

## HISTORY OF LIGHT ART: The Market (Part 1)

by Eileen Kinsella 06/06/13 9:57 AM EDT



An installation view of Laddie John Dill's "Elementary" at NyeHaus  
(Courtesy the artist and NyeHaus)

*Art made with light is having a moment, with pioneers of California Light and Space getting their due and cutting-edge technology putting new effects at the disposal of today's artists. In this [five-part series](#), we look at the connections between past and present, as well as investigating the challenges of creating and trading in works from this challenging genre of work.*

### **The Market for Classic Light and Space**

Up until 2008, the highest price ever paid at auction for a work by artist **DeWain Valentine** — a member of the 1960s Light and Space art movement in Southern California — was \$5,100, for an untitled cast polyester resin. But when the **David Zwirner** gallery showed his large-scale, fiery red “Triple Disk Red Metal Flake — Black Edge” (1966) at a 2010 group show, it was quickly scooped up for \$250,000 and is now in the permanent collection of the **Museum of Modern Art**, a gift from mega-collectors **Marie-Josée** and **Henry R. Kravis**.

The Zwirner show, entitled “Primary Atmospheres,” was but one in a string of recent Light and Space themed shows at galleries and museums that have ignited a fresh market boom. While leading lights of the movement, such as [Robert Irwin](#) and [James Turrell](#) have been catapulted into even higher price brackets, the burst of curatorial and gallery attention has also

drawn renewed interest for well-respected but lesser known names, like **Peter Alexander**, **Larry Bell**, [Mary Corse](#), **Laddie John Dill**, **Craig Kauffmann**, and **Helen Pashgian**, as well as Valentine.

“I think one of the driving forces is that people are starting to realize that California plays a really significant role in understanding American culture,” says **Kristine Bell**, a partner at Zwirner gallery, who helped organize the show. She admits that not so long before it, many of the artists’ names and works were a revelation both to her and the staff as a whole. That, in turn, was a result of the 2008 acquisition of a large chunk of the prestigious **Helga and Walther Lauffs** collection. “Names popped up that we didn’t know so well, so we tried to educate ourselves,” says Bell, who quickly became intrigued by the work.

Light and Space art works — many of which are best described as minimalist — were groundbreaking for their use of slick, finished surfaces, often incorporating light or sporting a luminescent effect as a result of the use of non-traditional materials such as resin or vacuum-formed plastic. “At a time when New York was focused on very dark, black hues, and artists were working with a lot of steel, the L.A. artists were exploring these very different materials, and obviously embracing light and space,” says **Bill Griffin**, a partner in **Kayne Griffin Corcoran** in Los Angeles. “They were not afraid of color. In fact they were embracing it.” “The main thing is that there has been a tremendous amount of visibility for these artists and attention has been rising steadily, especially over the past five to seven years,” says **Frank Lloyd**, owner of the eponymous Santa Monica gallery. He rattles off a list of major shows, starting in 2006 with the international exposure afforded by the Pompidou Centre’s “Los Angeles 1955-1985 Birth Of An Art Capital,” to the “surge” of interest following the Zwirner show, and the much lauded “Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface,” that took place at the **Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego** in 2012, part of the larger **Pacific Standard Time** series initiated by the **Getty**.

Prices have been rising fast as collectors and institutions sit up and take notice of these colorful eye-catching works that they may have missed the first time around. Griffin says he is now seeing a lot of new interest from European and Asian clients as well as a result of the various shows. Lloyd cites Kauffmann, who passed away in 2010 and is best known for candy-colored “loops,” large, curled acrylic sheets, and pill-shaped acrylic wall reliefs. “Works that I sold for between \$90,000 and \$125,000 in 2006, are now selling for between \$450,000 and \$500,000, a five-fold increase in seven years,” says Lloyd. “I don’t really see that slowing down. There is a small supply of high quality works available.”

And interested collectors might do well to look at later or more recent works, Lloyd suggests. Larry Bell, another name benefiting from the resurgence of attention to West Coast artists, may be best known for his large, mesmerizing translucent cubes, which typically sell for between \$90,000 and \$100,000 for smaller examples, and up to \$125,000 to \$175,000 for larger examples in pristine condition. However, they are typically snapped up privately as soon as they come to market, says Lloyd. His current show of two series of Bell's more recent works includes "Light Knot" paintings, which he says have attracted many new buyers and are selling well, priced far lower at \$12,500 to \$15,000.

Long-time Los Angeles dealer **Doug Christmas** sees the newly invigorated market as a result of a combination of factors. "Sometimes it takes information a while to seep in and penetrate," he says. "The fact that these artists were in L.A., 3,000 miles away from the art world center of New York and even farther from European centers, plays a role in the art getting noticed the second time around."

Dealer **Tim Nye** has also been a tireless proponent and ardent fan of the Light and Space artists, helping Zwirner gallery with various shows as well as organizing numerous ones on his own, such as a current show of **Laddie John Dill** in Chelsea (through July 26). "It's obvious these artists are individually benefitting from a heightened interest across the whole genre," says Nye. As examples of leaps in individual markets, Nye notes that in 2008, he sold a number of [Robert Irwin](#)'s historic disc works for about \$400,000, but a year and a half ago sold one for \$1.8 million. And a recent **John McCracken** plank from the 1960s sold for \$900,000. "Not so long ago that would have been \$400,000," he says. Contrary to what collectors might assume, the intangible nature of these works or their scale is not a problem, says Nye — but supply is.

"The scale is not challenging. A lot of these artists were showing these works in tiny storefronts. The real challenge is that they were not highly prolific." This may also help explain why most works have changed hands privately and auction records for many have been skewed or spotty. Nye adds that he has been focusing on more recent work by artists including Laddie John Dill and **Peter Alexander**. He says part of his job is to get collectors to pay attention to "particularly spectacular recent work," while he tries to "wean them off the historic work. There is not a great supply."