

LAURIE LEA

SACRED  
LIGHT



Laurie Lea

# SACRED LIGHT

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**Laurie Lea**     **SACRED LIGHT: GOLDWORKS**

September 11–October 10, 2014

IAM's Space 38/39

38 West 39 Street

New York, NY 10018

### DEDICATION

I would like to acknowledge and dedicate this catalogue to the YWCA of Brooklyn and to its CEO Martha Kamber, without whose support and encouragement this exhibition would have not been possible. After several years away from making art, this safe place has enabled me to create art again, has given me a place to showcase this work, and has provided me a precious public audience of tenants and neighbors to interact with, cheer me on, and encourage me to pursue work that might otherwise exist in a vacuum. They have all made the journey worthwhile.

Front cover: *Sacred Light* series #4 (detail, see page 13)

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## FOREWORD By Dr. Makoto Fujimura

The International Arts Movement (IAM) believes that the work of caring for culture begins by providing a safe space for artists to wrestle deeply with issues of art, faith, and culture. In IAM's exhibition, *SACRED LIGHT*, sculptor Laurie Lea creates art that speaks into our daily lives, edifies our journeys, and sheds needed light into our culture. Through the integration of light and form she confronts the brokenness and disillusionment of this world just as the light of Christ shines in darkness.



## ARTISTS NOTE

My work is based on the interrelationship between form and light. Exploring this interaction has given me a way of examining human experience both in the spiritual (invisible, intangible) dimension and in the material dimension of observable phenomena. The two bodies of work based on this concept which I presently pursue are SACRED LIGHT and CITY ON A HILL. I developed these bodies of work as sculpture before translating them into (primarily) two dimensions. This book focuses on SACRED LIGHT, which was originally conceived in three dimensions as an installation of 12 luminous vertical forms covered by broken glass, suspended by monofilament and hung high in the majestic space of a Cathedral. SACRED LIGHT was a fusion of broken forms and light, a metaphor for redemption, a symbol of hope in a darkening world. I continued working with this concept for several years before translating it into two dimensions. The labor intensive nature of sculpture eventually creates a need in me to be more dynamic and fluid, so I periodically turn from three to two dimensions for a season before returning to sculpture. This is part of the rhythm of my work.

I began making two dimensional "poured" art shortly after Superstorm Sandy hit our NYC area. The first body of work which appeared was GOLDWORKS, filled with dense blacks and brilliant light filled metallic oxides, interference pigments and other light conductive media. Considering that I had begun making art in the figurative, vertical tradition, these works surprised me with their clear sense of landscape. In these works, precious strands of gold and light appear out of darkness as harbingers of a place and a reality which cannot be destroyed by any force of nature or man.

Returning to the basic vertical concept of SACRED LIGHT, it became apparent that these GOLDWORKS "landscapes" would become the background for the next work, LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS, in the two dimensional SACRED LIGHT series. A small workspace necessitated a large artwork to be modular. Seven equal sized landscape panels stacked one above the other became the backdrop for a narrow vertical sculptural element, an LED strip running down the center from top to bottom. Light piercing the darkness recalls the writing of the prophet Isaiah, "Light shines in the darkness and the darkness knew it not." LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS was included in the exhibition SACRED LIGHT: GOLDWORKS which opened in New York City on September 11, 2015, a fitting date for the subject matter.

In all of my work, I use a wide variety of materials chosen primarily for texture and light conductive properties. Every element – from the media, materials and surfaces to lighting, processes and associations – is chosen to support the central vision of the light and form dynamic. My methods involve the use of chemical processes, gravity and temperature, and result in forms and surfaces suggesting states of violence, fragility, fragmentation and redemption. A sensuous experience of materials is counterbalanced by a sense of luminosity and space.



*GOLDWORKS* series #19, 2012  
metallic oxides, interference pigments, garnet, ground glass on paper / 11" x 10"

## THE ART OF BEING By Dr. James Romaine

Looking at the art of Laurie Lea (born 1948) one is almost immediately struck by the question “what is this?” In fact, the capacity for a work of art to provoke the what-is-this question is sign of its success. Any work of art that gives away its secrets too quickly is really no great work at all. The objective for the artist is to create work that both maintains its own mystery *and* holds the viewer’s attention. Lea effectively accomplishes this balance.

Lea’s art engages the viewer with an approachable generosity. Her work is conceptually purposeful but it is not overtly theoretical. It doesn’t require the viewer to have prior knowledge of art history. Lea’s work embraces viewers on their own terms. At a time when so much contemporary art is esoteric and politically heavy handed, this work is a refreshing oasis in which visual meaning is expressed with elegance. Her art is not about grace; her art is graceful. This proceeds from her own amiable method of working with her materials, which in turn proceeds from her vision and concepts. The result is work that is hospitable toward the viewer.

This art is alive; it is its own living being. In fact, coming into a state of being is a central theme of Lea’s art. Her series entitled *Water*, begun in 2002, evokes a primordial void, out of which matter is born. Working with ground glass, shellac, metallic oxides, clear tape, and fluid acrylics on glass-like vellum, Lea draws out poetic life that already existed in the properties of these materials. These works connect with a universal human urge for significance.

After a period of conceptualizing, brainstorming, and preparing the material that Lea anticipates needing for a body of work, she proceeds with a creative process of building up and breaking down layers of material. Her work in the studio is fast and intuitive but, at the same time, disciplined and deliberate. There is transference of aesthetic energy from the artist to the material, which activates the work. The final piece is born of a union of the artist’s imagination and the material’s inclination. This creative process sets in motion a dynamism that continues in the process by which the work reveals meaning to the viewer.

The works are a partnership between the artist and the material, that leaves room for the miraculous. The life begun in the studio continues in the gallery. Many of Lea’s works are not hung directly on the wall. Rather they are supported by nearly invisible pieces of Plexiglas, placed behind the vellum, that separate the work from the wall. This allows light to come through, from behind, and evokes an appearance of depth and movement. Like forms floating on water, these works float on light. They are, at once, substantive and weightless.



WATER series #10, 2008  
ground glass, fluid acrylics, chalk, cellophane on  
frosted polycarbonate/ 15" x 14"

Lea's art can neither be properly called painting nor sculpture. Although her present work is primarily two-dimensional, her approach to materials is more like that of a sculptor. The painter, very often, conceals the material quality of the paint by means of depicting a picture. The sculptor is, more often, conscious of the relationship between their material's natural properties and the art-making process. In Lea's art, the union of the concept and her material's inherent properties are often the starting point of the art-making process. For example, in her work with metallic oxides, Lea employs the material's physical weight and its chemical properties, which she often subjects to extreme temperatures, as part of the creative process. Lea's interdisciplinary work is as much based on the science

of thermodynamics as it is on the history of art.

In her series, initiated in 2002, entitled *Earth*, Lea poured shellac on paper and vellum in sub freezing temperatures out of doors. These works are all vertically oriented, like portraits. This series recalls Lea's earlier work, from between 1971 and 1991, as a figurative artist.



WATER series #5, 2008  
metallic oxides, interference pigments, cellophane on  
paper, ground glass on frosted polycarbonate/ 15" x  
14"

Her *Earth* series manifests Lea as an artist rooted more in a figurative or portrait tradition than a landscape tradition.

This distinction between the character of the landscape and portrait is evidenced in a comparison of Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* and *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*. As a landscape, *Starry Night* invites the viewer into the pictorial space. The movement is from the foreground into the background. In *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*, the artist emerges from the painting to encounter the viewer face to face. The visual movement is forward. Even in abstract art, this distinction can be seen by comparing the work of Mark Rothko, which opens itself to the viewer, and Barnett Newman's use of the "zip," as a form that confronts the viewer. Even though the series is entitled *Earth*, the manner in which Lea's materials



EARTH series #14, 2007  
shellac on frosted polycarbonate/  
15" x 12"

engage the viewer, as a fellow living organic being, is more akin to the portrait than a landscape.

The discussion, so far, of Lea's art may create a false impression that the work of art stands outside of time. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, art that has merit is work that evidences a visual method that is organically born out of the experience of the human condition in a particular time and place. Art that has historic value is art that was, or is, in its own time modern (i.e. contemporary). But what makes art contemporary? Charles Baudelaire, poet, art critic, and author of the essay "The Painter of Modern Life," also wrote, "the word modern refers to manner and not to date."<sup>1</sup> In other words, a work of art belongs to a time, past or present, not because of when it was made but

rather because of the visual language that it evidences.

While many artists since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have evidenced a heightened awareness of the moral urgency of being "modern," there have always been, in every moment in the history of art, artists who have pursued this purpose of finding a visual language of their own time and place. In 1947, the Abstract Expressionist painter Adolph Gottlieb wrote, in his defense of non-representational painting, "The role of the artist, of course, has always been that of image-maker. Different times require different images. Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality. To my mind certain so-called abstraction is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the realism of our time."<sup>2</sup>

Gottlieb's statement goes to the very core of the questions "what is art?" and "what purpose does art serve?" Is art just



EARTH series #13, 2007  
shellac on paper/ 15" x 11"

1. Charles Baudelaire, "Some French Caricaturists" in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*. Penguin Classics, 1995.

2. Adolph Gottlieb, "The Ides of Art: The Attitudes of Ten Artists on Their Art and Contemporaneity" in *The Tiger's Eye*, vol. 1, no. 2, December 1947.

another form of visual delight or does art have a moral function? If art has a moral function, one that transcends pleasuring the eye, then the artist's visual language is subject to scrutiny. According to Gottlieb, each moment in history demands that artists find visual methods that realize contemporary aspirations and fears. The artist should develop a visual language that gives material form to a certain outlook on the human condition.

Looking across the history of art, we can see that Gottlieb was right. The art that we hold in esteem today is work, that was, in its time, contemporary. For example, Giotto di Bondone is acclaimed for his development of a rich pictorial space. In his Arena Chapel frescos, Giotto combines figures and space to create a pictorial narrative. But Giotto didn't simply wake up one day with an insatiable urge to paint more naturalistically. Giotto's visual language of incarnational realism was an artist realization of contemporary theological currents. More specifically, Giotto's pictorial aesthetic was rooted in the theology of Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Francis's teaching changed how people in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, thought about God, the world that they lived in, and themselves. This required the development of a commensurate contemporary visual method. Of course there were artists in Giotto's time, as there are today, who reject the notion that an artist should be modern. But they have been discarded by art history.

As we consider Lea's art, we need to ask, "What makes art contemporary in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" To borrow Gottlieb's words, what is the "realism" of our time? In an age that is largely defined by digital information, when our engagement with and experience of the world and each other is often in digital formats that collapse barriers of time and distance, when our very identities exist as bits of information, the "realism of our time" is a non-pictorial visual language. If pictorial art, as developed by artists such as Giotto, equates image making with pictures, non-pictorial art communicates visually without reference to a picture. Visual art that calls itself "contemporary" in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is work that is self-critical of its own pictorial character, perhaps even to the point of being non-pictorial.

If, in the Western tradition, pictorial art (the suggestion that the work of art be a picture or representation of a subject) developed in the Renaissance, the legacy of Jackson Pollock is the end of pictorial art.<sup>3</sup> In the art methods of the late 1950s, artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol traded the pictorial character of painting for methods that gave greater emphasis to the mechanics and materials of art making. By the

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3. Although he does not use the word "pictorial," Allan Kaprow's 1958 essay "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" argues that Pollock's art brought a tradition of representational painting to an end and that, after Pollock, artists should return to work that directly engaged life.

1960s, artists, on both sides of the Atlantic, belonging to movements such as Minimalism, Earth Art, Light and Space Art, Arte Povera, Fluxus, Nouveau Realism, and Zero dispensed with pictorialism entirely.

Lea's art participates in this history of non-pictorial art. Her art is not representational and it is not abstract. Abstraction itself is a form of non-representation pictorialism. Although Lea's works are non-pictorial, they are no less visual. In fact, it could be argued that, without being pictorial, these works are more purely sensuous. In works such as *Goldworks*, begun in 2012, after the devastation inflicted by Hurricane Sandy on New York and New Jersey, Lea employs metallic oxides, ground glass, gold leaf, interference pigments, various minerals such as ground pearl, magnum and garnet, and gouache on vellum.

Like Lea's use of thermodynamics within the creative process, the optical properties of interference pigments requires an explanation that is as much scientific as it is artistic. There are, essentially, three types of pigments: absorption, metallic and interference. Absorption pigments are those which we most commonly encounter in art. The pigment, such as red, absorbs the entire spectrum of light except the color that we see. Metallic pigments, such as the gold that we find in much of Lea's art, reflect rather than absorb light. Although metallic pigments have a greater sense of dimensionality, both absorption and metallic pigments are a single and visually constant color. Interference pigments are more visually dynamic, the colors that we see are dependent on both the angle of our observation and the direction of illumination. If you look from one side, it is one color. If you look at the same work from a different side, it is another color. As a result, interference pigments have a greater three-dimensional or sculptural form.

In her use of interference pigments, Lea's *Goldworks* employ non-pictorial means to visualize the potential for destructive forces of nature to contain, within themselves, the potential for beauty and rebirth. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, these works offer hope.

In discussing Gottlieb's moral imperative of the artist to be contemporary, to seek out the realism of their own time, it should not be implied that the artist is strictly bound to accept their own time as they find it. Artists, such as Giotto di Bondone, Vincent van Gogh, and Andy Warhol, each developed their art with an ambition to add to or even change the world as they found it. By giving the viewer a vision of a potential reality, the artist has a potentially prophetic opportunity to call that new world into being.

In her installation entitled *Sacred Light*, Lea hung 12 vertical electro luminescent strips, covered in broken glass and emulsions. Suspended above the viewer by monofilament, the work was held in place by its own weight. Changing light conditions and air currents in the space might cause the work to gently move. The work translated light into creative energy,



*TRUE VINE* panel #5, 2014

interference pigments, metallic oxides, ground glass on frosted polycarbonate/ 14" x 30"

awakening within the viewer a sensation of the object in space that evokes the potential of a spiritually transformed world.

Building on the success of *Sacred Light*, Lea began a series of works, including *True Vine* and *Light in the Darkness* that were not site specific. *Light in the Darkness* is composed of seven horizontal panels, which ascend in a vertical form. The panels are linked by a single strand of LED light. *Light in the Darkness* is, at once, tangible and intangible. It combines translucent and opaque material. The translucent material, such as vellum, is visually activated by light and gives the work a sense of dynamic life. The opaque material, such as metallic oxides, visually ground the work. *Light in the Darkness* is a metaphor for hope in the midst of a broken world. Her art evidences the fact that material that is broken, fragmented, cracked,



*TRUE VINE* panel #5 (alternate view)

scratched, torn, or “damaged” in some way, allows light to penetrate. Materials that resist being broken or changed, remain opaque.

This potent spiritual life that runs through Lea’s art is an expression of the artist’s own faith. Many of her works, such as *Sacred Light* and *Light in the Darkness* have titles that evoke Christian themes of creation, suffering, hope, and redemption. The synthesis of the sacred and the material in Lea’s art shares a kinship with Medieval art. In his book *Seeing Medieval Art*, Herbert L. Kessler describes how works of Medieval art were designed to negotiate between substance and presence, between materiality and spirituality. He notes that, in Medieval art, “the traditional separation between matter and image, with its implied opposition of body and soul, cedes to a dynamic process that transacts the relationship between the two.”<sup>4</sup> Although her art does not directly reference Medieval art, Lea’s art shares a similar attitude of art making as a process of metamorphosis in which material moves towards meaning. Like many Medieval artists, Lea pursues a non-pictorial visualization of spiritual perception.

This engagement with art as a form of prophetic creation is also evident in the title of Lea’s series *City on a Hill*. Begun in 2003, during an Artist’s Residency at Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle, Washington, *City on a Hill* are forms of cast glass, which have an interior void. This void contains a neon light that causes the work to glow from within. The work was installed and photographed on a beach on Staten Island.

In works such as the *City on a Hill* series, the relationship between light and form is the conceptual and visual foundation of Lea’s art. Lea’s use of light reminds us of the potential slippage between the material and immaterial, between the seen and unseen, between the transitory and the eternal. Light has the capacity to visually dissolve solid



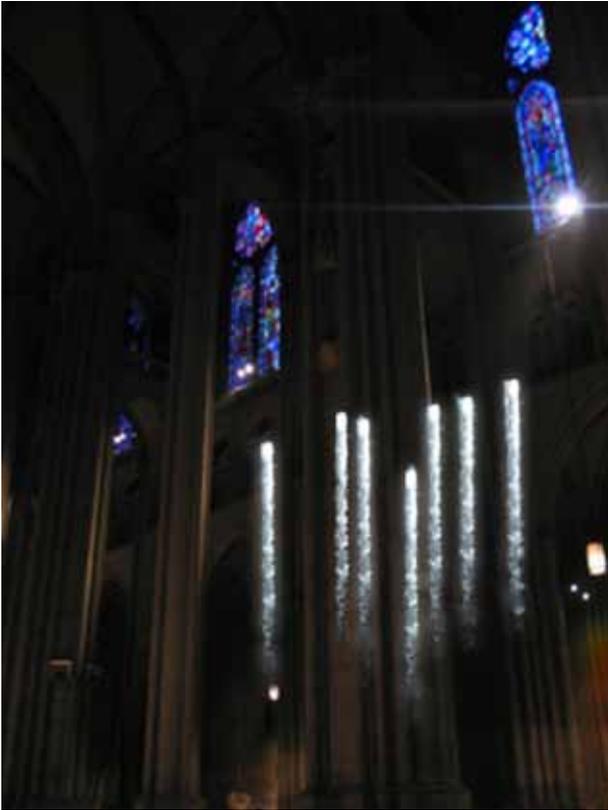
SACRED LIGHT series #1, 2007  
glass and emulsions, 4' x 4" x 3"



SACRED LIGHT series #4, 2007  
glass and emulsions, 4' x 5" x 3"

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4. Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*. Broadview Press, 2004, pp30-33.



*SACRED LIGHT*, 2008  
Cathedral installation/ variable dimensions

material forms, such as when the rising or setting sun transforms the New York City skyline from rows of buildings into shimmering flames. Light also has the capacity to visually solidify fluids, such as the transformation of water into the appearance of glass.

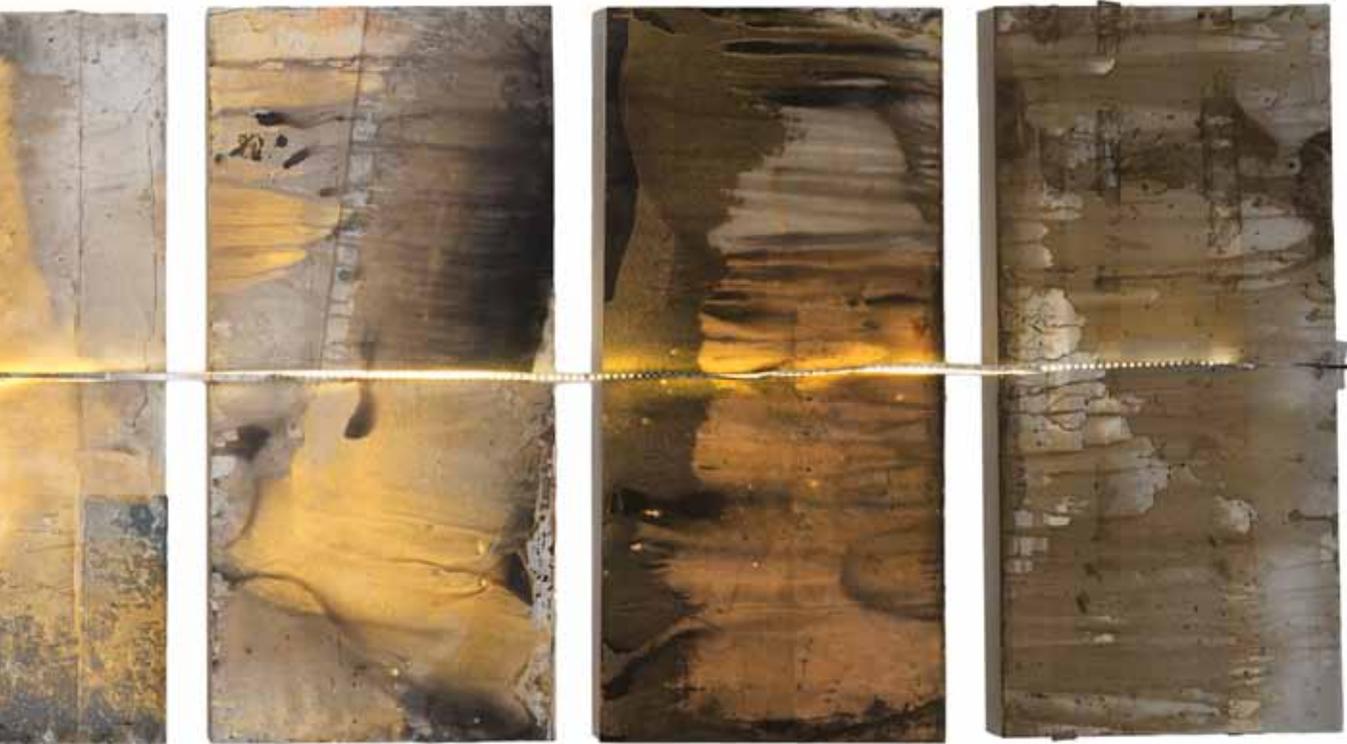
In Lea's art, the material and immaterial, the seen and unseen, the transitory and the eternal do not simply co-exist side-by-side. They inhabit each other. They are one mystery realized in material form. In the end, we are where we began, with the question "what is this?" Perhaps the highest praise that one can pay the art of Laurie Lea, or the work of any artist, is to say that it captures our imagination because it *is*.



*CITY ON A HILL* series #3, 2009  
cast glass and neon installation, Staten Island, NY/ variable dimensions

*LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS, 2014*  
LED lights, metallic oxides, interference pigments,  
ground glass, gouache, gold leaf and ground minerals  
on frosted polycarbonate / 9' x 30"







*GOLDWORKS* series #5, 2012  
metallic oxides, gold leaf, interference pigments, gouache on frosted polycarbonate/ 12" x 20"



*GOLDWORKS* series #6, 2012  
metallic oxides, gold leaf, gouache on frosted polycarbonate/ 12" x 20"



*GOLDWORKS* series #7, 2012  
metallic oxides, interference pigments, gouache on frosted polycarbonate/ 12" x 20"



*GOLDWORKS* series #8, 2012  
metallic oxides, interference pigments, magnum, ground glass, gouache on frosted polycarbonate/  
12" x 20"





*GOLDWORKS* series #11, 2013  
metallic oxides , interference pigments, magnum, gouache on frosted polycarbonate/19" x 19"





*GOLDWORKS* series #10, 2013  
metallic oxides, interference pigments, ground glass, gouache on frosted polycarbonate/ 19" x 19"





*GOLDWORKS* series #13, 2012  
metallic oxides, gouache on frosted polycarbonate/ 14" x 26"

**LAURIE LEA** received her BFA from the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado and then returned to her home town, Atlanta, Georgia, where she joined the Fay Gold Gallery and exhibited nationally and internationally, ("American Drawings, 1976", Smithsonian Arts Institute, Portsmouth, Virginia, catalogue; and "USA" Portrait of the South", Palazzo Venezia, Rome, Italy, catalogue). She won numerous awards, such as the 1972 Purchase Award for the Georgia Arts Council. For several years she served on the Fulton County Arts Council in Atlanta, Georgia, initiating and helping create the Per Cent for the Arts Ordinance for Atlanta. During these years she also co-created and helped oversee the Georgia Artists International Fund, which sponsored Artists' Travel Grants and organized international exhibitions for Georgia artists as well as reciprocal exhibitions for European artists in the United States.

In 1988 she moved to New York City where she received funding for public installations from the Brooklyn Arts Council; Artists Grants/Artists Space; and the New York State Council on the Arts. Other awards and residencies included Southern Arts, England, and the Arts Council of Great Britain. In 1991 she was awarded a British Exchange Fellowship Residency during which time she taught and lectured at various universities and art schools throughout England. In 1995 Lea did a major one-person exhibition, "Headlights", at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum in Bournemouth, England. This was connected with an artist residency, teaching and lectures. In 1997 she won a commission for a sculpture installation at the Walsall Museum & Art Gallery in Walsall, England, well known for sponsoring artists working with artificial light. On returning to New York City in 1999, she received a MacDowell Colony Fellowship (Peterborough, New Hampshire), and in 2000 was awarded a Gottlieb Foundation (New York City) Individual Artist Support Grant. In 2003 she was invited to create a one-person exhibition at the Tompkins College Center Gallery, Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, with catalogue and lectures. In 2004 she was awarded the Professional Artist in Residency at the Pilchuck School of Glass near Seattle, Washington.

During 2003 – 2008, Lea's work was included in several international exhibitions dealing with the theme of peace: the "9/11 Exhibition" which traveled in the Northeast United States; "Milestones for Peace" which traveled throughout the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Europe, (venues included the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy); "Christmas in Peace" at the Sato Museum, Tokyo, Japan; and "Senderos Mexicanos" at the Regional Museum of Michoacano, Morelia, Mexico. In 2004 she was awarded a residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Amherst, Virginia, and in 2006/2007 was awarded a Studio Residency and Public Sculpture Installation by Chashama, New York City. In 2008 Lea was invited to be one of the keynote speakers and to present her work in an International Symposium on Art and Light at the University of the Creative Arts in Farnham, Surrey, England. For the next several years she exhibited in numerous group shows in the United States as well as Canada, Japan and Africa. In 2014 she exhibited SACRED LIGHT at IAM's Space 38/39 in NYC. Future one person exhibitions include the YWCA of Brooklyn's Community Gallery and the Holland Tunnel Gallery in Paros, Greece, both scheduled in 2016. Her work can be seen currently at Holland Tunnel and Kentler International Gallery in Brooklyn, New York; the Museum of Robin's Center for Peace in Tel-Aviv, Israel; the Walsall Museum & Art Gallery, Walsall, England; the Russell-Cotes Art Museum, Bournemouth, England; the Georgia Arts Council, Atlanta, Georgia; and The Albany Art Museum, Albany, Georgia. Lea currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.



