

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

HYPERALLERGIC

The Luminous Effects of a Light and Space Painter

It is Mary Corse's use of the humble paint brush that allows the viewer to become sensitive to how light is dispersed in the space they occupy.



Installation view of *Mary Corse: A Survey in Light*, (from left to right) "Untitled (First White Light Series)" (1968), "Untitled (White Light Series)" (1966), and "Untitled (White Grid, Vertical Strokes)" (1969) (© Mary Corse. photograph by Ron Amstutz, image courtesy the Whitney Museum)

Mary Corse: A Survey in Light at the Whitney Museum is the first sustained look offered by a New York museum at a California painter who, until recently, lacked the consideration warranted by her unique painterly commitment to the Light and Space movement. Corse's active presence in the movement's seminal late 1960s exhibitions, and her career-long focus on light as a subject, should have netted her full recognition as a contributor, yet her position in the group grew marginal. As recently as 2011, her exclusion in a 250-page coffee table publication called *The Art of Light and Space* was briefly addressed by author Jan Butterfield as having to do with her choice to remain a painter, "rather than an artist concerned with room environments." (That Bruce Nauman's dabbling in light effects received full attention in Butterfield's book challenges the wisdom of this logic.)



Mary Corse, "Untitled (White Inner Band)" (2003)

As the Whitney show illustrates, Corse is as focused today on light as she was 40-plus years ago when she found inspiration in the relationship between minimalist painting and the lighting of a conventional art gallery. Her ability to exploit the potential of the gallery space deserves the attention it is now receiving. Perhaps it was the inevitable comparison with larger Light and Space efforts, notably James Turrell's Wagnerian land projects, that eclipsed the simple genius of her work.

Concurrent with a new, three-year installation at [DIA Beacon](#), the Whitney show marks an end to Corse's relative obscurity, and resets her contribution to the subject of light. I say relative because for readers who have never heard of her, a quick survey of her CV will show that Mary Corse is not a rediscovered recluse. Represented by [Ace Gallery](#) in Los Angeles for several decades, she was snapped up by [Lehmann Maupin](#) in New York following Ace's business turmoil and, later, by LA gallery [Kayne Griffin Corcoran](#). [Lisson Gallery](#) in London now completes her professional support network, along with DIA's recent commitment.

These new supporters, eager to address her belated recognition, have tried their best to explain. Lisson Gallery's Alex Logsdail, for instance, recently [stated](#) in Artsy that, "part of the reason that she's been overlooked is the work has been shown in an incorrect context." In other words, Corse's light-centric paintings had been exhibited in installations without optimal lighting. Yet the optical success of Corse's work, that of the paintings in particular, comes across in the Whitney show quite effectively, and apparently with no more attention paid to existing lighting facilities than any painter would receive from an attentive museum staff.

Divided into three open concept galleries, the west end of the Whitney's fourth floor carries an early clue as to what follows. "Untitled (White Diamond, Negative Stripe)" (1965) introduces the element of subtle change wrought from a juxtaposition of reflective materials. Subtler still — perhaps too subtle — are the surfaces of "Untitled (Two Triangular Columns)" (1965), a pair of six-foot, three-sided towers of which painted sides change

in tone, rather predictably, according to their angle of illumination. Technical wonders such as "Untitled (Space + Electric Light)" (1968) are easier to relate to the concerns of Light and Space.

The remaining galleries, along with the large wall facing visitors as they exit the elevator, are dedicated to Corse's best-known work: large geometric canvases that each affect a mesmerizing change of light and color as viewer move around the room. The effect is due to tiny glass microspheres added to the paint, a material Corse began using in the 1970s. Like a true Californian, she discovered them on the freeway's reflective traffic signs. Controlling the direction of paint strokes containing this additive allows monochromatic white canvases to reveal their geometric divisions, slipping in and out of sight as viewers adjust their proximity to the surface. A pair of photographs I took of "Untitled (White Inner Band, Beveled)" (1993) a few feet apart provides a sense of how the admixture creates a strange glow at the bottom of the canvas. Like Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, they are difficult to capture in a photograph.

Though a light-emitting piece was chosen for the cover of the show's catalogue, it is Corse's use of the humble paint brush that allows the viewer to become sensitive to how light is dispersed in the space they occupy. As the intensity of each reflective surface changes according to the viewer's position in the room, they become aware of moving through a field of light that is invisible outside its reflective effect on the canvas. Similar to the work of early minimalists like Carl Andre and Robert Morris, whose aim was to elevate a viewer's awareness of their physical relationship to the space in the gallery, Corse's canvases enable a viewer to sense the spatial regions defined by the distribution of light. The feeling is reminiscent of the way Gabriel García Márquez transformed light into a navigable substance in his short story, *Light is Like Water*.

"Untitled (Black Light Painting)" (1975), consists of a symmetrically arranged area of black paint framed on either side with six white squares that reflect the illumination in the gallery in tiny point of intense light (the result of plastic confetti that clings to the paint's irregular surface). The piece glitters within the deep black surface. It is the only painting in the show from this series. There is also one example ("Untitled (Black Earth Series)," 1978) of a project in which clay castings taken from patches of ground are fired and glazed with a polished black coating. Standing against the wall, rather than hanging, they look like quarry-faced architectural tiles, though their frames seem too irregular to form a true grid.

Presumably, these two pieces are meant to give the viewer a sense of how Corse has expanded beyond the white paintings. Missing from the exhibition are examples of recent work from a series shown at Lehmann Maupin, New York, in 2015 that utilized all three primaries in unison with white and black. When representing the work of an artist for whom public exposure has been a struggle, especially an artist whose work demands considerable gallery space, it is perhaps inevitable that categories of that artist's work will be left out. On the other hand, in an art world ensnared by star power and auction records, museums wait so long to show the work of lesser known artists that they are unable to give a truly balanced rendering in a single retrospective of what takes a lifetime to produce. As an introduction, *Mary Corse: A Survey in Light* is a welcome start.

—Peter Malone