

ARTSEEN - MARCH 5TH, 2015

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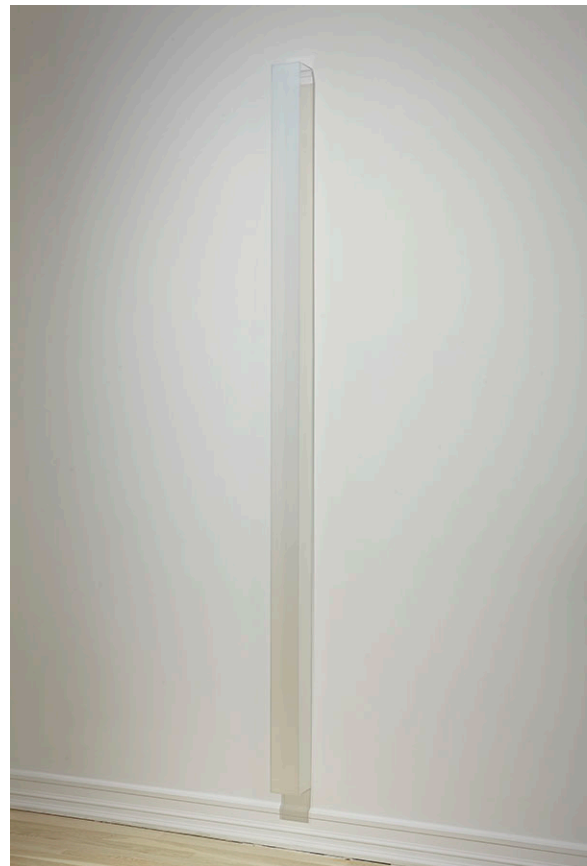
Ron Cooper

by Michael Straus

FRANKLIN PARRASCH GALLERY | JANUARY 29 – MARCH 13, 2015

Spaced at generous distances along the walls of Franklin Parrasch's cleanly-renovated Upper East Side townhouse, nine of Ron Cooper's lacquered Plexiglas *Vertical Bars*, each 8' x 3 5/8" x 3 5/8", stand guard over the mute transmission of light passing through the gallery's lavishly open space. Each bar is mounted upright against the wall so as to maintain a midpoint sightline more or less at eye level, and is colorlessly transparent when viewed directly from the side. The perceptual magic of each piece lies in the subtle yet austere application of gently graded shades of acrylic lacquer to its front-facing surface. The colors appear, blend, and nearly disappear as the viewer moves around the works, requiring him to elevate, lower, and otherwise shift his gaze.

In "Gold to Blue – Blue Transmission" (2014), for example, neither blue nor gold first appear, but something more akin to a glow. The quality of the light is not in the least thin, but is simply elusive, compelling a glance to become patient contemplation. Continued, quiet watching reveals a fragile blue that shades into gold but with no clear



"Gold to Blue – Blue Transmission" (2014), acrylic lacquer on Plexiglas. Image courtesy the artist and Franklin Parrasch Gallery

point where the one shifts into the other. This effect arises out of Cooper's multi-layered application of some 30 coats to the surface, evenly sprayed, in a manner he describes as the exhalation of "one long breath."

Take another example, "Rothko – Red Blue" (2014), where despite the strength of the colors (the blue much deeper, for example, than found in "Gold to Blue"), it is never possible to tell where one ends and the other begins, where the transition is far slower than that found in a simple color wheel or prism. And whether the work is an explicit reference to Rothko's 1954 painting "No. 1 (Royal Red and Blue)" or simply to his unique transmission of color in oil and canvas, the homage is plain and the heir legitimate. Cooper's red isn't meant to be a "Rothko red" or the blue a "Rothko blue"—in their own way, Cooper's colors are even dreamier, though his handling of light and color in his own chosen media is just as masterful. And because the lacquer is itself light-transmitting, the subtlety of graduated color in this piece as in the others derives both from light entering through the clear Plexiglas sides and passing



Left: "Aqua – All Color" (2014), acrylic lacquer on Plexiglas; Right: "Rothko – Red Blue" (2014), acrylic lacquer on Plexiglas. Images courtesy the artist and Franklin Parrasch Gallery

through the front of the bar, and from light shone onto its face. The resulting color values are therefore novel and even unfamiliar.

It is well known that Cooper's work emerges from and within the framework of Southern California's so-called "Light and Space" and "Finish Fetish" movements of the mid-1960s. He is properly cited as a key artist of that

moment by virtue of his early *Light Traps* and *Vertical Bars*, the latter sharing the essential formal characteristics of the works in the current show, but constructed using earlier-available coating materials for their pigmentation. Cooper's distinctive use of the resins and plastics of that era was evident in the Getty-organized shows that comprised the recent multi-venue exploration of California-based artists, *Pacific Standard Time*.

Yet Cooper's reprise of these early forms some 40 years later is evidence of his ongoing exploration of transformative experiences, one that fits perfectly with his concurrent and highly praised involvement in the elaborate production of mezcal in numerous Zapotec villages in the Mexican province of Oaxaca, where the villagers rely on mythically ancient distillation and flavoring methods unique to each village. For Cooper, this latter project—yielding a line of mezcal imported into the United States under the name Del Maguey in bottles bearing labels designed by the late Ken Price and presented in hand-woven, basket-like encasings—is itself an artwork. In his own words:

The criteria for me for successful art is that it transforms your experience in some way. I don't care if it's a nude, a sunset, or a pile of garbage, it's got to have that 'A-ha' moment. If it does, then it's a successful piece of art. A good mezcal is truly transformative and intoxicating, so it fits my criteria of art.¹

Cooper's consistent approach to perceptual experience challenges any preconceived or artificial separation of "art" from other endeavors. The energy of works such as the *Vertical Bars* depends on a necessarily changing combination of architecture, light, and viewer. That is—as with the works of kindred spirits (*pace* Asher Durand) such as Mary Corse, Helen Pashgian, and, more recently, Gisela Colon—Cooper's objects have an indefinable presence, existing not as portable objects that remain essentially unchanged when moved from place to place, but instead with their animation contingent on time and place.

Even the gallery's structural framework for the *Vertical Bars* provides an unexpected temporal disjunction that echoes Cooper's broader interest in bridging both time and culture. Thus, certain Victorian elements of the townhouse—doors, mantelpieces, window frames—have been retained in the otherwise white and contemporary space. The *Vertical Bars*' light and texture thereby plays against these as well, much as Cooper's multiple mezcals, all in varied and fragile liquid shades, bridge across an ancient and embedded culture to that of a new Mexico.

¹ *Meet Mr. Mezcal, Ian Camere, Difford's Guide* (June 12, 2012)