

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

BROOKLYN RAIL

Mary Corse: *A Survey in Light*



Mary Corse, *Untitled (White Multiple Inner Band)*, 2003, glass microspheres and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 240 inches.
Courtesy Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles; Lehmann Maupin, New York; and Lisson Gallery, London.

At the entrance to *Mary Corse: A Survey in Light* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a monitor plays *White Light* (1968), a film showing a young Mary Corse at work in her studio. In one scene, Corse holds a square of fluorescent tubing, moving it playfully in front of the camera. The square begins to glow, seemingly from within, without any apparent wires or electrical source. This scene encapsulates Corse's "light painting" practice, developed in the 1960s during the postwar technology boom in Southern California. Corse's work has been aligned with several strains of postwar abstract art, including Minimalism and Light and Space. She engages with issues of interest to both groups, including the relationships between the work of art and the space of exhibition on one hand, and the engagement of a spectator on the other. While Minimal artists abandoned painting, finding the category too restrictive, Corse believed the medium could be expanded beyond the flat canvas. One of the most fascinating aspects of Corse's practice is her refusal to confine the medium of painting to a specific material base. She considers all her works paintings, from her shaped canvases, to three-dimensional constructions, to electric light boxes, to clay tiles, defining painting as any work that generates an optical experience of light.

Her exclusion from postwar exhibitions in Los Angeles featuring other artists who believed light was the basic material of painting, including Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Doug Wheeler, suppressed attention to her practice. However, her decision to work independently was also a choice. She prefers to paint following her own logic, and the Whitney show traces her experimental path over five decades, demonstrating how formal echoes of her earlier paintings reappear in later works.



Mary Corse, *Untitled (Octagonal Blue)*, 1964, metal flakes in acrylic on canvas, 93 × 67 1/2 inches.
Courtesy Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles; Lehmann Maupin, New York; and Lisson Gallery, London.

Like many artists making abstract work in the 1960s, Corse chafed at the restrictions imposed by Clement Greenberg's theory of medium specificity, in which each medium was defined by the characteristics of its traditional materials. For Corse, painting was not defined by the flatness of the canvas or the optical effects of paint on a surface. Rather, painting is experiential. A painting is a vehicle that generates a field of light that extends into three-dimensional space, and the viewer's experience of this light is a fundamental component of the work. *A Survey in Light* traces Corse's attempts to "put light in the painting" using industrial materials and then-new technology, from Plexiglas to fluorescent light elements to Tesla-coil generators, before ultimately settling on painted surfaces embedded with glass microspheres (the reflective particles incorporated into the white paint of freeway lane dividers).¹ When [viewers are] looking at the paintings," Corse explains, "it's an outer light, but when you relate to it, it becomes an inner light to feel—to feel light—to feel the light in you."²

Corse, who was born in Berkeley, California, in 1945, began painting while a student at the Anna Head School for Girls. Her earliest attempt to paint with light, made while she was an undergraduate at Chouinard Art Institute in Los

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Angeles, is on display in the first gallery. Inspired by Josef Alber's color theory, in *Octagonal Blue* (1964), Corse embedded silver flakes into light-blue paint, trying to replicate the optical experience of a flash of blue light at the intersection of a field of blue and red paint. In her attempt to reduce painting to what she considered its essence: the expression of light, she soon decided that colored pigment was a hindrance because it competed with the optical experience of light. For nearly four decades, she made only monochrome works. A later, diamond-shaped canvas painting, *Untitled (Negative Stripe)* (1965), juxtaposes a white painted surface with a central vertical strip of bare canvas. Because Corse understood the painted surface to emit a field of white light into surrounding space, this contrast of paint and negative space inspired her move into three dimensions.



Mary Corse, *Untitled (Space + Electric Light)*, 1968, argon light, plexiglass, and high-frequency generator, 45 1/4 × 45 1/4 × 4 3/4 inches. Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; museum purchase with funds from the Annenberg Foundation. Photo credit: Philipp Scholz Rittermann.

During her last two years at Chouinard, Corse lived and worked in a warehouse studio at the intersection of Beverley Boulevard and Hoover Street in Los Angeles. There she made *Untitled (Two Triangular Columns)* (1965). In this piece she restaged the relationship between painted surface and negative space from *Untitled (Negative Stripe)* by creating two triangular columns installed several inches apart. Despite the divide, they are registered as two aspects of a single form. These columns appear to float, hovering almost imperceptibly above the ground on transparent Plexiglas bases. The three-sided plywood constructions are coated with many layers of white acrylic paint that has been buffed to a glossy sheen reflective of ambient light. Not only could paintings incorporate a variety of materials,

they could also exist as three-dimensional forms. Corse explains, "I've been painting the same painting for over 40 years. It just keeps moving around. So the paintings were shaped, and the white, getting to the light. And then the shaped canvas then came off the wall into those columns that I did, two triangular columns facing each other."³

Plexiglas soon became an increasingly important material in the artist's work. In a series of three paintings called *Untitled (Space Plexi + Painted Wood)* (1966), she applied white paint to a wood composite backing, sanding the paint to remove evidence of her brushstrokes. She then added square Plexiglas enclosures. As the series progresses, the squares of painted wood remain 24-by-24 inches, but the depth of the plastic boxes increase from 2.5 to 4.5 to 6 inches, annexing increasing amounts of the space. Corse understood Plexiglas to function as a permeable boundary; it was not a vitrine that delineated a difference between the work of art and surrounding space, but rather an aspect of the painting that signaled the expansion of the optical field of light generated by the painted surface into the surrounding space.

Corse's light box works soon followed. In them, familiar features of the earlier works are transformed. The wood backings become containers for electrical wiring and the Plexiglas now filters the glow emitted by fluorescent light elements. Insistent that the glow appear to emanate from within the work, Corse constructed false walls in her studio and exhibition spaces to conceal the works' electrical plugs. She soon sought out an alternative solution to creating paintings that appeared to glow autonomously: a Tesla-coil generator. Corse took a physics class at the University of Southern California, a safety procedure required before she could obtain the materials for Tesla coils.

One of these Tesla-coil light boxes, *Untitled (Space + Electric Light)* (1968), is ensconced at the Whitney within a roped-off alcove, accompanied by a warning to any patrons with pacemakers, defibrillators, and hearing aids. Corse made her Tesla coils (one is shown in the *White Light* film) from metal cylinders wrapped (by hand) with copper wire. When attached to a power source, electricity spirals upward through the wire creating an electromagnetic field that oscillates accompanied by a low buzzing sound. *Untitled (Space + Electric Light)* contains tubes filled with argon gas that ionizes when the generator—concealed in a false wall—is activated. The bulbs emit a blue-tinged glow that pulses in time with the accompanying hum.

Corse's experimentation with electricity was short-lived. In 1968, inspired by the illuminating glow of the paint of freeway lane dividers, she began embedding reflective glass microspheres in the acrylic paint of her white monochromes. Corse's paintings should not be contemplated from a distance; they respond to a viewer's motion and ambient light. The optical effects of the glass microspheres are clearest if a spectator moves parallel to the wall on which one is mounted. When seen while in motion, the painting sparkles and the viewer experiences a warm glow. Engaging this work is a reciprocal relationship.

All of Corse's white monochrome works using glass microbeads over four decades are part of her *White Light* series. In the *White Light Grid Series*, made at the tail end of the sixties, Corse contrasts the ordering form of the grid with strong gestural brushstrokes. More recent works, such *Untitled (White Inner Band, Beveled)* (2011), return to what

Corse calls the "inner band" (inspired by her columns), now manifest as an illusion of depth in one section of the painting that occurs when the viewer shifts in front of stripes of varying shades of white paint.⁴ Corse closely guards the painting techniques she uses to create this effect. These works contain formal echoes of her earlier works. The beveled stretcher of *Untitled (White Inner Band, Beveled)* evokes the shape of the wooden container in which Corse concealed the electrical elements of her early light boxes. The brushstrokes and tonal variations of the white paint in her later paintings mimic the subtle shape of the light fixtures visible behind the Plexiglas in her light boxes.

In the seventies, Corse began a new series following her move away from Los Angeles to the more remote Topanga Canyon. Inspired by her new environment, the *Black Earth* series functions as the conceptual opposite of the *White Lightworks*. "I had only painted *White Light Paintings* now for ten years. It was all, you know, white light, the clear, the ethereal, the unseen," explains Corse. "And then, I think my intuition, my nature was making me ground myself and realize, 'Hey, you have a body,' you know, psychologically."⁵ Works like *Untitled (Black Earth)* (1978) are made from clay fired in a massive kiln she constructed on her property. The *Black Earth* works are mounted flat against the wall and touching the floor. She laid the wet clay tiles on a large rock outside her studio before firing, incorporating casts of her own land (literally the ground on which she lived) into her pieces. Their glossy black surfaces both reflect and absorb environmental light. Recent pieces in the exhibition show Corse engaging the logic of both these projects simultaneously, alternating stripes of white paint embedded with glass microspheres with stripes of black paint on top of which she has piled glossy black acrylic squares about a quarter-inch wide. These later works juxtapose the ethereal glow of white light with the tactility and absorptive qualities of the black clay, leading the viewer to experience an oscillation between two incompatible perceptual effects that represent two sides of Corse's practice. Within these works are the echoes of the experience of her earlier pieces, reminding the spectator that Corse's works (or series) do not stand in isolation, but rather on one long experimental continuum.

— Elizabeth M. Gollnick