

Carlos Cruz-Diez, Whose Art Made Color Move, Is Dead at 95

One of Latin America's greatest postwar artists, he wanted shifting and shimmering color to be experienced as intensely as cold or heat.

By Karen Rosenberg

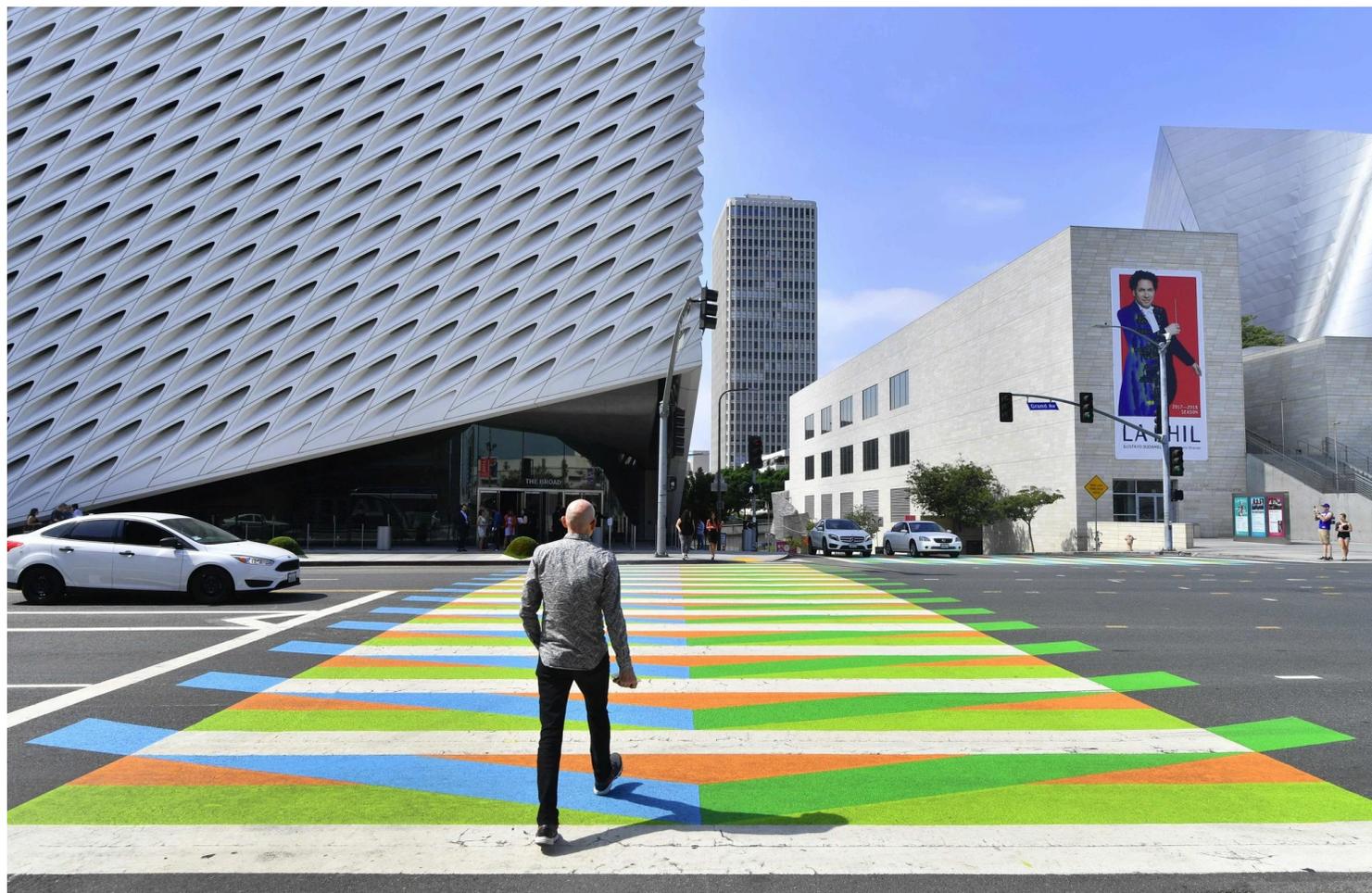
Aug. 2, 2019

Carlos Cruz-Diez, one of the most prominent Latin American artists of the postwar era, whose immersive paintings and installations set color in motion, stirring overpowering bodily sensations in the viewer, died on July 27 in Paris, his adopted city. He was 95.

His family announced his death on his website.

Mr. Cruz-Diez, who was from Venezuela, where he was addressed as “maestro” and where a museum in Caracas bears his name, achieved international renown early in his career in 1960s Paris.

He was celebrated in major North American museum shows, including a 2011 retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and a 1993 survey of Latin American art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



A pedestrian crossing painted by Mr. Cruz-Diez near the Broad art museum in Los Angeles. His public artworks can be seen around the world.
Frederic J. Brown/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

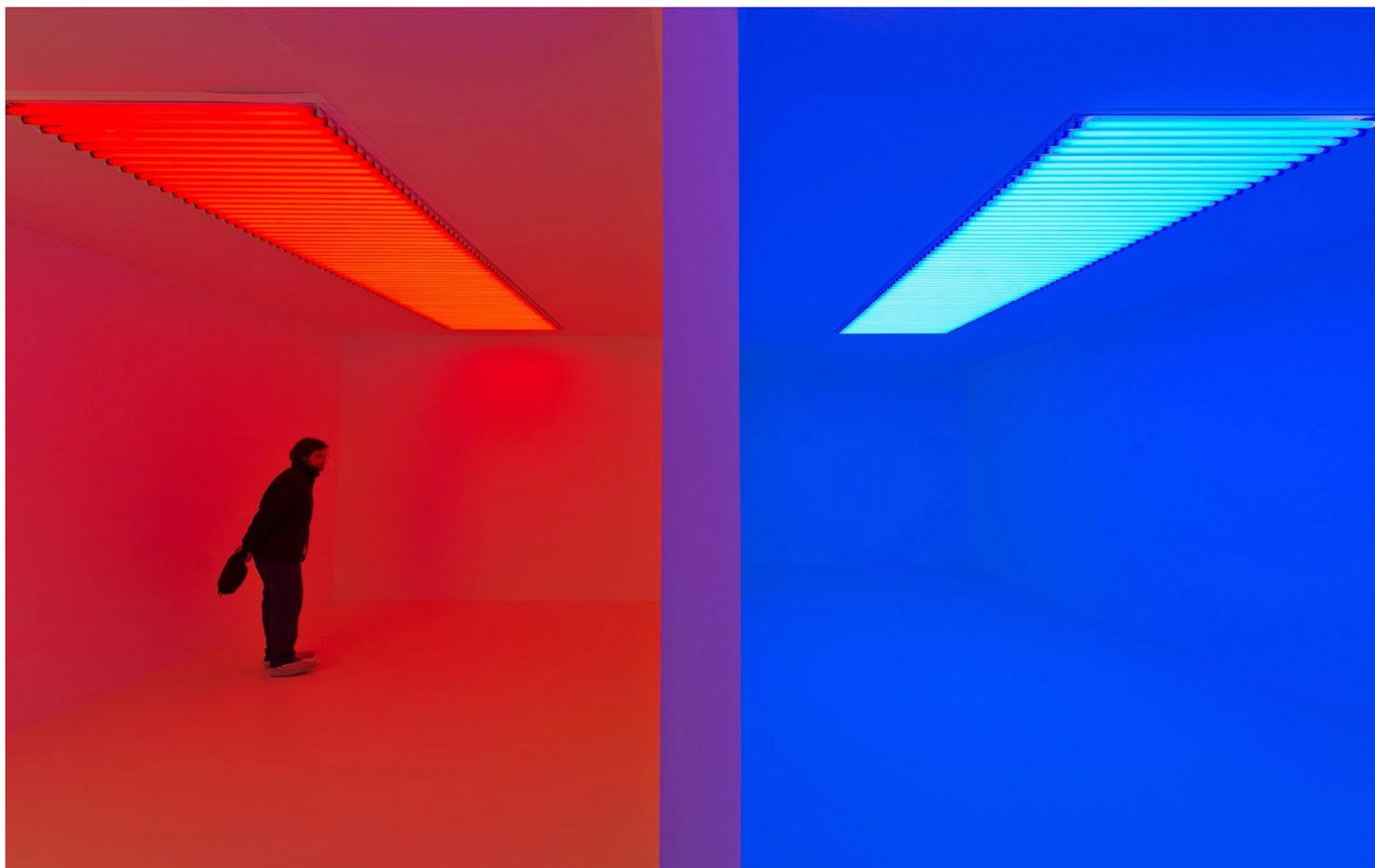
He also completed many large-scale public installations at sites around the world, including the Simón Bolívar International Airport near Caracas, the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines railway platform outside Paris and the walkway to Marlins Park, the baseball stadium in Miami.

Rigorously theoretical yet exuberantly experiential, his works challenge viewers to appreciate color as “a reality which acts on the human being with the same intensity as cold, heat, sound, and so on,” he wrote in 1975 in a publication put out by Denise René, his Paris gallery at the time. (He wrote extensively on color theory.)

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Mari Carmen Ramírez, the curator of the Houston retrospective, said in an email, “He made us see and experience color as a pure and sensuous pleasure; a participatory, interactive experience open to everyone, regardless of age, class, culture or social standing.”

Building on chromatic experiments by Sir Isaac Newton, the Impressionists and the artist and educator Josef Albers, among others, Mr. Cruz-Diez devised relief paintings of multicolored cardboard or Plexiglas strips that appear to vibrate as the viewer moves past them. These works, which he called “physichromies,” dating to the 1960s, were included in many exhibitions of Op Art and Kinetic Art, including MoMA’s movement-defining but critically lambasted 1965 group show “The Responsive Eye.”



A visitor walks through a work Mr. Cruz-Diez calls a Chromosaturations at the “Light Show” exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London in 2013.
Leon Neal/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

His other signature works, labyrinths of colored light that he called “chromosaturations,” plunge participants into a series of intense, stimulating and sometimes destabilizing “chromatic situations,” as he called them.

“So intense is the light that the colors seem to be felt rather than seen, like heat,” Holland Cotter of The New York Times wrote in reviewing “Carlos Cruz-Diez: (In)formed by Color,” a 2008 retrospective at the Americas Society in New York. “The sensation is slightly disorienting, dizzying, as if gravity had been tampered with.”

Mr. Cruz-Diez’s interest in “launching color into space,” as he once wrote, and his desire to create accessible interactive environments, have influenced many younger artists, like Olafur Eliasson, Tauba Auerbach and Ivan Navarro. They share Mr. Cruz-Diez’s interest in “light and color as a sensorial experience,” Estrellita Brodsky, a collector, philanthropist, curator and advocate of Latin American art, wrote in an email. (She organized the Americas Society exhibition.)

Mr. Cruz-Diez was well aware of this visceral, public-facing aspect of his legacy.

“It is only now, happily, that people are realizing that a great number of the art movements of the last 30 or 40 years come out of kineticism,” he told Ms. Brodsky in a 2010 interview in *Bomb* magazine. “Installation art, conceptual art, participatory art, interactive art, happenings, street art — we did all those things.

“What we called ‘environments’ later became installations,” he added. “Now young people read this work differently, and what they’re doing is called interactive art!”

Discoveries in Color: The Art of Carlos Cruz-Diez | Adobe Creative Cloud



Carlos Eduardo Cruz-Diez was born in Caracas on Aug. 17, 1923, to Mariana Adelaida Diez de Cruz and Carlos Eduardo Cruz-Lander, during the latter years of the dictator Juan Vicente Gomez’s long rule. Mr. Cruz-Diez spoke of his father as a poet and intellectual who made his living at a soft-drink factory; both parents, he said, were supportive of his art career.

Carlos was attuned to phenomena of color and light early on; the catalog for his Houston retrospective said that at age 9 he was transfixed by the red projections on his white shirt caused by sunlight streaming through cola bottles at his father’s plant.

He attended the School of Visual Arts and Applied Arts in Caracas, where he befriended Alejandro Otero and Jesús Rafael Soto, who would become his peers in geometric abstraction and the Op and Kinetic Art movements, respectively.

A successful design career in Caracas followed. Mr. Cruz-Diez was artistic director of the Caracas branch of the advertising firm McCann-Erickson from 1946 to 1951 while he continued to paint in his spare time. He married Mirtha Delgado Lorenzo in 1951 and started a family.



A visitor reacts to “Translucent Chromointerferent Environment” at the Art Basel fair in Switzerland in 2018. Harold Cunningham/Getty Images

As an artist he was restless, however, finding himself increasingly dissatisfied with the social realist paintings of shanty towns he had been making — “paintings that depicted poverty and social problems (which I couldn’t solve) for rich people to collect,” as he told Ms. Brodsky. He turned to making abstract sculptures and paintings with movable parts that could be manipulated by the public.

Mr. Cruz-Diez was increasingly drawn to abstraction and to the idea of developing his own movement or language, as Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian had done. But that seemed impossible in Venezuela, which was under another military dictatorship, that of Marcos Pérez Jiménez.

“Amid the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez, the artist or intellectual had no reception at all,” Mr. Cruz-Diez told Ms. Brodsky. “We’d be at a party and all of a sudden a military would show up and we would have to flee like flies.”

Mr. Cruz-Diez painted a former Liverpool pilot boat which was moored at the Albert Docks in 2014. The work, titled “Dazzle,” was part of the Liverpool Biennial festival.
Peter Byrne/PA Wire

In 1954, he uprooted his young family and followed Otero, Soto and other school friends to Europe, setting up a base in the Catalan town of El Masnou, near Barcelona. He made frequent trips to Paris, where in 1955 he was struck by a group show of Kinetic Art, “Le Mouvement,” at Denise René. It included works by Soto, Victor Vasarely and Jean Tinguely.

Inspired and “full of hope, sketches and projects,” he said, he made a brief return to Caracas, where he opened a graphic arts workshop and kept refining his abstraction, completing his first psychromie in 1959. But he felt misunderstood by an art world that was still enamored with figuration.

By 1960 Mr. Cruz-Diez had settled permanently in Paris, where he experienced, as he said in a video on his foundation’s website, a “creative euphoria” of competing movements, including Arte Povera, Pop Art and Fluxus as well as Op and Kinetic Art.

By the end of the ’60s he was well known outside Paris and Caracas. He had shown at MoMA in “The Responsive Eye” and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, in the 1961 Kinetic Art survey “Bewogen Beweging.” He had been awarded the International Prize for Painting at the São Paulo Biennale of 1967. And he had represented Venezuela at the 1970 Venice Biennale.

He is survived by his son Carlos Cruz Delgado; a daughter, Adriana Cruz Delgado; six grandchildren; and one great-grandchild. A second son, Jorge Antonio Cruz Delgado, died in 2017. Mr. Cruz-Diez’s wife died in 2004.

Mr. Cruz-Diez in his workshop in Paris in 2017. By 1960 he had settled there permanently. Atelier Cruz-Diez and Adagg, Paris; Lisa Preud'homme

Although he lived under oppressive dictatorships and through periods of social unrest and economic volatility in Venezuela — as well as long stretches of prosperity that stemmed from the country’s oil reserves — Mr. Cruz-Diez generally avoided commenting on these circumstances in his art.

“I was never very political,” he told Ms. Brodsky. “I once sat in on a Communist Party meeting and realized that in order to join a party one has to be obedient. I’ve never been obedient.”

Rather, he tried to depoliticize color. As Ms. Brodsky observed, “By way of experiencing color’s intense immediacy as light rather than pigment, the viewer’s eye is freed from the burden of interpreting representational forms that are preordained by class or political messages.”

Nonetheless, current events have seeped into his site-specific projects. One of his earliest chromosaturations installations, “Labyrinth for a Public Space,” was exhibited at the entrance to the Place de l’Odéon metro station in Paris in 1969, when the street protests of 1968 would have been fresh in memory for anyone navigating the work’s maze of red, blue and green tinted Plexiglas.

Mr. Cruz-Diez’s chromatic floor at Simón Bolívar International Airport, outside Caracas. Francisco Goncalves/Moment, via Getty Images

And in recent years, as Venezuelans by the millions have sought refuge from economic collapse and authoritarian rule, Mr. Cruz-Diez’s installation at Simón Bolívar airport has become a site of mourning and transition for people fleeing the country. (It has also become a popular image in social media posts, many showing feet planted on the work’s zigzagging bands of tiles.)

In a biographical video on his foundation’s website, Cruz-Diez said: “I don’t make paintings, nor sculptures. I make platforms for occurrences. They are platforms where color is being produced, dissolved, generated in a perpetual instant. In it there’s no notion of past nor future. In it is the notion of the present moment, just like life.”

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