

Mary Corse

Since the mid-1960s, Mary Corse has experimented with different ways to physically imbue her paintings with light. Her techniques have included the use of materials that project, reflect, and refract, such as electric light, glazed ceramic tiles, and retroreflective glass beads. These materials, which respond to their environmental conditions, are applied in simple configurations, using the logic of the grid as an organizing principle. Euclidean geometry gives structure to the fluid, luminescent internal space of Corse's paintings to which viewers are invited into a perceptual encounter that is grounded in both their vision and the movement of light across the composition's surface.

Corse is often associated with the Light and Space artists of Southern California, a group known for using translucent industrial materials to explore the physical and perceptual qualities of light and space in the 1960s and 1970s. She was among the first of these artists to incorporate electric light into her practice. Between 1966 and 1968 she built light boxes using fluorescent and neon tubes. One of the last and most complex works from this series, *Untitled (Electric Light)* (1968), is made of tubes of argon gas that are housed in a double-layered Plexiglas case. The argon gas is illuminated by hidden high-frequency Tesla coils. As energy moves between the coils and tubes it becomes visible as a gently pulsating light. The boundaries delineating this work from its environment are blurred by the diffusion of the light through Plexiglas.

Corse took classes in quantum physics at the University of Southern California in order to build her own light boxes. However, her studies into the inherent subjectivity of the physical universe encouraged her to return to gestural mark making. In 1968 she began a series of large paintings using glass microspheres, a material used in highway signage because it glows when in direct contact with light. To make her ethereal White Light paintings, Corse built up canvases with layers of uninflected acrylic, sanding each layer between applications of paint. Once the surface density reached her desired level of saturation she rapidly applied a final coating of the retroreflective beads.

The surfaces of these canvases oscillate with changes in lighting and the viewer's position. Movement illuminates squares of diagonally applied paint within the sixteen-part grid of *Untitled (Light Painting, Grid)* (1970), one of several early paintings from the White Light series that explored the directionality of her brushwork in opposition to the geometry of the grid. Similarly, *Untitled (White Light L-Corners, Beveled)* (1969), *Untitled (White Light, Beveled)* (1970), and *Untitled (White Light Square Corners, Beveled)* (1970) each manipulate the grid formula through articulated corners that glow in contrast to the central interior space. Repeating the corner motifs at varied scales, Corse explores the body's physical relationship to fields of structured light. In 1969 Corse began to bevel the edges of her paintings, to privilege the work's surface over its physicality. The resulting paintings appear to float on the wall.

In the mid-1970s Corse briefly turned from microsphere painting to experiments with other reflective materials. *Untitled (Black Earth Series)* (1978), from the Black Earth series, is emblematic of her work from this period and consists of glazed ceramic tiles that were molded directly from a large flat rock found in Topanga Canyon, California. The rough and undulating surfaces of these tiles precisely map the topography of their source, while their gridded arrangement recalls the sixteen-part structure of *Untitled (Light Painting, Grid)*. However, the dynamism of Corse's White Light brushwork—which reflects her own movements across the canvas—is supplanted by the naturally undulating topology of rock within the Black Earth series. Following her experiments with fired earth clay, Corse returned to painting with *Untitled (First Black Light Series)* (1979).

Corse's interest in the tension between geometry and light continues to evolve as illustrated in her recent Inner Band works. Paint is applied in broad sequential panels in *Untitled (White Inner Band with White Sides, Beveled)* (2010). This incident is not visible when the painting is perceived obliquely. As Corse explains: "Your perception, your subjectivity, your position, *you* are involved. It brings the viewer into the painting. The art's not really on the wall, it's in your perception."

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Mary Corse was born in Berkeley in 1945. She received an MFA from Chouinard Art Institute (now California Institute of Arts) in 1968. While at Chouinard, she started experimenting with ways to infuse light into her paintings. In 1966 she moved from creating minimally shaped canvases to working with transparent Plexiglas and eventually engineering complex energy systems. In 1968 she began mixing tiny glass beads, like those used in highway signage, into acrylic paint, creating expansive canvases that shift depending on the viewer's position and ambient light. Corse turned away from this work to experiment with other reflective materials in the mid-1970s, including acrylic squares, metal, and glazed ceramics, for which she built a custom updraft kiln at her studio in Topanga Canyon, California. She returned to using retroreflective paint in the late 1970s and continues to deploy this material on an increasingly large, mural-like scale. Corse is the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including the Cartier Foundation Award (1993), National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1975), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's Theodoron Award (1971), and Los Angeles County Museum of Art's New Talent Award (1967). Her work has been exhibited extensively in Europe and the United States. She is the subject of a comprehensive survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 2018. Corse lives and works in Topanga Canyon.

1. *Untitled (Light Painting, Grid)*, 1970
Glass and acrylic on canvas
Portland Art Museum; Bequest of
Marcia Simon Weisman

2. *Untitled (White Light Square Corners, Beveled)*, 1970
Glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas
Dia Art Foundation

3. *Untitled (Black Earth Series)*, 1978
Ceramic tiles
Dia Art Foundation

4. *Untitled (White Light, Beveled)*, 1970
Glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas
The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas

5. *Untitled (Electric Light)*, 1968/2018
Argon, Plexiglas, high-frequency
generator, light tubes, and monofilament
Courtesy the artist and Kayne Griffin
Corcoran, Los Angeles

6. *Untitled (White Light L-Corners, Beveled)*, 1969
Glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas
Dia Art Foundation

7. *Untitled (White Inner Band with White Sides, Beveled)*, 2010
Glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas
Andrea Nasher Collection

8. *Untitled (First Black Light Series)*, 1979
Glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas
Collection Michael Straus, Birmingham

