

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME MARCHES ON

KILLER TEXT ON ART

artillery

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VISION
QUEST

Mike Kelley

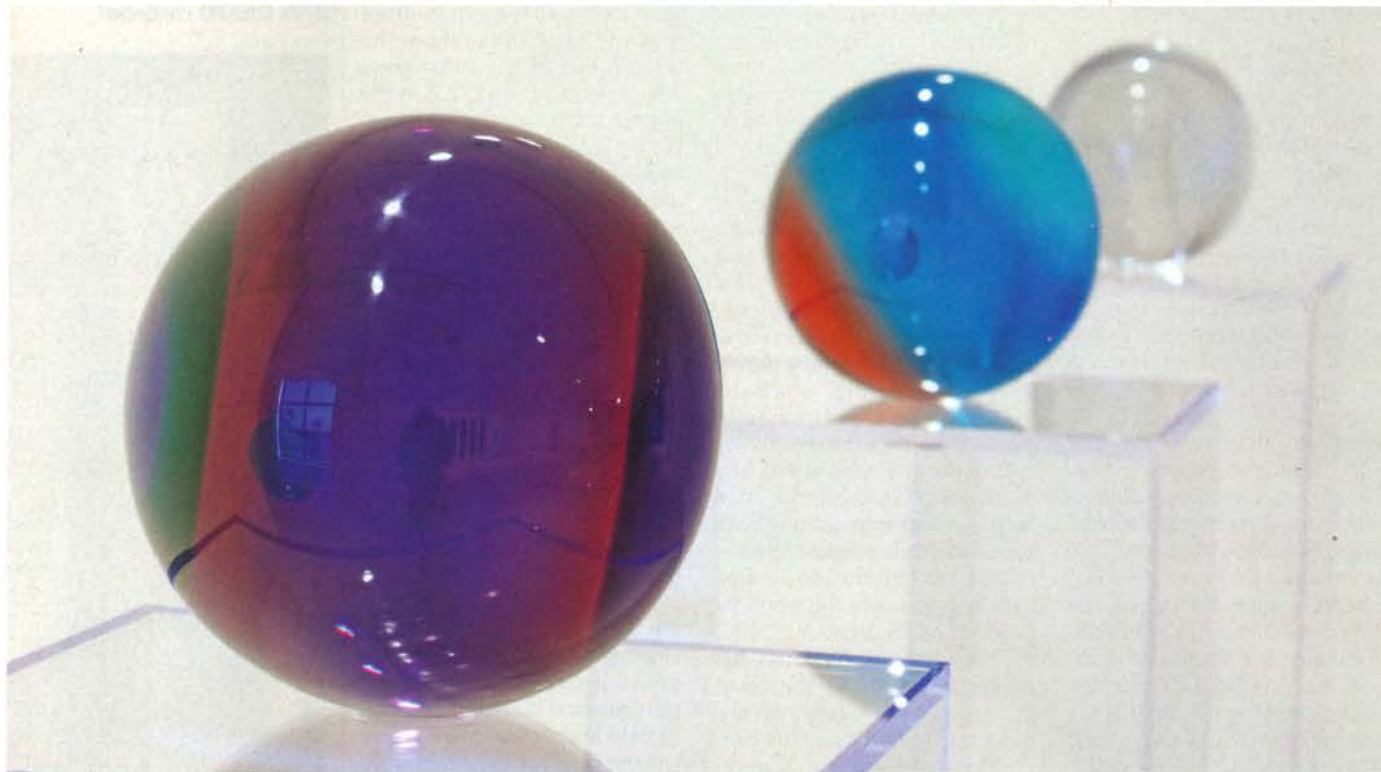
RETURNS
to DETROIT

Maurizio
Cattelan
AT THE
GUGGENHEIM

Prospect.2
NEW ORLEANS

GUEST LECTURE: Ed Moses





PHENOMENAL



“CALIFORNIA LIGHT, SPACE, SURFACE” AT MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SAN DIEGO

BY JOHN DAVID O'BRIEN

WHETHER YOU TRACE ITS ORIGINS TO THE ALTERED CONSCIOUSNESS of the psychedelic era, to the entrance of phenomenology into philosophical inquiry or to the overall iconoclastic tendencies of the West Coast, the Light and Space movement generated artwork unlike anything before it. At multiple Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego sites, “Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface” takes viewers into that astounding history and, in the process, reveals how much of that art was keyed to the senses and the body, to an experience without the mediation of language. An in-depth look at the work of 13 significant artist-thinkers, “Phenomenal” foregrounds how time and the viewer’s physical position and perceptual attitude determine this art’s meaning and configure a broader aesthetic threshold.

The lapse of time required of viewers to even “see” some of these works is daunting, but it is precisely in this challenge to viewership that the first point of “Phenomenal” becomes apparent. Viewer are asked to slow everything down and to look carefully at what is around them. That may seem obvious when written down on paper, but in the real spaces of the galleries, where light emanations fill an entire room or cast-resin forms shift their hues and disappear into their own shadows as the viewer moves around them, or mirrors confound the separation between viewer and work, slowing down and paying very close attention is an absolute prerequisite to appreciation.

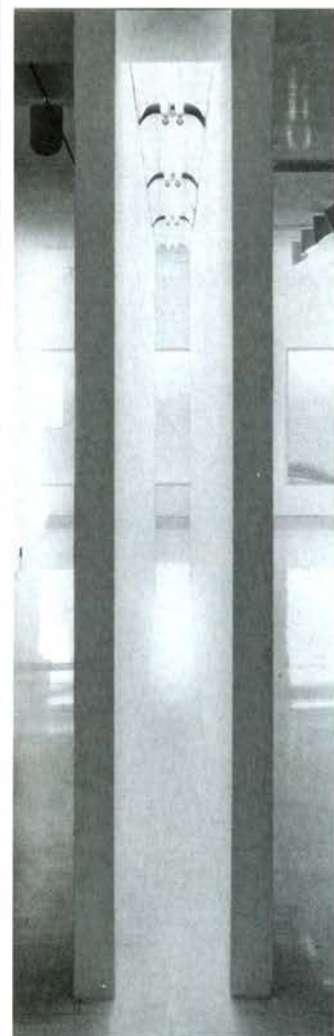
The body of the art viewer is rarely given such preeminence: where she is in relationship to the artwork, how he moves around it, where they cross in the space in front of the mirrored planes. The repercussions of this aspect of perceiving the art are entirely sensorial, and the implication is that viewers activate the work as they draw it into their perceptual grasp. The visual puzzles presented in “Phenomenal” are physical ones, through or around which viewers must step or sidle.

The epiphanies such puzzles engender are wordless and sensual. Although with so many specific artworks placed together there were a few problems with too much light seepage or not quite enough light around some, in general the show does work, giving viewers a chance to bask in a festival of the senses.

Eric Orr’s “Zero Mass,” a 1972-73 environment, plays off the slow acclimation of the eyes to total darkness. An elliptical chamber, located around the corner from a light trap that isolates it entirely, is accessible only by feeling one’s way along the paper wall. Once within the chamber, viewers must wait until the pitch black finally turns into a shadowy chamber in which the silhouettes of the walls and others become slowly discernible. Progressing from fear of the dark to a tingling awareness of their bodies loosed in the penumbra, viewers are finally able to make out things. Liberating and strangely revelatory, the experience focuses the viewers on their sense of corporal extension and touch, inviting us to dance in the quiet light of the dissipating darkness.

An installation of three 1968-69 untitled works (cast polyester resin spheres) by Helen Pashgian both bridges the gender gap within the exhibition and underlines the aspects of visual beauty that this art often exalts. The ambient light streaming in from the windows, the viewer’s reflections in the spheres, and the works’ reflections in and through one another add up to a shifting set of transparent colored lights in constant transition, counterbalancing the more neutral light choices of others.

Outside of the PST-established 1945–80 time frame, Robert Irwin’s 1997 installation “1°2°3°4°” indicates how far the light-space trajectory can push the experience of art. Consisting of apertures cut into



existing windows on the side of the museum facing the ocean, this work focuses on the difference between the light coming through space directly and the light coming through the clear glass panes. Framing the rolling ocean view as lighter squares within squares, Irwin effectively explores the physics of light as they occur within the viewer’s active present. In addition, viewers feel a cool sea breeze as they traverse the room while trying to decide whether or not to push their hands up against the missing pane—a complex and phenomenal encounter. ☉

“Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface” at MCASD, Downtown and La Jolla, runs through January 22, 2012. www.mcasd.org

Previous page, right: Helen Pashgian, installation view of three untitled works, 1968-69, courtesy of the MCASD, Pomona College Museum of Art, Claremont, California, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, photo by Pablo Mason. **Above:** Bruce Nauman, *Green Light Corridor*, 1970, collection Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY, Panza Collection, Gift, 1992, photo by Pablo Mason. © 2011 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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