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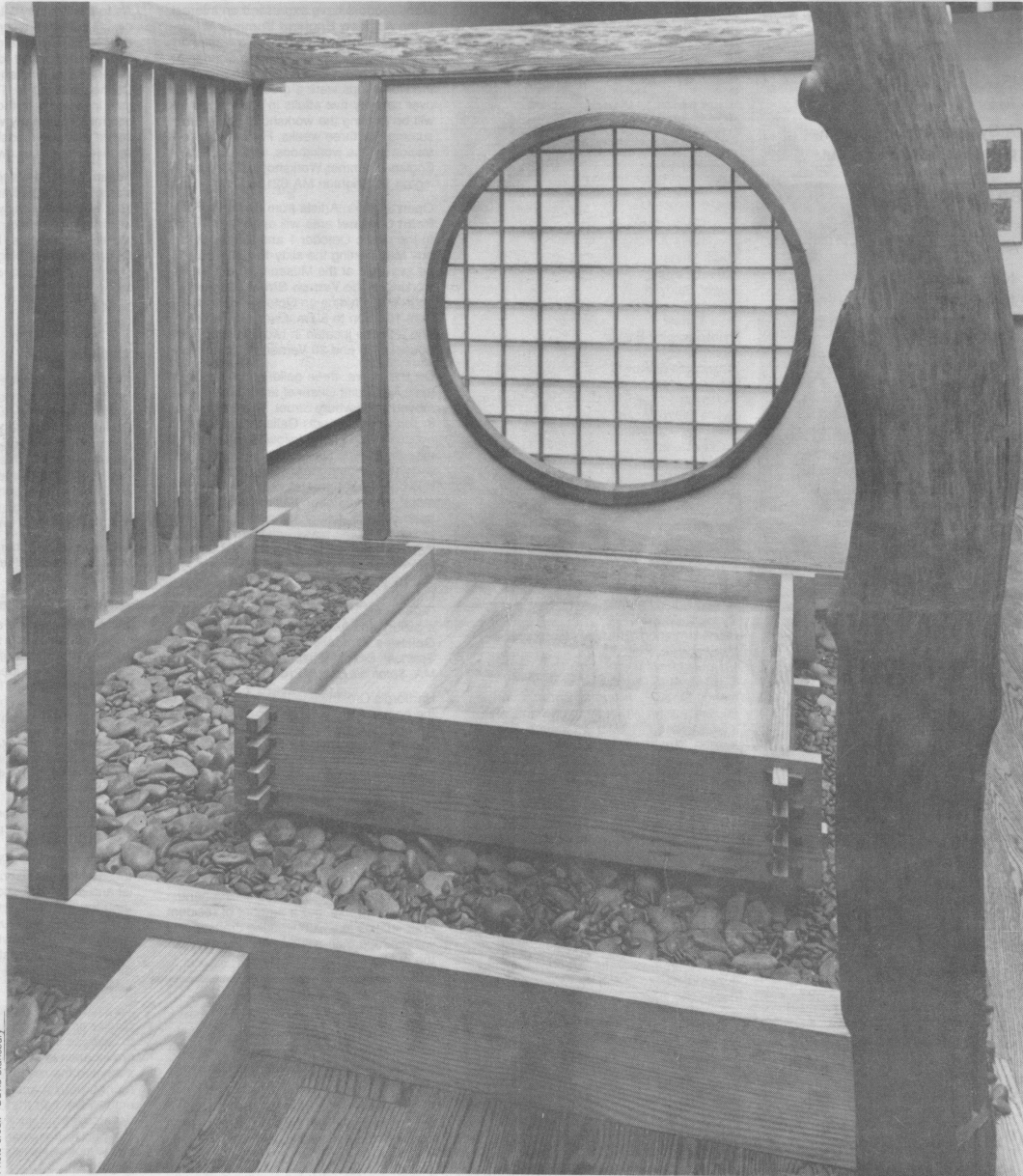
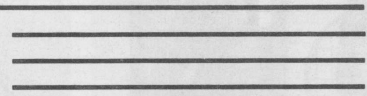
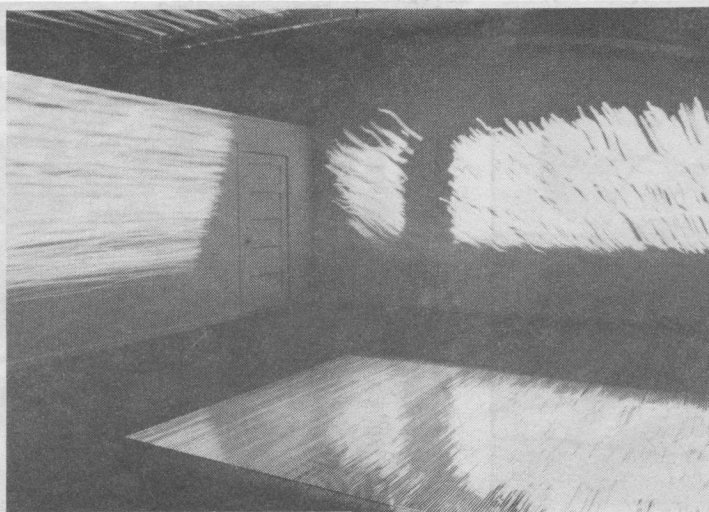


Photo credit - David Stanbury

Toshio Odate - *Pride of New England* (Detail)



Art New England: A resource for the visual arts

Beth Galston - *Lightwall*, installation

Kingston Gallery/Boston
Beth Galston

Beth Galston's installation *Lightwall* at the Kingston Gallery reminds us that the time may be right to assess minimal, perceptual, and phenomenological art in terms of its place in recent tradition, as well as to judge particular works in terms of their aesthetic and message. It has been twenty years since Robert Morris presented his first "primary objects" in the Green Gallery in New York, those lone, blank, cubic solids which, as everyone quickly discovered, not only demonstrated the radical reduction of the sculptural object but also inescapably demanded that the viewer's attention include the surrounding space as well as the object itself. In response, Morris followed, in 1965, with his *Mirror Cubes*, a tour-de-force physical-visual pun in which the faces of the volumetric solids dissolved into the reflected images of the floor and walls which contained them.

Beth Galston has constructed her installation in the plain geometric interior of the Kingston Gallery, placing on the floor a large mirrored rectangle made up of many narrow, straight strips of plexiglass, and hanging next to it an additional plane of strips like a tall fringe curtain. She has lighted the mirrors with lamps in four positions around the room at different heights. The bulbs—small, intense, and piercing—are programmed to dissolve off and on at different intervals. The light, according to the trajectory set up by the location and angle of the lamps, hits the mirrors and then areas of the walls and ceiling. Because the mirrors are composed of thin strips of a soft material which sags and arches with the unevenness of the floor, the cast reflections occur as areas of wispy threads of light. The material itself, elegant and bright, is sensually delightful; and the light effects natural to it are inherently, immediately seductive. The effect of the arrangement of mirrors and lights is one of great subtlety and delicacy.

The work is marred by the fact that the effect is not totally sustained. We learned long ago from Morris (and more lately from the exquisitely subtle Robert Irwin and the other California perceptual artists) that

once we are called upon to look not only at the objects but at the environment and to regard evanescent visual effects as art, *everything* in the environment must be incorporated in the artist's work. At the Kingston, the imperfect walls, the nondescript and awkward upper reaches of the architectural space, the extraneous lights, objects, and events in the room all interfere and distract. Galston's work is so quiet and meditative that we wonder why she did not see fit to clarify and purify the environment for the other senses also; we are aware of the intrusive whirring of backstage projector fans and businessmen in the next office speaking Chinese. James Turrell's perfectly crafted—and expensive—installation *Batten* in the Hayden Gallery last January gave us an example of the minimal requirements for environmental control in perceptual works inside architectural space.

For all this, Galston's work is still a work for thought. It raises certain questions not present in early minimalism and perceptualism about the nature of the image itself. In *Lightwall*, even though the materials and accoutrements are themselves high tech, the image conveyed is essentially romantic, even nostalgic. The evocative character of Galston's physical elements and their visual effects is enticing. The vertical curtain, as I watched it and its shadows and reflections change, I thought of as a harp for light, the floor mirror and its rippled reflections a cloudy pool. Speaking of the installation the artist said, "I think of it as a cross between a play space and a Japanese Garden."

Seventy years ago Claude Monet stood in the middle of an environmental work he had laboriously and lovingly constructed, a pool of water lilies surrounded by gardens, watched the light fall and the reflections glance off the water, and tried to conceive of a way he could capture the visual and emotional effects in the form of naturalistic painting. Galston, it seems, stands now at the other end of a long development in concepts of abstraction and innovations of materials and form, and still struggles with the questions of light, space, and feelings.

Nan Freeman