

ARTIFICIAL LIGHT
RICHMOND + MIAMI

Organized by John Ravenal, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, *Artificial Light* features works by seven artists [VCUarts Anderson Gallery, Richmond, September 15—October 29, 2006; Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Miami, December 7, 2006—February 4, 2007]. The exhibition operates at the intersection of the minimalist tradition and the exploration of light as visual language. In turn, the works respectfully disrupt and revise the formal conventions of historical minimalism, and explore complex themes ranging from phenomenology, politics, culture, and nature to semiotics through spare, sophisticated vocabularies as they rely on artificial and natural light as their primary medium.

Artificial Light features six artworks that, installed in individual galleries, literally and inevitably bathe in chiaroscuro. This is a result of their use of a range of technologies, from kinetic LED lights to motorized rotating window blinds. A cool sci-fi aura reigns as stark environments suggest futuristic laboratories or pristine gothic cells. Dimness is an essential dimension of the exhibition: not only does it impact its appearance and mood but it becomes a theme in itself. This thematization is as much a byproduct of the technical need to assign each work to a room, as it is a result of the fact that the light emitted by each work is also its own means of lighting. The dialogue between light and dimness—a varying, experiential chiaroscuro—also emphasizes the untouched blankness and scale of each space. As such, the exhibition becomes an architecture of theater-like installations. In fact, *Artificial Light* unintentionally plays with Michael Fried's famous 1967 description of minimal art as "theatrical," elaborating on his controversial attempt to differentiate art from objects.

Spencer Finch's *Kaaterskill Falls (July 30, 2006, 12:37pm)*, 2006, engages with the aesthetics of painting, which has historically been the realm of the exploration of light. The work depicts sunlight at a precise moment at a popular Catskill Mountains location. Finch first measured the sunlight's color

and light by using a scientific instrument. He then translated the readings into a nonobjective composition, painting vertical bars of colored plastic gels onto the translucent surfaces of two light boxes. While his interest in the moment corresponds to the Impressionists' intentions, Finch is more concerned with physical fact than optical impression. Nevertheless, subjectivity does factor in his translation process. The work's abstract forms reference paintings of the Washington Color School—in particular those of Gene Davis—and its verticality renders the downward flow of falls. Finch's ironic replication of natural light with artificial light injects painting with a startling glow. It also reconfigures Hans Hofmann's observation that in life color is light, while in painting light is color.

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's *Growth (Survival)*, 2006, pairs a suspended globe of grafted tropical plants with Jenny Holzer's LED light work *Blue Wall Tilt*, 2004. Highjacked to function as grow lights, Holzer's piece provides energy for the creature-like amalgam of plants. As Holzer's piece is repurposed into an energy source, her absurdist-acerbic texts suggest human domination of nature. Pierced by the dull glitter of streaming texts, the installation's darkness evokes survival in the void. Allora and Calzadilla's strange hybrid presents a living moral tale of the perversions of late capitalism that are also the object of Holzer's twisted ideological statements.

Ceal Floyer's *Overhead Projection*, 2006, investigates the uncertain relationship between fact and fiction by way of conceptual and perceptual play. A low-tech overhead projector produces an image of a transparent light bulb—suggesting that the light bulb supplies the surrounding light. Yet, the projector's proximity dissolves this illusion, functioning somewhat like René Magritte's inscription, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, across the surface of his painting *The Treachery of Images*, 1929.

Two works allude to the disturbing effects of political and cultural power. Nathaniel Rackowe's *Dead*

Reckoning, 2006, is a clean industrial corridor that, marked by gaps at equal intervals, diagonally cuts the expansive exhibition space in half. Inside, a high-wattage light bulb incessantly travels the length of the room on a track attached to the ceiling. Erratically sweeping the space, the light flashing through the gaps has a fragmented searchlight effect. Iván Navarro's *Black Electric Chairs*, 2006, two taut neon black-light sculptures, are intense visual poems that deconstruct twentieth-century utopian political aspirations. This pair calls on an icon of social progress—Marcel Breuer's *Wassily Chair*, 1925—while the work's title quickly deflates such a modernist ideal.

Douglas Ross' *Picture Motion*, 2006, fragments the inward flow of natural light from two opposing windows. Installed in a humble third-floor hallway's window frames, motorized spinning window blinds transform this ordinary space into a flickering environment, inserting the kinetics of film into experience. Here, the quality of light changes with the angle of the sun, the relative clarity of the sky, and the effect of street lamps and lights from neighboring buildings at night. The spirit of Allan Kaprow resides here as Ross' uncomplicated, playful idea converts the banal into an automatic Happening.

—Paul Ryan

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Nathaniel Rackowe, *Dead Reckoning*, 2006, corrugated asphalt roofing sheets, wood, drywall, motor, drive system, and light, 10 x 4.5 x 46 feet [courtesy the artist and Bischoff/Weiss, London] / TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Iván Navarro, *Black Electric Chairs*, 2006, neon black light, two pieces: 29 x 30.5 x 28.5 inches each [courtesy of the artist and Roebling Hall, New York]; Ceal Floyer, *Overhead Projection*, 2006, light bulb and overhead projector, variable dimensions [courtesy of the artist, 303 Gallery, New York, Esther Schipper, Berlin, and Lisson Gallery, London]; BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Douglas Ross, *Picture Motion*, 2006, plastic, aluminum, nylon, rubber, steel, electric motor, natural and city light, variable dimensions [courtesy the artist]; Jennifer Allora + Guillermo Calzadilla, *Growth (Survival)*, 2006, grafted tropical plants with Jenny Holzer's *Blue Wall Tilt*, 2004, six double-sided LED signs with bright blue diodes in stainless steel housings, dimensions variable, Holzer signs: 165 1/2 x 5 3/8 x 5 3/8 inches each [courtesy of the artists, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, Lisson Gallery, London, and Chaim & Read, New York]; Spencer Finch, *Kaaterskill Falls (July 30, 2006, 12:37 PM)*, 2006, fluorescent light-boxes with laminated filters, two parts: 74 x 50 x 8 inches and 56 x 38 x 8 inches [courtesy of the artist, Postmasters Gallery, New York, and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago] [all photos: Travis Fullerton, 2006, courtesy of VCUarts Anderson Gallery]

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