Glasstire

Light and Space and Time: Considering Larry Bell and Gyula Kosice

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What is the difference between an artist and a scientist? Both are driven by curiosity to experiment and innovate as they interrogate questions about the world — considering our past, present, and potential futures. The scientific process and the creative process are remarkably similar. In their pursuits, both artists and scientists often employ, respond to, and pioneer new technologies. Perhaps, the area in which they differ, more often than not, is their output. While scientific research culminates in scholarly articles and utilitarian objects (for personal and public use) — like vaccines and medicines, as well as diagnostic, transportation, and communication technologies — creative outputs are not meant to be *used* in the same sense. Rather, they're to be experienced, contemplated, and discussed.

Clerestory windows at Dia Beacon, designed by Robert Irwin. Photo: Jessica Fuentes

Last year, I made my way to Dia Beacon, mostly to see the physical building, which Light and Space artist Robert Irwin designed. I spent half a day walking through the galleries with my daughter, trying to take it all in. There was too much to consider and I couldn't comprehend how I would distill the trip into a single essay. Ultimately, I gave up. Instead, I focused my writing on Cameron Rowland's *Properties*, a poignant installation on land and ownership. I was willing to forego writing about Robert Smithson, Fred Sandback, Lucas Samaras, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Senga Nengudi, Meg Webster, Larry Bell, and others, because I knew that over the course of the coming years my experience of their work would seep out and inform other writings. The beauty of a space like Dia Beacon is that it allows conversations between artists, many of whom are interested in similar concepts. Larry Bell's work, for example, felt right at home in the open, light-filled galleries. Large panes of blue-shaded glass sitting delicately on pink carpet and small glass cubes resting on clear Plexiglas pedestals were simultaneously breathtaking and absorbed into the surroundings.

Works by Larry Bell on view at Dia Beacon

At the beginning of December, I visited the San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA) to see *Larry Bell: Improvisations*, a solo show that allowed more focused time to consider the artist's work. To someone unfamiliar with his works, a quick glance at Bell's cubes might bring to mind that of Donald Judd; however, Bell's work is far more complex, using similar minimalist structures but imbuing them with a variety of qualities that inherently alter the seemingly simple object. *Improvisations* opens with a set of three cubes on clear pedestals. Like all of Bell's work, the pink, yellow, and green-hued boxes are more complicated than they appear. As I moved around the pieces, colors shifted, silhouettes of

people in the gallery and my reflection appeared and disappeared, and transparency and reflection revealed themselves.

Installation views of “Larry Bell: Improvisations” at the San Antonio Museum of Art

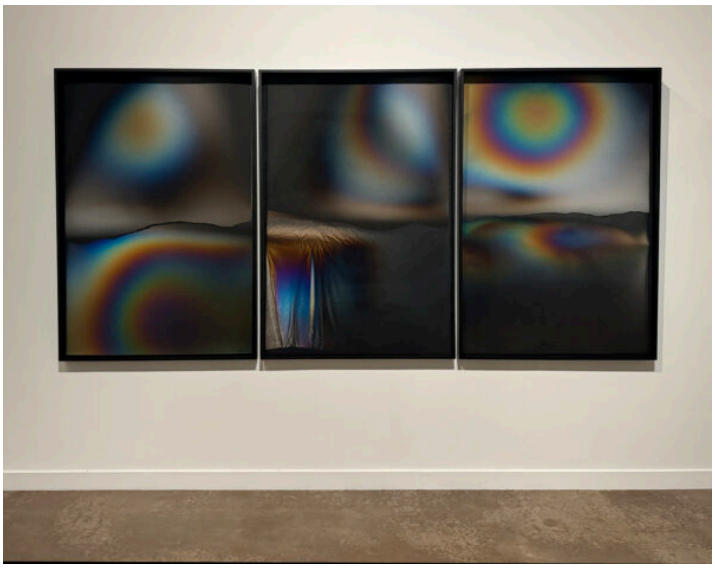
Works by Larry Bell on view in “Improvisations” at the San Antonio Museum of Art

This scenario of subtle shifts in perception would replay as I walked around the gallery filled with smaller works. Regardless of their size, I was enthralled by the playfulness of engaging with the pieces. Every encounter reminded me of a science experiment — playing with mirrors, prisms, and beams of light, watching a strand of white light break into a rainbow spectrum, layering colored glass to observe how light adds and subtracts differently than paint, placing mirrors to create an infinite space, and so on. I could have spent hours marveling at these small works; the more I looked, the more there was to see. Even the shadows

and light refractions from his first, simple glass cube, created in 1969, were intriguing.

A work by Larry Bell on view in “Improvisations” at the San Antonio Museum of Art

Lana Meador, SAMA’s Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, walked me through the exhibition and spoke about Bell’s method of tinting glass panes with a vacuum-coating process, using his own machinery to manipulate the material atom by atom, rather than outsourcing the production, as artists sometimes do. I imagine Bell as an alchemist, experimenting with chemistry and creating something magical; this experimentation and devotion to keeping his hand in the work is where the improvisation comes into play.



Larry Bell, “Uranuscape Triptych – Dea Studies Series,” 2023

Another gallery holds two-dimensional, mixed-media works, pieces of Bell’s I was less familiar with. Though here the process remains much the same, it is the output that is different. Bell still uses the vacuum deposition technique, but in place of glass he’s manipulating paper, Mylar, and cellophane, materials that are sometimes later layered and collaged together. My favorite is a more straightforward piece, *Uranuscape Triptych – Dea Studies Series*, which presents an eerie dark landscape with flares of color. The depiction of the “sky” and “ground” feels foreign compared to the previous galleries of work, but Bell is still considering light and space, much as a photographer might: how light over time reveals itself on paper, how crevasses and shadows fool the eye into seeing depth on a flat surface.

Larry Bell, “The Dilemma of Griffin’s Cat,” 1980, 1/2 inch plate glass coated with Inconel

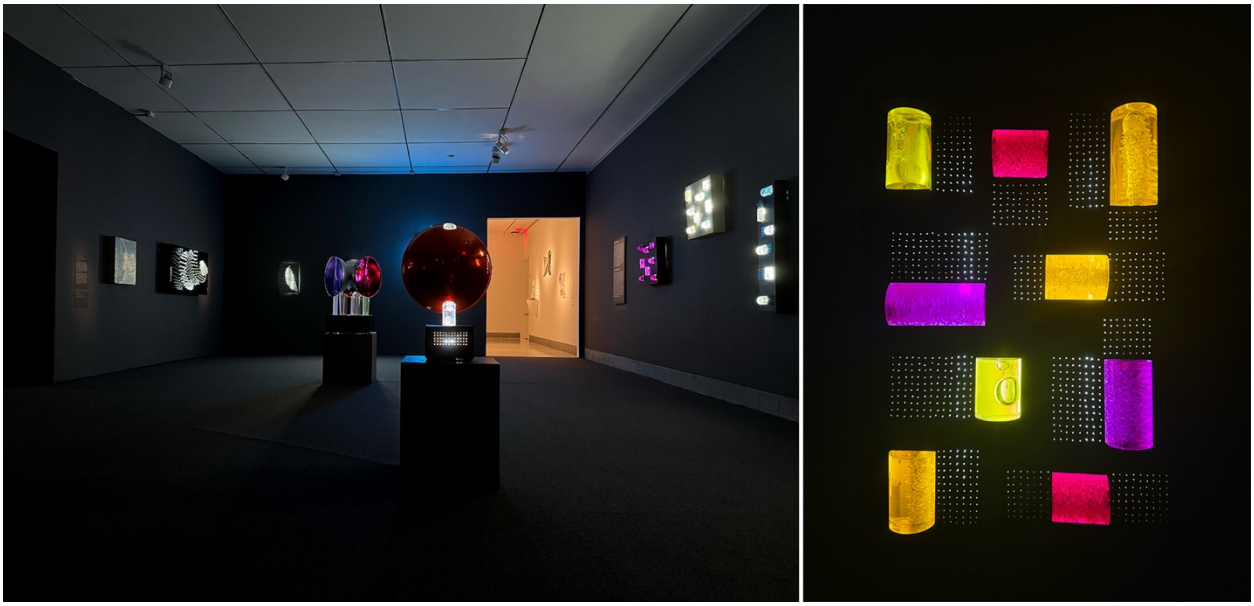
The final room is the big reveal; it's a homecoming of sorts for Bell's *The Dilemma of Griffin's Cat*, a large-scale sculpture commissioned by SAMA to mark the museum's opening in 1981, though the piece has not been on view in decades. The blue and gray-tinted glass sits on a light gray carpeted platform, which was not part of the original commission, but came later. The carpet isn't as flashy as Dia Beacon's cotton candy pink groundcover, but it serves as a barrier to keep visitors away from the glass and a textural juxtaposition to the smooth reflective surface of the work. I stand in one place and notice where the reflection of my body begins to fade into a transparent view of the space behind the glass. I watch as the gallery attendant circles the room, becoming a silhouette, vanishing altogether, and rematerializing.

If Larry Bell is an alchemist, then perhaps Gyula Kosice is a seer.

A few weeks ago, I traveled to Houston with my sights set on *Gyula Kosice: Intergalactic* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH). I had seen Kosice's *La ciudad hidroespacial (The Hydrospatial City)* on view in the museum's Kinder Building on past visits, and at the beginning of this year I spent a fair amount of time standing in front of his *Hidroluz (Hyrdolight)* at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin. I was drawn to its starlike light pattern and embedded sphere with bubbling water, unusual even among works by other Argentine artists of the same generation.

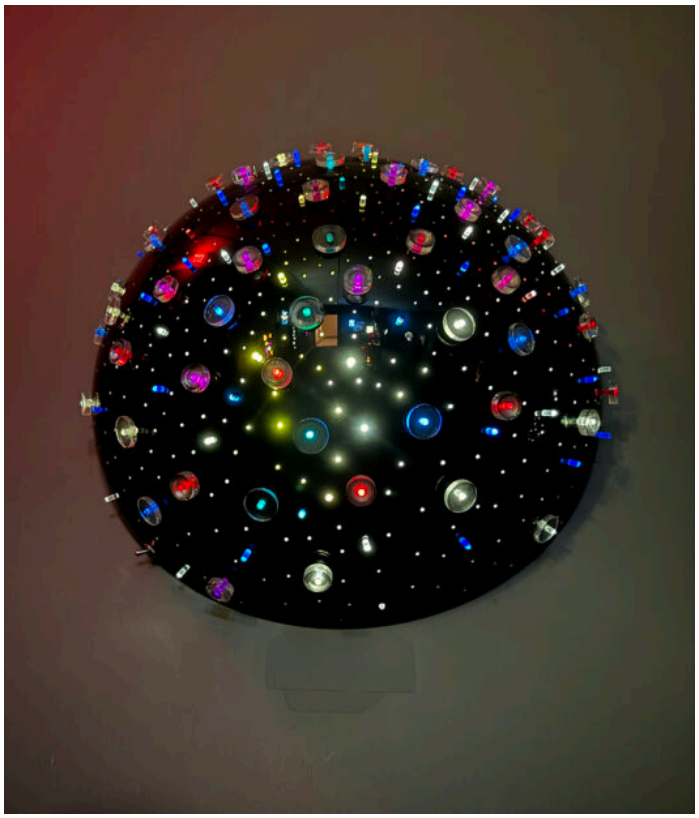
Left: An installation view of "Gyula Kosice: Intergalactic" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Right: Gyula Kosice, "Rotación espacial (Spatial Rotation)," 1958, acrylic

Like Bell, Kosice is known for his fascination with light and space (both in the sense of physical space and outer space), and for his experimentation with new materials. The first gallery of the Houston exhibition highlights Kosice's interest in transparency, showcasing an array of works that play with Plexiglas. In a film at the end of the show, we see the artist heating and shaping the acrylic. These works, which span from the 1950s to the '70s, are important and set the stage for an understanding of Kosice's interest in materiality, volume, repetition, and movement. However, the next two rooms are the heart of the show.



Left: An installation view of "Gyula Kosice: Intergalactic" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Right: Gyula Kosice, "Relieve lumínico (Luminous Relief)," 1958, painted acrylic, painted wood, and light source. Courtesy Fundación Kosice — Museo Kosice

Moving from the well-lit "transparency" gallery into a darkened room with colorful works is necessarily jarring — the contrast adds to the experience. Some of the earliest pieces in this space, like *Galaxia de París (Paris Gallery)*, seem to be precursors for the Lite-Brite — clear acrylic pegs of varying thicknesses extend from holes in a black surface, illuminated by a light from within the work. On an opposite wall, five pieces from Kosice's *Relieves lumínicos* are hung at varying heights. These works continue the use of light emanating from holes pierced into a dark surface, and also include large acrylic peglike cylinders filled with brightly colored plastic pieces that have fixed air bubbles and variances, giving the sense that the now-hardened liquid is still in motion. The back wall holds a series of half-spheres, known as the artist's *Meteorites*, also illuminated from within and dispersing light through small colored pegs strewn across the surface.



Gyula Kosice, “Aerolito azul (Blue Meteorite),” 1966, aluminum, acrylic, and light source

Kosice is bending, blocking, filtering, and transforming light, ultimately making this intangible form of energy into a physical manifestation.

Installation views of “Gyula Kosice: Intergalactic” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The next gallery adds water. Spheres and half-spheres enclosing backdrops pierced with light now also hold bubbling and flowing water. The fully confined water sculptures seem to create their own micro-ecosystems with condensation forming above the waterline. One wall is filled with teardrop-shaped acrylic pieces, which like the half-spheres are lit and hold water. A case filled with magazines and small jewelry pieces featuring Kosice's designs speak to the way his work infiltrated popular culture, spurred by a fascination with the Space Age.

Gyula Kosice's sketches for "La ciudad hidroespacial (The Hydrospatial City)"

A film by Alejandro Vignatti, which was shown at the 1964 Venice Biennale, is on display in the final gallery alongside reproduced sketches of Kosice's *La ciudad hidroespacial (The Hydrospatial City)*. The footage reveals some of the artist's processes while the narration speaks about water and a new world. After spending time in the exhibition, I walked to the Kinder Building to revisit *La ciudad hidroespacial*. With the added context of the artist's oeuvre, the playfulness and hope of the piece struck me. I imagined Kosice dreaming up his utopian visions as he reshaped and formed the Plexiglas, considered ways of circulating water and creating vapors, and experimented with dispersing light. But, perhaps because of the year that we have experienced, the installation also felt heavier. Not just an optimistic idea for a futuristic world, but a condemnation of the world we have created and an essential plan for its inevitable fate.

Gyula Kosice, “La ciudad hidroespacial (The Hydrospatial City)”

Going back to my original question: What is the difference between an artist and a scientist? The world seems to take scientists a bit more seriously than artists, which is a fundamental misunderstanding of the power of art and creativity. Larry Bell’s sculptures ask us to reconsider the space we are in at the moment. His cubes and glass planes invite us, through wonder, to look closely, to truly observe, and to consider how light, shadow, reflection, and transparency inform our perception of our environment. Gyula Kosice’s works ask us to imagine the space we might someday inhabit. His spheres, cylinders, and teardrop forms call us, also through wonder, to consider our resources — light, water, space — and how we might create a sustainable and equitable future. Both things are necessary; maybe now, more than ever, we should all be reflecting on the reality we are in and the future we want to create.

Larry Bell: Improvisations *is on view at the San Antonio Museum of Art through January 4, 2026*.

Gyula Kosice: Intergalactic *is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston through January 25, 2026.*