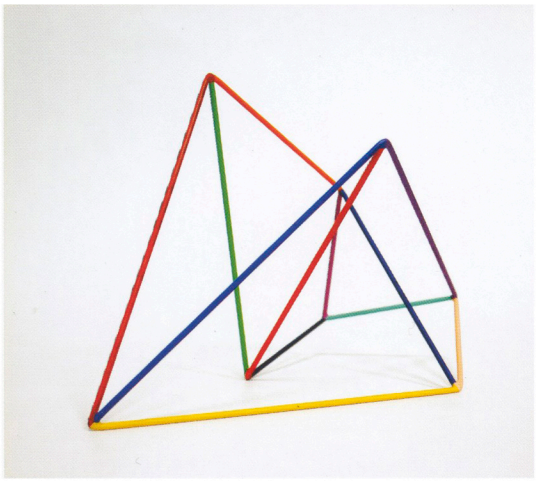

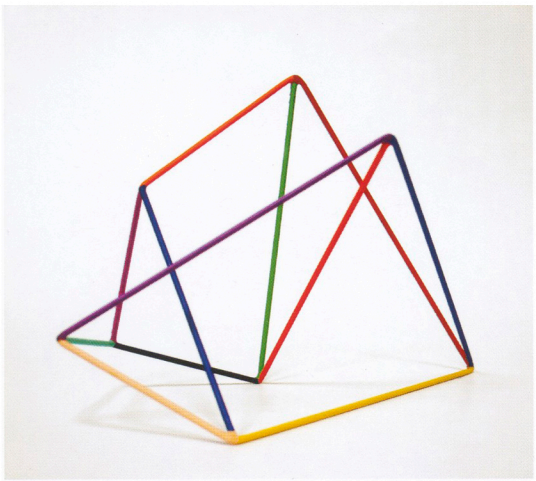

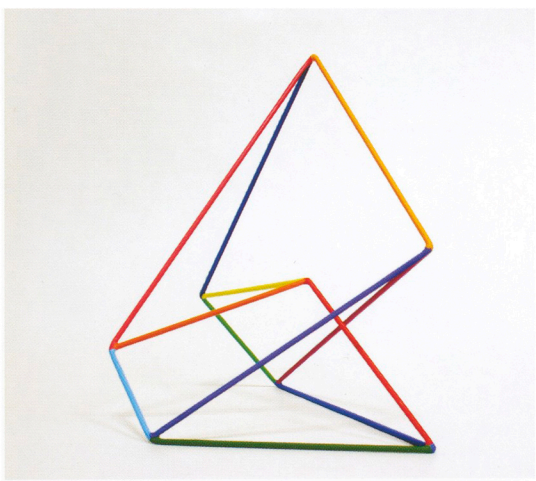

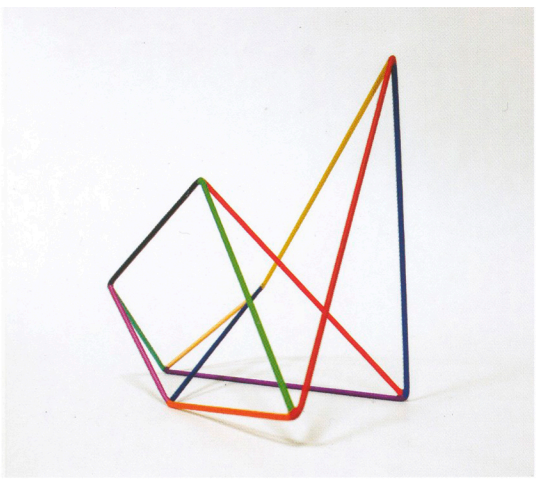

AN AMUSING PHYSICS Marcel Duchamp[1]

The paintings and sculptures of Robert Owen play perceptual tricks on the viewer and engage our innate tendency to search for patterns and ordering principles. This instinct finds its purest form in the disciplines of mathematics and physics, which are essentially studies into the numerical laws that underpin the world around us. There are elements of both disciplines in Owen's work; however, when speaking to me about his 2006 sculptural series *Florentia*, the artist suggested I forget about physics and focus on the poetry.

Owen generates the complex, tangled forms of the *Florentia* sculptures through a process of play – rotating and interweaving straight lines in space until he finds a form that works. Constructed of intertwined lengths of steel, each painted a different colour, the sculptures are intended to be sited outdoors. As their title suggests, their forms are reminiscent of flowers and, when walking around them in a garden setting, one can almost imagine petals unfolding. It is typical of Owen's richly associative practice that these hard-edged sculptures, which initially appear to be exercises in minimal abstraction, can yield to such allusive readings. Still, my mind keeps coming back to numbers.

The starting point for the *Florentia* sculptures is a 64-square flat grid, onto which the artist plots eight points. Picture these points as nodes or hinges, which can be grasped and pulled out into space. The lines between the nodes become the twelve edges of a cube, but a cube that has exploded and twisted in upon itself. There are no right angles, no parallel sides, just an intriguing jumble of overlapping lines enclosing empty space. Move around the sculptures and the relationships between the lines shift. With each change of perspective, the edges appear to regroup and the negative spaces expand and contract. Both static and fluid, the structure of these tangled cubes does not alter, but somehow the spatial relationships do.

This paradox intrigues the furtive physicist inside us all. Even the most innumerate soul could not move through space without an instinctive ability to calculate distance, mass, speed and trajectory. Owen's work activates an analytical process of perception that is inherent in every viewer. When standing in front of his paintings, our eyes skip from section to section, comparing relationships between colours and configurations; when walking around his sculptures, our eyes adjust for changes in perspective and work to fix the borders of shapes that keep changing their form. This visual dance is what makes the deceptively simple geometries of Robert Owen's work so mesmerising.

Owen's tangled cubes have come to the attention of Stephen Hyde, a physicist at the Australian National University, who sees parallels between the artist's playful manipulations of form and space and his own research into knot theory and molecular structure. It is a fitting conclusion to a tussle between poetry and physics, to reflect on a serendipitous correspondence between the intuitive structures of a visual artist and the rigorous calculations of a geometrical physicist. It allows a momentary hope that intuition will triumph over logic, when really we know that any successful endeavour must include a little of both.

Jacqueline Doughty

Jacqueline Doughty is Program Manager, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne

1 Marcel Duchamp, quoted by George Alexander in *Transits*, Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, Wagga Wagga, NSW, 1988, p. 17.