



A glowing cosmic spectacle - Anthony McCall Solid Light Works review

Hepworth Wakefield JMW Turner meets Isaac Newton and JG Ballard in this psychedelic show of smoke machines, light vortices and luminous mists that map roads into the unreal

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In a darkened, cavernous space, projectors draw strong white lines on black walls. The animated sketches they beam out form squiggles that grow into ovals and circles then collapse and start again. Meanwhile, smoke machines pump out a fine mist that floats into the cones of light and fills out their geometries to create an effect the artist calls “solid light”.

So far, so interesting, but when you walk inside that solid-seeming light and turn your eyes back towards the projector, strange things start to happen. The circles, ovals and triangles of light beaming around you form corridors and gothic arches, spooky tunnels and apocalyptic vortices of silvery whiteness where clouds of smoke stream by in an ever-changing stormy spectacle. It is like being inside a painting by JMW Turner, enclosed in cascades of luminous mist, revealing endless vistas of skies and seas that melt and merge in a glowing cosmic spectacle. Step out of the beam, and it vanishes in an instant. Run your fingers through the

light and you can draw with shadows, like putting your hand in a running stream to see the water dance.

McCall's art is interactive in the best way. It does not insist on any particular kind of behaviour or coerce a reaction. In fact, the mood is still and sombre. The white monochrome light is grave and serious. From the outside, the structures it creates are dignified, restrained, even mournful. Yet in the end you can't resist going into that light. As soon as you begin exploring its gradually altering pyramids a fantastical dimension opens up.



'In the end you can't resist going into that light' ... Doubling Back.
Photograph: Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images

What is light? Ask a physicist. Perhaps the first light artist was the father of physics himself, Isaac Newton, who released the spectrum of colours from white light by letting a sharp shaft of sunshine into a darkened room and refracting it through a prism. That was in the 1660s. Since then, light has been defined as both a wave and a particle and we know the light we can see is just one narrow part of the electromagnetic spectrum. McCall does not so much prove such theories as make us see, and seem to touch, the power of this fundamental phenomenon of nature.

In other words, he is a mystic, a sun worshipper. The awe McCall makes us feel is similar to the excitement that Neolithic people must have got from seeing winter sunlight penetrate the entrance shaft of Orkney's Maeshowe burial chamber at the winter solstice. Yet he hides his primitive cult of light under a rigorously scientific approach.

This important British artist's mini-retrospective at the Hepworth juxtaposes beguiling installations with drawings, photographs and films that chart his almost five-decade preoccupation with the tension between romance and rationality, vision and design.



'Fire-worshipping ecstasy' A still from McCall's Landscape for Fire II, 1972. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

McCall's journey into the light began at festivals in early 70s Britain where rock, art and drugs mixed freely. Between 1972 and 74 he worked with future members of the punk band Crass to create eerie "Landscapes for Fire" on abandoned second world war airfields. In a film of Landscape for Fire II, white-suited performers methodically light regularly spaced bowls of fire in a field at dusk until the flames form a precisely planned grid of pagan light in the darkness. JG Ballard could surely have written a story about this weird moment of psychedelic conceptual art in which ritualistic, fire-worshipping ecstasy is contained within a geometrical structure. It is a strange, disciplined rite.

In 1973, experimenting like Newton in his chamber, McCall let a single crack of light into his room to study how dust and smoke made it seem substantial. In those days there was more than enough cigarette smoke in galleries and to provide such effects. Nowadays, he has to supply dry ice.

I walk back inside the corridor of light. It is hard to resist those dreamy feelings of transfiguration. McCall is a scientist of the sublime, precisely mapping roads into the unreal. After a while, all critical faculties vanish as you wander down his intoxicating highways of light, letting go, with the controls set for the heart of the sun.

Anthony McCall, Solid Light Works is at the Hepworth Wakefield until 3 June.

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