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Review: Western Bridge exhibition lets light dawn in the dark

"Light in Darkness" at Western Bridge in Seattle features works by 20 artists that explore perception and meaning.

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By Gayle Clemans

EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Light in Darkness'

The metaphor of light coming through darkness offers familiar, almost clichéd, meanings: inspiration, hope, clarity, even an apprehension of the divine. Light works in opposition to the dark, which signifies despair, obscurity, the unknown, evil.

The brilliant thing about "Light in Darkness," the current show at Western Bridge, is that it conjures up these associations while avoiding, or tweaking, the old clichés.

Martin Creed's 20-foot-high blackout curtains swoosh open and closed over the large window by the gallery's entrance. It's a clever device that dramatically alters our perceptions of light inside the space and sets the stage for the acts of comprehension and pupil dilation that are about to occur.

Will Rogan's "Time Machine (Destroyer)" plays with ideas of fixed understanding or imagery. During the mere 20 seconds of the black-and-white video, we see a simple cause-and-effect sequence in super-slow motion: a finger pushes the button on an old camera; the flash fills the screen with a bright white light, momentarily obliterating all imagery; the white recedes while the first thing to emerge is a black rectangle, the negative image of the flash that has blinded us.

The video is on a loop, endlessly replaying this clever denial of the functions of light and the photograph — light leads to obfuscation rather than clarity; the camera negates what we see in the present rather than simply capturing it for the future.

While the Rogan work is jolting and mesmerizing at the same time, several works seem purely hypnotic. João Penalva's video of a beam of light shining through effervescent liquid pulls you into an almost blissful viewing experience. There is nothing to see but the way the light cuts through the liquid at a sharp diagonal, revealing clear, blue tones and a swirling array of bubbles.

The video is projected high on the wall, an installation that amplifies an awareness of the process of looking. From the ground floor, you have to look way up to see it, while upstairs, you're treated to a closer look from a cutout in the wall, like a Juliet balcony that permits an extension of your viewing pleasure.

A lot of the works call our attention to the act of looking, a strategy used by many "light and space" artists of the late 1960s and early '70s. The works on view here are more recent, most from the last five years or so (one exception being Roy McMakin's sly light tables from 1997) and use a postmodern variety of materials, forms and references to update the earlier, more minimalist approach.

But the interest in presenting actual light in a gallery setting also attests to the staying power of those earlier perceptual investigations.

The relationship of light to darkness raises questions about how we move through space and time, how we can (or can't) rely on our senses, how we are driven to seek clarity and understanding. These works remind us that seeing, more often than not, is also about feeling and thinking. When we "see," the effects are uplifting; when we don't, the implications are unsettling.