

## David Zwirner's 'Primary Atmospheres' Is California Sweet

The beautiful haze of West Coast minimalism makes Frank Gehry talk naughty

By Christian Viveros-Fauné Tuesday, Jan 26 2010

*'Primary Atmospheres: Works From California 1960–1970'* at David Zwirner

Minimal art—let's face it—is a bore. With all the cheerfulness of a leper's bell, it proposes that its preachy abstemiousness is somehow good for us. The 20th-century art movement that best echoes Puritanism, minimalism channels Cotton Mather across the ages. Instead of chafing wool, wood-plank architecture, and bans on graven images, we get rows of fluorescent fixtures, stacks of metal boxes, piles of cloth, and, most infamously, a mason's brace of cold bricks laid end to end. Regular folks hate it, and who can blame them? When I go to the supermarket, I hardly expect to celebrate empty shelves.

The purported benefits of minimal art are all about what its chief practitioners (Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre) told us we couldn't have. In New York, where the movement set up its HQ in the 1960s, this temperateness meant scissoring out art's heart plus a lung along with dreaded ornament. What high-church minimalism prescribed was the perfectly machined object—mute, weirdly antiseptic, and expressive as a Viking stove. In the post-Pollock laboratory of shiny surfaces, only the husk of content need apply.

Over time, minimalism became our official public art. A vessel emptied of meaning that accommodates all comers, minimalist sculpture matched America's fuzzy relativism to a T. Given mounds of earth or tons of black granite, minimal sculpture could tolerantly—democratically, even—say one thing as well as another. Take the Vietnam Memorial, for example—that Death Star of content-crunching monumentality. Excepting the names of the poor fuckers chiseled into it, the austere pile hallows America's war dead just as easily as it might extol the athleticism of the Bataan Death March.

So we are grateful for a galvanizing (and literally) enlightening January exhibition at David Zwirner gallery. A show that makes clear that minimalism's New York crew never did, in fact, possess the last gospel word on the aesthetic of reduction, this expert survey of what has alternately been called "California Minimalism," "Light and Space," and, condescendingly, "Finish Fetish" charts a key decade in the development of another pared-down strand of minimal art. This time, rather than obscure theory and stacked slabs of concrete, we get perceptual meditations on light and hedonistic color. Put into Jay Leno—speak: In the separated-at-birth sweepstakes, the gang profiled in this exhibition are, most definitely, the sunny, laidback



Courtesy David Zwirner, New York

Box of tricks: An untitled 1969 piece by Larry Bell

ones.

Narcotically titled "Primary Atmospheres: Works From California, 1960–1970" and curated by Tim Nye and Kristine Bell, this otherwise snappy collection of physical artworks and luminous sleights-of-hand offers the most radiant portraits possible of what Will Self has called "the surly gravity of L.A., pickled in its own nastiness of pollutants." Among other things, the show endorses the working cliché that much art looks a lot like the place it was made. If East Coast minimalism was all 1965 Soho lofts, square rooftops, and dying blue-collar businesses, its West Coast relative instead tripped out on Venice Beach haze (incredibly, there were oil rigs out there until the 1970s); the slick chrome and plastic surfaces of the city's signs and cars; and, most especially, L.A.'s artificially enhanced, at times comic, ability to pin a flaming halo on even the turdiest urban blight. Pacific light was the thing here—as filtered, mind you, by the Moloch of American industry.

It is appropriate, then, that one of the first works encountered in "Primary Atmospheres" should be Doug Wheeler's "light painting" of 1969. A large square of plastic with white neon embedded along its inside edges, this artwork blurs the distinction between its armature and the white walls enveloping it, while immersing the viewer in a visual sauna of steamy light. A nearby painting—a strangely glowing piece by the doyen of light and space art, Robert Irwin—reminds one that many of these artists (like most sculptors and art critics, though *pas moi*) were painters until their canvases, often quite literally, fell off the walls. What at first glance appear like staid dots of patriarchal oil on canvas, shimmers like lime jelly if stared at hard enough, acquiring the solidity of a relief.

The next significant perceptual payoff comes in the shape of light installations by another ex-painter turned Cali visual philosopher, James Turrell. A sort of King Midas of the phenomenological set, Turrell—when he isn't off chasing his own personal Moby Dick round the lip of Roden Crater—has long been famous for making forms appear when, speaking plainly, there is nothing actually solid there. Simple light projections reprised in two separate galleries, these ghosts resolve themselves into glowing, voluminous triangles—one mantis-green, the other bright garnet. Absences that turn taunting presences, these geometric phantasms provoke the Doubting Thomas in everyone to stick a finger, hand, or leg in it.

Eye candy of a less apparitional sort are what the other artists in the show are after, chiefly through the exploration of the kind of industrial materials that effortlessly draw our infinitely subdivided attention to strip-mall trash and flash: RVs, skateboards, and fast food signs, among other detritus. Stuff this West Coast bunch fingered for the first time as material for art, such elements became—in these and other works—perfect conduits for reverse transformations of "light, space, and color into material form."

"Primary Atmospheres" contains gems too numerous to mention. There's Peter Alexander, whose experiments with blocks of polyester resin cast pink transparencies ethereal enough for a meathead like Frank Gehry to compare them (favorably) to "pussy"; the vacuum-coated glass boxes of Larry Bell, which change color and opacity with every angle; and the back-painted wall-reliefs of Craig Kauffman, like Hall's lozenges oozing interior radiance.

And then there's John McCracken. The absolute nutter of the worldwide minimalist movement, this devotee of UFOs and astral projections has spent a lifetime making *2001: A Space Odyssey* monoliths that embody color with the transcendence of reliquary blood. Fiberglass planks he polishes into alchemical totems, they materialize what Turrell, in a moment of verbal genius, referred to as the "self-reflexive act of looking at your looking." Which just goes to show: Sometimes less is not a bore, it's just plain magic.