



Laddie John Dill: *Light Is The Object*

Curated by Anna Hygelund

MALIN GALLERY - Aspen

601 East Hyman Avenue, Aspen, CO

6 January - 20 February, 2022

Perception is the medium itself. Non-specific objects are a means to an end, the end being the perceptual experience.

-Gisela Colón

I'm like a boy with a butterfly net, except my net is my art and the butterfly that I am after is light.

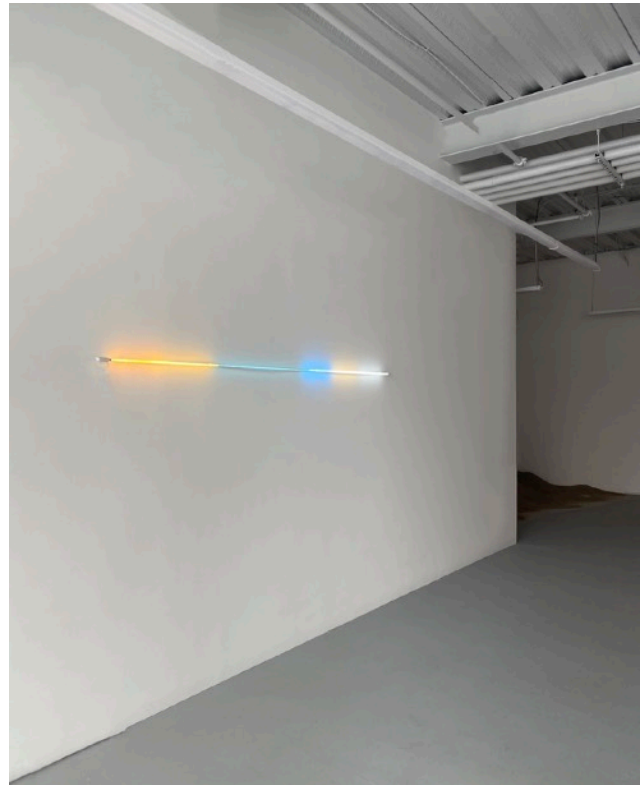
- Laddie John Dill

Malin Gallery - Aspen is proud to present ***Light Is The Object*** - an exhibition of sculptures and installation work by the renowned Light & Space artist Laddie John Dill. The exhibition features eight examples of the artist's on-going *Light Sentence* series along with a site specific *Light Plains* installation and a large-scale *Light Catcher* sculpture. *Light Is the Object* is the artist's first exhibition with the gallery.

In the late 1960s, Laddie John Dill emerged as one of the key progenitors of the West Coast Light and Space movement in Los Angeles along with a number of other loosely-affiliated artists including James Turrell, Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, Mary Corse, De Wain Valentine, Ron Cooper, John McCracken and Helen Pashgian. Although each artist developed a singular approach, they shared a key set of influences associated with the Southern California environs. The term "Light and Space" was inspired by a 1971 exhibition at the UCLA University Art

Gallery entitled *Transparency, Light, Space: Four Artists* featuring Laddie John Dill along with Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin and Craig Kaufmann.

Beyond the environmental and cultural characteristics of the Southern California milieu, an additional key influence on the Light and Space artists was the industrial technologies that flourished between the 1950s and 1970s in Southern California, particularly those associated with the Aviation and Aerospace Industries. These industries were a fertile source for new technology for the Light and Space artists, who experimented extensively with novel materials and industrial technologies.



Laddie John Dill, *Canal*, 1975

The Light and Space movement was anchored by multiple poles: the natural environment and light of Southern California; groundbreaking experiments in materiality and an abiding interest in the physiological and psychological aspects of perception. The Light and Space artists employed novel techniques to produce art that engaged the fundamental perceptual processes of the viewer - particularly as regards the sensory and psychological impact of light. As Malcolm Morano has noted:

Ethereal and atmospheric...the experiences of the Light and Space movement present a striking paradox to the viewer, one that requires active, and often multi-sensory, participation...There is no single defining aesthetic...but instead a preoccupation with the viewer's perception and participation.

Laddie John Dill grew up in Malibu, California. As an avid surfer, his immersion in an environment of light, water and sand were abiding influences. Concurrently, Dill gained deep experience in science and technology and an engagement with the study of light from an early age. Dill's stepfather was a scientist and mathematician who studied the properties of lenses and developed early versions of "night vision" technologies. Lasers were constantly present in the house, and Dill also developed an interest in the lighting aspects of the film arts and stage

design. To this day, Dill considers his singular type of creative expression to be grounded in empirical investigation involving deep analysis of materials and scientific experimentation with light, electrified gases and organic materials.

After graduating from Chouinard Art Institute in 1968, Dill served as a printing apprentice at the technically innovative artist's workshop and publisher G.E.L. Gemini, where he collaborated with artistic luminaries from both the east and west coasts, including Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns. While working at Rio Score's commercial sign shop in Los Angeles, Dill learned how to weld glass tubes and coat their interiors with fluorescent emulsions to create different various effects using electrified gases

Among the artists he met through working at Gemini G.E.L., Dill became particularly close to Robert Rauschenberg. The two artists staged a joint exhibition in 1970 entitled *The Light Show*. Visiting Dill's studio, Rauschenberg was intrigued by an early version of one of Dill's *Light Plains* installations composed of argon and neon tubes and roughly seven thousand pounds of sand. Rauschenberg brought the influential gallerist Ileana Sonnabend to see this work - a meeting which led to solo exhibitions for Dill at the famed Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in New York in 1971 and 1972, making Dill the first Light and Space artist to exhibit on the East Coast. At the Sonnabend Gallery exhibition, Dill showed another *Light Plains* sculpture fashioned from mounds of sand with partially buried panes of glass, which were illuminated from below by argon and neon light.

Composed of sand, glass and argon and neon lights, the *Light Plains* installations are often site-specific works. Dill typically creates these works from sand, with argon or neon lights submerged under the sand with glass panes emerging. The light from the submerged light tubes serves to illuminate the perimeters of the glass panes in an ethereal manner. The light panes create reflective, fractured casts of light, which are variously illuminated in the other panes of glass.

The *Light Plains* works yield an enigmatic atmosphere through an endlessly compelling interplay of earth,

I am attracted to the quality of contained light, which I refer to as "contained radiance" in my work. Light Catchers, Light Plains, Light Sentenced...these series all speak to my life-long interest in capturing light - in "containing radiance."

-Laddie John Dill, 2022

light, and glass. Since showing his first *Light Plains* sculpture to Ileana Sonnabend in 1969, Dill has created unique, often site-specific *Light Plains* works around the world. For each work, Dill uses local materials and arranges the glass planes and other materials to suit the space and local environment. In describing Dill's alchemical incorporation of sand, glass and neon or argon lights, Malcolm Morano has commented that the *Lights Plains* sculptures "create a fiber optic effect that appears as though it has been exhumed from the earth's core." For the current exhibition, Dill created *Lights Plains / Aspen* (2021) on-site in the gallery.



Laddie John Dill, *Lights Plains / Aspen*, 2020

Dill produced his first *Light Sentence* sculpture in 1970 and has continued producing the series over the course of five decades. Created from custom blown glass forms that are lined with fluorescent emulsion and infused with electrified gases, Dill's *Light Sentence* sculptures are hand-blown, straight glass tubes of varying lengths that emit sequences of colored and clear light. Although Dill considers the *Light Sentence* series to be an ongoing investigation into the interaction of light, color, gas and electric charges, viewers often see the works as ethereal or otherworldly. *New York Times* art critic Ken Johnson has characterized the *Light Sentences* as follows:

They glow beautifully like strings of illuminated beads. Mr. Dill liken(s) the segments of color to words grouped in phrases and sentences. This suggests that light itself could be a transcendental language.

The current exhibition includes *Light Sentences* created between 1969 and 2010 and includes examples that were first shown at Ileana Sonnabend Gallery in 1971.

The final work in *Light Is The Object* is one of Dill's massive, rarely exhibited *Light Catcher* sculptures. Beginning in the early 2000s, Dill began to create sculptures fashioned from aircraft aluminum - a material that Dill became interested in during the height of the Southern California aerospace industry in the 1960s and 1970s. The surface is brushed and burnished in varying directions, evoking variously the feathers of a bird, sweeping brushstrokes, leaves or sand dunes. The texture of the surface yields intricate light reflections, which shift as sunlight moves across the surface during the course of the day. The elegant, variegated surface of the *Light Catcher* is a dynamic plane that reflects and transmits light to the viewer in different ways depending on perspective and light conditions.

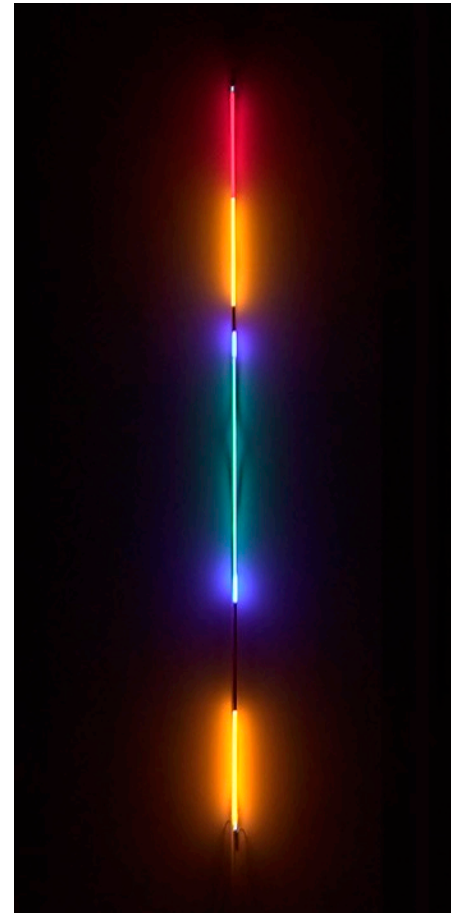


Laddie John Dill, *Light Catcher*, 2018

On a fundamental level, the common feature of art associated with the Light and Space movement was an engagement with light: its mutable physical qualities; its interaction with the natural environment; and, most importantly, the emotional, experiential, visual and neuro-cognitive effects of light on the viewer. The Light and Space artists produced art that was increasingly dematerialized. The physical object receded in importance; the objects were simply means of creating the phenomena of light and space to be experienced by the viewer. Viewers who engaged the works tended to be moved by the ethereal, even transcendental-seeming aspects of light. The art-historical concept of the sublime was often evoked in describing this new type of art, even though the sensory effect was diffuse - depending on the ethereal qualities of light and atmosphere rather than a specific art object. As Dill's colleague Helen Pashgian asserted when describing her work, "The light *is* the object," Similarly, fellow Light and Space artist James Turrell stated:

My work has no object, no image and no focus. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at?

You are looking at you looking. What is important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought.



Laddie John Dill, *Light Conditions of Northern New Mexico in Late Summer*, 1975

In a sense, Light and Space work distills the engagement of the viewer with light to a fundamental, almost pure essence. Whereas the depiction and representation of light have been key factors throughout the course of Art History, Light and Space works deny the necessity of using light as a means to portray or illuminate other subject matter. Shorn of religious or ideological implications, the Light and Space movement claimed the centrality of light itself - or more precisely the viewer's perceptual engagement with light - within the aesthetic experience. The viewer's experience of a Light and Space work is thus a profound exercise in the phenomenology of perception. Given the primacy of the unique and specific

relationship of a viewer to a Light and Space artwork at any given time, the genre has been characterized as a “conditional art.” Artist and critic Peter Plagens has described the experience of viewing Light and Space work as a “refined environmental perceptualism.”

Critics and viewers have found Immanuel Kant’s notion of the transcendental aesthetic sublime to be an apt frame work for articulating their response to Light and Space art:

The concept of The Sublime resonates within the all-encompassing aesthetic experience of a Light and Space installation.

Feelings of timelessness permeate the multi-sensory event, overwhelming and nearly transcendental, evoking the definition offered by German philosopher Emmanuel Kant, who describes the sublime as “found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it.”

Therefore, the sublimity of the the Light and Space experience...is the ethereal phenomenon of light itself.

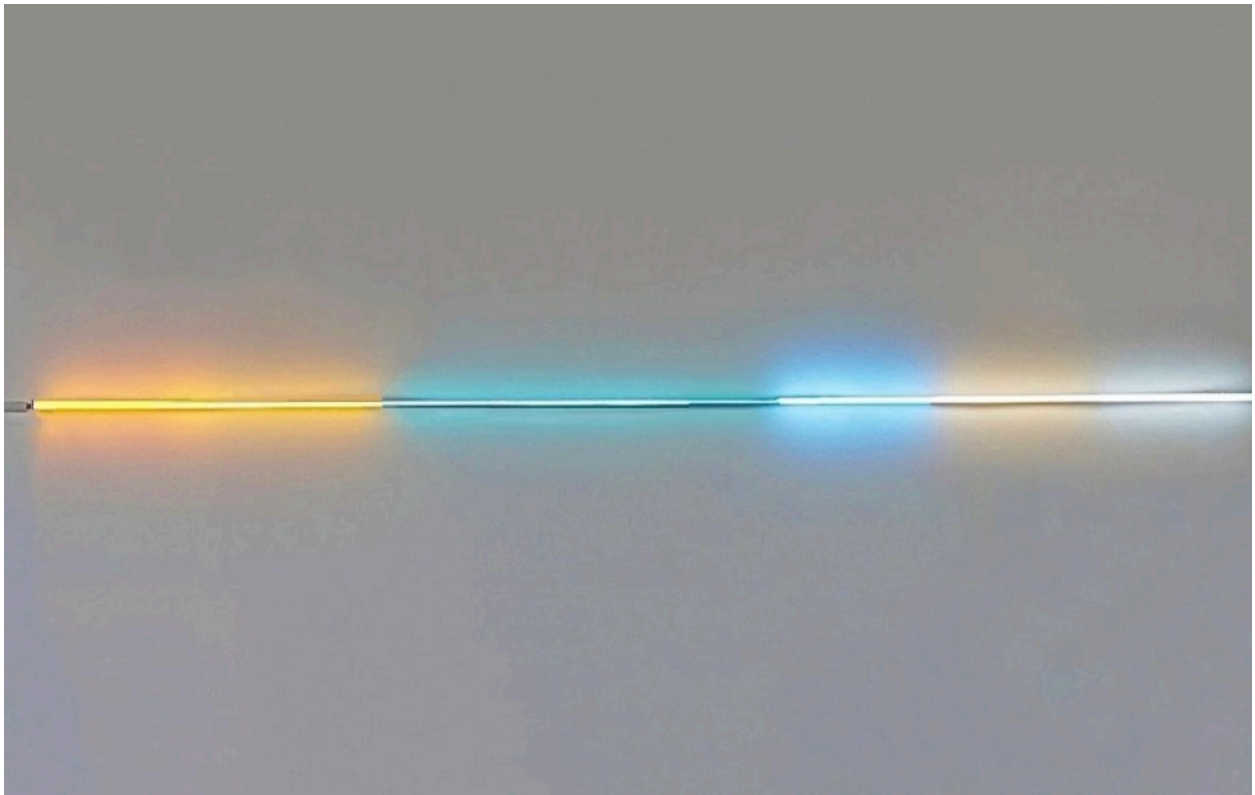


Laddie John Dill: *Light Is The Object* - Installation View, Malin Gallery, 2022

As Kant described in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1754):

The sublime...is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it...and yet it is also thought of as a totality.

Limitless and unknowable, we can only imagine [the sublime] in glimmers, but it fills us with awe.



Laddie John Dill, *Canal*, 1975

Laddie John Dill: *The Light Is the Object*, curated by Anna Hygelund, is on view at 601 East Hyman Avenue in Aspen, CO through February 20.

Biography

Laddie John Dill (b. 1943) grew up in Malibu Ca.. After graduating from Chouinard Art Institute in 1968, Dill became a printing apprentice and worked closely with established artists, like Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Jasper Johns before beginning his own prototypical work of the Light and Space genre.

Dill has enjoyed solo exhibitions at Sonnabend Gallery (NY); James Corcoran Gallery (LA); Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (CA); Long Beach Museum of Art (CA); Sun Gallery (Seoul); Di Donato (Napoli); Whitestone Gallery (Taipei); Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, (Naples); and Wiesbaden Gallery (Germany). He has participated in group exhibitions at institutions including Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Walker Art Center (MN); Pasadena Art Museum (CA); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (CA); Rose Art Museum (MA); Otis Art Institute (CA); Seattle Art Museum (CA); Albright-Knox Art Gallery (NY); Corcoran Gallery of Art (DC); Museum of Contemporary Art (Sao Paulo); Contemporary Art Museum (TX); Museum of Contemporary Art (CA); Pace Gallery (NY); David Zwirner Gallery (NY); Hammer Museum (CA) and Hauser & Wirth Gallery (CA).

Laddie John Dill's work is in the permanent collections of national and international institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (NY); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (CA); Museum of Contemporary Art (CA); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (CA); High Museum (GA); Phillips Collection (DC); Chicago Art Institute (IL); Smithsonian (DC); Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (Denmark); Pio Monte della Misericordia (Italy); Museum of Contemporary Art - San Diego (CA) and Museo Jumex (Mexico). He lives in Malibu and maintains a daily studio practice in Los Angeles.





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