

ARTFORUM



Charles Ross, Untitled (Beam), 1968, acrylic, oil, adhesive, 48 × 8 × 9". From the series "Prisms," ca. 1965–68.

Charles Ross

RULE GALLERY | DENVER

With Charles Ross on the cusp of the completion of a nearly five-decade-long project—Star Axis, an observatory or temple to stars and light—in the desert of New Mexico, Rule Gallery presents two early, more modestly scaled sculptures from the artist's ca. 1965–68 "Prisms" series: Broken Pyramid and Untitled (Beam), both 1968. The pair were conceived three years before his epic Land art construction ever came to mind. And these siblings, in their strange humility, are beautifully prophetic of the large ambition to come.

Each prism—an exquisitely modeled block of glass displayed on a white-metal plinth—offers itself as evidence of, and as a threshold into, a way of thinking: a mode of contemplation that is exceedingly elemental, nearly imperceptible. One could have stepped into Rule expecting nothing more than the dazzle of a previous generation's

avant-gardism. Yet once I left the exhibition, I felt as though I had been given a primer on the world's most fundamental workings. As I watched the sun begin its daily descent through the gallery's windows, I saw white light get caught in the prisms, then be cast out as rainbows. Observing this, I was ushered helplessly into thoughts so basic, so rooted in the deep loam of the mind, they even brought me, the questioner, into question. What is water? What is light? What is time? And what surfaces, day after day and cloud cover depending, are a grammar-school lesson taught by pre-Socratic philosophers—Thales, Heraclitus, and Anaximander—a history of stars, fire, logic, and flux, delivered without pretense, available to all.

Roughly a half century later, Ross's prisms continue to do work that is ever new. Through these sculptures, the mind learns again to think through the eyes, as philosophy is the body's task. Untitled (Beam) is the primary source of contemplation: Its very transparency mimics the nature of the eye. One comes so slowly to the realization of Ross's gift: Here is an art that doesn't teach us to see, but teaches us to see that we see. Nothing can be taken for granted—not the horizontal band of the spectrum, drifting north to south, hypnotic in its bright intensity, where one cannot exactly tell how a particular hue drifts into the next, where the exact line that demarcates violet from indigo or orange from yellow scatters and shifts. Simultaneously, a lozenge of white light, reflected off the top of the prism, moves from the ceiling and down to the wall, bands of color and light-cloud slowly nearing until, wondrously, they converge. The eclipse grows brighter instead of darker.

Ross returns to us our simplest tools, those that are attuned to letting us take the measure of cosmic processes so ever-present they are almost wholly ignored. The eye is a door but does not know it. And with light come time and an honest bewilderment—the sun, whose luminescence takes eight and a half minutes to reach the Earth, moves through time but seems other than time: less mortal and circumscribed, yet utterly transcribed. Time writes on the wall its poem made of light: a poem I felt I read and will need to read again, something so simple it is hard to understand.

Ross's humble objects are an art of philosophic passivity. They let enter into them the forces that enter us all, put nothing on delay, but give us a glimpse of the cosmic realities that more truly house our lives.

— Dan Beachy-Quick