

Of light and surface

Larry Bell's timeless sculptures at Wood Street are all about style

By GRAHAM SHEARING

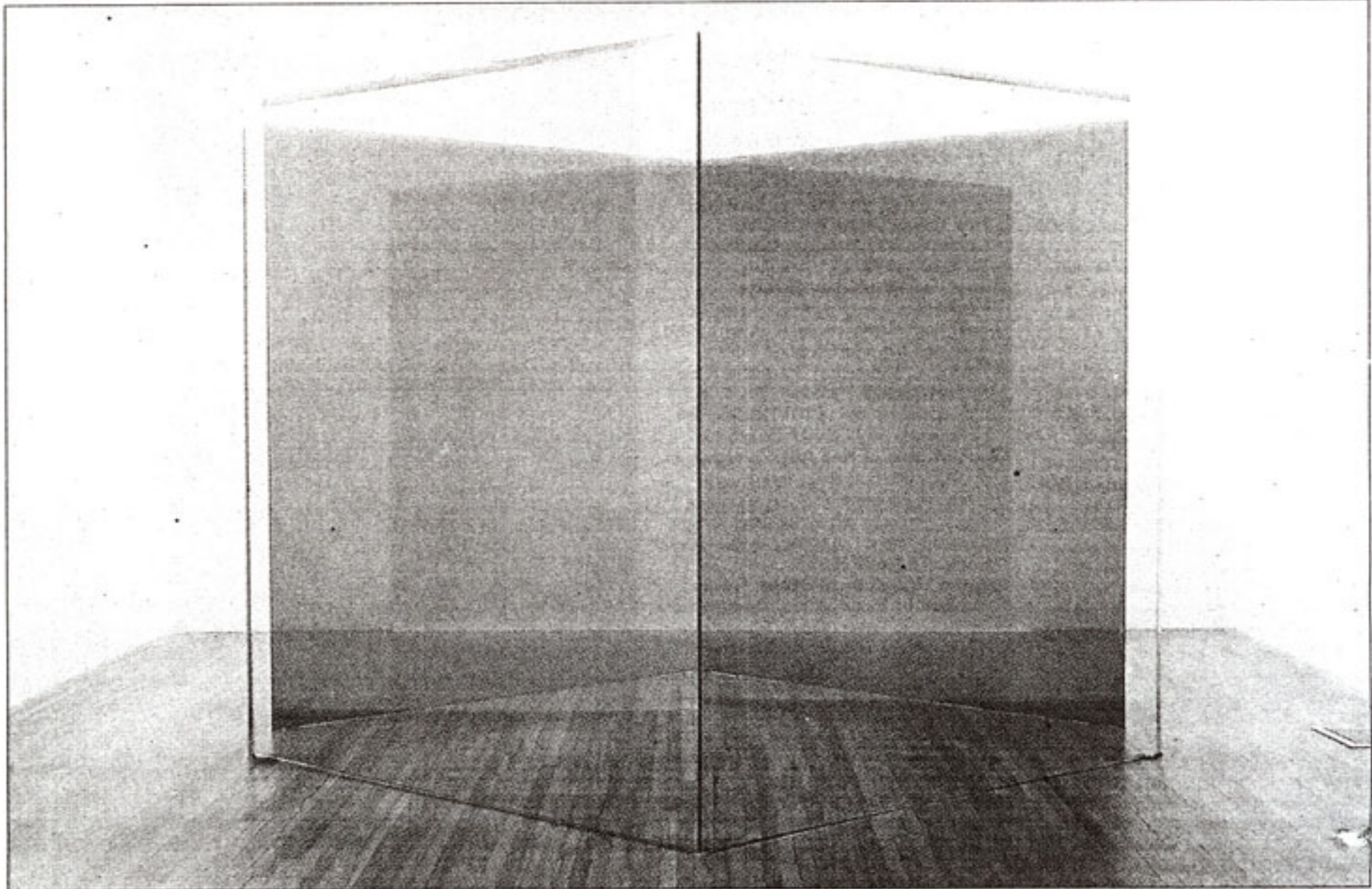
You can walk through or by the glass boxes Larry Bell has placed on the second and third floors of the Wood Street Galleries. You can see through them too. They are large sheets of heavy glass, sometimes tinted or mirrored, set at angles to each other and fixed by some super glue whose properties, effective as they may be, do nothing to remove the sense of tension experienced by the very presence of this vitreous material. Glass is like that, you have to treat it with respect ... don't mess with it.

It should be clear that Bell's larger pieces, of which there are three in this exhibition, are installations and highly dependent on a sympathetic environment. The ideal space may well be the white cube, which as a setting eliminates much of the accidental reflections you find in ordinary gallery spaces. Bell has screened the windows of the galleries with a white material and has controlled the lighting within it. The arrangement may not be perfect, some extraneous detail may perhaps intervene, but the aim is to make each construction the supreme object in its environment.

With such carefully prepared environments typical of the control freak, you might then be surprised at the importance Bell places on chance and accident in the way these pieces come about and are perceived by the viewer. He tells me he does not prepare these sculptures with elaborate and carefully thought-out drawings or blueprints ... maybe the slightest sketch. On the other hand, after 40 years of making work of this kind, he may well not need to. He started making glass sculptures of this kind in the 1960s in California and has continued to work them, performing them almost as a fugue, since that time. It is the style for which he is best known, although a small body of work (Fractions), which are collages incorporating earlier painted work, are also displayed in the exhibition.

In 1997 the Albuquerque Museum (New Mexico) staged a retrospective of the entire range of Bell's work, which includes a number of interesting pursuits not shown at Wood Street, but since his work has, to the best of my knowledge, never been seen in Pittsburgh, these glass sculptures are a great and enticing luxury.

Light (*lux* in Latin, and Bell happily puns the word *de luxe*) and its interaction with surface is critical for this artist. He uses the expression "the interface of light and surface" almost as a mantra. The complexity of the work is surprising. Surely a few sheets of glass set at angles could only involve a limited number of perceptions? But in fact, these apparently simple arrangements which differ from each other only slightly are almost prodigious in the effects they can achieve. Mathematicians may be able to establish quite how finite the possibilities are. One of the glass panels has a beveled edge which sets up a whole new range of complex reflections. Other panels are variously tinted with reflective materials



Larry Bell, "97-6x6x4 Bevel" (1997), four glass panels.

'Larry Bell: Installations'

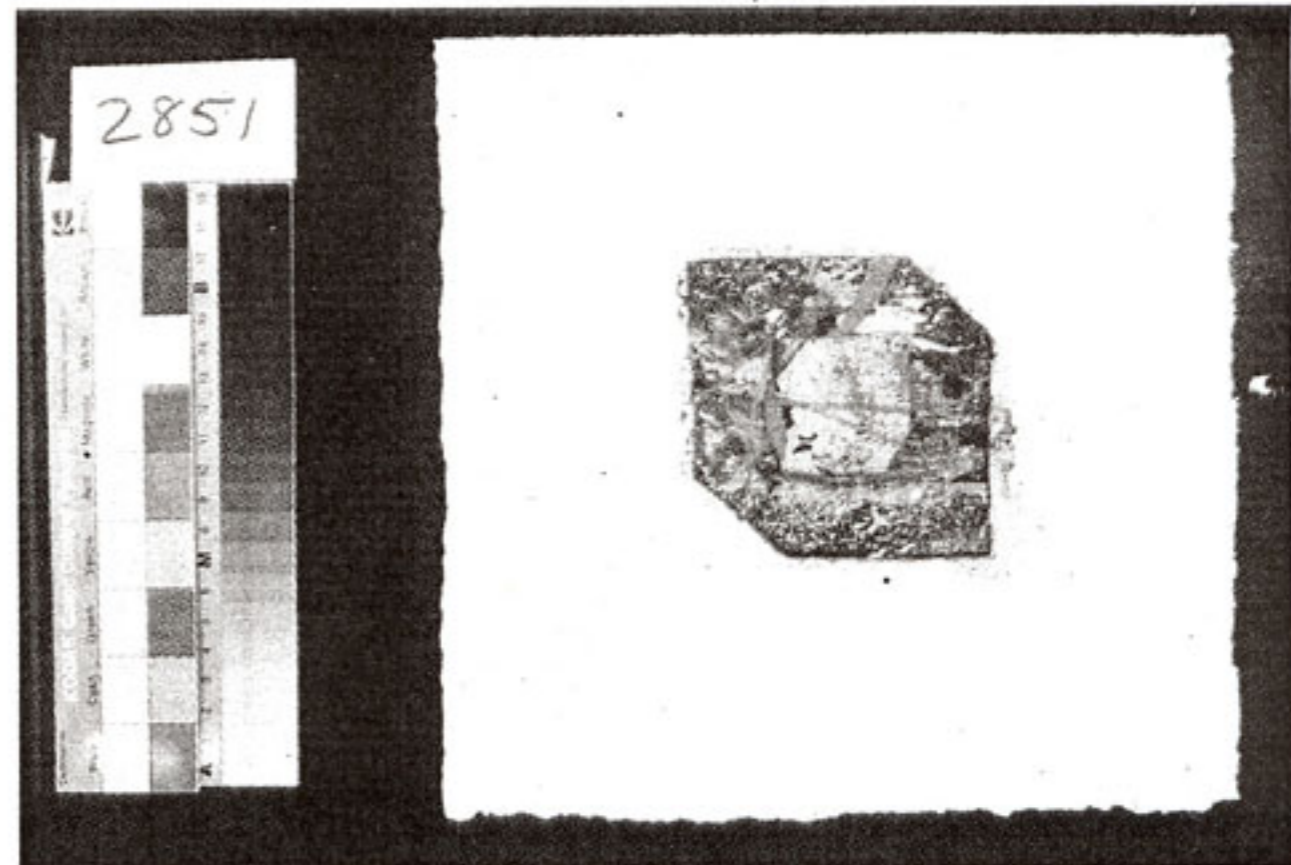
- ▶ Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.
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which manipulate the flow of light in varying degrees.

Equally critical for Bell is the participation of the viewer, who, in a very real sense, completes the work. The glass structures are still and inert when viewed from a single point. When the viewer wanders in and around the piece the reflections and modifications of what is perceived change constantly and, providing one is attuned to it, the experience is mesmerizing.

In a small section of the upstairs gallery some early works in glass are shown. One, a large rectangular block of glass, is in fact a found object discovered by Bell on a dump site in California. He coated it with a yellow pigment and it stands on a tall base as a definitive minimalist object. Bell points to the chip on the glass affectionately, for it compromises the minimalism of the piece ... another welcome intervention of chance.

Some years ago Bell started to cut large canvases he had painted in the '50s into small squares and rearranged them as



Larry Bell, "Fraction #2851" (1997), mixed media/watercolor paper.

collages. Part of the series is shown on the third floor at Wood Street. Set on a sheet of heavy white paper, the pieces of canvas were subjected to some kind of treatment (Bell says they "melted"), and an oily stain seeped into the support sheet. Some additional painting has taken place on the works, effectively finishing what had come about by chance. Bell

refers to the landscapist qualities of these small, quiet and beautiful collages.

Quite apart from the appeal to minimalism and visual aberration, the impressive thing about the work is its uncompromising sense of style and finish. Somewhere in this body of work there is an art deco sense of luxury that is improbable and intriguing.