

# ULTRA

An exhibition of painting and installation

by

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

This thesis paper is meant to serve as a supporting document for a thesis exhibition that was held the University of Waterloo Art Gallery. The show consisted of paintings on Plexiglas and sculptural installations with fluorescent lights.

The aesthetic style of my paintings makes a strong reference to the visual vocabulary of computer software. More specifically, it mimics architectural computer vector graphics from the 1980s. There is a visual metaphor created in my paintings where it blueprint drawing has 'evolved' into computer vector graphics, ultimately though, nothing has changed. The images are still hand drafted with pencils and then hand painted. The lexicon of digital software is appropriated, but by transferring the images from the virtual space of the screen to a literal three-dimensional space, the meaning is discarded. They become generalized abstract signs that retain their connotations, but not their meaning and function. The work thus makes a simple point in its refusal to 'get digital.' There is a fetishization of technology, yet simultaneously a refusal of it.

Other concerns that I deal with in my work and thesis paper, include notions of good and bad taste, kitsch and the Camp aesthetic, science-fiction, nostalgia, representations of the 'future,' Suprematist painting, Minimalism, Design, and the utopian ideals of Modernism.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Taste and Aesthetics**

My current body of work represents a combination of various stylistic and aesthetic references. I have been particularly concerned with understanding what constitutes good or bad taste and what informs my own sense of aesthetics. This inevitably has a great deal to do with my personal sense nostalgia and sentimentality. It has led me to investigate a graphic sensibility that is reminiscent of the computer games from the 1980s that I grew up with. Other influences on my work include Suprematist painting, International-Style architecture, Minimalism, quasi-futuristic design, and science fiction set designs from television and film.

My work has always had a great deal to do with aesthetics and my own personal taste. Taste is essentially one's own perception of what is aesthetically ideal or pleasing. It is important to consider that taste is highly informed by one's class and socio-political situation, and thus provides categories of social division and cultural hierarchy. When considering the so-called low, middle and upper classes, certain generalized distinctions of taste can be observed. Since these discrepancies of taste are strongly associated with one's financial situation and level of education, it is inevitable that hierarchies of aesthetics have developed which favour the upper class. The language used in relation to aesthetics inexorably reaffirms these hierarchies. The taste of the 'low' class is often described with derogatory intent, perhaps as being kitsch, garish, uneducated, cheap, and distasteful. In contrast, the upper class is said to have 'good' taste, however bourgeois and conservative it tends to be.

As I became increasingly aware of the hierarchies of taste and the codes of meaning that certain aesthetics carry, I gradually realised that my taste was associated with lower classes; A sensibility which is often

branded as 'bad' taste. The so-called 'trashy' aesthetic of disco, arcades, and mobile homes, was in fact what I grew up with and which greatly informs my current taste. The images that my paintings make reference to, namely those of 1980s video games and sci-fi TV shows, inevitably reference a sensibility that has been branded 'pop' or 'low' culture. The uses of materials such as sparkles, Plexiglas, and fluorescent colours, have a similar reading. Not only are these materials associated with the low class, they also have an equally pertinent significance as part of kid culture. This may banish sparkles and fluorescent colours even further into the realm of bad taste, seeming perhaps to be 'unsophisticated' and 'immature.'

The ironic sensibility of 'camp' has played a crucial role in my work for the past number of years. I have used irony in order to explore and reinterpret my notions of what constitutes bad taste, especially as they relate to my own feelings of nostalgia. Camp became a device that enabled me to seriously fetishize and indulge in the most garish aspects of my childhood influences, namely the glittering candy-coloured aesthetic of disco.

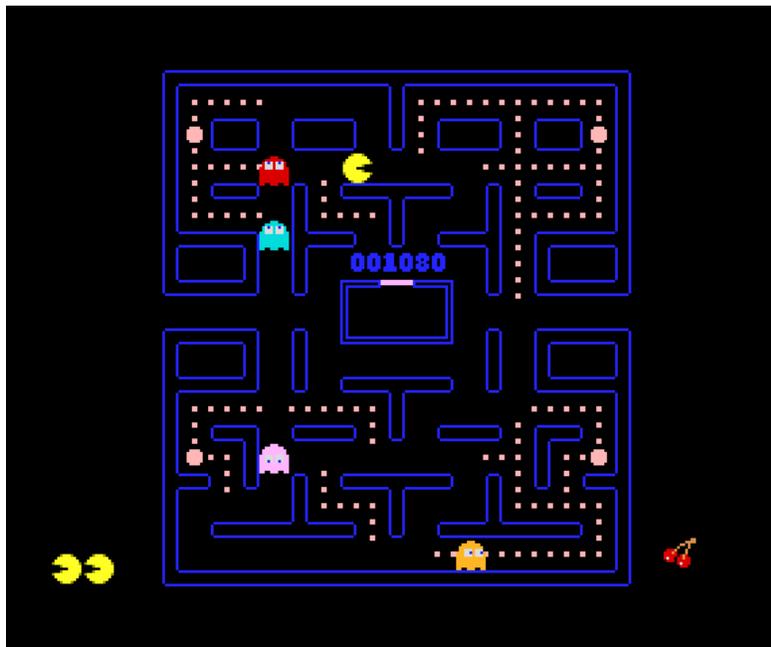


1. Album cover of *Musique's 'Keep on Jump In'*

The work of author Susan Sontag has been especially relevant in my understanding of how the camp sensibility functions in my work. Sontag famously defined the term in her 1964 short essay entitled 'Notes on Camp.' She wrote that Camp is a mode of aestheticism that sees the world not through beauty, but rather its degree and artifice and stylization. Many examples of Camp are things that, from a 'serious' point of view, are either bad art or kitsch. The Camp sensibility falls towards that which is strongly exaggerated, such as particularly flamboyant sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms; it's a metaphor of life as theatre. The most obvious example are Drag Queens who have fashioned entire identities around the Camp sensibility. In order to grasp their identities, or any Camp aesthetic, a double interpretation is needed as gestures are full of duplicity.

The common approach in appreciating a work of art is by assessing its truthfulness, seriousness, dignity, and beauty. Such readings however, inherently set-up hierarchies of high and low culture. Camp is an alternative to the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. It offers a different way of evaluating, other than the tragic or comic seriousness that is typical of high culture. Camp is "the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling" writes Sontag. Ultimately, something is good not because it is achieved, but because it reveals another, equally valid, reality of the human condition and experience. Sontag offers an interpretation of three overall sensibilities. "The first sensibility, that of high culture, is basically moralistic. The second sensibility, that of extreme states of feeling, represented in much 'avant-garde' art, gains power by a tension between moral and aesthetic passion. The third, Camp, is wholly aesthetic... It incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,'

'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy." writes Sontag. Camp dethrones the serious and is playful. It feels that 'sincerity' is often not enough, and can often just be simple Philistinism and intellectual narrowness. It "involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (Sontag). Ultimately, Camp is a mode of enjoyment. It "doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn't sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures" (Sontag).



2. Image of 'Pacman' computer game circa 1984

The relation of Camp taste to the past is extremely sentimental. The passage of time has a great deal to do with the development of something as Camp. "Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday fantasies, the fantastic nature of which we don't perceive. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own" writes Sontag. This is why so many

Camp objects are old-fashioned and out-of-date. It's not so much about nostalgia, but rather the sense of detachment that happens over time, which ultimately allows the Camp interpretation. With regards to my own work, though I do believe that sentimentality and nostalgia are deciding factors in my taste, my attraction to Camp and the distancing effect that occurs with time is also quite relevant.

A dominant theme in twentieth century art has been to subvert and deconstruct notions of high and low culture. With my work, I have been interested in blurring the distinctions between what I consider to be good or bad taste. An example of what I consider good taste is the cool reductive aesthetic of Minimalism and Modern design. At the same time that I have been attracted to the garish side of popular consumer culture, I have also admired the minimalist sensibility of Modernism. High-Modernism was a movement that catered almost exclusively to elite circles of bourgeois intellectuals. At its outset, the ideas of Modernism tended to alienate middle and lower classes. This was curious since the original intentions of Modernism were in fact to create a puritan machine-made aesthetic that would debunk the ornate and decadent tastes of the old bourgeois. Instead Modernism simply became a new upper-class convention that reiterated the same fundamental hierarchies of high and low culture. In the end, Modernism has become a contemporary archetype of good taste and high culture. For this reason, I have introduced several approaches of Modernism into my new work, simultaneously with disruptive pop references. My aspiration is that the work will not fit neatly into any category of taste.

Colour has always been a major concern of mine, and an important element in my work. Relating to themes of good versus bad taste, I have been attempting to combine my ideas of what are tasteful and distasteful colours. This may be indicative in my decision to reduce the amount of

colour in my work in pursuit of a Modern or Minimalist palette. My work has gone from being almost completely fluorescent, to about ninety-five percent white, grey, or black. I still use accents of bright fluorescent colours which serve to juxtapose the achromatic elements.

As the corporate mentality continues to saturate our culture, political correctness and the need to be 'inoffensive,' has seeped into our aesthetic tastes. For example, the typical decor of a Canadian hotel room would usually consist of varying shades of beige; never would the room be too colourful, or too achromatic. The conservative approach is not too much or not too little, but rather a balance of both in order to avoid any extremes which might be offensive to some. In a way, I have adopted this notion of 'balanced' colouration. My version of balance however, is quite extreme; rather than using beige, I might instead use large quantities of pure grey with small accents of fluorescent yellow. If the piece was all grey, it might be boring in its absence of colour. However, if it were all fluorescent yellow, then it would surely be offensive in its garish intensity. When the two are 'balanced' however, the end result is oddly inoffensive, while simultaneously not being conservative. In any case, it still wouldn't work in an average hotel room.

In my recent work, I have also been interested in incorporating fluorescent lights into my sculpture and painting. Though this inevitably reaffirms my interest in Minimalism, and the work of artists such as Dan Flavin, my original attraction to light came from very different sources. As a teenager, I associated myself with the 'raver' sub-culture. Attending a rave was essentially like going to a suped-up discotheque in a warehouse. From 2:00am to 10:00am on Friday and Saturday night, my friends and I would dress-up like characters from our favourite eighties cartoon shows, and dance to a type of music that sounded like disco on high speed. Ecstasy was the drug of choice and its entrancing qualities

made one especially perceptive to the disco lights. I believe that the ultimate inspiration for using light in my work comes from going to raves and experiencing the entire *Saturday Night Fever* aesthetic. Inevitably this also might relate to my tendencies towards 'bad' taste and so-called kitsch.

### **Aesthetic References**

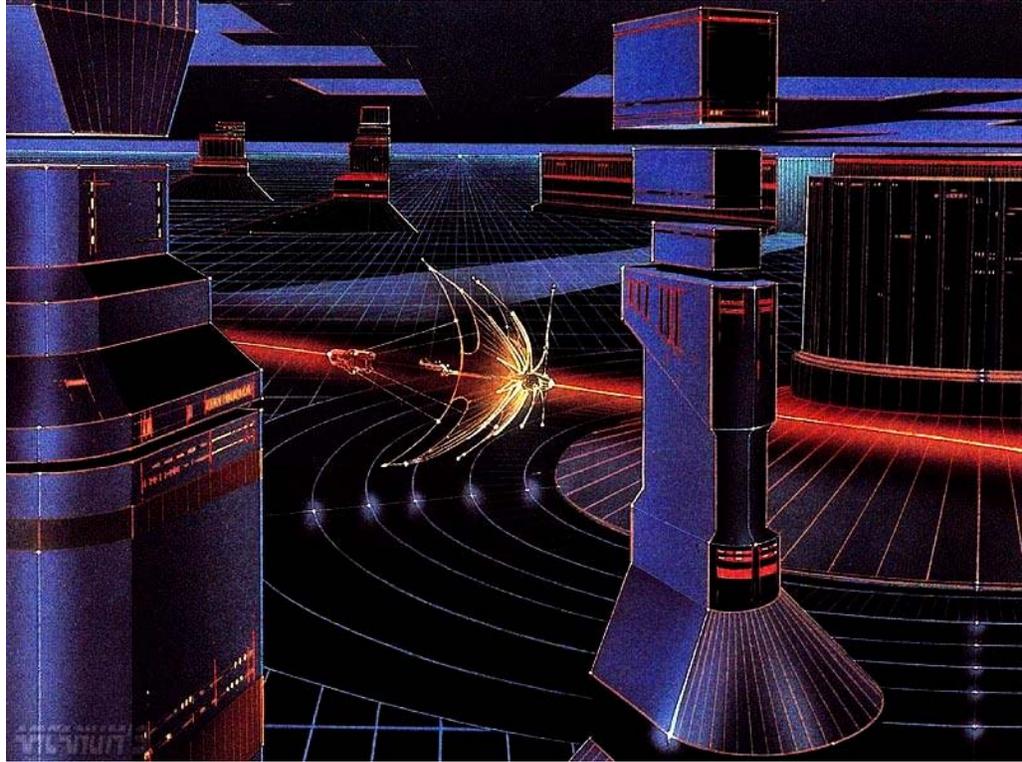
My thesis work has taken the form of both painting and installation. With regard to the technical processes of my paintings, I have recently begun to work on the back of Plexiglas. I begin by covering the surface with masking tape and then I map out a basic grid. Using a pencil and ruler, I then draft simple geometric forms within the grid. When the final image is complete, the various shapes and lines are cut out of the masking tape with a utility knife, and painted with acrylic in flat colours. Once all the shapes have been painted, the remainder of the masking tape is removed. In some pieces, I then add a layer of sparkles mixed into epoxy resin, before finally painting a solid background colour. Since the Plexiglas is the top layer, these paintings are created in a subtractive manner working from foreground to background.

The Plexiglas, flat paint handling, and sparkles, ultimately place a great emphasis on the surface. This flattens the illusionistic space that is created by the geometric shapes that appear in perspective. At first, the slick graphic image might seem as if it had been created in a computer program and printed onto the Plexiglas like a commercial advertising. Upon closer inspection however, it becomes obvious that the work is hand painted. In order to narrow that gap between the initial misconception and subsequent realization that the work is hand-painted, it is important to mimic the slick technical perfection of an industrially manufactured product. Though I try to reduce 'the hand of the artist,' it is

important to me that the work remains a 'false' representation of something industrially or digitally produced, in order to emphasize the differences and discrepancies between the two. I am attracted to this sense of false perception, things that are deceiving, not what they seem, and can have double meanings; a painting for example that resembles a digital graphic, or a representation of the future that is based on the past. This may ultimately reveal how notions or perceptions of the future are socially constructed.

In some works I have drafted the space using one or two point perspective drawing. This means that shapes recede in space towards a vanishing point. Recently however, I have been working with an isometric perspective in which there is no vanishing point. The sides of a cube for example, are represented with parallel lines. With this approach, the back of a shape ends up with the same dimensions as the front. When describing a shape as transparent or without solid planes, it becomes confusing to distinguish between the front and back planes of the form. There is a sort of optical illusion created where the space can be inverted, and the front and back planes of a shape become interchangeable.

Drafting with isometric perspective makes a strong reference to blueprint drawing; it creates a flatter and less convincing representation of space. I couple this effect with a golden mean method of composing space. My simplistic use of golden mean sections results in stiff and contrived shape designs in which forms 'coincidentally' line-up with one another. This creates confusion as to where one shape may start and another ends. The effect increases a sense of improbability, making the space less believable and more difficult to enter.

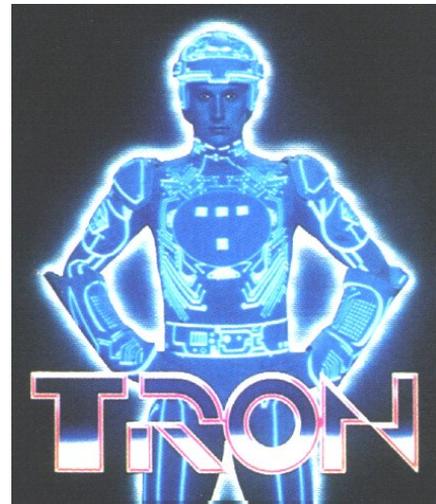


3. Still from the movie 'TRON' (1982)

The flat geometric style that I have pursued in my paintings makes a strong reference to the visual vocabulary of computer software. More specifically, the combination of a flatly painted geometric stylization with planes and grids in perspective makes reference to early computer vector graphics and video games from the 1980s. I am interested in this transitional period when traditional blueprint drawing in pencil on isometric grid paper, began to be computerized into vector graphic software. My paintings create a visual metaphor of traditional blueprint drawing 'evolving' into computer vector graphics; ultimately though, nothing has changed. The images are still hand drafted with pencils and then hand painted. However feasible it may be to produce actual computer graphics and exhibit digital prints, I feel that it is important that the work remain hand-painted. This allows 'painting' to remain a conceptual component of the work. In a sense, I am making traditional paintings, however digital the end result may seem. In some recent

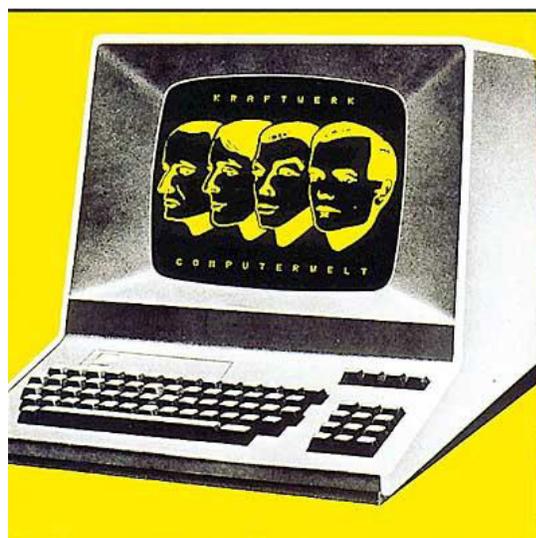
pieces, I have been leaving the vector lines clear and installing fluorescent lights in the stretchers in order to have the line work glow. For a split second, the viewer may actually have the impression that they are looking at a digital image on a computer screen. However digital the images may seem, they remain a false representation of computer vector graphics. I appropriate the lexicon of digital software, but by transferring them from the virtual space of the screen to a literal three-dimensional space, the meaning is discarded. They become generalized abstract signs that retain their connotations, but not their meaning and function. The work thus makes a simple point in its refusal to 'get digital.' There is a fetishization of technology, yet simultaneously a refusal of it.

On an aesthetic level, early vector graphics were much more ambiguous in delineating or defining space in comparison to today's capabilities. Such graphics would often appear as coloured contour lines that denoted sharply defined geometric shapes floating on a solid black background. The emphasis on geometry and contour had the effect of an architectural or blueprint drawing. As computers evolved, digital imaging became increasingly concerned with a more naturalistic representation of space. I am interested in how the earlier period of digital imaging, by providing a reduced level of information, was much more open-ended and ambiguous in the way it described form and space. There in fact seems to be a coincidental aesthetic alignment in 1980s computer graphics with the work of Suprematist painters such as Kasimir Malevich. If a great goal of twentieth-century art was the reduction in form and content, then it is interesting to consider how earlier computer graphics were perhaps more in tune with ideas or approaches in contemporary art making. As digital imaging moves closer towards a naturalistic mode of representation, it seems to be increasingly concerned with illustrative matters.



4. Album and film covers for the movie 'TRON' (1982)

The movie 'TRON' (1982), which is supposed to take place in an actual computer, is a good example of early 1980's computer graphics. The film has been especially influential in my new work. It also evidences a sense of optimism regarding the advent of personal computers. The early electronic music of *Kraftwerk*, with track titles like *Computer Liebe* (computer love) and *It's More Fun to Compute*, also evidences a similar sentiment of enthusiasm and curiosity regarding computers (and synthesizers).



5. Album cover of *Kraftwerk's 'Computerwelt'* (computer world)

While focusing on the stylistic premise of computer graphics, I have inevitably aligned my work with issues that relate to design and technology. Within these topics I am particularly concerned with the ways in which images of the 'futuristic' are constructed. I have been interested in constructing a visual metaphor of utopia in my work. More specifically, the brand of utopian thinking that was developed in high Modernism with the work of designers such as Le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe. Their visions of the future revealed in the reduction of form and content, and placed faith in the potential of technological progress. I am interested in understanding how ideas or notions of the future and utopia are constructed and manifest themselves in our built environment.

Deeply rooted in Modernist ideology was the idea of progress. There was a great sense of optimism and hope towards technological advancement, and a belief that society was evolving to something greater. In the fine arts there was the sincere belief that International Style architecture and reductive abstract painting were improvements on their predecessors. The denial of decoration and nostalgia was understood as a progressive move forward. It was thought that through reduction and objectivity, it was possible to communicate truth on a fundamental and universal level. A Mies van der Rohe office tower for example, could communicate a sense of logic and control over its environment had utopian overtones; that by reducing form to its essential elements, a primary and universal truth could be communicated.

Representations of the future have also come to be communicated through a specific lexicon of signs; aesthetic signifiers that communicate the idea of the future. These signs change from period to period, and ultimately just reflect their own contemporary concerns or aspirations. In the twentieth century, it seems as though the ideas that emanated from

Modern avant-garde design set up the basis for how the future would be envisaged. From *Das Werkbund (DWB)*, the *Bauhaus* and Burg Giebichenstein, to the International Style, the future was constructed to be rational, objective, minimal; to reject the past, to be made of 'industrial' materials, and to be concerned above all else with technological advancement.

This quasi-futuristic sensibility was emphasized in modular design from the 1960s and 1970s. Architect Moshe Safdie best exemplified modular design in his Habitat '67 housing complex that was featured at Expo '67 in Montreal. In his thesis put forward to McGill University in 1960, Safdie wrote of a "system of spatial urbanization with unlimited growth potential, based on the three-dimensional networking of elements that are standardized and can fit together harmoniously to fulfill all the urban functions in variable, complex, and evolving patterns" (Elder, 65). Pre-fabricated modular systems held great promise in the 1960s, and Habitat was designed to be a type of housing complex for the future. Today it stands as an icon of the optimistic thinking that prevailed in the 1960s regarding technology, design, and the future. Although large-scale projects like Habitat '67 were not widely adopted, modular design had a great impact in industrial design. Automotive manufacturers for example have become increasingly conscious of design, and particularly receptive to the slick, efficient, and plastic sensibility of 1960s modular design. Cars have become a kind of traveling utopian module where one can travel through an environment while maintaining the illusion of comfort, stability, and control. The interior designs of most trailer homes also implement modular systems in order for maximal efficiency. Having spent my summers in a trailer home as a child, this modular plastic environment and its futuristic design sensibility have been a great influence on my practice. I have become especially concerned with how utopian ideals can be manifested through functional design.

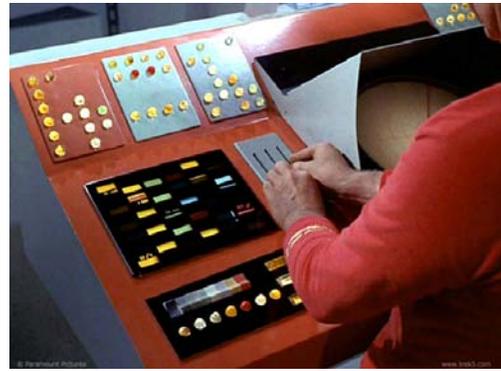


6. Habitat '67 in Montreal (Moshe Safdie, 1967)

In the 1960s, design also shifted its attention away from modernist applications of steel and glass towards an exuberant pop aesthetic that made use of the new possibilities that plastics presented. Author Brent Corder wrote that “plastic was the counterpart of utopia. It complemented the expression of an ideal future because the vessel-like forms that emerged from its properties found agreement in how an abstract concept such as utopia was formalized. The hermetic capacity of plastic married well with the insular requirements of sixties utopianism- material, form, and idea coalesced into ideal representations” (Elder, 92). In my recent work, I have been using Plexiglas in both sculptural pieces and as a painting surface. I am interested in the inherent meanings and associations that arise with the use of plastics.

The other components of my thesis work are installations comprised mostly of quasi-futuristic computer consoles. The influences for these pieces come from science-fiction images from pop culture, including television shows like *Dr. Who*, *Space 1999*, and the original *Star Trek*.

These three television series were from the 1960s and 1970s, and shared a similar aesthetic in set design; namely that of ambitious yet low-budget sets that were flashy, cheap, and often very unconvincing. They were extremely theatrical in the sense that everything was made to look hyper-futuristic, despite the logistics of what might actually be probable. In the end, it was all very cliché and contrived: aerodynamic furniture, one-piece bodysuits, pentagon shaped hallways, and big important-looking computers with flashing jewel-like rainbow coloured lights that did seemingly important things. One might wonder what was going on with all those blinking lights; perhaps the computer was thinking up some grand scheme to take over the world. Or maybe it was just a cardboard box with flashing Christmas lights in it. This uncertainty in reading the object is what interests me. Science fiction nowadays seems very slick and convincing; it sets up a more believable fantasy (similar perhaps to the evolution in digital imaging). With early science fiction however there is a distancing that occurs as the contemporary viewer is usually aware of the theatricality of the situation. It is obvious for example that the alien landscapes in *Star Trek* are made of papier-maché rocks with overhead fuchsia-coloured spotlights. It is as though the signs become confused and reveal that they are empty or not what they seem. The papier-maché rocks on *Star Trek* are not convincing and as such their primary reading become that of low-budget 1960s set design, instead of actual rocks. The super-computers that appeared on *Star Trek* have also revealed themselves with time as theatrical signs. Now they primarily signify an idea of what people once thought computers would look like. They are the representation of an unrealized and obsolete future; it is highly doubtful that a spaceship of the future would ever look like one from *Star Trek*.



7. Images of Star Trek computer console props (1967-1969)

For my installation projects I have constructed several such fake computer consoles that reference 1960s and 1970s low-budget science fiction. These objects become very ambiguous when de-contextualized from their sci-fi surroundings and their own time period. I am also reducing the level of information that might clearly signify the pieces as representations of retro sci-fi computers. This is important in order that the pieces remain open-ended and refer to other equally important visual conceptual references, such as those of Minimalism and modular design. The use of industrial materials such as Plexiglas and fluorescent lights, an almost all-white palette, and reductive designs, make a strong reference to Minimalism as characterized by artists such as Dan Flavin and Donald Judd.

The installation piece in my show entitled *'ULTRA MARINA,'* for example, consists of three white sculptural pieces that resemble buildings. They are arranged on white Plexiglas that sits on a section of the floor that has been painted pale blue to resemble water. The main structure appears as a boxy white tower-bloc, with a Plexiglas surface that glows softly with fluorescent light from within. Similar in proportion and design to the United Nations headquarters building in New York, an archetype of International-style architecture, it is meant to function more literally as an illustration of a Modernist utopia, while quoting the cool

reductive aesthetic of Minimalism.

Another sculptural piece in the show, entitled '*Fade to Grey*,' is a grey rainbow constructed of Plexiglas and glowing from within with fluorescent lights. By portraying the iconic form of a rainbow while subtracting the colour, this piece becomes markedly about the idea of absence. It is almost as if the mystery and magic that a child might see in a rainbow, has been drained away; Like a future that has dissolve into a dystopia. While also emphasizing industrial manufacturing, objectivity and simplicity of content and form, the piece is closely linked to the conceptual intents of Minimalism.

### **Simulacra and Simulation**

An important tool in my own understanding of my work, has been Jean Baudrillard's theories of 'Simulacra and Simulation.' This essay has been especially relevant since my work deals with camp and the mimicking of images or styles from outside sources. In his essay, Baudrillard defines the various stages that images or simulations go through as they are filtered over and over in pop culture. Eventually they become more and more abstracted or distanced from their original source, or 'referent' as Baudrillard calls it. They can even become clichés or stereotypes, making a fundamental break from reality and into hyper-reality. Such images begin to function independently as simulacra. They are in fact completely genuine or real yet exist as hyper-realities. They have become several times removed from their referents, and begin to take on independent meaning. Eventually, images can even prevail over their referents and take on more meaning or reality than the original.

Roland Barthes' ideas of mythology are also important to consider. Author Byron Hawk wrote, "in regard to wrestling, Barthes makes the

important observation that what the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. The desire for the spectacle, for the image, for the archetype, pervades the mentality of the viewing public. We want the image of violence in movies but not violence itself... [T]he spectator does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only enjoys the perfection of the iconography" (Hawk). Essentially, we want imaginary passion, without the real thing (which might lead to pain and suffering).

As our culture becomes increasingly absorbed with images, namely advertising and television, it has begun to take the form of a massive hyper-reality. Simulations evolve from simulations, distancing any notion of a primary referent. Our culture becomes exaggerated or a caricature of itself that is basking in artifice, stereotype, and camp. It is at this point that the world can be clearly seen as a series of stage sets; that the status-quo perception of reality is constructed, theatrical, and in itself a myth.

### **Influential Artists**

There are several artists who have been influential in the direction that my practice is taking. Many of these contemporary artists build from the ideas of early Suprematist thinking, namely the work of Russian painter Kasimir Malevich, who was a pioneer of geometric abstraction. He began working in an unexceptional Post-Impressionist manner, but by 1912 was painting in a style closer to that of Cubism and Futurism. Malevich desired however 'to free art from the burden of the object' and launched the Suprematist movement, which brought abstract art to a style of geometric simplicity more radical than anything previously seen. As early as 1913, he made a painting that consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field. Some of his other works from the

1910s introduced colours contained in simple and flatly painted geometric forms in perspective that suggested a deeper spatial relation.

Almost a century later, artists such as Julie Mehretu and Benjamin Edwards incorporate many motifs that were common in Suprematism. It is interesting to consider however that the contemporary work that follows in the footsteps of Suprematism tends to simultaneously reference early computer graphics. In the early stages of digital imaging, the technology was not capable of producing very naturalistic effects. This era of digital imaging was characterized by a flat stylization with simply articulated planes that seemed to evoke the aesthetic of Suprematist painting. Another reference is that of Modern architecture, which was in its early stages during the actual time of Suprematism.



8. Benjamin Edwards, 'Historical Zone #0053,' 2005.

Benjamin Edwards is a painter who explores what he calls 'the architecture of suburbia,' found in strip malls, fast-food restaurants, gas stations, motels and other familiar places of consumerism. Accompanying the architecture is what Edwards refers to as 'the

iconography of the roadway,' including commercial signage, symbols, colours and artificial elements juxtaposed against the natural environment. Edwards takes these images and digitally reduces them to flatly coloured graphics. He then carefully layers them one over the other in acrylic paintings. The result is a conflated composition that becomes emblematic of what he refers to as the 'American consumerist utopia.' His paintings end up looking misleadingly futuristic, but by sourcing imagery that actually exists, he claims that the future is now. His work has been especially influential to me in the linking of utopian themes with the evolution of computers. It is almost as though he is saying that the future is not in our actual built environment, but rather our virtual environment; that the new site of utopia is in fact the internet.



9. Julie Mehretu, Empirical Construction, 2003.

Julie Mehretu's often large-scale paintings are built up with layers of delicate ink drawings and coloured shapes in acrylic, between a thick

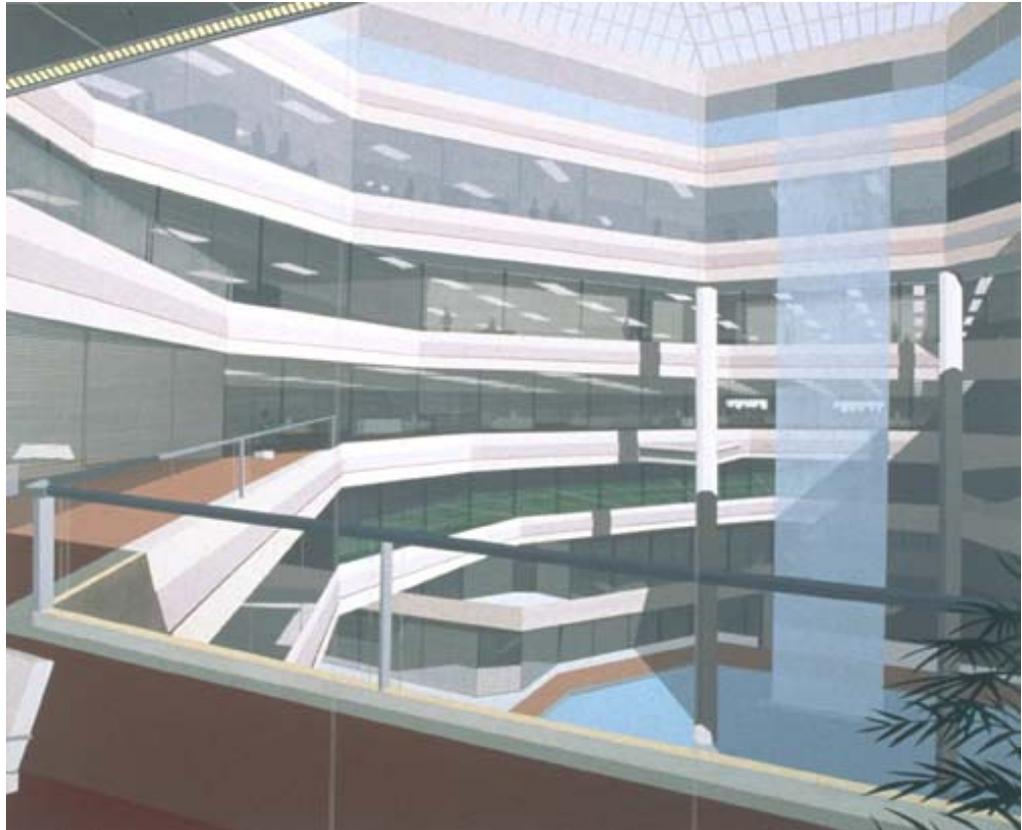
layer of silica. Drawings of explosions and abstract forms that reference elements of architecture, early digital imaging, and Suprematism, are juxtaposed in complex bursting compositions. Her work feels like a cataclysmic explosion of images. Perhaps it alludes to how our daily lives have become overwhelmed by a barrage of images; a society that is moving so fast that it is bound to explode. Her work has been influential to me in regard to its simultaneous referencing of Suprematism and early computer graphics.



10. Sarah Sze, *Proportioned into the Groove*, 2005.

Sarah Sze is an artist who works in 2-D and 3-D. I had the opportunity to see one of her elaborate installation projects in New York. In her whimsical constructions, Sze organizes small found objects such as toothpicks, candy, plastic cups, clothespins, and pencils into complex arrangements dependent upon their wall, floor, or shelf supports. Her

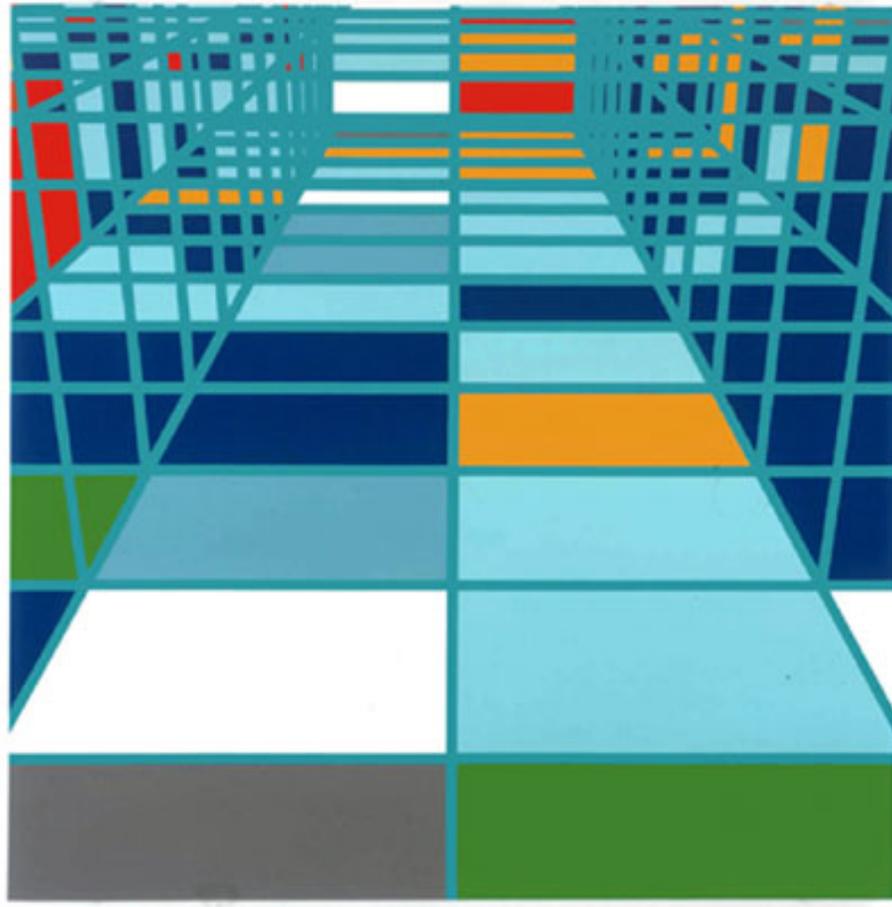
constructions seem to defy gravity and come together to form entire micro-cities, complete with lights and waterfalls. They have futuristic and utopian qualities that are ultimately undermined by their inherent fragility. Her work inspired me too focus more specifically on the theme of unlikely utopian cities that are on the brink of disaster.



11. Brian Alfred, Lobby, 2004.

Brian Alfred works with video animation, painting and collage. His digital animations use images he has painted or collaged, and are accompanied by electronic music. He works with themes of a passively aggressive hi-tech society that seems to be nearing both disaster and utopia simultaneously. Endless high-rises, various mass-transit vehicles, nuclear reactors, high-voltage electric wires, piles of computers and cables, and fenced landscapes are some of his landscape and still-life subjects. I am particularly interested in how his style of flat paint

handling references digital imaging reminiscent of the 1990's, and how it is linked to the cool environment of corporate places.



12. Sarah Morris, Metro Center (Capital), 2001.

Sarah Morris is a New York based artist, for whom I worked as an intern in 2005. Her work strongly references geometric abstraction, but it is interesting how a contemporary reading of her work brings in references to early digital imaging. She works from the realm situated between the two, emphasizing the digital references by painting spaces with grids in perspective, which was a common motif in 1980s digital imaging (as seen in the movie TRON for example). Though I have always been attracted to a graphic style of painting with flat colours, working with Sarah Morris made me seriously consider it for my own work.



© Julian Opie

13. Julian Opie, You Are in a Car, 1996.

The work of Julian Opie has been especially influential with regard to the sense of duality and theatricality that I am concerned with. In his 'Driving in the Country' series, he presents boxy car-like objects on which further details are painted. The pieces function as symbolic representations of cars, but are of course not actual cars. The stylization of the pieces also strongly reference a simple digital graphic of a vehicle, so much so in fact, that the work becomes more an image of an image of a car.

## **Conclusion**

In my current body of work I have drawn upon various stylistic references in order to investigate the aesthetic hierarchies that inform my sense of taste. In the end, the work is very much about my own nostalgic attraction towards 1980s computer games and science fiction, combined with newer interests in Modernist art and design. I am attempting to create an aesthetic experience that draws interest in its inability to be understood as any one thing; to create visual tension through the juxtaposition and layering of different stylistic references. My black paintings for example, seem to reference a style of early vector graphics, but the work is too ambiguous to affirm that reading; The

image could be anything from a computer graphic on a monitor screen, to a lunar colony in space, or perhaps a Suprematist-like graphic design. The layerings of visual references confuse one another and create a sense of ambiguity and open-endedness. There is also a subversive quality in the visually mimesis of computer vector graphics which stubbornly remain in the traditions of hand drafting and painting instead of being digitally printed. By transferring the graphics from the computer monitor into the physical space of a painting, the images lose their meaning and become empty or false signifiers that are superficial and purely aesthetic. This sense of falseness and theatricality reaffirms my interest in the sensibility of camp. With a sense of irony, I have been attempting to blur certain distinctions between high and low culture, the future and past, and notions of good versus bad taste

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## ULTRA: Studio Work for Thesis Exhibition



1. Fade to Grey, 24" x 48", Plexiglas, acrylic, frosted mylar, and fluorescent lights, 2006



2. ULTRA installation view



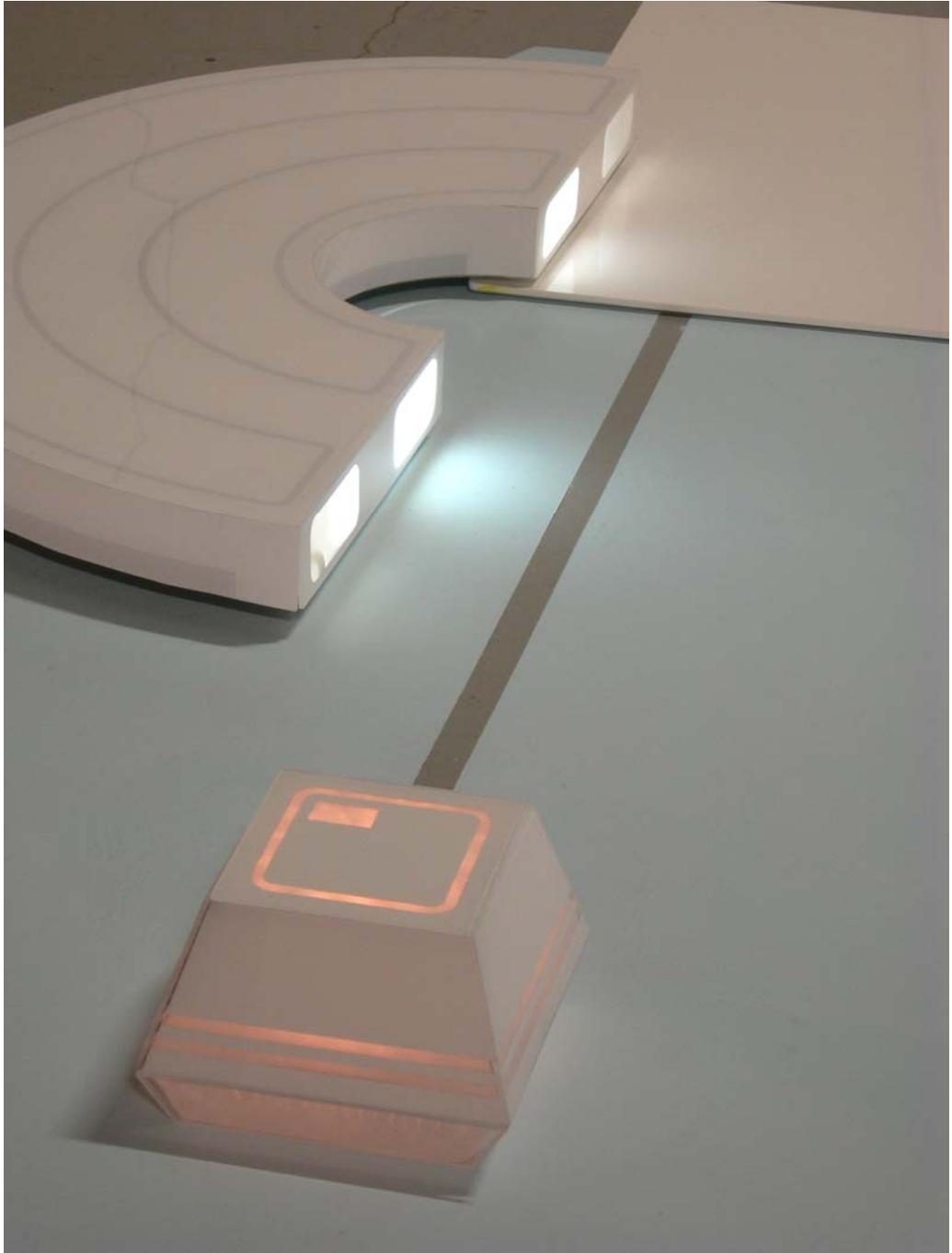
3. 'ULTRA MARINA,' three sculptural pieces in Plexiglas with fluorescent lights on painted floor, 2006.



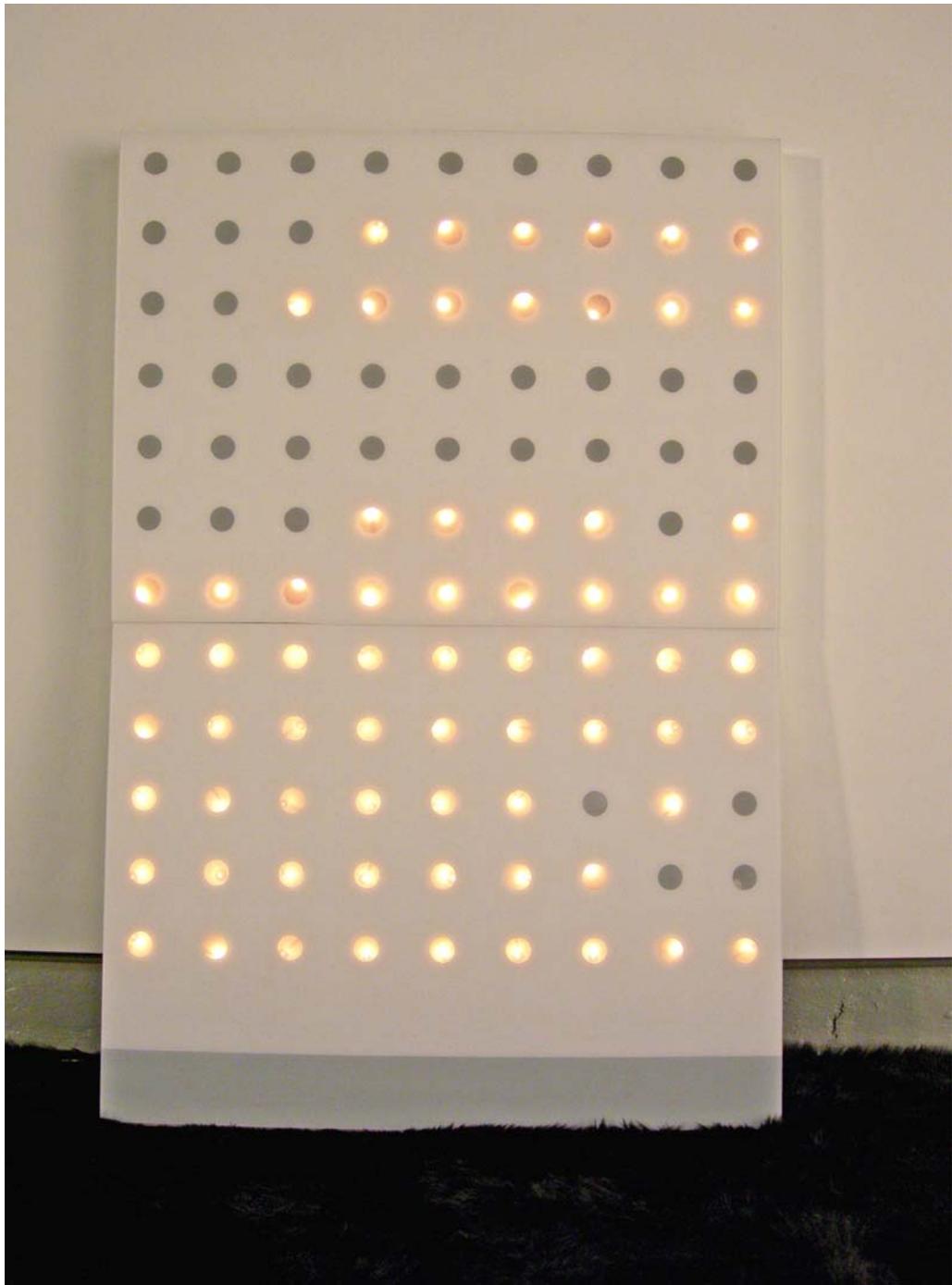
4. ULTRA installation view



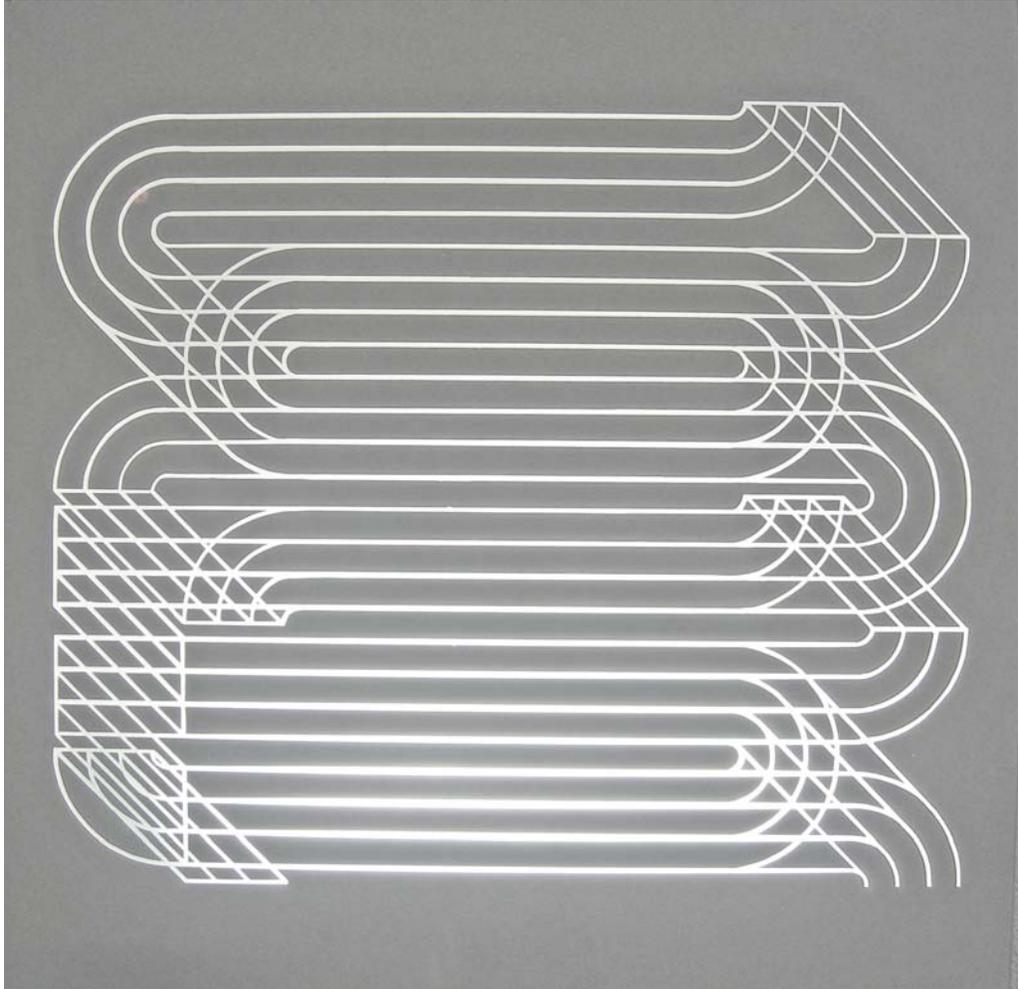
5. ULTRA installation view



6. detail of 'ULTRA MARINA'



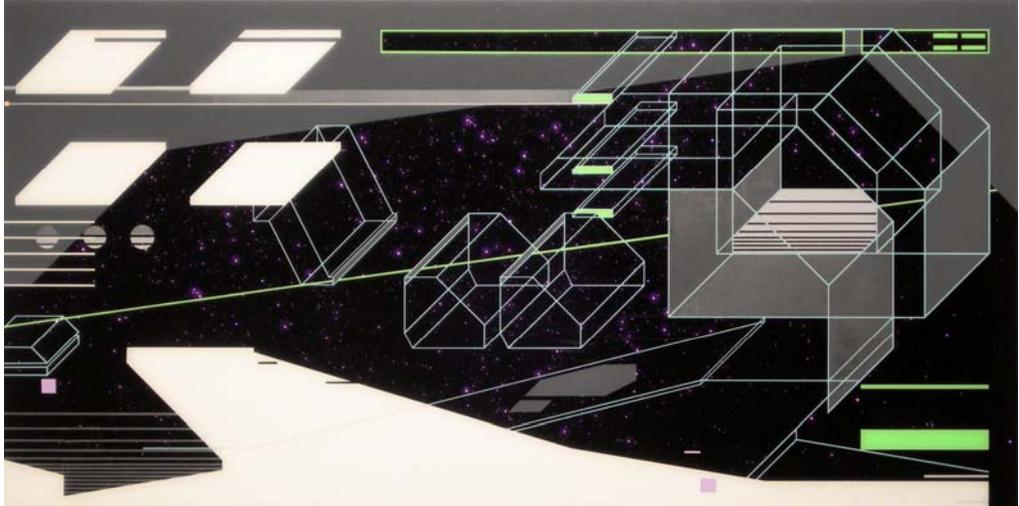
7. 'Console,' Plexiglas and acrylic with flashing mini lights on black fun fur, 2006.



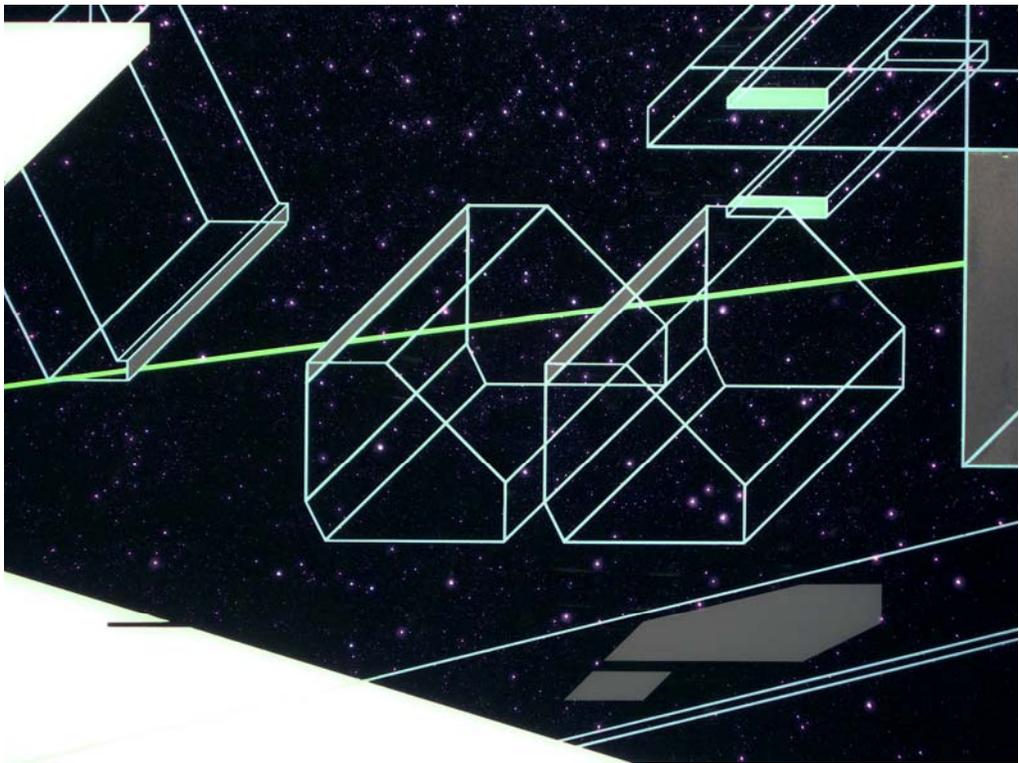
8. 'Snow White,' 18" x 18", Acrylic on Plexiglas with Fluorescent light, 2006.



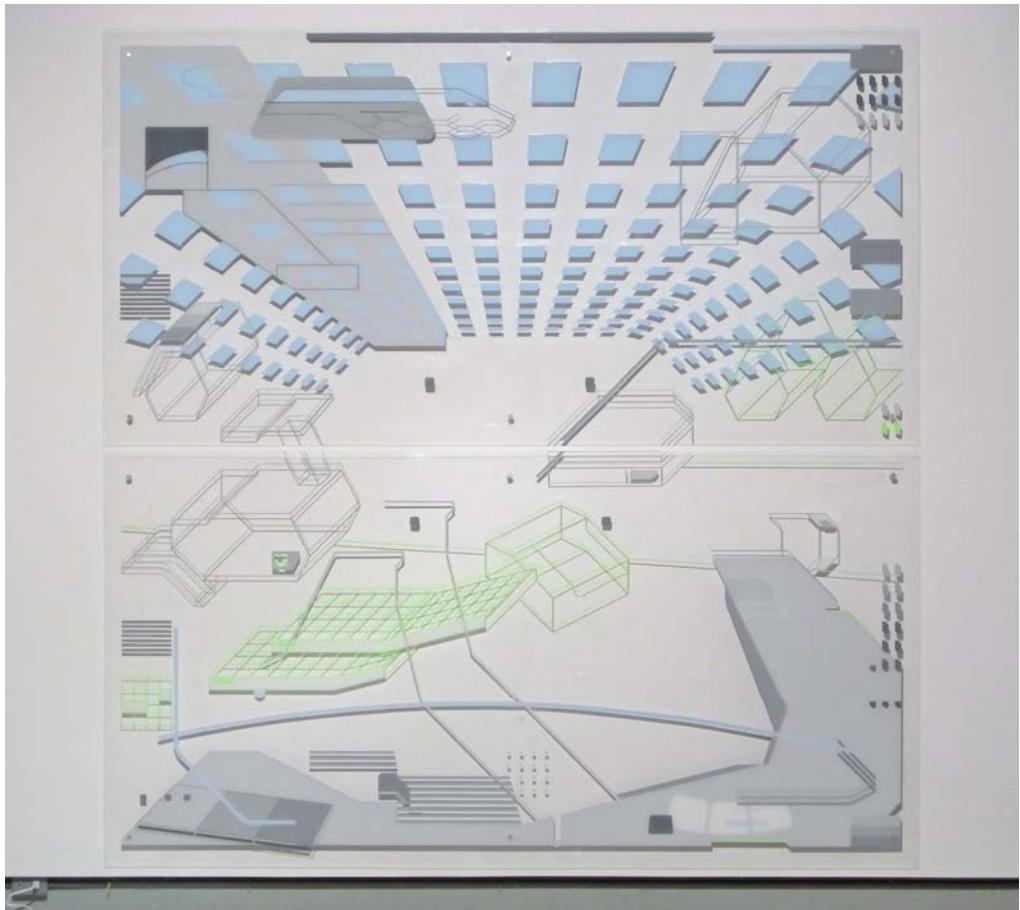
9. Convention Center, 2 panels at 36" x 48" each, Gesso and Acrylic on Board, 2006



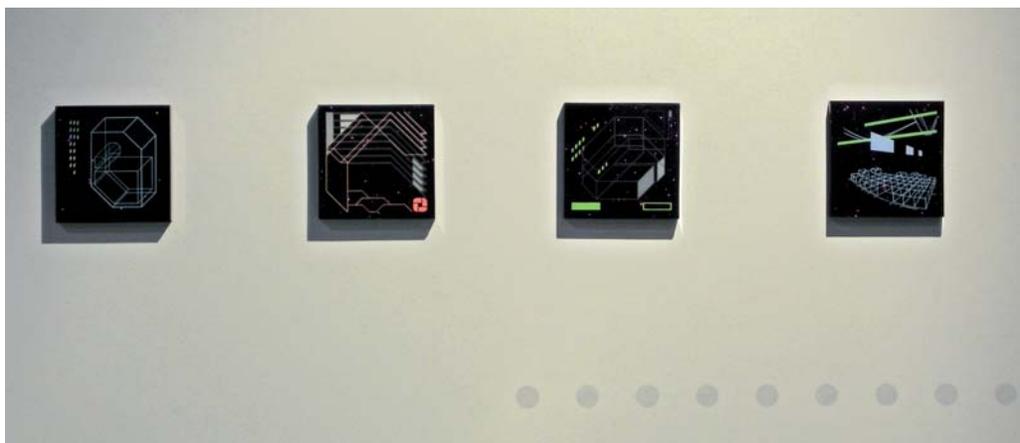
10 'Epsilon,' 36" x 72", Acrylic, sparkles and epoxy resin on Plexiglas, 2006.



11. detail of 'Epsilon'



12. 'Shorne Neue Computerwelt,' 98" x 98", Acrylic on clear Plexiglas mounted on the wall, 2006.



13. Installation of four 10" x 10" pieces, Acrylic, sparkles, and epoxy resin on Plexiglas, 2006.