2015

Coherence: An Immersive Laser Installation by Dan Corson

Dan Corson

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Iowa State University Museums

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For nearly 100 years, Iowa State University has been a leader in collecting public art and integrating it into the campus experience. Part of the mission of the Christian Petersen Art Museum is to celebrate public art on campus and provide an environment and experience for learning about new public art and artists.

Dan Corson is an award-winning public artist from Seattle who challenges the notion of public art and infuses his installations with drama and thought-provoking design. He researches light and laser technology and experiments with his own art when new technologies arise, allowing him to innovatively explore human interaction in space. His environments play games with our perception, draw an emotional response, and leave us asking, how did he do that? As a significant contemporary figure in the area of public art, creating this installation on campus provides the Iowa State community with another opportunity to experience world-class art. This exhibition will engage the Iowa State students in disciplines from engineering to the arts and will challenge visitors’ understanding about public art and space.

One of the stated goals of Iowa State University is to lead the world in advancing the land-grant ideals of putting science, technology, and human creativity to work. This exhibition will show visitors how art, science, and technology are constantly influencing and impacting each other and that the most spectacular results come from the combination of all three.

More information about Dan Corson can be found at his website dancorson.com.

This exhibition is organized by University Museums and the Iowa West Foundation with support from the Neva M. Petersen Endowment for the Christian Petersen Art Museum, the estate of Shirley Held, Kathy and John Howell, Peter and Rae Reilly, the College of Engineering, Country Plastics, the ARK Pet Shop, and the College of Design. Images by Wyeth Lynch, 2015 and Dan Corson.
This exhibition, Coherence, is the culmination of a series of laser-focused experiments and art installations that I have been working on for the last 10 years. For the exhibition, I have sought to create luminous atmospheric spaces that conjure the infinite and touch our ancient reptilian brain stem in a visceral and phenomenological shared moment.

The perception and phenomenology of light has always been of great interest to me. Since my undergraduate days working in the theatre (where lighting deeply psychologically supports the scenes), I have been fascinated by the use of light to conjure mood, define spaces, shift perceptions and reveal the hidden. Now working mostly in the arena of Public Art, I am particularly interested in exploring the intersection of light and space and using light not only as a sculptural medium but to describe space and to define one’s movement through the experience of that liminal space.

I see these pieces as exploring the very act of seeing— as it relates how light enters our eyes and produces the experiences we perceive and feel.

The kinetic manipulation of laser beams through the vibrationally calibrated scanners and pea-sized mirrors, creates a perception of movement and allows for the project to change and evolve marking both time and space. Aesthetically, there is a formal quality to the work that through a minimalist vocabulary allows the viewer/participants to personally engage the work through their subjective sensorial experiences and corporeal movement through the gallery.

For this exhibition, some of these spaces are small, contained environments like the Eidolon pieces that almost holographically define space and form through the illusion of the “thickness of light”. In Eidolon 1, shifting planes of light are projected through dyed water creating a virtual wedge or veil of light that continuously interacts with a distorted mirrored surface creating a glorious distortion that reminds me of spectacular sunrises and certain science fiction or ghost-like optical effects.

The project Decay, utilizes the decay of photonic patterns created on a doped phosphorescent surface to inscribe gestures that create visual echoes of text and patterns. Indigo lasers excite the phosphors and briefly mark the wall revealing past and present simultaneously.
Coherence - the main room installation, utilizes the special inherent quality of spatial coherence to create the illusion of infinite spaces and provides the magic that will illuminate one filament and not the one next to it. Exploiting this special and unique nature of lasers elevates this environment to more than just a science experiment by creating the appearance of internal illumination where there is none, motion where there is none and with the addition of a mirrored floor, produces a subtle perceptive disorientation while defining and marking space in infinite and mesmerizing ways.

The nature of these pieces and projected light generally, promotes references of illusion. However for me, some of the joy in the experience is demystifying the experience: “pulling back the curtain” and having the magician share some of his secrets. It is about the phenomenology of light that works on visceral, psychological and intellectual levels. So with both experiences, I hope that our reactive visceral brain stem can hold and enjoy an expansive conversation with the curiosity of the cerebral cortex talking late into the night.
Artist Dan Corson is well-acquainted with extremes of light and darkness. As an aficionado of the ocean, he knows light’s capability to dazzle, producing a disorientingly profound experience through its overwhelming abundance. As an avid explorer of caves and caverns, he has also inhabited what he calls the “completely controlling” spaces of underworld, where one is overwhelmed not by light’s presence but by its absence. Light’s transformative power, its ability to define places and to control perception of them, has fascinated him from an early age.

In Coherence, he harnesses this power, combining the brilliant qualities of light with the contractedness of darkness to create a series of powerful, even hypnotic experiences. Like much of Corson’s artwork, Coherence takes advantage of the new to access the primal: the elements in the installation are united by their employment of lasers. The exhibition’s title refers to the defining quality of the laser, its spatial coherence—the tendency of the light waves in a laser to align with one another, resulting in an extremely narrow, focused and powerful beam of light. Corson uses this power in a variety of ways throughout the exhibition. In the main gallery, lasers of varying colors play across a field of dangling filaments, sometimes illuminating just a single thread while those next to it remain in shadow (something an ordinary light beam could not do). In the Christian Petersen Art Museum’s distinctive turret, off the main gallery, two of the objects employ systems of mirrors to bounce the blue lasers first off the ceiling, then the floor, before they finally pass through two blown-glass vessels filled with fluorine-dyed water, illuminating them and causing them to fluoresce. In still another artwork, lasers make patterns on a wall painted with a phosphorescent paint that retains the patterns as if by magic, continuing to glow for...
several minutes after the laser has passed over it. Two more water-filled objects seem to contain and act upon the light, manipulating it—as sculpting it—as it passes through them.

Corson came to art through his love of light and its capabilities, not the other way around. Put differently: he did not choose light as his art medium; he chose art as the means by which to put light to work, to express the ideas he already had regarding its capabilities. Trained as a theatrical lighting and set designer, Corson found that his experience translated neatly into a career as a public artist: the scale of the proscenium is very like the large scale on which one must think and work as a public artist; and the inherently collaborative nature of theater design prepared him well for the experience of working with the large teams required to achieve his concepts. Corson has become known for his dazzling large-scale installations, many of which achieve their most complete realization only after nightfall, when they become literal beacons in the darkness.

Corson’s gallery work comes from a similar place and operates on similar principles to his public art, but it permits him a greater degree of freedom because it comes with fewer limitations regarding subject matter, size or durability. Granted, his gallery installations are restricted by the boundaries of the walls, by the size and shape of the space, restrictions not present in his outdoor works of public art. But as a visitor experiencing one of his indoor oceans of light, one hardly feels the confinement. Corson’s gallery spaces are, like magic houses in fairy tales, bigger inside than out.

As a student Corson encountered, and found his instincts ratified by, artists like James Turrell and Robert Irwin who were interested in the phenomenology of light and space. More surprisingly—though with the equal reason—Corson also claims the atmospheric extravagances of the British romantic painter J.M.W. Turner as an inspiration. Another appropriate nineteenth-century parallel might be found in the work of the designer, inventor and impresario Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre. Trained as a painter of theater backdrops, in the 1820s Daguerre parlayed his comfort with large-scale painting and the illusionistic qualities of light into a popular Paris attraction called the Diorama. Visitors to the Diorama stood before an enormous and incredibly
illusionistic landscape painting and watched as, through the magic of theatrical lighting, an entire day appeared to pass over the scene, from sunrise to sunset in an hour. The wild success of this endeavor later funded Daguerre’s better-known undertaking, the invention of an early form of photography called the daguerreotype. Like Corson, Daguerre was comfortable working on an enormous scale and harnessing the power of light to achieve his immersive illusions. Like the daguerreotype, Corson’s installations permit the temporary and fleeting to become permanent and tangible, opening it to examination.

A legend about the theologian Martin Luther offers still another parallel. In the story, Luther is walking in the woods when he sees the moon’s reflected light sparkling in the snow on the boughs of an evergreen tree. Keen to show the vision to his family, he takes the tree into his house and lights its branches with candles, recreating the effect. The legend is usually repeated as an origin story about the tradition of the Christmas tree, but it actually points to something far bigger and more universal: in bringing the tree into his house, he seeks to make permanent an evanescent phenomenon, to concretize his fleeting feeling of being transported by nature.

Coherence inhabits precisely this territory. Corson offers for his viewer a sense of being overwhelmed and transported by the disorienting action of light, creating ideal conditions for the viewer to discover light’s capabilities as though for him- or herself. In the process the viewer arrives anew at an age-old feeling, finding in the gallery a sense of the sublime, with its simultaneous annihilation and fulfillment of the self in the face of the spectacular void.
A community-driven plan to turn Council Bluffs, Iowa into a hub for public art was once just an idea on paper. Now, 10 years later, the dream is a reality for the river city just across the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge from Omaha.

Funded solely by the Iowa West Foundation, the Iowa West Public Art collection in Council Bluffs, 2015's “River City of the Year,” features numerous internationally-renowned artists’ works. They include Wellspring and Oculus by Brower Hatcher in Bayliss Park, recently named a "Great Place" by the American Planning Association; and the latest addition to the ever-developing riverfront: Big Mo, a seventy-five-foot “spacetime orange” sculpture designed by Mark di Suvero.

The collection also features an interactive lighting environment by the name of Rays on the five-acre great lawn of Tom Hanafan River’s Edge Park. It’s designed by none other than Dan Corson, the artist behind Coherence. In addition to choreographed sequences, Rays showcases a complex interactive lighting component that tracks and "plays" with people through a series of games. And as the seasons change, the lights take on new color palettes.

In addition to public art, the Iowa West Foundation has been a catalyst in revitalizing downtown Council Bluffs, including the revamp of a former International Harvester Warehouse into affordable live/work space for artists. Built in 1888, the Harvester is a four-story building with approximately 47,000 square feet in the main structure and an additional 24,000 square feet in a spacious one-story addition that dates back to 1928. Current artists include acrylic painter Patty Talbert, ceramic artist Tom Harnack and painter Steve Joy.

The Harvester Artspace Lofts team is thrilled to host Corson’s Coherence display this summer and provide the people of western Iowa and eastern Nebraska with another opportunity to embrace Corson’s artistry as well as that of the artists in residence.

More information at www.iowawestfoundation.org