

Cultural Daily

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Neon Art: Lili Lakich

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, March 28th, 2018

In 1982, I documented the “Artistic Renaissance of Downtown LA.” I photographed artists in their lofts (Eve Steele), art galleries (Cirrus, Neil Ovsey), a show of photographs by Matthew Rolston at the Jennifer Dumas Gallery, the owners of Gorky’s Cafe, etc. I especially loved the airplane by Dustin Schuler nailed to the brick wall of the American Gallery.



Airplane by Dustin Schuler, photo by Elisa Leonelli 1982

I visited MONA, the Museum of Neon Art, and met its founder, neon artist **Lili Lakich**. I photographed her next to her signature piece, “Mona” 1981, which was inspired by Leonardo’s painting of the Mona Lisa.



Lili Lakich at MONA, photo by Elisa Leonelli 1982

Last week I met with Lili again. She is still at the 5,000 square feet building she bought in 1980 on Traction Avenue, at the corner of 3rd and Alameda, in the heart of DTLA’s Art District. **MONA** reopened in Glendale in 2016, having been dark since 2011, when their Grand Hope Park location closed after 15 years. Lili ended her association with MONA in 1999, but she is still creating and exhibiting amazing neon art in her studio & gallery. She is also teaching new generations of students how to make neon sculptures and signs. Her next 8-weeks workshop starts May 8.



Nuart marquee, photo by Elisa Leonelli 1979

Lili explains “The technology of neon involves capturing in a glass tube an inert gas that glows when electrified.” It was developed in Paris by George Claude in 1910. Neon signs were used in the US starting in the 1920s for motels, diners, shops, movie marquees, etc. See above the 1939 Art Deco marquee of the Nuart movie theater in Los Angeles.



New Neon on Melrose, photo by Elisa Leonelli 1985

In the early 1980s neon experienced a renaissance. It was actually after taking a workshop at MONA that Gary Burns, who owned a cactus shop on Melrose Avenue, started promoting the use of neon among his fellow merchants. That is when I did a photographic essay on New Neon. See above the Erotica store Drake’s on Melrose.



Blessed Oblivion © Lili Lakich 1975

After reading her 2007 book “LAKICH: For Light. For Love. For Life,” I learned a lot more about Lili Lakich. She has been making neon art since the 1970s. Her most famous piece is Blessed Oblivion, 1975, depicting a panther and a python entwined in battle.



For All the Young Men Dying (c) Lili Lakich 1988

From 1988 to 1993, Lili created the AIDS series as a response to the devastating epidemic: men torsos made of honeycomb aluminum, inspired by Michelangelo’s sculpture “The Dying Slave.”



Lakich studio, photo by Elisa Leonelli 2018

From 2002 to 2006 Lili made 3 pieces for the series “Self-Portraits with Bombs and Blonde Bombshells.” From 2006 to 2009 she built her largest artwork, “Flyaway,” 114 feet long, commissioned by the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. [Click to watch video.](#)



Believe Me © Lili Lakich 2016

In August 2016 Lili made a piece titled “Believe Me”, depicting Donald Trump with a Pinocchio-like nose growing longer through an animated sequence. She thought it would have a short shelf life...

Thanks to the groundbreaking work of Lili Lakich, many artists use neon today. See recent [article in Los Angeles magazine](#).

For more photos, click on the series “[LA Downtown Art](#)” and “[Neon Art](#)” in the [Elisa Leonelli, Photojournalist Collection at Claremont Colleges Digital Library](#).

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