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McQuaid, Cate. "Out of the darkness, dazzling visions in Otto Piene exhibit in Fitchburg."
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"Proliferation of the Sun" is among the works in "Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton, 1983-2014" at the Fitchburg Art Museum.
CHARLES STERNAIMOLO

FITCHBURG — To understand Otto Piene's obsession with light and fire, consider the darkness he came from. Piene was born in 1928 in Bad Laasphe, Germany, and drafted at 16 to fight in World War II. As an antiaircraft gunner, he was entranced by the beauty of the tendrils of lights left by exploding bombs.

"But fear came before beauty;" he wrote in 1965, "seeing was aiming."

"Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton, 1983-2014" at the Fitchburg Art Museum examines how these essential themes show up in the revolutionary artist's later works.

Piene's art insisted on a better, more hopeful future. In the late 1950s, he cofounded Group Zero, which focused on kinetic art, events, and experimental techniques. The group, with affiliates including Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana, and Jean Tinguely, associated their name with the final beat in a rocket launch's countdown.

"Our defining experience was living an age when people dreamt of astronomic and cosmonautic adventures, in which they were capable of leaving Earth, of overcoming gravity. We are interested in light, in fire, in airstreams, in the unlimited possibilities for creating a better, more perfect world," Piene wrote.

The pioneering artist was the first fellow at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies in 1968. In 1974 he became the center's director, and held the post for two decades. He and his wife, Elizabeth Goldring, bought property in Groton in 1983 that they dubbed the "art farm." Students and collaborators visited regularly. In a grain silo, Piene set up one of his signature "Light Ballets," spectral installations whirling with projected, starry lights.

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During the Groton years, until his death in 2014, Piene revisited themes and projects he'd been working on for decades: "Light Ballets," inflatable sculptures, paintings, and drawings made with fire and smoke, and "Proliferation of the Sun," a multimedia installation that debuted in 1967 as an orchestrated performance featuring more than 1,000 hand-painted glass slides in several slide carousels.

"Fire and Light" is the largest exhibition in the United States devoted solely to Piene's works. It makes a strong case for an even more ambitious one. MIT List Visual Art Center would be the logical venue; that institution mounted a magical "Light Ballet" in 2011, and has the space for much more.

"Proliferation of the Sun" is the dazzling centerpiece of Fitchburg's show. In 2014, Piene updated and digitized the project for display at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. He died of a heart attack the day that show opened. "Proliferation," which hasn't been seen in the United States in more than 50 years, features audio of the artist "conducting" the performance — "set your timers at a sequence of 15 seconds. Now. Now. Now," he says.

But it's all automated: Projections of radiant orbs and smears of color linger and shift over screens on walls and at angles throughout the gallery, and on a large, inflatable white sphere in the middle of the room. When an oval appears on the sphere, it evokes a godlike eye taking everything in. Piene fills the room with ovals, or leaves everything a sacred, quiet white, or paints wild pink everywhere.

It fits into a "made for Instagram" style of 21st-century art installations, yet even as it feeds that hunger for overwhelming lushness, its rhythms and visions seep inward. Like a symphony, it prompts an affecting private experience, sparking thrills and lulls and ardor that can't be shared on social media.

The juicy gestures in "Proliferation of the Sun" dominate Piene's paintings, as well. A loosely painted blue figure flails at the center of "Antigravity," one of the artist's fire paintings made with paint and a flammable fixative, set aflame in a controlled way.

Fire is elemental, and the fire paintings read that way: like birth and death, exploding stars, universes dissolving into darkness and being reborn. Piene was a master of textural effects and searing color. In "Sulphur," a billowing omphalos of yellow and adobe red, soot engulfs areas in dark ether, and the yellow at the center crackles like dry earth.

Piene was best known for his grand inflatables, which led to what he called "Sky Art" — gleeful balloons vaulting over rivers or floating high overhead. There's a splendid, if relatively humble, one anchored indoors here, "Red Star," a palm-tree form that sighs and droops, then inhales and perks up — not unlike the rest of us. The museum has a sky art outdoor event scheduled for April 27.

One of Piene's collaborators, Boston light artist John Powell, has choreographed Fitchburg's "Light Ballet." It features two "Light Cubes" — perforated metal cubes with revolving lamps inside, which cast wheeling patterns over the walls. Piene first started projecting light like this in 1959, as if to capture the mystical shimmer of rotating galaxies in a single room.

Before he died, he was working with Powell to update the cubes into "Light Robots." Two robots on view are still, but will dance a pas de deux in a March 24 performance. I got a little preview of one robot's moves.

Its spinning stars were not all that different from those of the "Light Cubes" — indeed, they were simpler — except for one ghostly element that flitted among the dabs of light, a projection of the light bulb's

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filament. It brought to mind the blobby, luminous forms in 19th-century spiritualist photos, said to be traces of psychic energy.

I chose to think of it as the guiding hand of Piene himself, as ever turning persistent, elemental themes over to new technologies.

Fire and Light: Otto Piene in Groton, 1983-2014 at Fitchburg Art Museum, 185 Elm St., Fitchburg, through June 2. 978-345-4207, www.fitchburgartmuseum.org