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Mary Corse: A Survey in Light

The industrial precision of Corse’s “light paintings,” from the mid-nineteen-sixties—plexiglass illuminated by fluorescent tubes—are in tune with the West Coast Light and Space movement of the same period. But, later that decade, she achieved a more sensuous quality by using flickering argon light, as seen here in the apparitional “Untitled (Space + Electric Light).” Suspended invisibly from the ceiling and powered wirelessly through an electromagnetic field with a concealed Tesla coil, the feat of painterly engineering is the subtle centerpiece of this retrospective, which is, remarkably, Corse’s first solo museum exhibition. In 1968, while driving in Malibu at night, Corse realized that the reflective glass microspheres used to paint lines on roads held untapped potential, and the tiny beads became the defining material of her career-spanning “White Light” series: big color-field paintings that appear to morph with the slightest shift of vantage point, their brushstrokes emerging and disappearing in satiny expanses that abut crisp panels of matte acrylic paint. These shimmering works are impossible to capture in photographs—a breathtaking antidote to Instagram bait.

— Johanna Fateman