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Rediscovered, Aged 72

Market Analysis—Mary Corse



Mary Corse at her studio in Topanga Canyon, CA. Photo credit: Joao Canziani. Courtesy Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles

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This is the story of how an acclaimed avant-garde artist quietly faded from view before being rediscovered aged 72, after decades without attention or interest from the art world or market.

For Californian artist Mary Corse, who is the subject of two major New York exhibitions and several international gallery shows this year, the recent recognition “is great. I am getting a lot of work done and I have a brand new studio. I can order frames whenever I want, or hire assistants, so I’m happy.”

The market is playing catch up, particularly for the earlier works. Just last week at Tefaf New York Spring, [Lisson Gallery](#) sold *Untitled (Black Ceramic)*, two fired clay tiles from 1983, for \$450,000 while at Frieze New York, [Kayne Griffin Corcoran](#) sold two works from the “White Light Band” series: one from the early 1990s (84” x 56”) for \$400,000 and a smaller work (36” x 36”) from the late 1980s for \$200,000.



Mary Corse, *Untitled (Black Ceramic)* (1983) © Mary Corse; Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London; Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles; and Lehmann Maupin, New York

Capturing light

Corse has been fixated with imbuing art with light since she was a student in the 1960s, a quest that has caused her to study quantum physics as well as pioneer new forms and media in art-making. Regardless, she has never been the subject of a major solo show—until now.

“It is kind of confounding that we were not aware of her work,” says Jessica Morgan, the director of Dia, which recently acquired four major paintings by Corse that will go on show as part of a [long-term installation](#) of her work at [Dia: Beacon](#) this month.

Morgan first came across Corse’s work in a 2011 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego that was part of the California-county wide exhibition, [Pacific Standard Time](#), entitled “[Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface](#)”.

The presentation also caught the attention of Kim Conaty, the Steven and Ann Ames curator of drawings and prints at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), which will open a solo exhibition focusing on Corse’s work next month (“[Mary Corse: A Survey in Light](#), 8 June until 25 November). “That was when I really realized how important she is,” Conaty says. “I couldn’t believe I hadn’t really studied her or been aware of her practice.”

Singular vision

While Corse's work has, for decades, been in the permanent collections of museums including the [Guggenheim](#), [LACMA](#) and the [Menil Collection](#) she nonetheless was a peripheral figure. "She was not only overlooked in America but completely unknown in Europe," says Alex Logsdail, executive director of Lisson Gallery, which is currently showing new and old work by Corse in London (until 23 June).

"There is a very real need to look back and recognize that this was an artist working concurrently with many people who became incredibly famous, and the work is equally good," Logsdail says. "There is no real, rational reason why this work would be excluded from the canon."

Corse's work is too much about painting to neatly fit neatly into the Light and Space movement with which she is often associated; too gestural to be categorized as Minimalist. "I appreciate all of those movements, but they don't have anything to do with why I paint anything," she says. "I just keep doing my work."

What is astonishing is how focused Corse's artistic vision has been since the beginning of her practice. "She never wanted to paint light. She wants light to be *in* the painting," Conaty says. This makes her work difficult to reproduce. "If you are a curator and you have not seen the work in person, then often what you will see is a white square," Conaty says. "The *experience* of the works is critical to thinking about how they might find a place in a collection."



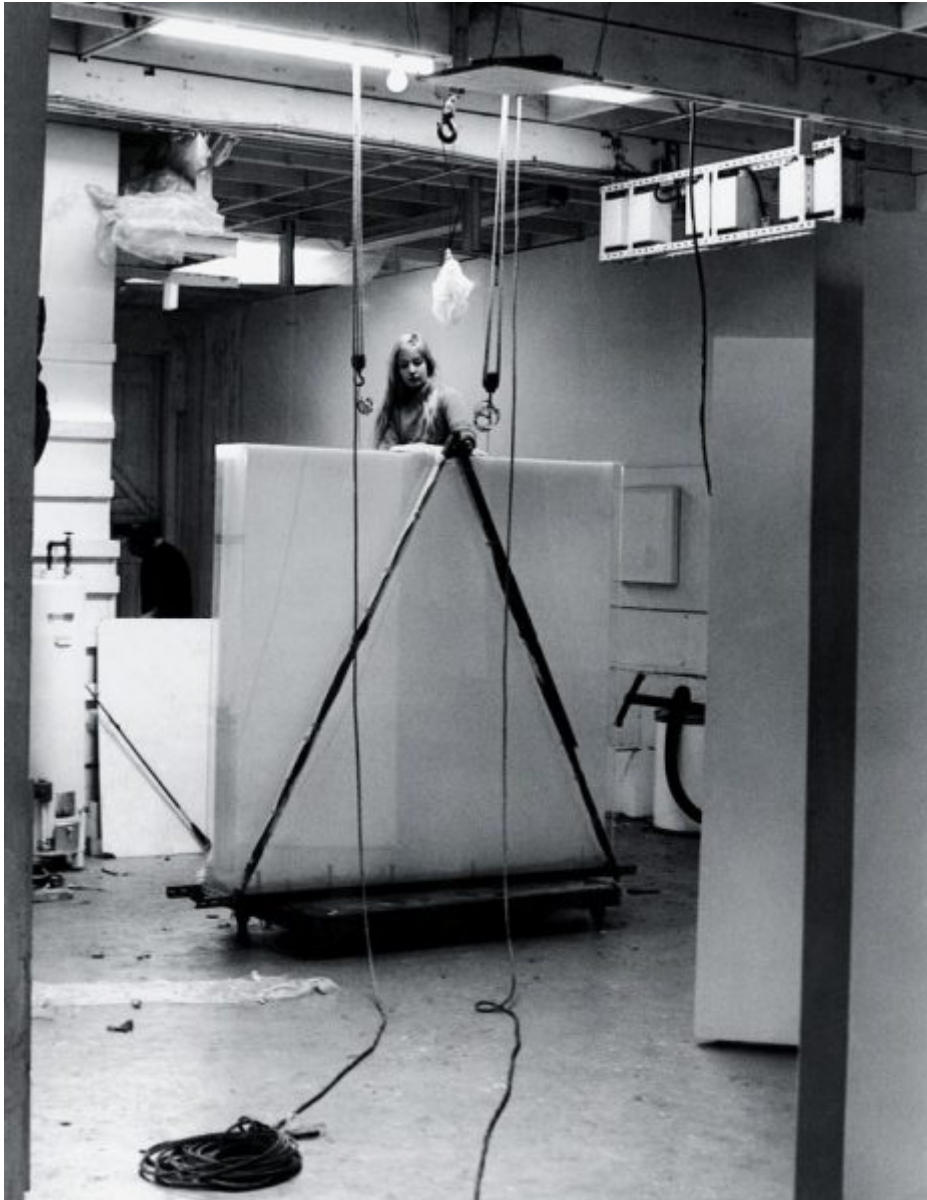
Mary Corse, *Untitled (White Multiple Inner Band)* (2003). Courtesy Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles, Lehmann Maupin, New York; and Lisson Gallery, London. Photo © Mary Corse

Time is another reality

Each encounter with a work by Corse is different: take a step in any direction and your perception of the object will shift. Walk across one of the larger paintings—and Corse works often works on a very large scale—and, as the light refracts, the work will change before your eyes. "When a person is standing at one end of a 42-foot painting, it should be a totally different experience than standing at the other end," Corse says. "The size forces you to walk around, which brings in the element of time—and time is another reality."

"Your position creates your perception. I have managed to get it so that a painting can contain some reality—but a non-linear reality. I like that a painting cannot be static," Corse says. "I like that paintings can express that part of our reality: the mirage, the ambiguity we all live, where it's not always clear whether things exist or not."

It is "the ideal work for us to show in Dia: Beacon", says Morgan, who has been focused on bringing attention to overlooked artists that might fit within Dia's collection since becoming director. "It has been incredible to see how different each work looks depending on where and how it is placed—the movement of light looks like water moving across the surface."



Mary Corse with *Untitled* (1967). Courtesy the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles

Charting a career

“Mary works in a linear fashion” says Amy Cosier, senior director at [Lehmann Maupin](#), which has been working with the artist since 2011. “Her process is intuitive and each work arises from questions in the work before it. Her artistic maturity came very young—it’s quite extraordinary how consistently she has been working with her chosen medium.”

Four of the major moments in Corse’s career to date will be charted in the Whitney exhibition. She had a highly developed studio practice when still a student at the [Chouinard Art Institute](#) in the 1960s: “She was making advanced shaped paintings and sculpture, experimenting with Plexiglas, screenprints and electric light boxes,” Conaty says. “We felt it was important to introduce her work so people realize she didn’t just land on this idea of painting large monochromes with glass microspheres, but there she is someone who was trying out all kinds of things.”

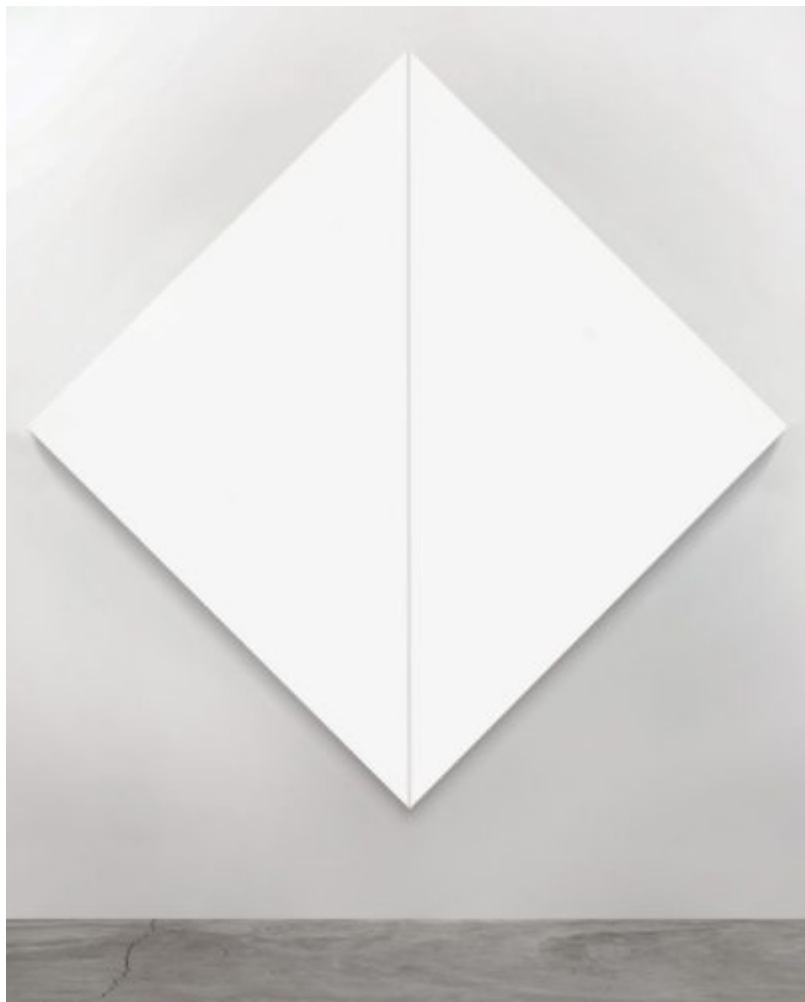
The microsphere works are what Corse is best known for—paintings in which she embeds glass microspheres, a reflective material used in road markings, in order to give the work a light and life of its own. There will be a “jewel of a room” in the Whitney exhibition, focusing on the first “White Light” paintings Corse made in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The exhibition will then take two paths, tracking Corse’s move from painting “White Light” works in grids towards the “Inner Band” works she began making in the 1990s — a band which illuminates or recedes, depending on the viewer’s vantage point.

It will also focus on her use of black, which has become an important part of her work—finding ways to deal with color without always using black paint, such as the “Black Earth” series—rocks that she cast in clay to create surface ripples that reflect light, before firing. “There is an expansiveness and open-mindedness to her practice that I hope we can suggest in the show,” Conaty says.

Invisible at auction

Corse barely features in auction records. Since 1999 there have only been 40 works sold at auction, selling on average for a mere \$771. On the private market, works range in price from \$100,000 to above \$500,000 for larger, earlier paintings, dealers say. “I’d say prices have gone up an average of 50% over the past eight years,” says David Maupin, co-founder of Lehmann Maupin.

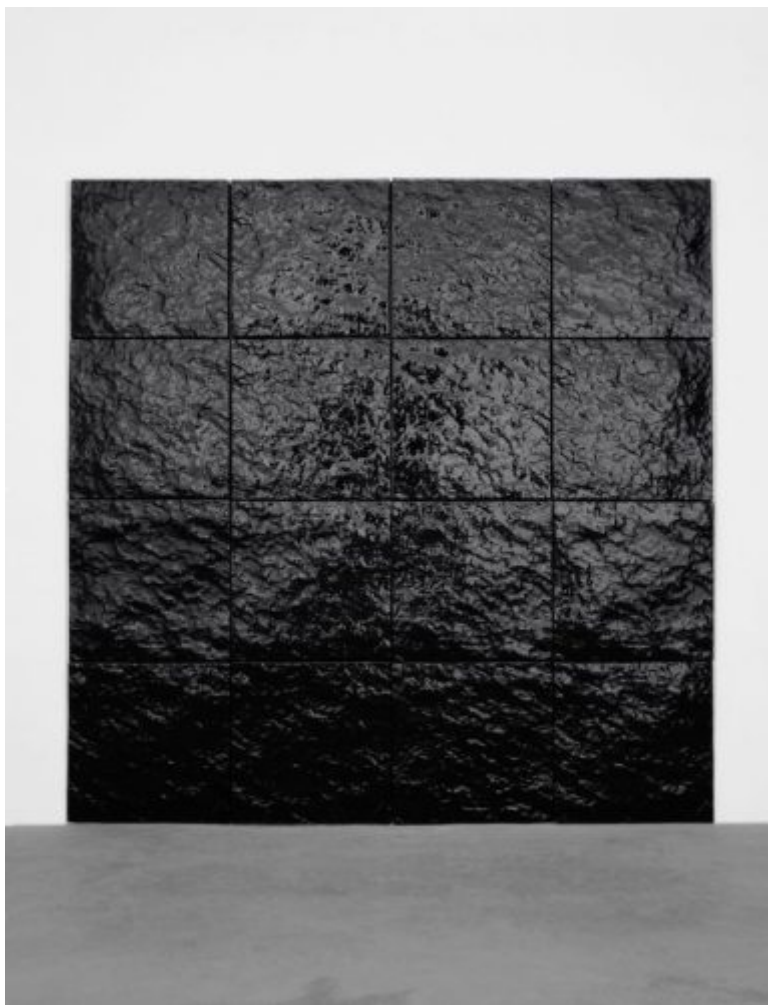


Mary Corse, *Untitled (White Diamond, Negative Stripe)* (1965). Collection of Michael Straus. Photo © Mary Corse

Corse’s name has been on Maupin’s radar since he was an art history student at [Berkeley](#). Since working with the artist, his priority has been to reposition her work: “It’s about showing her in the context of other artists; working with museums and trustees to show her work properly so it’s seen and reevaluated; and working with curators in order to schedule museum shows.”

Demand is principally focused on earlier works, and prices are dependent on size and condition—especially for the monochromatic works which tend to show wear more than busier, brighter works. “There were a number of decades in which the work wasn’t really selling for big numbers or to a huge mailing list, so now there’s a demand for work in great condition,” says Bill Griffin, director of Kayne Griffin Corcoran—which began representing Corse after the artist [James Turrell](#) insisted on the importance of her work. “Artists can point you in the direction of other great artists, and James has always championed her work,” Griffin says.

Limited access



Mary Corse, *Untitled (Black Earth Series)* (1978) © Mary Corse. Courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles

“It is confounding that we were not aware of Mary’s work,” Morgan says. “But, alas, that is the case with many artists—especially women.” Corse’s career stalled for several reasons. “Access to her work was limited for a number of reasons,” Griffin says. “She was working out West at a time when few people were paying attention; there was a gender bias; she has lived for a long time in Topanga Canyon—really in the wilderness.” Equally, Corse was adjacent to several major movements but not really part of any: she has plowed her own furrow.

Poor career management was another major factor. She was part of the [Richard Bellamy](#) stable in New York for a period of time, a dealer known both for his eye and for his finances (“I think he wanted his artists to suffer,” Corse told ARTnews in an [interview](#) last year).

More tumult came when Corse filed a motion for the return of works of art she made before 1980 from Ace Gallery, which had in 2013 filed a complicated bankruptcy case, as reported in the [New York Times](#).

Now, three galleries now share representation of Corse—Lehmann Maupin since 2011; Kayne Griffin Corcoran since 2016; and Lisson Gallery since November last year. This is bringing her more opportunities not only to sell work but to show it—including projects she conceived decades ago such as *The Cold Room*, which she first imagined in the late 1960s but only installed last year at Kayne Griffin Corcoran. It is a light box suspended in a room in which the temperature is just above freezing: human senses are heightened in the cold, and Corse wanted to test the effect of that on the viewer’s perception.

For Corse, the renewed attention is unlikely to change her practice. “I wish I could paint for the market,” she says, with a hearty chuckle. “But I paint for deeper reasons—for sanity!”

