

Concepts With Neon

**Cathey Billian
Janet Evans
Christopher Freeman
Don Jacobson
Robin Kahn**

**Bill Kane
Joseph Lewis III
Michael Rocco Pinciotti
Cynthia Tecler
Amy Young**

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**University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
State University of New York at Stony Brook**

INTRODUCTION

A neon world is stunning and magical, born of signs, commerce and entertainment and categorically marginalized within society and the art world. The combination of populist appeal, the facticity of signage, and the phenomenal wonderment in the vibrancy of light are repressed partly because they threaten. Iconoclastic elements in our society have celebrated exactly these properties. In the 1920s the jazz fringe saw it as a "moderne" pulse whose vibrancy deconstructed the past. For the lost generation of the 1950s Beats, neon was a tawdry character of the night directed against bourgeoisie materialism. The "hips" of the 1960s and 70s rediscovered it as a general metaphysics of the body electric. An anxious identity was forged.

This exhibition draws upon a different generation of artists who neither fear that ambiguity nor are totally seduced by the pure phenomenality of neon. They place the marginalized qualities of the medium into contexts which explore issues relevant to both the lived and art worlds. As such, they continue to call into question the meaning of art while inscribing terms for our culture and our identity.

Janet Evans and Rocky Pinciotti explore in different ways the long held relation between light and spirituality that conflates the primitive with the modern. Evans abstracts the motif of the mountain as the site of pilgrimage. The bones of martyrs and technology, a cocoon of spears, mark the difficulty and the history of human ascent.

Pinciotti addresses the interiorizing of spirituality in culture from nature to temples and icons. A primary form, the altar, and the primary fact of spirituality are equated with the primary element, light. His interest in prime moments extend to the shelter of home where the child is formed.

For Cathey Billian the fundamental elements are structure and time played out through a combination of nature, technology, and memory. Her photograph is "a-part" of her environmental work and provides a point of convergence. It functions, like her art, as part of the past and present; an autonomous "wall" piece and part of a greater whole. Several photographs illustrate those environments.

Don Jacobson confronts us with technology through the kinetics of his work, but motion is utilized on several levels. Here his parents transform from warm, smiling individuals to monsters and back again. The placement of a screen in front of his neon uses the motion of the viewer – like his own kinetics – to present a moiré pattern as a signal to his interest in transformations.

Chris Freeman walks the tightest wire in this exhibit with the pure phenomenality of neon in a strong formalist field. Neon is liberative from the constraints imposed but not denied from other media. He uses it to mark the rupture from ceramics, sculpture, drawing, and painting. His ceiling piece purposefully balances between pure abstraction, pure neon, and expressionist marks in space whose ground is the wall. Several photographs document his developments in "guerilla" and "graffitti" neon, and volumetric light sculptures created through drawing in space with neon over time.

Robin Kahn uses the literal neon sign, one whose awkwardness rails

against finesse, to use the facticity of command to enlighten the position of women's presence defined by absence. The sign literally re-lights and openly re-writes the past to mark both the desire and necessity to recognize difference on the levels of culture and personal identity.

Joe Lewis reverses not only the sign heritage of neon but utilizes its claim to clarity to stress what is not known, and the deadly consequences of HIV. He also aligns the primariness of neon with formal, primary art shapes and colors to consider why we prize them but not the primariness of race and color within and outside of art.

Bill Kane also explores the concept of signage on multiple levels. The poignancy of a love poem written on the Berlin wall is re-produced in his hand next to a photo re-production whose hidden neon stands as analogue for what is hidden between people and boundaries. His new series, taken from the Russian libretto where Malevich's primary forms of Suprematism first appeared, uses neon to pose the technological light that was to be the "Victory" over the natural sun for the now-defunct Russian revolution.

Cynthia Tecler's extraordinary "Doll" is a craft fetish whose feminine features ridicule the facial fetish that "dolls" in society must have. The signs of the face, body, and name are used humorously to announce and hold up for examination public signs that are held in front of women.

Amy Young also holds up a public ritual, the ritual of a male (her brother) coming of age in the submarine service. Her media – all alternative processes – also operate as signs; the graphic qualities of the submarine show how awkward the ritual, lived or observed, while the neon halo highlights death as a possible reality in this public-private "game" of young males, military, and identity.

Richard Leslie
Guest Curator

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

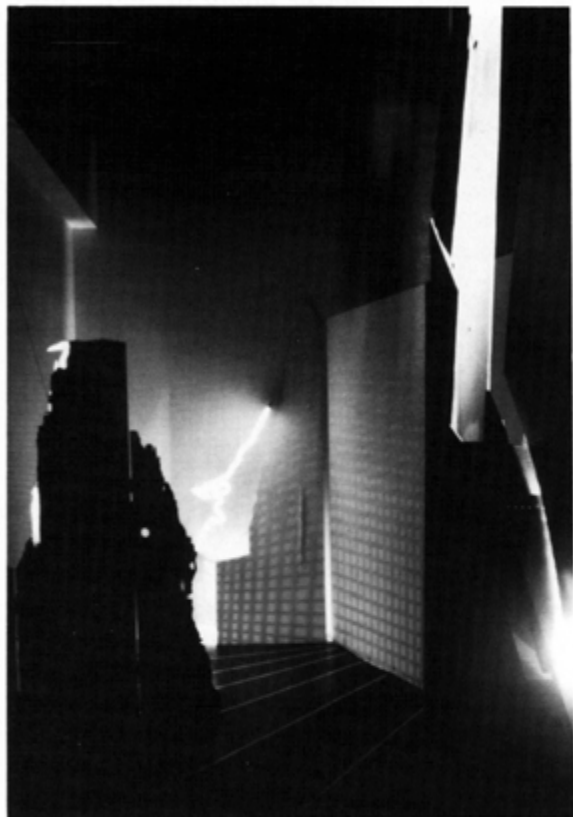
I would like to express my gratitude to guest curator Richard Leslie, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Art at the State University of New York at Purchase, for curating this exhibition and contributing the catalogue essay.

Special thanks are also extended to members of the Staller Center for the Arts staff: Nancy Alberto, Dwana Farrell, Ida Flores, Brenda Hanegan, Patricia Hubbard, Heejung Kim, Annemarie Roper, Shadia Sachedina, and Pamela Sienna, Gallery Assistants; David Buckle, Nicole Kitaeff, and Jessica Smolinski, Gallery Interns; Patrick Kelly, Liz Silver, and the Technical Crew, Staller Center for the Arts, for exhibition lighting; and Mary Balduf, Gallery Secretary.

Most of all, I wish to thank the artists for making this such an exciting exhibition.

Rhonda Cooper
Gallery Director

CATHEY BILLIAN



Stopped Time, Sculpture
Center, NYC
Argon, projected and internal
light, and graphite patinaed
wood, 216 x 180 x 288"

"STOPPED TIME/silent occurrence"

MEDIA —

Deep space

Intervals: (physical) materials
(luminous) atmosphere

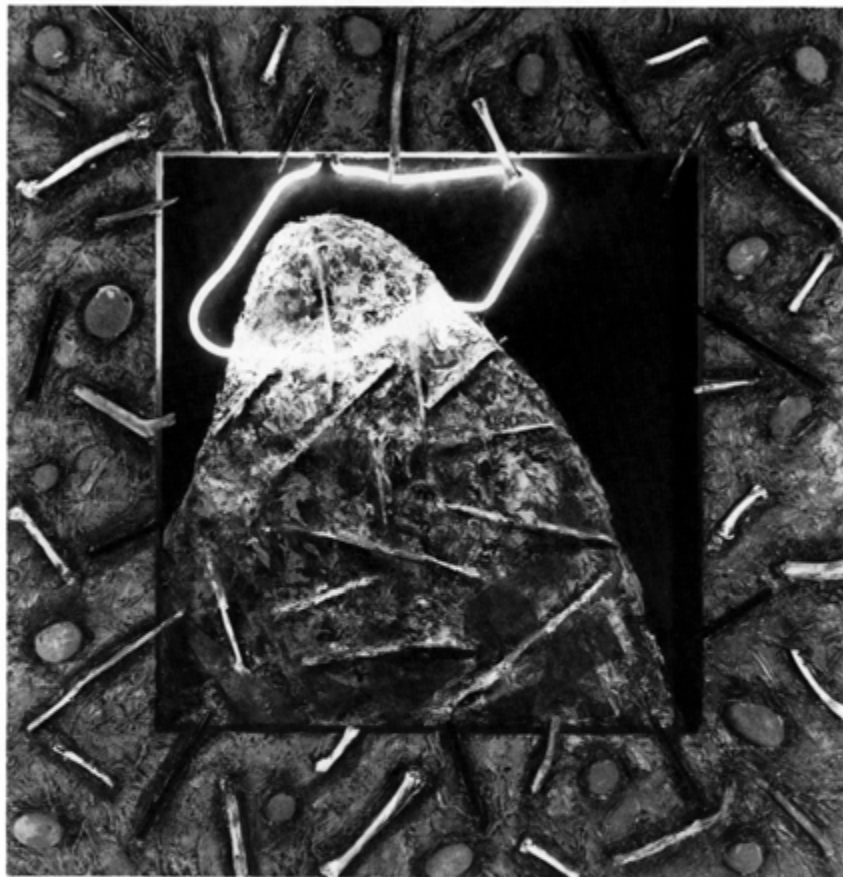
Antiquity, intercepted by technology

Spacial transition, a resonant bridge
a realm of future
a geographic site.

"of consequence to spirit.

*My concern is for the potential of light to converge fantasy, theatre, and
psychic event in luminous environments of and for daily life.*

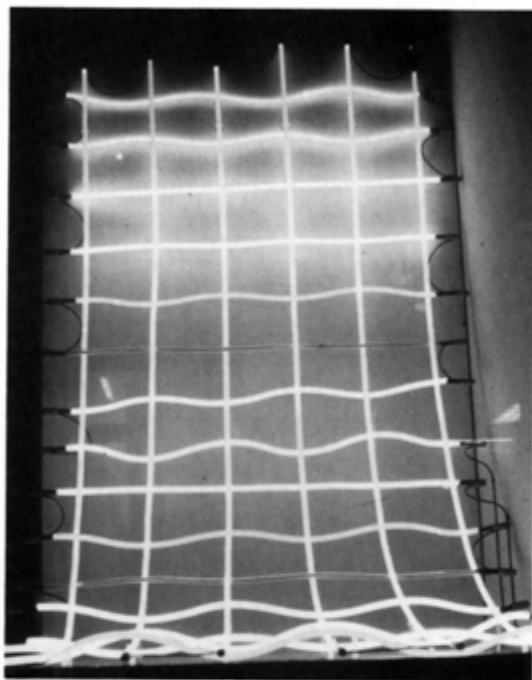
JANET EVANS



Soul Survivor, ©1988
Neon and mixed media on wood, 40 x 42 x 6"
Photo credit: Bill Kane
(not in exhibition)

*Essentially, my work deals with the notion of preserving something
sacred. Using neon with natural materials, I work to create a dynamic
balance and interactive unity between the carnal and the spiritual. Refer-
ences to sarcophagi, cocoons, and the inherited archetypes of prophet,
martyr, messiah, and saint all serve to inform the work with a sense of
enlightened grace and sublime transformation.*

CHRISTOPHER FREEMAN



Woven Light, 1989
Neon and argon mercury, 60 x 72 x 108"
Lent by the artist
Photo credit: © 1993 Chris
Freeman Designs
(not in exhibition)

Residing in Brooklyn, NY, with a background in traditional ceramics, I gravitated towards incorporating glass and light into my work while obtaining my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Alfred University.

Using light I am able to create a different and perhaps completely new way of looking at things that are familiar. One facet of my work is in the studio with controlled environments I create using clay and other materials. With 30" Ceramic Platters and 12" square Ceramic Tiles as a palette, I am able to expose textures and create moods with the light's intensity and colors. Another facet of my work is called "Guerilla Neon." These pieces are dealing with the same aspects of light, but in this case I work outdoors in an environment of my choice, without official permission, using light to again expose a new way of looking at something familiar. For example, I have lit a section of the stone wall surrounding Central Park on 5th Ave., a Pier of Bank St. and the West Side Highway, a section of the Sheeps Meadow in Central Park and a section of Battery Park.

DON JACOBSON



Parents' Piece, 1989 (detail)
Wood, plastic, aluminum, assorted metals,
neon, motors, timers, glass, plexi, and
colored transparency, 51 x 75 x 6"
Photo credit: D. Jacobson

We are constantly confronted by visual phenomena created by the juxtaposition of man-made materials and the environment. Science and technology allow me to recreate and (through the artistic process) to reinvent these phenomena, in turn causing the viewer to reconstruct ideas in new and different ways, through their own personal associations.

ROBIN KAHN



Who Cooked the Last Supper?!
Cook Supper, 1992
Neon and photo installation, 22 x 55"
Lent by the artist
Photo installation courtesy UNIFEM

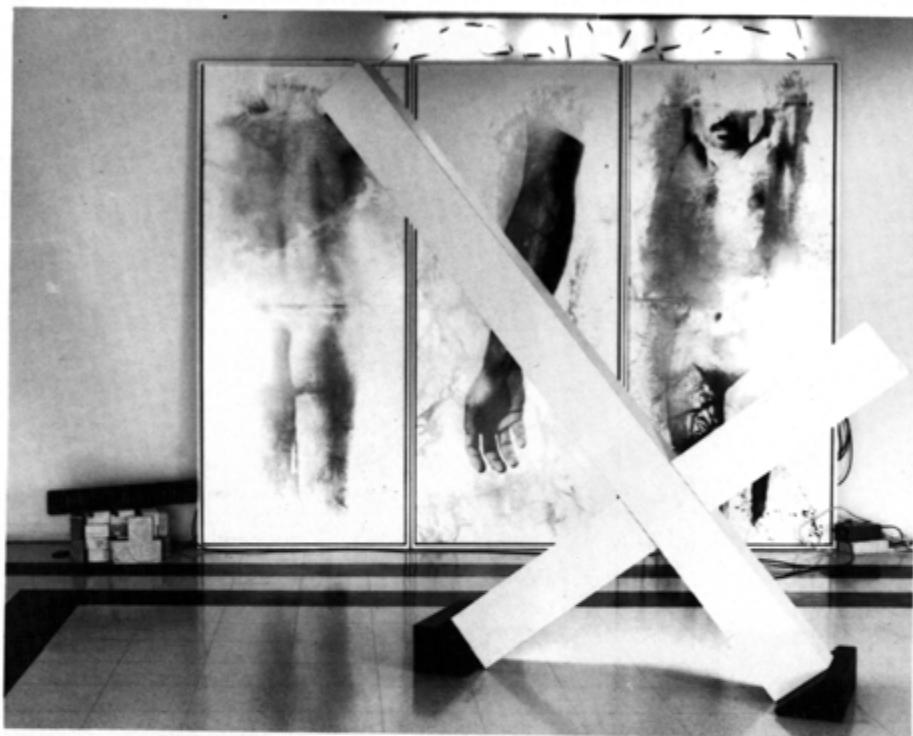
"Who Cooked the Last Supper?" comments on the absence of women from the records of major historic events. The medium of neon evokes the restaurant, the professional counterpart to the family kitchen. As the neon light blinks, it repeatedly rests on the command "Cook Supper" to which every woman is conditioned to respond and comply.

BILL KANE



Victory Series; Iron Bird, 1993
Wood, paint, and neon, 61 x 45 x 4½"
Lent by the artist

JOSEPH LEWIS III



H.I.V. What You Don't Know Can Kill You, 1989
Photography, neon, formica, fluorescent lights,
and LED, 144 x 168 x 46"
Courtesy Robert Berman Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

H.I.V. What you don't know will kill you: Get the facts!

*Primary Peoples, Colors, and Shapes Vanquished
By the Bald Eagle*, 1991:

The 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution states that there can be no indentured servitude or slavery within the United States or its protectorates unless you are deemed a criminal.

MICHAEL ROCCO PINCIOTTI



Temple of Time, © 1992
Neon and mixed media on wood, 30 x 30 x 8"
Lent by the artist
Photo credit: © 1992 Joan Glase

The use of neon in my work symbolizes an inner life in the form of radiant energy. The neonized temples and icons focus on the idea of man-made structures as revered objects reflecting the poetry of place within which this inner life may dwell.

In these holy and magical reliquaries, neon brings us into a place of comfort and meditation, while at the same time energizes us with its harmonious and electric glow.

Life, death, heavenly beings, and creation have all revolved around the concept of light. In a sense, without light, only our imaginations can see. With light, these inner visions and places can become a bright and visible luminescent reality.

CYNTHIA TECLER



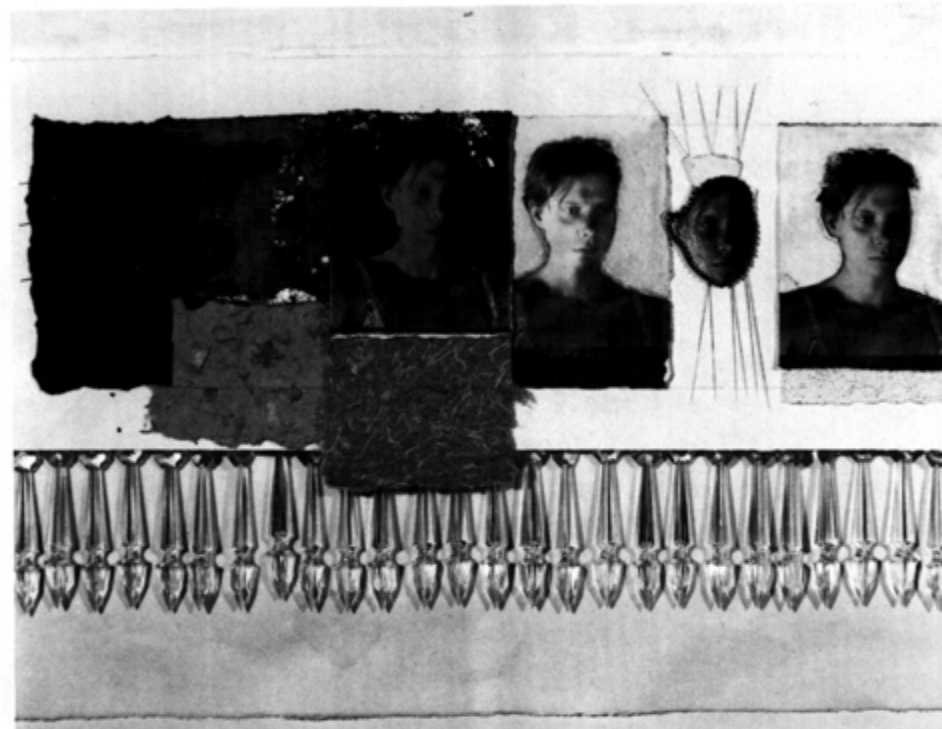
Doll Face, 1992
Neon, fabric, and resin with mixed
media, 66 x 48 x 18"
Lent by the artist

Fascinated with bright lights and flashing signs, I joined the power of the line and light quality of neon with fabric and other materials. The neon light passes through the transparent skin-like silk, exposing the insides of my forms, providing the feelings of life and strength to the piece.

In Doll Face, the notion of dolls as a metaphor for human beings accompanies the cutie-pie attitude given toward women as a supposed compliment. A bright smiling face looks out calling the viewer to see that she has become some creature that is not herself; resulting in a nightmare of centipede on attack, soft limbs reaching out but exposed, laughing.

Combining everyday experiences, personal history and memories, I have tried to manifest a more benevolent yet trepidated form of humor into my art; while questioning the effect the roles of childhood play and gender conditioning have on society.

AMY YOUNG



Self-Portrait, 1992
Cyanotype and mixed media, 12 x 16"
(not in exhibition)

I react to moments in relations, personalities, and publicly enforced rituals. My mixed media assemblages are not "straight" but always alternative processes. The physical conditions of media and processes are embodiments of the conceptual provocation I found in the originating issue. Handmade paper and familiar personal objects provide an imbeddedness similar to the matrix of memory. Fragments evoke a whole due to association to suggest but not enforce interpretations. The works admit reality is not something represented or captured but re-presented and constructed, while continuing to rely upon and explore the strength of the pictorial through association. I exploit the issues of self-consciousness and referentiality. I want aesthetics, realism and the artifice of construction to attract but expose their function as Brecht uses his open stage setting. I want the fusion of form with narrative, history with insight, and private with public to declare themselves more openly than the world admits.

University Art Gallery

**S T A L L E R
C E N T E R**

 **STONY
BROOK**