

AARDT FOUNDATION

AMERICAN LIGHT

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Presented by The Aardt Foundation, powered by Vortic
Curated by Michael Straus and Anna Valverde

The United States approaches the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in a spirit of both celebration and reflection. It is in this context that the Aardt Foundation presents this virtual exhibition, installed in a digital twin of an industrial warehouse in Alabama, on ways that communities of artists have dealt with distinctively American landscapes, exploring the nature and effects of both natural and artificial light. One unifying theme concerns the nature of light in pictorial space, on one's physical surrounds, and as a non-objective element of perception. We therefore trace such expressions across the distances of time, place, and working method that separate a Hudson River School painter standing before Kaaterskill Clove in the 1850s and a California artist in a Los Angeles studio a century later, the one seeking to capture the evanescence of light in hills, sky and water, the other the boundary between substantive material and luminosity.

And American light can have a character of its own. The Hudson River School painters understood this not as an aesthetic preference but as a physical fact. It is relevant here to note that Asher B. Durand, in his foundational "Letters on Landscape Painting" published in *The Crayon* in 1855, urged aspiring artists to go directly to nature rather than to the traditions of the Old World. For him and his fellows in the Hudson River School movement represented in this show (including John Frederick Kensett, Thomas Cole, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church), the American landscape demanded its own visual accounting.

The haze over a Catskill valley in late afternoon, the way the Adirondack lakes hold the sky's color at dusk, the pellucid quality of a New England autumn morning, the scale of a Yosemite sky breaking open after a storm – these are not interchangeable with European atmospherics, and the difference is not

merely aesthetic but physical and geographical. The light of the Alps or of the Mediterranean coast tends toward warmth. Earth-colored stone and stucco absorb and reflect heat, the olive groves and ochre slopes cast a golden diffusion that painters from Monet to Matisse mapped so thoroughly it became synonymous with “painterly light.”

The Hudson River School painters began from a conviction that was at once patriotic, spiritual, and empirical. The young Republic, lacking the ancient monuments and aristocratic traditions of Europe, felt it had been given instead something more fundamentally significant in the form of a landscape of incomparable grandeur that was itself, in the language of natural theology, evidence of providential favor. As Barbara Novak argued in her study *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875*, this fusion of nationalist ambition and Protestant natural theology was not incidental to the School’s project but constitutive of it, the very condition under which the American landscape became a subject worthy of sustained pictorial attention. That history is of course far from uncomplicated. The continent’s first inhabitants had prior rights along with their own spiritual relationship to the land, a relationship in many ways at odds with the goals of the newly immigrated.

Yet without glossing over the complexities of the history, it remains the case that from the perspective of the nation’s early landscape artists, to paint the wilderness faithfully was simultaneously a patriotic and a spiritual act. Thomas Cole, who founded the tradition, was explicit about what was at stake. For him, the American landscape was legible as divine text, and the painter’s task was something between transcription and homily. But before any of this theology could become visible on canvas, it had to pass through an act of direct physical encounter with the landscape itself. That encounter had its own discipline and its own primary genre: the plein air oil sketch, painted rapidly before the motif in specific weather at a specific hour, capturing the precise quality of light before it shifted. As the art historian Eleanor Jones Harvey demonstrated in her monograph, *The Painted Sketch: American Impressions from Nature, 1830–1880*, these small field studies were not merely preparatory notes for the larger studio canvases that followed. They were objects in their own right, compact records of personal encounter, moments when the painter’s eye and the landscape’s light met without the mediation of convention or composition, securing a particular configuration of light as

something that could be revisited. And what the Hudson River School oil sketch tentatively proposed—the fixing of light as a discrete, examinable object—the Minimalists would later insist upon without qualification.

Various works in this exhibition provide a window into that practice. Cole's *Alps at Sunset*, Durand's *Sailing on Lake George*, McEntee's *Moonlight*, Colman's *Mt. Chocorua* — these small works on board were made to be held near the eye rather than viewed from across a gallery. They carry a directness and optical intensity that the great studio productions, for all their grandeur, can lack. To look closely at one of these sketches is to participate retrospectively in the act of looking that produced it. The painter's attention and the viewer's attention converge on the same object, whether the specific fall of afternoon light on water or the precise color of a winter sky an hour before dark. Placed in proximity to the Bierstadt's towering *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* or largest canvas Kensett painted in his career, *Mount Chocorua*, they illuminate the full arc of the Hudson River School working method: intimate encounters in the field, monumental visions resolved in the studio.

A century later, and by a very different route, Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, De Wain Valentine, Laddie John Dill, Helen Pashgian and Mary Corse would refine that vision, stripping away the conventions of painting to allow for unmediated perceptual encounters with light itself. And the light of Southern California is something else entirely. Helen Pashgian, who spent her childhood near the coast and her career attending to its qualities, has described it as “cold and bluish” — shaped by the glint of metal from the freeways, by white buildings, by the desert to the east pressing its own atmospheric conditions through the basin. She even notes that the south-facing beaches of Orange County carry a different quality of light than the west-facing beaches of Malibu as the prevailing wind from the Pacific alters the atmosphere. So it is not a coincidence that the Light and Space group emerged where it did. The terrain, the ocean, the sky, and the desert all bore on it. Indeed, the aerospace industry that put new optical and plastic materials into artists' hands was itself situated in that same geography.

Beginning in the 1960s, these artists appropriated such newly-available materials and technologies in their own explorations of light as both subject and medium. Where Cole and Durand began with nature and moved toward transcendence, the California artists began with the formal problems of

painting and sculpture and, after successive acts of reduction, adopted light itself as medium. Their shared vocabulary was phenomenological rather than theological, shaped more by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's insistence on embodied perception than Emerson's Transcendentalist romanticism. The scholarship assembled for the Getty's 2011 *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980* established with some precision how systematically these artists engaged perceptual philosophy as a working method rather than a retrospective justification for formal decisions already made. Yet the destination was recognizably similar. And the discipline that produced it was more continuous with the Hudson River School tradition than the difference in medium might suggest. Irwin, for example, famously spent months simply sitting in his studio, attending to the act of perception before making any object, subjecting himself to an experience of stripped, unmediated looking that the Hudson River School painters, standing in Kaaterskill Clove in the specific light of a specific afternoon, might have recognized as their own practice realized in a new register.

The California artists worked with the physical materials of light as generated, mutated or affected by electricity, polyester resin, argon, glass, scrims and fluorescent tubes. Helen Pashgian's resin lenses appear to be lit from within. De Wain Valentine cast acrylics into three-dimensional trapezoids, rings and circles, a process he described as "painting in space." Mary Corse's argon-filled acrylic box generates its own luminosity, the gas excited by electrical current glowing within its container — the point at which "painting about light" becomes "painting with light." What these works produce in the viewer is therefore not so different, finally, from what the Hudson River painters sought in their small field studies -- a stilled attention, a dissolution of the boundary between viewer, object, and that which illumines.

The sculptural works in the exhibition — Dan Flavin's fluorescent light pieces, Carl Andre's zinc floor plates, Laddie John Dill's light sentence, Ron Cooper's light trap, Richard Long's slate circle, Beverly Pepper's stainless steel, Tara Donovan's shattered glass cube — arrive from a position that might on first glance seem like a repudiation of both of these traditions. Minimalism's foundational commitment, as Donald Judd formulated it, was to the "specific object," what a thing actually is rather than what it represents or evokes. A fluorescent tube is a fluorescent tube. A zinc plate is a zinc plate. This sounds like a renunciation of the transcendence the Hudson River painters sought

and the phenomenological intensity the California artists pursued. But the apparent tension dissolves on examination. Each of these three traditions arrives, by a different path, at the same understanding – that a work of art is not a self-contained portable meaning but an event, something whose full existence depends on a specific encounter between viewer, object, and the light that both inhabit. The California artists understood this when they made objects whose animation is contingent on time and place rather than carried unchanged from wall to wall. And for their part, the Minimalists understood it when they refused to let representation substitute for the actual presence of the thing in the room. Flavin's pink, yellow and blue tubes flood a corner of the gallery with colored light that has no more representational content than a sunset, yet is fully capable of elevating one's experience of the space they inhabit. Andre's sixty-four zinc plates, laid across some ten square feet of floor space, alter the visual field as the matte gray surface absorbs light differently from the surrounding concrete floor. Both works, in their commitment to the literal and the irreducible, achieve something continuous with what Irwin achieved by sitting in his studio attending to light until there was nothing left to strip away.

Nor does the phenomenological dimension vanish under Minimalist pressure. Tara Donovan's shattered glass cube makes the point with particular precision. Where Bell's polished surfaces reflect and transmit light in controlled, almost architectural ways, Donovan's broken glass scatters it unpredictably, producing refractions with no governing logic. The work is about light behaving as it actually does when the artist relinquishes control of the material. And the broken cube's apparent solidity is itself evanescent, because the whole structure could be swept away with a broom. That fragility is not incidental but central, because every perceptual encounter with light is equally provisional, equally dependent on conditions that will shift.

Light, for these American artists working across all three traditions, is the medium through which the world discloses itself, and the condition under which that disclosure can be received. The nineteenth-century painters would have described this in the language of natural theology; the California artists sometimes described it in the language of perceptual psychology; while the Minimalists, insisting on the literal, crafted works that engage with the illuminated spaces they occupy. These artists thus arrive by different paths at a common recognition that perception involves situated experience.

There is a wry touch here, in that the viewer navigating the virtual space of this exhibition is not in an entirely imaginary environment, but the digital representation of a real one. That condition — the represented presence, the evoked encounter — is itself a meditation on questions of perception raised by the works within it. The viewer thus encounters works about unmediated light through the mediated surface of a backlit screen. Yet Irwin's own practice was built on a recognition that there are no truly unmediated encounters with light, that all perception involves a surface, a medium, an eye. Here too, the exhibition triangulates between our actual warehouse, its digital image, and the works that inhabit both.

To be sure, Sanford Robinson Gifford's *Lake George* (1873) and Robert Irwin's *#3 x 6' Four Fold* (2010–11) are separated by a century of industrial modernization, two world wars, the displacement of landscape painting from cultural centrality and the entire project of abstraction. Yet what unites them is the particularity of their engagement with light as the essential element, regardless of medium. Or, as Charles Ross said in a recent interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, "Light is everything." That Ross said this in the twenty-first century, and that Durand said something recognizably similar in 1855, suggests that attending carefully to light is not merely a recurring artistic subject in American culture but something closer to a sustained habit of mind. The nation was founded 250 years ago on the Enlightenment proposition that the world is knowable, that clear perception is the instrument of clear judgment, that what one actually sees matters. The artists in this exhibition have realized those propositions not in the language of politics or philosophy, but that of light itself.