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Jane Haskell: Drawing In Light

October 20, 2015–February 19, 2016

Drawing In Light surveys Jane Haskell’s (1923–2013) artistic scope, focusing on work in which the emphasis on light is key. Accentuating the multifaceted ways Haskell mined light’s metaphoric, scientific and perceptual associations, the exhibition’s title and conceptual anchor is prompted by a series of fluorescent light installations that she completed in 1998 titled *Drawings in Light*. Her use of the term drawing in the title of that series also links light to two-dimensional representation, the absolute core of mark-making, and reveals how conjoined the medium, form and content of light and object-making was to her. For Haskell, the incorporation of light reinvents space, provokes sensations for viewers and challenges notions of what constitutes an art object. The objects included in *Drawing In Light* consider light in the context of Haskell’s enduring interest in abstracted forms, reductive compositions and the interaction of color.

Haskell was guided by affinities she felt challenged by and made objects that came from rigorously thought-out ideas. She was informed by the French Impressionists’ examination of the principles of illumination and reflection and Abstract Expressionism’s compositions dominated by fields of color. As an artist and collector, Russian Constructivism’s audacious break with Western European aesthetic rules during the early twentieth century was a deep-rooted interest of hers. She shared the Minimalists’ less-is-more ethos, which influenced her consideration of artmaking and light. Haskell’s work definitively draws upon the history of abstraction and engages in dialogue with the legacies of Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism while also offers stimulating models for the role of abstract art in the twenty-first century.

Haskell’s 1949 move from New York to Pittsburgh was a defining catalyst. She began taking painting classes in 1954 with Samuel Rosenberg, Pittsburgh’s inveterate painter of light, who first encouraged her exploration of the qualities of luminosity and painting. She delved into painting and exhibited abstract images throughout the sixties. Her ideas around light firmly coalesced during the late 1970s, when she shifted towards working with fluorescent lighting directly for the first time. *Drawing In Light’s* earliest work, *Light* (1979), denotes this turning point. Fusing light’s metaphoric associations and physical properties, *Light* shares characteristics of Minimalism, including its geometric shape, diagrammatic patterning, sculptural form, absence of specific reference and incorporation of industrial lighting. This body of work is critical; it not only distinguished the prevailing strategies Haskell is best known for, but it also led to several important public installation commissions, including *Rivers of Light* in downtown Pittsburgh’s Steel Plaza Subway Station.

Haskell’s heightened interest in these modes coincided with painting’s unabashed come-back. Minimalism, once appealing for its slickness and sparseness was, by the late 70s, perceived as rigid and sterile. The rise of hyper-personalized and expressive imagery in the early 1980s also put a temporary damper on abstraction’s popularity as a visual form. Many artists though, including Haskell, continued to favor open possibilities around forms, materials and processes, while holding a deep affinity for Minimalism’s bare aesthetic and abstraction’s lack of narrative. In many ways, the more politicized and identity-laden imagery became throughout the eighties, the more Haskell found potency in the subtleties of uncomplicated imagery, repetitive forms and the play between light and color. *Light Construction* (1984) is a composition that exemplifies these ideas. A painting, it none-the-less takes on dimensionality. The vertical neon rod placed down its center plays with our sense of perception, connects the piece physically and creates illumination that emanates into the surrounding space. Despite its non-referential content, *Light Construction* is an expressive, tactile rendering of light, color and surface materiality that elicits various associations.

Window Series, comprised of oil and acrylic paintings and oil crayon drawings, is a key body of work and well-known motif that Haskell began working on during the 1980s. In these works, she incorporated permutations of the grid in configurations of squares, lines and varied hues of color to explore light’s qualities and tinker with the opacity and translucency of pigment. The meeting points of the chromatic squares were of keen interest to her, and she coaxed her paint or crayon to achieve varying degrees of radiance, abstraction and spatial dissolution. These objects likewise cover conceptual ground about reckoning with perception, considering the limits of vision and provoking curiosity about the vastness and unknowability of the area beyond the frame of representation.

The ideas Haskell was thinking through with the *Window Series* laid crucial groundwork for her most recent drawings, which she worked on regularly between the early 1990s and 2013. The black rectangular cells she set against white backgrounds in the *Millennium Series* produce strong evocations relating to architecture and the urban grid, specifically conjuring the World Trade Center. The abstracted patterns in the untitled *Digital Drawings* suggest spatial depth, tectonic movement and conveyance of light and dark contrasts so powerfully the pictures are nearly vibrational. In *Nocturne Drawings*, inspired by constellations as well as by dense natural landscapes, she wrestled with depicting the absence of light. The imagery in these three series strikingly riffs on the formal traditions of abstraction while also hints at cosmology, urbanism, collective memory and scientific language, dominant queries instigated by abstract artists in this century. The contextual narratives of these images demonstrate how invested she was, even towards the end of her life, in thinking about new possibilities with abstract representation.

Importantly, Haskell was a disciplined artist who was ambitious and wanted to succeed. That may seem too banal to merit clarification, but she came of age artistically during the mid-twentieth century, an era when notions like professional drive still carried taboos for women despite the approaching sweeping social changes. It is important that she worked through these obstacles and that her aspirations were emboldened early on by her family and by Rosenberg, her mentor. She was married and raising three daughters in 1957 when she began a master’s degree program in art history at the University of Pittsburgh. The faculty’s willingness to work with her schedule facilitated her ability to prioritize her professional development. During the 1960s, when Haskell was establishing herself as an artist, organizations like the Arts and Crafts Center (Pittsburgh Center for the Arts), Associated Artists of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Plan for Art, Society of Sculptors, Three Rivers Arts Festival and Westmoreland Museum of American Art provided significant exhibition opportunities. Her first solo museum exhibit took place in 1964 at Carnegie Museum of Art, where she was invited to show as part of a series launched by museum director Leon Arkus to expose audiences to local artists. She put her master’s degree to use by becoming a lecturer in art history at Duquesne University, where she taught for a decade. When Pittsburgh Cultural Trust awarded her the Steel Plaza Subway Station commission in 1984, she decidedly got a seat at the table and opportunities to exhibit new work and awards for public art commissions accelerated. In tandem with her drive and determination, these pivotal figures and institutions helped set the stage for Haskell to find her voice, claim authorship and negotiate her identity as a woman and artist.

Haskell is known as a prolific maker, but she was also a deeply engaged patron, a discrete yet generous philanthropist and a salt-of-the-earth friend. During the 64 years that Haskell lived in Pittsburgh, she steadfastly championed issues she believed in. She enthusiastically promoted the work of emerging artists she felt strongly about. She maintained long-standing involvement in numerous arts and social service organizations. She relished the camaraderie of talking shop with peers and belonging to a community of like-minded thinkers, and she cast a social network that was wide and inclusive. Haskell not only had her fingers on the pulse of Pittsburgh’s creative community, her involvement and tenacity helped shape the city’s particular cultural narrative.

Illustrating Haskell’s significant contributions as a patron and collector, in conjunction with *Drawing In Light*, Carnegie Museum of Art presents *Jane Haskell’s Modernism: A Pittsburgh Legacy*, on view from November 21, 2015–May 16, 2016.