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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-three-new-shows-artist-mary-corse-is-finally-having-her-moment-1525183947>

## ART &amp; DESIGN

# With Three New Shows, Artist Mary Corse is Finally Having Her Moment

After a five-decade career, this season she is suddenly hard to miss



Mary Corse at her Topanga Canyon studio with "Untitled (White Multiband, Beveled)," 2011. PHOTO: CAROLYN DRAKE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

*By Ted Loos*

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**DRESSED IN COWBOY** boots and jeans, her long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, Mary Corse stands in her new studio, on a break from a day of painting. "It has heating now—fancy," she says, chuckling as she compares it to her drafty old workspace. "I can get a lot more done." Her house, which is just behind the studio, is surrounded by towering palms and a backyard barbecue, as well as lemon trees laden with ripe yellow fruit. She can't really have pets, because of the rattlesnakes.

The studio is located on a remote hilltop in out-there Topanga Canyon, about 25 miles west of downtown Los Angeles. On the wall behind Corse today is one of her signature "band paintings," a 9-by-9-foot canvas with bold, hard-edged ribbons of black, yellow and white, all lined up in a row like a telegraph transmission from an unseen force. Corse scans the rest of her studio, which is filled with sketches and works in progress.

This month she shows at Dia:Beacon and London's Lisson Gallery, and in June her survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art will be unveiled. "I'm so excited," says Corse, 72, of the recognition she's finally getting. "It's been a long time coming." At Dia:Beacon, eight of her works are going on long-term view for at least three years, putting her in the company of Dan



TOOLS OF THE TRADE Corse's painting *Untitled (Yellow, Black, White, Beveled)*, 2010. PHOTO: MARY CORSE, *UNTITLED (YELLOW, BLACK, WHITE, BEVELED)*, 2010, GLASS MICROSPHERES IN ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 12 X 108 INCHES; CAROLYN DRAKE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Flavin, Donald Judd, Walter De Maria and Louise Bourgeois, among other greats, while Lisson will present eight new pieces. The Whitney survey, which opens on June 8, will consist of more than two dozen works from the past 54 years. The luminous abstract canvases that will be seen there—each packs a maximal wallop with minimal means—will be a discovery for many visitors.

Although she has produced art consistently for over five decades, Corse is only now being recognized by the wider world as a key member of the Light and Space Movement. Centered largely in California, the movement emerged in the 1960s as an offshoot of conceptual art, one that attempted to understand artwork as a function of sensory perception. Artists associated with the movement include Robert Irwin, Peter Alexander and John McCracken, but its most famous member is James Turrell, known for his pleasingly disorienting *Skyspaces*, his blockbuster 2013 Guggenheim exhibition and for *Roden Crater*, a mammoth ongoing installation in a dormant Arizona volcano.

About Corse's career, Turrell, a friend, is blunt in calling out the challenges posed by gender bias, then and now. "It took her a lot longer because she's a woman," he says. "But she was the most interesting artist out there." The possible impact of gender on her career is not a topic Corse likes to address, but then again, she's not a big talker.

Corse is an authentically Western personality, more about action than chat. As she herself said in the 1968 short film *White Light*, which documents her heyday as a young, groovy woman in a mostly male milieu, "Words are very difficult."

"She's a do-it-yourself person," says Whitney curator Kim Conaty, who organized the museum's show and has seen Corse turn down assistance in moving around enormous canvases. "She has the pioneering spirit." For her silently shimmering white "light box" works of 1968—which hold

the viewer's gaze in a surprisingly strong grip, given their pared-down construction from Plexiglas and a few other components—Corse famously made her own Tesla coils, the electricity-conducting circuits that make them glow. “She made her own Tesla coils—people don't do that,” says Courtney J. Martin, deputy director and chief curator of the Dia Art Foundation. “Flavin was into readymade, but Mary is the exact opposite.”

Despite her mistrust of words, once warmed up Corse will readily relay a few thoughts on a lifetime dedicated to art making. A pet peeve is the assumption that somehow the Light and Space Movement took place in California because of that state's happy abundance of the two qualities in the name. Not true, according to Corse. “I'm not a landscape painter,” she says, standing in front of a band painting. “I don't see the light of the sky and say, ‘Oh, I want to do that in a painting.’ No, it's more about the human state, internal. I would paint the same paintings in New York as I did here.”

Corse's approach has a decidedly meditative, Eastern philosophy quality—which does sound somewhat California-like. “What I learned was, you cannot think a painting,” she says. “They don't come out well. You try to get rid of your thoughts so you can experience something else.” Corse adds that she has to get her mind “empty enough” to find “the pathway” to the composition.

But even after a lifetime at the canvas, she's still finding new ways to improve her process. Pinned up on her studio wall is a series of some three dozen doodles done with black and blue pens, creating a forest of rectangles, crosshatches and other shapes. Recently, Corse realized that she was doodling whenever she was talking on the phone, and that those shapes were ending up in her art. So now she's saving them more purposefully. “It's a direct path to your subconscious,” she says.



Sketches of works in progress and general ephemera. PHOTO: CAROLYN DRAKE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

A California native who grew up in Berkeley, Corse was already working abstractly in the seventh grade and admiring the art of mid-century greats Hans Hofmann and Josef Albers. She was “tracing their paintings, writing 10-page papers as a 12-year-old,” she says. She continued in this way, eventually going on to receive her B.F.A. from the

Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts) in 1968.

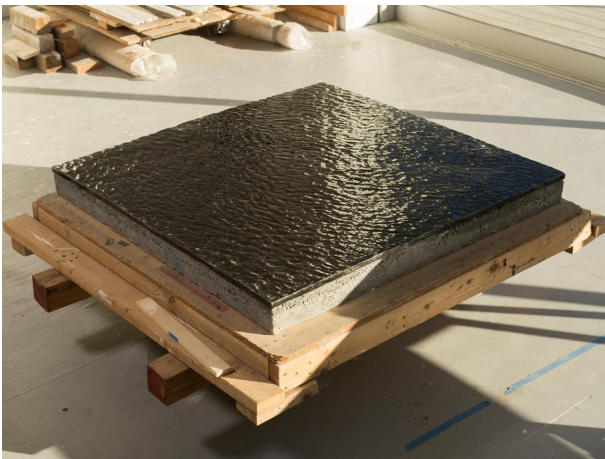
As a young woman in her 20s and 30s, Corse already had traction in the art world, working with acclaimed New York dealer Richard Bellamy, whose gallery presented early shows by a number



A heap of used foam paintbrushes. PHOTO: CAROLYN DRAKE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

of then up-and-coming artists including Yayoi Kusama, Richard Serra and Judd. Though now thought of as a West Coast artist, Corse was better appreciated by Easterners like Bellamy. “It’s not very intellectual out here, or it wasn’t then,” she says. It was for this reason, as well as for family considerations, that she took herself out of the urban art scene, such as it was at the time in Los Angeles. She moved, in 1970, to the same remote property

she occupies now.



Mary Corse “Untitled (Hand to Earth),” c. 1978 fired earth, 48 x 48 x 4 inches PHOTO: CAROLYN DRAKE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Even though she acknowledges she’s not “a city person,” Corse still seems surprised that she ended up in Topanga Canyon. “It was a cinder-block shack with a donkey walking past,” she says of the state in which she found the property. But the lack of distractions appealed to her, and she needed a place to raise two children. “She’s always been a little bit of a hermit,” says Conaty. “She’d rather be in the studio, with a paintbrush in her hand.”

Her path was not always easy. “I was a single mom and broke—totally broke,” Corse says now of a period that she says lasted until about 2000. “There were many times I would have preferred to quit.” She notes that she never had a job other than painting—except for a long-ago gig as a backup dancer in a ballet production, for which she was paid \$25. She always managed to sell a painting when she needed to. “Bellamy kept me working, and I’m sure he’s responsible for the grant I got,” she says about the National Endowment for the Arts fellowship she received in 1975. These days, she is represented by Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Lisson Gallery and Lehmann Maupin.

But it was her inclusion in the first iteration of *Pacific Standard Time*, the L.A.-focused, multiexhibition event of 2011, that helped put her back on the art-world radar. The fact that she made it into two of the shows—*Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970* at the Getty Center and *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego—indicated that the art world’s collective consciousness was naturally turning back to her.

As the works at the Whitney demonstrate, Corse has been on a remarkably consistent artistic trajectory for decades. “Capturing light has been her quest,” notes Conaty. The earliest painting in the show, 1964’s *Untitled (Octagonal Blue)*, is one of the rare instances of color; many of the other pieces are predominantly white. “Different colors make for different internal journeys,” says Corse. “They create emotions and feelings.” But the clue is in the materials: The metal flakes embedded in the acrylic blue paint show her trying to render light. That quest continued with her fluorescent light boxes, like *Untitled (White Light Series)* from 1966.



A scene from Corse's studio. From left, “Black Earth,” fired earth clay, 48 x 48 inches, circa 1975 and works in progress. PHOTO: CAROLYN DRAKE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Following this period, Corse moved to a phase where white itself represented light. The painting *Untitled (White Grid, Vertical Strokes)*, 1969, is a feat of subtle tone variation that makes the hand of the artist palpable. *Untitled (White Double Arch)*, 1998, presents a crisp black shape resembling a gateway, with a bifurcated white background that suggests an open book. Like all of her work, it’s an invitation of sorts.

‘Her work has evolved a lot, in a tight range.... it’s a great period for her.’

—James Turrell

In 1968, she took to embedding glass microspheres in her paint, a move that fueled her

best-known works. The idea came to her through a classic aha! moment one dark night while cruising down the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. “It struck me when I was driving, ‘What’s in those white lines?’” she recalls of the road paint. “As they lit up, I thought, Oh, I’ve got to try that.” She learned from the highway department that there were different-size beads mixed into the paint used for pavement markings; she bought them from the same manufacturer and started blending them together to create a recipe she could use.

Her tools varied over the years, but they all served the underlying understanding that the perceptual was everything. “I realized there was no objective truth; it wasn’t out there,” she says. “That was a big deal.”

“Her work has evolved a lot, in a tight range,” says Turrell, who gives her credit for pushing forward even when the art world wasn’t very encouraging. “She kept the faith and stayed with it—she got through to the other side.” Being an older artist has its perks, says Turrell: “She’s freed up now in a way she might never have contemplated before. It’s a great period for her.”

Corse agrees, but true to form, she is focused on making new art rather than talking about it. The adulation of the exhibitions will be pleasant, but outside validation is not what has powered her this far, because that can be a trap. Despite her devotion to art and her shunning of

doing anything else to make money, she chafes at the idea that it's a job. "I don't know if I want to be a 'professional artist,' " she says, smiling. "I guess you want to stay free."

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