



Bilhenry Walker: Light, Space, and Metaphor

October 19, 2019 – January 12, 2020



Clymantra, 1969-2019, oil and acrylic on Sonotube, 46 x 76 x 20 inches.

Bilhenry Walker of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, has been making fantastic sculptures for more than fifty years. He began making art in California, influenced heavily by his exposure to the work of artists such as Robert Irwin and Doug Wheeler. Irwin and Wheeler were at the forefront of artists using light, a movement that became known as *Light and Space*. What was especially important about these artists in the 1960s is that, while Minimalist artists were reducing their objects down to studies of design, process, and materials, *Light and Space* artists went further, directing our attention not just to the objects themselves, but to how we perceive them. These artists understood that the viewer was just as important as the object or idea, so their artworks provided a more interactive sensory experience for viewers than much of the other art produced during this time.

Bilhenry's earliest explorations of art and materials began in 1968 and consisted of wall-mounted sculptures, using paint on industrial Sonotube material. These sculptural paintings, or painted sculptures, when viewed straight-on, appear to be typical, shaped, abstract paintings from their era. However, their three-dimensionality becomes more apparent through lighting, so that the cast shadow becomes an important part of the visual experience. The first of these paintings was *Oberon* (1968). It features intense colors in concentric shapes beginning as ovals and gradually widening into circles. Lit from above, the painting's dramatic arc is revealed to viewers standing in front of it only through its shadow, which curves unexpectedly downward from both the left and right edges of the painting. Just as important as the visual surprise of the shadow is the extension of the painting into the space around it. Through light, a relatively simple painting can assume a much grander appearance.

The success of this painting led Bilhenry to continue along these lines, and he produced *Clymantra* the next year. This painting, much more complex in its use of paint and three-dimensionality, is lit from the side. The experience of viewing it is unexpected. Because we are unaccustomed to viewing artworks with side lighting, in this case from the right, the intense brightness on the right and the relative darkness of the left side of the painting is unsettling. But as the external lighting moves from right to left in intensity, the blue and green shapes Bilhenry painted are lighter at the tops and fade toward darker colors at the bottoms. Added to that is the shadow, which is more unexpected than that of *Oberon*. The lower right portion of the painting casts a surprisingly curved shadow under the painting, and the left edge of the painting produces a shadow similar to that of *Oberon*. Only this time, the shadow moves sideways rather than downward. The mix of paint, shape, light, and shadow causes us not simply to look at the artwork, identify it, and move on, but to stop to try to make sense of what our eyes are experiencing.

In the early 1970s, Bilhenry began to place light sources directly into his artworks. *Colonel Blume* and *Kaptain Krakovitch* are crisply painted, flat, geometric images on Masonite. However, behind the surfaces is a structure that projects the images six inches from the wall and backlights them using fluorescent bulbs. Installed against white walls, the paintings' large oval shapes, painted with countless layers of pearlescent paint, are both pushed forward from the backlighting and recede back into the walls because of their similarity in color.

After these initial works in which Bilhenry experimented with the interplay of his artworks and the walls on which they



Foreground: *Atomics Proto Impalers I, II, III*, 1985, polyester resin, (tallest) 74 x 14 x 12 inches.

Background (L to R): *Beringer Flats Solo*, 1974, acrylic lacquer on Plexiglas, 47 x 47 x 4 inches; *Aluminum Mustard*, 1975, acrylic lacquer on Masonite, 77 x 65 x 4 inches; *Oberon*, 1968-2019, oil and acrylic on Sonotube, 46 x 42 x 22 inches.

were installed, he moved to translucent materials, beginning with Plexiglas. The clarity of the Plexiglas enabled him to make certain that the wall surface became part of the visual puzzle of works such as *Beringer Salt Flats* and *Prelude to the Springhill Mine Disaster*, both from 1974. The next year, he continued his experimentation with Plexiglas, using 4-inch thick sections of the material to carve stand-alone sculptures like *Thiouria* and *Flint III*. These small works, carved in dynamic, multifaceted shapes, were among the first of Bilhenry's works that eliminated paint and relied, instead, on the prismatic effects of light to provide color.

The excitement Bilhenry felt in these small sculptures made him want to create larger sculptures. Because Plexiglas provided limited depth in his sculptures, he turned to polyester resin, a material that some artists connected to the *Light and Space* movement had begun using a few years earlier. Once he mastered the craft of controlling and shaping the resin, his sculptures increased in scale, difficulty, and visual impact. Beginning with sculptures suitable for pedestals, he then began creating series of sculptures that were presented on custom bases, his first steps away from needing the support of a wall or pedestal to display his work.

Throughout the 1980s, the resin sculptures grew. With *Atomics I, II*, and *IV*, Bilhenry took delight in the massive forms he could create. Each sculpture in this series is more than one foot in depth. For his next series, *Atomics Proto Impalers*, he increased the height, accentuated the slenderness of the sculptures, and placed the clear resin closer to eye level. He followed that with *Atomics Impalers*, in which the clear resin rises from the floor to a height of more

than six feet, allowing viewers a remarkable range of visual effects as they walk around each sculpture.

This last series fully demonstrates the unique quality of Bilhenry's resin sculptures. Though they can allow us to view forms inside the resin, they do not provide a clear view through the sculptures. The internal forms are not visible from all sides. Reflections, the separation of the colors of light, and the distortion that occurs while looking through a three-sided form all work together to surprise our eyes as we look at the sculptures from different viewpoints.

The resin sculptures in this exhibition culminate with three large works: *Duplex Vector*, *Shard Olduvai*, and *Atomics Obelisk*. The arced, suspended forms of *Duplex Vector*, the gently curved and patterned *Shard Olduvai*, and the visual magic of *Atomics Obelisk* bring the pleasures of Bilhenry's resin sculptures to an awe-inspiring scale, dominating viewers and their space by their enormity and light effects.

The above is a quick summary of Bilhenry's work using light and space. But what about metaphor? Do his titles help us out? Some titles mention characters and places from literature or mythology, such as *Oberon* and *Thangrodrim Thrust*. Other titles reference "Olduvai," "Thiouria," and "the Springhill mine disaster," all of which might be unfamiliar, but they are real things. What does all of this mean? It means that light and space are such fundamental things to our lives that they can connect to almost anything. In these cases, they have connected to particular things that are meaningful to Bilhenry Walker, as he has worked to shape and color his sculptures. You are welcome to find your own metaphorical connections as you view this exhibition.



(L to R): *Kaptain Krakovitch*, 1973, acrylic lacquer on Masonite with fluorescent light, 60 x 72 x 4 inches; *Duplex Vector*, 1989, polyester resin and hardware, 120 x 72 x 60 inches; *Flint III*, 1975, Plexiglas, 12 x 20 x 4 inches; *Colonel Blume*, 1973, acrylic lacquer on Masonite with fluorescent light, 65 x 70 x 4 inches.



(L to R): *Atomics Obelisk*, 1989, polyester resin, 130 x 46 x 26 inches; *Shard Olduvai*, 1988, polyester resin with granite base, 130 x 28 x 22 inches.



(L to R): *Thangrodrim Thrust*, 1988, polyester resin, 78 x 29 x 8 inches; *Epilogue for a Dithyramb*, 1974, acrylic lacquer on Masonite, 48 x 126 x 4 inches; *Duplex Vector*.



Installation shot with *Thangrodrim Thrust* in foreground.

cover:

Atomics Impalers I, II, III, 1986, polyester resin, (tallest) 115 x 12 x 10 inches; with *Fractured Memory*, 1977, polyester resin, 22 x 10 x 5 inches, and *Fractured Landscape*, 1977, polyester resin on granite base, 12 x 26 x 6 inches, in background.