

3 / 2 / 2020

Smoke, Mirrors & MegaPointes for Bon Iver Tour

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Michael Brown is a lighting designer who loves to experiment and take some creative risks in the quest for imagining new and exciting performance environments ...

... and that's exactly what he did for the US leg of Bon Iver's recent tour, part of the campaign for new album *i, i*, where 49 x Robe MegaPointes and 25 x Kinetic Lights custom moving mirrors were at the core of his dynamic design combining the diverse visual disciplines of art, architecture and concert lighting.

Michael has worked with the band since 2012, following a chance backstage encounter a few years earlier with lead singer Justin Vernon. It's been a fertile and stimulating partnership, for which they implicitly trust in his creative judgment.

He first encountered the Kinetic Lights winch system in 2017 while researching cool art projects for the Eaux Claires Festival in Wisconsin for which he was the creative director/ visual arts curator for all four years – 2015 to 2018 – that the event has run so far.

Bon Iver's Justin Vernon and Aaron Dessner from The National are the main curators – for music and all aspects – of the entire festival.

Michael reached out to WHITEVoid's Christopher Bauder, a light artist based in Berlin, who invented the winch system and a very elegant and precise bespoke control for the moving mirrors. He was keen to work with Christopher on some sort of collaboration. At the time, a specific project didn't materialize, but the two started communicating and expressed a strong creative connection and the desire to work together.

Fast-forward three years, and Christopher has refined and further developed the winch system and created several large-scale spectacular light art installations and shows worldwide using the mirrors, the best known is SKALAR, which utilizes 90 x Robe Pointes and was most recently presented in Mexico City at the end of 2019 and at SKALAR 360 Amsterdam Jan / Feb 2020.

In late 2018, Bon Iver made a big decision to play arenas during the upcoming year. This shift to playing larger venue space is an anxious conundrum for many truly indie artists – do they or don't they – for all the obvious reasons! When they finally made the decision

after many considerations to reach out to more fans per show, with it came a huge commitment to ensuring that their stage presentation was something totally special!

The show and the production design had to help retain the intimacy of smaller spaces that everyone loves and the huge connection Bon Iver has with their fans, yet also be visually and sonically provocative, interesting and assist in heightening all the raw emotional responses at the very essence of the music.

So, when Michael revisited the Kinetic Lights mirror ideas and the kit in 2019, everything was different!

Christopher and WHITEvoid – the company presenting the project side of his work – had a lot more experience of utilizing the kit, and both Justin Vernon and Bon Iver's production manager James Dean were also onboard. Most importantly, Michael had a plan for converting what would likely be an 8-day get in window for an art installation scenario ... into a 4-hour one in the wonderful world of rock 'n' roll!

Christopher connected them with WHITEvoid's representatives in Las Vegas – Peter Thompson and Liz Roncato – and the production design started to energize.

Before he approached Christopher this time around, Michael had the design and layout of the winches and MegaPointes all worked out, some of it inspired by SKALAR combined with several original ideas for how it would work uniquely with Bon Iver.

The 3D geometry that defined the band's touring lighting rig was created by five identical overhead chevron trusses comprising 32ft long wings connected by a 90-degree corner block, which resembled a diamond from the audience perspective and mirrored a diamond-shaped layout of the band risers onstage down below ... with no one on the central plane. The 25 custom diamond-shaped Kinetic Lights LED-outlined mirrors, each suspended on three of their proprietary winches, flew below the chevrons – in five vertical rows of five – able to move up / down / pan / tilt in any direction, controlled by their own KLC control software, developed specially for this purpose.

Then there were two grids of MegaPointes at the core of the rig.

A row of 21 fixtures formed a U-shape around the winches with another 21 echoing the same positions on the floor, and all these fixtures were mapped onto the mirrors.

The combination of the MegaPointes and the mirrors looked fantastic as a piece of engineering, and during the show they bent and refracted light creating numerous looks, aberrations and optical magic from the structural and architectural to the abstracted. Using the light in this way brought a completely different quality and texture to lighting the stage. The other seven MegaPointes were on the floor aligned directly below certain mirrors.

All the flown elements were sub-hung from a mothergrid installed into the arenas to ensure millimeter precision for each gig.

Although Pointes and MegaPointes have been used as the default fixture in various WHITEvoid installations, MegaPointes are also Nashville-based Michael's moving beam / multi-

functional light fixture of choice right now – for the brightness, the smooth CMY colour mixing, the overall versatility as well as the reliability.

The combination of mirrors and MegaPointe beams has set the tour apart visually, and delivered something that is properly new, different and innovative.

Michael has been using Robe products in his work for around 10 years, starting when the LEDWash 600 was launched, and he thinks that Robe has produced a steady and consistent stream of good products over that time. In the last 2 to 3 years he reckons the brand has risen to become one of the market leaders for moving lights.

“MegaPointes are the cream of the crop for bold, beam FX lights,” he stated, super-excited to be using them in conjunction with the mirrors.

In this concert scenario, he specifically wanted the extra punch of MegaPointes to cut through all the various other layers of lighting in the design. The live show is very different from a perfectly balanced art installation situation with no other lighting.

Lighting – for the MegaPointes plus a number of other moving lights and LED battens and strips – was controlled via a grandMA2 console which was also triggering the KLC computer for the winch movements.

Lighting equipment, all the associated rigging and the set risers were supplied out of rental specialist Clearwing’s Milwaukee shop, with the mirrors and winches a rental from Kinetic Lights in Germany.

Michael’s foresight and everyone’s hard work in assisting him to get this show on the road – especially his Clearwing crew chief and systems designer Sam McKeown who made sure that everything would work practically and logistically on the road – has certainly paid off.

The tour has got many people noticing, chatting, and sharing positive comments and generated a huge buzz around the production and music industries – from managers and artists to crews, techs, and designers.

Christopher Bauder and Kinetic Lights / WHITEvoid and the international team at Robe have also been intrigued to see this evolution of their own partnership – the first time Kinetic Lights mirrors / winches have been on the road in the U.S. for a concert tour and used in a live band context like this!

Apart from the timescales, the aesthetics and the operation have all taken the system concept into a new dimension ... thanks to the intrepid streaks in Michael Brown and Justin Vernon and their quest for visual adventure.

Photo Credit: Graham Tolbert





