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Creating a Desert Essence With Light and Space

Doug Wheeler's highly experiential art goes on view at David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea on Saturday



Doug Wheeler in front of 'Untitled, 1968/2015' at David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea, where the sculptor's work will be on view starting Saturday. *PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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For Doug Wheeler, a longtime sculptor of light and space, making art is a way of summoning old memories of the wide desert sky.

“As a kid, I would lie down and have to grab onto something,” he said of the vastness he grew up with in the American Southwest. “I was afraid gravity would fail and I would fall into it.”

The sublime skies of his youth, Mr. Wheeler said, provided inspiration for atmospheric art that has strived for decades to provide the same sensation, one that can be

experienced in an exhibition opening Saturday at David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea.

The exhibit, the 76-year-old artist's third solo show in New York after a welcome return from obscurity in 2012, features five historical works that transform light and space into highly experiential art. Hung on a wall in meticulously calibrated conditions in specially designed rooms, each piece features neon tubes in translucent plastic encasements that seem to float and glow in different dimensions.

"It's a void that is charged," Mr. Wheeler said of the effect. "Not an empty void—it's got substance."

'He was always an artist that commanded a lot of respect in the art world, but his work can be very hard to find and see'

—Jeffrey Weiss, senior curator at the Guggenheim Museum

After growing up in remote Arizona, Mr. Wheeler honed his art in Los Angeles, where he was an integral figure in a West Coast movement known as "Light and Space" in the 1960s and '70s. Along with artists such as James Turrell and Robert Irwin, he investigated known and unknown aspects of physical science and human perception.

"I liked painting," Mr. Wheeler said of his earliest work. "But the spaces between things seemed to attract me more than the things I was spending time on."

After trading paint for more adaptable and ephemeral light, he was able to fashion atmospheric fields without clear boundaries that viewers could enter into rather than stare at from a remove.

Mr. Wheeler found some early success, but the many challenges of installing such work made him a bit of an enigma in subsequent decades.

"He was always an artist that commanded a lot of respect in the art world, but his work can be very hard to find and see," said Jeffrey Weiss, senior curator at the Guggenheim Museum, which has acquired the artist's work.

In his early years, Mr. Wheeler was supported by the storied minimalist-art collector Giuseppe Panza and was courted by the powerhouse dealer Leo Castelli, but for decades,



An installation view of 'RM 669' (1969) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 1984. *PHOTO: DOUG WHEELER/DAVID ZWIRNER NEW YORK/LONDON*

the difficulty of showing his work to exacting specifications secreted his reputation to those in the know.

In 2012, Mr. Wheeler had his first solo New York exhibition, for which the Zwirner gallery space was transformed into an unrecognizable home for light works that seemed to offer views into a limitless abyss.

An even bigger show in 2014 made space for a seemingly infinite room, a large installation with the walls and ceiling curved in service of what Kristine Bell, senior partner at David Zwirner, described as “this ethereal, weird, cloudlike atmosphere.”

Those works inspired lines around the block with waits for entry of up to four hours. While the historical works in the new show, conceived between 1967 and 1969, predate them, the perceptual effect is much the same.

“I try to make the room as featureless as possible,” Mr. Wheeler said while carefully installing his luminous environments in the Zwirner gallery’s 20th Street location earlier this week.

Rounding the edges between the floors and the ceiling with plaster erased any hard corners and lines. Soft, misty light emitted from inside neon-aided plastic panels that hang like paintings and provide the entire space with an otherworldly effect.

Mr. Wheeler, a hobbyist pilot who flies between his homes in Los Angeles and Santa Fe, N.M., likened the effect of peering in to a phenomenon pilots sometimes see.

“When you’re flying and you have no clouds, there are times when you can see differences in the air and know there might be turbulence because the density of the air changed. You can see that.”

Because of its immersive nature, the work is difficult to fully capture with photography.

“Without a direct encounter, all you have is a vague idea with nothing like the intensity of the experience itself,” said Mr. Weiss, who is working on presenting another Wheeler installation piece at the Guggenheim this summer.

Of the five works newly installed in Chelsea—two of which are for sale, each for \$2 million—Ms. Bell said, “It strips you down to your basic senses so that all ideas and associations and meaning can be let go. There’s nothing to hold on to, so you’re left with your own thoughts and feelings.”

Mr. Zwirner, who made space for his own personal room-size work by Mr. Wheeler at his East Village townhouse, echoed the sentiment.

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“It’s experiential work, and we’re in this moment when people are craving experiential work,” he said. “You’re not going to go into this show and not remember it.”

Mr. Wheeler, in quiet tones, compared the act of looking into his environments to the wonders of being alone in the desert. “I can in no way compete with it—I wouldn’t even attempt. But some of the things you get to experience in a place like that, I try to make that happen.”