

## Craig Kalpakjian

KAI MATSUMIYA

An increasingly common trope in big-budget science-fiction films has been mankind's departure from an overcrowded or ecologically devastated Earth. Such films include *WALL-E* (2008), *Elysium* (2013), *Interstellar* (2014), *Passengers* (2016), and *The Midnight Sky* (2020). An early example of this premise is *Silent Running* (1972), directed by Douglas Trumbull and starring Bruce Dern as Freeman Lowell, a botanist on board a space freighter transporting bio-domes filled with specimens of otherwise extinct flora and fauna. When the freighter receives orders to destroy the samples, Lowell attempts to save them by killing his crewmates and escaping to the dark side of Saturn. The trees begin to wither from lack of sunlight, so he installs an array of electric lamps before jettisoning the last remaining dome. After Lowell commits suicide aboard the freighter, the film ends with a diminutive robot named Dewey waddling among the plants while holding a watering can.

In his solo exhibition at Kai Matsumiya, Craig Kalpakjian's sculpture *Silent Running*, 2019–20, paid homage to the film's final scene: A neon pothos houseplant grew around a black-steel armature, at the top of which hung two spotlights that illuminated and nourished its leaves. A small metal watering can sat nearby. This nod to ecological themes marked a departure from Kalpakjian's previous work. In the ongoing interplay between art and science fiction, Kalpakjian's practice has generally suggested an affinity with the popular cinema of the late 1990s, when screenwriters, reading the same French theory as artists were, imagined worlds of stultifying blandness that masked systems of surveillance and control. In the years immediately preceding the release of *Dark City* (1998), *The Truman Show* (1998), *eXistenZ* (1999), and *The Matrix* (1999), Kalpakjian produced computer-generated photographs and animations of anonymous corridors and corporate lobbies. Even when these images avoided explicitly showing security cameras, their immaculately rendered surfaces gave off the impression of environments watched by invisible eyes.

Alongside *Silent Running*, Kalpakjian presented several new digital prints that combined the themes of his earlier work with a motif borrowed from Josef Albers. Each picture showed an empty room that, as it receded in depth, changed hues in patterns that recalled the inlaid geometries of the Bauhaus artist's "Homage to the Square" series, 1950–76. At first, Kalpakjian's aesthetic of all-encompassing surveillance appears to align perfectly with the modernist enclosure of Albers's canvases. With careful looking, however, irregularities reveal themselves: The edges of the prints bulge subtly outward, and the horizontal lines of the individual squares refuse to remain level with the floor beneath their frames. Awkwardly, fussily, these seemingly sealed-off compositions activate the physical space around them. The reverse is true of *Into the Corner*, 2020, an eight-foot-tall metal tower crowned by five security cameras. The appa-

ratus was well positioned to capture a visitor's every movement, yet a television monitor showed that in fact the cameras were all pointed toward the gallery's ceiling. A sixth camera recorded the monitor, creating a *mise en abyme* of self-surveillance.

The comic aspect of *Into the Corner* suggests that Kalpakjian may have been drawn to *Silent Running* for Dewey. A bipedal trash compactor operated by a double-amputee puppeteer hidden inside, Dewey is now best remembered as George Lucas's inspiration for the *Star Wars* droid R2-D2. However, a case can be made that this little robot is *Silent Running*'s true protagonist, more so than the murderous Lowell (whose first name, Freeman, is as aggressively symbolic as that of Keanu Reeves's Neo in *The Matrix*). Alone in a garden somewhere beyond the rings of Saturn, Dewey steadfastly tends to an imperfect world.

—Colby Chamberlain

Craig Kalpakjian,  
*Silent Running*,  
2019–2020,  
dual moving-head  
spotlight, DMX  
controller, houseplant,  
lighting truss and base,  
security mirror,  
counterbalance  
weight, watering can.  
Installation view.

