

February 12 2013 | Last updated 2 hours 9 minutes ago

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Reflections on a creative movement

On display in Dubai are the works of the greats of the Light and Space movement and an young artist following in their footsteps

By Jyoti Kalsi Special to Weekend Review
Published: 21:30 November 15, 2012

GULF NEWS



Image Credit:
Waves (with sunset): fluorescent lights and filters, 2012, by James Clar

It is a sign of the growing maturity of the art scene in Dubai that two galleries in the city are now hosting exhibitions of works that use light. "The Substance of Light" is a collaborative project between Pace London and Cuadro Fine Art. It features iconic works by four artists, Larry Bell, Dan Flavin, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, who are the pioneers of the Light and Space movement that emerged in the United States in the 1960s. On the other hand, Carbon 12 gallery's show, "Iris Was a Pupil", has the latest works by young American artist James Clar, whose contemporary vision is pushing the boundaries of this form of art. Irwin and Bell were the first to make objects and installations that were purely designed to manipulate light in front of or around the viewer. And Irwin's student, Turrell was among the first to create artworks solely from light, giving substance and physical form to light itself. Since then, artists around the world have embraced light as a medium to create artworks.

The show at Cuadro features three recent works by Irwin. The installations are made from fluorescent tubes wrapped in gels of various colours and play with the perception of rhythm, texture, density, temperature and chromatic relationships of light. Bell is represented by a seminal work from the 1970s, featuring a spectrum of colours reflected by mineral-coated glass. Another iconic piece is Flavin's "Untitled" (to Bob and Pat Rohm) from 1969. The piece, made from coloured neon tubes installed in a square, interacts with the architecture of the gallery and has been exhibited in museums around the world.

A highlight of the show is the seven reflective holograms made by Turrell between 2006 and 2008, based on his seminal "Projection Pieces" from the 1960s. As you approach these seemingly dark, empty pieces, a sliver of light magically appears, with the colours, size and shape changing as you move around it. Unlike traditional holograms that manipulate light to create an illusion of a three-dimensional object, here, Turrell has used dichromate reflection holography to examine the phenomenon of light itself. "The Light and Space movement emerged on the US West Coast around the same time as the Pop Art movement in New York. It marked the beginning of minimalism and a new subtle approach to art, which was almost in rebellion to the loudness of Pop Art. Through this show we want to educate the public about an important movement in the history of modern art and to introduce them to the founders of the movement. The show is backed by a programme of tours and lectures designed to help art lovers appreciate these significant works, and to better understand contemporary works with light," says Bashar Al Shroogi, director, Cuadro Fine Art Gallery.

Clar acknowledges the influence of these masters on his work. "These artists showed us that all visual art originates from light and that it is possible to use technology and light as a medium for self-expression. My generation is taking the movement forward by using new technology and dealing with contemporary issues, such as the growing influence of modern technology in our lives," he says.

The artist from New York became interested in using light as a medium while studying filmmaking with a focus on 3-D animation. He developed this interest further after he moved to Dubai in 2007, and is well known in the region for his unique luminescent creations. He recently moved back to New York and is excited about returning to Dubai for his first solo show in the city. "This show is quite personal. It reflects my anxiety and struggle to find my identity in the New York art scene. The title, 'Iris Was a Pupil', reflects my desire to keep my vision fresh and continue learning by constantly looking for new viewpoints. My aim is to create a new aesthetic using light and to develop my distinct signature," he says.

The central piece in the show looks like an iris, as well as a clock with the hands showing 1.40. The origin of the piece is interesting. Clar went to sleep wearing a brainwave sensor, which recorded his brain activity throughout the night. The resulting graph indicated that REM had occurred at 1.40am. This is the moment when his brainwave activity increased and he entered dream state. Clar mapped the pulses generated during that minute on to light filters and arranged the fluorescent lights in a large circle to create the artwork titled "One Minute Dreamstate (1.40am)". "This piece portrays my subconscious mind or an inward eye. And the entire show is about existing in a dream world and bringing elements out of that world in a visual form," he says.

The artist has found innovative ways to depict the thoughts and images that flashed through his mind in that dream state. Fluorescent blue lights, mounted in a wave pattern, mimic the form and movement of waves in the sea. And yellow lights create the effect of the setting sun in this painting-like work. He has used a series of slanting lights in shades of blue to create a minimalist depiction of rain; and a spatial array of blue and yellow lights to recreate a three-dimensional cross-section of the coastline, where water meets land. In an interesting use of technology, he has cast a 3-D print of an orchid on rubber to create an organic form. Lights of different colours placed around the white orchid give it a surreal dreamlike quality.

In other more technical works, Clar plays on the concept of the dream world to examine how technology is blurring the line between the real and virtual world. "Standard Observer" is based on the CIE standard observer graph featuring all the colours a human eye can see. But it highlights the part of the graph that is displayed by a computer monitor. "Although our eye can see a large spectrum of colours, our visual reality is limited by the smaller area depicted in this work because most of us spend a major part of the day in front of a computer screen. This work speaks about the limitations of technology and how that limits our perception of reality," Clar says.

But he also visualises the bridging of the gap between the real and virtual, in a work titled "Increasing Resolution". This is a linear array of fluorescent lights starting from the top with the three primary colours, which are then mixed to create more hues, ultimately leading to a full smooth spectrum in the last tube. "The exponential increase in colours is reflected in the distance between the lights and depicts the fact that as computer technology improves it becomes more and more like reality," he says.

The last piece in the show is a lighthearted installation of an alarm clock placed in a vacuum chamber titled "Wake Up". "The alarm is there to pull us back from the dream world into reality. But because there is no air around it, it cannot be heard," he says.

The two exhibitions illustrate that in the hands of creative artists, something as abstract as light and something as cold as technical data can be transformed into beautiful, warm, witty and meaningful works of art.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

Iris Was a Pupil will run at Carbon 12 until December 8. The Substance of Light will run at Cuadro Fine Art gallery until January 6, 2013.