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Larry Bell's Undimmed Fascination With Light

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Asked about the vitality of his career, Larry Bell bites down on his cigar extra-hard. His dark eyes look up. His mouth opens a little and he leans forward, as if to bite the question itself as it hovers there before him.

"I'm still alive, in case there is any doubt," he answers, his tone softly factual. You expect Bell to snarl, but he doesn't. In fact, pacing the Laguna Art Museum's main gallery, installing a show of his drawings that continues through Feb. 28, he says he actually understands why some people may have doubts about his artistic survival. "I guess out of sight is out of mind, huh?"

Twenty years ago, Bell was sure in sight. One reference book called him "the undisputed king" of the Los Angeles art scene in the 1960s. The most important museums collected the glass cubes and other pieces with which he explored new uses for light. Major New York galleries showed him. And important critics sang the name of this darkly handsome kid from the San Fernando Valley, even though the work never fit into any critical category very neatly. But the young artist had lost control of his life.

"For a long time, I was trying to be part of the art scene. I drank quite a bit, mostly because I was afraid of being around more than five people at once. All the drinking did was make it worse. It made me more obnoxious. I still have a reputation for being rude and obnoxious. The reputation is probably true."

A living piece of Los Angeles culture in an exhausting decade, he felt himself adrift until he found a home in the mountains of New Mexico. He moved to Taos in 1973 and has stayed. "I was burnt out," he recalls. "I wasn't fit to live among civilized people. I just stopped working for two years. Then I got back into it. I worked hard." And now? "Now, I guess I'm kind of invisible in terms of the art world."

A large man, he shifts in his seat. "I'm a student of my work. My life is my work. That's my career."

"I'm not an artifact. These are artifacts."

He points to sheets of paper he has spread on the museum floor. Together, they form a hypnotic grid pattern: their black and white stripes spread apart slightly along their lengths, in a way that creates the optical illusion of a blur. It makes the stripes seem to waver.

The pieces "fit together like this," he says, interlocking his fingers. The work is titled "Moving Ways." One of 60 works in the show, it dates back to 1978. Other pieces are brand new. Six have never been shown until now.

Bell calls these 60 works his "vapor drawings." He can get very technical about how he makes them, talking of fancy filters, quartzlike crystals and a special vacuum machine. But then he dismisses all that with the wave of a large, raw hand.

"I'm still interested in how light interacts with a surface," he says. "If it doesn't work as art, forget it. Critics say I'm into high-tech. That's not the point. If I could control light on a surface with water and cottage cheese, I'd do it."

The drawings derive from a process developed largely by the optics industry to make glass reflective. Bell used this process to coat his glass cubes, vaporizing and applying metals and minerals in dozens of thin layers. One day in 1978, the vapors stuck to a piece of paper by mistake. Bell had found a new mode of expression.

He admits the new works are partly commercial in intent. "A lot of people want to own (other, often larger examples of) my work but they can't afford it, or it doesn't look right in their collections," he says. "It's easier to get these into people's hands."

The pieces impart a dual sensation of surface and depth, as if they're both reflecting and containing light. He turns one piece from side-to-side and it is like looking at a peacock shift its plumage in the sun.

But beyond the attractive colors and his interest in the technique, is there a larger point to his handling of light this way? "I've always been fascinated with it, that's all," he answers. "I guess it's partly the novelty. I don't know. . . . Ever read any H.G. Wells?," he asks suddenly, describing Wells as his favorite writer. "Well, he was a journalist who started writing novels. . . . He was interested in the depth of the works, not so much in their perfection. He wrote some good novels and some bad ones, but he just kept working."

"That's how I think of myself."

Such remarks make it tempting to call Bell a survivor. But that would be misleading. It would emphasize demons, struggle, loss and bitterness. Bell, one senses, still has his angels. One is his capacity for wonder--even if it draws upon some of the same concepts that inspired him a decade ago.

His head is still a mass of dark, tousled curls. He wears blue jeans; suspenders barely keep them even with the bottom of his stomach. The cigars are a constant. When he returns to the Los Angeles area he stays in Venice, an old stomping ground where he drank with the (now) well-known Robert Irwin, another artist fascinated by light and surfaces. "I haven't done anything in New York since 1980, and the last big show I did was at the Detroit Institute of Art a few years ago," he says. "Critics talk about my having been part of an era, the '60s, when I was best known for doing something else, but my work has gotten much better since then as far as I'm concerned."

His work continues to find admirers. "I think that the way Larry thinks is immensely provocative and clear," says Robert Creeley, one of America's most distinguished poets. At 61, Creeley is David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He has been Bell's friend since they met in New York in the late 1950s. "I love to work in oblique angles and so does Larry," says Creeley. "Usually, people look at rectangles on walls and the exhibition space is like a theater where they're waiting for a show to begin, but Larry's (work) involves the shifting of experimental space in a room. It changes your mind about what you thought of as a stable perspective." Creeley adds that Bell "is a workaholic. He goes his own way. . . . There is no side to him that needs to be reassured that he is, quote, 'successful,' and that is rare."

"I don't know what people will think of the exhibition but that's not the most important thing," says Bell. "This is an opportunity for me. I haven't ever put these pieces together before. The exhibition space is really an extension of the studio because I'm going to learn something."

"I'm not looking for perfection here," he adds, looking every bit the perfectionist as he scans a gallery wall. "I just want it to be tolerable."

"Larry Bell: Light on Surface" continues through Feb. 28 at the Laguna Art Museum, 307 Cliff Drive, Laguna Beach. Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday. General admission is \$2, \$1 for children and seniors. Information: (714) 494-6531.