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PIXEL; GHOST

PIXEL; GHOST

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

By

John Christopher Kelley
Baylor University
Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2003

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University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

Pixel; Ghost is an exhibition of video and sound installations that explore the creation, change, and degradation of memory, transitional states of mind, and family. The pieces are structured around cinematic clichés such as dream sequences, flashbacks and establishing shots, using them as a language to translate personal experience into something more universal.

In my work, *Pixel* refers to the individually active component of a larger system. A pixel itself changes and has its own characteristics, though these are ultimately subservient to its role in the larger system of a screen. The purpose and meaning of a pixel comes not from its internal content but from its spatial and time-based context.

Ghost refers to memory and its active function in the present. Memory is inherently tied to video; watching recorded moments of the past can be a séance, bringing the past into the present where its meaning will change depending on the surrounding circumstances of the remembering.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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Larry Swartwood

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DEDICATION

Pixel; Ghost is dedicated to Graham S. Kelley and to the memory of Florence Foster Jenkins.

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PRELUDE

I spent my first semester in graduate school experimenting and failing, and eventually yielded two projects. The one that I focused on the most was little more than a continuation of work that I began before school. The practice sought to translate anxiety into abstraction and was mostly based on formal elements that I brought with me from my application work: mark making, balance, repetition, and my usual color palette (fig. 1).

The other project never reached resolution, but ended up forming the foundation of my current work. This series was comprised of small watercolor portraits of horror movie heroines. The subjects were taken from classics of the genre (*Rosemary's Baby* – fig. 2), lesser known masterpieces (*The Sentinel* – fig. 3), and newer cinematic disasters (*The Unborn*). While watching the movies at home, I would actively look for moments with well-lit, terrified characters. I'd pause the movie, take a few photos of the TV screen, and use those photos to paint from. The fear portrayed in the pieces was of course false. Initially, I hoped the work would comment on my own general fear and the palatability of fear as it relates to entertainment, but the very practice of seeking a language in movies – something cultural through which to describe something personal, became a precedent for my later work. As the work continued, I became much less interested in actual fear, and more interested in ways in which culture at large takes its emotional cues from cinema. Going to the movies could be a lesson in how to act in bizarre circumstances.

The portraits were reductive and delicate, painted with mostly monochromatic value, in pale pinks and yellows. The color in these pieces, and subsequently in much of my work, did not simply describe observation, but rather functioned like theatrical lighting. The color suggested something more about the subject and spoke to the emotional content of the work, or in this case

sought to further complicate the thinking of the pieces. To paint a frightened subject in harsh colors seemed heavy-handed and clumsy, not to mention beside the point. The color choices were an attempt to establish a bittersweet balance by using two polarized visual languages, a theme that would later surface in my work in more substantial ways.

During my second and third semesters, I pushed the movie-influenced work to the side and focused on formal problems. I wanted to create work that still maintained the elements of drawing and painting, but impacted space in a more direct way. Initially, this was simply a compositional problem; trying to work against the rectangular format that my pieces were so safely rooted in. This was also when I began a routine of removing the most obvious part of my work at the beginning of each semester, here the rectangular format. This was a way to keep me thinking on my feet and making creative decisions based on artistic approach rather than on certain materials. It kept me from relying on my abilities and skills and assured an experimental, improvisational and resourceful approach to each project.

I began to experiment more with my materials, eventually settling on white acrylic paint on clear plexiglass left over from framing. Around this time I started keeping everything, as it would eventually find a place in my practice. These pieces were very much like slides, and utilized light to project the image by way of shadow on to the wall (fig. 4). The imagery on the panes was motivated by several different experiments with varying levels of success. The first of these was to carry over imagery from my first semester work. At other times, I would paint non-specific organic shapes, trying to suggest an object or thing without there actually being one, simply by portraying characteristics inherent in organic objects. In some cases, I would try to recreate the intaglio hard ground process, by painting a ground with white paint and scraping away with a nail. The panes of plexiglass were then attached to the wall using more improvised

materials: waxed linen string and pushpins. In a darkened room, the pieces were lit by miniature colored LED spotlights. By using several spotlights from different locations, the image could stretch into new proportions with each pane creating several overlapping shadows, mimicking the effect of an off-register print (fig. 5). I enjoyed the questions raised by this practice: the ambiguity of the art object, the temporal nature of the light, and the visual histories of shadow and reflection. The panes easily overlapped and gave me the opportunity to use each finished pane as source material for a larger collage of pieces. The collage element to the work insured that the pieces could be used in new and interesting combinations with each showing. This is a project I hope to continue working on, though at the time I felt I was getting too comfortable with it.

My most important semester at school was the third, in which my work more or less failed. Over the summer leading into that semester, I once again removed the most obvious component. In this case, it was the plexiglass itself. I began an experiment in approaching the waxed linen string as a sculptural element that would be lit in such a way to project its shadow onto the floor and wall, essentially serving the same purpose as the plexiglass paintings; companion pieces to their own shadows. Each of the forty pieces represented an anxious and confused week in my wife's pregnancy (figs. 6,7). Sentimental souvenirs were woven into some pieces. Several were vaguely organic, or even illustrative of a developing fetus. Some were simply compositional and proportional studies of my own body measurements. Ultimately, the project reached in too many directions, and tried to encompass too much of my personal experience. The work was passionate but confounding, as it seemed to grow out of my grasp and control. The project successfully represented my confusion and anxiety towards pregnancy, but in the end was mostly frustrating. I realize now that the working process for this project was the

reason I continued with it. When lit only by LED lights, my studio became transformative – a dramatic and empty space unlike the reality on the other side of the door. I would sit in this darkened, womb-like environment silencing my worried mind by keeping my hands busy with the tying and re-tying of the strings, haphazardly working in random objects from my studio, hoping to describe the moment simply by being active in it. While I have enjoyed working outside of my comfort zone in school, I found this particular project to be too far outside of my expertise or ability. The work itself was physically shoddy and the concept very vague. I found it incredibly helpful at that point to survey what went wrong and why.

Media-wise, things came together after that semester. I accepted that my last remaining interest in my previous project was light, and the possibility of creating moving light. I had also been working professionally and casually with long-term sound collage (“sequencing”) projects using old session tracks from years of working as a musician and audio engineer. It made sense at this point to move to video, particularly projected video, with prerecorded sound. In my initial plans, the projections would be little more than moving, colored light, taking the place of and enhancing the idea behind the LED lights. The goal was to transform a room into an immersive environment by projecting slowly shifting colored light onto the walls with an accompanying original soundtrack that was scored to move with direct correlation to the color. I knew that I wanted the piece to be somehow related to / about the birth of my son – which at this time was expected shortly – but did not know what form that would take.

LIGHTS WE SAW:

My son was born on the second day of class during my candidacy semester. I cannot succinctly describe the fullness and strangeness of this experience, but will attempt to explain how it determined my work for that semester. At the time, I wanted to document the experience

of early parenthood and then trust my ability to turn that into a compelling piece, but the specifics were incredibly vague. That was partly due to the biggest and most direct impact of his birth: the immediate and devastating sleep deprivation. This was a huge obstacle and I became extremely anxious that nothing would ever get done. Worrying that nothing will get done is something I'm good at, and in this case as in many it meant that I got a great deal done, but very little of it made sense in the moment. I tried to shoot or photograph every idea I had. Eventually, I realized that just by working compulsively through a murky and overemotional state such as sleeplessness, I was in the process documenting that very state; bringing back confused artifacts into the waking world and trying to make sense of them.

I decided to focus on that murkiness and describe those states that lie between being one way and another, containing elements of each but being neither. I was never really awake or asleep. I was somewhere else entirely (fig 8). I felt pulled between the roles of being a child and being a parent, and started to realize that any memory I had of my own childhood was now an expectation for my own child. I began using a projector as a way to create a new level of disconnection and address my internal monologue. I was able to create doubles of my current self, and ghosts of my past by projecting new and old footage onto the walls of my house and interacting with them. In scenes that began to emerge, my image haunted my own house. While my understanding of what was driving the work was becoming more and more clear, the format in which it would all fit was still amorphous. It was after a weekend in which I re-watched Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* and Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* that I realized there were templates for this sort of thing. I used a sped-up version of the pacing of a science-fiction movie, and mediated my experiences through classic and contemporary television and

movie clichés like dream sequence transitions to create an emotional and murky account of my first few months of parenthood.

The dream sequence served as a wonderful metaphor for my early-parent-condition. In classic television and cinema, dream sequences allow characters to engage in settings and behaviors that are other than their normal reality. They create separate spaces in which fantasies and more often fears give reprieve to the normal narrative structure, and operate in a different, often sporadic logic. In *Lights We Saw*, I used a palette based on Technicolor as a way to suggest this parallel timeline. I also used effects that were used in movies to signal a dream, such as the shifting colors and water running down a pane of glass (fig. 9). I also used static, which has been used cinematically to describe non-realities (*Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, *Poltergeist*), but in this piece it also signals anxiety – a discomfort in time. Static, after all, is what we look at when we are waiting for something else to appear, or when what we hoped to see is already gone. In my work, these effects suggest a transition to another place, real or imagined, fantastic or terrifying. *Lights We Saw* was as complex, moody and bittersweet as my actual experience, but the subtraction of direct description and use of the cultural and cinematic left room for the viewer. It seems preemptive to call this a “watershed” piece, but it was unquestionably a game-changer for my work.

I would like to make clear that none of my works are directly about my son or his birth. They are based on occurrences, realizations, and general strangeness due to his arrival. Certainly without him I would have never gone through the extreme sleep deprivation that inspired *Lights We Saw*, but that piece relates nothing about him. It describes the conditions that arose in the wake of him as experienced by myself. Since he was born I have exercised everyday. I do this because of him and for him, but my jogging is not *about* him.

Ruminating and poking around in the ideas of fatherhood during sleepless nights brought about ideas of memory and expectation, a conceptual transformation of my house into a home whose walls separate and protect the interior from the exterior while housing the past and future, and an absolute indulgence in things I would have at one time been too cynical to address in my work. In my most recent work, these ideas and experiences are reduced down to their most basic characteristics and then translated through cinematic and musical language into a time-based piece that still retains those most basic characteristics.

CONTEMPORARY ART INFLUENCES

As an undergraduate student I saw a Jeremy Blake show in a small Chelsea gallery in New York City. The show consisted of around fifteen small paintings, and a looped DVD of his *Reading Ossie Clark*. Several years later I saw one section of Blake's *The Winchester Trilogy* – based on rifle heiress Sarah Winchester -- in Houston. Blake was creating a long form portrait in both cases. Meandering and meditative, computer generated imagery explored the namesake identities and their surrounding cultures. What struck me first about both of these pieces were their extremely saturated colors. The emotional content seemed to echo the intensity of the color. The palette itself reminded me of early Technicolor: approximations of skin tones, hair color, clothing, and sets that tended to err on the side of flat saturated color. Technicolor seemed to me idealized, suggesting that there was some better way for things to be that was intertwined with color. In popular film, color saturation has been used many times as a means to portray a character's emotional state, most recently and perhaps most effectively in Tom Ford's *A Single Man*.

Blake also appealed to me because of his approach to computer-based work as an extension of painting. In a 2005 interview with *Wired Magazine*'s Elizabeth Bard he said, "The

computer is the visual equivalent of an electric guitar. I was trained on an acoustic." While Blake's pieces are time-based, they contain no recorded segments. All of the imagery was computer-generated in the most painterly way possible. I wanted to combine this technique with camera-recorded elements in my own work.

It was important to me that I create a majority of my own footage. Many contemporary artists working in video – some of whom I greatly admire – use mostly appropriated imagery from popular movies, television and video games. Michael Robinson's *Light is Waiting*, for example, is a new edit of the family sitcom *Full House*. Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, is exactly that: Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* stretched to last 24 hours. Many of these pieces feel like one-trick ponies, subverting our pre-existing awareness of the source material and asking the viewer to reexamine it...and then move on. Though Gordon's work addresses speed's ability to transform the terrifying into something meditative, many pieces are as short as television commercials, and in some cases just as obnoxious. Paul McCarthy's video work has recently been reincarnated through supposed wunderkind Ryan Trecartin, who creates extremely long pieces that operate within the same realm of intellectual abrasion. I have tried to make work that deviates from these established norms. Rather than creating a timed spatial effect like I had originally hoped, I take advantage of what is inherently cinematic in video. Clear beginnings and ends in video pieces imply a narrative structure, and it is through the allusion to a narrative or action that I am able to draw the viewer in, rather than having them physically walk into the piece.

I have used films as reference points for many years, but have always felt that there has been a well-established precedent for this sort of thing. Paul Pfeiffer's *Quad Nomen Mihi Est?* that refers directly to *The Exorcist* stands out as an example of an artist using a culturally

recognizable allusion to describe something else. Pierre Huyghe's videos, particularly *A Journey that Wasn't*, take advantage of cinematic and musical structures to illustrate very simple actions that themselves allude to something universal.

WORKS IN EXHIBITION

While working in drawing, painting, sound, music and most other creative endeavors, I have always tried to be as reductive and economical as possible. In the drawings and paintings of early graduate school, I tried to find exactly how much I could remove from a drawing or painting and still have it function as such. Particularly in the drawings, the structures were reduced down to the most efficient mark able to support the compositions as based on the borders. Time-based work by nature suggests that there is a beginning, middle and end -- in short, a narrative. In my video work, I try to remove as many individual components of a narrative, and still have the work function to suggest one. While there are things to be said for non-narrative cinema, I feel that my work still operates as narrative -- just with an ambiguous narrative. In the two-dimensional pieces, the arrangement of shapes was the armature on which the success of the piece depended. In the time-based pieces, this translates to timing.

The movie editors of the past have established over the course of cinematic history, techniques that have taught viewers how to react and emote, based almost entirely on timing. However it is much easier to coerce an audience to feel with effective sound and music working in concert or consciously against imagery. The easiest example to use for the latter would be major-key music with slow, reluctant rhythms - often waltzes - playing over scenes of happiness or celebration to create a bittersweet atmosphere. I have several years of experience as a musician working in film music, which has enabled me to create scenes suggesting action where none is shown. In creating these musical passages, I have also tried to reduce the melodic and

instrumental components to see what alternative sounds can take the place of the standard instrument recording.

The footage for all of these pieces comes from a self-made cache of imagery. Many sections are shot to fulfill certain qualities that I might need when editing. Other shots are culled from hours and hours of my own home movies from childhood and college. While using this kind of imagery is highly personal and subjective, and often chosen with very personal and emotional goals in mind, I feel that this footage within the context of an edit functions as a universal component, contributing to the timing of the piece. These are all ultimately collage elements, used simply for their ability to work with or against those pieces around them. However, the media used – obsolete VHS tapes, lo-resolution video cameras, as well as limited editing software – add to the overall texture of the piece, and create a nostalgic sentiment that the viewer can recognize. The use of obsolete cameras and footage to suggest nostalgia or a bygone era is in no way a new idea and can be seen in casual settings like the introduction to *The Wonder Years*.

When creating the soundtracks, I pull from old recording sessions from the past ten years or so, as well as native audio from home movies, field recordings, and occasional sampling from other musicians, which is always appropriated purposefully and meaningfully. In *Meredith*, a short video describing the co-mingling of memory and expectation that takes place during a birthday celebration, I briefly sample Saint-Saens' *The Swan*, from *The Carnival of Animals*. In *Meredith*, a sped-up loop of a preteen girl's birthday becomes an awkward and hypnotic ritual of extinguishing and relighting the birthday candles ad nauseum. The focus of the video then drifts through shifting colors to footage of the same girl roller-skating in reverse and at half speed, an act of leisure and beauty devoid of any self-conscious posturing as seen at the birthday party,

erasing itself back to the point of its beginning (fig. 10). Roller-skating itself, is a nice image here too, simply because it wants to be but is not ice-skating. *The Swan* plays briefly, its title alluding to the story of the ugly duckling, an illustration of that awkward period and hope for the future, while the slow tempo of the music synchronizes nicely with the dancelike movement of the roller-skating.

LONG-JUMP/PIXEL-SWARM:

A theme consistent in my work is that of multiple perspectives in time. I see this as a time-based analog to the painting practice of presenting several points of view in space. Layers of information present themselves in half speed, quarter speed, as well as in reverse, etc. This layering of heavily saturated and high contrast imagery on top of the same shots mimic the activity of over-thinking a situation as it occurs, as well as being caught between memory (the past) and anticipation (the future). This theme is in a majority of my pieces, but is the focus of “Long-Jump/Pixel-Swarm” (fig. 11). In this short video, we see a drunken long-jump competition that took place in front of my house in Austin, Texas during the holiday season of 2008. One reason for using this footage was simply to satisfy my desire to work with figures again. Most of my works before graduate school were figurative, and I miss dealing with the external body as a language. There is also something jarring and beautiful about jumping in reverse. The simplicity of the act seems elegant in a way, just as excessively complicated movement and effects are not only laborious but are as self-serving as an overlong guitar solo. The piece is comprised of one sequence, which is shown back to back, while being layered over the top in 400% and 200% speed. This piece is not overly sentimental in content but still draws attention to the material-based causes for emotional responses to my work: color combinations, and the synchronization of movement with music. The frenetic pace of the beginning sections

alludes to the youthful and obnoxious energy that this sort of event is dependent on, but as the piece continues, different layers of the action are dissected and remembered through multiple points-of-view, bookended by celebration and romanticized into slower scenes with sounds reminiscent of mid-century cinema romance themes. Making this work was in a way inspired by my son, as it is a lament to the energy and resilience of irresponsible youth, but it was also an opportunity to create a counterpoint to my normally moody and slow-burning videos. While *Long-Jump/Pixel-Swarm*, is in many ways a sore thumb, it provides reprieve to the slow, murky and ruminative pieces that surround it in the overall program of videos. This is another belief that I carry throughout my work: that all pieces or components, sometimes in spite of their internal characteristics, will find meaning and content through context. For this reason, I often shoot scenes with no overall content-based meaning, realizing that they will find their place and purpose during the editing process. The sequence and arrangement of one video to the next, as well as that of the individual shots within each video are very much like sequencing tracks on a record.

SPATIAL CONTEXT:

While many of the more complex and involved videos are presented one at a time by projector in a time-based context with the other videos, I am also presenting a three-television piece that displays video imagery within time-based and spatial context to other images. Each television plays a program timed with the other two, playing different corresponding imagery – domestic night scenes lit by a moving flashlight, backwards ocean footage, abstract color sequences, etc. – which change on all televisions at the same time. At times, two televisions will cede focus, playing supportive imagery to a longer video on the third television, like a musical trio would perform a jazz piece. One section of imagery present in this program is that of my

own home movies. In these sections, three channels of the same shot are layered on top of each other, each running at a time slightly quicker than the one before. These color layers begin with each other, as a unified color, but the transparencies break apart as their time inconsistencies spread further apart, revealing the three individually moving channels (fig. 12). The televisions themselves will also play out this process, as the day moves on. They will be started together in the morning, but will inevitably fall further and further out of synchronization as the day progresses and their cohesion degrades, providing new image combinations as well as a visual example of memory degrading and changing meaning within the context of new events. While each video section of this program is conceptually driven as an individual component, it remains supportive of the larger process; a pixel in the screen.

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Figure 1: *Signal vs Noise #8*, pastel on paper, 2009

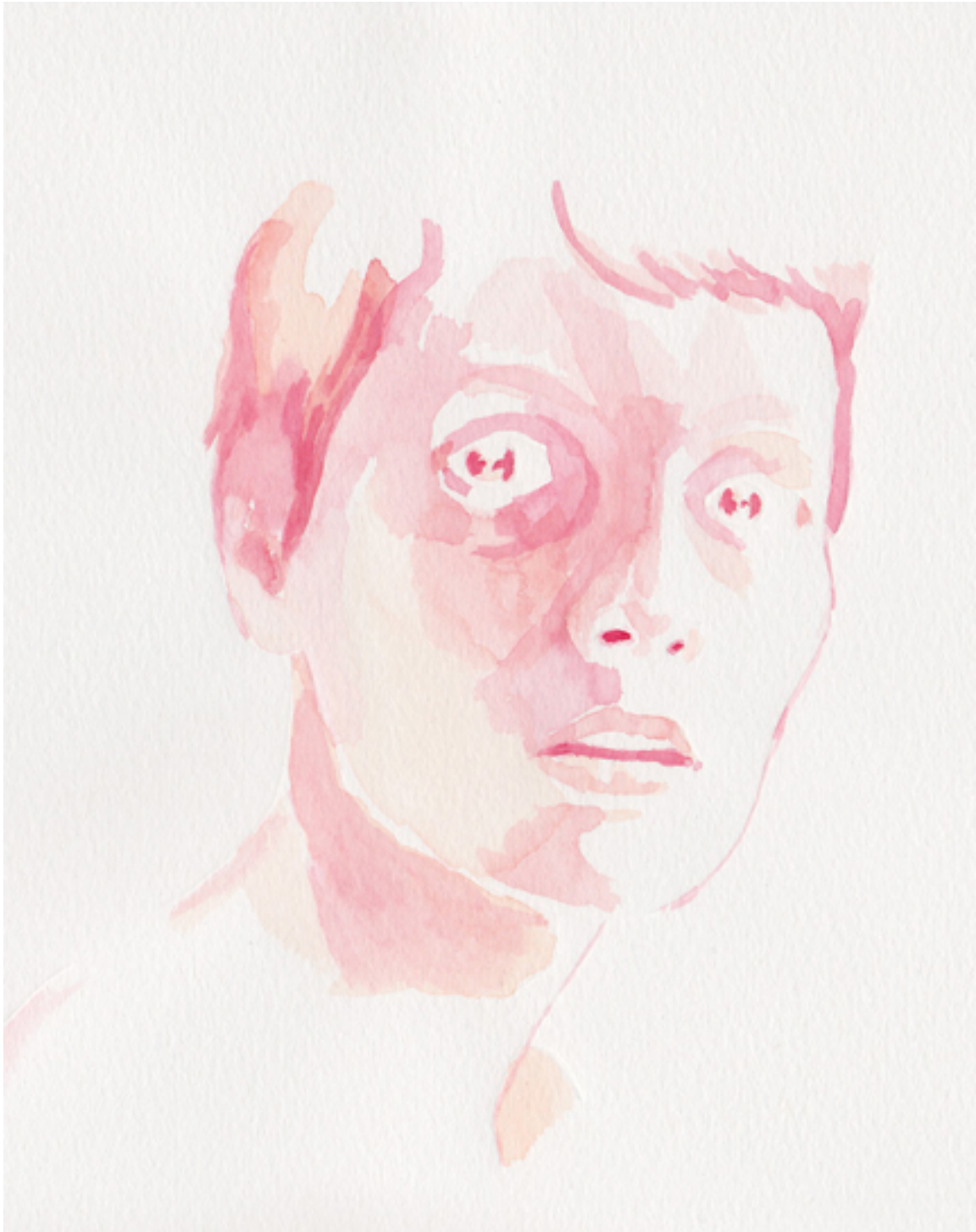


Figure 2: *This is No Dream*, watercolor on paper, 2009



Figure 3: *Black and White Cat, Black and White Cake*, watercolor on paper, 2009

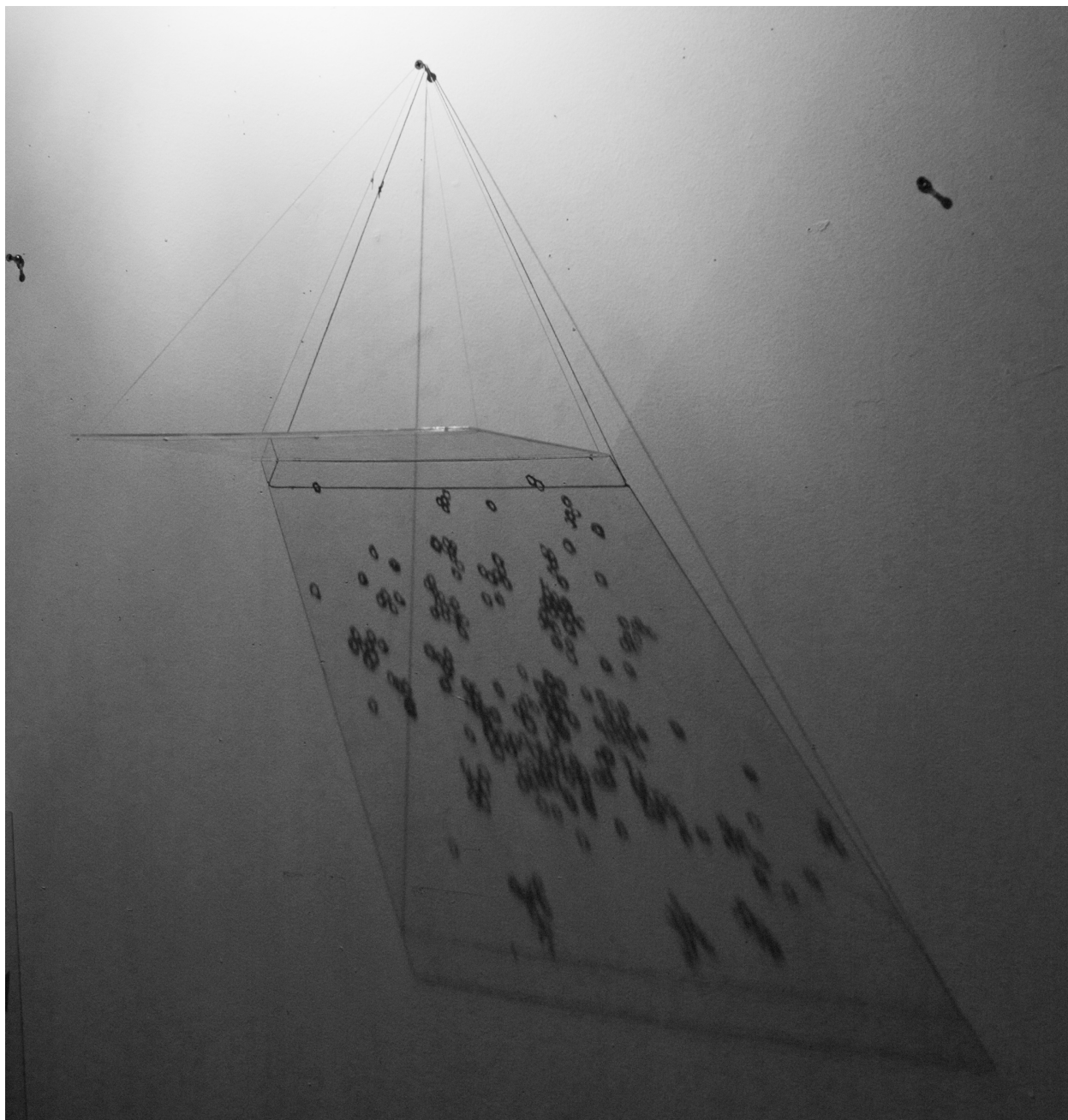


Figure 4: Plexiglass, waxed linen, white acrylic paint, studio lighting, 2010



Figure 5: Plexiglass, waxed linen, paper, white acrylic paint, studio lighting, 2010



Figure 6: mixed media, led lights, 2010



Figure 7: mixed media, led lights, 2010



Figure 8: *Lights We Saw*, still image from video, 2011



Figure 9: *Lights We Saw*, still image from video, 2011



Figure 10: *Meredith*, still image from video, 2012



Figure 11: *Long-Jump / Pixel-Swarm*, still image from video, 2012



Figure 12: *Pixel; Ghost*, still from video with sound, 2011