

*One Again* 2005

DIGITAL VIDEO

*Distill* 2006

DIGITAL VIDEO

*Filament* 2006

DIGITAL VIDEO

*Ghost* 2007

DIGITAL VIDEO

*Columns* 2007

DIGITAL VIDEO

*Resonance* 2007

DIGITAL VIDEO

**DVDs are available in a limited edition of 5  
(including a Pioneer 7400 DVD deck and screen)  
for \$5,000**

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# Dennis Summers

## PHASE SHIFT

NOVEMBER 3 - DECEMBER 15, 2007

I had been thinking about the early music of Steve Reich, and it occurred to me that I could create something visually similar using digital software. In Reich's early compositions he played simple repeated motifs that slowly went out of phase with one another. The musical interest came from playing off the predictability of the motif, against the unusual sonic combinations created over time.

The first piece created in this series, *One Again*, begins with what appears to be a solid red square that cycles through the color spectrum. Soon the viewer will notice that there is a fuzzy dot in the center. This dot cycles in 1/6 of a second less time than the field it is on. Over about 15 minutes the hue shifts 360°, returning to red.

The parameters are set in the software, and then the video, frame by frame, is produced by the computer over a period of time which—depending on complexity—can take days. So I had no idea what to expect with *One Again* until it was completed the next day. I was pleased by what I saw and recognized the potential for variation that I'm still investigating. Like a minimalist painter, sometimes I'll explore what happens when I logically develop one structure into a series of closely related pieces. Other times, like an action painter, I'll push the digital “paint” around until I begin to see something interesting evolve.

All of the Phase Shift videos are structured similarly to *One Again* but with different visual elements and color distributions. Although parts of the image may appear to move or change shape, this is an illusion—*nothing* is altered, except color over time. Like many time based experiences each one of these pieces tells a different “story.” One can achieve a wide range of visual and temporal possibilities within this seemingly restricted process. The work included in this exhibit represent a small sample of the possibilities.

Still images from most of the completed videos can be found at [www.phase-shift.org](http://www.phase-shift.org).

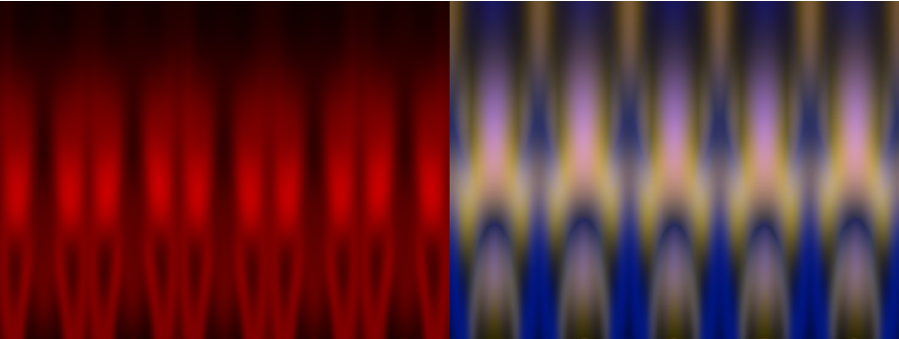
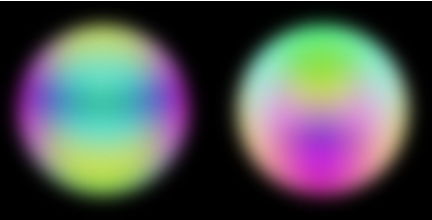
—Dennis Summers

# SHAPE-SHIFTING KOANS

## Dennis Summers at Center Galleries

In *De Anima*, his luminous treatise on the soul, the venerable old philosopher conceives what the ancient Greeks called the *psyche* as “the first Actuality of the living body,”<sup>2</sup> and the faculty of perception as one of its defining functions. Things move of their own volition and therefore are alive; they sense and engage with their surroundings, and therefore move. But, for Aristotle, the soul is not immortal; it lives and dies, comes into being and goes out of existence, with the body it energizes. Now in an improbable but exhilarating leap from the 4th-century BC to the 21st-century, Detroit digital artist Dennis Summers premieres his uncanny *Phase Shift Video Series*, a sequence of massive light works that morph, actualize themselves in time, engage and animate our perceptions in ways for which we're only marginally prepared. Moreover, each piece has a pulsating soul of its own.

In a more than 20-year visual art career, Summers has made films, sculpture, performance and installation art, and an ongoing, international, location-specific series called the Crying Post Project (memorializing the sites of man-made environmental disasters). His works in various media are included in, among others, the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Pompidou Center (Paris), the San Francisco Art Institute, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and most recently the Biental Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo (Almería, Spain). But a crucial part



“All these we perceive by movement.”<sup>1</sup> —ARISTOTLE

of his development has been as a painter in the thrall of minimalism, a man responding irresistibly to the ideas of Josef Albers, Mark Rothko, and Robert Irwin. In fact, Summers’ new light works make a powerful case for the enduring centrality of minimalism, alongside cubism and surrealism, in the bedrock of contemporary art. He speaks glowingly of Albers’ subtle precision, the spiritual aura of a Rothko composition, and the seminal shock of Irwin’s early canvases and light sculptures. Summers’ latest kinetic, computer-generated pieces owe much to his immersion in the minimalist canon, and to a technological virtuosity that allows him to actualize literally whatever he can imagine.

“But it is possible that whenever anything has been set in motion there is something else that is moved by that thing.”<sup>3</sup> —ARISTOTLE

*One Again* (2005), the original work in the Phase Shift series, was inspired by the rhythmic variations of minimalist composer Steve Reich's early music. It weaves a counterpoint of tempo, amplitude, and color saturation that recalls a range of painting, from Albers to Ellsworth Kelly, yet its pulsating core of emptiness harkens back to the eighth image in the ancient Chinese Zen series, “In Search of the Missing Ox,” which is an enigmatic, empty circle. The accompanying commentary states:

“*No Ox, No Man*...The moment your ego appears, circumstances appear. When your ego vanishes, circumstances vanish.”<sup>4</sup>

Summers’ own Zen practice informs the Phase Shift series on multiple levels, from the grand-scale, philosophical encounter with nothingness, to the palpable sense of enigma generated by such pieces as *Ghost* (2007) and *Resonance* (2007). In them the centuries-old tradition known as *koans*, verbal paradoxes used as a basis for meditation, has been given a visual equivalent. Ideally and inevitably, the viewer of Summers’ most recent pieces experiences the focus, pace, and egolessness of meditation, while realizing the historic connection between minimalism and the philosophical concerns of the ancient world, although in a paradoxically high-tech medium. The intriguing quality of Summers’ latest project is that it manages to be both simple and complex, multiply layered and subtly detailed, yet so invisibly sophisticated that it takes on a moving life of its own.

George Tysh  
DETROIT, OCTOBER 2007

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Penguin Classics, translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, p. 190.  
<sup>2</sup> Lawson-Tancred, Introduction to *De Anima*, p. 15.  
<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, p. 200.  
<sup>4</sup> Katsuki Sekida, *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy*, Shambala, pp. 228–229.

