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Larry Bell and Robert Irwin step into the light

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California Light and Space artists move out of the East Coast's shadow



Larry Bell in his studio in Taos in New Mexico

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Is West Coast minimalism having a moment? Long eclipsed by their better-known East Coast counterparts such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd, the Californian artists Larry Bell and Robert Irwin currently have dazzling work on show in both Europe and North America.

In Miami, a spectacular glass-wall sculpture by Bell was unveiled this month. In February, an exhibition in New York – his first such show in the city for more than 30 years – will trace Bell's artistic development from the 1960s to the 1980s. Irwin has

reworked a 1998 site-specific Manhattan installation for Dia: Beacon on the Hudson. And next April, an in-depth survey of his work — the first in a US museum outside California since 1977 — will open at the Hirshhorn in Washington DC. Across the Atlantic, an exhibition at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery examines the influence of Bell and Irwin on a younger generation.

For more than 50 years Irwin (b 1928) and Bell (b 1939), exponents of the strand of minimalism known as California Light and Space, have been making art from that most immaterial of materials: light. Alongside James Turrell, John McCracken, Peter Alexander and De Wain Valentine, they explore its effects on glass, Plexiglas, resin and more. "They were at the cutting edge of scientific developments in certain materials," says Susan May, artistic director at White Cube. "But essentially they were using them to explore ideas of perception."

"Glass does three things," Bell explains, with obvious pleasure, when we meet beside "6x6 An Improvisation", his glass-wall configuration in Miami. "It reflects, transmits and absorbs light, all at the same time."

Comprising 18 pairs of 6ft x 6ft coated-glass panels arranged as a kind of maze, the work draws you into its endless reflections. It disorients too: more than once, as we chat, a low thud signals that someone has mistaken a clear panel for an opening. "I've found glass convenient for experimenting with transmitted and absorbed light, but I don't want it to sound too technically motivated," Bell continues. He points into the work. "See that? I like looking at that space because the reflections of the area line up with it and there's a mystery as to what's in there, when in fact there's nothing!"

This sense of mystery that Bell has pursued throughout his career is rooted in geometry, the cube emerging early on as his favourite plaything. "Somebody once asked me whether Mondrian's work had influenced me, because he used a lot of right angles. I came to the conclusion it wasn't Mondrian's work but the corner of my studio." It also grew out of the illusions of volume he had been painting.

"All of a sudden I became a sculptor. It wasn't my intention to change my trip. It just happened. It grew out of the work."

At Dia:Beacon, Robert Irwin's installation is every bit as disorienting as Bell's "6x6". Entitled "Excursus: Homage to the Square 3", the work consists of 16 small white rooms made of gauze-like scrim, each one equipped with four white fluorescent lights, with bright bands of colour at their centre. Like "6x6", it's a kind of maze, inducing a dreamlike state as you move about, glimpsing shadowy figures through the scrim or through the doorways.

At Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery, a large spot-lit acrylic disc by Irwin dissolves into shadow as you look at it. The piece dates from

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the 1960s, soon after the artist's radical break with painting, which will be a focus of the Hirshhorn survey. "Irwin's contribution in some ways is only now being felt," says Melissa Chiu, the Washington museum's director. "His focus on issues of perception resonates today where artists are less interested in materials and making than in creating an environment that alters our view of the world around us."

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- Larry Bell

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Entitled *Another Minimalism*, the Edinburgh show contrasts the work of the Light and Space artists with the material, object-based art produced on the East Coast by Andre, Judd, Frank Stella et al and draws attention to a group of artists who for several decades were largely forgotten. "The art world was very East Coast-centric," says Melissa Feldman, the exhibition's curator. Or, as the artist Peter Alexander puts it: "New York thought we were out to lunch."

Another Minimalism seeks to identify a group of Light and Space descendants. Brussels-based Ann Veronica Janssens (b 1956) is clearly in Irwin territory when she speaks of our perception of time being transformed by her mist installations, but the influence doesn't need to be conscious, the show suggests. Sarah Braman's cube with a car door attached must surely qualify the artist (b 1970, Massachusetts) for honorary Californian status. "The West Coast doesn't feel so separate to me — I guess there's light and space everywhere," she says with a smile, when we meet in Miami. "But it might have a different tone."

Part of an LA scene in the 1960s that included Frank Gehry and Ed Ruscha, Bell withdrew to Taos, New Mexico, in 1973. "I fell in love with somebody and wanted to get her away from my hairy-legged friends," he says. These days he divides his time between Taos and Venice Beach, driving the 1,000 miles between the two with just his dog for company. And since that early move from painting to sculpture, he goes where the work takes him.

Most recently it's taken him to a series of collages based on paper and Mylar (thin plastic film) and a series of delicate "light knot" sculptures. The latter emerged accidentally, when Bell pulled the corner of a sheet of Mylar back through an incision in itself and let gravity do its work. "The moment when the form claims its space is very powerful for me," he says. "I'm addicted to that instant of surprise where you do something and all of a sudden it becomes something else. It's a beginning and I like beginnings." Back home now in Taos, he'll be waiting for the work to lead him to a new one.

'6x6 An Improvisation', Melin Building, Miami, to January 9, whitecube.com; 'Larry Bell — from the '60s', Hauser & Wirth, New York, February 3 to April 9, hauserwirth.com; 'Excursus: Homage to the Square', Dia:Beacon, New York, to May 2017, diaart.org; 'Another Minimalism: Art After California Light and Space', Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, to February 21, fruitmarket.co.uk

Slideshow photographs: Rick Scibelli Jr; Jon Lowe/White Cube/Larry Bell; Larry Bell Studio

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