

GALERIE MITTERRAND

KEITH SONNIER

FILES, SHIELDS AND NEONS

23 JAN > 21 MAR 2020

PRESS RELEASE

OPENING ON THURSDAY 23 JANUARY

Galerie Mitterrand is delighted to announce a new exhibition from American artist Keith Sonnier. The exhibition, entitled *Files, Shields and Neons*, will take place from 24 January to 21 March 2020, bringing together both early and more recent works, completed by the artist between 1968 and 2005.

Keith Sonnier is a post-minimalist American artist who began his career in New York City in the 1960s, alongside other artists from Rutgers University. Sonnier redefined sculpture by using materials and techniques that were previously restricted to the hardware store. Although he may share some of the ideas of anti-illusionist sculpture with Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, or Sol LeWitt, his works have always offered a more narrative and literary aspect than those of minimalists. Early in his career, Sonnier worked with a wide variety of materials such as latex, fabric, and found objects to create sculptures which had an ephemeral and transitory quality. Starting in 1968, he was among the first artists to explore the effect of incorporating light in his work. Initially using light bulbs (incandescent light) and introducing arched neon that wrapped around the bulbs, he began creating a dialogue between architecture, environment, and lines drawn in space.

For this new exhibition dedicated to Keith Sonnier's work, Galerie Mitterrand, who has represented Sonnier since 2008, is showing seven wall sculptures from the *Files, Shields, and Neon Wrapping Incandescent Series*. The works *Veiled File I* (1968) and *Flocked File* (1968) belong to the *File* series that Keith Sonnier began in 1966, before he became known for his use of light. From the starting point of a cardboard nail file wrapped in string in 1966 (*Small File Study*), he produced many versions of this simple form, sometimes recognizable but at times veiled, hidden, disguised, covered, or even stuffed. With these works, deliberately created with limited resources, the artist experimented with the tactile and sensual implications of surface, manually coating, wrapping, or filling.

Keith Sonnier says of the origin of this series: "*The idea of isolating an object in this way made me think about redefining the shape by wrapping it, kind of like adding drawing on top of it, but essentially wrapping it like a mummy. Then other ways of developing the work for the File series came after that. Things were layered. Things were stuffed. Things were filled. Touch, as opposed to concept, was crucial.*"¹

With *Neon Wrapping Incandescent I* (1970), the artist entered a more emblematic and expressionist period with works that incorporated light bulbs, as well as his famous curved neon tubes. In these pieces, whose titles quite simply describe the materials and the actions involved, Keith Sonnier's lines, arches, and upstrokes reflect the sensual, or even sexual, element of his work.

Three more recent works from the *Botswana Junction and Elliptical Shields Series* complete this overview of Keith Sonnier's work. *Botswana Junction I*, *Botswana Junction II* and *Elliptical Shield Extended Arm* (all completed in 2005) were inspired by the artist's interest in Africa in general, and in tribal shields in particular, whose elongated forms are replicated in these works. Since the start of his career, Keith Sonnier has been interested in the primitive arts of Africa and Asia. His appropriation and integration of these forms contributes to blurring the line between minimal and primitive art.

Keith Sonnier was born in 1941 in Mamou, Louisiana, in the United States. He lives and works in New York. Since the 1980s, he has received some twenty public commissions. His work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, notably at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, in 1979; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, in 1989; at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2003; and more recently at MAMAC, Nice, 2015 and at the Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York, 2018. His works are included in the collections at the Whitney Museum of American Art and MoMA in New York, the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, and the MOCA in Los Angeles, among others.

¹ Keith Sonnier, interview by Barbara Bertozzi Castelli in *Keith Sonnier: Files*, (New York: Leo Castelli, 2011).

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