

# Los Angeles Times

## 'Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface'

October 4, 2011 | Christopher Knight

SAN DIEGO -- Of all the 60 or so exhibitions in Pacific Standard Time, the Getty-sponsored extravaganza that explores Southern California art made in the first two generations after World War II, one of the most anticipated has been "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface." The title riffs on phenomenology, the philosophy of first-person consciousness.

Los Angeles is closely identified with Light and Space art, a distinctive form of perceptual exploration that emerged in artists' studios in and around Venice Beach in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, until now, a broad survey of the genre hasn't taken place.

The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego has happily rectified that long-standing lapse by turning over all three of its modestly sized exhibition venues, two downtown and one at its flagship seaside building in nearby La Jolla, to a beautiful and provocative show of 56 works by 13 artists. (Forty fascinating drawings and documentary works are also included.) Yes, there's obvious irony in the fact that it's taking place 130 miles south of Los Angeles. Give or take 20 miles, though, that's roughly the same distance as between Jackson Pollock's studio in Springs, Long Island, where the iconic New York School artist's great drip paintings were made, and the Museum of Modern Art in midtown Manhattan. So a visit to San Diego for archetypal L.A. School art is more than called for.

There's also the fact that the museum has steadily built an impressive permanent collection of Light and Space art. Nearly one-third of the exhibition comes from MCASD's own holdings.

What the show and its excellent catalog accomplish is both substantial and memorable. They reassert the stature of the genre's most brilliant practitioner, critically resuscitate a reputation too little known today, provide an expansive context of related work (especially colored sculpture), offer abundant supporting material and, at the end, provide an unexpected but provocative twist. That's a lot for any show to achieve.

Robert Irwin, who ranks as the master of Light and Space, has never been more beautifully presented. On the second floor of one downtown building -- whose galleries he helped to design in 1993 -- his rigorous process of stripping away extraneous elements, step by step, is magnificently laid out. The sequence starts with an abstract painting (a pair of brick-red horizontal lines on a brick-red field of color); works through a gently bowed canvas painted with tiny dots and an acrylic disk whose central dark line hovers impossibly in midair; and ends with a room-size wedge of visually tactile space articulated by a scrim of translucent fabric.



Nearby, a selection of painted plastic wall reliefs by Craig Kauffman, Irwin's onetime studio mate, is an exquisite elucidation of the development of the object wing of Light and Space art. The kicker: Save for one Kauffman tucked in a corner, none of his wall sculptures nor any of the Irwins is illuminated by artificial light. Instead, a pair of indirect skylights and a side window let in ambient sunshine. The marvelous effect is to italicize how light, carefully considered, functions as both subject and medium.

The eye opens, the buzzing mind lets go. A spectator arrives at a perceptual base point. As your body begins to feel the space it occupies, the rational brain shuts off. The effect is sensuous and exciting.

That sensation -- call it seeing yourself see -- is likewise central to the show's painting, wall relief and installation by Doug Wheeler. An artist essential to the early development of perceptual art, he is not well-known today. This show will change that.



Enter Wheeler's big, snow-white room and you'll be hit with a sudden, disconcerting mistrust of what you see. Doubts arise about the solidity of walls and ceiling, the stability of the floor, the common negotiations of proximity and scale and the reliability of color. It's like being inside the Cinerama Dome, circa 1968, but an epic story of perceptual consciousness has replaced the wide-screen movie matinee.

Searching the space reveals a scrim stretched overhead, pale pink and blue neon tubing tucked behind a wall's beveled edges, gently curved corners and more. Wheeler hides nothing. Slowly you surrender to the experience, accumulating confidence. Perceptual knowledge bumps rational thought as a primary value.

Two later fluorescent light installations by James Turrell, now ubiquitous in museums internationally, add flamboyant color to the equation, while a sensory deprivation chamber by Eric Orr (1939-1998) drains it from view. Optical science creates exotic illusions that emphasize unnatural atmospheres.



Minimalist sculptures are also abundant. The best are by Larry Bell and John McCracken (1934-2011). Bell's vacuum-coated glass cubes and free-standing walls complicate perceptual space through palpable layers of reflection, transparency and translucence. McCracken's highly polished plinths, slabs and a pyramid are sprayed with lacquer in dense, pristine color -- playful chunks of pure, uninflected pigment that weirdly seems to give the object its physical structure and heft.

The surprise in the show comes at the end, where a long, tall corridor by Bruce Nauman -- not an artist usually associated with Light and Space -- has been constructed in exactly the spot where it was first shown in 1970. The 40-foot corridor is exactly one foot wide.

Shimmy through the narrow, deeply claustrophobic hallway, illuminated by green fluorescent tubes overhead, and a growing sense of nausea is jostled by something unexpected: Eyes saturated with intense green light compensate by perceiving bright pink space glowing up ahead, in a glass-walled room that overlooks the Pacific. A wrenching psychological contest ensues between secular visions of heaven's pellucid promise and hell's iron grip.



One disappointment is that Maria Nordman, whose breathtaking 1976 installation in the Panza Collection just outside Milan, Italy, is a late masterpiece of Light and Space art, declines to participate in group shows. However, since she's an artist whose direct involvement in site-specific installations is essential, her omission could not be helped.

More disappointing is the absence of any hard-edge geometric paintings by John McLaughlin (1898-1976). A painter whose work developed in the 1950s, he would have set the stage for a perceptual genre that significantly emerged after 1960 at the hands of other artists who began as painters, including Irwin, Wheeler, Kauffman and Bell. If Nauman is a compelling bracket at the end of the show, McLaughlin is the essential but missing bracket for the start.

"Phenomenal" is not the definitive Light and Space show. That would require even more than the nearly 30,000 square feet of space that MCASD curator Robin Clark and director Hugh M. Davies have given to their important survey. An early form of gallery-gobbling installation art, Light and Space defies usual museum capacities.

Still, this is a first-rate show. It would have gained in power if it wasn't divided into three separate venues, but it demonstrates nonetheless why a big, permanent installation of Light and Space art -- which exists nowhere in the world -- remains an unfulfilled necessity for understanding the great art of the 20th century's second half. Simply put, "Phenomenal" is.

**"Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface,"** Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 700 Prospect St., La Jolla, (858) 454-3541, through Jan. 22. Closed Wednesday. [www.mcasd.org](http://www.mcasd.org)