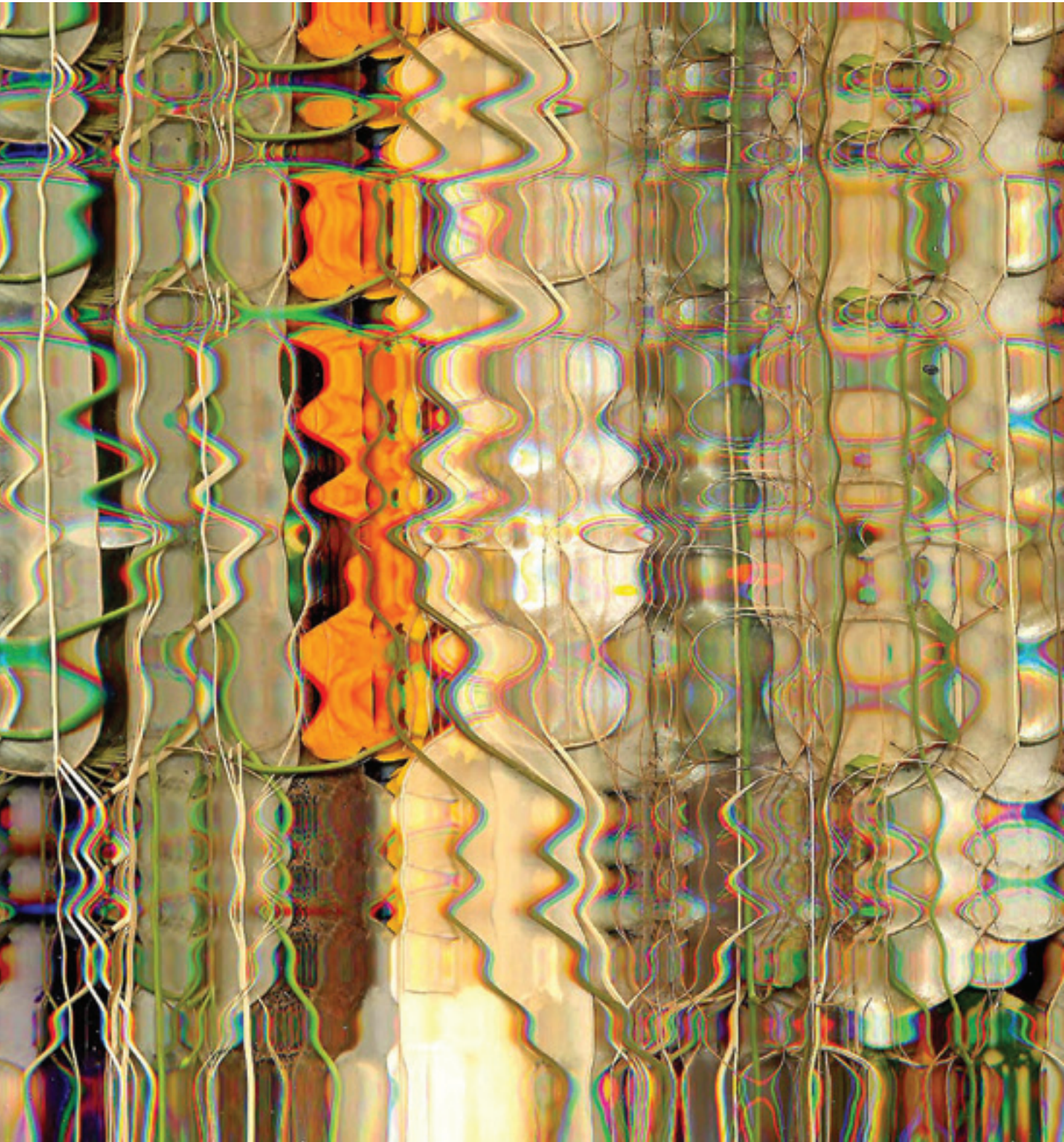


## ROBERT BHARDA

*Architect's Dream, 2018*  
Digital image from organic collage, 36 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## LARA MARKSTEIN

### A Romantic Like That

**M**ine is your typical boy-meets-girl love story, set against the walls of a pyramid beneath an alabaster sky.

I was a young artist in those years. A photographer who dreamed in black and white during the days of HDR-filter algorithms on mirrorless phones. It was a futile fight for a dying art, fueled by small-time gigs: designing logos for nonprofits, posters for bands yet to make it big. That day, I worked on a more lucrative contract, shooting pictures for a tech firm that specialized in supporting families as they transitioned aging parents into end-of-life care. I'd chosen the Miller crypt at Mountain View Cemetery as my canvas, in part because the Olmstead-designed avenues perched above Oakland with views of the Golden Gate Bridge made for an exquisite property to place your bones—in part because it was close to home. So focused was I on reading the light exposure that I almost didn't notice my foot was warm. When I glanced down, I leaped back—a hairless ferret of a creature had urinated on my shoe.

“Major Paws!” A woman stood before me aghast. “I’m sorry.” She doused my already wet feet with her water bottle, her thick lashes resting on pink, mortified cheeks, and I knew I was in love.

I didn't even know her name.

My name is Ashton—A5he5\_77 on the forums, although I wasn't on the forums then. I was trawling for commissions, hawking my work to local galleries. On the side, I ferried passengers around the city in a beat-up sedan. That night, idling outside a club, I flipped through the social media on my phone and found myself searching every picture as though I might find the ghost of the girl I'd seen. A hopeless pastime in a city with half a million inhabitants, so as I drove home across the bridge, I tried to push her from my mind. But she haunted my thoughts, and in bed later, I discovered myself typing in the Facebook search bar: “Major Paws.” Only one military canine lived in Oakland and had a snaggletoothed grin. In photos, the Major was tagged with Rebecca Palanjian.

When I closed my eyes, I dreamed of Rebecca, Becky, Bex. We lay on the Crocker mausoleum beneath a fishbowl-blue sky, Major Paws nestled in the space between our ribs.

My friends did not appreciate my new infatuation. “You've never met her,” Hans, a German sound musician