

# SPRÜTH MAGERS

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By Jane Ure-Smith

## In the 1960s, Californian artists became masters of light and space

*Their work still invites viewers to question how they see, as demonstrated in a group of new exhibitions*

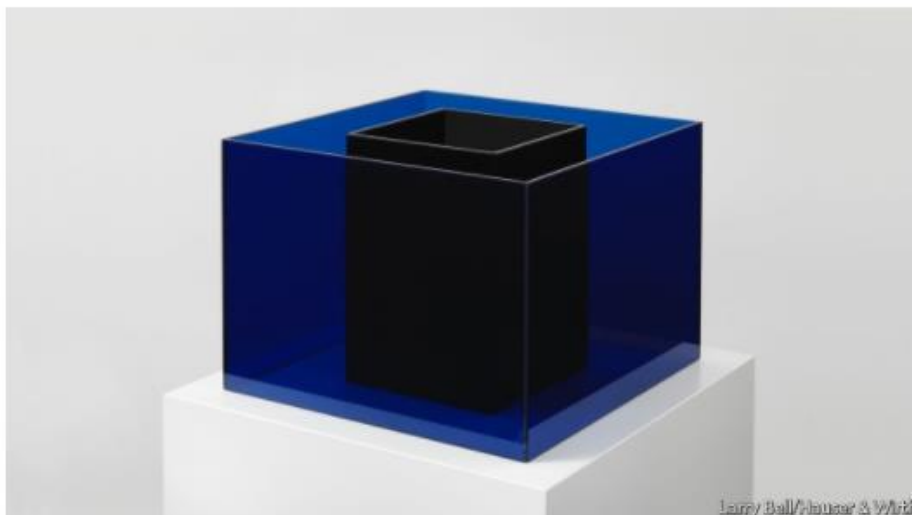


ON A dull day in Zurich, it's a treat to encounter a warm sunset glow infusing salty white light in Hauser & Wirth's trendy industrial art space. Larry Bell, a Los Angeles-based artist, was inspired by the marine fog that rolls towards his Venice Beach studio to use four large glass cubes, each housing a smaller one, to evoke four variants of Los Angeles' famously beguiling light. Los Angeles' light is also a focus in the city itself, where Sprüth Magers, a gallery, has invited Robert Irwin to remodel its space as an immersive installation (pictured) using his trademark scrim—a gauze-like material that is “both there and not there”, as he puts it. The aim, as always with the ingenious Mr Irwin, is to heighten the viewer's awareness of his or her surroundings.

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Messrs Bell (now 78) and Irwin (89) are pioneers of California Light and Space, a west coast strand of minimal art. Like the better-known James Turrell (74)—who, on Boxing Day, unveiled four disorienting light works at Tasmania’s Museum of Old and New Art (Mona)—the pair have been toying with our perceptions for 50 years.

All three emerged from the radical reassessment of art that took place in America in the 1960s. In New York, the then-centre of the art world, Donald Judd—the artist credited with inventing minimalism, even though he rejected the term—declared painting dead, because no one could do more with it than Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko had. The next phase would involve (often factory-produced) three-dimensional objects. This was the moment when the high drama of abstract expressionism gave way to the minimal aesthetic that, often unnoticed, still provides a subtle foundation of much contemporary art today.



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West coasters like Mr Bell and Mr Irwin felt the need to go beyond painting, too. The latter spent some years deconstructing the medium, before abandoning his studio in 1970 and vowing only to do site-specific works when invited. Commissions have included designing the much-loved gardens at Los Angeles's Getty Centre. His art always makes us question how we see.

Mr Bell, meanwhile, moved quickly from painting to experiments with glass (pictured, above). He forged friendships with New York artists and showed and sold his work there. New York was the place with the galleries, dealers and art publishers and, for some time, many west coast artists were eclipsed by their east coast counterparts—most notably Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin and Mr Judd, who all theorised about art as prolifically as they made it. And New York critics were sniffy about the spaced-out, cars-and-surfboards culture that they believed underpinned Californian art. “The prospect of these young dropout types hanging out in Venice Beach, making candy bubbles for the rich, amuses us,” wrote one in 1972, with reference to their gleaming, often resin-based, works.

California's artists have gained recognition and respect, yet shows often assume an east coast-west coast opposition. A second Sprüth Magers exhibition, this one in London, challenges that assumption. Entitled “Crossroads: Kauffman, Judd and Morris”, the show brackets Craig Kauffman, a west-coast artist who died in 2010, with the two better-known east coasters, stressing their similarities rather than their differences.

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The vibrant greens and lollipop pinks of Kauffman's Plexiglas "loops" are matched by the deep, dive-in blue of one of Mr Judd's iron-and-Plexiglas "stacks" and the glowing amber of his Plexiglas floor work. Upstairs, the proximity of a tumbling felt work by Mr Morris highlights the fluidity Kauffman could conjure from plastic.

Artists on both coasts were using industrial materials such as Plexiglas—a clear plastic used in the art world since the 1930s. But they sought different qualities in these materials and, on the evidence of the show, used them rather differently. Mr Judd's amber box and Mr Morris's felt works look earthbound next to Kauffman's bright flights of fancy. The exhibition highlights the latter's delight in colour and his pursuit of the sensual side of his materials, but it also shows that the New Yorkers' concern was the object, while the Californian pursued the light. While Mr Kauffman's art had many focuses, he sits comfortably alongside Mr Bell and Mr Irwin under the umbrella of Light and Space.

*"Larry Bell, Venice Fog: Recent Investigations" is showing at Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, until March 3rd; "Robert Irwin" is at Sprüth Magers Los Angeles until April 21st and "Crossroads: Kauffman, Judd and Morris" at Sprüth Magers London until March 31st*