

Arts and Leisure: Minimalist Flavin casts a lasting aura

by Robert Pincus

LOS ANGELES - The hardware store turned out to be a hotspot in 20th century art history. Marcel Duchamp walked into one in 1915, picked out a shovel and gave it a title, "In Advance of the Broken Arm." It became one of his early "readymades" - a work of art simply because Duchamp decided it should be one. Needless to say, this gesture challenged most established notions of the work of art and has influenced artists ever since.

One is Dan Flavin, though there isn't a parallel story about him and hardware stores. Yet, no one can help but think that a stroll through aisles filled with lighting supplies must have been important to him at the beginning of the '60s, since fluorescent tubes, straight from the shelves, became his medium.

But Flavin, who died in 1996 at 53 from complications related to diabetes, was a strikingly different kind of artist than Duchamp. The readymades were philosophical; the idea matters more than the object, even if his chosen objects are now enshrined in museums and books. Flavin's installations were visual: experiences that expanded the sense of what sculpture could be.

"Dan Flavin: A Retrospective," which premiered 2.5 years ago at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., is now at its last and only West Coast venue: the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. LACMA's recently appointed director and a Flavin scholar, Michael Govan, co-curated this show with Tiffany Bell, director of the Dan Flavin catalogue raisonne.

This, the largest show to date of Flavin's work, is a remarkable exhibition. He was seen as a pivotal minimalist; however, after seeing this array of his work, you'll know why he disliked that term. It is too austere for the range of what he achieved with the fluorescent tube.

Flavin did love simplicity. One of the earliest works in light, "the nominal three (to William of Ockham)" (1963), consists of 8-foot tubes positioned vertically against a wall: one in the left corner, two of them in the middle and three in the right corner. And it's dedicated to this 14th century Franciscan theologian because the artist liked Ockham's notion that "entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily."

And yet, his reference to a theologian is a clue that Flavin found something mystical in his use of industrial light, even if he chose to downplay this quality of the work in interviews. The procession of one, then two and then three tubes implies the possibility of a group of four, then five and then more. The piece contained within it the implication of an unending progression. It underscores the mystical nature of numbers and the infinite.

DAN FLAVIN: A RETROSPECTIVE - Using standard fluorescent tubes, minimalist Dan Flavin turned some of his works into luminous walls. CNS Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

JUST THE MINIMUM - Minimalist Dan Flavin's 'Untitled (to You, Heiner, With Admiration and Affection)' gets its own museum gallery at an exhibit of his work in Los Angeles. CNS Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

HARDLY HARDWARE - No one can help but think that a stroll through aisles filled with lighting supplies must have been important to him at the beginning of the '60s, since fluorescent tubes, straight from the shelves, became his medium. This exhibit is called 'Untitled (to my dear bitch, Airily)' 1981. CNS Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

You see this aspect of Flavin's vision come into play with the spectacularly long piece "Untitled (to You, Heiner, With Admiration and Affection)" (1973) - which pays homage to German dealer Heiner Friedrich, who later founded the Dia Foundation, Flavin's greatest source of patronage. It's a barrier-like structure, consisting of 4-foot tubes in green that form a procession of rectangular modules and extend the length of an expansive gallery. The light this piece produces floods the entire room and the longer you look, the whiter it becomes. The transformation is optical, but seems mysterious and a bit cosmic.

The way Flavin used color is hardly minimal. He was Matissean as well as Duchampian and revealed as much with a piece called "untitled (to Henri Matisse)" (1964). His four primary colors - pink, yellow, blue and green - create a lush vertical ray of color that shares Matisse's exuberance.

Flavin's first solo exhibition was in 1964, and it's reassembled in the works on view. You can see how seminal he was to the rise of installation art when you look at a selection like "pink out of a corner" (to Jasper Johns) because the room becomes his canvas; this composition is as much about the way light bathes the walls, emanating from the tube standing in the corner, as it is concerned with the actual source of light.

He was one of a group of painters who turned to sculpture. Donald Judd, a vital minimalist sculptor and a close friend of Flavin's, was another. It was Judd who called minimalism a "continuation of painting by other means" - a phrase that resonates with Flavin's art.

As early as 1961, Flavin was attaching tubes and bulbs to Masonite panels that he called "icons." They reflected his orientation toward painting and drawing. And if they are intriguing small-scale works, they wouldn't be of great interest if they hadn't foreshadowed his leap to fluorescent light.

We tend to think of an artist's development as somewhat linear, with changes happening in succession or stages. But once he had made the breakthrough to what he called "my fluorescent light system," Flavin thought situation mattered more than anything else.

"I sense no stylistic or structural development of any significance," he said of his body of work in 1966. And while this comment is too self-deprecating, there is something to it.

For him, it was new situations that seemed to elicit fresh possibilities. One of those happy situations

happened in Los Angeles in 1982, when he was commissioned by architects/designers Massimo and Lella Vignelli to create an installation for the E.F. Hauserman Co. for its showroom in the Pacific Design Center. These works have been reconstructed for the Los Angeles version of this retrospective, and the results are ravishing.

There are three corridors. One is filled with blue diagonals. The others have a horizontal wall of tubes in the middle, with varied colors. View each from one side and the array of colors is different from when it's seen from the other view. But in both cases, the sense of light and color is enveloping and intense.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of his work is how well it wears. Or, as Tiffany Bell, the show's co-curator, writes, "The lights shine in a continuous present." Flavin's art is of our time as much as his.

He is akin to a magician who shows you every aspect of his feats and still manages to confound you. We know his means: 2-, 4-, 6- and 8-foot lengths of light tubes. All the nuts and bolts are visible, too. Flavin didn't even remove the information labels on the sides of the tubes. But acknowledging all of this doesn't explain the perceptual pull of these works. His luminous vision of electric light is the core source of their power.

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Datebook

- "Dan Flavin: A Retrospective"

- Through Aug. 12

- Los Angeles County Museum of Art,

- 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles

- \$9; \$5, students (18 and older) and seniors (62 and older) free to ages 17 and under

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