



TAOS NEWS

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GALLERY GUIDE

Studio Stories | Larry Bell



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Larry Bell in his studio
SEAN RATLIFF / TAOS NEWS



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By Lynne Robinson

Larry Bell is a renowned contemporary American artist, best known for his glass cubes and large-scale sculpture.

Born in Chicago in 1959 he mostly grew up in Los Angeles, where he studied at the Chouinard Art Institute (now part of CalArts), with the intention of becoming a Disney animator. It was at Chouinard where Bell was introduced to abstract art.

Bell is most associated with Light and Space, a West Coast art movement that focused on the perceptual experience that arose from the viewer's interaction with the work itself.

He moved to Venice Beach, following friends including Robert Irwin, Ken Price, and Craig Kauffman. Many recall Bell being the youngest artist on that scene.

His earliest pieces were paintings but soon he began incorporating shards of glass in these pieces which started to resemble cubist works in the angular geometric, three dimensional compositions.

The three-dimensional cases that followed were the natural progression for the artist, and from the shadow box pieces, Bell began to make the body of work he is most known for; cube sculptures on transparent pedestals.

Bell's sculptures set the artist apart from his contemporaries and the Pace Gallery in New York soon offered him a solo show.

Bell's surfaces work both as mirrors and windows, sometimes simultaneously. In his 2018 show at the Harwood Museum of Art - Hocus, Pocus & Focus - Bell returned to his roots after years of exploration and experimentation.

In his introduction to this show at the Harwood, Curator Gus Foster explained that "this was not a retrospective", although it went way back through the archives of the artist's work. But rather, Bell "sees his exhibitions as extensions of his studio", inviting the viewer to participate in the process. A theme in his life work.

One walked into a collection of familiar Bell pieces made through the years – all of which are part of the Harwood's collection. A collection of his mid-career Fragments unframed, hung on the back wall with three mylar mobiles suspended above them.

Exhibited in four of the Harwood's galleries; three installations downstairs and one upstairs. In another, darkly lit space, three large smokey mirrored installations played with light to trick the eye.

A upstairs room was hung with the Church Studies (named for the former church/studio they were made in) and a selection of his extensive and important collection of guitars that rival any Rock Star's.

In the center of the space, two of his Art Deco chairs (the artist occasionally designs furniture),sat next to each other facing in opposite directions - playing with duality, shadow and light - the cubist in the process of seeing.

Bell is one of the faces on the cover (taken by his friend and long time Taos resident, Dennis Hopper) of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, the iconic 1967 Beatles' album. His face is pasted into the third row

He has received important grants from, among others, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation and his work is included in many important international and national collections and cultural institutions.,

Bell has lived and worked in Taos for most of his career, while maintaining a studio in Venice. He was the recipient of the 1990 New Mexico Governor's Awards for Excellence in the Arts

When we visited him at his Taos Annex recently Bell was still recovering from a sudden bout of illness but seemed to be on the mend. We had gone there to ask Bell which artists working in Taos, were on his short list.

He responded generously. "Oh the first thing you've got to do," he said, "is see them in their studios. That's where you'll see their best work."

We questioned that in light of the fact we were interviewing him for the Gallery Guide.

"Just ask the gallery's to arrange the visits and it will be fine." He assured us, as he led us through the "guitar room." the vast space hung salon style presently with all of his guitars. A collection began as a boy who had a hearing problem, when he discovered he could hear, and play, twelve-string guitars.

Across a short alleyway, sits Bell's own studio; his laboratory, complete with a huge tank which is his secret weapon in assisting him get the surfaces that are his signature.

When Bell first saw the former commercial laundry facility, it was in ruins.

"The roof was caving in. It was a total mess," he says, "but there were four walls and it was cheap."

When we entered the work space, we were greeted by geometric pieces of colored glass, some were built into cubes - prototypes for much larger sculptures - like the ones at the Harwood, but in living color.

He had just returned from a show in NYC at Hauser & Wirth, where he had taken over the ground floor of its Chelsea location for "Still Standing", an exhibit of three Standing Walls, scale models for other freestanding pieces, and three new cubes in a show filled with glorious color.

The crazy mylar mobiles were catching the last rays of afternoon light as we asked Bell whom we should visit next.

"Oh there are some great artists to see here in Taos." He exclaimed. "Tom Dixon, Marcia Oliver, they both make interesting work." He said, citing two of Taos' most

important, post Taos Modern moderns - each continuing in the footsteps of, and building on the legacy of Agnes Martin, with their abstractions and other worldly sight.

We ask about two of the artists we have already visited and he says he has bought work from each of them. Smiling, he asked, "did you see their studios?"

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