



Features

Dan Paz: The sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building

By James Knowlton April 3, 2019

In-depth, critical perspectives exploring art and visual culture on the West Coast.

In the exhibition *The sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building*, Seattle-based artist Dan Paz examines two institutions of Washington state: Seattle University and the juvenile detention center nestled nearby. Exploring how concrete monoliths control and subvert light, Paz works to expose the underlying levels of surveillance one incurs within these Brutalist-informed buildings. Curated by Yaelle Amir, the exhibition most notably comprises a large-scale video projection that deconstructs the cinematic form; its choreography investigates how light, or the lack thereof, can be manipulated to incite behaviors of control, domination, and sublimation. Paz shows that particular architectural structures create banal and carceral environments that subject their residents to lasting effects.



Dan Paz. Credits, 2019; video; installation view, *The sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building*, HOLDING Contemporary. Courtesy of

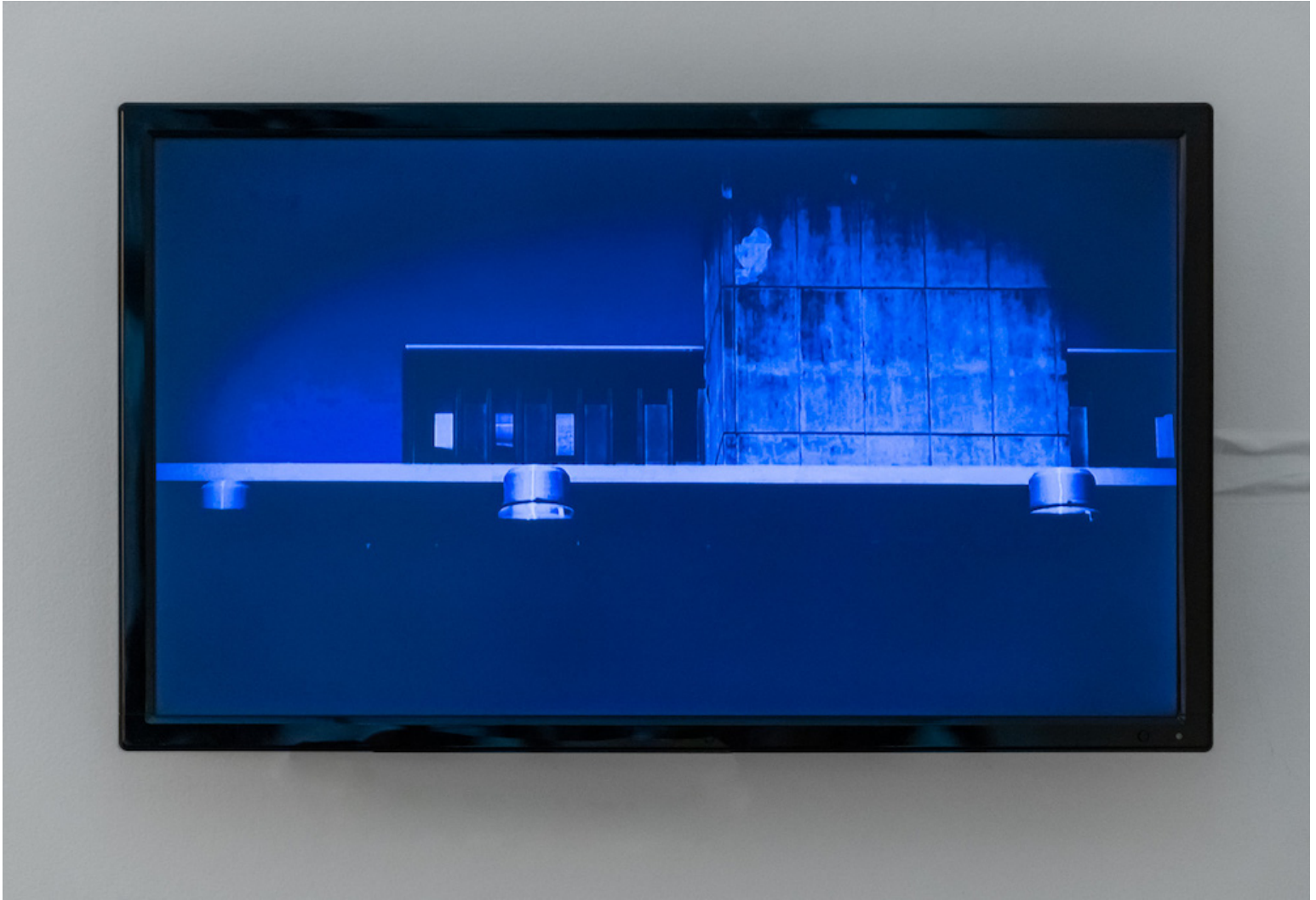
The host gallery, HOLDING Contemporary (formerly Williamson | Knight), has blacked out its storefront windows, mirroring the Brutalist architectural forms that often allow little to no natural light to penetrate their concrete walls. Light gives life; it can also expose, illuminate, or even extract an idea from a hidden place. In the gallery, there are several ceramic and concrete lanterns on the floor, accompanied by three large overlapping projections. The 4K videos capture a group of young individuals enacting semi-synchronized movements on Seattle University's soccer field. The gestures are led by the Seattle-based choreographer and frequent Paz collaborator, Donnell Williams. The videos are shot from overhead by a drone operated by Paz. Each projection reorients and re-establishes a new perspective of the action while maintaining its focus on the individuals. Beyond the images of the field, there are periodic shots of the neighboring juvenile detention center and other nondescript city buildings. Each time the camera shifts and re-establishes its point of reference, the demarcated lines of the field shift as well, forming new geometric composite shapes between all three projections. The shift of the camera mimics that of a role-playing video game, pivoting on sharp turns and hard angles. The people become like small birds or insects; they become people running from an unseen force in the sky. They weave to and fro, throwing their arms asunder or waving their hands. The youths become citizens in a martial law environment, in which helicopters observe their every move as they flee. They writhe and roll on the ground. From moment to moment, their actions break from synchronization to what appears to be individual improvisation. The action consistently ebbs and flows as the camera continues to shift its perspective around and above them.

The lanterns that function as the sculptural foil to the projection are thick, concrete disc-like forms stacked at a range of heights. Atop the concrete pillars rest ceramic cylinders with vertical rectangular cutouts that reveal the candlelight. Each cylindrical tower is hand-built and cast in porcelain and stoneware. The artist explains, "[The sculptures] show the hand and the institutional attempt at replication. Some were entirely hand-built; others were cast and then reshaped by hand before drying or firing." Some are more uniform; one appears blown open a bit, along a window-like cutout; a few others tilt to the side.

With cylindrical towers rising above cells below, Paz's forms are reminiscent of the panopticon, an architectural design created by Jeremy Bentham in the nineteenth century. In this design, the circular inspection tower allowed one guard to view all of the inmates in the cells below the tower, each cell separated from one another by a wall. With this model, it is physically impossible for a watchman to view all the inmates at once, yet because the inmates know that they can be watched at any moment, they are motivated to regulate their behavior out of fear of exposure. In the eyes of the philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault, the panopticon became a mode and theory of governmental control and surveillance. According to Foucault, the subjects within a society driven by what he called "panopticism" become "the object of information, never a subject in communication."¹ Paz's work forms linkages between stark, concrete Brutalist schools and prisons and how our urban environments covertly control our behaviors through implied surveillance. Within an individualized and highly surveilled society, we all become the watchers and the watched.

Long after one has left the gallery, the sonic component of the exhibition lingers. Paz collaborated on the overture with a Seattle University student chamber trio (Josie McDonell on piano and Raymond Seng'enge and Anna Iwasaki on violin). The soundtrack is additionally enhanced by the Auburn University marching band and recordings of found instrumentals, slowed to an incomprehensible drone. The drone is what remains, reinforcing the auditory sensation of a pressurized room—of an inescapable space, or a preconceived narrative placed upon one by a societal prejudice.

Statistically, eighty percent of federal and state prisoners are high-school dropouts, and individuals born in the economically lowest ten percent are twenty times more likely to end up in prison. And for a variety of reasons, such as prejudice, the Black community makes up nearly forty percent of the incarcerated population.² There is a direct correlation between race, poverty, and imprisonment; surveillance and national educational frameworks play a role in eliciting the behaviors they supposedly seek to prevent. Ultimately, the video and sculptural works in Paz's exhibition meditate on the buildings where society has placed its youths at a formative time in their lives. These buildings and questions surrounding the modes of community support they advertise lie at the heart of contemporary criticism for our prisons and schools alike.



Dan Paz. *Credits*, 2019; video; installation view, *The sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building*, HOLDING Contemporary. Courtesy of HOLDING Contemporary, Portland. Photo: Mario Gallucci.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes our current prison-industrial complex and society of surveillance as a carceral archipelago or a prison of many islands.³ These islands exist as border walls, hospitals, schools, and prisons and between the civil servants responsible for gateways and checkpoints. Paz believes that the people who are most impacted by systems rife with suspicion and neglect are the marginalized—mostly Black and Brown bodies, the differently abled, and queer communities. Because our society views some people as inherently criminal, the prison system becomes an entity that normalizes their mistreatment within institutional frameworks. The prison-industrial complex relies on a cycle of recidivism—of policies and laws that target already vulnerable populations in order to exploit these bodies for economic profit. Regarding the juvenile detainees who are unseen in the video but felt through the presence of the structure that holds them, it is important to note that eighty-five percent of juvenile defendants reoffend and return to prison.⁴ This is why current activists, such as the group Critical Resistance, do not believe in prison reform but instead in prison abolition and an entire overhaul of the school-to-prison pipeline. Paz's work asks the viewer to consider the ways in which the literal and ideological structures society builds around its youth affect their self-image and self-worth. To both Foucault and Paz, it appears that the ways we are surveilled are subtle, varied, and more common than we realize, with potentially dire consequences.

Dan Paz: The sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building, *is on view at HOLDING Contemporary (formerly Williamson | Knight) through April 13, 2019.*

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Penguin, 1985), 157.
2. Dan Kopf, "New Data Clearly Illustrate the Poverty-to-Prison Pipeline," *Quartz*, March 22, 2018, <https://qz.com/1233966/new-data-clearly-illustrate-the->

poverty-to-prison-pipeline/; Eli Day, "The Race Gap in US Prisons is Glaring, and Poverty is Making It Worse," *Mother Jones*, February 2, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2018/02/the-race-gap-in-u-s-prisons-is-glaring-and-poverty-is-making-it-worse/>; Izza Choudhry, "High School Dropouts More Likely to Go to Prison," *The Spotlight*, March 19, 2018, <https://slspotlight.com/opinion/2018/03/19/high-school-dropouts-more-likely-to-go-to-prison/>.

3. Foucault, 297.

4. "Do We Know the Full Extent of Juvenile Recidivism?" *MST Services*, November 1, 2018, <http://info.mstservices.com/blog/juvenile-recidivism-rates>.