

# LADDIE JOHN DILL

## with

# Michael Straus

Laddie John Dill is an LA based artist who was at the forefront of the “Light and Space” movement in the late sixties. In 1971 he had his first solo show at Ileana Sonnabend’s gallery in New York City. Since then Dill’s work has been shown and celebrated internationally. Early in the fall Michael Straus spoke with Dill on the occasion of the artist’s exhibition at Malin Gallery. The conversation that follows touches upon Dill’s early artistic development, his work as an educator, and his careful consideration of how architecture functions in the context of his sculptures.

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*Laddie John Dill: Intimate Light*  
Curated by Anna Valverde  
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**MICHAEL STRAUS (RAIL):** Good afternoon, Laddie. We’re on a Zoom call from me in Alabama to you in LA with our friends at the *Rail* looped in from Brooklyn. We’re reconnecting with each other after, well, I don’t know, it’s been a few months for sure. Or else, it’s been all of COVID.

LADDIE JOHN DILL (L. J. D.): I was flat on my back for a year. It wasn’t COVID, it was a herniated disc from lifting, but it sort of coincided with COVID.

**RAIL** Well I’m glad to see you up and about, and the timing is good for this interview. To set the stage a little bit, I want to give some context on a personal level. I was thinking back to when we first met, I’m pretty sure it was at your studio.

L. J. D. When I was in Venice, yes.

**RAIL** So that was around ten years ago, and I had already acquired a couple of your “Light Sentences” from a show you had at Nyehaus in New York. The work I was most familiar with at the time, and I think that the first thing that still comes to most people’s minds, might be the “Light Sentences,” maybe because they were in *Pacific Standard Time* but also numerous other exhibitions in the States and abroad. But in the middle of your Venice studio I remember seeing a large basalt rock piece which also had glass panes somehow inserted into it. And so it was like one of the “Light Plains” pieces, which we’ll also talk about, but it was in stone and I wasn’t really even sure how to deal with it as a medium. So maybe we can

start by talking about your attraction to basalt as a medium—a stone that most people would think of as not malleable, not reflective, not allied with light let alone glass.

L. J. D. Well, I can lift a three foot section of volcanic rock for one thing, and I like the color of it. This particular work was black volcanic rock. There was also an argon tube running beneath the rock and with glass plates inserted perpendicularly to one other. It was around twenty feet in length. I wanted the light and the glass to work symbiotically, but at the same time I wanted them to retain their own individual connotations. So it was a matter of juxtaposing the glass in a certain way. The thing about the reflection in the lights with the stone was that the light, when it’s reflected into the actual glass, you get the illusion that the light is going through the glass. In other words, the argon works to illuminate the secondary sheets that lean against the primary sheets to create this illusion, as each adjacent sheet to the left picks up the perfect reflection of the one that preceded it.

**RAIL** Now, in the earlier “Light Plains” pieces you use sand rather than rocks for the placement of the glass panels, right?

L. J. D. Yes, here the rock is the sand. Same thing. In changing the medium I was thinking about a piece I did at the Walker many years ago, a show I was in where my work was in the same room with Bob Irwin. I had to situate it in a way that the lighting conditions would work. I used parallel sheets of glass as primary placements and then the secondary sheets running at a fifteen degree angle. But this now has a completely different feel to it. I thought about rock in general, because I wanted to use an earth material, but I also wanted to make an outdoor piece. I was going to have the whole unit waterproofed, and then these large rocks worked into it, you know, cut

and broken and put together like that. It didn’t have the ephemeral beauty of the sand, which I still love. But it had a different kind of, let’s-deal-with-the-elements kind of feel, and of course the glass is thicker.

**RAIL** Did you ever develop the work I saw in your studio into an outdoor piece?

L. J. D. No, I actually moved on. But if I get the opportunity I would. This was one of those things where, okay, I know how to do this. Now. But I don’t want to spend the rest of my life honing it, you know?

**RAIL** When I visited we talked about the “Light Plains” series from the late sixties and I recall that Bob Rauschenberg’s name came up in that context. Maybe you’d like to talk about some of those early encounters with him and others during that time period. You mentioned for example staying at his home/studio in New York, almost as a crash pad.

L. J. D. We all lived there. [*Laughter*] Yeah, it was wonderful. My first experience I lived on Bleeker Street with Allen Ruppersberg, it was the first time I’d ever been in New York. I wasn’t there very long. This was 1970 and my second experience in New York. I was with Jan, my girlfriend at the time. We were supposed to stay at Mark di Suvero’s studio. To get into Mark’s studio you had to climb up a rope, not a rope ladder, but the kind of rope we had at a gym. And then swing over. It was like a hole in the floor on the second floor, swing over, and then you’re in. And there was just all this sculpture that he had made, but too big to get out of the building. It was also February in the middle of a blizzard. So it didn’t look like we could stay there very comfortably and we needed to find some other place.

Now, the only person I really knew that was in town was Jasper Johns because I had worked with him at Gemini. We did a lot of the lead reliefs and all the waxwork—all that kind of stuff—so I called him. That’s the kind of thing you do when you’re in your mid-twenties. But he was out of town, in South Carolina. I asked his secretary to try to get in touch and ask him whether he had any ideas about where I should stay, since I was kind of stuck. She reached him and said, “He’s going to be gone for a couple of weeks, but go to his office and just get the key to his studio,” which was on Essex and Houston. And so we did. I stayed there for about a month or so. It was quite an experience. And even after he came back we stayed another week or so and every day at five o’clock it was happy hour and all of his friends would show up for drinks. That meant Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, some architect I can’t remember, Jasper of course, and this guy who ran a museum in South Carolina that Jasper financed. One night we went to Max’s Kansas City for dinner and Rauschenberg was there. And I leaned over to Jan, who was with me, and I said, “You know, it’s time to leave New York. I want to go before Jasper mentions how long we’ve been there, he’s been so gracious.” And Rauschenberg leans over and says, “I’m moving to Florida, you could do me a favor and move into my place.” [*Laughter*] So we gathered everything up into a sheet and just dragged it down the street. We moved over to Bob’s and stayed there till I had my show. It was amazing.

**RAIL** Hard to think of people turning the keys to their loft or apartment or home over these days, I think.

L. J. D. Bob was unbelievably generous. Once when I was working at Gemini, he called me after he saw my work and came for a studio visit. He asked, “Would you want to do a collaboration? I’ll do some light pieces, you do some light pieces. I have this really great area that sits above LA.” We did these earth pieces where



I actually dug holes in the ground and laid very bright neon and argon pieces down into the holes below eye level. So you had these light lozenges that ran across at night.

**RAIL** How did you power them?

L. J. D. We ran wire in the trenches back to a generator. Bob got two klieg lights, for his piece, the old kind they used to use in Hollywood. They look kind of funny, with little spindly legs and arms and a big head. He put the two heads together about four inches apart as if they were having a conversation then turned them on full blast. The power coming out of the edges was incredible.

Anyway, Bob came over to the studio and I had all these neons, and I'm explaining all this electronic stuff you know, how the neon works and everything and he says, "Let's do another one, but this time with flashlights." [Laughs]

**RAIL** So is that the time when he saw the prototype for your "Light Plains" works?

L. J. D. Yeah. The original armature that holds the glass plates parallel to one another was made of wood. I was using it to work the bugs out. I started at tabletop size, and realized that I could get the kind of illusions I described. Actually, everything I do starts at tabletop size. When it doesn't work, it gives me more information so I can move on in a way that it does work. When it doesn't work, I go, "Oh, I see." It's the scientific method.

**RAIL** I think you said that Bob wanted to acquire one of the "Light Plains" pieces.

L. J. D. Oh, that's a funny story. When he first saw them he said, "I'd like to buy these pieces." Now look, this is Bob Rauschenberg. I couldn't believe it. Then he said, "but I have cats." [Laughs] Bob was great at one-liners.

**RAIL** Is that when he invited Ileana Sonnabend to come over to look at them?

L. J. D. What happened was, I'm ready for the next collaboration, right? I mean, it was in the late sixties and early seventies and Bob was one of the most famous guys then. He called me and said "you're probably wondering why we haven't gotten together. We could do another collaboration, but I want to do you one better. I'll introduce you to my dealer." Warhol was having a show at the Pasadena Art Museum and so the whole New York crowd was there. And Rosamund Felsen and Bob Rauschenberg brought Ileana Sonnabend to my studio.

Well let me explain one thing. What drew me into this tech-oriented way of expressing myself was the quality of the light. That was the main impetus for a lot of this work. I mean, I grew up with oscilloscopes and lasers and all that kind of stuff. And trying to develop a vocabulary in the early days, I kept going toward the light-oriented, high-voltage oriented light that is produced by these things, even from an oscilloscope to a laser. And then how to apply that without it being some kind of commercially cornball deal. And I found that you could strip it back to just the light and the color.

**RAIL** That's a direction I want to explore, because you're talking now about the light component of what's referred to as art created in the context of the light and space movement.

L. J. D. Yes, if light is directed in a certain way and contained in a certain way it can be directed to create an illusion.

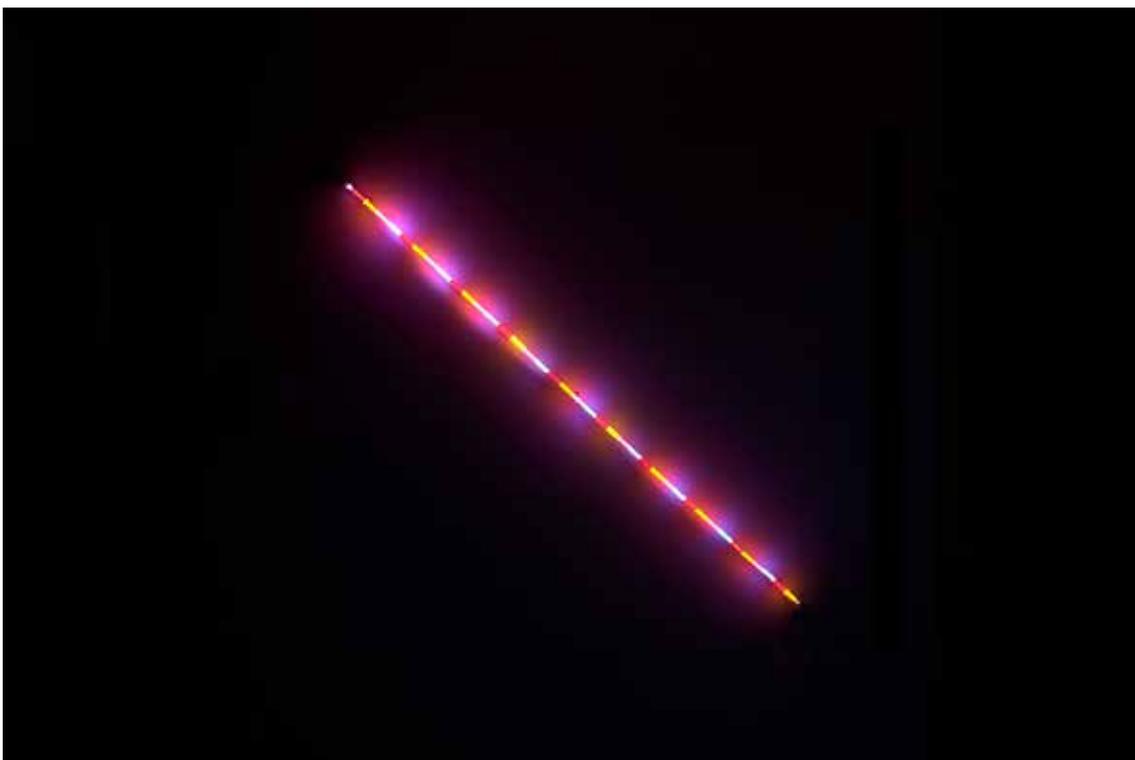
**RAIL** So is there a difference in that regard between the way in which you approach dealing with light as your vocabulary, your palette, your medium, and how other artists might? One impression I get is that for you light itself can be ephemeral. There are some obvious formal differences for example between your work and Dan Flavin's, but Flavin also would be looking at light effects, how we perceive them. And certainly that's true for Helen Pashgian. And yet another key aspect that you seem drawn to—when you talk about rock and sand, even glass—is solidity, which in a way is at the other extreme from light. So is it that somehow you've focused on creating a tension between material space and immaterial light? In other words, is there a tension there between your wanting to purify light while at the same time taking advantage of the materials that surround it—the hard materials?

L. J. D. The hard materials give it a sense of place. It's an environment that it's in. And I feel that whether it was volcanic rock or sand, that the work is set into what you might consider a contemporary landscape. I'm not thinking about making a picture or anything like that,

Laddie John Dill, *Light Plains*, Aspen, 2021. Sand, glass, neon and wood, Dimensions Variable. Courtesy the artist.



Laddie John Dill, *Early Child's Play*, 1970. Argon and mercury gas, electrodes, transformer and neon wiring. 80 x 3/4 in. Courtesy the artist.



because the materials do all the work. The arrangement and the sense of place that it has is very important.

**RAIL** That's helpful because it does remind me of something that Donald Judd said, where he insisted that the space surrounding his work was crucial to it. And that as much thought went into the space around it as the piece itself. Are you also saying something like that?

L. J. D. Yes. And I'm always very aware of the architecture around a work, what's beyond just the rock or the sand. I want it to be in an environment that is conducive to it. I can tell, because I've been doing this for so long, if it's gonna work or not in that space.

**RAIL** You might remember that you looked at different parts of my office space, my warehouse, and we lit (as it were) on a certain wall. I had to deinstall a couple of things that were on that wall in order to give you a clear space. And we agreed—or rather you agreed, since it's really your call—that that was a good place for it.

L. J. D. Correct.

**RAIL** But once you installed the piece, do you remember how you reacted to a piece that was some yards past it in a corner?

L. J. D. It was a Dan Flavin piece.

**RAIL** And do you remember what you said?

L. J. D. No.

**RAIL** It was something to the effect of, "I really love that piece of Dan's. But the light from Dan's piece interferes, or eclipses, or is at least in tension with the delicacy of the light as reflected via the argon tube beneath the glass plates of my piece." And you asked me if I could move it. And so I moved Dan Flavin's piece to another room in order to enhance the space around yours. But you were right. It made all the difference.

L. J. D. Well, actually I thought Dan's piece ended up looking better where you moved it because of the size of the room and the relationship to his piece.

**RAIL** You were right about that also! Maybe you also remember what you said about the now vacant corner, where Flavin's piece used to be?

L. J. D. Oh yeah! "I have just the piece that could go there!"

**RAIL** Once again you were right. Why don't you describe the piece that replaced Flavin in that corner? Because I think the interrelationship with the sand piece is important.

L. J. D. It's made of black basalt.

**RAIL** And it's called *Inverted Ziggurat*, which is its form.

L. J. D. Yes, for lack of a better title. But there's a connection with the two pieces in a sense. The black one uses earth materials like the sand piece does but in a completely different way, in a much more formal way, you could see the range on it. You brought up an interesting thing, though. On those pieces, if I did anything with the glass and the sand or the glass and the basalt—it's all specific to the area. In other words, you know, the dark areas in the sand piece. That's all local stuff. I try to use all the materials that are indigenous to the area, like the basalt. When I did the big sand piece in Minneapolis at the Walker, it had a kind of greenish feel to it. Because the local sand has a low-grade jade oxide in it. And so it's not like jade. But it had that kind of feeling because it's all indigenous to that area. I mean, I could have—if we had a logistics problem—I could have gotten everything together and built it in your warehouse. In the early days I used to do that.

**RAIL** So in other words, build the armature onsite?

L. J. D. I could build it onsite. Yes.

**RAIL** Okay. Well, I'm just saying, you know, everything's evanescent in one sense. Suppose the lights burn out, or the gas leaks out. What do people do? What would a museum do?

L. J. D. Oh we've done that. That's happened. Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena has an early light piece—it's about fifteen feet long. And it was broken. Not while it was on display, but in the box. Someone put it in wrong. So we just welded it back together and then you have to pump fresh gas into it and everything.

It's an interesting story about the Pasadena Art Museum at Norton Simon. They were so security oriented—I worked in this hot shop over in this crummy part of LA—and so they had to send over an art mover with a piece in it and two security guards that came in and watched over the rest of the place while I welded this thing back together, and then pumped it with the gas. It's an easy thing to do. And you know, in fact, neon, and all those gasses have made a real resurgence lately. They found out because it lasts forever, it's "green" so it's okay. What was becoming really difficult at a certain point was finding the right glass for the tubes. Like you have some tubes that are early that have uranium in them. I mean, it's about as radioactive as a clock radio, but still some of the glass has some uranium.

**RAIL** I don't think that was disclosed to me when I bought one.



L. J. D. No, it probably wasn't. I forgot about that. But I mean, it doesn't give off radiation. You're still here. Anyway, glass was becoming a real challenge to get in. I had certain criteria for color that I want, that I still have. But it's kind of picked up a little bit.

**RAIL** Let's go back to the architecture question. The show that you did at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples. I'm not sure how that came about. It struck me as one of the most unusual installations I think anyone's done.

L. J. D. The Archaeological Museum houses all the Roman sculptures from Pompeii—the bronze sculptures—it's all there. It's a gigantic place. And they have a new, young curator and also a young director. So he wanted to introduce contemporary art into this museum, which is ancient. The first person he asked was Damien Hirst, and I think I was next. There might have been another artist between us. But they gave me the entire run of the museum. My idea was to juxtapose something out of the twentieth century against these things from the first century. I considered it a group show where I was the youngest artist for a change. *[Laughter]*

Each room was a challenge, and I approached them differently. I think the most successful effort was the piece or room when you walk into the entrance of the museum. There was a large floor piece of sand and light—it was all indigenous too. And then I included basalt. After all, Vesuvius is right there.

**RAIL** I mean, you really are going to about as distant a juxtaposition as you were saying as you could

both art historically—you could get earlier works—but we're still dealing with ancient works, and truly contemporary technology. So beyond the obvious casting of light, suffused colors, on the cold white marble, for example, what did you see in the physical juxtaposition? Because you had to determine how close a given "Light Sentence," for example, would be to a particular sculpture. And how it would sit in relationship to it. More than the reflection of the lights. What was it that resonated? What energy was created, if you could say it that way, between the ancient stone and the contemporary light?

L. J. D. Okay, that's a good question. I have to go back a little bit. I used to have trouble—I still do—titling works. I remember asking Bob Rauschenberg, I said, "You always have these great one-liner titles, how do you figure it out?" He said, "For the most part, I try to find a title that has nothing to do with the image. And when you look at that image, your brain makes this connection, giving the illusion of it being universal. Because you pick up all these images that don't even exist, try to make the connection with your brain of the two elements."

**RAIL** Wow.

L. J. D. I never forgot that. And actually, Bob referred to it as a trick. *[Laughter]* "The mind makes the connection." And of course, he finished it with, "or it doesn't."

**RAIL** That's funny. So I take it you were happy with the installation?

L. J. D. Yes, I was. I was dumbfounded by it at first. And then just worked it through, you know, put your head down and get to work.

**RAIL** But as you say, you really are trying to be sensitive to the space. And I think that that shows in the way the works get installed and the way they interact. So it makes me wonder, while there you were dealing with stand-alone 3-D works, wouldn't it be a lot more difficult to have your pieces installed in juxtaposition with paintings? Or would it? I mean suppose you're invited to the Louvre or something?

L. J. D. I'd accept. *[Laughter]*

**RAIL** Okay, fair enough.

L. J. D. But, the other thing about it is, well, Mr. Hirst's installation was like camouflage in a sense. I mean, you would notice one in a group of torsos or something like that. Mine being light, I just went in the opposite direction. So you look down this hall. It's about one hundred yards long. And here's a light piece down at the other end. It's very visible. So it creates a whole environment.

**RAIL** It actually sounds very theatrical. Have you ever done any set designs?

L. J. D. I did sets for local things. Long Beach Opera has an amazing opera house. And I did Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice* there and a corresponding show with the pieces at Cal State in Long Beach.

**RAIL** But with light installations of what sorts?

Laddie John Dill, *Magma*, 1971. Argon and mercury gas, electrodes, transformer and neon wire. Installation image of *Magma*, 1971, at the Smart Museum of Art (Chicago, IL) exhibition *Monochrome Multitudes* (September 22, 2022 - January 8, 2023)



Dill: Mostly blue, cobalt, and sand, which just emulated water. It looked like water from the stage. They actually worked within the piece itself. So it was kind of cool. Then I collaborated with an actor by the name of Harris Yulin.

**RAIL** I think of him mostly from westerns.

L. J. D. Yes, westerns. He was always the judge. Anyway, he asked me if I would design a few sets for a small theater that he was running in Hollywood. So I did about four or five plays for him. I had actually studied filmmaking and set design at Chouinard for a while. I was on a full scholarship so I could study whatever.

**RAIL** Thinking about theater spaces, museum spaces, neither is exactly what you might refer to as a “sacred space,” like a church or a synagogue or a mosque. At the same time, people sometimes think about museums as though they are a temple to art. But have you ever thought of what it would be like to intervene as it were, or interact with a classically sacred space in that sense, like a chapel?

L. J. D. In fact I did a chapel in southern Italy. And they had frescoes on the wall. So you couldn’t hang anything. It’s all suspended from the ceiling. That wasn’t a permanent installation but I did do a synagogue installation that’s permanent. I made an ark to hold the Torah for a huge synagogue in Irvine, California. And of course it’s lit. But not with neon. It’s glass and metal. And ground minerals and oxides. It’s predominantly blue, cobalt oxide, red iron oxide, and then the structure is raw aluminum. I even spoke at a service and explained the work.

**RAIL** I don’t know what else to say other than that’s totally cool. I’d like to make sure we cover the show opening in New York in December.

L. J. D. It’s at Malin Gallery in Chelsea, curated by Anna Valverde. It’ll be like a survey show dedicated to my “Light and Sand” series. There will be a huge work installed on the lower level; similar to the piece I made for *Pacific Standard Time*. Upstairs there will be drawings that are effectively studies for the “Light and Sand” work below. Outside of a group show at LACMA in 2015, I have never exhibited drawings before. But there is something I want to say.

**RAIL** Go ahead.

L. J. D. A lot of my influences—really, I was lucky, I was very young to get started. And I mean, it is a serious career I’ve had. I got information from some of the wisest people in the art world at that time. So I just want to say how grateful I am for that.

**RAIL** I can’t wait to see the show. And I think it will be very interesting for people to see, keeping in mind the context also of other artists’ focus on existing or purpose-built sacred spaces. There is Ellsworth Kelly’s chapel for example. So there’s a history or even tradition involved. Obviously, there’s Matisse. But then you just wind the clock back to the Renaissance and spaces like the Pazzi chapel. Some of the most elevated and elevating installations, architectural designs, whether they have sculptures or paintings in them or not, are the intimate chapels that you find all over Rome and Florence. So I think you’re working in a really interesting tradition.

L. J. D. What else can I say? I have taught almost consistently since 1971. I was the youngest to teach at UC Irvine. I was twenty-six. I taught sculpture, and it scared the shit out of me, I wanted to teach painting. I was always afraid the students were going to cut their hands off, but it was an interesting group of people. Chris Burden was a student. Then I moved to UCLA in 1972 and taught there for fifteen years and literally walked away from tenure because I was so into the work that I didn’t want to spend all my time on curriculum and budgets. There are mornings when I wake up I go, “What did I do that for?” But for the most part, I’m very happy I did that. I work better on the edge. And then I started a school right after that with Peter Alexander and Alexis Smith, as well as Frank Gehry. And we ended up turning out a few artists who are still working today. The school cost two hundred dollars a year. And if you got in you were given a pile of plywood and some two by fours, and you had to build your own studio in this huge warehouse that we got for one hundred sixty four dollars a month.

You know, basically what I was trying to say is, I wish they would put more money into arts education. It was available when I was there, when I was young, and it’s not available now. My grandchild starts kindergarten today. But she’s also in training at my studio. She is going to be the one fixing the lightbulbs when I’m gone.

**RAIL** Well in the meantime, we’ll certainly all enjoy experiencing both the light and the spaces together. Thank you so much for your time, work, insights, and all these gem-like stories.

Michael Straus is a contributing writer for the *Brooklyn Rail*, a member of its Advisory board, and Chairman of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.