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Sculpting With Light: Contemporary Artists and Holography

A Magical Blend of Art and Science

Getty Museum

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According to Wikipedia, “holography is a technique that enables a wavefront to be recorded and later reconstructed. It is best known as a method of generating three-dimensional images, and has a wide range of other uses, including data storage, microscopy, and interferometry.” That holography has not been embraced by artists like many other new technologies should come as no surprise: it is cumbersome to both create and to view. Creating holograms necessitates lasers and mirrors and specifically placed objects in a controlled setting. Unlike a traditional photograph, once the image is captured it is not simply framed and hung on the wall but displayed with mirrors and lasers in dimly lit galleries.

Since the late 1960s, a number of artists across the globe (including Bruce Nauman and Salvador Dali) have experimented with holography. For whatever reason, it became more of a display spectacle than a viable art form. A hologram appeared on the cover of *National Geographic Magazine* in 1984, 1985 and 1988. Around that time, holograms also began to appear on credit cards.

But it was not until the C-Project (which ran from 1994-1998 and was overseen by Ron Mallroy and Matthew Schreiber), that other artists began to experiment with the process. On view at the Getty Museum, *Sculpting With Light: Contemporary Artists and Holography* is presented under the umbrella of *PST ART: Art & Science Collide*. Many of the holograms in the exhibition and in the Getty’s collection were donated by Guy and Nora Barron, the collectors who funded the original C-Project (“C” being the speed of light). Although 20 artists participated, just six are included in the Getty exhibition which features ideas for holograms as well as fully developed works by artists as diverse as John Baldessari, Louise Bourgeois, Chuck Close, Ann McCoy, Ed Ruscha and Dorothea Rockburne. The exhibit also includes two other artists currently working with holography: Deana Lawson and Matthew Schreiber.

Schreiber is both an artist and technician, having studied holography and then worked with the C-Project artists to develop their ideas and bring their projects to fruition. Schreiber’s own works are traditional holograms made with laser light that “reflects, diffracts, and interferes with subject matter.” On view are pieces from his “Bowie Series” started just after the musician’s death. These feature silhouetted hands against brightly colored interference patterns. His interests in the supernatural and illusion and how these ideas could be illustrated through holography led Schreiber to create a series of works about Lilydale, New York, a large spiritual community. These images emphasize the “otherness” of the medium.

When viewing holograms, once the “wow” factor has worn off and the vagaries of how to

position oneself to view the entirety of the image are understood, holograms can be appreciated and critiqued as viable works of art. In some ways, experiencing a hologram falls somewhere between watching a video and looking at a lenticular photograph. The pieces are static and dynamic at the same time. They encapsulate three-dimensions and appear to move, yet it is the viewer's movement in relation to the picture that "completes" the image.

The exhibition includes projects by a number of well-known artists. Chuck Close's holograms are close-up self-portraits. Rather than flatten his features into a two-dimensional plane, these show three-dimensions. When a viewer moves from side to side, Close's gaze appears to follow and track the viewer. Louise Bourgeois' holograms are small and delicate. They are dream-like and eerie, functioning like miniature, surreal stage-sets filled by objects with psychological resonance (including disembodied figures, chairs and beds). These scenarios are enmeshed in a pink-red glow, reminiscent of the color found in a traditional darkroom. Ed Ruscha is represented by a suite of holograms titled *The End*. These works reference early cinema and reproduce the flicker between frames and after the credits would roll. In some ways, they are like mini-movies as moving from side to side causes the picture to oscillate.

Deana Lawson began integrating holographic images into her photographs in 2020 while working with Matthew Schreiber. She was intrigued by "the multiple perspectives holograms provide when viewed from different angles in addition to the references to spiritual and mythical realms." In *Black Gold* (2021), she juxtaposes past and present. The present is a candid image of an African American man holding numerous gold chains. He is standing next to a black brick wall alongside a table filled with miscellaneous objects — perfume, a box with a microphone, etc. The holographic image is located as an insert behind the main figure at the back of the scene and appears as a backlit orange-green gradient. It features a different Black man in a lush garden holding a garden rake over one shoulder. While the date of this image within is unspecified, it appears to be historical and creates a relationship between then and now.

Since this is the first time The Getty is exhibiting its holographic holdings, *Sculpting With Light: Contemporary Artists and Holography* is a must see. It is well contextualized as part of *PST ART: Art & Science Collide*. The takeaway is that holograms are a magical blend of art and science, yet as artworks, they do not always transcend their technical complexities. The works on view remain enigmas, albeit beautiful, complex and compelling, but more challenging than satisfying as works of art.

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