FROM MOUSE HOUSE TO MOMA

An odd header introducing work by a major contemporary artist of our time. But worth it if it gets viewers past the ‘vacuum-vapor’ tech-talk to a place where they can really look at a layered work like Church Study CS11.7.15D (2015) and find the satin, luminous harmony of a Dutch still life.

An art student in Los Angeles in 1957 at Chouinard Art Institute, Bell hoped to become an animator for Disney Studios. Instead, he met painting teachers like Robert Irwin “finding their own way in a world that did not need what they did,” and who believed in “the joy of working in the world of the totally unknown…” Two years later, aged nineteen, encouraged by one of his teachers, Larry Bell moved into a studio “and [I] never left.”

For Bell, exhibitions are extensions of his studio, “temporary spaces to learn from the work I’ve done.” The current exhibition at the Harwood is no exception. This is not a retrospective of a career spanning six decades. Nor is it a straight survey of forty-five years in Taos, where Bell moved in 1973, set up studio and installed his vacuum tank by 1976. Larry Bell: Hocus, Focus and 12 is a rare, vicarious glimpse into his Taos studio, a unique look at what Bell has learned from the work he’s done there.

The exhibition opens with Cube #41 (2006). Larry Bell’s glass sculptures, dating from 1965, have become the signature statement of his work. The process for the cube sculptures comprise a glass-coating technique of vacuum deposition of thin metal and mineral films on the glass. By 1969, Bell had advanced the scope of this process to produce his large-scale glass wall environments.

Two installations Gus’s Berg (1975) and Venice Fog I (2017) command the lofty hangar-like space of the Mandelman-Ribak Gallery. Gus’s Berg (1975) was the last glass wall installation completed in his Venice studio prior to Bell’s move to Taos. Venice Fog (2017) brings Bell’s series of glass constructs on a grand scale to the present. The two large-scale installations bracket the enormously productive Taos phase of Larry Bell’s career that continues to the present.

With his arrival in Taos, Bell began to apply his process of the vacuum film-coating process for his glass sculptures to the medium of paper and mixed media—to paper in the late 1970s, and then to canvas by the 1990s. So, the Harwood galleries that host Hocus, Focus and 12 are temporary spaces where visitors can tour works from his Taos studio: the paper-based Vapor Drawings since 1978, the collage-based Mirage...
works, their shredded cast-offs reworked into Fractions from 1996 to 2000, and the more recent Light Knot mobiles, suspended spirals of coated mylar.

And it’s a magical mystery tour. It starts from Bell’s momentous insight around 1965 that “ultimately an illusion of volume is a limitation in itself. [It] will only be just that: an illusion.” That insight led to his decision to move away from painting and “make volumes that had weight and mass as part of the presence of the volume...to make volumes out of glass.” Bell’s glass cubes and wall installations would lead him to the magic of his works on paper—vapor drawings, mirage collage, fractions. His aim was the same for the paper as for the glass: to explore “light and its interface with a surface.” The locus of Bell’s work—“what makes it interesting”—is that interface. That is where the process occurs, where the passion resides.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Larry Bell’s glass cubes and standing wall installations from the mid-1960s paralleled the new three-dimensional objects—primary structures—of Donald Judd and other Minimal artists who sought to get clear of the illusionist legacy embedded in painting and sculpture, in favor of art that defines itself by its materials and literal status as a physical object in a specific space, and whose literal presence and emotive import are co-extensive—what Frank Stella described as “what you see is what you see.”

What sustains the continued relevance of Bell’s work six decades later are its magical visual effects—on glass, paper, collage and canvas—at the interface of light and material surface. In his early cubes using mirrors, Bell “liked the fact that the light was reflected back directly to the viewer, leaving a blank or empty space where the construction stood.” Thus, Bell could have his cake and can eat it too: making sculptural volume actually present appear to be absent, while still maintaining the material integrity of the object.

This anti-illusion effect carries over when Bell replaced the mirrors with vacuum coatings of thin film on both sides of a pane of glass, rendering it reflective without obscuring the literal identity of the object: “The thin film process only changed the nature of the light and not the nature of the surface. It still looked like a piece of glass.” And again, for a large glass-wall configuration like 6x6 An Improvisation, a maze of 18 pairs of 6ft x 6ft coated -glass panels, Bell subverts illusion by conjuring the presence of panels by their reflections in an actual void: “I like looking at that space because the reflections of the area line up with it and there’s a mystery as to what’s in there, when in fact there’s nothing!”

Hocus, Focus and 12 reveals this sense of mystery in Bell’s Taos works on paper, applying the layered use of this coating process at varying film density to paper, collage, and canvas. The result is a rich spectrum of visual effects produced by endless optical variations of the coated materials through reflection, absorption and interference, as the varied materials and coatings interfere with how the light reaches the eye—in other words, an interface of light with the surface.

Bell’s magic sleight of hand in making what is there disappear—invisible—is revealed in Hocus, Focus and 12 by a beguiling interactive work in the exhibition. Bell’s Time Machine (2002) features a large glass mirror—retrieved from a Los Alamos Labs surplus yard—set between two chairs whose occupants gaze through the mirror at an image of themselves on the other side—not the other viewer, who is thus invisible. Time Machine attests to Bell’s fascination, dating from 1982, with H.G. Wells, whose science fiction—e.g., Time Machine and Invisible Man—mimics art’s capacity to make the artist invisible, replaced by the vicarious presence of the viewer.

Vapor Drawings, on paper, yield a displaced image of what is materially present—a mirage, generated by heat and light—rather the deceptive presence of something absent—an illusion. Bell introduced a collage technique to these film-coated papers to produce “an unlimited source of interesting images” which he called Mirage Works. Those that he then collaged to canvas became “imitation paintings.” The Fractions followed.

Thus, the mirage effect of Bell’s light-on-surface, coated constructs defy the traditional role of illusion in painting and drawing. That unique approach would, over the course of some six decades, yield new work marked by the improvisation, spontaneity, and intuition he absorbed from his teachers at Chouinard. As Bell put it recently, “I’m addicted to that instant of surprise where you do something and all of a sudden it becomes something else. It’s a beginning, and I like beginnings.”

Dr. Richard Tobin
Director
The Harwood Museum of Art
Gus' Berg | 1975  Coated glass

Venice Fog I | 2017  Laminated glass
**Untitled** | 1978  Vapor drawing

**MELIN 31** | 1985  Vapor drawing
Fractions | 1996-1997  Mixed media

Time Machine | 2002  Cold mirror on barium crown glass
CS 1.21.16 | 2016  Mixed media on black Stonehenge paper

Victor | 2016
Ultimately an illusion of volume is a limitation in itself. It will only be just that: an illusion.”
—LARRY BELL, TAOS
A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE ARTIST’S JOURNEY

1939
Larry Bell is born on December 6 in Chicago, Illinois, the first of two sons of Rebecca and Hyman Bell.

1945
Moves with his family to the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, California, because of his brother’s health problems. Their father opens an insurance agency.

1958
Graduates from Birmingham High School and decides to pursue a career in animation after his parents ban him from the couch and TV. Enrolls in Chouinard Art Institute, a training ground for Disney animators. Bell studies with Robert Irwin and establishes lifelong friendships with fellow students Ed Ruscha, Ken Price, Craig Kauffman, Billy Al Bengston, Doug Wheeler and others now known as the LA Cool School.

1959
Drops out of Chouinard and enters studio life parttime. Rents a studio on Marine Street in Venice Beach, adjacent to those of his artist friends. He works part time as a bouncer and guitar player at the Unicorn in Hollywood, where he meets well-known folk singers (and comedian Lenny Bruce!) and briefly considers pursuing a career in music.

1962
First one-man show opens at Ferus, the gallery that launches the Cool School and puts LA art on the art world’s map.

1965
Inclusion in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, Pace Gallery and Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York City prompts him to move to Manhattan’s Lower East Side. He purchases his first vacuum-coating machine during this time in New York.

1966
Returns to Los Angeles while continuing to be included in group and solo exhibitions on both coasts and in Europe. He commissions the construction of a six-by-ten-foot vacuum-deposition machine that is delivered to his Market Street (Venice Beach) studio in 1969.

1970
London’s Tate Gallery exhibition, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler, is a pivotal moment in the careers of all three Los Angeles artists. Bell’s work continues to be recognized in shows around the country and internationally.

1972
Visits Taos for the first time to exhibit in the Dennis Hopper Art Gallery on Kit Carson Road.

1973
Moves to Taos with Janet Webb in order to “better control [his] distractions.” He maintains his Venice Beach studio for another three years and travels back and forth. During this time, he begins his pivotal The Iceberg and Its Shadow, a 52-panel standing glass sculpture, making sketches and ordering glass in Taos, then returning to Venice to coat the glass.

1974
The first of his three children, Zara Bell, is born in Taos in August. The French government invites Bell to submit sculptural concepts for La Defense, a large development outside Paris. He brings his friends, Robert Irwin, Newton Harrison, Frank Gehry, and scientists Ed Wurtz and Josh Young to help him submit a cross-disciplinary proposal. It gets good reviews from art critics but is ignored by French officials.

1975
*The Iceberg* is exhibited for the first time in Fort Worth and continues to be shown in museums around the country until, three years later, it finds its permanent home at MIT in Massachusetts. He begins the Solar Fountain concept with friend and artist Eric Orr. With artist Gus Foster, he purchases a run-down commercial laundry building in Taos. Together, they renovate the structure to become both studio and living space.

1976
The vacuum tank is moved to Taos and Bell closes his Venice Beach studio.

1978
Bell begins experimentation with coating paper in his vacuum chamber, birthing the *Vapor Drawings*.

1979
Second child, Rachel Bell, is born in Taos in December.

1980s
Third child, Oliver Bell, is born in Taos in August of ’81. Bell explores furniture design, beginning with shapes copied from a vintage chair bought in a Los Angeles thrift store years earlier. *Chairs de Lux, Chairs in Space* and the *Corner Lamps* are part of this series and show in museums and galleries throughout the country during this decade. The *Solar Fountain*, Bell’s collaborative project with Eric Orr, is installed next to the Denver Center for Performing Arts and other large-scale glass sculptures are acquired by municipalities and corporations, including the City of Abilene and the National Institute of Health. He returns to coating and construction of glass cubes briefly in the ’80s.

1990s
Continues to create two-dimensional works on paper including *Fractions*, a series of ten-by-ten-inch collage compositions that eventually number 10,000. He begins a series of bronze sculptures based on calligraphic figures titled *Sumer*, part of a collaboration with friend and architect Frank Gehry. A series of twelve figures result, many at heights up to 30-feet, and are installed in Hong Kong, New York and Albuquerque.

2000s
In ’04, Bell rents a second studio—the same Venice Beach Market Street studio that had been his work space in the ’60s. He establishes a work routine of coating materials in his Taos studio and assembling them in the Venice Beach studio. He develops the *Light Knots*. Major exhibitions during this time are mounted in Nimes, France, Venice, Italy, and Albuquerque.

2010-17
White Cube expands Bell’s gallery representation with solo shows in its London, Rio de Janeiro and Hong Kong galleries. A year-long installation at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, features 6 x 6, an improvisational work comprised of forty 6 by 6-foot glass panels. Hauser & Wirth present solo shows in New York, Zurich and Los Angeles. The Getty Museum’s Pacific Standard Time brings international attention to the work of Bell and his lifetime Los Angeles art colleagues. He moves his Venice Beach studio from Market Street into a former church on Brooks and Main, and names the Mirage works he creates in that space *Church Studies*.

2018
*Hocus, Focus and 12*, an exhibition curated by his friend and studio partner Gus Foster, opens at the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos, marking Bell’s 45th year living and working in the community.
HOCUS, FOCUS AND 12 EXHIBITION LIST

MUSEUM ENTRANCE

Cube 41 2006
Coated blue and clear glass
Gift of Larry Bell

MANDELMAN-RIBAK GALLERY

Gus’ Berg 1975
1 panel 7” x 6’ rectangle; 2 panels 7” x 6’ triangles, Coated glass
Gift of Gus Foster

Venice Fog I 2017
4 panels 6” x 8’ True Sea Salt; 4 panels 6” x 4’ Dusk, Laminated glass
Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles

Time Machine 2002
Cold mirror on Barium Crown glass
Metal and wood support
62 3/4” x 60” x 3 1/2”
2 Chairs de Lux
Painted wood and leather cushions
30 3/4” x 25 1/2” x 26 3/4”
Courtesy of Larry Bell

CAROLINE LEE AND ROBERT ELLIS GALLERY

Untitled Maquette (Blush/True Fog) 2018
4 panels 12” x 16” Blush; 4 panels 12” x 8” True Fog, Laminated glass

Untitled Maquette (Sea Salt/Zinc) 2018
4 panels 12” x 16” Sea Salt; 4 panels 12” x 8” Zinc, Laminated glass
All Courtesy of Larry Bell Studio and Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles

Larry Bell/Eric Orr Solar Fountain Study c. 1978
Vaporized metals/SIO on glass
Gift of Gus Foster

GEORGE E. FOSTER, JR. GALLERY

Untitled 1978
Vapor Drawing
Gift of the Robert and Andys Burns Estate

Untitled 1978
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Sandra Lerner

VF 33 1978
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Gus Foster

PFBK 13 1979
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Tally Richards

Untitled 1981
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Mary Dill

Barcelona Suite #4 1989
Color Lithograph
Gift of Francoise Drayer

Barcelona Suite #8 1989
Color Lithograph
Gift of Francoise Drayer

Untitled (Cyrano) 2002
Watercolor
Gift of Gus Foster

ELIN 61 1982
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Mary Dill

Mirage #247 1990
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Gus Foster

MELIN 31 1985
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Larry Bell

AAAAA 47 2007
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Gus Foster

AAAAA 127 2009
Vapor Drawing
Gift of Gus Foster

STAIRWELL GALLERY

50 Fractions 1996-1997
Mixed Media
Gift of Francoise Drayer

Light Knot #4 2012
Mylar coated with aluminum/SIO
Gift of Gus Foster

LLK 2012
Mylar coated with aluminum/SIO
Courtesy of Larry Bell

12 STRING GUITARS

Bruno Lyra 1910
Galiano 1920
Zamatius 1965
Gerlach 1970
Earthwood (Converted 6 String) 1972
Martin 1976
James Goodall 1986
Bown 1986
Sobel (English-made, arched top) 1990
McPherson 2016
Victor 2016
Avanti 2017

Collection of Larry Bell
LARRY BELL
Hocus, Focus and 12
June 9 – October 7, 2018
Gallery Guide

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Front cover Desiree Manville, Larry Bell’s studio, 2017
Page 2 Frank Thomas, 1965
Page 15 Caron Levin, 2018
Page 17 R. Doen Tobey, 1980

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