



Obituary

Michael Heizer
1968

“...I did die when I started making prisms.”
- Charles Ross

When I first heard of Ross' premature death, I was of course startled. I had known for some time that someone should speak about his concerns, since they had been known for several years, and I had come to be acquainted with some of his interests. His achievement through death is common to art. Often it is the languid passage from one state to another that best serves formal purpose. Whatever means are employed are up to the artist.

One decisive factor in art is the quality of the experience. The experience of Ross' prisms is resolute. They are transparent, translucent, reflecting, mirroring, distorting, magnifying, refracting, bulging, fragmenting, compressing, repeating, and altering what is immediate to themselves. They are made of clear plastic and filled with clear oil. Since they are transparent, almost incomplete objects, their visual resolution is found at any point of opacity. Whatever solidity occurs when looking at them is brought into the object from another part of the room or landscape. Their allusion to the exterior condition and their blankness suggest a visual generosity rare to object sculpture. This might or might not be personally orchestrated by the viewer. The prisms are visual tools, dumb tools with no use. They are intended to be looked with. Ross is responsible for the prisms which do what they can with what's around.

The perception being offered here are ocular, perceived in planes, in fragments, and in angles of the prism. They present the general condition of vision rather than any closed or specific idea of form, since the object of any individual prism merely relegates itself to the potentialities possible through and within itself. This work underlines the specificity of its setting; it somehow attains its whole identification only when its surroundings are acknowledged to be part of itself. This attitude is shared by other artists in various manners such as non-sites, earth liners, land drawings, and elemental materials juxtaposed against interior settings.

The confirmation with exterior, setting and placement, is due. If what the works look like is so important, similarly, where it is seen and what its surroundings are, are important. These issues will no longer be disregarded. There are no neutral ground or place in which to view art. Setting is always apparent, specific, and is vital to reception and reaction. The prisms, since they are ocular, tend to observe. Should Ross have chosen not to be concerned with “exteriorative” issues, he would not have made art that is inclusive of its setting. He might instead have made solid, opaque blocks.



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His work tends toward the invisible, achieves the transparent, and relies upon the opaque.

The opaque, which really, has been dealt with throughout art in many ways and has also been disregarded as an issue. The walled, contained mass is “made clear” so it is seen as both outside and inside simultaneously. What is there, suggests. What it is, is clear. The viewer is allowed experience of looking for himself. Ross’ art is analytical of itself and its place. The form of this analysis is structured but the responses available are innumerable, This way and means of seeing is offered as experience. It does not compromise its insistence that art is transient experience rather than abiding, preserved experience.

Aesthetic death occurs frequently in the art dialogue and the artist’s life. I am not sure in this case whether or not there ever was a death. Possibly a coercion of life – through art.

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As it was true in 1968, Ross is still very much alive today. This essay refers to his aesthetic death and re-birth in 1965