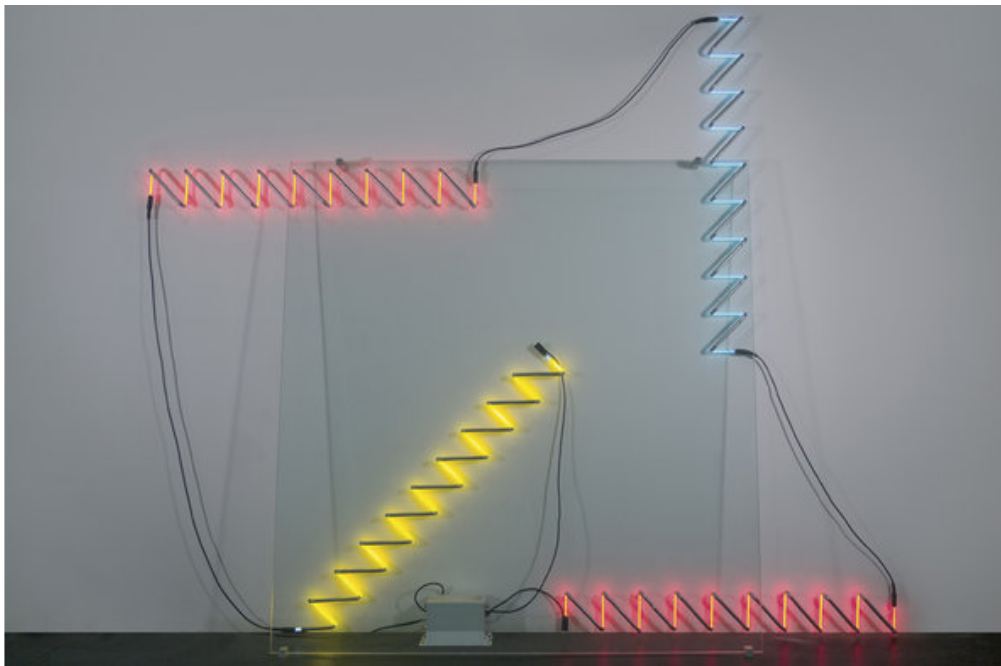


ON VIEW

## Artifacts | The Sensual, Suggestive Appeal of Keith Sonnier's Neon Sculptures



Keith Sonnier's "Zig Zag Square," 2013. Caterina Verde, Keith Sonnier/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

by Linda Yablonsky

When the sculptor Keith Sonnier arrived in the late 1960s, he was identified with other young radicals like Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman and Lynda Benglis as "Post-Minimalist," a catchall term that immediately wrote them into history books. The label was meant to distinguish them from their slightly older, Minimalist contemporaries, including Sol Lewitt, Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Dan Flavin, all of whom used inflexible materials for impersonal, geometric objects manufactured by others.

The Post-Minimalists, on the other hand, made art out of cheap, even flimsy materials they manipulated by hand to evoke the more sensual properties of the human body. Sonnier's works, fashioned from cheesecloth, silk, wire mesh, latex or the neon that became his signature medium, were especially supple and erotic, often made on the spot in the galleries where they were shown. Flavin's fluorescent lights were straight lines; Sonnier's twisted and curved, almost dancing in space.

"Flavin called us Dada homosexuals," Sonnier said the other day in his native Louisiana drawl, recalling the rivalry between the two camps as a form of camaraderie. "We were all in the same shows," he said. "The only real difference is that they used hard materials and ours were soft."



These days, Sonnier, now a burly, white-haired 72, works with both. "Elysian Plain + Early Works," a buoyant show of his wall-mounted neon works (some new, some vintage) at the Pace Gallery in Chelsea, maps his trajectory from the ephemeral to the durable, a path elevated by the artist's suggestive wit. In one early piece, "Neon Wrapping Incandescent," a pink neon curlicue rises between two nipples of incandescent blue bulbs, their wires dangling to the floor like black veins. "It's like lingerie," Sonnier said, laughing. "Very Frederick's of Hollywood."

Two other neon works from the period suggest tables or chairs that have materialized out of thin air. "They're about aligning space with architecture," Sonnier explained, pointing to "Mirror Slant," a kind of slumping torso made a few months ago, as another case in point. Composed of three sections divided by yellow, red and blue lights, it has a square glass bottom that looks as if it's sliding drunkenly off the wall, but is supporting a mirror that reflects another piece on the opposite wall, call-and-response style.



Sonnier's "Shmoo - O.G.V.," 2013, and "Neon Wrapping Incandescent," 1969. Caterina Verde, Keith Sonnier/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The other recent works, made over the last three years in Sonnier's Bridgehampton, N.Y., studio, similarly balance sturdy geometrics with weightless froth. "Lobbed Claw" has short, curving strokes of blue, red and green neon floating behind thick, elliptical planes of clear plexiglass that combine to form the shape of a painter's palette. This Sonnier compared to Wonder Woman's translucent airplane. "Gorgeous," he said. "Schmoo" — the title is a nod to his Cajun roots — looks like a transparent grand piano lid with steel hinges highlighted in pink, blue and green.

Because his works emit light that's extremely flattering to both viewers and the surrounding space, he has taken steps to keep them from becoming merely decorative objects. He doesn't hide wires or transformers; as with the flesh-colored latex he smeared with tacky flocking early in his career, he exults in what he calls the "perversity" of his materials. He also embraces the illusionism that was anathema to the Minimalists, creating a sense of depth by placing his colored lights on or under reflective glass or mirrors that put viewers inside them.

As a younger artist, Sonnier experimented with nascent technologies, collaborating in 1977 with the filmmaker Liza Bear on "Send/Receive," which connected galleries in New York and San Francisco via a live feed bounced off a NASA satellite. The expense and logistical difficulties of the two-day operation have kept him earthbound ever since. For his next project, he's collecting large stones and painting them.