

Modern American artist **LADDIE JOHN DILL**

One of America's foremost sculpture artists has been a leading figure in the use of industrial materials for more than 40 years

By David Rosenfeld

At first glance, Laddie John Dill's studio in Venice seems more like an industrial machine shop than an artist's studio. A fence lines a storage yard with rusted parts and scraps of wood and metal. Without any noticeable entrance, a visitor hollers over the noise of a saw blade until the chain-link gate opens by remote.

It's one of Laddie's three assistants who lead me inside where a row of sunroofs bring in natural light. Hanging on the wall are some of the original neon tubes that lit up the art world, you could say, 40 years ago. It were these neon tubes that represent some of the first works that made Dill a fixture in the contemporary American art world beginning in the late 1960s, a time eclipsed by Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollack.

"I was in the right place at the right time," he said. "But I also worked my butt off."

Dill is well-respected these days in the art world as a pioneer in the use of industrial materials. It was an activity in which he has always felt at home. If he wasn't an artist he said he'd likely be a truck driver. The 70-year-old who grew up in Malibu enjoys long hours on the road taking commissioned pieces to cities across the country.

First known for his use of sand and cement with reflective light, Dill has long been at the forefront of a modern American art movement. It followed on the heels of an older generation of artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, both of whom gave support and encouragement to a young Laddie in his 20s.

New York, 1970

It all goes back to New York in 1970. Dill and his girlfriend at the time found themselves without a place to stay. So he called the only person he knew in town, the famed sculptor Jasper Johns. Johns wasn't home, but he let the pair stay in his studio, which was a century-old former bank building on the lower east side of Manhattan.

"All the booths had been removed and it was like a museum," Dill said. "I remember sitting on the couch in this bank and watching him paint this gigantic encaustic painting using wax and oil that was shown in the Montreal World's Fair. When people knew I was staying there, they were all wondering who the hell is this kid from Malibu."

They would soon find out. That same year Dill got his first break when Iliana Sonnabend offered him a show with the famed Sonnabend Gallery in New York, which handled Andy Warhol. His first show with experiments in light and space were at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris and then in New York in February 1971.

"Other than that, no one else was really showing any interest in my work," Dill said.

Shortly after that Robert Rauschenberg gave an equally praiseworthy blessing of Dill's work when the pair collaborated on a show together in Los Angeles.

Is that art?

Today, Dill's work is shown in galleries and museums around the world. Individual pieces sell for tens of thousands of dollars. And his commissioned work for companies like Northrop Grumman and University Synagogue in Irvine are among his proudest. When we sat down together, Dill talked about his motivation for using industrial materials and his outlook on modern art.

"I always wanted to use materials that are not necessarily associated with art making," he said. "It's not as revolutionary now. A lot of artists use other things. Marcel Duchamp was quoted as saying he'd rather spend time in a hardware store than a museum. I've always identified with that kind of mentality."

The result has been a number of styles Dill calls activities. One is a technique where he uses tempered glass and an emulsion of oxides and cement to create images that look like aerial views from the Hubble Telescope. Another is the use of industrial grade aluminum, the kind manufacturers use to make airplane fuselages. Dill buffers the surface and cuts it to shapes that resemble leaves. When it comes to the interpretation, Dill said he doesn't mind the question of whether it's art.

"I got this from Jasper," he said. "I wanted art that asks questions more than it answers. Is this art? I like that question, because it pushes the envelope. It engages you. I don't find that question insulting at all. It's not the point of it, but it's not supposed to be totally accepted either. A lot of people would say this is not art. It's just an exercise in materials. But I think some of the greatest art was not totally accepted in its time. That's my only problem with the art world as it is



today. It's market driven. They buy too much with their ears."

New art history

Painter Charles Arnoldi has been a friend of Dill's for more than 40 years. The two shared a giant studio in downtown Los Angeles together in the 1970s where Dill filled his entire half of the floor with seven tons of sand and a mattress in the corner.

"You had a bunch of very creative individuals in Los Angeles at that time who didn't feel like they were trying to make the next New York or European step," Arnoldi said. "We weren't following art history. And we felt sort of liberated. People were trying all kinds of innovative, new moves using less traditional materials. So what you had was this burst of creativity that was very unique and original."

For Dill, working with light beams and mechanics were a natural extension of a childhood growing up with an engineering stepfather and a screenwriting mother.

"My mother basically raised us," Dill said. "She encouraged us to do whatever we wanted to do as long as we made a commitment to it."

He described a home where his tinkering stepfather would remove the backs of television sets and might shine laser beams down the hallway.

"I don't use these materials for shock value. It's more the idea of using things that are associated with other walks of life or other worlds," Dill said. "People all over the world look at something differently. Germans see materials. In Korea and Japan they see more imagery. They pick up things that resemble objects in nature. To them this tells a whole story. I think that's pretty interesting." ■