‘New Realism’ of Mary Corse Invites The Viewer Into Her Luminous New Large-Scale Paintings

One painting disappears as you wander past it toward the next, your perception guiding you in different directions to view how light and time transform the colossal canvases of Mary Corse. The sprawling first floor of the immense new Pace Gallery flagship in New York is an ideal environment to linger and examine the new large-scale *Inner Band* glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas paintings that isolate fields of primary color between vertical bands of black and white.

“I am learning what is important. I want everything in my painting. I call it new realism. In old realism, you see the outside world. I want to paint things from my inner state,” Corse said in an interview. “Painting changes with time. We live in abstraction. You don’t see the other side of the moon. We live with uncertainty. These paintings change when you walk by.”

*Mary Corse: Recent Paintings* at Pace is the first solo exhibition of the California artist’s work in New York since last year’s *Mary Corse: A Survey in Light* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, organized in association with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
Along with the first-floor display of ten paintings executed over the last year, the exhibition on view through December 21 features a wireless light box work powered by a high-frequency Tesla coil from the 1960s as well as a new monumental outdoor painting on steel that was installed on the gallery’s sixth-floor outdoor terrace.

Born in 1945 in Berkeley, California, Corse rose to prominence in the mid-1960s as one of the few women working within the West Coast Light and Space movement, exploring how light itself is simultaneously a subject and a material of art.

Corse’s paintings are beveled, or sloped “not really on the wall,” adding to the abstraction and the viewing experience.

“I’ve been using a similar process for quite a few years. I use the glass microspheres view which refract the light and draw the viewer into the painting,” said Corse. “I’ve added more brushstroke recently.”

“I’m looking for an objective truth and wanted to get rid of the subjective,” said Corse. “Working with the plexiglass at a point I realized through an understanding of quantum physics that there was no objective truth. I use perception to create the reality.”
Corse began dabbling with subtle brushstrokes in 1968, and has added more with her new primary color pairings. She has devoted most of her career to working in tonal variations of white and black, and in the 1990s she began reacting to the way glass microspheres in her *White Light* and *Black Light* paintings act as tiny prisms, breaking down light into its constituent parts.

Painting with primary colors is an evolution of Corse’s decades-long fascination with the nature of refraction and reveals how chromatic effects have always been cleverly present in her putatively monochrome canvases. Her new works are majestically luminous.

“We are made of energy and people have been known to glow,” said Corse. “Is there a light inside of us? What is the last thing you are going to hang onto? It’s probably the light. I like it because the paintings bring up questions. They first start talking to you by saying ‘I need a little more paint here’. Pretty soon the band appears and disappears. Maybe we appear and disappear. I like that the paintings make you feel other things.”

Corse’s *Untitled (DNA Series)* fetched $435,000 and set an auction record for the artist at Christie’s flagship autumn 20th Century Week series in New York, a bright light amid overall dim results across major auction houses this season.

- Natasha Gural