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Suspensory filaments

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SUSPENSORY FILAMENTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
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B.F.A, National University of Colombia, 2008
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Abstract

The interrelationships between vision, desire, and language are the elements that drive my artistic practice. “What is seeing?” “How is seeing related to desire?” These questions are at the base of my interests. I recognize optics as a subset of perception, yet I strive to reform them into interchangeable components. My interest in optics is based on doubt. I’m not interested in optic’s correctness, clinical orientation, or current sophistication, but rather in undermining its limitations. Our culture still struggles to absorb the notion of the sentient being, one example is our acuity of vision being standardized to 20/20. Within my research, the perceptual engagement between the work and the viewer is an initial tool to stress the importance of the act of seeing as a language rooted and dynamic human capability. The present work forms a non-linear, non-descriptive assimilation and response to these issues and how they can provide the possibility of a meaningful aesthetic experience for the contemporary viewer. The exhibit includes installations and paintings in diverse media, which were manipulated considering the implication of conceptual juxtapositions as well as the effect they created as sensual surfaces.

Brace

It was a perfect time to think silver. Silver was the future. It was spacey. Astronauts wore silver suits. And their equipment was silver, too. And silver was also the past. The Silver Screen. Hollywood actresses photographed in silver sets. And maybe more than anything else, silver was narcissism. Mirrors were backed with silver.

– Andy Warhol

*If there are no edges, there is no vision;
nothing is perceived in a uniform field.*

– Ralph Norman Haber

Polly, Polly

Two significant developments directed me towards the body of work presented as my thesis. The first comes through understanding my previous subject, the garden, as a subdivision of my overall interests. The garden was an excuse to look hard at something (that is not there); it wasn't so much the garden itself that interested me as much as the ideas and the challenges that it posed as a visual, physical, and aesthetic experience-space. The second event was the studying of American artist Polly Apfelbaum's work. Her art, beyond its obvious attractiveness, holds up to a level of sophistication, sensibility and intelligence of someone like Andy Warhol; from whom in fact she often borrows.¹ To me she is the major living artist whose work I am most interested in reacting to in my own work.

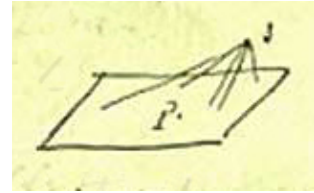
Apfelbaum's approach to art making is holistic and simultaneous. This process means that the product is not easily defined or categorized and it conveys multiple meanings through the considered use of materials, scale, and product-viewer relationship. Through simple gestures such as laying fabrics on the floor, mixing glitter on top of color play-dough, or randomly finding images from the Google database she deals with complex contemporary issues of painting such as reconfiguring pictorial space in relationship to the viewer's body and the gallery architecture – reconsidering the fundamentals of color theories through the dislocation of perceptual/optical cues and

¹Apfelbaum's flower prints not only take advantage of Warhol's flower paintings, the woodblock technique that she developed actually mirrors Warhol's silk-screening mode in as much as it allows her to maximize her output by rearranging them indefinitely. Another example is Apfelbaum's *Stolen Kisses* works, where she references Warhol's *Silver Pillows* by using pillow covers as pictorial frames that contain hand dyed-hand cut velvet patches suggesting daydreaming and platonic love.

expanding the notion of found (virtual) objects. The implications of her work extend to larger issues regarding vision², color theory, popular culture, desire, sexuality and craft.

² Consider Alpfelbaum's floor installations like *Off colour* as oppositions to anti-optical modes of space perception such as in Descartes and his *Blind Man* illustration. In which, disengaged from the external world, vision and touch operate as secondary elements of the rational mind. Another example of sensual space perception in relationship to "the garden" can be found in Jorge Luis Borges' short poem "Alhambra".

The “Plastic Effect”



The 3 dimensional vision of a plane P. corresponds in the continuum to a 4 dimensional grasp of which one can get an idea by holding a penknife clasped in one's fist.

– **Marcel Duchamp**

I see everything that way, the surface of things, a kind of mental Braille. I just pass my hands over the surface of things.

– **Andy Warhol**

Seeing is savoring.

– **Robert Irwin**

A painting is a complete bi-dimensionality. As such it restricts the eye's mechanism to explore quantitative depth. How, then, can one achieve an image whose qualities can be defined as tangible without resorting to highly artificial and overworked conventions of spatial organization such as linear perspective? In other words, deprived of graphic conventions, at what point does an image become haptic? This concern can be filtered to more contemporary and specific concerns of perception. In his essay *Reconciling Pictures and Reality*, Dhahran Vishwannath proposes the concept of “The plastic effect”. He describes this effect as:

... the qualitative perceptual experience that makes objects appear “real, “touchable” or “graspable” and where one feels a visual “immersion” and “embodiment” in space. Each of these experiences is crucially linked to the vivid sense that we can successfully interact and manipulate things in the visual field through motor action.³

³ Dhanraj Vishwannath, *Perception Beyond Inference. The Information Content of Visual Processes*. MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2010. Pg. 226.

The notion of “the plastic effect” allowed me to expand my understanding of surfaces not as signifying or information containers but as perceptual realities.

Chronologically, the first work in the exhibition is a pivotal small silkscreen titled *A or One Silver Heart* [Fig 1]. This work is essentially the shape of a heart, pale white, on an off-white paper. Due to the visual interaction of the specific white tone of the heart and the specific tone of the paper, an optical effect creates a sensation which becomes the apparition of a pulsating heart in the observer’s eyes; the presence of a virtual shadow or an afterimage which can be described as “the presence of a sensation in the absence of a stimulus.”⁴



Fig. 1. *A or One Silver Heart*, 2012.⁵

Furthermore, this work engages the observer by challenging the immediate meaning of the symbol and de-establishing it by means of experience. While I do not want to assign a specific meaning to my works, to me the heart is essentially a self-

⁴ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, Cambridge, MIT Press, Pg.98.

⁵ Due to the optical nature of the works, photographic documentation is insufficient.

portrait that acts as a response to Duchamp's famous simultaneous contrast print

Fluttering Hearts as well as a statement of my fascination with Apfelbaum. That is:

... the relation of emulation enables things to imitate one another from one end of the universe to the other... by duplicating itself in a mirror the world abolishes the distance proper to it; in this way it overcomes the place allotted to each thing. But which of these images coursing through space are the original images? Which is the reality and which is the projection?⁶

A or One Silver Heart is a marriage of sublimation and vision; a significant notion for the following works.

I expanded the level of "plasticity" in *Why envy sunflowers?* [Fig. 2]. With this work, the observer is presented with what appears to be an infinite looming space of contradicting cues. At the same time, by moving the body sideways while looking into



Fig. 2. *Why Envy Sunflowers?* 2012.

two concave mirrors that are laid on a table in front of the painting, a subordinate mirage happened in which by means of binocular vision one sees three distorted heart shapes and not two as the above figure presents. So that "desire-in-vision is formed through the

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Phanteon. Pg. 18-19.

temporal arc of the body's fibers."⁷ Hence, this work discloses the kind of illusion I seek, one that is so strong it sneak attacks the nervous system, and thus makes the experience undeniably real. In the slim structure of this installation, vision and desire, or subject and object, are made emphatically co-dependent and interchangeable.

Concurrently, I addressed the problem of viewing distance in the work *The Forge and the Cast* [Fig. 3]. Here, a small-scale version of *A or One Silver Heart* stands framed on a shadow box and surrounded by an irregular shape of black velvet. It presents a situation in which, within a single piece, two perceptual realities struggle to be grasped simultaneously.

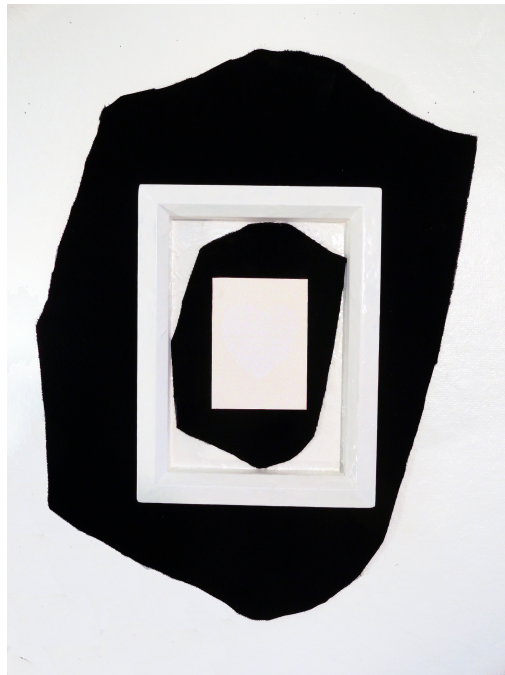


Fig. 3. *The Forge and the Cast*, 2013.

The small print and the larger arrangement require their own viewing distance. Far from being a pun on visibility, what I attempted with this work was to expose a gap in vision and to encourage it not as a given rigid configuration but as a continuous unfolding

⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *The optical unconscious*, MIT press, Cambridge. Pg. 140.

experience; a situation in which it would be impossible to not catch yourself *seeing*. Here, “perception is the presentation of a unitary occurring event of which the perceiver’s subjective structure is a non-independent part.”⁸ In other words, I seek to defy *looking* and promote *seeing*. Understanding that, “to see is an action of the *Verstand* (presentational awareness), whereas to look at things is an action of the *Vernunft* (discursive mind).”⁹

One major component of the exhibition is the necktie prints.¹⁰ I was attracted to neckties as possible pictorial objects by their flatness, their frontality, their gender ambiguity, their sharp edges, their magnetism to the eyes (male and female) and their relationship to *touch*.



Tiex #1 and Red, Yellow and Blue, 2013.

Yet, when I am asked why I use ties, I humorously say that they came to me as a way to stop painting flowers. While this may seem like a small witticism, there is a serious

⁸ *Perception Beyond Inference. The Information Content of Visual Processes*. MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2010. Pg. 7.

⁹ Jan J. Koenderlink, *Perception Beyond Inference. The Information Content of Visual Processes*. MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2010. Pg. 37.

¹⁰ Ties have been used as motifs by painters in the 20th Century, the most notable being Picasso and Jim Dine. Duchamp also made a graphic analogy between the necktie and the Louis XV chassis styled leg of his *Chocolate Grinder*, connecting it, therefore, to desire.

reason behind this gesture. The ties allowed me to distance myself from Apfelbaum. The easily recreated tie shape accelerated my production without depending on the creativity of the skillful hand or the weight of flower painting history. While in appearance *Tiex* [Fig.4] may be Apfelbaum-like, in terms of its implication it stands on the opposite side of the spectrum, *Tiex* is a cynical celebration of solitude and emotional indifference.

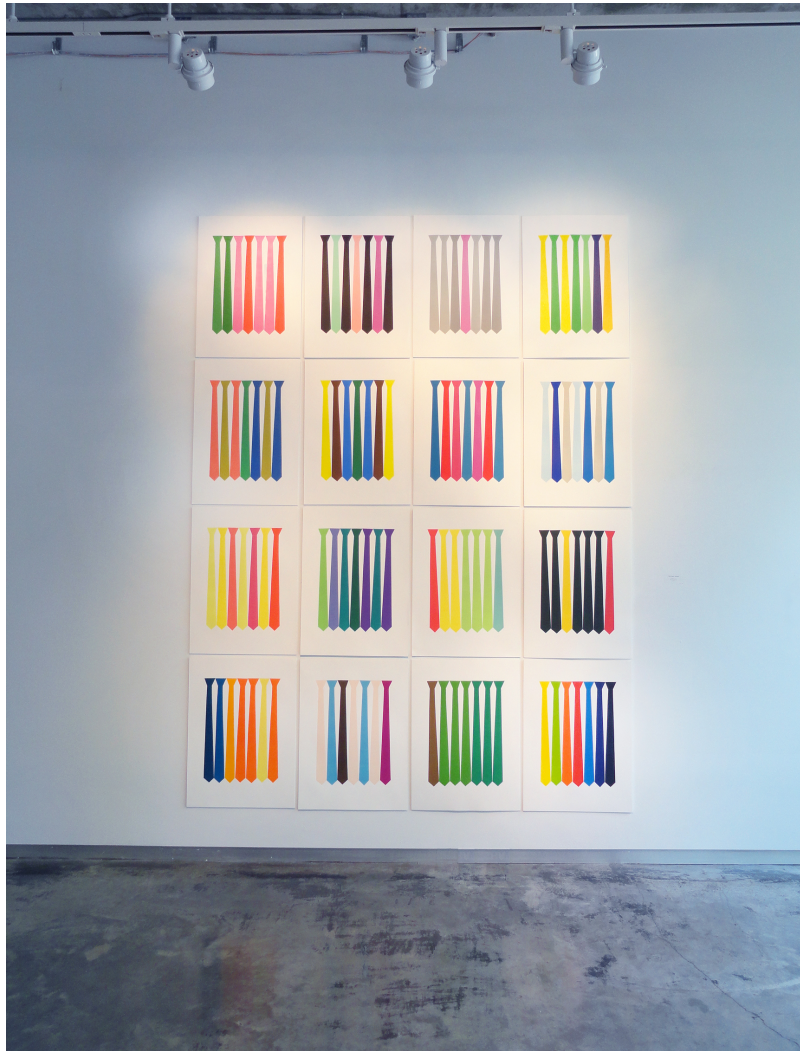


Fig. 4. *Tiex*, 2013.

In this sense, the tie prints escape from basic conventions of color psychology and gender identification, since in their multiplicity and arrangement they decidedly embody a gap between the stimulus and the intended meaning.

This stimulus, coming from the color interactions, is:

...conceived potentially “Atopic” so that the natural sign’s necessary connection to the visual field can no longer be maintained. And now, fully embedded within the nervous web of the body’s tissues, it comes to be understood as well as something subject to the temporality of the nervous system itself, to its access to fatigue, to its necessary rhythm of innervation, to that which causes color to ebb and flow within experience in an infinitely mutable evanescence.¹¹

Simply, the observer creates the colors. I use inks as tools to alter the observer’s perception. For me, the tube of paint does not contain color; it contains paint.

The issue of entoptic phenomena¹² in relation to color was addressed in *Fever Schedule* [Fig. 5]. This work is a *pictorial translation* of the optical and neurological disturbances I experienced from an undiagnosed illness in August of 2012. One of the symptoms was a strong visual distortion that included color hallucinations and light sensitivity. Yet, this work is also a reminder that a surface is supposed to be *experienced*, and that titles should work in conjunction with the image to assemble meaning.



Fig. 5. *Fever Schedule*. 2013.

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, *The optical unconscious*, MIT press, Cambridge. Pg. 133.

¹² Of or pertaining to the interior of the eye.

The idea behind this humorous title is rather serious. A fever schedule is impossible. Fevers are parts of the sometimes-enigmatic inner workings of the body, while schedules are highly artificial cultural categories that have nothing to do with organic processes. Hence, this work recognizes a fundamental dissonance between what we feel (the body) and what we know (culture), or *the thing and its name*.

The problem of the nature of a surface is crucial to my work. The works *I'll Keep Them Still*, *Parasite Paradise Paradise Parasite* and *Huffs and Puffs* addressed this issue. *I'll Keep Them Still* [Fig. 6] is a series of relief color prints in various color papers that were split in two and then re-arranged to create a complete new surface.



Fig. 6. *I'll Keep Them Still*, 2013.

The prints, which show a similar flat abstract flower shape, are displayed on the wall and at floor level as if referring to the notions of horizon and landscape. By exploiting the notion of *static movement*, this work appeals to the idea that vision is never motionless, pure or clear; but unstable, multiple and difficult.

Parasite Paradise Paradise Parasite [Fig. 7] consists of two panels, color paper and glitter. These arrangements take advantage of the surface as a totality; two sensations alternate from the same stimulus and produce the haptic vision of hovering flowers.



Fig.7. *Parasite Paradise Paradise Parasite*, 2013.

Huffs and Puffs [Fig. 8] is made out of combining holographic paper, clear plastic sheets and lithographic inks. The viewer engages his or her body and attention on the unfolding surface that is laid on the floor. By placing the installation on the floor, the iridescent¹³ nature of holographic paper makes possible that the surface be graspable from unlimited geometrical points, eliminating the hierarchy of the geometrical center of

¹³ The property of certain surfaces that appear to change color as the angle of view or the angle of illumination changes.

the frame. Still, what was interesting by covering the holographic paper with different consistencies (thicknesses) of various colored inks was the altering of the three dimensionality of holography through a manual process.

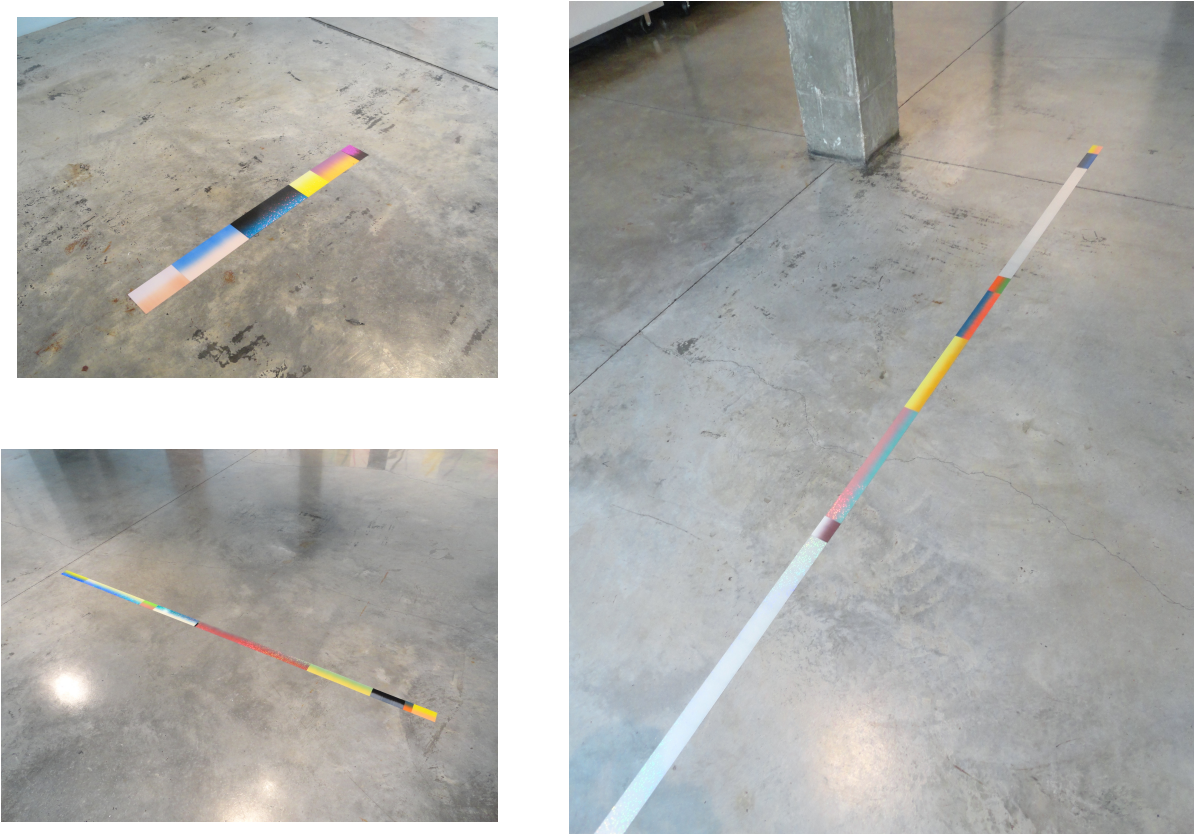


Fig. 8. *Huffs and Puffs* (details), 2013.

In their final stage, *I'll Keep Them Still* and *Huffs and Puffs* reveal that:

... the most perceptually immediate property of surfaces is their continuity... that the table surface in front of me appears smooth because smoothness is the perceptual indicator that I can run my finger along the entity without interruption... that it is not the contingencies that are perceived but a perceptual object that may have associated qualities related to sensorimotor contingency (the plastic effect).¹⁴

¹⁴ Dhanraj Vishwannath, *Perception Beyond Inference. The Information Content of Visual Processes*. MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2010. Pg. 233.



Fig. 8. *Huffs and Puffs* (views of installation), 2013.

The last work in the exhibition is the most critical. It consists of two 11 x 15 inch sheets of museum glass and an eccentric shape made out of masking tape. This juxtaposition is tied to the idea of a decidedly ambiguous back and forth between *inopticity* and *opticality*, a notion that I hope to evoke in most of the works. Here, what I give to apprehend is the optically-uninteresting masking tape, yet this non-metrical enigmatic construction is highly intelligible as its effectiveness comes from its absences of linguistic cues of space construction, such as the ones used in isometric, linear or curvilinear perspective. On the other hand, the museum glass works as a highly sophisticated optical device that shows literally *nothing* but impurities and aberrations; its only escape would be to produce alternative appearances. In other words, in this work one sees everything and nothing at the same time. One is finally trapped into acknowledging that “from an optical perspective, vision is only skin deep.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Jan J. Koenderink, *Perception Beyond Inference. The Information Content of Visual Processes*. MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2010. Pg. 40.

Here, the observer attends an encounter in which the structure of vision finally collapses through the *Constitutional Formation of a Corner. Pool of Regrets* [Fig. 9].

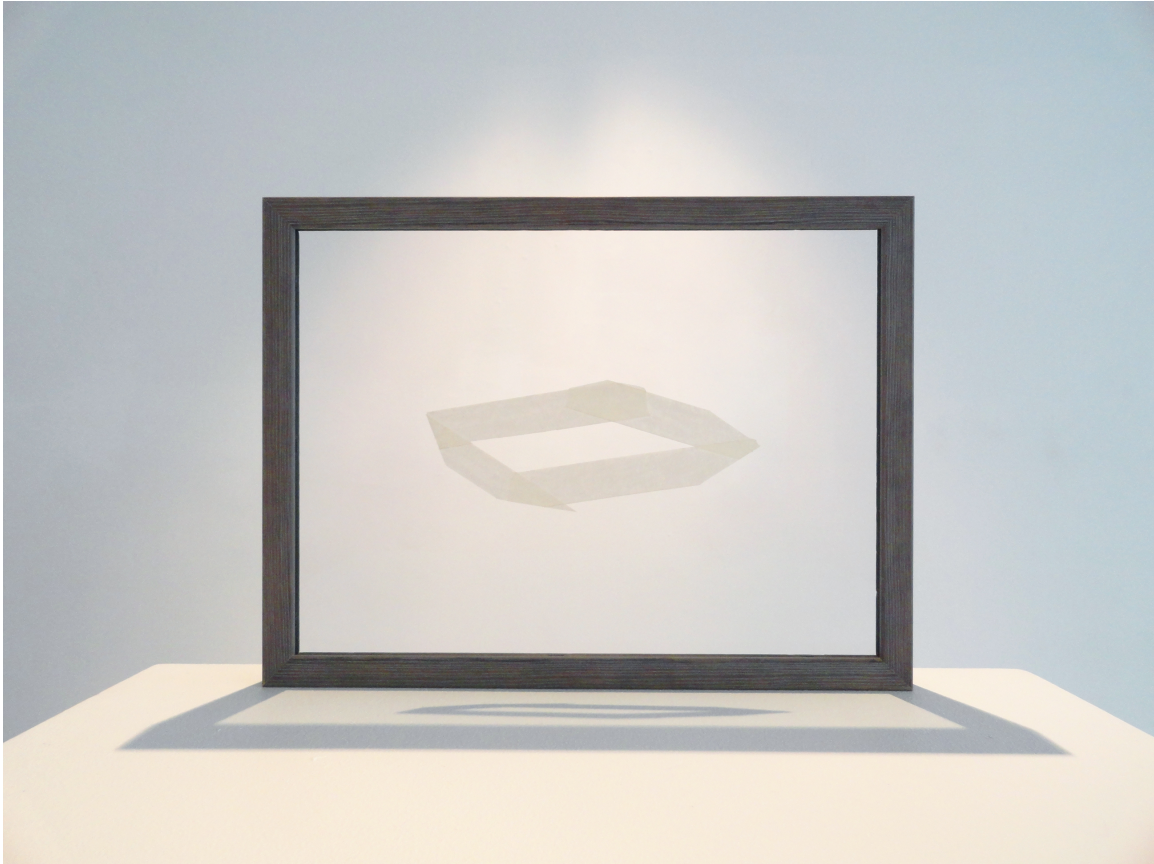


Fig. 9. *Constitutional Formation of a Corner. Pool of Regrets*, 2013.

For my research as well as for the public attending this exhibition, it would be a realization to recognize that:

... the visionary experience today can only come out of specific machinic assemblages that engage the body and its capabilities and limits. The body here is not an abstract optical system for a transparent viewing of the world but a charged field of surfaces, which are simultaneously productive and receptive of sensory experience.¹⁶

¹⁶ Jonathan Cary, *Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events*, Exhibition catalogue. Basel: Kunsthalle Basel; Berlin / Muttentz: Schwabe & Co. AG, 1997. Pg. 8.

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Vita

Santiago Pineda was raised in Bogotá, Colombia. He received his B.F.A from the National University of Colombia in 2007. He is a degree candidate at Louisiana State University for his M.F.A. in Studio Art.