

CIRCUMNUCLEAR STAR CLUSTERS IN THE GALAXY MERGER NGC 6240, OBSERVED WITH KECK ADAPTIVE OPTICS AND THE *HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE*

L. K. POLLACK,¹ C. E. MAX,² AND G. SCHNEIDER³

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ABSTRACT

We discuss images of the central ~ 10 kpc (in projection) of the galaxy merger NGC 6240 at H and K' bands, taken with the NIRC2 narrow camera on Keck II using natural guide star adaptive optics. We detect 28 star clusters in the NIRC2 images, of which only 7 can be seen in the similar spatial resolution, archival WFPC2 Planetary Camera data at either B or I band. Combining the NIRC2 narrow camera pointings with wider NICMOS NIC2 images taken with the F110W, F160W, and F222M filters, we identify a total of 32 clusters that are detected in at least one of these five infrared ($\lambda_c > 1 \mu\text{m}$) bandpasses. By comparing to instantaneous burst, stellar population synthesis models (Bruzual & Charlot), we estimate that most of the clusters are consistent with being ~ 15 Myr old and have photometric masses ranging from 7×10^5 to $4 \times 10^7 M_\odot$. The total contribution to the star formation rate (SFR) from these clusters is approximately $10 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$, or $\sim 10\%$ of the total SFR in the nuclear region. We use these newly discovered clusters to estimate the extinction toward NGC 6240's double nuclei and find values of A_V as high as 14 mag along some sight lines, with an average extinction of $A_V \sim 7$ mag toward sight lines within $\sim 3''$ of the double nuclei.

Subject headings: galaxies: individual (NGC 6240) — galaxies: interactions — galaxies: starburst — galaxies: star clusters — instrumentation: adaptive optics

1. INTRODUCTION

Ultraluminous infrared galaxies (ULIRGs) output more energy in the infrared than at all other wavelengths combined and have $L_{\text{IR}} > 10^{12} L_\odot$. In the local universe, these relatively rare objects are frequently associated with peculiar galaxies, thought to be merging systems (Sanders et al. 1988). Their high infrared emission comes from warm dust, heated by a combination of starbursts and active galactic nuclei (AGNs) that are thought to be fueled by huge quantities of molecular gas that fall inward toward the nucleus during a major merger of two gas-rich spiral galaxies (Sanders & Mirabel 1996). While at the present epoch ULIRGs are rare in number, numerical simulations by Mihos & Hernquist (1994) suggest that they are not merely anomalies resulting from “special” merger conditions, but rather their rarity is due to the fact that they represent a short-lived yet common phase of galactic evolution, namely, when spiral galaxies collide to form massive elliptical galaxies. Detections by the SCUBA telescope of hundreds of high-redshift submillimeter galaxies (SMGs) lend further support to this theory (e.g., Borys et al. 2003). The properties of SMGs are similar to those of local ULIRGs (Conselice et al. 2003), and the number density of SMGs is similar to the number density of massive elliptical galaxies at the present epoch. Thus, assuming that structure in our universe forms by hierarchical assembly, ULIRGs offer us the unique opportunity to glimpse a brief but important stage in a galaxy's life, when massive spirals transform into ellipticals.

Although NGC 6240 ($z = 0.024$, $d = 98$ Mpc, $1'' = 477$ pc; $H_0 = 71 \text{ km s}^{-1} \text{ Mpc}^{-1}$, $\Omega_M = 0.27$, $\Omega_\Lambda = 0.73$) technically lies at the high-luminosity edge of the LIRG class with $L_{\text{IR}} \sim 6 \times 10^{11} L_\odot$, in many ways it is a prototypical ULIRG and is

commonly referred to as such. NGC 6240 is a late-stage merger of two massive disk galaxies (Tacconi et al. 1999); it has extended tidal tails and a close nuclear pair separated by $\sim 1.5''$, or a projected distance of 715 pc (e.g., Max et al. 2005, 2006; Beswick et al. 2001). Its K' -band light is dominated by red supergiants in ~ 20 Myr old starbursts (Tecza et al. 2000), and at the double nucleus two AGNs have been discovered in hard X-rays (Komossa et al. 2003), as well as at 5 GHz (Gallimore & Beswick 2004). As in other merging systems, most notably NGC 4038/4039 (the Antennae galaxy; Whitmore & Schweizer 1995), star clusters have previously been observed in NGC 6240's main body and tidal tails with the WFPC2 F450W, F547W, and F814W filters (Pasquali et al. 2003). But recently Max et al. (2005) detected previously unseen circumnuclear star clusters at J , H , and K' bands using natural guide star (NGS) adaptive optics (AO) with the NIRC2 wide-field camera on Keck II. These clusters, as well as other similar clusters in ULIRGs and galaxy mergers, may hold clues regarding a variety of open questions, from the distribution of dust and star formation in ULIRGs to the formation and evolution of globular clusters (GCs).

Historically, measuring star formation rates (SFRs) in galaxy mergers has been difficult, and until recently the contribution of SMGs to the total luminous energy density in the high-redshift universe has been significantly underestimated. A variety of heterogeneous techniques have been used to measure SFRs (Kennicutt 1998), but in starburst galaxies these are complicated by the presence of dust (Calzetti 2001), including the usual methods of measuring SFRs through $H\alpha$ line fluxes or UV continuum luminosities. In these cases astronomers have turned to far-infrared (FIR) wavelengths to measure the dust-reprocessed light. But a well-known problem arises when using FIR luminosities to estimate SFRs in ULIRGs: in addition to young OB stars, AGNs also help heat the dust. While studies have shown that the luminosities of most ULIRGs are dominated by star formation even when AGNs are present (Genzel et al. 1998; Kewley et al. 2001), accurately measuring the fractional AGN contribution to the bolometric luminosity (L_{bol}) has proved difficult. For example, Armus et al. (2006) reported on their detection of the $[\text{Ne v}] 14.3 \mu\text{m}$ emission

¹ Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064; pollack@ucolick.org.

² Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064; and Center for Adaptive Optics, University of California Observatories/Lick Observatory, Santa Cruz, CA 95064; max@ucolick.org.

³ Steward Observatory, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721; gschneider@as.arizona.edu.

line feature, with a flux of 5×10^{-14} ergs cm^{-2} s^{-1} , which provides direct evidence of the buried AGN in NGC 6240. They note that the $[\text{Ne v}]/[\text{Ne II}]$ ratio is often incorrectly treated as a reddening-independent quantity, even though $[\text{Ne v}]$ comes directly from gas heated by the AGN, while $[\text{Ne II}]$ can be dominated by a starburst. Without correcting for dust, Armus et al. (2006) state that the large equivalent width of the $6.2 \mu\text{m}$ polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon (PAH) emission feature and the small $[\text{Ne v}]/[\text{Ne II}]$ and $[\text{Ne v}]/\text{IR}$ flux ratios are consistent with an apparent AGN contribution of only 3%–5% of L_{bol} . But after correcting the measured $[\text{Ne v}]$ flux for extinction using values implied by their SED fitting, Armus et al. (2006) estimate that the intrinsic fractional AGN contribution to the bolometric luminosity of NGC 6240 is much higher, between 20% and 24%.

By detecting individual, massive, star clusters in merging galaxies, we can trace the most violent star formation activity, while circumventing some of these hurdles that make accurately measuring SFRs a difficult task. For example, the circumnuclear locations of clusters make them easily distinguishable from AGNs. In addition, while the exact size distribution of dust grains in both star clusters and diffuse stellar populations is impossible to know, the complicated dust mixing models required for analyzing diffuse stellar fields reduce to simple dust screens toward clusters, if we assume that all intracluster dust has been evacuated. Even when some intracluster dust is present, the dust screen approximation is still reasonable assuming that the amount of dust internal to the cluster is far less than the intervening dust along the line of sight through the entire merging galaxy. Furthermore, individual clusters are well approximated by single stellar populations, making stellar population analysis of clusters more straightforward than for diffuse stellar fields. Finally, near-infrared (NIR) cluster observations provide a more localized measure of the SFR compared to estimates based on longer wavelength observations. But unfortunately, while star clusters seem to represent a common mode of star formation in spirals and LIRGs alike (e.g., Larsen 2002; Scoville et al. 2000; Fall et al. 2005), detecting dust-reddened clusters is challenging because longer wavelength observations are innately of lower spatial resolution. However, with the improvement of AO systems on large, ground-based telescopes, the possibility of detecting individual infrared star clusters, even at $z \sim 0.02$, is now a reality.

In order to measure *localized* SFRs⁴ with fewer complications due to AGNs and dust, we have obtained $\sim 0.04''$ resolution images of roughly 10 kpc surrounding the merging galaxies' nuclei using the NIRC2 narrow-field camera with NGS AO at Keck. We combine our data with *Hubble Space Telescope* (HST) images taken with the NICMOS NIC2 camera (using the F110W, F160W, and F222M filters) and the WFPC2 Planetary Camera (using the F450W and F814W filters). Using the combined data set, we study a total of 32 clusters with inhomogeneous wavelength coverage, partially due to variations in the FOVs, and partially due to non-detections in some wave bands. In order to estimate the SFR associated with these clusters, we estimate masses, ages, and extinctions toward these 32 clusters by comparing the clusters' spectral energy distributions (SEDs) to model SEDs from stellar population synthesis codes (Bruzual & Charlot 2003), employing simple, screen extinction models by Draine (2003). Given the data currently available, we do not attempt to quantify the cluster's

⁴ We note that this method of using star clusters to measure localized SFRs, while beneficial in that it sidesteps complications due to AGNs and dust, by no means traces the total SFR. We preferentially trace star formation in the most massive, least dusty environments. Less massive or more obscured clusters likely remain undetected in this work.

TABLE 1
KECK AO OBSERVATIONS OF NGC 6240 USING NIRC-2 NARROW CAMERA

Date	Filter	Integration Time (s)	Guide Star's On-Axis Strehl
2005 Apr 24.....	<i>H</i>	800	0.21
2003 Aug 17.....	<i>K'</i>	630	0.32

properties with the precision of previous studies of nearby mergers. This work is meant to be a preliminary analysis of NGC 6240's recently discovered cluster population, one of the most distant such populations ever detected; future high-resolution spectral observations will provide a much clearer understanding of the cluster's properties. In § 2 we describe our observations, in § 3 we describe our data reduction, including the techniques we used to identify clusters and perform photometric calibrations, and in §§ 4 and 5 we present and discuss our results.

2. OBSERVATIONS

2.1. Adaptive Optics at Keck

We observed NGC 6240 with the NGS AO system on the Keck II telescope using the narrow-field camera ($0.009942'' \text{ pixel}^{-1}$; $4.74 \text{ pc pixel}^{-1}$) of the NIRC2 infrared instrument at *H* ($\lambda_c = 1.633 \mu\text{m}$) and *K'* ($\lambda_c = 2.124 \mu\text{m}$) bands. The *H* and *K'* observations were obtained on 2005 April 24 and 2003 August 17, respectively. The natural guide star ($B = 13.5$) is USNO-B1.0 0924–0386013, located $35.8''$ east-northeast of NGC 6240's dual nuclei.

Due to the faint nature of the star clusters superposed on the diffuse background light from the galaxy, it is problematic to measure the resolution and Strehl ratio (S) at the location of the clusters, i.e., off-axis from the guide star. We did not observe PSF star pairs and therefore cannot reasonably guess what the Strehl may be at the clusters' locations. If there were no tip-tilt errors, then the core of the off-axis point-spread function (PSF) would be diffraction limited, and at $2.1 \mu\text{m}$ the FWHM of this diffraction-limited, off-axis PSF core is $\sim 0.04''$ ($\sim 19 \text{ pc}$ at $z = 0.024$), making our observations slightly oversampled. Throughout this paper we assume that the off-axis PSF and Strehl, whatever they may be, are constant across the off-axis field of view (FOV). This assumption is well justified when a small FOV ($\sim 10''$) is far off-axis ($\geq 30''$), and when the areas of interest in the FOV are oriented perpendicular to the direction of the guide star. Most of the clusters in our images are located along the north-south oriented double nuclei and therefore are oriented approximately perpendicular to the direction of the guide star. The assumed constancy of the resolution and Strehl ratio across the FOV implies that our detection limits and photometric measurements should be accurate in the relative sense; in § 3.4 (case II) we describe the steps we have taken to ensure that our photometric measurements are accurate in the absolute sense as well, by sidestepping the need to know the absolute Strehl ratio to perform photometry.

In Table 1 we outline the details of these Keck observations, including the on-axis Strehls achieved for the guide star on each night. While the off-axis Strehl is unknown, the Strehl measured on the guide star is an indicator of the overall performance of the AO system, including the effects of wind turbulence, sampling rate, and weather.

2.2. Archival HST Observations

We have analyzed archival WFPC2 images taken as part of the GO proposal 6430 (PI: R. van der Marel). The observations were

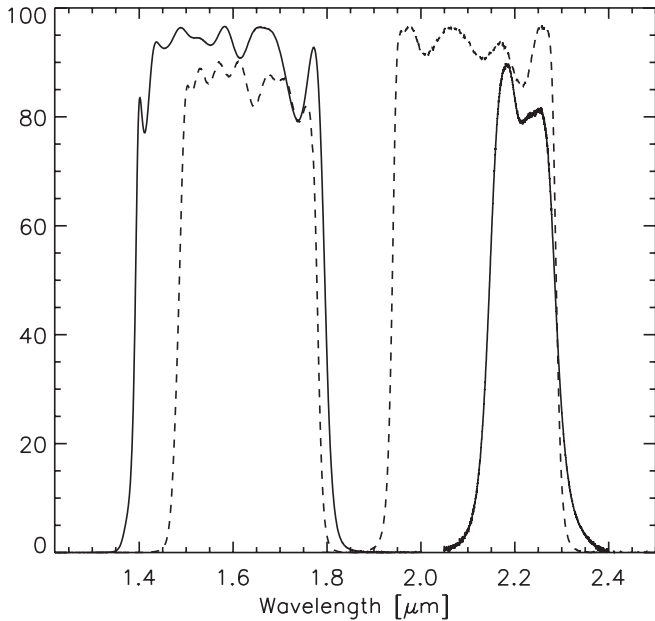


FIG. 1.—Filter transmission functions for the NICMOS (solid curve) and Mauna Kea (dotted curve) filter sets. The curves centered around $1.6 \mu\text{m}$ are the F160W and H filters, and the curves centered around $2.2 \mu\text{m}$ are the F222M and K' filters.

taken with the Planetary Camera ($0.0455'' \text{ pixel}^{-1}$; $21.7 \text{ pc pixel}^{-1}$) using the F450W and F814W filters on 1999 March 28. The theoretical FWHM of the diffraction-limited PSFs for these two WFPC2 images are $\sim 0.038''$ and $\sim 0.069''$, respectively. At NGC 6240's distance, these angular resolutions correspond to 18.1 and 32.7 pc, respectively. The F450W and F814W filters are roughly equivalent to the Johnson-Cousins B and I filters; therefore, throughout this paper we use the shorter Johnson-Cousins notation interchangeably with the true WFPC2 filter names. However, when performing all calculations and measurements, we use the exact filter transmission functions for the WFPC2 filters.

We have also made use of archival NICMOS images obtained on 1998 February 2 with *HST* using the Near Infrared Camera and Multi-Object Spectrometer (NICMOS) as part of the Guaranteed Time Observing (GTO) program 7219 (PI: Scoville; Scoville et al. 2000). The imaging program employed three spectral filters (F110W: $\lambda_c = 1.100 \mu\text{m}$, FWHM = $0.592 \mu\text{m}$; F160W: $\lambda_c = 1.594 \mu\text{m}$, FWHM = $0.403 \mu\text{m}$; F222M: $\lambda_c = 2.116 \mu\text{m}$, FWHM = $0.143 \mu\text{m}$) in NICMOS camera 2 (pixel scale: $x_{\text{scale}} = 0.0762'' \text{ pixel}^{-1}$, $y_{\text{scale}} = 0.0755'' \text{ pixel}^{-1}$; $x_{\text{scale}} = 36.3 \text{ pc pixel}^{-1}$, $y_{\text{scale}} = 36.0 \text{ pc pixel}^{-1}$). Four exposures in each filter, using STEP8/NSAMP = 10, 11, and 12 multiaccum sampling (MacKenty et al. 1997) for F110W, F160W and F222M, respectively, were taken with corresponding integration times of

40, 48, and 56 s in each exposure. NICMOS camera 2 critically samples its PSF at $1.6 \mu\text{m}$ (see Max et al. 2005, § 2.2). All images were acquired under a four-point “dither” pattern with pointing offsets of $1.9215''$, thus enabling critical sampling at $1.1 \mu\text{m}$ (after image combination), as well as improved sampling and rejection of data from defective pixels at all wavelengths. Because the F160W and F222M filters provide wavelength coverage roughly similar to the H and K' Mauna Kea filters (Fig. 1), these two NICMOS images are used primarily as a tool to help perform photometric calibrations on the NIRC2, AO images. (The details of this photometric calibration technique are described in § 3.4.) However, where the FOVs of the NICMOS F160W and F222M images extend beyond the NIRC2 FOVs, the NICMOS images provide additional spectral information and thus we analyze these images. Note that of all the data discussed in this paper the NICMOS images have the lowest spatial resolutions, about 4 times lower than the resolution provided by the Keck AO system at similar wave bands. The theoretical FWHM of the diffraction-limited PSFs for the three NICMOS images are $0.093''$, $0.13''$, and $0.18''$, corresponding to linear scales of 44.2, 64.3, and 85.0 pc.

Details regarding both the WFPC2 and NICMOS *HST* observations are shown in Table 2.

3. DATA PROCESSING

The complete set of data is composed of seven images from three different instruments at the following bandpasses, in order of increasing central wavelength: B , I , F110W, F160W, H , K' , and F222M. The inhomogeneous nature of these images, including the manner in which they were taken, the morphology that they display, and their resolutions that span more than a factor of 5, requires that we employ nonuniform processing techniques. We discuss the pitfalls inherent to treating data in a nonuniform fashion.

3.1. Data Reduction

The NIR images taken with NIRC2 were reduced in the standard way, by masking bad pixels, flat-fielding each frame using twilight images, and dark subtracting and sky subtracting frames of the appropriate exposure times. Before combining NIRC2 narrow camera frames, we removed the geometric distortions using the IRAF DRIZZLE package with the distortion coefficients published in the NIRC2 manual, and with the kernel parameter set to “lanczos3.”

The NICMOS data analyzed in this paper were obtained by recalibrating and reprocessing the archival data. Instrumentally calibrated count rate images were created from the raw archival multiaccum frames after applying linearity corrections, dark-frame subtraction, DC bias compensation, flat-field correction, and cosmic-ray rejection. Darks, made from contemporaneous on-orbit calibration observations, calibration reference files for linearity corrections, obtained from STScI, and flats, obtained from

TABLE 2
ARCHIVAL *HST* OBSERVATIONS OF NGC 6240

Observing Program	Instrument	Camera	Filter	Exposure Time (s)
GO 6430 (PI: van der Marel)	WFPC2	PC	F814W (B)	3×400
	WFPC2	PC	F450W (I)	3×700
GTO 7219 (PI: Scoville)	NICMOS	NIC2	F110W	4×40
	NICMOS	NIC2	F160W	4×48
	NICMOS	NIC2	F222M	4×56

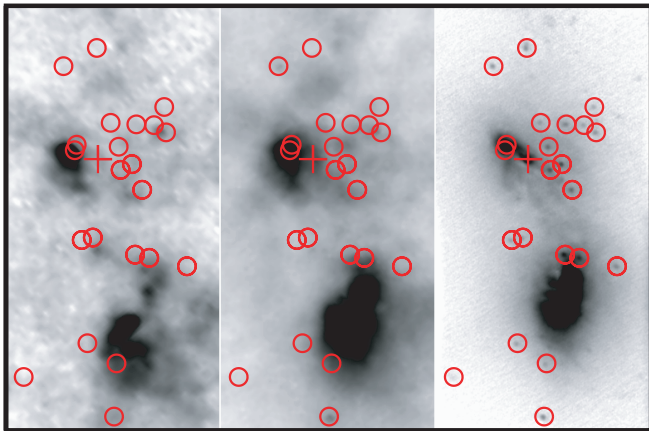


FIG. 2.—Left and middle panels show logarithmically scaled WFPC2 images at *B* and *I* bands, respectively. Known cluster locations are marked with circles. A plus sign marks the location of cluster 15, which is coincident with the northern black hole. Images are $2.5'' \times 5''$ (1.2×2.4 kpc); north is up and east is to the left. The right panel shows the same cluster locations superposed on a logarithmically scaled, unsharp masked *K'* image taken with NIRC2 using Keck NGS AO. The northernmost and southernmost clusters encircled are clusters 5 and 28, respectively.

the NICMOS Instrument Definition Team (IDT), were applied in an IDL-based process closely following the IRAF/STSDAS *calnica* task. The image data were photometrically calibrated based on the absolute instrumental calibration established by the IDT (F110W: 2.031×10^{-6} Jy count $^{-1}$ s; F160W: 2.190×10^{-6} Jy count $^{-1}$ s; F222M: 5.487×10^{-6} Jy count $^{-1}$ s). Known “bad” or defective pixels were replaced by two-dimensional Gaussian weighted interpolation of good neighbor pixels with wavelength-dependent weighting radii of 3, 5, and 7 pixels for the F110W, F160W, and F222M frames, respectively. The fully calibrated images were geometrically rectified to correct for the $\sim 0.9\%$ linear geometrical distortion in NICMOS camera 2, and for each filter, those four images were median combined into a single image on a 2 times finer resampled grid (~ 38 mas pixel $^{-1}$). All image resampling (including remapping for registration and rectification) was done with sinc function apodized Gaussian weighted interpolation using the IDP3 package developed by the NICMOS IDT (Schneider & Stobie 2002), conserving the target flux density while resampling. The three resulting images (one for each filter) are those that are discussed further in this paper.

We obtained the archival WFPC2 data from the WFPC2 associations at MAST (Multimission Archive at STScI), and these data are corrected for bias, dark current, flat-fielding, and cosmic rays. We performed no additional processing on these WFPC2 associations.

3.2. Cluster Identification

We attempted to identify unresolved star clusters in the seven images in a systematic way by using the FIND routine adapted for IDL from DAOPHOT. However, this method and variations on this method, including using the FIND algorithm on unsharp-masked images, were all unsuccessful, especially in regions where the diffuse background light from the galaxy is highly variable or bright. Therefore, in this paper we have visually identified clusters, and we define a cluster to be any source that appears unresolved in an unsharp masked image. We neglect clusters that are visible only at *B* and/or *I* bands because these have been previously analyzed by Pasquali et al. (2003) and our analysis would provide no new spectral coverage. Figure 2 shows the cluster positions superimposed on images at *B*, *I*, and *K'* bands.

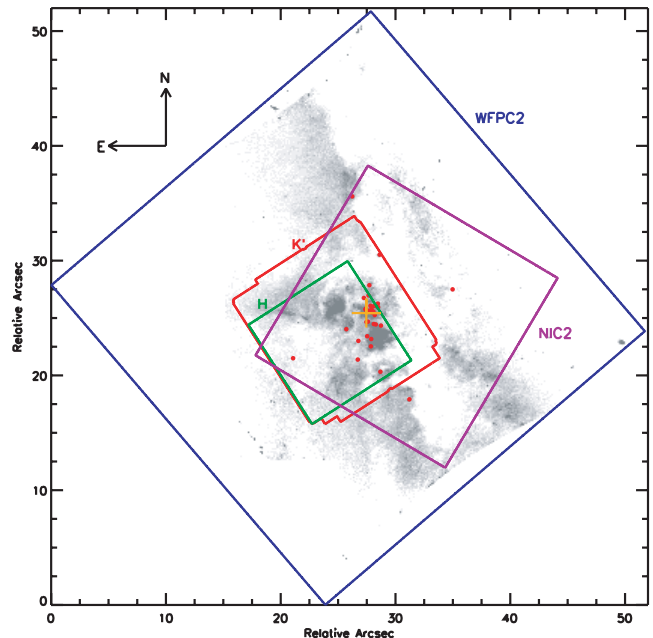


FIG. 3.—Relative FOVs for the complete set of seven images analyzed in this paper. The blue square shows the WFPC2 Planetary Camera FOV (F450W and F814W filters). The purple square shows the NICMOS NIC2 FOV (F110W, F160W, and F222M filters). The red and green squares show the NIRC2 narrow camera FOV (*K'* and *H* filters, respectively). Red filled circles show the locations of all 32 clusters analyzed in this paper, for which we have spectral information in at least one of the NIR wave bands. The orange plus sign marks the location of the northern black hole, as determined by Max et al. (2006). The overlaid gray-scale image shows NGC 6240 taken with the WFPC2 F450W filter.

In total we identified 32 clusters that are visible in at least one of the infrared passbands (F110W, F160W, *H*, *K'*, and F222M). Of these, 27 lie within the intersection of the seven FOVs, lending themselves to the most complete spectral analysis. Of these 27 clusters, only 7 have low enough extinction to be detected at *I* band, and this number decreases to 5 at *B* band. Figure 3 shows the locations of all 32 clusters and the relative sizes and orientations of the seven FOVs. In Figure 4 we label each cluster with a number from 1 through 32, with 1 being the northernmost cluster. Note that cluster 15 is coincident with the site of the northern black hole, as determined by Max et al. (2006). For reference, in the publicly available WFPC2 *I*-band image, the brightest pixel in the northern nucleus is $0.27''$ east and $0.099''$ north of the northern black hole (i.e., cluster 15). In Figures 3 and 4 we mark the position of the northern black hole with an orange plus sign. The positions of each cluster relative to cluster 15 can be found in Table 3.

The complicated morphology of NGC 6240 makes it impossible to specify a single cluster detection limit across the entire FOV. The morphology of the *H* and *K'* images is relatively smooth, with background luminosity increasing sharply toward the double nuclei. Therefore, the cluster detection limits at *H* and *K'* worsen monotonically toward the double nuclei. While it is generally true that the detection limits worsen toward the double nuclei in the *B* and *I* images as well, the situation here is more complicated because these images are far more patchy due to dust obscuration. We estimate our detection limits by adding simulated clusters to various locations in each image and decreasing the fluxes of the simulated clusters until the clusters become undetectable by eye (see § 3.4, cases I and II for a detailed description of how we create the simulated clusters). Using this method, we estimate that clusters brighter than $K_{AB} = 22$ mag, $H_{AB} = 23$ mag,

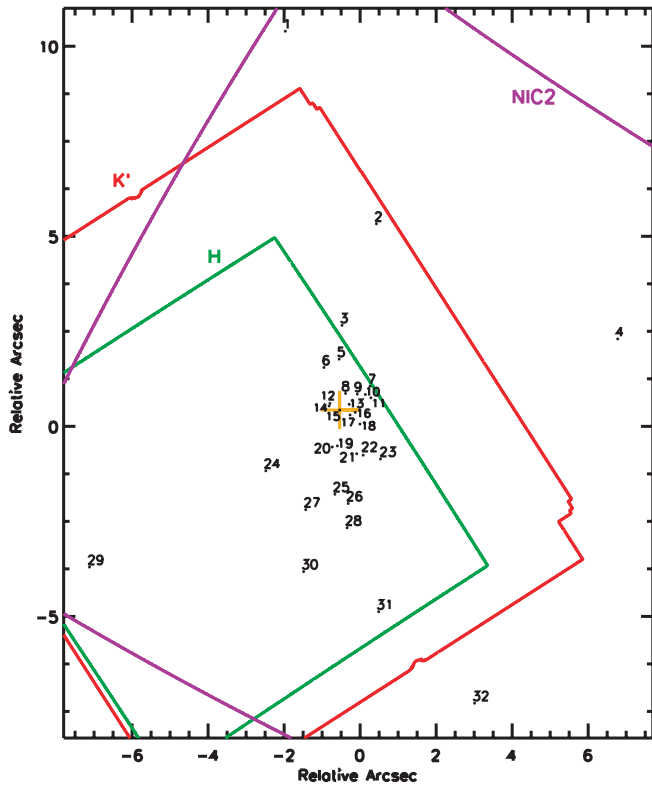


FIG. 4.—Position and identification number of all 32 clusters, shown relative to the infrared FOVs. Scale in arcseconds is $\sim \frac{1}{4}$ that in Fig. 3. Identification numbers increase toward the south. The orange plus sign indicates the position of the northern black hole, which is coincident with cluster 15.

$I_{AB} = 24$ mag, and $B_{AB} = 26$ mag should be detectable throughout much of the images.

3.3. Image Alignment

In order to align all seven images to the same spatial grid, we first visually determined which star clusters are common to pairs of images. (No stars are visible in the small NIRC2 FOV.) We fed the centroids of the matched cluster pairs into the IRAF geomap routine, and in this way computed second-order polynomial spatial transformation functions. We applied the transformations with the IRAF geotran package using bilinear interpolation to rebin the images. Due to NGC 6240's drastically different morphology between B and K' bands, finding enough clusters in common at these two wavelengths was challenging. Therefore, instead of aligning the B image directly to the K' image, the B image was first aligned to the I image, and then to the K' image using the transformation computed for the $I - K'$ alignment. This two-step process also ensures that $B - I$ colors are as accurate as possible, with the fewest errors introduced from poor image alignment. Typical rms fitting errors computed by geomap were ≤ 0.5 mas when aligning Keck images, ≤ 2.5 mas when aligning HST images, and ≤ 5 mas when aligning HST images to Keck images.

3.4. Aperture Photometry and Flux Calibrations

Because the star clusters, although unresolved, cannot be conveniently modeled as many point sources on a smooth sky background, and because the Strehl ratio for the AO images is uncertain, we performed aperture photometry rather than using the standard PSF-fitting photometry packages like DAOPHOT. We explored two aperture photometry techniques. First, we sim-

ply performed aperture photometry on all images using an aperture radius of $0.07''$ and a $0.02''$ wide sky annulus centered at a radius of $0.1''$ from the cluster centroid. This annulus is near enough to the cluster that we can accurately measure the local background in a complicated environment, while the aperture is large enough to lessen the effects of poor image alignment. Second, we tried to minimize the color errors by creating matched-resolution image pairs before performing aperture photometry. We found that this second technique produced poorer results because we were forced to degrade the image quality of the NIRC2 images, making many of the clusters disappear into the noise. Therefore, the results presented in this paper were calculated by performing simple aperture photometry on all the clusters, using the same aperture and annulus size for each filter. Note that the WFPC2 and NIRC2 images have very similar resolutions, with the best resolution (from the H -band AO image) being a factor of 2 better than the worst resolution (from the WFPC2 I -band image). However, the NICMOS images have poorer resolutions than the WFPC2 and Keck AO images, so that performing aperture photometry on these images with the same size aperture and annulus introduces color errors in the case where different colored background flux from the galaxy falls within the aperture. Thus, caution must be used when interpreting the NICMOS data, especially in regions near the nuclei where the background flux from the galaxy is bright.

In Figures 5–7 we present the results of our aperture photometry measurements in the form of SEDs for each cluster, and in the following paragraphs we outline the procedure we used to create these SEDs for two key cases. Other cases can be deconstructed into variations on these two cases.

3.4.1. Case I: Creating an SED for a Cluster Detected Only by HST

In order to populate the SED of a cluster that is detected in only the B , I , F110W, F160W, and F222M images,⁵ first we perform aperture photometry on the cluster in each image (using aperture parameters just described). We calculate appropriate aperture corrections by repeating this procedure on simulated point sources extracted from the Tiny Tim (ver. 6.3) software package. Finally, we convert the (aperture corrected) counts to calibrated flux (in Jy) using the PHOTFLAM and PHOTPLAM keywords in the fits header of the WFPC2 images and the instrumental calibration values determined by the NICMOS IDT (see § 3.1). On an SED graph we represent these measured fluxes in the form of a single point at the position of the central wavelength for each filter.

To calculate the photometry errors shown in Figures 5–7, for each cluster we simulated 100 additional clusters using Tiny Tim PSFs. The simulated clusters were made to have the same SED as that which was measured for the real cluster, and they were placed in approximately similar areas of the image as the real cluster. (We defined three regions of the images: far, close, and intermediate distances from the nuclei.) Next, we performed the same aperture photometry procedure on the simulated clusters as we did on the real clusters. The resulting distribution of 100 measurements is sensitive to the exact placement of the simulated clusters and is not Gaussian. Therefore, we discard the 10 smallest and largest measured values and quote errors as 80% confidence limits from the pared distribution. The error bars on the single data point at which all models are normalized

⁵ A cluster would be detected in only the B , I , F110W, F160W, and F222M images, while not being detected in the H and K' images, if it is located outside of the NIRC2 narrow camera FOV. Cluster 4 is an example of such a cluster for which the described procedure was performed.

TABLE 3
IDENTIFICATION OF INFRARED CLUSTERS IN NGC 6240

Cluster ID (1)	ΔX (arcsec E) (2)	ΔY (arcsec N) (3)	M_V (mag) (4)	A_V (mag) (5)	M ($10^6 M_\odot$) (6)	SFR ($M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$) (7)
1.....	1.43	9.95	-14.9, -13.0*, -13.6	2.5, 0.5*, 1.0	2.8, 0.9*, ^a 7.9	0.97, 0.06*, 0.04
2.....	-0.96	4.89	-18.0, -15.8*, -16.4	4.5, 2.0*, 2.5	49.0, 11.4*, ^a 105.7	17.00, 0.79*, 0.59
3.....	-0.06	2.23	-17.6, -14.1*, -14.8	12.0, 6.5*, 7.0	34.0, 2.4*, ^b 23.9	11.81, 0.17*, 0.13
4.....	-7.31	1.87	-16.7, -14.5*, -15.1	6.0, 3.5*, 4.0	14.8, 3.4*, ^a 31.9	5.13, 0.24*, 0.18
5.....	0.01	1.34	-19.1, -15.8*, -16.1	18.0, 13.5*, 11.0	137.5, 11.1*, ^b 77.3	47.73, 0.77*, 0.43
6.....	0.41	1.12	-17.7*, -14.4, -15.1	9.0*, 5.0, 6.0	35.8*, 3.0, 31.4	12.42*, 0.21, 0.17
7.....	-0.80	0.63	-17.2, -13.8*, -14.3	10.5, 6.0*, 5.0	22.9, 1.8*, ^b 15.2	7.95, 0.13*, 0.08
8.....	-0.15	0.44	-15.7, -12.4*, -13.1	7.0, 3.5*, 4.0	5.6, 0.5*, ^b 4.9	1.93, 0.03*, 0.03
9.....	-0.46	0.42	-18.0, -14.6*, -15.4	10.5, 6.0*, 7.5	48.8, 3.9*, ^b 42.8	16.93, 0.27*, 0.24
10.....	-0.67	0.41	-16.7, -13.3*, -14.0	9.5, 5.0*, 5.5	13.8, 1.1*, ^b 10.8	4.80, 0.08*, 0.06
11.....	-0.82	0.32	-18.3, -15.0*, -15.4	15.0, 11.0*, 9.0	63.5, 5.4*, ^b 39.9	22.05, 0.37*, 0.22
12.....	0.26	0.17	-20.4, -17.1*, -17.8	10.0, 6.5*, 6.5	433.5, 39.0*, ^b 359.6	150.53, 2.70*, 1.99
13.....	-0.25	0.15	-17.6, -14.3*, -14.9	10.0, 5.5*, 6.0	34.6, 2.8*, ^b 27.2	12.02, 0.19*, 0.15
14.....	0.28	0.11	-20.1, -16.7*, -17.4	8.0, 3.5*, 4.0	325.2, 26.2*, ^b 255.2	112.93, 1.81*, 1.41
15.....	0.00	0.00	-21.0, -17.5*, -18.2	14.5, 9.0*, 9.5	782.1, 56.3*, ^b 549.1	271.57, 3.90*, 3.04
16.....	-0.41	-0.06	-19.1, -15.5*, -16.2	14.0, 8.0*, 8.5	129.7, 8.8*, ^b 86.2	45.05, 0.61*, 0.48
17.....	-0.27	-0.13	-18.6, -15.1*, -15.9	12.0, 6.5*, 7.5	86.2, 6.2*, ^b 64.0	29.93, 0.43*, 0.35
18.....	-0.53	-0.37	-18.9, -15.2*, -16.0	15.0, 8.5*, 10.0	105.9, 6.8*, ^b 74.3	36.77, 0.47*, 0.41
19.....	0.06	-0.94	-16.8, -13.4*, -14.1	11.0, 6.0*, 6.5	16.4, 1.3*, ^b 12.2	5.71, 0.09*, 0.07
20.....	0.19	-0.97	-17.3, -13.9*, -14.6	12.5, 7.5*, 8.0	26.1, 2.0*, ^b 19.4	9.06, 0.14*, 0.11
21.....	-0.45	-1.15	-18.4, -15.1*, -15.8	11.0, 6.5*, 7.5	71.6, 5.8*, ^b 59.4	24.85, 0.40*, 0.33
22.....	-0.62	-1.19	-16.2, -13.0*, -13.7	8.5, 5.0*, 6.0	9.3, 0.8*, ^b 8.7	3.24, 0.06*, 0.05
23.....	-1.07	-1.29	-17.6, -14.3*, -15.0	11.0, 7.0*, 7.0	34.7, 2.9*, ^b 27.2	12.04, 0.20*, 0.15
24.....	1.94	-1.60	-14.4, -12.5*, -12.8	4.0, 2.0*, 2.0	1.8, 0.5*, ^b 3.8	0.61, 0.04*, 0.02
25.....	0.13	-2.21	-16.7, -13.5*, -14.2	8.0, 5.0*, 5.5	14.5, 1.4*, ^b 13.4	5.03, 0.10*, 0.07
26.....	-0.22	-2.46	-15.9, -12.7*, -13.2	8.5, 5.5*, 4.5	7.2, 0.7*, ^b 5.7	2.51, 0.05*, 0.03
27.....	0.89	-2.62	-18.0, -14.6*, -15.3	19.0, 14.0*, 15.0	50.0, 3.8*, ^b 39.2	17.35, 0.26*, 0.22
28.....	-0.19	-3.10	-17.9*, -14.6, -15.3	8.0*, 4.5, 5.5	42.3*, 3.8, 39.2	14.68*, 0.26, 0.22
29.....	6.58	-4.13	-17.0*, -14.5, -15.1	6.5*, 3.5, 4.0	19.3*, 3.4, 31.9	6.71*, 0.24, 0.18
30.....	0.95	-4.25	-16.0, -13.2*, -13.8	7.5, 4.0*, 4.5	7.3, 1.0*, ^b 9.2	2.53, 0.07*, 0.05
31.....	-1.02	-5.30	-14.4, -12.8*, -13.4	3.5, 2.0*, 2.5	1.8, 0.7*, ^a 6.6	0.62, 0.05*, 0.04
32.....	-3.54	-7.71	-19.0*, -16.2, -16.9	7.5*, 4.0, 4.5	124.7*, 17.0, 157.6	43.31*, 1.18, 0.87

NOTES.—Col. (1) specifies each cluster using the identification numbers as shown in Fig. 4. Smaller numbers correspond to more northern clusters. Cols. (2) and (3) give the clusters' positions relative to cluster 15, which is coincident with the site of the northern black hole. Col. (4) shows the unextincted V -band absolute magnitude each cluster would have if it were 2.9, 14.5, and 180 Myr old, respectively, and if it were extinguished by an amount specified in col. (5). (See text for detailed description of the assumptions made for the stellar populations.) Col. (5) specifies the minimum amount of extinction needed for the measured SEDs to match the model SEDs for the three cluster ages as in col. (4). Col. (6) gives the mass of each cluster for the three cluster ages assuming the values of A_V listed in col. (5). Errors on the mass and extinction can be deduced from the error bars shown in Figs. 5–7. Col. (7) shows the SFR implied by the masses and ages listed in col. (6); we simply divide the mass by the age in each case. An asterisk indicates which of the three stellar population ages best agrees with our observations, as determined through visual inspection.

^a Using visual inspection of model SEDs, it is difficult to distinguish between the 14.5 and 180 Myr old stellar populations, while we can rule out the 3 Myr population. In these cases, to be consistent with our method of quoting the minimum amount of extinction needed for the measured SEDs to match the model SEDs, we choose as the most likely cluster age that which yields the smallest cluster masses. The 14.5 Myr old stellar population implies a less massive cluster.

^b Using visual inspection of model SEDs, there is insufficient data to distinguish between stellar populations with ages ranging from 2.9 to 180 Myr. In these cases we choose as the most likely cluster age that which yields the smallest cluster masses. The 14.5 Myr old stellar population corresponds to the least massive cluster.

represent something slightly different from the error bars on the other points in the SED. The former are 80% confidence limits on the flux at that frequency, while the latter are 80% confidence limits on the color. Thus, when analyzing these normalized SEDs, which are plotted in loglinear space, realize that the SEDs may shift vertically by an amount governed by the error bar on the point at which the SEDs are normalized, while the slopes of the SEDs may change only by the size of the error bars on the *other* points. Since the slope of an SED is governed by the stellar population of that cluster and any intervening dust, the color error bars indicate how confidently we know the cluster's stellar population. Likewise, since the total mass of the cluster corresponds to an overall multiplicative factor, i.e., a vertical shift in loglinear space, the flux error bars indicate how confidently we know the cluster's mass, assuming no errors on the stellar population and extinction values.

In the error analysis procedure described above, if the 80% confidence limits indicate that the cluster may have negative flux, as is sometimes the case when performing aperture photometry on barely detected clusters, then we replace the lower error bar with a downward arrow, signifying an upper limit. (We still plot the upper error bar.) For clusters that we deem undetected we calculate upper limits using a different method. We create a simulated cluster using a Tiny Tim PSF and place it exactly at the location of the known cluster. We decrease the flux of the simulated cluster until it is undetectable (by eye) and call the final flux an upper limit.

3.4.2. Case II: Creating an SED for a Cluster Detected Only with Keck AO

Because absolute flux calibration of NGS AO images is very difficult when the off-axis Strehl is unknown, the procedure we

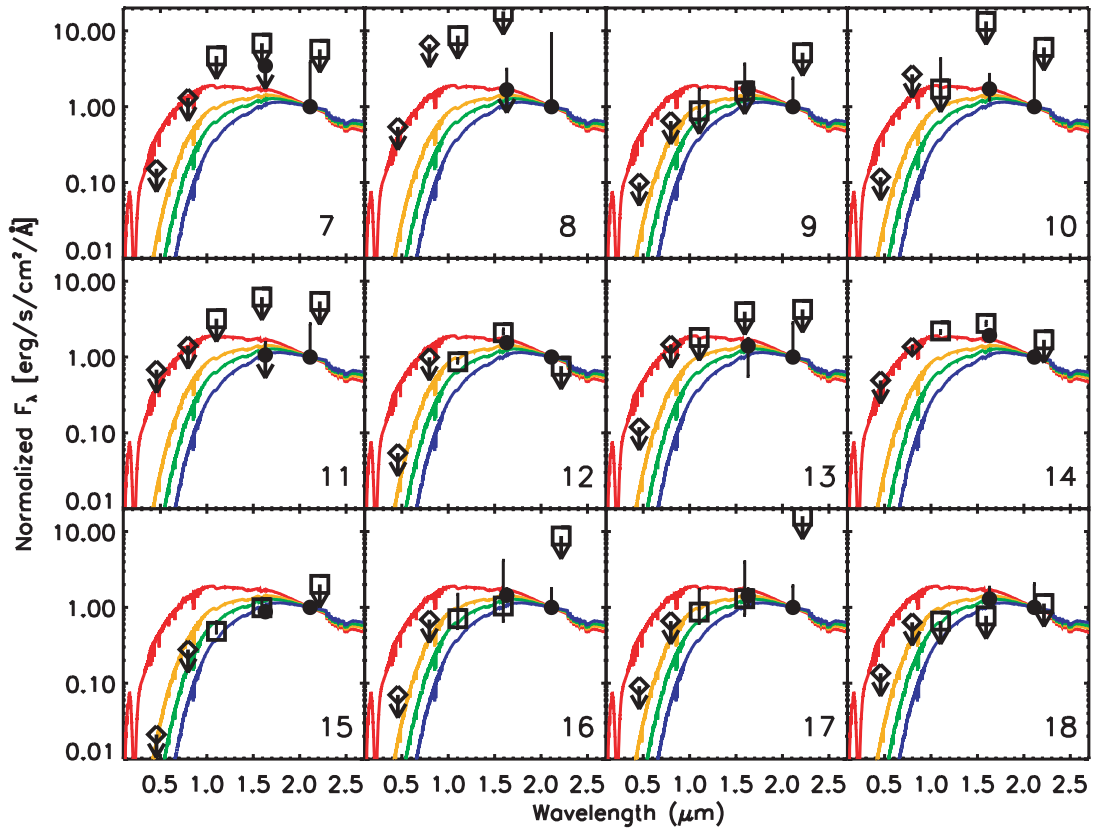


FIG. 5.— Open diamonds, open squares, and filled circles mark the photometric measurements made for 12 clusters using WFPC2, NICMOS, and NIRC2 images, respectively. The 12 clusters depicted here are those situated nearest to the northern nucleus, in projection; cluster labels are given in the lower right corner of each panel. Error bars show 80% confidence limits. Upper limits are depicted with a downward arrow for those filters where a cluster is not detected. Read § 3.4 to understand why some clusters show both upper error bars and upper limits for a single filter. Overplotted on the measured data points are model SEDs created by the population synthesis code of Bruzual & Charlot (2003). The model SEDs show 14.5 Myr old instantaneous burst, solar metallicity, stellar populations, assuming a Salpeter IMF and Padova evolutionary tracks. Models have been extinguished by varying column densities of dust in a simple dust screen, following the Draine (2003) dust prescription. Red, orange, green, and blue curves correspond to $A_V = 3.5, 6.5, 8.5,$ and 11 mag, respectively. All model SEDs, as well as the observed K' photometry, are normalized to the K' data point for ease of comparison.

have adopted for populating a cluster's SED with photometric information taken by the Keck AO system is quite different from the procedure outlined for *HST* in case I. As an example, we outline the procedure used to populate the SED of a cluster detected only in the H and K' images. Cluster 18 is an example of such a cluster for which the following procedure was employed.

We begin as before by first performing aperture photometry on the cluster in the K' image. Next, because we have no way of performing an accurate aperture correction or converting counts into janskys for this image taken using AO, we make use of the NICMOS F222M image. Although the particular cluster in question is not visible in the lower resolution NICMOS image, one cluster, namely, cluster 2, is visible in both images and is relatively far from the bright nuclei. We calculate the total flux of cluster 2 in the F222M image using the standard procedure for NICMOS data, namely, performing aperture photometry and applying an aperture correction calculated from a Tiny Tim PSF and converting aperture-corrected counts into calibrated janskys by using the appropriate instrumental calibration value determined by the NICMOS IDT. Next, we perform aperture photometry on cluster 2 in the K' image. The ratio of the total flux of cluster 2 to the aperture photometry result can be used to convert from counts in the K' image (calculated using a particular aperture and annulus) to *total, calibrated* flux for any cluster. We use this ratio to convert the counts in the particular aperture and annulus for cluster 18 in the K' image to *total, calibrated* flux. On

an SED graph, this flux is represented in the form of a single point at the position of the central wavelength for the K' filter.

Because the K' and F222M filters are not identical (as can be seen in Fig. 1), the bootstrapping procedure described above produces accurate results only when the slopes of the SED in the NIR are flat, or the same, for clusters 2 and 18. Indeed, the NIR SED is very flat for the case of young, dusty clusters. To estimate the errors introduced by this bootstrapping procedure, we convolved various Bruzual & Charlot (2003) stellar population models with the transmission functions for the F222M and K' filters. Assuming a Salpeter IMF and a solar metallicity, and using the Bruzual & Charlot (2003) Padova-1994 option for evolutionary tracks, we determine that observations taken with the two different filters should differ by less than 0.1 mag for a cluster between the ages of 0 and 10 Gyr. If an intervening dust screen, corresponding to extinctions ranging from $A_V = 4$ to 12, reddens the cluster and flattens the NIR SED, then observations taken with the two different filters should differ by less than $K'_{AB} = 0.05$ for a cluster that is less than 1 Gyr old. A completely analogous procedure, which makes use of cluster 29, is used to bypass the aperture correction and flux calibration of the H -band AO images; the errors introduced by calibrating H -band data with F160W images are comparable to the 0.1 mag errors quoted above.

The photometry error calculations and the upper limit calculations in the case where the cluster is only detected in the AO images are completely analogous to the procedures described in

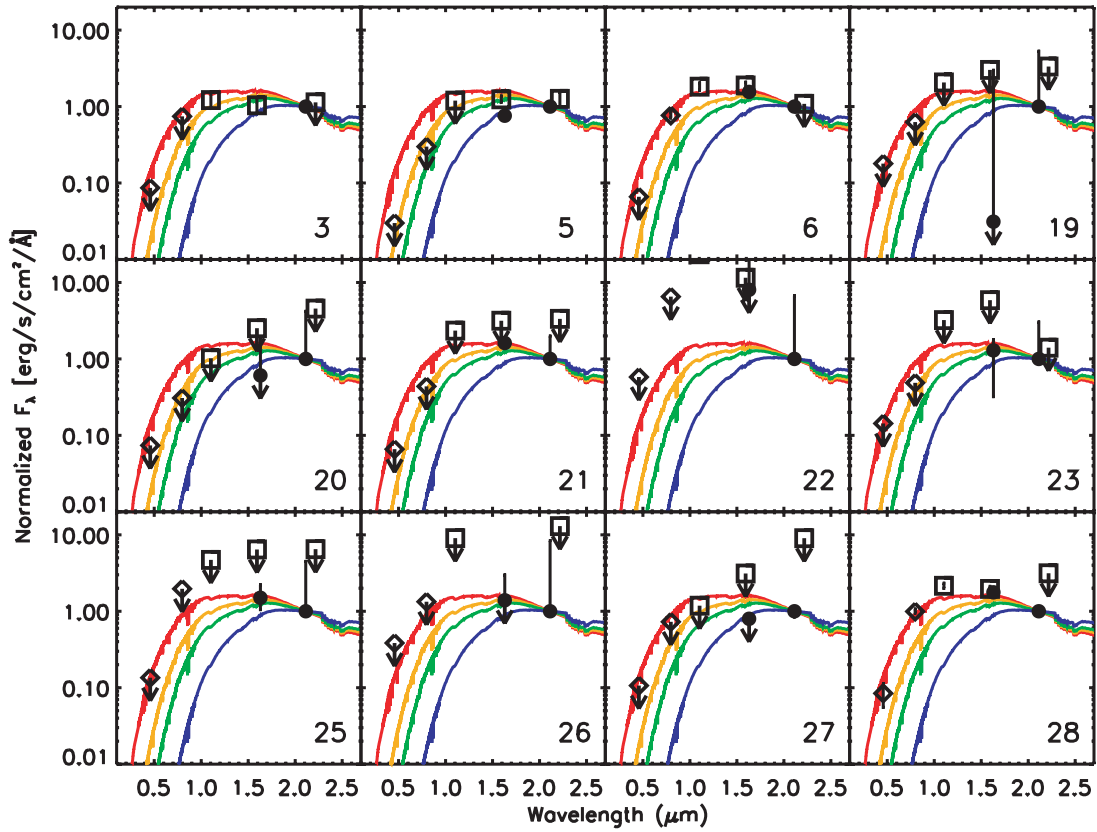


FIG. 6.—Similar to Fig. 5, but here we show the 12 *next* closest clusters to the northern nucleus. Red, orange, green, and blue curves correspond to 14.5 Myr old stellar populations with $A_V = 4.5, 6.5, 8.5,$ and 14 mag, respectively.

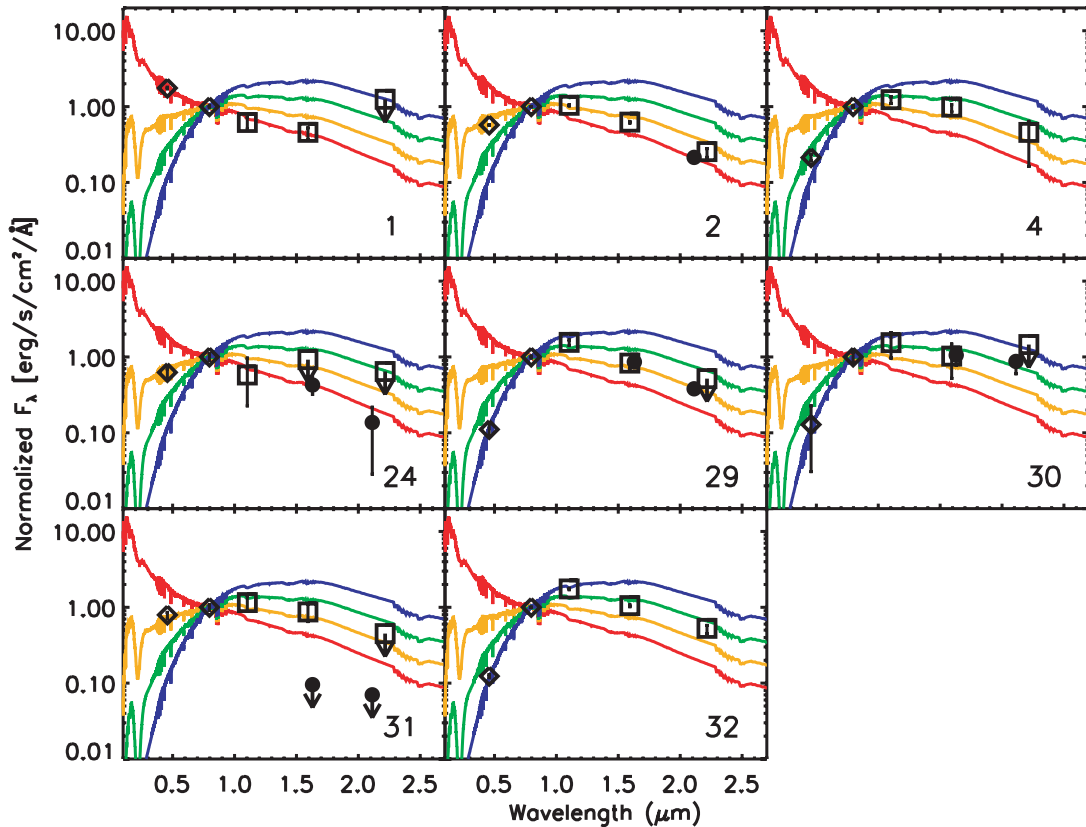


FIG. 7.—Similar to Fig. 5, but here we show the eight clusters farthest from the northern nucleus, with all photometry and model SEDs normalized to the I data point for ease of comparison. Red, orange, green, and blue curves correspond to 14.5 Myr old stellar populations with $A_V = 0.5, 2.0, 3.5,$ and 5 mag, respectively. Read § 3.4 (case II) to understand why the H and K' upper limits shown for cluster 31 should not be trusted.

case I. However, instead of using Tiny Tim PSFs to simulate clusters, we used a theoretical AO PSF. We model the AO PSFs as the sum of two Gaussians. One Gaussian has an FWHM equal to $0.98\lambda/D$, where λ is the observing wavelength and D is the 10 m diameter of the Keck telescope. The other Gaussian has FWHM equal to $0.98\lambda/r_0$, where r_0 is the Fried parameter, which we assume to be 30 cm. We let the on-axis Strehl ratio govern the ratio of the total amounts of energy in each Gaussian. We recognize that the Strehl used for the simulated clusters is certainly overestimated. One of the consequences of these assumptions is evident in Figure 7, where upper limits for cluster 31 are clearly far too low. (Larger Strehls make fainter clusters easier to detect.) Therefore, when interpreting infrared upper limits shown in Figures 5–7, the upper limits computed from NICMOS data, for which the PSF is well modeled by Tiny Tim, should be trusted more than the upper limits computed from the AO data.

4. RESULTS

In this complicated galaxy merger the values we have calculated, namely, a cluster’s magnitude in *at most* five distinct wave bands,⁶ are outnumbered by the unknown variables, which include, but are not limited to, the following list: (1) the metallicity of gas that formed each cluster; (2) the duration and temporal profile of the starburst for each cluster; (3) the initial mass function (IMF) of stars in each cluster; (4) the stellar evolutionary track followed by every star in each cluster; (5) the extinction, scattering, and absorption properties of the dust in and in front of each cluster; and (6) the mass and age of each cluster. In principle, we would like to find the stellar population that most closely matches the observed photometry for each cluster, but because it is impossible to fully constrain this problem, rather than perform minimization techniques on a many-dimensional parameter space, we adopt a different approach that requires making the following simplifying assumptions. We assume that all clusters (1) have solar metallicity, (2) were formed in an instantaneous burst, (3) are composed of stars with stellar masses governed by a Salpeter IMF, (4) are composed of stars that evolve on Padova evolutionary tracks, and (5) have evacuated all intracluster dust before an age⁷ of ~ 3 Myr and are obscured behind a simple dust screen that behaves according to $R_V = 3.1$.

The fact that all 32 of these clusters are concentrated within <5 kpc of the double nuclei (in projection) suggests that their formation was triggered by the merger and that they were formed roughly contemporaneously. To simplify our analysis, we initially assume that all clusters were formed simultaneously, although this is obviously false. Later we relax this assumption to allow for clusters of three possible young (or intermediate) ages. It is possible that some subset of the clusters are old GCs from the progenitor galaxies that happen to be passing through the center of the merger, but this is surely not the case for the majority of the clusters, especially those closest to the nuclei. Assuming that the clusters are not old GCs, it is reasonable to choose a metallicity close to solar. If the triggering event was short, then the assumption that the clusters’ stellar populations are well modeled by an instantaneous burst is roughly accurate. However, those clusters that are located very near to the double nuclei may be experiencing a continual accretion of gas, and therefore it is possible that they would be better modeled by a stellar population with a

⁶ Recall that the F160W and H wave bands are similar, as are the F222M and K' wave bands.

⁷ Note that even if some intracluster dust remains after 3 Myr, our assumption is still good assuming that the effect of the remaining intracluster dust is far less than that of the dust along the line of sight through the merging galaxy.

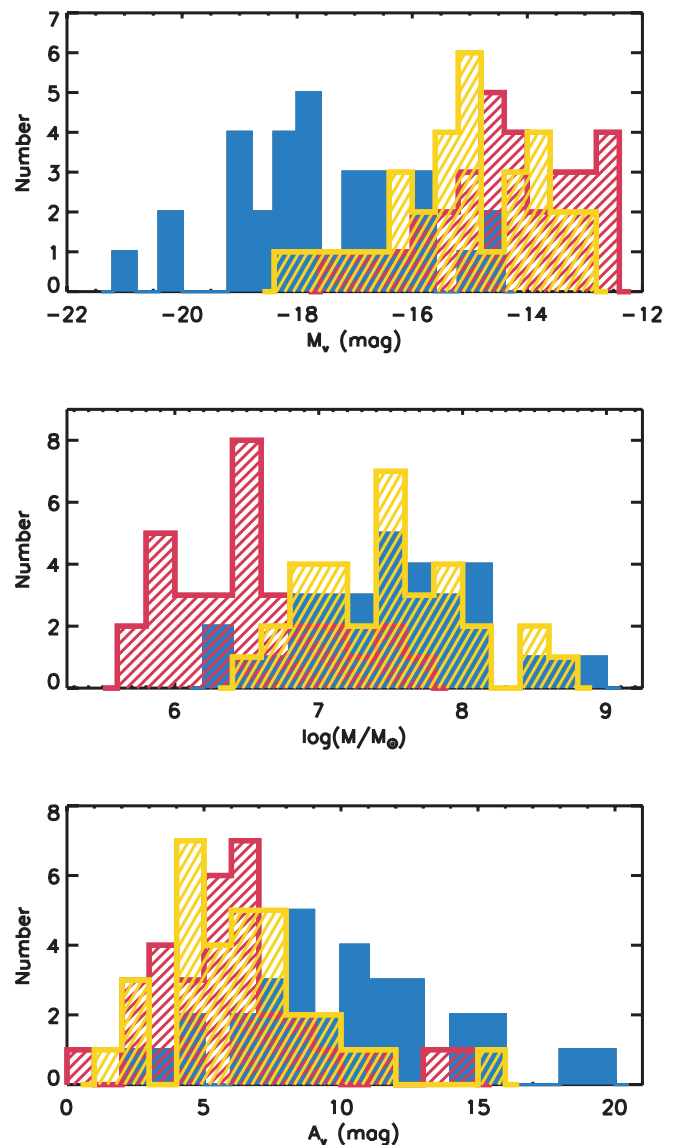


FIG. 8.—Red histograms show the unextincted absolute J -band magnitudes, masses, and extinctions of clusters when all clusters are forced to be 14.5 Myr old and differ only by the amount of extinction applied to each (e.g., red histograms summarize the results of Figs. 5–7 for the best-fitting A_V). Blue and yellow histograms show similar summaries for the cases where we force all clusters to be either 2.88 or 180.5 Myr old, respectively. Note that these histograms include data for all 32 detected clusters, although we believe that five of the clusters may be better described by different, intermediate ages.

constant SFR. We leave the clusters’ ages and the amount of intervening dust along the line of sight to each cluster as free variables.

After making the aforementioned simplifications, our approach entails visually comparing the SEDs that resulted from performing aperture photometry at B through K' bands, to model SEDs created by the isochrone synthesis code of Bruzual & Charlot (2003). In Figures 5–7 we present the results of this approach for the case where we assume that all clusters are 14.5 Myr old. (We justify this choice of age shortly.) We organize the results into three groups: Figure 5 shows the 12 clusters closest to the northern nucleus, Figure 6 shows the 12 next closest clusters, which lie at an intermediate distance from the northern nucleus, and Figure 7 shows the remaining eight clusters that are farthest from the northern nucleus. All model SEDs shown in these figures embody the former six simplifying assumptions, and for

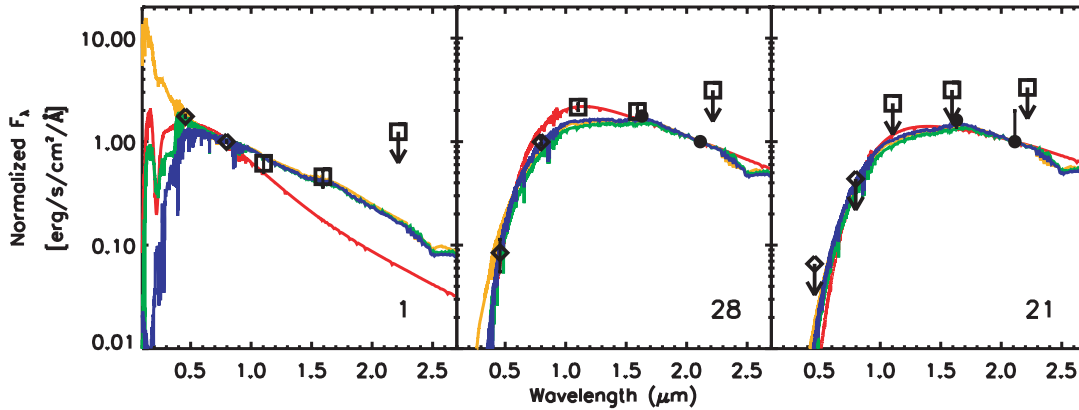


FIG. 9.—Open diamonds, open squares, and filled circles mark the photometric measurements made for clusters 1, 28, and 21 using WFPC2, NICMOS, and NIRC2 images, respectively. Overplotted SEDs in red, orange, green, and blue show 2.88, 14.5, 180, and 2000 Myr old instantaneous burst stellar populations, respectively. For each model SED plotted, we have applied the amount of extinction necessary to make the SEDs most closely match the observed photometry. For cluster 1, the red, orange, green, and blue curves correspond to $A_V = 2.5, 0.5, 1,$ and 0 mag. For cluster 28, the red, orange, green, and blue curves correspond to $A_V = 8.0, 4.5, 5.5,$ and 4 mag. For cluster 21, the red, orange, green, and blue curves correspond to $A_V = 11, 6.5, 7.5,$ and 6 mag. Read the caption of Fig. 5 for more details.

the purpose of visual comparison, each SED has been scaled so that it passes through either the K' or the I data points.⁸ The different colors of the SED curves correspond to varying column densities of interstellar dust applied using the Draine (2003) dust prescription with $R_V = 3.1$. (Grain size distribution comes from Weingartner & Draine [2001]; PAH optical properties come from Li & Draine [2001].) For the 12 clusters nearest the northern nucleus, column densities corresponding to between 3.5 and 11 mag of visual extinction were required to match the observations with the models. Similarly, when comparing the intermediate-distance clusters to the model SEDs, column densities corresponding to A_V between 4.5 and 14 mag were applied to the models. But for the clusters farthest from the northern nucleus, much smaller column densities, corresponding to $A_V = 0.5$ –5 mag, were needed to produce SEDs spanning the range of observations. Immediately we see that if our simplifying assumptions are correct, and if all clusters are assumed for the time being to be the same age of 14.5 Myr, then on average the outermost clusters are obscured by a thinner dust screen than that which obscures the inner clusters.

We repeat this procedure for two additional cases, where all clusters are 2.88 Myr old, and where all clusters are 180 Myr old. These ages were chosen for the following two reasons: (1) The ages span a range that is consistent with our previous assumptions. For example, clusters younger than 3 Myr could have considerable intracluster dust, and clusters older than several hundred million years would have been formed before the onset of the merger; thus, it is unlikely that they would have formed contemporaneously or be situated coincidentally near the nuclei.⁹ (2) The ages bracket the results published in the literature for other star clusters in NGC 6240. Using photometry at the F450W, F547W, and F814W wave bands, Pasquali et al. (2003) found that the clusters in NGC 6240's main body and tidal tails have probable ages ranging from 5 to 13 Myr. By analyzing the CO 2–0 absorption band head equivalent width, Tecza et al. (2000)

show that NGC 6240's K -band light is dominated by a ~ 20 Myr old, short-duration starburst.

For each of the three ages analyzed, we choose as the “best-fitting” model the SED with the smallest value of A_V that matches the observations for each cluster. For example, the observed SED for cluster 13 in Figure 5 is consistent with model SEDs having A_V ranging from 5.5 to 16 mag; therefore, we assume that cluster 13, if it is 15 Myr old, is extinguished by $A_V = 5.5$ mag. Note that larger extinctions translate to more massive clusters, so our method finds the least massive cluster that matches the data for a given age.

We do not show graphs of the 2.88 and 180 Myr old model SEDs for every cluster; instead, we tabulate the results of this exercise in Table 3. The values of A_V listed for each cluster and for each assumed cluster age correspond to the best-fitting model just described. The masses of each cluster are directly proportional to their unextinguished fluxes; for two clusters with equal ages and equal apparent magnitudes, the more extinguished cluster is more massive. In Figure 8 we depict these same results in the form of histograms. The blue, red, and yellow histograms show the best-fitting A_V , and corresponding mass and (unextinguished) M_V , of all 32 clusters for the cases where all clusters are assumed to be 2.88, 14.5, and 180 Myr old, respectively.

While the values listed in Table 3 indicate the stellar population with the best-fitting A_V assuming three different cluster ages, we have not yet specified which age stellar population best matches the observations. We address this next step using Figure 9, in which we use three typical clusters to directly compare the model SEDs with the best-fitting A_V for four different ages. Each of the measured SEDs for clusters 1, 28, and 21 is shown overplotted with model SEDs corresponding to stellar populations that are 2.88, 14.5, 180, and 2000 Myr old. Cluster 1 is typical of a cluster for which it is difficult to distinguish between the 14.5 and 180 Myr old populations, but it is easy to rule out the youngest and oldest ages with the help of spectral information at wavelengths beyond $1 \mu\text{m}$. In cases like these, to be consistent with our previous method of quoting the least massive clusters that match the data, we choose as the most likely cluster age that which yields the smallest cluster mass. For cluster 1, the 14.5 and 180 Myr old populations correspond to $\sim 1 \times 10^6$ and $8 \times 10^6 M_\odot$, respectively, and so we designate this cluster as having aged 14.5 Myr. In Table 3 we indicate this final designation with an asterisk.

⁸ All models are for zero redshift. The small redshift of NGC 6240 ($z = 0.024$) implies an insignificant k -correction.

⁹ Note that in principle the clusters could have been formed during an initial tidal interaction just a few hundred million years ago, making them now older than 180 Myr. However, as discussed in § 5, the masses required to match the observations to the models for clusters older than ~ 180 Myr are too large to be credible.

The middle panel in Figure 9 uses cluster 28 to demonstrate the case where the 2.88 Myr old model SED visibly fits the observations better than stellar populations of the other three ages. In cases like these, although the cluster’s young age requires it to be very massive, we nevertheless designate it as having aged 2.88 Myr by using an asterisk in Table 3. Finally, cluster 21 is representative of the majority of the clusters, for which it is not possible to rule out any age stellar population through visual inspection of the various model SEDs. In cases like these, we again resort to choosing the cluster age that yields the smallest cluster mass. For cluster 21, the 2.88, 14.5, 180, and 2000 Myr old populations correspond to clusters that have approximate masses of 70×10^6 , 6×10^6 , 60×10^6 , and $150 \times 10^6 M_\odot$, respectively, and therefore we designate this cluster (and clusters like this one) as having aged 14.5 Myr. Note that in order for the younger models to be consistent with the observations, we must assume more intervening dust; the 2.88 Myr old model shown for cluster 21 corresponds to $A_V = 11$ mag, while the 2000 Myr old model corresponds to $A_V = 6$ mag. This, of course, demonstrates the typical astronomer’s dilemma of distinguishing between young, dusty populations and older stellar populations.

Finally, having just described the method we used to estimate the properties of each cluster, we reiterate our motivation to *not* perform a detailed χ^2 minimization when matching model SEDs to our observations. Given the number of assumptions we are required to make in this work, a detailed minimization of the SED fits would provide very little additional insight and could be misleading. In particular, a minimization would only describe which of the three chosen ages best fits the models; a fourth (intermediate) age could fit the models better than any of the three. Therefore, it is more instructive to examine the cases of young and old clusters and to discuss how our results would differ if we had chosen different ages. We do this in § 5.1, and indeed, we discover, not unexpectedly, that a different intermediate age may best describe some of the clusters.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Properties of the Cluster Population

As shown with an asterisk in Table 3, the best-fitting model stellar populations and dust screens imply that the clusters are consistent with being young (~ 3 –15 Myr) and having masses that range from approximately 7×10^5 to $1 \times 10^8 M_\odot$. The summed mass of all 32 clusters is $\sim 4 \times 10^8 M_\odot$, with the single most massive cluster making up $\sim 30\%$ of the total mass. The eight next most massive clusters with $1 \times 10^7 M_\odot < M < 6 \times 10^7 M_\odot$ contribute $\sim 60\%$ of the total mass. Cluster 15, which is coincident with the site of the northern black hole, is the only cluster that we expect may have a nonstellar SED, or may be poorly modeled by an instantaneous burst. This cluster is the second most massive cluster and accounts for approximately 10% of the total mass.

With the exception of the most massive cluster, the clusters analyzed in this paper have masses similar to, albeit slightly larger than, those found in other well-studied merging galaxies. Whitmore & Zhang (2002) estimate that the young, optically bright clusters in the Antennae galaxies have masses ranging from 2×10^4 to $4 \times 10^6 M_\odot$. Gilbert et al. (2000) find that the brightest NIR star cluster in the Antennae is ~ 4 Myr old and has $M = 1.6 \times 10^7 M_\odot$. Similarly, many of the young (< 10 Myr) clusters in Arp 220 have masses $> 10^6 M_\odot$, or even as much as $10^7 M_\odot$ (Wilson et al. 2006). (Note that all three of these aforementioned works assume a Salpeter IMF.) McCrady et al. (2003) found kinematic masses of 3.5×10^5 and $1.5 \times 10^6 M_\odot$ for two clusters in M82.

Recall that the masses stated in this paper are underestimated in the sense that we adopted stellar population models with the smallest value of A_V possible. In addition, for all cases where the observed SEDs fit the different aged models equally well, we designated the correct model to be that which yielded the least massive cluster. But by comparing the resulting cluster masses to those in the literature, we judge that these two assumptions were probably necessary for the majority of the clusters. Figure 8 shows that if we had assumed that the clusters were much younger or older than ~ 15 Myr, many of the resulting masses would be far larger than those measured in any other merging system. In fact, the clusters’ masses put stringent constraints on their maximum ages, assuming that we have correctly modeled other properties of the stellar populations. As clusters age past 180 Myr, they become dimmer and dimmer so that the masses required for us to detect them become unreasonably large ($\sim 10^9 M_\odot$).

The SFRs measured for NGC 6240 using a variety of methods put additional stringent constraints on the cluster’s ages. Beswick et al. (2001) use the 1.4 GHz luminosity to show that $\text{SFR}(M \geq 1 M_\odot) = 83.1 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$ in the nuclear region of NGC 6240. Gao & Solomon (2004) show that the HCN luminosity, which traces dense molecular gas, is a good indicator of the SFR in spirals and ULIRGs alike. Using the relationship described by Gao & Solomon (2004) and the value of L_{HCN} measured by Solomon et al. (1992), we calculate that the total SFR in NGC 6240 is approximately $200 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$. This value is slightly larger than that derived from NGC 6240’s integrated IR luminosity, $\sim 140 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$ (Heckman et al. 1990).

The total SFR due to the 32 clusters analyzed in this paper is $\sim 90 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$. Considering that our measurement exceeds the SFR measured by Beswick et al. (2001) for the nuclear region of NGC 6240, and that the unresolved clusters do not include the majority of the infrared nuclear light (see Fig. 2), our measured SFR may be implausibly high. However, $\sim 80\%$ of the total SFR from the clusters comes from just four clusters, each of which contributes $\text{SFR} > 6 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$. These four clusters are the only clusters for which we determined that the 3 Myr old model SEDs fit the observations better than models of other ages.¹⁰ We have already conceded that our method of visual inspection does not search the entire parameter space for a best-fitting model. While a Salpeter IMF or a solar metallicity may be to blame, it is unlikely that all but four clusters can be reasonably modeled by our assumptions. Thus, we suggest that these four clusters are neither 3, nor 15, nor 180 Myr old, but rather some other intermediate age. The K -band brightness implied by the instantaneous burst stellar population models (Bruzual & Charlot 2003) monotonically decreases for population ages greater than ~ 10 Myr and increases for population ages between ~ 3 and 10 Myr. Thus, these four clusters may be better described by a stellar population with an age of ~ 10 Myr, implying that they are less massive and contribute less to the total SFR.

The total SFR measured for the remaining 28 clusters, for which the observations are consistent with 15 Myr old stellar populations, is $\sim 15 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$. This agrees well with the literature and implies that the newly detected clusters account for $\sim 20\%$ of the nuclear SFR, or $\sim 10\%$ of the total SFR in the ULIRG. Finally, if we assumed that the same 28 clusters were all 3 Myr old and summed their appropriate SFRs in Table 3, we would conclude that they contribute a whopping $\sim 879 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$. Thus, given our assumptions (outlined in detail in the first paragraph of § 4), the total SFR for NGC 6240 puts rather stringent constraints on the clusters’ ages.

¹⁰ All four of the clusters that have $\text{SFR} > 6 M_\odot \text{ yr}^{-1}$ also have $M > 10^7 M_\odot$.

To summarize, the masses of star clusters observed in other mergers like Arp 220 and the Antennae strongly suggest that the clusters in NGC 6240 are younger than 180 Myr, while the SFRs measured for NGC 6240 using $L_{1.4\text{ GHz}}$, L_{HCN} , and $L_{8-1000\text{ }\mu\text{m}}$ require that the majority of the clusters be older than 3 Myr. A total of 28 of the 32 detected clusters are consistent with being 15 Myr old, while the large SFRs of four clusters (clusters 6, 28, 29, and 32¹¹) suggest that these four may be more consistent with another intermediate age. The large mass of cluster 15 and the fact that cluster 15 is coincident with the northern black hole suggests that the measured SED may have a nonstellar component. NGC 6240's cluster population, excluding the five aforementioned clusters, is very similar to other cluster populations in the literature. The cluster masses range from approximately 7×10^5 to $4 \times 10^7 M_{\odot}$, and the total contribution to the SFR from these 27 clusters is $\sim 10 M_{\odot} \text{ yr}^{-1}$, or $\sim 10\%$ of the total SFR in the nuclear region.

The cluster population discussed in this paper is considerably more massive than that which was discussed in Pasquali et al. (2003). The latter consists of 41 clusters located in NGC 6240's "main body" and 13 clusters located in the galactic tails. Pasquali et al. (2003) estimate that these clusters have probable masses of $(1-2) \times 10^5 M_{\odot}$. Because Pasquali et al. (2003) do not give the locations of the clusters they analyze,¹² it is difficult to know whether this is a discrepancy or whether we are simply noticing an increase in the cluster mass toward the double nuclei, as was noted by Pasquali et al. (2003). While it is obvious that Pasquali et al. (2003) did not analyze the majority of the clusters discussed in this paper, for which we measure only upper limits on the B and I photometry, it is intriguing that clusters 2 and 4, which are located in what appears to be the main body of NGC 6240, and for which B and I measurements were made, are rather massive ($>10^6 M_{\odot}$) compared to estimates made by Pasquali et al. (2003). It is possible that this apparent discrepancy is due to the fact that Pasquali et al. (2003) used Starburst99 stellar population models with a different reddening law and subsolar metallicity. This apparent discrepancy cannot, however, be attributed to a difference in IMF, since Pasquali et al. (2003) used the same IMF as we did in this paper, namely, a Salpeter IMF with lower and upper mass cutoffs of 0.1 and $100 M_{\odot}$, respectively.

Finally, we note that while using a Salpeter IMF is helpful when comparing our results to the literature, the Kroupa (2001) IMF is more realistic and results in lower cluster mass estimates. Since the infrared luminosity of clusters is dominated by light from high-mass stars that quickly turn off the main sequence, and since the Salpeter and Kroupa (2001) IMFs differ only for masses below $0.5 M_{\odot}$, the cluster masses one derives when employing these IMFs differ by a simple scaling factor for clusters with ages less than the main-sequence lifetime of a $0.5 M_{\odot}$ star. The exact mass scaling can be easily derived by piecewise integrating the two IMFs from 0.1 to $100 M_{\odot}$. The result is that two young clusters with equal infrared luminosities but different IMFs have masses that differ by a factor of ~ 1.3 , with the larger mass corresponding to the cluster formed with a Salpeter IMF and the smaller mass corresponding to the cluster formed

with a Kroupa (2001) IMF. Thus, if we had used a more realistic IMF throughout our analysis in this paper, we would have estimated cluster masses to be smaller by a factor of about 0.77. Correspondingly, our SFR estimates would decrease by this same factor.

5.2. Dust and Extinction in NGC 6240

NGC 6240's cluster population, if in fact obscured by a simple dust screen with $R_V = 3.1$ as described by Draine (2003), is extinguished by column densities of dust corresponding to A_V between 0.5 and 14 mag.¹³ There is no significant difference in the values of A_V measured for the 24 clusters closest to the northern nucleus, but the eight clusters farthest from the nucleus exhibit significantly less extinction. This is to be expected for an active merger, in which gas is funneled onto the nuclei, in this case powering the AGN that Komossa et al. (2003) detected. Excluding clusters 6, 28, 29, 32, and 15 as previously discussed, on average the six clusters farthest from the northern nucleus are extinguished by $A_V = 2.3$ mag, and the remaining 21 clusters closest to the nucleus are extinguished by $A_V = 7$ mag.

Gerssen et al. (2004) and Tecza et al. (2000) both estimate extinctions toward the northern and southern nuclei assuming foreground dust screens. For the northern nucleus we can directly compare our results to theirs using clusters 12 and 14 as two sight lines through this region. (Gerssen et al. [2004] and Tecza et al. [2000] both classify the brightest northern knot as the northern nucleus.) Gerssen et al. (2004) and Tecza et al. (2000) estimate that $A_V = 2.35$ and 1.6 mag, respectively. Both of these values are considerably less than the measurements made in this paper: $A_V = 6.5$ and 3.5 mag toward clusters 12 and 14, respectively. In addition, Tecza et al. (2000) measure a peak extinction of $A_V = 7.2$ mag, while we find that many clusters discussed in this paper have $A_V > 7$ mag. For these reasons we suggest that Gerssen et al. (2004) and Tecza et al. (2000) have both underestimated the amount of extinction in this ULIRG. Our values of extinction agree better with the values in the literature, measured using a variety of methods. Vignati et al. (1999) used X-ray observations and found $A_V \sim 10$ mag, Genzel et al. (1998) used line ratios and found $A_V \geq 5$ mag, and Rieke et al. (1985) used continuum K and L spectrophotometry and inferred $A_V \sim 15$ mag. The cause of the previous underestimates may be due in part to the different spatial scales being probed, and in part to the fact that the measurements can only probe the optically thin layer surrounding the nuclei. The observations presented in this paper are the first infrared observations to resolve the northern nucleus, and thus it is sensible that we would infer higher values of extinction than were found by Tecza et al. (2000).

Finally, note that while Tecza et al. (2000) may have underestimated the overall extinction in this ULIRG, the morphology of their extinction map is consistent with our findings. They find that the extinction is greatest between the nuclei and least toward the northern nucleus. We detect a cluster coincident with the northern nucleus and we find a large concentration of clusters just northwest of the northern nucleus, yet we cannot resolve the southern nucleus, nor do we detect many clusters directly between the nuclei. Thus, the locations of the clusters in our sample strongly suggest that the region between the nuclei is the most obscured and that the southern nucleus is more highly obscured

¹¹ Note that because clusters 29 and 32 lie outside of the "nuclear" region for which Beswick et al. (2001) measured $L_{1.4\text{ GHz}}$, their high SFRs do not directly contradict the $83.1 M_{\odot} \text{ yr}^{-1}$ limit set by Beswick et al. (2001).

¹² Pasquali et al. (2003) did not publish the locations of the clusters they analyze, nor did they provide this information on the Web site they mention. We were not able to obtain the cluster positions from private communication with the authors.

¹³ We have not accounted for Galactic extinction when estimating these values. The Galactic extinction toward NGC 6240 is $A_V = 0.25$ mag and is negligible given the uncertainty on our measurements.

than the northern nucleus. This evidence suggests that deeper observations would result in additional cluster detections, particularly between the two nuclei.

5.3. Summary

The circumnuclear locations of the clusters detected in these new, high-resolution observations strongly suggest that their formation was triggered by the merger event that created the ULIRG NGC 6240. This motivates our decision to model the clusters as solar metallicity, instantaneous burst stellar populations. If we further assume that the stellar populations were created with a Salpeter IMF and that the stars in the clusters follow Padova evolutionary tracks, then we find that 27 of the 32 newly discovered clusters are consistent with being ~ 15 Myr old, and 4 of the 32 clusters are probably between 3 and 15 Myr old. Cluster ages much younger or much older than 15 Myr can be ruled out by the large SFRs and masses inferred, respectively. Assuming that the clusters are 15 Myr old, then the majority of the clusters have masses ranging from 7×10^5 to $4 \times 10^7 M_{\odot}$, and the total contribution to the SFR from these 27 clusters is $\sim 10 M_{\odot} \text{ yr}^{-1}$, or roughly 10% of the total SFR in the nuclear region.

The extinctions calculated toward these clusters range from $A_V = 0.5$ to 14 mag, with the least extinguished clusters being located farthest from the double nuclei. While the range of extinctions quoted in the literature for NGC 6240 varies greatly, the values measured in this paper agree well with some of the larger published values. The locations of the clusters detected here, along with the extinction map published by Tecza et al. (2000), suggest that there may be as yet unobserved clusters located between the nuclei that are still obscured. The com-

plicated morphology of this ULIRG makes it very difficult to determine our completeness limits empirically.

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