

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## Larry Bell's 'Aspen Blues' unveiled at Aspen Art Museum



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Wherever you are reading this, artist Larry Bell is willing to predict that he knows what the scene surrounding you looks like. Or, at least, that he knows the most common visual element around you.

"I could make a guess and say the most potent aesthetic element would be right angles," Bell said, probably correctly, in a recent phone interview from his studio in Taos, New Mexico. "They predominate everywhere."

The right angle, as a form, has occupied Bell for some five decades. Most famously, and influentially, this long inquiry has taken shape in his glass cubes and boxes.

"The tyranny of the right angle is something that's ubiquitous for us all," he said. "We live with this tyranny constantly reinforcing a way of thinking."

His latest work is "Aspen Blues," a series of glass boxes installed on the rooftop sculpture garden at the Aspen Art Museum and opening June 1.

These new boxes (Bell is quick to note they are boxes, not cubes) absorb and reflect light, performing based on the quality of sunlight on the roof and the vision of the viewer — at times mirroring, turning translucent and transparent. They don't seem to show the artist's hand, and they may at first appear like cold, machine-fabricated works of conceptual art. But don't be fooled. Though the components are machine-made, Bell retains his prized spontaneity in these pieces. Two weeks out from the opening, with his glass and components in hand, the plainspoken master proudly admitted he was still unsure of what exactly he'd do with "Aspen Blues."

"To tell you the truth, the configuration I don't have it down yet," he said. "I see the things that are my responsibility in the studio as being totally dependent on improvisation, spontaneity and intuition. So things have to happen fast. Decisions have to be made fast."

Bell emerged out of the heady Los Angeles art scene of the 1960s — that creatively lush and rebellious crew of Minimalists, Perceptualists and progenitors of the Light and Space movement. Living in Venice Beach, Bell's cohort included the likes of Ed Ruscha and Robert Irwin. (If "Aspen Blues" piques your interest, that '60s L.A. scene will be the subject of a two-day critical dialogue at Anderson Ranch Arts Center this summer. Titled "[Rebels in Paradise](#)," it will be led by KCRW art critic Hunter Drohojowska-Philp and Otis College of Art and Design's Roy Dowell on July 9 and 10).

Bell's cubes and boxes have grown more complex over the years, with the help of new technologies and advanced fabrication techniques. In the early years, he scraped at household mirrors to create his signature effects. These days he uses responsive materials that can transmit, absorb and reflect light to his desired effect. But the concept remains intact and simple — playing with those rigid right angles and the magic of human perception and light.

He's used a similar approach for a recent body of work using paper and Mylar, in pieces that hang from ceilings, and in the early '80s created his ethereal and iconic "vapor drawings" and mirage works based on similar principles.

The artist has used light as a medium and the sun as a collaborator for so long and done it so innovatively, that one might assume his move from Los Angeles to the mountains of Taos had something to do with the atmosphere, the thin air and moving up in elevation getting closer to the sun. But Bell isn't so sure.

"What living out here has done for me, more than anything else, is to get rid of distractions," he said. "I don't know how to describe how the light and sun has influenced my work. It's safe enough to say that it has. But I don't know how."

Bell is a staunch believer in the artist's instinct and the old Beat Generation philosophy of "first thought, best thought." When young and emerging artists look to him for advice, he said, he urges them to get out of their heads, trust their hands, and ignore critics and trends.