

THESIS

LIGHT WORKS

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Sophia Dixon Dillo

Department of Art

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY SOPHIA DIXON DILLO ENTITLED LIGHT WORKS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate work



Suzanne Faris



Mary-Ann Kokoska



Marius Lehene



Patrick McKee



Advisor, Dave Yust



Department Chair Gary Voss

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

LIGHT WORKS

Light Works explores the incorporation of light into painting in both small wall works and large hanging installation works. The pieces have a quiet gentle presence that sets the tone of the space they inhabit. Light is incorporated into the pieces through the combination of opaque layers such as off-white paper and white paint, with transparent and translucent layers of plastic and Mylar. Varying combinations of these materials create subtle visual effects as the light interacts with the layers. Elements of shadow, light, and visual foginess or clarity of material all occur depending on the viewer's spatial relationship to the works.

These works are non-objective. They use all-over patterning in order to *not* establish a visual hierarchy between forms. The viewer's attention thus tends to alternate between the whole of the work and the particular forms of the pattern. The combination of scale, composition, light, color, material, and physical placement of the works creates a space of simplicity, openness, and stillness. The intention is to situate the viewer in the immediacy of direct experience. Instead of our usual mind of naming, comparison and association, these works try to evoke a *felt* sense that exists before labeling, before

thinking. I intend to have this space invite a specific experience of beauty, beauty as an activity of mind, a mind that reaches out to an object and returns nourished.

Sophia Dixon Dillo
Department of Art
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523
Spring 2009

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I saw a room full of Mark Rothko (1903-1970) paintings I was rendered speechless. The paintings as individuals, and the space they created as a group, were completely other than anything I had ever experienced before with art. Standing close to one piece I felt my perceptual and physical space surrounded by its vibrating color. Stepping back, I noticed how the works seemed to envelop the bodies of those who passed before them. The works were immense and powerful. I had no words; I simply *was* before this artwork, feeling my body and my mind as the paintings saturated my visual field and the felt space of the room. I sat and took it all in; I was in complete awe.

The power of Rothko's work has remained in the background of my own explorations in art ever since. Somehow the size, the simplicity, and the energy put into these layers of paint created a *felt* visual field of experience. The work placed me in my direct experience in relationship to the art object. The art object had the power to hold my attention, to slow me down and cause me to enter my sensory body, temporarily leaving my habitual thinking mind.

In *Light Works* I intend to push the boundaries of painting by manipulating materials, scale, color, light, and space in order to create works that encourage a similar kind of direct, felt sensory experience. My focus is an experience of simplicity, openness and stillness. These are things we can discuss to a great extent, but they are not

something we necessarily experience through talking about them. Thus, I am interested in making art that creates its own experiential space. My approach to this begins in the making of the art object. In making art, I try to cultivate a non-habitual mind of attentive awareness. The way I hold my mind gives shape to what I am working on, and provides the work with its particular experiential *texture*.¹ As a means of communication, the work of art then hopefully allows viewers to engage in a similar experiential territory.

In the following pages I will set the stage for *Light Works* through conveying key concepts and views that are in the background of my approach to making art. Then I will explore visual art as a means of communication and why I choose non-objective abstraction as my primary mode of expression. This will lead into a detailed description of the form and combination of mediums. Finally, I will discuss how these works are oriented in space and how they push the boundaries of conventional definitions of painting in order to become what I call “installation paintings.”

¹ What I call the “texture” of the work can be understood both literally and metaphorically. It’s the literal texture of the work, how it appears, how it feels when touched. It is also the palpable, felt experience of the work.

I.
DIRECT EXPERIENCE

The Western mind, as I observe and experience it, tends to establish continuity through discursive thinking. Our self-narrative “glues” our thoughts together.² By identifying with our thinking we are able to maintain a certain amount of control over our experience and make our world more “predictable.” Discursive thinking tends to dominate our mental and physical space, and we live in a comparative, associative, and conceptual mind most of the time. Continuity is thus established through thinking. When we identify with these forms of mind, the direct experience that is always at hand becomes obscured.³

In contrast, the original mind of a baby, for example, is based in the experiential: the tactile, visual, aural. Once a child learns language, he or she begins to describe experience. Eventually stories can be told, and the child’s identity is established through narrative and memory. This conceptualization of experience then begins to overshadow the direct sensory experience, and becomes more and more ingrained as the child grows into an adult.

² Baker, Richard, *New Year’s Seminar Lecture* (Lecture, Crestone, CO, December 30, 2008).

³ An example for how narrative can overshadow direct experience: Someone *hates* nuts. He refuses to eat them. He tells everyone that he hates nuts, and whenever they are served he will undoubtedly remove the nuts from his plate and place them on his neighbor’s. Then he eats a really good new dish. He exclaims with delight how good this dish is, only to have it revealed to him later that a main ingredient in the dish was almonds. His self-narrative that follows the lines of “I don’t like nuts” is threatened. Instead of staying with his *actual* experience of enjoying the dish with nuts in it, he remains with his previous thought identification of not liking nuts.

This is not to say that we should inhabit the mind of a baby, but it is possible to shift the focus of the mind in a way that is more nourishing and less busy. Shunryu Suzuki (1905-1971), a Japanese Zen teacher who taught Buddhism to Westerners in the sixties in San Francisco, brings up the contrast of these states of mind in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*:

When we do something with a quite simple, clear mind, we have no notion or shadow, and our activity is strong and straightforward. But when we do something with a complicated mind, in relation to other things or people, or society, our activity becomes very complex.⁴

When we identify with our thinking, our experience becomes more complicated because another layer is added to it. Thinking is one structure of the mind. The activity of mind also includes direct perception, atmospheric feeling, naming, association, emotion. Thinking is not “bad,” and it is not necessarily opposed to experience, but I find that it has a tendency to obscure our direct experience or perception. The function of mind emphasized becomes the basis for how we experience the world, the basis for our worldview. In most cases our discursive mind is emphasized.

So, what happens when continuity is established in a new way, through a mind of *attention* rather than *thinking*? When the mind is relatively free from discursive thinking and self-narrative it is more able to ground itself in the direct experience of bodily proprioception and sensory perception. The sense fields and the felt body can be experienced as mind extending into and taking in the immediate situation as space. Then attention is primarily located in the *field* of mind, rather than the *contents* of mind; it enters a pulse of reaching out to the particulars, and returning to the field. In the field of

⁴ Suzuki, Shunryu, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind – Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*, (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1970), 62.

attention things appear as unique and unrepeatable, even when we interact with them on an everyday basis. We are able to relate to things as they appear, rather than as we have known them in the past.

Objects are not only things that we bring our attention *to*, they also have the power to bring us *to* our attention. A Japanese tea bowl and an American mug are made with very different intentions, though they serve the same purpose. A mug has a handle on one side. We tend to grab the mug with one hand without much attention to the object itself or the warmth of the liquid inside. The design is created to make drinking tea a convenient activity.

A Japanese tea bowl, on the other hand, has no handle. This causes us to have to pay more attention to the object in order to drink from it. The bowl is made to be held with two hands rather than one, so the drinker's body, and thus his attention, is called to turn fully toward the object in order to drink the liquid inside.⁵ The Japanese tea bowl is created to interact with the body through attention, whereas the American mug allows a person to engage in thinking and other activities while drinking.

Any object can be made with the intention to bring us into a mind of attention, and when we bring our full attention to an object, continuity can be established through the particularity of the object rather than through thinking. I experience the tea in a different way if I bring my attention to it and feel the warmth of it in my hands, than if I think about something else while drinking the tea. The presence of an object also

⁵ A refined tea bowl made for the Japanese tea ceremony is designed to have a particular frontal orientation. After the bowl is filled with tea, the bowl is meant to be turned to align a particular spot on the rim with the lips. As one drinks, a design on the inside of the bowl on the opposite side reveals itself as the tea disappears. The warmth of the tea is felt in both hands. Every element of the bowl is taken into consideration in the design. The object becomes an activity.

surfaces more as we learn to bring our attention to our direct experience. Simplicity in a tea bowl, an object of nature, or an art object seems to allow for this kind of attention to arise more easily because it can naturally focus the mind in direct experience.

I find that I have an affection for the simple *as-isness* of things. The white curve of a bone, the negative space created by the bend of a flower, the impression of a printing plate on white paper all capture my attention. Noticing these ordinary objects as particular reveals their unique presence and makes the mind more receptive to beauty. Beauty is usually understood, as a *quality* of an object, or as pleasure derived from an object. Beauty, to me, is when the mind reaches out to an object and returns nourished. In this sense, beauty originates in the mind, it is a posture of the mind that allows things to be just as they are. Creating art is my attempt to honor and share this kind of experience.

For me, making artwork is a practice. It is an activity, a *doing*, a direct experience that I bring my attention to on a regular basis. My hands work with the materials; I respond to what I see before me. The physical engagement in making art helps to concentrate attention by connecting mind and body through activity. As soon as I try to control or predict what I make through preconceived ideas, or I begin to identify with discursive thinking, the direct connection with what I am doing is compromised.⁶ Shunryu Suzuki said: “[T]he real secret of the arts [is to] always be a beginner.”⁷ Cultivating a beginner’s mind, being open and ready for the new, is to know how to step

⁶ This is not to say that thinking is not present at all in making art. But for me, making art is not primarily based in thinking.

⁷ Suzuki, 22.

outside of self-narrative and other established structures of thinking. It is to work in, and with, the immediacy of the present situation.⁸

⁸ “Beginner’s mind” is an established term in Zen Buddhism: “The practice of Zen mind is beginner’s mind. The innocence of the first inquiry – what am I? – is needed throughout Zen practice. The mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind which can see things as they are, which step by step and in a flash can realize the original nature of everything.” – Richard Baker, “Introduction,” in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Edited by Trudy Dixon, 13-14.

II. VISUAL COMMUNICATION

As art is an activity that I bring my attention to, my hope is that something of my experience is then translated into the artwork itself. My intention is to create art that, like a tea bowl, has the ability to bring another person to their attention in relationship to the object. The object is a means of communication, an outward expression of my intention, a physical manifestation of my direct experience in making the object.

Thomas E. Wartenberg writes on Leo Tolstoy's (1828-1910) view of art as communication in *The Nature of Art*:

No one can doubt the importance of speech, for it allows human beings to convey to one another their thoughts and experiences. In Tolstoy's view, art is no less central to human existence, for it makes accessible the feelings of other human beings... [I]t allows one to access the felt experience of those in circumstances other than one's own.⁹

Tolstoy recognizes this non-verbal communicational element of the art object as a way of communicating *feeling* rather than *thought*. He chooses to concentrate on the *felt experience* rather than on the conceptual experience of the art object.

The philosopher Eugene Gendlin also talks about this non-verbal realm of communication and its connection to felt experience. He writes: "Most of life's actions, observations, and situations occur without verbal symbols. Whether there are verbal

⁹ Wartenberg, Thomas E., *The Nature of Art – An Anthology, 2nd Edition*, (United States: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007),102.

symbols or not, felt meaning is present whenever any of these have meaning to a person.”¹⁰ He then writes the following about the experience of art:

[W]e have a *felt sense* of works of art. Let us ask ourselves what we experience in viewing some painting or statue. Whatever we may be inclined to answer in words, first we will find ourselves observing internally our felt sense of the impact on us of the work of art.¹¹

Gendlin shifts from Tolstoy’s focus on the feeling of the artist as communicated, to the felt sense that arises in the viewer in relationship to the art object. As a non-verbal object, art communicates on a level that is pre-lingual or pre-conceptual, from artist to viewer.

When speaking about my own work, I prefer the term “felt sense” to “feeling,” because it is more neutral and seems to refer less to emotional states that are usually caught up in discursive, self-narrative thinking. A “felt sense” does not have meaning; it is what meaning is derived from. It arises from direct experience with a situation or object. This is the territory of experience that I am interested in exploring through art.

Doris A. Dondis explains in *A Primer of Visual Literacy* how our understanding of the world is connected to our ability to see: “Human visual experience is primary in learning to understand and respond to the environment.”¹² In Western culture, however, understanding is usually associated with the intellect. Visual experience of objects develops along conceptual, comparative, and associative lines linked to language. We see something, label it, then comparisons and associations begin to develop on the basis of past experiences of that object. On the one hand, we must do this in order to function

¹⁰ Gendlin, Eugene, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning – A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1962), 70.

¹¹ Gendlin, 70.

¹² Dondis, Doris A., *A Primer of Visual Literacy*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1973), 2.

in the world. But, eventually we no longer really *see* the object for what it is because we already know it. Language creates a relationship one step removed from the direct experience of the object, and can actually stand in place of real experience. If we see a painting of a familiar object we can immediately relate to the image through our past experience, knowledge, or stories about the object.

Representational Art

This world of known objects is familiar and tends to be where our self-narrative is comfortable. My father, Willard Dixon (b. 1942), has painted landscapes for more than forty years. He recognizes that people respond to the pieces because they depict familiar imagery. Everyone recognizes and has experienced a landscape. The objects in the image can be labeled and identified.

Pop art of the 1960s exploited this kind of familiarity in its images by focusing on consumer goods and logos. An interesting contrast is how people responded more to Claes Oldenburg's (b. 1929) The Store in 1962 than they did in 1961. This was because the art objects that filled The Store in 1962 no longer had the messy hand-painted pop quality that the works had in 1961. The objects were more accessible, more recognizable. Viewers of art tend to like what is familiar because they can identify with it in some way, as long as it stays close to that appealing familiarity of objects around them.

Abstract Art

Abstraction in art still relies on the known world of objects as its source of imagery, but the objects become distorted into a simplified or more “essential” form. Imagery is still recognizable, but the object is not represented *as* we know it. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), for example, painted from life, but rather than painting a woman just as she appeared, he painted her as a composite of views of her from different angles. Her body became divided up into simplified, recognizable parts and put together into an unfamiliar whole. The image became an *interpretation* rather than a straight *representation* of the whole. I find that abstraction loosens the ability to cling to familiar imagery, yet it does not entirely remove it. Thus, conceptualization and association can still arise in the viewer when looking at abstract art.

Non-Objective Art

Non-objective abstraction takes us a step further by removing the referential basis. Images are compositionally based on “pure” form, and the source of the images tends to be internal rather than external. I am drawn to non-objective abstraction because it strips away the layers of associative meaning in which our everyday lives are embedded.¹³ Non-objective images emphasize a space in our experience that exists before labeling, before thinking. Unobstructed by familiar icons, a bodily felt dialogue between the viewer and the work of art then might arise more easily.

I have found through my explorations of non-objective images that even when there is no referential basis for the forms, people still tend to make associations, thus

¹³ Before we label an apple “apple,” before it is given the definition of a “round red fruit,” before it takes on associative meaning, it simply is what it is.

making the work more familiar and accessible to themselves. The removal of objective reference in art *at least* makes this more difficult. I try to push the composition and imagery as much as possible away from interpretability.

III. FORM

Space

Space is an important element in this body of work. By “space” I mean both physical space and the felt sense of that physical space. Space is an expanse, an emptiness, an interval – both as a location and a feeling.¹⁴ Space has a feeling of freedom about it; it is where things can arise.

Space is affected and structured by things that fill it: objects, people, light, color. An office, for example, can be dark, cramped, and messy or it can be light, open and clean. Objects and their arrangement shape the space they occupy and create a particular atmosphere. This atmosphere reflects the mind of the person who uses, arranges, and cares for the space. It can be experienced as a felt sense by anyone who enters it. Subject and object mutually co-create this felt sense of the space. This atmospheric co-creation experientially blends what is commonly thought of as “internal” space (the mind) and “external” space (the world).

I use a particular combination of scale, composition, light, color, material, and physical placement of the works to create a space of simplicity, openness and stillness. This space is free of much of the busy movement and visual activity that fills so much of our daily lives. My intention is for the space to be nourishing, quiet, and inviting, but

¹⁴*Oxford American Dictionary, Version 1.0.2, 2005, Apple Computer, Inc. application.*

with a strong presence. I want the space to have the ability to shift viewers into a quieter experience of themselves, locating them in their bodies and their senses.

Scale

This sense of space is, in part, established through scale. Some of my works rely on a large vertical scale, approximately 42"x120" (see Fig. 1 – Fig. 17). On a perceptual level the pieces cannot be taken in all at once. This causes the vision to open outward from the body, making it necessary to scan up and down to see an entire piece. The pieces have a vertical, upright posture and seem to request a reflection of this posture in the viewer. This brings the viewer's vision into dialogue with his or her body. The size requires an attention that engages the whole body. The size of the works also defines the atmosphere of space between and around the pieces when hung together. In a way, because of how tall they are, the works *create* the space and *become* the space.

I also use small scale to create more intimate pieces. The works are all in the range of 22"x30" (see Fig. 18 – Fig. 27). These pieces become more personal because the vision moves inward toward the works rather than outward. These works do not overtake the viewers physically, but invite them in to explore the pieces more closely. When hung together they are meant to create a similar quiet atmosphere.

Composition

Composition is another element that is meant to influence the viewer's experience of the work. Variations of all-over patterning are present in most of the works (see Fig. 1 – Fig.10). All-over patterning allows me to create visual interest while decreasing the

emphasis on dominant forms, shapes, or lines. The eye and the mind tend to want to cling to dominant elements of composition and interpret them. Through repetition, all-over patterning removes the importance of any one element over another, and a visual continuity arises. In this way, I hope to simultaneously expand the attention of the viewer to the whole, while still allowing individual elements to be present in the composition. The individual elements come forth when the viewer focuses on them. The attention is able to alternate between the whole overall pattern and the particular of a singular element without creating a visual hierarchy (see Fig. 1 – Fig. 2). This seems to loosen the conceptual associations that can arise when a hierarchy of compositional elements is present, and the viewer is more likely to then experience the work as a perceptual and felt experience more than as an intellectual experience.

Other works also have all-over patterning, which is contained into one larger form within the rectangular format of the piece (see Fig. 11, Fig. 20 – Fig. 25). In these pieces this one form dominates the composition. Though this may allow the pieces to become more interpretable, the colors chosen and the layering of materials still quiet each piece into one united image.

I use the repetition of pattern as a means of evoking a sense of sameness (see Fig. 1). This can be likened to the experience of getting up early in the morning, before the rest of the world wakes up, to the stillness of a thick blanket of snow covering the landscape. The landscape is quiet, untouched. All things that are different are given a continuity through the sameness of their snow cover. Everything is a bump, rounded, similar, and yet particular. Things retain their uniqueness, and yet they are also united. The whiteness of the snow affects our experience of the covered landscape. The white

has an untouched stillness about it that can quiet the mind. My experience of this quieting effect is one reason I choose white as a predominant “color” in my compositions.

Color

Simplicity of color in these works creates continuity in composition. Most of my compositions are made with white paint (see Fig. 1 – Fig. 11, Fig. 18 – Fig. 27). The white is either against the backdrop of translucent materials and warm or cool lighting sources that alter its appearance, or against an off-white paper background (see Fig 1 – Fig. 10, and Fig. 11, Fig. 18 – Fig. 25 respectively). The off-white has a slight warmth to it that allows for a low-key presence of color in contrast to the white patterning. The off-white is also used as the singular color in other compositions that are made from small forms cut into the paper which allow light to shine through (see Fig. 12 – Fig. 17).

I use white because it has a certain neutrality about it. Black could be considered neutral as well, but it has a heaviness, a weight to it that does not carry the felt sense that I am interested in creating with my work. White, on the other hand, has a lightness and openness to it. I am also attracted to white’s ability to reflect light rather than absorb it. This reflectivity, in combination with subtle variations in applications of white, can give the color innumerable appearances. White is “the result of the reflection of most wavelengths of visible light.”¹⁵ The reflectivity of white in the pieces themselves, as well

¹⁵ *Oxford American Dictionary*, 2005.

as of the background walls, is important to making the medium of light part of the artwork.

IV. MEDIUMS

Light

The visual arts are named so for their dependence on what is *seen* as the central means of communication. What is often overlooked is that it is the very presence of light that allows us to see objects. Dondis writes about this in the following:

Primarily, the act of seeing involves a response to light. In other words, the most important and necessary element in the visual experience is tonal. All other visual elements are revealed to us through light, but they are secondary to the element of tone, which is, in fact, light or the absence of light. What light reveals and offers us is the substance by which man fashions and devises what he recognizes and identifies in the environment, namely all other visual elements: line, color, shape, direction, texture, scale, dimension, motion. Which elements dominate which visual statements is determined by the nature of what is being designed or, in the case of nature, what exists.¹⁶

I have chosen color, elements, and materials that emphasize the presence of light. These choices bring light to our attention in a particular way so as to make light visible.

I am fascinated with how light can be both visible and invisible at the same time. Light is always present, yet not always *seen*. It is constantly reflected or absorbed by objects in our everyday world, but it is usually only noticed *as light* when it shows itself more clearly.

We seem to notice light most when it is brought to our attention by an object. We see a beam of light coming through a window because the light illuminates dust in the air.

¹⁶ Dondis, 21.

If there were no dust in the air, we wouldn't have the same awareness of light as light. Yet the light is present in both situations whether it is "visible" or not. Similarly, we also *see* light when it is in strong contrast to a shadow, when it is tinted, or when we look directly into a source of light. We notice light when it is refracted by a glass, or reflected on a shiny surface. We don't usually notice light in the same way when it is not so obvious, such as when an entire wall is uniformly lit by daylight.

My works play with this internal contradiction in the nature of light. I combine transparent, translucent, and opaque layers to create images that incorporate light and shadow on and between the surfaces in varying ways. Light becomes a medium in these works, an "intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses," both directly and indirectly.¹⁷ The result is a fusing of the materiality of the art object with the immateriality of light. The works are in the same moment clear readable objects *and* foggy, vague, ungraspable spaces because of how light is incorporated into the pieces (see Fig. 22). The visual experience as one or the other depends on the position of the viewer in relationship to the piece. As the viewer moves, the appearance of the piece shifts (see Fig. 2 – Fig. 3). This happens in relationship to the light source and how that light source is affecting the transparent, opaque, and reflective surfaces of the object. Thus, the incorporation of light ties the art object to space itself, because of how light alters materials and the spaces between the materials.

The light sources used for these works vary. Indirect lighting gives the works a more consistent overall illumination (see Fig. 5). Direct lighting allows for more complex interactions to occur between layers (see Fig. 15). Light's presence is obvious

¹⁷ *Oxford American Dictionary*, 2005.

when it causes shadows or light bands to occur between layers, when it filters through the opaque all-over patterning, or when it is reflected on a shiny surface (see Fig. 16, Fig. 9, and Fig. 3 respectively). It is less obvious when it is reflected on duller surfaces, or when a more uniform illumination of transparent materials occurs (see Fig. 11).

I use either cool artificial lighting, warm artificial lighting, or natural light from a window to illuminate the works (see Fig. 4, Fig. 1, Fig. 26 – Fig. 27 respectively). In person, the artificial lighting has a subtle presence of hue, while in photographs, the color becomes exaggerated. Rather than being identified as a material color, the lighting comes across more as a felt color, or atmospheric color. The color of the light source sets the tone; it affects the appearance of the individual pieces as well as the felt sense of the space of the work.

Layers

The light interacts with materials such as Mylar, vellum, plastic, paint, paper, string, and tape. Each of these materials is either transparent, translucent, white, or off-white. The subtle shifts between these layers, and the way they are able to incorporate the other layers into themselves, visually ties them together in a harmonious way. Light either shines through the transparent/translucent layers, is blocked or absorbed by the opaque layers, or bounces off the reflective surfaces (see Fig. 22). Slight variations in the combinations or applications of these materials, and the spacing between the layers, allows for subtle shifts between the pieces to occur. Continuity of materials used allows for a similar appearance and feeling throughout the whole body of work. These similarities add to the work's ability to create a quiet space when hung together.

Mylar gives the pieces a foggy, somewhat intangible quality by blurring the straightforward materiality of the other layers (see Fig. 20). It creates a softness, a gentleness. Its translucency also allows light to be visible *as* light on its surface (see Fig. 13, Fig. 16).

I use two kinds of plastic that act as the painting ground. The thinner translucent plastic allows for light to travel through its surface. This plastic has built-in folds that create slight planar shifts that allow the white paint to catch the light at different angles (see Fig. 7 – Fig. 8). When paint is applied to it, it can be manipulated to create varying planes and patterns through wrinkling the plastic or removing the paint as it dries. These layers then interact with the Mylar that is layered over it, or paper layered under it (see Fig. 7 – Fig. 11). The thicker vinyl sheeting has a slick, shiny surface that allows the paint to adhere to it in a more permanent way (see Fig. 1 – Fig. 6, Fig. 18 – Fig. 19). The paint is applied to the plastic either through brushstrokes or stamped marks. The quality of the vinyl allows for interesting plays of light and shadow to occur between the paint and the Mylar that is layered over it (see Fig. 3, Fig. 19).

When it is present in the pieces, the paper acts as a background to the plastic and Mylar layers (see Fig. 11, Fig. 18- Fig. 25). The paper is mostly opaque. When backlit, it takes on some of the light into its presence as an object (see Fig. 12). When frontally lit, it becomes a uniformly reflective surface (see Fig. 14, Fig. 11). In the works without paint layers, the paper is the ground into which a pattern of forms is cut. In these pieces, the paper acts as a material that both blocks light and lets light through (see Fig. 12 – Fig. 17).

Vellum is used in a couple of the small pieces as a thin semi-opaque layer that interacts with the other layers placed behind or in front of it. Its white contrasts with the white of the paint and the off-white of the paper, creating subtle shifts in the interactions between the layers.

The string and masking tape are present in a handful of the small pieces (see Fig. 22 – Fig. 25). These objects are there as material objects. The white string is reflective and also creates shadow under certain lighting conditions. The color of the tape ties into the off-white background of the pieces. The string and tape are compositional elements against the background of the larger form which has the all-over patterning application of paint on it.

V.
ORIENTATION IN SPACE

Wall Works

I began to explore the relationship between painting and light in small wall works (see Fig. 18 – Fig. 25). These works are composed of various combinations of paper, paint on plastic, Mylar, vellum, string, masking tape, and thread. They deal primarily with surfaces that reflect light and create a patterning through light and shadow. Transparency is an important element in these pieces, but it is subdued by the combination with opaque layers. The pieces are meant to be hung close to the wall at eye level, unobstructed by a frame or glass, so that the viewer can interact with them as directly as possible. They reveal their materiality. They also reveal light as a medium (see Fig. 19, Fig. 23). They are not meant to be mysteries, they reveal themselves as the viewer explores them closely.

Installation Paintings

The large works are related to the smaller works in terms of composition, material, and feeling, although they relate more to the space of the room than to the wall. The wall is still important because it reflects light that affects the pieces indirectly. The pieces hang vertically from the ceiling, away from the wall. Some are double-sided, meant to hang in space so that the viewer can have access to both sides (see Fig. 1 – Fig.

10, Fig. 12 – Fig. 17). Others are single-sided, and hang closer to the wall, meant to be viewed from the front (see Fig. 11). These pieces are composed of two or three layers that interact with each other when lighting is incorporated. Their compositions rely, for the most part, on variations of all-over patterning.

I call these large works “installation paintings.” They have roots in the painting tradition, with a leaning toward installation. They are paintings in the sense that they rely on the traditional flat rectangular format established by the canvas stretched over a frame, and that the larger portion of the works relies on paint as the compositional medium. The pieces have a presence that initially seems to want to orient the viewer directly in front of them in a one-on-one relationship, much like a conventional painting.

However, the works push the boundaries of traditional definitions of painting to become installation pieces in a number of ways. They are pulled out into actual space to hang from the ceiling, rather than against the wall. The hanging of the materials allows the works to be seen *through* (see Fig. 1 – Fig. 10). The pieces hang loose in space without a frame. They move slightly as a person passes by, causing them to never have a completely static appearance or relationship to space. Freedom from a rigid frame allows the pieces to integrate more with their surroundings, both visually and spatially. This, combined with the quality of the materials, gives the pieces a more vulnerable presence. The viewers, in turn, must be more aware of their own bodies because of how the pieces inhabit space.

The works hang in space, allowing them to be viewed from all sides. This also allows for a looseness between the layers that creates different effects when combined with varying lighting conditions. The frontal view of the works emphasizes the effects of

the light source on the various layers that are interacting with each other in a more visually and spatially foggy version of the piece. The side profile of the various layers reveals how a piece hangs, and how the frontal image is created. The back side of the double-sided pieces emphasizes the direct rawness of the materials used to create the frontal image. The exposure of the backside creates a coexisting version of the piece in its interaction with the light source that creates the frontal image (compare fronts and backs in Fig. 1 – Fig.10, Fig. 12 – Fig. 17).

The process of making is revealed, unlike in traditional painting where the process is generally concealed. Rather than creating an illusion of light and space on the surface of a canvas, these works incorporate actual light and space into the appearance of the object. The pieces do not hide their status as objects the way canvases can do. The works are images *and* objects at the same time. So, these paintings become installations: objects occupying space *and* shifting space.

CONCLUSION

In these works I have brought together my interests in space, light, and painting into one body of work. The art form that arises out of this combination of elements allows for many variations and possibilities through subtle manipulations of materials, many of which I have yet to explore. I am fascinated with how each piece can take on a wide number of appearances depending on the space they occupy and the type of lighting they interact with. I like to call these works “impermanent fixtures.” They are objects made from “static” material, but at the same time they are in flux because their appearance is dependent on the environment in which they are viewed. This causes the art object to become more of an activity than an entity.

The “installation paintings” are paintings in the sense that they are essentially “flat” rectangular individual works, and installation in the sense that they are impermanent objects intended to hang together in order to affect space, and create a space of their own. The installation element in these works allows me to explore site-specific, temporary, impermanent forms of creating as art. This brings the art into a spatial dialogue with the world around it, and the very nature of that world as impermanent, always changing.

The world, as I experience and view it, is not only impermanent but also interdependent. Things are not entities, but activities. Things, even if they appear as stable and seemingly unchanging, emerge from a web of relationships. Everything is

interdependent with everything else. As humans, we shape and are shaped by our environment through this mysteriously complex, interdependent web of relationships. If this is true, then we participate in the creation of our world. In my artwork, I am trying to find ways to make this interdependent, participatory world that is usually hidden – hidden in the obvious – more apparent. I find light to be an ideal medium for this task. Light itself is “invisible” unless it interacts with an object. In other words, the visibility of light emerges from the interrelationship of object, viewer, and light as the medium. This becomes apparent when the light sources become a visible part of the art object. In these *Light Works* light works, it is an active part of the artwork. As the viewer moves in relationship to the light source, the art object changes. Light and shadow get caught in the layers of my work and reveal subtleties in relationship to the viewer’s attentiveness and willingness to explore details. I am interested in the experiential quality of things as they appear. The felt sense of experienced objects that precedes associations and thoughts about those objects is the ungraspable medium of our ever changing experience of the world just as light is the ungraspable medium of the visual world.

I find that the art I am interested in making often ends up being very difficult to photograph. Photographs capture one moment as interpreted through a mechanical object that tries to replicate the functions of the eye. The camera is not an eye, it is not connected to a body or a mind that interacts with the world. The subtleties that are present in these works, caused by the works’ spatial relationship to light and the viewer, essentially require the viewer to see the works in person. The works are meant to be experienced. This is because they are more than just images, they are all these things together: space, light, material – which come together in a particular moment, in a

particular setting, to create a particular felt sensorial experience in relationship to a particular person.

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FIGURES

Figure 1, Stamped Ovals (Variation I - front and back), acrylic paint on vinyl sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120"x42".

Figure 2, Stamped Ovals (Variation I - detail of front), view looking directly at the piece.

Figure 3, Stamped Ovals (Variation I - detail of front), view looking at the piece from the side.

Figure 4, Stamped Ovals (Variation II - front), acrylic paint on vinyl sheeting, Mylar, mix of cool indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120"x42".

Figure 5, Brushstrokes (Variation I – front and back), acrylic paint on vinyl sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120"x42".

Figure 6, Brushstrokes (Variation II - front), acrylic paint on vinyl sheeting, Mylar, mix of cool indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120"x42".

Figure 7, Thin Print (Variation I – front and back), acrylic paint on plastic sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120"x42".

Figure 8, Holes (Variation I – front and back), acrylic paint on plastic sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm direct flood lighting and warm direct flood lights, 120"x42".

Figure 9, Holes (Variation I – detail of front), view looking at piece from the side.

Figure 10, Crinkled (Variation – front and back), acrylic paint on plastic sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120"x42".

Figure 11, Crinkled Diptych, 2009, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, Mylar, 120"x88" (with space).

Figure 12, Circles (Variation I – front and back), paper and Mylar, warm direct fluorescent lighting from behind, 120"x42".

Figure 13, Circles (Variation I – detail of front).

Figure 14, Circles (Variation II – front and back), paper and Mylar, warm direct fluorescent lighting on the front side, 120"x42".

Figure 15, Slits (Variation I – front and back), paper and Mylar, warm direct flood lighting from behind, 120"x42".

Figure 16, Slits (Variation I – detail of front).

Figure 17, Squares (Variation I – front and back), paper and Mylar, warm direct flood lighting from behind, 120"x42".

Figure 18, Small Stamps I, paper and acrylic paint on vinyl, 30"x22".

Figure 19, Small Stamps I (detail), 2009.

Figure 20, Crinkled Form I, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, masking tape, and Mylar, 30"x22".

Figure 21, Crinkled Form II, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, and Mylar, 30"x22".

Figure 22, Crinkled Form II (detail).

Figure 23, Crinkled Form III, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, masking tape, string, and Mylar, 33"x22".

Figure 24, Crinkled Form IV, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, masking tape, string, thread, and Mylar, 30"x22".

Figure 25, Crinkled Form V, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, masking tape, string, and Mylar, 32"x22".

Figure 26, Crinkled Square (Variation I, front), acrylic paint on plastic, Mylar, daylight from window and fluorescent overhead lighting, 30"x30".

Figure 27, Crinkled Square (Variation II – front), acrylic paint on plastic, Mylar directly over window, daylight from window, 30"x30".

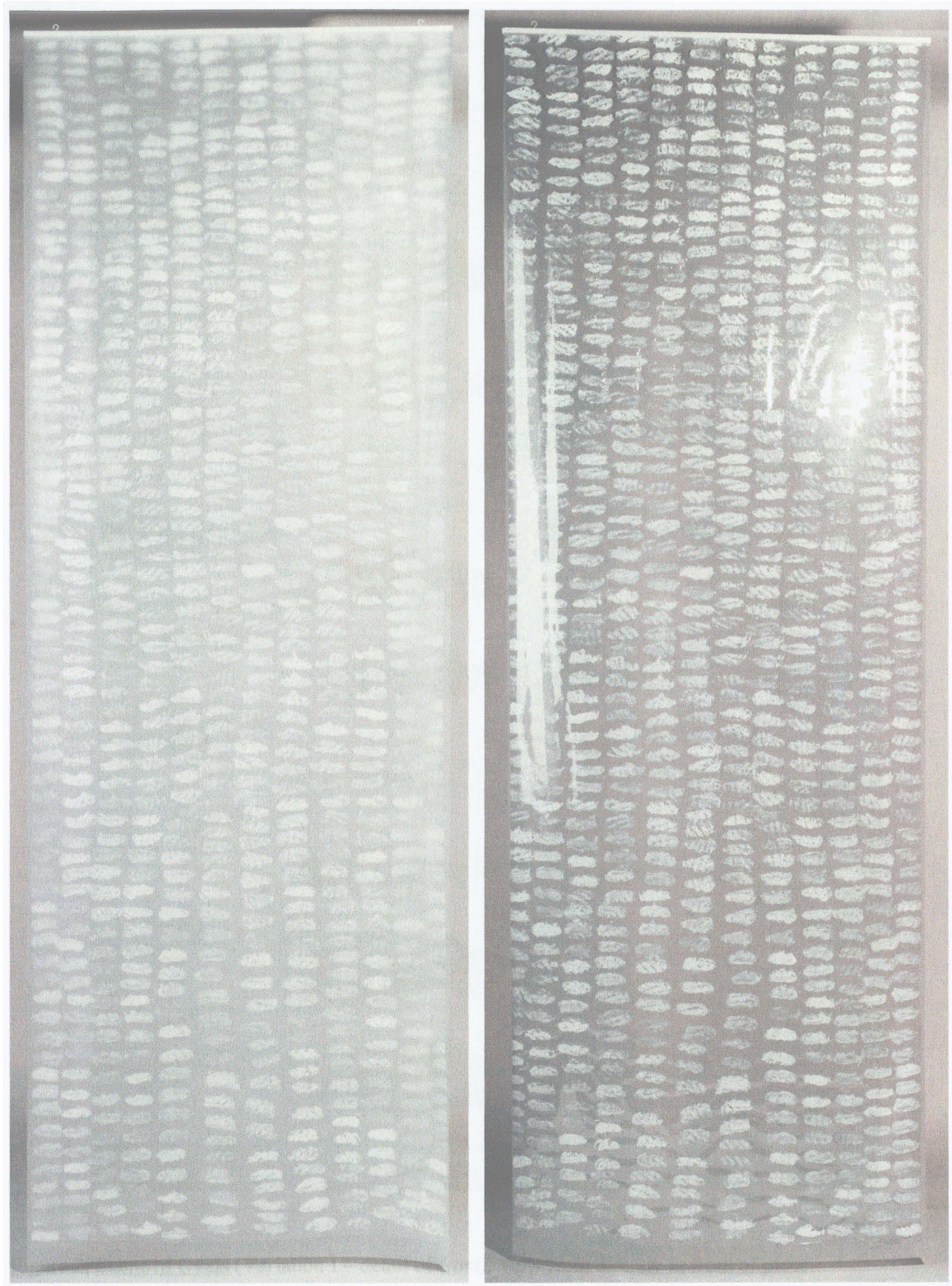


Figure 1, Sophia Dillo, Stamped Ovals (Variation I – front and back), 2009, acrylic paint on vinyl sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120"x42".



Figure 2, Stamped Ovals (Variation I – detail of front), view from directly in front of piece.



Figure 3, Stamped Ovals (Variation I – detail of front), view looking at the piece when standing to the side.



Figure 4, Sophia Dillo, Stamped Ovals (Variation II – front), 2009, acrylic paint on vinyl sheeting, Mylar, mix of cool indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120”x42”.



Figure 5, Sophia Dillo, Brushstrokes (Variation I – front and back), 2009, acrylic paint on vinyl sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120”x42”.



Figure 6, Sophia Dillo, Brushstrokes (Variation II – front), 2009, acrylic paint on vinyl sheeting, Mylar, mix of cool indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120”x42”.



Figure 7, Sophia Dillo, Thin Print (Variation I – front and back), 2009, acrylic paint on plastic sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120”x42”.



Figure 8, Sophia Dillo, Holes (Variation I – front and back), 2009, acrylic paint on plastic sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm direct flood lighting and warm direct flood lights, 120”x42”.



Figure 9, Holes (Variation I – detail of front), view looking at piece from a side angle.



Figure 10, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled (Variation I – front and back), 2009, acrylic paint on plastic sheeting, Mylar, mix of warm indirect fluorescent lighting and warm direct flood lighting, 120”x42”.



Figure 11, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Diptych, 2009, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, Mylar, 120"x88" (with space).



Figure 12, Sophia Dillo, Circles (Variation I – front and back), 2009, paper and Mylar, warm direct fluorescent lighting from behind, 120”x42”.

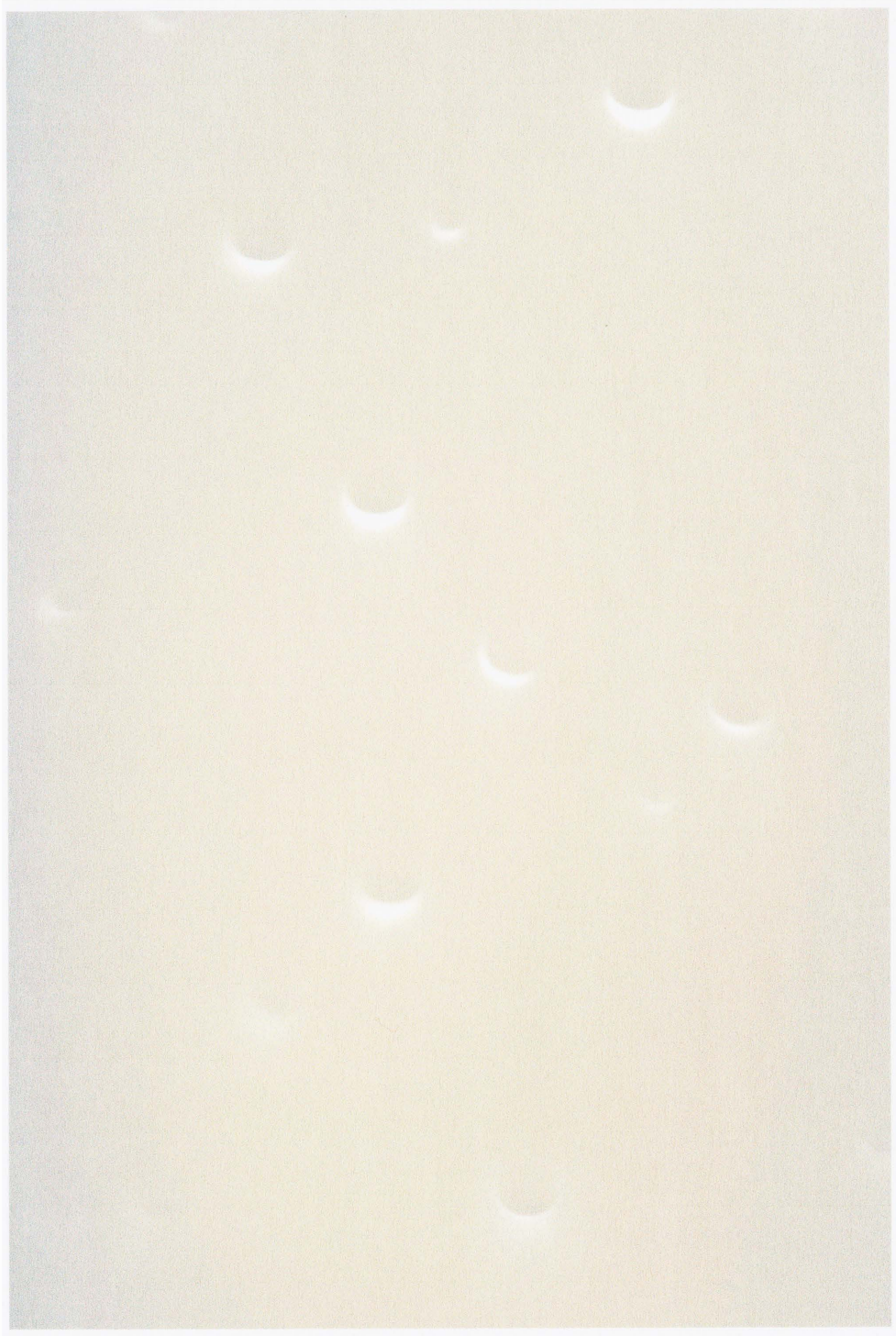


Figure 13, Circles (Variation I – detail of front).



Figure 14, Sophia Dillo, Circles (Variation II – front and back), 2009, paper and Mylar, warm direct fluorescent lighting on the front side, 120"x42".



Figure 15, Sophia Dillo, Slits (Variation I – front and back), 2009, paper and Mylar, warm direct flood lighting from behind, 120”x42”.



Figure 16, Slits (Variation I – detail of front).



Figure 17, Sophia Dillo, Squares (Variation I – front and back), 2009, paper and Mylar, warm direct flood lighting from behind, 120”x42”.



Figure 18, Sophia Dillo, Small Stamps I, 2009, paper and acrylic paint on vinyl, 30"x22". (One in a series of four variations of materials with same patterning. Three not shown.)



Figure 19, Sophia Dillo, Small Stamps I (detail), 2009.



Figure 20, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Form I, 2008, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, masking tape, and Mylar, 30"x22".



Figure 21, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Form II, 2008, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, and Mylar, 30"x22".



Figure 22, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Form II (detail).



Figure 23, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Form III, 2008, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, masking tape, string, and Mylar, 33"x22".

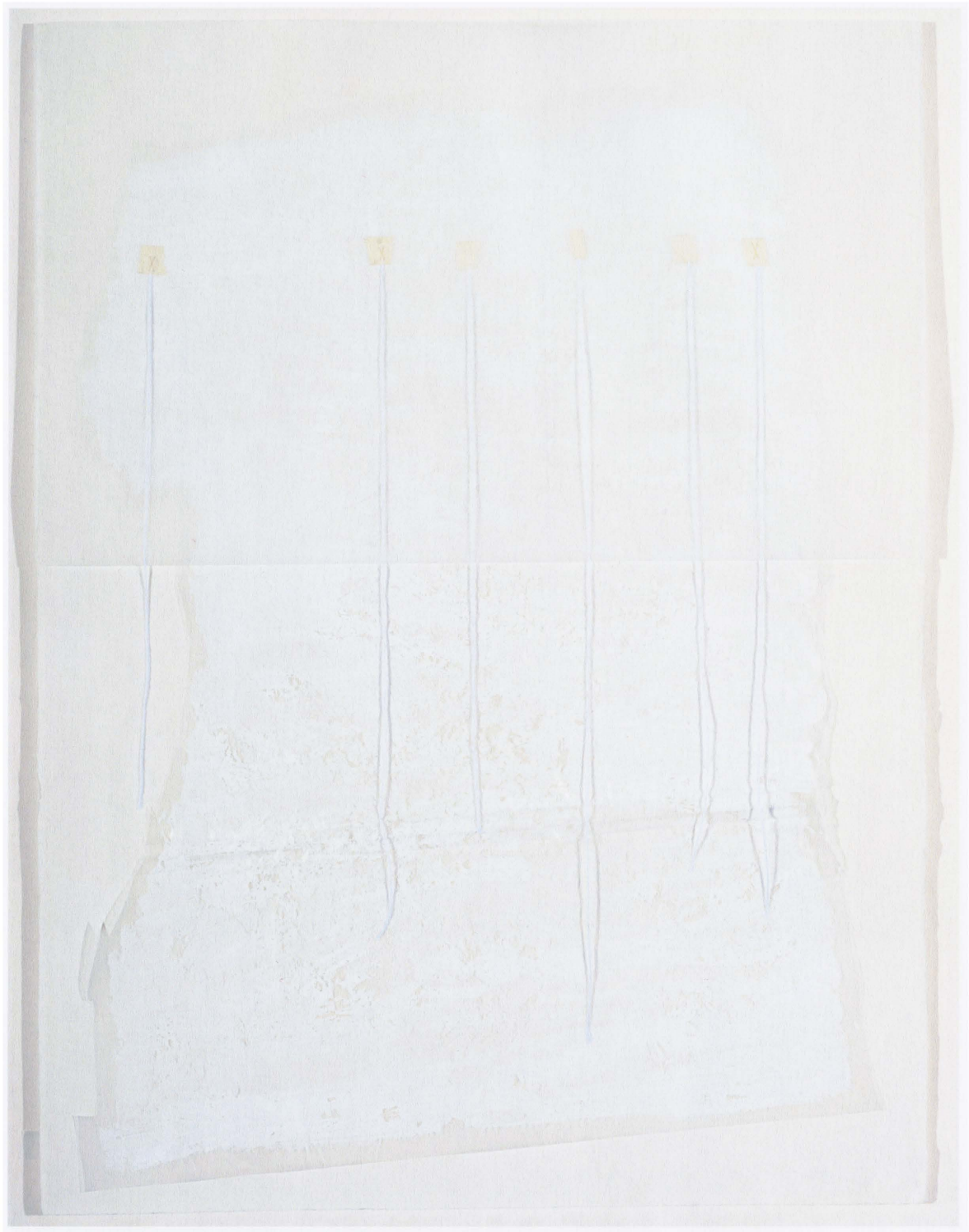


Figure 24, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Form IV, 2008, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, masking tape, string, thread, and Mylar, 30"x22".



Figure 25, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Form V, 2008, paper, acrylic paint on plastic, masking tape, string, and Mylar, 32"x22".

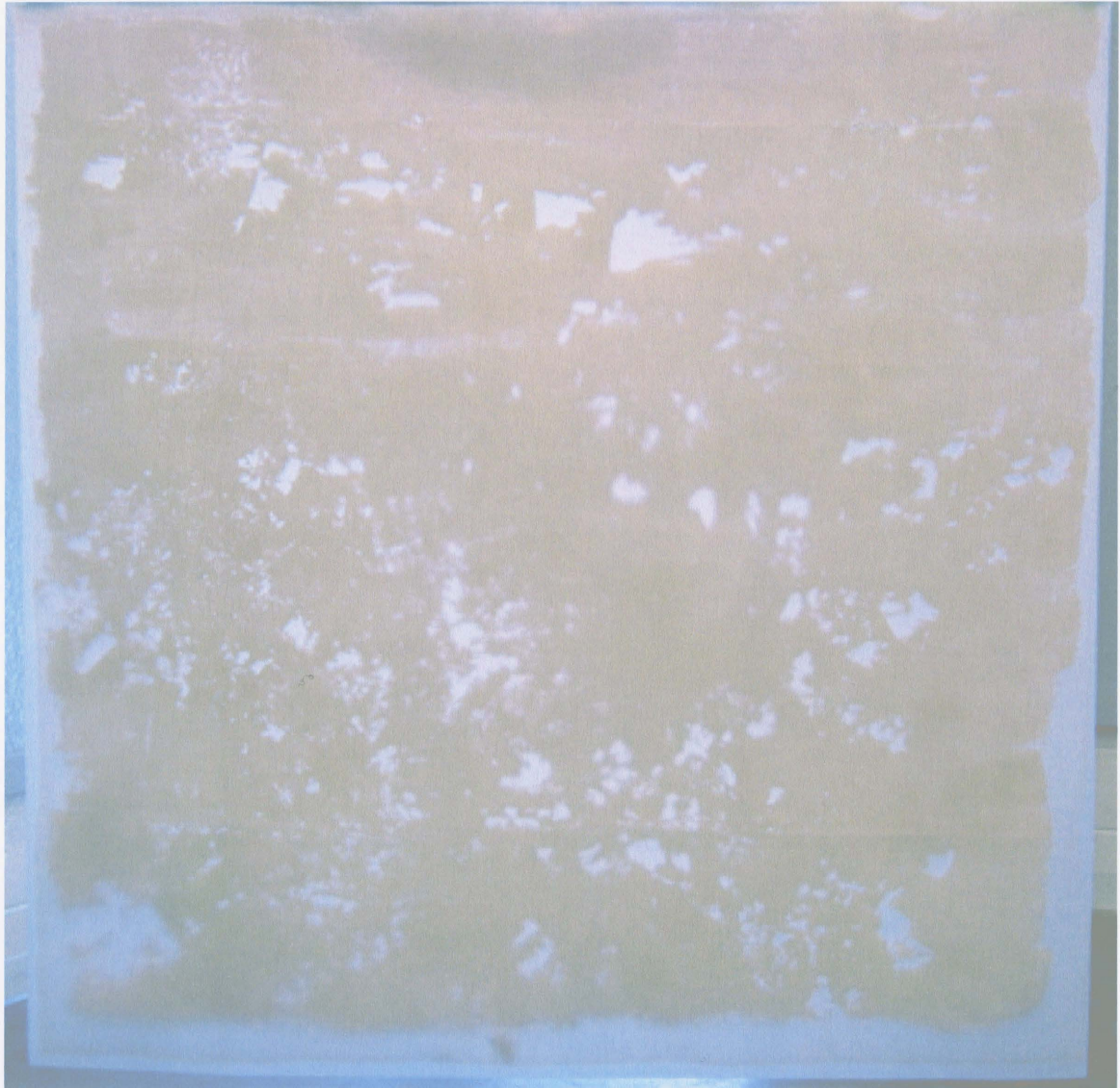


Figure 26, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Square (Variation I – front), 2008, acrylic paint on plastic, Mylar, daylight from window and fluorescent overhead lighting, 30”x30”.

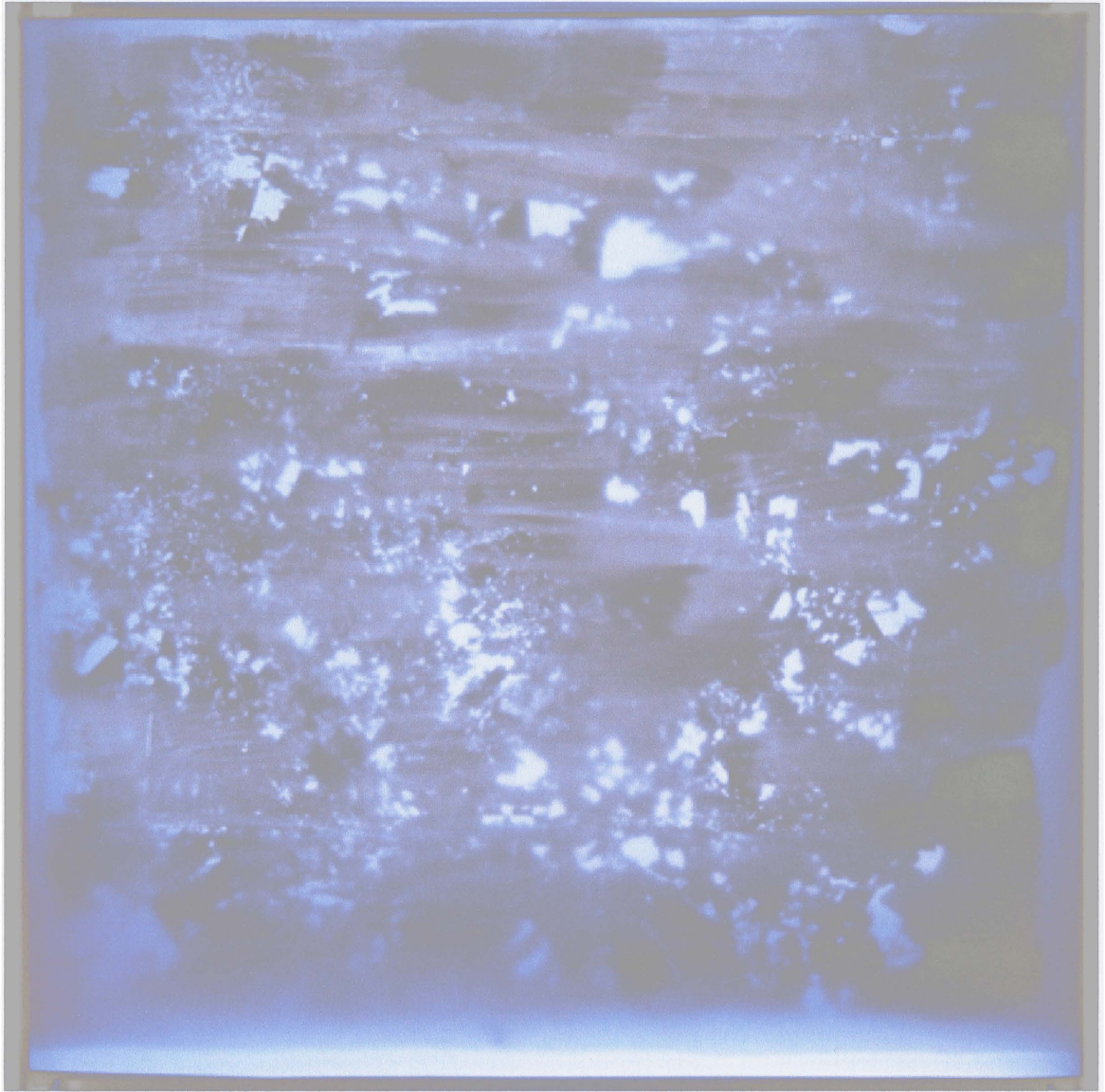


Figure 27, Sophia Dillo, Crinkled Square (Variation II – front), 2008, acrylic paint on plastic, Mylar directly over window, daylight from window, 30”x30”.