



ELECTRIC BOOGALOO Lite Brite Neon caters to upscale clients from the worlds of art and fashion, including Stella McCartney (above) and Calvin Klein (below).

Bright lights, big city

Lite Brite Neon is decorating NYC with its handiwork, one bulb at a time **By Steffie Nelson**

Matt Dilling has been fascinated with electricity ever since he was a child. When he was three, the Washington, D.C., native asked his mother to decorate his birthday cake with an electrical plug made of chocolate. Now 25, Dilling is arguably the neon king of New York. He founded Brooklyn-based Lite Brite Neon seven years ago, and as one of the city's few—and most respected—custom neon-lighting designers, he's amassed a client list that includes museums, fashion designers, retail stores, pop stars and visual artists. Among his most notable projects, Dilling has created neon plaid for Burberry, neon snowflakes for the Gap, neon bed pillows for Calvin Klein and a brilliant ten-by-ten-foot neon logo for the art-rock band FischerSpouner.

"Part of what I think is so exciting about neon is that people tend to hate it because they think it's this awful thing that can't be done well," Dilling says, referring to the light's low-rent, sleazy reputation. But rather than attempting to burnish widespread public opinion of his craft, Dilling relishes the opportunity to play with neon's trashy connotations. For example, for designer Stella McCartney's posh namesake Meatpacking District boutique, he created a sign that reads GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS. And like hemlines, his fashionably arty clients' points of reference change with every season. "They're into [neon] one month because they think it's a formal and beautiful thing, and they're into it the next because they think it's seedy."

What makes neon an art is its provenance: All neon signs are handmade, since no machine can bend glass. (Even the ubiquitous Budweiser signs are handcrafted—sweatshop style—in China.) The delicate and detailed process, which, for the small staff at Lite Brite, takes no fewer than two weeks to complete and can cost anywhere from \$500 to \$50,000, leaves zero margin for error. Still, Dilling says neon is considered "the bastard child of the art-glass world." That may explain the art-glass community's beef with artists like Post-minimalist sculptor Keith Sonnier. Last year, Sonnier, who has been working with neon since the mid-'60s, commissioned Lite Brite to create 15-foot-tall neon tubes to line the inside lobby of the Lever House. The project was one of Lite Brite's most prestigious jobs, but Sonnier received all the glory. "Keith Sonnier's never bent a tube of neon in his life," Dilling laments. "But that doesn't mean he's not a great artist."

All rivalries aside, Dilling is happy to take his clients' ideas and transpose them into a shape and size that can be rendered in glass. "We get requests to make everything from an AC/DC logo for some kid's bar mitzvah in New Jersey to blueprints that we scale to one sixteenth of an inch." He's also eager to share the tricks of his trade with aspiring neon designers at two-day workshops that he teaches two or three times a year. (The cost is \$375, plus a onetime registration fee of \$50.) Dilling's advice for novices? "Simpler is better."

Matt Dilling's next workshop will be at UrbanGlass April 24-25. For more information, visit www.litebriteneon.com or call 718-625-3685, ext. 0.

