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Features

Brooklyn Neon Artist Lights Up the World

by Jennifer Needleman (jenn@brooklyneagle.net), published online 01-30-2004



Arty Mad Scientist Who THINKS Outside the Box

GOWANUS — Soon to be 25-year-old Matt Dilling is Brooklyn's own mad scientist with an electro-artistic twist. As the art and fashion world's go-to guy for anything neon, Matt Dilling, owner of Lite Brite Neon, spends his days bending thin rods of glass into glorious shapes and shipping the results to anxious clients around the globe.

His work, which ranges from simple neon word signs ('No Vacancy' or 'Hosiery,' for instance) to three-dimensional sculptures, has found its way onto the runways of Paris, the modernist columns of the Lever House on Park Avenue, the Whitney Museum and select Gap stores, just to name a few.

"The interesting thing about neon is that all signs, from Times Square to Motel 6, are handmade," explained Dilling. Apparently, the neon trade has remained basically the way the turn of the 20th Century found it, and has not been developed into a "mechanized trade." Dilling runs Lite Brite Neon out of a sunny, ground-floor shop in Gowanus, which is one of the relatively few neon shops in all of New York City. The difference between his work and the work of other neon artists, however, is extreme. Every job Dilling and his rotating crew of freelance assistants take on is 100% custom. From the color of the light (neon comes in almost any color of the rainbow) to the actual design, Dilling will work with anyone's ideas, and takes pride in the fact that he finds solutions for projects that other studios turn down as impossible or too far afield.

Cover



Poll

How do you feel about the prospect of a Nets sports complex in Downtown Brooklyn?

- I'm mixed. While I like the idea of adding some prestige to this great borough, I'm concerned about its effect on Downtown Brooklyn.
- I'm against it. Don't Manhattanize Brooklyn with your fancy sports arena.
- I'm in favor of it. Let's bring basketball back to

"Other places are making nail salon signs," explained Dilling. "They know how much it's going to cost, they know how much they're going to make on every job."

Dilling, however, is tickled by challenges. For the Lever House project, for instance, the designer who contacted Dilling wanted 15-foot tubes of neon to run up the side of the building. 15-foot tubes are longer than most glass samples used for neon signs — the usable length is decided by the strength of the vacuum pump that is needed to evacuate the air from the glass tube. Dilling, however, had somehow fused two pumps together and was able to adequately pump the 15-foot tubes. Otherwise, he explained, there would be ugly seams in the glass where two smaller tubes get attached, and the task of then attaching the glass to the wall would become too complicated for words.

"Other places would look at the 15-foot tubes for the Lever House and say: 'Forget it!'" said Dilling. Additionally, the Lever House presented an extra challenge for Dilling because of its landmark status — no holes could be drilled for installation. Not a problem for Dilling, however, who invented special clamps to secure his work without impacting the face of the historic building.

For the little people, meaning anyone who is not Bergdorf Goodman or Old Navy or Sony or Chanel, for instance, Dilling is still your go-to neon guy.

"We do quite a few small projects," said Dilling, who has made birthday presents and custom art for walk-in clients. Though Dilling's prices are not low (the bottom line cost for any project starts at around \$300), Lite Brite Neon service is guaranteed to include detailed special attention. That's why artists who show work at places like MoMa and in Chelsea galleries outsource to Dilling whenever they come up with an idea for a neon piece. One artist arrived with a concept for a sculpture in which a giant neon snowflake was to be created, somehow, in three-dimensions. Other studios couldn't, but Dilling did. His next possible project, another "never been done before" endeavor, is to integrate neon with an ice sculpture.

"That's going to be a whole new kind of headache," said Dilling.

Dilling's experience in neon tubing came from an apprenticeship with an artist in Washington D.C. and through a brief and unfinished tenure at a Boston art school. But most of the equipment in the Lite Brite Neon shop was salvaged from M.I.T. dumpsters. Dilling, who truly seems like a mad scientist when he works with his glass-tube-connected matrix of scientific-looking flasks and modular flame burners, has worked with electricity his entire life.

"For some reason, when I was three years old I wanted a brown plug on my birthday cake," said Dilling. And at the Lite Brite Neon shop, there's a 22-year-old picture to prove it.

Neon art these days has an interesting cache — or lack thereof — which has landed Dilling in a lucrative niche. According to Dilling, during the 60s and 70s, new and cheaper alternatives were devised — lit signs, for instance, made out of Plexiglas. The demand for neon fell, and thus, neon workers scrambled to find ways to make the medium cheaper, cutting corners and exposing dangers that were previously non-existent. Neon began to acquire a reputation as an outmoded and hazardous material. Furthermore, neon is seen as the language of Las Vegas, as tacky and seedy, and was, for a while, entirely out of fashion. But in the world of fashion and trends, what goes out, must come back in. Dilling has seized the opportunity to make several high-quality reinventions of the medium.

Still, many people don't think outside the box.

"Everybody contextualizes it," said Dilling, adding, "Everyone has some kid of previous conception of neon, they don't see it as a medium for anything but what 'neon' has always been."

He recently created a sign for artist Stella McCartney that reads "Girls, Girls, Girls," in the style of retro strip clubs. That, repeated Dilling, is not thinking outside the box. Still, business is business.

In addition to custom neon art, Dilling has a series of semi-typical neon signs (again, 'No-Vacancy') that he rents out for films and events. He also works with interior designers to create architectural lighting for restaurants and other commercial spaces.

From 1940s restoration projects, to hip, "throw-back" aesthetics, to contemporary art, to fashion, to commercial signage, Lite Brite Neon will find a way to make it happen.

For more information on Lite Brite Neon and Matt Dilling, please visit www.litebriteneon.com.

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