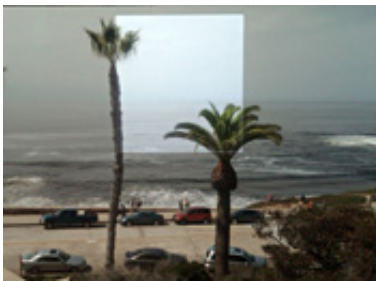


Bruce Nauman, *Green Corridor*, 1965, installation view in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego



Robert Irwin, *1°2°3°4°*, 1997, apertures cut into existing windows, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

## Pacific Standard Time PHENOMENAL: CALIFORNIA LIGHT, SPACE, SURFACE by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Arguably the most phenomenal moment of "Phenomenal," the exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, is produced by the artist least associated with what is known as the Light and Space movement of Southern California: Bruce Nauman's 1965 *Green Corridor*. In an installation originally conceived for the building, a relatively slender person can scotch through a passage between a pair of free-standing white walls. The passage takes a few minutes, and upon emerging at the end of the corridor, your eyes are saturated with the prolonged effects of intense pea-green light.

You emerge, relieved, into a gallery glowing with the aftereffect: all is deep rosy pink. Still tingling, you are confronted with a 1997 work by the artist most associated with Light and Space: Robert Irwin. A wall of windows faces the Pacific Ocean, but Irwin has cut three squares from the glass, which lets the pungent smells and cool, humid wind into the gallery. The lavender blue of the sea on the other side of the window turns jade green when seen through these openings. All of the usual perceptual cues are thrown off and it is tough to resist a sudden surge of buoyancy. Phenomenal indeed!

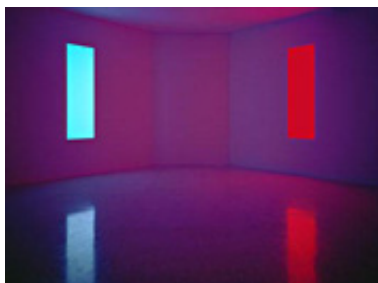
One of the key exhibitions of the "Pacific Standard Time" initiative funded by the Getty Foundation, "Phenomenal" was organized by Robin Clarke and



Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1969, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



Douglas Wheeler, *Untitled*, 1969, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



James Turrell, *Stuck Red and*

succeeds as a long overdue attempt to take stock of Light and Space, which despite its rather prosaic name remains a unique moment in the history of art in Southern California. Clark introduces her catalogue essay with a description of the word "phenomenal" as "known through the senses rather than through thought or intuition." Although many works in the show have places in previous surveys of L.A. art of the 1960s and 1970s, the exhibition of so many key works together for the first time is a real service.

For one thing, Irwin, James Turrell and Doug Wheeler, whose earliest works were shown in a series of solo exhibitions at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1967 and 1968, shows organized by the late curator (and *Artforum* editor and artist) John Coplans, haven't been seen together in four decades. Their similarities and differences are telling.

As seen in this show, Irwin's journey is compelling: from an orange monochromatic painting with just two straight lines of glossy orange (1962) to a white concave and nearly square canvas covered in tiny red and green pin dots (1963-65) to wall-mounted white acrylic discs with edges that bleed to nothing and a darkened band in the center (1969) to a clear cast acrylic 14-foot-tall column (1970) to white scrim mounted across an empty space that is barely discernible as an installation. This rapid and radical progression is extraordinary but better known from literature (Lawrence Weschler's unsurpassed *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*) than experience. But experience is really the point.

The exhibition offers exactly that. Similarly, the show tracks Wheeler's evolution from a precocious 1964 white-on-white painting with reflective "chips" in the four corners -- completed while the artist was still an undergraduate at the Chouinard Art Institute, though not a student of Irwin -- to his 1965 fabricated square of white-painted canvas on Plexiglas with a deeply beveled support and white neon tube around the back, giving it the appearance of floating on a cushion of light. By 1968, Wheeler had expanded his exploration. *DW 68 VEN MCASD 11* is a large gallery of slightly foggy atmosphere that produces a pleasant if disorienting sensation as the edges of the room are somehow

*Stuck Blue*, 1970, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



Craig Kauffman, *Untitled*, 1968, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



Larry Bell wall in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

rendered indistinct by the structure of the space and hidden neon tubes.

At the end of the 1960s, Irwin and Turrell actually tried to collaborate, but the younger artist's progression is notably different when seen in this exhibition. Turrell is the master of illusion, and the play between two- and three-dimensional space. *Afrum (White)* (1966) appears to be a solid white cube hovering mysteriously in a dark gallery corner, which is in fact produced by a projection of white light. Similarly, *Stuck Blue* and *Stuck Red* (1970) appear as vertical rectangles of brilliant color, yet upon closer inspection their physicality dissolves. You can move through seemingly solid matter and into the void. *Wedgework V* (1975), an entire gallery covered in scrim and illuminated red light, sustains these ideas.

On the flip side, the late Eric Orr's *Zero Mass*, (1972-73) called an "immersive environment," asks a viewer to sit in complete darkness and silence until feeling the transformative power of the moment.

If this exhibition only presented works by these artists together, it would have been substantial enough. Clark rightly recognized another group of artists exploring similar issues regarding perception in the realm of Minimalism and specific objects. The late Craig Kauffman's vacuum-formed plastic wall reliefs -- a bright "erotic thermometer," pastel "bubbles" and a sunset "loop" -- are hung in the gallery with the Irwin pieces, a choice embraced by Irwin, since the artists were friends, shared a studio and, at that stage of their careers, spent much time discussing evanescence.

The show includes the most convincing and brilliant installation of Larry Bell's development from two-dimensional illusion in painting to three-dimensional form, and also features a single, marvelous painting of an orange hexagon on a shaped canvas, *Little Blank Riding Hood* (1962). The rest of the gallery is filled with Bell's well-known cubes of the 1960s. Mirrored, some with white stripes or lozenge shapes, or covered in a smoky finish, and ranging in scale from a mere 4 x 4 in. to 40 x 40 in., they rest on clear Plexiglas bases and seem to float. As Bell developed his system of coating glass with



De Wain Valentine, *Diamond Column*, 1978, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



De Wain Valentine slab in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman

iridescent minerals, the boxes evolved into larger enclosures of space. A monumental 1970 work of five glass panels, partly mirrored, coated or clear, captures a viewer within its folds.

The relationship between singular volumes, translucency and color can be seen as well in the cast resin slabs of De Wain Valentine, the cast resin wedges of Peter Alexander, the cast resin spheres and disc of Helen Pashgian and the poured resin light box of Ron Cooper. The late John McCracken made solid objects with perfect reflective resin surfaces, while Mary Corse addressed the issues of surface in Minimalist, reflective white paint on canvas. In their simplicity and radiance, all attest to a fascination with captured light and color.

The exhibition is installed in three locations: the museum's original 1911 Irving Gill structure in La Jolla, and two newer buildings near the Santa Fe railroad depot in downtown San Diego. As a result, it can be a challenge to follow the thread of any single artist's development. For example, Irwin's work is installed in all three buildings. Nonetheless, for anyone familiar with this period, the show is a triumph. For anyone unfamiliar, it should prove a revelation. More bits of missing history brought to light during PST. Phenomenal.

**HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP** is the author of *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s* (Henry Holt, 2011).



Peter Alexander, *Orange Wedge*, 1970, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



Helen Pashgian, *Untitled*, 1970, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



Helen Pashgian, *Untitled*, 1970, Orange County Museum of Art, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego



John McCracken, *Blue Block in Three Parts*, 1966, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1960, acrylic lacquer on formed acrylic plastic, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



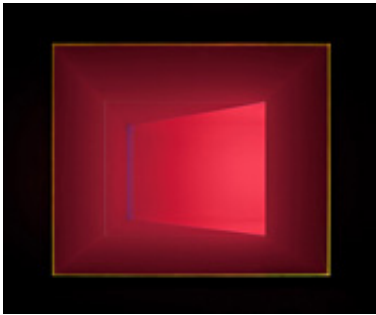
Doug Wheeler, *DW 68 VEN MCASD 11*, 1968/2011, white UV neon light, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



Larry Bell, *Little Blank Riding Hood*, 1962, acrylic on shaped canvas, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



Larry Bell, *Untitled*, ca. 1970, Inconel coated glass in five panels, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman



James Turrell, *Wedgework V*, 1975, fluorescent light, dimensions variable, in "Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface" at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman