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Kayne Griffin Corcoran

Los Angeles Times

Into the Infinite with Mary Corse



Painter Mary Corse in her Topanga Canyon studio. (Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times)

If you stand outside of Mary Corse's studio in Topanga Canyon at just the right hour, you might get to see one of her works come to life. The painter, who is known for playing with the properties of light, last year transformed the exterior of her studio into one of her largest pieces to date. Along the building's exterior face, she painted a sequence of four simple columns employing one of the materials for which she is best known: white paint mixed with glass microbeads. The material is what gives street signs and lane markings their illuminative properties.

"They don't reflect light, they prism," Corse says. "It makes a triangle between the surface, the viewer and light. So if the viewer moves, then it changes."

In broad daylight, the columns on Corse's studio are barely perceptible. But at dusk, when the light dims, it is a different story. The moment the wall is hit by any stray beam of light, the columns take on an otherworldly glow. The effect is that of a portal opening into a parallel universe.

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"I like work that takes you beyond," Corse says, seated in her studio on a bright October day. "Thinking is great in its place. ... But my work resists the technological in a way. It resists thought. Thinking is finite. Thinking is in the past. I like work that takes you into the infinite."

It's hard not to have a *whoa* moment when standing before a work by Mary Corse.

Since the 1960s, the Los Angeles artist has produced a body of work that toys with light and the emotional states it can induce — using reflective and refractive materials to create pieces that can shift and change in surprising ways as you move before them.



Mary Corse transformed the exterior of her studio into a work of art: "Untitled (White Light Bands)," 2016, takes on an otherworldly glow at dusk.
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

For much of her career, Corse has worked quietly in Topanga Canyon, apart from the hubbub of the art world, and apart from the largely male California Light and Space artists with which she is most frequently associated. That movement — identified with figures such as James Turrell, Larry Bell and Robert Irwin — was once clustered primarily around Venice Beach.

"One of the things I like about being here in Topanga," Corse says, her bright blue eyes surveying the room, "I was left a lot to my own ideas."

Corse has consistently made a living as an artist. She was part of the stable at Richard Bellamy's famed Manhattan gallery. She has shown at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Her work is in the permanent collections of the prestigious Menil Collection in Houston and the Los Angeles County

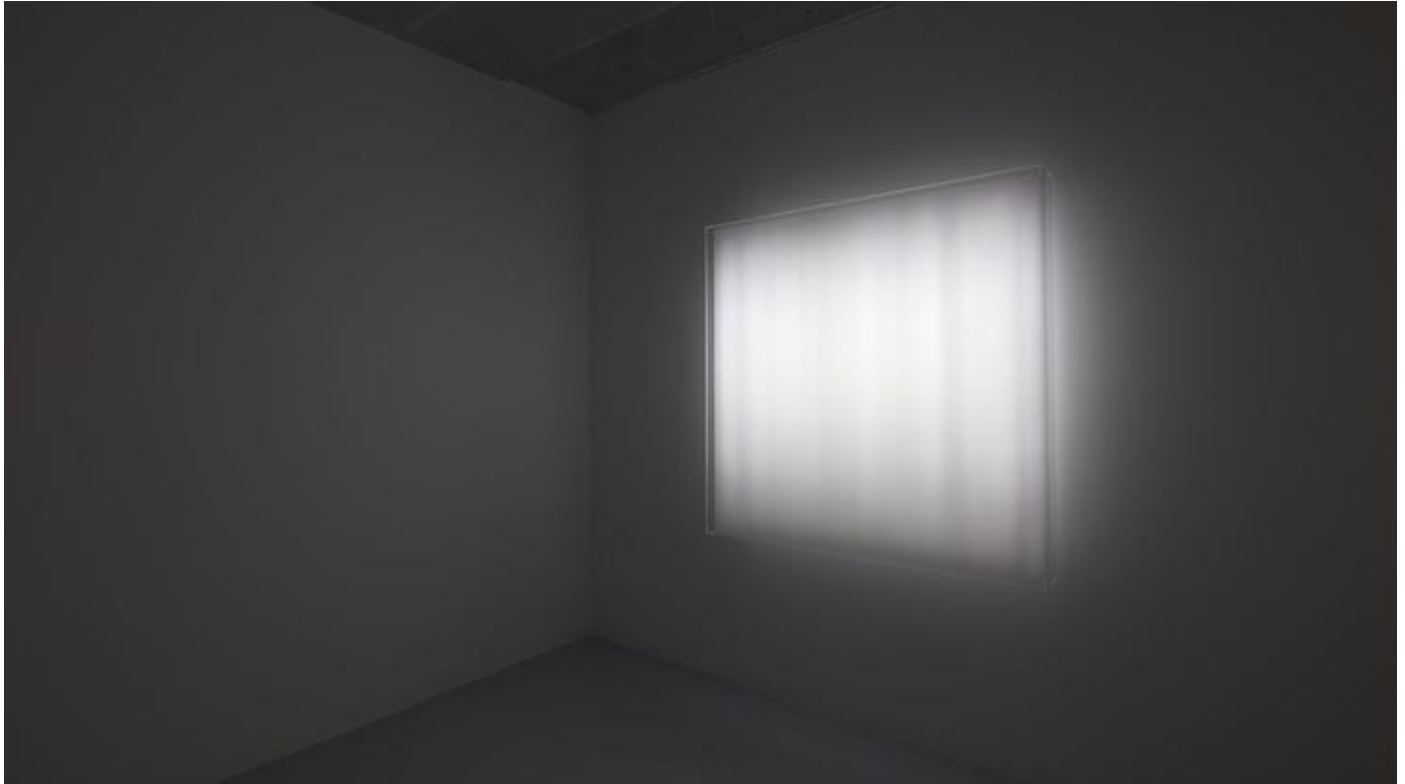
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Museum of Art. But as an artist, she has remained somewhat under the radar — known to a circle of art world insiders; less so to the general public.

That is changing.

Corse is the subject of a one-woman show now at Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles, with works from various stages in her career — including an immersive environment she first conceived in the 1960s titled "The Cold Room," a free-standing structure kept at near-freezing temperatures, in which floats a spectral light box.

"If it's very hot, you slow down," she says. "If it's colder, you wake up and pay attention. I like that state."



"The Cold Room," 1968/2017, features a work made from light displayed in a chilly room.
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

In May, Dia:Beacon, the temple to minimalism in New York's Hudson Valley, will present a long-term installation of four recently acquired works covering the span of her career. And the following month, the Whitney Museum of American Art will open the doors on Corse's first solo museum survey.

"It will be focusing on her critical moments," says the exhibition's curator, Kim Conaty, "starting with her early experiments with shaped canvases, when she was beginning to think about how to find light within painting."

In powerful, yet understated ways, Corse uses materials both common (paint) and high-tech (Tesla coils) to create perceptual experiments that also nod to abstraction and Light and Space.

"She has not only used materials in innovative ways to literally capture light," Conaty says, "but to also capture the metaphysical qualities of light. And she has done a lot of it through painting."

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Bill Griffin, a founding partner at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, who has represented Corse since last year, says he came to her work through Turrell, whom he also represents. "He's a huge champion of Mary and the degree to which she has been under-recognized," says Griffin, who feels it's time for Corse to get her due. "This is a story of somebody who has been completely committed for five decades, regardless of what the market or what anybody said. She has carved out an incredible body of work on her own."

The light spark

Corse grew up in Berkeley, where she cultivated an early interest in both art and ballet — dancing until the age of 16. On a couple of occasions, she even appeared in performances for the Oakland Ballet Company.

Through ballet, "I learned to work hard," she says. "The freedom of ballet is when you are finally moving across that floor doing these amazing jumps and turns to the music. You really lose yourself in this other world. It's another state."



A view of the exterior of "The Cold Room" at Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles.
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

Art offered her similarly ecstatic states — and the path she would ultimately follow. Corse says the private girls' school she attended afforded her the luxury of a well-trained art teacher who cultivated in students a serious interest in abstraction.

"I was introduced to [Willem] de Kooning, [Hans] Hoffman, Josef Albers — a lot of artists," she says. And she was taught that "painting did something."

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"You looked at a Hoffman and things were moving around back and forth," she explains. "Same with Albers. You stare at it and you see one color and then you see another. That was important to me."

After high school, she attended UC Santa Barbara, where she graduated with a degree in fine arts in 1963. Shortly thereafter, she went on to the Chouinard Art Institute (later to become part of CalArts) for her master's degree. By the time she landed at Chouinard, Corse was already on her way to defining her mature artistic voice. She had explored color and abstraction — creating octagonal paintings that experimented with the nature of the medium, adding metallic flake to her paint for extra brilliance, placing works inside Plexiglas boxes to give them an added dimension.

In those early years in Los Angeles, she lived and worked out of a warehouse on the fringes of East Hollywood, where she began creating light boxes out of argon tubes.

"I was on my own trip," she recalls of that era. "[Painter] Emerson Woelffer was my teacher. He would come by every six months. I worked more there than you do at school."



"Untitled (DNA Series)," 2017, installed at Kayne Griffin Corcoran.
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

Over time, Corse became interested in creating squares of light that appeared to hover in space. To get rid of all the electrical clutter, she began employing a high-frequency generator, known as a Tesla coil, to light the bulbs. (Mere proximity to a Tesla coil can illuminate a bulb without the need for wires or transformers.)

Most remarkably, Corse didn't farm out the electrical engineering. She did it herself. In fact, sitting in the middle of her studio is a working Tesla coil. She walks over, flips it on and places a light tube a few inches away. It flickers right on.

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"See, it creates this spark," she says. "I once built one that was 4 feet tall."

The technology required the artist to have a working knowledge of physics — something that has also inspired her work.

"Quantum physics really impressed me," she says. "I was starting to understand that there is no objective reality as clear as we might think. I had been looking for this objective truth, making these light pieces that were true. Then I realized that perception was as much a part of reality as reality."

The turning point came during a sunset drive in 1968. She was headed east and noticed that the light was illuminating the lane markings and street signs before her. "I was in Malibu," she recalls. "The West was behind me and everything was lighting up."

Corse immediately looked into the source of that light. It came courtesy of microbeads used to make roadway markings more visible in the dark. At that moment she realized she didn't need actual light to create a perception of light. She has been using glass beads ever since.



"Untitled (White Multiple Inner Band, Horizontal Strokes)," by Mary Corse. Glass microspheres in the paint give her work a luminous quality.
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

This results in paintings that are never the same from one moment to the next. Step back and suddenly light might turn white. Move to the right and a previously dim painting lights up like a flash. Walk back and forth in front of it, and you might feel a rippling effect. (All of this is impossible to convey in the photographs. To truly see a Corse painting, you have to do so in person.)

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"My work is about light and space, but I'd like to add time," she says. "The paintings are long. It takes time to walk by. I put time into the paintings."

Conaty says the work requires some commitment from the viewer.

"You pass it, you do the double take, you come back, you move along the side of it," she says. "You can't just walk through."

Painting the infinite



Mary Corse, shown in her studio, will be the subject of a career survey at the Whitney Museum in New York. (Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times)

In the early '70s, Corse relocated to Topanga Canyon, in search of a quiet place to work.

"I came the first time myself and I went with the first realtor and the first place he brought me was here and it was a cinder-block shack with a donkey walking through it," she says with a laugh. "It was like destiny. I just knew." The shack is now the site of a small, well-appointed home. Immediately adjacent is her sun-filled studio.

In this peaceful spot she has raised her two sons. She has also produced multiple series of works featuring a range of materials, including inky fired clay panels that take the form of the earth (all crafted in a kiln that Corse built herself).

Over the years, there have been high points: her inclusion in the high-profile 2011 Pacific Standard Time exhibition "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego brought her work to the attention of a new generation of critics and curators.

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There have also been myriad challenges: During the Northridge earthquake in 1994, a boulder came rolling down the mountain and smashed into her living room. Plus, there was the very public bankruptcy of Ace Gallery, the Beverly Hills space that represented her for a number of years. It is a matter that Corse prefers not to dwell on. "We are moving on," she says.

Whatever is happening outside the studio, however, is less important to Corse than what happens in it.

"It's my sanity," she says. "As soon as the paint brush is in my hand it's another conversation. It's the infinite rather than the finite."

The success has been nice, but what holds the most meaning for this artist lies in the magic of making.

As we wrap up our interview, Corse stands to see me out.

"Now," she says with a smile, "I can put on my paint clothes and get to work."

— Carolina A. Miranda