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'It's a neverending story': inside the amazing world of Larry Bell

As the 78-year-old artist premieres a new exhibition, he talks about an extensive career filled with experimentation and discovery

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Larry Bell's cubes, arguably the star of the artist's newly opened Institute of Contemporary Art Miami show, Larry Bell: Time Machines, sound so simple. Each consists of six panes of glass assembled into a box, but the effects of their sometimes smokey, sometimes iridescent surfaces "do improbable things to light that your eyes aren't used to seeing", according to Bell: they enhance the inherent ability of glass to reflect, transmit, and absorb light. The process that makes that possible is even more complex.

In Taos, New Mexico, where the 78-year-old artist has lived since the early 70s, Bell operates his studio like a lab. At the center of it is his 14-ton vacuum deposition chamber, The Tank, a cold war-era behemoth of pipes and protruding wires. He acquired it in 1969, having had it built outside of Niagara Falls and shipped cross country to his then-studio in Venice Beach. For each

cube, the glass panes go inside its iron belly, where the air pressure drops dramatically. Using jolts of electricity, the machine heats various metals - recently a lot of aluminum and silicon monoxide, but his ICA show has pricier early works in gold and chrome - until they melt and evaporate. Sitting in a wooden chair at a pancake-sized peephole, Bell observes as the metallic mist redeposits itself as a fine sheen on whatever's in the chamber.

At the end, The Tank's engine is cooled with well water, and Bell insists that it's not the energy-guzzler it appears to be. Results vary according to metal and amperage of electricity, and after decades of trial and error, Bell has it down to an exact science. Applying the process not only to cubes, but freestanding glass walls and various papers, his work is defined by its lovely gradients of opacity and sheen. The iridescent effects come from what's technically known as "interference colors", the wavelengths of which correspond to the thickness of a metal coating.

"It's simply light trapped at the surface," says Bell, comparing the process to the rainbows that form on puddles of water at the gas station. "Where you see blue on the water, the gasoline is thinner than where you see red on the water, and all the colors are on the spectrum between the blue and the red."



Larry Bell: Time Machines at Institute of Contemporary Art.
Photograph: Fredrik Nilsen/Fredrik Nilsen Studio

Shortly before acquiring his deposition chamber, Bell received a book called *Vacuum Deposition of Thin Films*, although Bell thinks of it solely as an introduction. "The work is my teacher," he often says, having dropped out of art school after only two years. He studied animation at LA's Chouinard Art Institute (known now as the California Institute of the Arts) from 1957 until 1959, when Robert Irwin, a teacher and pivotal figure in Light and Space art, encouraged him to leave.

"I could tell he would've done as well in school as he would have on his own," says Irwin. "I had about 50 students who were all pretty good, a third of them were really good, and Larry was one of the best."

Bell shot to art world stardom not long after dropping out. Alongside artists like Irwin, Ed Ruscha and Kenneth Price, he was a member of the Cool School, the Ferus Gallery boys club that formed the center of LA's small but potent art scene. In New York, his cube exhibitions were selling out at the mega-gallery Pace, and one of Tate Gallery's *Three Artists From Los Angeles*, a 1970 exhibition in London that included Irwin and Doug Wheeler. He's been called a California Minimalist and Light and Space artist, two labels with which he doesn't

particularly identify.

“What isn’t light and space?” he often jokes. “You can’t see anything if there’s no light, and you need space to put it down.”

In 1973, Bell opted out of the art world spotlight, trading a glass cube and freestanding wall for some land in Taos, a tony New Mexican suburb of preserved adobe pueblos and luxury ski resorts. For Bell, the move to Taos was partly from frustration.

“Larry was making pieces that at the time, dealers didn’t know how to deal with,” says Graham Steel, the artist’s current dealer at international power gallery Hauser & Wirth. Bell’s acquisition of The Tank meant larger, sometimes room-sized works of glass that were not only fragile and unwieldy but also pricey, putting him into debt with his gallery. Unwilling to compromise his practice and scale down in size, he and a friend bought a former commercial laundry building in Taos and relocated The Tank there. In his distance from the art world, “I could keep my head clean” and “hide myself from other influences”, he says. In Taos, he was out of range of “anything that would make me anyone other than who I was, on the trail that I was on. You have to keep after it - the thing that makes your work a different trip from someone else’s trip.”

Bell’s process was never in isolation, however. “He was able to bring a critical and innovative approach to technology in his work due to his credible way of encountering scientific minds,” says the ICA director, Alex Gartenfeld, co-curator of Time Machines. The exhibition grounds his work in the social and technological transformations of the 60s and 70s with the inclusion of Bell’s lesser-known room-sized environmental works, the results of some chance encounters and far-flung experiments.



Larry Bell, Hydrolux 1, The improbable Flow at Taos Studio, 1986.
Photograph: Thomas P. Vinetz

Meeting strobe light inventor Harold Eugene Edgerton, for example, inspired Bell to make Hydrolux, a 1986 installation that projects surveillance footage of the viewer on to a screen of falling water. And in the late 60s, when Irwin and James Turrell were engaging in sensory deprivation experiments, they introduced Bell to the scientist Ed Wortz, head of life support systems for the Apollo moon landing.

“He was a funny guy and a Zen Buddhist,” Bell recalls, who spoke of an Amazonian tribe who had learned to constrict their veins, and therefore the blood flow to their wounds, at will. Bell thought he might be able to constrict and dilate his pupils in the same way, and set out teaching himself to see in the dark. In his Venice Studio, he built a blacked-out corridor and had his assistant place two reflective glass rods at the end. His work was to time how long it took him to see which side they were on.

“It went from about 12 to 14 minutes down to a minute or less over a period of six months,” he says, although he never quite succeeded at dilating his pupils at will, the experiment led to *Black Room*, a space that debuted at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1970. At the ICA Miami, it immerses the viewer in total darkness, save for a sliver of light on the horizon from a reflective glass rod.



Larry Bell: *Time Machines* at Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami.
Photograph: Fredrik Nilsen/Fredrik Nilsen Studi

“I see myself as celebrating my 62nd year of unemployment,” says Bell, whose voice has the rich tremor of an American folk singer. He has a Stetson fedora and 200-piece guitar collection to match. In his studio, the guitars hang in a room between collages of metallic sheets - paper, mylar and laminates among them - that have been processed by The Tank to an iridescent shine. Unlike rigid panes of glass, the cuts of paper sinuously curve. Framed and hung between Bell’s guitar collection, they look a lot like 70s-era album covers.

These days, Bell’s schedule is packed with a rotating roster of global museums and galleries vying to show his work. “I wish they had called me sooner,” he jokes, namely during the difficult decades in Taos where he worked outside of the art world spotlight. In his insistence on working for himself, he had realized, “It’s not the quality of the artwork that makes it sell. You need someone who knows how to sell, and I really wasn’t capable.”

Following a few major exhibitions that Steele organized in recent years at White Cube and Hauser & Wirth, Bell’s career is back in full force. In addition to his studio in Taos, he keeps a second studio in a baroque former Sunday school in Venice Beach. Every few weeks, he makes the 16-hour drive between Taos in LA in his Subaru with his 15-year-old bulldog Pinky in tow. After those difficult years, he doesn’t regret striking out on his own at all.

“It gives you the responsibility to make things work,” he says. “If your work is your teacher, then it will lead you to the next step all the time, as long as you keep at it. It’s a neverending story. When you call on the muse for where to go, she’s always there.”

Larry Bell: *Time Machines* is on show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami until 10 March 2019.