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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 × 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 × 6′ × 10″. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin.

Corse: Those are big: l 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.