

ALL OF THIS AND NOTHING

For *All of this and nothing*, the most recent exhibition in the Hammer Museum's ongoing Invitational series, curators Anne Ellegood and Douglas Fogle have invited seven Los Angeles-based artists to exhibit alongside seven of their peers from Berlin, Buenos Aires, Glasgow, London, Mexico City, and New York. At its heart, *All of this and nothing* explores affinities among a group of artists who investigate fundamental philosophical questions about our experiences of existing in the world. These expansive questions—"all of this"—are addressed not through grandiose statements or monumental objects but rather through simple gestures that are inscribed with the everyday and the ephemeral, with the sense that the things that appear to be "nothing" may in fact warrant our attention. By grounding their works in materiality and deconstructing their mediums, the artists featured in this volume reveal the processes of art making to the viewer and support the notion that meaning in art is unstable, residing in constellations of objects over time rather than in singular objects.

With contributions by Douglas Fogle, Anne Ellegood, Corrina Peipon, John Cage, and Charles Long.

ARTISTS

Karla Black, Charles Gaines, Evan Holloway, Sergej Jensen, Ian Kiaer, Jorge Macchi, Dianna Molzan, Fernando Ortega, Eileen Quinlan, Gedi Sibony, Paul Sietsema, Frances Stark, Mateo Tannatt, Kerry Tribe

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selection of which were later printed and exhibited. Afterward he threw out all the leftover materials so that the project served not only as an experiment with another medium and mode of working—the construction of sculptures intended to be experienced only as images—but also as a sort of cleansing of the studio and simultaneous clearing of the mind.

This was, of course, connected to the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein²⁶

Just as Holloway's work takes up large questions and delves into fundamental issues of our existence, Ian Kiaer's research-based practice covers a lot of territory. Reflecting his interests in literature, architecture, art, and philosophy, Kiaer's work has revolved around such subjects as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's architectural treatise *L'architecture*, Frederick Kiesler's *Endless House*, the work of the architect Moshe Safdie, and Alexandre Dumas's nineteenth-century novel *The Black Tulip*. For his contribution to *All of this and nothing*, Kiaer made a new work related to the Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov's 1929 experimental cylindrical dream house and studio, a subject that he tackled in an earlier work. A highly unusual structure, the Melnikov house consists of two conjoined cylindrical shapes with sixty hexagonal windows that are reminiscent of the organic form of the beehive. As Kiaer wrote recently in an artist's statement about the dwelling, "Its geometry, white surface, and remote, singular poise, appear designed to provoke rumour of more complex workings within; as if the circular solution and eclipsing diameters might conform to some mystical planetary alignment or map an overlapping design of halos for an icon of orthodox saints." Melnikov intentionally combined living and working spaces, seeing the restful state of sleep as integral to his work, as it provided access to mysterious worlds generative of his creative process. Kiaer explores how the unusual house provided little connection to the outside world despite its many windows, taking on attributes of a tomb, a place of potential isolation more than inspiration.

Understated and elegant, Kiaer's individual works each consist of a constellation of modestly scaled objects, carefully composed to occupy the gallery like a group of props on a stage or a series of models intended as tools for thinking about a problem or for representing complex and layered ideas. The typically small scale of the various components of his installations creates a sense of intimacy and a feeling of narrative space wherein morsels of a mysterious story are suggested but never explained. The installations include carefully constructed sculptures coupled with two-dimensional wall works such as ethereal washy paintings or found materials

wrapped around stretchers, but Kiaer also places familiar objects like rolls of paper towels or pieces of Styrofoam directly on the floor. These items could easily be misunderstood as leftover materials from the installation rather than parts of the works of art themselves. His skilled use of scale calls on the latent potential of the architectural model as a proposition for something much larger and farther-reaching than itself. Resisting all expectations of the monumentality of sculpture or the unity of the art object, his material choices are simple and rooted in the everyday—plastic bags, rubber sheeting, Styrofoam, paper, pillows, found fabrics, and wood. Kiaer's installations are spare, and he deliberately leaves a lot of breathing room in the gallery so that each object is understood as an interconnected fragment of a larger investigation while still inviting contemplation on its own. The elements and their collective meaning remain elusive, suggesting an incomplete history that is rooted in both the past and the future, that is inspired by historical figures and events yet has become wholly anomalous and magically full of potential. In some sense, while Kiaer's specific interests in such things as the search for idealistic space inform all of his works, his projects remain so ambiguous and expansive that we are allowed to weave our own stories and interpretations into his simple yet incredibly seductive forms.

Never neglect the little things of life.

—Samuel Beckett²⁷

This essay borrows its title, "Assisted Levitation," from a work by Fernando Ortega in which he used a large crane to position a small bird feeder outside the window of a gallery at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil in Mexico City. There were no other works in the exhibition, and one had to walk through empty galleries to reach the window and see the piece. What at first glance appeared to be an incredible understatement (something as modest as a mere bird feeder constituting an entire exhibition) was revealed to be a much more complex affair, the scale of the crane far exceeding that of the typical artwork and its positioning outside the museum's windows no easy task. Whether the viewer would see a bird feeding outside the window was left to chance (and patience), giving visitors an incentive to spend more time than they might normally with a work of art in order to see it come alive. Like much of the work in *All of this and nothing*, Ortega's project enacts the temporal within the object. In works such as *Levitación asistida* (Assisted levitation, 2008), he deliberately employs obfuscation in order to slow down our experience.

Working in various mediums, Ortega takes note of the subtle interactions and occurrences that surround him—the way that one form or body affects or has to negotiate with another. These fleeting moments may on occasion be captured by his

camera, but more often he re-creates them, constructing environments and situations that mirror his experiences in the world or flights of fancy. For a recent video made while living temporarily in India, titled *Close Encounter* (2010), the artist reenacted a scene that he had witnessed on a narrow one-lane bridge across a river. A motorbike and an elephant approach each other from opposite ends of a single-lane bridge only to meet in the middle, unable to pass each other. There is a long, tense period in which the two face off, presumably contemplating their next move. While the elephant is clearly larger and heavier, he also seems to be smarter and more diplomatic, as he slowly walks backward off the bridge and out of sight, allowing the motorbike to cross.

Ortega's series of photographs *N. Clavipes Meets S. Erard* (2008) are the result of putting a spider in a room with a harp that has been stripped of its strings. Over time, the spider wove its web in place of the harp's strings, creating a delicate new instrument. While Ortega hoped that the spider would find the void within the harp an attractive site, whether it would "perform" as desired was left entirely to chance, the outcome thus feeling like a small miracle of nature. Many of his works invoke or use music in different ways, tapping into the meaningful connections between the visual and the auditory. *Transcripción* (Transcription, 2004) consists of a score inspired by the irritating buzz of a mosquito in one's ear. The sheet music sits on a simple music stand in the gallery, and periodically a violinist enters unannounced and plays the composition. For a work such as this, Ortega creates parameters and then leaves the visitor's experience somewhat to chance. The score itself is guided by the particular sounds of the mosquito, but the opportunity to hear it performed is completely arbitrary, relying simply on the possibility that one happens to be in the gallery at the right time. Ortega's practice relies on contingencies—moments and gestures that might otherwise go unnoticed or that could be easily forgotten. He heightens our awareness of the enormous beauty and innumerable mysteries of the everyday and encourages us to take time to look around.

"Modernity" is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent.

—Charles Baudelaire²⁸

Jorge Macchi's work also has a strong connection to time and an ability to identify the poetic within the cycles of life and death. Reflecting his interest in the trajectory of time and the different ways in which it operates, his works articulate and frame fleeting moments as well as protracted periods, from the hours of the day to a lifetime. For *Vidas paralelas* (Parallel lives, 1998), Macchi took a hammer to a sheet of glass, puncturing a hole in it and creating a series of cracks radiating outward from the point of

contact. On a second, accompanying sheet of glass, he painstakingly created identical cracks with a glass cutter, producing what seems like a nearly impossible twin form. The two pieces become bookends of chance and precision; the immediacy of the act of breaking a piece of glass juxtaposed with the intense focus and time needed to re-create this short-lived but dramatic moment. Macchi's *Tiempo real* (Real time, 2007) marks the passing minutes of the day in a video that portrays a digital-looking clock—the parts of the numbers composed of matchsticks—presented on a monitor in the gallery. The clock is set each morning to display the actual time of day, and visitors are made aware of the passing of time as they move through the space.

Monoblock (1999) is emblematic of a number of works in which Macchi cuts newspapers or other readily available materials. In this case he has excised the texts from the obituary pages of a newspaper, leaving only the framed outlines of the daily death announcements with their accompanying religious symbols and layering the now abstracted forms upon one another. The inevitable fact of death is presented in a way that removes the details to acknowledge the universal connections between us. Working in a range of scales, from small drawings and collages to room-size installations and public artworks, Macchi also enacts various relationships to space—in some cases expanding our perception through light or tricks of illusion, as in his wallpaper work *Vanishing Point* and his disco ball installation *Sull Song*, both from 2005—making us more aware of our body's relationship to its surroundings. Like other artists in the show, Macchi investigates what it means to exist in the world, taking on questions both large and small and encouraging us to experience our lives with new insight.

I think art's project is fundamentally meliorative. The aim of meditating about the world is finally to change the world. It is this meliorative aspect of literature that provides its ethical dimension.

—Donald Barthelme²⁹

While the philosophical explorations found at the heart of the works in *All of this and nothing* have been the purview of artists throughout history, there are also arguments for contemporary art that prioritize the idea that it should be concise and understandable, that works should be complete and autonomous, and that artists should present their works as the inevitable outcome of confident claims and articulations of conclusive ideas. From the marketplace to platforms for pedagogy and criticism, value is often placed on evaluating individual works. This perspective emphasizes the notion that artworks should stand alone and that meaning should reside on the surface in order to be readily understood. Any sense of criticality is likely to

IAN KIAER

Having started out as a painter, Ian Kiaer expanded his practice to incorporate sculptural elements after seeing an exhibition of the work of the architect Rem Koolhaas. Kiaer was impressed by the latent potential of the architectural models on view: "It was something to do with the model's physical presence, which by its nature is intimate and dependent on an interior space and yet metaphorically always tends to imply a wider proposition for society. I suppose in that sense, the model can work in the space between hermeticism and engagement; it has a place in both."¹ Interested in visionary thinkers throughout intellectual history, Kiaer is fascinated by the idea that utopian social ideas are often developed by thinkers who are cloistered in forced or voluntary exile, an ironic duality that parallels the process of art's production occurring in isolation and its reception playing out in public.

Architectural models are made in preparation for building something at full scale, but in Kiaer's work models operate as proposals as well as spaces into which one may project oneself or that one may envision inhabited by an imaginary population. In this sense, his models are more like miniatures, a distinction of scale as it pertains to the experience of sculpture versus the function of scale in an architectural model, in which scale is used out of necessity to show how an idea will be manifested at a much larger size. In other words, they are intended to represent something real. In sculpture, scale is manipulated in relation to the content of the work and plays on perception and association in order to achieve a desired effect and to aid in the construction of meaning. By incorporating models into his arrangements of handmade and found objects, Kiaer opens the work to both possibilities; in the context of an artwork that includes other elements, his architectural models are both propositions and representations. He is thus able to achieve a doubling of scale. The first is human scale—one's encounter with the array of objects and images within the space in relation to one's own body—and the second is the imagined scale of a figure small enough to occupy the space of the model. At this scale everything is transformed: an upturned garbage pail is a mountain; an expanse of black plastic is an ocean.

Dumas project (2010) is based on the French author and adventurer Alexandre Dumas's 1850 novel *The Black Tulip*, which is set in seventeenth-century Holland and tells the fictional story of a young man who attempts to win a national competition to breed a black tulip but is suddenly imprisoned. The tale is set against the backdrop of the true story of the lynching of the highest-ranking Dutch government official and his brother by an angry mob in 1692. The constellations of works in *Dumas project* are mostly black and white, with the exception of *Dumas project: yellow offset* (2010), which is made of stretched yellow cotton cloth covered by clear plastic sheeting. The black-and-white palette suggests presence and absence, substance and lack. The arrangements of objects recall traditional still-life painting, a genre that was prominent in seventeenth-century Dutch art. The landscape was also revered by Dutch painters of the period, and Kiaer's placement of delicate constructions of square, circular, and triangular hivelike forms in *Dumas project: black tulip/rings*, *Dumas project: small white offset*, and *Dumas project: large white offset* calls to mind the ships in harbor scenes that celebrated the legendary Dutch affinity for trade or the bounty of fruit and bouquets of flowers that symbolize abundance, beauty, and life in Dutch still lifes. Other floral motifs run through the work, as in the white-on-white patterning in the fabric element of *Dumas project: small white offset* (2010) and the suggestive title of *Dumas project: bud, a small rock that is shaped like a nascent flower*.

Kiaer strives to eradicate the possibility of apprehending his works as complete by employing several strategies, including composing his tableaux from fragments, refusing clearly delineated frames, and dispersing the point of view. These strategies are reinforced by his use of found ephemeral materials. The cast-off materials engage in an interplay with marginalized utopian ideas that he pulls from history and embeds in the work, not always as metaphor but often as representation. Using modest materials such as worn fabrics, balsa wood, cardboard, and trash to invoke majestic spaces, diminutive gestures to stand in for grand ideas, and sparsely arranged ordinary objects to evoke extraordinary landscapes, Kiaer conjures imagined spaces and real places, inviting the viewer to enter and explore the continually evolving ideas and the potential for change that lie within one's own history.

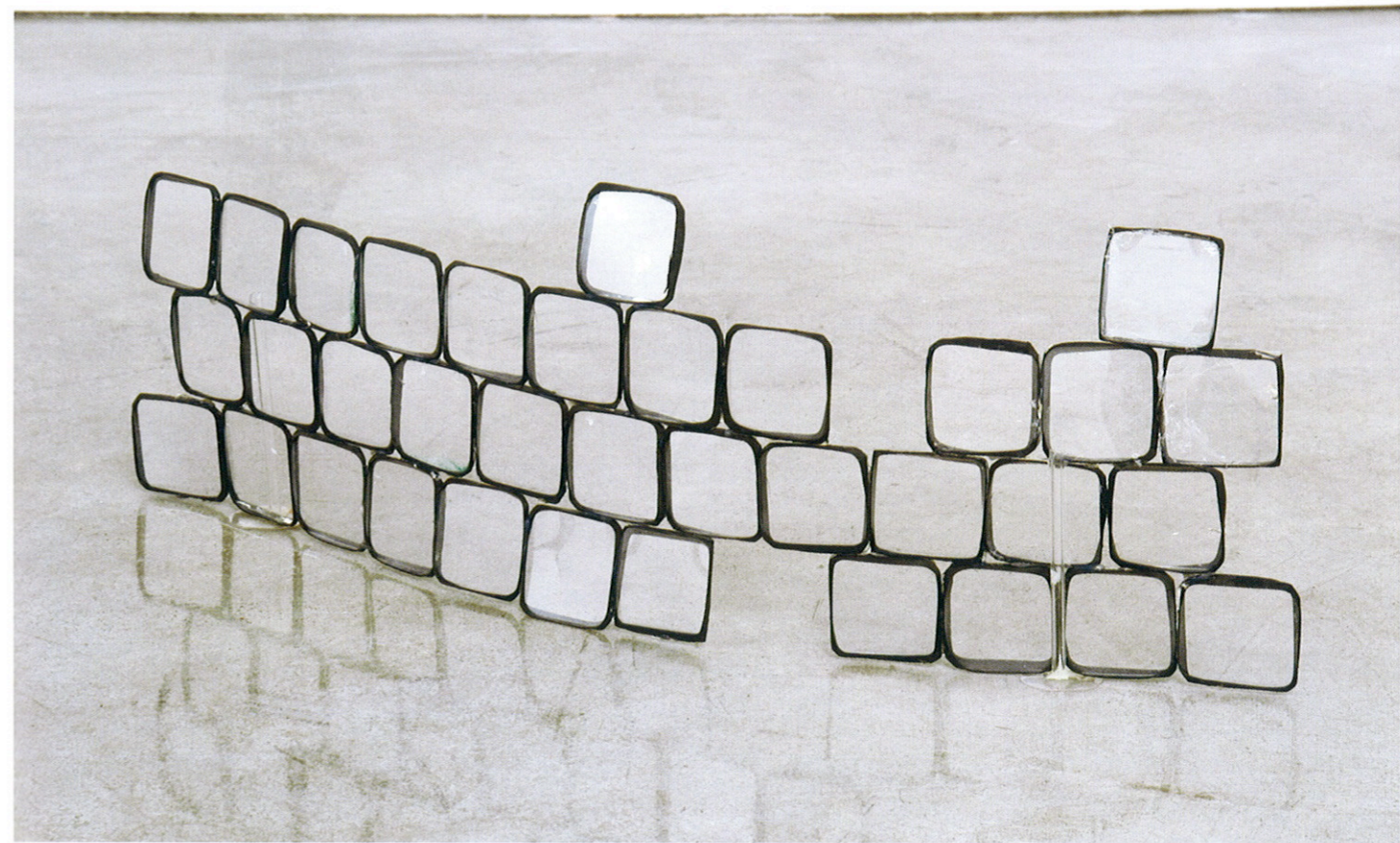
1. Ian Kiaer, in "Interview with Ian Kiaer and Caoimhin Mac Giolla Léith," in *Ian Kiaer: Endless House Projects* (Rome: British School at Rome, 2005), 19.



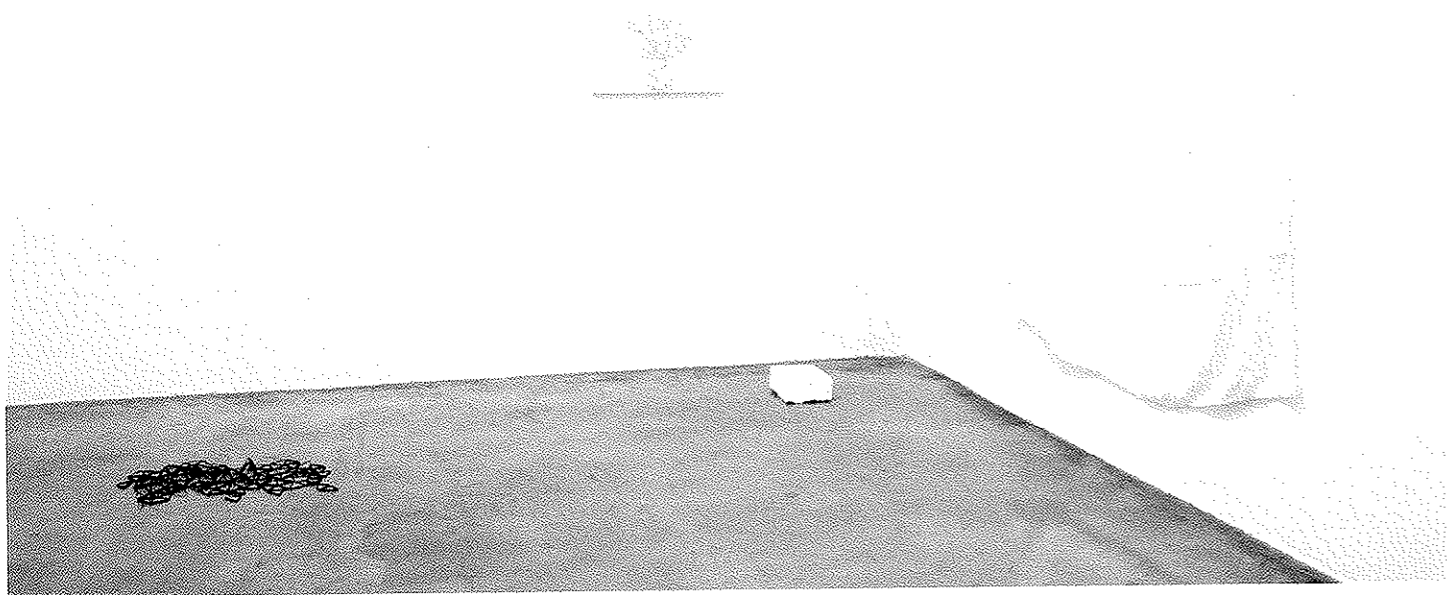
Ian Kiaer, *Melnikov project: Pravda workers' club*, 2004; metal, wood and Formica table, paper, cardboard, rubber and acrylic sheet, wood, and watercolor and varnish on linen; dimensions variable. Courtesy of Jarla Partilager.



Ian Kiaer, *Dumas project: black tulip/rings*, 2010; synthetic fabric, acrylic on taffeta, tissue paper, rubber, and plastic; overall dimensions variable, approx. 77 x 110 x 280 in. (195 x 280 x 710 cm). Collection Dr. Paul Marks, Toronto. Installation view, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.



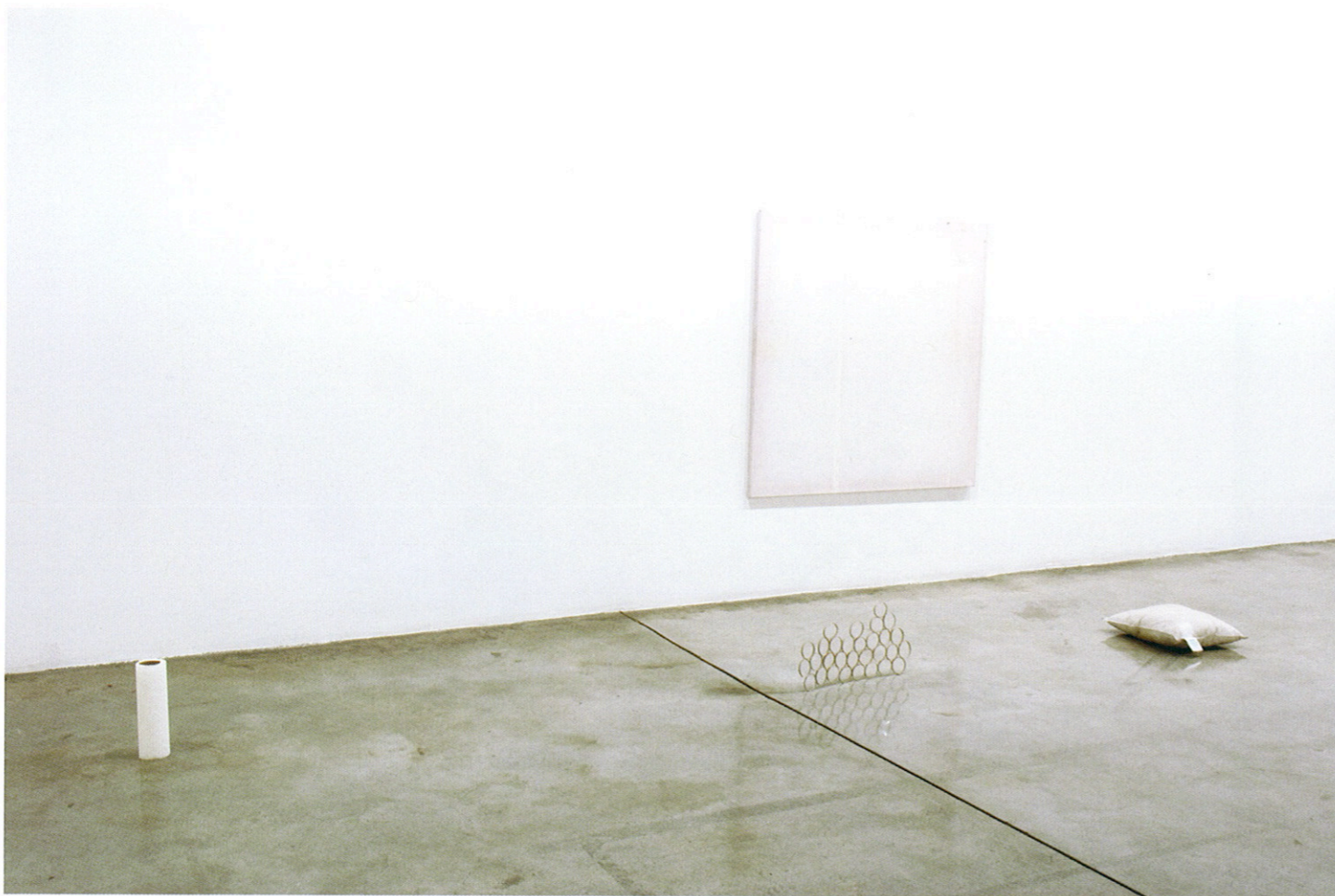
Ian Kiaer, *Dumas project: black tulip/rings*, 2010 (detail)



Ian Kiaer, *Dumas project: large white offset*, 2010; linen, acrylic on cotton, polystyrene, plastic, and rubber; 77 x 104 x 122 in. (195.6 x 264.2 x 310 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Installation view, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.



Ian Kiaer, *Dumas project: large white offset*, 2010 (detail)



Ian Kiaer, *Dumas project: small white offset*, 2010; oil on cotton, cotton pillow, cardboard, plastic, and paper towels; overall installation dimensions: 55 x 135 x 45 in. (139.7 x 343 x 114.3 cm). Collection Dr. Paul Marks, Toronto. Installation view, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.



Ian Kiaer, *Bruegel project: survival balloon*, 2007; Mylar and electric fan; installation dimensions variable, approx. 84 x 84 x 91 in. (213.5 x 213.5 x 231 cm). Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. Installation view (with detail), Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 2007.