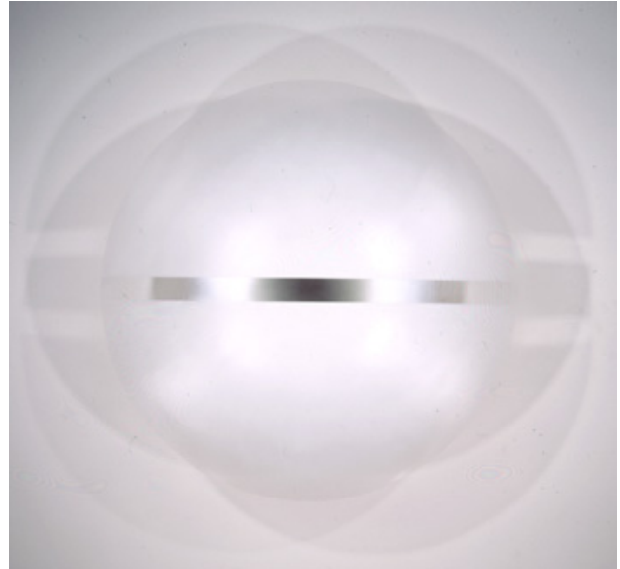


The Art of Light and Space In the Anderson Collection

If you asked me the sum total—what is your ambition? Basically it's just to make you a little more aware than you were the day before of how beautiful the world is.

- Robert Irwin

Robert Irwin
Untitled, 1969
Acrylic lacquer on cast acrylic
53" diameter x 24 1/2"d



The remarkable quality of light in California has captured the imagination of many post-war artists, including DeWain Valentine, Robert Irwin, and Larry Bell, all of whom are represented in the Anderson Collection. All of these artists were active in Los Angeles as the art scene bloomed there in the 1960s, creating work that had what Peter Plagens described as “The L.A. Look.” That “Look,” Plagens explained in an exhibition review from 1981, refers to work that, “favors result over process...clean over messy, slick over rough, detail over approximation, professionalism over individuality, and icon over action.”¹ That is to say, Los Angeles artists (not all, but many) made art in many variations that all moved beyond the process-oriented, messy, rough, action-paintings of Abstract Expressionism to a more clean-edged, meticulous style that often depended on industrial fabrication. There was a “coolness” to this new art that seemed a natural fit with the breezy, sun-drenched atmosphere in which it was made.

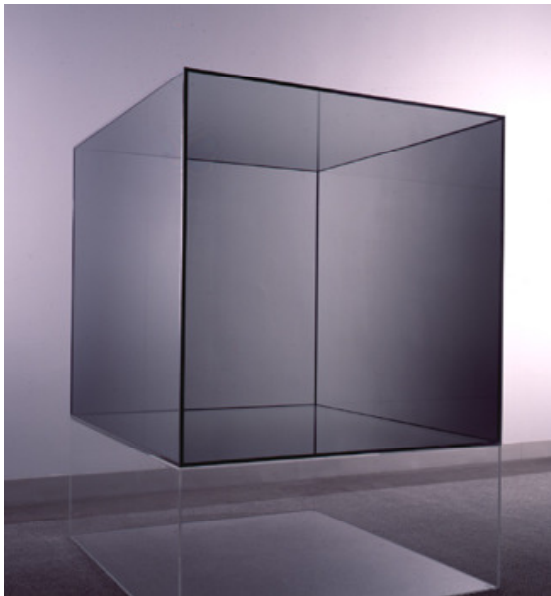
Under that broad umbrella of what L.A. art was in the 1960s, Valentine, Irwin, and Bell made work that has come to be known as Light and Space art. Using transparent or semi-transparent materials like glass, plexiglass, plastic, and resin, over the last four decades these artists have continued to create minimal forms that challenge the limits of our visual perception. There is an airiness to much of this artwork, an embrace of material dissolution that attunes our attention to the acts of looking at the work and simply being in front of it. While the minimal shapes and colors, or lack thereof, are basic and easy to apprehend, seeing this art is remarkably complex. The subtleties of the surfaces merit and reward our extended, contemplative engagement with the work.

Born in Fort Collins, Colorado, DeWain Valentine had his first encounter with plastics in a junior high school shop course where he learned to cast resin. Before moving to Los Angeles, he worked at a few boat shops in Colorado, which exposed him to fiberglass-reinforced plastic, the same material he would use first as a supporting medium in his early bronze sculptures and later to make plastic patterns within his bronze castings. Eventually the plastic took center stage. Valentine used it to create clean-cut discs, columns, and other volumetric shapes in luminous, semi-transparent colors.

¹ Peter Plagens, “Art in Los Angeles: Seventeen Artists in the Sixties,” *Art Journal* 41 (4) (Winter 1981) 375.

His work belies his interest in the relationship between exterior surfaces and interior spaces. “I am fascinated by the idea of being aware of the outer surface of an object, of seeing through it and of seeing also the inner surface,” he said in a 1971 interview.² That fascination persists in his 2004 piece *Vertical Skyline 002*, a work that plays with the boundary between two and three dimensions. The painted surface is smooth and flat, but in the slim, shallow void that runs along its central vertical axis, the eye gets lost in the surprising appearance of depth. That narrow strip of space seems to contain the whole horizon, transfixing us as we try to make sense of the work as a whole. If *Vertical Skyline 002* blurs the line between inside and outside, Robert Irwin’s untitled disc from 1969 softens the line between the work and the world around it. Irwin explained the project for his series of cast acrylic discs as follows: “The question for the discs was very simply. How do I paint a painting that doesn’t begin and end at an edge but rather starts to take in and become involved with the space or environment around it?”³ Here, we can see Irwin’s formal answer to his own question. The convex cast acrylic disc is softly tinted with a thin layer of acrylic paint in the upper and lower registers. Across the center runs a horizontal, semitransparent band which appears to be a space sliced through the surface, which is also painted at the center to give the illusion of depth. With the shadows produced from the lighting above, the edge of the disc blends with its environment, merging disc, shadow, and wall into a greater whole.

Larry Bell’s clear minimalist cubes stand as iconic, if hard to see, examples of Light and Space art. Bell’s *Glass Cube* from 1984, is typical of his work, showing us a familiar form in a new light by employing unconventional materials. At first the glass cube seems to be missing something, like an empty display case, but as we move around it, we can begin to notice the remarkable effect it has on



Larry Bell
Glass Cube, 1984
 Glass and metal
 36"h x 36"w x 36"d

our perception of ourselves and the space around us. In the semi-mirrored finish on each of the cube’s visible faces, we see our own bodies and those of anyone nearby in cropped and multiple reflections. Moving nearer, farther, and around, the figures that we see in the surfaces change. When someone passes by behind us, they, too, become a part of the work, if only for a moment. Peering at, into, and through Bell’s cube, we attain a multi-layered appreciation for the space that it encompasses and for that in which we operate. As with the work of Valentine and Irwin, Bell’s glass cube offers us a heightened awareness of our environment and our physical relationship to it, if only we stop a moment to take it all in.

Heather Green
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² Dorothy Newmark, “An Interview with Dewain Valentine, Sculptor of Plastic,” *Leonardo* 4 (4) (Autumn 1971) 380.

³ Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. (Berkeley: U California Press, 1982) 99.