



## Liquid Fire

New York Neon: Jeff Chiplis

By Douglas Max Utter

Neon is not all that easy to find. It's just 1/65,000th of the atmosphere, though there's a lot more around Las Vegas. Obtaining a thimble-full of the stuff involves liquefaction and fractional distillation. The 17th-century French astronomer Jean Picard first discovered a glowing substance while working with a mercury barometer tube, but the "new" ("neon" in Greek) gas wasn't isolated and named until 1898, by British chemists William Ramsey and M. W. Travers.

Discovering the neon artist Jeff Chiplis also took some time. He's located in that 1/65,000th of the planet called Cleveland. Chiplis has been re-working vintage and found neon signs in his Tremont studio since the early 1980s, while keeping a day job and serving as a board member of the nonprofit SPACES Gallery. His abstract light sculptures and creative signage are well known locally.

Nationally and internationally there's no shortage of context for this sort of thing. From the time French manufacturer Georges Claude produced the first neon signs for Packard in 1938, the medium has appealed to a wide range of artists as different and important as Joseph Kosuth and Bruce Nauman. The granddaddy of neon art in our time is world-renowned Stephen Antonakos, while minimalist painter Francois Morellet has produced abstract works either including or consisting of bent neon since the 1960s. The even broader field

of light sculpture includes figures like Don Flavin, best known for fluorescent tube art, and a host of others. Yayoi Kusama's *Ladder to Heaven* is a neon-looking fiber-optic work currently on display in New York City - across the street from Chiplis' one-man show at the very highly regarded nonprofit space, White Box Gallery.

It happened like this. Last year Thomas McEvelley wandered into Asterisk Gallery on Professor Avenue in Tremont, where Chiplis' works were on display. He liked what he saw and the rest of the story is an art world fairy tale. McEvelley is one of America's most respected and original writers on the arts, author of many books including this year's *The Triumph of Anti-Art*, and frequent contributor to major journals over the past quarter century. The February issue of *Art in America* includes his three-page article about Chiplis' works and career, timed to coincide with the White Box exhibit, which itself is a result of McEvelley's patronage.

The show, titled *Excited Inner Gases*, is Chiplis at his best. Eleven of the twelve pieces hang from the ceiling, emphasizing their sculptural qualities. It is important, too, that this is recycled neon, reclaimed from commerce and the modern urban night, its light assimilated to a new aesthetic. The Gallery's checklist briefly explains the origins of each. The circling red tubes and zig-zag crown of *Happy Boy* were found unbroken by the side of the road. The starry lines of *White Dwarf* were "salvaged from a sign maker because they were the wrong color." Separately each work has an emblematic, almost admonitory presence, somewhere between the biblical writing on the wall and the skywriting of the wicked witch of the west, but condensed, like a tattoo.

From either end of the gallery several pieces line up visually, intersecting and combining like different typewriter keys stamping on the same spot, or like layers of graffiti, but inscribed in the urban air. The viewer is struck by the fact that these shards, and Chiplis with them, have traveled far, from one end of our to culture to another, carrying a message that expands, like a gas, in search of larger significance.

Excited Inner Gases: Jeff Chiplis  
White Box Gallery  
New York City  
Through February 22

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