

Keith Sonnier 68 – 70

Exhibition of works from 1968 to 1970 by Keith Sonnier

Mary Boone Gallery

January 5, 2013 to February 23, 2013

Website: <http://maryboonegallery.com/exhibitions/2012-2013/Sonnier/index.html>

Review by: Yiran Sun

Keith Sonnier is far from the only artist that worked with modern light fixtures during the late 60s and early 70s. There was the sternly geometric Minimalist Dan Flavin who briefly preceded him, his fellow “Post-Minimalist” Bruce Nauman, and west coast artists who came on the scene shortly after him such as James Turrell and Robert Irwin. Yet Sonnier distinguished himself by being more personal than Flavin, not as camp as Nauman, and less dramatic than Turrell and Irwin. Instead giving light the starring role like many of his contemporaries, Sonnier uses it as one of the many elements in his work, along with a variety of textures, lines that exists between 2D and 3D spaces, and evocative forms. Neon is almost too commonly found in modern art, but Sonnier uses it for his own ends, not just because it was the weapon of choice of many artists of his generation.

Compared to some of his fellow light artists, Sonnier’s work is somewhat neglected in the contemporary discourse. Perhaps that is because his work could be mistakenly dismissed as kitsch, since they are made with non-traditional materials and often have playful, cartoonish shapes, but they are not kitsch enough to be provocative

like Bruce Nauman's implicative phrases and graphic imagery. That would be an unfair assessment, since Sonnier's sculptures are actually more classically modern than kitsch. Many of his drawings – which are simply rough drafts for his sculptures – could fit in any early modernist painting & drawing retrospective. Although he is not known as a painter, his sculptures, installations, drawings and many videos have quite a bit of painterly values. Differing from the grand, masculine and industrial Minimalists, Sonnier's work is closer to the Expressionists in that they are active, unconstrained, and occasionally figurative.

The exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery is showcasing several pieces from Sonnier's formative *Ba-O-Ba* and *Neon Wrapping Incandescent Series*. The setup of the show is refreshingly uncluttered. Six sculptures of similar size occupy a small reception area and a large backroom. The sculptures are placed on the floor and leaning against the wall, with the same amount of space between the pieces, giving each of them enough room to cast their own shadows and reflections.

The sculpture *Lit Circle Blue with Etched Glass* (1968) is composed of a clear, circular piece of glass, and the outline of the bottom half of the circle is highlighted with blue neon lights. The crimped, half circle shaped reflection of the neon can be seen on the polished concrete floor, which is reminiscent of shadows on lake surfaces that are disrupted by ripples. That imprint changes with the environment around the piece, but is just as much of the piece as the glass round and the light tubes.

The interaction between the material body of the work and the surrounding environment is a critical component of these sculptures, yet they are not exactly site

specific. It is more accurate to say that the sculptures are paintings that merge into and grew out of their backgrounds, but they don't need a specific background. In fact, those pieces can work in almost any space.

The neon functions not as a reference to cultural artifacts, but as a tool that transforms the lines in those images into being three-dimensional and active. This is especially true in the piece *Neon Wrapping Incandescent III* (1970), where the glass panel is absent, and the work is a drawing of colorful lines that lights up, black lines that doesn't light up, and the shadows of those black lines. Those pieces are also decorated with incandescent light bulbs and are more illustrative than the *Ba-O-Ba* series. The bright, playful lines suggest a cartoon figure that would not look out of place on a 1920s cover of *The New Yorker*.

"I love light in my work but I was never influenced by neon signage in itself, rather its effect on nature and architecture," the artist said in a conversation with Max Blagg from *Interview Magazine*, published back in 2008: "You can't ignore what's around you, but at the same time, an artist who has a sophisticated form language knows how to pull in different elements, and readjust and redirect those." Sonnier is not receiving as much attention nowadays as some his contemporaries are because he is not concerned with reacting against his immediate predecessors, and not interested in following trends. Instead, he is picking and choosing elements from different art movements and different generations (including the ones he belongs to) as references to make the work he wants to make.

Keith Sonnier managed to build his work on art history while not following the linear narrative of western art. This would be a courageous and original approach for any art maker to take during any given decade, but it is especially so for someone who began working in the small, insular art world of New York in the 1960s. This revisit of Sonnier's work serves as a reminder of how artists can be a part of the greater cultural discourse without only being relevant in the context of their time.