

## CURATOR

August 2016



Featured image: Peter Alexander inspecting a casting of his work. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Jesse Fleming

**An informal conversation between LA editor, Amanda Quinn Olivar, and longtime family friend, artist Peter Alexander, on the occasion of his career-spanning survey at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery.**

Peter Alexander is a Southern California artist whose work explores light and space. He has been widely exhibited in galleries and museums worldwide since the mid-1960s and has received multiple honors and awards including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1980 and the California Art Award in 2014. His work resides in the permanent collections of numerous institutions including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles), and the Museum of Modern Art (New York).

We started talking on cell phones and the call was cut off. Peter was in the desert and I called him back from my landline:

Peter Alexander: Is that better?

Amanda Quinn Olivar: That's better. Is that better for you?

PA: Yeah yeah... [pause] Yes, Dear.

PA/AQO [laughing together]

PA: Ask me the questions. I just read over them real quick. It's hard to answer on paper and give a real answer without sounding sort of snooty.

AQO: You're not snooty.



Installation view, Peter Alexander Sculpture 1966 - 2016: A Career Survey Parrasch Heijnen Gallery



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PA: Give me a question...

AQO: What drew you away from architecture into art?

PA: Control.

AQO: That's not snooty. What is it about control in...?

PA: Well as an architect, it's a service and you're really dealing with a lot of other people's expectations, money, rules, etc. But when you do what I do, you do it all yourself and it's finished and then you let it go. Does that make sense?

AQO: It does. What architectural elements carried through into your artwork?

PA: Well, right angles, you know... flat surfaces.

AQO: When you decided to become an artist, was it a natural transition?

PA: Ah, well yeah, except for the fact that I was given permission because of what

was going on at the time. Like what other artists, like Donald Judd and Larry Bell... you know they were using right angles and things. So, in a way they gave me permission to do it. So then I made these boxes that you could crawl into.



Peter Alexander circa 1968-9 in his studio on Estrella Avenue. Image courtesy of the Artist

AQO: Your own universe...

PA: Yes! Like underwater...

AQO: Did I tell you when I saw your box at Pacific Standard Time, it was surrounded by young kids.

PA: [a hearty laugh] Oh really?

AQO: It was terrific. I couldn't get near your piece because the kids were trying to figure it out. I could hear them talking; they were completely bewildered.

PA: Oh that's wonderful! Thanks for telling me that.

AQO: Sure... That's a good memory for me.

AQO: How does your relationship to surf and water translate into your work?

PA: The reason why I liked the resin was because it was like water. It doesn't smell like it, you know and all that... but it looks like it. And you can solidify it. So the idea of being able to use water and having it take shapes and colors was really special.

AQO: What's the process and how long does it usually take? Does it depend on size?

PA: You mean to cure it... to make it solid?

AQO: Yes.

PA: It's a chemical reaction between two parts and depending on size and stuff... If I wanted to make one of those boxes, like in the show [at LA's Parrasch-Heijnen gallery], it would kick off in about 3 hours.

AQO: Is the process with the new resin different?

PA: No, it's the same because you have two parts, but the cure time is longer... There's other things involved but not significant. It's really the same, but it's a much better material.

A lot of the things, like those really thin edges that are in this show, you couldn't do that with polyester. It would crack and break.

AQO: I remember a lot of those older pieces with thin edges... maybe not as thin as your new works.

PA: Well, the tragedy is, is that in order for me to make those older ones with thin edges, I had to mix what's called a flexible resin in with the material... which was not a great idea, but it worked. I'm surprised they're still alive.

AQO: They are alive and still beautiful.

PA: Yes.

[laughing together]

AQO: What's the importance of color to your work? How do you choose the colors and is there a significance?

PA: It goes from crystalline to, um, kool-aid. That kind of range. And the crystalline is usually more the natural stuff or... more of the earth, and then the

kool-aid is just because it's a brilliant color. This material lends itself to amazing color density.

AQO: When you delve into the colors and mix them, is it an experiment in process?

PA: Always... every one is different.

AQO: Do colors repeat in the different forms you create? For example, in your boxes and bars?

PA: The dark bars that are on the walls [at Parrasch-Heijnen gallery]... do you remember those? Sometimes I'll find a color when I make those that I'll then translate into, let's say... a box. So, to answer your question, I do use colors in more than one form, because the perception is completely different.



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AQO: Do you consider your work as existing within any particular art movement?

PA: Oh sure... You know, it's the, you know, the Light and Space, honey. That's the key.

[laughing together]

PA: Yeah, I was part of that group and I was very much influenced by it. And... it's inseparable. And it's a real advantage too, because everybody kept raising the bar.

AQO: Well that group, who are your oldest friends, and ours... I guess you inspired each other, but who was the first person that moved you in that way and introduced you to Light and Space? Was it Larry [Bell]?



Peter Alexander with resin works in his Westminster studio, circa mid-70s. Image courtesy of Joan Agajanian Quinn



Peter Alexander with resin works in his Westminster studio, circa mid-70s. Image courtesy of Joan Agajanian Quinn

PA: Yeah, it would be Larry. I think. Yeah. He was doing things before I was and was active perhaps 5 years before I came on the scene. And what I got from him were these beautiful boxes, and I thought... *My God, I bet I can cast a box.* He gave me permission to cast a box. And my boxes were all different but, it was a box. And I like him enormously, as I'm sure you do too! [laughing]

AQO: Yes, I do! [laughing]. Love you both!

PA: [laughing]



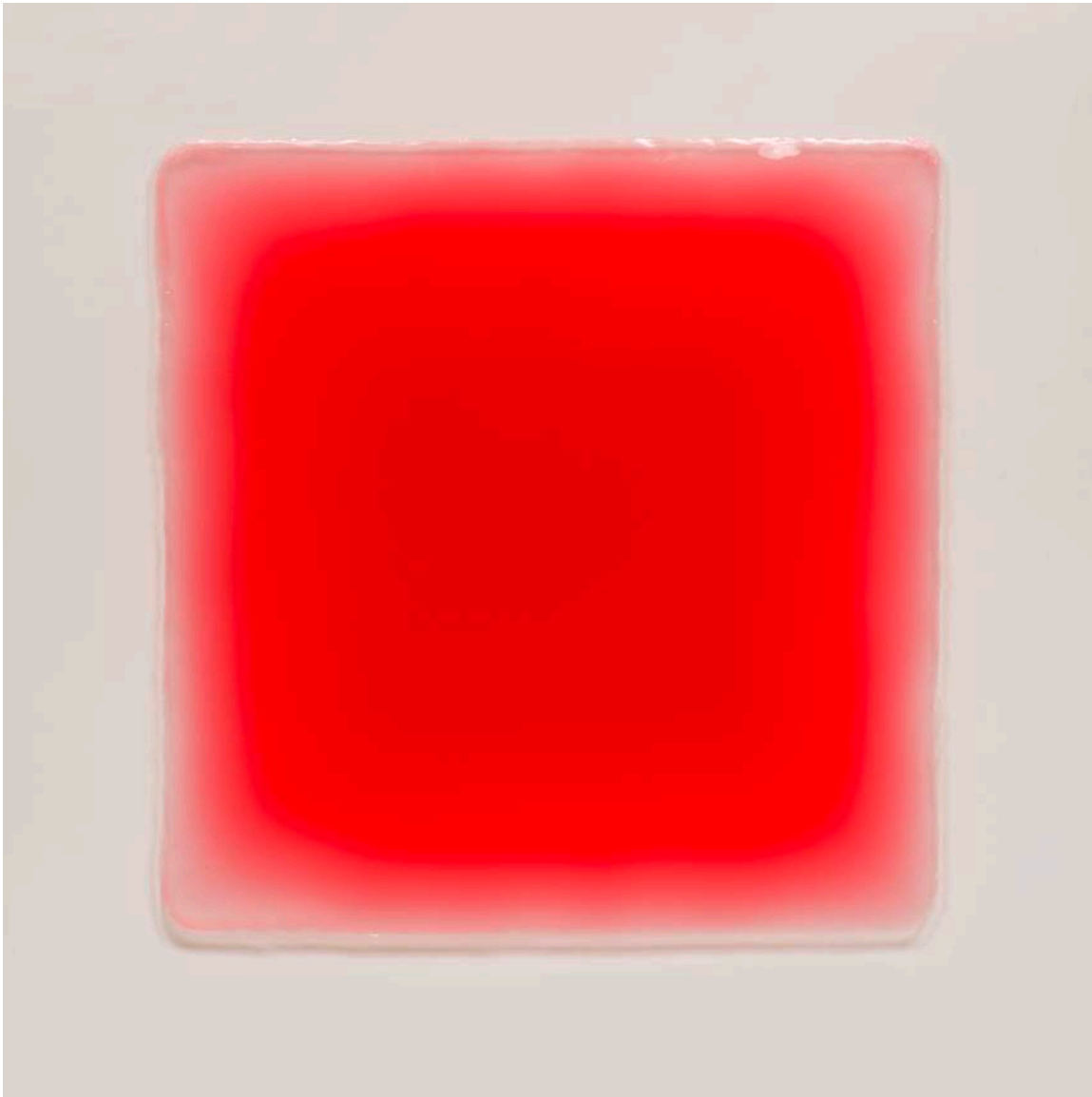
AQO: ...most of my life knowing you both!

PA: Pretty much... Isn't it!

AQO: It's crazy.

PA: It's crazy, but it's wonderful.

AQO: It really is.



Peter Alexander, Big Red Puff, 2015 urethane 58 x 59 inches Image courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery

AQO: So, you recently returned to working with resin, after years away. What did you do in the meantime?

PA: Well, I couldn't use the original material, with polyester, because I got sick... and there were other things going on at the time and I wanted to learn to do pictures, something that was really... kind of dumb. So I started doing sunsets. That's when I was building a house up in the Canyon, and in the evening we'd see the sunset over the water... you know, and I'd say to myself: *Jesus, something could be done with that!* You know.



Peter Alexander 5/16/16 (Lime Green Box), 2016 urethane 7 x 8 x 8 inches Image courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery

So, it was sort of a, it's something to push against, because it's such a cliché. But, how do you take that that cliché and re-entuse it? But... and then it went on and on. I mean the velvets, for an example, it wasn't because of the kitsch... It was because of the black. I tried to *paint* that black many times and I couldn't do it. So I said, *well fuck it, I'll just go ahead on the velvet.* The idea of velvet as kitsch is often asked because it's the natural place to go. Not that I was immune to it... I mean, that was part of the challenge.

AQO: Well you do have the sense of humor for that.

[both laughing]

AQO: Your humor would go that direction, but it was because of the color then?

PA: Yeah, the black. And I'll tell you why the black: because if you put something that shines on top of that velvet, you get the immediate sense of deep space... and there's a big gap between whatever the black is and the shiny thing. You know what I mean? So in deep space there's something that our bodies respond to. It's not an intellectual thing... it's not a cerebral thing... It's physical. And I like doing things that are physical. I trust them more.

AQO: I love that explanation.

PA: [laughing] I thought you might.

AQO: And finally, but never really final: will you please relate a memory or two that impacted your life and/or career?

PA: [whispering] Oh God. That's a tough one. I could say... I mean a very recent one is that fantastic review that David Pagel gave me in the [LA] Times, and it would be remarkable because if I had gotten that kind of review twenty years ago, I would have been absolutely ecstatic. But now... I mean it's certainly better to have one like that than not, but it happens that you reach a point that you don't really care that much, because you're committed and involved in what you do and you're not going to change, so... You know what I mean? That's not a very good story though. I mean, I have to think about that... there's no one story.

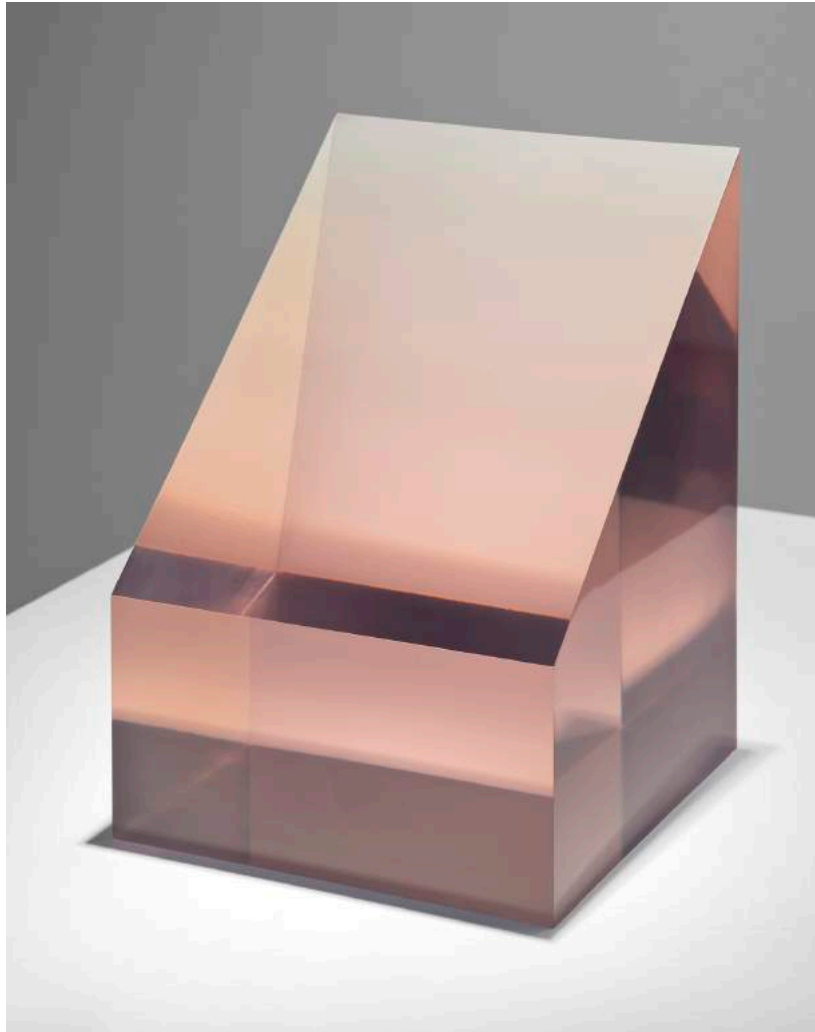
AQO: I know, there's a lifetime.

PA: Yeah. I mean, I could talk about sailing off Mexico, you know...

AQO: Well, that must have a lot to do with your work and the sunsets...?



Peter Alexander Small Cloud Box, 1966 polyester resin 5 x 5 x 5 inches Image courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery



Peter Alexander Pink Box, 1967 polyester resin 12 x 8-3/4 x 8-2/4 inches Image courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery

PA: Well, as a kid I grew up by the jetty in Newport Beach you know, on the peninsula there... and one of the memorable things that happened is that, in 1946, there was this, uh, comet that came across at night. And so the sky was falling. It was about two in the morning, and my parents woke my brother and me up saying: *you've got to come outside*. So I was sitting on these sand dunes outside the house, looking up at the sky, and I never forgot it. It was the most... it was absolutely indelible. And that's why I *love* polka dots [laughing].

AQO: Peter, that's a good story

PA: OK, you can use that one! And at the time I was, what... seven years old.

AQO: That's a perfect ending. You knew it!

PA: It's 'cause you're so sweet... I'm just answering your questions.