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Painting, Geography, and the Body: Charting the First Two Decades of Mary Corse's Art

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Painting, Geography, and the Body: 
Charting the First Two Decades of Mary Corse’s Art

by

Sarah Meller

Submitted in partial fulfillment 
of the requirements for the degree of 
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May 15, 2018
Date

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DEDICATION

To my Grandma Ima, a fellow CUNY graduate, who loved the classroom more than anyone I’ve ever known.
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INTRODUCTION

An Uncharted Corse

Mary Corse’s singular body of work investigating light as painterly material, perceptual experience, and incitation to movement has languished in obscurity for decades. Corse has been producing mature works since 1964, when she was only 19, and she participated in critical exhibitions as a young artist. Nevertheless, she will not have a solo museum presentation until the year of this writing, at the age of 72.\(^1\) If mentioned in any art-historical narratives, she is generally positioned in relation to the California-based Light and Space movement—this despite being a generation younger than most of the movement’s practitioners and being primarily committed to painting as opposed to perceptually-oriented installations. Only one scholar, curator and art historian Drew Hammond, has made a dedicated attempt to write Corse into a narrative beyond that of California art.\(^2\) In his piece published in 2011 on the occasion of “Mary Corse: Inside the White Cube” (an exhibition at the London gallery White Cube), Hammond argues that Corse’s trademark *White Light* paintings transcend “the hitherto mutually exclusive categories” of Abstract Expressionism.

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\(^1\) It should be noted that this exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art isn’t a complete retrospective, but rather a “focused survey” of the artist’s work. It is organized by curator Kim Conaty and will be on view June 8 through November 25, 2018. This summer, Dia:Beacon will also open a long-term installation dedicated to Corse.

\(^2\) Others have mentioned Corse in their scholarship, but no other writer besides Hammond has dedicated an essay to her work that goes beyond a chronological overview. Beyond Hammond’s writing, the most generative interpretations of Corse’s art happened on the occasion of Katy Siegel’s exhibition “High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975” (to be discussed at length later in this thesis).
and Minimalism “by using each in opposition.” He further attributes a realist element to Corse’s abstract works, through their ability to evoke time: “To invest a ‘still’ painting with a temporal dynamic is to address the problem of realism in a more fundamental way than a representational image could aspire to do.”

While I find Hammond’s interpretation overly reliant on Corse’s own rhetoric, his desire to situate Corse within a concurrent movement like Minimalism is admirable, particularly because the artist herself is so categorically reluctant for her work to be read in relation to that of her contemporaries. Corse has always maintained her position on the periphery, a tactic that critic Martin Herbert tackles in his recent book of essays, *Tell Them I Said No*. In the collection, Herbert discusses artists like Agnes Martin and David Hammons to illustrate how a deliberate retreat from the art world and its attendant mechanisms poses a direct challenge to “the artist’s role now,” which is as much about “showing up to self-market [and] being present” as it is about actually making art. Herbert could have equally included an essay on Corse, whose self-mythology is characterized by the relatively cloistered life she leads in Topanga Canyon, a small community in the Santa Monica Mountains, as well as her refusal to acknowledge any relationship between her work and the contemporary world—whether that be Los Angeles, the current political climate, or the artists who taught, studied, and made work around her.

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4 Ibid., 5.
In a recent interview, Corse offered a characteristic response when pressed on her work’s connection to time, place, and history: “I’m not a landscape painter; those literal aspects of my environment have never influenced me, and that includes other working artists. Since coming out of Abstract Expressionism, I was never influenced by the outside world.” Despite her reticence to align herself with other artists and movements, it’s telling that Corse has chosen to recognize Abstract Expressionism as her own point of origin. The movement’s authority was already waning by her earliest years as an artist, and new modes of painting and artmaking were certainly on the rise. However, by aligning herself with Abstract Expressionism—a movement identified with myths of male artistic genius and the New York art world—it may be that Corse was interested in escaping the marginalization inscribed upon her by being both a woman and an artist living and working in California. Still, I would argue, Corse’s professed allegiance to Abstract Expressionism actually worked to isolate the artist from her particular historical moment and place.

Perhaps due to how direly under-researched Corse’s oeuvre is—a common plight for women artists of the period—the artist’s own word on her marginality has been taken at face value in nearly all extant writing on her practice. Her first monographic catalogue, a modest tome published by the Los Angeles gallery Kayne Griffin Corcoran in 2017, reinforces Corse’s inherent non-belonging as a primary aspect of her foundational narrative (a peculiar


7 This is unfortunately the case with huge swaths of writing on contemporary art and artists.
move for a gallery, which is ostensibly attempting to establish the market value of the work). The biography published in that catalogue maintains that, in spite of some scholars’ placement of her in the Southern California Light and Space movement, “Corse evolved independent of the region’s dominant personalities, philosophies, and scenes,” pursuing “her vision almost entirely on the periphery of the art-world spotlight.”\(^8\) However, Corse’s early professionalization and successes, as well as her work’s connections to broader impulses and concurrent trends, challenge the accepted account of her isolation and existence on the periphery. The popular inclination to position Corse on the margins ultimately obscures the ways in which her practice, for decades, has been in dynamic dialogue with that of her contemporaries and is emblematic of a particular art historical moment.

This study will consider Corse’s work from the mid-sixties through the early eighties, during which time she established the majority of her artistic vocabulary. The mid- to late-sixties provided fertile ground for a series of successive experimentations with hard-edge geometric abstraction, reflective paintings, and light technology (figs. 1, 2, and 3). In 1968, Corse discovered her trademark material—industrially sourced glass microspheres used to illuminate lane markings on roadways—which she harnessed to expand on past reflective investigations and create the responsive white monochromes for which she is best known (fig. 4). These glittering yet minimal paintings belie the intense bodily effort exerted as part of their making. The works are created through an

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extremely physical process in which Corse disperses the glass beads atop layers and layers of paint, while she lays across a wheeled platform that allows her to position herself directly over the canvas. Through the mid-seventies, Corse continued to riff on these gleaming *White Light* paintings, playing with various compositional strategies and also sometimes using black acrylic paint. In 1976, Corse initiated a short foray into glazed ceramic earth paintings, which she created using a large-scale kiln she built herself (fig. 5). Making the works required significant physical effort on her part, evidenced by her body’s indexical markings in the finished pieces, which—along with the glaze—produce perceptual effects similar to the *White Light* paintings. By the early eighties, however, Corse had returned definitively to her luminescent canvases. Over the following decades, her reflective works would grow larger and their compositions would incorporate additional elements like arches and bands, while remaining faithful to the strategies she developed in her work of the late sixties.

In order to write Corse into the historical narrative, I will connect her artistic output during this prolific two-decade period to broader trends operating in the art world at the time. Chapter One, “Geography and Community,” deals with a consideration of space and place in relation to Corse’s practice. I will tackle Corse’s identity as a Los Angeles–based artist, as well as her relationship to New York, a city which at least in that period functioned as the center of the art world. The section begins by outlining Corse’s formative years on the West Coast, her exhibition history across the two American cities, and the ways in which she both resists categorization within and at the same time fits into larger
West Coast movements including Light and Space and Finish Fetish. I will also take a closer look at the ways in which her work is reflective of automotive culture, a concern that connects her intimately to Los Angeles, and—perhaps more surprisingly—to the rhetoric of East Coast Minimalism. Corse’s focus on the road connects her to her contemporaries, and also provides an impetus for a recurring theme in her work: putting the body into motion. Chapter Two, “Departure and Return,” will contend with Corse’s self-identification as a painter. I will closely chart her output in painting, and at the same time allude to her significant deviations from the medium (the latter of which—works in ceramic—will be grappled with more closely in Chapter Three). Corse’s approach can be positioned within a broader impulse in the late sixties and seventies, in which artists were challenging the “dead end”—to use Katy Siegel’s words—of painting. Here, the idea of movement is evoked both through Corse’s fluid shifting between mediums during her formative years, as well as her primary aesthetic strategy—the use of reflective materials such as the glass microspheres—which produce visual effects that are constantly shifting in response to the viewer and their ambient environment. Chapter Three, “Career and Identity,” will approach questions of Corse’s status as a woman artist, her categorical refusal of feminism, and her engagement with the human body in her work. Connecting her output with dance and architecture, I will reveal the ways in which the viewer’s apprehension of her work depends on physical movement.

and consequently leads to a heightened embodied awareness that has feminist implications.

Corse has undoubtedly operated on the margins, a position she has at once maintained deliberately and had imposed upon her as a female artist. Her career exposes the double bind that comes about when an artist’s strategies and the effects of the discrimination she encounters come too directly into alignment. This tension has worked to obscure the fact that Corse’s work did not come out of a vacuum; it is related to art historical factors and contemporary politics. Uniting all of these concerns is the artist’s abiding interest in movement. Mary Corse is a product of her time, place, and experience and an investigation into her practice through these various lenses can produce an enriched understanding of the moments and movements she lived within and between.
CHAPTER ONE

Geography and Community: Mary Corse, a Los Angeles Artist?

Corse’s personal mythology is rooted in a childhood steeped in artmaking. Born in Berkeley, California, on December 5, 1945, Corse was a precocious and creative child, who played classical piano and danced ballet starting at the age of five with the enthusiastic encouragement of her mother. Corse’s proclivity for the visual arts, though not something her mother supported with a similar zeal, was nevertheless apparent. The artist has recalled that she “used to hide from [her] mother to paint.”\(^{10}\) While Corse characterizes her childhood as “a lot of work,” her time-consuming extracurricular activities also instilled in her the dedication required to pursue a career as an artist.\(^{11}\) “Had I not had the dancing, and all of that discipline . . . I probably wouldn’t have been able to make all these paintings and stick to it as an artist,” she has stated.\(^{12}\) Beginning in the seventh grade, Corse attended Anna Head School for Girls in Berkeley where she spent three hours a day making art under the tutelage of an alumna of Chouinard Art Institute, an influential school in Los Angeles that Corse herself would later attend.\(^{13}\) It was there that she says she was first introduced to the abstract work of such figures as Josef Albers, Willem de Kooning, and Hans Hofmann—artists whose work she often evokes as

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\(^{11}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Ginger Elliott Smith, “Technology and Artistic Practice in 1960s and 1970s Southern California” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2015), 103–104.
influences on her own. She credits this early experience as her “jumpstart” into the abstract painting she would devote her entire career to pursuing. Exposed to art primarily through books and reproductions, Corse credits a trip to Europe at the age of 18 in 1962 as a pivotal experience for her artmaking, as it was there that she finally got to see many of the masterworks by artists like Degas and El Greco that had entranced her as a student. Though she knew she wanted to pursue a career in art, at her mother’s behest she attended the University of California, Santa Barbara, for one year, in 1963, to study psychology. However, she left in 1964, when she was awarded a scholarship to Chouinard (now absorbed into the California Institute of the Arts), where she received her BFA in 1968.

At Chouinard, Abstract Expressionist painter and Black Mountain College alumnus Emerson Woelffer took Corse under his wing (one assumes this relationship also partially inspired her self-identification with Abstract Expressionism). Known for his “unorthodox use of both the stark contrasts of Bauhaus design and the bold gestures of the New York school,” Woelffer has been recognized by many artists under his tutelage at Chouinard—Ed Ruscha, Joe Goode, and Larry Bell among them—as providing a seminal influence on their respective artistic practices. It was a similar case for Corse, who had

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14 Bacon, “In Conversation: Mary Corse with Alex Bacon.”
15 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 5.
quickly grown bored at art school.\textsuperscript{17} Woelffer helped her acquire studio space of her own in downtown Los Angeles where she could work independently, with Woelffer checking in on her progress every six months or so.\textsuperscript{18} During Corse’s time at Chouinard, from 1964 to 1968, the school was a nexus of cultural production in Southern California. Frederick Hammersley, David Hammons, Allen Ruppersberg, Laddie John Dill, Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler, and Terry Allen—all of whom would go on to significant careers in the art world—were counted among the institution’s students and teachers during that period.\textsuperscript{19} Corse maintains that, despite this confluence of talent at the school, she was isolated throughout her years at Chouinard. She has cited gender as a primary factor in that experience. “There wasn’t a camaraderie. Especially toward a girl, and I dressed like a girl. It was before Women’s lib,” she said in a 2017 interview.\textsuperscript{20} While Corse’s seclusion seems hard to fathom given the vibrant creative atmosphere of Chouinard, it’s true that sexism was rampant in the Los Angeles art world at the time, and many other artists felt a similar isolation. Jo Baer, an artist then working in Los Angeles, described the legendary Ferus Gallery (which operated from 1957 until 1966) as “one big buddy-fuck. No girls

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\item Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 12.
\item Wagley.
\end{enumerate}
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allowed.”21 Living within the artistic community in downtown L.A. didn’t seem to bring Corse into the fold either, as she maintained she didn’t attend openings or events, but instead stayed home at night with her then-husband, filmmaker Andy Eason.22

Despite this apparent marginality, Corse met New York–based gallerist Richard Bellamy when the L.A. dealer Nicholas Wilder brought Bellamy by her downtown studio in 1968, at which time Corse was in her early twenties. To hear Corse tell it, while Wilder “didn’t know what to do with [her]” (he never did show her at his own gallery), Bellamy immediately realized her potential and began to represent her at once.23 This meeting, and in fact the first decade of their professional relationship, curiously goes unmentioned in Judith E. Stein’s recent Bellamy biography, Eye of the Sixties, which only makes very brief reference to Corse’s representation by the gallerist during his years running Oil and Steel—a space he founded in 1980 on Chambers Street. Exploring Bellamy’s papers in the Museum of Modern Art’s archives, one finds a mention of Corse—the first of only a handful—in a ledger book memo dated December 11, 1970, confirming, at least in part, the artist’s recollections of her early, albeit unfruitful, relationship with the gallerist.24 As Stein affirms throughout Eye of the Sixties, Bellamy’s “singular attitude toward money” (“he simply wasn’t interested in making it”)

22 Alex Bacon, “Interview ” in Mary Corse (Los Angeles: Inventory Press, 2017), 155.
23 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 73.
24 The memo listed a handful of small monetary transactions between Corse and Bellamy.
certainly fits with Corse’s own recounting of their partnership. Bellamy was an independent dealer for the first twelve years of their working together, functioning largely without a dedicated gallery operation. Corse’s commitment to him during this time could have resulted in her losing some of the art market footing she might have received if she had had more reliable gallery representation.

Nonetheless, Corse’s relationship with Bellamy provided her with an entry into the New York art world. One can fairly assume that it was thanks to Bellamy’s support and influence that Corse found some early success in the city’s major museums, where she was featured in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s “1970 Sculpture Annual” and then in the 1971 exhibition “Ten Young Artists: Theodoron Awards” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (which also quickly scooped up one of her works for the then-not-inconsiderable sum of $2000). Meanwhile, she found equal success on the West Coast. In 1971, she was additionally shown in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s “Twenty-Four Young Los Angeles Artists.” On the whole, the reviews she received at the time would turn out to be some of the most positive of her career; writing on her work on view at the Guggenheim, Peter Schjeldahl called the art “exquisite,” and Hilton Kramer wrote that Corse’s works are “worth the

25 Stein, xii.
“effort” of contemplation they demand.²⁸ This positive sentiment, however, would not last.

Around this same time, in 1970, Corse crucially left the Los Angeles hotbed of artistic experimentation for a plot of land in Topanga Canyon, located about twenty miles from downtown L.A. As she tells it, her impetus to move was a desire to provide a better, more grounded childhood for her two young kids (she would soon divorce Eason).²⁹ However, one can reasonably speculate that this gesture of self-isolation may have been a means for Corse to assert agency. If Corse didn’t feel accepted into the L.A. scene as a woman artist, it may have been more productive for her to purposely extricate herself, rather than passively accept the situation as she found it.

In the early seventies, Corse continued to travel on and off to New York; she visited Bellamy and occasionally traded studios with artists there, returning every time “the need to see art and connect with other artists became intense.”³⁰ This statement hints at something about Corse’s sustained ambitions and worldview that contradicts much of her isolationist rhetoric. As we will come to see, Corse remained very much oriented towards New York and the art world at large, despite her inclination to disconnect her work from a broader historical moment or market. In 1972, she had her first one-woman show at Joe LoGiudice Gallery in SoHo, a connection likely made via Bellamy, who Stein

²⁹ Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 63.
says was regarded “as a mentor” by LoGiudice. Artforum published an unfavorable review of the exhibition (Joseph Masheck, later the magazine’s editor-in-chief, called the work “rich art, fat art, dessert art, ‘lobby painting’”).

The piece kicked off a career-long series of gendered and biased critical reviews. To make matters worse for Corse, LoGiudice—heavily in debt—ran off to Mexico in 1973, stalling any momentum generated by the exhibition and foreclosing the possibility of another show at the gallery.

Nevertheless, even after settling indefinitely in Topanga, Corse remained active in both the West and East Coast art worlds, though her work was received in different ways. While she was generally shown in solo presentations in New York in the seventies and eighties, in that same period her work usually appeared as part of group shows in California. For example, after seven years of representation, Bellamy gave Corse a solo exhibition at his New York gallery in 1975, and she was also shown in a solo installation at the Clocktower Gallery, an alternative exhibition space in Tribeca, in 1981. However, after her inclusion in “Ten Young Artists” at the Guggenheim in 1971, Corse wouldn’t be shown in a group exhibition in any New York gallery until 1993, and at a New

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31 Stein, 234.
33 Stein, 234.
34 Corse’s solo 1975 exhibition must have been held at Bellamy’s space at 333 Park Avenue South, where he spent the years between 1973 and 1980. This exhibition is confirmed in all of Corse’s career timelines in Bellamy’s archives at MoMA. However, per Stein’s biography, the gallerist only hosted two exhibitions in the space, both featuring work by David Rabinowitch. I’m unable to locate a single review of the exhibition to help resolve this discrepancy.
35 Her next group exhibition in New York was at Blum Helman Gallery and titled “Physical Abstraction.”
York museum until 2011, in the Guggenheim’s collection show “Surface, Support, and Process.” Meanwhile, before 1983 Corse had only a single solo exhibition in Los Angeles, which was held at the Janus Gallery in 1979—a full seven years after her first solo exhibition in New York. Nevertheless, she found her way into numerous group shows in Southern California. Some highlights during this time period are her inclusion in “Fifteen Los Angeles Artists” at the Pasadena Art Museum (1972); “L.A. Six” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1974); “Decade: Los Angeles Painting in the Seventies” at Pasadena’s Art Center College of Design (1981); and “Nine Artists” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1985). Despite a fairly active exhibition history, Corse’s lack of inclusion in New York group shows attests to the East Coast art establishment’s seeming inability to fit the artist into a wider context outside of regional California movements. This would continue to condition the ways in which her work would be received for decades to come.

Corse’s ongoing residence in rural Topanga—which has remained her primary home since 1970—has certainly contributed to the enduring narrative of her isolation. Located in the Santa Monica Mountains, Topanga Canyon is home to only about eight thousand people, and has been long considered a freethinking enclave far from the hustle and bustle of Los Angeles.36 Despite a handful of solo gallery shows in recent years (Corse received her first comprehensive survey at Ace Gallery in 1995) and the inclusion of her work in a

few group museum exhibitions in the late eighties through the early 2000s, her career didn’t really experience another boom until her work resurfaced as part of 2011’s “Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1950–1970,” at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and “Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface” at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego that same year. The overdue resurrection of Corse’s oeuvre can be attributed, in part, to the art world’s game of catch-up in recent years, as curators worked to correct the historical inequity that has plagued female artists and artists of color. This work has happened via revisionist group exhibitions like Connie Butler’s show “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,” which debuted in 2007 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, as well as through more purposeful museum acquisition strategies and dedicated solo shows. Corse will have her first solo museum survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art in June 2018. At the time of this writing, Corse’s career is in the midst of a resurgence.

Despite her work’s inclusion in two of the “Pacific Standard Time”

37 Both exhibitions were part of Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980, which took place across 60 southern California art institutions. The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego’s contribution—Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface—was on view from September 25, 2011, through February 5, 2012, and was curated by Robin Clark. The Getty’s exhibition “Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1950–1970,” was on view October 1, 2011, through February 5, 2012, and was organized by Andrew Perchuk, deputy director; and Rani Singh, senior research associate; with Glenn Phillips, principal project specialist and consulting curator, and Catherine Taft, curatorial associate (all of the Getty Research Institute).

38 Since 2011, Corse has also become a fixture at art fairs, and she has been recently picked up by a group of commercial galleries: Lehmann Maupin in New York; Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles; and Lisson Gallery in London.

exhibitions—which initiated what I deem to be the second phase of her career—Corse is hesitant to acknowledge an inherent connection between her art and California. However, upon closer examination, her work is in fact in dialogue with many of the trends and impulses that arose on the West Coast. While the artist refutes the idea that she is inspired by the region’s light and landscape, the one aspect she does cite as instrumental to her practice is the infamous sprawl of the city. “One thing I liked about L.A. is you can have a lot of space between artists as opposed to New York, where, it’s no wonder they were getting stuck. . . . [In L.A.] you could do your own thing and get away from the influences.”

For Corse, L.A.’s limitless bounds are what afford her the isolation that she deems so essential to her practice.

Ironically enough, Corse’s own emphasis on the unique seclusion of Los Angeles living—and its diametric opposition to the New York City experience—aligns her with many of her California peers. The discourse surrounding the secluded, solitary L.A. artist is well established. In a 1978 issue of *Art in America*, Leo Rubinfien interviewed seven artists for commentary on the experience of working and living in the expansive Southern California metropolis. In the compilation, the experience of Los Angeles is variously billed as “hermetic” (Eleanor Antin); characterized by its “isolation” (Chris Burden); and summed up succinctly as “going from place to place” in one’s car (Alexis Smith). As Jane McFadden, one of the contributing authors to *Pacific Standard*.

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40 Mary Corse, interview by Rani Singh, April, 21, 2011, video recording (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute).
*Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945–1980*, observes of the set of conversations, each interviewee’s account (despite their differences) offers an experience of Los Angeles typified by “isolation, which in turn evokes chance encounters, deliberate mobility, and further wandering.”42 As I will come to argue, this observation could equally be applied to the experience of Corse’s art. Take, for example, any of her *White Light* paintings, which make use of the reflective glass microspheres (fig. 6). Because the glass beads refract light differently based on a viewer’s position in the gallery space, the works demand a peripatetic form of perception. Put another way, the spectator’s “wandering,” incited by the paintings’ abundant capacity to shift and change, calls to mind the mobility demanded by the sprawling urban metropolis of Los Angeles that McFadden and others observe. Such a connection belies the artist’s categorical reluctance to acknowledge the specificity of her milieu. The question remains: why might Corse want to push back on her connection to this particular locale?

Corse’s career-long rhetorical attachment to painting, generally, and Abstract Expressionism, specifically, might provide some answers. Artist and critic Peter Plagens, who penned the groundbreaking 1974 book *Sunshine Muse*, which surveyed the work of post-war California artists, identifies the West Coast with a desire for new beginnings. Writing in his introduction to the “Decade: Los Angeles Painting in the Seventies” exhibition at the California Art Center College of Design (in 1981), Plagens argues: “The West in this country

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has traditionally been the direction in which people, artists included, have gone to get away from old things and get into new things.”\textsuperscript{43} For this reason, Plagens asserts Los Angeles is “aggressively non-historical.”\textsuperscript{44} He attributes many artists’ interest in the medium of painting—Corse among them—to a desire to connect themselves, and their artistic practice, to a broader narrative. “History, particularly art history, is a little hard to come by in Southern California,” he writes.\textsuperscript{45}

I find this last statement a helpful one for understanding Corse’s own self-mythology. Corse’s self-positioning as an inheritor of Abstract Expressionism, a movement that shifted the center of the western art world to the United States (and more precisely to New York), provides a way for her work to enter a dialogue that goes beyond Los Angeles. Further, I would speculate that Corse strongly identified with the claims of many Abstract Expressionists that they themselves were to be understood as the origin points for the meaning of their works. Take for example, Barnett Newman, whose 1948 essay “The Sublime Is Now,” announced his freedom from “the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, and myth.”\textsuperscript{46} Even the titles of many of his works—from \textit{Eve

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 20.
(1950) to *Onement, I* (1958)—suggest beginnings (figs. 7 and 8). While many would argue that the American vanguard enterprise was in fact heavily reliant on a foundational myth and the “nostalgic glasses of history,” Corse’s attachment to the idea of a work standing as a testament to a personal experience as opposed to the external world—and its contingencies—is understandable. As a female artist, asserting a connection to this predominantly male-driven heritage could also be tactically rooted in her sense of her own gender’s limits.

Corse’s inclusion in Plagens’s exhibition “Decade: Los Angeles Painting in the Seventies” is notable as it’s one of the few group shows dedicated to painting in which the artist has been featured. This comes as no surprise, as Corse has been canonized as one of the handful of female members of the California Light and Space movement, an impulse often held up as one of the region’s most important contributions to postwar American art that is characterized primarily by perceptually-oriented installations. Like many of those designated in art-historical accounts as members of Light and Space, Corse herself doesn’t identify with it. However, as we will see, Corse shares many concerns and strategies with her Light and Space contemporaries.

Compared to many other twentieth-century movements, the tenets and putative origins of Light and Space aren’t nearly as well rehearsed in art historical scholarship. In fact, it wasn’t until 2011 that a large-scale and comprehensive survey of the movement was organized at the Museum of

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47 The same could be said of Jackson Pollock’s repeated use of titles using the phrase “Number 1.” For example, *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* at the National Gallery of Art; *Number 1, 1949*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art; and *Number 1A, 1948* at the Museum of Modern Art, among many others.

48 Newman, 139.
Contemporary Art, San Diego, as part of the cycle of exhibitions organized under the umbrella heading “Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980."49 In the accompanying catalogue for “Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface,” museum director Hugh Davies accounts for the movement’s underrecognition compared to other postwar American art movements by citing its regional specificity, the inaccurate assumptions that plague existing scholarship, and many practical concerns. Light and Space practitioners were considered by some to be “superficial for their emphasis on surface,” and too preoccupied “with looking over thinking” and the experiential over the intellectual.50 In addition, the works themselves are often large-scale, site-specific, and ephemeral, and they may lack sufficient documentation, all of which tends to make it difficult for them to be shown in museum and gallery exhibitions (particularly beyond Southern California).51 It’s worth noting that it was also a movement dominated by men. Of thirteen artists included in the groundbreaking 2011 presentation in San Diego, only two—Corse and Helen Pashgian—were female.

Simply put, artists associated with the Light and Space movement were united by an overarching concern with perception. These Southern California artists used varying mechanisms, both natural and industrial, to investigate the perceptual effects of light in order to “create situations capable of stimulating

[49] Not to be confused with “Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1950–1970,” which was the specific exhibition held at the Getty on the occasion of the cross-institutional initiative of a similar name.
[51] Ibid.
heightened sensory awareness in the receptive viewer.\textsuperscript{52} The origins of the movement can be traced back to the dot paintings that Robert Irwin began in 1964: white convex canvases painted with tiny marks that produce varying visual effects depending on the viewer’s position (fig. 9).\textsuperscript{53} Artforum editor Philip Leider deemed the works’ effect on a viewer’s perception “an experience of space and of light” when viewed from afar.\textsuperscript{54} From 1966 through 1969, Irwin continued down this path by moving from painted dots to convex discs hung on a wall and illuminated by incandescent lamps (fig. 10). With his discs, Irwin aimed to create a work that “does not begin and end at an edge but rather starts to take in and become involved with the space or environment around it.”\textsuperscript{55} As writer Lawrence Weschler—who spent thirty years documenting conversations with Irwin—observed, while other artists like Frank Stella (and Corse herself) were experimenting with shaped canvases, Irwin, in contrast, was “trying to create a painting that would simply dissolve into its environment.”\textsuperscript{56} The discs, as described by John Coplans in the catalogue accompanying Irwin’s show at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1968, did just this; the installation resulted in “the shadow, the disc, and the outer area of the illuminated wall [being] seen as

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Robert Irwin, quoted in Lawrence Weschler, \textit{Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 101.
\textsuperscript{56} Weschler, 103.
an entity. Thus the three elements . . . [were] equally positive.”57 According to Coplans, Irwin’s discs “not only engaged the viewer in a perceptual experience but also seemed to open up an interstitial space between painting and sculpture.”58 Soon, Irwin and his peers moved their work off the wall entirely in favor of sculptural objects and perceptual environments.

There are those who believe that, despite her undeniable interest in perception, Corse doesn’t fit precisely into this narrative; she did, after all, decide to return definitively to painting in the mid-eighties, unlike so many of her Light and Space peers, who left the medium behind much earlier. It’s primarily for Corse’s embrace of painting that Light and Space scholar Jane Butterfield puts the artist’s association with the movement into question. Butterfield, who in 1993 published the first monographic study of Light and Space, purposely omitted Corse from the book, explaining that Corse is “a painter rather than an artist concerned with room environments or site-specific installations.”59 Butterfield concludes, “Corse is long overdue for a serious critical consideration, but this book is not the place for it.”60 Corse, for her part, also views her dedication to painting as incompatible with the movement: “Even though I’m seen as related to the Light and Space group, because it happened at the same time and all that—I’m a painter . . . I got rid of the extra dimension.”61

57 Ibid.
58 Conwell and Phillips, 191.
60 Ibid.
61 Bacon, “In Conversation: Mary Corse with Alex Bacon.”
I, on the other hand, disagree. Corse’s sincere obsession with the process of perception absolutely puts her work into dialogue with Light and Space. It is no surprise that Corse saw Irwin’s discs at Pasadena in 1968, right before she discovered the glass microspheres in road paint that would become her signature material. Her use of crystalline beads on painted surfaces generates a similar experience to that of Irwin’s dots and discs—one that varies based on the viewer’s position and creates an environment-like viewing space. Irwin is in fact one of the few artists that Corse generally acknowledges as, if not a direct influence, then someone whom she respected and who impressed her artistically: “I saw him bringing consciousness back to painting after Jackson Pollock had made the unconscious so important.”

(In another interview she is, characteristically, more withholding, stating, “I always loved his work . . . not an influence though. My influences were much earlier.”) Further, the concepts of Light and Space occupy a consistent position in Corse’s rhetoric. She’s apt to make proclamations like: “Art has always been about light and space. The human being is about light and space.” Indeed, light is a primary concern for her practice; whether it is through the use of glass microspheres, glazes, or fluorescent technology, the artist is constantly seeking a way to insert illumination into the art object. Corse’s use of these luminescent materials means that the activation of her art is contingent on the light source of its ambient environment. In addition, the work’s demand for mobile apprehension

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63 Mary Corse, interview by Rani Singh.
64 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 69.
produces a further awareness of space in viewers that is not unlike the effects of the perceptual environments of artists like Irwin and James Turrell.

Corse’s work also fits into several other regionally specific movements and impulses. Glenn Phillips has positioned Corse as a process-based painter, comparing her objects to Allan McCollum’s *Constructed Paintings* of 1970 and 1971, Ed Moses’s resin paintings from the early part of that decade, and Richard Jackson’s *Wall Paintings* (figs. 11, 12, and 13). As with these other artists, Phillips argues, Corse’s painting process was not just a means to achieve an end product, but an end in and of itself. I find the most compelling analogy to Corse’s art in Phillips’s account of Jackson’s process, which the curator describes as a performance that produces a painting that fits “somewhere between gesture and remnant.” I would take Phillip’s reading one step further and argue that Corse’s art evokes a performance not only during its making, but also through the viewer’s experience of it. Corse’s use of light refracting materials—be they glass microspheres, mica flakes, or lustrous glazes—produces objects that prompt fleeting perceptual experiences that are mediated through a viewer’s own actions in the exhibition space. The peripatetic viewing experience provoked by Corse’s work is integral to its meaning.

For his part, Peter Plagens has grouped Corse into what he calls Reductivism, a sensibility he deems “the most important over-all phenomenon of

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66 Ibid.
art in Southern California since the Second World War.” His definition of Reductivism is not medium specific; rather, it connects hard-edge paintings to Larry Bell’s glass boxes, to the sculpture of DeWain Valentine, and to installations by Robert Irwin, Michael Asher, and James Turrell. “Somewhere in the middle of that procession,” he writes, “is an appetite for the ‘fantastic object,’ and somewhere in the desire for that object is a wish for the smoothest possible painting, with, perhaps, a little ping of specific identity.” “Painting in this territory,” he continues, is “difficult to sustain because it wants to be something else.” Again here, Plagens words resonate. Corse has made several deviations from the painterly medium—despite her continuing insistence that she only makes paintings—both with her fluorescent light explorations of the late sixties and her years of working in ceramic the following decade. Even when Corse makes objects that are more akin to traditional paintings, they challenge the boundaries of the medium through their use of unconventional materials, activation of the gallery space, and capacity to prompt an array of perceptual experiences.

Corse’s interest in industrially sourced materials and technology also inserts her work into what could be characterized as a regional dialogue. While East Coast artists like Dan Flavin and Carl Andre were using pre-fabricated materials in their work, Los Angeles artists participated to a greater degree in the use and production of these types of manufactured materials—from plastics

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
to pigments. In many cases, artists in Southern California extended material processes beyond the scope reached by industry,” argue Ken Allan, Lucy Bradnock, and Lisa Turvey in *Pacific Standard Time*. Corse’s inventive use of materials and interest in pushing technology beyond established limits connects her to the technological experimentalism embraced by many of her California peers. For example, her use of the Department of Transportation–sourced glass microspheres was the first time the material was used in fine art. Corse also ambitiously returned to school in order to harness the technology of tesla coils to make wirelessly powered light encasements. And when she decided to try her hand at ceramics, Corse pushed the existing technology in order to design and build a kiln that allowed her to fire works as large as eight feet wide.

Many of the artists experimenting with technology and new materials were considered part of the California Finish Fetish movement. The term “Finish Fetish,” coined by John Coplans, describes works that “used new resins, paints and plastics, and adopted highly innovative fabrication processes from the industrial world to create seamless, bright, and pristine-looking objects directly inspired by California culture.” The movement’s practitioners embraced

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72 Allan, Bradnock, and Turvey, 166.
73 For more on this topic, see Ginger Elliott Smith’s dissertation “Technology and Artistic Practice in 1960s and 1970s Southern California.”
“immaculate surfaces painstakingly achieved” in lieu of Abstract Expressionism’s sole focus on a worked surface.\textsuperscript{75} Similarly, Corse generally refutes the importance of surface to her work. “I don’t like the idea of putting paint on the surface,” she said during an interview in the mid-eighties.\textsuperscript{76} “I want the object and the painting to be one.”\textsuperscript{77} Finish Fetish works routinely incorporated both industrial materials and handcrafting, a combination that Corse also embraced. While the DOT-sourced glass spheres were her primary material, the artist’s highly personal touch is conveyed through both her manual scattering of the beads and the vibrant gestures of her brushstrokes.\textsuperscript{78} Her work’s medium fluidity also connects it to the movement. Finish Fetish objects often “mixed painterly aspects with sculptural ones.”\textsuperscript{79}

As Finish Fetish artist Billy Al Bengston noted in 1978, his work “took off from things [he] saw in the streets: cars, signs, etc.” “Los Angeles of course, was, and is, a car culture… so I used car- and sign-painting materials and colors the way artists would any other kind of color,” he continued.\textsuperscript{80} Car culture refers primarily to the styling, detailing, and aesthetics of the actual motorcar, but the experience of the road more generally also served as inspiration for many Southern California artists. Perhaps the aspect that positions Corse most compellingly within her local milieu is her work’s evocation of the road, which

\textsuperscript{75} Allan, Bradnock, and Turvey, 126.
\textsuperscript{76} Brown and Crist.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid..
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Rubinfien, 78.
occupies a central place in the narrative of her artistic trajectory for the ways in which it led to her use of glass microbeads. As Corse has said in countless interviews, this “aha” moment came to her during an evening drive down a Los Angeles freeway in 1968. At the time, the artist had moved away from traditional painting and had been experimenting with complex technologies—including fluorescents, neon, and tesla coils—for about two years; however, she had recently decided to be “less technical” and instead find “something that [she] could paint with.”

One day in the car, with the sun setting behind her, Corse was suddenly struck by the illuminated safety lines demarcating the highway’s lanes. Realizing that it was her vehicle’s headlights in motion that inspired the light’s reflection on the asphalt, she decided to experiment with the material in her own painting.

Corse subsequently reached out to the California Department of Transportation, and learned that the light was generated by millions of glass microbeads—or “retroreflective microspheres” as they are officially named—that were embedded in the paint. The 3M Company, then known as Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing, first made these glass beads available to highway departments in the late 1930s (a laborer in the company’s abrasives department, Harry Heltzer, is credited with the discovery). The technology advanced in the fifties, when 3M began to provide the French army with

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81 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 34.
reflective sheeting to adorn vehicles, with the aim of preventing nighttime accidents. That the transparent beads are spherical in shape is integral to their success; while a flat surface could also collect and reflect oncoming light, it wouldn’t be able to bend it directly back to the source (instead, it would scatter the light). The glass microspheres are tiny—each nearly as small as a diameter of a strand of hair—and are produced industrially. The luminance emitted from the beads is brightest at close distances, and is dependent on both the intensity of the light source and the material into which the beads are bonded.

Corse obtained a supply from the same distributor used by the California DOT, and got to work with what would become her primary technique for five decades. She is always careful to accurately describe the glass spheres’ function in terms of a triangular relationship: “They don’t reflect. It’s not two-dimensional reflect back, but it’s a prism that creates a triangle between the light, the surface, and the viewer.” In other words, the beads aren’t functioning through simple reflection, but their behavior is equally dependent on a light source, the binder the beads are housed within—in this case, acrylic—and the viewer’s perception. Because of this, standing relatively still in front of one of

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88 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 34.
Corse’s objects doesn’t allow one to fully experience the work. Instead, the spectator must be in motion to apprehend the piece’s full effect. In this way, the experience of the microbead works is entirely contingent on the viewer’s own mobile spectatorship. Much in the same way a moving car and its headlights generate the perceptual experience of the freeway’s lane lines, in Corse’s work the interaction between a viewer’s moving body and an external light source determines the experience.

In her dissertation, “Technology and Artistic Practice in 1960s and 1970s Southern California,” Ginger Elliott Smith describes Corse’s engagement with the glass microspheres as a continuation of the artist’s broader interest in harnessing science and technology to expand the definitions of painting, which Smith categorizes as part of the larger regional trend discussed above. She is the only scholar to—albeit briefly—engage with Corse’s work through the lens of Los Angeles’s “autopia,” a term Smith borrows from critic Reyner Banham’s 1971 book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. While Smith recognizes the extent to which the geography of Los Angeles—and car culture specifically—have been used as frameworks to understand cultural production in Southern California, she is also cognizant of Corse’s own statements to the contrary. “While many postwar Los Angeles artists did associate regional and environmental conditions with their art’s inspiration, artist Mary Corse did not,” she writes. Perhaps for this reason, Smith doesn’t linger on the idea when she

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90 Ibid., 100.
91 Ibid., 101.
asserts a connection between “the potential for limitless travel” through L.A.’s interconnected roadways and Corse’s own interest in the mathematical concept of infinity, as well as, of course, her primary painterly material which derives from highway construction.92 I would double down on Smith’s analogy and argue that Corse’s relationship to Los Angeles and its car culture extends to the actual experience of her art itself. While the mobile spectatorship provoked by Corse’s work doesn’t necessarily approximate that of vehicular movement (which can connote both speed and tedium), the artist’s prioritizing of the body in motion—her work’s apprehension depends on it—is directly related to her lived experience in Southern California. While it’s true that all cities demand movement, the immensity of the greater Los Angeles highway system and the amount of time its inhabitants spend on the road is unique.93 In the same way that mobility is demanded by the urban spread of Southern California, so does one have to move when perceiving one of Corse’s art objects.

Ken D. Allan, Lucy Bradnock, and Lisa Turvey have documented the ways in which the automobile became synonymous with Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s, when there was extensive growth of the freeways.94 Writing on California Pop art, they position the car culture of L.A. as contributing in three ways to art being made in that city: “as literal subject, a point of view . . . , or a material technique.”95 Artists took this new everyday experience as impetus and subject matter for artmaking. For Billy Al Bengston, the embrace of both car and

92 Ibid., 102–103.
93 Ibid.
94 Allan, Bradnock, and Turvey, 147.
95 Ibid.
motorcycle culture was inextricably tied to the artist’s concept of masculinity.96 For his 1968 retrospective at LACMA, an imposing life-size wax figure of the artist on a real motorcycle greeted museum visitors upon entry (fig. 14), asserting the importance of the road to his artmaking and identity.97 Bengston’s extensive use of metal and spray lacquers, a technique most often associated with custom detailing, puts his work into direct dialogue with L.A. and its freeways.98 From a more critical position, Ed Ruscha—another Chouinard alumnus, who like Corse has a more ambivalent relationship to L.A. than Bengston did—also engaged highway culture in his work.99 His iconic book Twentysix Gasoline Stations (1963) not only took its subject matter from the road, but the car enabled its creation (Ruscha took the photographs over the course of a drive between his hometown of Oklahoma City and L.A.) (fig. 15). A few years later, in 1966, Vija Celmins’s painting Freeway was featured in her exhibition at David Stuart Gallery in Los Angeles (fig. 16).100 The photorealist work depicts a view of the 405 Freeway as seen through a car’s windshield. The painting typifies a subject positioned inside a vehicle, and Celmins treated it with the same deadpan approach she used when depicting the everyday objects in her studio.101

Corse’s work offers a unique engagement with automotive culture as subject, material, and point of view. Most obviously, the road provides Corse

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96 Ibid., 125.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid., 158.
99 Ibid., 140.
100 Ibid., 147.
101 Ibid.
with her primary material. Corse also works on the floor of her studio. While this painterly technique certainly recalls the emphasis on horizontality in postwar art—from Jackson Pollock’s canvases to Robert Rauschenberg’s flatbed plane as described by art historian Leo Steinberg—Corse’s need to work on the floor stems directly from the technical makeup of her chosen material. It simply would be impossible to embed the crystalline beads if the in-progress canvas hung vertically. In this way, her process of working with the glass beads, by necessity, doesn’t stray very far from their commercial application to illuminate lane markings on roadways. Most significantly, Corse’s works allude to the car’s primary task: to put bodies into motion. This aspect represents a unique contribution to how the automobile manifested in art of the period. The body in motion becomes both the experience and subject of Corse’s works: each object compels the viewer to move within the gallery space in order to find a singular vantage point from which she can apprehend the work in its entirety. Again here, it is not to suggest that the movement provoked by Corse’s works mimics the specific type of movement enabled by a vehicle, but rather to connect the demand for mobility in Corse’s work to the same demand imposed by the experience of Los Angeles. In short, viewers are induced into motion when perceiving Corse’s works.

It would be easy to connect this idea of “art as experience” to one of Corse’s myriad quotes on the topic (“Art is the experience,” Corse declared in 1969. “That’s the only place [art] has any reality at all—in the experience.”102).

102 Mary Corse speaking about her art in Andy Eason, dir. and ed., with Mary Corse, narrator, White Light, 9 min. 10 sec. (Los Angeles: Eason Design Films,
But in an effort to move beyond the artist’s own statements on the topic, and illuminate points of connection with her contemporaries, the specific experience of driving and its relationship to artistic discourse is something worth pressing into. The notion of the road as providing an experience that art can attempt to mirror puts Corse’s seminal work into additional dialogue with East Coast Minimalism. This is important in that it once again brings to light connections between Corse’s work and other currents in art at the time, and also demonstrates the ways in which the artistic discourses of Los Angeles and New York converge in her practice.

In 1966, Artforum—at this point still headquartered in L.A. (it would move to New York a year later)—published artist Tony Smith’s now-famous interview in which he described his formative experience on the New Jersey Turnpike, then still under construction. While Drew Hammond has positioned Corse’s work in relation to Minimalism, no scholar has made the direct connection between her use of the lane-marking microbeads and Smith’s own formative nocturnal driving experience. In the piece, Smith describes an illicit ride down an unfinished portion of the newly constructed New Jersey Turnpike with several of his students. The experience of driving with nothing to light their way beyond the vehicle’s headlights challenged Smith’s definition of art. “The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn’t be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done . . . its effect was to

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liberate me from many of the views I had had about art,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{103} At first, Smith wondered if his experience signified an end to art, since, after all, “most painting looks pretty pictorial after that.”\textsuperscript{104} As art historian James Meyer has described it, Smith’s “experience of vast, open space was so powerful that gallery art seemed impoverished by comparison.”\textsuperscript{105} But the event provided Smith with insight into a new function for art: “There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.”\textsuperscript{106} Driving down the incomplete turnpike afforded Smith with something that art and architecture hadn’t up until that point; it took place over time and space and it had no pre-defined or objective function.\textsuperscript{107} Instead, it provided a subjective experience.

Corse hasn’t admitted to being influenced by the essay, but she was surely aware of the piece, which was published in L.A. during her tenure at Chouinard. Despite differences in experience, Corse’s discovery and embrace of the roadway microbeads can be read in dialogue with Smith’s iconic essay in ways that go beyond drawing inspiration from a nighttime drive. Firstly, the emphasis that Smith places on art as an experience that happens in space and over time relates to ways that Corse’s work prompts a certain kind of apprehension in the viewer. Her use of reflective materials instills both a spatial and temporal dynamic to her work, in that viewers must traverse space in order

\textsuperscript{104} Wagstaff.
\textsuperscript{106} Wagstaff.
to fully experience them. (This idea challenges the notion that art should be able to be perceived all at once—that “at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest”—which modernist critics like Michael Fried were calling for in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{108}) Further, both Corse and Smith are interested in producing an art that goes beyond the frame. While Minimalist sculptures, in their three-dimensionality, accomplish this literally, the act of perceiving Corse’s objects extends into the surrounding environments as viewers are compelled to physically move within the space.

Some of Corse’s rhetoric explicitly responds to the work her New York peers were doing contemporaneously. The publication of Donald Judd’s seminal essay “Specific Objects” also coincided with Corse’s time at Chouinard, and would likely have been discussed among her classmates and teachers. In the treatise, Judd argues that much of “the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture.”\textsuperscript{109} Asserting the limits of painting—primarily due to its inescapable shape-ness and referential status—Judd asserts that work in three dimensions allows for an engagement with “actual space,” which he argues, “is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface.”\textsuperscript{110} Corse has often said that there “really are no specific objects” in the sense that Judd puts forth.\textsuperscript{111} However, much of Corse’s work emblematizes

\textsuperscript{108} Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” \textit{Artforum} (Summer 1967); reprinted in Michael Fried, \textit{Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 167.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{111} Hammond, 1.
Judd’s manifesto. Her light encasements and ceramic works occupy a liminal space between painting and sculpture. Even Corse’s more traditional painterly works push up against the confines of the medium through their use of unconventional materials and compositions that evoke variable perceptual experiences. Further, paintings like her *White Light* works, in their encouragement of mobile spectatorship, speak directly to Judd’s concept of art as a means to engage with space. Again here, in connecting her with Judd, it becomes clear that Corse was indeed responding to the full range of art that critics deemed “advanced” at the time. This belies both the artist’s claims to the contrary, as well as her work’s marked absence from some of the more developed critical discourses of the twentieth century, such as that of Minimalism. Here, we see the ways in which Corse’s marginality was at once deliberately orchestrated by the artist’s own isolationist rhetoric, as well as imposed upon her by the art establishment’s bias against women artists (particularly those working outside of New York).

Corse has an undoubtedly complex relationship to the art that was being made around her in Los Angeles. While her work is inflected by the city, it also looks beyond it, beginning with her own self-described origin point in Abstract Expressionism, the adherents of which were largely based in New York City. While Corse’s use of microbeads is well documented, scholars have generally relegated discussion of them to their reflective, material qualities, in keeping with the artist’s own rhetoric. However, Corse’s use of the glass spheres is symptomatic of a deeper relationship to car culture, as well as the artist’s
overarching concern with inciting movement through the apprehension of her work. These interests both ground the artist in her local milieu—as Jane McFadden has observed, “Los Angeles has a geography that demands movement”¹¹²—and also enter her into dialogue with the rise of Minimalism on the East Coast. As we will come to see, Corse’s desire to expand and redefine the bounds of painting also connects her to a wider impulse that was very much alive in Lower Manhattan at the time—namely, that of experimental painting.

¹¹² McFadden, 273.
CHAPTER TWO

Departure and Return: Corse and Painting

Like many artists of her generation, Mary Corse has a complicated relationship to the medium of painting and its history. Firstly, she is specific when citing influences. It is in the Abstract Expressionist works that she encountered as a student that she locates her origins as an artist, despite the fact that newer modes of artmaking had, by then, gained authority. At the same time, she also generally refuses to be compared to those painting contemporaneously with her. And yet, her statements and work suggest a deep response to contemporary artistic and art critical discourses. When Corse proclaims, “The more you can get rid of, the better. Two dimensions is less than three dimensions,” she is indeed embroiled in the painterly questions of the nineteen sixties.¹¹³ This sentiment is in dialogue with various elements of contemporary discourse—from Frank Stella’s mantra “What you see is what you see” to Michael Fried’s take on post-painterly abstraction, which the art historian and critic celebrated for its “new illusionism” that both “subsumes and dissolves the picture surface.”¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Corse considers all of her works to reside within the category of painting. The artist, along with scholars like Jan Butterfield, grounds her refusal to categorize her practice as part of the Light and Space movement in her unique status as a painter. And yet, Corse has had several significant forays into sculptural work—both during her formative experimentations with artificial illumination in the late sixties, and again during

¹¹³ Bacon, “In Conversation: Mary Corse with Alex Bacon.”
¹¹⁴ Fried, 79.
her years-long investigations into ceramics in the late seventies and early eighties. Finally, Corse insists on characterizing her approach to the painterly medium as an outright refusal of three-dimensionality, or “objectness.” In fact, for much of her career, Corse preferred to bevel the edges of her canvases in order to create a very flat surface that would produce “less physicality.” However, I would argue that despite much of her work’s apparent flatness, its relationship to its surrounding space is more akin to three-dimensional sculpture or perceptually-oriented environmental work than traditional painting.

All of this begs the question: why does Corse claim she is, and always has been, a painter, despite the aforementioned evidence to the contrary? I understand this impulse to be symptomatic of a wider concern artists working during this period were grappling with—namely, the ostensible “death” of painting. In order to demonstrate the complex relationship Corse has to the medium, as well as the ways in which her experimental work is emblematic of currents in art in the late sixties and early seventies, it’s essential to understand the evolution of the artist’s practice. While Corse conceives of her career on a teleological trajectory—she maintains that “each painting comes out of the painting before”—her aesthetic strategies actually remain quite consistent over the decades in their exploration, within a relatively basic visual vocabulary, of the ways in which light can be captured, reflected, activated, and experienced. Further, the artist has departed and returned to the painterly

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115 Mary Corse, interview by Rani Singh.  
116 Bacon, “In Conversation: Mary Corse with Alex Bacon.”  
117 Mary Corse, interview by Rani Singh.
medium on two significant occasions, thus forging a trajectory that is more zigzag than linear.

While Corse had painted abstract canvases since high school, her work immediately matured upon her matriculation at Chouinard in 1964. In her first two years there, Corse started to engage most of the aesthetic strategies that she would continue developing over the course of her long career. Though she played with primary colors—“all that’s really necessary”\(^{118}\)—her paintings in art school were minimalist and already tended towards the monochrome. In part influenced by her knowledge of Josef Albers’s color theory, which she learned about in her high school art class, Corse began to experiment with what would become—in her eyes—the primary concern of her practice: how the viewer’s perception is part of a painting.\(^{119}\) Again here, it’s worth noting that Corse is selective about identifying influences. For years, artists pre-dating Albers had focused on perception in a similar way, and the issue was a constant of art-historical discourse in the sixties and seventies, not to mention the primary concern of Light and Space artists. I would venture to say that, given her status as a young female artist working in California, Corse strategically aligned her practice with established East Coast art figures like Albers in order to give it an art historical pedigree.

In Corse’s very early career, her concern with perception came to life in hard-edged, geometric paintings that utilized primary colors, echoing the strategies of slightly older artists like Frank Stella and Carmen Herrera. For

\(^{118}\) Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 49.

\(^{119}\) This idea of “the painting isn’t on the wall; it’s in your perception” (as quoted in Corse’s interview by Rani Singh) is a hallmark of the artist’s rhetoric.
example, in *Untitled (Red/Blue)* from 1964, Corse added a small corner of blue pigment to a large, red canvas (see fig. 1). At the colors’ bifurcation, Corse saw a “flash of white,” an experience which led her, for the most part, to abandon color in her work in favor of white.\(^{120}\) That same year, she also began to experiment with shaped canvases—using both colored and white pigments to explore negative space within octagons, hexagons, and diamonds. In 1964, she also inaugurated her lifelong pursuit of creating reflective effects within her paintings with the help of other materials—at this point, mica flakes from the art supply store—as she did in *Octagonal Blue* (1964) (see fig. 2).\(^{121}\) Soon after, she began to add zip-like lines to these shaped canvases, producing works like *Hexagonal Wt.* (1965) and *Untitled (White Diamond, Positive Stripe)* (1965) (figs. 17 and 18). These linear elements would evolve through her soon-to-come sculptures and resurface again decades later in her inner band paintings of the mid-nineties.

Although Corse’s output from 1965 through 1968 represents a significant deviation from what would become her trademark glittering monochromes, it still occupies a central part of the narrative of her career. The period is often mischaracterized in writing on the artist as the experience that propelled Corse resolutely back to painting. Instead, it merely marks her first significant foray into work outside the medium. In 1965, Corse started to create imposing, white triangular columns, which incorporated open linear elements, as in work like *Two Triangles* (1965) (fig. 19). These sculptural investigations evolved with the

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\(^{120}\) Suzanne Hudson, “Painting with Light,” in *Mary Corse*, ed. Eugenia Bell (Los Angeles: Inventory Press, 2017), 145.

\(^{121}\) Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 14.
inclusion of more diverse materials, including fluorescent lights. In 1966, Corse created her first light box, *Untitled (White Light Series)*, which was later shown in the 1970 Whitney Sculpture Annual and then acquired by the Guggenheim (fig. 20). The work, which hangs on the wall in a way that suggests it’s floating, was constructed out of a painted wood panel, Plexiglas, and fluorescent lighting tubes. Corse made a great attempt to disguise her hand by sanding out the brushstrokes on the panel in order to attain what she thought of as “objectivity.”¹²² Corse’s hope, in incorporating technology and removing her gesture, was to attain “an objective truth” through her art.¹²³ She recently described this pursuit as “no lies, no ego, no delusion.”¹²⁴ Despite their sculptural qualities, the light encasements were not viewed by Corse as a rejection of painting. “I called those light box pieces ‘light paintings,’ even though they were three-dimensional.” She continued,

> They were very thin, and I always thought that the essence of painting is not about the paint. I was more interested in the flatness, the light, and the space. To me that was what painting was about. It didn’t have to be made out of paint and canvas. It’s about the meaning and the experience.¹²⁵

Despite her stated allegiance to painting, Corse was clearly pushing beyond the traditional bounds of the medium.

> Corse was still hungry for a way to escape the wall entirely (again, a desire very much aligned with her Light and Space peers); however, this would require a means of hiding the trappings of the light technology she was using. In

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¹²² Hudson, 147.
¹²³ Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 18.
¹²⁴ Bacon, “In Conversation: Mary Corse with Alex Bacon.”
¹²⁵ Ibid.
her mind, freeing the object from the wall was essential to her quest for
objectivity. “I wanted to make a free object. I was still looking for an objective
truth, I think. I didn’t want art to be subjective.”126 In order to procure a certificate
to purchase parts for the high-frequency generator she needed to power her
light paintings wirelessly, she had to take a physics class at the University of
Southern California (see fig. 3).127 As she tells it, the knowledge gained during
this class unexpectedly shifted her perspective. Corse was introduced to
concepts in quantum physics, and suddenly her ultimate quest to attain
objectivity through her art felt misguided: if there was no single objective human
experience, why was she attempting to create that in her art? “Realizing there
was no objective reality,” as she described it, Corse decided to return to more
traditional painting and embrace a more gestural way of working.128

Los Angeles–based art historian Suzanne Hudson has characterized
Corse’s early work as sharing a singular objective: “To radicalize the nature of
looking as an interdependent exercise where material mutability meets ambient
contingency, and both are subject to the exigencies of the embodied
perceiver.”129 This characterization of Corse’s work as emblematic of a
triangular relationship between surface, environment, and viewer reaches its
apex with the artist’s discovery of the glass microbeads’ prismatic potential and
her subsequent foray into her trademark White Light series. Beginning in 1968,
Corse started to make large white monochromes layered with the glass

126 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 16.
127 For much more on this topic, see Ginger Elliott Smith’s dissertation.
128 Mary Corse, interview by Rani Singh.
129 Hudson, 145.
microspheres, which featured additional compositional elements like grids, square corners, and vertical strokes (figs. 21 and 22). The paintings in this series are all characterized by their use of the crystalline spheres to create luminous effects, as well as a worked surface of visible brushstrokes that lends an additional optical element to the refraction of light. In Corse’s words, the glass microspheres function as a “way of putting light into the painting.”\textsuperscript{130} The beads’ capacity to capture ambient light sources produces an endlessly variable experience that is entirely dependent on one’s positioning in the surrounding space. In this way, the experience of the paintings is fully contingent on the viewer: from one angle, the works appear to be matte; from another position, they are aglitter with lustrous light. “Two people looking at the same painting are seeing two different things. The painting isn’t on the wall; it’s in your perception,” Corse rightfully points out.\textsuperscript{131} She also sees these works as delivering on her aim of creating a painting that extends beyond its flat surface. “I always wanted to go deeper, and the light in the painting does that.”\textsuperscript{132} This sentiment echoes both Irwin’s and Judd’s respective calls for art objects that occupy the liminal space between sculpture and painting.

Corse would harness the glass spheres in projects that continued to explore the ideas at the heart of the \textit{White Light} paintings. For example, she began the \textit{Halo with Rainbow}\textsuperscript{133} series, for which she was granted the

\textsuperscript{130} Mary Corse, interview by Rani Singh.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Unfortunately, the only existing photographic documentation of this series that I could locate is an archival black-and-white photograph from the
Theodoron Award from the Guggenheim, in the early seventies (fig. 23).\textsuperscript{134} For these works, the glass microspheres’ prismatic effect is leveraged to create “a shifting iridescent and rainbow effect which changes with the movement of the viewer.”\textsuperscript{135} As Corse has described the experience: “The single image is formed only by small unpainted squares or angles in the corners, reflecting precisely a halo and rainbow around the viewer’s shadow which enlarges as the viewer backs up to finally a solidly lit surface.”\textsuperscript{136} Corse continued to work on the series through 1973, at which time she was awarded a National Endowment Fellowship.\textsuperscript{137} That same year, Corse introduced black into her painting for the first time, experimenting with what she referred to as “glitter” or acrylic squares (fig. 24). By 1979, she inaugurated her \textit{Black Light} painting series, which utilized the same glass microspheres she had harnessed for the \textit{White Light} monochromes initiated eleven years earlier but this time affixing them to a black painted surface (fig. 25).

During this same time, likely precipitated in part by her 1970 move to rural Topanga Canyon, Corse additionally began to create what she refers to as her \textit{Black Earth} series (see fig. 5). These large-scale ceramic pieces with glaze that mimics the light refraction of her microsphere works are not paintings in any traditional sense of the word. To make the series, Corse designed and built a kiln that could hold a tremendous capacity in order to fire earthen molds she

\textsuperscript{134} Theodoron Award catalogue in the Guggenheim archives. I’m forced to rely primarily on the artist’s description.
\textsuperscript{135} “Mary Corse: Career Summary.”
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
would cast from rocks she gathered in the landscape around her studio.\textsuperscript{138} With the huge kiln, she was able to fire “painting-scale” tiles that she hung on the wall in groups of two or four.\textsuperscript{139} As Corse observed, “The reflections of the rock’s bumpy surface glazed black had the effect of a field of light.”\textsuperscript{140} Corse additionally experimented with metallic and iridescent glazes (fig. 26). The final pieces would utilize many of the same compositional strategies as Corse’s previous works on canvas—sheen, repetition, and a monochrome palette—and produce similar perceptual effects, albeit in a new material and medium. Corse exhibited these works at the Janus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1979, at the Clocktower Gallery in New York in 1981, and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1983.\textsuperscript{141} The reviews she received were generally abysmal. One has to wonder whether it was the artist’s insistence on the works’ status as paintings that threw off critics.

In 1982, after eight years of working on and off with her kiln, Corse resolutely returned to creating paintings topped with reflective materials (fig. 27).\textsuperscript{142} Her work since then has trafficked in many of the same strategies she developed during the first two decades of her career. More recent series of particular note include the \textit{Black Arch} paintings, begun in 1989, which are generally bichromatic and feature a carved out negative space in the center of the canvas (fig. 28).\textsuperscript{143} Topped with the glass microspheres, the paintings’

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\textsuperscript{138} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{142} Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 31. \\
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 38.
\end{flushleft}
surfaces produce an experience that is similarly contingent on the location and movement of the viewer. Several iterations featuring more than one arch are quite large—even for Corse who generally works on an outsized scale—measuring more than twenty-feet across. The central space located between the arches led to Corse’s next series, in which she embraced an “inner band” motif. Per the artist, the White Inner Band series explicitly began in 1999 (fig. 29), but a similar exploration of negative space can be seen in work as early as her bifurcated, shaped canvases of the mid-sixties. In the more recent paintings, bands appear and disappear depending on where the viewer is in relation to the work and its light source. The act of viewing one of these works demonstrates the ways in which the series represents a continuation of Corse’s interest in the relationship between a painting’s surface and its dimensionality as an object. As she stated in a recent interview,

If you look at the flat surface from the side you don’t see it, but when you move around it appears—it’s like it’s actually inside the painting. Though this should be impossible, since there’s no “inside” to a flat, two-dimensional plane. This inner band exists first in an abstract perceptual reality, just like the other side of the moon, which we know exists, but which we’ve never actually seen, except maybe in photographs.

The act of perceiving the Inner Band paintings creates, in the artist’s words, an “experience of another dimension.” This must have felt like the ultimate success for Corse, inasmuch as she continues the series, and other related ones, until today.

144 Hudson, 147.
145 Mary Corse, interview by Rani Singh.
146 Ibid.
As evidenced by this history, one aspect that has remained consistent throughout Corse’s career is the ambition to create works that are constantly in flux. There is no single angle, or vantage point, from which one is meant to see the work, whether made in paint, light, or ceramic; the art object itself is always shifting and changing based on one’s position and perception. Because of this, all of Corse’s works encourage movement in their viewers, as those viewers attempt to seek out a non-existent vantage point from which they can see the work in its entirety. This propulsion is felt most strongly when regarding the glass microsphere paintings, but is also present in those works that utilize ceramics, fluorescent lights, and mica flakes to create similarly ephemeral perceptual experiences.

The work’s endless capacity for transformation finds its counterpart in Corse’s fluidity across the bounds of medium. As noted, Corse left painting not once, in 1966, as is generally acknowledged, but twice, when she ventured into the world of glazed ceramics in the seventies. Her double departure and return can be seen as emblematic of a broader moment in the late sixties and seventies during which, as art historian and critic Katy Siegel describes it, a “more complex terrain of possibilities” arose that challenged the definitiveness of “one must paint; or one cannot paint.” During this time, “the freedoms of new mediums” like video, performance, and conceptual art worked to open up the practice of painting into a realm that was not so clearly defined, but markedly more fluid and less specific. Rather than signaling the death knell for the

147 Siegel, 29–30.
148 Ibid., 30.
medium, Siegel contends that perhaps only a single definition of painting—that medium-specific one most readily identified with the modernist critic Clement Greenberg—was over.\textsuperscript{149}

Siegel tackled this complex moment of transition and innovation in her 2006 exhibition “High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975,” which strove to bring to light the generation of painting after Pop and Minimalism that challenged the traditional boundaries of the medium as it was defined until that point. Corse’s work was, somewhat controversially, included in the show (\textit{New York Times} critic Roberta Smith argued that neither Corse, nor German sculptor Franz Erhard Walter, should have been included based on their geography and the show’s more deserving omissions).\textsuperscript{150} In the accompanying catalogue, Siegel groups Corse into a cadre of painters who recognized the ascendancy of the photographic medium and sought to similarly use light as material (among them David Diao and Jack Whitten). While I remain unmoved by Siegel’s case that Corse was using surface techniques related to photography, I think the critic’s insertion of Corse into the landscape of experimental seventies New York painting makes a convincing framework within which to further discuss the artist’s practice.

Corse’s work offers a compelling example of various strategies cited by Siegel in \textit{High Times, Hard Times}. Firstly, Corse’s leveraging of non-traditional painting techniques and embrace of experimental materials fits squarely within

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
the rubric put forward by Siegel. During this moment, painters were trying everything—“from pouring to sewing and sponging and squeegeeing”—with the aim of bringing “in experiences that did not belong to the story of art history.” Artists ranging from Lynda Benglis to Jack Whitten experimented with an unusual array of techniques and processes: engaging the physical space of the gallery, introducing previously devalued craft elements, and using non-art materials, among other strategies. Corse’s breakthrough microbead paintings of course fit this bill, as do her light boxes and ceramic works, if one is to accept the artist’s insistence on their status as paintings (albeit not in the traditional sense). The handmade quality of Corse’s work also connects her to this historical moment. On this topic, Siegel writes, “The hand in question is direct and practically engaged with completing a task, rather than invested in minute refinements.” Corse’s arduous process of making the microsphere paintings, for example, requires the depositing of layers and layers of acrylic. Corse often adds structural elements like grids and vertical strokes to her compositions before the painting’s final stage of making, during which she scatters the crystalline beads while hanging from a platform above the work. The process is at once methodical and spontaneous. It brings to mind the technique of an artist like Joan Snyder, whose process is described by Siegel as similarly structural yet expressive. For her work The Storm (1974) (fig. 30), Snyder used a two-step process, first painting one of her gestural “stroke” paintings, and then

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151 Siegel, 30.
152 Ibid.
systematically layering on top an array of bold and heavy marks. Most relevantly, Siegel points out that the experimental painting of the late sixties and seventies also produced a new experience for the viewer, which in many cases challenged the “insistence on a design that could be apprehended immediately” (thus contesting the ideal, put forth by Fried, of being able to perceive a work all at once). Both the palette and composition of these paintings created a kind of “attenuated perception, a seeing in time and space rather than instantaneous apprehensions of design or gestalt.” In her discussion, Siegel cites the work of Kenneth Showell, whose Besped series unflattens the grid, and Jane Kaufman’s 6 p.m., which Siegel argues, creates “room for the viewer to enter a field that offers no resistance” (figs. 31 and 32). Corse’s work fits within this paradigm through its refusal to offer up a sense of totality from any single viewing position.

Corse’s movement between mediums—from hard-edge painting to technological sculptures, from ethereal monochromes to earth art—is emblematic of the moment during which new artistic possibilities gave rise to a renewed interest in pushing painting past its traditional bounds. While Corse settled on the medium by the early eighties, her work maintains its unfixed quality. In this way, the artist continued her exploration of creating art that was open-ended and fluid while maintaining her allegiance to painting. Her work—particularly the microsphere paintings—served to unfix the terms of the medium.

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153 Ibid., 81.
154 Ibid., 32–33.
155 Ibid., 33.
156 Ibid.
Rather than depart again, Corse succeeded in redefining and expanding what painting could be.

That Corse was also a female painter at a time when painting was considered a dead end for artists certainly added to her marginalization. As Corse puts it in rather succinct terms, “I was a painter, I was bad. I was a woman, I was bad. I was young, I was bad, I was a mother, I was bad.”157 While painting was deemed a medium in crisis throughout the twentieth century, its death throes during the seventies were particularly injurious to its female practitioners, leading to what curator Elisabeth Sussman has called the “erasure of woman painters.”158 Artist David Reed agrees that, in general, the advances of seventies painting are ignored because so many of the medium’s leading practitioners at the time were women.159 “It’s very strange that the history of painting could be thought to end just as women were beginning to make their contributions,” he noted in an *Artforum* roundtable with Sussman and other scholars in 2003. “Perhaps, instead, it’s only the idea of the heroic male genius that has died.”160 Reed expounded on this idea in his introduction to the catalogue accompanying “High Times, Hard Times” (the artist advised on the show):

> Often, experimental painting was not acknowledged because in such an old and distinguished, male-dominated medium, the innovations had come from

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157 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 79.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
unexpected, new sources—women, blacks, lesbians, gays, countercultural radicals, and bohemian sensualists. These attacks, however, did not stop the artists from painting.\textsuperscript{161}

Given these important observations, Corse’s continued engagement with the medium of painting must also be considered through the lens of gender.

CHAPTER THREE

Career and Identity: Corse, Feminism, and the Body

Talking to *Newsweek* in 1972, Corse spoke about what she perceived as the advantages afforded to her as a female artist: “If a man is married and an artist, he has to support his wife. We have less pressure. If a woman doesn’t make too much money, it’s not very downgrading.”162 The article’s author, Douglas Davis, held Corse up as an example of the astounding success a young female artist could achieve in the seventies—he touted her impressive dossier of awards from major museums, all won before the age of twenty-five. When pressed on whether having a family was a challenge for a working artist like herself, Corse went on to say that her husband and baby encouraged, rather than stymied, her achievements. “The baby keeps my head straight,” Corse remarked to *Newsweek*. “Some men just don’t think that a woman can really paint, but if my paintings are strong enough, I’ll get shows and exposure whether I’m a woman or a man.”163

Corse’s early career coincided with the emergence of feminism in the art world in the sixties and seventies. But, like many women artists of her generation, she has a complicated relationship with gender politics. To this day, the artist continues to deny her participation in the feminist movement. Reflecting on this, Corse stated definitely: “I didn’t want to make the art about

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163 Ibid.
politics.” As an artist striving to be recognized on her own terms, and on equal footing with male peers, Corse’s personal distancing from the feminist movement is unsurprising. This was true of more than a few women artists of the period. In a response to Linda Nochlin’s “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” published in 1971 in ARTnews, Elaine de Kooning made a similar argument:

To be put in any category not defined by one’s work is to be falsified. We’re artists who happen to be women or men among other things we happen to be—tall, short, blonde, dark, mesomorph, ectomorph, black, Spanish, German, Irish, hot-tempered, easy-going—that are in no way relevant to our being artists.

As curator Helen Molesworth confirms in her writing on abstract female painters of the sixties and seventies, “if the awakening of feminism meant that one had to identify with other women, it also meant that one had to identify oneself as not equal to men—a position some embraced with the proper anger and others avoided with an equally reasonable ambivalence.” In her writing on the topic, art historian Anna Chave has similarly observed that while some women artists preferred to participate in programmatically feminist exhibitions and initiatives, “others saw such endeavors as a trap, a way of formalizing a separate and

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164 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 19.
165 Especially considering the specificity of Corse’s personal experience. While many female artists had a dearth of role models, Corse’s first formative art encounters happened under the tutelage of a female art teacher.
secondary status for women.” To be sure, it was an especially complex time in which to work as a woman artist; one had to carefully balance a desire to be seen as equal to one’s male peers, while still exploring the particularity of one’s lived experience.

While Corse is resolute in her rejection of everyday politics, she views her art as offering a means of liberation from the limits of her contingent identity:

I have no interest in art that is about political statement, or grotesque. That to me is the finite world that I don’t want to be stuck in…I crave through art something beyond this finite existence…I want it to be about the human being not tied to specific time and space. I want to learn about myself from my work.

This desire to make art that pushes one out of the contingency of one’s immediate experience—including, in Corse’s case, her status as a woman and a mother—demonstrates a level of engagement with gender politics. Indeed, Corse was cognizant of her status as a woman in the art world, and she has been forthcoming on the ways in which her lived reality intersected with feminist concerns. As previously noted, according to the artist it was caring for her young family that drove the decision to leave the downtown L.A. scene in the midst of major professional successes for the relative isolation of the hills of Topanga Canyon. In retrospect, Corse considers the move fortuitous, in that it kept her “not as out there on the scene . . . more isolated,” her preferred way of

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169 Mary Corse, interview by Rani Singh.
working.\textsuperscript{170} As I’ve already speculated, this self-isolation may, in part, be predicated on self-preservation—a desire to remove herself from a male-dominated scene in which she already felt alone and under-recognized. However even if the move to Topanga wasn’t a conscious assertion of agency, the artist’s lived reality certainly connected her to the feminist movement’s goals. “What other woman artist raised two kids in those days?” she often asserts.\textsuperscript{171} Despite this fact, the artist contends that even as a single working mother she didn’t get respect within the movement. “I didn’t do all-woman shows. You know, and they didn’t like me for that. . . . I raised two kids on my own, and I’m independent. Women’s lib should love me.”\textsuperscript{172} One has to wonder if Corse’s refusal to be characterized as a female artist hindered further career exposure. Because she didn’t want her work to be associated with the political, she refused to participate in all-women shows. In this respect, Corse’s self-imposed isolation may have adversely affected her reception on a larger scale.

The artist’s rejection of figuration and embrace of abstraction further marginalized her from the feminist cause. Much has been said about the extent to which female artists who engaged with abstraction deliberately avoided the gender politics of the 1970s. The fierce feminist proponent Lucy Lippard questioned women artists who practiced formalism and therefore weren’t explicitly engaging with gender in their work. Reflecting back in a 1996 interview with Susan Stoops for the catalogue \textit{More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the 70’s}, Lippard suggested that at the time abstract painting

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{172} Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 19.
worked against the feminist cause, as formalist concerns were inherently masculinist:

> For me any conscious rejection of formalism was not so much aesthetic as political. It wasn't formalism so much as the formalists, who were so sure they were great, that no woman could make art as well as they did. For a lot of feminists, formalism represented the patriarchy — male authority, male ideas, and male rule, as well as a kind of neutralized, dehumanized art.\(^{173}\)

It’s worth noting that Lippard famously underwent her own feminist evolution, initially not self-identifying as part of the movement before later becoming one of its most stalwart defenders. In this way, Lippard herself embodies the conflict many women felt in the seventies about identifying with the feminist cause. In his dissertation on the critic’s feminist trajectory, scholar John Kaufman argues that in the seventies the art world provided alternative roles for women, thereby conditioning their receptiveness to feminist aims whether or not it was made explicit in their work.\(^{174}\) “Some women in the art world didn’t feel the need to deal with feminist issues, because they had already defined a high degree of personal freedom,” he writes. “But their lifestyle meant that they were already exploring issues of contemporary feminism.”\(^{175}\) This was surely the case for Corse, who raised two children on her own and continued—unwaveringly—to make art.

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\(^{175}\) Ibid.
More recently, others have argued that female abstract artists of the time need to be looked at through a more complex lens. In the catalogue accompanying a 2014 exhibition at the University of Michigan Museum of Art that reassessed the contributions of female minimalists, curator Erica Barrish reflected on the difficulties that plagued female practitioners of abstraction. “Their choice to avoid or simply forgo overtly feminist and politically charged themes in their work at a time when the women’s movement was ascendant undermined the degree of seriousness with which they were regarded by curators, critics, and even their fellow artists,” she argues, citing Corse, Agnes Martin, and Anne Truitt as relevant examples.176 In the catalogue, Barrish makes the case to view these and other likeminded artists not in terms of their rejection of traditional gender roles, but rather as committed to the “particular medium of painting” which they used to “translate their visual objectives onto the picture plane and give their art a form.” Rather than reading their work in the negative (i.e. as antithetical to politics), she advocates for emphasizing it in terms of a positive contribution to the medium and formalist discourse: “Their work was about color, surface texture, or compositional balance.”177 While Barrish notes that gender politics didn’t provide the motivation for these artists’ work, it necessarily conditioned “the circumstances of where and how they practiced.”178

177 Ibid.
178 Ibid., 8.
In her essay, “Outlaws: Women, Abstraction, and Painting in New York, 1967–1975,” Anna Chave puts forward the proposition that abstraction itself could represent an empowering gesture on the part of female artists: “For most women, demanding the freedom to become an artist meant demanding the freedom to work as they pleased. For many, abstraction stood as the epitome of aesthetic liberty.”¹⁷⁹ (This sentiment directly echoes Corse’s desire to create art “beyond [her] finite existence.”) This form of abstraction, Chave argues, often entailed rule-breaking—pushing the medium in new and novel ways—as well as reclaiming devalued techniques and materials that were typically gendered as female. For example, Chave argues that embracing the decorative—once called “the only art sin” by Eva Hesse—can itself be considered a feminist gesture.¹⁸⁰ Chave positions Corse, along with Ree Morton, Howardena Pindell, Jane Kaufman, and Joan Snyder, among those female artists who “set about reclaiming the decorative for their own purposes, whether burlesquing, reimagining, or celebrating it.”¹⁸¹ While I find Chave’s feminist assessment of Corse quite admirable, I don’t think it’s Corse’s material choices—the glass beads, glitter, and ceramics—that most productively insert her into a feminist discourse. Instead, as I will come to argue, it’s those materials’ shared ability to engender a viewing experience that demands mobility. In so doing, Corse’s work asserts embodied experience, and not just vision, as a vehicle for apprehension, thus giving legitimacy to the self as bodily.

¹⁷⁹ Chave, 117.
¹⁸⁰ Ibid.
¹⁸¹ Ibid.
It comes as no surprise that other readings that evoke the decorative elements of Corse’s art are not as generous as Chave’s. Criticism of Corse’s work abounds with references to what is presumed to be an innately feminine form of frivolity and vanity (of which the decorative is often put forth as an example). This gendering of the artist’s materials and approach exposes an underlying sexism. As Molesworth has smartly observed, while abstraction and painting may have promised a “non-gendered category ‘artist’ to the women who operated within its realm, the audience—critics, curators, collectors, dealers—was not so willing to operate in a state of genderless suspension.”

Instead, the audience actively “reinscribed these abstract works in a field of gendered language.” This is evident in the decades of criticism on Corse’s art.

That Corse’s work lacks seriousness is a longstanding theme in writings on her work by art critics. In 1971, Peter Plagens wondered in *Artforum* whether the *White Light* paintings were intended for a “lovely teen-age girl.” Plagens went farther in his 1974 *Artforum* review of the “L.A. Six” at LACMA, when he accused Corse of being “caught up in that glitter-rock, this-is-what-my-momma-raised-me-on-as-an-oppressed-little-girl-who-just-loved-sparkle, epicene, late camp shit.” In his 1972 *Artforum* review of Corse’s first one-woman show at Joe LoGiudice Gallery, critic Joseph Masheck likened one of her paintings to “a giant trinket.” “I hope it is ironical,” he condescends.

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182 Molesworth, 434.
183 Ibid.
186 Masheck.
Times piece, Pepe Karmel denounced Corse’s work as too lavish and superficial, accusing the White Light paintings of demonstrating an “inflationary opulence not yet denominated, even by Baskin-Robbins.”\textsuperscript{188} Karmel’s reference to ice cream attributes an inherent naïveté to the work that becomes more conspicuously gendered alongside his other outright references to traditionally female-associated domains and items. Corse’s ceramic paintings are compared to “luxurious wall tiles—something you’d find in a kitchen or a bathroom of a Los Angeles mansion” and the artist’s use of glitter is like “sequins on a cocktail-party dress.”\textsuperscript{189} While it’s a valid argument to describe some of Corse’s works, particularly the ceramics, as garish and less sophisticated, the sexism of the rhetoric undermines a legitimate critique.

Relatedly, comparisons that position Corse’s work as a feminine—and less successful—version of a male painter’s output are similarly rampant in criticism of her art. In 1971, in the Los Angeles Times, William Wilson identified in her approach a kinship with Robert Irwin, and yet Wilson asserted that the comparison only functioned to reveal the failings in Corse’s work. “Their whiteness seems to be about still contemplation, like similar art by Robert Irwin,” he writes. “[However] the contradiction between action and sensation in the Corse suggests the work, rather than the viewer, has a problem.”\textsuperscript{190} In the same 1972 Artforum review by Masheck, cited above, the critic referred to the White

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
"Light paintings as “sugarcoated, fairy-sparkled Robert Rymans.”"¹⁹¹ This rhetoric was not just a byproduct of earlier less enlightened times, but continued over the decades. In the same 1995 New York Times article quoted previously, Karmel described Corse’s Black Earth works as “like seeing Ad Reinhardt in drag, teetering along on spiked heels.”¹⁹² One wonders whether Corse has resisted comparison to peers precisely because she recognized it might work against her in a male-dominated art system, as these quotes surely demonstrate. That these biased comparisons persisted, despite Corse’s best attempts—both rhetorical and literal—to distance herself from her contemporaries, is symptomatic of the pervasive biases to which female artists are subjected. Corse’s work is also often accused of being “lobby art.” When leveled at artists in criticism, the phrase tends to evoke unfavorable qualities such as blandness and a kinship with decor. In his 1974 Artforum piece, Plagens described Corse’s installation at LACMA as looking “like lobby decorations for the Hollywood Egyptian-Cocaine porno theater.”¹⁹³ In her 1981 review of Corse’s installation at the Clocktower Gallery, which featured the artist’s Black Earth tiles hung together in a 12-foot-square mural, Barbara Smith admitted, “It is hard to think of this work as painting; I even have trouble thinking of it as art.”¹⁹⁴ She continued, “At this point Corse’s work seems closer to some very expensive custom tile work, which would look great in some very expensive

¹⁹¹Masheck.
¹⁹²Karmel.
As quoted in Chapter Two, *Artforum’s* review of Corse’s first solo show in 1972 echoed this sentiment, describing the work as “rich art, fat art, dessert art, ‘lobby’ painting.” While the assertion of “lobby art” isn’t in and of itself sexist, it’s notable that similar criticism has been leveled at male contemporaries and yielded different results. Whereas Frank Stella’s work has been long criticized by art writers for its overly decorative approach, the critique hasn’t stymied his success in either the corporate or museum spheres. Stella, who was celebrated as “the Developer’s Choice” in a 1985 *New York Times* write-up, was also recently granted an 18,000-square-foot Whitney retrospective (for which, it should be noted, the artist was lauded for his “risk-taking extravagance” by the *Times*’ chief art critic). It’s unsurprising to observe that qualities like boldness and embellishment are considered acceptable, if not praiseworthy, in the case of a male artist like Stella, whereas they are considered an inherent weakness of Corse’s art.

While these undeniably sexist critiques have done a disservice to Corse, there is space for a richer consideration of the ways in which the artist’s work was engaged with contemporary issues of gender. Her work’s evocation of the body offers a productive way into a discussion of her contribution to the

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195 Ibid.
196 Masheck.
discourse of feminism. During Corse’s early career, the second wave of American feminist art was getting underway. At the same time that this feminist work continued “the shift toward the perceptual conditions of the viewer” initiated by Minimalism, it also challenged the notion that all viewers—and bodies—are the same. 199 Accordingly, the second wave of feminist art embraced the idea of an essential womanhood and was “governed by an identification of woman and body.” 200 The body is a theme that is seldom discussed in the conventional narrative of Corse’s career. In part, the disavowal of the body as significant to Corse’s work can be attributed to her artistic strategies, which greatly diverged from the majority of her female peers. While contemporaries as varied as Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, and Carolee Schneeman were engaging in an overt politics of the body, Corse didn’t explicitly harness gender and sexuality as frameworks for her own work—this despite her temporal and spatial proximity to the CalArts Feminist Art Program and the general centrality of Los Angeles to the burgeoning second wave of the feminist movement. However, in revealing the ways in which Corse’s work emphasizes the body—both her own and that of her works’ viewers—her art can be read within a feminist discourse.

Corse’s bodily presence is expressed through both her gestural brushstroke and the sheer physicality of her artmaking process. The artist’s


200 Ibid., 572. Note, this art of the second wave was met with backlash in the nineteen eighties when many scholars engaged a discourse that was pointedly anti-essentialist and unembodied, while simultaneously forging a radical revision of current understandings of history, identity, and selfhood.
impulse to make her hand present in the work can be traced back to her
discovery, in 1968, of the glass microspheres, and her related decision to
embrace subjectivity over objectivity. Since this time, Corse has identified the
physical contact she has with the art object as an integral part of her artistic
process.201 “It is the grounding of creativity and a way to lose a lot of your
personal self,” she has said of her physical contact with the art. “You wouldn’t go
through all the labor, trial and error involved in making these pieces without
some sort of surrender to yourself . . . I like the experience of pushing the
human limit as part of making art.”202

As I’ve already alluded to, the application of Corse’s trademark material—
the glass microspheres used to illuminate lane markings on highways—indeed
calls for an extremely physical process. To make the works, Corse disperses the
glass beads atop layers and layers of paint, while suspended on a rigged
platform over the canvas, which lies below her on the floor. The physical
scattering of the beads is essential to their luminescence. (If the beads were
pre-mixed with the acrylic, the paint would hinder their refractive properties.)
Corse has to work extremely fast, as the paint layers dry quickly in the warm
and dry California weather; there are no re-dos.203 “The last layer is so difficult,
and the paint dries fast, and each brushstroke is so difficult to make,” Corse
described in a recent interview. “I throw the glass beads on. It’s very physical, I
have to pay attention.”204

201 Brown and Crist.
202 Ibid.
203 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 66.
204 Bacon, “Interview,” 158.
Interestingly, the almost painful physicality of Corse’s process is always mischaracterized in writing on the artist. Journalists from Douglas Davis in *Newsweek* to Linda Yablonsky in *T Magazine* have variously misrepresented Corse’s process as *mixing* the glass beads into acrylic paint prior to its application on canvas.\(^{205}\) Scholars alike have neglected to elucidate the process behind the microbeads’ application. Jan Butterfield, in her monographic study of the Light and Space movement, characterized Corse’s famous technique as “mixing crushed glass with acrylic paint.”\(^{206}\) Similarly, Robin Clark, in her exhibition catalogue for *Phenomenal*, inaccurately described Corse’s technique as “using pigments mixed with clear glass microbeads.”\(^{207}\) Not only do these mischaracterizations of Corse’s process negate the technical makeup of her trademark material, but they also diminish the sheer physicality involved in the making of her art objects. When accurately described, Corse’s propagation of the glass beads atop her canvases is revealed to be an intensely physical act that highlights the importance of the artist’s body to her artmaking. Additionally, the process connotes the powerful drips, flings, and ejaculations of Pollock and his Abstract Expressionist peers. That Corse is assuming the heroic, male gesture of action painting through the application of the microbeads attributes a


\(^{206}\) Butterfield, 245.

\(^{207}\) Clark, 55.
further feminist aspect to the work that is otherwise obscured through the
misrepresentation of her process.

Other aspects of Corse’s artmaking process similarly affirm an intense
physicality. Corse interprets her significant foray into earth art in the seventies
as related to a sudden recognition of her body, something she has described as
“traveling the continuum towards physicality.”\(^{208}\) As the artist explains it, after
working primarily on the ethereal *White Light* paintings for almost a decade, her
“intuition” compelled her to pursue a new direction: “My nature was making me
ground myself and realize, ‘Hey, you have a body.’”\(^{209}\) This shift towards nature
and her body directly connects Corse to the feminist aims of the time period.
However, it should also be noted that her interest in using the earth as material
is also concurrent with the rise of Land Art, supplying yet another instance in
which Corse’s work is in dialogue with concurrent art movements. (Despite
rejecting any notion of influence, Corse has indeed admitted that Michael
Heizer’s iconic *Double Negative* (1969; fig. 33) is “one of [her] favorite works of
art on the planet.”\(^{210}\)

To make the earth pieces, Corse and a friend would drive into the
mountains surrounding her property. Once they identified a site, Corse would
press clay into the rocky surfaces to create a mold. Together they would tie the
mold onto her truck, and drive it back to her studio.\(^{211}\) The works were fired in a
huge, high-fire kiln on Corse’s Topanga property, which she designed and

\(^{208}\) Corse, “Artist’s Statement,” 63.

\(^{209}\) Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 77.

\(^{210}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{211}\) Ibid., 27.
constructed herself in order to create works that were human-sized. While Corse would generally install the works in a four-by-four grid, giving the impression that together the ceramics traced a continuous site, each tile actually repeats an impression of the same piece of rock. In this way, Corse referenced the seriality of Minimalism while using the earth as her material. Though made of clay, the works glitter and refract light similarly to her glass microbead paintings. As Suzanne Hudson has described it, the appearance of these reflective, imposing works “is disorienting . . . it has the remarkable effect of suggesting a pool of water that should be at one’s feet.”

The importance of Corse’s gesture and body manifests itself quite powerfully in the Black Earth series. While putting the clay to the earth, Corse would use her fingers’ strength to model the surface. “The clay paintings are hand pressed . . . It is, again, connecting consciousness to material,” she has said. This process leaves a literal bodily trace that remains in the finished pieces, and which contributes an additional optical element to the refraction of light produced by the glaze. The work Untitled (Black Earth Series) (1978) demonstrates the enduring traces of Corse’s hand, and alludes to the human figure in both its dimensions and scale (fig. 34). In viewing it, references to the body become explicit. One sees the evidence of Corse’s weight in the remnant hand-markings, and the spectator’s own body is referenced by the work’s scale. Untitled makes a strong case to connect Corse’s Black Earth series with

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212 Bacon, “In Conversation: Mary Corse with Alex Bacon.”
213 Hudson, 148.
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
feminist-oriented earth art such as Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas*, which the artist inaugurated in 1973 (fig. 35). For her series, Mendieta created hundreds of works by imprinting, sculpting, molding, and tracing her silhouette into materials like sand, dirt, fields, and trees. The *Siluetas* assert a connection between the body and nature that is emblematic of 1970s feminist artistic practice. Corse’s *Black Earth* series can be read within a similar framework.

As alluded to above, the sheer physicality of Corse’s process and her hand’s indexical trace are not the only times the body is gestured at in the work. The artist often references the importance of making her art human-scaled. For Corse, the impressive scale of her works is not about ego or taking over space, but rather engaging the viewer’s own body and encouraging mobility. Discussing her paintings on the occasion of *Summer 1985* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Corse described how she always creates works with the “physical relationship to the viewer in mind.” By making paintings “slightly taller than a person—seven feet or over,” Corse intends to incite participation by the spectator. For example, in the case of the *Halo with Rainbow* series, she says, “You can actually enter [the works]…because you can see your shadow and your halo in the painting.” Similarly, by making her clay pieces about “the size of a doorway,” viewers can “metaphorically . . . go through them.”

Corse’s concerns with scale echo those of Agnes Martin, who famously said that a painting is “a good size [when] you can just feel like stepping into it. It has to

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216 Brown and Crist.
217 Ibid.
218 Ibid.
219 Ibid.
As Corse recently described to Alex Bacon, scale also provides a means to introduce the element of duration to the perceptual experience of her work: “If the painting is very long, it takes time to take it all in.”\textsuperscript{221} As I’ve already observed, the body’s transambulation through space is an integral aspect of experiencing Corse’s works.

In her dissertation, Ginger Elliot Smith touched on Corse’s engagement with the body by describing her paintings as instigating “a spectatorship orchestrated by moving the body through space.”\textsuperscript{222} This notion of an embodied viewership challenges the Greenbergian enshrinement of pure opticality. Key to Clement Greenberg’s theory was the privileging of the optical over the physical. As the critic argued in 1958, “The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in either pictorial or sculptural art; now it is eyesight alone.”\textsuperscript{223} While Smith doesn’t posit the corporeal experience of Corse’s work within a feminist discourse, I would argue that the work’s demand for a physical apprehension, in additional to a merely visual one, gives legitimacy to the self as bodily. I would argue that the individuated embodied experiences mediated by Corse’s work have feminist implications, even if the artist was not explicitly engaged with the politics of gender.

\textsuperscript{220} Nancy Princenthal, \textit{Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art} (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 67.
\textsuperscript{221} Bacon, “Interview,” 157.
\textsuperscript{222} Ginger Elliott Smith, “Technology and Artistic Practice in 1960s and 1970s Southern California,” 138.
Critic Patricia Kelly’s appraisal of Jo Baer’s white paintings and abstract works of the late sixties and early seventies provide a powerful analogue for reading Corse’s work in such a way. Like Corse, Baer didn’t identify with the feminist movement and “eschewed direct political engagement through the art object.”

Nonetheless, Kelly ascribes political motivations to Baer’s work through its “insistence on the viewer’s critical consciousness and by the instigation of transformative individual experience.” Describing the artist’s *Stations of the Spectrum* (1967–69), Kelly asserts that “depending on viewer position, lighting, and angle of one’s gaze, certain optical effects are initiated which are based solely on processes of perception rather than the material construction of the canvas itself” (fig. 36). In this way, Kelly argues, the experience of Baer’s canvases is mediated through the body of the spectator.

Kelly contends that this prioritization of the viewer’s body in motion can function as a means for a female artist like Baer to “interject a poetics of difference into advanced avant-garde practice.” By similarly utilizing a model of viewership “rooted in the body as much as the eye,” Corse’s work can also be read in a politically engaged context.

Beyond their interest in painterly abstraction, both Baer and Corse also share a personal connection with dance and performance. Corse was trained in classical ballet starting at the age of five—she would eventually perform with the

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225 Ibid.
226 Ibid., 54.
227 Ibid.
228 Ibid., 62.
229 Ibid., 58.
Oakland Ballet in her teens—and until this day, she has a dance studio for her own private practice in her Topanga home. In addition to her lifelong passion for dance, Corse has signaled an interest in the concerns of performance art. She has cited Robert Morris, an artist who was creating performances “as an expression of his interest in the ‘body in motion,’” as one of her few contemporary influences. For her part, Baer started to take classes with experimental choreographers like Yvonne Rainer and Lucinda Childs in the late sixties. Kelly asserts that these experiences encouraged Baer to explore how an audience “physically interfaces” with her paintings. I would argue that for both Corse and Baer, movement can be considered elemental to the way they think about their own body and experiences in the world. Both artists’ “commitment to a peripatetic viewership”—to borrow the words of Kelly—speaks to their radical and groundbreaking efforts to challenge contemporary notions of painting. By thinking of the work in this way, Corse’s canvases take on an almost performative quality, extending themselves beyond the frame in a way that links them both to contemporary performance as well as to the overlapping concerns of Light and Space and Minimalism.

If we look at Corse’s paintings as creating an environment beyond their edges, Deborah Fausch’s theory of feminist architecture offers another relevant lens through which to consider the artist’s engagement with an embodied

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230 Email with Melinda Lang, curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum of American Art, March 2, 2018.
232 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 28.
233 Kelly, 61.
234 Ibid., 52.
spectatorship and therefore the politics of gender. Corse has been adamant that, while an avid interest of hers, architecture doesn’t affect how she conceives of her work: “I think about architecture. I love it, and I love showing in modern architecture buildings, but it’s not a big issue. . . . Perception . . . has more to do with the human being size.” The perceptual environment created via Corse’s work, however, is relevant to the larger conversation of architectural space and also the haptic, embodied ways in which viewers must apprehend her paintings. Much like the opportunity Fausch identifies in architecture, Corse’s paintings’ demand for a physical experience, in addition to a visual one, provides a platform to experience—and legitimize—the self as bodily.

In her essay, Fausch theorizes a feminist approach to space, arguing that since architecture engages the body, it has the potential to be feminist. She makes clear that the essentialism she engages with is strategic: her argument is not that the feminine is bodily, but rather that a “nonoppressive attitude would include a regard for the bodily.” Fausch argues that Western culture has a propensity towards “abstraction, distortion, mistreatment, even banishment of the body.” A feminist architecture would thus endeavor to merge body and mind, and require it “be experienced by senses other than vision in order to be understood” (here again challenging the notion of Greenbergian opticality).

235 Mary Corse, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 43.
237 Ibid.
238 Ibid., 40.
239 Ibid., 39.
Fausch cites several examples of art that use “the body as a necessary instrument in absorbing the content of the experience,” including Mary Miss’s *Veiled Landscape*, which demands “movement as a mode of apprehension” (fig. 37).

Like Miss’s work, Corse’s art demands a physical experience grounded in the body, as much as in the eye. In the course of perceiving her work—especially the microbead paintings—one falls into a sort of dance around the gallery space that leads to a heightened sense of one’s own physicality. The viewer comes closer to the work and then backs away, noticing how the light shifts and the surface changes. The experience of the work varies with the body’s movement: compositional elements like grids and bands are revealed and then dissipate. In some positions, the paint will appear entirely smooth and lusterless; however, as the viewer’s position shifts, she will encounter points of illumination and evidence of the artist’s hand. The works can’t be apprehended in a single glance—the experience of them is fluid, contingent, and always shifting. To paraphrase the words of Corse, the experience of her art forces the realization, “I have a body.”

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240 Ibid., 42.
241 Ibid., 43.
CONCLUSION

Place, Time, and Identity

Through its assertion of a relationship between surface, light, and viewer, Corse’s work moves beyond its edges and engages with the world around it. The artist’s practice can be thought of in a similarly expansive way. Despite Corse’s statements to the contrary, as well as her general exclusion from art historical discourse, the first two decades of her work are in dynamic dialogue with broader impulses and concurrent trends operating at the time. For this reason, a more complex and historically contextualized understanding of Corse’s contribution to contemporary art has been long overdue.

Corse’s innovative use of reflective materials to engender an art viewing experience that is grounded in the movement of the body, as much as in the perceptual experience of the eye, is connected to its place of making, the time in which it was made, and its maker’s lived experience in the world. The geography of Los Angeles provided Corse with several aspects integral to her artistic practice: plenty of space and the central experience of mobility afforded by its endless arteries of roadways. However, the isolation typically engendered by these same qualities belies Corse’s fruitful relationship to her contemporary moment. The first two decades of Corse’s career represent a deep response to the concurrent art movements and contemporary discourses developing on both the West and East Coasts—from Light and Space and Finish Fetish to Minimalism and Performance. At the same time, Corse was also contending with the status of painting, a medium in ostensible crisis. Through her artistic
investigations, she challenged the traditional boundaries of painting and in doing so succeeded in unfixing the terms of the medium. As an artist who came of age in the late sixties, Corse was also hyperaware of the ways in which her contingent identity as a woman and a mother conditioned her career in the male-dominated art system. Despite her unwillingness to align publically with the burgeoning feminist cause, Corse engaged in the politics of gender by giving legitimacy to the self as bodily through her work.

All of these connections challenge the artist’s own antagonistic position towards the art world, as well as the general absence of her work in art historical scholarship and discourse. Being a female artist, a young mother, and an abstract painter positioned Corse—in ways real and imagined, externally imposed and self-created—on the margins of the art world. To that end, it’s difficult to parse where Corse’s deliberate “opting-out” ends and the art establishment’s structural biases begin. Her art’s intersection with so many different artistic approaches and concerns also speaks to its propensity to eschew categorization, adding an additional barrier for contemporary reappraisals.

Of course, Corse’s own elusiveness finds its most persuasive expression in the art itself. The subtlety of her work, particularly the White Light paintings, demands it be encountered physically in real life, which makes it not only difficult to talk and write about, but also puts it at somewhat of a disadvantage in an age of digital reproduction and communication. But it is in fact this intangibility that gives Corse’s work its unique power. In bringing it to light in this study, it is my
hope that Corse’s art can be more readily considered, and contextualized, within critical discourse. Doing so will not only illuminate Corse’s decades-long contribution to artmaking, but will also enrich our understanding of the trajectory of contemporary art.
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Figure 1: Mary Corse (b. 1945), *Untitled (Red/Blue)*, 1964. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 52 inches. © Mary Corse
Figure 2: Mary Corse (b. 1945), *Octagonal Blue*, 1964. Metal flakes in acrylic on canvas, 93 x 67 1/2 inches. © Mary Corse
Figure 3: Mary Corse (b. 1945), *Untitled (Space + Electric Light)*, 1968. Plexiglass, neon, high frequency generator, 45 1/4 x 45 1/4 x 4 3/4 inches. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. © Mary Corse
Figure 4: Mary Corse (b. 1945), *Untitled (White Light L-Corners)*, 1970. Glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches. Collection of Dia Art Foundation. © Mary Corse
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Figure 6: Mary Corse (b. 1945), *Untitled (White Light, Beveled Edges)*, 1970. Glass microspheres in acrylic on canvas, 107 x 107 x 3 inches. © Mary Corse
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