

MODERN PAINTERS

November 2006

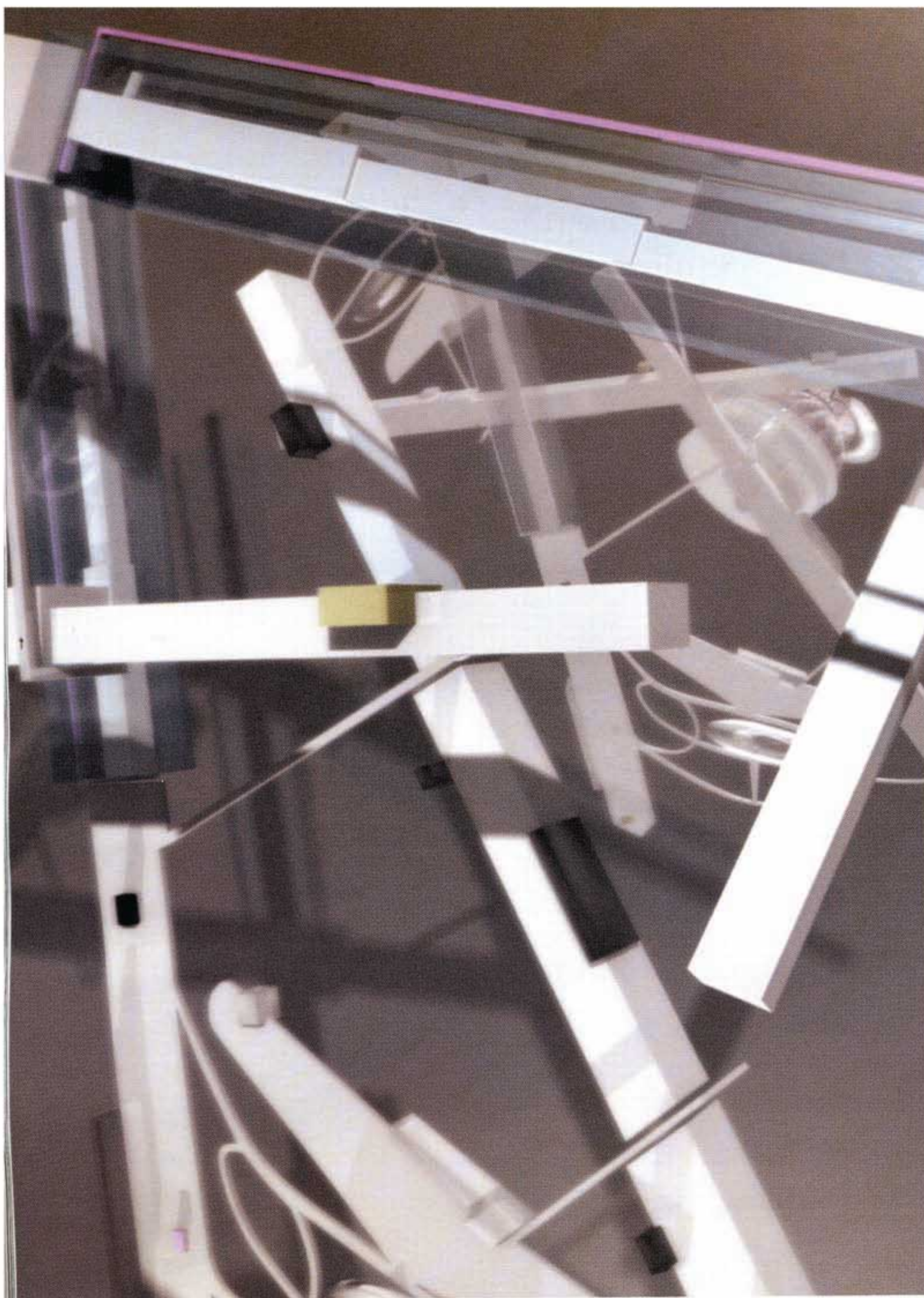
The International Art Magazine



Light Sensitive

Conducting electricity in Vegas

TEXT AND IMAGES BY HALUK AKAKÇE



PREVIOUS SPREAD
AND LEFT
STILLS FROM
SKY IS THE LIMIT, 2006
DVD, 6 MIN
COURTESY GALLERIE
MAX HETZLER, BERLIN

with a white light and a barrage of floating abstract forms and colors. For those seconds every form has their own time flow, their own pace and rhythm. Quickly they disappear, leaving the viewer with a constricted, linear background. In contrast to the harsh neon lights of Vegas, the light in my video contains multiple gradations of soft electric color. Beautiful electric color, not the garish kind. The opening of the piece feels concrete and real, at least to me, but the work dissolves and becomes an illusion of itself, much like the city that inspired it.

The ripples and the crescendo represent the state of mind that dominates Las Vegas. The city is about expectation—you see it on the faces that fill every casino. An important part of them knows they may not get what they want, but they don't listen to it. If the work celebrates anticipation, it's also about loss: a sudden return from fleeting glamour and exhilaration to cold solitude.

Sky Is the Limit doesn't have the conventional narrative or time-based structure of standard media, such as television or cinema. It has two beginnings, no end, and the punch line is in the middle. I envision it as a Bruegel painting. There is a multitude of action occurring simultaneously, with many stories in each image. It's a romantic piece, the atmosphere is quite lonely, and there is no protagonist, only a landscape. My hope is it will provide a void for the viewers to enter and have their own experience. My last video, *Shadow Machine* (2006), was filled with objects trapped in a revolving universe, a carousel almost, in which the objects themselves acted as orbits of an invisible mechanism. *Sky Is the Limit* is similarly structured. There is a parade, not of objects this time but of forms, and a transient landscape that is a meeting of the mechanical and the organic.

I visited Las Vegas for the first time last year. I arrived by day and departed at night. Looking down from my place in the sky as I left, I realized that Vegas is an electric painting. The city emerges from the continent like brushstrokes of light on a black canvas. Strangely, I felt an instant affinity between this thing in the void below and my artistic practice. When I begin work on a new video piece, I am building an imaginary, abstract world in the digital field of the computer, which is itself isolated—a type of virtual desert.

The piece I'm working on now is a development of that sudden interpretation of Las Vegas that I experienced as I was leaving its confines and I'm making it to show there. The video begins with a black void that is gradually broken by ripples of color. As the circular forms accumulate, they become color fields on which the ensuing action unfolds. The shapes grow and explode to a crescendo in the middle of the piece, when, for 80 seconds the entire screen is filled

Paradoxically, *Sky Is the Limit* is being made for Fremont Street's Viva Vision screen, an overhead LED canopy that extends the length of four city blocks in downtown Las Vegas. The canopy is like an electronic sky, placed high overhead. It's so big that when it's on, the real sky disappears, replaced by the screen's imagery. Of course, thinking about how the work will be projected on such an outrageously long screen is a huge challenge. Normally, I visualize my artworks through the mostly static lens of the camera. When you project a piece in a room, you know how it will be observed and from which points people will view it. Here, in Vegas, I lose that control. People will be constantly moving and occasionally looking up. Furthermore, the canopy distorts and bends the image—there are no straight lines. Instead of thinking about the image through a camera, then, I'm thinking about a long picture frame. That's new to me, having to walk through the canopy to view the piece. And because the entirety of the image can never be seen, and the viewer's movement and pace affects their perception of it, I have to appreciate that images will be edited in each individual's mind as I'm editing. Because of my architecture



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background, I always think in mechanical terms of building forms; I don't allow myself to rely on morphing or other computer tricks. It's just a long process of drawing the shapes, animating their movement, and drawing again.

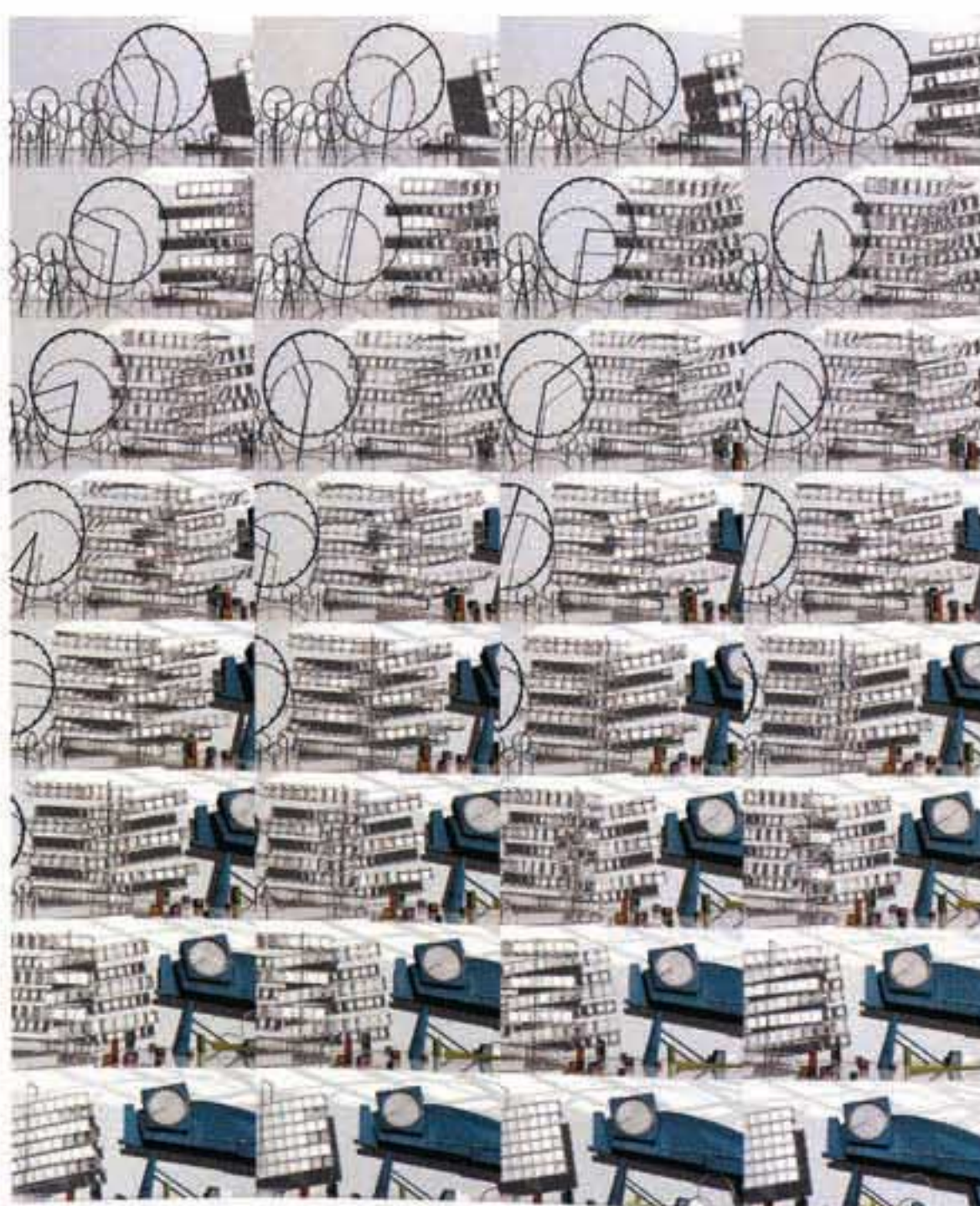
The idea of Vegas as a city of kitsch is disappearing. There are other myths that are gaining importance, like the speed with which it is growing, and how distinct its culture is from that of other American cities. For example, you don't see people going to work on the subway in the morning. And signage has become the way in which the city communicates. Though there was once a vision there of creating a microcosm of nations—the wonders of the world miniaturized and all in one place—Vegas is beginning to embrace its own history. It has got to the point where it accepts its identity as a destination unto itself.

It is no coincidence that landscape dominates *Sky Is the Limit*. Landscape is the new kitsch in Las Vegas. They build a fake mountain behind your hotel so that when you look outside your window, you see a hill that could not exist naturally in that part of the world. The earth itself has become part of the constellation of luxury there.

The constant, irrepressible movement of light is a uniquely discordant experience. It's as though this electrical mirage creates its own time flow. In this way, Vegas is not a place but an idea, and, like my piece, a mere abstraction of movement and light.

WITH THANKS TO PETER ELEEY

SKY IS THE LIMIT, by Haluk Akakçe, with Dan Donovan and Glassworks Ltd, will be on view at the Fremont Street Experience, Las Vegas, at 8 PM every evening from November 3 to 30.



ABOVE
STILL FROM
SKY IS THE LIMIT, 2006
DVD, 6 MIN
COURTESY GALERIE
MAX HETZLER, BERLIN

LEFT
SEQUENCE FROM
SHADOW MACHINE, 2006
DVD, 10 MIN
COURTESY GALERIE
MAX HETZLER, BERLIN