

and capitalist crusade. On the other hand, Chan points to a new form of spirituality, one in which religion acts as a medium for imagination.

Chan's narrative has no singular historical or theological precedent. It is both timeless and unsettlingly familiar. The imagery is indisputably current, and the projections relate a story that seems all too likely to make headlines in the twenty-first century, calling to mind tragedies familiar to anyone living in the wake of 9/11. The *Lights* are reminiscent of Iraqi war imagery and acts of terrorism, a present-day Last Judgment in which a subjective and anonymous hand decides what rises and what falls. Touching on the viewer's own fears, the result is not as one might have imagined: worthless objects ascend while human life is cast aside like rainfall. Although "The 7 Lights" are richly tied to historical, philosophical, and political references from times past, there is the acute and lingering possibility that they are a contemporary prophecy of events still to come. If that is the case, and when they do, we will certainly feel like we have seen them before.

—Jarrett Gregory, Curatorial Assistant

Paul Chan lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include the Serpentine Gallery, London; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia; and Portikus, Frankfurt. His work was also featured in important group exhibitions, including the 2006 Whitney Biennial, the 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007), the 54th Carnegie International (2004), and the 8th Lyon Biennial (2008). Chan's single-channel videos have been screened in film festivals worldwide, including the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. In November 2007 he collaborated with Creative Time and the Classical Theatre of Harlem to stage free site-specific performances of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans.

"Paul Chan: The 7 Lights" is organized by Massimiliano Gioni, Director of Special Exhibitions.

A 158-page catalogue, *The 7 Lights*, produced in collaboration with the Serpentine Gallery, includes color reproductions of Chan's complete oeuvre to date, with essays and interviews by George Baker, Paul Chan, Massimiliano Gioni, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Adam Phillips, and Kitty Scott.

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All works courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, unless otherwise noted.

COVER: 5th Light, 2007. Digital video projection; 14 min. Image courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo by Jean Vong.
INSIDE: 2nd Light, 2006. Digital video projection; 14 min. Image courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo by Jean Vong.

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Paul Chan The 7 Lights



**NEW
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Paul Chan

The 7 Lights

"Paul Chan: The 7 Lights" marks the American premiere of New York-based artist Paul Chan's complete cycle of large-scale digital projections. Begun in 2005, "The 7 Lights" is an ambitious series of haunting animations and works on paper. By combining obsolete computer technology with hypnotic imagery, Chan transforms the moving image into a succession of enigmatic encounters with light and darkness. This quality is indicated in the title, where the word "light" has been struck through, drawing attention to both its presence and absence. In addition to "The 7 Lights," the exhibition assembles key selections from Chan's growing oeuvre, including works on paper, earlier videos, and a new projection, offering viewers a unique occasion to explore the practice of an artist who engages with such fundamental themes as politics, poetry, war, death, and desire.

The exhibition opens onto Chan's charcoal drawings and collages that predate "The 7 Lights," and *Score for 7th Light*, a suite of works on self-styled sheet music. Scattered throughout the galleries in no chronological order, projections fill the space to create a vast image of cyclical destruction and rebirth, spread across floors and walls like shadow plays. All of the natural light has been blotted out and replaced with these silent illuminations.

In the cycle of works that comprise "The 7 Lights," Chan sets a scene of low light falling through a window and casting shadows. Structured over the course of a day, each of the *Lights* begins peacefully, with the gradual fading of warm colors at dawn. In 1st *Light* the stillness breaks when telephone cables come into view, punctuated by a flock of birds that seem to herald some impending catastrophe. Day begins in 2nd *Light* with the flicker of sunlight filtering through leaves on a tree. In 5th *Light*, rifles, headphones, and animals ascend in an otherworldly procession; throughout the series, sacred and mundane objects become dismantled by obscure forces as they rise up through the seemingly viscous air. Each of the *Lights* is marked by a hallucinatory quality, encouraging the viewer to suspend disbelief and accept the illusion that casts these scenes into the space.

The atmosphere in 1st *Light* changes once the first human shadow plummets through the air. Like a dream deteriorating into a nightmare, as the body count grows, the sequence becomes increasingly horrific, quickly degenerating into mayhem. Chan achieves an unsettling tension between the subject matter and its execution: the catastrophic narrative is exalted by its paradoxical beauty. Eventually the light starts to fade to dusk and peace returns as the frame is slowly filled with nighttime hues of blue and gray, waiting for dawn to break again.

Just as a shadow cannot fully describe the object from which it emanates, "The 7 Lights" relate a narrative that is inevitably incomplete. It is a story told through omissions and obstructions, and its effect lies in that ambiguity. The viewer is confined to speculate about the source of the images, which linger like silent manifestations from a nearby world.



In spite of their mesmerizing simplicity, the *Lights* are layered with historical references and interpretations. Chan's primary tools—light, shadow, and the window—are some of the most resonant symbols throughout the history of Western culture. According to ancient myths, art was born when the Maid of Corinth traced her lover's shadow on the wall. The very concept of enlightenment is rooted in the word "light," and in painting it has historically been used as a symbolic representation of divinity. Chan's sources are myriad and rich, including the Greek philosopher Plato, whose allegory of ignorance describes humans who could not look directly into the world but only at the shadows cast on the walls of their cave; the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche for his writing "The Wanderer and His Shadow"; and the Baroque painter Caravaggio for his use of chiaroscuro, a technique characterized by strong contrasts in light and dark.

The subject matter of "The 7 Lights" can be related to Biblical accounts of both the birth of the world and its impending end. While the apocalyptic undertones in Chan's cycle are arguably the most potent, thematic parallels between "The 7 Lights" and the seven days of creation in the book of Genesis are also striking. Creation begins when God separates light from darkness. He creates the world in six days; the seventh is a day of rest. "The 7 Lights" are comprised of six projections, and a suite of collages titled *Score for 7th Light*, wherein sheet music could be read as a visual equivalent of the day of rest. Throughout Chan's series, other religious references abound. The telephone pole in 1st *Light* bears resemblance to a crucifix; the table in 3rd *Light* is a replica of the table from Leonardo da Vinci's famous fresco of *The Last Supper*. In our neoconservative times, Chan's imagery speaks to the fundamentalist fervor embedded in America's foreign policy, when war is both a religious