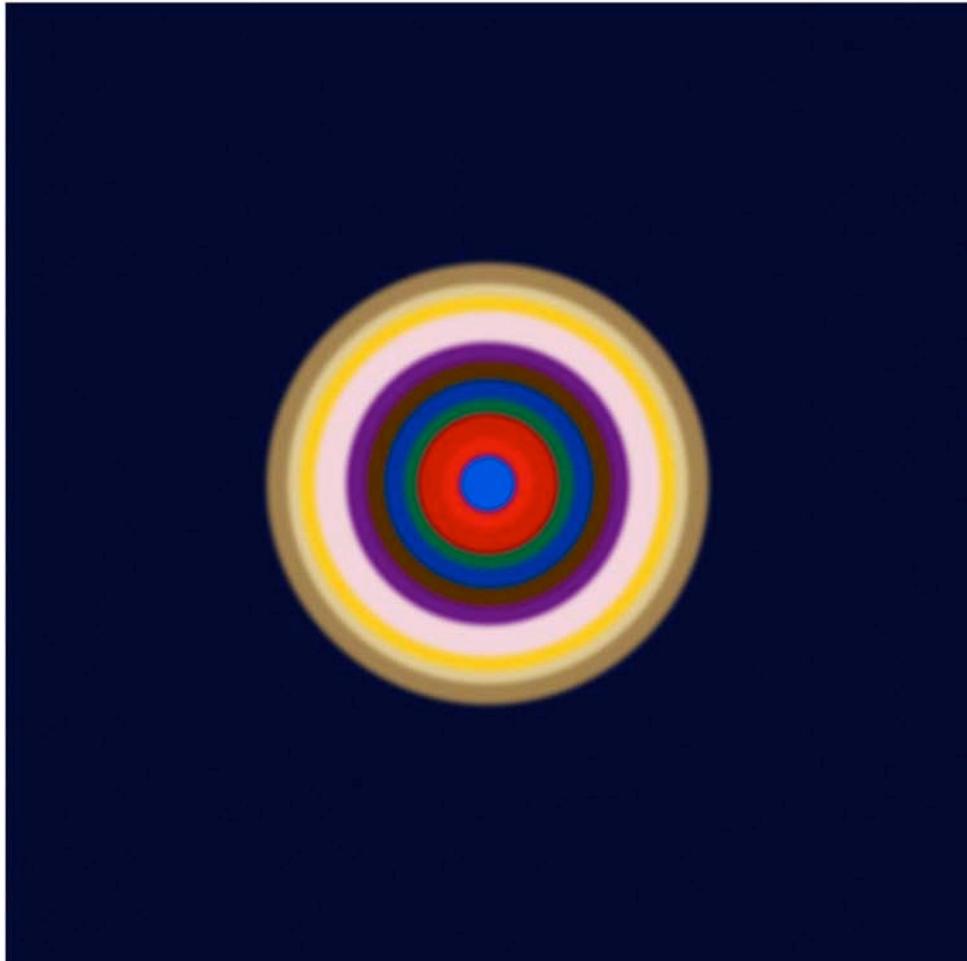


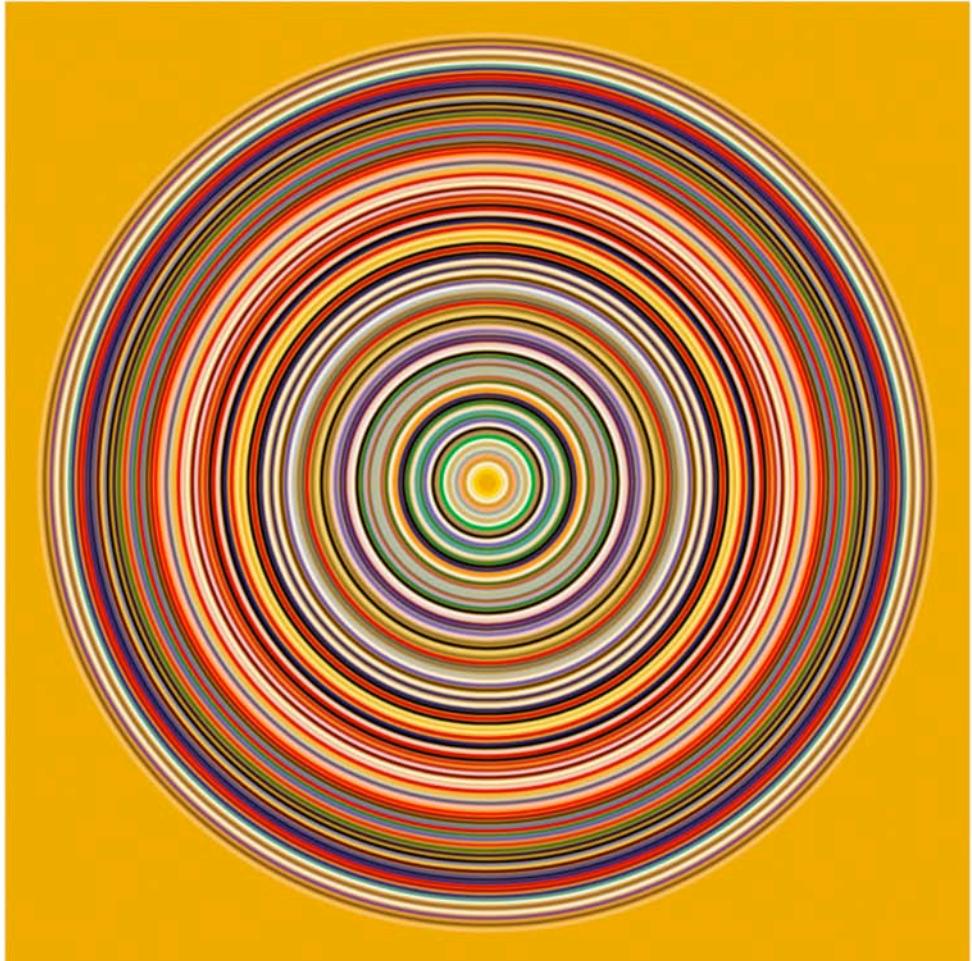
*KLS.Klingsor*, 2006, 34" x 34" pigment on paper

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ancient anchor of history to the spontaneous, mobile potential of the present.

Klingsor wanders the valleys, villages and mountain paths of Ticino, bathed in summer light as he paints, loves and ruminates. Timeless, universal themes are investigated with a savage spiritual thirst and a keen sensitivity. Here, Klingsor celebrates the way that the old drink youth in like wine, drawing warmth and comfort from its electric beauty. There, he marvels at the possibility of "visiting three continents in a single day" by finding in his compatriots and surroundings the Other which one seeks with travel: the "primeval forest, heat, beautiful alien people without nerves, sunlight, [and] temples" of Africa, India or Japan, all there in his own Swiss meadows and palazzos. Mortality is a constant concern; of all his interior zones, the spectrum of life and death is revisited with the greatest frequency. Klingsor wrestles with the impermanence of art, expression, of his own body and its matrices of desire. At times he sees Death embodied as a shadow, a figure at his table as he drinks with friends. Elsewhere, he finds in his own relentless artistic output a "cannon" with which to defend against an inevitable end: "I have also shot at death with paints," declares a proud, fearful, drunken Klingsor, "with fiery green and explosive vermilion and sweet scarlet lake. Often I have hit him on the head; I have driven white and blue into his eye."



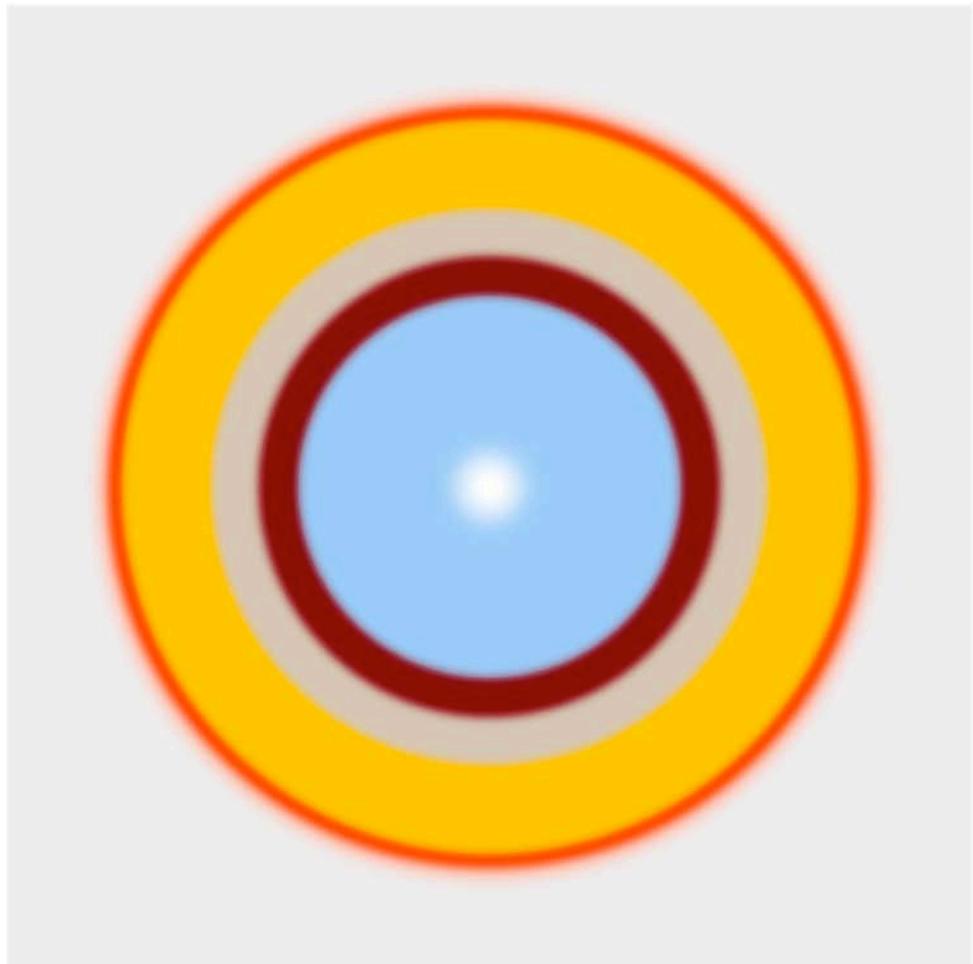


*KLS.Day At Karen*, 2006, 34" x 34" pigment on paper

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Klingsor is, of course, not Klingsor but a fictional avatar of his author: Klingsor is Hesse-writing-Klingsor, Hesse himself shooting at death with ideas, words and paint. As a rebellious youth, Hesse escaped from a series of religious institutions and schools, finally finding his path as an apprentice in a bookstore. Beginning with a volume of Romantic lyric poetry, the teenage Hesse began to synthesize his long hours of intellectual inquiry into a body of written work all his own. He read volumes, exploring Schiller, Goethe, theological texts and Greek mythology, wandering to Sri Lanka and Indonesia in search of Buddhism and Eastern spiritual traditions, seeking psychological insight from contemporaries of Jung. Indifferent to any received notions of the incompatibility of Western and Eastern ideas, Hesse sought in his own writing to confront the universal, to see the cosmic flux between idealism and reality, between the monolithic stasis of culture and the evanescent brilliance of the individual.

Troubled by the horrors of the Great War and a collapsing marriage to an increasingly psychotic wife, Hesse sought refuge in 1919 in a rented house in Montagnola, where *Klingsor* was written over the course of a single summer. Hesse cultivated friendships with painters, like Louis Moilliet, a friend of Klee and Kandinsky who appears in *Klingsor* as Lewis the Terrible. Not coincidentally, he also spent much of his time in Ticino painting the southern landscape. While he modestly dismissed his own work as that of a mere dilettante, Hesse's dexterous handling in *Klingsor* of the painter's jargon of cadmiums, cobalts and

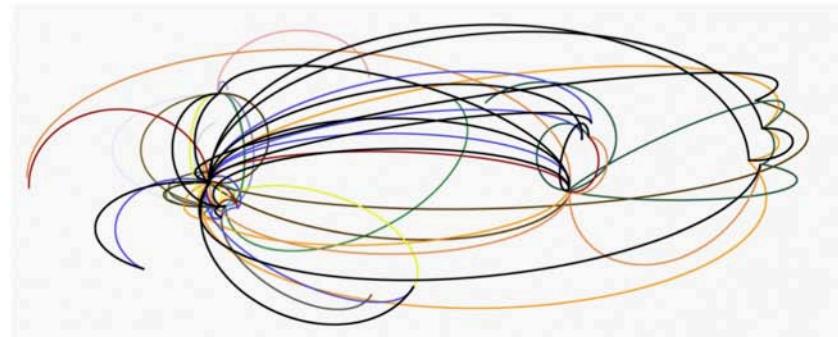


KLS.Klingsor *To Edith*, 2006, 34" x 34" pigment on paper

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vermilions was the result of applied study: at the time of the author's death, in addition to his literary accomplishments, he had composed more than 3,000 watercolors. Nevertheless, there is something astonishing in the way the colors have been written into *Klingsor*, and consequently in the way the reader's eye picks up the colors from the page, that his paintings simply cannot match. Using only words -- an array of standardized letters printed in black on a white page -- Hesse's prose evokes a "farberkonzert," a symphony of colors. The singing, radiant beauty of Hesse's descriptions derives much of its intensity from an unrivaled palette.

Reso Karalashvili has written that what Hesse achieved as a colorist in *Klingsor* "goes beyond all possible limits." No doubt this boldness with regard to a medium's perceived boundaries was enormously appealing to Lewis deSoto. What a profoundly sympathetic note must have resonated in deSoto's being as he encountered Hesse and Klingsor for the first time! Even at the surface, deSoto and Hesse have more than a little in common: both underwent an influential religious education; both possess a thirst for knowledge matched with a wandering spirit. Moreover, deSoto has made a career of exploding the limits of a medium, as in his practice of combining printed words and photographs to find hidden intersections of meaning. In 1985's *Kachina*, for example deSoto finds in the shape of an electric tower the form of a native totem, reminiscent of Klingsor's discovery of an unlikely



Left: *Kachina* (*Heyheyka Kachin Mana*), 1985, photographic print with colored text and wooden frame, 36"x36"  
Right: *Passion Trace*, 2006, pigment on paper, 16" x 40"



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exotic Eastern presence in the Swiss mountains. deSoto's 2006 print *Passion Trace*, wherein color-coded trails record on an invisible map the global paths he has traversed over the course of a lifetime of love affairs, is inarguably Klingsoresque in its unabashed celebration of love as the mind's pilot. In deSoto's appropriation of the visual language of custom car culture to tell stories of Cahuilla identity and Spanish conquest in his 2006 *Cahuilla* and *Conquest* projects, an analog emerges: deSoto writes a poetic history with sculpture and images, while Hesse paints a spiritual portrait with words. No doubt deSoto saw in the explosive music of *Klingsor*'s colors a process which seemed familiar -- namely, an intense engagement with both personal and universal themes via an unorthodox approach to media.

deSoto's *KLS* resonates strongly with its namesake. Each print in the series possesses a distinct musicality, a sense of vibration in its field of concentric rings, as if recording a sound emanating from the center of the page. There is musicality in the colors' interplay as their chromatic changes register harmonies and discordances. Even deSoto's use of digital sampling to determine the colors reflects a contemporary musical aesthetic. His use of circles reveals an appreciation of the infinite, cyclical approach to life and time evident in *Klingsor*. Given that the works are completely symmetrical from top to bottom and left to right, the viewer's eye is always seeing a reflection of the same sequence, regardless of his or her chosen point of entry. There is a sense of oneness and eventuality in the flowing,

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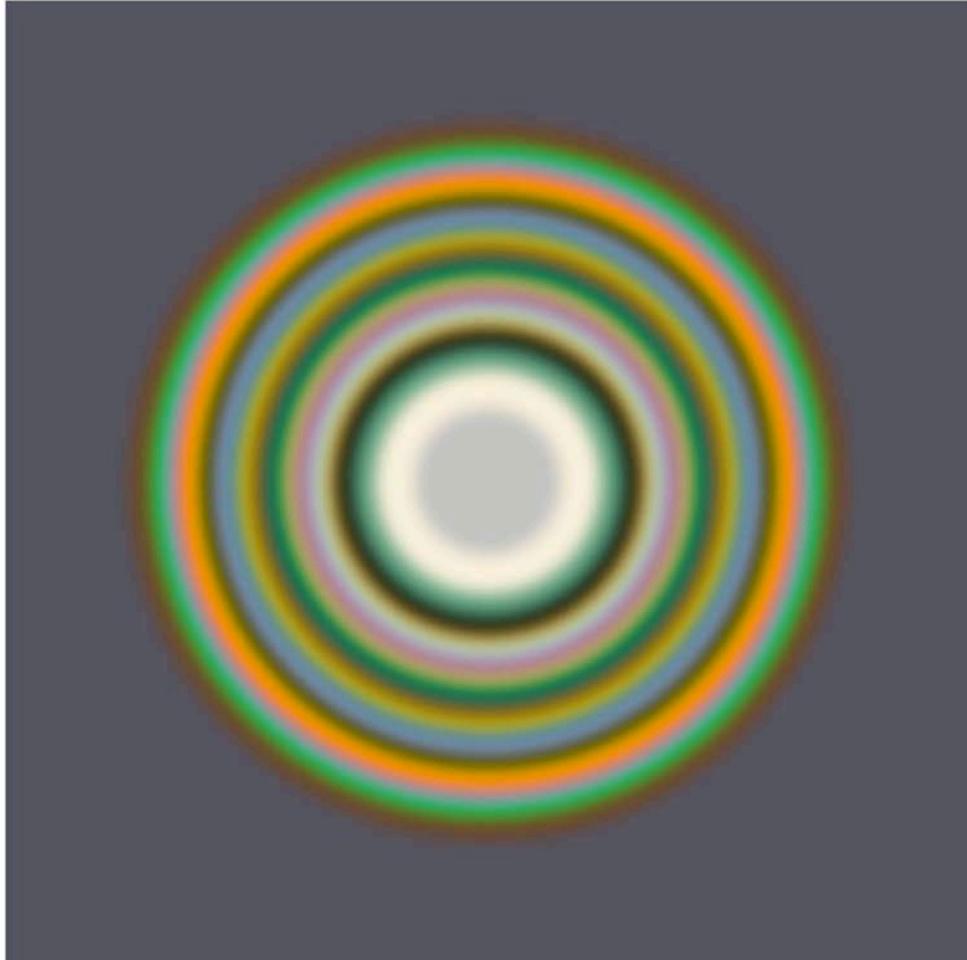
borderless shifts between colors which is in keeping with Hesse's (and Klingsor's) attention to the universal. An optical effect is produced, a false sense of receding interior space or contraction, in prints like *KLS Music of Doom* or *KLS Day at Karen*o which subtly acknowledges Hesse's favorite theme: the journey inward.

Klingsor himself, one imagines, would appreciate *KLS*. For one thing, deSoto's extraction of the colors of each chapter results in some cases in an expressionistic, Klingsoresque rendering, as in the maudlin, morbid "red flesh" of the chapter "Klingsor sends his friend Tu Fu a Poem," which fills its corresponding print like a spreading pool of blood, or the golden sunset yielded from distilling the kaleidoscopic colors of "Day at Karen." Perhaps more to the point, though, deSoto's *KLS* stylistically echoes Klingsor's approach to art -- in particular, his self-portrait: "The picture is above all a symphony of colors, a marvelously harmonized tapestry that in spite of its brilliant hues gives a sense of tranquility and nobility." One gets the sense that deSoto's formal strategy in composing *KLS*'s abstracted, chromatic melodies and sense of underlying oneness was inspired by Klingsor's own words:

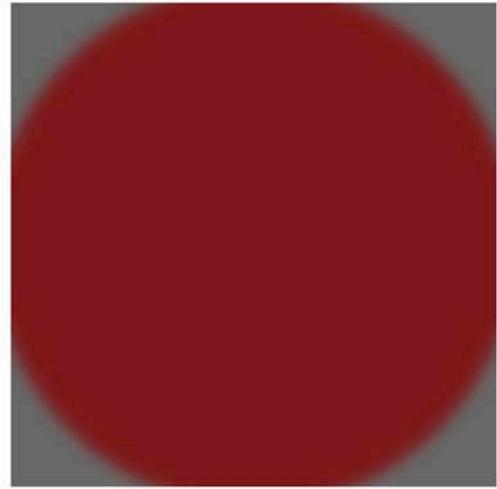
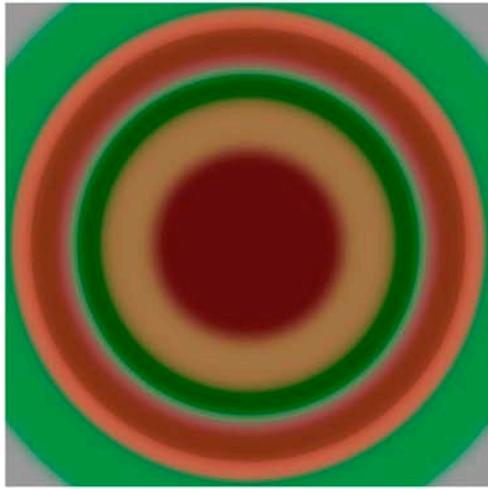
"Painting was lovely; painting was a dear, lovely game for well-behaved children. But it was something else, grander and more momentous, to direct the movements of the stars, to project the beat of your own blood, the circlets of color from your own retina, into the world, to send the vibrations of your own soul thrumming out with the wind of the night."



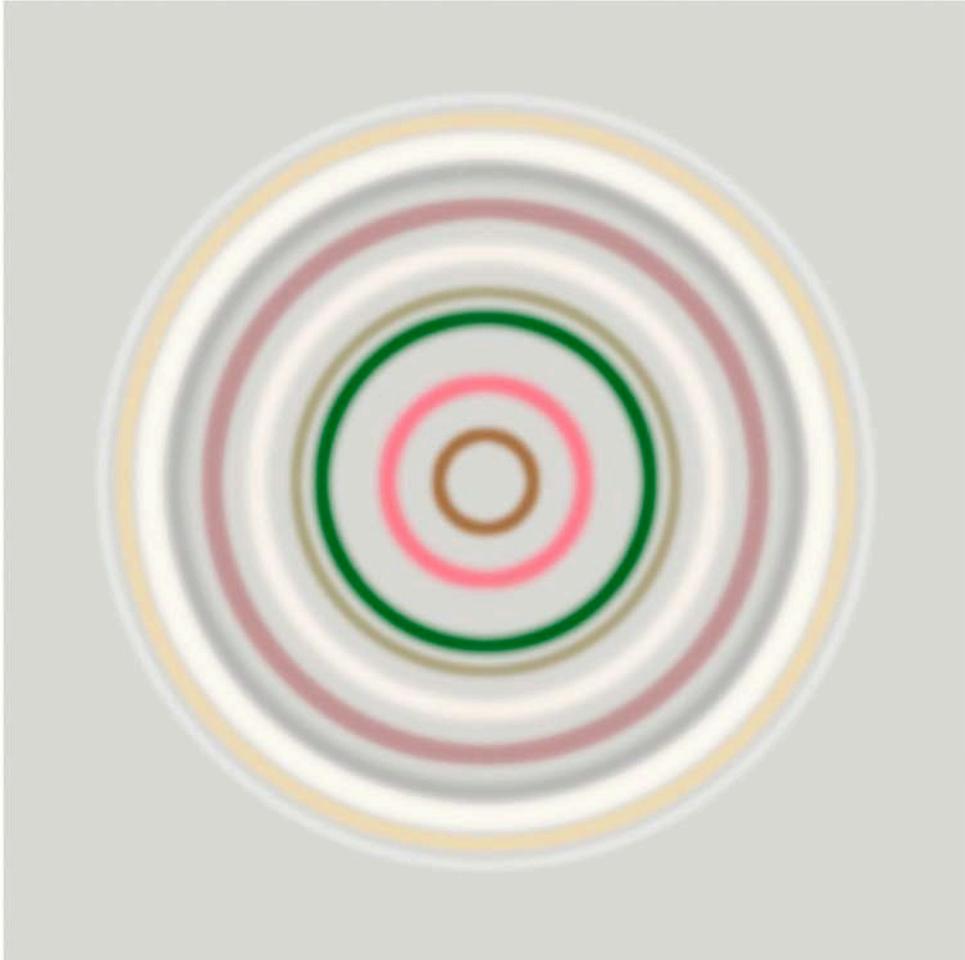
*KLS.Music of Doom*, 2006, 34" x 34" pigment on paper



KLS. *Evening In August*, 34" x 34" pigment on paper



Left: *KLS.Klingsor Writes To Louis The Cruel*, 2006, 34" x 34" pigment on paper  
Right: *KLS.Klingsor Sends His Friend TuFu A Poem*, 2006, 34" x 34" pigment on paper



KLS. *The Self Portrait*, 2006, 34" x 34" pigment on paper

# Lewis deSoto

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MFA 1981 Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, CA  
BA 1978 University of California, Riverside

Professor of Art, San Francisco State University, 1988 to present

Public Art Commissions:

City of San Francisco, City of San José, CA, City of Phoenix, AZ, University of Texas, San Antonio, City of Oakland, CA.

One Person Exhibitions (selected)

Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH; Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL; Samek Art Center at Bucknell University, Louisburg, PA; Bill Maynes Gallery, New York, NY; Worcester Museum of Art, Worcester, MA; List Visual Art Center at MIT, Cambridge, MA; Metronòm, Barcelona, Spain; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MI; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, NM; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, NY; Artists Space, New York, NY; Matrix Gallery at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA; Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA

Group Exhibitions (selected)

Aldrich Contemporary Museum of Art; Ridgefield, CT, Rubin Museum of Art, New York, NY, Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA; Art OMI Sculpture Park, Ghent, NY; Wave Hill, Bronx, NY; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; San José Museum of Art, San José, CA; Museo Contemporáneo de Arte, Mexico City, Mexico; New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark; Museu D'Art Contemporani, Barcelona, Spain; Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.; Fundação de Serralves, Oporto, Portugal; DeYoung Museum, San Francisco, CA; Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO; The New Museum, New York, NY; Camerawork, Ltd., London, U.K.; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA; John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI

Collections:

Bank of America, San Francisco, CA; di Rosa Preserve, Napa, CA; California Museum of Photography, Riverside; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, AZ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Microsoft Corporation, Bellevue, WA; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Neuberger Berman, New York, NY; University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA; Weisman Museum at Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA

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