

MIT List Center

James Melchert

Jim Melchert preferred medium tile. He enjoys being able to conjure something artistic from the utilitarian material. He called this 1994 work Coming to Light. It was commissioned for the lobby of the Koch Biology Building through the MIT Percent-for-Art. Artist Jim Melchert.

I wanted to use visual metaphors, all related really to magnification, to changing of sizes. All of these are metaphors we use about coming to understand something that we don't yet know. And of course, research is what all the activity in the building is devoted to.

You can experience the work from outside on Ames Street or from the inside, but it's best seen from inside. Starting at the main entrance on Ames Street, the large black circles are meant to represent the pupil of the eye, and seeing, and understanding. Moving along the mural, the next panel of tiles is embedded with tiny colorless glass bumps.

If you stand with your back to the window and you're facing them, you see yourself reflected in all of them. And if you flap your arms, you see this field of yourself and little microbes making this extraordinary movement.

In the next section, you'll see splotches of color in a range of shapes. These came out of Melchert's discussion with MIT faculty.

They asked if there could be a section of the wall of images of microorganisms, and they said, OK, you make them up. So I made this little field of imagined microbes. And the funny thing is at the opening, one of the graduate students came by, and I was standing there. I said, excuse me, can you identify any of these? And he said, oh, sure, he identified every one of them, which was astonishing.

As you continue down past the black and white elliptical rings, and the double helix, and several doors, you'll come to the final wall. Walk down to the end of the hallway to the big black circle, what Melchert calls his grand finale. It's an optical illusion of sorts, the ultimate synthesis of the idea of coming to light. As you are walking down this corridor, as you approach that final large black circle, you see that the light from the window is now changing the solid wall into something light and airy. The process of moving towards that end where the wall is disappearing is a metaphor for what you're doing with your research.