



# Letting video out of the box

*Sarkisian's works lie somewhere between sculpture and cinema*

By Neil Kendricks

New Mexico-based film and video artist Peter Sarkisian doesn't want his video artworks to sit complacently inside the frame of a television monitor.

Rather, his projected video installations are more likely to take an environment hostage. They occupy a space with the seductive charisma of a spider waiting to ensnare the viewer in its web of free-floating metaphors.

In "Dusted: Works by Peter Sarkisian," an exhibition at USCD's University Art Gallery, the skeleton crew of metaphors is slippery and nonspecific. They deliberately flirt with ambiguity, transforming the gallery into a spooky antechamber of fleeting images. And Sarkisian wouldn't want it any other way.

The pieces are "ambiguous, intentionally," says Sarkisian during a recent phone interview from the annual art festival, Art Forum Berlin, "because I really don't want to hit anyone over the head. It's very important to me to try to convey basic ideas of who and what we are, and just insights that I have. But to do it in a way that's passive."

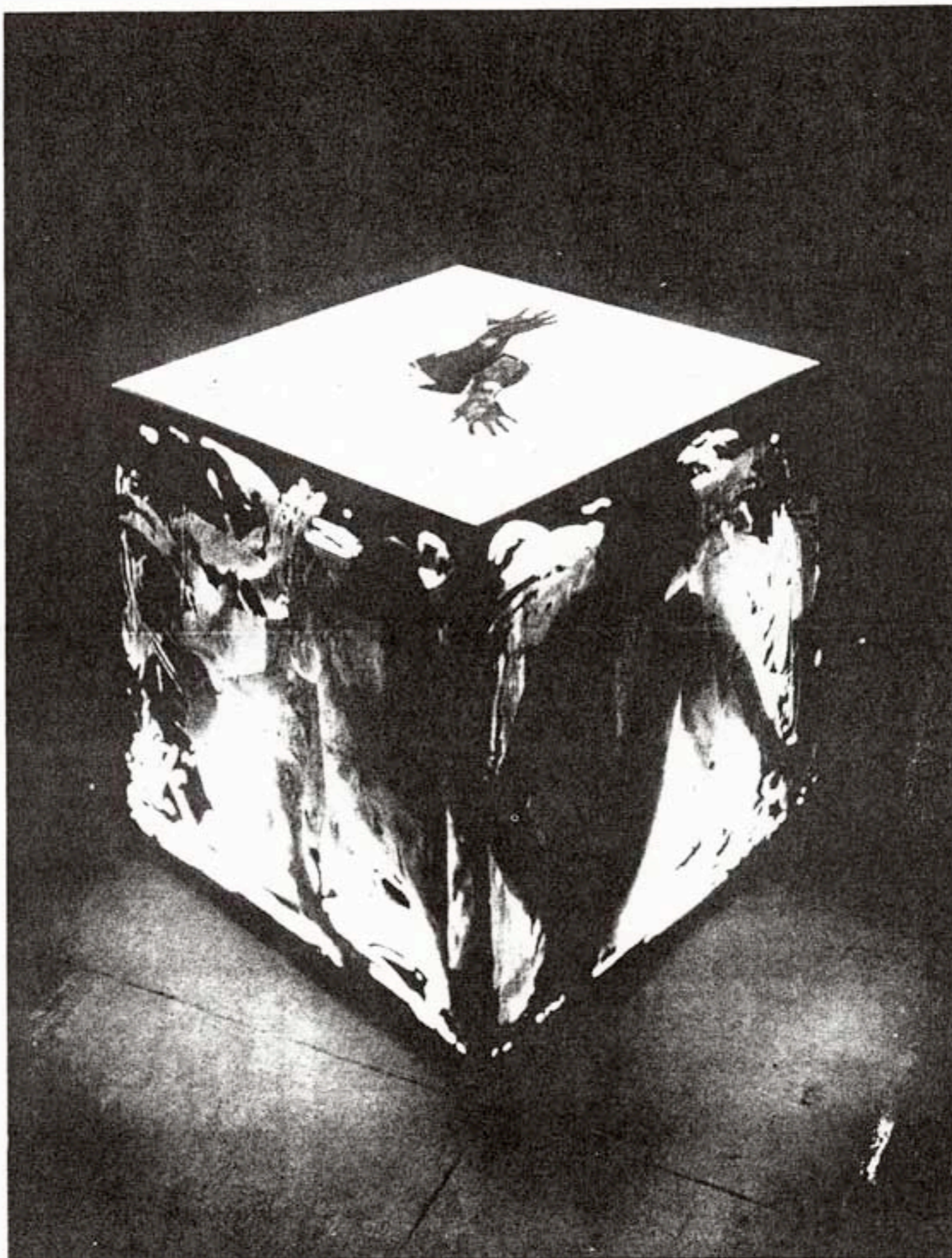
"That's what I do as an artist: I explore ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions, and I try to go farther than the average viewer would ever think of going."

The four individual pieces of "Dusted" are pregnant with an almost passive-aggressive presence. At the entrance to the exhibition, the viewer is drawn in by the quiet lull of a hushed female voice whispering names in the dark.

At first, the darkness is disorienting. As your eyes begin to adjust, you notice a large, almost milky-white, translucent cube sitting in the center of the stark, gallery space.

As the soft voice murmurs on the soundtrack, the four sides of the cube — measuring roughly 33 inches square — gradually begin to reveal points of light. There is a smear of moving flesh. The illusion of illuminated movement eventually reveals two tightly confined, nude bodies rubbing up against the inside of the strange box.

During the piece's 12-minute video loop, the projected images of a man and woman move in a slow, rhythmic crawl, as if they were trying to find breathing room. Periodically, the couple stops for a moment, only to resume shifting over each other. The figures' halted, jerky movements in "Dusted" cause the cube's interior soot to cover



The video-projected images of figures confined inside a large, translucent cube are the centerpiece of "Dusted: Works by Peter Sarkisian."

their torsos and limbs like a coat of muddy, body paint.

Sarkisian's intriguing, claustrophobic image could easily pass for a small isolation cell, or the glassy confines of an artificial womb radiating light. The strength of the piece arises from these contradictory readings, in which one viewer's prison is another person's dream of

soft, groping bodies.

#### Film wise

Without pinning down a specific narrative, there remains an undeniable cinematic quality to Sarkisian's two-dimensional video imagery projected on three-dimensional objects. Each of the gallery's four small, partitioned areas feel

strangely haunted by what the 32-year-old artist calls a "removed space."

With their awkward silences and abrupt movements, Sarkisian's haunted imagery inhabits the gray area between sculpture and a shifting, amorphous form of cinema. Like his fellow video artists Bill Viola, Tony Oursler and Gary Hill,

#### DATEBOOK

**"Dusted: Works by Peter Sarkisian"**  
11 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily through Dec. 12; University Art Gallery, Mandeville Center, UCSD, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla. Free; (619) 534-0419.

Sarkisian says, he wants to break out of the frame usually associated with video art.

"I'm trying to break down the walls, in terms of the limitations of both the medium of video and the beginning-middle-and-end structure of film," he says.

In the piece "Roadside Series: #6 East Helena," a pair of women's slippers sits perched on a suitcase arranged on a pedestal. In an adjacent room, a similar piece, "Roadside Series: #3 Aberdeen," shows a pair of men's shoes placed on another suitcase.

Strangely enough, the dominant elements of these companion pieces are the dim, ambient noises on the soundtrack: the fading roar of passing traffic, a telephone ringing in the distance, the knocking on some unseen door that goes unanswered.

Likewise, there is the sound of breathing from an unseen figure in the dual pieces "Rare Drop: (Green and Blue Postponed Dreams)." The only objects in the room are a pair of beds and small bowls filled with a resin-like material simulating liquid.

Both the "Roadside Series" and "Rare Drop" works leave the viewer with the guilty sensation of sneaking into a stranger's home or hotel room. Only, instead of finding furniture and personal objects, we encounter plays of shifting light and vaguely familiar sounds. The cumulative effect is not unlike stumbling across a room filled with someone else's memories, the visual echo of figures that have just left the space, only to leave behind their shadows.

By projecting the video image on a cube and other assorted props, "Dusted" demonstrates how video can function as a trigger for evoking a shifting tableaux of moods. Nothing is fixed or certain in Sarkisian's world. Everything is reduced to a sense of dislocation involving the spatial relationships between the sounds and images of a particular, manipulated space.

**NEIL KENDRICKS** is an artist who writes about the arts for the Union-Tribune.