Electric art

JANE HASKELL'S NEON CREATIONS: CHANGING COLORS, CHANGING MOODS

BY ABIGAIL PESTA

Commuters rushing to and from work through Pittsburgh's main subway station may not necessarily stop to note that the walls they pass are red and orange at dawn, blue and green at dusk. But chances are, on a subconscious level, it registers.

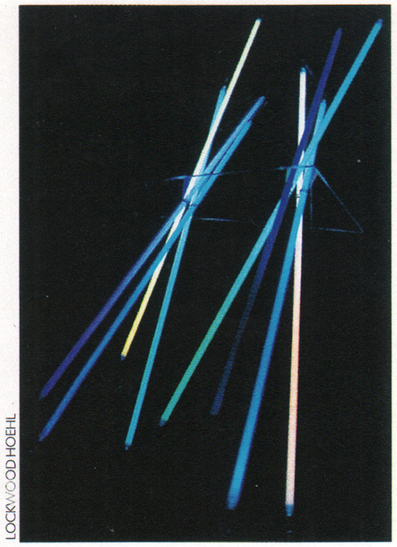
"We perceive our whole world differently in different light. When the colors of objects change, our perceptions are changed; our moods are changed," says Jane Haskell, the artist responsible for the timer-controlled hues in the 5,000 sq. ft. neon installation at the Steel Plaza Subway Station.

Since her initial paint experiments with light and color in the mid to late 70s, Haskell has left an indelible mark on the world of neon artistry, with the Pittsburgh subway station serving as her first major commission in 1982.

Currently in the works for Haskell, who lives in Pittsburgh, is the design of an installation for the Delta terminal of the Fort Lauderdale Airport, which she plans to complete later this spring. Intending to use fiber optics to create a design that suggests motion, Haskell says, "The space is very wide and not very high, so I hope to make a long, flowing pattern of light, possibly to complement the idea of an area where there are conveyers for baggage. I'd like to express the idea of a light conveyer."

Haskell has mapped out 100' of fiber-optic cable for the terminal, with the intent of creating constantly evolving colors. Through the use of a rotating color wheel, the light should change shades as quickly as every few seconds. The artist hopes that fiber optics will create a softer, more subtle glow than neon, which has been a primary source of light for her previous installations. "People might not want to be assaulted by flashing neon while waiting for their baggage," she notes.

Haskell's interest in color's relationship to light dates to her days as an art-history professor at Pittsburgh's Duquesne University in the late 60s. "I was very interested in



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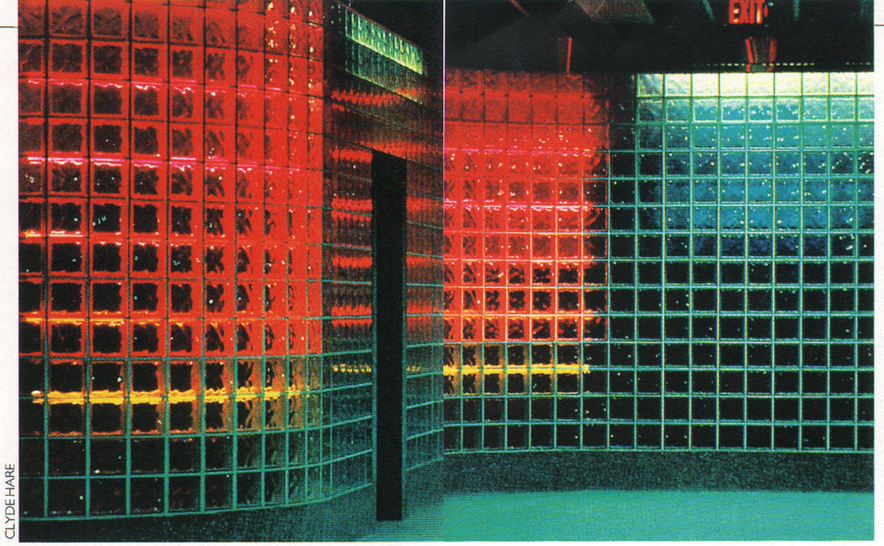
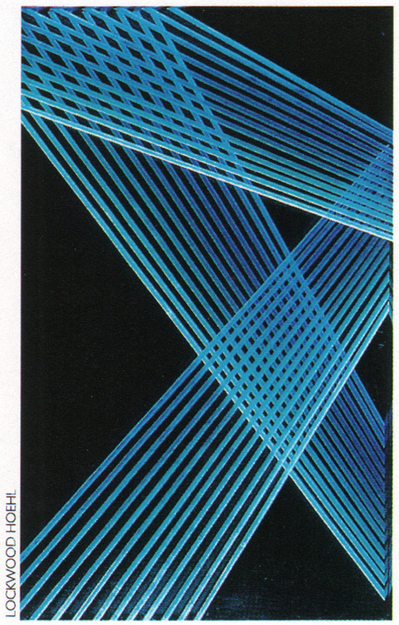


CLYDE HARE

Jane Haskell's "Concerto in Light, No. 1 and No. 2," created in 1981, consists of two 10' 6" x 8' acrylic-painted canvases illuminated by neon (previous page). Haskell's recent "Cosmic Tracks" (left) is her first three-dimensional neon hanging sculpture. "Planes Intersecting," which Haskell designed in 1978, is a 35" x 36" x 6" form of etched plexiglass, fluorescent light, and wood (below, left).

color and light as expressed by the impressionists in late 19th Century France," she says. "Scientific research influenced Seurat and the pointillists, particularly in the breakup of color into prisms. There were many publications which dealt with physical aspects of color and light; these intrigued me as much as they intrigued the painters of the 19th Century."

Joseph Albers, a professor at Yale, was among the artists who inspired Haskell in the early 70s, through his volumes titled *The Interaction of Color*. Albers illustrated the way in which color changes in relationship to its environment, Haskell says, with two glasses of water, one warm and one at room temperature. If a person thrusts a hand into the warm glass first, then into the room-temperature one, Albers wrote, the water in the second glass is perceived to be cold. He observed that color is similar. Placing one color in proximity to others changes the way it is perceived—red surrounded by green appears redder, for example, than it does by itself. Haskell notes that she strives to take the concept a step further, using light to change the perception of color.



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For instance, in an exhibition at the Pittsburgh Plan for Art gallery in 1985, Haskell used the gallery walls as a canvas in her piece "Mystery at Eleusis." The long walls of the rectangular space were painted red and blue, while the shorter ones were painted violet. Each of the violet walls had an 11' column of neon light. At the center of the room, a white altar of four pyramid-shaped structures stood, reflecting light from the columns. It was thus impossible to tell that the pyramids were painted white. And the walls changed as well, appearing gray, for instance, where green and blue light mixed with a red wall.

Haskell has found that neon is the most practical medium for her artwork, as a neon tube can last 30 or 40 years, if the proper care is taken. "Neon is initially more expensive than fluorescents, but the life of a fluorescent lamp is limited," she says, "so I hesitate to recommend fluorescents to anyone."

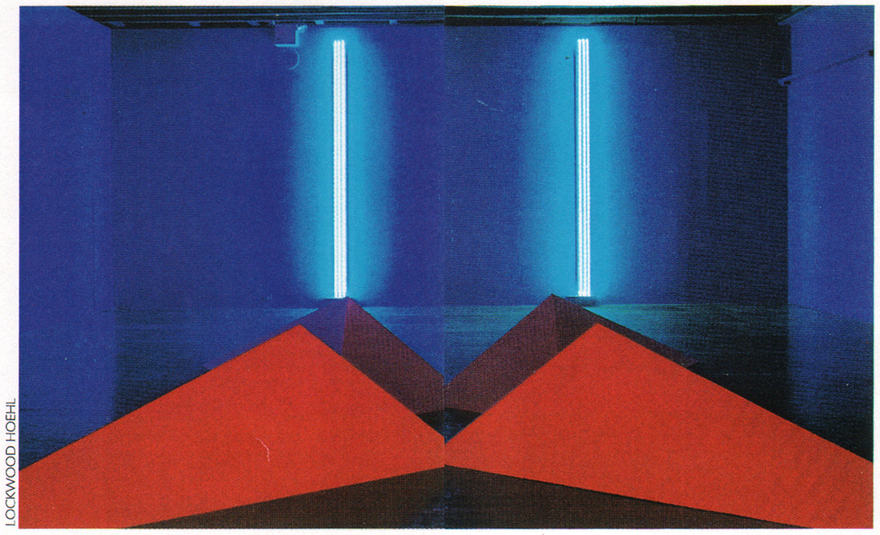
Haskell hires glass fabricators after designing her patterns, and works directly with contractors as well as by herself in her studio. "I like seeing something grow; I like working with other people to get across my ideas and to have them work with me to complete those ideas," she says.

The concept of working with her hands has appealed to Haskell since her youth, but after initial experimentation with wood and clay, she found that her hands simply weren't strong enough. "I'm just not physically able to do the kind of sculpture that a really strong person can do," she says. "But when I found light, I found something that I could work with."

Being able to conceive and design a large work and at the same time remain in control of it is essential to Haskell. Because neon tubes themselves are rigid, her work evolves in the design phase. Once a neon tube is made, there's no experimenting with it. However, with wood, clay, or other moldable material, she notes, she would have to ask someone to form her artwork for her with their hands, which might alter her original design.

Haskell's designs range from gallery pieces—such as Rothko-inspired painted canvases illuminated by neon, and 19' tall painted-steel and neon sculptures—to major public commissions. Among these is an installation in the student union at the University of Pittsburgh, which consists of a neon panther bearing the tree of knowledge on its back. Each branch is in a different color, symbolizing the degrees granted by the university.

Symbolism plays a significant role in Haskell's artwork; for instance, her subway-station installation is based upon Pittsburgh's being at the confluence of three rivers. The station is triangular, and Haskell decided to take advantage of that shape and the tracks' convergence to create a theme based on the merging of the rivers. "I created behind glass block a warm pattern and a cool pattern of light and color," she says. "The block creates a flowing pattern, and behind the block the colors flow like water, with the east side having the light of dawn and the west side the colors of evening." The timer-activated neon lights radiate reds, oranges, and yellows in the morning, with the blues, greens, and violets appearing at 3pm.



LOCKWOOD HOEHL

Four white enameled-wood pyramids (left) reflect colors of various neon columns in Haskell's "Mystery at Eleusis." The artist (portrait, above, right) used painted aluminum, glass block, and neon to create the flowing pattern of light and color in her installation at the Steel Plaza Subway Station in Pittsburgh (above, left).

Subtle symbolism crops up again in Haskell's installation at Boston's Logan Airport parking garage, which she completed in 1991. Designed in the 60s by a disciple of architect Louis I. Kahn, the building has two stairways at either end. Haskell was asked to make them more interesting for the traveler—but in a manner that could be easily maintained by the building's electricians. "I designed what I call 'Windows of Light,' because the stairwells have all these convoluted Romanesque architectural forms, but it was a bare-bones concrete shell, not pierced by any openings," Haskell says. So she superimposed on the concrete walls neon installations simulating stained glass windows. "It's a very contemporary building, but it has the spirit of the medieval. I thought I would create an aura of light and a psychological effect of warmth and welcoming," she says.

Haskell also designed a "Window Series," which was on display in the A.I.R. Gallery in Soho in New York City in the spring of 1992. "There's an effect of the window, with the light coming through the window or going out from it," she says. "Is it welcoming you into a lighted room, or are you a prisoner in that room looking out on the world? Are you protecting yourself through those half-darkened windows from the intrusion of the outside world?...These are psychological effects that intrigue me."

Haskell plans her designs with a Claris MacDraw II program on a MacIntosh IISI computer, a method she finds infinitely superior to her early days of planning everything on graph paper, as she can now come up with a much faster design on a computer than she could freehand. "I'm now able to put units of light into my memory and then pull them out of the memory and move them around on the screen until I get a configuration that I like," she notes. On graph paper, the time involved in constantly redrawing ideas severely limited the number of variations Haskell had the patience to try, she says.

Currently, Haskell is working with a three-dimensional program on the Mac and has planned some 3-D neon pieces, among them a hanging plexiglass trapezoidal form, which was displayed in the fall at the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh Gallery's "Illumination" exhibit. "Most of my works are sculptural wall pieces. The idea of a three-dimensional hanging piece is something new for me," she says.

Also on Haskell's to-do list is further experimentation with fiber optics. "I don't know whether it's going to work for me, but one of its wonderful potentials is that you can use a rotating color wheel to change the colors, which move through fiber-optical material, creating constant change," Haskell says, pointing out that fiber-optic material is also unbreakable, but that it is necessary to regularly replace a halogen lamp behind the color wheel.

Haskell experimented with fiber optics in the late 70s but found at the time that it was used mainly for medical procedures, so was not developed in terms of decorative or artistic material. "The purpose was to create points of light at the end of the optical fiber, rather than to emit light along the cable," she says. Now fiber-optic material that emits light through the length of the cable is available, and can be used for architectural detail.

ARTHUR MONES

Haskell says she is encouraged by the potential for light artistry, what with the continual evolution of computer-design programs, technology, and light forms. "I'm always experimenting,...and it's very exciting. Light is such a dynamic medium," she says. "Every work is a surprise when it's completed. It's fun to turn on the lights, because until I do, everything on paper is just an approximation. When I turn on the lights, I know whether I've succeeded or failed." □