

Lucid Stead Elements Box 4, 2015, by Phillip K Smith III

Spotlight Paper by Timothy Leary, 2017



Phillip K. Smith III is a contemporary American artist born in the Coachella Valley in 1972. He attended Rhode Island School of Design where he earned both a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1995 and a Bachelor in Architecture in 1996. He is known internationally for his large-scale public site-specific installations that consider light, color, and environment. *Lucid Stead Elements Box 4* is the product of one of those installations. It consists of brushed aluminum, wood, acrylic, one-way mirrors, and custom electronic components.

A Subjective/Objective Experience

The work sparks interest on several levels. First of all is its connection to the original site-specific *Lucid Stead*, which was installed in Joshua Tree, CA in 2013. *Lucid Stead* was Smith's re-imagined seventy-year-old homesteader shack. It was a sensation, and made Smith an international figure. A video of the installation made its rounds on the Internet in 2013. That video was my first exposure to Smith's work. I received a link to the video from a Bay Area artist friend. It was fascinating in the unexpected way the mirrors played with light and reflection. In addition to the surrounding field the mirrors reflected the sky so the viewer could observe the movement of clouds and shadows. It was at times confusing, and always surprising. The fact that it changed moment by moment would require spending time with the work in order to see the slow changes that were taking place and by all reports kept viewers enthralled. It was the steady changing that made the viewer stop, slow down, and take notice of her or his surroundings.

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Lucid Stead Elements Box 4 is made from pieces of the original structure and other elements that made up *Lucid Stead*. This includes the light boxes on top and bottom that slowly change color by following the sequence of the color wheel, a one-way mirror in the center of the piece that is set at eye level for an adult, and an LED light that illuminates the piece from behind revealing its inner structure. The LED light establishes the piece as a work of architecture, as was the original homesteader's shack. It is an important aspect of the work. All this gives the viewer in the enclosed space of the museum an opportunity to experience some of the effects that the original work imparted. Even in this enclosed environment one can experience reflections of oneself and of other objects in the museum as the light and colors slowly change in Smith's patented color-changing light panels. Just as the original installation of *Lucid Stead*, this is a piece that requires contemplation and time. As Smith explains in the YouTube video of 2013, much of the focus of this work is to help the viewer experience the slow pace of change that occurs in the desert.

In an article for *Art Ltd. Magazine*, entitled "Desert Visionary," Shana Nys Dambrot quotes Smith, "I've created projects for a number of environments. In the end, I'm interested in opening people's eyes to the beauty that exists around them by actually using the environment as material within the work." I believe that Smith's use of environment as material is the key to understanding his work and his motivation. It is the most exciting and innovative aspect of this work. The one-way mirror serves as a means to bring the viewer and her or his immediate environment into the work thereby creating an individual and direct experience. This allows the viewer to see him or herself as part of the art. The viewer becomes both subject and object, creating an interaction that could be either pleasing or distracting depending on the viewer. Actively participating in the experience in this way is still unusual in museums, where most viewers expect to only observe. Therefore, this work can be very thought provoking. A viewer who decides to engage this work must slow down in order to witness the various perspectives from which the work can be observed. The slow moving color changes and the changing images in the mirror's reflection create an unexpected meditative experience.

That personal experience for the viewer was part of the original intention of abstract expressionists. Their work was intended not necessarily to tell a story, but instead to relate the feelings of the artist, thereby evoking feeling in the viewer. *Lucid Stead Elements Box 4* builds

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on the concepts of the Light and Space Movement, which originated as an offshoot of Minimalism in the 1960s in southern California. According to Ian Wallace in an article in *Artspace* entitled, “How the Light and Space Movement Prefigured Today’s Merger of Art and Tech,” the artists associated with this movement began using industrial materials, technologies, and facilities that were left behind on the West Coast after the war effort of World War II. Some of their media included neon, resin, fluorescent lights, and fiberglass. Artists started to use those materials to explore how light and color reflects and refracts. Joan Boykoff Baron and Reuben M. Baron in their *Artcritical.com* article “No Choice But To Trust The Senses: California Light and Space Revisited” state that the goal of this work was “to make us reexamine how we perceive the world—what is illusory and what is real.” That is exactly what Smith’s work does for the viewer.

A similar art movement, the Land Art Movement is an obvious influence in Smith’s work. This movement is a move away from museums and galleries by artists who create large-scale site-specific public art that use the landscape as material.

Lucid Stead Element’s place in the museum’s collection

Lucid Stead Elements Box 4 offers the opportunity for visual engagement and some sense of optical illusion for the viewer. This, along with many of the pieces in the Steve Chase Wing of the museum, examine fields of color and utilize light as artistic element. Examples of this include *Hyper Ellipsoid Glo-Pod* by Gisela Colon and *Exploded View (Birds) – Condensed* by Jim Campbell.

Phillip K. Smith III and the Palm Springs Art Museum

Lucid Stead Elements Box 4 is a new acquisition purchased with funds provided by Donna MacMillan. The work is part of an ongoing relationship between Phillip K. Smith III and the Palm Springs Art Museum. In 2010, Smith was an Artist-In-Residence at the museum and produced the exhibition *Aperture* on site. In addition to this work Smith’s sculpture, *Eroded Column*, is on view in the Faye Sarkowsky Sculpture Garden at The Galen in Palm Desert. Smith also designed the podium that is used in the Annenberg Theater.

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Phillip K. Smith III's most recent work, *The Circle of Light and Sky*, one of the Desert X installations, uses an open desert environment in Palm Desert, CA to influence the viewer's experience. In this installation, Smith continues to challenge the viewer to consider her or his place in the desert surroundings. He includes the viewer in the study of the desert landscape with the use of a large circle of narrow nearly-vertical mirrors. The mirrors are spaced approximately two feet apart to provide enough room for visitors to walk between the mirrors and view slices of what is in front and what is behind them at the same time. By tilting the mirrors at a ten-degree angle, the viewer is also able to observe the changes in the sky during a visit to the site.

This installation seems to be an extension of Smith's *Quarter Mile Arc*, which was on view in Laguna Beach in November of 2016. As with *The Circle of Light and Sky*, this work consisted of narrow vertical mirrors and challenged the viewer to observe the pace of change in the surrounding environment at the beach. The two installations taken together can demonstrate how different environments are affected by the climactic elements of changing light and shadow. These join another reflective work of Smith's called *Reflection Field* that was on view at the 2014 Coachella Music and Art Festival, which also used mirrors and LED lights to change its appearance from day to night. Another reflective installation of Smith's was *Bent Parallel* at the Laguna Art Museum in 2014, which consisted of two walls of slowly changing color.

A Final Thought

Lucid Stead Elements Box 4 has the ability to challenge visitors to the museum and move their art viewing experience to a new level by its insistence on the viewer's participation. Phillip K. Smith III's work is a seamless marriage of art and architecture. With his background in architecture, Smith is able to create large-scale art installations that are not only soundly designed, well made, and engineered, but also inviting and accessible to viewers.

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