

SEEING THE LIGHT

Art Monthly
Interview by Chris Clarke
Issue no. 487
June 2025

Originally inspired by Surrealism, the New York-born artist later experimented with new technologies to harness light as a means of freeing the body and expanding the senses through movement, reflection and refraction.

Chris Clarke: I want to begin with how your practice developed out of language, literature, science, philosophy, religion and Surrealism – inhabiting a somewhat unusual, in-between place. What was your impetus to make visual art and did you consider your practice during that period as being specifically ‘visual’?

Liliane Lijn: When I started out, I wanted to be a painter, except that I didn’t like the idea of going to art school. I was, if you like, ‘over-educated’. I had an education in two different languages, two different cultures, and I just wanted to make art. I didn’t want to study it particularly, but I didn’t have another way of surviving. My father said he would help me if I went to university, so I studied archaeology. That was a good compromise. I studied that for a short while, probably six months, and then I dropped out. I tell the story in more detail of how I dropped out in my autobiography *Liquid Reflections*, but basically what happened was I met an old school friend, Nina, who wanted to be a painter – she was a little younger than me, about 17 and I was 18, and I hadn’t seen her since we were 11, but, just by chance, I met her again. She said to come to Venice, so I did, spending a wonderful weekend there, during which time we both decided that we would meet again in Paris that autumn. It was very romantic, nothing was going to stop us, and so we did – we went to Paris. I took classes at L’École du Louvre and the Sorbonne, then in the evenings Nina would take me to visit the surrealist cafe and I would meet people there. My life became very rich and full of experiences. But, after a while, I realised that to paint you needed to know how to draw. So, I drew all day. Then I met Takis and he became something of a mentor. We became close friends and, from that, we fell in love. This is the late 1950s.

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Throughout your practice, there has been a real tension between ideas of the material and the ephemeral. For example, your 'Koan' series from the mid 1960s, gently turning conic structures with illuminated lines of colour, seem to lose a sense of their physicality, particularly when shown in darkness. I believe there have been instances of these works being exhibited outside – is that right?

Yes, at University of Warwick, in front of the Mead Gallery.

They become these moving, calligraphic strands, floating in space. It's also a characteristic of your early 'Poem Machines' made from 1962 to 1968, which give a concrete, even clunky, presence to language itself. You have stated in relation to these works: 'Machines were dirty, noisy and related to both industry and manual work in contrast to the intellectual. Machines thought in opposition to the organic, natural, emotional context of poetry.' What led you to explore and to visually realise this opposition?

It took me a while before I got to the idea of 'machines', I was first interested in light – the ephemerality, the non-physicality of light took me away from my own body, a feeling which I found extremely disturbing. I wanted to get away from the body on one hand, but on the other, when I was painting, I felt like I was sunk into my body. It was a very physical experience.

Interestingly, around this time I began the 'Sky Scrolls', 1959–91, which were less physical; there was already something ephemeral to them because, in a sense, I was drawing the sky. These fantasy landscapes and creatures in the sky, they took me away from the physical world and eventually led me to start experimenting. I worked consistently for about a year on these until I got to a point where I felt my drawing had become almost too good – by which I mean I wasn't putting anything into it. I wanted to get away from that. At the same time, I couldn't sell them, because nobody was interested in drawings, or any works on paper. I was told that you had to use canvas. So, I tried using canvas, but it didn't work. Yet that's what led to me experimenting with different materials.

I found this odd material. It was wax but it wasn't wax – it was a new kind of polymer called ski wax, which was made from plastic and only really used by Olympic skiers. It was fantastic and came in all colours. I thought that looked interesting. So that's when I started using plastics, learning how to vibrate these sticks of material, basically extrusions of colour that I could make thinner and thinner, so that I could actually draw with them in the air, before letting the lines settle onto Perspex. That was when I saw the double. I saw shadows and I began to understand that the object of what I had been making were these shadows. It was ephemeral but it was also material, so it was both. The material was also completely poisonous, so I abandoned it and I started using clear polymer, like Perspex but liquid. I made biomorphic forms with it on Perspex, but they're all gone now.

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With my very early 'Poem Machines', there was a certain amount of aggression, not against poetry but against the elitism of the poetic world. It was a kick in the pants, an aggressive statement. I showed these works together. The first exhibition I had showed the 'Poem Machines' alongside *Echolights* from 1963. So, you had dematerialised Perspex and polymer works shown with these rather concrete, motorised, noisy objects.

The noise is very present.

I didn't care. For me the noise is part of the work. If anything, I liked it. The work was recently on show in 'Radical Software' at Kunsthalle Wien (Reviews *AM485*), and it actually has a screw or something loose inside it, so the noise is quite random – I didn't do it on purpose – but it's there, and it's quite nice. Some things just happen, unplanned and then I decide afterwards that I actually like it.

In your work *Liquid Reflections*, 1968, there is a rotating horizontal disc which has been tilted with a mixture of oil and water. On top of this you have placed two acrylic balls, and we essentially see a demonstration of physical effects. The balls pull and push in different directions, according to centrifugal and centripetal forces, while, simultaneously, you use a fixed light source to create an array of reflections. The work encourages a meditative, even mesmerising, encounter. Yet the physical components are all present: a motorised disc, a light stand, a combination of simple geometric objects. How did you come to bring together these qualities of the transcendental and the material? I wonder if you can also talk about this in the context of your interest in Buddhism and spirituality.

Well, when I made that work, there were steps. I didn't think about making a work using gravity or centrifugal force. I'm not a scientist, so I never planned that. I was working with light, first with formless reflections, and then I decided that I wanted to be more disciplined. I wanted to create very simple lenses. And I figured out a way of making them with a hypodermic needle. I would inject onto the surface of the Perspex a liquid polymer, which is essentially the same thing as Perspex. But it's a lens so it still reflects. Then I made *Echolights*, for which I made my own projector with a revolving lens shining light onto the surface of a thick block of Perspex, the depth of which allowed for a very

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big area in which the reflections and the shadows could move. The more distance between the surface and the back, the more movement. Afterwards, I figured out that these very expensive blocks of

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Perspex weren't necessary, that I could have an empty space – that was when I made 'Cosmic Flares', 1965–66. But I had in mind that I would really like to put water in them, and I had already earlier thought of hollowing out a solid Perspex block. The thinking is all quite linear.

I wouldn't say that I was the first artist to use water and Perspex but the way I came to it was because of 'Cosmic Flares'. Once I had made an empty Perspex box, I understood that I could use this approach instead. I liked the droplets when they were liquid, but when they dried, they became dry lenses. When they were liquid, they vibrated, they moved, they had a real life in them, so I thought how could I do that? Why don't I try water? Because I made 'Cosmic Flares', I was able to apply this approach. I made the first one just with water inside it, no balls, and you just looked at it, and what happened was so interesting because it seemed to repeat exactly what I had been exploring. What happened is that, at first, the water was in completely vague polymorphic shapes that slowly condensed into dewdrop-like lenses, which became identical, so that the surface of the disc was covered with these identical droplets. That's nature. I didn't cause that. I just put the water in, and what I found so extraordinary is that it took the same path naturally as the path that I had been following in my previous experiments with liquid acrylic polymer.

First, I kept them static, but I thought it would be interesting to put them on a turntable. I made a shallow drum containing water that created both reflections and shadows, and, as it turned, you could watch these changes happening. One day, I placed a Perspex ball on a white table and it rolled around. I thought I would make a white turning disc and place a Perspex ball, maybe two, on it to see what they would do together, but I didn't have a white disc, just the shallow drum containing water. I placed the ball, then two or three small Perspex balls, on the surface of this drum and I couldn't believe what I saw. The balls were essentially moving magnifying lenses, and, as they moved, when you looked at the balls, you could see the drum magnified – it was fantastic. Everybody who saw it was knocked out. Then, when I decided to make a bigger one, it was very tricky to keep the balls on the disc. That's when I started understanding the whole process of centripetal force that pulled and spun these balls. If I compressed the disc, I was increasing gravity and creating a situation in which the balls would move randomly.

It is interesting how you talk about your process as experimentation, and even having these sort of 'eureka' moments. I know I started this question by asking about the meditative effects on someone who is looking at your work, but I wonder whether there was also something similar occurring during the process of making. It almost reminds me of author Robert M Persig's 1974 classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and how the idea of manual labour, the intense focus on physically making something, becomes a form of meditation in its own right.

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True. My first exhibition was quite successful, and I was then asked to show here and there. It was perhaps the beginning of a career, but instead I went to Greece. I decided to get away from all materialism. Greece was poor at that time, and there was nothing there, no materials and you certainly couldn't buy Perspex. In a sense, what I was doing for three and a half years was trying to purify myself, through efforts such as trying not to talk – killing the ego, all that. Things that I quite disapprove of now, that I think aren't healthy. I basically wanted to get away from the materialism of the West, of swimming in a bog of materialism. In Greece I read a lot of Buddhist texts, particularly the Tibetan Buddhist Milarepa who lived 1052–1135. I read his biography and *100,000 Songs of Milarepa* so many times that I knew his writings by heart. He was a great Buddhist poet and saint, and his story is amazing. Obviously, that all went into my work and when I came back to London in 1966 I brought all of that thinking with me.

How did you come to use prisms in your work? You have used 'tank prisms', which are like periscopes for armoured vehicles that are intended to maintain a safe distance while allowing one to view and potentially attack the surrounding area. In *The Four Figures of Light*, 1978, these prisms serve as 'heads' for the Figures but also they are a way to expand the scope of the installation, so that when you are viewing the work, you suddenly become aware that you're already immersed in the reflections. There is an intriguing subversion of the original function of the tank prism, almost in opposition to its intended usage.

I first encountered the prism in a shop window. I saw it from across the boulevard in Paris and it changed my state of mind. What happened was that the sun hit the prism and sent me one part of the light spectrum. Suddenly, I had this flash of colour in my eye, a very brilliant colour. I was completely illuminated and just felt totally different. I had been depressed, I had been in a quarrel and was in a terrible mood, and that was a very special experience. It was 1964 when I started to want to use prisms, but I came to use tank prisms much later. Of course, prisms are used in all kinds of scientific experiments – in cameras, you know, they're ubiquitous. They are basically tools for seeing. The interesting thing about them is that they see through matter – for example, we know what gases stars are made of because we use prisms to refract light into spectra and identify the spectral lines. Without prisms we wouldn't be able to do this. I used tank prisms because of scale. I was making installations using small prisms on bases that I thought of as big, as gigantic. At that time, I was making small things that I thought were large. Then, I came by chance upon these big tank prisms, but they were in their actual steel cases. I practically ruined my whole studio trying to get them out of their casings using hydrochloric acid. That was a disaster. Luckily, I then found a company that made tank prisms and they had quite a few that were obsolete. They were no good for war because they were a target due to their reflectivity. The new type they use in tanks do not reflect light and

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the tanks are less visible. The old ones, which I had, were reflective. I bought a whole lot of these for practically nothing because they were surplus. In fact, all the prisms that I used were surplus. They might have some tiny little defect that made them useless for the military – for example, the angle wasn't absolutely precise – but they were perfect for me. I liked the idea that they came out of war machinery and that I could transform them into the heads of my 'female figures' – I always thought of them as heads.

There is a circuitous nature to your practice that seems to return to certain themes and approaches, often over long periods of time. Within the context of a retrospective one encounters certain sight lines which tie together motifs that might otherwise be ungraspable. In bringing together your works, have there been moments where you have discovered new facets of your practice or aspects that weren't previously apparent to you?

I knew there were through lines in my work but nobody else could see them. That was a problem the exhibition curators Emma Enderby and Manuela Ammer have very clearly sought to bring to light. Of course, while I know there are connections, that my works are all interrelated, this exhibition has allowed me to see new connections that I haven't seen before too. I'm amazed at how clear they are.

Liliane Lijn's exhibition 'Arise Alive' is at Tate St Ives to 2 November, having travelled from Mumok, Vienna.

Chris Clarke is a critic and curator based in Vienna.

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<https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/issue/june-2025>

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