

The Outer Limits

Larry Bell eschews the Light and Space label, continuing to mine notions of the ephemeral by harnessing the power of subatomic technology

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATHERINE LEDNER



Larry Bell strikes a pose—wearing one of his signature Stetsons—in his new Venice Beach, California, studio, set up in the ballroom of a former church.



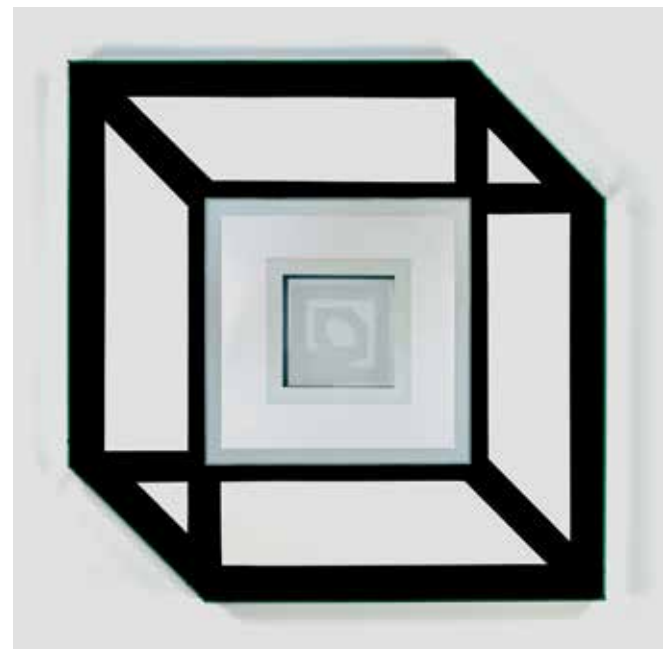
A collage work in progress, above, of Mylar, laminated film, thin metal, and nonmetallic evaporated materials, juxtaposes Bell's *Untitled 1962*, an early conceptual investigation into perspective. Opposite: A large-scale glass sculpture, made between 1969 and the late '90s, was shown at the Chinati Foundation in 2014–15.

EVERY THREE WEEKS Larry Bell packs his Chevy Suburban with his 12-year-old American bulldog, Pinky, and all the materials he's metallized in the nine-ton vacuum chamber at his sprawling work/live compound in Taos, New Mexico. From there he drives the pieces—which might include large sheets of black and red Hiromi paper, polyester films, and adhesives—14 hours across the New Mexico, Arizona, and California deserts to the Los Angeles studio he recently established inside the old ballroom of the Twentieth Church of Christ, Scientist, in Venice Beach.

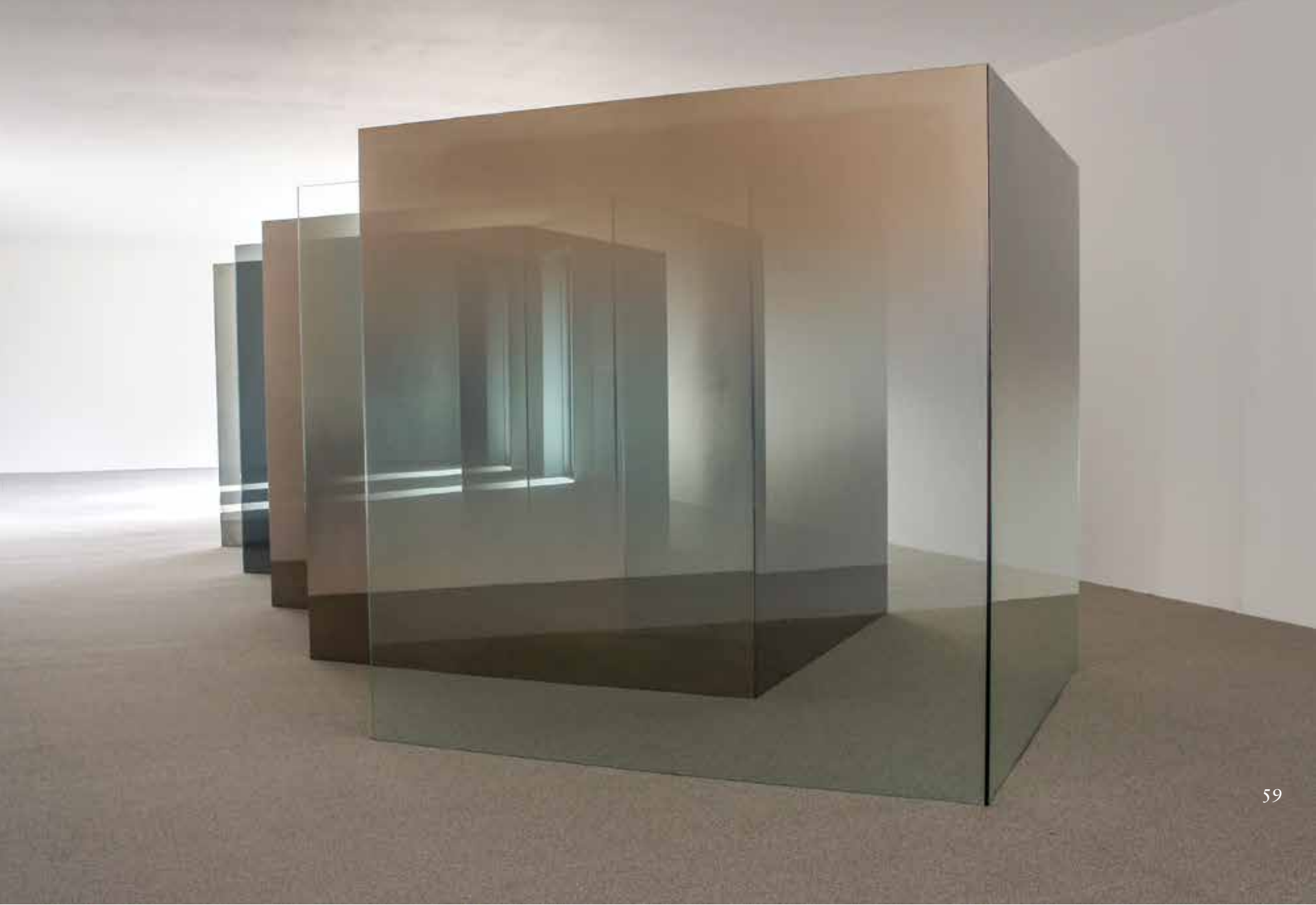
"Sometimes I'll stop in Flagstaff, but usually I just drive all the way through," says Bell over breakfast at the Hotel Erwin, which has served as his California home along the boardwalk (he actually named the place) ever since he moved to New Mexico in 1973. Dressed in his uniform of black jeans, black clogs, and one of his trademark Stetsons, the 76-year-old Los Angeles art legend orders multiple espressos in rapid succession, explaining why he's spent the past decade reestablishing himself in Venice, the oceanfront enclave that was home to him as part of the early Ferus Gallery stable before they were marquee names.

"I came here in '59 right out of art school because it was cheap. But nobody would come down here because there was nowhere to eat and it was too dangerous. There was one biker bar called the Ventura Inn, and every other night somebody would get thrown right through the window," says the Chicago-born artist, who followed friends like Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Ken Price, and Craig Kauffman to the beach. Bell moved to New Mexico some 15 years later—on the heels of Price's move to the high desert pueblo—because he "wanted to keep a beautiful woman away from my competition," he jokes.

That woman was Janet Webb, who moved with Bell (and eventually had three children with him) after he traded one



RIGHT: GENEVIE HANSON AND HAUSER & WIRTH, NEW YORK



of his large glass installations—“a series of right angles,” the artist recalls—for a home in Taos owned by a Texas-based collector friend. “I had a bunch of sculptures,” he says. “So I just made the best deal I ever made.”

At the time, leaving L.A. was a radical idea, especially given Bell’s meteoric rise. “He was the first and youngest person to crash the art scene of that era,” says Ed Ruscha. The two met in the late 1950s at the Chouinard Art Institute (now part of CalArts), where the cartoon-obsessed Bell went with the intention of becoming a Disney animator. “Larry did a thundering impression of Groucho Marx at the Marcel Duchamp retrospective opening in Pasadena and couldn’t be forgotten for that. It was this unforgettable impression and his smooth operator persona that got me to cast him in my film *Premium*,” says Ruscha of Bell’s aristocratic, cigar-puffing, tux-wearing alter ego at the time, known as Dr. Lux. “In his art I would not be surprised to see him go down another unconventional path. His glass boxes demanded real commitment and surprised everyone.”

Hewn from remaindered bits of glass salvaged at the Burbank frame shop where he worked while studying at Chouinard, Bell’s sculptures set the artist apart from his contemporaries. After the Sidney Janis Gallery sold one of his early cubes to Buffalo’s Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Pace Gallery in New York offered him a solo show, along

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with representation, as did Ileana Sonnabend, then based in Paris. His inclusion in the Jewish Museum’s seminal 1966 survey, “Primary Structures,” and the Tate Gallery’s “Three Artists from Los Angeles” exhibition in London in 1970 (alongside Irwin and Doug Wheeler, both of whom have enjoyed late-career reappraisals in recent years) further cemented his stature as one of the era’s preeminent practitioners—on the West Coast and beyond. He even made the cover (in a photo by his friend Dennis Hopper) of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the iconic Beatles’ album. But by the time the artist moved to New Mexico and cut his gallery ties, the surge of activity all but dried up.

“When I quit Pace, I sort of stepped out of the cosmos and decided I was going to try and make it outside of the art world,” says Bell, noting his experience of Taos wasn’t that of celebrities who frequented the adobe-dotted ski resort over the years. “I borrowed money and refinanced my studio and my house I don’t know how many times to make things,” he says. The studio was furnished with prototypes of burlwood



Art Deco furniture of his own design (later seen in his *Chairs in Space* game installation at the Detroit Institute of Arts) only after he persuaded collectors to buy editions. “It was really hard. There was nothing regular, and that’s what Janet got tired of, the vagaries of trying to hold things together.” When Bell and Webb eventually split up, three decades after their arrival in Taos, he spiraled into a depression, prompting him to reconnect to his L.A. roots and take a space not far from his current studio in Venice.

“In 1964, Larry Bell, Frank Stella, and Donald Judd were like fucking rock stars—Larry wasn’t even 30—but they hit this high point,” says Hauser Wirth & Schimmel senior director Graham Steele. Then, he continues, “tastes changed, and Larry wasn’t making the work that he was before, so by the ’80s he was gone.” Steele started working with Bell, and was instrumental in resuscitating his market three years ago, when he was a director of White Cube in London, where the artist debuted his second-generation mixed-media paintings and “Light Knot” works, iridescent arabesque chandeliers of sorts, made by threading one corner of a sheet of coated Mylar film (previously used in his collage, referred to as

BOTTOM: LARRY BELL AND KOHN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

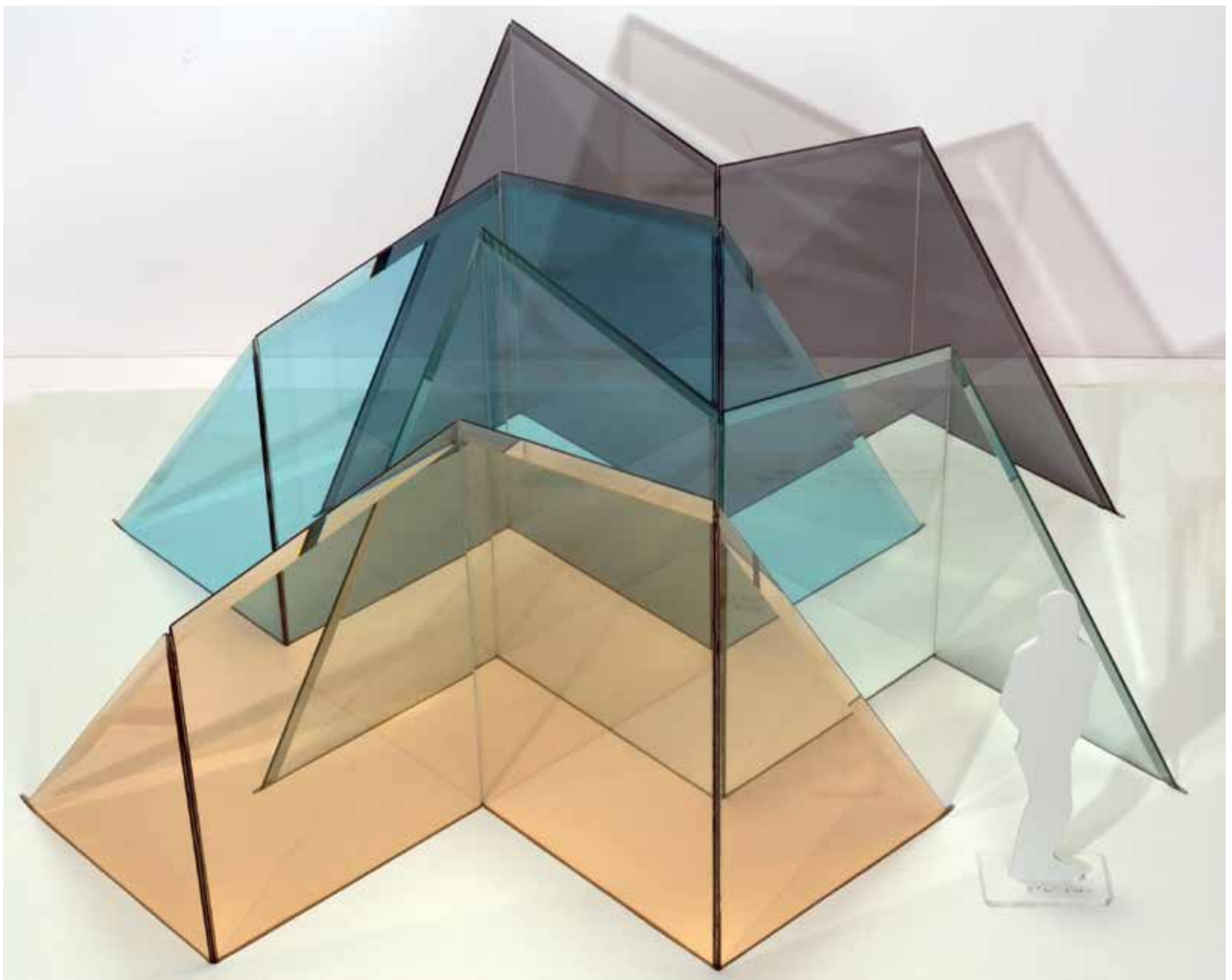


Mirage paintings, an ongoing series begun around 1984) through a series of improvisational cuts made by the artist.

“At the time, he wasn’t actively working on glass sculptures, and he hadn’t had a proper relationship with a major dealer in 30 years,” says Steele, noting the gallery didn’t show anything made prior to 2004 in three successive shows (in London, São Paulo, and Hong Kong). “It was important to Larry not to do another cube show.”

Steele left White Cube shortly after the Hong Kong show, but upon his arrival at Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, he pitched a historical survey, from Bell’s 1960s work to the present, which is on display at the Hauser & Wirth East 69th Street location in New York through April 9. Showcasing early wood, glass, and mirror box sculptures that emerged from the frame-shop fodder; glass-embedded works on paper; and the artist’s seminal 1960 painting *Lil’ Orphan Annie*, which presaged his future explorations of perceptual phenomena, the exhibition is a deep dive into the myriad ways Bell utilized the medium of glass and the then-emerging technology of thin film deposition. The piece that most excites Bell is the

Bell takes a break with his bulldog, Pinky; below, the maquette for *Glacier*, 1999, which illustrates an unrealized installation for the Anchorage airport. Opposite, from top: Works from the current “Light Knot” series hang from the studio skylight, while *Slot II*, 2008, features two center floated glass panels.

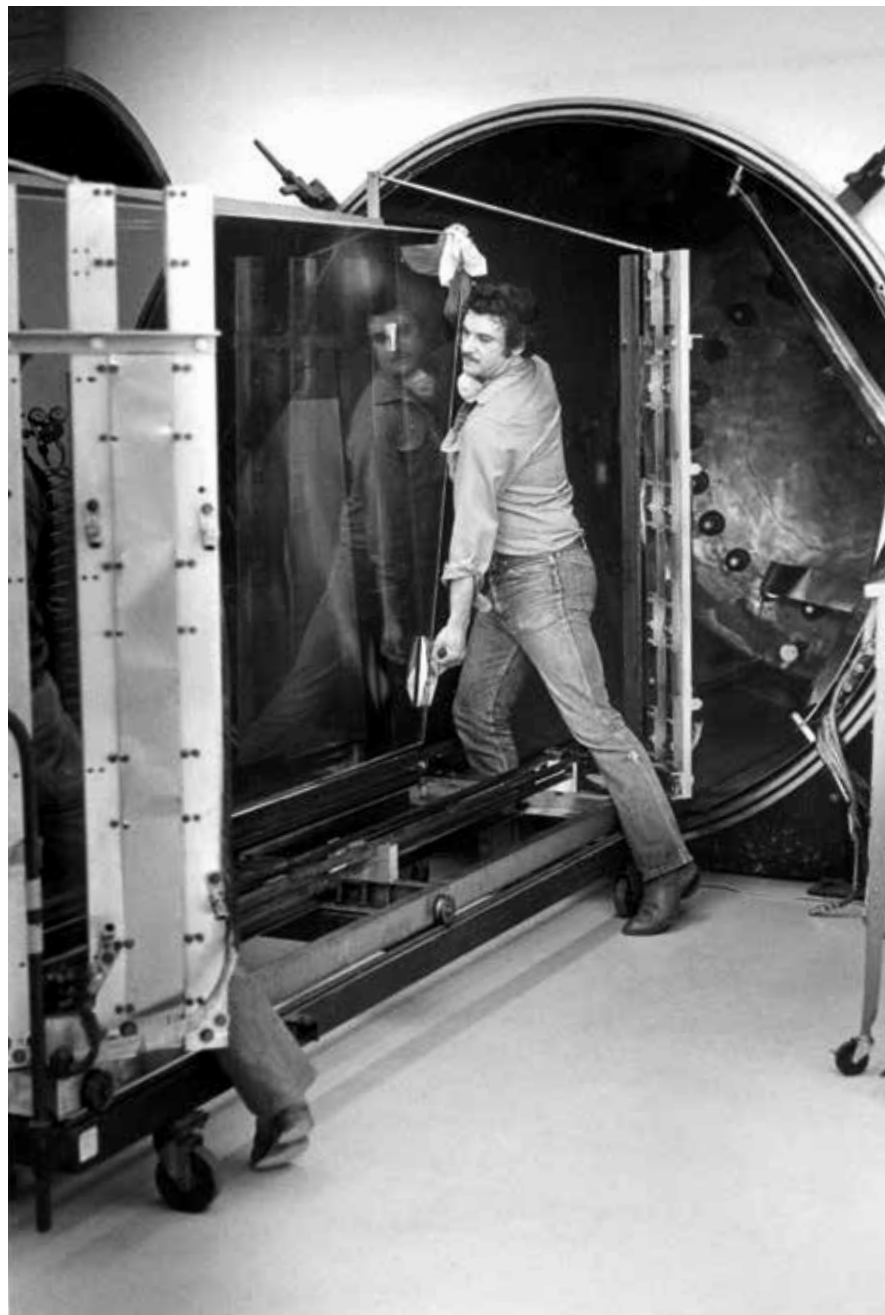


new fabrication of *Made for Arolsen (Pink/Blue)*, 1992/2016, a 6-by-4-foot blue glass box surrounded by an 8-by-6-foot rose-pink box. It represents a series of sculptures that were conceptualized in 1992 but never fully realized until recently.

“It was originally a diptych that was shown in Germany, but Larry didn’t have the money to produce the whole series,” says Steele, who envisions the show as a sort of gateway drug that drops people back down the rabbit hole of Bell’s shape-shifting, perception-altering world. In fact, it has stoked new interest from major New York and European institutions.

“I never thought of what I did as part of a group activity. I kept being included in arenas of activity, everything from Minimal art to fetish finish art to Light and Space,” says Bell as we tour the cavernous Venice studio, where stained-glass windows cast multiple shadows and reflections onto the constellation of “Light Knot” pieces hanging from the rafters. “I never thought of myself as a Minimalist, and Light and Space was always pretty general for me, because every-

Below: Bell at work in his studio in 1980 on *Homage to Griffin*, an eight-panel piece owned by the Valley Bank in Reno, Nevada. Right: One of the “Light Knot” works in progress. Opposite: *Cube #31 (Amber)*, 2006, which features colored glass coated in a nickel-chromium-based alloy that is resistant to corrosion at high temperatures.



thing is in space and everything is in light; it could mean anything.” Clearly, Bell seeks to free himself from the reductive critical ghettos that have haunted him over the years. His generalist take on the movement plays out all over the studio. Scattered around his desk is a small forest of root furniture he’s collected over the years, while six new paintings with a quartzlike film over black, red, and raw canvases replicate the phenomenon of gas hovering over a puddle of water at a filling station.

“This is a pretty one,” says Bell, pointing to a luminous black torso painting. “But I’m going to re-cook it in the vacuum laminator. We’ll see if that doesn’t eliminate a few peripheral lines. Heat and the absence of air allow things to liquefy and pull everything together.”

Whatever label critics apply to Bell’s practice, it’s nothing if not relentless. These days his process begins in Taos, where he uses his vacuum chamber to coat an assortment of materials he rips, slices, and cuts, then arranges with help from his French-born assistant, Patou, a former cook who worked in a Taos restaurant Bell frequented. “You can’t buy art supplies like this; you have to make them,” says Bell as Patou lays out a series of shapes that Bell can arrange in the vacuum sealer. “I count on a level of intuitive spontaneity,” he says. “In Taos, all I’m making are parts for things, just preparing surfaces. Then, in Venice, I improvise with those things.”

Spontaneity is key. One of the more common refrains you’ll hear from Bell is that he “follows the work,” from his earliest boxes and the late ’70s “Vapor” drawings, which began serendipitously with a stray piece of paper left in the vacuum chamber, to the “Corner Lamps” works, made with prisms and light projections filtered through a piece of glass fitted to corners of gallery walls, and “Fractions,” the 10,000 watercolor-and-acrylic Mirages pressed with clippings of older, unsold metallized works on paper made throughout the ’90s and early aughts. Those begat the “Light Knot”

“What would justify someone doing something like this, which is so expensive and big and complicated?” asks mechanical engineer John D. Williams, who is helping Bell develop new technologies.

works and Bell’s current pursuit of a different vacuum processor that will allow him to ionically bond molecules of titanium to the surface of large glass panes, creating ceramic-like titanium nitride coatings that have a mirrored gold gradient. “It’s a way of controlling the purity of the film, and it takes less energy to do it,” says Bell of the technique, which will also render his glass works scratch-proof. “But right now it’s industry-based and only used in tooling.”

Although enlightened intellects would likely see the commercial benefit of allowing an innovator like Bell access to one of these machines, getting a company that coats drill bits to halt production for some fedora-loving glass artist has been another story. Rather than waiting for such an opportunity, Bell is researching options for retrofitting an ion-sputtering processor to his existing chamber with the help of Dr. John D. Williams and his team in the department of mechanical engineering at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. Williams met Bell three years ago when the artist’s vacuum chamber needed refurbishment. Since that encounter, the two have been devising a way to bring Bell back to glass, which the artist gave up producing in large volumes because he couldn’t hulk it around the studio anymore. “We haven’t done glass coating in years,” says Bell. “In the old days, the best and most sensuous part of the whole studio trip was grunting the stuff around. I liked the whole macho feeling of having these giant pieces of glass and having to be so careful with them that you didn’t fuck anything up.”

Getting Bell (even with a robotic arm or team of assistants) back in the chamber to produce some of the largest, most cutting-edge pieces of his career is utterly enticing to the Fort Collins crew. “A lot of times, what engineers build is a system to do exactly the same thing every time, and this is almost the opposite of that,” says Williams, who plans to spend six months in Taos with a team of lab techs helping Bell fabricate his new parts. “What would justify someone doing something like this, which is so expensive and big and complicated? It’s interesting technologically, for me, to get something like this to work and to be useful for an artist because it will prove that we can understand the technology better and make it adjustable.”

The conservative estimate is that Williams and his team won’t have the chamber ready for ion sputtering until the middle or end of 2017. Until then, Bell is fine with using transparent films sandwiched between two panes of glass, which served as his material for *Made for Arolsen*, or simply making more paintings (he once pumped out 24 in a single day) and countless variations of the “Light Knots.”

“The thing I like best is how simple they are,” says Bell, weaving one together in seconds before my eyes. “I think of the cuts like signing my name, I just do it and go. It just is what it is, and I think they’re fantastic. This is reflecting the environment and bending it and twisting it and tying it in a knot.” 田

