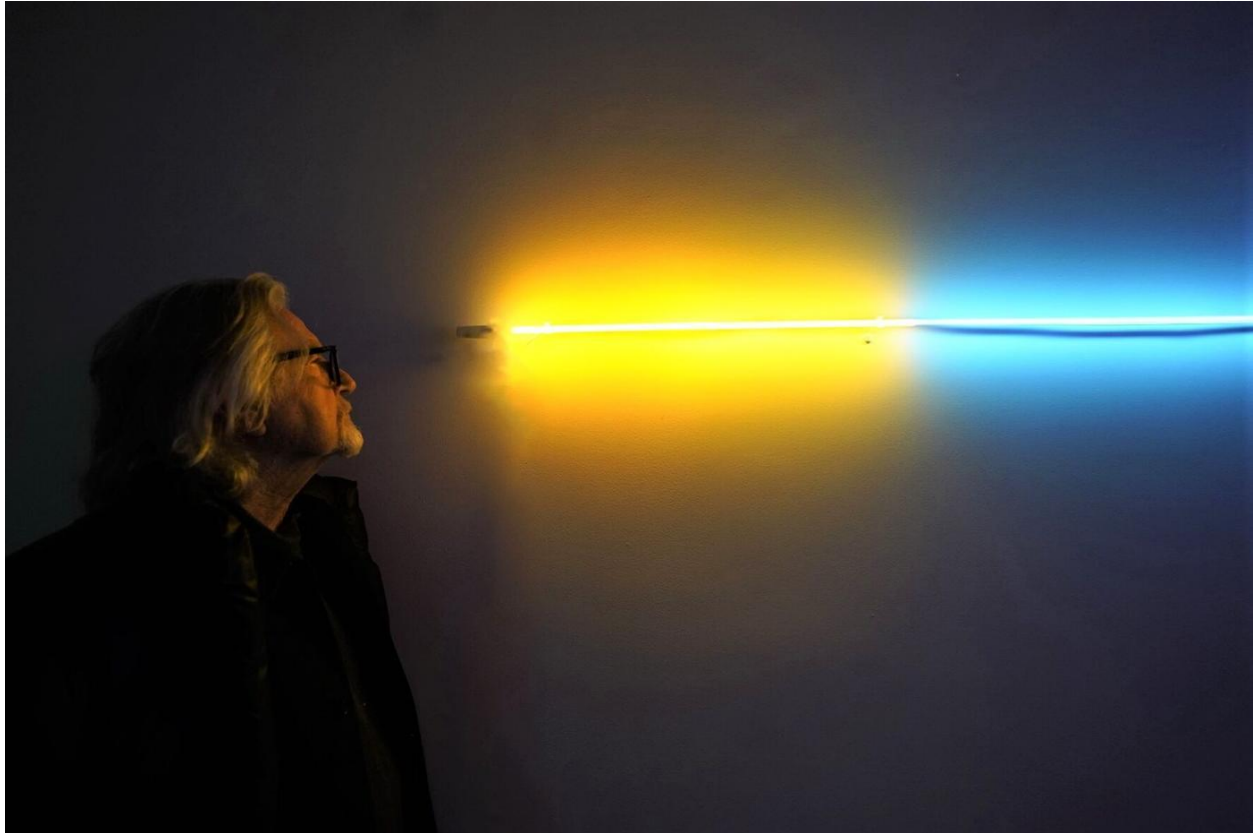


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Experiencing art through the lens of light

By Jacqueline Reynolds, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer | Jan 15, 2022



Artist Laddie John Dill has been surrounded by light for as long as he can remember.

Growing up in 1950s rural Southern California, his mother was an artist and his stepfather was a scientist and mathematician who studied the properties of lenses and developed early versions of night vision technologies.

With lights, lenses and laser beams filling the walls of his childhood home, Dill was inherently fascinated with the qualities and capturing of light, and he dedicated his life and career to exploring the phenomena.

“A lot of the work that I do and have done is relative to growing up in that environment, and my stepfather was a big influence on me — his approach to lights, lasers and things like that in our house,” Dill said. “Over the years, I started to develop a way of mentally painting these light pieces.”

After graduating from the Chouinard Art Institute in 1968, Dill connected with various artists of the “Light and Space Movement,” a loosely-affiliated art movement influenced by the Southern California environment and new perceptual processes regarding the sensory and psychological impact of light. He had found his calling.

Now recognized as one of the leading Light and Space artists, Dill’s work is in the permanent collections of national and international institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples, Italy.

At 80 years old, the artist continues his practice, crafting sculptures and installations with light, electrified gases, glass, sand grains and other organic materials in his studio space in downtown Los Angeles.

“I consider my studio a very private place, like a lab in a sense,” Dill said. “I’ve basically always used the Scientific Method approach — when something fails, it gives me more information than when it works — and I’m still experimenting.”

Dill’s reputable “Light Sentences” — which are hand-blown vertical glass tubes of varying lengths that emit sequences of colored and clear light — are currently featured in exhibits in Denmark, Italy, Massachusetts, California — and right here, in Aspen.

On view through Feb. 20 at the New York-based Malin Gallery, a pop-up on East Hyman Avenue near the Aspen Art Museum, the solo exhibition titled “Light is the Object” features eight of Dill’s ongoing “Light Sentence” series, one of his large “Light Catcher” sculptures and a site-specific “Light Plains” installation.

While Dill’s “Light Sentences” are widely seen — he’s been producing the series over the course of five decades — “Light Catcher” and “Light Plains” are rarely exhibited and most people have never seen these works in-person, gallery owner Barry Malin explained.

Malin, who returned to Aspen for the winter season after a successful summer pop-up experience, said this is Dill’s first show with Malin Gallery, as well as the artist’s first exhibit in Aspen.

“I thought this would be a good show because it relates to the environment and the ambient light, which you have an abundance of in Aspen,” Malin said. “And then I thought, with the weather and it getting darker earlier here, this would be an interesting show because it changes during the course of the day too, depending on how the light is; in the evening, it’s a little more dramatic.”

Though “Light is the Object” marks Dill’s first exhibition in Aspen, the artist has deep roots in town and the valley. In the early 1990s, he was an artist in residence at Anderson Ranch Arts Center, for printmaking. In cultivating relationships with artists and collectors over the years, there was a period of time when Dill was going to Aspen on a regular basis.

“I’ve always known the Aspen community is very savvy to design and the arts,” Dill said. “So in this first exhibit, I didn’t mind showing stuff that was really raw.”

An exhibition such as this one involves a very intricate installation process, Malin said. Prior to the show’s opening on Jan. 6, Dill came out to Aspen to create “Light is the Object.”

In collaboration with the show’s curator Anna Hygelund, Dill said he decided to handcraft one of his “Light Plains” creations because of the way the sand pieces talk about landscape and “light defining landscape.”

Composed of sand, glass and argon and neon lights, the “Light Plains” installations are created on site, as Dill arranges the materials to suit the space and local environment. In 2017, the MoMA acquired one of the “Light Plains” installations, and Dill said it took him over a week to put the piece together up on the fourth floor of the museum, describing the process as one of the best experiences he’s ever had.

Tucked in the back corner of the Malin Gallery space, the sand piece for Aspen was created and installed to allow for a more intimate experience than previous “Light Plains,” Dill said.

“Others I’ve done have looked like huge areas of landscape from a distance, and I wanted more intimacy with this one so people could see closely how the light comes up and through,” he said. “It was perfect when installing it, with the snowstorm and white environment, it reflected on itself.”

Malin mentioned that Dill's sand pieces can be credited to the launch of his career. In the late 1960s, artist Robert Rauschenberg visited Dill's studio and discovered an early version of this work. Intrigued, Rauschenberg brought the influential gallerist Ileana Sonnabend to see the "Light Plains," which led to solo exhibitions for Dill in Sonnabend's famous gallery in New York in 1971 and coined Dill as the first Light and Space artist to exhibit on the East Coast.

With "Light Plains" and "Light Sentences" representing Dill's earlier artistry concepts, the massive "Light Catcher" sculpture belongs to Dill's more recent body of work. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Dill started crafting these sculptures from aircraft aluminum, disturbing the surface in a rhythm by grinding the material.

The result is a textured plane that reflects and transmits light to the viewer in different ways depending on perspective and light conditions. Though this piece is separate from the colorfully lit "Light Sentences" dispersed among the gallery walls, they work together throughout the course of the day, Malin said.

"Even photographically, there's an interplay between the works that involves the medium of light — the currency they exchange," he said.

In showing the three very different series of works in one space, a certain dynamic exists between the art pieces in terms of how the light shifts and interacts with the objects. This changing perception of light is especially evident from around 5-6 p.m. As the sky outside goes darker, the light literally becomes the object.

“Light is the Object” is on view through Feb. 20 at Malin Gallery’s pop-up space, 601 E. Hyman Ave. The gallery is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 11 a.m.- 7 p.m.