

GAGOSIAN



Frank Gehry's Water Ballet with Giant Illuminated Fish at Gagosian, Beverly Hills

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Frank Gehry, Spinning Tales, 2021, installation view © Frank O. Gehry. Photo: Joshua White. Courtesy Gagosian.

Frank Gehry has used the fish form as a recurring motif in his groundbreaking architecture, sculpture and furniture design since the 1980s because he found “a perfect form” to express movement in a static object. Today, the indefatigable 92-year-old icon is still fascinated by the limitless possibilities of the dynamic fish form, which continues to inspire his ongoing experimentation. In his eighth exhibition at Gagosian, *Spinning Tales*, Gehry suspends giant glowing fish lamp sculptures from the ceiling of the gallery in an immersive installation, which shows that the living legend is still on top of his game.

This new elaboration on the *Fish Lamp* series uses polyvinyl and copper for the first time to create a scale-shifting, weightless feeling that Gehry is known for in his architectural designs.

The oversize fish floating and diving above the viewer’s head create a perspective-shift which reverses our normal relationship to them. The viewer looks upwards to see the graceful movements of these swooping, acrobatic fish which are choreographed like a water ballet. This whimsical installation is enclosed by a circle of oversized standing fish lamps that create an underwater feeling. The change in point of view is an architectural idea, which is also used in

film. To see a recognizable biomorphic shape blown up to a gigantic scale and to view it from an unusual position, is both amusing and puzzling, which makes Gehry's exhibition highly entertaining.

According to a popular legend, the Canadian born Gehry had a childhood fascination with fish because his grandmother would buy a live carp every Friday to make gefilte fish, and he liked to watch its movements in the bathtub. However, the real reason the fish shape fascinates Gehry is because it solved the dilemma of feeling trapped in a theoretical impasse between the postmodernist demand for historicism and the modernist emphasis on an exhausted vocabulary. The fish form is primordial, so it is more ancient than any historic architectural reference used by postmodernists. Nor is the fish part of modernist architectural vocabulary, even though the double curves of the fish form are geometrically complex. The fish shape is also easily recognizable, so it is more accessible to viewers who find modernism too abstract. It is sensual and has an emotional appeal which austere architectural geometry lacks.



Frank Gehry, Untitled (Los Angeles V), 2021. Polyvinyl, stainless steel wire, and LED lights, 87 x 184 x 85 inches © Frank O. Gehry. Photo: Joshua White. Courtesy Gagolian.

Gehry's first iteration of his *Fish Lamps* (1983) came purely by accident. He was working on a marketing commission for the Formica Corporation promoting ColorCore - a then-new plastic laminate infused with color instead of just layered on the surface. When Gehry accidentally broke the ColorCore, he realized it had shattered into rough-edged shards that resembled fish scales. The architect-entrepreneur had both the nerve and the verve to reuse the commercial material in a radically different way, and glued the jagged, arrowhead-shaped shards over a metal armature to create the first of these *Fish Lamps*. Fish sculpture is not new, but quirky fish lamps that emit glowing light from within were an innovation that took the art world by storm.

The initial *Fish Lamps* were more Oldenburg-esque: stocky, puffy, static fish on pedestals and simple boxes that paralleled his early architectural period of using plywood and chain-link fencing. He attached one to a building (Kobe, 1986), made a glass version (Minneapolis, 1986) and later, a giant metal version (Barcelona, 1992). The fish is a constantly moving form which Gehry continues to reinterpret and deconstruct in many architectural projects, becoming the signature motif of his oeuvre.

In 2012, Gehry began making a second generation of larger scale, hanging balletic *Fish Lamps*. These *Fish Lamps* are elongated like the carp that first captured his childhood imagination. However, the polyvinyl and copper Gehry is using today for a third generation of *Fish Lamps* is lighter than the chunky ColorCore he used previously. These new materials create a sense of weightlessness akin to Isamu Noguchi's Akari lanterns crafted from bark paper and bamboo. Gehry also makes the fish scales more ornamental with detailed patterns that resemble maple leaves and plant fronds. For the standing fish lamps, he uses torn pieces of fish scales that parallel Gehry's architecture, which is often likened to a crumpled piece of paper.



Frank Gehry, *Fish on Fire (Los Angeles I)*, 2021. Copper, stainless steel wire, and LED lights, 43 x 24 x 24 inches © Frank O. Gehry. Photo: Joshua White. Courtesy Gagosian.

Gehry has continued to evolve the *Fish Lamp* series in different materials and configurations, which have been exhibited in Beverly Hills, Paris, Hong Kong and London. In his current exhibition, the giant fish lamps are paired with a more eccentric installation upstairs, *Wishful Thinking* (2021) which is a witty take on the Mad Hatter's tea party from *Alice in Wonderland*. Using brightly painted metal, he creates abstract renditions of Lewis Carroll's characters standing around a glass table with oversized teacups. The crumpled surfaces are a continuation of Gehry's relaxed use of materials. Viewers can even see themselves in a wall mirror as guests at the tea party - which is delightful folly.

Gehry has always felt more comfortable in the artist community (especially Kenneth Price, Ed Moses, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin and others) rather than with his architectural peer group. His "no rules" approach to architecture and use of unconventional materials owes a debt to Los Angeles funk art and assemblage art from the 1960s to the present. To say that Gehry is inextricably tied to LA art history would be an understatement. Gehry's work is seen wherever one goes in LA: the multiple residences he designed (including his own), the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, the Walt Disney Concert Hall, the renovated Hollywood Bowl, or a

LACMA art exhibition he designed. One even encounters Gehry in home interiors of artists who collect his furniture and *Fish Lamps*.

Today, instead of going quietly into retirement, Gehry remains highly active with socially responsible architectural projects. The “Bilboa effect” created a global craze in architecture, but what I identify as the “Gehry effect” is almost omnipresent in LA - one might even say, Gehry is LA. This is because he is a true collaborator who allows the influences of others - particularly LA artists and his expert clients - to inform his daring technical maneuvers, whether architectural or artistic. As *Spinning Tales* demonstrates, Gehry is a conduit for innovation and whimsy which makes him quintessentially LA.