Light and Space: Stephen Hendee

by Rebecca Dimling Cochran

For the past seven years, New Jersey-based artist Stephen Hendee has filled galleries and nonprofit spaces across the country with his fantastical architectural installations. These unusual environments have been compared to sci-fi movie sets, Modernist architecture, outer-space modules, and even internal organs. While none of these comparisons fully describe Hendee's work, each tries to explain the visual appearance of his installations while characterizing the physical experience of their space.

Hendee's most successful projects totally surround viewers with cave- or tunnel-like constructions that obscure the surrounding architecture. The fabricated walls and ceilings are broken into panels of geometric shapes—squares, rectangles, hexagons, and triangles—delineated by black lines. These seemingly familiar elements are purposefully arranged in unnatural ways: the panels jut forward and recede, rarely meeting at a 90-degree angle, and the dark lines imitate a grid pattern that is never quite resolved. In this way, Hendee puts view-

ers on edge, so that their senses are more attuned to the space around them.

Though labor intensive, Hendee's environments use a minimal number of materials. He begins with a wooden armature that he faces with a translucent skin of foam board or corrugated plastic. He uses either a heavy black tape or a less intrusive black glue to connect the sheets. Behind this skin he places lights, which he sometimes covers with colored gels. These simple materials enable Hendee to create strikingly different works that derive from individual conceptual narratives often inspired by the location of the project or a particular novel or song. From each theme Hendee extracts an emotion, which he then tries to evoke in his environments by controlling the relationship of the human body to the space and manipulating the psychological effects of color.

Hendee has learned a great deal from the way that James Turrell and Dan Flavin use light to define an architectural space. Yet, while these artists depend on an immediate confrontation with light, Hendee concentrates on translucency. Alternating the type of light he uses (fluorescent, incandescent, or halogen), as well as the surface material (foam board or the more transparent corrugated plastic), he is able to control the quality of the light passing through. So when he adds color in the form of gels, he has a diverse range of possibilities at his fingertips.

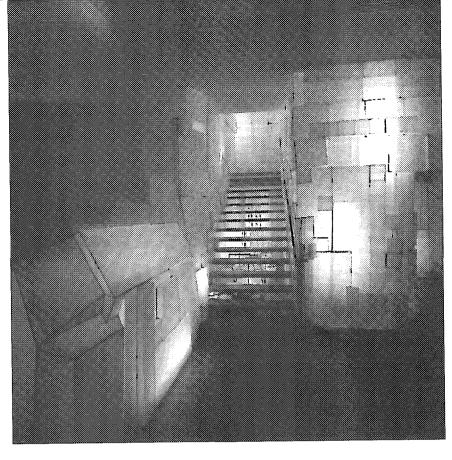
For example, in Black Ice, an installation at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, Hendee used foam board, black tape, and red lights. As the light passed through the foam board, it produced a diffuse monochromatic glow that was heightened by the contrast of the thick black lines. The space was warm, enveloping, almost womb-like. Ascension, at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, had a completely different feel. Hendee used the more transparent corrugated plastic so that the lights were much more localized. He alternated the colored gels, using the shift in tones to accentuate the multi-faceted surfaces. The change was gradual, with pastel pinks, yellows, greens, and blues creating a lighthearted, almost ethereal passage as one journeyed up the stairwell.

Hendee's manipulation of physical space plays hand in hand with the light. Some areas have low ceilings and narrow walls to create a sense of discomfort; other areas are voluminous, suggesting a more spiritual atmosphere. Whatever emotion Hendee wishes to create, he achieves it in large part using the existing architecture of each sitespecific piece.

For example, *Presence Control* at the Laguna Art Museum in California was designed around the notion of temporality, particularly as it relates to human habitation in an area known for earthquakes. Using an existing hole in the floor, Hendee created an installation that could be experienced from two levels of the museum. From the top, the view revealed the underlying structure of the work, giving the appearance of something under construction. In the installation itself, the perception shifted.

Black Ice, 2000. Foam board, gaffer tape, wood, fluorescent lights, and gels, view of installation at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.





Above and below left: Ascension, 2003. Polypropylene, black glue, fluorescent lights, and gels, two views of installation at the Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama. Below right: Presence Control, 2000. Foam board, gaffer tape, wood, mixed lights, and gels, view of installation at the Laguna Art Museum, California.

Monumental light boxes that looked like large building blocks leaned against one another, as if viewers were somehow walking through a building that had collapsed in on itself.

In *Iron Skies*, at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Syracuse University, Hendee responded to the oppressively cold gray winters of upstate New York. Two cramped tunnels with very low ceilings led viewers

to a large empty space. Although one expected to feel relief in the wide open chamber, there was none. Using the black tape as both structural adhesive and drawing tool, Hendee covered the surfaces with dark lines, which echoed the gloomy buildings and leafless branches of the surrounding area.

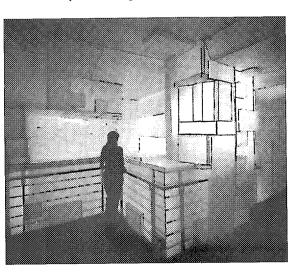
This fusion of drawing, architecture, and sculpture is what makes Hendee's work so encompassing. The visual play

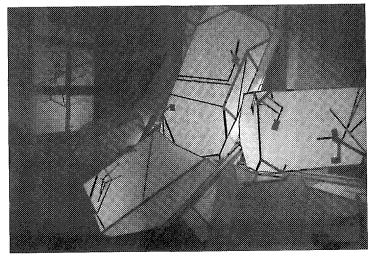
of the lines, the psychological effect of the light, the physical experience of navigating the space, and in one instance, the inclusion of sound all work to create a multi-sensory experience for the viewer. For the artist, the fusion also makes working in this arena difficult: his site-specific works are destroyed at the end of each exhibition.

Hendee uses the same materials to create freestanding sculptures. Some climb up the walls, some dangle from the ceiling. Others bump and roll over a flight of stairs. Some are permanent commissions; others can be disassembled and re-configured in different locations. Hendee's imagination finds inspiration in virtually any location. But these efforts often seem less successful because, in most instances, Hendee cannot control the exterior conditions. The amount of ambient light hitting the surface of his works proportionally affects the density of the color he is able to create. When the light does not read well, the overall piece is not as strong.

Hendee remains open to new ideas and continues to experiment. With each piece, he learns additional ways to manipulate the materials to create the effect he desires. This sense of exploration makes visiting each new work a different experience and makes the future of this artist look so intriguing.

Rebecca Dimling Cochran is a writer living in Atlanta.





TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT: MARK GOOCH



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Light and Space: Stephen Hendee

SOURCE: Sculpture 23 no9 N 2004

WN: 0431500727014

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher: http://www.sculpture.org

Copyright 1982-2004 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.