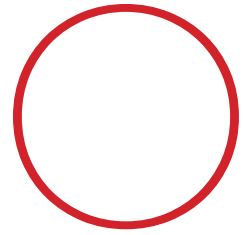


AS LUCAS SAMARAS

LIKES TO TELL IT,

his latest group of photographs found their start in 2010 on one of his daily walks around New York. The gray-bearded, puckish-looking artist was striding along near Port Authority, pocket Leica in hand, when he happened upon a store whose front window, full of colorful buttons and beads, called out to be photographed. “I guess it reminded me of my work,” he says, shrugging.

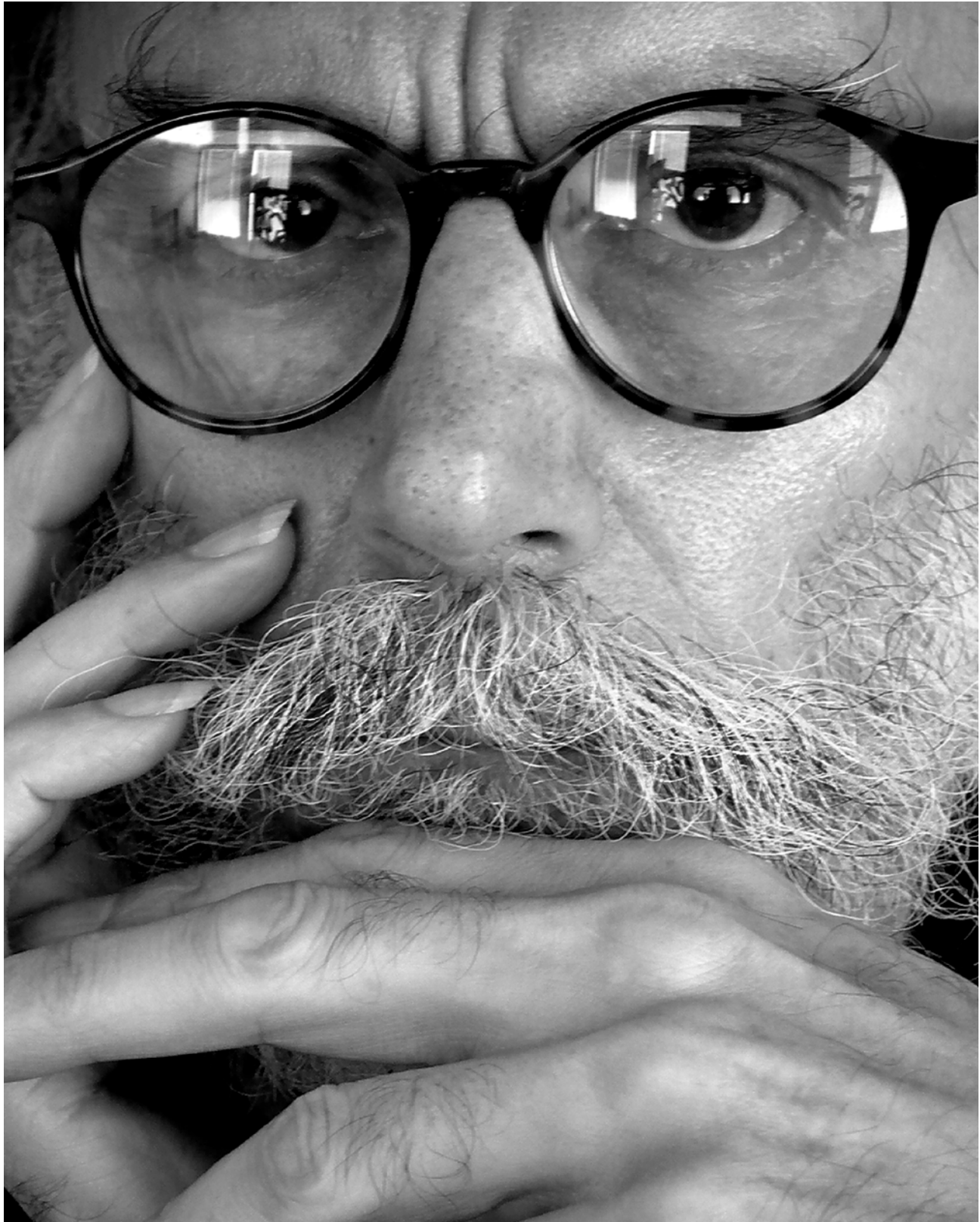
A detail of XYZ 0001, 2012, from Lucas Samaras’s “Flea” series, inspired by the flea markets and shop windows of New York is one of many digitally manipulated photographs in his current show at the Pace Gallery. All images © Lucas Samaras, courtesy Pace Gallery



nce home, he imported the picture into Photoshop and did his usual “Samarizing,” as he puts it: intensifying the colors, mirroring parts of the image against themselves, and pixilating or gently warping the resulting colors and shapes. He arrived at an image that looked strikingly like one of the box constructions he has been making since 1960, filled with enticing objects but spiked with nails and shards of glass. The next day he went out in search of more shops and ended up focusing on flea markets, which he had frequented for decades but never photographed.

Thus began the obsession that gave rise to “Flea,” a series in which all the disparate flotsam and jetsam of the bazaar — bedraggled dolls and mannequin heads, piles of old shoes and scarves, a gilded angel, a vintage army uniform — jostle up against each other, transformed by Samaras into surreal narratives that seem infinitely more dramatic than the sum of their parts. “It’s like the whole world has evidence somewhere in the flea market,” says Samaras, 76, who still retains the strong accent of his native Greece, from which he emigrated with his family when he was 11. “And the spectacular thing is its haphazard arrangement. For me it is treasure.”

Samaras is known for his AutoPolaroids and Photo-Transformations of the 1960s and '70s, from which this latest work has descended.





XYZ 0001, 2012



What's even more spectacular, however, is that Samaras's digital explorations didn't end there. As he delved further into the Samarizing, he was moved to create three more series, these constructed entirely inside his computer. Called "Pixel Cock and Bull," "Chinoiserie" and "Razor Cut," they use Photoshop's swatch palette, rather than a photograph, as the basis for each image. Selections from all four series will be on view in "XYZ" at the Pace Gallery in Chelsea from September 28 through October 27.

It's Samaras's latest iteration in a 60-plus-year career that has spanned just about every sort of medium, from drawing, painting and sculpture to jewelry, performance, film, video, installation and assemblage. As Arne Glimcher, the founder of Pace, likes to say, "He is the most dramatic example of post-modernism in contemporary art." (The gallery has represented Samaras since 1965.)

Samaras came on the scene in 1959 as a participant in Allan Kaprow's "18 Happenings in 6 Parts" — otherwise known as the first Happening. For a notorious show at Manhattan's Green Gallery in 1964, he recreated his own cluttered bedroom.

Photo-Transformation, 1976

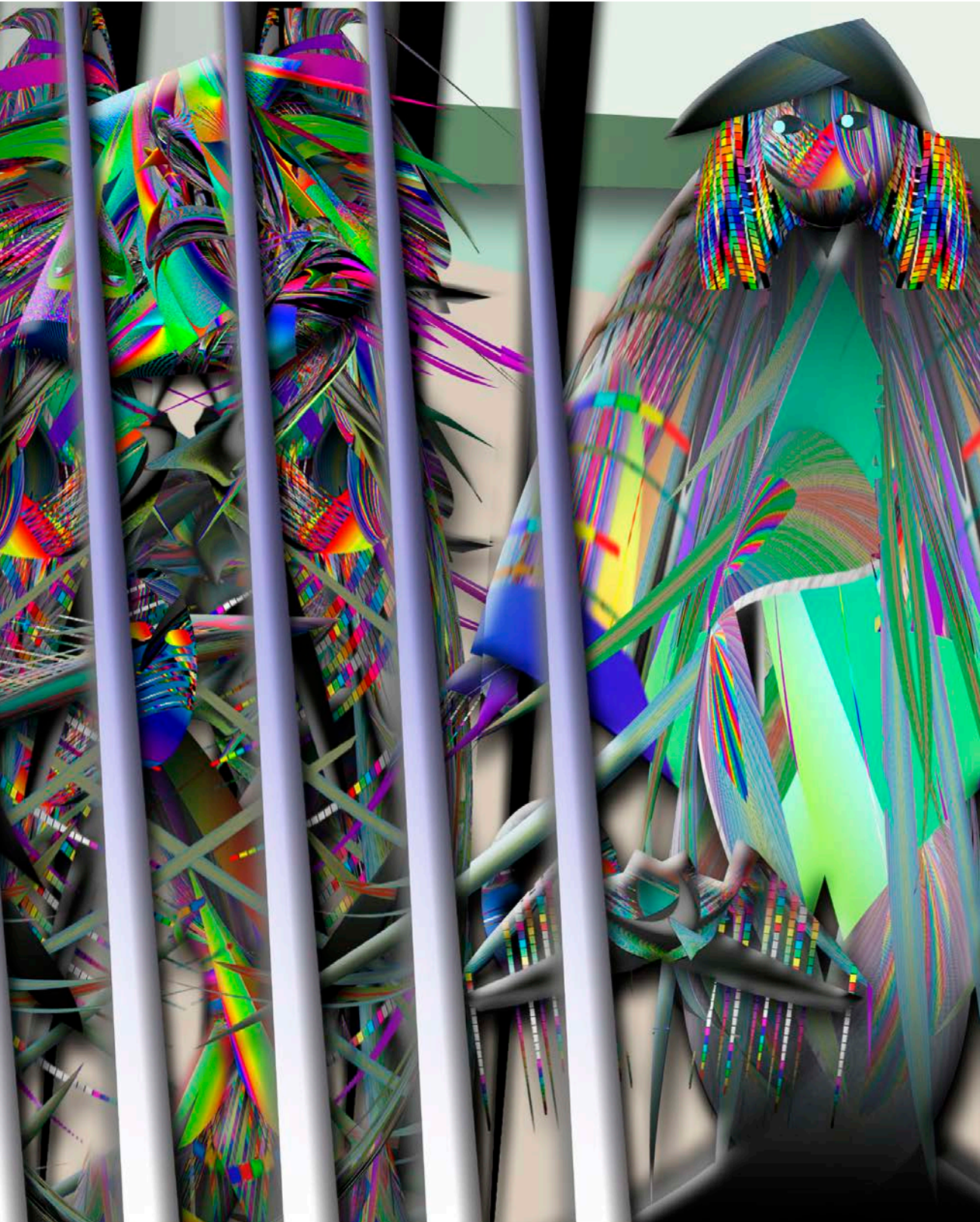
But Samaras is probably best known for his AutoPolaroid and Photo-Transformation self-portraits, made between 1969 and 1976. In some, he mugged for the camera, wearing costumes and wigs; in others, he manipulated or added color to the photographic emulsion to create distorted renditions of his own naked body and face. Sometimes he'd be subsumed by polka dots or radiate light; elsewhere he seemed to disappear into the ether.

Countless solo shows and museum retrospectives later, Samaras is generally acknowledged today as an artist's artist, one whose work has anticipated scores of movements and trends, from the Minimalist floor pieces of the 1960s to the costumed self-portraits of Cindy Sherman and the cut-out silhouettes of Kara Walker.

Yet for the last 12 years, he's devoted most of his energy to digital photography and video, using technology available to anyone with a Mac computer. "I'm not picky," he says, "and it makes the challenge more interesting." Then he quotes Delacroix, saying, " 'Give me mud, and I will make it look like the voluptuous skin of a woman.' "

Sittings 8 x 10 (44 B), 1979

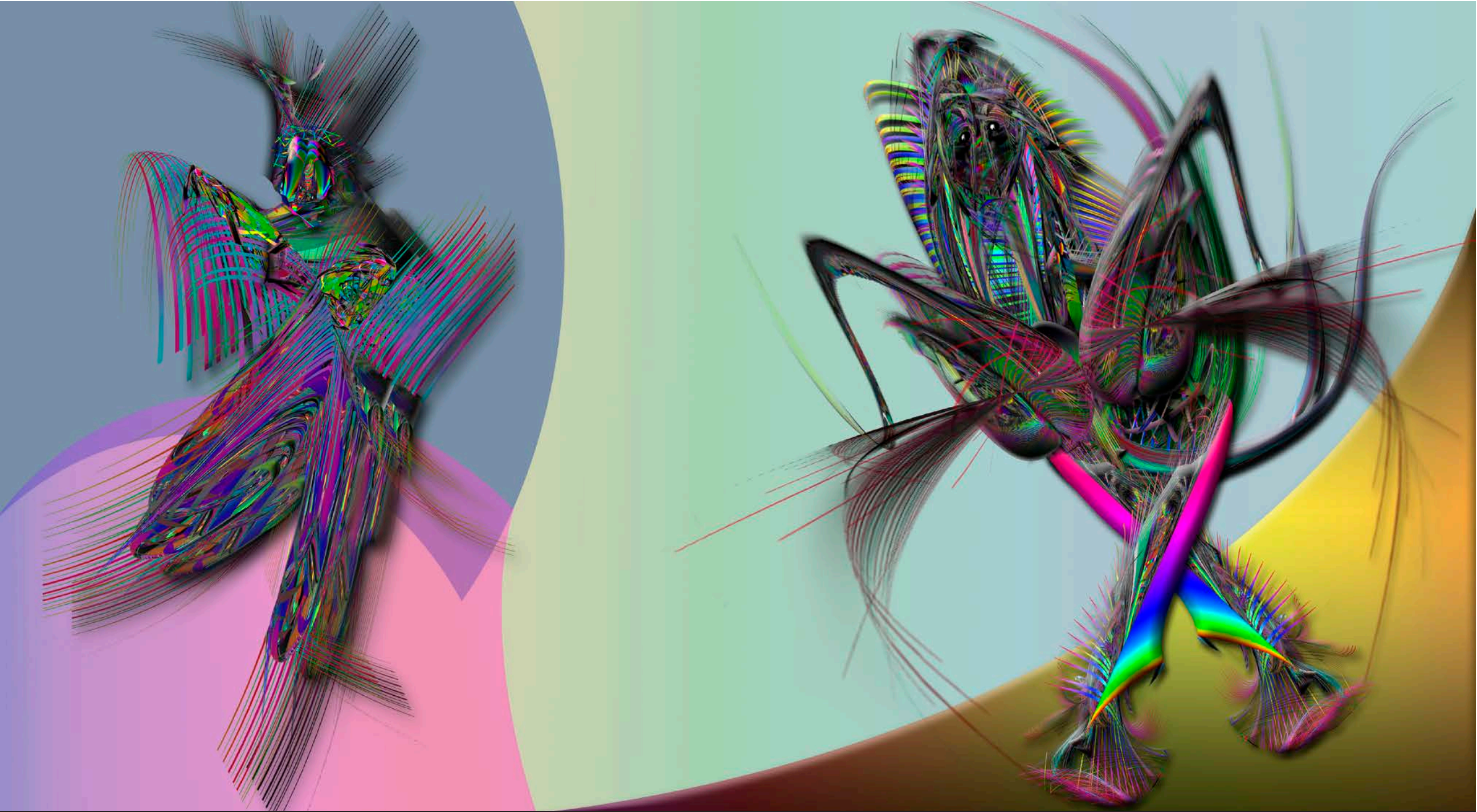




This digital work has drawn new admirers, including Matthew Higgs, the director of New York's nonprofit White Columns exhibition space. "I was really astonished at the youthfulness, the energy," says Higgs, who curated Samaras's show "Paraxena" when the artist represented Greece at the 2009 Venice Biennale. "He approaches technology with an almost gleeful curiosity, wrestling with this sense of, 'What can it do for me?'"

Perhaps the one constant in Samaras's work, apart from his self-portraiture, is his apartment, which has long served as a set for his photographs and videos. A maze of hallways and rooms on the 62nd floor of a high-rise near Carnegie Hall, the apartment has walls lined with a dizzying array of mirrors, theatrical draperies, cabinets full of art-making materials and artwork-filled vitrines. Each space is chock-full of every era of his work, from the pastel self-portraits of the 1950s to the chair sculptures he has been making since 1969.

Detail of XYZ 0907 (Razor Cut), 2012

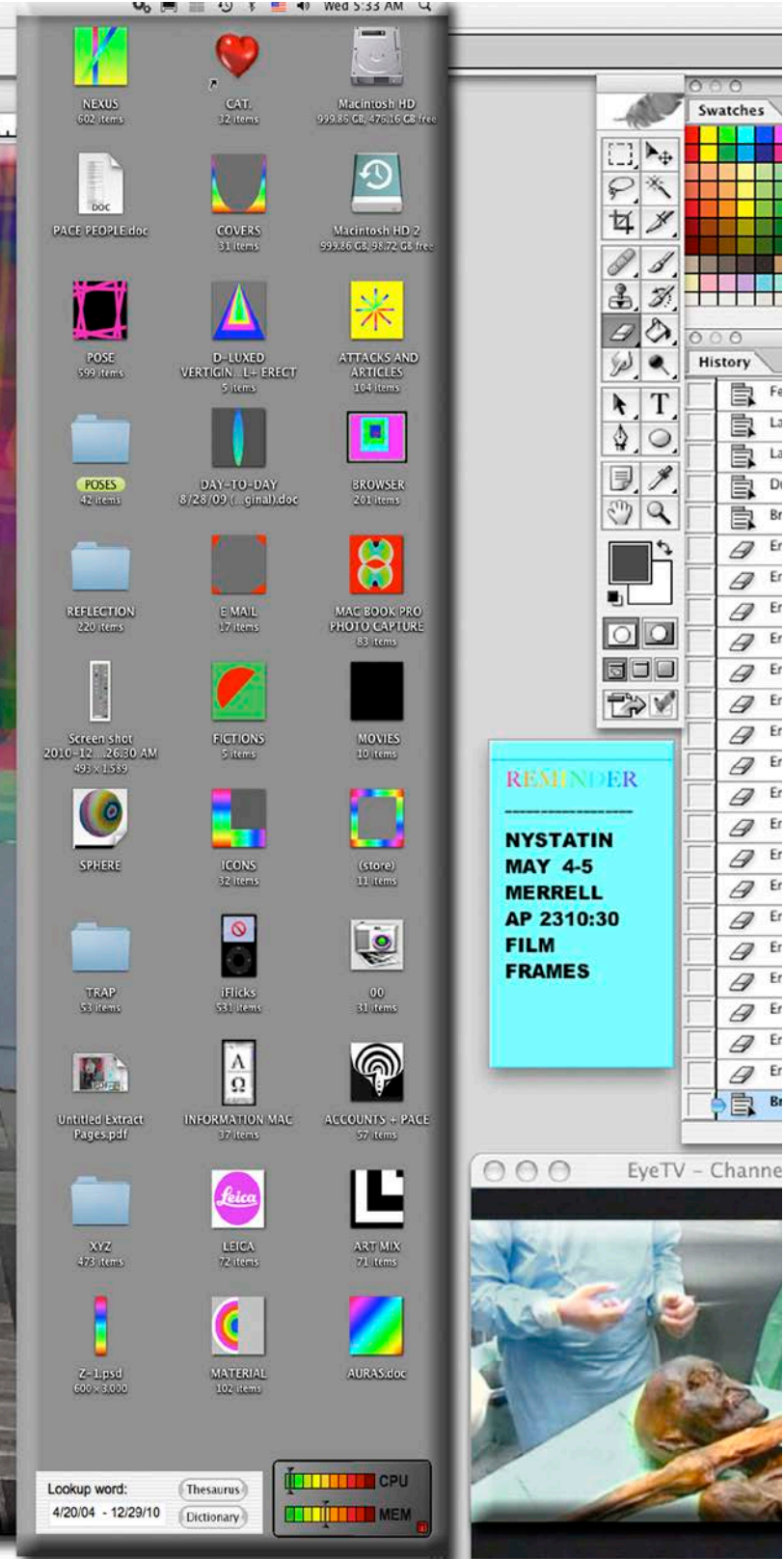


XYZ 0927 (Razor Cut), 2012

These days, however, the apartment's creative epicenter is clearly the computer room just inside Samaras's front door. That's where he works his magic with a Mac Pro, two Apple Cinema displays and a Wacom tablet, which lets him manipulate the image on-screen as if he were pushing a stick through Polaroid emulsion, or a pen across a pad. "It's totally addictive, you can't keep your eye off it," he says of the moment he brought home his first computer in 1996. "It's worse than having a baby."

Asked how he arrived at the new digital series, he says, "It's called seduction. You try something different one day, and you say "Oop, that's it." Yet curiously, just as some of the "Flea" photos recall his boxes, so too do these new pictures recall earlier moments in his work.

Samaras as depicted in XYZ 0236, 2012



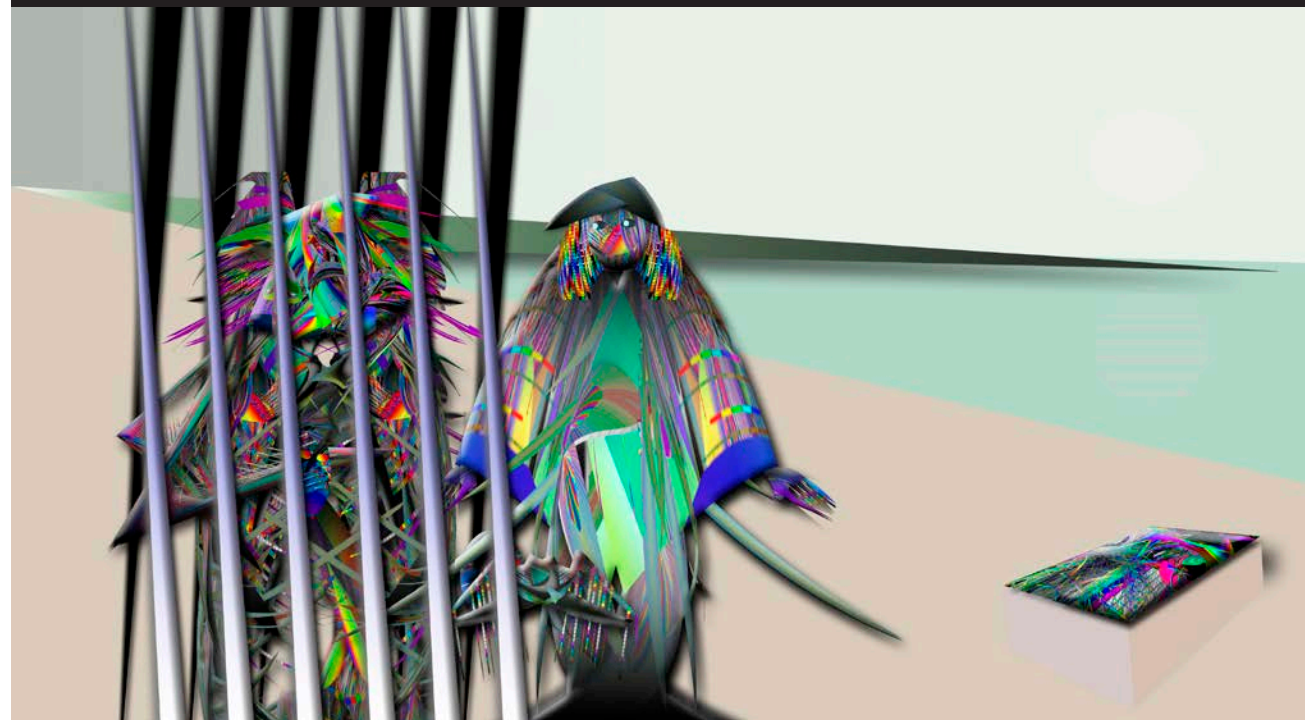
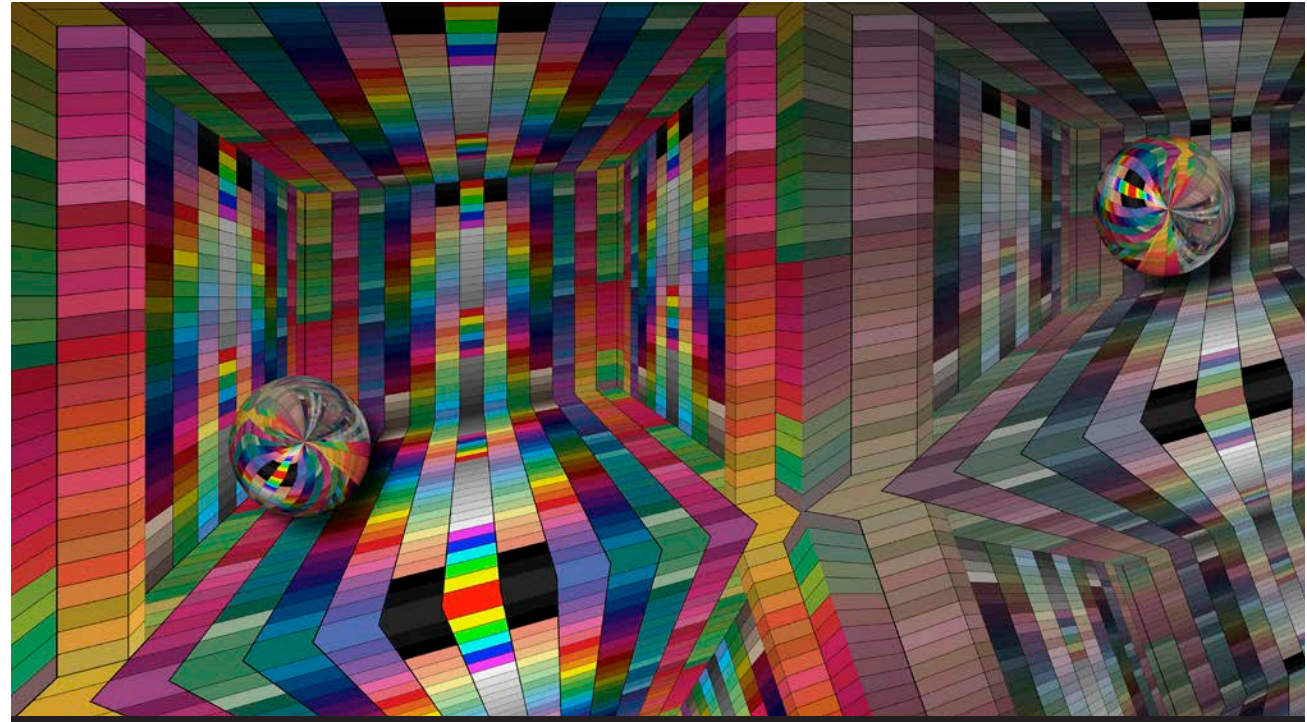
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XYZ 0851 (Chinoiserie), 2012

Pixel Cock and Bull” presents colorful grids that have been nudged and distorted into chamber-like enclosures, suggesting the drawings for his first mirrored room, a dazzling blend of Minimalism and flamboyance that was a highlight of the season when it debuted at Pace in 1966. In “Chinoiserie,” the grids have liquefied, creating swathes of marbled color that can suggest solar systems or *objets d’art*, paralleling the way Samaras’s own body seemed to evanesce in some of his early manipulated Polaroids.

As for the “Razor Cut” pictures, they are peopled with casts of humanoids who seem to be enacting Dalí-esque dramas on a computer-generated stage. Bristling with spikes or swirled with color, they might have stepped out of those original Polaroids. “It’s an abstract presentation of the human condition,” Samaras says of the “Razor Cut” figures. But he’s unwilling to draw such a direct line, even as he reflects on the length and variegation of his career. “From those to these,” he adds, “is an eternity.”



From top: XYZ 0540 (Cock and Bull) and XYZ 0907 (Razor Cut), both from 2012