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O’Riordan, Alan. “Anthony McCall’s First Irish Exhibition Makes for Light Work,” *Irish Examiner*, April 4, 2017.



Anthony McCall creates art installations using beams of light

OVER the past decade, Lismore Castle Arts has carved out a strong profile as a home for the contemporary visual arts in the southeast, attracting high-profile artists and curators.

Headlining this year’s summer show is Anthony McCall, the British-born, New York-based artist known for his “solid light” works that blur the boundaries between film, sculpture and installation.

McCall was a central figure in London avant-garde filmmaking, before he became more interested in exploring the parts of film — light, time, experience — rather than what it can be used to represent.

Both those aspects of his work are evident in this, McCall’s first solo exhibition in Ireland, with works from the 1970s showing alongside works from recent years.

One of the solid-light works included is his iconic ‘Line Describing a Cone’ from 1973. The work is made from a beam of light from a film projector, which shows a line gradually forming a complete circle. Mist is used to give the beam a dense, three-dimensional feel, which incorporates the viewers, who affect the conical light sculpture as they move through the space. Visitors slice through the cone projection, or are observed to do so by others. One of McCall’s aims is to defamiliarise the elements of a very familiar experience — of being in a dark room, shared with a projected light source; that is, of going to see a film. Visitors to Lismore will, he says, be asked to do this in a more self-aware way.

They will be greeted by the works in four completely darkened spaces. But McCall contrasts the experience with that of a cinema.

There, he says, paradoxically, “As soon as the lights dim, you stop being in the dark: you are absorbed into the imaginative space of the movie. One way I think of my solid light installations is as sculptures made of light in three-dimensional space quietly going about their own changes.

“These projected forms exist in the dark, in three-dimensional space, and they have to be found and explored by a mobile, thoughtful visitor. The engagement is self-aware, and it involves a relationship with other visitors doing something similar. Perhaps these things place it beyond the reach of the term ‘immersive.’”

McCall’s roots in avant-garde film-making are represented by ‘Landscape for Fire’, literally a film of a fire installation set in a landscape.

"It was a film of a performance," he says. "But as I edited the performance footage, I became increasingly interested in the processes of filmmaking and in the theory behind them. Once I started showing the completed film, I became intrigued by a problem: that the events represented happened in the past, and that they happened in a place far from where the audience sat looking. I wondered if it was possible to make a film that was itself a performance, one that occurred in a present tense shared with its audience, and that existed in the same physical space. A year and a half later, I made a work that proposed a response to this question: 'Line Describing a Cone'."

Those ideas have sustained McCall since then, with a recent work, such as 'Swell', still exploring them. "There is progression in the work," he says, "since each work tends to suggest new questions to explore. But, conversely, I find myself re-exploring ideas that I first played with in the early '70s, so it is a two-way street."

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, McCall's art career took a back seat. "It was clear that there was no possibility to get representation for this kind of work by a gallery," he says. "I began designing art books and catalogues for a living. There was another important difficulty: when shown in art biennials or kunsthalls, my solid-light films proved to be almost invisible. I discovered that I had been working all along with a medium of which I was unaware: dust from the rough floors and old plaster walls of downtown lofts, and cigarette smoke (many more people smoked in those days). This proved to be a real stumbling block since there was no way to solve the visibility problem."

That problem, he found, was solved by haze machines in the 1990s, something that allowed his work to more easily achieve its effects. At the same time, video art had become more a gallery staple, so McCall returned to solid-light works again, exploring the use of multiple projectors, convergence, and, especially, vertical works, where the projector is on the ceiling. He has also revised his outdoor work, notably with 'Crossing the Elbe', a large-scale outdoor work that was shown in Hamburg in 2015, a film of which is included at Lismore.

McCall's ideas, he says, come from his own re-thinking of his work, but that continuity is perhaps all the more important given the changes that have taken place around them. For an artist that asks us to consider the mediation of screens (often by removing them), ideas of observation and surveillance, it's obvious how our present moment throws those into high relief.

Changes like social media and the omnipresence of screens, he says, "do rub up against my work". He cites the example of a work called 'Circulation Figures', from 1972, which brought a dozen photographers and cinematographers together to record their own presence within an environment of mirrors. The results were unusable, until recently, when digital editing allowed McCall to create an installation replica of the earlier performance

"When it was shown (in Serralves, Portugal) there were was new unexpected layer of circulation: visits with their smartphones photographic themselves and sending off the images to their friends."

It seems our times are adding layers to McCall's work, making him more an artist of our strange times.