

Context from Place

An Interview with Peter Alexander

This article is taken from a longer interview *Oz* editors conducted with Peter Alexander. It has been edited to remove extraneous words and read easier. Otherwise, the article has remained mostly unchanged to maintain its accuracy.

Oz: Using resin to cast objects came about early for you. Did that begin while you were in architecture school?

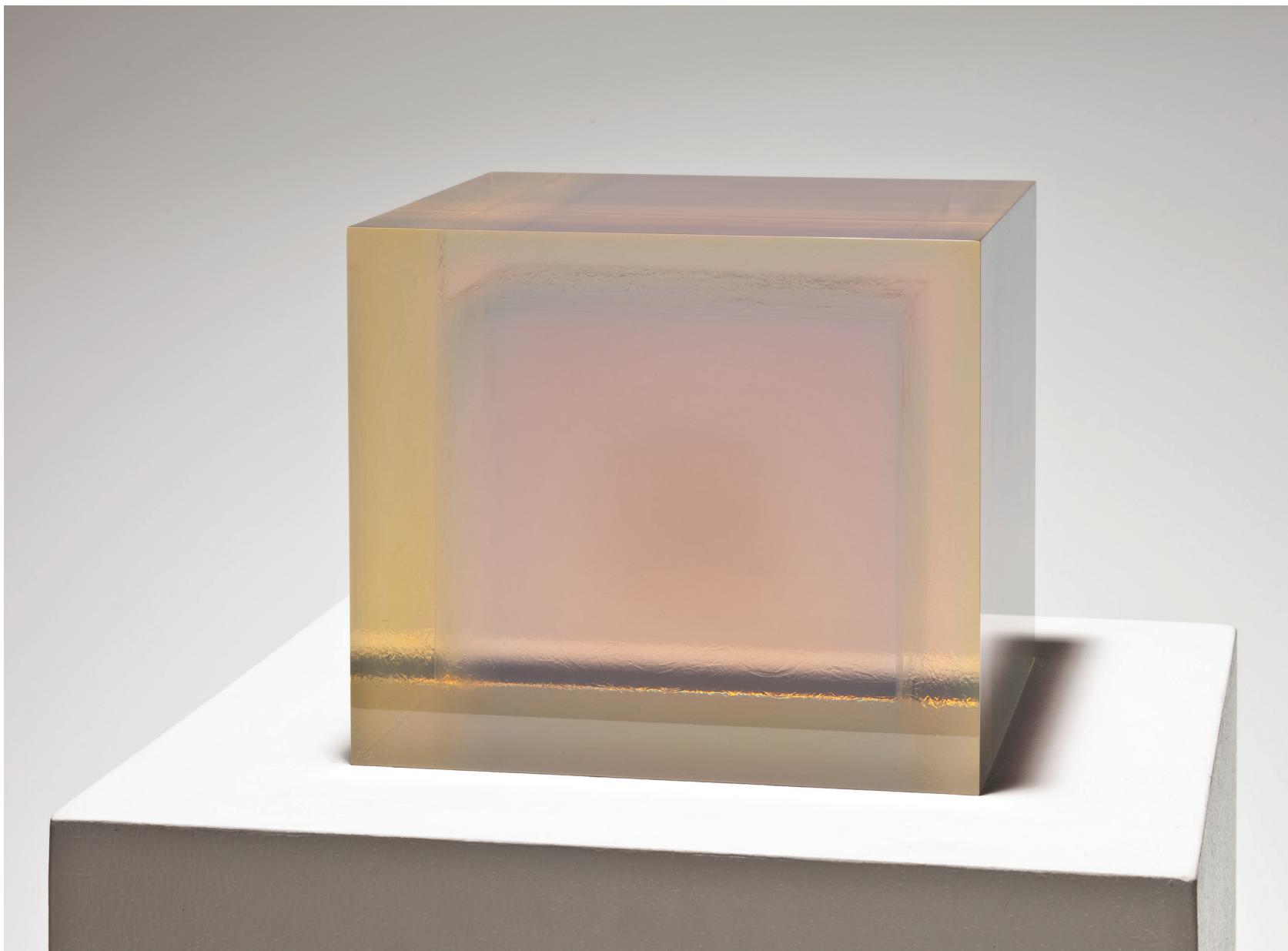
Peter Alexander: I got the idea from patching surf boards. I started surfing when I was about thirteen, and I used fiberglass polyester to patch digs in the board. I remember in the bottom of the Dixie cup was this clear liquid that had hardened and looked like water, like frozen water. At the time, I was doing a project at UCLA, and I thought that I could do that using resin. One thing led to another, and that is how I started. I didn't know anybody else working with it then, although I did meet others later on, but plastics were not popular at the time. They were a no go, and that was a fun thing to push against.

Did that ever make you second guess yourself or were you always sure about the resins?

I was absolutely positive. I started casting cubes. Boxes and cubes. The first ones I did had some objects inside—like the cloud box. And that was sort of an ordeal.

The resin at the time could only be cast a half inch at a time, otherwise





it could explode. It wasn't made to be used the way I was using it. I caught a few things on fire from time to time. Nothing of consequence, but it just happened. So, I had to cast in layers. It was during that process that I did the clouds.

Do you have a process on choosing the color for these objects?

It is all gut. There is no rational method that I use, and the only color theory I knew about was Corbusier's

theory of color, which was sort of a crock, but it was a place to begin. It gave me the idea that there was something determinable and calming, but really, there was not.

If I had not been in California, none of this would have happened.

Really?

Sure. You start with the surfing and the ocean. That's what I was seduced by, and the closest thing to water

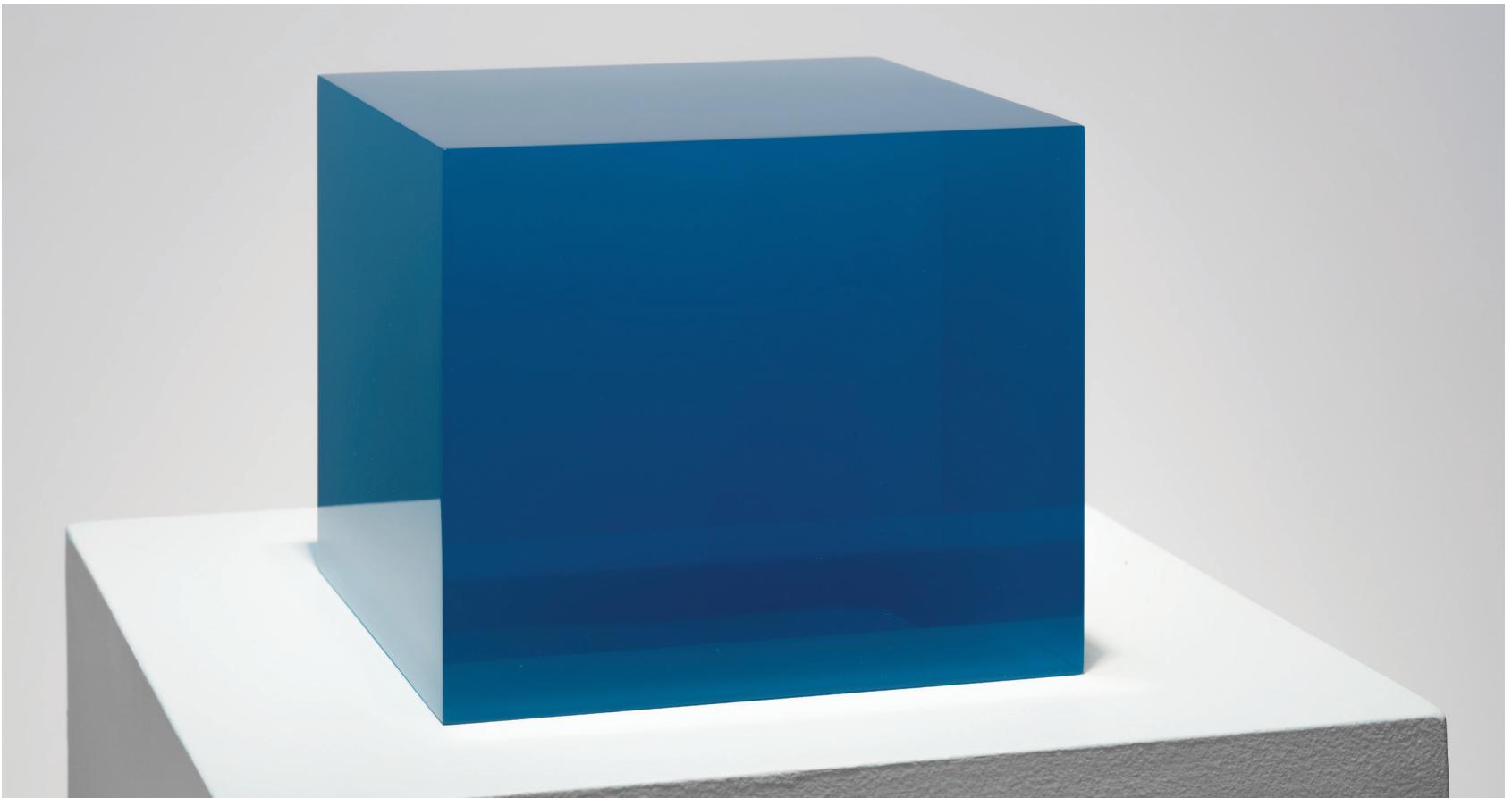
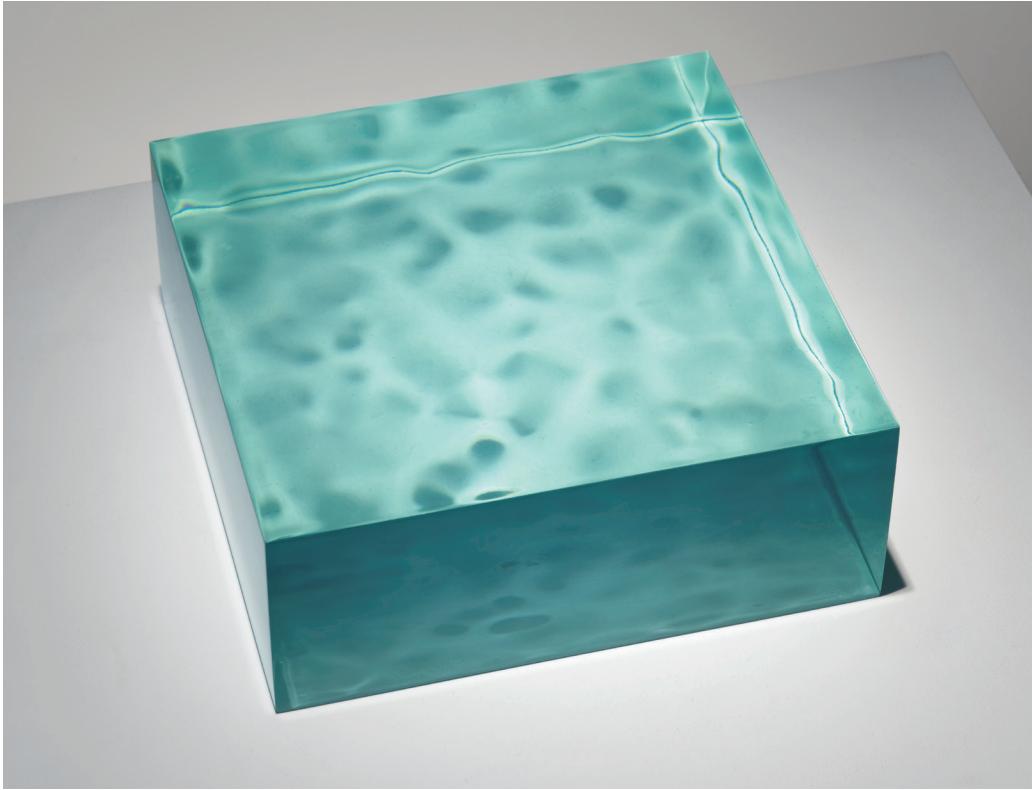
was the resin, and I could solidify it. I could turn this thing into something solid that was like water. If I lived in New York, it never would have happened.

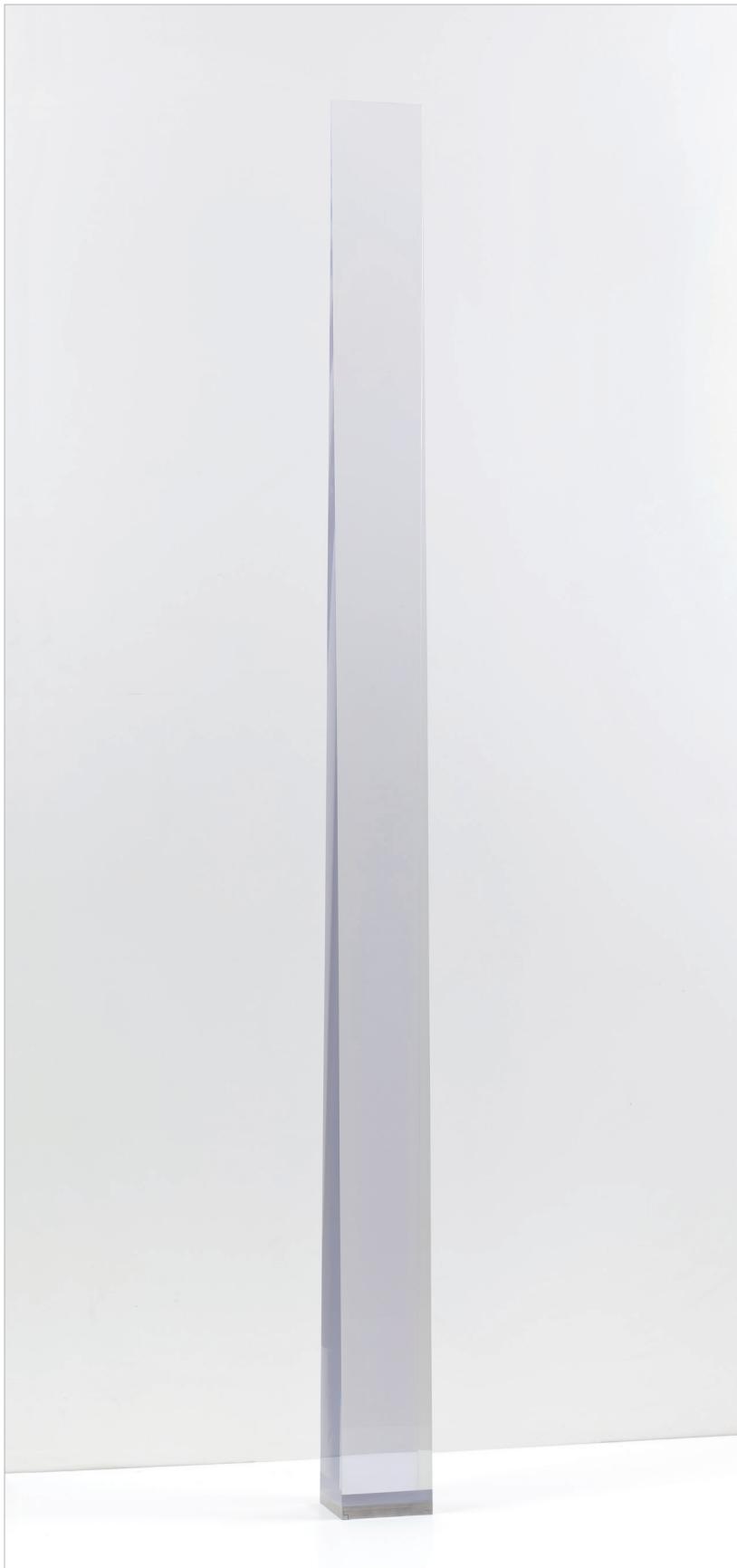
There was a show at the County Museum not long ago that were German paintings from 1946 to 1960. That was a time in my life that revolved around sun and fun at the beach in California, but in Germany, it was god awful. The paintings and images that came out of it were so forlorn.

They were rightfully so, depressing and negative, and everything that was awful. At the same time, I was doing joyous pieces in resin, and that's context.

It's very similar with architecture, although we call it place. When you first started developing the casts, were they considered authentic California art, or is it more obvious looking back?

No, it was because at that time we are talking about, 1965 or 1968, the





late 60s, there wasn't a great deal of enthusiasm for art in Los Angeles. The judgements were coming from New York and we were being compared to rough-and-tumble New York. Andre and Heiser and that group. By comparison, we were all pussys because there was a lot of testosterone in their stuff. That wasn't a high element in what we were doing, and by we, I mean the group that I was a part of, which had the identity of more light and space.

And through all of that, with most of the criticism coming from New York, you stayed on your path and just knew that was what you wanted to do?

Well I did. Now, there were other artists I knew that went to New York in order to get some kind of attention because you couldn't really get much attention out here. I had no ambition to that, but I said I am staying here because I loved it. It was doing everything I wanted. It wasn't exactly high on the intellectual side, but I was very keen on the sensual side. So, if that becomes your seduction, then that's what you do.

Color is essential in each object, but light also seems to be a very...

Oh it's critical. It's critical. The objects that I made, or still do, are for domestic. They're not for commercial use, and they're not institutional. I always think of them in a domestic condition. One of the reasons is that you're allowed to get light throughout the day, so these objects will shift depending how the light is.

One piece that has always stood out to me is the tall prism that comes to a point at the top and fades...

The wedges. Those are self-portraits, or at least they started out that way. They're kind of tight-ass and erect. Not necessarily phallic, but like me

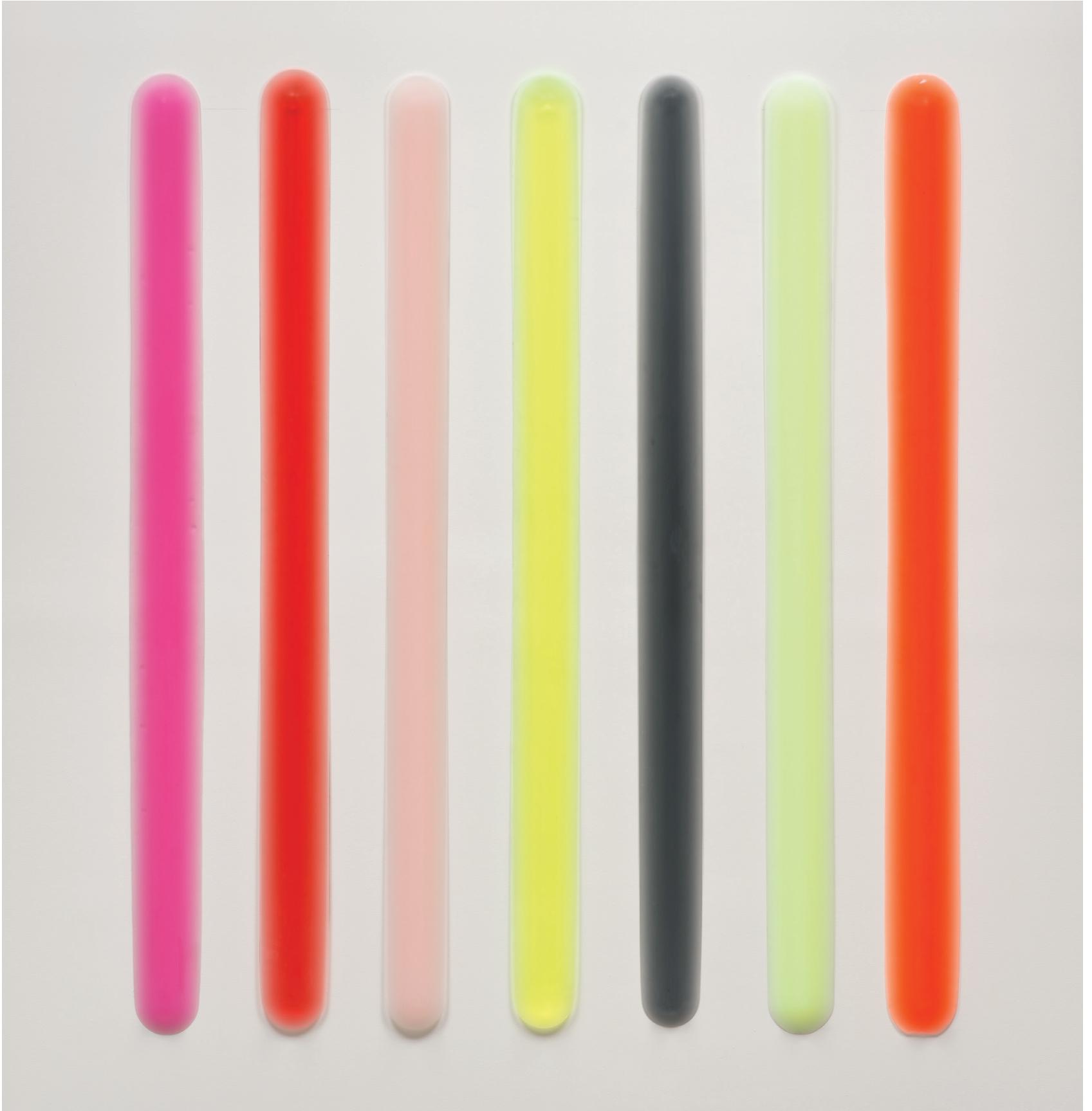
standing next to a wall, and that's the shape. The disappearance, the fact that it goes into nothing, is—suggests a condition that you don't know quite what it is. It is mysterious when you really cannot quite find the top of this object, which is where my romanticism comes in. There is something that is heavenly to that disappearance. It has some of that from flying over the coast and seeing how the ocean met the coast. It would be dark and then get lighter and lighter and lighter, so you couldn't tell the difference between the water and the land because the color had disappeared from it thinning out.

In some of the earlier boxes and cubes, it looked like there were boxes inside of others. But throughout all of those, it does seem like there is a sense of space...

They were spaces. They were rooms that I could swim around in, which was my fantasy. That's what I was thinking about with the subtle color and mystery and translucency. It was like Vermeer for me. I am being a little bit much, but one of the things I loved about a Vermeer painting is its silence, and you would get lost in its space. You get sucked into it.

So then after you made the switch from the Polyester to the Polyurethane, did the materiality change what you were trying to accomplish with each object.

Absolutely. It was like night and day. Urethane is flexible, and polyester is very fragile. Once the polyester is cast, and there is a thin cross section, it can split. It can just crack off very easily. But now with urethane, you can go to a knife edge, and it will stay flexible—meaning you can actually tweak it because it wouldn't crack. I have done lots of castings that would fade out to nothing, and with the urethane, you can really use





that without having an object that is so fragile that you can't really do anything with it.

In closing, does the idea of authenticity come up while you are working? Have you thought about how this is authentically your own work while you were creating it?

Well, I'm sure I did. I'm sure my ego got in there and said, "you're really a fucking prick." But I got here by instinct. Instinctively I would do something, and that would make me want to do something else. Or something continual to keep going.

It was never a question for me. It was so natural that it was the only thing I got really excited about, and that was its own authenticity.

That seems to be a common element with many people we have talked to. They don't come onto it necessarily by accident, but it just happens.

It happens. And you can't do that in architecture.

It's certainly more difficult.

