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## Forever starts now

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# FOREVER STARTS NOW

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth  
University.

by

Lior Modan

Bachelor of Arts, Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, 2009

Director:

Elizabeth King, Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
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## ABSTRACT

### *FOREVER STARTS NOW*

By Lior Modan, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Major Director:

Elizabeth King, Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Moms as historical perspectives, abstraction and image making;  
Through stoves, swimwear and carpets. Then, one hope-  
That one-day history will become yours and mine.



**FOREVER STARTS NOW**

**“We know how to see”**

Vladimir Tatlin, explaining why artists are superior to engineers

“Waiting in the front yard, sitting on a log;  
Single shot rifle and a one-eyed dog.  
Yonder come my kin folk in the moonlight:  
Louisiana Saturday night.

Well, you get down the fiddle and you get down the bow  
Kick off your shoes and you throw ‘em on the floor  
Dance in the kitchen 'til the morning light  
Louisiana Saturday night”

Don Williams - **Louisiana Saturday Night**



I. **MOTHER.** I remember encountering this word again, in early 2012, when I was reading an essay on the Polish avant-garde artist Katarzyna Kobro. This is the first word to appear in the only published monograph on her work. The text was written by the artist's daughter, she had to attempt to contain an entire life into a few pages. Kobro, a Russian artist who spent all her life in Łódź, Poland, is a key figure for me in my research on the avant-garde figures of the early twentieth century. Historically, the artist is often mentioned aside with her legendary partner Władysław Strzemiński a fertile avant-garde artist himself who engaged wide-ranging art forms. Despite the differences in their artistic enterprises, intimacy surrounded them as life partners and offered another vivid dimension, which was missing when I first become aware of their work. Since then, I've been 'collecting' and rediscovering avant garde couples; Aleksander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, Sophie Taeuber and Jean Arp, Sonia and Robert Delaunay..

Man, woman, ideals, bodies. Then comes the mother.

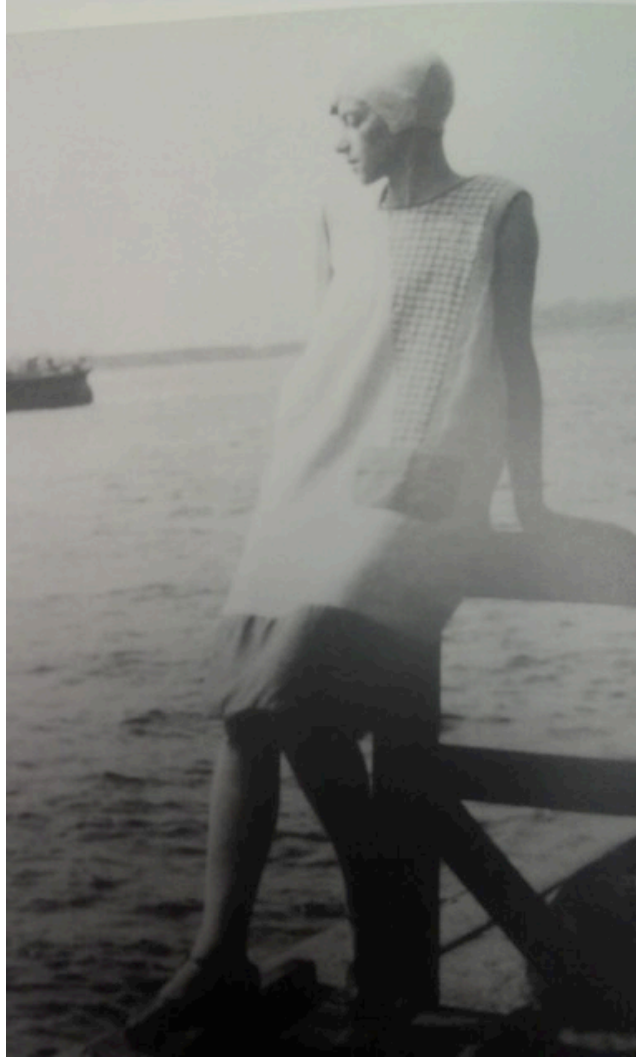
The most familiar word supplied me a shift in perspectives. It suggests a different kind of look into history, a vantage point that prefers the person to the historical

persona. Stealth (a daughter's view). A first person testimony about what had seemed to be out of reach, a witness when everything appeared to be hermetic.

*“ She would often “test” the clothes designed by my father. Some of them referred to his architectural compositions. “* Nika Strzemińska, Kobro's daughter.

This revelation gave birth to several projects, including *“When I looked at you, all I could see were Geometrics”*, 2012. This work was directly informed by research on the life and work of these Polish artists. In the investigation process, which was a breakthrough for me, I attempted to adopt their radical yet intimate way of imbuing abstraction with specificity. Working in the 1920's, the artists introduced a unique model of family life and avant-garde ideology. In his search for new compositions, Strzemiński hand-sewed dresses for his wife, translating formal ideas into lived-in textures. In response, I made several of my own. The dresses were used as platforms for painting, extending the visual language of Eastern European abstraction. To complete the objects, I vacuum-cast them onto a cylinder as one hermetic unit, a material compression that was meant to flatten historical and personal narratives into a single structural piece. In this and other works, I undertake the burden of history in terms of a possible conversation, cued to the present moment.





Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951), wearing a dress made by her husband Włodzimierz Strzemiński (1883-1970).

II. Over the past two years, I have used my work as a way to engage and interrupt history, positioning sculptural, pictorial and painterly decoys alongside each other in unexpected ways. The propositions and actions I set up arise from the crevice I perceive between history and its protagonists. I manifest those crevices through references to specific characters, places, beliefs, and appropriated icons. In the process of building my work, I use art historical

research as both a wedge to insert myself into time, as well as a lever to upend certain narratives. Most recently, I have been following the evolution of visionary modernism and artists associated with the Polish avant-garde. A new piece currently in development combines exploration of early European abstraction, material interventions in 1970s men's swimwear, and production experiments involving vacuum-casting techniques. A spectrum of other historic and contemporary artists and writers who have enriched my vocabulary and deepened my approach to conceiving and making include Jean-Jacques Lequeu, Charles Fourier, Juan Gris, Ivan Ilich Leonidov, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Sonia Delaunay, Kurt Schwitters (especially the Merzbau and its lovely desire to protect domesticity of history, and the ongoing symbolic failure due to the spreading of the war), Charlotte Posenenske, Blinky Palermo, Reinhard Mucha, Stuart Sherman, Charline von Heyl, and Michel Houellebecq.

III. In laying out the territory of my work I might envelop a modern day photo booth in a purple fog (*The Image-Maker*, 2013) or cast a field of aluminum banana peels to offer a mode of gestural mark making (*bananas*, 2013). A VW van, the All-American cinematic symbol of the rainbows generation, proposes a mobile exhibition space where love could dwell (*The Traveling Museum of Love*, 2007-11). I often attempt to absorb the spiritual attitudes surrounding objects and images, and then push them through material transformations and defamiliarization.

IV. I constantly find myself intrigued by the modern belief in the art-into-life project; the thought of noncapitalist modernity, where consumption is a consequence of co-production. In the logic of a world like that, the artist becomes a component of the everyday life. The abstraction product of yesterday is actually the product of tomorrow. Art is useful and a necessity in such universe. I remember Tatlin favoring a kitchen stove over his monument. This was heroism, to prefer the principle instead of the glorification of the ideal. The failure or guilt, which accompanies such process, is the anus of this enterprise. When a modern idea of "truth of materials" takes on a social agency a wild hybrid is created. Then the art product may become perverted, either for the better or for the worse.



Vladimir Tatlin, *design for a multipurpose metal pot*, 1923. Pencil on paper.

V. For our candidacy show at Reynolds Wrap old factory warehouse I wanted to make a site-specific work. A piece that may operate the vastness of the space and its 25' ceiling, but is still related to its history. "*Do it for the team-team*", 2012, is a bucket. It suggests an imagery that is estranged and familiar at the same time. Or maybe it is not a bucket; it is a resin cast of a used-looking hand-sculpted bucket shaped. The water and the neon are cast resin as well to combine a uniform materiality. It shows different appearances in different layers. The mantra inside the bucket encourages the spectator to act for a social order without supplying a motif. While it has an educational mission, its morals remain obscure. I am fascinated by the potential of a utilitarian thing to evoke an action.

VI. The correspondence between an individual and existing or speculative society echoes some of the instability of the images in my pieces. "*Crowd*", 2011, uses a photo of a mass audience that looks quite similar to the surface of the carpeted architecture adjacent to it. In this work, the surface of carpet becomes a crowd of threads and the image becomes a material: curved and moving toward form. The use of two copper tubes that suggest a possible piping as well as balancing mechanism between the carpeted unit and the image propose a third energy that ties these visually alike surfaces together. Copper is both a conduit of electricity as well as one of fluid. "Crowd" is rebelling against the consensual separation between imagery and abstraction. By creating vertigo of metaphors, a person who may encircle the piece gains more information by letting go of their

earlier impressions. In a way, the piece proposes its own rules as a learning habitat; it encourages the empirical study.

## VII. DOLLY-SHOT:

[On a humid summer night in Tel Aviv a few years ago, I was taking a bike ride, rolling down the dark streets. I found myself surrounded by collapsing Bauhaus era buildings. Massive and fragile, they appeared to me as a residue of beliefs from an extinct world. They were avatars of an older aesthetic worldview. More than just architectural relics of a historic moment, these buildings exist as grand sculptures of optimism. They passed before me as I rode, embodying and fracturing their histories.]

Cut.

## VIII.

So now we are here.

*There is a door in front of us. It is displaced from its original location,  
missing the handle and the lock. The door is handmade out of hardwood.  
A nice lacquer-coated-good-sweaty-condition-shape.*

*We look at this door.*

Is this form an image?

What would it take for it to become a vehicle of an abstraction?

One could say that abstract thinking is a carpet of particulars. The densest fabric of representation:

Like a play. Or the feeling of many mid-70's European movies. A long night of TV that is full of regrets. We are flying far above and looking downward. Falling asleep, slowly. Walking too fast. Running. Suddenly inside an illustrated children's dictionary. Full of schoolboy science and language games. Like us. Cereal melting into milk.

One could say that abstract thinking is a carpet of particulars.

IX. “The *Image-maker*”, 2011-13, is an interesting study case in the conjunction of a body and recent history. I think of it as a meta-image wearing a wet t-shirt. As a cultural icon, the device can be placed on the timeline a step before the digital revolution. It is a nostalgic machine. A machine that binds the magic surrounds the photographic process production with a distinct appearance of the object itself. The Photo booth is a familiar heterotopia within public spaces; shopping malls, beaches, Diners. A potential space that exists in the realms of larger spaces and offers to capture a momentary experience.

In a conceptual sense, the device suggests feasibility of replication and immortalizing. An image that gives birth to another image.

The scale of the piece is tricking, almost two-thirds of the original measure.

The object cannot contain anything but itself. The topography of the sculpture is based on subtle transitions between the different rectangles, which could be noticed through the translucent veil. Its three-dimensionally becomes a question mark. Are the visual characteristics indicating that this is actually a painting?

Relief? Furniture? Box?

The materiality remains vague, being consumed through a purplish filter; the resin-soaked linen leaves some haze, generates momentary uncertainty about where the exact surface is. There is a peculiar feeling of reflection, an echo of a daydream or a passing thought about the nature of the body of things in a world of disembodied technology.

To create the casing of the object I used a unique technique I have been developing over the past year. In a slow, 48-hour-long process, resin is applied to a fabric, using a vacuum machine. The effect that this process produces is compression between different parts of the object. This compression allows very close material connection, preventing the viewer the option of dismantling the piece into its components, and thus as a force to deal with the object as a whole, homogenous unit.

X. In the center of the flat Tel Aviv landscape stands Menashe Kadishman's *Rising*, a well known, outdoor abstract-minimalist sculpture constructed of three monolithic carbon steel circles. Still and hegemonic, it is a monument of the masculine 1970's generation. Their attempts to translate the common European visual language of the era are still spread all over the country. Just before moving to the USA, I wanted to add a simple intervention. I got a tattoo of this work, adding my nipple as a fourth circle that brought the original into the present (*"Portable Monument"*, 2010). It was a private refreshment of its ethos. I wanted this gesture to be an act of brotherhood that could participate in tradition while betraying its authority. The possibility of scarring the body in order to carry an ethos was a breakthrough in understanding potential of social relations between an individual and an individual's place in history.



*Portable Monument, 2010*



XI. Over the summer of 2012, I did a marathon of Pasolini's movies, with an emphasis on the trilogy. It has been a while since the first time I watched these. I was amazed to see the amount of effort Pasolini invests in defining the style, which surrounds the characteristics of the actors, most of them intellectuals or jet-set culture makers. Their style felt minimal, prestigious. Almost flashy in its gracefulness. The multiplied beach scenes were the ones that attracted my attention the most. The way miniature bathing suits represent how a person stands in the world was astonishing. It made me think about the triangle of fashion-attitude-person. I was curious to investigate this potential in the sphere of arts, in the realm of modern and contemporary history.



*Still from Pasolini's L'avventura (1960)*

*"Modern Swimmers"*, a work in progress, is comprised of 10 sculptural objects based on men's swimwear from the 1970's, using minimal clothing as a playful site for exploring reductive ideals in art. It is a meeting point between the

everyday body and utopian ideals. The swimwear are following the procedural and intuitive logics of skin grafts and remixes, the bathing suits are subjected to a matrix of interdependent alterations where, for example, a shape derived from the visual language of Eastern European abstraction is cut from one fabric and implanted onto the next, triggering sequences of corresponding changes in the other garments to produce weird, dissonant hybrids. One of the production challenges is to maintain a successful economy of exchanges, so that a particular shape removed from one suit will necessarily be replaced by a matching patch taken from another. The historical familiarity of these compositions is confronted with the stiff boundaries of the present economy. In order to create an abstraction which is coherent to artists such Sophie Taeuber-Arp, František Kupka, Ivan Kliun, the process has to obey to the logic of exchanges, the real material which is it borrowing from.

Following the sewing phase, the bathing suit collages were vacuumed-cast into modeled clay. The clay was sculpted in notion of organic and anthropomorphic design, and was treated as image-less figurative sculpture. The final product is an excessive object; it feels as if it drowns with genitals, but simultaneously it has a disembodied ghost-shape, though clothed, which does not correspond directly to a specific human form. But more than this, this strange bathing carries the baggage of embarrassment. A universal feel of sudden inflation of a trunk inside a water source or an unpredictable erring piss within a swimming pool. Maybe, if we are prompted once again by the Eastern-European early 20th century social approach, this aspect of an outspoken encounter with a fashion garment may

present an unexplored resolution of seeing the other person. This person, who used to be your coworker in the factory, is also a self.



1970's swimwear with compositions derived from European abstract art.



Sonia Delaunay – various swimsuits 1928-32

XII. The works that are presented here take the shape of sculptures, paintings and reliefs that merge borrowed forms of everyday objects with art historical references and humor. The pieces explore various strategies of friction between surfaces and familiar imagery. When assembling the forms in these works, I search for particularities, using notions like warmth, wind, compression or suction as guides. The materials are diverse, with surfaces that develop through slow processes of layering. These skins may be invisible or untraceable in the final product but serve as catalysts for emotional response. They are melded singular entities. The time it takes to perceive the objects connects deeply to the time that went into their making.

As I step back, I like to think of my work as a kind of Concrete Abstraction. One that is a product of specific images, histories and processes. I want the abstract image to be present, instead of theoretical or intellectual. The work is an attempt to convey experience of the world 'the way it is.' This concrete abstraction invites the viewer to inhabit the object and then reassemble it, to take part in a kind of blurring, slippage and shift, from representation to abstraction and back again.

XIII. Forever starts now.

I wish to preserve history by forcing images to have one.

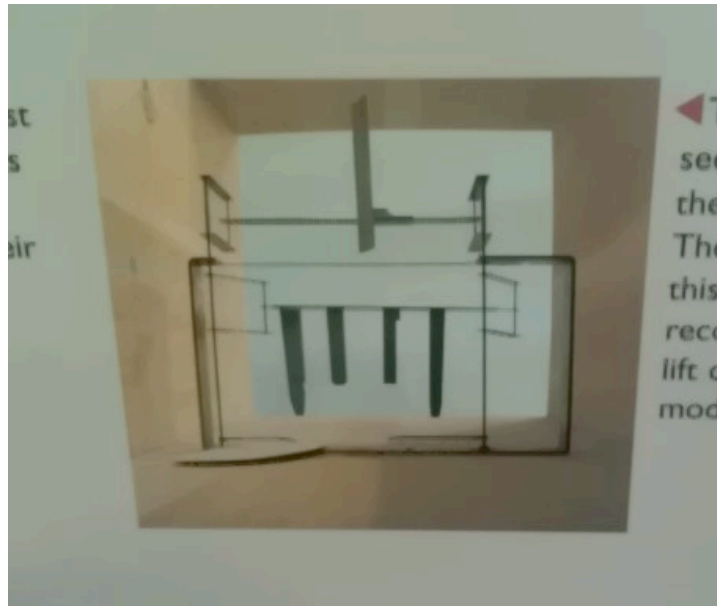
I wish to enact the past through a future slide.

I wish that the space of such transition would be my kitchen.

If Sci-fi could coexist with surrealism, thus maybe Tatlin can reside along with Orville and Wilbur Wright.

If what lasted of the idea of productive society is just an image, not quite appearing but still out there, it still can become a real tropicity.

One thing I know for sure, that sexuality and humor will be sweet vehicles to get there.



Lift balance model; design and built by the Wrights brothers

Maybe it is like storing a guitar on an airplane.





Works mentioned in the text:

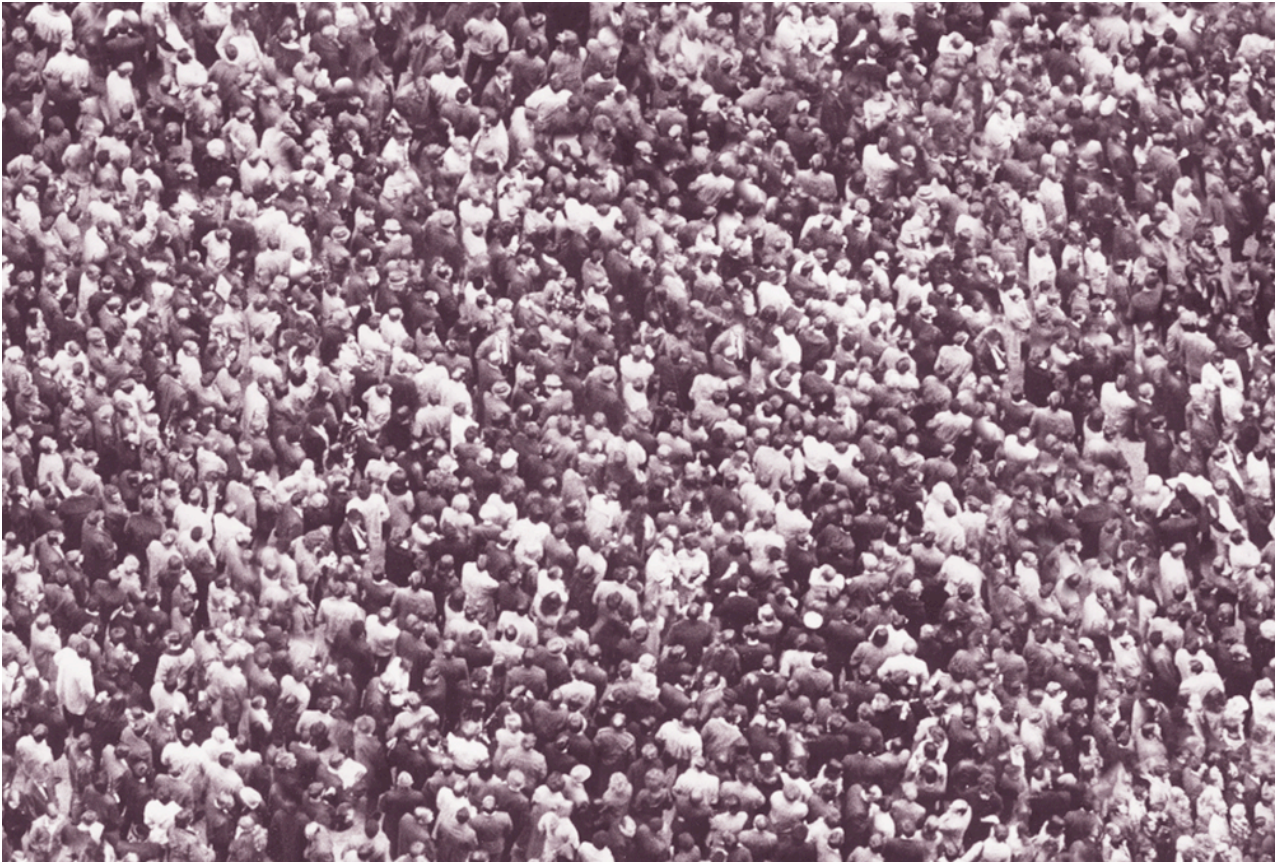
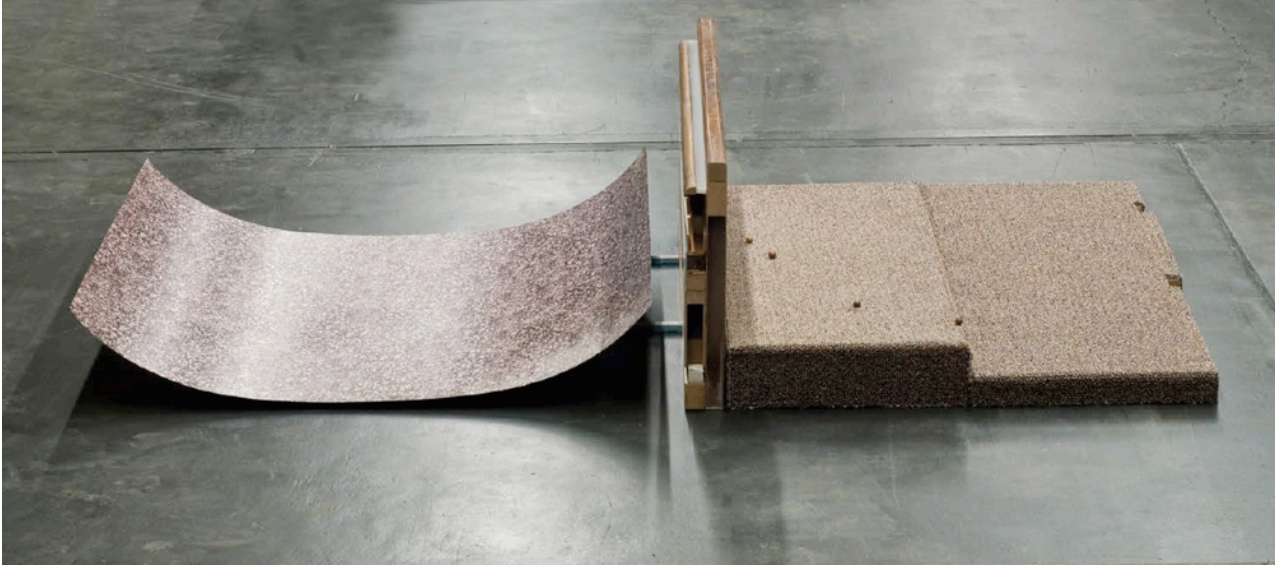


I.      *When I looked at you, all I could see were Geometrics*, 2012



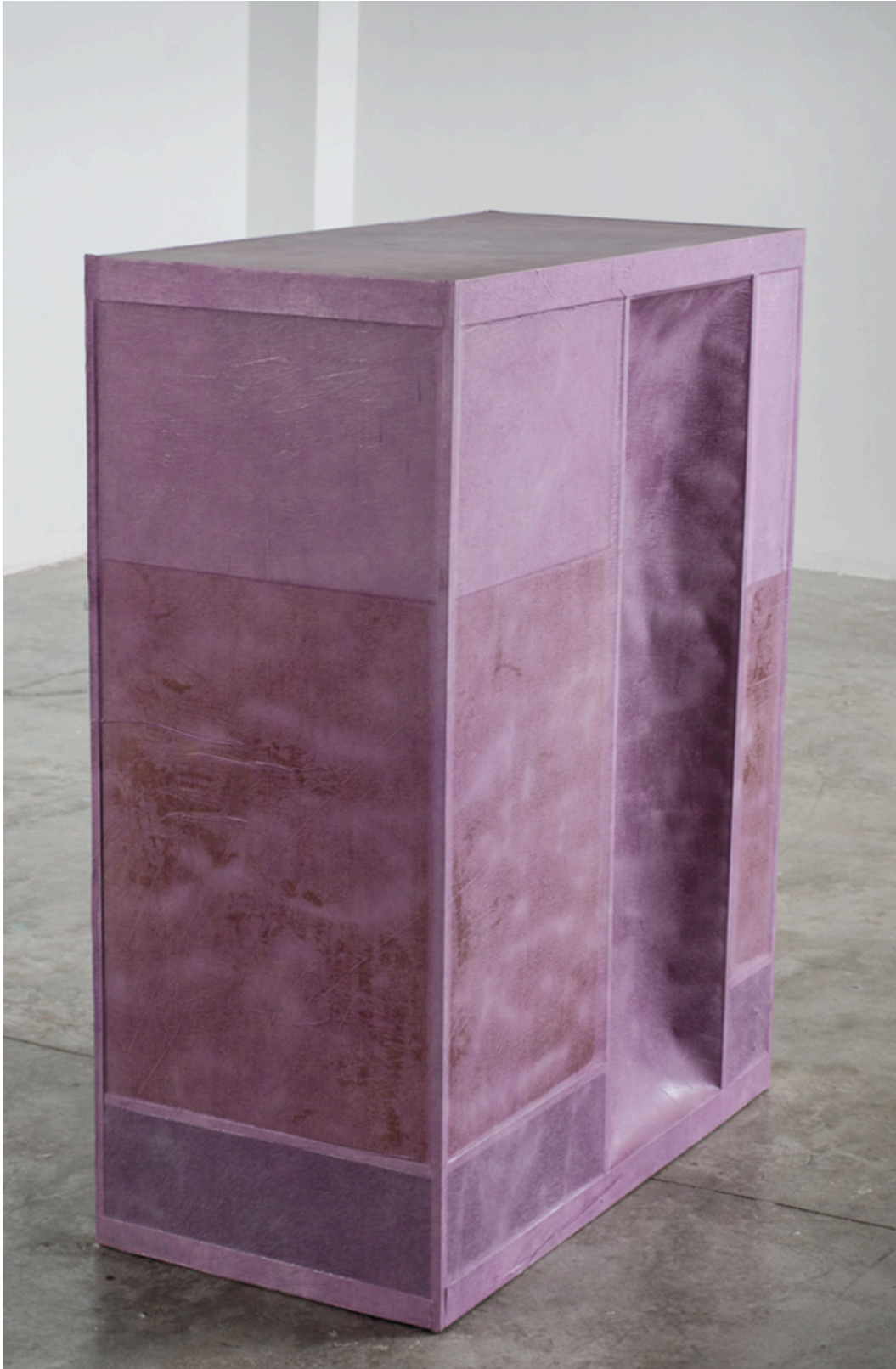
V. *Do it for the team team*, 2012





VI. *Crowd, 2011*





IX. *The Image-maker*, 2011-13

Thesis Exhibition images



Installation shots





Installation shots



*bananas, 2013*





*bananas (detail), 2013*





*Forever starts now, 2013*

## **Vita**

Lior Modan

Born 1983

Lives and work in Richmond VA

BFA Fine Arts, Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, 2009

MFA Sculpture and Extended Media, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013