

In Los Angeles, City Of Illusions, Nobody Has Manipulated Perceptions Quite Like Larry Bell



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Larry Bell learned to make art by reading a book. The book came from a guy in New York whose main line of business was manufacturing glass Christmas ornaments. When Bell bought the man's old machinery – a nine-ton apparatus that gave glass a metalized finish – the guy threw in the book for free.

Bell wasn't much of a reader, but he read *The Vacuum Deposition of Thin Films* from cover to cover. Nearly six decades later, the book still rests on his shelf, even though the wizardry underlying his [monumental glass installations](#) exceeds the technical acumen of the vacuum deposition industry. A [recently installed sculpture](#) on the rooftop of the Museum of Contemporary Art shows the degree to which his glassy sorcery with light and space also looks beyond many of the illusionistic preconceptions of fine art.



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Larry Bell, *Bill and Co* at MOCA's Nest (2019), installation view, MOCA Grand Avenue. Laminated ... [+] ZAK KELLEY

Before he started working with glass, Bell was obsessed with optical illusions. Many of his first paintings were made on canvases shaped to look like cubes rendered in perspective. On these trick canvases, he painted additional cubes to create perspectival puzzles that would give M.C. Escher a headache.

Tiring of the game, Bell began to give his canvases their own substance, transitioning from surfaces to objects. However, objects also turned out to have limitations, especially for someone obsessed with perceptual effects. Glass provided the perfect compromise. “It had some very special qualities,” he told *The Brooklyn Rail* in a 2016 interview. “It reflected light; it transmitted light; it absorbed light – all at the same time – and had a shelf life of about three million years.”

Vacuum deposition provided a way to modulate the optical qualities with precision, initially in the interest of making cubes that were ethereal, floating atop glass pedestals. Bell discovered the technique after spending countless hours scraping patterns into the surfaces of store-bought mirrors. Living in Los Angeles, he was just a short distance from myriad special effects shops. He found one that could control the reflection, transmission, and absorption of light in a glass sheet. Relocating to New York for several years, and discovering that the same process was used to manufacture Christmas ornaments, he attained the means of doing it himself.

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Learning the vacuum deposition technique was essential not only from the standpoint of control, but also from the perspective of creativity. Bell has always worked with a combination of intuition and spontaneity, the former gained through experience and the latter sustained by destabilizing competence with play. Through constant experimentation with his nine-ton apparatus, he has attained a level of mastery that paradoxically supports unpredictability, ensuring that his work continues to hold novelty. For instance, his installation atop MOCA is comprised of nested glass cubes, but variations in coloration and scale and siting bring new fascination to a structure that Bell has enlisted repeatedly since the '60s.

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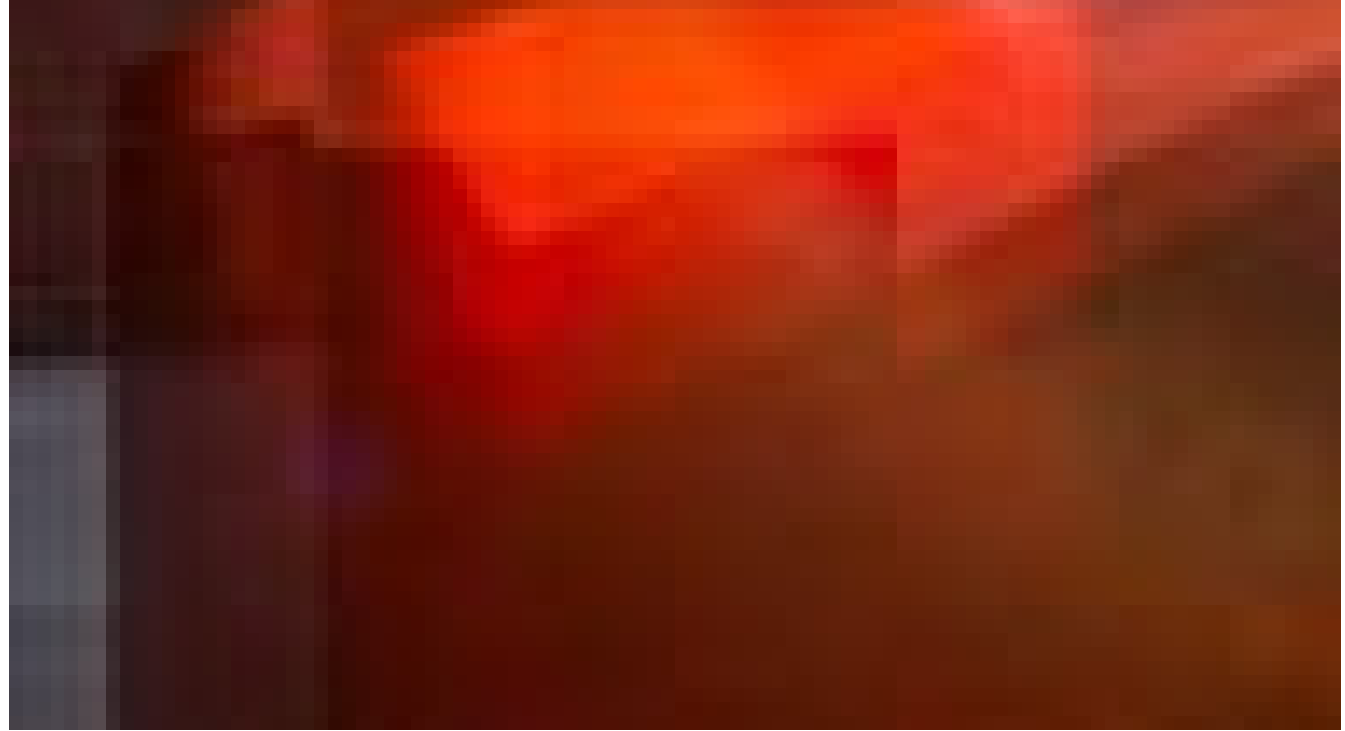
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Bell is typically categorized as a Light and Space artist, and grouped with fellow Angelinos including Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Mary Corse. He has been dismissive of this classification, sarcastically remarking that all art occupies space and requires light to see it, but this self-evident statement misses the point. What distinguishes Light and Space Art is the absence of anything other than light and space. Bell was one of the first artists to make this negative breakthrough when he started making art too large to be supported on a pedestal. Some of this work was big in the manner of his MOCA roof installation, but the bigger break from sculptural materiality was made when he began to break apart the cube, using just the corners to control the illumination in empty rooms.

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The control of light and space through the treatment of glass provides Bell with a means of manipulating perception that bears some kinship to the optical illusions that initially obsessed him. However, Bell insists on an essential difference. As he explained to the *Rail*, “What I’m looking at is really happening. There are no tricks. This is another reality, and I know it is because I can see it.”

In other words, the perceptions are real because the phenomena can be experienced, and experience is the only basis upon which the authenticity of anything can be established. All there is to the work is light and space, and the work suggests that light and space may be all there is in reality. The sheets of glass might just be illusory.

By this simple proposition, Bell inverts the whole history of art, much of which has been concerned with the production of simulacra in oil paint, whether depicting angels in heaven or cubes in three dimensions. Contrary to Bell’s distinction between glass and canvas, the reality of perceptions would appear to include the perception of all these illusions, and to throw the reality of the support structures into question.

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