Upon entering the darkened gallery, visitors see a glowing box on the floor in the middle of the room. A circular opening punctures its opaque top, and its transparent sides are covered on the inside with a dark, sootlike dust that is mysteriously smeared and wiped away. Two nude human figures, male and female, slowly twist and turn within the box, as if attempting to find a comfortable position in their tight enclosure. Occasionally, one of them extends a hand through the opening, leaving dark smudges on the top of the box. From elsewhere in the gallery, a female voice whispers a list of male and female first names. As the couple continues twisting and turning, their naked bodies become coated in the dust that once obscured them from view; the sides of the box become transparent as the figures darken. Then the box goes blank. Moments later, it is illuminated again, and the surreal, dreamlike sequence repeats itself.

Peter Sarkisian first exhibited *Dusted* at New York’s I-20 Gallery in 1998, gaining wide recognition for this singular video sculpture. Trained in cinematography, he had begun making video installations four years earlier. Critics applauded his bold move to replace the video screen with a three-dimensional object that occupied space in the gallery and demanded viewer engagement. As he said at the time:

“There is a real sense of shared space with the image. You don’t get that when you watch television because you’re looking at a box held to a frame. Television is a reference to another time and place. With my stuff there’s less a sense of mediation between you and the image.”

Although *Dusted* reappraised nearly unanimous praise, critics made divergent associations with it. They ranged from viewing the couple as Adam and Eve, to musing on the difficulties of modern-day romantic relationships, to comparing the traditions of abstraction and figurative in art history. Sarkisian himself saw *Dusted* in even broader and more philosophical terms: “The core of this work is balance,” he said, “the equal and opposite relationship between clarity and obscurity, growth and decay, life and death.”

Interestingly, neither the artist nor those writing about this work dwelt on his use of technology here. Although his medium is video, Sarkisian does not draw attention to it. Instead, he employs it imaginatively to create illusionistic scenes that invite careful attention and encourage contemplation.

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**Peter Sarkisian**

*American, born 1965*

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*50 Dusted*

1998

Five-projection digital video, plywood box, and audio track, 29 1/2 x 33 x 33 in.

*Museum Purchase, 2003.0001*
Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwartz is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwartz, won the Hendrickson Book Award and Prize.


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