



Heather Hutchison's Living Light

By Eleanor Heartney

"All that is solid melts into air." So said Karl Marx in a completely different context. But that evocative sentence might serve as a description of Heather Hutchison's luminous constructions. They shift and shimmer, as if pure light and color had been captured and sealed within shallow plywood boxes. From the outside, the boxes are solid, workaday and finite, but inside they seem to have expanded to contain indeterminate depths. Their mysterious contents respond to the surrounding light and change as the viewer moves. Inside the boxes, light emanates from diffuse bands of color, seeps through translucent orbs and bounces off rippling waves. Forms are evoked but refuse to completely resolve. Instead, like half recovered memories, they conjure the mere suggestion of glowing sunsets, reflective waters, mist covered hills, moonlit plains, low lying fog and recently the blaze and smoke of wildfires and cloud feedback.

But these works are by no means meant to be read simply as landscapes. Rather than describing nature, they evoke what more accurately might be described (at the risk of sounding corny) as the soul of nature. Nature here is meant in the largest and most encompassing sense, akin to what Emerson described as a state of one-ness and unity between inner and outer realities. He reports a state of egolessness in which "I become a transparent Eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." Hutchison does not espouse any such western concept of God, but she affirms a spirituality that derives from a sense of connection with the animate, ever changing forces that make up the world that has made us.

Part of the magic of these works is that they are rooted in paradox. They adopt the outward format of the minimalist box, but transform it into a carrier of mysterious energies. They employ the language of abstraction but are rooted in the experience of the natural world. They glow as if from an internal illumination but depend only on available light. And while they achieve the dematerialization of matter into light and color, they emerge from a long and intense engagement with prosaic and unorthodox materials. Like any good magician Hutchison resists revealing the mechanics behind

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these works, but notes that over the years she has employed gels, beeswax, mirrors, mylar, duct tape, aluminum flashing, plexiglass and reflective paint. Through experimentation and serendipity she has discovered ways to manipulate these materials to create all manner of evocative effects.

Hutchison's work has evolved over time to encompass major life experiences like love, joy, loss and death. But they also offer a response to momentary sensations like the fall of light from a window or the flicker of reflections as a breeze passes over the surface of a lake. From the beginning she has sought to expand painting into the realm of time, using it to create a sense of movement and flux. Early minimalist shadow boxes employed the light absorbing qualities of beeswax to suggest light weaving from the horizontal bands of venetian blinds or dancing over reflective surfaces. Always experimenting with new effects, she went on to explore the ability of clear and scored plexiglass to conduct and distort light and experimented with the properties of gels and other mediums to more effectively diffuse color across the surface of her works. At one point she abandoned the framing box altogether in order to let light play freely over bent plexi constructions. She also created installations within existing outdoor architecture and windows and explored the use of time lapse films which allowed her to capture the fleeting changes brought about by changing light conditions. For a long time her works were dominated by horizontal bands of light and color that bled into each other or were demarcated by the hard edges of tape or strips of paint. But in all these works any effect of solidity melts when the viewer moves or the ambient light shifts across the surface.

More recently Hutchison has been introducing curves, arcs, orbs, swaths and arabesques into her boxes. These accentuate the illusion of depth and draw the eye into a multi-dimensional space. In some works, such forms are created by mylar and flashing shaped to billow, ripple or suggest whiplash lines. Others present overlapping curves or mounds. One persistent motif is the full or partial orb. These figures add to her repertoire of landscape references. They suggest clouds, gentle mountains and hills, waves, and depending on the play of color, glowing suns or translucent moons. Conventional thinking assigns distinct identities and properties to such entities - clouds are vaporous and ephemeral, mountains solid and mostly unchanging, moons constantly waxing and waning, suns rising and setting and waves both mutable and material as they are pulled here and there by the forces of gravity. But for Hutchison,



they easily shift into each other, both in terms of their forms, but also, at a more basic level in their essences, as air, water and earth shape and are shaped by each other. With these works, Hutchison transitions from the sense of calm and stillness induced by the horizontal format of her earlier work. The new elements introduce greater movement and flux, reflecting the growing sense of impermanence and chaos that pervades nature in a time of climate change.

The most recent works here originated in a residency in Bisbee, Arizona, a town which has loomed large in her life. Hutchison's connection to Bisbee and to the American Southwest is fundamental to her work. During her formative years, she and her family lived in and operated a grand hotel in this former mining town near the Mexican border. In the early 1970s, Bisbee was a magnet for creative types fleeing more orthodox lifestyles, and young Heather was exposed to artists, writers and other visionaries. These gave her permission to think of herself as an artist and she notes that she began her first studio practice there at age 10. When Hutchison was thirteen her family left Bisbee, but in her adult life Hutchison has returned there annually.

Following an adolescence moving around California and Oregon with her family, Hutchison struck out on her own. Her artistic ambitions took her first to the San Francisco Bay area and then in 1986 to New York City, where, though essentially self taught, she achieved an impressive exhibition history. Since 1996 she has lived in Woodstock in upstate New York. But while the more circumscribed skies and forested light of the Hudson Valley find expression in her work, she retains a kinship with other artists whose work bears the imprint of the expansive space, endless skies and peculiarly translucent light of the American West. One thinks for instance, of California native Christopher Wilmarth whose glass and steel constructions trapped and reflected light. Or of Agnes Martin, a transplant to New Mexico who transformed the minimalist grid into luminous bands and vibrating nets. Another antecedent is the California Light and Space Movement, a loose collection of artists who in the 1960s explored the properties and perception of ambient, reflected and radiant light. And one also feels here echoes of the earlier Transcendental Painting Group, a mid 20th century movement based in New Mexico whose most prominent member, Agnes Pelton, has recently been rediscovered and celebrated. Pelton's shimmering nature based abstractions seem to glow from within, creating a kind of mystical pictorial space. Her intentions, as she described them in 1929, seem to chime with Hutchison's. She remarked, "Those



pictures are like little windows, opening to the view of a region, much visited consciously or by intention—an inner realm, rather than an outer landscape.”

Casting further back, Hutchison draws on the traditions of Romanticism and Luminism. Like Romantic precursors such as J. M. W. Turner, Thomas Cole, and Casper David Friedrich, she expresses the sublimity of nature as a realm that both enfolds and at times overwhelms us and that can serve as a metaphor for subjective emotions. Like Luminist painters such as Martin Johnson Heade and John Frederick Kensett, she explores the contemplative side of landscape with a focus on luminosity, atmosphere, stillness and reflection. Hutchison brings these ideas forward into our own turbulent times, marrying a minimalist inspired simplicity with a sense of the ever shifting nature of reality and consciousness.

In the end, Hutchison’s essential material is light. This is the medium through which she realizes her works, and is ultimately also her subject. Throughout all cultures, light (and its twin, darkness) carry mystical import. Light is the source of all colors. It is the embodiment of spirit, divinity, intelligence, understanding and goodness. It is also the energy that makes life possible. It is at once a powerful symbol and a vital necessity. Transmuting her experiences and emotions into pure light and color, Hutchison creates meditative spaces where we might pause and reinforce our own connections to earth, sky and spirit.