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northern california art

Peter Alexander @ Brian Gross

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by David M. Roth



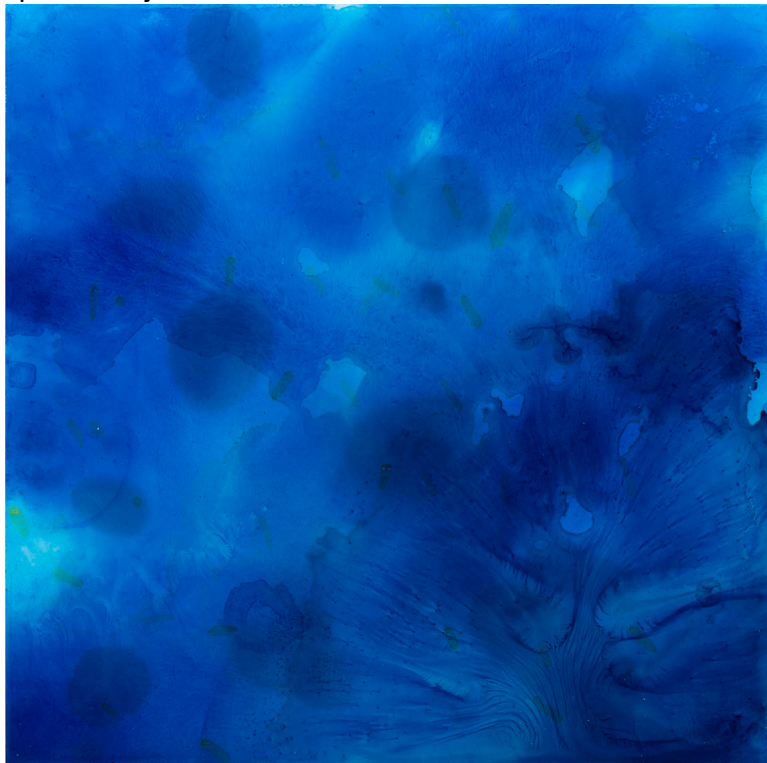
Pozo, 2005, oil, metal flake, and resin on aluminum, 40 x 60 inches

Peter Alexander, a leading exponent of the Light and Space movement, left behind a remarkable legacy when he died last year at 81. From the start, the LA artist was propelled by lucky accidents and fateful experiments. They began in the mid-1960s when he learned he could make light-emitting sculptures from molded polyester resin and continued with the discovery that he could coax paint to perform similar

feats. Among his peers, which included Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Larry Bell and Billy Al Bengston, it was only Alexander who made painting an integral part of his practice.

He made the shift in the early 1970s, the peak of his renown as a sculptor. Painting had been declared dead, and his instincts warned that such a move – first to sunsets executed on velvet, then to velvet-based collages – would earn him scorn. It didn't. It mainly garnered kudos, breaking what was thought to be a barrier for an artist so strongly linked to Light and Space and to the industrial materials on which it was based – materials to which Alexander would later return.

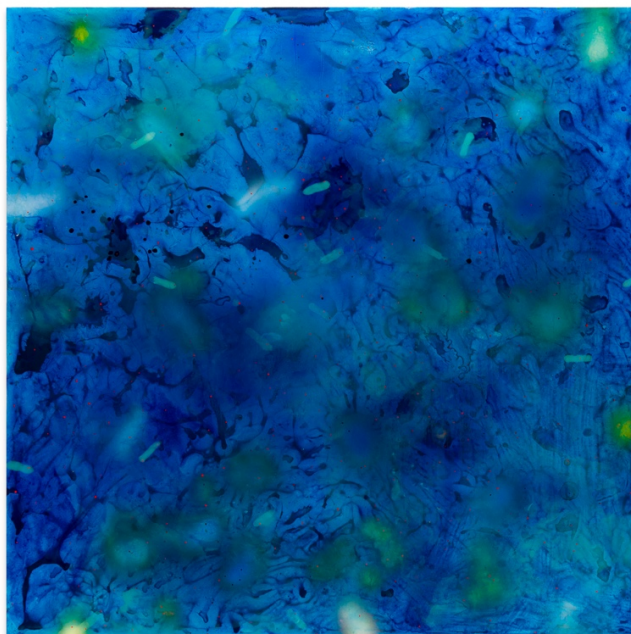
Deep Dive, Alexander's first posthumous painting exhibition, explores his longstanding fascination with water and its interaction with light. The artist unites the two elements by applying layers of aquamarine blue at varying opacities to aluminum panels topped with a transparent gloss. The paintings resulting from this process confuse depth and perspective by reflecting light off both the surface and the back of the picture. We could be looking up or down, into deep or shallow water – it's impossible to tell; the only clues come from shifts in value, but even these seem impossibly conflated.



Espita, 2006, oil, metal flake, resin on aluminum. 24 x 24 inches

Each of the ten paintings on view — made between 2005 and 2008 and at scales ranging from intimate to monumental — challenge the senses. In *Culebra*, for example, a 120-inch-long triptych crisscrossed by deep shadows, bio-luminescent vertebrates float in pools of light, indicating a location near the surface. But do such creatures dwell near the surface? Alexander, at least in this body of work, seemed more interested in conveying accumulated impressions than in relating facts: a sharp break from earlier series in which subjects, ranging from aerial views of LA to terrestrial depictions of southeast Asian jungles, were always identifiable — even when the noirish atmospherics he superimposed rendered the surfaces fuzzy. Not so with Alexander's pictures of water.

Here, an oft-told story, about a fishing trip to San Clemente Island in the mid-1970s, bears repeating: "We boarded the boat at midnight, and stopped halfway across the channel to get squid for bait. It was in September, and the Santa Anna winds were blowing, so it was very warm. There was no moon, and it was pitch dark, and I was up on the top deck looking out into the blackness when they shined a bright light down into the water to attract the squid. The squid moved into the light and underneath them was a school of glistening pink fish, and deeper still were sharks, who were swimming up to get the squid. The water was phosphorescing, and there were two whales outside the arc of light blowing phosphorescence like fireworks.¹"



Vico, 2008 oil, acrylic, metal flake, resin on aluminum, 48 x 48 inches

Deep Dive contains many such effects. Most, as the title suggests, appear to be summoned from what lay beneath the waves. *Espita*, a small picture of shadows, suggests a colony of moon jellies drifting overhead, while a collection of veiny brushstrokes in the lower right corner depict what looks to be an aquatic plant swaying in the tide. In *Pozo*, Alexander visualizes roiling currents with finger painting. The sweeping gestural lines, reminiscent of spun smoke, and a series of surface scratches, readable as tiny crustaceans, make this one of the exhibition's highlights. Red dots and bits of glitter on the surface of *Vico* drive attention to the painting's depths, giving the impression of a petri dish teeming with jewel-like microorganisms. The bathypelagic zone, where no light penetrates, gets its due in *Muna*, a painting so dark it strains comprehension. *Claire*, a four-part work measuring 96 x 96 inches with a dark splotch at the center, calls to mind the fishing trip cited above, suggesting, alternately, a sea cave or the silhouette of a shark.

Alexander's mastery of media, whether two-dimensional or three, enabled him to define light and space in terms uniquely his own. His artistry was, to paraphrase Irving Berlin, as deep as the ocean.