

Art News

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Mary Corse, Ace Contemporary

By Peter Clothier

For more than 30 years, Mary Corse has been investigating the phenomenon of light in essentially monochromatic paintings—in blacks and whites and shimmering shades of gray and silver. This recent survey was a moving tribute to her achievement.

Beginning with her glowing light boxes and her geometrically shaped canvases with pure white fields from the mid-1960s, the exhibition traced Corse's relentless pursuit of the evocation of pure light and space on a two-dimensional surface through the 1990s. Ace's vast gallery spaces served her well, permitting the exploration of several phases of the work in discrete environments. One area was dedicated to the "Black Earth" series of the late 1970s—large abutting panels of glazed ceramic whose uneven surfaces evoke dark moonscapes. Other rooms held the hue, stunning "Black Light Paintings" from the same period, in which black metallic squares were added to the paint, creating glittering galaxies. Still other rooms were used to display the continuing series, "White Light Paintings." In these, white paint is mixed with glass microsphere to create a satiny sheen, filling the canvas with gleaming, washy grids, or applied in broad bands against a matte white background.

Because of their size, the canvases need to be experienced by walking past them. As a result, our movement defines our experience of the canvases at each moment. The most recent paintings, as large as 34 feet in length and 10 feet in height, offer wide doorways, or arches, for our consideration of their darkness or brilliance. Corse's surfaces, at once immensely powerful and surprisingly delicate in their detail, are capable of suggesting the purity of both light and darkness.