



ARCHITECT OF LIGHT

*ITALIAN-BORN ARTIST IOLE ALESSANDRINI
EXPLORES THE BEAUTY AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT
OF WORKING WITH LIGHT*

BY RACHEL GALLAHER

A photo of the artist is framed within the luminous planes projected against the walls at Jack Straw Gallery in Seattle.

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How many colors do you see?” Artist and architect Iole Alessandrini asks me this on a cold, windy evening in late February. We’re sitting in an attic-like nook in her apartment at West Seattle’s Cooper Artist Housing, a 36-unit former school that has been transformed into an affordable live/work space specifically for artists.

I’m looking at a square photo of a color wheel leaning against the wall — a series of progressively smaller circles and squares nested inside each other. The room is bathed in blue light coming from an RGB LED strip (made with red, green, and blue LED chips) mounted on the opposite wall.

“I see yellow, dark blue, black, and white,” I say hesitantly, looking up at Alessandrini. It feels like a trick question. She smiles, and suddenly the blue light changes to a magenta hue. I look back at the photo, and the colors have shifted to red, sky blue, and white. When Alessandrini turns off the LED strip, the photograph appears in full vibrance: shades of yellow, red, and blue, all at once.

“We just witnessed a color phenomenon that is both additive and subtractive,” Alessandrini says. “Under these light conditions, we were subjected to an optical illusion that caused us to believe that what was changing was not the color of the light but the color in the color wheel itself.” She pauses. “Light is so much more than bulbs and lamps. I have been awakened to an awareness of light and its potential as a spiritual experience.”



Alessandrini, who has been creating art in Seattle for nearly three decades — and has a show coming up at Seattle’s SOIL Gallery in May, titled “To the North Pole and Back” — easily slips between the scientific and artistic when talking about her chosen medium. Intangible and undeniably magical in the right conditions, light vacillates between the banal (think overhead fluorescent office lights) and the fantastic (Dan Flavin’s final installation in Milan’s Santa Maria Annunciata in Chiesa Rossa church comes to mind), a phenomenon that Alessandrini is interested in investigating through her work.

With a background in art, architecture, and industrial design — and an intense interest in technology, math, and science — Alessandrini is perfectly poised to explore the nature of light and how she can manipulate it to create an emotional experience for her work’s viewers. She uses a keen understanding of context and materiality (working with everything from lasers to video to the human body) to create site-specific installations that encourage observers to question the nature of what they see and dive deeper into the intersections of art, technology, and imagination.

“To me, the notion of site-specific installations means that you’re in a place that maybe you go to all the time, but now there is something new, something different there,” Alessandrini says. “Suddenly, your senses are heightened because the space transforms — a new awareness that manifests itself.”

Born in Avezzano, Italy, Alessandrini grew up in a creative family in Rome. (Her father was a furniture maker, and her mother was an herbalist.) She studied architecture at the University La Sapienza, landing in Seattle after meeting Astra Zarina, a larger-than-life professor in the University Washington department of architecture, best known for creating the University of Washington Italian Studies program and founding of the UW Rome Center. At the time, Alessandrini had applied to a Ph.D. program in Florence, but came in fourth for acceptance (out of three slots). Zarina, recognizing her academic interests, suggested that she move to Seattle instead.

“I looked at her and said, ‘Where is Seattle?’” Alessandrini recalls. “And we pulled out an atlas and looked it up. Seattle was across the country from New York. I thought, ‘What a fantastic idea!’”

Alessandrini arrived in Seattle in 1994 and lived with Zarina and her family in their Wallingford house for the next 20 years. As a visiting scholar through the Furniture Design Studio at the College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Alessandrini studied furniture design but was introduced to lighting by one of her instructors, Marietta Millet.

“Marietta woke me up about light,” Alessandrini explains. “She talked about it not only in qualitative and quantitative terms; she talked about light as a spiritual experience, an awakening.”

Armed with this new outlook, Alessandrini started experimenting with light as an artistic medium. At the time — the late ’90s — the city was a hotbed for technological advancements, and she became interested in using them to manipulate the appearance of light.

Her first big exhibition was in 1998, as part of the “Objects in Hangar 2” show, sponsored by the Seattle Arts Commission. According to a description on Alessandrini’s website, the video, sound, and light installation, titled “Sand Blast,” “exploited the tension between being able to see into a room but having physical access denied because the room is a hazardous area.”

“The fact that an arts agency was giving me money for my work made me feel very encouraged,” Alessandrini says. “I realized that it meant that what I was doing was valuable and relevant. It was a pivotal moment for me.”



Iole Alessandrini's "Winter Season of Light" brightens Pacific Avenue in Tacoma.

From there, Alessandrini doubled down on her experimentation with light, creating site-specific installations, gallery exhibitions, and public artworks from Edmonds to Perugia, Italy. Her work with the Laser Plane is particularly captivating and has been ongoing as the Laser Project Series since 2001, when she had a residency at the Bellevue Arts Museum in collaboration with optical engineer and retired astronomer Ed Mannery.

Using custom-built lasers, photocells (light-sensitive sensors), sound, Pure Data programming environments, and a light-controlled room, Alessandrini allows viewers to interact with these futuristic environments in ways that raise questions about boundaries, reality, and the perceived value of physicality. (Who's to say that our dreams and emotions don't have worth?)

A recent public art piece, "Raven and The Light," which opened last August at Climate Pledge Arena, continues Alessandrini's interest in new and emerging technologies, utilizing an augmented reality component that lets users view the constellations in the sky through a stargazing app. When we spoke, she was thinking about the SOIL exhibition but hadn't nailed down exactly what she wanted to show.

"There is something about AI that is fascinating to me right now," she says, "so I might do something involving that. My question is how can we use that technology to make it ours? What is it going to do to art, to philosophy, to critical thinking?"

"I feel like there are parallels between what happened when photography emerged in the 1800s," Alessandrini says, noting that when an image could quickly and easily reproduce reality with a click, artists started exploring new styles of painting, sculpture, and drawing — expanding the bounds of their creativity to new levels.

Alessandrini was recently accepted to The Arctic Circle art and science residency program. In October, she will travel with a group to the high-Arctic Svalbard Archipelago and the Arctic Ocean, where she will spend nearly three weeks aboard a specially outfitted sailing vessel, furthering her installation and laser work in a new environment. **S**