

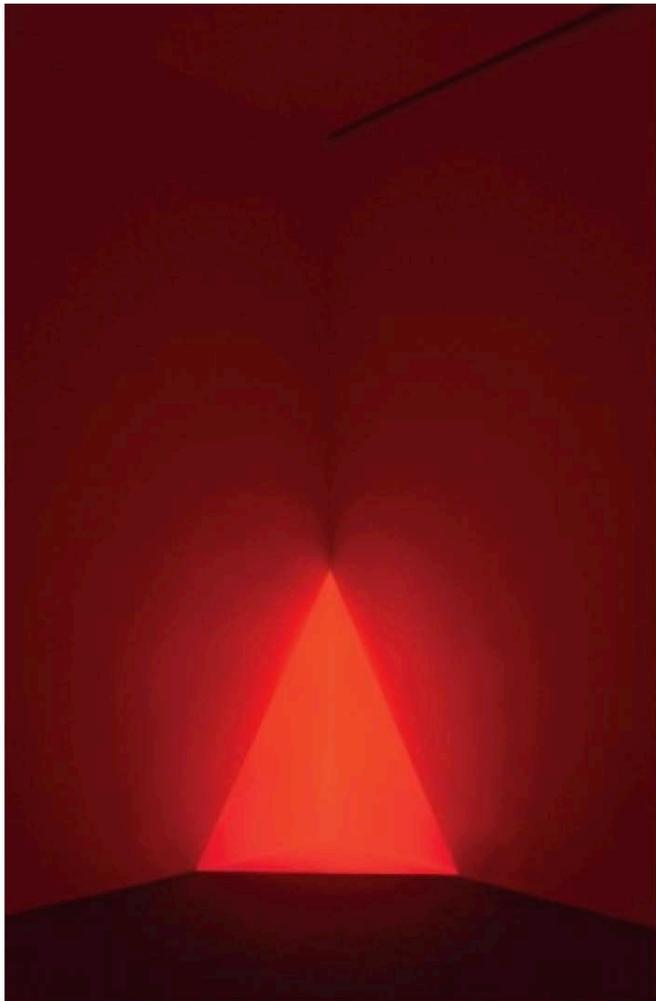
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WAY OUT WEST

California minimalism comes to town.



By Peter Schjeldahl



James Turrell's "Gard Red" (1968), left, and a glass box by Larry Bell (1966).

Photographs by Left: Cathy Carver / © James Turrell / Courtesy Pacewildenstein; Right: Cathy Carver / Courtesy David Zwirner

New York light is clear and mild. Los Angeles light is soft and fierce. Edges stand out in New York. In L.A., they melt. (This applies to thoughts as well as to things: minds work a mite differently in America's two capital cities of cultural production—not that it matters greatly now for culture, swamped as it is in glowing, placeless pixels.) A splendid show, at the David Zwirner gallery, of California minimalism, mostly from the late nineteen-sixties, revisits an apotheosis of the continental divide. Back then, Southern California writers and artists attained global stature by glorifying local quirks. (Two words: Joan Didion.) A tiny art community in L.A. absorbed influences of triumphant New York minimalism—the stringent simplicities of Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, et al.—and responded with forms and ideas that were so distinctive it was as if the movement had been reborn to more indulgent parents. The development acquired critical rubrics: Finish Fetish, for sculpture that sported industrial plastics and resins and glossy car enamels, and Light and Space, for increasingly ethereal environmental works. They shared a serene sensuousness that couldn't have been more remote from New York's principled asperity. In point of fact, they advanced a philosophical argument about the role of art in life which has aged well. Most of the four-decade-old works at Zwirner feel as fresh as this morning.

Take Larry Bell's glass boxes: chrome-framed cubes, vacuum-coated with vaporized minerals (usually grayish, but gold in one instance). The transparent objects admit your gaze. The space inside them is a continuation of the space you occupy, simply inflected with misty tones. The works are echt minimalist in that they are understood almost before they are seen. Mystery-free, they leave you nothing to be conscious of except yourself, affected by their presence. But unlike, say, Judd's sternly confrontational metal and wooden geometries, they don't mind seducing. They are as obvious as furniture and as dreamy as whatever mood you're in. Not only elegant, they precipitate a feeling of elegance: ease, suavity, cool. They look expensive, not just in their lapidary craft but by extension, assuming an ambience of taste in key with themselves. (You wouldn't want a Bell box in a railroad apartment; it would be like living with an indignantly offended aristocrat.) In the sixties, puritanical New Yorkers (me included) liked to deplore the air of lotus-eating chic that Bell shared with other California minimalists. Today, after what seems an eternity of having been pummeled by the big-ticket swank of stainless-steel bunnies by Jeff Koons and tanked sharks by Damien Hirst, I find Bell's slickness generously candid—and the pseudo-Shaker austerity of Judd, for all his greatness, correspondingly coy. There's no crime in art's looking like a luxury. It is a luxury. Meanwhile, the intellectual integrity of the cubes, merging Euclid and reverie, proves rock solid.

The inveterately Southwestern critic Dave Hickey writes in an upcoming catalogue for the show that, unlike the starkly structural East Coast minimalism, West Coast minimalism, "like the California culture that nurtured it," is "intrinsically concerned with chemistry, with the slippery, unstable vernacular of oxygen, neon, argon, resin, lacquer, acrylic, fibreglass, glass, graphite, chrome, sand, water and active human hormones. This is a world that floats, flashes, coats, and teases." (In passing, Hickey nails a sense you get, between desert and ocean, "of the earth as the bottom of the sky.") This befits Bell and the other paladins of the Finish Fetish: Craig Kauffman, with vacuum-molded Plexiglas reliefs, spray-painted from behind in plangent monochrome; Peter Alexander, with cast-polyester-resin wedges infused with graduated hues; John McCracken, with tall, surfboard-glossy planks nonchalantly leaning against walls (one is robust red, another fey pink); and Helen Pashgian (one of the few women on the scene), with an internally complex sphere of cast polyester resin and acrylic, like a crystal ball complete with omens. Of special note, and new to me, is an untitled installation, first made in 1971, by Laddie John Dill: a wall-hugging dune of beach sand that surrounds and supports standing, angled squares of plate glass in two sizes. Buried argon lights impart green glows to the tops of the smaller panes. Reflections in the larger panes multiply the ghostly edges to virtual infinity. The work stirred, for me, memories of starry nights in Santa Monica.

This brings us to Light and Space: Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Doug Wheeler. Irwin, the subject of a classic book by Lawrence Weschler, “Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees” (1982), developed in the early sixties from a minor Abstract Expressionist painter into an internationally renowned orchestrator of luminous near-emptiness, as with rooms divided by scrims that impress viewers as both barriers and atmospheres at once. Turrell is famous, and much beloved, for installations that induce sublime spatial illusions with colored light alone. Representing the lesser-known Wheeler at Zwirner is a big, acrylic-masked square of neon tubes which suggests a foggy apparition on a lonesome road. All three men can seem as much pragmatic neuroscientists as conventional artists. They play with visual percepts—the fleeting formations in the brain that summarize vision on the verge of consciousness. This is a matter less of forgetting the name of a thing seen than of being pulled up short remembering it. One of Irwin’s few object works—a standing, slim prism in acrylic, twelve feet high, from 1970-71—epitomizes the effect. You know that it’s an object, but your eyes, assaulted by fractured reflections of the room, don’t agree. Your percept stutters with incessant double takes. Is this pleasant? It is if you surrender to it, accepting, with fascination, the humiliating faultiness of human perception. Seeing that you don’t see and knowing that you don’t know, you are flooded with an awareness of reality beyond your conscious grasp. Actually, any successful art (not to mention nitrous oxide, at the dentist’s) may bring about something like that. Irwin’s feat is to make a science of it.

For Turrell’s “Juke Green” and “Gard Red” (both 1968), a projector in a darkened room beams a shape of intense hue into a corner of walls and floor. The green is wedge-shaped and the red triangular—or boxy and pyramidal, as your eye, automatically exploring the possibilities of what’s there, reverses its reading of the corner contours from concave to convex. As with Irwin, you register the unreliability of your vision, only with a bonus of beauty, replete with associations to music, savor, and scent. (No texture, though. Your meditative state is out-of-body, touchless.) Again, succumbing is optional. I have often resisted and even resented the blandishments of Light and Space art, whose oh-wow effects come with an intimation that the viewer has been cast as a laboratory animal. In this, I’m a New Yorker. In public places here, we are normally averse to letting our egos dissolve like sugar cubes in hot tea. In amniotic L.A., everybody goes around half-deliquested already, as a matter of course. (L.A. sensibility tilts to the chemical, as Hickey notes; New York’s is generally electric.) If, as a visitor there, you don’t smoothly adapt, you may be as noisily wretched as Woody Allen in “Annie Hall.” Practice the proper adjustment with works of California minimalism.

You will see one of two shows in the big Finish Fetish room at Zwirner, depending on whether it is illuminated only through the gallery’s skylights or, owing to wintry dimness, the halogens are switched on. The works are far happier in the first case, while poignantly craving full blasts of Pacific sun. But most of them hold their own, in either case. They pass the test of leadership for a major-league aesthetic: faring ahead without deigning to check whether you, or anyone else, is following. Be there or be square. ♦



Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine’s art critic. He is the author of “The Hydrogen Jukebox.”

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