



# Alyson Shotz: Standing Wave

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**Christopher Bedford:** Can you tell me what drew you to the material you used to create *Standing Wave*?

**Alyson Shotz:** I'd been making sculptures that had virtually no color for a few years. Most were made of clear glass or various types of plastics. They absorbed and reflected the light and color of the room, but they were essentially clear. I was really beginning to miss using color in my work, but yet I didn't want to paint color on. I wanted it to be a physical part of the material in some way. I'd had a sample of this stuff in my studio for a few years—one of my suppliers had sent it to me to try. What made so much sense about it was that color was created as a natural byproduct of its structure—it sort of subtracts colors from the spectrum. The dichroic film is clear, however, it transmits certain wavelengths of light while reflecting others. The transmitted color is different from the reflected color, and when the light rays transmit straight through the acrylic they are less affected by refraction than when passing at an angle, which makes the light travel a greater distance through the acrylic. This is what causes the color shift. It's a similar phenomenon to what is seen on dragonfly wings or peacock feathers.

**CB:** What you're saying here really resonates with the work of the light-and-space artists like John McCracken, Larry Bell, and Craig Kauffmann, all of whom were (and are) invested in phenomenology and the specific physical and visual properties of materials.

**AS:** Yes, and Robert Irwin of course. All of the artists we've mentioned are from the West Coast, but I find a lot that is resonant in the work of minimalists and conceptual artists of the 1970s, from both the East and West Coasts. I am interested in creating an experience that changes the viewer in some way if that's possible, that allows them to have a shift in perception of space, physicality, light...

**CB:** To that end, your work seems to me far more playful and generous, less reticent, than that of the minimalists in particular.

**AS:** I am a proponent of making work that is accessible to everyone on some level. Ideally I'd like my work to be available in some way right off, and then if you choose to dig deeper, there is more there to find. I'm not so interested in setting up rules to follow. I might have temporary rules for myself that guide the work or that seem integral to making the piece successful, but there won't be rules that guide every work that I make in my life.

I always felt oppressed by the idea that in minimalism beauty and pleasure were opposed to intellectual rigor. I believe they can exist simultaneously.

**CB:** The acrylic material you used to create *Standing Wave* is completely affectless and colorless in and of itself. Installed, however, it is incredibly responsive, absorbing and reflecting light to present an array of startling colors. Your material, then, makes literal and exaggerates a very popular idea in contemporary art: contingency. What if any is your relationship to this idea?

**AS:** I'm interested in making objects that change infinitely, depending on their surroundings. The light at different times of day, the weather, the number of viewers looking at the piece, what the viewers are wearing, all these are just some of the variables that will make the piece different every time one comes in contact with it. For me an ideal work of art is one that is ultimately unknowable in some way. A work of mine that incorporates so many variables beyond my control will ideally always be surprising, even to me.

**CB:** In addition to the East/West Coast divide that still persists in the literature on the minimalist period—much of which stages an opposition between East Coast rigor and West Coast whimsy—various scholars, including Anna Chave, have explored the way gender can be encoded in or intimated through materials. Her inquiry centered on expressions of machismo through hulking masses of steel and lead and so forth, but it is interesting to consider such artists as Anne Truitt, Mary Corse, and indeed yourself in relation to a similar set of questions about materials and gender.

**AS:** I want to get as far away as I can from that old linkage of feminism and materials. I will use any material depending on what I'm trying to achieve. Many of the materials I've chosen so far, I've chosen because they push or pull space in a way I'd like to push or pull it. If we are speaking art historically, however, I'm more interested in questions and definitions of beauty, rather than materials and gender. Richard Serra's work, Donald Judd's, Dan Flavin's—they are all beautiful to look at. They share a commitment to a structure that is intentional, maybe even mathematical in some cases, intellectual but also beautiful. These are qualities I work to achieve in my own work. Beauty has been a bad word in art for too long. Maybe we need to redefine beauty and not be afraid of the word.

**Standing Wave**  
Site-specific installation for  
the Wexner Center, 2009  
Dichroic acrylic and tape  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Derek Eller Gallery

**Alyson Shotz** (b. 1964) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She received her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and her MFA from the University of Washington, Seattle. Her work has been exhibited at numerous galleries and museums, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MOCA), Whitney Museum of American Art, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and Cleveland Museum of Art.

**Christopher Bedford** is Curator of Exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts and the curator of this exhibition.

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