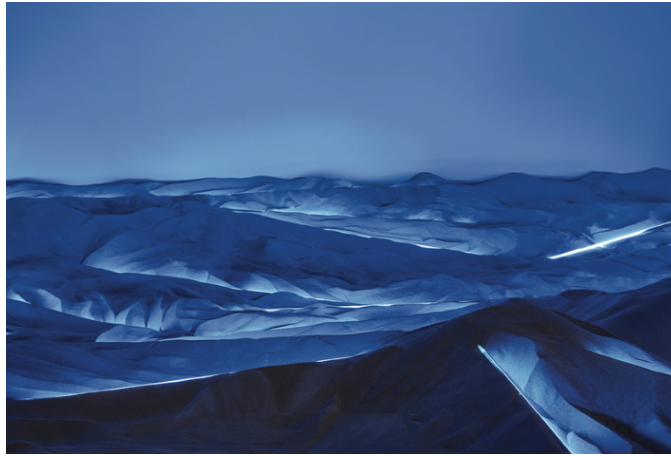


ARTFORUM

March 1, 2023
By Donald Kuspit

Laddie John Dill



Laddie John Dill, *EST*, 2022, argon and mercury gas, sand, electrodes, transformer, and neon wiring, dimensions variable. From the series "Silica Landscapes," 1970–.

In 1704, Sir Isaac Newton invented the color wheel, which featured red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. When rotated, the hues fade to white, collapsing the spectrum into pure lumen. This diagrammatic rainbow has had a long if eccentric life, as Robert Delaunay's "Circular Form," or "Disc," pictures of 1913 indicate. In Delaunay's hands, the thing becomes a solar emblem; more mystical in import than scientifically precise.

In 1971, California artist Laddie John Dill exhibited the first works from his "Light Sentences," 1969–, an ongoing series of straight and illuminated glass tubes filled with sundry gases—argon, mercury, neon—featuring discrete sections in different hues. The sculptures, hung either vertically or horizontally, offer a more ascetic take on Newton's invention. Similar to Delaunay's images, they radiate a kind of spiritual quality, but one that is streamlined, constrained. Each color functions like a word, perhaps from some enigmatic experimental tongue, such as Esperanto. In this language, colors and forms have multiple meanings, although Dill's "communiqués" here seem to have none, suggesting they are empty signifiers. For instance, *Levee*, 2022, is more than nine feet long and contains five sections, or "words": The longest one, in teal, sits in the middle of the piece and is flanked by two others, one in black and one in white; the central component is the length of a single black-and-white pair. The mathematical precision of this composition seems more to the point of the work than anything else, inviting one to view it as an example of systemic art. The repetitive arrangement of the forms/words is perhaps *Levee*'s most significant aspect, whatever one may read into it.

The sculpture's title connects it to nature, the misleading association falsifying the piece, for a levee, often made of earth, is built to prevent the overflow of a river. Dill's object is an elegantly purposeless and mechanical device, an example of what historian Lewis Mumford called "technological exhibitionism"—less dramatic than Jean Tinguely's self-annihilating contraption *Homage to New York*, 1960, which for Mumford was exemplary. *Levee* is somehow more insidious, as it quietly suggests the inevitable takeover of art by technology, and thus art's eventual depersonalization. The artist's show here was called "Intimate Light," but there was nothing cozy about it. His use of color lacks the psychological depth it had for Wassily Kandinsky—Dill's palette is nothing more than physical presence, symptomatic of what the Russian painter called the materialistic attitude prevalent in modernity.

The wonderful *EST*, 2022—one of Dill's sculptures from the ongoing "Silica Landscapes" series, begun in 1970—is of a more ecstatic character and calls to mind the deep blue sea. It reads as an abstract reprise of nature, ambiguously gestural and geometrical, less constructive and more spontaneous than the "Light Sentences." In this piece, rigidity and reserve have been replaced by fluidity and verve. The "Light Sentences" might be a tribute to Dill's stepfather, "a scientist and mathematician who studied the properties of lenses and developed early versions of 'night vision' technologies,"

according to a press release from Dill's 2022 show at Malin Gallery, "Light Is the Object." But *EST* suggests that the artist has gone beyond the paterfamilias, finding a form of sublimity in the outside world that he could not locate in machines, which are after all dead, however much of one's existence has been invested in creating them.

Contained Radiance, 2021, another "Light Sentence," felt like a swan song—its weak luminescence fades in and out, as if the object were in the throes of death. This funereal piece could be a memento mori to the "Light Sentences" and could even be Dill's way of recognizing his own finitude (the artist was born in 1943). Perhaps this sculpture signifies Dill's life force, still visible and intact, holding its own in defiance of encroaching death and all-consuming lightlessness. Even in the most cold-blooded and meticulously crafted mechanical art, there is no escape from mortal truth.

MALIN GALLERY
515 West 29th Street