

Elusive signs: Bruce Nauman works with light.

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Elusive Signs: Bruce Nauman Works with Light

January 28 - April 9, 2006

Bruce Nauman deals with the big questions of life, in the words of his 1983 neon: *Life, Death, Love, Hate, Pleasure, Pain*. Nauman's work focuses on the essential elements of the human experience. *Elusive Signs: Bruce Nauman Works with Light*, premiering at the Milwaukee Art Museum January 28 - April 9, 2006 is Nauman's first solo exhibition in Wisconsin, the state in which he was raised. Bruce Nauman has been recognized since the early 1970s as one of America's most innovative and provocative contemporary artists. (right: Bruce Nauman, *Life, Death, Love, Hate, Pleasure, Pain* (1983), Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Gerald S. Elliott Collection)

Bruce Nauman works in diverse media; this exhibition focuses solely on light. Light offered Nauman a medium that has the quality of being both elusive and effervescent while aggressively pervading an environment with its message. Nauman's art is motivated by ideas, not an attachment to a particular medium. Through the use of neon signs, a public and familiar means of communication to relate an idea, Nauman's goal is to make the viewer think. *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman noted, "he inspires reverence, or loathing...It's hard to feel indifferent to work like

his."

"This exhibition is all about the visitor's experience," said Joseph D. Ketner II, Milwaukee Art Museum chief curator and curator of the exhibition. "Visitors will walk into a darkened gallery full of neon signs and fluorescent light environments. They'll experience a disorientation of light and space, just as Nauman intended."

The exhibition is divided into three sections, split by two fluorescent light environments (a room and a corridor). The sections are: early neons based on identity, word game neons and figurative neons. There are approximately 15 works in the exhibition.

The first section in the exhibition features Nauman's early neons on the subject of identity. Working in his first professional studio, the neon beer signs in the shop fronts of his San Francisco neighborhood intrigued Nauman, who became determined to subvert the commercial purpose of the advertisements. In response, the artist created *Window or Wall Sign* (1967) and hung it in the window of his storefront studio. With this piece he sought to achieve "an art that would kind of disappear -- an art that was supposed to not quite look like art." Nauman then embarked on a series of neons that grapple with questions of identity. Interested in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and building upon his early performance works, the artist produced *Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten-Inch Intervals* (1966) as an innovative exercise in portraiture as sculpture. With *My Name As Though It Were Written on the Surface of the Moon* (1968) he forces the viewer to contemplate a signature as the object

of art.

Two fluorescent light environments divide the exhibition's three sections. The rooms force the viewer into tight or oblique spaces with harsh lighting effects that heighten the perception of space. The two works are the *Helman Gallery*

Parallelogram (1971), a green fluorescent light room, and the *Corridor with Mirror and White Lights* (1971), through which the viewer must pass, providing spatial counterpoints to the neon signs. (right: Bruce Nauman, *Five Marching Men*, 1985. Friedrich Christian Flick Collection. Photo: Roman Maerz, Berlin)

Language, signs and symbols make up the second section. Nauman's work in neon during the 1970s emphasizes the neon as a sign, presenting provocative twists of language. He was acutely aware of the confrontational potential of neon when exhibited in a museum or gallery and offered harsh and humorous socio-political commentary in such pieces as *Raw War* (1970) and *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear* (1972). This series culminates in the monumental, billboard-scaled *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984). His largest and most complex piece neon, Nauman employs overwhelming scale to bombard the viewer with sardonic aphorisms.

In the third and final section of the exhibition, Nauman explores the pictographic potential of the medium for image-based signs. *Hanged Man* (1985) makes a playful reference to the children's word game while providing a biting criticism of human rights abuses then in South America and Southeast Asia. With these neons, Nauman acknowledges the great power of images to convey ideas.

Wisconsin Connection

Bruce Nauman was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1941. He grew up in Milwaukee and graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1964. His father worked for General Electric and the family moved often. Some of his family still lives in Wisconsin. Bruce Nauman currently lives in New Mexico.

MAM and Contemporary Art

The Milwaukee Art Museum has over a century-long tradition of originating important contemporary art exhibitions including *Henry O. Tanner* (1913), *The Modern Spirit* (1914), *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy Photographs* (1931), *Pop Art: The American Tradition* (1965), *Light/Motion/Space* (1969), *New Figuration from Europe and New Figuration in America* (1982), *Warhol/Beuys/Polke* (1987), *Word As Image* (1990), and *Identity Crisis: Self-Portraiture at the End of the Century* (1997). Bruce Nauman is a significant addition to this list.

Catalogue

A 96-page catalogue accompanies the exhibition, with images of 75 Nauman works. In incisive essays, Joseph Ketner II, chief curator of the Milwaukee Art Museum, Janet Kraynak, a New York based art historian, and critic Gregory Volk analyze and interpret these works in light.

Organization & Tour

The exhibition is organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum's new chief curator Joseph D. Ketner II. The exhibition is sponsored by Carlene and Andy Ziegler. After its debut at the Milwaukee Art Museum, *Elusive Signs* travels to Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana (2006); Museum of Contemporary Art, N. Miami (2006); Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington (2007); Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal (2007); Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Victoria (2007); and Queensland Art Gallery, Australia (2008).

Editor's note: *RL* readers may also enjoy

- [The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain: Selected Works from the di Rosa Preserve: Art & Nature \(6/22/05\)](#)
- [The Lighter Side of Bay Area Figuration \(5/4/00\)](#)
- [SITE Santa Fe and Museum of Fine Arts \(6/1/97\)](#)

and from other web sites:

- PBS's two-season television series [Art-21, Art in the Twenty-First Century](#) welcome page explains that the series is "the only series on television to focus exclusively on contemporary visual art and artists in the United States, and it uses the medium of television to provide an experience of the visual arts that goes far beyond a gallery visit. Fascinating and intimate footage allows the viewer to observe the artists at work, watch their process as they transform inspiration into art, and hear their thoughts as they grapple with the physical and visual challenges of achieving their artistic visions." The *Art-21* web site contains video clips relating to each of the many featured artists including [Laurie Anderson](#), [Margaret Kilgallen](#), [Sally Mann](#), [Bruce Nauman](#), [Raymond Pettibon](#), [Martin Puryear](#), [Collier Schorr](#), [Kiki Smith](#), [William Wegman](#) and [Fred Wilson](#).

The Art:21 series and its companion materials answer the following questions: who are today's artists?; what are they thinking about?; how do they describe their work? and why do they do what they do? The Season One and Two home videos are two sets with four hours each. Viewers meet "a diverse group of contemporary artists through revealing profiles that take viewers behind the scenes-into artists' studios, homes, and communities -- to provide an intimate view of their lives, work, sources of inspiration, and creative processes." Representational as well as abstract artists are featured in the videos. The Emmy nominated Season One video set features 21 artists and is divided into four general themes spanning four hours on two separate tapes. Season Two of the series features 16 engaging artists and is divided into four general themes spanning four hours on two tapes.

- The [Internet Archive](#) offers [The True Artist](#), filmed in 2004 showing the art of Bruce Nauman
- [Bruce Nauman Online](#) from Artcyclopedia.com
- [Bruce Nauman](#) from Video Data Bank
- an [essay](#) by Lynne Cooke provided by the Dia Art Foundation

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