

ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Show Turns A Spotlight On Light Itself In All Forms

By William Zimmer

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"THE Magic of Light" is the Hudson River Museum's new, elaborate crowd-pleaser.

It's a show of sculpture that incorporates actual incandescent or phosphorescent light in a variety of inventive ways. Some pieces incorporate magic of the how-did-they-do-it sort, while others simply take the viewer, momentarily at least, out of the range of ordinary experience.

The exhibition is successful in part because the 15 artists have room to show off what they do. Some have used the museum, its building and grounds for site-specific work. The show wisely includes enough pieces by veterans of light in art when it was a branch of Minimalism in the 1960's and 70's, providing depth to complement the newer ventures.

One piece is in sight constantly, to be looked at frequently out of the corner of one's eye. Erwin Redl's "Matrix" is bands consisting of thousands of tiny lights that are strung across a long wall. The catalog describes this piece as hypnotic and as giving a sense of warmth without heat. As the most consistently visible work in the show, it lives up to that description.

His piece has a relative, in both form and mood, in "(Untitled) America" -- 12 strings of incandescent light bulbs, 42 bulbs per string, draped on the museum's facade. It is by the Cuban-born artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who died in 1996.

While Mr. Redl's piece doesn't need interpretation, the red neon spiral "Grace" by Pietro Costa has a narrative attached. It is a memorial to Sept. 11, with the names and brief biographies of the victims on slips of paper arrayed beneath the otherwise abstract sculpture. Mr. Costa's history as an artist associated with the Italian movement Arte Povera lends the sculpture genuine feeling for those artists' deliberately incorporated humble materials, here the slips of paper, along with more sophisticated ones.

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Some pieces need the viewer's participation to be realized. For example, Liz Phillips with "Echo Evolution" and the team of Bill Jones and Ben Neill with "Pulse 48," depend on music and other sounds, and a viewer's movements, to become animate.

Sheila Moss's "Night Fishers" is a darkened room glowing with 2,000 Q-tips hanging like Spanish moss through which the viewer navigates. It is a very successful creation of a singular experience. If a viewer is lucky the room's lights will accidentally come on and he will see the swans with their white ends exposed like bare bones.

Photography began by capturing images through the exposure of specially treated paper to light. Something similar is involved with "Backtrack" by Susan Shortening, who used phosphorescent paint on a wall. Viewers passing between the wall and the projected light source leave a shadowy silhouette on the wall.

An old device is revived by Kenny Greenberg in "Ouija Light." A modern-day Ouija board is set up in the museum's lobby; a viewer asks questions and moves a mouse pointer across the board. This action changes the colors and patterns on a circular screen rigged with neon light that is set up across the courtyard in the doorway of the historic component of the museum, the Glenview Mansion.

The old guard artists include Dan Flavin, who made sculpture with fluorescent tubes of various colors. A Flavin piece is installed permanently on the museum's facade and, the museum's director, Michael Botwinick said, it inspired the present exhibition. The temporary Flavin is an untitled grid of vertical and horizontal tubes made in honor of the 30th anniversary of the Leo Castle Gallery in 1987.

Keith Sonnier improbably uses shades of all-green neon tubing to achieve what resemble relief sculptures. "Saule Pleurer" and "Palm Blatt" both refer to plants in Mr. Sonnier's native Louisiana.

Stephen Antonakos uses neon as if it were pigment in "Welcome" and "Ruby Neon Incomplete Circles on a Light Blue Wall." In the first work varicolored neon glows warmly from behind a blue-black aluminum square on the wall, and in the second, sections of red neon tubing seem to be threaded through the wall like large stitches. Mr. Antonakos has a permanent installation in the museum.

Robert Irwin and James Turrell both deal in optics and ineffability. Aluminum discs painted white and four floodlights play tricks with the viewer's perception of presence and absence in an untitled work by Mr. Irwin from 1965-67. In Mr. Turrell's "1967 Afrum No. 6 (Blue)," a rectangle of light projected in the corner of a room looks like a solid cube. It dissolves when the viewer gets closer.

The viewer can't get closer to Robert Thurman's interlocked revolving pyramids of fluorescent light, "Also Spoke Zarathustra." The work is installed in Glenview Mansion's high tower, and is probably the only piece in the show to avail itself of daylight.

"The Magic of Light" remains at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers, (914) 963-4550, through May 19.