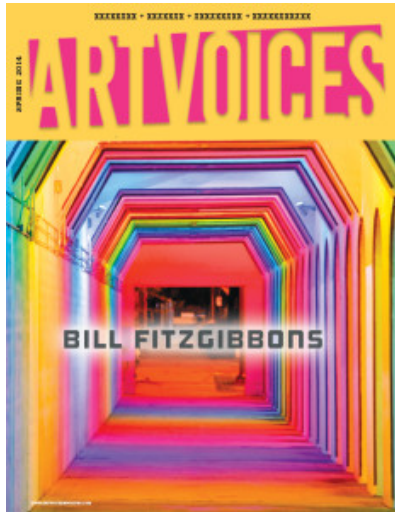


ART VOICES



Bill FitzGibbons



Written by Lilly Wei
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Joseph Beuys, one of the most influential artists of the latter half of the 20th century, coined the term “social sculpture,” defined as an artwork situated in the public domain that requires the engagement and intervention of an audience for completion. For Beuys, social sculpture is both political and spiritual, a catalyst to ignite the innate creativity in all of us, thereby transforming the social realm. “My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture,” he once said, and “should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be...”

San Antonio-based artist Bill FitzGibbons is also deeply interested in social sculpture, his version of it emphasizing accessibility, both physical and conceptual. His ideal audience is diversified and includes those who are aesthetically knowledgeable as well as those with little or no formal education in art. “It’s important to me as an artist that my work is understood, that a general audience can connect to it and participate in it,” he says. “To have an artwork in the public realm where people who don’t normally go to museums or galleries can see it is what art is really about.”

FitzGibbons started out as a painter, perhaps one reason why his sculptures typically incorporate color, not something that every sculptor pursues. He was introduced to neon as an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee and was immediately hooked, his sensibility allied with the California Light and Space movement. Eventually, it led to his first public neon art piece in 1988, when he was in Anchorage, Alaska. Neon lighting, however, had limitations. It was made of glass and quite fragile, not the ideal material for public art. The availability of a power source was also sometimes an issue and neon had a range of only about forty colors. When he discovered LEDs, many of his problems were solved. And most exciting to a colorist, LEDs could produce a limitless array of colors across the visible (and ultraviolet and infrared) wavelengths, and had a capacity for fades and high brilliance that spurred his imagination.



Skywall (2003), his first LED project created for the Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, is a sixty-foot-long, slow curve of aluminum embedded with multi-colored circles of lights that suggest a changing, star-studded rainbow. One of his most recent works, LightRails (2013), was installed this past summer in Birmingham, Alabama in a 1931 Art Deco railroad underpass in the city's center, turning it into a resplendent public thoroughfare leading to the newly developed Railroad Park. It's part of a plan to revitalize the downtown area and reverse suburban flight, reclaiming it from the vagrants who had hunkered down in the underpass. FitzGibbons is particularly proud of his projects for underpasses, where the lighting is not only dazzling but also rehabilitative. Once lit, derelict and dangerous dead zones become lively hubs for social events and spontaneous gatherings, drawing people to them. A photograph sent to him of a couple getting their wedding pictures taken there pleased FitzGibbons enormously; it is precisely "this kind of interaction that I want my work to have," he says triumphantly. Looking down one corridor at an incandescent recession of color bands, it suggested a high-wattage, walk-in, 3D color field painting, the concrete structure ceding to the abstract and back again. Indeed, FitzGibbons is part sculptor, part painter, part architect, part urban planner, and all magician, intent on making public places of enchantment.



He's done much the same thing in San Antonio, where he has been a longtime resident and one of the city's most visible artists. In 2006 he created Light Channels, a forerunner to LightRails. It illuminates an underpass that connects downtown San Antonio to its east side, a sizzling light show made up of hundreds of LED lights and aluminum sculptures, splashing the colonnade and ceiling of the concrete underpass in his signature fantasia of techno-hues, making over

another forbidding strip into an appealing and safe passageway. The San Antonio Colorline (2013) beams from the facade of the University Health Clinic, a permanent installation that picks out the planes of the architecture as if each were a luminously pinstriped abstract painting. Other local projects include a recently installed LED light sculpture at Culebra Plaza (in collaboration with a neighborhood association and school), and for a citywide festival in 2008 he lit up the Alamo, the city's most famous historic monument — a first for the iconic fort.

FitzGibbons has shown his artwork — sculpture, light works, performance, drawings — nationally and internationally, in Athens, Istanbul, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Helsinki, Stockholm, Oslo, and elsewhere, with a mid-May project in progress for Florence and a group exhibition in New Delhi scheduled for early 2015. Other major projects from the last few years include Chinook Lights (2012), a site-specific LED light sculpture for the King County Office in Seattle, Washington, and Knoxville Colorline (2010) for the Knoxville Museum of Art in Knoxville, Tennessee. He also took on the facade of Reykjavik's City Hall that year. The building's elegant facade rises from a clear expanse of water; playing across its colonnade and reflected on the water's surface in a doubled image was FitzGibbons' spectacular Öndvegissúlur (Poem of Light), an homage to the aurora borealis, visible throughout Iceland during the fall and winter.



At the moment, he is not only involved in his light sculptures but also in fire drawings, another expression of his love of light and a continuation of the light and fire performances he has produced for decades. The fire drawings are made with an oxyacetylene torch on birch plywood, the smoky, textured images usually circular, “like portals,” he says. FitzGibbons has a solo show coming up at the International Museum of Art and Science in McAllen, Texas, from March 20-September 7, 2014. It will include fire drawings, LED light pieces, and a performance exploring the fraught and complex question of borders and

illegal entries called Right Side/Wrong Side. FitzGibbons will replicate a section of the border fence that measures 12 x 20 feet with ladders that have been used to scale the actual fence, the dancers multiethnic. A second performance will take place at the Brownsville divide, without permission of the Texas border patrol, another instance of his ongoing embrace of social sculpture, of an art that engages with the real.

Bill FitzGibbons received his BFA in Sculpture and Art History from the University of Tennessee and his MFA in Sculpture and Multi-Media from Washington University in St. Louis. In 1979 he became the first curator at Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, Missouri and from 1985-8 he was the Director of Sculpture at the Visual Art Center in Anchorage, Alaska. In 1988 he became the Department Head of Sculpture at the San Antonio Art Institute and in 1991 he was a Fulbright Scholar in Budapest, Hungary. He has taught at Trinity University in San Antonio and has been the Executive Director of the Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum since 2002, stepping down last June to concentrate on his studio practice.