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Montreal's light show

44 artists show the light touch has many facets

By Alan G. Arner
Art critic

Before there was anything else, there was light. It has defined every creation from the first act itself.

Whatever we do is conditioned by it, and it determines all that we see. Light is power. Light is intellect. No wonder Prometheus was martyred for stealing fire, the first light man could control.

All art begins with light. It is both a generator and a subject. Over the years, artists have moved from representing it in different media to using it directly, allowing it to express its own character, artificial or pure.

Some of these works, such as Dan Flavin's neon installations, are classics. West Coast artists Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Doug Wheeler also have attained legendary status, having established an important new direction known as "California Light and Space Art."

But no one can say that any of this work is overexposed. Turrell, for ex-

ample, didn't have a museum exhibition in California for 18 years. And the prospect of encountering first-rate installation art in general is not improving.

One of the summer's more provocative exhibitions is, however, "Lights: Perception-Projection," in Montreal. Organized by the International Center of Contemporary Art, the show brings together 44 artists from eight countries to present as gratifying a collection of lightworks as any we soon will see.

This is attributable to the independence of the center, which is less an institution with a fixed program and locale than a freewheeling bureau. Founded two years ago by its current executive director, Claude Gosselin, the center hires its staff on a project-by-project basis and mounts its exhibitions just about anywhere.

Last year a show of 23 Canadian installation artists was held in the basement of a shopping mall known as *Place du Parc*. During its three-month run—a time known each year as "The 100 Days of Contemporary Art"—the exhibition attracted 20,000 visitors, which naturally was agreeable to developers of the complex and, hence, the rough-and-ready quarters now are being used for another show.

This time the exhibition is decidedly international, though Canada and the United States are represented by the greatest number of artists, 20 and 10,

respectively. France follows with eight, Switzerland with two, and England, Italy, West Germany and the Netherlands with one each.

The art makes use of everything from photographs, slides and video to holograms, neon, lasers and film. However, each instrument of light is usually the central part of a larger piece that combines several different materials. All the works are recent, the majority created especially for the show.

Turrell's piece, breathtaking as ever, is one of his large rectangles situated at the end of a fairly long room. One wants to say it has been mounted there, for the lavender expanse has the character of an exquisitely refined color-field painting. Only when a viewer stands inches away is it apparent that the piece was created entirely by lights on the other side of the rectangular hole.

Some will recall a similar work he did, in black, at the Art Institute of Chicago several years ago. More were in an exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum, and still two others appeared in his show at the Temporary Contemporary in Los Angeles last November. This is the classic Turrell piece, each one pure and remarkably simple. That, by now, it does not seem too easy an approach to ecstasy is astonishing. But like the art of Irwin—who, regrettably, did not re-

spond to the invitation to exhibit—Turrell's work stakes out its perceptual territory so intensely that the initial freshness always seems recaptured.

Among the other well-known figures with works on view, Christian Boltanski has a wall full of tiny cardboard skeletons suspended near lighted candles. The viewer peers through a hole in the wall immediately opposite as the candles flicker and the shadows of the skeletons elongate, contract or ripple. Here is a primitive piece that strikes deeply, at once suggesting votive lights and the *dance macabre* of a witches' sabbath.

Keith Sonnier's neon calligraphy has a spare, almost Oriental splendor that contrasts dramatically with Bruce Nauman's eye-jangling neons on sexuality and power. Dramatic, too, is how Chris Burden reins himself in to recreate a famous 19th Century light experiment that one might better expect from Giulio Paolini, though his glance at history, using projections, is more elegant and every inch the work of an Italian.

Only two cases presented problems. Daniel Buren, whose prize-winning installation filled the entire French pavilion at this summer's Venice Biennale, was unhappy with his smallish space in Canada and altered his original plan, choosing merely to echo the lighted entranceway—four times, no less—with his characteristic vertical

stripes. The result is rather like one in a series of those courtyards that precede the royal chambers in certain palaces of the East. It has the feeling of a public space conceived for reception, coming or going rather than a lengthy stop.

The trouble with Flavin was simpler. Three weeks into the exhibition, the piece he promised still had not turned up. His New York representatives said he was ill, citing repeated postponements of a large exhibition in Europe; the work for Canada was supposed to arrive sometime this month.

The surprise is the level of expressive power among artists who have not yet attained great international reputations. Krzysztof Wodiczko, the Polish-Canadian who employs large-scale projections to turn famous buildings and monuments into vehicles of protest, is positively stinging. French video artist Ange Leccia shows a fierce relish for confrontation. Serge Tournant even ravishes the eye with photographs that explore fairly arid two- and three-dimensional ambiguities.

Few works are as complex and seductively beautiful as "Ad Infinitum," by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel. Here water, flame, light and apparent vapor combine in a cycle that is abstract but resonant with human feeling. It is a meditation on time, notable for its poetic and formal maturity.

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