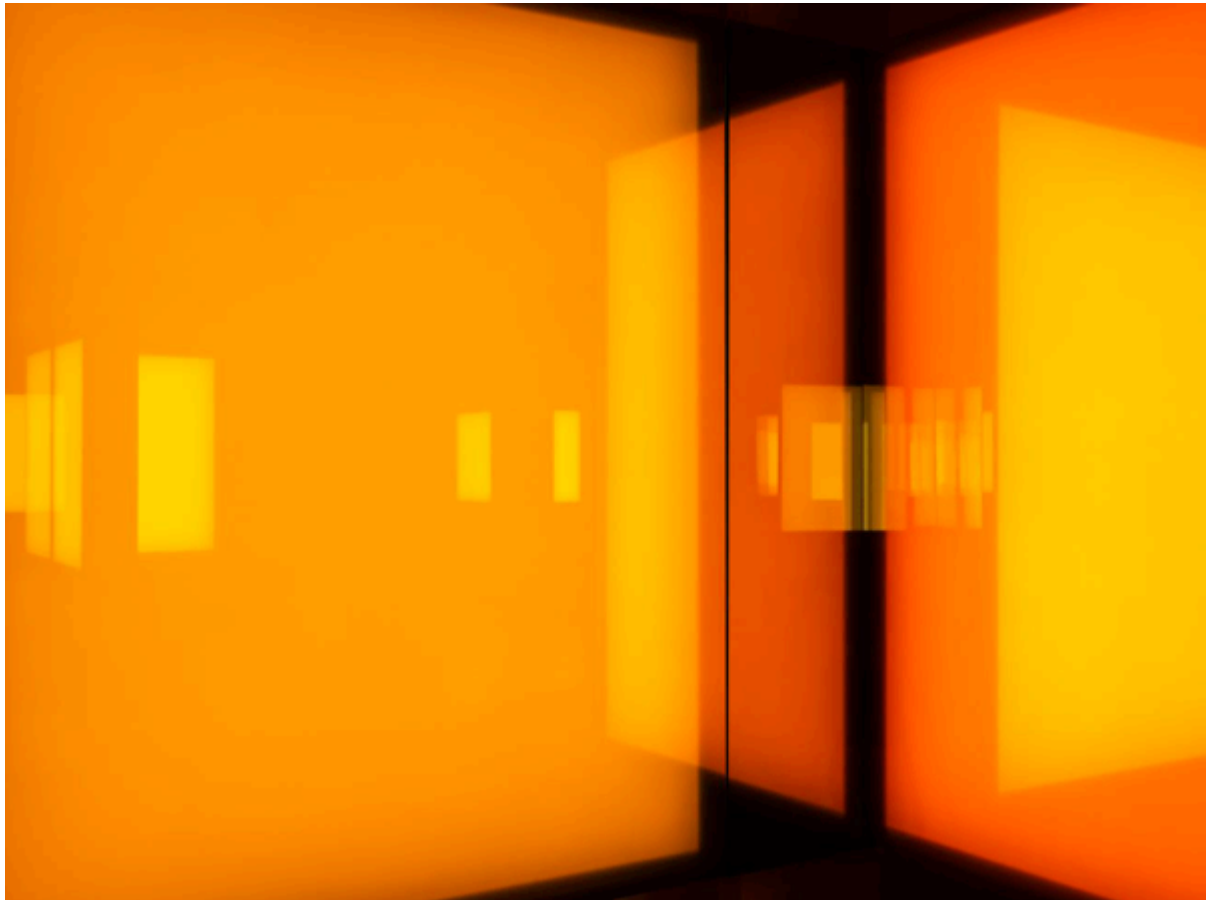


BRIDGE PROJECTS
6880 SANTA MONICA BLVD
LOS ANGELES, CA 90038

Los Angeles Times

PHILLIP K. SMITH III Review This artist re-created sunrise, indoors. Walk through the mind-blowing room yourself

By: David Pagel | October 31, 2019



Phillip K. Smith III, *10 Columns (installation view)*, 2019, photo: Lance Gerber

Just how long have sunrises and sunsets been appearing in art? The transition from night to day and back again has overwhelmed generations of painters with nature's splendor — but also led to those calendar photos and screen-savers. Most artists turn to more earthbound subjects so their work is taken seriously and not treated as cliché.

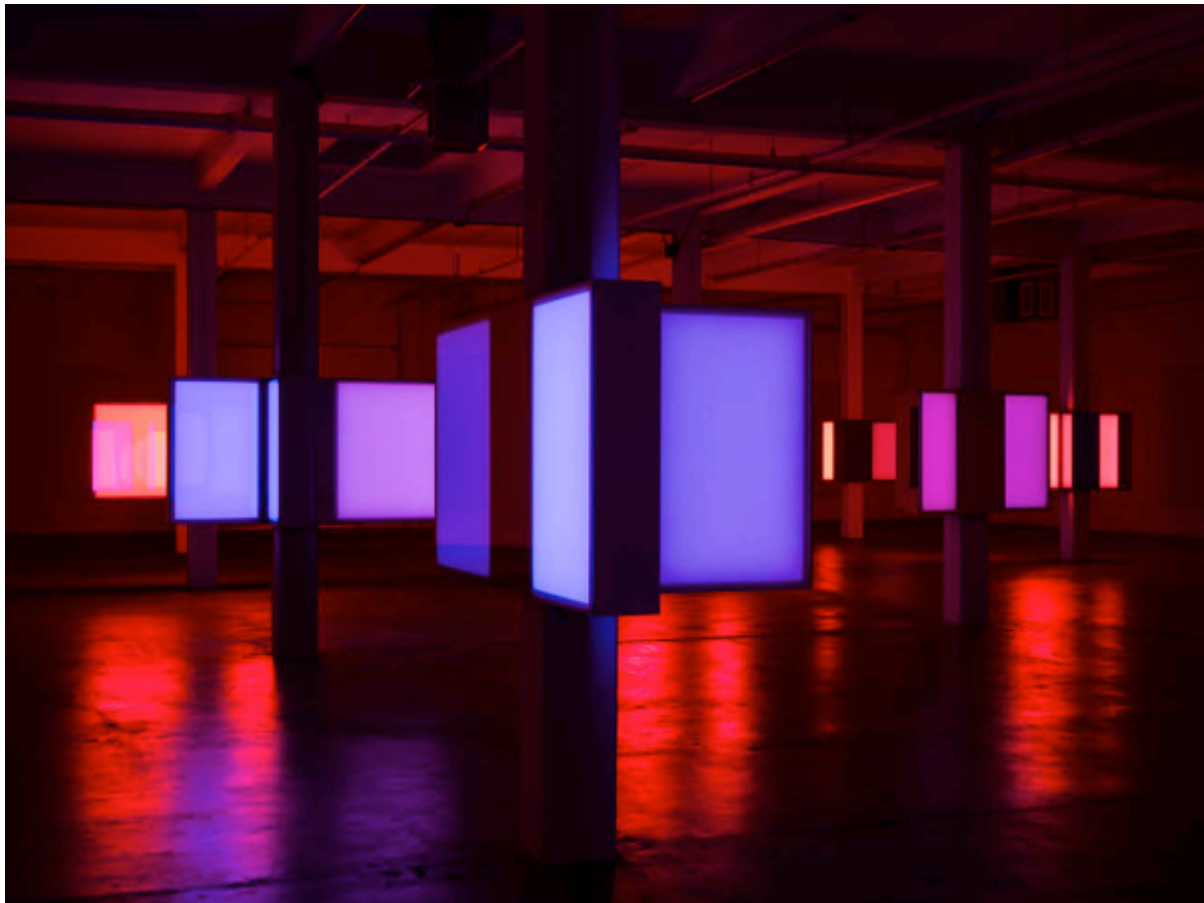
Phillip K. Smith III cannot be counted among them. Never one to go along with any crowd, the 46-year-old architect-turned-artist lives in Palm Desert and makes



indoor and outdoor installations that neither shy away from the beauty of nature nor worry about being too beautiful to be taken seriously. His newest work, simply titled “10 Columns,” inaugurates Bridge Projects by transforming the 7,000-square-foot exhibition space in Hollywood into a synthetic sunrise/sunset.

On each of 10 13-foot-tall columns, Smith has wrapped a cluster of two, three or four mirrored panels. Each panel is considerably thicker than a TV screen. More streamlined than the monolith in “2001: A Space Odyssey,” its front and back sides illuminate, creating right-angled arrangements of rectangular planes whose colors shift and intensify, fade and blend, complement and contrast.

Think flowers designed by Donald Judd. Or fractals made by Fred Flintstone. Mirrored surveillance windows also come to mind. As do Brobdingnagian tablets, meant to be used by octopuses.



Phillip K. Smith III, *10 Columns (installation view)*, 2019, photo: Lance Gerber



Smith has programmed the light-emitting diodes in each panel to cycle through an hourlong sequence of colors. The palette is space-age baroque, its primaries and secondaries endowed with the artificially enhanced zing of exquisitely mixed tertiaries.

Sometimes the entire installation goes monochrome. At others, shades of a single color suggest a single light source — like the sun — just beyond the horizon. At still others, Smith deploys every tint that light comes in, creating complex compositions.

For example, a red panel, perpendicular to a blue one, makes you see purple. More subtle mixtures — and more complex patterns — occur when you see one cluster's colors reflected in another's. Or two or three colors reflected in one or more clusters.

You'll want to pick a spot, sit down and be bathed in the supercharged rainbow. Then you'll want to roam around, circumnavigating each column as if you were a satellite orbiting a planet or, better yet, a planet circling the sun.

In terms of hardware and software, the installation is pretty sophisticated. But Smith is uninterested in razzle-dazzle. "10 Columns" is a decompression chamber that invites visitors to slow down, breathe deeply and see color for what it is: a sensual mystery that is never experienced the same way twice.

Smith does not duplicate the appearance of the sky when the sun crosses the horizon. Instead, he makes your attentiveness to such gradual transformations pay off in spades. If the Earth orbited not one sun but 10, sunrises and sunsets might give Smith's mind-blowing installation a run for its money.



The Architect's Newspaper

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Phillip K. Smith III's *10 Columns* of mirrored light forces total immersion

By JULIA INGALLS • November 4, 2019



Located at Bridge Projects in Los Angeles, *10 Columns* is a mirrored light installation that completely immerses the viewer. (Lance Gerber)

Artist Phillip K. Smith III's site-specific commission *10 Columns* is the inaugural show of Bridge Projects, a former roving art salon turned Los Angeles gallery. Located next to a public storage facility near a burgeoning series of art galleries in Hollywood, Bridge Projects has amplified the intensity of the exhibition by keeping its front windows and doors completely opaque. When the viewer steps inside, the glare of California sunshine briefly illuminates what appears to be an otherwise pitch-black room.

Once the door swings shut and one's eyes adjust to the 7,000 square feet of darkness, the glow of 30 rectangular mirrored surfaces mounted on a series of 10



columns become visible. The slowly shifting colors of the artist's signature dynamic light program combined with their perpendicular mounting calls to mind not only a desert landscape but a *Blade Runner*-type dystopia, as well as the joy and terror of our ever-shifting present.



The illuminating surfaces are mounted at a height of 42-inch each and arranged into three groupings of 10 with three lengths of 16, 26, and 36 inches. The sheer size of the space, together with the surrounding darkness, creates an outsized feeling of immersion and contemplation. Even when seen with a group of people, it becomes easy to wander out to the far edges of the exhibition like a lone desert traveler.

There is no specific beginning or endpoint and the longer one stands in the eerie glow, the easier it becomes to feel unmoored. The lack of signage and explicit directionality makes every viewpoint as valid as the other. Is one witnessing a sunrise or a sunset, a cultural awakening or a catastrophic meltdown? Ultimately, in this constantly changing landscape, the simple act of witnessing becomes its own reward.

10 Columns is on view through February 16, 2020.



Meet Phillip K. Smith III

Alexandra Peers | March 27, 2018



“Everybody wants their bean now,” Phillip K. Smith III says with a grin, perhaps even gloating a bit. The architect-turned-artist is talking about Chicago’s *Cloud Gate*, the shiny, popular public sculpture by Anish Kapoor that has become emblematic of that city.

Its success, and other towns’ desire for a similar totem—all the better if the viewer can interact with it—has propelled Smith’s career of late. The California artist’s light-based works and huge, site-specific installations are on view or soon to take root in more than a dozen cities, including Oklahoma City, Pomona, Bellevue, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

With a 300-mirror surfside installation that debuted in the Faena Arts District during Art Basel Miami Beach last year and his most ambitious project to date opening in April in Milan, Smith may be the most successful—or, at least, the busiest—artist you haven’t heard of. Unless you hang at Coachella, of course, where much of his fame began.





Today, Smith is a model of a different kind of artist: One who has found success outside of the mega-gallery system and who owes much of his current status not to a small group of gatekeepers, but to a combination of Instagram, old-fashioned hustling, and a wholesale disruption of the gallery model.

An Artist Made for 2018

Smith's mirrored towers and LED-lit fiberglass sculptures tick a surprising number of the 2018 art world's boxes: experiential art, land art, environmental art, installation art, digital art. One of his most successful pieces even got its kickstart with online funding.

He's wrestling, too, with a lot of questions that hover over contemporary artists today: How commercial is too commercial? Am I over-extended? Screwed without a dealer? Accepting the right commissions? What happens, Smith wonders, when a significant part of his artistic process involves sitting in a "big comfy chair, plugging in my laptop, and staring at this thing"? And, now that he finally has the freedom to make choices about his career, what should he do next?





At 45, the bespectacled artist is trim, reserved, and thoughtful. He was born in Los Angeles in 1972, but his family moved to the desert when he was in first grade. After stints in Providence, Boston, and New York, he returned to Palm Springs for good in late 2000.

Today, his studio is located in the nearby town of Palm Desert. He is flanked by assistants, construction materials, and an attentive moon-faced French bulldog, Teddy, whose click-clacking paws provide a lively soundtrack. He employs three full-time assistants, up to eight more on an as-needed basis, and a bevy of outside fabricators.

Smith cites as artistic inspirations Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Christo—“I’m the next generation pursuing those artists”—and, perhaps most reverently, Mark Rothko. He dreams of computer-animating a Rothko, and wonders whether the master was ever asked to change the colors he was using, as Smith often is with his electronic works. (‘It’s a no,” he clarifies. “It’s like a painting.”)

From Architecture to Coachella

Smith got an architecture degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1996, but ultimately found work solely as an architect unfulfilling. Then, in 2013, everything changed when he raised about \$22,000 on a fundraising site for an



installation that eventually became *Lucid Stead*, the work that would put him on the art-world map. (Commissions today cost over ten times that—up to \$3 million.)

To create the piece, he tricked out a 70-year-old homesteader shack in Joshua Tree National Park with mirrors and lights. At various points over the course of the day, the structure seemed to glow, ignite, or disappear. Striking and atmospheric, it drew crowds and “has its own fan club,” Smith notes. *Architect Magazine* listed it as one of the “very best projects of 2013” and the *Los Angeles Times* named Smith as one of the three “2014 faces to watch in art.”

Then, Coachella came calling—and, initially, Smith cringed. A lot of what shows up at music festivals, he says, is just “concert art... there’s some flames involved. Welding. I said, ‘I’m not a part of that world.’ And they said, ‘We don’t want that.’” Instead, they wanted him to bring “the shack,” also known as *Lucid Stead*. “But I said, ‘I don’t really want to be the shack guy.’”

That first year, he created mirrored towers called *Reflection Field*. The following year, he got fancy and created *Portals*, a lounge with a giant mesquite tree in the center flanked by animated circles of colored light. He set the animations to move faster than he would have liked in order to please the younger crowd. “I was trying to keep pace with the event,” he says.

It got Instagrammed a lot, which delighted him. “Where else can any artist have an enduring vivid presence that is more public and more free than Instagram?” he asks. “For me, Instagram has certainly become the new immediate way to research an artist and their work.”

His Most Ambitious Project Yet

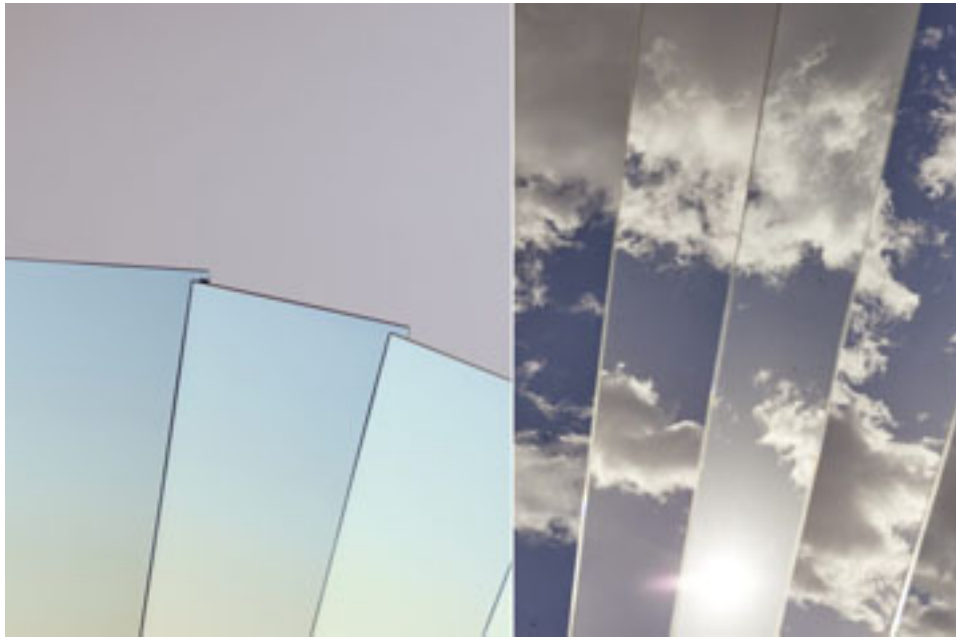
Fast-forward to this month, and Smith is crafting one of his most high-profile projects to date: a site-specific installation inside Milan’s 16th-century Palazzo Isimbardi. It was commissioned by the Scandinavian fashion house COS and opens in tandem with the Salone del Mobile, Italy’s huge design fair, on April 17.

Smith has big shoes to fill. The company previously has teamed up with established design firms like Snarkitecture and Studio Swine to create much-photographed installations. “The pressure is on,” he says.

COS selected Smith because of how his “installations interact with their natural surroundings, allowing us to experience spaces in new ways,” says Karin Gustafsson, the creative director of the fashion brand, who adds that she’s “eager”



to see how his work appears in an urban environment. (So far, COS is keeping the design under wraps, leaking only one photo: a glimpse of a fan of mirrors angled at the sky.)



At this point, Smith is between galleries, having left Los Angeles dealer Royale Projects last summer. And while artists routinely claim (often unconvincingly) to be happy about not having a gallery, Smith seems credible when he says he does not want representation for at least a year.

“Many of the base functions of the gallery are being shifted over to my studio,” he says. He is currently working closely with private collectors, city governments, art consultants, museums, and universities—and billing them directly, too.

The artist hopes he’ll be able to negotiate a better deal with a gallery that has international reach about 18 months down the road, once he has completed a slate of in-progress commissions. “I want them to approach me,” he says of dealers, “not the other way around.”

Since he’s been solo, though, things have been easier. “No more, ‘Return that call, who’s been paid, who’s paying me?’” The art world, he notes, is experiencing “changing artist-dealer relationships,” though there are “not too many other models.”



What's Next?

On top of it all, Smith is experiencing lot of pressure from his New York artist friends to move east. He says they are constantly asking, “What are you doing in Palm Springs?” But the artist wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. His art is inextricably linked to the desert.

“There’s an incredible natural light phenomenon that happens every single day here, incredible gradients of light,” he says. “Purples, blues. I like dirty colors... muddled or in-between... a smoky sunset, a denim blue sky that is both dark and bright.”

When asked if he’s overextended himself with about two dozen projects in the works, he corrects the interviewer: Actually, there are 31. Some are smaller scale, he notes, and some are awaiting next steps. A couple are similar to what he’s done before. “I like it when things begin to overlap,” he says.

Other notable projects include an installation for the Toledo Museum of Art’s Glass Pavilion and an innovative light piece for an abandoned, 100-foot-long Skyway Bridge connecting two skyscrapers in Detroit.

And if he’s lucky, one fearless patron will someday provide him the means to accomplish his most unusual dream. “I’d like to animate some Rothkos, to see them warp and change—it’s kind of a goal of mine,” he says. Rock on.



Wallpaper*

Californian artist Phillip K Smith III in five surreal installations

By Pei-Ru Keh | 2 March 2018



The light-based installation works of the artist Phillip K Smith III might typically be fleeting, temporary creations that are set against exceptional nature backdrops, but five of Smith's most arresting outdoor works are now newly immortalised in a fresh tome called *Five Installations*, published by the Laguna Art Museum.

Opening with Smith's breakthrough creation, *Lucid Stead* (2013) – which saw the artist transform an original Joshua Tree homestead shack into a dynamic mirrored structure that reflected and distorted images of the surrounding desert landscape and sky – the book is filled with detailed photographs that highlight and expand upon Smith's unique creative approach.

'This was my first time using the environment as a surface,' recounts the artist, who has based his studio in Palm Desert since 2000 (see his insider guide to Palm Springs [here](#)). '[The structure] became a tool for viewing and experiencing the desert.'

For Smith, who was born in Los Angeles and pursued both fine art and architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design, the vibrant, changing quality of light and the natural landscape – both so unique to the Palm Springs and Death Valley areas – are what he seeks to convey in each of his large-scale works.



In *1/4 Mile Arc*, a striking installation Smith created for the Laguna Art Museum in 2016, a gentle arc of reflector planes traces the contour of the beach, reconfiguring and recollaging scenes of the oceanfront surroundings with a new, captivating result. 'I wanted to create a quarter-mile-long reflective drawing that would change as the environment of Laguna changed,' says Smith.

While the book also shines a spotlight on Smith's smaller-scale sculptures, such as a continuing series of mirror works and light works that experiments with the perceptions of reflection, shadow and colour in compact and self-sufficient forms, it is ultimately Smith's outdoor installations that hold no comparison.





DESERT X ARTIST FROM COACHELLA VALLEY IN SEARCH OF BEAUTY

COACHELLA VALLEY NATIVE PHILLIP K. SMITH III TAKES US BEHIND THE SCENES OF HIS DESERT X INSTALLATION AHEAD OF ITS FEB. 25 DEBUT.

By: Kristin Scharkey, *DESERT* magazine | January 27, 2017

Phillip K. Smith III has been described as a magician, but that doesn't seem like the most accurate term. After an afternoon with the artist at his Palm Desert studio, I'm impressed by his meticulousness, his focus. Smith speaks about his work like a mathematician talks about equations. When we stand in front of *Crease*, a painted fiberglass piece from his *Light + Shadow Works* series, he explains that the geometry of its five lines allows the viewer to understand how light is moving. Smith wants his work to be like the clouds, he says. Everyone accepts them as beautiful, but we don't always wrap our minds around why.

"I'm interested in an idea of universal beauty," Smith says. "Of something that, like the sunset or the clouds, forces all of us as human beings to stop, no matter what our background is, no matter where we are – that experience of being on the edge of the Grand Canyon or seeing that ray of light coming through the clouds. ... I think that the art world is a bit leery of the word 'beauty' because, how can beauty be universal? It's so much in the eye of the beholder. But I would argue that it's not. I think there's actually something that can be tapped into, that rises above all of that, that is a universal sense of beauty and sense of awe that makes us all want to stop and look."



His studio is two stories, with white-washed walls punctuated by various pieces including the white concentric circles housed in Portals, an installation at last year's Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. Each is a blank canvas for an infinite number of LED-powered light "paintings," blurring through ever-changing pulses of color at a mesmerizing pace. Their glow reflects off his black-rimmed glasses as he smiles and points to a patch of gray hair on the side of his head. He earned it during the installation, he explains, then points to a patch on the other side and credits his 2014 festival piece, Reflection Field. Will he show work at this year's Coachella? No, he says. He doesn't want a gray stripe down the middle.

Born and raised in the Coachella Valley, Smith rose to international acclaim in late 2013 after his Joshua Tree light installation, Lucid Stead, dazzled viewers across the world. Mirrors on a homestead shack reflected the desert landscape by day and radiated his now patented color-sequencing program by night. It was a piece that harnessed the pace of change in the desert, an optical illusion now included in Henry M. Sayre's textbook "A World of Art" that warranted Smith comparisons to James Turrell, Robert Irwin and Kenneth Noland. This month, the artist will head back into the local landscape to unveil his latest installation: The Circle of Land and Sky. It debuts Feb. 25 at the inaugural Desert Biennial's Desert X exhibition, a series of site-specific work by international artists across the Coachella Valley.

Open dusk until dawn, the piece will be constructed within a plot of raw desert on the corner of Portola Avenue and Frank Sinatra Drive in Palm Desert, and comprise a perfect circle – 165 feet in diameter – made up of 300 mirror-polished poles placed 22 inches apart and angled at 10 degrees. As visitors approach, all that will be reflected is the untouched landscape; but stand at the center, and all you'll see are individual samplings of the vast, open sky.

"For Lucid Stead and this piece, it is all about connecting with the desert and the pace of change that's happening," Smith explains. "What I was really happy about with Lucid Stead was that people's natural reaction was to whisper as they approached it and walked around it – the sense that the piece had somehow made this space of the desert sacred, and that it was important and therefore, needed to be respected and needed to be taken in. You needed to spend time with it. Some people were there for half an hour, some people were there for five hours or beyond. Some people came back 10 times. I hope that same thing happens here."

We visit the Palm Desert plot the day after my studio tour, and Smith's eyes light up when I ask about the Los Angeles Lakers license plate on his car. He still has his leather jacket from the Showtime era, he says with a grin, before turning back to install a mirrored pole in the ground. It's a slow process to anchor each post into the dirt,



then coordinate a pair of levelers to angle it at exactly 10 degrees. The sun glints of Smith's glasses as he explains how he'll take his time with this installation – a lesson learned after installing a similar piece in Laguna Beach.

Made of 250 identical mirrored poles, ¼ Mile Arc reflected downtown Laguna on one side and the ocean on the other, allowing a free flow of movement down the sand. While in dialogue, the pieces also differ in terms of their geometry: One follows the undulations of the ocean; the other creates a distinct space within the desert's expanse.

"The circular reality allows the eye to continue to revolve around that space," Smith explains of his Desert X piece. "You're not getting caught up on corners or stoppage points."



The circle serves as a "welcome mat" due to the universal language of geometry. Plus, the stepped formation removes transitions and creates "hiccups" that "allow us as humans to actually understand what's going on," he says. It's important to Smith that all viewers be able to access his work, a desire stemming from his time earning undergraduate degrees in architecture and fine arts from Rhode Island School of Design, and the subsequent five years he spent working on the East Coast.

"Being in college and going to New York City, [I was] seeing work that was obviously well made and carefully thought out but that didn't give me any kind of way in," Smith explains. "I could appreciate it from a certain standpoint but I knew I was missing tons of it. It was almost like opening up someone's diary on a page and not knowing the 200 pages prior and how we got there. That really affected me. I really wanted everyone that looked at my work to be able to have a way in, so that no matter what your level of intelligence, experience, desire, whatever it is, that you have an opportunity to have your own unique experience with this work."

In earlier pieces, Smith was even cognizant of colors that didn't "have any kind of baggage," like the red-orange shade similar to the Golden Gate Bridge's iconic International Orange used in Inhale/Exhale, a 55-foot fiberglass sculpture outside the University of La Verne. In the piece, equilateral triangles are manipulated so that the point becomes the face becomes the point, and so on, as they ascend the column.



From afar, it appears to be a cylinder of undulating waves. Stand at the base, however, and you can understand how it's made.

While this type of geometrical transformation can provide a "way in" to Smith's work, it is often also rooted in opposing forces of light and shadow. Built into a mirror, for example, are the inherent realities of dark and light. If not baggage, there is the acceptance of tension – of mystery. In *The Circle of Land and Sky*, for example, your experience will depend on what time you arrive.

"Everyone has their own desire for comprehension and experience," Smith says. "People will come for half an hour and some people will stay for five hours to watch the shadows converge into a black arc. There will be people that will come at 5 a.m. to see dawn and will be there at 7:30 for dusk.

"You're looking at this blade of reflection that you know is behind you but it's almost [like], 'Am I looking at that? Am I looking at what's in between? Is what's in between behind me?' " Smith adds. "There's an ambiguous reality to your perception that happens. I think that's the question of, 'Does beauty exist between these opposing forces?' I'm trying to allow your brain to exist in between. Or to freely oscillate back and forth. ... I like that blurred reality."

It's fitting, then, that Smith uses an utterly unforgiving material – light – to capture moments of purity in the world. Perhaps he isn't as much a magician as he is a true, unadulterated believer. God knows the Lakers need some these days.

"I would say, too, I grew up as a Christian," Smith continues. "Faith is an important thing in my life. [It's] about believing in something that is bigger than you that is, in a way, universal – and something that is about pure creation and that is also about something that's beautiful and good. When I think about those ideas of universal beauty, I think about faith because, in a way, there is a jump that has to happen. I understand that. I believe in that. I can get on board with that.

"If you have that understanding, our entire lives are living in a blurred state," Smith adds. "Absolutely oscillation of both sides. We hope we're able to stay on one side more than the other."

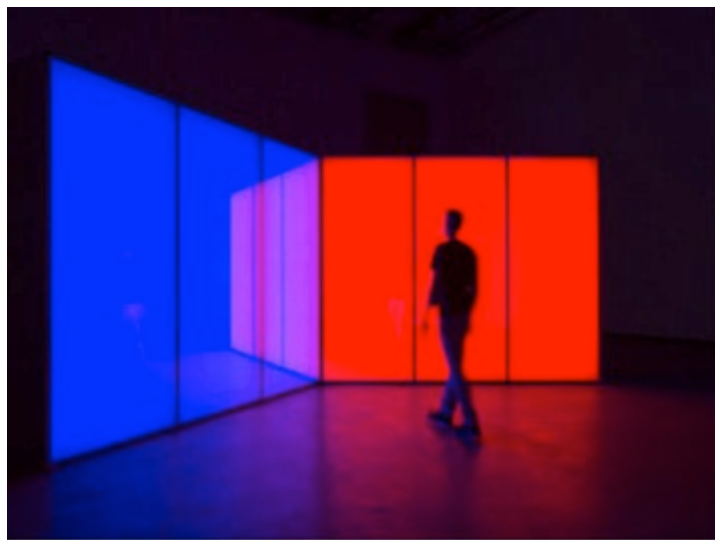
Back on that afternoon when we walk through his studio, Smith leads me down a hallway covered in portraits of projects that have been and will be. *Lucid Stead*. *Reflection Field*. *Aperture*. *Portals*. Works viewed by hundreds of thousands at music festivals and in museums. But a trio of renderings in their midst has not yet been seen: three large-scale portals immersing participants in suspended, reflective spaces.



Spanning Double Horizon at Golden Gate Park, Infinity on a Mojave Desert salt flat and Sky Tower in the Midwest farming flatlands, they were an exercise in Smith's capacity to scale his ambition – a 2014 commission with no budget that ultimately fell through. But the images stay posted, a reminder of what is possible, what lies ahead. Completing these designs with neither financial constraints nor geographic boundaries didn't change Smith's perspective on his process. It simply affirmed what he and his studio already do.

"I started in architecture and now I'm almost reconnecting them in a way," Smith says. "I want to continue to work at the scale of architecture. People often say, 'This doesn't look like an artist's studio. It looks like an architect's office.'" Well, it kind of is but it kind of isn't. That's what I think the next chapter holds for me."

The pieces epitomize the direction that Smith is heading towards: an exclusive focus on large-scale public experiences, similar to the career path of Christo and his late partner, Jeanne-Claude. Through the marriage of his own art and architecture, Smith seeks to capture universal beauty to "unite human beings." It's a full-circle harnessing of change and its potential. Merging dichotomies to touch the clouds.



art ltd.

DESERT VISIONARY

Merging elements of Light and Space art with his own architectural, site-specific aesthetic, Palm Desert artist PHILLIP K. SMITH III conjures spectrums of beauty from the land.

By **Shana Nys Dambrot** | January 1, 2017



A modern tabernacle rises from brown desert sand, glowing with an ethereal, science fiction-inflected pageant of color, field, and sky; a jackrabbit homestead wears a mirrored cloak that renders it almost invisible when the sun and horizon perform their choreography; an intimate dark room reveals itself infinitely larger on the inside, as suffuse colored light bends the rules and optics of physical space; a bunch of tripping hipsters get their minds totally blown by a temporary temple to cushy magic-hour light between sets at Coachella. All of this and more is the spectacular handiwork of sculptor and installation artist Phillip K. Smith III (aka PKS3), a denizen of the high desert whose unique relationship to architecture, the

landscape, and the Light and Space movement has yielded some of the most intriguing interior installations, public sculptures, and ephemeral Land Art in recent memory. From Joshua Tree to Indio to Laguna Beach, and now as part of the inaugural edition of Desert X this winter, Smith has quickly become one of the most sought-after and emblematic artists of the current intertwined interests in art from the Los Angeles region, issues of the desert climate, and the resurgence of the land art genre in general.

A resident of Palm Desert, and artist-in-residence at Palm Springs Art Museum in 2010, Smith first came to broad attention in 2013, after his Lucid Stead project—a small remote cabin whose mirrored exterior reflected the empty world



around it by day while its interior emanated an otherworldly light show by night—went viral. At the time, Smith's deepening relationship to the desert was longstanding, in both personal and aesthetic ways. The desert's allure he considered as the content, muse, and setting for his meditations on the spectrum of colors of the earth, its particular qualities of the light and sky. But his recent ever-increasing involvements with both ocean and city, as well as his developments in interior immersive and free-standing works, speak to a more conceptual framework rooted not only in his early life, but in his professional background in architecture. "Crafting a spatial experience that converses with a sensitive, contextual response to the environment is at the core of my thinking," Smith explains. "There's an understanding of the movement around, through, and within the work; of interacting with the environment and defined space via light, surface, form, and materiality..." as well as economies of scale and mechanisms of constant change based on his experiences in the landscape—the poetic drama, say, of the curving, crisp line of a sand dune's edge fading to a pure plane of color.

"Getting out into the landscape is important to me," notes Smith. "I desire to be confronted with a very real, overwhelming beauty that challenges the understanding of my own work and the potential that exists." Most recently, Smith has been engaged in a dialogue between the ocean and the desert, two ecologies that are deeply related in terms of the region's cultural and geological history. Apparently, you can still find seashells in certain parts of the Coachella Valley desert and the evidence of the prior sea level line can be seen on some of the mountains in the East Valley. The sands of the beach and the sands of the desert are in a constant state of change. Both environments deal directly with a strong horizon line, creating what Smith loves the most: "The distinct meeting of a horizontal plane with an expansive space. And within that moment, there is an equal understanding of finite and infinite space. I've created projects for a number of environments. In the end, I'm interested in opening people's eyes to the beauty that exists around them by actually using the environment as material within the work."



Smith's recent show at the Laguna Art Museum this fall, combined with the 1/4 Mile Arc temporary installation that he executed along a stretch of local beach there, deals with the expansion and compression of ideas and experiences. Through tracing a pure arc of sculptural elements that followed the natural geometry of the beach, he was able to "harness the sunset" via an aggregation of reflective, ordered samplings of the sky. Focusing on one of those samplings and the gradients that exist within that vertical reflection directly inspired the color shift that exists within Torus 9 (a major work, installed inside LAM). Merging ideas of color and reflection, the related Bent Parallel focuses the eye on the dialogue of two color planes and how their meeting can create a third, material-less, zero-thickness plane of color through a structure of geometry and reflection. This experience of shifting scale, of the intimate and the infinite, of memories created, is as key within Smith's work as any of its physical or optical elements.

Watch for Smith's thoughts and evolutions expanding on the in situ experiments begun in Laguna to be further explored in Palm Springs, as Smith has described his plans for the forthcoming Desert X festival as "looking to bring the dialogue that I established with the horizon line of the ocean, to the horizon line of the desert." Of course, even creating a work that is 20 x 20 x 20 feet is quite small within the context and size of the desert, where epic scale is a requirement. And Smith is the first to admit that land art is challenging. It's logistically difficult. It requires approvals and permits and drawings and dealing with people that have zero interest in art. But Smith says he actually relishes those kinds of challenges. "I like being thrown into a room of people that never talk about art and coming to an understanding of how we can achieve something together. And to be clear, so many artists believe that such processes can only result in compromise and a watering down of the original concept. I could not disagree more. What I've found on every large-scale project I've created is that people want to be part of something important and memorable. And that through the process, attitudes change and eyes and ears are opened. Now that 1/4 Mile Arc has been achieved, what else is possible? By pushing the boundaries and understanding of art in atypical environments at atypical scales, the door can be opened for other artists seeking great, visionary projects."



But the folks in charge of curating Desert X are anything but art-world outsiders, and the show boasts an eclectic roster of artists who are themselves vigorously embracing, or at least, being prompted to navigate, both the process and the place, some as veterans and many for the first time. "For me," Smith says, "it's been exciting to dialogue with the Desert X artists to see how they interpret the regional landscape from an outsider's perspective. This is the environment that I am immersed in and that I find inspiration in on a daily basis, so I'm looking forward to seeing how an East Coast, European, or South American mindset recalibrates within this environment." Smith has participated in previous festival-style desert-centric events, differently conceived and slightly smaller-scale projects like High Desert Test Sites and the first edition of the Joshua Treenial (the second of which opens in March), which in some ways are the precursors to Desert X, and in some ways offer an arguably more contemplative, intimate alternative to Desert X's massive aesthetic and presence. And indeed, Smith is not alone in asking the kinds of questions many have about Desert X. To what degree will the works speak to the core of the desert experience of time, change, and history? Will the artists submit to the desert climate, or fight to tame it? How will interactions with the landscape affect not only the artists' but also inevitably the viewers' own experiences? There are environmental factors at work which artists like Smith can perhaps anticipate, but not control.

When it comes to crafting a more managed and manageable experience, Smith is also expert at the subtle but total transformation of interior spaces. In both immersive, walk-in spaces and through the operations of simple self-contained wall-mounted sculptures, Smith deftly manages to translate his affection for pure color, malleable light, their effects on architectural and emotional perception, and a hint of awe-inspiring, instagram-flooding theatricality into less arduously accessed works of art. For example, his Los Angeles gallery Royale Projects has installed a reconfiguration of the elements from the now-dismantled Lucid Stead into a semi-permanent room-size installation in the gallery's downtown arts district location. Where much of Smith's work literally absorbs elements of its surroundings into its composition and content, rather than playing with horizons and changes in natural atmospherics, his interior works play with deracinated aspects of depth and shape. Reviving the classic aims of Light and Space, Smith's indoor voice renders seeing as a physical action, and optics as a matter for the body as well as the mind, one that ought not be taken for granted. Its syncopated changes, and the multichannel phasing ensure it never repeats exactly. Pure color fields with no image content, these narratives are phenomenological rather than informational. Their spacetime is suspended, anchored to neither sand or horizon. Expect magic, no off-roading required.



The Alchemist of Light: An Interview with Phillip K. Smith

By FRANCEASCA SEIDEN, SEPT. 2016



"We desire the powerful, memorable experiences that we can't fully explain. We desire mystery and beauty as they remind us of the unity, love, immensity, and incomprehensible complexity that exist in the world." – Phillip K. Smith III

Phillip K. Smith III is a lightworker, an alchemist, an inventor and a magician. His other worldly creations draw upon ideas of perception: space, form, color, light, shadow, environment, transience. The elemental root of Smith's work is change -- shifting color variations, translucent to opaque, 2- and 3-dimensionality. Smith's work is conceptual, intensely physical, extremely technical and meditative. In

2015 art writer and curator, Jan Tumlir wrote about Smith's work: "There is the effect in sensory deprivation so prized by American artists of the 60's and 70's that reorients attention toward the phenomenal minutiae. The incremental movements of celestial bodies, changing of the light, quality of air, and so on -- all are here more acutely observed." Smith has often been compared to his predecessors such as Robert Irwin, Constantin Brancusi, Kenneth Noland and James Turrell.

In Smith's work, viewers are guided through an abstract metaphysical journey bestowing perception-shattering illusions of time and space, in a futuristic and geometric environment examining esoteric themes of singularity and totality. "These works," says Smith, "make us step away from our pattern, our life, our work, our errands, and our conversations and allow us to see sublime beauty shifting and changing before our eyes. Those are the moments that make life worth living."

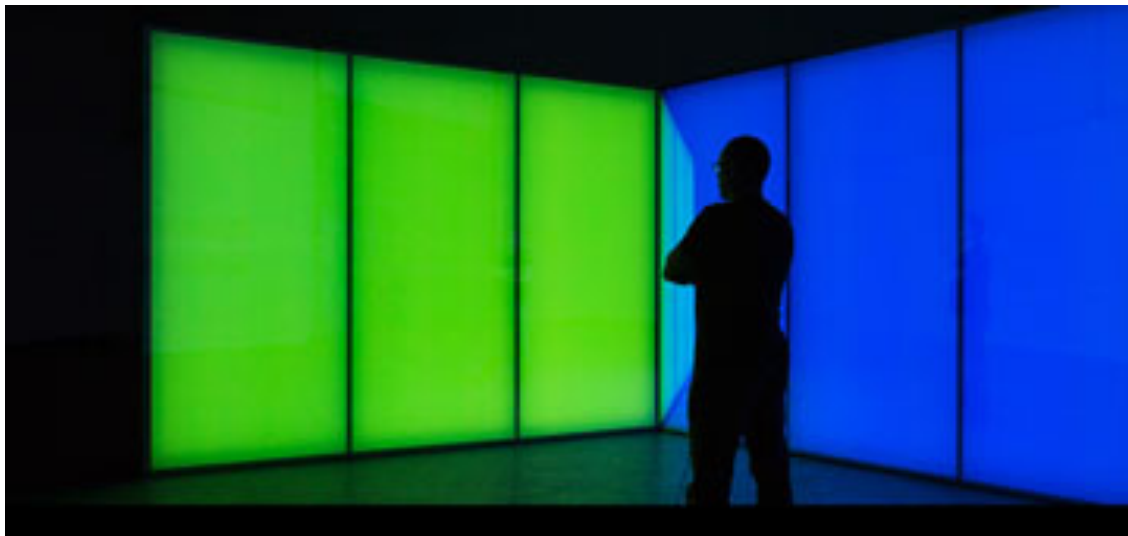
Smith's best known works were launched from a modified antique cabin called *Lucid Stead* in Joshua Tree, CA, which became an international phenomenon receiving and led him to



twice collaborate with the Coachella Music and Arts Festival. In 2014 he produced “Reflection Field,” a light installation that interacted with attendees, allowing them to move within dimensions as colors slowly shifted by ambient sunlight and movement; and this past year he created “Portals” an 85-foot diameter light pavilion. Whitehot Magazine’s Franceasca Seiden spoke with the artist about the intentions behind this choreography of light, space, abstraction, and consciousness.

WM: Do you think of yourself as an alchemist?

PKS3: If our understanding of alchemist is being part scientist and part magician, I’ll say yes. Scientist, because I’m interested in breaking down experience to base elements, the most distilled elements. Magician, because I’m interested in mystery, discovery, timelessness, and memorable experiences. Somewhere in the middle of these two is a sense of sublime beauty, happily existing between knowing and not knowing. Beauty is not discussed much. As alluring as it is, it’s challenging and subjective, difficult to define, highly personal -- embarrassing even. However, there are moments of universal beauty, of shared experience, of discovering experiences that bond all of us together as human beings. Light is most often at the root of these experiences. It’s these moments of beauty, purity, and universality that I’m seeking to create.



WM: Your studio space is away from Los Angeles in Palm Desert, which is a more serene area surrounded by nature. What makes it so special to create there?

PKS3: The desert is a place where the environment can be simplified to sky and earth, activated by light. It is in a way, an environment of deprivation, of a reduction of elements. It is a place where there are daily light phenomena occurring everywhere at once. To be out in the middle of the desert is to open one’s eyes to those phenomena. For me, that quiet,



beautifully desolate, and visually rich environment is pure inspiration. And it's wrapped around us, changing, every day showing something new. All that is required is stop, look, and listen.

WM: What is your take on being compared to James Turrell, Craig Kaufman, Robert Irwin, Dan Flavin, and others who have diversely explored the Light and Space arena? I also see influences from the visionary art movement, artists that didn't necessarily play with the same medium, such as Alex Grey.

PKS3: Whether it's Turrell, Kaufman, Irwin, Flavin, or Grey, I think that they were all in search of a deeper understanding of perception, a more real experience. There was a search for truth through light, perception, site, material, manufactured product, paint, and composition. Most importantly, there was, amongst their works, an aspect of the pace of the experience. Stopping and really looking -- of understanding how your eye and mind perceives -- was a necessary component of the experience of these artists' work. For me, *Lucid Stead* really established a sense of pace for the work I wanted to create. That project was my first work inspired by the desert, built in the desert, and that actually used the desert as medium, or material. *Lucid Stead* combined with *Aperture*, which really focused on color, set the foundation for future works. Prior to those pieces, I had done a lot of large-scale work that interacted directly with the sun through the movement of light and shadow across a surface.



WM: Many of your materials -- wood laminates, metal alloys, chemical compounds, plastics, glass treatments, digital and fabrication -- are non-conventional to fine art. How did you come to work with them?

PKS3: As a result of my college training as both an artist and an architect, I have an ingrained interest in materials and their innate capabilities. In addition, over the last 20 years,



the development of materials and creative manufacturing technologies has been unprecedented. The arsenal of materials and technologies that are available to artists these days is incredibly exciting. Glass manufacturing, LEDs, controllers, CNC milling, 3D printing, Arduino, 3D modelling software, the list goes on. I'm always interested in technology so that I can better understand the potential of process and materials. If it's out there, why not use it? If it can allow my concept to be as pure and true as possible, I'm going to use that material or that technology. The litmus test is always one of priority, that the concept must always come first, that these materials and technologies are just tools that I'm using. I'm never interested in expressing the "newness" or capabilities of these materials and technologies. They must be subservient to the idea and never compete with the intent of the work, otherwise, mystery and discovery dissolves instantly and I've lost my interest and my audience. Often, I find myself involved in high-tech processes and materials that are presented in a seemingly low-tech way.



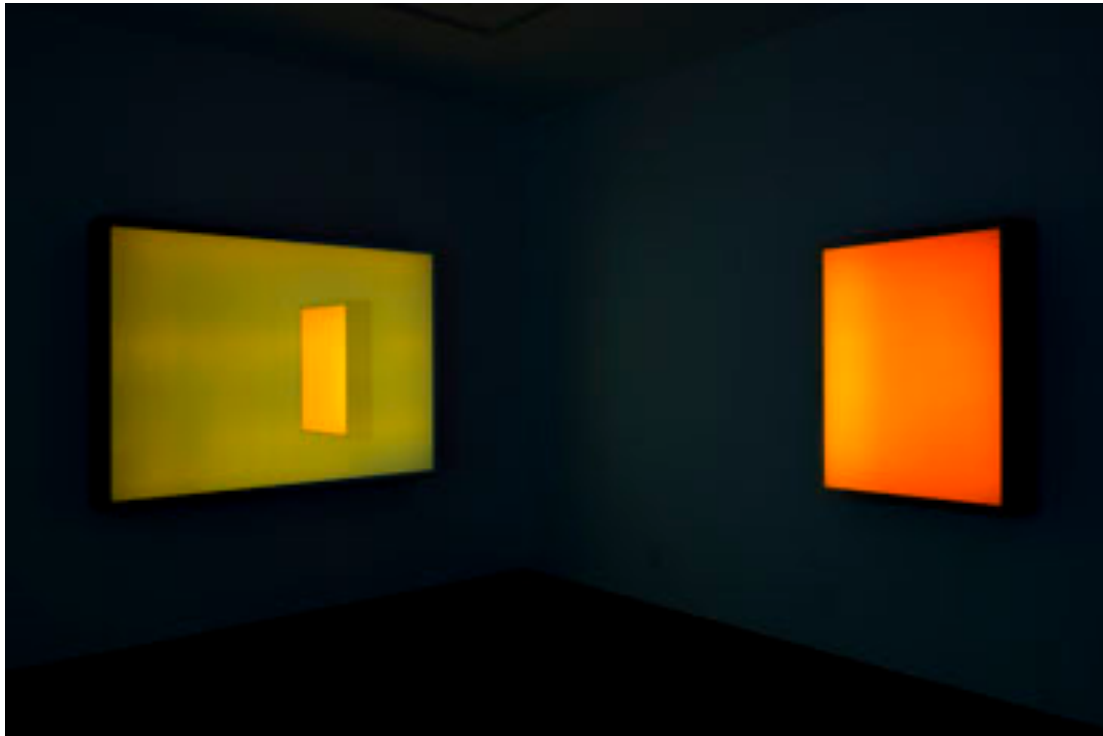
WM: Are you more influenced by your predecessors or aligned more with ideas of progressive futurists?

PKS3: Both, equally. Often, I find myself asking, What would Sol LeWitt do if he had access to the materials and technologies of today? How would these tools allow a progression of ideas? Or simply allow seemingly too complex older ideas to finally come to fruition as originally intended? When I look back at the work of LeWitt, Turrell, Irwin, Brancusi, Stella, etc. I often find incredible ideas sketched out that just simply weren't possible in that time period. Look through LACMA's catalogue of the Art + Technology program and you'll find a book littered with failed attempts at immense, wild, incredibly forward-pushing ideas. It's incredible. Really, you find that artists presented with a new material or processes were able to translate, expand, and further their ideas from their traditional materials -- and to degrees that were unprecedented. Ultimately, whether the project was built or not, that process of



collaborative thought is quite powerful. It breaks an artist out of his or her studio or set way of thinking and forces them to work through ideas never before considered.

I still find the idea of the Art + Technology program incredibly inspiring and intelligent. When I was a young kid, I would drive around in the industrial areas of LA with my grandfather, who had an aerospace engineering background and was an original maker with his brothers -- a maker during the Great Depression and beyond, which meant invention out of necessity. But we'd drive by open warehouse doors and look in. If it looked interesting, we'd just walk in. Nervously, I'd ask my grandfather if we were allowed to do this. He'd say: "The worst they can say is No, please leave." We got in everywhere and had personal tours by welders, product manufacturers and shop owners. They loved to share what they were doing with someone that was interested. Besides, who could say no to a 72-year-old grandfather and his inquisitive 7-year-old grandson? This same curiosity guides me today. I'm always on the lookout for processes and materials I've never seen before. Some of my most exciting projects have been a result of collaborating with shops that have never ever worked with an artist before. The excitement of working on something different builds a mutual bond.



WM: What made you decide to patent your color-sequencing program? (Other than intellectual property protection.)

PKS3: Simply stated, it's part of my creative process. It's integral. It's the result of much work and is still always changing. We've created a lot of proprietary elements in the studio to



create the works and experiences that I've crafted. Sometimes, existing elements can be changed or used in an unexpected way for a project. Other times, we just simply have to create an electronic component from scratch or create my own process to achieve what I want.

WM: What is your relationship with the transitioning of color movement is there meaning or preference when the transitions occur?

PKS3: At the root of transition is *change*, which, for me, has become a necessary element in my work. Color shift, shadow movement, formal shift from 3 dimensions to 2 dimensions, sharp to blurred, translucent to opaque, reflection, using the environment. These are some of my examples of change. Change implies a sense of life... of breath. When something is always in a state of change and not a simple, repetitive, patterned change, but a paced, seemingly organic change, I believe it creates a real connection with the work. It forces people to stop, to question and to discover, to give themselves over to the work. That giving over is similar to a sunset making you stop and look or how a campfire strangely captures your attention. At the root of these experiences is that state of being in between knowing and not knowing. You know in a base scientific way in which these moments have come to fruition, but at the same time, you have no idea how they really, truly exist. The key is pace that these experiences universally force us to stop or slow down. They make us step away from our pattern, our life, our work, our errands, and our conversations and allow us to see sublime beauty shifting and changing before our eyes. Those are the moments that make life worth living. We desire the powerful, memorable experiences that we can't fully explain. We desire mystery and beauty as they remind us of the unity, love, immensity, and incomprehensible complexity that exist in the world.



WM: I experienced “Reflection Field” at Coachella 2014; this was the first time that the festival displayed complex installation art. It was a place where you would want to hang out and take it all in. What was your intention behind this work?

PKS3: *Reflection Field* really grew out of *Lucid Stead*. In fact, I had just started talking with Goldenvoice about the potential of proposing a project, while I was finishing up the installation of *Lucid Stead*. So, when *Lucid Stead* sort of blew up publicly, and I was spending a lot of time in Joshua Tree, it was then that I started to conceive of a large-scale project that could be built at Coachella. The shift from day to night of *Lucid Stead*, of sky and desert to pure floating color was at the root of my concept for *Reflection Field*. In addition, I wanted to expand the reflected surface area of experience for the dawn and dusk moments when you see yourself reflected as, say, purple, but the reflection of the environment is still its true color. The trees are green, the sky is blue, but you are reflected as a shifting color. And with the expansion of that surface area, gradients across the surface of the glass became possible. So, now I could paint the sky pink and fade it into the true green of the grass. Or I could paint the ground blue and fade it upwards into the true color reflections of the yellow-orange-red sunset.

In between *Lucid Stead* (October, 2013) and *Reflection Field* (April, 2014), I exhibited *Lucid Stead: Four Windows and a Doorway* at the Lancaster Museum of Art + History in January 2014. In this exhibit, the desert environment was removed and the shack was essentially turned inside out. Now, the 5 color fields of *Lucid Stead* were turned inward. And with the desert and shack removed, the 4 windows and a doorway interacted directly with each other. Reflected color merged with reflected color through perspective. A red window extended in space in the reflection of a green window as a yellow plane. Placed on 4 walls, the color program shifting at the pace of *Lucid Stead*, and with you the viewer moving through the space, the installation was in a constant state of change. And each viewer could have their own individually unique experience because perspective and spatial shift affected everything. If you want to see this in person, Royale Projects has built a space for this installation in their downtown LA gallery. That installation as well as the forthcoming *Lucid Stead: Elements* series of works are the only true artifacts from the original installation.





WM: Does science (astrophysics/quantum physics) and space have any influence in your work like design, technology and color does?

PKS3: Not really. I'd probably say that geometry and mathematics, combined with design, technology and color, have more influence. I'm interested in distilled form, base elements of line, shape, and form: arcs, circles, squares, parallelograms, angles of reflection, etc. These are elements that all of us understand. I often use these as "ways in" for viewers. They are common ground elements that, again, allow a strong step towards the middle ground between understanding and mystery. While I'm constantly using basic mathematics when conceiving and fabricating works, I was able to understand my work through a higher plane of mathematics while I was an artist in residence at Dartmouth College last year. A student that was double majoring in mathematics and art suggested that I give a talk to some of the Mathematics Department professors. It was then that I learned that several of my works could be explained via mathematical terms I had not heard of before, such as a 3-Torus space, or that some pieces emulated diagrams for conceptual mathematics. I'm not necessarily striving for these alignments, but I view them as affirmation that I am heading down correct distilled paths of thought.

WM: When and what will be the upcoming show in Laguna?

PKS3: The upcoming show in Laguna will be two fold. Firstly, I'll be exhibiting *Bent Parallel* and *Torus 9* in the California Gallery at the Laguna Art Museum. *Bent Parallel* is a large 9-foot high x 21-foot long light installation. It is composed of two mirrored planes that have been bent at 120 degrees. The result is a third reflected plane that is zero thickness, material-less, and the merging of the colors of the two planes. The mirrored surface affects your perception of the space that you are within and that is reflected. As you approach the



glowing, mirrored plane, your brain tries to adapt to what it is seeing and begins to question which side you are on. Are you within the color looking back? Are you looking through color to the true colors of the space? Or...?

Upstairs, at the end of the mezzanine level that looks down into the space of *Bent Parallel* will be *Torus 9*. This piece is the most recent in my Lightworks series that merges 6 different color zones, each differently paced, slowly shifting, across a very specific form and surface. There is a dialogue between color shift and surface. You will find that the warm tones of yellow, orange, red, and violet are held within the center of the piece, while the cool tones of blue and green are projected onto the wall around the piece. The result is a strong sense of depth. Depending on the color combinations, the form appears to push and pull, to change from translucent to opaque and back. These two works will be up as of mid-October and will be on view for about 3 months.

Additionally, as part of the Museum's 4th annual Art + Nature series, I have been selected as the commissioned artist to create a temporary installation on Main Beach, directly adjacent to the Museum. From November 4-6, people will be able to view *1/4 Mile Arc*, an installation composed of 300 mirror-polished uprights equally spaced over a quarter mile following the true arc of the beach itself. The uprights will emerge directly from the sand just above the high tide line. The result of these spaced uprights will be a condensing of reflection, as a quarter-mile long reflection of Laguna, that will reflect and track the light, sky, water, and atmosphere as it changes in real time. I wanted to evidence the beauty of the place...both in its distinct power and distinct subtlety. Don't miss it!

And don't blink. WM





Double Truth: Light Artist Phillip K. Smith III Plays with our Perception of Space

BY: ERIC DAVID | 09 JANUARY 2016



Capturing the perceptual corporeality of light and shadow may be acknowledged as a tall order but that's exactly what American artist Phillip K. Smith III is successfully attempting in his new solo exhibition fittingly called "Light + Shadow Works" at the Royale Projects gallery in Los Angeles. Through a sculptural series of pure-white, precisely-illuminated geometrical forms, visitors are exposed to what the artist calls "the subtlety of light across a surface" and how our spatial perception both depends on and is manipulated by the interaction of light and matter.





Eschewing more intricate techniques such as the LED colour-changing lighting he used in his previous work —as seen for example in *Lucid Stead* (2013), a “see-through” mirror-clad cabin installed in the middle of Joshua Tree desert in California- Smith III now employs an even more minimalist approach. He creates carbon-fibre 3D forms, paints them matte white, and lights them by one or more stationary light-sources. In this way, the artist attempts to present “light in its most reduced state” and allow “the brain to exist in blurred states”: as the visitor changes his or her point of view, light and shadow encroach upon one another while the forms that they see change shape between a two- and a three-dimensional state, as if they expanding and contracting, unfolding and retracting.



The larger of these forms is a composition of 2.4-meter-wide hovering disks named “Complex Surface: Discs 1-3” exhibited at the gallery’s front salon, where the disks appear as curvaceous, bent surfaces when viewed from the side. Other rectangular or elongated shapes can be found in the other rooms, all creating illusions that appear to be both convex and concave surfaces depending from which angle you look at them, together with ten smaller versions of the aforementioned “Complex Surface” discs from the “Faceted Discs” series —itself an ongoing project of 100 unique pieces which the artist has pledged to create over a decade, at a rate of ten per year.



These glowing sculptures, the only source of illumination in the gallery, create an almost mystical ambience, as they transform the space into a shrine of light and shadow, a sacred space of perceptual contemplation, which is exactly what the visitors are invited to do as they move around the exhibits taking in their ever-shifting forms.





PKS3: MASTERING THE MIX OF LIGHT, COLOR, FORM & SPACE

By// PS STYLE | July 12, 2015



Sand swirled on the unpaved road as we headed deep into the California high desert toward the art installation that had people across the country buzzing. It was October of 2013, and “Lucid Stead,” the creation of artist Phillip K. Smith III, was situated in Joshua Tree, California, about 45 minutes from Palm Springs. Using an existing 70-year-old homesteader shack as the base, Smith modified the structure with mirrors and LED lights that transformed as the sun set. During the day, the mirrors reflected the surrounding environment, while at night the multicolored LED lights in the doorway and windows became the focal point.



Smith, already an accomplished artist at that point, experienced a newfound level of recognition and fame spurred by the project. Some still wander the desert in search of “Lucid Stead,” but such searches are for naught; Smith has since disassembled the installation, with the LED components repurposed into “Lucid Stead: Four Windows and a Doorway.” Initially exhibited at Royale Projects gallery in Palm Desert, the work is now located in Smith’s new Palm Desert studio. And what a studio it is, with 24-foot ceilings and more than 10,000 square feet of space across the main studio and the adjacent workshop. “Lucid Stead: Four Windows and a Doorway” is located in an alcove that allows the five pieces (four windows and a doorway from the original structure) to reflect off of and within each other, merging hues as the lights shift and allowing the viewer to focus on the interaction of pure color.



Born in Los Angeles and raised in the desert, Smith is a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, where he studied fine art and architecture, and he spent just over a decade on the East Coast before returning to his desert roots in 2000. Smith uses his work to push the boundaries of modernist art and design while working within a community that is no stranger to embracing modernism. Incidentally, Smith's wife, Lisa Vossler Smith, currently heads up the staff of Palm Springs Modernism Week as its executive director.

2014 saw Smith's work take a leap into the cultural phenomenon that is the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, with the installation of "Reflection Field" on the polo fields at the festival. "Reflection Field" is a continuation of his examination of color theory, optics, perception, scale and technology, consisting of five freestanding monoliths of light and mirror scaled as large as 18 feet high and 17 feet wide. By day, each piece of 'Reflection Field' is a mirror reflecting earth and sky (as well as Coachella attendees, iPhones in hand capturing selfies), while at night they become expansive fields of color that blend and layer through echoes of reflection.

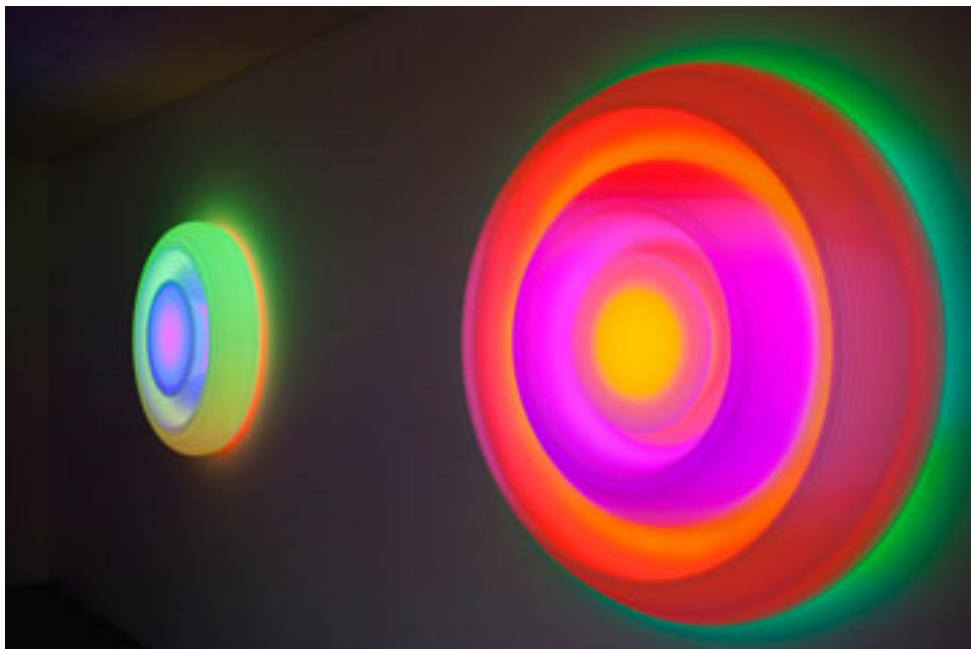


It was at Smith's studio that we got a peek into what's new, with his current projects widely varied in concept and scale. There is the Light and Shadow series, with white fiberglass sculptures like the "Faceted Discs" that line one large wall of the studio. Smith plans to produce 100 unique discs over the next 10 years, releasing 10 each year.





Then there are more Lightwork pieces incorporating LED technology with continually changing colors, like the Torus series, which draws its name from what Smith describes as “the fancy mathematical word for ‘doughnut.’” Also in the works are new small-scale pieces that integrate original wood elements from the “Lucid Stead” structure, along with LED lights. “Lucid Stead” also appears in yet another incarnation through a series of photographic prints entitled “Chromatic Variants,” which incorporate images of the installation in situ in Joshua Tree, layered with tight bands of transparent color that appear to fade into the desert scenery from a distance, while up close they separate the view of the environment, recalling the banded surface of “Lucid Stead.”



Part of the evolution of Smith's work seems to be a continual increase in the scale of his works, as demonstrated by his "Bent Parallel" installation created for the 2014 Untitled Art Fair in Miami during Art Basel. Almost nine feet tall and over 21 feet long, the work is described by Smith as a "new investigation of the spatial and perspectival relationship of color, light and reflection." Bending two parallel surfaces programmed to change color from red, green and blue, "Bent Parallel" creates a third reflected, material-less plane of color that is the mixture of the colors on the two bent planes.



Site-specific, large-scale commissions keep Smith particularly busy these days. "Each new site provides new conditions and realities which in turn provide new insight into the potential of my concepts that could not necessarily have been replicated or produced in my studio," says Smith. A piece for the VA Hospital in Palo Alto is still in the small-scale model stage during our studio visit, while two corten steel Light and Shadow works entitled "Line to Circle" and "Arc-Line-Arc" were en route to Arlington, Virginia. Smith was also about to hit the road himself, heading to Hanover, New Hampshire for a prestigious artist residency at Dartmouth College that boasts such past participants as Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella and Donald Judd.





Los Angeles Times

Coachella 2014: Phillip K. Smith's 'Reflection Field' lights desert

By DEBORAH VANKIN | APRIL 11, 2014



INDIO, Calif. — In the sprawl of desert scrub brush and freeway ramps that is this industrial part of Indio, the sun burns brightly in a barren office park. Light and shadows flash off the scorched asphalt, and the landscape is a spare palette of dusty brown, faded green and gray.

Inside one tucked-away structure, however, artist Phillip K. Smith III is preparing to paint the sky red.

Or pink. Or green, depending.

“Welcome to the different sides of my brain,” Smith says, leading the way through his studio, which looks like an airplane hangar and is filled with elements of a light installation premiering at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival.

One of the studio’s four rooms resembles an architect’s office — clean and bright, with colorful drawings and sculptural models crowding tabletops and assistants tinkering on computers. There’s a “dirty workspace,” an airy gallery space, and a



“semi-clean build space,” which conjures high school shop class, complete with power tools, cable cords and sheets of laser-cut acrylic.

This is where Smith, 41, created his internationally known installation, “Lucid Stead,” which lighted up the Joshua Tree desert for two weekends last October. His worn, wooden shack, tricked out with mirrored slats and multicolored LEDs, stood alone in a dusty clearing where it shimmered in the sunlight and glowed orange, pink and blue under the moon.

About 400 people trekked to ogle “Lucid Stead” in person, but it created an even bigger splash online. Images of the shack became an Internet sensation, with a video garnering more than 300,000 views on lucidstead.com. It catapulted the artist to a new level of recognition. The gallery that represents Smith, Royale Projects in Palm Desert, received phone calls from collectors worldwide, and magazine pieces followed in Italy, India and Germany, among other places.

“It’s amazing to have the world embrace your project,” says Smith, ruggedly handsome in a black T-shirt and faded jeans this afternoon, his close-cropped hair graying at the temples. “But the blunt reality is: Nothing changes. I still gotta come back here and make art — which is what I want to be doing.”

Smith’s newest project, a much larger and more ambitious light installation called “Reflection Field,” opens to the public at the Coachella festival Friday. The piece, which was commissioned by Coachella producer Goldenvoice, will sit in the center of the Empire Polo fields throughout the festival as Queens of the Stone Age, Pharrell Williams and Lorde rock out nearby.

The installation is composed of five sculptural elements — four enormous squares and a towering rectangle standing nearly two stories high — in a grassy circle 100 feet in diameter. The five “volumes of light,” as Smith refers to them, are fully mirrored on the outside and will reflect their desert surroundings by day: lithe palm trees, a ring of mountains and curious visitors. At night the LEDs will glow from within, creating dramatic light-play that will drown bystanders in color.

A computer program that Smith and his team created will time the color progressions so that the reflections from the individual structures blend together in strategic ways. (This “color merging” is a key factor that sets Smith’s new work apart from “Lucid Stead.”) At the same time, the multicolored hues will play off of the natural environment, bleeding into the earth and sky.

“I can fade [one screen] from blue into the red of the sunset, so that it disappears into the sky. Or I can paint the sky green and then fade it down into the green of the



grass,” Smith says. “It plays between these two worlds of projected light and the reality of the environmental light and the surrounding world.”

Exploring color theory, light and shadows, form, perception and technology, Smith’s work is in the tradition of California’s Light and Space artists, a movement that took hold in the mid-’60s and ’70s. James Turrell and Robert Irwin are touchstones, Smith says. He’s also been influenced by earlier artists such as minimalist Sol LeWitt and sculptor Constantin Brancusi.

“I’m inspired by their purity of form and search for truth,” he says.

“Reflection Field” is a natural evolution of “Lucid Stead,” which is now inactive, though the shack, minus the LED applications, still stands in the desert. The new work also draws on Smith’s earlier, much smaller light works on display at Royale Projects, as well as a solo show he had earlier this year at the Museum of Art and History in Lancaster.

Coachella has always featured art, mostly large-scale works by Southern California artists, since its inception in 1999. Goldenvoice said the festival substantially increased the art component in 2011, when it commissioned original works. The company wouldn’t say how much it’s investing in art this year, but festival art director Paul Clemente says the budget has gone up the last two years. The LEDs alone in Smith’s installation cost about \$800,000.

This is the first year artists are being featured on the festival lineup poster along with the bands.

“It’s nice to be on the same bill as Arcade Fire,” Smith jokes.

“We want to explore ideas that maybe other festivals haven’t gone the distance on,” says Clemente, who helps select the art and who saw “Lucid Stead” in person last year. “Art will continue to be more of an emphasis as we move forward.”

Smith’s “Reflection Field” won’t be the largest installation at Coachella this year, Clemente says. Artist and designer Keith Greco created a series of 18 structures, including a lighthouse, an A-frame building and a house built out of popsicle sticks. A 50-foot animatronic robot by Patrick Shearn of the L.A. art collective Poetic Kinetics will roam the polo grounds.

Smith’s installation represents the direction in which Coachella wants to head, Clemente says — artists whose work is worthy of a museum show. Plus, the artist has roots here.



“When you grow up in the desert, it’s in your blood,” Smith says. His grandfather and uncle inspired his interest “in tinkering and making,” he says, and he went on to study fine arts and architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design. After about a decade living in New York and Boston after school, Smith moved back to Palm Desert, where he now lives and is “married with dog,” in part because he missed the natural light here.

“I was at a point where I felt like I could start to produce art that really mattered,” he says, “and I wanted to do it in a place that I cared about, and that was the desert.”

Smith has created more than a dozen large-scale sculptures across the country, including a 50-foot-plus fiberglass piece, “Inhale/Exhale,” for the University of La Verne in 2009. With more than 200,000 people streaming through the festival over the two weekends, he’s optimistic the images of “Reflection Field” that visitors snap will go viral again — and that’s part of his vision for the project.

“Everyone’s gonna have a phone with them. There are infinite spots where different people are gonna find different things,” he says. “I’d love that people begin to talk about light and color and space in an excitable way again.”

After Coachella, Smith says he could imagine “Reflection Field” re-erected in a number of types of art spaces. But first, he says, “I just want it to live and breathe at Coachella.”

“I’d like people to perceive my work as they do the clouds — something that is looked at as universally beautiful,” he says. “No one ever looks at the clouds and says, ‘That’s ugly.’ But also, everybody sees something different.”



In *Lucid Stead*, Phillip K. Smith III Demonstrates Reverence for Land and Light

BY SHANA DAMBROT | NOVEMBER 25, 2013



Philip K. Smith III's *Lucid Stead* is a remote and ephemeral monument to light in all its shifting, blinding, beckoning, alienating, meditative, magical, natural, and artificial splendor. The site-specific art installation occupies a homestead location about 20 minutes outside of Joshua Tree — a skeletal shelter on five acres surrounded by 40 of federal land that Smith augments with one- and two-way mirrors, weathered wood, and interior light sources to create a temporary, yet epic work. While not officially part of High Desert Test Sites, *Lucid Stead* coincided with this year's iteration, and Smith conceived it as a conceptual and geographical cousin — inspired by this “raw environment that invites investigation” — that will live in an indefinite and evolving state.

Smith, also an accomplished architect, has gained notoriety for his large-scale public sculpture in California, Arizona, Virginia, Tennessee, and Oklahoma. He was the 2010 artist in residency at Palm Springs Art Museum, where he created *Aperture*, a light-based sculptural installation “in a constant state of slow change.”

Lucid Stead is different from and on a continuum with works like *Aperture*, which demonstrates his architectural way of thinking about structure, scale, and sightlines. Smith



uses combinations of high-grade plastic, steel, lighting, and electronics, but he reminds you that his light itself is his true medium. He uses LEDs to “extract the distilled experience of how light changes over time — how a mountain out here can be blue, red, brown, white, purple, and black all in one day,” he says. “Color creates space that’s both crisp and organic.”

Sounds like the words of a painter. In fact, Rick Royale of Royale Projects, the Palm Desert gallery that represents Smith and opened an exhibition of his work in November, places him partly in the context of what might be called desert painting. “Much of his passion and inspiration is derived from the distinctive desert light, the slowly changing colors of the landscape, and the unrestrained volume of its wide-open spaces,” Royale says. “These are elements that artists have marveled over for centuries. From the early California Impressionists to Light and Space artists such as Peter Alexander, Phillip consciously continues the historical lineage.”

Smith bought the five acres that became *Lucid Stead* in 2004. He grew up near Joshua Tree, had moved back from the East Coast several years earlier, and was pursuing his architectural practice as his visual art was coming to the fore. “I wanted to be in the raw, have the experience of no close neighbors. The desert is part of who I am. I missed my brown mountains and my open horizons.”

This relationship is paramount in everything he does — architecture, public sculpture, site-specific installation design, or some combination. The experience of *Lucid Stead* lands on this continuum, demanding the same kind of hyper-awareness and attentiveness as *Aperture* and his gallery works. It’s a durational spectacle; it requires a time commitment. Smith says the drive to Joshua Tree is “not the same as a trip to the museum. You have to really participate; you have to engage.”

In these ways, all his work hinges on experiential quality — and that is especially true with *Lucid Stead*.

