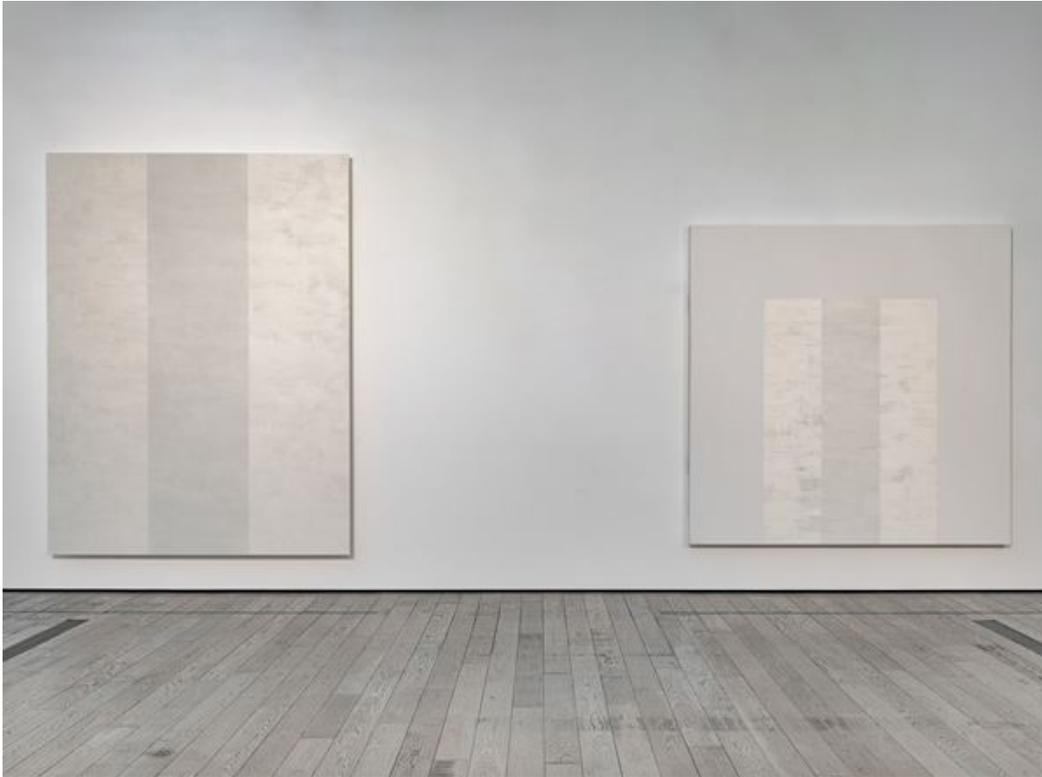


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Mary Corse at LACMA: Painting Light and Space



Exhibition view: *Mary Corse: A Survey in Light*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (28 July–11 November 2019).
Art © Mary Corse. Photo: © Museum Associates/LACMA.

Mary Corse: A Survey in Light is an ideal title for Corse's major retrospective exhibition, now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) (28 July–11 November 2019), that succinctly summarises her decades-long and ongoing experimentation with light. *A Survey in Light* debuted last year at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (8 June–25 November 2018), and offers a comprehensive examination of the artist's key works from the early years of her career in the mid-1960s to 2011, organised at LACMA by Carol S. Eliel, the museum's senior curator of modern art.

Corse, who was born in Berkley, California, in 1945, embarked on her formal training as a painter at Chouinard Art Institute (now California Institute of the Arts) in Los Angeles in 1964. There, she made her shaped canvases, which not only convey a desire to break off with the rectilinear format of traditional painting but also a nascent interest in the perceptual experience of light. In *Untitled (Octagonal Blue)* (1964), for example, Corse painted the octagonal canvas with a mixture of silver flakes and light-blue pigment to create a surface that reflects ambient light.

Soon, the artist moved away from colours because they undermined the presence of light and painted, for the following decades, predominantly with white or black. *Untitled (White Diamond Negative Stripe)* (1965) is an early example of such monochrome paintings, in which a diamond-shaped canvas is covered entirely in white save for a central stripe that divides the picture plane into two triangles. Through the blank space, Corse tried to imply that a space existed beyond the flat surface of the canvas.

An extension of Corse's shaped canvases are column works such as *Untitled (Two Triangular Columns)* (1965), which consists of a pair of wood and Plexiglass columns painted in white acrylic. The two columns are placed at an angle against each other, with a small space between them. During this period, Corse was concerned with eliminating the artist's hand in her works and sanded the columns' surfaces down to emphasise their nature as impartial objects.



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Her next venture into portraying light without paint involved using actual objects that emit light: fluorescent light tubes. With these, Corse made her lightboxes or 'light paintings' that are mounted on the wall like traditional paintings. The earliest light paintings were powered by cords, which distracted from their formal purity. This was later achieved through studies in quantum physics, which enabled Corse to achieve wireless electricity through argon gas-filled tubes and high-frequency Tesla coils. In works made using this method, such as *Untitled (White Light Series)* (1966) or *Untitled (Space + Electric Light)* (1968), white lightboxes seemingly illuminate the darkness on their own, without the baggage of plugs.

Corse's engagement with light and the use of Plexiglass and fluorescent light, which were then new materials to art, align her with the West Coast Light and Space Movement that emerged in Southern California in the 1960s. Like her contemporaries associated with the movement—among them James Turrell, Robert Irwin, and John McCracken—Corse was inspired by the material possibility and perceptual experience of light. Her efforts to hide the brushstrokes also recall the smooth and polished surface that Light and Space artists and minimalists pursued. Recognised as one of the few female artists associated with the movement, Corse was included in group exhibitions such as *The West Coast Now: Current Work from the Western Seaboard* at Portland Art Museum in 1968, which travelled to Seattle Art Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and LACMA.

While her contemporaries moved away from painting, however, increasingly working with sculpture or light tubes, Corse delved deeper into the medium. For her, paintings can exist without either the canvas or paint; a painting is defined not by materials but by an experience of light. This perceptual experience, in turn, is

invariably subjective—an idea that occurred to the artist when studying quantum physics, in which we see light as a particle or a wave but never both at the same time. Light enables vision and each individual experiences different visions.



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Art © Mary Corse. Photo: © Museum Association/LACMA.

In 1968, Corse began to mix pigments with microspheres, the glass beads that are used in traffic lanes for their ability to refract light. Subsequent works, such as *Untitled (White Grid, Vertical Strokes)* (1969), appear to emit light in different places depending on the observer's position in relation to them. Corse also reintroduced the brushstrokes to her works, underscoring the return from the objective to the subjective.

Although Corse continued to exhibit throughout the following decades, she remained relatively unknown in the 1970s due in part to gender bias and to her moving away from the artistic hub of Los Angeles to Topanga Canyon in 1970, where she still lives and works. Nevertheless, her experimentation continued, such as exploring the luminosity of the colour black in *Untitled (Black Light Painting)* (1975), which she painted with black paint and black microspheres alongside her characteristic white. Corse also built her own kiln to produce ceramic tiles. In *Untitled (Black Earth Series)* (1978), which was moulded off the surface of a rock, two rectangular tiles are stacked atop the other and placed against the wall, refracting light in a manner similar to her microsphere paintings.

A Survey in Light follows Corse's journey to her ongoing 'Inner Band' paintings, begun in the 1980s, which depict alternating bands of matte white acrylic paint and bands of white acrylic paint mixed with microspheres. Evolving from the embedded silver flakes of her early years, the light in Corse's later paintings, such as in *Untitled (White Inner Band)* (2003), seems to vanish and re-emerge into vision as the observer moves from one side to the other.

- Sherry Paik