Illuminating Seeing the Light Traps
By Alice Wise

At the Wood Street Galleries, German artist Mischa Kuball6 creates both heaven and hell on earth. Illumination and darkness chase each other through the space set with beauty and horror play. Using projected light and imagery upon minimalist sculptures, Kuball's installations reveal a multiplicity of meanings within their simplicity. His magic appears to all be done with smoke and mirrors to produce realms of luminous immateriality.

Within one blackened gallery, slide projectors shoot the words "speech," "space," and "speed" onto glittering, spinning disco balls. Their distorted, blurry letters, infinite and glowing, glitter through the air, turning the room into a viewer's private solar system, a starry blizzard that seems to penetrate physical reality and burn through it—a place where real and imaginary things mingle. There is a sensation of stepping out of the empty right, hypnotized, onto some dance floor only to follow one's own shadow through deepening dreams, awakening just on the edge of language. It's a space without definition or time, where the world, possibly falling to ruins, remains far distant.

This part of entry offers the intoxication of exploring a limitless universe. But whatever multifaceted possibilities were discovered within this expansive free zone of abstract and keep on earth, some of which is kept in the most claustrophobic period in German history.

Nazi films attempted to reduce the population's intellectual capacities so as to facilitate acceptance of their propaganda. Seemingly to summon these works' dark purpose, two video projectors display a German word meaning "to ask," symbolically diminishing the will to question authority: Its disconnected letters beat wildly, like captured hearts, under the narrow gaze of some unseen eye. Yet there could be positive, formative shadings to the work. It could also be taken as a simulation of the mental experiences of very young children which must be a kaleidoscope of sensations and impressions, as they begin to link sounds with meanings, trying to make sense of a blooming, buzzing environment.

Kuball seems to intend containment manipulation in other works. One piece could possibly refer to Nazism's intent to overthrow humankind and peaceful progress. Projected upon a circle of lab coats, parallel views of urban structures from Germany and Pittsburgh mix with photographs of vanished German cultural figures, building a web of familiarity, memory and interpretation.

The vacant uniforms might recall concentration camp medical and psychological experimentation, provoking reactions of bodily and spiritual violation. The fleeting vistas of architectural achievements and inquisitive faces act as a counterforce that spotlights individual values. Kuball also resurrects the haunted screen of German Expressionism cinema, with its atmospheres of psychological horror and collective unease. Its imaginative terror predicated elements of the Nazi regime that was about to come—on the overrunning evil of its protagonists and its scenes of torture. For Hitler's "Cabinet" Kuball uses stills from the films, which rely on disembodied framings, bizarre shots, motionless shadows and slow-motion camera shots to produce a sense of entrapment or malaise. These images, transferred to slides, are intermittently projected from the ends of four rectangular boxes arranged as a cruciform. This malevolent object seems a symbol for the silent resignation and passivity of those under the irrational power of tyrannical rule. The work creeps into consciousness quietly toward that lonely, interior landscape where reality fuses with nightmares. The spirit of violence that sweeps through the scene materializes into the shape of the swastika. This shifting apparition reflects that Nazism's existence depended upon its ability to transcend all reality, leading the masses to believe in the solidity of the swastika world. In the calm between pictures, however, the cruciform appears again. Enshrouded within this empty world, the sense of suspending doors, while always threatening to overwhelm the scene, is, for these moments in suspension. Fighting fire with fire, this installation of feisty grandeur acts as a reminder of the tragic dimensions of these visions, a cautionary statement against complacency toward all atrocities worldwide, historical and contemporary.

Kuball's work also indicates that sometimes the prediction for what promises to frighten, shake or repulse is as deeply impruned in the psyche as the counter-impulse toward light, truth and goodness.

Light-Traps continues through Dec. 26 at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown. 477, 5605.