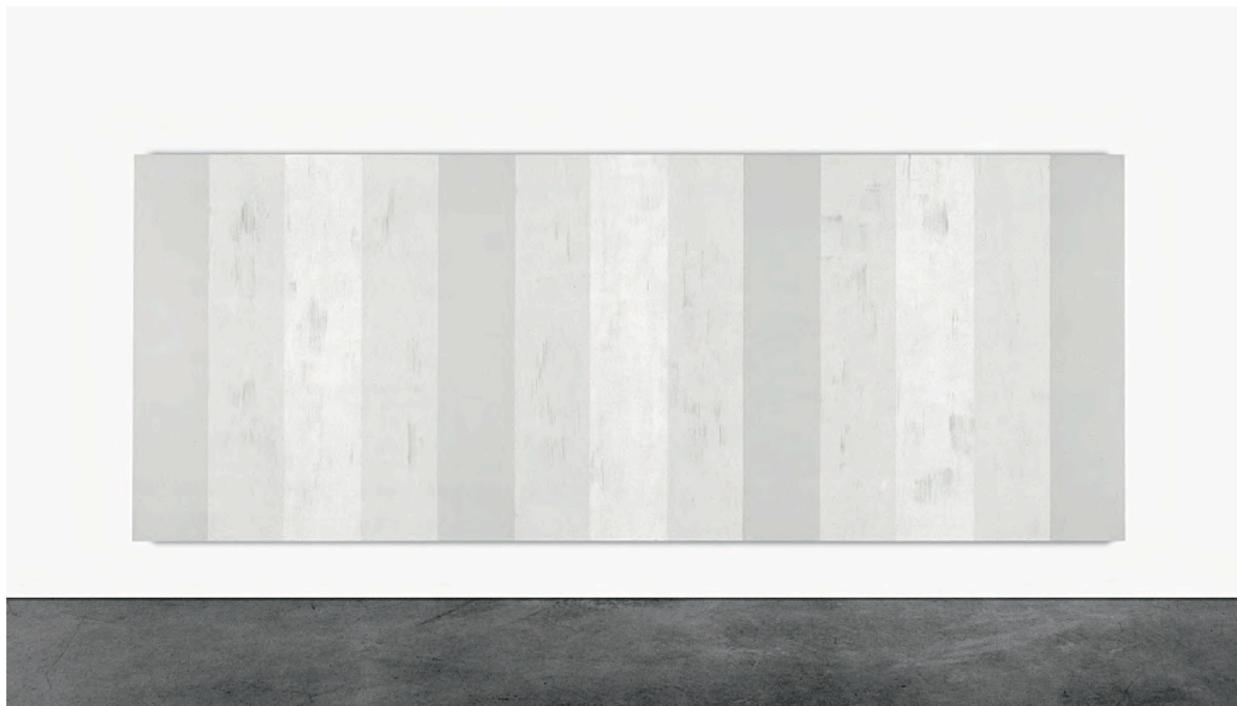


# LISSON GALLERY

*Modern Painters*  
May 2018



LONDON

## *Mary Corse' at Lisson Gallery*

Mary Corse has mastered the art of producing deceptively simple paintings. Take "Untitled (White Multiband, Vertical Strokes)," 2003: a wide, rectangular painting of vertical stripes in a trio of light gray gradations. It would be easy to attribute the influence of Minimalist painting on her practice. Yet these paintings play tricks on the eye, courtesy of the glass microspheres (often found in the reflective lines on highways) that are embedded in the acrylic paint which Corse applies to the canvas in these geometric striations. For Corse, an LA-based artist who first gained recognition in the mid-1960s through her association with the Light and Space movement that included contemporaries like James Turrell

and Robert Irwin, Abstract Expressionism (surprisingly enough) and scientific enquiry have played an equally significant role in the development of her innovative painting technique.

Her first major solo exhibition in the UK at Lisson Gallery, on view until June 23, brings together a selection of 10 recent works, spanning 2003 to 2018, out of which seven have been created specifically for the exhibition. The show also includes multiple pieces from her "White Band" and "Black Band" series, with which she has continued to experiment and hone her technique, as well as "Untitled (Electric Light)," 1968/2017, an installation composed of argon and Plexiglas.

After having graduated from CalArts in 1968, Corse enrolled in a physics course at the University of Southern California where she was introduced to quantum physics. After her BFA, Corse was already pushing boundaries on the effect of light on surface and space via experimental white monochrome paintings on shaped canvases and Plexiglas constructions illuminated by fluorescent light bulbs. Then, her study of physics confirmed her belief that "there is nothing static in the universe." Afterward, her practice has been predicated on a compulsive engagement with light's effect on human perception, and a quest to find new and innovative ways of addressing the idea of subjective experience and of heightening

Mary Corse  
"Untitled" (White  
Multiband, Vertical  
Strokes), 2003.  
Glass microspheres in  
acrylic on canvas  
243.8 x 609.6 cm  
96 x 240 in



Mary Corse  
 "Untitled (White Inner  
 Band, Beveled)," 2012.  
 Glass microspheres in  
 acrylic on canvas  
 289.6 x 228.6 cm  
 114 x 90 in

consciousness. As such, her paintings strike a fine balance between a scientific precision and rigor that leaves nothing to chance or accident with a romantic portrayal of infinity whose result is quietly seductive.

In 1999, Corse began a series of "White Inner Band" paintings, which were borne out of her research, and creation of the "inner band," a vertical stripe full of luminous, active brushstrokes, in which the hand of the artist is both visibly present but that also has the capacity to disappear into the surrounding canvas when viewed from certain angles.

If light has been the driving force

behind Corse's experiments throughout these years, it is only natural then that her body of work also encompasses white's antithesis: black. Interspersed with the microsphere-filled pale strips of paint, when Corse has recourse to black, the acrylic too sparkles like glitter. Walking from one end of a canvas to another, we are invited to take our time, to stop, look and bask in the visual instability that her work delights in.

*"Mary Corse" will be on view at the  
 Lisson Gallery, 67 Lisson Street in  
 London, May 11-June 20.*

ANYA HARRISON



Mary Corse  
 "Untitled (Multiband with  
 White Sides, Beveled),"  
 2017. Glass microspheres  
 in acrylic on canvas.  
 134.6 x 134.6 cm  
 53 x 53 in

# LISSON GALLERY

*WSJ Magazine*  
April 2018



PAINING: MARY CORSE, UNTITLED (WHITE MULTIBAND, BEVELED), 2011, GLASS MICROSPHERES IN ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 96 X 72 INCHES



raise two children. “She’s always been a little bit of a hermit,” says Conaty. “She’d rather be in the studio, with a paintbrush in her hand.”

Her path was not always easy. “I was a single mom and broke—totally broke,” Corse says now of a period that she says lasted until about 2000. “There were many times I would have preferred to quit.” She notes that she never had a job other than painting—except for a long-ago gig as a backup dancer in a ballet production, for which she was paid \$25. She always managed to sell a painting when she needed to. “Bellamy kept me working, and I’m sure he’s responsible for the grant I got,” she says about the National Endowment for the Arts fellowship she received in 1975. These days, she is represented by Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Lisson Gallery and Lehmann Maupin.

But it was her inclusion in the first iteration of *Pacific Standard Time*, the L.A.-focused, multiexhibition event of 2011, that helped put her back on the art-world radar. The fact that she made it into two of the shows—*Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970* at the Getty Center and *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego—indicated that the art world’s collective consciousness was naturally turning back to her.

As the works at the Whitney demonstrate, Corse has been on a remarkably consistent artistic

trajectory for decades. “Capturing light has been her quest,” notes Conaty. The earliest painting in the show, 1964’s *Untitled (Octagonal Blue)*, is one of the rare instances of color; many of the other pieces are predominantly white. “Different colors make for different internal journeys,” says Corse. “They create emotions and feelings.” But the clue is in the materials: The metal flakes embedded in the acrylic blue paint show her trying to render light. That quest continued with her fluorescent light boxes, like *Untitled (White Light Series)* from 1966.

Following this period, Corse moved to a phase where white itself represented light. The painting *Untitled (White Grid, Vertical Strokes)*, 1969, is a feat of subtle tone variation that makes the hand of the artist palpable. *Untitled (White Double Arch)*, 1998, presents a crisp black shape resembling a gateway, with a bifurcated white background that suggests an open book. Like all of her work, it’s an invitation of sorts.

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Her tools varied over the years, but they all served the underlying understanding that the perceptual was everything. “I realized there was no objective truth; it wasn’t out there,” she says. “That was a big deal.”

“Her work has evolved a lot, in a tight range,” says Turrell, who gives her credit for pushing forward even when the art world wasn’t very encouraging. “She kept the faith and stayed with it—she got through to the other side.” Being an older artist has its perks, says Turrell: “She’s freed up now in a way she might never have contemplated before. It’s a great period for her.”

Corse agrees, but true to form, she is focused on making new art rather than talking about it. The adulation of the exhibitions will be pleasant, but outside validation is not what has powered her this far, because that can be a trap. Despite her devotion to art and her shunning of doing anything else to make money, she chafes at the idea that it’s a job. “I don’t know if I want to be a ‘professional artist,’” she says, smiling. “I guess you want to stay free.” ●

“HER WORK HAS EVOLVED A LOT, IN A TIGHT RANGE.... IT’S A GREAT PERIOD FOR HER.”

—JAMES TURRELL



#### TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Clockwise from left: Corse’s painting *Untitled (Yellow, Black, White, Beveled)*, 2010; sketches of works in progress and general ephemera; a heap of used foam paintbrushes.

**D**RESSED IN COWBOY boots and jeans, her long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, Mary Corse stands in her new studio, on a break from a day of painting. “It has heating now—fancy,” she says, chuckling as she compares it to her drafty old workspace. “I can get a lot more done.” Her house, which is just behind the studio, is surrounded by towering palms and a backyard barbecue, as well as lemon trees laden with ripe yellow fruit. She can’t really have pets, because of the rattlesnakes.

The studio is located on a remote hilltop in out-there Topanga Canyon, about 25 miles west of downtown Los Angeles. On the wall behind Corse today is one of her signature “band paintings,” a 9-by-9-foot canvas with bold, hard-edged ribbons of black, yellow and white, all lined up in a row like a telegraph transmission from an unseen force. Corse scans the rest of her studio, which is filled with sketches and works in progress.

This month she shows at Dia:Beacon and London’s Lisson Gallery, and in June her survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art will be unveiled. “I’m so excited,” says Corse, 72, of the recognition she’s finally getting. “It’s been a long time coming.” At Dia:Beacon, eight of her works are going on long-term view for at least three years, putting her in the company of Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Walter De Maria and Louise Bourgeois, among other greats, while Lisson will present eight new pieces. The Whitney survey, which opens on June 8, will consist of more than two dozen works from the past 54 years. The luminous abstract canvases that will be seen there—each packs a maximal wallop with minimal means—will be a discovery for many visitors.

Although she has produced art consistently for over five decades, Corse is only now being recognized by the wider world as a key member of the Light and Space Movement. Centered largely in California, the movement emerged in the 1960s as an offshoot of conceptual art, one that attempted to understand artwork as a function of sensory perception. Artists associated with the movement include Robert Irwin, Peter Alexander and John McCracken, but its most famous member is James Turrell, known for his pleasingly disorienting *Skyspaces*, his blockbuster 2013 Guggenheim exhibition and for *Roden Crater*, a mammoth ongoing installation in a dormant Arizona volcano. About Corse’s career, Turrell, a friend, is blunt in calling out the challenges posed by gender bias, then and now. “It took her a lot longer because she’s a woman,” he says. “But she was the most interesting artist out there.” The possible impact

of gender on her career is not a topic Corse likes to address, but then again, she’s not a big talker.

Corse is an authentically Western personality, more about action than chat. As she herself said in the 1968 short film *White Light*, which documents her heyday as a young, groovy woman in a mostly male milieu, “Words are very difficult.”

“She’s a do-it-yourself person,” says Whitney curator Kim Conaty, who organized the museum’s show and has seen Corse turn down assistance in moving around enormous canvases. “She has the pioneering spirit.” For her silently shimmering white “light box” works of 1968—which hold the viewer’s gaze in a surprisingly strong grip, given their pared-down construction from Plexiglas and a few other com-

abundance of the two qualities in the name. Not true, according to Corse. “I’m not a landscape painter,” she says, standing in front of a band painting. “I don’t see the light of the sky and say, ‘Oh, I want to do that in a painting.’ No, it’s more about the human state, internal. I would paint the same paintings in New York as I did here.”

Corse’s approach has a decidedly meditative, Eastern philosophy quality—which does sound somewhat California-like. “What I learned was, you cannot think a painting,” she says. “They don’t come out well. You try to get rid of your thoughts so you can experience something else.” Corse adds that she has to get her mind “empty enough” to find “the pathway” to the composition.

But even after a lifetime at the canvas, she’s still finding new ways to improve her process. Pinned up on her studio wall is a series of some three dozen doodles done with black and blue pens, creating a forest of rectangles, crosshatches and other shapes. Recently, Corse realized that she was doodling whenever she was talking on the phone, and that those shapes were ending up in her art. So now she’s saving them more purposefully. “It’s a direct path to your subconscious,” she says.

A California native who grew up in Berkeley, Corse was already working abstractly in the seventh grade and admiring the art of mid-century greats Hans Hofmann and Josef Albers. She was “tracing their paintings, writing 10-page papers as a 12-year-old,” she says. She continued in this way, eventually going on to receive her B.F.A. from the Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts) in 1968.

As a young woman in her 20s and 30s, Corse already had traction in the art world, working with acclaimed New York dealer Richard Bellamy, whose

gallery presented early shows by a number of then up-and-coming artists including Yayoi Kusama, Richard Serra and Judd. Though now thought of as a West Coast artist, Corse was better appreciated by Easterners like Bellamy. “It’s not very intellectual out here, or it wasn’t then,” she says. It was for this reason, as well as for family considerations, that she took herself out of the urban art scene, such as it was at the time in Los Angeles. She moved, in 1970, to the same remote property she occupies now.

Even though she acknowledges she’s not “a city person,” Corse still seems surprised that she ended up in Topanga Canyon. “It was a cinder-block shack with a donkey walking past,” she says of the state in which she found the property. But the lack of distractions appealed to her, and she needed a place to >

ART TALK

## THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

For much of her more than five-decade career, the painter Mary Corse was largely overlooked. But with three new shows this season she’s become hard to miss.

BY TED LOOS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLYN DRAKE

ponents—Corse famously made her own Tesla coils, the electricity-conducting circuits that make them glow. “She made her own Tesla coils—people don’t do that,” says Courtney J. Martin, deputy director and chief curator of the Dia Art Foundation. “Flavin was into readymade, but Mary is the exact opposite.”

Despite her mistrust of words, once warmed up Corse will readily relay a few thoughts on a lifetime dedicated to art making. A pet peeve is the assumption that somehow the Light and Space Movement took place in California because of that state’s happy

**LEAD THE LINE**  
Mary Corse at her Topanga Canyon studio with  
*Untitled (White Multiband, Beveled)*, 2011.



raise two children. “She’s always been a little bit of a hermit,” says Conaty. “She’d rather be in the studio, with a paintbrush in her hand.”

Her path was not always easy. “I was a single mom and broke—totally broke,” Corse says now of a period that she says lasted until about 2000. “There were many times I would have preferred to quit.” She notes that she never had a job other than painting—except for a long-ago gig as a backup dancer in a ballet production, for which she was paid \$25. She always managed to sell a painting when she needed to. “Bellamy kept me working, and I’m sure he’s responsible for the grant I got,” she says about the National Endowment for the Arts fellowship she received in 1975. These days, she is represented by Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Lisson Gallery and Lehmann Maupin.

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[INTERVIEW](#) → [MARY CORSE](#)

## Quantum leap for Mary Corse as clutch of shows brings overdue recognition

Light and Space artist has exhibitions in London and Beacon, followed by New York retrospective

[HILARIE M. SHEETS](#)

4th May 2018 08:00 GMT

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Mary Corse in her Topanda Canyon studio © Joao Canziani

At the age of 72, Mary Corse will have her first solo museum exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art next month. A group of her pioneering abstract paintings has also recently been acquired by the Dia Art Foundation. Now recognised as sharing affinities with works by artists in the California Light and Space movement, including James Turrell and Robert Irwin, Corse's works will go on view this weekend (6 May) at Dia:Beacon alongside those of her better-known peers working contemporaneously in the 1960s and 1970s.

At her studio and home in the rugged hills of Topanga Canyon, where she moved from downtown Los Angeles in 1970 as a single mother, Corse has been busy completing new monochrome and striped paintings for her debut show with Lisson Gallery in London, also opening in May. (In addition to Lehmann Maupin, which has represented her since 2012, she was taken on by Kayne Griffin Corcoran) in 2016. Corse seems both gratified and bemused by the recent flurry of attention.

"For years, I was not accepted at all," Corse says. She recalls a group exhibition—including artists such as Irwin and Dan Flavin—that featured one of her 20ft paintings but "it wasn't even mentioned that I was in the show in the review". But Corse says she was always more focused on making her work and raising her sons than on a career. "Art was about your state of mind, your passion," she says, noting that it was not until the 1970s that students coming out of the California Institute of the Arts seemed more professionalised.



Untitled (White Multiple Inner Band) (2003) © Courtesy of Kayne Griffin Corcoran (Los Angeles), Lehmann Maupin (New York) and Lisson Gallery (London)

In 1964, when Corse was only 19, she shifted from making abstract expressionist paintings, influenced by Hans Hofmann and Josef Albers, to experimenting with all-white shaped canvases that were inflected with subtle grooves made from varying layers of white paint. "The vibration of light started to really interest me," she says.

The Whitney retrospective will highlight Corse's key moments of experimentation across five decades. "It's tightly focused on when she comes upon a new material or new structure that helps her play out her ideas of light and how one might find light inside the canvas," says Kim Conaty, the exhibition's curator.

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The show includes her electric light boxes, begun in 1966—solid white Plexiglas encasements of fluorescent tubes that emit light from the surfaces. Two years later she made them completely free and floating by removing all wires. While taking physics classes at the University of Southern California as she was completing her BFA at Chouinard Art Institute, Corse developed a technique of using Tesla coils embedded in a wall or pedestal to power and ionise the argon gas in the light boxes’ neon tubes. “It wasn’t that I was particularly scientific but I wanted to solve that problem,” she says.



Untitled (Space + Electric Light) (1968) © Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; Photo: Philipp Scholz

While she had reached for objectivity in her early monochromes by sanding out the brushstrokes, the study of quantum physics led to her interest in perception and subjectivity. On a drive home from Malibu in 1968 with the sun angling behind her, she was struck by how it lit up the white dividing line on the highway. She began experimenting with utilitarian glass microspheres used on roadways as a way of harnessing and refracting light on the surface of her paintings.

“It’s high-tech sand,” says Corse, who continues to use the material today, applied over white paint in wide vertical bands that divide the canvases in equal segments. From one side, a painting might look like a perfectly flat monochrome. From another angle, the microbeads light up in alternating stripes that dazzle and make visible the swooping brushstrokes.

“Mary’s very interested in the ethereal magic of what those microspheres

can do on the surface of the painting,” Conaty says. “An inner band that looks alternately like it’s greyish or a brighter white appears and then disappears. For her, the monochrome is something that’s active and alive, and you are part of creating that viewing experience.”

- *Mary Corse, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York, from 6 May*
- *Mary Corse, Lisson Gallery, London, 11 May-23 June*
- *Mary Corse: a Survey in Light, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 8 June-25 November*

 *Appeared in The Art Newspaper, 301 May 2018*

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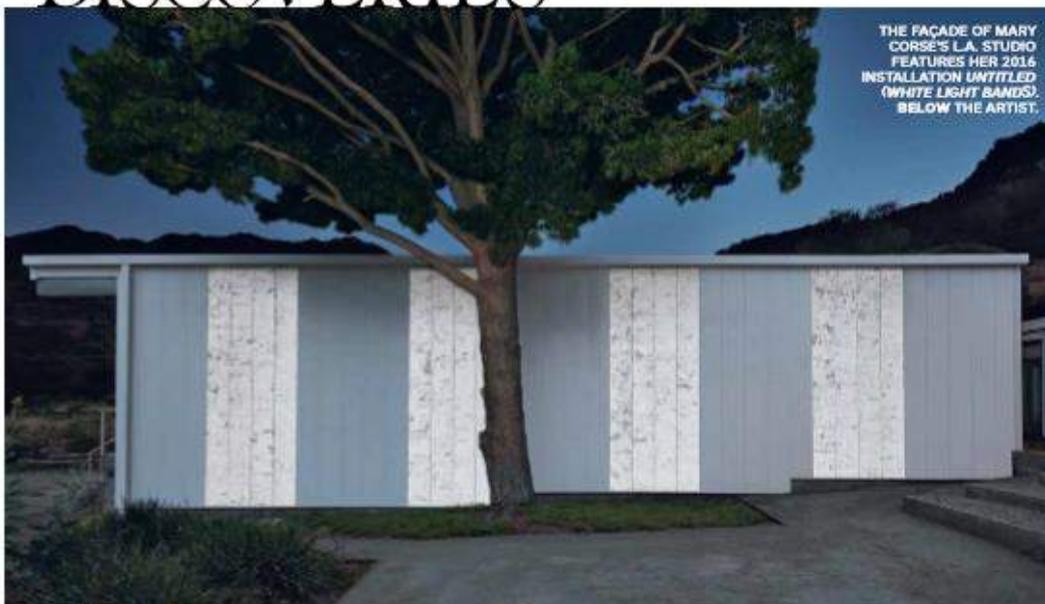
Preview

New York

Abstract art

Light and Space

## DISCOVERIES



THE FAÇADE OF MARY CORSE'S L.A. STUDIO FEATURES HER 2016 INSTALLATION *UNTITLED (WHITE LIGHT BANDS)*. BELOW THE ARTIST.



### In the Light

After working under the radar for more than 50 years, *Mary Corse* emerges from the art-world shadows with back-to-back museum and gallery openings

**N**estled in a canyon on the outskirts of Los Angeles, artist Mary Corse's house and studio are a short drive—but a world away—from the city's hustle and bustle. Cell service cuts out en route to her home, which is reached via a single-lane bridge and winding dirt road. Neighbors are few and far between, affording Corse ample room to paint in private. Which is what she's been doing—quietly, steadily—for more than five decades, building an important body of work while innovating on pace with established pioneers of the Light and Space movement. This May, however, she will take an overdue step center stage, with a long-term installation at Dia:Beacon and a debut show at London's Lisson Gallery, followed by her first solo museum survey at the Whitney in June.

"Mary's work eschews easy categorization," says Alexis Lowry, an associate curator at Dia. "As early as 1966, she was making light-based work that was as advanced as anything by more recognizable figures like Doug Wheeler or James Turrell. But she was also radically different, using paint to harness light and make space within her paintings that extends beyond the physical." The art world, Lowry notes, is only now giving Corse the attention she has long deserved. "A lot of Dia's recent focus has been looking at work made by women in the sixties and seventies that has been underappreciated."

Born in Berkeley, California, Corse started painting at the age of five, finding teenage inspiration in the abstract work of Josef Albers, Hans Hofmann, and Willem de Kooning. In 1964, she moved to L.A. to study at the Chouinard Art Institute, now CalArts, where she began using white to express light while experimenting with abstract-shaped canvases. Early all-white paintings encased in Plexiglas (so as to create pockets of space) eventually gave way to illuminated boxes that employed

MAKEUP BY KAT THOMPSON FOR X ARTIST'S; EXTERIOR: FILING STUDIO/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KAYNE GRIFFIN CORCORAN, LOS ANGELES

# DISCOVERIES

fluorescent lights, then argon-filled neon tubes. Eager to do away with wires, she enrolled in physics classes, engineering her own high-frequency generators using Tesla coils.

Her eureka moment came in 1968, when Corse observed reflective road markings and realized she could use the same glass microspheres found in highway paint. "I was able to put light in the painting, not just make a picture of light," she recalls. Incorporating the prismatic material in bands and arches, she has since created nuanced abstract fields that shift depending on ambient light and the position of the viewer. "I want to express an experience, a moment of truth," she says. "Perception needs to be in the painting."

The technique has arguably defined her practice ever since, sparking evolutions in primary colors and—using acrylic squares—black, as well as forays into ceramics. This past

**"I was able to put light in the painting, not just make a picture of light." —Mary Corse**

September, her latest paintings debuted in New York and L.A., with simultaneous shows at Lehmann Maupin and Kayne Griffin Corcoran galleries. The latter exhibition featured a light box placed in a refrigerated room, one of several ambitious projects, long gestating, that she is now realizing. "The cold heightens your consciousness," explains Corse, who also completed her first outdoor installation, a 2016 composition of bands on the exterior of her studio.

"You can see the focused progression of her work," says Lowry. "There is a vocabulary of forms and a means of applying paint that she is able to revisit, rethink, and reframe." Underpinning Corse's practice is a desire to escape the ego and the tyranny of relentless thought. "All my work is really about inner vision, about going inside yourself," she notes. "For me, painting is about the human condition. I paint so I can experience that." —SAM COCHRAN



1. A 2013 PAINTING IN HER STUDIO. 2. AN ARRAY OF BRUSHES, WHICH CORSE CUSTOMIZES. 3. CORSE'S HAND REACHING INTO A BUCKET OF HER SIGNATURE ACRYLIC SQUARES. 4. *UNTITLED (DNA SERIES)*, 2017, INSTALLED AT L.A.'S KAYNE GRIFFIN CORCORAN GALLERY THIS PAST SEPTEMBER.



# LISSON GALLERY

*Los Angeles Times*  
2 November 2017

## Los Angeles Times

### Into the Infinite with Mary Corse



Painter Mary Corse in her Topanga Canyon studio. (Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times)

If you stand outside of Mary Corse's studio in Topanga Canyon at just the right hour, you might get to see one of her works come to life. The painter, who is known for playing with the properties of light, last year transformed the exterior of her studio into one of her largest pieces to date. Along the building's exterior face, she painted a sequence of four simple columns employing one of the materials for which she is best known: white paint mixed with glass microbeads. The material is what gives street signs and lane markings their illuminative properties.

"They don't reflect light, they prism," Corse says. "It makes a triangle between the surface, the viewer and light. So if the viewer moves, then it changes."

In broad daylight, the columns on Corse's studio are barely perceptible. But at dusk, when the light dims, it is a different story. The moment the wall is hit by any stray beam of light, the columns take on an otherworldly glow. The effect is that of a portal opening into a parallel universe.

“I like work that takes you beyond,” Corse says, seated in her studio on a bright October day. “Thinking is great in its place. ... But my work resists the technological in a way. It resists thought. Thinking is finite. Thinking is in the past. I like work that takes you into the infinite.”

It’s hard not to have a *whoa* moment when standing before a work by Mary Corse.

Since the 1960s, the Los Angeles artist has produced a body of work that toys with light and the emotional states it can induce — using reflective and refractive materials to create pieces that can shift and change in surprising ways as you move before them.



Mary Corse transformed the exterior of her studio into a work of art: “Untitled (White Light Bands),” 2016, takes on an otherworldly glow at dusk.  
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

For much of her career, Corse has worked quietly in Topanga Canyon, apart from the hubbub of the art world, and apart from the largely male California Light and Space artists with which she is most frequently associated. That movement — identified with figures such as James Turrell, Larry Bell and Robert Irwin — was once clustered primarily around Venice Beach.

“One of the things I like about being here in Topanga,” Corse says, her bright blue eyes surveying the room, “I was left a lot to my own ideas.”

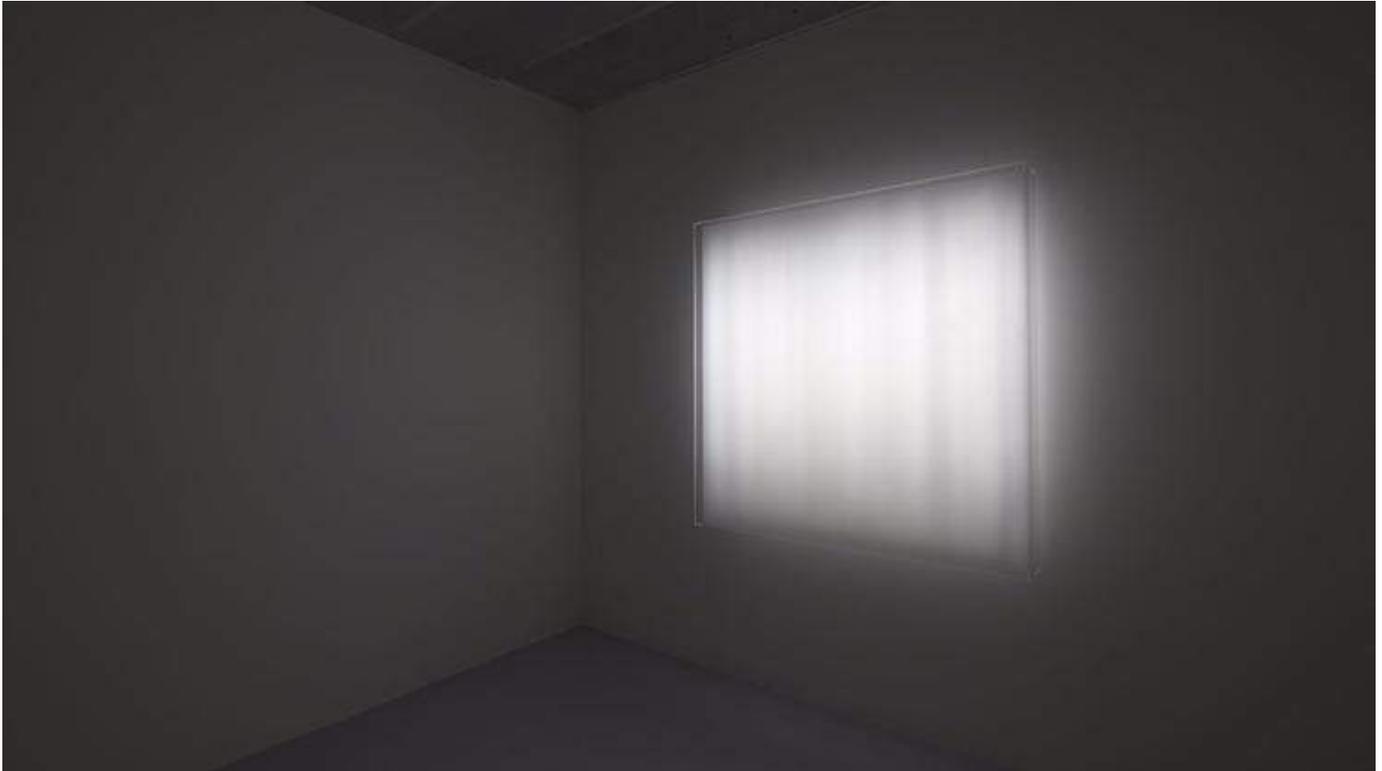
Corse has consistently made a living as an artist. She was part of the stable at Richard Bellamy’s famed Manhattan gallery. She has shown at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Her work is in the permanent collections of the prestigious Menil Collection in Houston and the Los Angeles County

Museum of Art. But as an artist, she has remained somewhat under the radar — known to a circle of art world insiders; less so to the general public.

That is changing.

Corse is the subject of a one-woman show now at Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles, with works from various stages in her career — including an immersive environment she first conceived in the 1960s titled “The Cold Room,” a free-standing structure kept at near-freezing temperatures, in which floats a spectral light box.

“If it’s very hot, you slow down,” she says. “If it’s colder, you wake up and pay attention. I like that state.”



"The Cold Room," 1968/2017, features a work made from light displayed in a chilly room.  
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

In May, Dia:Beacon, the temple to minimalism in New York’s Hudson Valley, will present a long-term installation of four recently acquired works covering the span of her career. And the following month, the Whitney Museum of American Art will open the doors on Corse’s first solo museum survey.

“It will be focusing on her critical moments,” says the exhibition’s curator, Kim Conaty, “starting with her early experiments with shaped canvases, when she was beginning to think about how to find light within painting.”

In powerful, yet understated ways, Corse uses materials both common (paint) and high-tech (Tesla coils) to create perceptual experiments that also nod to abstraction and Light and Space.

“She has not only used materials in innovative ways to literally capture light,” Conaty says, “but to also capture the metaphysical qualities of light. And she has done a lot of it through painting.”

Bill Griffin, a founding partner at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, who has represented Corse since last year, says he came to her work through Turrell, whom he also represents. “He’s a huge champion of Mary and the degree to which she has been under-recognized,” says Griffin, who feels it’s time for Corse to get her due. “This is a story of somebody who has been completely committed for five decades, regardless of what the market or what anybody said. She has carved out an incredible body of work on her own.”

## The light spark

Corse grew up in Berkeley, where she cultivated an early interest in both art and ballet — dancing until the age of 16. On a couple of occasions, she even appeared in performances for the Oakland Ballet Company.

Through ballet, “I learned to work hard,” she says. “The freedom of ballet is when you are finally moving across that floor doing these amazing jumps and turns to the music. You really lose yourself in this other world. It’s another state.”



A view of the exterior of "The Cold Room" at Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles.  
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

Art offered her similarly ecstatic states — and the path she would ultimately follow. Corse says the private girls’ school she attended afforded her the luxury of a well-trained art teacher who cultivated in students a serious interest in abstraction.

“I was introduced to [Willem] de Kooning, [Hans] Hoffman, Josef Albers — a lot of artists,” she says. And she was taught that “painting did something.”

“You looked at a Hoffman and things were moving around back and forth,” she explains. “Same with Albers. You stare at it and you see one color and then you see another. That was important to me.”

After high school, she attended UC Santa Barbara, where she graduated with a degree in fine arts in 1963. Shortly thereafter, she went on to the Chouinard Art Institute (later to become part of CalArts) for her master’s degree. By the time she landed at Chouinard, Corse was already on her way to defining her mature artistic voice. She had explored color and abstraction — creating octagonal paintings that experimented with the nature of the medium, adding metallic flake to her paint for extra brilliance, placing works inside Plexiglas boxes to give them an added dimension.

In those early years in Los Angeles, she lived and worked out of a warehouse on the fringes of East Hollywood, where she began creating light boxes out of argon tubes.

“I was on my own trip,” she recalls of that era. “[Painter] Emerson Woelffer was my teacher. He would come by every six months. I worked more there than you do at school.”



"Untitled (DNA Series)," 2017, installed at Kayne Griffin Corcoran.  
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

Over time, Corse became interested in creating squares of light that appeared to hover in space. To get rid of all the electrical clutter, she began employing a high-frequency generator, known as a Tesla coil, to light the bulbs. (Mere proximity to a Tesla coil can illuminate a bulb without the need for wires or transformers.)

Most remarkably, Corse didn’t farm out the electrical engineering. She did it herself. In fact, sitting in the middle of her studio is a working Tesla coil. She walks over, flips it on and places a light tube a few inches away. It flickers right on.

“See, it creates this spark,” she says. “I once built one that was 4 feet tall.”

The technology required the artist to have a working knowledge of physics — something that has also inspired her work.

“Quantum physics really impressed me,” she says. “I was starting to understand that there is no objective reality as clear as we might think. I had been looking for this objective truth, making these light pieces that were true. Then I realized that perception was as much a part of reality as reality.”

The turning point came during a sunset drive in 1968. She was headed east and noticed that the light was illuminating the lane markings and street signs before her. “I was in Malibu,” she recalls. “The West was behind me and everything was lighting up.”

Corse immediately looked into the source of that light. It came courtesy of microbeads used to make roadway markings more visible in the dark. At that moment she realized she didn’t need actual light to create a perception of light. She has been using glass beads ever since.



“Untitled (White Multiple Inner Band, Horizontal Strokes),” by Mary Corse. Glass microspheres in the paint give her work a luminous quality.  
(Flying Studio / Mary Corse, Kayne Griffin Corcoran)

This results in paintings that are never the same from one moment to the next. Step back and steely light might turn white. Move to the right and a previously dim painting lights up like a flash. Walk back and forth in front of it, and you might feel a rippling effect. (All of this is impossible to convey in the photographs. To truly see a Corse painting, you have to do so in person.)

“My work is about light and space, but I’d like to add time,” she says. “The paintings are long. It takes time to walk by. I put time into the paintings.”

Conaty says the work requires some commitment from the viewer.

“You pass it, you do the double take, you come back, you move along the side of it,” she says. “You can’t just walk through.”

## Painting the infinite



Mary Corse, shown in her studio, will be the subject of a career survey at the Whitney Museum in New York. (Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times)

In the early '70s, Corse relocated to Topanga Canyon, in search of a quiet place to work.

"I came the first time myself and I went with the first realtor and the first place he brought me was here and it was a cinder-block shack with a donkey walking through it," she says with a laugh. "It was like destiny. I just knew." The shack is now the site of a small, well-appointed home. Immediately adjacent is her sun-filled studio.

In this peaceful spot she has raised her two sons. She has also produced multiple series of works featuring a range of materials, including inky fired clay panels that take the form of the earth (all crafted in a kiln that Corse built herself).

Over the years, there have been high points: her inclusion in the high-profile 2011 Pacific Standard Time exhibition "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego brought her work to the attention of a new generation of critics and curators.

There have also been myriad challenges: During the Northridge earthquake in 1994, a boulder came rolling down the mountain and smashed into her living room. Plus, there was the very public bankruptcy of Ace Gallery, the Beverly Hills space that represented her for a number of years. It is a matter that Corse prefers not to dwell on. "We are moving on," she says.

Whatever is happening outside the studio, however, is less important to Corse than what happens in it.

"It's my sanity," she says. "As soon as the paint brush is in my hand it's another conversation. It's the infinite rather than the finite."

The success has been nice, but what holds the most meaning for this artist lies in the magic of making.

As we wrap up our interview, Corse stands to see me out.

"Now," she says with a smile, "I can put on my paint clothes and get to work."

□ Carolina A. Miranda

# LISSON GALLERY

*ARTnews*

29 September 2017

## ARTNEWS

'The Painting's Not Really on the Wall': Mary Corse on 50 Years of Her Elusive, Seductive Art, and Shows in Los Angeles and New York

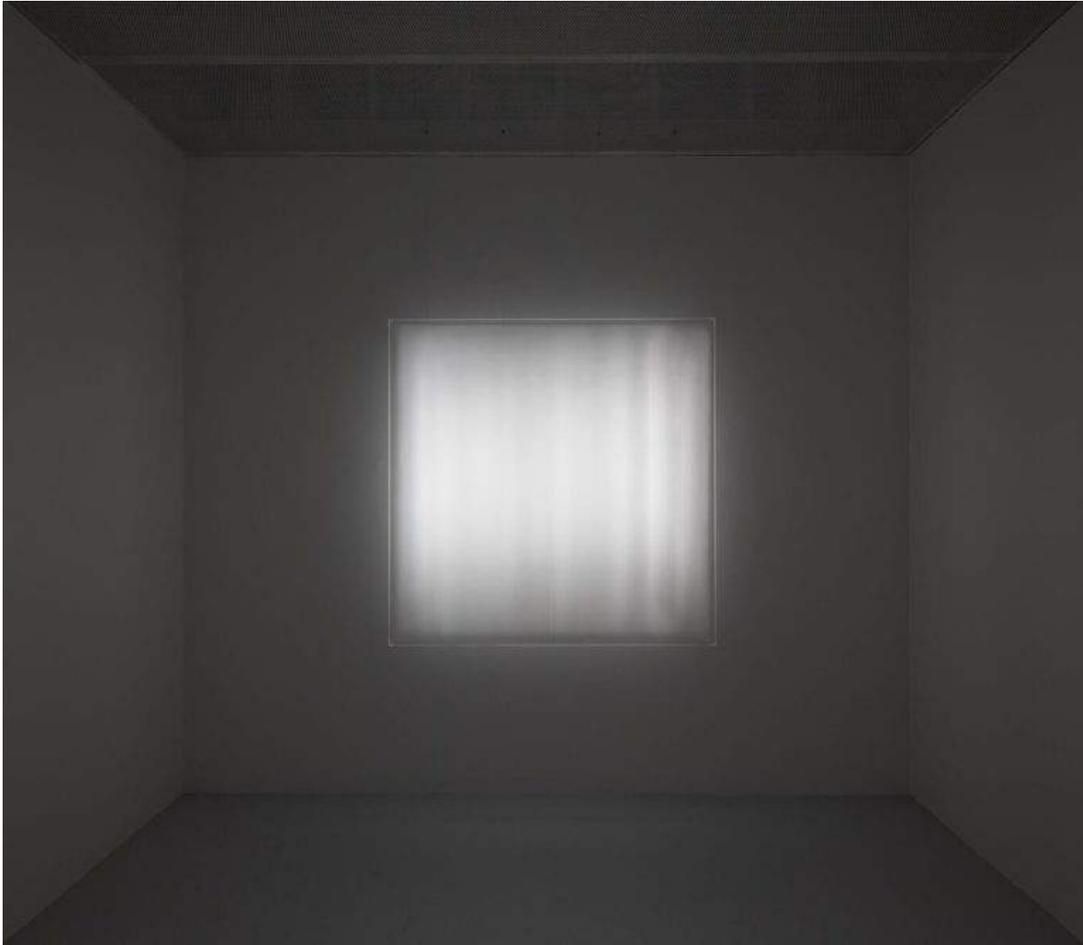


Exterior view of Mary's Corse's *The Cold Room*, 1968/2017. Courtesy the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles. Photo credit: Flying Studio

In 1967, Mary Corse first came up with the idea to build a cold room to house one of her ascetically minimal, neon-lit light boxes. She imagined giving visitors coats before they entered the chamber. She didn't get a chance to build the piece at the time, but half a century later, a 12-foot-high, 12-foot-wide white cube now stands inside Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles, its interior cooled to 40 degrees. The light box hangs against the room's southernmost wall. In this finally realized version, there are no coats. The chill is part of the experience.

"I had the idea that it would be great to look at this in the cold, because the cold, I've since found out, heightens your consciousness," Corse told me, as we sat in her studio in rural Topanga Canyon, about 30 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles, on a recent Saturday afternoon, a few days before work on the installation began.

The cold room at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, part of her first solo show there, which is on view through November 11, has a heavy sliding door and an elegant look—brushstrokes are visible in white paint on the exterior. “It’s going to be very quiet,” she said, “just like a wakeup in the cold to look at the white light.”



Exterior view of Mary Corse's *The Cold Room*, 1968/2017. Courtesy the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles. Photo credit: Flying Studio

Corse, who got her MFA from Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts) in 1968, began making art in the Los Angeles area a few years before then, and has stayed put ever since, working with light and primarily white and black monochromes the whole time. Her best-known paintings are the shimmering white ones she has long made with glass microspheres, the same material used to make traffic signs glow at night. Four feature in the KGC show, alongside the new works she calls DNA paintings, composed of bands of white and bands of small black acrylic squares. Another suite of DNA paintings are on view at Lehmann Maupin in New York, where another solo show runs through October 7.

“Like Athena who sprang from the head of Zeus fully formed, dressed and armed, Corse has been producing mature work . . . since her first show at age nineteen,” curator Drew Hammond, a fierce supporter, wrote in a 2011 catalogue essay. She had an early start: at the private school she attended in Berkeley, her Chouinard-educated teacher taught a tiny class of adolescent students about Hans Hoffman and Willem de Kooning. “I went back and looked at some early work,” Corse said, meaning by “early” the art she made in middle school. “A couple of them had this glowing white

cup in the middle of the painting. When you look back and see these little traces of things, you wonder, How long has that been there?"



Installation view of "Mary Corse" at Lehmann Maupin in New York in 2017. Matthew Herrmann/Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

As a student at Chouinard, Corse worked from her own studio in Downtown L.A., building her first light boxes, initially placing fluorescent lights inside Plexi mounted on white-painted, sanded-down wood. Later, she learned to use argon-fueled neon, wirelessly powered by tesla coil generators hidden in a wall or ceiling. Her advisor, Abstract Expressionist Emerson Wollfer, came by every six months to see her work. A photo from 1966 shows Corse sitting and staring up at a light box bigger than she is. It's suspended from the ceiling via metal cords, and nothing about her industrial set-up looks remotely amateur.

She arrived in L.A. at a fruitful moment. Her fellow Chouinard classmates included Laddie John Dill, Doug Wheeler, Al Ruppberg—and, a decade before, Robert Irwin, an artist to whom she's often compared, had gone to the school and was at work in the city. But she didn't feel part of their world. "There wasn't a camaraderie," she said, "especially toward a girl, and I dressed like a girl. It was before Women's lib."

By the 1970s, she'd left Downtown, moving with her young children into what she described as a shack in Topanga Canyon. She never had another job besides making art. "I felt like, I've got kids and painting," she said. "That's two things right there." This meant that she often just scraped by, trying to manage her art career without much outside help. The L.A. dealer Nick Wilder, who Corse said "didn't know what to do with what I was doing," brought New York

dealer Richard Bellamy up for a studio visit in the 1970s. Bellamy, an unconventional dealer who had helmed the short-lived Green Gallery in Midtown Manhattan before starting a number of other projects, fell for Corse's paintings. "Her great beauty and spirit are unbroken by a long series of misfortunes," Bellamy wrote of her in a letter to a collector, around the time he helped her scrape together funds to build a track system that would hoist the textured clay tiles that made up her "black earth" paintings from her studio floor out to her kiln. "She has the violet glow," Bellamy continued.



Mary Corse, *Untitled (DNA Series)*, 2017, at Lehmann Maupin in New York.  
Ron Amstutz/ Courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles.

"I was very naïve," Corse told me. "I said [to Bellamy], 'Sure okay, you're my dealer.'" Occasionally, he sold some paintings, but he wasn't known for his financial acumen. "He simply wasn't interested in making [money]," Judith Stein says in the preface to her recent book about the dealer, *Eye of the Sixties*, "even as the contemporary art market exploded around him." Corse put it another way: "I think he wanted his artists to suffer."

As Bellamy tried to develop a New York audience for her work, the L.A. art world lagged behind. In 1995, *Los Angeles Times* critic William Wilson, who had been covering art in the city for 30 years, wrote, "Mary Corse has made art here since the early '60s. She emerged in the '70s only to get lost in the crowd..." She won a Guggenheim Theodoran Award in 1971, a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1975 and had occasional solo gallery exhibitions throughout the 1970s, selling work just often enough to keep afloat.



Installation view of "Mary Corse: Then and Now" at Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles in 2017. Courtesy the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles. Photo credit: Flying Studio

But like so many women of her generation, she lacked consistent institutional support. Wilson continued, "This art does not need membership in a category to be interesting. But simply as a fact of its sheer physical existence, it does belong in the annals of California Light and Space."

Corse has never identified with Light and Space as a California movement. "I'm not a landscape painter," she told me, as she has told interviewers before. "So if I were in New York I'd do the same thing." Her work is not regional, in other words. She has also never like being identified as a "woman artist," she said. "So I didn't do all-women shows. That didn't help me either." She's not sure she likes being identified at all. "I don't really identify even with my name," she says. "I am not. People say, Are you Mary Corse? [And I say,] 'Once in a while.'"

"Back in the 1960s, Corse said that she believed she could somehow escape herself, erasing her hand from her work and thus finding a greater truth. "I was looking for an outdoor reality," she said. "An objective reality. I was trying to make something true out there." Around this time, she stumbled upon quantum physics. She needed an electric part to build a generator to keep her light boxes lit, and she had to take a physics test in order to acquire the part. Quantum physics "got me thinking in a whole different way," she said. "I started to realize how perception, our created reality has more to do with reality—there's not really an objective reality out there." She returned to painting, and stopped trying to remove all traces of strokes.



Installation view of "Mary Corse: Then and Now" at Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles in 2017. Courtesy the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles.

In her white on white paintings, four of which hang on the walls surrounding the cold room at KGC, the brushstrokes create a trippy experience. Made with the microspheres, they look different from every angle. "See how it changes sometimes in the light, and sometimes it doesn't?" Corse asked, walking along a wall of her studio that held one of the new, large white and black DNA paintings that would soon leave for the gallery. The small, sleek acrylic squares that make up the black bands resemble confetti—there's precision to Corse's work, but not necessarily over-seriousness. It's okay if, from one angle or another, the work looks like it's drenched in glitter. "The painting's not really on the wall, it's in your perception," she said. "It also brings in time—the time to walk along the whole thing. They forgot it should be Light and Space and Time."

None of the other artists prominently associated with Light and Space returned to painting. Turrell, Irwin, Dewain Valentine, and Craig Kaufman all left the canvas behind. But Corse doesn't see her early attempt at objectivity as antithetical to her subsequent paintings. "It's odd, but it's almost like everything is true in art," she says. "Just because you do one thing, say you make a black painting, doesn't mean making a white painting next invalidates it. It's all true. It's fascinating."

□ Catherine G. Wagley

# LISSON GALLERY

*Artforum*

11 October 2017

## ARTFORUM

### Critics' Picks: Mary Corse



Mary Corse, *Cold Room* (detail), 1968/2017

Argon, Plexiglas, high-frequency generator, light tubes, monofilament, compressor, refrigeration panels, plaster  
50 x 50 x 6 1/2". Installation view.

It is a wonder to step inside Mary Corse's *Cold Room*, 1968/2017, an installation that took the artist nearly fifty years to realize. Once you're past the sliding door and within the small, freestanding space, a distinct feeling of solitude descends. Immediately, skin responds: every exposed inch enlivened by the temperature-controlled room. A floating plane of light (argon and tubes) flickers with inconstancy, powered from a distance by a hidden Tesla coil. (The artist has been building high-frequency generators for similarly functioning works since she took a physics class in the late 1960s.) Unlike Yayoi Kusama's mirrored infinity rooms, which tend to drive even the most dispassionate art viewer into a social-media frenzy, *Cold Room* is a place of retreat and quietude, absorption and reflection.

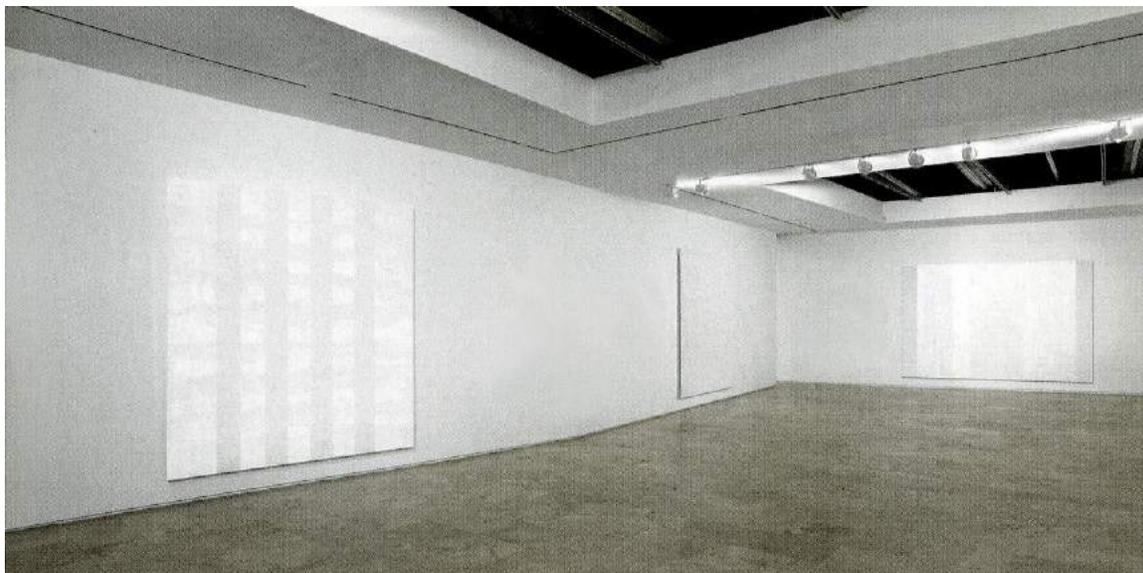
This is true, too, of the other works in this show, all paintings completed in the past seventeen years. In art-historical accounts, if Corse is discussed at all, she gets placed at the edges of California's Light and Space movement. This is at once apropos and entirely beside the point. Phenomenological perception of light is certainly a major theme in her work—as evidenced by the prodigious use of tiny glass microspheres, the kind used to paint white lines on asphalt roads, which shimmer and animate the surfaces of paintings such as *Untitled (White Multiband, Beveled)*, 2011. But there are other concerns as well: the way the spheres seem expressionistically streaked in raking light, or how the five untitled paintings from the ongoing "DNA Series," 2017–, employ shiny black acrylic squares, as if someone had dragged a Barnett Newman painting through a Bob Mackie showroom, lifting some of the seriousness of Corse's sparse palette. □ Andy Campbell

# LISSON GALLERY

*Art in America*  
May 2017

## Art in America

Exhibition Review: Mary Corse at Lehmann Maupin



View of Mary Corse's exhibition, showing three works, all 2011, glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas, at Lehman Maupin.

### MARY CORSE LEHMANN MAUPIN

Not unlike her scintillating paintings, Mary Corse has flickered in and out of visibility during the past five decades. While her early association with the California Light and Space movement brought her significant acclaim, many younger viewers are experiencing her works for the first time, largely due to the widespread and renewed interest in the Los Angeles art scene of the 1960s. For a recent solo show at Lehmann Maupin, her first in New York since 1995, Corse exhibited five new paintings (all 2011) that demonstrate her abiding commitment to the monochrome and its attendant perceptual pleasures.

In 1968, after creating a series of works that encased fluorescent bulbs in Plexiglas boxes, Corse discovered glass microspheres, the tiny reflective beads that are commonly used to brighten highway signage. Corse has long combined these microspheres with white acrylic paint, carefully brushing the mixtures on large

canvases before sanding certain areas to a pristine finish. Though they sometimes appear blank and uninflected, the "White Light Paintings" are highly responsive to their environments and reveal internal complexities when lighting conditions fluctuate or viewers change their positions.

Emphatic grids tend to govern Corse's earliest works, but all five of the new paintings are subdivided into wide vertical bands that gain and shed luminosity as one moves through the gallery, a mysterious effect that seems to derive from variable brushstrokes and microsphere densities. *Untitled (One Inner Band)*, for example, offers uniform whiteness from certain angles while revealing its tripartite composition from others; the central panel of this 8½-foot-square canvas can suddenly glisten like a silvery mirror. Similar oscillations greet the mobile spectator of *Untitled (Four Inner Bands)*, for whom the multiple vertical stripes continually trade inert matterness for a lively shimmer. And here, especially from a raking perspective, one also notices the horizontal

brushstrokes that cover the ground and provide a gestural counterpoint to the painting's geometric rigor.

The primary experience of Corse's work is no doubt phenomenological, betraying her emergence as an artist during the heyday of Minimalism. But aspects of this show might place some viewers in a meditative state. While four of the paintings were hung in pairs on opposite walls, the fifth and largest work spanned an adjacent wall to create a chapel-like space that Mark Rothko might have appreciated. Measuring 8½ by 13 feet, *Untitled (One Inner Band with White Sides)* resembles a lustrous polyptych whose narrow outer bands are painted a flat white. Possessing the scale and structure of an altarpiece, it induces quiet contemplation of its three central panels, which invariably leads to fleeting moments of illumination.

—Matthew Nichols

# LISSON GALLERY

*The Brooklyn Rail*  
3 June 2015

**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## In Conversation: Mary Corse with Alex Bacon



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Alex Bacon met with Mary Corse at her solo exhibition at Lehmann Maupin (open through June 13, 2015) to discuss the issues she has been dealing with consistently and incisively over her five-decade career.

Alex Bacon (Rail): Could you discuss how you came to make art?

Mary Corse: I grew up in Berkeley and had the rare opportunity of being in a private school. My teacher had gone to Chouinard, which later became CalArts, and I had two or three hours a day of art class from the time I was 12. Early on, I was introduced to artists like Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, and Josef Albers. So I actually come out of New York Abstract Expressionism.

Rail: So would you say you skipped having any kind of figurative phase?

Corse: Well, I did have to keep a sketchbook and learn to draw trees, and as a child I drew figuratively all the time. But I lost interest in figurative art very early. By the time I was 13 I was writing 10-page papers on de Kooning, and tracing the paintings. So I had a very early understanding of, and introduction to, abstraction. By the time I went to art school I was already abstract.

Rail: Were you seeing the work in person as well as hearing about it?

Corse: Not so much. It was mostly reading about them, and tracing them from books. It's true that I didn't see them in person first. Early on, I thought all real artists were dead. [*Laughs.*]

Rail: Were you affected at all by the art that was being made around you in early 1960s L.A.?

Corse: I think in L.A. there was a small group of likeminded people—even though I didn't know them and we worked separately. I was working with light and space too. People like to say things like, "Oh, you're from California, so you must be painting the skies or something." But I'm not a landscape painter; those literal aspects of my environment have never influenced me, and that includes other working artists. Since coming out of Abstract Expressionism, I was never influenced by the outside world.

In New York, you've got artists upstairs and downstairs, but I was left to myself, so I didn't have a lot of influences. I also didn't really know a lot of these other artists who were in L.A. at the time. I was living up on a mountain, and that was good. Showing wasn't the big thing for me either. I was mostly painting.

Rail: So when you were in art school you continued studying abstract art?



Mary Corse, "Untitled (Red/Blue)" (1964) Acrylic on canvas, 61 1/2 x 52 1/4". Courtesy the artist.

Corse: Yes, and I continued painting abstractly. Then at some point—I think it was around 1964—I started getting rid of more and more and I got very minimal. For example, it would be a red canvas with a blue corner. That painting was important because I started to see light flashing where the red and blue passages met. So I got interested in that light, and I started my first white painting. Well actually there were two first paintings—they were shaped canvases. Early on I was trying to put the light in the painting, even though I didn't realize it. In 1964 I made an eight-foot octagonal blue painting with fine metal flakes and another octagonal white painting, and

that was the beginning. For at least 10 years I did only white paintings, starting with reduced, minimal, shaped canvases.

Rail: And those were just flatly painted, there were no metal flakes in them?

Corse: Flat paint, but they had an indented edge. Those hexagonal, six-sided, white canvases were painted relatively thick, but not that thick; the straight line down the center was thinner, so it was indented. What I find interesting is, when I go back and look at the early work I realize that the things I'm still working on now, I was already exploring back then without realizing it. For example, now one of my main inventions or creations is the "inner band." If you look at the flat surface from the side you don't see it, but when you move around it appears—it's like it's actually inside the painting. Though this should be impossible, since there's no "inside" to a flat, two-dimensional plane. This inner band exists first in an abstract perceptual reality, just like the other side of the moon, which we know exists, but which we've never actually seen, except maybe in photographs. The inner band is in several of the works in this show at Lehmann-Maupin. But when I look back I realize it was also there all the way back in 1965; for example, in a series of 3D columns where there was a space between each panel.

Rail: In 1968 there was an article on you in *Artforum* by Fidel Danieli which talks about your work as if you were moving to abandon painting for objects, as many of your peers were doing around this time.

Corse: Oh, that was when I was building those big light boxes.

Rail: People described these as being like a slab of light suspended; and, even though they were, technologically speaking, very complex, they were perceptually very direct.



Mary Corse, "Untitled" (1967). Plexiglas and light, 6' x 6' x 10". Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin.

Corse: Those are big: I would say six feet square and five inches deep of solid light, and then I'd have a space of clear plexiglas on each side, so it was a light space. Each piece, starting with those early paintings, would progress from the one before. In the '60s I didn't want any human touch. I got rid of the brushstrokes, sanded each one out. But then out of those monochrome paintings, I made those boxes; they were white with space. And

then out of the white came light. So I would have light coming out of the wall a couple inches, like three inches. And then after that I thought: "let's get rid of the wall," and made them with plexi on both sides. So then it became a free-floating, two-sided combination of light and space. And then I would look at it, and I was suspending it with transparent wires. But then the wires, what's the meaning of those? Are those necessary? So then I developed the high-frequency generator that I put in the wall, out of sight, so I could get rid of the wires, and they could hang wireless on clear monofilament.

I think at those times I was trying to make an object with an objective truth. As a painter and as an artist, you are trying to make something that's true. You are trying to have no lies, no ego, no delusion. Trying to get to the essence of our truth. So I got rid of all the wires, trying to make the work this objective truth. There was this place, Edmund Scientific, where they sold all these science parts, and when I wanted to make a bigger light box with the high frequency generator, in order to get the parts I had to go take a physics class. You had to pass this test before they'd let you have the part.

Rail: When would this have been?

Corse: To make the bigger one—like 1967, 1968, somewhere around there. So I did build the one with the bigger generator and everything. But when I was taking the physics class, I started studying quantum physics. And all this stuff started coming together and I realized that there is no objective truth. Subjectivity and perception is a part of reality, and that's what sent me back to painting, back to the brushstroke, because you can't get rid of subjectivity. There is no specific object.

Rail: In order to take this position, did you feel the need to reject certain other positions that were important in the art world at that moment? Because you just used the term, I'm thinking, of course, of Donald Judd's seminal 1965 essay, "Specific Objects."

Corse: No, I loved Donald Judd's work. It wasn't about rejecting the outside world again.

Rail: You didn't need to deal with those ideas that way?

Corse: I was less aware of artists at the time than I should have been because I was so busy. I don't really reject Judd at all. Part of me thinks that physics and art are two sides of the brain, they sort of parallel one another in their discoveries. I think as time goes on, physics discovers what artists are already painting or doing. Like, here's the bomb and here's Abstract Expressionism. Here's field theory and here's Jackson Pollock. So I think it was just the opportune time to come to the understanding that there is no outside reality without perception. In other words, the tree doesn't fall if no one is looking.

Rail: Having that realization, did you think that you needed to push the work in a certain direction?

Corse: Having that realization allowed me to put the brushstroke back in—allowed me to accept subjectivity, which before I had out, out, out. The work before was totally minimal.

Rail: Would you say that before that moment you were working your way "out of painting," like so many of your peers? Giving it up for the promise of direct phenomenological impact seemingly guaranteed by objects sited in actual space and atmospheric conditions?

Corse: No, I called those light box pieces "light paintings," even though they were three-dimensional. They were very thin, and I always thought that the essence of painting is not about the paint. I was more interested in the

flatness, the light, and the space. To me that was what painting was about. It didn't have to be made out of paint and canvas. It's about the meaning and the experience.

See, when I was doing the light pieces, the plexi boxes, when I went back to painting realizing that, it was still about light and space. I wanted to put the light in the painting. So I went around trying to find out how to put the light in the painting and I tried all kinds of different paints and all that, and I came upon the glass microspheres they use on the white lines on the road, which light up at night when car lights hit them. And then I was finally able to truly put the light in the painting. The first works with glass microspheres were the white grid paintings I started in 1968.

Rail: That's really interesting, because as far as I'm aware, you're the only artist who had these realizations about light as a kind of material entity, as well as a visual one, and then went back to, or kept on, painting. Because, obviously, for a lot of artists—like James Turrell, say, the idea is, "Oh if I'm interested in light, if that's the thing I like about these paintings of the past, then what I want is actual light, so I should use a light fixture or else court and contain the ambient conditions of a given space." This is Dan Flavin, this is Robert Irwin, this is the dominant story of: we give up painting because we want actual light.

Of course, as you're saying, in your practice you also experimented with what light fixtures and electric and neon light could do, but it ultimately wasn't sufficient for what you were interested in doing with light. And I wonder if you could talk about what that difference is for you between the technological, mechanical light used by artists like Turrell and Flavin and the kind of light that you are using in your painterly work. For example, it's like, if I look at a street lamp, I have an experience, but I have a sense of, "that's there." It's discrete; it's contained in this object. But what's interesting and exciting about your paintings is that the viewer activates it.



Mary Corse, "Untitled (White light, beveled edges)" (1984). Glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas, 9 × 9'.  
Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin.

Corse: Exactly.

Rail: When I move around them, the quality of light in the paintings changes. When a cloud goes over the sun, they change.

Corse: Right. Your perception, your subjectivity, your position, *you* are involved. It brings the viewer into the painting. The art's not really on the wall, it's in your perception.

Rail: Which is maybe less true of the light box, right? Because it's static. It's an experience of light, but it's not going to change too much in the course of me looking at it.

Corse: Right. What interests me now a lot too, especially with the black and white paintings, is when I put the black and the white together: that edge. It's so optical. It starts flashing. We've never seen energy. And you actually start to see energy. And in the thin ones, if I make the line thin enough, I can actually see an energy field. So, on the side, I think I'm interested in seeing energy. That's a new concern.

Rail: When you started making the paintings with the microspheres, you also created very specific lighting conditions for them?

Corse: Not very specific, but it sort of evolves, especially when you do a show. You do a show and people come in for five minutes, so you want them to see that it does all light up. For example, when you live with a painting, it could be a dark night and you go down to the kitchen and turn the light on and in another room the painting is activated, and that becomes a conversation. Or say it's dark and the full moon lights it up, so it's constantly changing.

Rail: In the early exhibitions, how did you do the lighting?

Corse: I guess I was a little more specific with the early microsphere paintings. At one point I wanted viewers to see them as a single light field.

Rail: So you actually wanted to light them in such a way that the whole work was equally luminescent?

Corse: At one point, yeah. To show that it was a light field.

Rail: That is fascinating. So in the beginning you actually thought of them as single, uniform planes of light, rather than changing ones. Is that true?

Corse: More then than now. So that's what I had learned from the paintings. I came out of the light field. I was making an objective field of light.

Rail: So would you say that the painting is a tool to activate perception, rather than a discrete, autonomous object?

Corse: Yes, a tool that creates an experience that makes us understand reality in a deeper way, or which generates a new meaning, or presence, or state of being.

Rail: It seems that, in the beginning, you were very interested in eliminating color. Working with neutral colors: whites, blacks, grays, etc.

Corse: Yes, I got rid of everything I felt was unnecessary. For about 10 years I only painted white paintings, very ethereal. But then I actually found myself needing to go into the mountains and mold the earth—not many people know about these—I call them “Earth Paintings.” They were black and molded off the earth. So I went from the white light to the black earth. I built this big kiln, and the kiln builder said—this will never work. It was pretty bizarre, this big kiln. So I made these black earth pieces, and then that allowed me to do black paintings with the reflective glass microspheres I had been using in the white paintings.

I have added color since then. The primaries: red, yellow, and blue. I did this because I realized that these are the colors that emerge when you break down white light into its component colors, which are the primaries. I was also eventually able to use color with the microspheres, because it lights up with outside interaction—the viewer, whatever light source, etc.—so there the color is actually light and not applied. I didn’t want to make a picture of color, as one does when one uses pigmented paints. I’m a realist and once I could make color a function of light and activated by the interaction of the viewer, finally then I could use color.

At first I would put just one color with black and white, I wouldn’t put two colors, for example, because I didn’t want to establish or suggest any relationship between the colors. But more recently I’ve found that I can put them all together in the same work, but then the painting has to be very large to keep the three colors separate. I’m working on one of these paintings now and it had to be over 40 feet long to keep the colors apart. And now I have a show the Lehmann Maupin, which is all black, white, and color. There each color is in a separate room so that there is no relationship between the colors.

Rail: How do you know if a given work is successful?

Corse: If it touches me, if I get it and it teaches me something. If I get it, then there’s the possibility that someone else might get it on that same level. Also, I think it should have different levels. But you try to create something that has a level that can go deeper and deeper and deeper, that isn’t just that initial, surface one. That’s why I’ve never had any interest in art that’s a political statement, because it’s too narrow a context. It’s too specific to a certain country at a certain time. I’m trying to reach the essence of the human being and the states of experience that exist there.

Rail: So would you say you are more excited about the finished painting than by the process of making it? What’s the process like?

Corse: I would say both because I love painting. As soon as that brush is in my hand, it becomes a different conversation. Then I’m out of finite, limited thinking. So that process to me is so important. That’s why I like doing big paintings—35 feet long sometimes even bigger. I like it when you’re painting for three hours without stopping, because then you go through all the circles of your mind. I guess one might call it a meditation.

Rail: So in a way, it’s working from this very internal personal experience, both your own, which then expands out in the way it affects the viewer.

Corse: The point is to take us out of thought. I always say, you can’t think a painting. For me, anyway. You have to empty out thought, and then something pops in.

Rail: How do you go about working on a painting then?

Corse: Well each painting comes out of the one before, so I sort of know what I'm doing. I visualize it in my mind, often like the kinds of visions you have when you're asleep, dreaming. Then come the practical concerns: figuring out what size, etc. Then you get the frame and the canvas: stretch it, gesso it, sand it. It's a lot of work.

Rail: So would you say that the sequence of paintings from the beginning of your career to the present is like this never ending chain to which you're always adding the latest work?

Corse: That's something that I like about painting and why—even though I'm seen as related to the Light and Space group, because it happened at the same time and all that—I'm a painter, because I got rid of the extra dimension. The more you can get rid of, the better. Two dimensions is less than three dimensions.

Rail: Is that why you bevel the edges of many of your paintings?

Corse: Right, to get this super flat surface—I want there to be less physicality.

Rail: So in a way then you don't perceive the canvas as a shallow box, as the stretched canvas has conventionally appeared over the past half century or so, then it's all just surface: with edges, but no sides, so to speak. When did that happen in the work?

Corse: Well the first beveled white painting that I did was in 1969, and early on the Guggenheim acquired one from 1970. And then I left it because I started doing bands down the side, and working the frame was part of it. So for years they weren't beveled anymore. And then I went back to the bevel—I still use it today—because I started to understand flatness and the potential of two dimensions differently. Understanding your own work is part of the struggle, because when you first do something, you don't really understand it intellectually: especially me, because I paint intuitively.