

Magic vs. Mystery in the Art Worlds

by [Paddy Johnson](#)

I don't know how to express this idea without sounding overly romantic, but I like art with a little magic to it.

The art world typically replaces the word "magic" with "mystery," a colder noun more likely to entice collectors than a term evoking rabbits and hats, but the latter term is not always appropriate. Mystery has certain perks, implying critical engagement, the desire and possibility of solving and figuring out the unknown; "Magic" doesn't offer this kind of triumphal resolution.

Take [Yvovi Kusama's](#) *Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity*, a small house of mirrors lit only by hanging lights at Gagosian Gallery. Audiences can easily identify its components, and yet the experience of viewing feels otherworldly. A darkened room of mirrors; countless burning lights; a floor of water with a small deck -- each create a sense of limitless space. From this, a viewer might conclude that drastic, rapid shifts in scale affect our senses in a way that feels unnatural, but reducing the encounter to the functionality of its materials feels like a bit of buzzkill. So instead I choose to own my corndog and declare the piece magical. It doesn't explain the experience, but like a lot of art, it performs better without too much interpretation.

Meanwhile, over at Matthew Marks Gallery, a small [Charles Ray exhibition](#) comprised of three spare sculptures feels a little more mysterious than it does magical. Best known for his disconcerting mannequin sculptures in the 1990s, the artist's earlier work (currently on display) seems just as intent on jarring the viewer. *Ink Line* (1987), for example, resembles a black Fred Sandback-esque thread strung from the ceiling to the floor, when in reality it's a continuously falling stream of the eponymous liquid. Much like *Ink Box* (1986), a topless steel cube filled to the brim with the same substance, the repercussions of a gallery attendant failing to reveal the sculpture's materials could be grave. Certainly gallerygoers are apt to experience something a little more extreme than the results of an exploding pen.

The other two components of the exhibition go beyond treacherous illusion. The rotating circular block of cement in the floor (*Spinning Spot*, 1988) and the gently moving wire protruding from the wall (*Moving Wire*, 1988) also ask the viewer to imagine the space they don't see. Gesturing to hidden artistic process, the mechanics of all three remain mysterious. Nothing magical happens here -- the most compelling aspect of this piece comes from the delicate tension pulled from unknown sources -- and that's ok. Mystery may not function the same way as magic, but in the art world, its value is often equivocal.