

# ART REVIEW: Daniel Arsham and the Art of Alteration of Known Things

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by Gabrielle Selz

Artist and filmmaker [Daniel Arsham](#) explores the realm between the familiar and the unknown. In his piece, *Formless Figure* (2015) now on view in the main exhibition room at [Robert Wilson's Watermill Center](#), Arsham engages the viewer by challenging the very wall of the space to perform in a unique, mysterious way.

Since his early work with [Merce Cunningham](#) in 2004, when he designed the lighting, sets and costumes for the piece “eyeSpace,” Arsham has collaborated in the creation of dance and stage design. Seeking to blur the lines between architecture, performance and art, Arsham's pieces—from his floating pixelated clouds to his antiqued relics of everyday life—have a stark theatricality that syncs seamlessly with Wilson's aesthetic.

Arsham is also color blind. Rather than a hindrance, colorblindness allows the artist to expand on a vocabulary of grays, whites and blacks.

In 2011, Arsham began creating three-dimensional works, variously titled, *Hidden*, *Draped*, *Bound*, or *Hollow Figure*. Like these earlier installations, *Formless Figure* is human size, constructed from draping a mannequin in fabric to get the shape right, then crafting a wire and fiberglass body that is covered in plaster.

A cloaked form with an empty interior, *Formless Figure* emerges seamlessly out of the white wall like a ghost under a sheet. Standing at the far end of the gallery with arms spread wide as if in blessing, the figure with its white plaster, hooded and rippling robe is almost Christ-like in appearance. Like the [Shroud of Turin](#), the famous piece of linen cloth which bears the figure of a man and which some believe is the burial shroud of Jesus Christ, *Formless Figure* has the presence of the miraculous.



“The Formless Figure” by Daniel Arsham. Fiberglass, metal and plaster. Courtesy of The Watermill Center.

The wall appears to come to life, stretching out of its skin to form the shape of a man. Yet, the man’s substance remains hidden, spectral within the folds of the wall. Indeed, transfiguration and all that it implies—metamorphosis, and spiritual change—is at the heart of Arsham’s art.

Arsham was raised in Miami. In August of 1992, at the age of 12, he experienced the devastation wrought by [Hurricane Andrew](#). Hiding in a closet while the storm raged, Arsham emerged to find his home, his town and his world in ruins. Much like the violent natural forces that recalibrated his landscape, the impact of that storm shaped Arsham. The hurricane, as well as the aftermath of sifting through the rubble, eventually led Arsham to reconsider art and architecture and to reinterpret the notion of destruction for creative purposes.

Arsham’s world is mutable. Instability and its sometimes swift, sometimes creeping inevitability intrigue him. From his early monochromatic gouache on Mylar landscapes depicting the punctuation and erasure of architecture, to what Arsham calls “relics,” everyday objects like

toasters, cameras and mobile phones immortalized in volcanic ash; to his work with [Snarkitecture](#), the practice he cofounded with [Alex Mustrone](#) that aims to investigate structure and material by designing space and furniture that resembles artifacts and ruins, Arsham continues to be devoted to contrasts.

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All art comes down to a moment. A juncture in space between before and after that we call the present. This moment can be recorded on canvas, stone or film. But it is within this crevice in time where one thing becomes another, the immaterial becomes the material, and art is born. Dance and performance art, with its use of the body in motion, seeks to exist at this threshold, to pinpoint and describe the moments between creation and death.

Arsham wants architecture to do what dance and performance art does. In seeking to depict substance, he turns the accidents of time into purposeful intention. He wants to represent the fluidity of objects and structure. Not just their destruction, but finally, their reemergence and redemption as art.

*Formless Figure* is a shell with only an empty space to mark its center. It contains absence and presence, an invisibility that can only be called spirit. All that is left to describe the place where a man once stood is his encasement. Perhaps this man will appear out from under the wall, or perhaps the wall has already swallowed him up.

It is in this moment of trapping, specifically of arresting and embodying the urge to come to life, the urge to persist, where Arsham's art resides.

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**BASIC INFO:** *Formless Figure* by Daniel Arsham remains on view through June 7, 2015. Watermill Center is located at 39 Watermill Towd Road, Water Mill, NY 11976. [www.watermillcenter.org](http://www.watermillcenter.org).

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