

REVIEWS

GALLERIES

Northern Lights
Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh

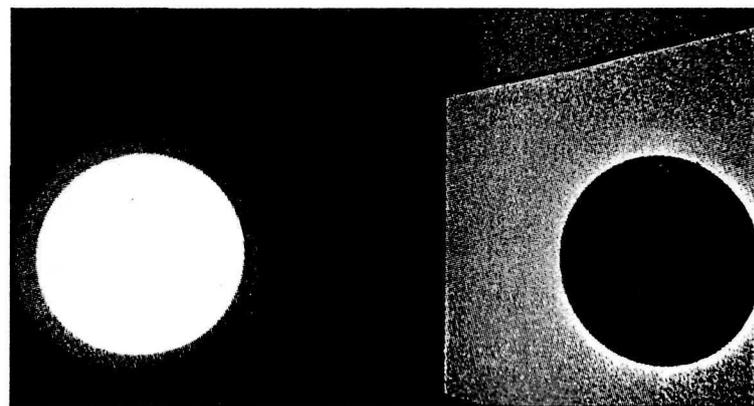
Duncan Macmillan

IN the Middle Ages, light was the key to some of the greatest spiritual architecture ever – daylight filtered and transfigured by wonderful translucent mosaics of coloured

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glass. But light played no part in painting at that time. It was only later that western painting became so deeply involved with it. Think of Rembrandt, Turner or Monet; the mystery was transferred from glass to paint. But their painting was also linked directly to the way we see and in the 20th century, once again, painting has gone its own way. It parted company with perception, with seeing. You do not think of light in a painting by Picasso. Matisse is another matter, but even in his painting it is not a separate agent. It is dissolved in the paint.

We have yet to see light reinstated in all its glory in architecture. But the American, Dan Flavin, who died recently, did take the first step to distil light out of painting again into something the artist could use in an architectural space. He exploited artificial light with great subtlety and



Painting with light: Andrew Gifford's *Eclipse II* & *Lunar*

invention. It is not coincidence that he was also one of a generation of American artists profoundly influenced by Matisse.

The exhibition currently at the Fruitmarket, *Northern Lights*, is a coincidental, serendipitous memorial to Flavin. There are six artists in the exhibition – six “artists”, but one of them, Wenyon and Gamble, is actually two people. Like Flavin, they all use light as their medium – real light, electric light. It makes an enjoyable exhibition, but it ends up unresolved, half way between architectural light and light in painting.

The best work here is by James Turrell. He has made a completely dark room with a tall narrow entrance, a bit like a Romanesque church. You lose your bearings in the dark, but as your eyes become accustomed to it, you become aware of a glimmer.

Two hidden sources dimly illuminate a horizontal, rectangular recess apparently painted dark red.

This red shape floats, half-seen and impossible to pin down, a ghostly presence. It is enjoyable, but somehow it does not give the spiritual charge that one can get from a great painting by Rothko, or from a painting by Matisse even though there light is still trapped in paint and this is actual light.

It is all too ingenious. Perhaps that points to the way that none of these artists have really improved on their pop art predecessors in the Sixties. Abstract painters who turned to using light to try to intensify the impact of a simple image. Here Andrew Gifford does just that. His *Erebus* is an abstract painting in light. A floating, red rectangle is hung in front of a field of soft blue, but the light in the work opposite tinges this mysteriously pink. It is very lovely.

The way Andrew Barker-Mill successfully mimics the light of a candle has a similar magic.

Richard Ellis makes a direct reference to the great Gothic cathedrals in *Seeing Music in Cathedrals*. This is a series of slide projections of strips of light projected onto a Gothic architectural structure, apparently a model. Music has been commissioned especially. But think how once music was written for the cathedrals as vast instruments with their own harmonies where it mingled with transfigured light. We don't seem to be able to match that.

Wenyon and Gamble have made a horizontal rainbow, *The Form of the Visible*. It is a kind of continuous hologram of the spectrum, mobile and fascinating to look at. It was made as a homage to James Clerk Maxwell, the Scottish scientist who, among other things, discovered that

though they are invisible to the human eye, infra red and ultra-violet are still part of the spectrum.

This work poses questions about the relationship between art and science. But another artist here, Patrick Beveridge, also plays this kind of optical science game. The kind of game that was fashionable in the Sixties, but fashionable in the 19th century too. The quasi-science of the kaleidoscope and the magic lantern is more the ancestor of this kind of art than are the windows of Chartres. But those toys were always fascinating and this show has something of the sense of fun that made them so.