

Larry Bell

Smoke On The Bottom

28 April – 18 June 2017

South Galleries, Bermondsey

White Cube is pleased to present an exhibition by Larry Bell in the South Galleries at Bermondsey. This exhibition brings together works from Bell's extensive career, from early paintings and works on paper to recent collages, centring on the large-scale installation *6 x 6 An Improvisation* (1989-2014), Bell's largest standing wall work to date.

Since 1968, Bell has been developing his series of freestanding glass wall sculptures in varying scales and configurations. *6 x 6 An Improvisation* is the culmination of this series. First shown at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas in 2014, it consists of 40 panels, each measuring 72 x 72 inches or approximately 6ft square, a measurement relational to the artist's own height. Bell has reconfigured the panels for White Cube Bermondsey, creating what he terms an 'Improvisation', combining clear glass, grey glass and glass coated with Inconel (a nickel/chrome alloy) which results in it becoming, to variable degrees, reflective. Arranged in right angle pairs, some that are inverted or doubled up, the sculpture forms a labyrinthine series of spaces that reflect and refract the interior architecture of the gallery. Highly dramatic and visually complex, *6 x 6 An Improvisation* subverts the viewer's spatial comprehension through a layered convergence of hues and densities, while maintaining an illusion of volume.

Commenting on the series of freestanding wall works as a whole, Bell has said:

'In some cases, it's highly reflective where the glass parts come together; in others it is highly reflective where the glass touches the floor, and so on. And I like the idea of being able to just combine these things so they'd stand up, since the parts were all the same size. They balance in the weight of their own vertical thrust, and are anchored to the floor with glue, and equally bound together by glue. So they hold each other up, and I could change it any way I want. So there was a lot of versatility. That gives a certain kind of symmetry to the relationship of the reflective coatings to each other. I'm trying to say that symmetry comes from the relationship of the distance between the parts being half the width of the part.'

Two early paintings by Bell from 1960 vividly show similar preoccupations with geometry and perspective. In *My Montauk* (1960), acrylic is applied opaquely onto canvas to create a monochromatic abstraction where a black rectangle is set against a white background which appears to have been clipped at its opposing corners. During the '60s, Bell produced several shaped canvases that drew attention to the painting's status as an object. Similarly, in *Untitled* (1960), two triangular shapes are masked out from a vivid orange background, meeting point to point in the centre of the canvas, thereby suggesting an isometric projection of a three dimensional form.

Bell's large-scale 'vapour drawings' employ the same coating process that the artist uses for his installations in glass. In these drawings, thin layers of aluminium and quartz are vaporised onto the paper surface in variable thicknesses to build up an image using alternating bands of gradients and optical effects. Some of these processes create dark, semi-reflective areas that enhance the sense of volume, while in others, they create abstract and minimal forms that divide the ground vertically, or with a curve-like shape that runs from top to bottom. In a series of 'Ellipse' works from the 1980s, a central oval shape appears to float or form a portal within

the composition; for instance, in MEL 39 (1984) or MEL 35 (1984), the varying application of coatings create a rainbow-like pattern of refracted light and optical play. In the 'HFBK' works from late 1970s, strips of aluminium coated with silicon monoxide on black paper create horizontal banded patterned compositions that appear to run over, beyond the paper's limits. In MSHFBK 26 and MSHFBK 9A (both from 1978), the bands are curved, creating the effect of a strict but distorted geometric composition that appears to be receding or fading away. Also included in the exhibition is a series of 11 new, large 'Church Studies': densely layered collages that combine various papers and films, overlaid by fencing grids and props that undergo a coating process in Bell's vacuum thermal evaporation machine, which he has used since the mid-60s. Verging on abstraction, some of these collages suggest a female torso or, equally, the curvaceous shape of a guitar, inspired by the collection of acoustic guitars that Bell regularly plays. Bell returns to this curvilinear and undulating form throughout the 'Church Studies', fusing a range of vivid colours, textures and alchemical intonations that are absorbed onto the dense black Arches or red Japanese Kozo paper that he uses.