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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

A Movement Towards a New Modernism

Ira Howard Kusnetzky

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## APPROVALS

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## **Thesis Proposal**

The genesis of my life as an artist, and art that I produce, is a direct link to my experiences growing up. The artistic and philosophical foundation given to me by my parents and modified by my own life experiences has formed the conceptual framework for the art that I create. As an artist I do not necessarily need to make every piece that forms in the mind, but try and make the pieces that can be best realized. The classic artist materials - paint, charcoal, and watercolors can certainly allow an artist to depict a moment. However, with the advent of new technologies, video, sound, projection, and computer, an artist can convey a moment that could not be portrayed in the past. There are now new ways to think through the process of creating art, which combine the static image with motion (and emotion). I propose to integrate painting and video to help reveal images in time that I feel are unrecognized transcendental moments of life. To accomplish this, I will embed video screens in a series of paintings. The painting and video in each piece will address the same concept - enhancing and complementing each other. I openly embrace the new forms of art and technology that have been developed by artists like Nam Jun Paik, Bill Viola, and Laurie Anderson. Additional influences on my beliefs and processes include the Art movements of the Bauhaus, Cubism, Constructivism, and Abstract Expressionist. Combining an historical perspective with the chance and spontaneity of events occurring in the present allows me to be open to life and the opportunity of artistic processes.



## **Thesis**

As an artist, I try to reveal images and moments in time that I feel are transcendental moments of life. For several years before coming to the Rochester Institute of Technology, I had thought about creating (or recreating) such moments by combining a painted canvas with an LCD screen inserted into the painted surface. By unifying the still image of a canvas with the movement of video, I would be able to create a moment or feeling in a traditional historical medium as well as manufacture moments and feelings by means of new technology.

At RIT, I came to understand that the harmonious combination of a video projection and the static painted surface required that I discover a new language within myself, which would in turn allow me to speak of my work, defend it and champion it as my art and my creation. My thesis committee helped me realize that by placing LCD screens into the painted surface, I am asking the power of paint, abstract concepts, and narrative thought to balance themselves out with the most powerful medium that exists in art and entertainment: TV. I believe that the video aspect of my art is in essence a collage element, juxtaposed with other visual elements using a process that mimics more traditional artistic practices. It is a tool that I can control to help me find a way to see. Within a historical context, however, video signifies that I am a contemporary artist, working with contemporary tools.

After solving the technological problems of inserting a video screen into a canvas, and after improving my skills in painting (with the help of Professor Alan Singer), I was able to create four works for my thesis show: "Painting within a Painting," "Eye Candy," "Untitled," and "This Is What I Have Lost, Now What Have I Gained?"

## “Painting Within a Painting”

“Painting Within a Painting” (see figure 1) is the only piece that does not have canvas. It was done on a wood face that was secured to a frame. In “Painting Within a Painting,” the LCD screen and the painted surface are in harmony, allowing the actual technology to hide for a moment. It is this moment I feel is important to give to the viewer.

The distinguishing point, for me, from work to work is the amount of information I give the viewer. In “Painting Within A Painting” I created a beautiful *mandala* of pattern and color that perceptually pushes and pulls the viewer. Directly in the center of the piece is an LCD screen, showing in a constant loop a film of the painting itself. When I began to see the interaction with and reaction to my art in critiques and gallery settings, I realized that I had succeeded in showing my thoughts in an indirect way. Without confronting the viewer, the work opened the possibility that they might find something more than the surface of their initial thoughts. In “Painting Within a Painting,” I try to reach out to the viewer, and to say, “Do you see this”? , Or “What do you see”?

“Painting Within a Painting” is the one piece in my thesis show that creates an immediate dialogue with the work of a pioneer in the use of video technology in art, Nam June Paik. His “TV Buddha” (see figure 2) represents the true conceptual jump in his art from the use of traditional tools to a work that identifies him as an artist making contemporary art with the most advanced tools available in 1974. ‘T.V. Buddha’ is an

historical heavyweight whose impact on artistic practice can be seen as comparable to Picasso's 'Les Demoiselles d' Avignon' of 1907.

Just as Paik put the 3 dimensional Buddha in front of a television showing a flat image of Buddha, I put the viewers staring at a monitor of the painting they should be looking at. The fulfillment they experience at watching the interaction of the LCD screen appears to form an immediate relation with the art, they relax and in turn open themselves to it with an understanding of what the piece is offering. They see the technology; they see the cords coming down from behind the paintings. They can relate to it in a concrete every day way, and not just left looking at an abstraction. It does not turn off their minds; just as though they were watching a commercial, it does the opposite it opens it. Although I do not argue that my artwork resembles a TV commercial, I do believe that the combination of painting and video in "Painting Within a Painting" lures everyday people into viewing the work without the realization that they usually do not enjoy abstract art, as well as shape recognition. When something tries to short-circuit this reaction, we work harder at pattern recognition.

### "Untitled"

When you first look at "Untitled" (see figure 3), you only see color from the three LCD screens and from the three white canvases that hold the screens. But when you walk up to the work and around it, there develops an interaction, a movement of color between the three objects. When the viewer looks straight at the piece from ten feet away, he or she can see the true colors: red, grey, and blue. Once the viewer leaves this center point, however, all the colors change, sometimes only slightly, sometimes



substantially. From thirty feet away and at angle, the red is blue, the grey is black, and the blue is grey. The discoveries that are made from each point of view create an interaction with the viewer that is both adventurous and lyrical. I, the artist, do not give you anything but a conceptual abstraction to look at. All the other pieces have a common recognizable object (even if it is purposely hidden), or a common recognizable theme (even if it is an abstract theme).

“This Is What I Have Lost, Now What Have I Gained?”

“This Is What I Have Lost, Now What Have I Gained?” (see figure 4) is the one piece in my thesis project that has narrative images. These images are baby films taken of me by my parents. This is the exact opposite of giving the audience nothing: it gives them a movie to watch. I tried to construct a place where the viewer can sit down, and watch a dream that I cannot have anymore in reality.

Although the dream itself is lost, the combination of painting and video has offered me the possibility of recreating it, and thereby to reproduce the dream in a form that the viewer can experience, interact with, and learn from. “This Is What I Have Lost, Now What Have I Gained?” shows a moment that originally existed only as a dream inside my head. What made the dream so overwhelming and true was that it contained things that were beyond my touch. The reconstruction brought them within my touch. Unimportant things in the dream I represented in a two-dimensional, flat way. The transparency prints of African Art have a little more importance representing the spirit world. In Africa the ties to the spiritual world and its relation to everyday life have not been severed,

as in the western world. The culture recognizes the impact of the artist and the link they provide to the dream world. This is the reason I chose to use the African masks, to help signify the leap from dream to reality.

The films being shown in the center section of this work bring to life the two figures with whom I shared a living moment within my dreams, and whom I never thought of as not being alive with me today. This is how I insert myself, the artist, into the work.

### “Eye Candy”

“Eye Candy” (see figure 5) shows the hole in the center of the dome of the Pantheon in Rome, Italy. I reproduced the image twenty-one times on video, then placed it within the canvas. In considering the colors in the video, I painted the canvas a bright orange.

Although the piece is as the title suggests “Eye Candy”, it was not my original intention. I constructed a beautiful piece of art, hiding the Pantheon so well using technology that my intentions are not visible in the piece. The viewer is presented with a mystery that is revealed only in the written explanation of my intentions. The reason for me using the Pantheon was the impact and realization of the modernity of the building when seeing it for the first time. I cannot bring every viewer to the Pantheon, however I can use it as a symbol and a parallel to my use of contemporary technology in the creation of ‘Eye Candy’. When the Pantheon was constructed it heralded the Romans as the most modern architects of their time. It was the most advanced structure built in the

second century A.D. To use images of the Pantheon, re-contextualized in cutting-edge artwork today, is really exciting to me -- especially when people say that it is so pretty to look at!

## Theory and Influences

All the art I do is based on a philosophical principle or triangular thought process. I was helped in its development from different Professors over the years. The first stage is the conceptual moment. This first step I feel is the most important. The understanding of the moment I wish to convey has to be established in this step. I consider whether the piece lies in a pure emotional, abstract state or whether a visual reference is present, or whether there is some combination of the two. I also decide at this time whether I think making the piece of art is important to me, or whether I should let go of it. For this process to continue, I must see a logical conclusion for this work of art to come alive. I must be able to see the whole process come to a completion. I need to be able to see the finished piece. The second stage is the choice of the medium or media, and the execution of the idea into a concrete state as a piece of art. The third and final stage is the comparison of the finished product with the ideas and principles of the conceptual moment. If the first and third stages are in harmony, the work is successful. If not, then I learn from the piece in a different way. Working and reworking my ideas in this way allows me to skip the sketch and eliminate the need to create preliminary pieces. I do my problem solving in the conceptual world of my head, rather than with a tangible piece of paper, or notes. I do however; complete the process by writing about and sometimes diagramming the concept. However I am not



inclined to use materials as some artist do. My sketchbook is full of notes not drawings.

Constructing my work in the studio involved a great many trial and errors. I had to find the right method of projection, as well as the ability to secure the video image to the painted surface. I first tried shooting the image onto the canvas with a projector, this did not work, because of too many variables, light conditions, equipment and the ability of the viewer to block out the image. After deliberation I found LCD screens that were built to be used in the visors of cars for viewing DVDs. The process of taking them apart was simple enough; the hard part was finding a power source. They (screens) are intended to run off a car battery, as well as how to secure them into the painting. I found a large toy battery that would produce the proper voltage and with just the hindrance of having to recharge it on a nightly basis. The next step was finding a way for LCD to rest in the paintings, for canvas alone was not going to be strong enough to hold them. I found that 1/4-inch masonite would fit into the frames evenly and then I could wrap them with canvas and have a smooth surface to paint on. Before the insertion of the LCD screens I needed to cut the canvas and the masonite to the dimensions of the screens, then I was able to place the LCD's into the paintings. I then had to secure the motherboards and the controls to the backs of the pieces with Liquid Nail, then connecting the proper cords to a DVD player and then to the battery. I shot all the films myself with a mini DV camera and did all the editing on Final Cut Pro. I then produced the DVD myself. This process that I decided on worked very well, I had two cords coming down from behind each piece that ran to the battery and DVD players. I found that I needed to hide these sources to allow the viewer to not be concerned with how it

was all working, but with presenting an aesthetic that would allow the viewer to experience the work.

The artist who has had the greatest influence on my work is Kasimir Malevich. One of the central figures in the Russian Constructivist Movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, both his work and philosophical approach have been profoundly influential. His notion that great art is made in a time of flux is a wonderful way to gain insight into a time when great masters were at work. I was first drawn to his figurative work, not his abstract art. In his figurative paintings, the painted field is recognizable as a male or female form, but there is no definition in the face. To me, Malevich captured people's souls, and the plight or emotion that defines them. He favors what is abstract, leaving out what is recognizable; his work allowed feelings to surface that were intrinsic to the creation of my won inner dialogue and ultimately to my subsequent art work. It was not until after I was able to digest the figurative work that I found a love for his abstraction, and this in turn led me to his writings. "Untitled," in my thesis show, draws immediately on Malevich's "Black Square" (see figure 6): straight white canvases with video screens instead of a black square. Exposure to Malevich's artwork, in other words, taught me not only the emotional and spiritual impact art could have, but also a pictorial method for setting up an abstraction. Malevich's writings taught me that a work of art should contain a soul, and that the soul of one's artwork should be for the betterment of all who see it -- as opposed to deterrence, or propaganda.

Malevich also wrote about the impact the cinema was having and could have on the general population:



“I pointed out the similarity of interpretation of images and whole pictures on the screen produced according to the artist-painters’ laws of light composition, which were established in the pre-cinematographic era, i.e. before science found a way of drawing living images on the screen’s canvas. I also showed how the artist-painter used to try with the greatest effort to paint with bristle and paint nature and image in such a way that they would seem living and natural in all their movements; the attainment of expressiveness in the latter became one of the things that he strove for most. But as a result of all these efforts the artist was only able to fix on the static canvas one impression of this movement *in one still*. The artist remained in this hopeless, doomed position until, on the one hand, science invented the cinema and achieved the reproduction not of an *impression* but of an actual *movement*, and, on the other, a number of painters clarified the question of “what was painting and what was art”. From this moment art fell into two basic divisions: some artists became objectivists (concretists), easel painters, reproducers of everyday life, who did not clarify in their own minds the essence of art; others became non-objectivists (abstractionists) who clarified the essence of art and rejected the portrait and reflection of everyday life.

[1]

By combining these two mediums, it is my hope that that these beliefs are embodied in my won work. It may be arrogant to say I know the truth, but I believe that as an artist one can (and must) always tell one’s own truth!

The truth that I believe in is honesty, the ability not to take more than one needs, to not get confused between a want and a need. Above all else the ability to let go of emotion or actions that force the ego rather than the soul, to the front, a razor's edge to be sure and a huge challenge. If all used these tools and approaches, it is my belief that this world would be a better place in which to live. These principles accompanied by the teachings of the great religions were instilled in me by my parents. They are there for everyone, and allow us all a choice we must make as we develop into adults and people functioning and living together in this world.

Malevich was writing about a time when the concept of movies was still undefined. For Malevich "film" was much closer to the way he thought about painting. Still, he also knew that this new medium had a huge advantage in relaying images of the mind. This idea is reflected in the work that I create, since I am not going to show the viewer anything mundane, unless mundane is called for. As an artist, one thinks through oneself and re-contextualizes oneself, over and over. This constant reworking of an idea is one of the few remaining acts of freedom – away, if you choose, from the visual and social agenda that is being pushed on the general public. As an artist, you are on an island, an island of spiritual awakening. To the people who can't look for their spirit in this world (or who simply don't), you give a glance into a world they don't know how to get to anymore. I write "anymore," because I think we all possess that spirit in the beginning of our life, when we are able to live as children. Artists can live in a self-indulgent world, where they are allowed to think in large realities that don't play out for anyone other than himself or herself. I live in this world. Learning how to join together the adult world

and the child in me, or the soulless world and the spiritual world, was just as important a process for me as learning how to combine painting and video. I do not want to die while I am alive.

In his *Breaking Open the Head*, Daniel Pinchbeck argues, “What if the origin of culture, what Carlo Ginzburg called “the matrix of all possible narratives,” was the shamanic journey? Then art and literature, dance and theater would be elaborated or degraded forms of the original impulse to reach the “other worlds” through trance and ritual”. [3] For me, the largest misunderstanding in art history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the separation of the individual from the spiritual world. That is Picasso in his creation of cubism did nothing more than copy the lines and forms of the African artists and then covered the Western World in them, from architecture to portraiture this was heralded in art history as modernism. What did not transfer was the spirit that had guided the artists of Africa, (I loved it when my father told me what he thought of Picasso: “Fantastic artist. He should just be glad he found African Art, otherwise he would have just painted in blue and red for the rest of his career.”) In art history, African art is categorized as “primitive,” whereas Picasso is considered a “modern master.” But, in fact, Picasso severs a crucial connection, the root of a world that was once grounded in the balance of people and the earth. Instead of talking to wise elders, we in the West try to learn about the past by going to a museum.

This need for grounding also informs my answer to the question whether painting is dead. Painters in the Graduate Department often asked Dr. Lightfoot in critique whether he thinks painting is dead. When he passed this question on to me, I would think to myself, how could painting be dead, I use paint to construct my artwork; I believe I will



continue to in the future. What was not lost on me was the ability to expand my pallet of mediums. As a modern artist I could find new ways to explore my ideas, and often they moved from what can be called convention, to what is called cutting edge. I never believed that by not using cutting edge materials that the art was not being created. This topic generates great debate among artists who are rooted in traditional concepts involving artistic disciplines. It was not until I read *Portraits: Talking with Artists at the Met, the Modern, the Louvre, and Elsewhere*, by the *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman, that I found a brilliant answer to this question, given by the artist Chuck Close: He wrote “There is something about the smearing of colored dirt on a flat surface and denying the flatness through the illusion of depth which retains its original magic from the days of the cave painters and which can never be denied.” [1] This statement is certainly true for me. Both as a child and as an adult, whenever I have been near water and sand, I have always been, and probably always will be, fascinated by drawing in sand, and seeing water wash it away to let me do it all over again. I do not think painting is dead. I just choose for myself to be able to construct my art to the fullest of my abilities, Without any limitations on my creativity I choose the materials and tools that allow me to best construct my art.

## Future

My thesis has been the discovery of creating (or recreating) moments in narrative or abstract compositions by combining a painted canvas with an LCD screen inserted into the painted surface. By unifying the still image of a canvas and the movement of video, I would be able to create a moment or

feeling in a traditional historical medium as well as manufacture moments and feelings by means of new technology. An amazing journey it has been for me, and hope I will continue to learn from it for the remainder of my life.

The work ahead has been defined by the work I write about now. My work over the last two years has grown in directions that I would not have known possible. At the same time, I have completed a moment that transpired many years ago, and the journey has changed my life in the way I had hoped it would. I am proud of my artwork and look very much forward to the exciting possibilities that my thesis show work has provided for me to explore in the future.

First, I am going to explore a whole wall of pieces like “Untitled,” to see how beautiful the dance of the viewer with the work would be. As the viewer moves, subtle shifts in color and dimensions will occur due to the nature of the LCD screen. This could lead to additional work with installations. Second, I will try to develop the narrative aspect of my artwork by finding a chroma key room to shoot aspects of the different personalities people display. Third, I will work with found objects. I hope also to work in ceramic medium, taking the oldest known artistic medium, baked clay, and try to set new media in it. This should be very interesting and exciting. A final, very ambitious aspect of my art is to produce a Hollywood motion picture. Using the tools I have developed at RIT and the aesthetics I have written about in this paper, I want to tell of the truths of life’s story, with a lot of beauty, and with words helping guide the viewers and myself along this journey that we together call life.

Figure 1



Ira H. Kusnetzky, "Painting Within a Painting," from the 2005 thesis show. 4 x 4 Ft. Acrylic paint, photo paper, negative paper, LCD screen, DVD player.



Figure 2

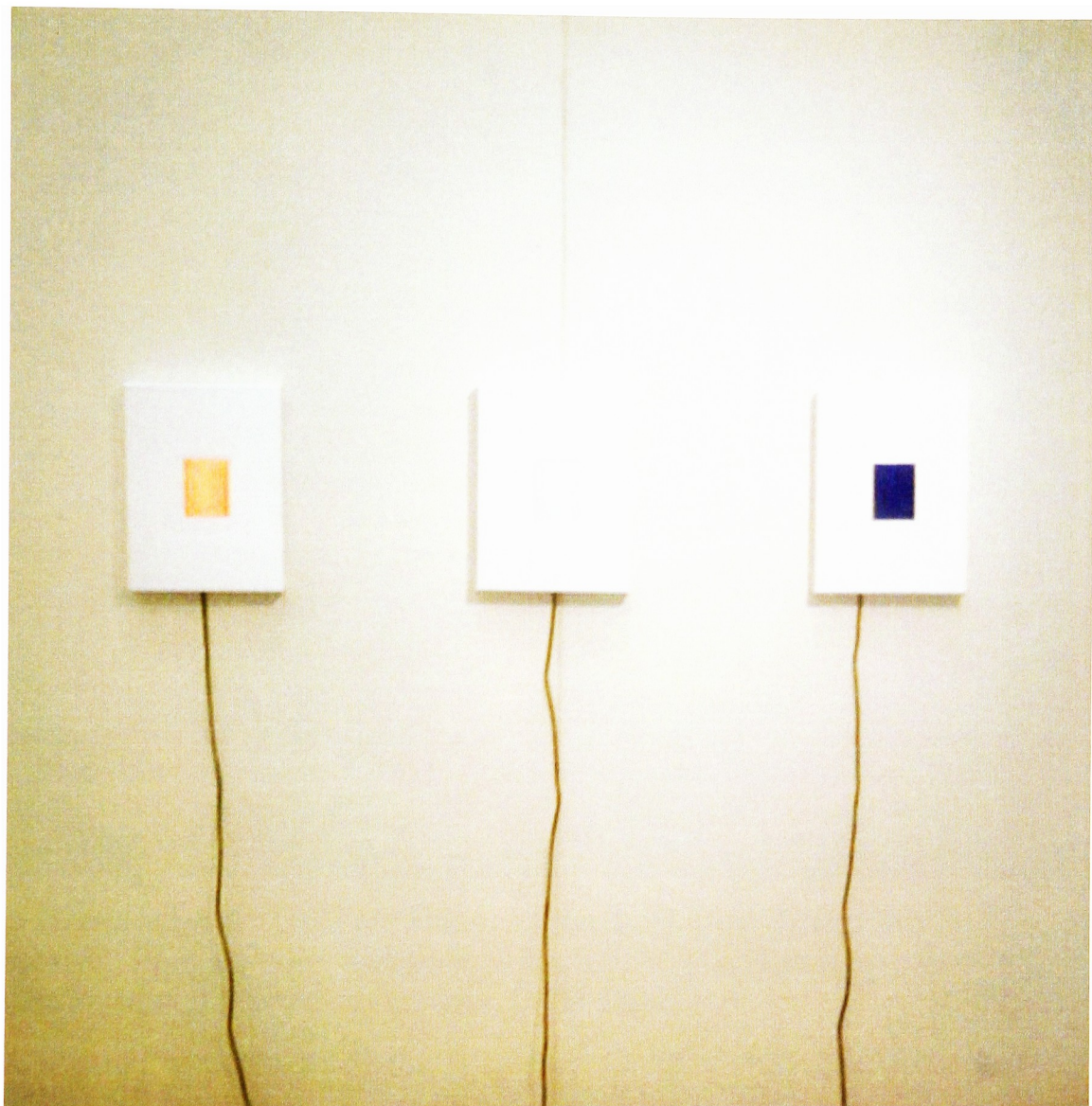


Nam June Paik, "TV Buddha," 1974.

Closed Circuit video installation with bronze sculpture

Collection of the Artist

Figure 3



Ira H. Kusnetzky, "Untitled," from the 2005 thesis show. 12 x 12 inches.  
Acrylic paint, LCD screens, DVD player.

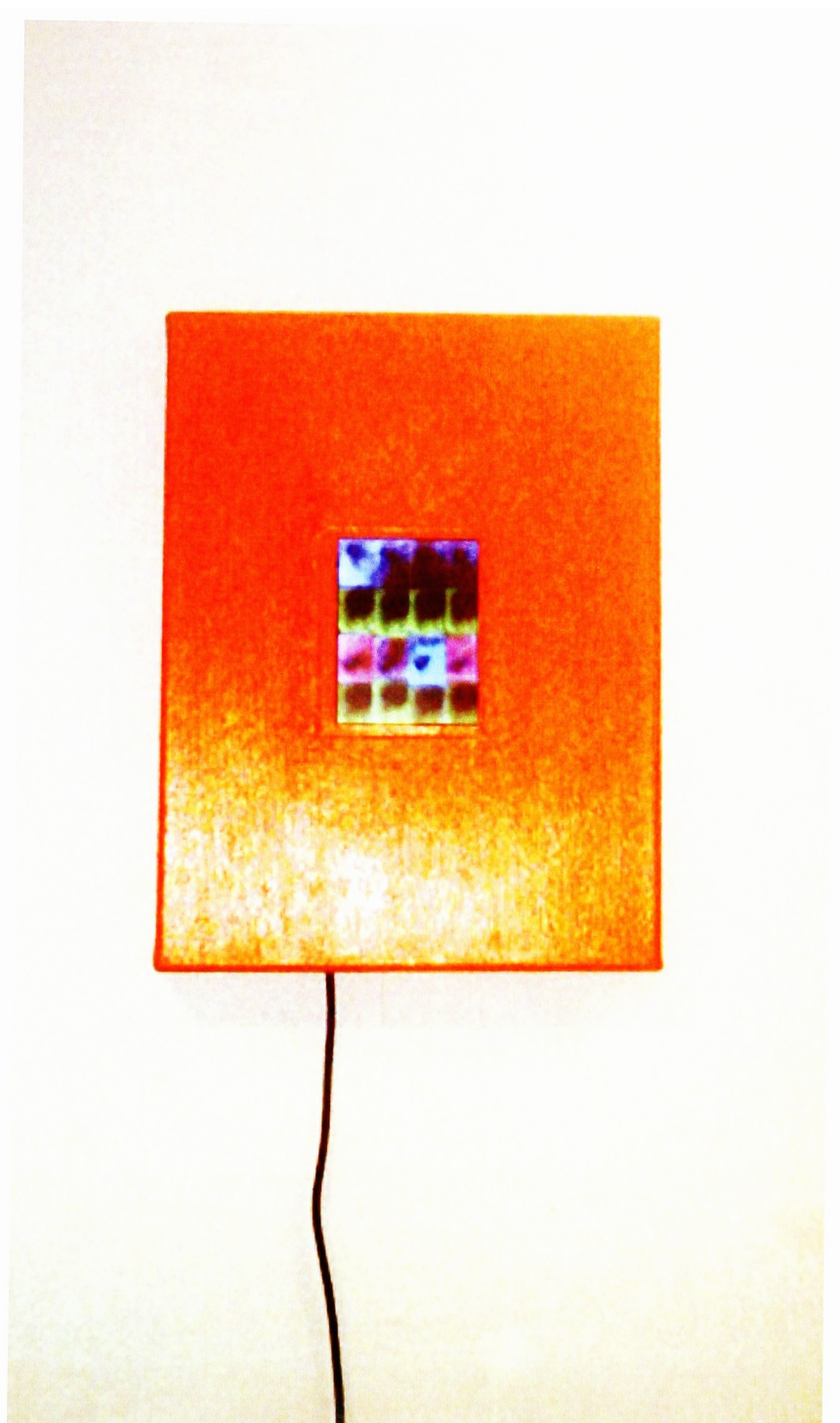


Figure 4



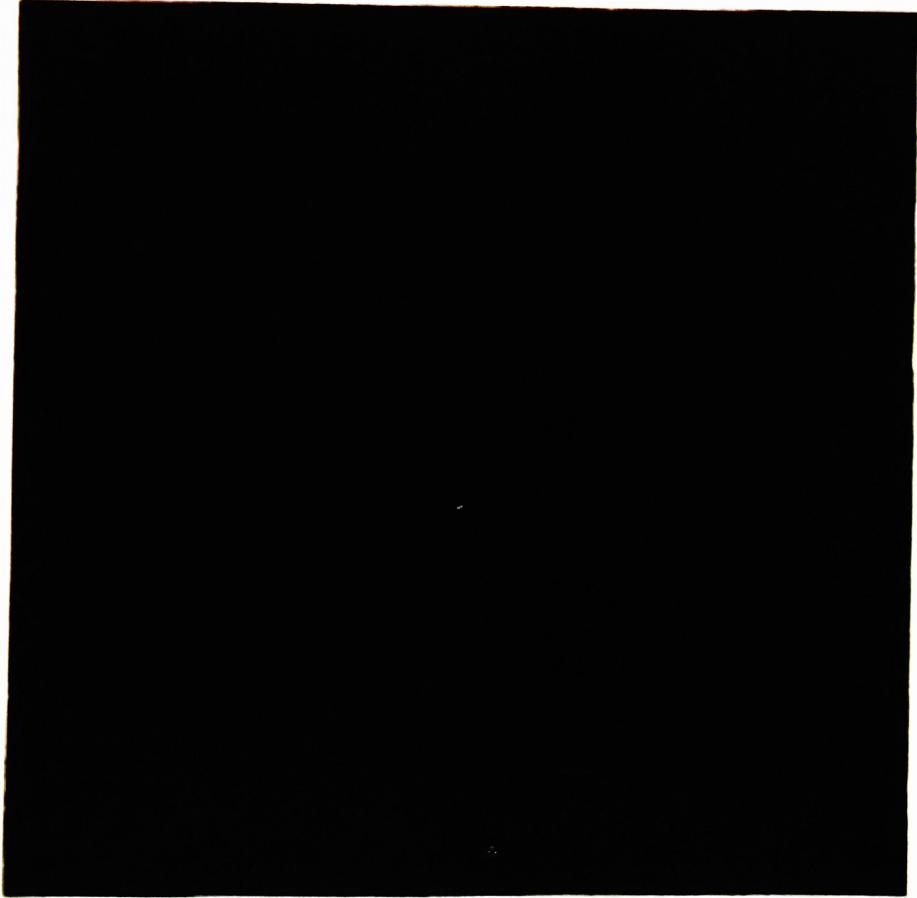
Ira H. Kusnetzky, "The Two Things I Have Lost, Now What Have I Gained?" from the 2005 thesis show. 6 x 8 ft. + 20 x 54 inches + 6 x 8 ft. Acrylic paint, digital transparencies, DVD player

Figure 5



Ira H. Kusnetzky, “Eye Candy,” from the 2005 thesis show. 12 x 12 inches. Acrylic Paint, LCD screen, DVD player.

Figure 6



Kasimir Malevich, "Black Square," 1913.  
Oil on canvas 41 3/4 x 41 7/8  
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

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