

MALIN GALLERY



Laddie John Dill

Intimate Light

Curated by Anna Valverde

December 6, 2022 - February 18, 2023

Exhibition essay by Dr. Matthew Simms

Intimate Light includes new work by veteran Light and Space artist, Laddie John Dill. Included are *Levee*, a six-part light sentence, suspended near the gallery entrance; *EST*, a sand and light installation located downstairs; and a group of six graphite and charcoal drawings executed as studies for the installation. As a group, the works capture well a theme that has run through Dill's art since his beginnings as an artist – namely, the physicality, indeed, the intimacy of light.

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Dill studied painting at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, but after graduation gave up painting and began to experiment with what he called light systems. To make his first modular, multi-colored light sentences, Dill collaborated with a professional glass blower in the San Fernando Valley, who also helped him pump the finished tubes with rare gasses – argon, mercury, neon, helium, and xenon. Sentences in name only, the staccato light bars addressed the viewer on a somatic level, inviting sensory discrimination between hues, intensities, and tactile qualities of light. Once they had been attached to the walls of his Venice Beach studio, and connected to electricity, the sentences became humming, horizontal or vertical arrays of variously subtle or jarring color concatenations. Before long, however, another altogether unexpected contrast impressed itself upon the artist. While the light emerging from the tubes came across as vivid, concentrated, glassy, and wet; the same light, splashing and spreading on the stucco wall, felt soft, diffused, coarse, and dry. Can light be variously wet or dry? Slick or coarse? Such questions led Dill to experiment with attaching the light sentences, by now growing in number and variation, on increasingly rutted and pitted walls, all in an effort to intensify the contrast between the light source, on one hand and emitted light, as it splashed across neighboring surfaces, on the other. As he told Merle Schipper, “I began mounting them on white brick walls, stucco walls, or whatever irregular wall surfaces were available.” All the while, Dill was learning about the physicality of light, about how light becomes substance through contact with physical things. The wall investigations issued rather quickly into floor explorations. “I wanted to increase the irregularity of the surfaces,” said Dill, “so I began working on the floor and eventually

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came to use sand.”¹ Dill hauled the sand into his studio, one sack at a time, and poured, shoveled, and swept it into dune-like formations. Sand was appealing because it was evenly-textured, malleable, and light absorbent. The light sentences looked different when laid flat across sand piles. After a few experiments, however, Dill decided that their multiple color combinations, while successful on the wall, introduced too much complexity on the ground. So, he returned them to the wall and adopted for the floor pieces a more restrained and concentrated chromatism in the form of long monochromatic tubes of red, blue, and a few other hues.

EST, acronym for “Eastern Standard Time,” is Dill’s most recent example of this sand and light format, which he now refers to as silica lightscapes.² The piece measures roughly 38 by 35 feet and required 162 eighty-pound bags of silica sand. The sand is in two shades, one slightly darker than the other, the darker sand laid down first and the lighter sand poured on top. Dill also brought in 44 glass tubes, coated with Royal Florescent Blue and pumped with argon and mercury gasses, which he arranged in V formations, sometimes partially buried or sliding into mini ravines, sometimes flush with sandy ridgelines, and sometimes projecting up above hillocks of sand. Dill likes to keep ambient illumination to a minimum, favoring what he terms “twilight,” which enhances raking contrasts and maximizes the mood of dramatic tenebrism. The tubes look a bit like scattered circumflexes, or a volley of radioactive arrows fallen from the sky. Color from the tubes pours or cascades into sandy pockets, vibrating there like

¹ Merle Schipper, “Interview with Laddie John Dill, March 1980,” in Laddie John Dill: *An Installation*. Exh. cat. (Dominguez Hills, CA: University Art Gallery, California State University Dominguez Hills, 1980), unpag. All quotes, unless otherwise cited, are from this unpaginated interview.

² *EST* is a pendant to *PST*, or “Pacific Standard Time,” a light and sand piece that Dill installed in 2011 in downtown Los Angeles as part of the Getty-sponsored Pacific Standard Time series of exhibitions and projects.

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bioluminescent pools. Or, to use Dill's analogy, the spreading light appears to stain the sand like pigment on canvas. He elaborated on this analogy in his conversation with Schipper:

The light has the same function as staining. Here you see the source, that is, the tube, but then the light that is reflecting on the sand saturates it in much the same way as staining a canvas. It penetrates the sand, and by manipulating the sand in certain ways you can play different fields of these stained colors against one another, just by simply blocking out one light with a mound of sand and allowing the light to fall down the side.

The sand, he adds, drawing the analogy to a conclusion, "basically becomes a shaped canvas and the light becomes a pigment." We think of Helen Frankenthaler, who initiated the method of staining raw cotton duck in the 1950s; or Morris Louis, whose so-called "Veils" carried on from Frankenthaler, but which managed to achieve a sooty, granular quality that was new. What might be called the granularity of color is also on display in *EST*. As Dill noted, making such sand installations was a compositional endeavor, during which he would move sand relative to light, variously blocking or catching color. "I can make shapes with it, mound it – it's like a dry liquid with a unique relationship to gravity."

Dill was not the first artist to experiment with sand as a medium. Navajo artists have long known the value of sand as a narrative vehicle and Tibetan Buddhist monks

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have also used sand to create mandalas. Pablo Picasso and André Masson both introduced beach sand into oil paintings for added texture. Closer to home, in Southern California, Connie Zehr exhibited temporary floorbound installations of sand at about the same time as Dill. Zehr's work generally leaned in the direction of symbolic meanings and was loosely aligned with the Los Angeles feminist art movement. For his part, Dill belonged to a dialogue about light, space, and energy that was developing among artists including Robert Irwin, Douglas Wheeler, and Mary Corse. Dill's debut took place at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York, in 1971, where he showed light sentences, and two distinct sand installations. One consisted of panes of glass shoved deep into piles of sand, where they came into contact with concealed, bright neon tubes, resulting in light piping up and along the leading edges of the glass. The successive panes of glass had the effect of orienting attention toward the vertical elevation of light, as it rose up from buried depths to glow like pinstripes along the outer contours of the precisely-cut glass sheets. The second sand installation was an early, small-scale silica lightscape with only five tubes scattered across or partially buried in sand mounds. For this second installation, emphasis was on the horizontal spread of sand and light, both in terms of the prone tubes and the stains of spreading color. In an exposé for *Time*, Robert Hughes noted that the fallen light tubes "lie on the surface of the sand, spilling their unnatural polychrome radiance across its furrows and ridges so that the image hovers between landscape and abstraction."³ Or, as Grace Glueck, put it, reviewing the show for the *New York Times*: "a pile of sand that half buries, half reveals five colored

³ Robert Hughes, "View from the Coast," *Time Magazine* (Feb. 1, 1971), 58.

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argon tubes – the whole evoking, as one observer suggested, California desert highways seen from the air at night.”⁴

Like this early, untitled work, *EST* summons both imaginative and sensory involvement. The installation makes good use of the gallery walls, for example, where the glow of blue light creates the impression of cool moonlight, or perhaps the feel of distant city lights bleaching the horizon, as if one was indeed contemplating a desert landscape in the vicinity of a metropolis “seen from the air at night.” But with one proviso: it is not the sand that has suddenly become a miniature landscape before our eyes, but us, the viewers, who have shrunk in our perceptual imaginations to the size of a fly, astonishingly suspended somewhere high above a vast and barren world. An analogous experience, incidentally, can be had before Dill’s drawings, six of which hang in the exhibition. All the same size, all from the same sketchbook, all made in the leadup to the show – the drawings are at once studies for the temporary installation and stand-alone investigations of the texture of light and shadow in a parallel medium. The rag paper takes bites out of the charcoal and graphite that Dill drags across its surface, breaking it up and diffusing it in ways similar to how light spread on his studio walls or how it suffused into sand pockets. Dill has worked flat, rubbing dark matter against light, unsullied paper surfaces, returning in places with his eraser, effacing certain marks, softening others, and producing in the process an illusion of the luster of light, of its shine. The six views adopt a similarly diagonal, downward orientation, as if scanning the terrain in a sequence of closeups. But these closeups can also become distanced views. Like the installation for which they are studies, these drawings are both material

⁴ Grace Glueck, “Black Artist Shows in Whitney Lobby,” *New York Times* (March 20, 1971), 25.

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studies, inviting absorption in surface qualities, and invitations to imaginary fantasies of floating high above abstract landscapes.

“A color is never merely a color but the color of a certain object,” observed Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “and the blue of a carpet would never be the same blue were it not a wooly blue.”⁵ Color and, by extension, light, is always material when it enters experience, even when it appears in the form of a rainbow, which is light refracted through and held in raindrops. For Dill, color, or light, more broadly, is variously wet and dry, unbroken and diffused, wavelike and corpuscular, all depending on context. Light clings to sand. It appears dry, like granular matter, or like paint soaked up by rough canvas. Or, like charcoal and graphite rubbed on coarse paper. Along the extent of the outstretched tubes, light takes on the qualities of glass, of melted sand refined into reflective substance. It shimmers and gleams, and glows like lava flows cutting narrow swaths through a volcanic landscape. *Intimate Light*, then, is ultimately an exhibition about light’s touch, its feel, and its sensual qualities. Starting with the light sentences, it traces Dill’s expanding ambitions as they steadily developed toward a mixture of sensory and imaginative involvements, of eye and mind in dialogue.

-Dr. Matthew Simms

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962), 365.

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Dr. Matthew Simms is a specialist in European and North American Art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with additional expertise in post-war California art. He has published widely on the art and careers of Southern California artists Robert Irwin, Helen Pashgian, and Ed Boreal. His articles, reviews, and notes have appeared in the following peer-reviewed journals: *Art Bulletin*, *Art Journal*, *Art History*, *caa.reviews*, *Chinati Foundation Newsletter*, *History of Photography*, *Journal of the Archives of American Art*, *Oxford Art Journal*, *Res: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Women's Art Journal*, and *Word and Image*. He has chapters in exhibition catalogues published by Princeton University Art Museum (2002, 2014), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (2016), Budapest Museum of Fine Arts (2017), DeYoung Museum (2018), Kunstmuseum Basel (2018), Whatcom Museum (2019), and the Chinati Foundation (2019). Recently, he was project advisor and contributor to KCET's *Artbound* episode, "Light & Space" (Season 11, Episode 1, 2020) and the Jennifer Lane directed documentary "Robert Irwin: A Desert of Pure Feeling" (2022).

Dr. Simms also holds the position of Gerald and Bente Buck West Coast Collector for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. In this capacity, he helps artists and galleries organize and donate papers, and also conducts oral history interviews. He has collected the papers of, among other artists, Ronald Davis, Laddie John Dill, Ilene Segalove, Eduardo Carrillo, Tony DeLap, Charles Arnoldi, Chiura Obata, and Tom Marioni.