

# Monkey Painter

*1977-2007*

Lucy Hogg



In 1977 I became an Abstract Expressionist.

Our foundation training had emphasized grisaille as underpainting. Franz Kline, with his black and white gestalts, was something I could understand.

Here, as a corrective, my self-assignment was: combine two colours that are complementary.

*Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 42", 1977.



Our teacher, Harold, encouraged us to move off the easel. We stapled our canvas directly to the floor and stopped using traditional brushes. Some of the students had moved on to sponges and squeegees; I still needed the control of a house brush.

We stretched our paint with Rhoplex as a medium, which we ordered from Rohm and Haas in five-gallon containers. We'd collectively buy our canvas in one-hundred-yard rolls shipped directly from Toronto. We learned that you had to buy your materials in bulk earlier in the year, while you still had funds from your student loan. Canvas had to be like toilet paper, our teacher said. Cost shouldn't be a constraint.

Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 42" x 76", 1978.



We weren't a totally united front. Some students were doing earth-work installations, making Duchampian gestures, or reviving the irony of Warhol and Pop. We had a new photography department.

There were also some people who had come for Mount Allison's legacy of figurative painting, the ghost of Alex Colville looming. That was why I had originally signed up. I had spent the previous two summers painting landscapes "en plein air".

*Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 42" x 76", 1978.



After a year of expressionism, I knew I needed counterpoint. I transferred to another school. The teachers at Université d'Ottawa were all from Montreal, more conceptual. I found myself in an urban environment, which was both exciting and disorienting, but made my landscape-based abstraction seem irrelevant. I had my first crisis as a painter.

No. 9, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 72", 1979.



The curriculum in the first semester of Université d'Ottawa's third year was more structured than I would have liked, so I started doing my own work at home. I went back to smaller brushes and decided to work with a limited number of factors. What was the least amount required to make a picture? And then I would add a new factor if the formula seemed exhausted.

No. 12, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 72", 1979.



The paintings looked raw and probably ugly, but when I brought them in at the beginning of the next semester the teachers were supportive. My painting teacher, Lucio, was an exponent of the Support/Surface movement from France, and didn't have much good to say about Clement Greenberg.

No. 8, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 72", 1979.



Class critiques mostly took place in French, and were pretty far beyond me, at least in jargon, for me to understand completely. So I was quiet in class, and interpreted what was going on through body language. Some of the more advanced students thought our instructor was too conservative.

No. 22, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 72", 1979.



I was painting in a small emptied out bedroom. I made two stretchers, each 54" x 72". When I finished the second painting I would unstretch the first, roll it up, and stretch fresh canvas for the next painting. So I never saw more than two paintings together at one time; I couldn't see what progress I might be making.

No. 21, acrylic on canvas, 54" X 72", 1979. Collection of the Owens Art Gallery, Sackville, New Brunswick.



I was taking my first ever contemporary-theory class, thankfully in English, taught by Phillip Fry. He allowed me to research my interests in painting while quietly introducing us all to video, sculpture as installation, and photo-based work. I realized later that he felt that painting could only ever be a colonialist venture, at least in Canada.

No. 7, acrylic on canvas, 54" X 72", 1979.



Université d'Ottawa had a bilingual requirement which I knew I wouldn't be able to complete in one more year. So I sheepishly returned to Mount Allison to finish my degree, back in time for summer, looking for a job. They let me set up a studio in the sculpture area in exchange for cleaning it up, the last semester's students having left their mess behind. It was a large dark hall, but I was happy in there with my homemade studio lights. I started making bigger stretchers, since the wood-shop equipment was nearby.

No. 5, acrylic on canvas, 54" X 120", 1979.



My best painting buddy, Norene—who had just graduated with the cohort that was supposed to include me—came to visit my studio. Her work was more lyrical and I had a hard time trying to explain my paintings to her. Mine were more systematic, like solving math problems.

*No. 3*, acrylic on canvas, 54" X 120", 1979.



My advisor that final year was a Greenbergian, so he would photocopy Greenberg's essays for me. They were okay to read, but when I asked if there were any oppositional views, he gave me Harold Rosenberg's essays on Action Painting, which felt like we were all still in the same boat. I got that making a painting was performative. I waited for each month's *Artforum* to show up in the library. There wasn't much in there about painting. Same with the quarterly *Parachute*, from Montreal.

No. 7, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 120", 1980.



One of my professors from my second year, a landscape watercolourist who was a former pupil of Alex Colville, stopped by my easel to chat. He asked me why I kept making the same painting over and over again. I asked him, wasn't that what he did? With his rocks, water, and clouds. When I ran into him seven years later at an art show in Vancouver, it was all water under the bridge.

No. 23, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 120", 1980.



In the final semester a professor from NSCAD came to visit. Eric was a systemic painter, and he encouraged me to apply to grad school in Halifax. It was great to talk to somebody who got the paintings, but at the time I thought five years of art school was enough, and I was moving to Toronto to be an artist in the big city. I still have lingering regrets about that decision, forty years later.

*No. 24*, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 120", 1980.



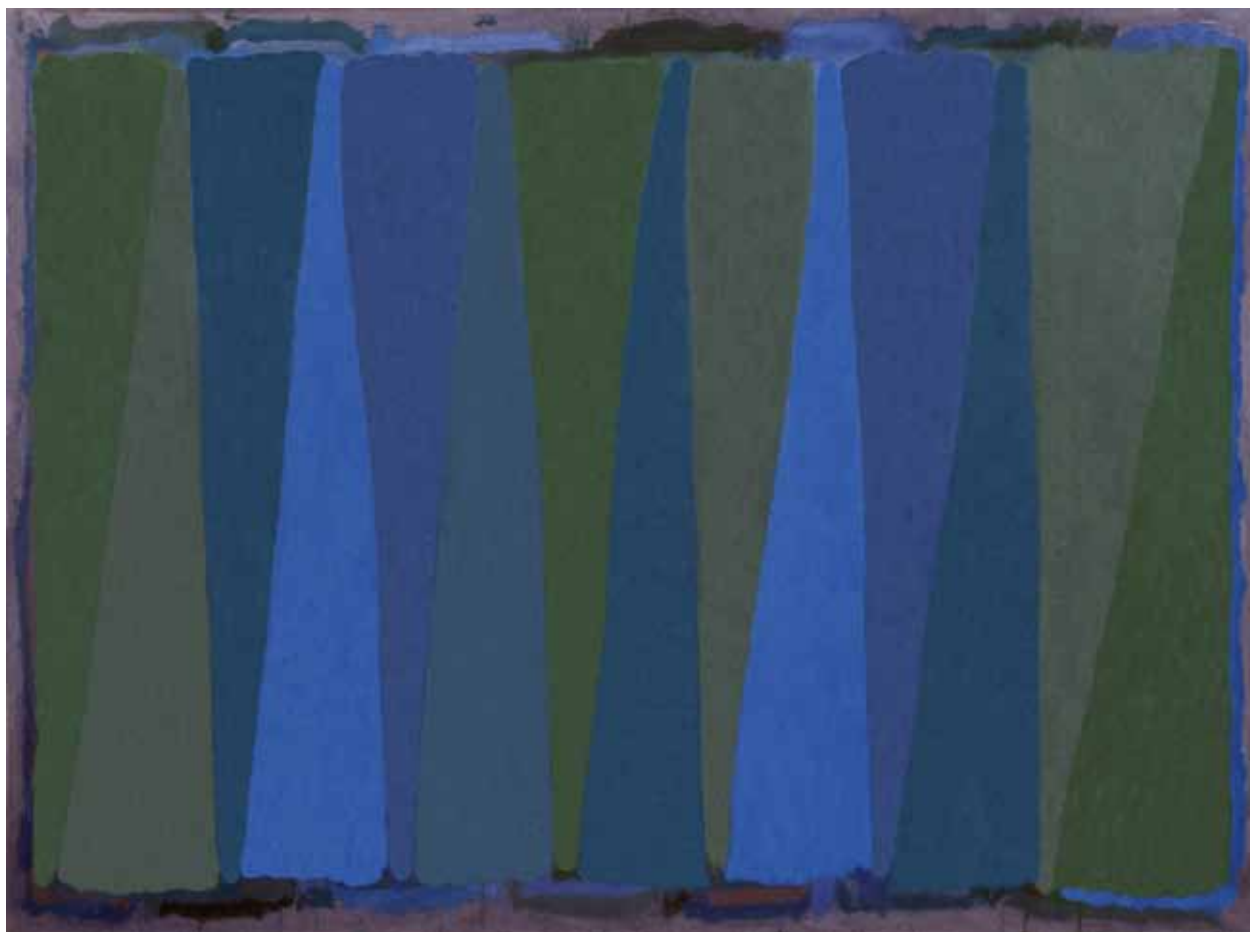
The school held summer workshops, and for my last summer I became a teacher's assistant for the Painting section. It was more like a residency: we didn't have many students, there was time to paint, and I had my own visits with the guest instructors.

Gordon Smith made me open up all my paint pots on the floor and we did a jam painting together as a demo for the students. Liz Magor spent her two weeks making bricks out of clothing scraps, using a portable mold-making machine she constructed especially for that purpose. André Fauteux made use of the welding shop to fabricate a sculpture out of steel. Henry Saxe colonized one of the empty school buildings and he and his girlfriend did impromptu installations with found materials. Lynn Donoghue had me pose as the model as she taught everyone in the class how to paint portraits in her style. William Ronald showed up in a double-knit white suit with matching pristine white clogs. A day later Virgil, the director of the program, found a small wet painting signed by Ronald in his office, along with a note saying he'd gotten on the next plane back to Toronto. As the T.A. who would have had to follow him around all day, I was relieved.



Just before I left the Maritimes for Toronto, I was given my first solo show at a small artist-run centre in Charlottetown, my hometown. It was a tiny space but there was room for four of the smaller paintings, which I built new stretchers for, on my parents' sundeck. My younger brother Ian, who was studying woodworking, took a moment to make fun of my hand-sawn mitred corners. The curator, Ken, wasn't much older than I was. We'd been in an art class together at the Confederation Centre, when we were eleven or twelve years old. My family all came to the opening. It was a bit awkward, as I don't think anybody much liked the paintings except Ken.

No. 16, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 120", 1980.



By the end of that series of paintings, I was mixing colours I couldn't find names for. I started thinking only in terms of warm and cool. It seemed to me that no matter how narrow you made the band of hue selection, there would always be that tension.

*No. 17 (Blue Piano)*, acrylic on canvas, 54" X 72", 1980.



I unrolled the paintings a few months later in my new city digs. Settling in, working a waitress job, finding a studio had taken several months away from my work. Although I was still very attached to the paintings, I wasn't sure what was going to come next.

*No. 18 (Mel's Piano)*, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 72", 1980.



*Ottawa, 1978-1979*

I signed up for a photography course, a team-taught class, because one of the instructors was a painter I had come to the school originally to study with—but he wasn't teaching painting that year. The other instructor also painted, although I wasn't as crazy about his work. It was more figurative. But it was the first time in a class that I saw mature artists, with different approaches, talking to one another about their ideas.

*Store window, Ottawa, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1978.*



I had a fixed-lens camera, a Minolta Hi-Matic that my dad had bought second hand for me at Norton's Jewellers in Charlottetown a couple years before. I had let my photo studies lapse, but Ottawa was exotic, my first city, and I spent hours walking around, taking photographs.

*Montreal*, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1978.



I quickly realized that the Photo Department was the most focussed area of the school and the discussions in our seminar tended to be in English, which I was grateful for, given that the school's mandate was bilingualism. The instructors did speak French when they argued. Some of the students were older, which added some weight to the critiques. Other photo instructors and visiting artists would drop in to the class. There was a coffee vending machine in the lounge area, where we would meet before class.

*Fine Arts Department, Université d'Ottawa, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1978.*



Our instructors were still talking about the *New Documents* photography show that had happened at MoMA in New York, ten years before, and the influence of its curator, John Szarkowski. We were encouraged to use our cameras in an anti-aesthetic, casual way. One of the instructors carried his brand-new Minox in his pocket and would shoot from the hip, as an example to the rest of us. I had a crush on him.

*Ottawa*, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1978.



I veered away from taking pictures of people in public. I was shy; as a Maritimer I felt like an interloper in the capital, not quite sophisticated enough. But the city had its own qualities which didn't involve that many pedestrians, especially on Sundays, which is when I had time for long walks.

*Ottawa*, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1978.



The Ottawa snow was immobilizing and there were days that were so cold it was impossible to be outside. The shooting days were the days that were warm and when the snow was getting a bit old. The thawing material literally pointed to things, making it too easy to find photographs.

Ottawa, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1978.



The school had a budget for a small reading room, which contained every book on photography that had ever been published, as far as I could tell. I got a part-time job tending it. It wasn't a busy place, and I had time to read.

Ottawa, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1979.



We didn't focus on the technical aspects of photography. We had one workshop with a technician, who spent an hour showing us how to mix up chemicals in the darkroom, and that was it. Our teachers did not chastise us for dust on our prints, or complain if they were lacking tonal range. If deficits were pointed out it would be the lack of a running idea in what images we chose to print. And clichés were immediately identified as a form of non-thought.

Ottawa, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1979.



The class was a six-hour day, spent seated in a seminar room. There was an age difference between the two instructors, and thinking about it now, I realize that the difference also spanned modernism and post-modernism. They were sparring, but in a productive way, about “fine art” and where photography fit in. Sometimes the discussions got very personal, triggered by what the students brought in—like whether a person who had had children was by definition occupying a more moral position than someone who hadn’t, or decrying a hygienic society which requires a box of kleenex next to every bed to clean up after sex, or whether it was possible to make a Walker Evans-style photograph and get away with it, now.

*Ottawa*, gelatin silver print, 5” x 8”, 1979.



Nobody ever seemed to be bored, and everyone got enough—and maybe sometimes too much—attention. We discussed what made a bad photograph. Maybe there was no such thing. Every picture pointed to something, and was a springboard for thinking.

Exhausted by the end of the day, I and my closest classmate, Elizabeth (who was also taking a year off from Mount Allison), would scramble 35 cents together for a half-pint of draught after class at the Lafayette, a little farther away.

*Ottawa*, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1979.



I only printed the negatives that had a consistent medium density. I felt vaguely guilty for not exploring the medium more, but that was a different class to take. I felt like I had enough on my plate, looking for what I wanted to photograph. The instructors told me my work was both morbid and humorous, and that I should go to the music library and listen to *La Danse Macabre* by Saint-Saëns. I was twenty-one years old.

Ottawa, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1979.



After the term ended we had a class party in somebody's apartment. I was conscious that I probably wouldn't run into some people again since I knew I was returning to Mount Allison. Have a nice life, we said to each other. I wish I had kept people's names, so I could find them all now on Facebook. Both the instructors, Charles Gagnon and Sylvain Cousineau, are now dead, but they are still vivid in my mind.

*Ottawa*, gelatin silver print, 5" x 8", 1979.



I came back to Sackville early in the summer, and after planting trees for a few weeks I got a job photographing old tombstones in a local graveyard, a preservation project for a church. The stones were barely legible, but I learned to photograph them on grey days for better texture, shooting in black-and-white using a Mamiya C330 on a tripod. I would spend hours on rainy days rocking trays in the darkroom at school, playing whatever cassette tapes were left lying around.

The big white church was torn down thirty-five years later to make way for a senior citizens home, or luxury apartments, I'm not sure which. I found out later that eight unmarked stone posts in the cemetery, grouped together at the back, were for people who had been slaves.

*Sackville, New Brunswick*, gelatin silver print, 5.5" x 5.5", 1979.



A few acquaintances were still in town but I didn't see much of them at first. I had burned a few bridges, having broken up with a boyfriend, and they didn't approve. I set up my painting studio where the school let me, and I walked around the town looking for photographs. The square format of the Mamiya had completely changed my world.

*Sackville, New Brunswick*, gelatin silver print, 5.5" x 5.5", 1979.



Sackville had over five-thousand residents, although it seemed I never saw them. Getting tired of the streets, I started climbing around the backs of people's houses, which quickly gave way to fields and vantage points that allowed me to feel disoriented, a feeling I began to crave.

*Sackville, New Brunswick*, gelatin silver print, 5.5" x 5.5", 1979.



I would pack up my camera equipment and hitchhike the eleven miles to Amherst, a bigger town nearby. Like Sackville it had large 19th-century homes financed first by shipbuilding and then by the railway, economies now made redundant by automobiles. People referred to Amherst as the armpit of Nova Scotia.

*Amherst, Nova Scotia, gelatin silver print, 5.5" x 5.5", 1979.*



The Trans-Canada Highway veered-in close to Sackville, as had the railway when it was built over one hundred years earlier, diverted from a more practical course by 19th-century politicians who had imagined that Sackville would be a thriving industrial centre rivaling Pittsburgh or Philadelphia.

*Sackville, New Brunswick*, gelatin silver print, 5.5" x 5.5", 1979.



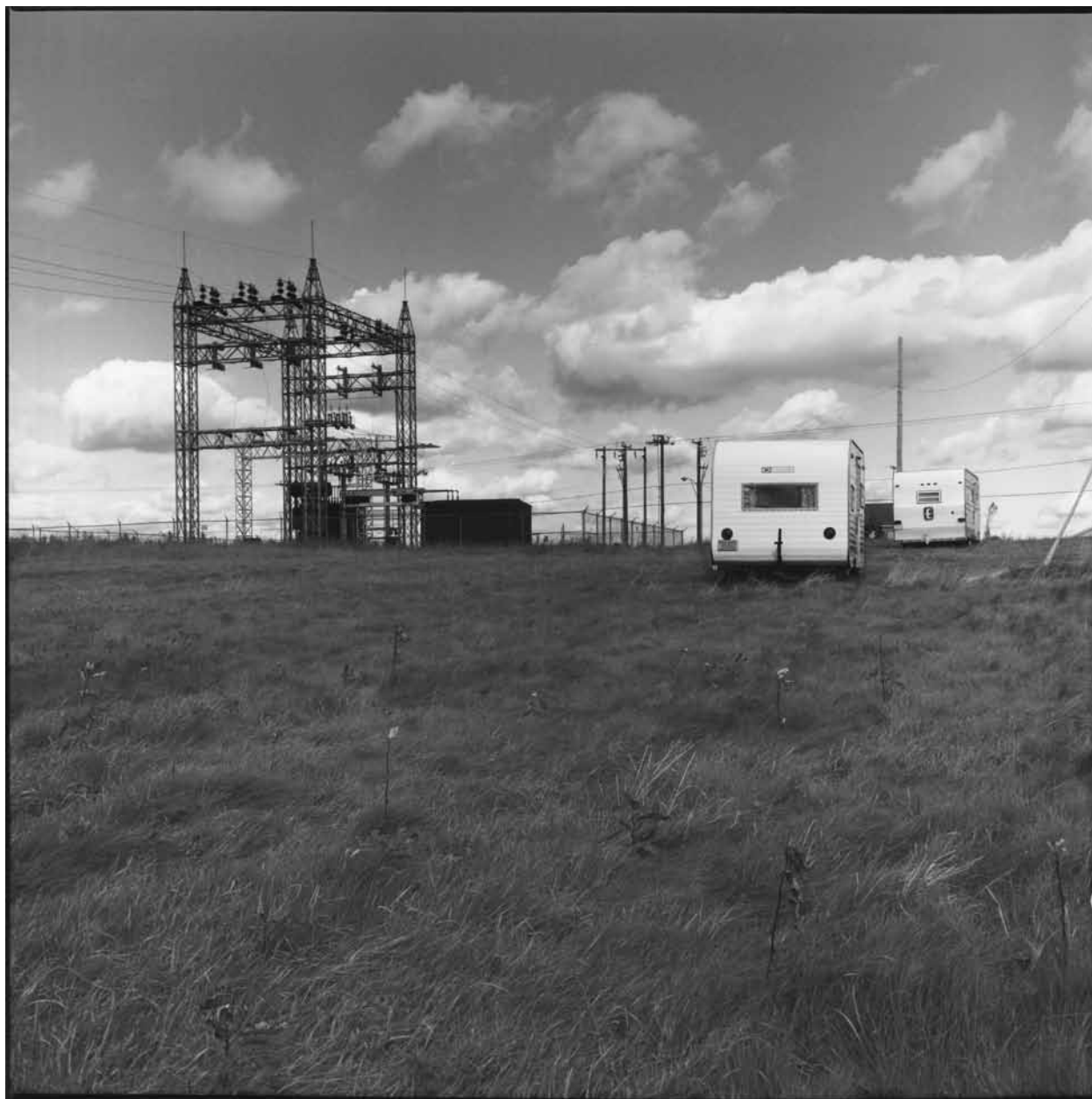
That autumn my best painting buddy, Norene, who had already graduated and moved to the city, was hit by a drunk driver while waiting for a bus in the suburbs north of Toronto. I was standing in the Fine Arts building lobby when Virgil, the head of the department, came out of his office to tell me. Norene was in a coma and died a few days later. She was seven years older and smarter than me; my mentor. She had been struggling with the dilemma of establishing herself as an artist in what was turning out to be another recession; she'd become another Maritimer 'Going down the Road'. The first random death of someone I was close to in my life: I understood that it wasn't a story anymore, that there wasn't any story.

*Sackville, New Brunswick*, gelatin silver print, 5.5" x 5.5", 1979.



The graduating cohort that year had a weekly seminar. We spent the first term reading *The Glass Bead Game* by Hermann Hesse and the second semester discussing *The Horse's Mouth* by Joyce Cary. Both novels had been published in the 1940s. I couldn't identify with anything much in the books.

*Sackville, New Brunswick*, gelatin silver print, 3.5" X 3.5", 1979.



I wanted to know how to apply for Canada Council grants, and how to go about finding places to show my work, but universities didn't teach professional practices in those days. I threw myself into an elective French class, because for a few months I thought I would be moving to Montreal; I had fallen in love with somebody there. The French professor held supper clubs in the cafeteria and there I began to retrieve a bit of a social life, speaking haltingly in French.

*Sackville, New Brunswick*, gelatin silver print, 5.5" x 5.5", 1979.



It hadn't started to snow yet, but the Christmas break was looming. I knew I'd have to think of an indoor project as Sackville became slushy and dull with brown sugar. It seemed to me that all the photographers I'd been channeling only took photographs in the summer, but maybe they were just all southerners.

*Sackville, New Brunswick*, gelatin silver print, 5.5" x 5.5", 1979.



I decided to do portraits in my last semester. It was an indoor project, but I didn't realize how much work it would be: setting up appointments, casing-out people's apartments for settings, trying to reconcile lighting conditions to shutter speeds, and attempting to combine a photo-shoot with what would usually end up being a social visit. I realized how hard it was to photograph a person.

*Thaddeus, Sackville, New Brunswick* , gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.



I was bouncing off a project I'd seen a student do a year before in Ottawa. She had booked a seminar room, asking everyone in the class to show up that one day for the shoot, taking their turns one-by-one under the fluorescent lighting. Her shots were more like photo IDs, two frames per person snapped very quickly. She only needed one roll of film to take care of the class. The final prints were hastily processed on resin-coated paper. Her work's anti-aesthetic was discussed by the class in conceptual terms. Otherwise, as a student she was a single mom with two kids, and didn't have as much time as the rest of us to do her projects .

The idea was that somehow the person's portrayal would be caught between the two frames, the invisible moment when the sitter made the decision to change position, or not. It was a moment that couldn't actually be photographed.

*Doug, Sackville, New Brunswick, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



My adaptation was to shoot a whole roll per person, but then from the contact sheet, try to choose the one image that I thought was that in-between moment. That was about it. My photo instructor didn't like the prints, but didn't seem to give me a good reason, other than that those kind of photographs had already been done before.

*Marian, Sackville, New Brunswick, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



My sister Alison had enrolled in the Fine Arts program two years after me. When I returned that fall our separate accommodations had fallen through, so we defaulted to sharing a room. Having followed in my steps with the same instructors and curriculum, she wisely avoided my know-it-all advice. Despite having the same gene pool, same upbringing, same classes, and at that time the same way of dressing, we turned out quite different. She is the one who is still painting, now.

*Alison and Lucy, Sackville, New Brunswick, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



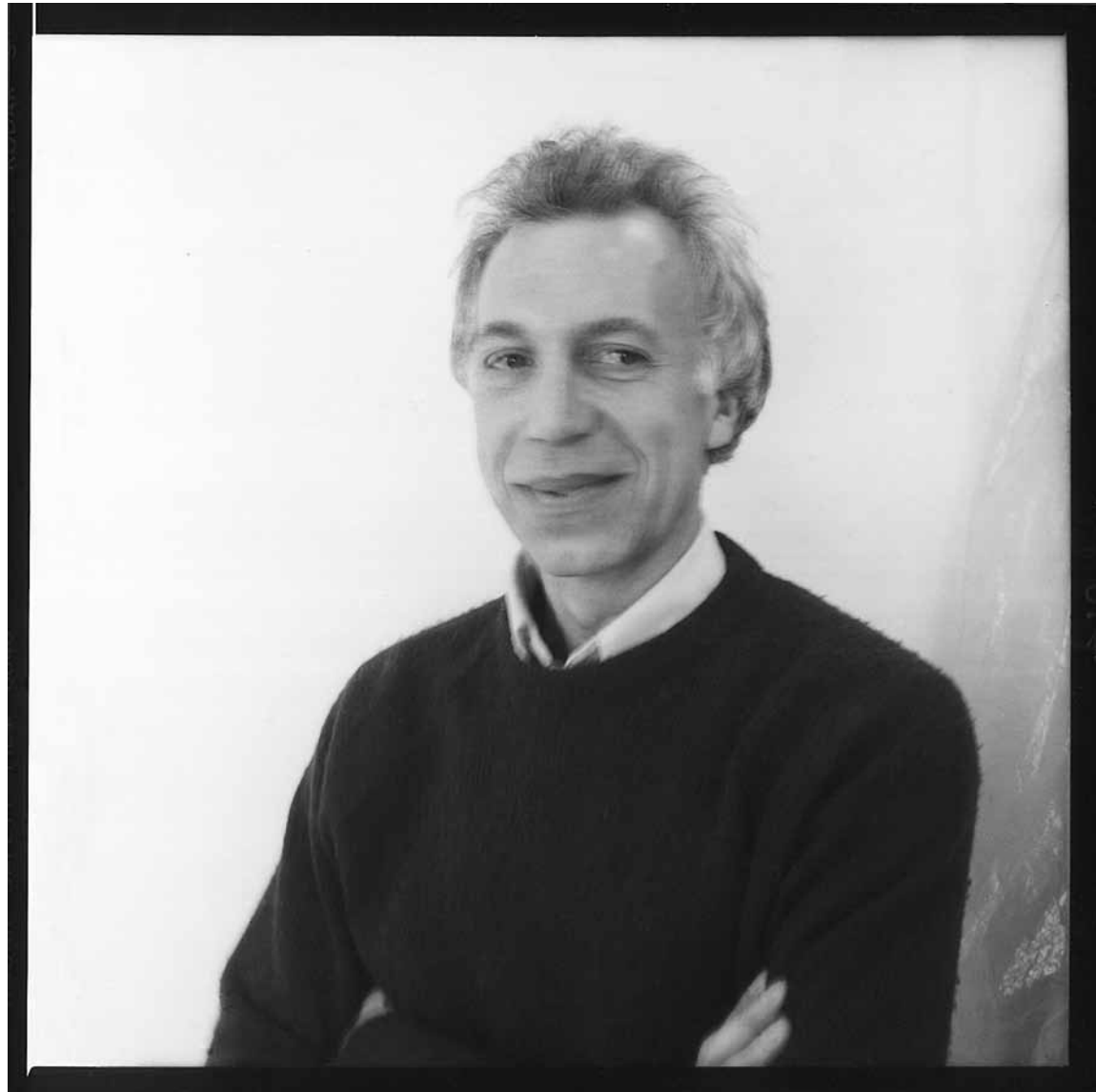
By the next semester, our social group had gotten tighter. My friends Su and Jo invited me to live in their large apartment over Helen's Beauty Salon. Su had been Norene's best friend while I'd been away, and we became closer as we talked over Norene's death. Su was Jo's older sister, so we both had sisters we vaguely felt responsible for. Having turned drinking age we would go to the student pub on Friday nights, ordering large Drambuie from our friendly bartender, Al. We would discuss our love lives, which were complicated.

*Su and Jo, Sackville, New Brunswick, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



In a moment of confusion, a well meaning graduating student who thought I should develop leadership skills nominated me as president of the Student Association for Fine Arts for the upcoming year. I wasn't sure at all what I was supposed to do. I held one meeting but was very nervous, and after some inarticulate complaining about curriculum we couldn't advance any other agenda except the Valentine's Day party, which meant I ended up being the one mixing the punch. At the party we eventually got everyone dancing in the studio, but not before somebody sat on the turntable while it was playing Rickie Lee Jones's *Chuck E's in Love*.

*Laurie Woods, Sackville, New Brunswick, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



John Asimakos was my painting advisor. He was working on a lecture about Matisse which was going to be presented at the Owens Art Gallery, but it was postponed twice. We decided he was nervous about public speaking. There was one small, beautiful painting of his from the '60s in the gallery's collection, an image of precisely painted vertical colourations reminiscent of Gene Davis. Like many of us John moved on to semi-figuration in the '80s. I wasn't aware then that he knew how to play the piano, and that as a youth had been recruited to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. By the time I returned to Mount Allison 15 years later as a visiting artist, he had been diagnosed with Pick's disease, a kind of early-onset dementia. I met with him and his partner, Linda, for lunch and we had a long tangential conversation about Matisse, Cézanne, and Clement Greenberg, which had been what we'd always talked about before. Linda went on to make a film about John, which I'd like to see one day. I couldn't get him to sit still for the camera, back in 1980.

*John Asimakos, Sackville, New Brunswick, gelatin silver print, 3.5" 3.5", 1980.*



Peter, the boyfriend of my oldest sister, Janis, was studying the philosophy of science. After having seen my first exhibition in Charlottetown, he asked me when I thought a painting was finished. I knew I was being coy and somewhat contradictory when I said I just knew. A few years later, having spent some time teaching painting to others, I could finally articulate that painting was for me a set of calculated decisions based on a set of anticipated moves drawn from an acquired language: intuition as a concept had become too vague a term to work with. But back then I didn't have the vocabulary.

*Peter, Sackville, New Brunswick, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



Janis was studying sports medicine and she and Peter lived for competitive badminton. I was never a disciplined athlete but Janis had taken me in hand back in high school, training me every week in the church hall for phantom opponents. Smashes, drop shots, and a good serve; covering the court, running backwards and forwards. The main thing seemed to me that you had to keep an eye on the bird. There was a learned hand-eye coordination that later served me well in drawing the human figure; measuring distances and proportions, empathizing with a figure in motion, translating what you see into an action. I loved the affect of the props of a racket sport: the loose fitting tennis whites, Michael York in *Accident* with his Oxford accent, languishing court side.

*Janis, Sackville, New Brunswick, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



Before I left for the city, my parents and I set out for a tour around Cape Breton, in my father's Winnebago. Because of the oil crisis, it had spent most of its early life parked. It functioned mostly as Dad's private studio; he would drive it to places where he could paint landscapes from the driver's seat, with all the comforts of home in back—fridge, stereo, a place to nap—most studios have all that. We had to cut the trip short, since my mother decided I was too irritable. I thought that the idea of a four-thousand-pound tin can hurtling through hairpin turns should have everyone on edge. Happy hour was always the highlight at the end of a day on the road.

Dad had wanted to be an artist, but as the story goes, his parents wouldn't let him. He became a dental surgeon, because he thought at least he'd be working with his hands and there were some aesthetic choices to be made crafting bridges and crowns. When I went to art school I was among the few who could say their parents encouraged them to go.

*Dad, Tea Hill, Prince Edward Island, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



When I asked my parents and my sister Lianne—who was still at home—if they would pose, they put on their best clothes. Dad wore the last three-piece suit he ever bought. Mom wore a dress she'd recently sewn. Lianne was in a dress Mom had made for our brother Billy's wedding the year before.

In the early '50s my mother's first choice of subject to study had been advanced math, but her scholarship options offered only nursing or home economics. Being the first person in her family to go to college, it seemed better than no choice at all. She wasn't needed on the farm, so they let her go.

By 1980 my parents had only been in their dream home for four years, after years of planning and saving. Whenever my mother had gotten a piece of furniture reupholstered she would choose a shade of muted green, usually in a figured material; by the time they moved in all the furniture matched. The yellow ochre rug in the split-level living room brought it all together, along with dramatic floor-to-ceiling curtains in the two-story dining room.

It was only twenty-eight years later, in the rush of helping my mother downsize the contents of the house for a smaller condo—with wheelchair access—that I realized what a coherent world they had built for themselves, and now had to leave behind. Packing up on the last day, my mother wanted to take the curtains with her; she was hoping to repurpose them for their new place. As we were leaving, just minutes before the buyer's walkthrough, we had to leave one portion of the curtains hanging. It was just too far to reach; our ladder was too short.

*Mom, Tea Hill, Prince Edward Island, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



That day Lianne let me do up her hair the way I wore mine, tight and a little severe. She was the last sister in the house. We'd all been her built-in baby sitters until we all, one by one, left home to go to university, and then for farther away, not able to return as often. We had already become less of an influence on her.

*Lianne, Tea Hill, Prince Edward Island, gelatin silver print, 3.5" x 3.5", 1980.*



By the time graduation loomed, there was a lot of end-of-semester tension in our Sackville apartment. People had stopped eating dinner together, frayed by final papers and upcoming tests. I'd finished my requirements early. We'd hung our grad show, and I left before the graduation ceremony which they had scheduled for a month later. I'd run out of money and needed a job. I would be coming back that summer for my first gig as a teaching assistant, but everyone would be gone by then. Su helped me with my trunk, to get it to the train station for the twenty-two hour trip to Toronto. She was very sweet to see me off. We hadn't spoken much in the last few weeks. I was sure I'd done something wrong but I didn't know exactly what. I was in a solipsistic moment, and we were all pretty tight for cash.

It would take a while to get settled; find another job, find a studio, sort out my relationships. I was staying with an ex-boyfriend, and trying his patience. I looked after his studio while he was away for six weeks, but I was still there when he came back.

369 Sorauren Ave. photo by William Gourlie Hogg, 1981.



One of my former painting teachers from Mount Allison was moving to a bigger studio, so I took his old one and started living the loft life. There was a sophisticated artist-couple living on the other side of the thin wall I slept next to. I was jealous of their earnest conversations about art, which seemed to happen late at night. I moved my bed to the other wall, across the room.

*Persuasion*, acrylic on canvas, 66" x 92", 1981.



I hadn't been successful at waitressing, but a friend introduced me to some archeologists at the Royal Ontario Museum who needed somebody to draw profiles of potsherds from Jerusalem. I had shown them examples of my representational drawing, and they thought I was good enough. I was happy to get such a rarified opportunity, but it was a full-time job. Although I loved walking through the dinosaur hall every other Friday to pick up my pay check in accounting, I couldn't get much painting done.

*Proposal*, acrylic on canvas, 66" x 92", 1981.



André Fauteux, the sculptor I'd met earlier that summer, gave me a studio visit. I was still ruminating over my undergrad work from Sackville, which in my mind was still drying. Looking over my somewhat static compositions, he told me that symmetry was boring.

I had struggled with the idea of asymmetry, afraid that it would introduce a narrative I didn't want. I likened it to programmatic music of the 19th century, the kind my father listened to. But I had to do something different, and I was very suggestible. I did recall a teacher saying once, "When in doubt, introduce a diagonal."

*Heavy A Second*, acrylic on canvas, 66" x 92", 1981.



The drama of the diagonal compositions forced me to look for counterpoint in the colour juxtapositions and tonal contrasts—far from the nuanced, contiguous relationships I had worked with before. I kept thinking of what my friend Norene had once said about my work, that I treated colours as if they were social entities and I was imagining the interactions in the room.

*Easter*, acrylic on canvas, 72"x 53", 1981.



The Tushinghams were very kind to me but the archeological drawings they needed were very schematic and precise and I wasn't up to scratch; my lines were too inflected. They made sure I had enough employment weeks before they fired me. I now had time to paint, but the unemployment insurance would only last so long. Canada was in a full blown recession, the second wave of the oil crisis. The job boards at the government employment offices all required skill-sets I didn't have.

*Lake Upon Lake*, 53" x 92 ", acrylic on canvas, 1981.



I went to visit Lynn Donoghue, the portrait painter whom I had assisted that summer at Mt. A. She was in the thick of the Toronto painting community, which was on the cusp of breaking out into new kinds of figuration, after a couple of decades of abstraction dominating the commercial scene. She and her studiomate Paul Hutner (another painter) looked at my slides. They told me my paintings were pretty good for their genre, but Greenberg was old hat. It wasn't the first time that year someone had told me that, since arriving in Toronto.

When I told Lynn about my job woes, she suggested that I become a freelance bookkeeper. She had done that earlier in her career, taking care of artists' accounting. You could work at home, have a flexible schedule, not have to deal with too many people, but also learn about how their worlds operated.

She also told me I needed to work on my style and become more of a girl about town. Women artists couldn't just register as mousy versions of themselves. They had to be picturesque in some way: sleek and sophisticated, vintage campy or kick-ass tomboy. I didn't see how I was going to manage any of those things.

*Short End*, acrylic on canvas, 66" x 92", 1981.



The employment office offered job training at George Brown College. I signed up for accounting, office management, and speed typing. The classes were structured to progress at your own rate. I wanted to finish the program as fast as I could. We had to take a workshop on presentation, and were advised that we should use underarm deodorant and always wear a dress to the first interview. Get the job first, they said, then see if you can wear pants after that.

*Clean Dress*, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 53", 1981.



The Accounting instructor noticed I was reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* during class breaks. He told me he thought it was a great book. It occurred to me later he might have thought I was reading the other book about Ulysses, *Homer's Odyssey*. Nevertheless, he gave me some hope there might be some accommodation for culture, in the business environment.

*Cry Wolf*, acrylic on canvas, 66" x 92", 1981.



While all this was happening I was having a bit of a mental breakdown, trying to sort out my life. In addition to consulting *I Ching* I went to a psychiatrist, since psychiatry was covered by the Canadian health plan and therapists weren't. He diagnosed me as manic-depressive and put me on lithium.

After three weeks I had to stop taking the medication; it was interfering with learning how to type. The doctor then told me he had been one of the proponents of shock treatment back in the '50s. He acknowledged that the procedure had since been discredited, but he was excited to say it was coming back and I'd be a good candidate. I'd seen *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*; I cancelled my next appointment.

*Last Exit*, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 53", 1981.



In school I had always numbered my paintings, taking pleasure as the numbers moved into the double digits. Art for art's sake; no story there. Now my titles became cryptic references to things I was trying to work out in my personal life, with less of a sense of anything moving forward. There was a tradition, I noticed, of applying random titles to abstract art. The paintings might have been about nothing. But when I read the titles now the whole story comes back.

*Caught Twice*, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 53", 1981.



Having been out of school for a year by then, and in possession of a fresh slide sheet of twenty new paintings, I applied for a Canada Council grant. For my work proposal I simply said, "I would like to make ten to fifteen more paintings in a similar style"—or something to that effect. It was probably the last year you could get away with such a simple statement. I got the grant.

Later I saw that the jury had had someone on it who was a colleague of my old painting instructor. My paintings were definitely in their ballpark. I was glad to be supported, but it was my first inkling that the art world operated on a referral system.

*Hoper's Limitations*, acrylic on canvas, 92" x 66", 1981.



My unemployment insurance was running out and I was running out of canvas. I was seeing lots of low-paying jobs at the employment office that I didn't really want but now had the credentials to apply for. The letter telling me I was getting a grant was months away. I made a few shitty paintings in a row. I rolled them out on the floor and in an attempt to salvage them, started to crop and slice. I'd seen the format in my teacher's studio. It seemed elegant and practical. You could work on several strips at once, stapled to the floor.

*Alison's Complaint*, acrylic on canvas, 88" x 18", 1981.



I was still feeling new to the city, but by now I had met some Post Painterly abstractionists. I always thought “post” meant “after”—as in Barnett Newman and Morris Louis—but these artists were pretty painterly. Another term that was used was “lyrical abstraction”. I know the artists themselves were having trouble with what they were called. At one point a survey went around, generated by one of the artists, asking for suggestions. It was prefaced with a description of what they all agreed art was, which seemed to to exclude a lot of what I was seeing, out and about in the galleries and museums.

*Moneychanger*,  
acrylic on canvas,  
88” x 27”, 1981.



I met the art critic Karen Wilkin who was then living in Toronto. Friends had suggested to me I call her up and have her over to my studio. An American, she was associated with Clement Greenberg, and was working on a monograph on Jack Bush, one of my favourite artists. I managed to gather the courage to call her. She said she was busy, but to call her back in a couple of weeks. I marked the calendar. I phoned two weeks later and left a message which it seemed she might have missed. I knew she was in town, because I'd spotted her window-shopping on Bloor Street one day with her husband, both looking elegant in fashionable summer khakis. I called her again, and we made a date.

*Final Platitude,*  
acrylic on canvas,  
88" x 11", 1982.



Rather than working with completely enclosed triangles as I had in the past, with hard edges dividing the canvas, I'd let one or two sides of each triangle remain open and brushy, integrating with the randomly gestural underpainting. Karen had seen a lot of painting by then in her career. It was probably more obvious to her than it was to me what my influences were. She told me I had a good device. After she left I realized my device was only going to last so long.



My boyfriend moved into my studio. With a fresh degree in modernist and medieval literature, he was also casting about for jobs. We acquired two young cats and became a family. Together finances got easier; we could get by on odd gigs and savings. After a Kafkaesque stint at the United Parcel Service he landed a part-time job with Canada Post, delivering mail. It was reassuring to see the company supplied blue polyester shirts hanging up with the rest of the clothes. My grant money had arrived, but to supplement it I got a part-time job at a travel agency, doing manual ledger entries. The office was full of women who spent all their time fielding customers' phone calls. I got my hair cut, sewed up some dress pants and a couple of tailored jackets, and tried to fit in.



My old art-school friend John had returned from his post-graduate studies in England. I considered him more advanced than me; I had consciously mimicked his painting strategies when we were undergrads together. When he arrived for a studio visit, he was encouraging, but I could tell he thought my work was pretty bland. He had been an abstract painter but his new work was starting to introduce the figure and narrative allusions; people were calling it New Image painting. He was already teaching, and I'd go with his classes on field trips to the Albright Knox Museum in Buffalo, where I fell in love with a particular Cézanne, *Le Matin en Provence* (1900-1906).



When we got back from our wedding trip I realized that the travel agency had bought a computer, and were training the salesgirls how to do the book-keeping on it. George Brown College hadn't shown us any computers; I was still doing addition in my head. I was let go two weeks later.

I got another part-time job, working for an ex-employee of IBM, who was starting up a computer-sales business in his basement, which he had set up like an office with cubicle dividers. He would come down the basement steps in a full suit. Everything was communicated by inter-office memos in triplicate, which I didn't adapt well to. Our arrangement didn't last long.

I went to another job interview with an accountant whose husband was an artist, a mutual friend. I thought maybe now worlds would conjoin, but I never heard back. I had some brochures printed, offering freelance bookkeeping to artists, and rode my bike all over town to studio buildings, slipping them under people's doors. This bore no fruit. I hadn't thought it through. Most artists probably didn't need a bookkeeper.

I finally found a four-day-a-week job at A-One Uniform. They owned a smaller company called Valley Slacks that needed a dedicated bookkeeper. Miles and miles of polyester pants. My supervisor's name was Ettie, and people called her E.T., for good reason. I did get some practice with bank reconciliations and trial balances, but my typing was still jumpy on the IBM Selectric. Things came to a head when I was typing the T4s, which were on a perforated triple-carbon roll. If I messed one form up we'd lose the numerical sequence, and E.T. would be on the ceiling. She phoned me the day after I did that to tell me not to come in. I was about to phone her to tell her I was quitting.

*Guardian*, acrylic on canvas, 89" x 28", 1982.



We had moved into an apartment from the studio, since it seemed we needed more rooms with doors. Our schedules were slightly different, and as an early riser for Canada Post, M.'s involved a nap in the afternoon. I used two small rooms as workspace, setting up shelving, storage, and protective flooring for painting and stapling canvases. One room was the messy room, the other room was for administration. My bookkeeping business, which had started off spotty, finally patched itself together through word of mouth.

*Shrift*, acrylic on canvas, 90" x 26", 1982.



I carried on with the cryptic titles, although their allusions were no longer so fraught. That year was about domestic adjustment: buying used furniture, trying to figure out how to use wedding presents, getting a vacuum cleaner for cat hair. Using household sponges to apply paint, the work was turning into a set of repetitive actions. Laying down some washes, then cutting into them with editorial swatches. I was back to my allover painting; I was the figure and the painting was the ground. When friends came over, the work wasn't getting much of a response, though, and I knew I needed more definition.

*Pearl Diver*, acrylic on canvas, 89" x 28", 1982.



It was a new year, and to get out of a rut I went to the hardware store and bought a squeegee. It was a tool I hadn't tried yet for painting. You poured a pool of paint onto the stretched canvas on the floor, quickly moving it along with the squeegee in a continuous gesture. The mixture of medium and pigment would skim out as a flat glaze, condensing as colour on the edges.

*Fast Lane*, acrylic on canvas, 66"x 27", 1983.



These squeegee actions were very similar to the three-minute gesture-drawings I had done many times in art school, sketching from the model. You got one or two shots to move the flat piece of compressed charcoal across the newsprint, gently placing pressure on one end of it or the other, depending on where you wanted the tone to drop on the page to create the figure.

*Reliance*, acrylic on canvas,  
57" x 15", 1983.



It must have been early in the year when the curator from the Edmonton Art Gallery, Russell Bingham, visited my studio. He picked a painting that I had just finished to be in a show that summer. It was one of the first paintings done with my new squeegee, and to me it felt a bit tentative as a work. But I was proud of the title of the show: *Contemporary Canadian Art: The Current Generation*. I thought maybe this was the start of my official career.

*Quartet*, acrylic on canvas,  
82" x 24", 1983.



A woman came around who said she was an art consultant. She seemed enthusiastic. A recent divorcée, she had a newly renovated house she wanted to host a show in. My friend John put up some landscapes and another friend Tony placed some small sculptures on plinths. As she directed the hang, we became more aware that she wasn't that seasoned. Just before our opening reception, John found that she'd moved his work to the downstairs vanity room. He promptly de-installed it, put it in his car and drove home. As far as Tony and I could tell by their few questions, the people who came to the event weren't collectors. We realized we were at a housewarming.

*Praecipitium*, acrylic on canvas, 65" x 28", 1983.



Murray was M.'s new colleague from the Post Office, who was doing his master's in sociology. When I discussed my dilemma as an artist straddled between the mundanity of clerical jobs and the idealist aspirations of artmaking, he told me that although I had no money I had cultural capital and was therefore actually privileged.

*Fleda's Care*, acrylic on canvas, 67" x 25", 1983.



Shortly after that conversation Murray found a book for me to read, *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger. I didn't immediately think that the history of the Western nude as a category had anything to do with the art I was making, but I knew I was thinking about the body—whether it was active or passive. I went to the Art Gallery of Ontario and saw a William Blake show. I was swept away by an image of a horse and rider suspended over a supine figure. The weight and momentum of the composition at the top of the image seemed radical to me. I tried it out.

*Ambassador*, acrylic on canvas, 26"x 72", 1983.



Another art consultant came by, this time with colour swatches. She was using them to source artwork that would coordinate with her client's décor. She actually had clients, though, and wanted to mount a show of what she considered more radical work than what she usually dealt with.

She temporarily rented an exhibition space on Front Street in the same building with some other galleries; she thought we'd attract some of their stray visitors. She put up my new work with a couple of other abstractionists. The show opened with the usual white wine, grapes, and too much cheese.

She hired me to sit the exhibition, which was up for a month. I got to observe the foot-traffic. It was my first real insight into what the average viewer's attention span consisted of.

*Fumarole*, acrylic on canvas,  
87" x 25", 1983.



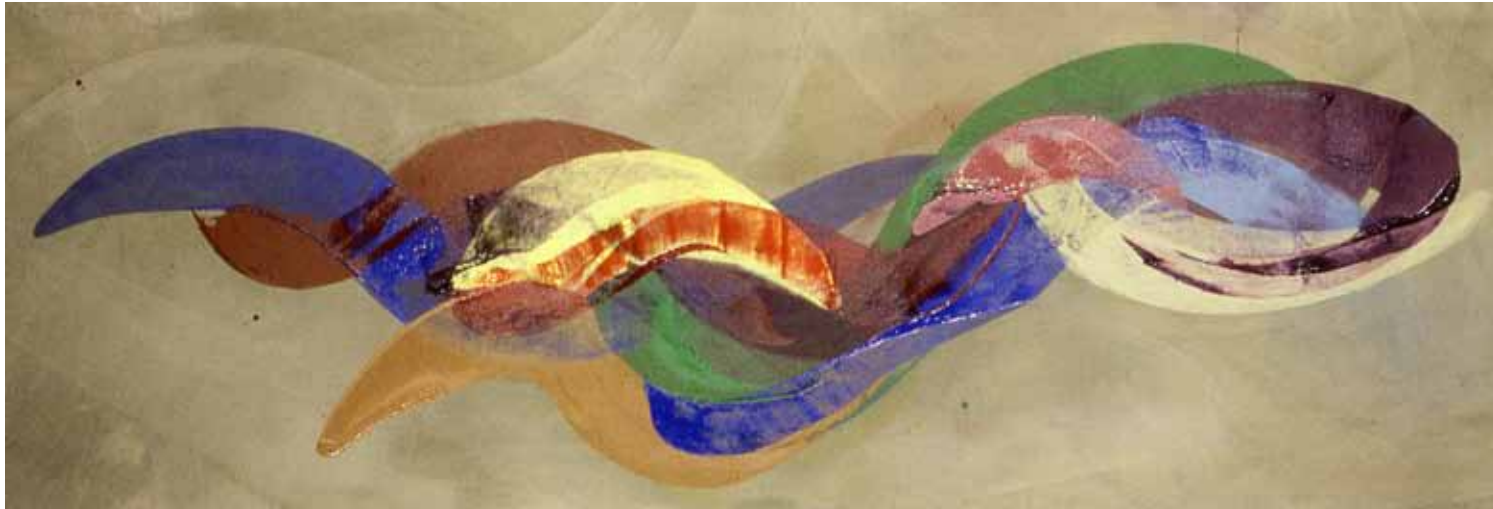
I ended up working as the art consultant's part-time assistant for almost a year, doing her books, typing correspondence, documenting artwork, and installing it in mostly corporate locations. The job made me realize where your average artwork ends up, at least in Canada. I could see that I was using colours that were probably too intense, if I wanted my work to end up in those places.

*Envoy*, acrylic on canvas,  
89" x 26', 1983.



I was doing the books for a couple of well established artists, and could see how selling their art impacted on their lives. The sales seemed to last a few years and then level out. One of them complained how in Canada his market was saturated now that the institutions and collectors each had just one of his works. Very few artists were collected “in depth.” He then complained that if he wanted to expand his market he'd have to move to New York City, where it would be harder because it was more expensive to live there, and he'd have fewer connections with which to establish himself. He seemed like a rock in a hard place.

*Odalisque*. acrylic on canvas,  
83” x 23”, 1983. Collection of Robert  
Gerry and Kathy Wilkinson.



Maybe all cities were more interesting in the early '80s, before the housing booms. The younger art community in Toronto was focused on Queen Street, with the more experimental commercial galleries opening close to the artist-run centres and progressive bookstores. The nearby cafes and clubs presented artist discussions and performances, as well as hosting “alternative” bands—before people were using that adjective. Artists were running galleries out of their apartments and ignoring the institutions altogether. There were so many reasons to walk downtown.

*Orlando*, acrylic on canvas, 26” x 81”, 1983.



I could see that the artists in the city who were my age and exhibiting were ahead of the curve. I'd seen a show called *Monumenta*, mounted across several artist-run centres: large, expressive figurative forms in painting and sculpture that looked familiar, maybe regressive, but challenging. Another show, *Chromaliving*, was one of the first more inclusive shows, refuting the formalist teleology I was attached to, cracking things up. I went to Yarlow Salzman, a gallery downtown, and saw an A.R. Penck show. I wanted to hate the large graphic paintings of stick figures, but I knew they were probably good.

*Second Odalisque*, acrylic on canvas, 84" x 26", 1983.



Clement Greenberg was coming to the city, as he did once a year or so as an executor of the Jack Bush estate. The abstractionists in town would host him for additional days and he would do studio visits. I chipped in \$50 and arranged to hang my work in Tony's studio alongside his sculpture. The work looked good together, and it would save time. The group of artists and critics arrived at ten in the morning. Tony, who wanted to savour the moment, offered Greenberg a glass of whisky, which got the visit off to a good start. They spent quite a bit of time with Tony's work, and the mood was congratulatory. I had been anticipating the visit for quite a while, imagining what I would say my work was about when they got around to me.

Greenberg mentioned the usual things you say when you look at abstract paintings, finally suggesting I turn what I thought of as figures upside down. I kept my thoughts to myself.

*Madonna*, acrylic on canvas,  
84" x 26", 1983.



I don't want to blame Greenberg, but after his visit I crashed. He didn't get it, I didn't get it, nobody ever would. I stopped painting for four months. When I did pick up the squeegee again, my technique was laboured as I intentionally tried to use more jarring colours, over-working the entire painting until the canvas could no longer breathe.

*First Amazon*, acrylic on canvas,  
84" x 26", 1984.



I had applied to the master's program at York University with last year's paintings. I knew the faculty were tough, more conceptual, but had hoped they would see I had potential. I got the short letter saying I didn't get in.

There was one formalist up there at York, a historian, but I guessed that he hadn't been on the review panel that day.

*Warrior*, acrylic on canvas,  
85" x 26", 1984.



I broke down in front of my friend Bettie, a dancer and choreographer. She gave me Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to A Young Poet* to read. I copied some of the earnest words into my new sketchbook. He had some good advice on how to deal with influences, and had a particularly optimistic section on how modern women would distinguish themselves from men.

In lieu of going to grad school, I cobbled together some reading lists and started more consistently reading *Artforum*, which was publishing more articles about the new painting, the pros and cons.

*Second Amazon*, acrylic on canvas,  
84" x 26", 1984.



I felt like I was going to be doodling for the rest of my life. As a teenager I had already discovered the limitations of that. I cracked open my Janson's *History of Art* to look for some ideas, settling on the figures of Adam and Eve as depicted in the end pieces to Hubert and Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*. I hoped that working from a source would give me some new strategies, but I ended up with more of the same doodling, except bigger.

*Adam and Eve*, acrylic on canvas,  
84" x 34", 1984.



Later on, when I gave artist talks, I would just skip over the next five years I'm writing about now. Why be sentimental, one friend had advised. The next few months in particular were hard to explain. I knew I needed to get more specific about what I was painting, and that I wanted to work with figures, but that was about it. As it turns out, that is what a lot of people were struggling with, right then. I set aside the squeegee and went back to my old brushes. The return felt really regressive.

*Annunciation*, acrylic on canvas, 84" x 34", 1984.



I was beating myself over the head. I was going backwards and didn't know what I was looking for. I wished I'd paid more attention in my art-history survey class nine years earlier, when they'd talked about subject matter. Art for art's sake had been too easy to embrace.

*Annunciation 2*, acrylic on canvas, 84" x 34", 1984.





I had participated in an open-studio weekend, a city-wide, inclusive event. Later someone asked me if I had anything small for a fundraiser. I brought my collages—rough, gummed with glue and unframed—to the storefront gallery. Two men (boys) receiving the work discussed it while I stood there, as if I wasn't there, saying it reminded them of Tim Jocelyn's work. He was affiliated with Chromazone, an artists' collective in town. I was quietly pleased. I thought maybe that meant I was on to something. The men (boys) were immediately distracted when another artist (girl), understatedly chic, came in the door, somebody they knew. The collages didn't sell; I had to come back and pick them up a week later.

*Life Before Man*, acrylic on paper, 19" x 9", 1984.



I could see by the look of things that I had enough skill-sets to participate in the new figuration, but so far my concepts seemed like illustrational one-liners. I had no relationship to content, except through the materialism of paint. I was going to have to start from scratch.

*Landslide*, acrylic on paper, 19" x 9", 1984.



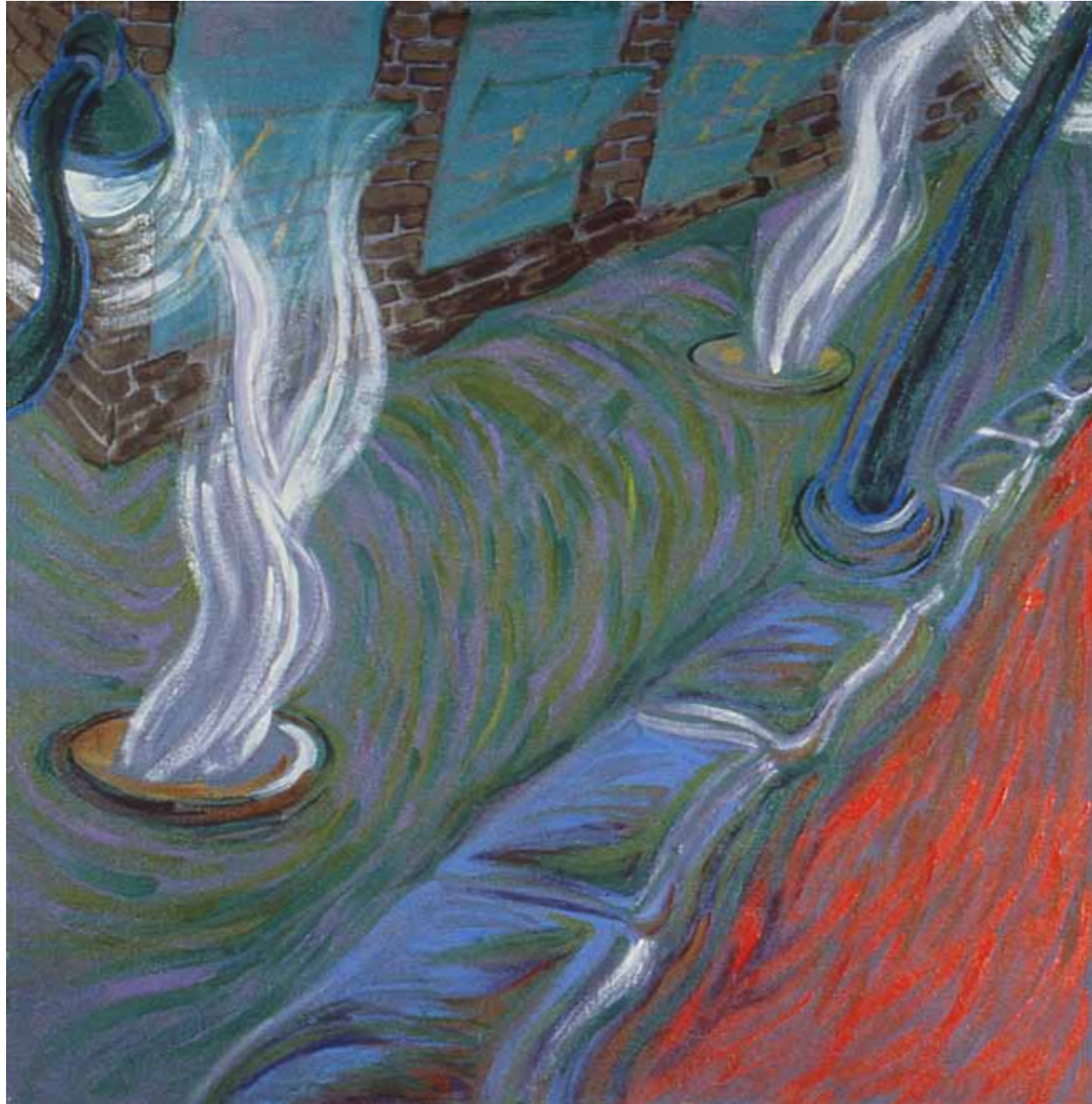
So then I became a neo-expressionist painter. I decided I would only paint from my direct experience, which would be loosely based on observation, dreams, and news stories that had made an impression.

*Eaton's Car Park*, acrylic on canvas, 34" x 34", 1984.



I took a new job, with some misgivings—referred by a friend of a friend. She was a sportswear manufacturer, back when Gore-tex was a new thing. My boss was charming but also turned out to be high-maintenance. As the bookkeeper, I knew the seamstresses were getting paid just over four dollars an hour. Sometime I could hear the boss screaming at them on the other side of the wall, when they made a mistake. The rhythm of the workday was guided by the sounds of the sewing machines. When it was break time the entire power on the production floor was cut off, a brief respite for all of us from the wall of noise. My employer thought of the bank as “The Man,” which complicated things for me, as her bookkeeper. The job ate up a lot of my time.

*Journey to Banff Wear*, acrylic on canvas, 24” x 32”, 1984.



To get to work I had to cycle out Weston Road past the meat-rendering plants, which smelled the same way every day. I had been a vegetarian for seven years by then, but I had cats and knew that meat was what they ate. I lasted until the end of the year with the sportswear company, but when I was offered a job as office manager at a music magazine, downtown, I jumped at it.

*Factory Period*, acrylic on canvas, 32" x 32 ", 1984.



Early that next year we went to New York City. Jonathan Borofsky's installation at the Whitney Museum was still up, and then the next day we saw Carravaggio at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We dressed up and made the rounds of the gallery openings, ending up at a Ronnie Cutrone opening at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery on Mercer Street. I guess we just missed seeing Andy Warhol. At another gallery they were serving martinis and a man was playing *My Funny Valentine* on a violin. I unrealistically felt like I could become a different person if I lived here; it became my new spiritual home.

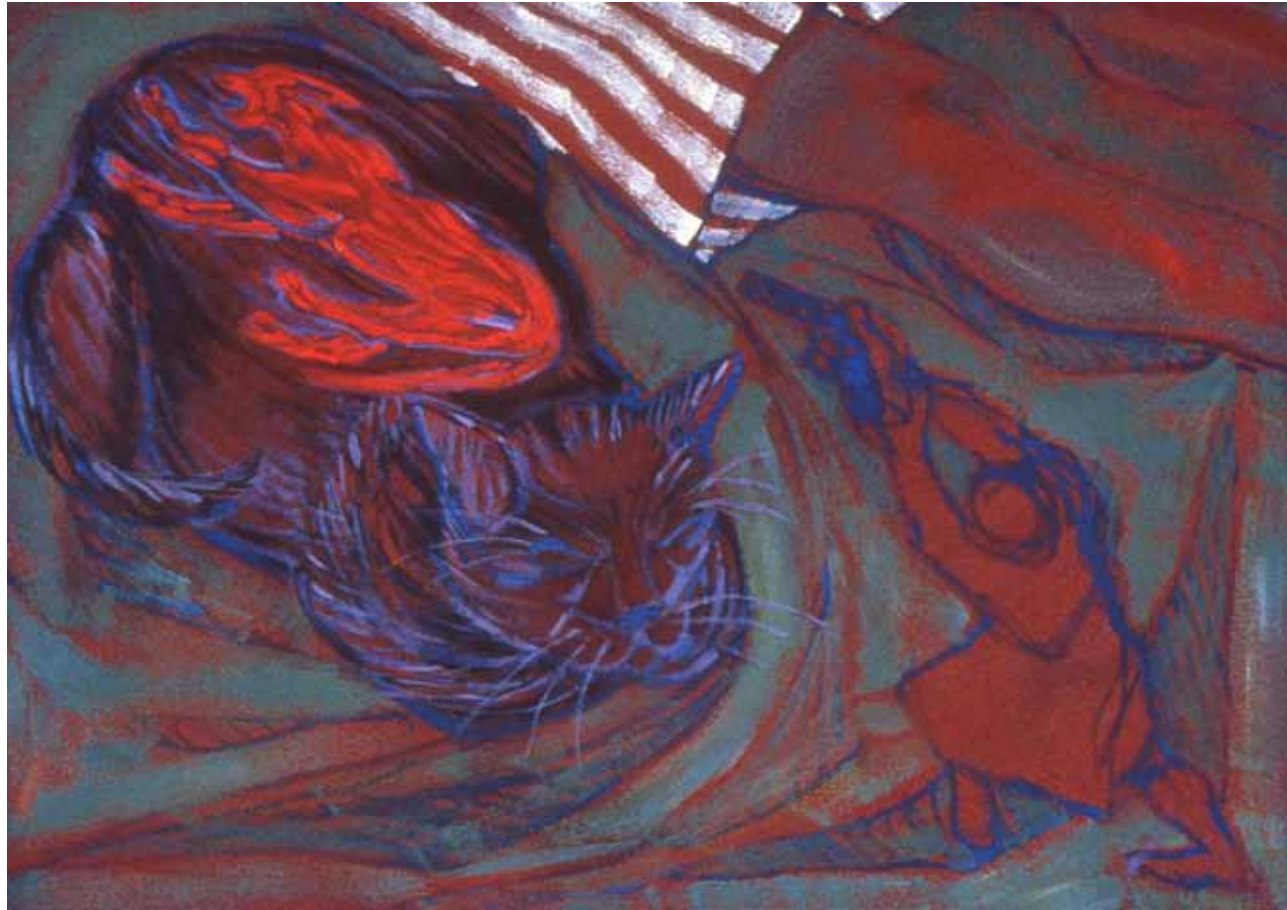
Back in Toronto we went to see Eric Fischl give a talk at the art gallery at Harbourfront. I had seen several of his paintings at the Art Gallery of Ontario. His imagery forced me to grapple with the notion that bad painting could embody content. He talked about learning to paint in public, which I realized a lot of people were doing, lucky them. He explained that he had started as an abstractionist but while teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design had become a figurative painter. This seemed to me to be something I could identify with.

*ShipsCatScotScat*, acrylic on canvas, 25" x 42", oil on canvas, 1985.



*The European Iceberg*, an exhibition curated by Germano Celant, had just come to the AGO, and I saw the German and Italian painters. Jorg Immendorf became my new hero. But there were many new Canadian painters who were exhibiting around Toronto, who interested me. Most of them were women: Shirley Wiitasalo, Sandra Meigs, Carol Waino, Landon MacKenzie, Eleanor Bond, Wanda Koop, Arlene Stamp, Renée Van Halm, Rae Johnson, Sybil Goldstein, Betty Goodwin. They didn't seem like token inclusions, and there was no one style. Their subject matter seemed to open up new topics for painting.

*Crowd Scene*, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 66", 1985.



My immediate friends were supportive of my new work, and thought I should try to show it to a larger public. A couple of new galleries were showing emerging artists. I geared myself up for a cold call. One gallerist said I could come see her and bring my slide portfolio, as she wouldn't do a studio visit. She kindly sat with me for an hour. She began by saying that at least I knew how to draw, but then listed all the things I needed to do before she would be able to consider showing me. I hadn't paid my dues. It was the beginning of the professionalized era.

*Last Night I Dreamt I Killed My Cat*, oil on canvas, 17" x 25", 1985.



I asked a couple of my abstractionist friends to come and see my new work. It had been two years since my Greenberg visit and my subsequent breakdown. They'd been helpful and supportive in the past. I felt like I had risen from the flames and I wanted to see how they saw that. I tried to explain what happened. They made some kind remarks but I could see by their faces that they thought the paintings were terrible.

*Exterminator*, oil on canvas, 36" x 72", 1986.



My partner M. was consistently at odds with his job, delivering mail in Toronto winter weather. Although it was part-time, he was exhausted when he came home, leaving less time for his own projects. His father was ill and he missed the West Coast. He put in for a transfer, and we knew that in a matter of months we'd be moving to Vancouver. I had been reconciled to my job at Musicworks Magazine; I was around people I was sympathetic to, for a change. But I knew that a job in arts administration was only going to lead to other jobs in arts administration, and I wasn't settled with that. I liked Toronto and did not want to leave, but we were both young enough to imagine that moving might change things.

*Last Night I Dreamt You Were A Wall*, oil on canvas, 25" x 18", 1986. Collection of John Armstrong.



On a whim I applied to grad school again, thinking that *that* could give me added incentive for the move. I fleshed out my page of twenty slides with drawings, as my fail rate with the paintings over the past year had been high. I knew I had to present a coherent self, so didn't include my abstract work. I also had to come up with some writing, so I got M. to write a paragraph. My dilemma was that the moments I chose to represent seemed vivid but inarticulate to me, epiphanic. M. used the word “ineluctable”, which I had to look up, but it made the statement sound more specific. Our friend John, who by then was writing reference letters for his own students, gave it a practical edit. It seemed like a long shot, but I got in.

*I Am the Curious Meerkat* , oil on canvas, 36” x 22”, 1986.



Vancouver still had some of its old character, although Expo 86 had just opened and the havoc of developers' future plans was already in motion. We moved into a tiny hippie house with a large front yard on the east side of the city, on Eton Street. Its previous renters had been drug dealers, according to our neighbours. We mended a few large holes in the walls, tore out the shag carpet, and painted everything white. Our friends Murray and Pam, who'd moved to the city the year before, showed us around. We were like tourists; exploring the trails, the last of the 1950s roadhouse restaurants, the great Stanley Park. It was an idyll except for all the rain, a honeymoon moment.

*West Van Birthday Party*, oil on canvas, 54" x 48", 1986.



M.'s old high-school friend had a brother, David, whose painting I'd seen earlier on the cover of *Vanguard*, a west-coast art periodical. Work by his wife, Allyson, had also been featured in the magazine, along with a group called the Young Romantics—new expressionist painters from Vancouver. Allyson had just finished up her master's at University of British Columbia—the program I'd been accepted into—so I asked if we could meet. Over tea, while minding her toddler, she recommended a class on the 19th century from a Marxist-feminist perspective, as well as an Italian-studies class that focussed on 20th-century literature and film. I asked her which faculty member I should choose as a studio advisor, as I knew I needed more female role models.

*Humber River Escape*, oil on canvas, 38" x 72", 1986.



As I had anticipated, the Marxist-feminism class was not relaxed. I had settled into a nice little studio space on campus in the Armoury above the drill hall, but found myself spending several hours a week in the library, just photocopying the photocopied articles the instructor had put on reserve. We started the course off with unpacking the myth of artistic genius, as seen through a detailed art historical analysis. We then went on to examine the representation of women's bodies vis-à-vis orientalism and recent feminist psychoanalytic theory. Next was an examination of photography and genre painting of the 19th century from a sociological perspective. I had a lot to catch up on.

*Washroom Attendant*, oil on canvas, 46" x 60", 1986.



My new classmates were an interdisciplinary group: 3D-installation, performance, drawing, photo-based work, and painting. We met each week to discuss readings on contemporary art, bringing us all into an understanding of our postmodern condition. Our seminar leader, Wendy Dobereiner, was just a few years older than us. An animated provocateur, she approached all the dense literature from a dialectical point of view. She was vibrant, naturally fashionable, in touch with the larger art community. She knew which lectures and symposiums to attend, and was always the first in a public audience to ask questions. As my main advisor she would meet with me every week to help me with my readings from my other class, in addition to discussing my studio progress. She gave us so much of her time. I couldn't know then that this kind of energy in a professor was so rare. She was brave, and she was my lifeline.

*Buried Alive*, oil on canvas, 20" x 20", 1987.



For the first few weeks we took turns presenting our own work, along with additional slides showing our influences and interests. One of my classmates, Robert, whose painting was also figurative, showed us some work he was interested in that I hadn't seen before, calling it Neo-Geo. He said this was the next new thing. I was crestfallen, like, I'd been on that bus, got off that bus to get on another bus, but should have stayed on the first bus. Robert dropped by my studio afterwards, leaning against the wall, a very tall man. "So you're a Neo-Expressionist," he said, indulgently. I know he had good intentions but I suddenly felt typecast. No doubt he was right.

*Worm Hunters*, oil on canvas, 78" x 64", 1987.



Towards the end of second semester we were all competing for the two teaching assistantships and one drawing scholarship available for the following year. We met as a collective and voted that we would combine all the funds and distribute them evenly amongst the group when they were awarded. We hoped this would send a message to the administration that they should be funding us all, if they thought we had been worth admitting in the first place. The money in total would have been small potatoes. Of course within a month one person dropped out of the pact, and the others lost heart. The usual competitive dynamic ensued, destroying the already fragile solidarity we'd managed to establish.

*Office Drama*, oil on canvas, 25" x 36", 1987.



Our second year brought a new seminar leader, and the readings took on a more essentialist, spiritualist bent. I was quiet in this class, not being as interested. The professor, a woman, took me aside and said it was my job as a woman to speak up. Ross, one of the other students and an activist, was more explicitly frustrated with the readings and suggested the class use Brian Wallis's *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* as a textbook. The professor didn't take it up, but I went straight to the bookstore.

*His Idea* (after Simone de Beauvoir), oil on canvas, 66" x 66", 1987.



We were excited, as a new faculty member had come on board, a photo-conceptualist. Wendy, my advisor, thought this would raise the bar for everybody. She thought that his work and my work had content in common; figures in context, ineluctable moments.

I had met with the other fine arts faculty. Roy Kiyooka, who held court as the wise elder in the Vancouver community, was blunt. He asked why, with what he called my sophisticated background in abstraction, I would be making paintings that looked like William Kurelek's—an artist who was said to have made his best paintings after he had endured shock therapy in the 1950s. Another faculty member, an installation artist, suggested I drop painting and take up animation, a curriculum the school didn't offer. I would talk shop with another faculty member, the only painter; he knew a lot about painterly matters, but we didn't discuss my subject matter. I never told anyone about my background in photography.

I only had one visit with the photo-conceptualist. I heard later through a back channel that he didn't think I could change, mature students rarely do, so we didn't arrange a further meeting.

*The Visitor*, oil on canvas, 66" x 66", 1988.



My work was actually changing, if incrementally. I still worked from “out of my head”—constructing scenarios from memory, or from a story I had heard, or illustrating a dream. But I had started to source my elements: found images in the library, or drawing from life. This got me out of my stylistic tape loop.

*Out of Sight, Out of Mind*, oil on canvas, 66” x 66”, 1988.



In the meantime, my exhibition prospects were picking up. A couple of open-submission shows: *Artropolis* in Vancouver and a drawing show in Edmonton at Latitude 53, an artist-run centre. My grad show was scheduled for the fall at Pitt International Galleries on Hastings Street, concurrent with a group show, *New Painting*, at the Contemporary Art Gallery, just up the street.

Maybe now, then, was the official start of my career.

*Baby*, oil on canvas, 12" x 12", 1988.



The group critiques with faculty happened once a semester and were usually fraught. You became more aware of the social dynamic between faculty rather than of what they were actually saying. They weren't a copacetic bunch. The photo-conceptualist would always comment after everyone had spoken, taking what they had said and bringing it all to a point, which I appreciated. In my case he posited that I was vacillating between illusionistic space and the flatness of a Persian Miniature. I was somewhere in between and that wasn't working.

My final critique with the faculty group was inconclusive. The day was warm, a late afternoon, and they couldn't agree on anything. The photo-conceptualist fell asleep on the couch. He apologized profusely after the session. I was upset, but in a way he had manifested how he really felt about my work, and I had to be grateful for that.

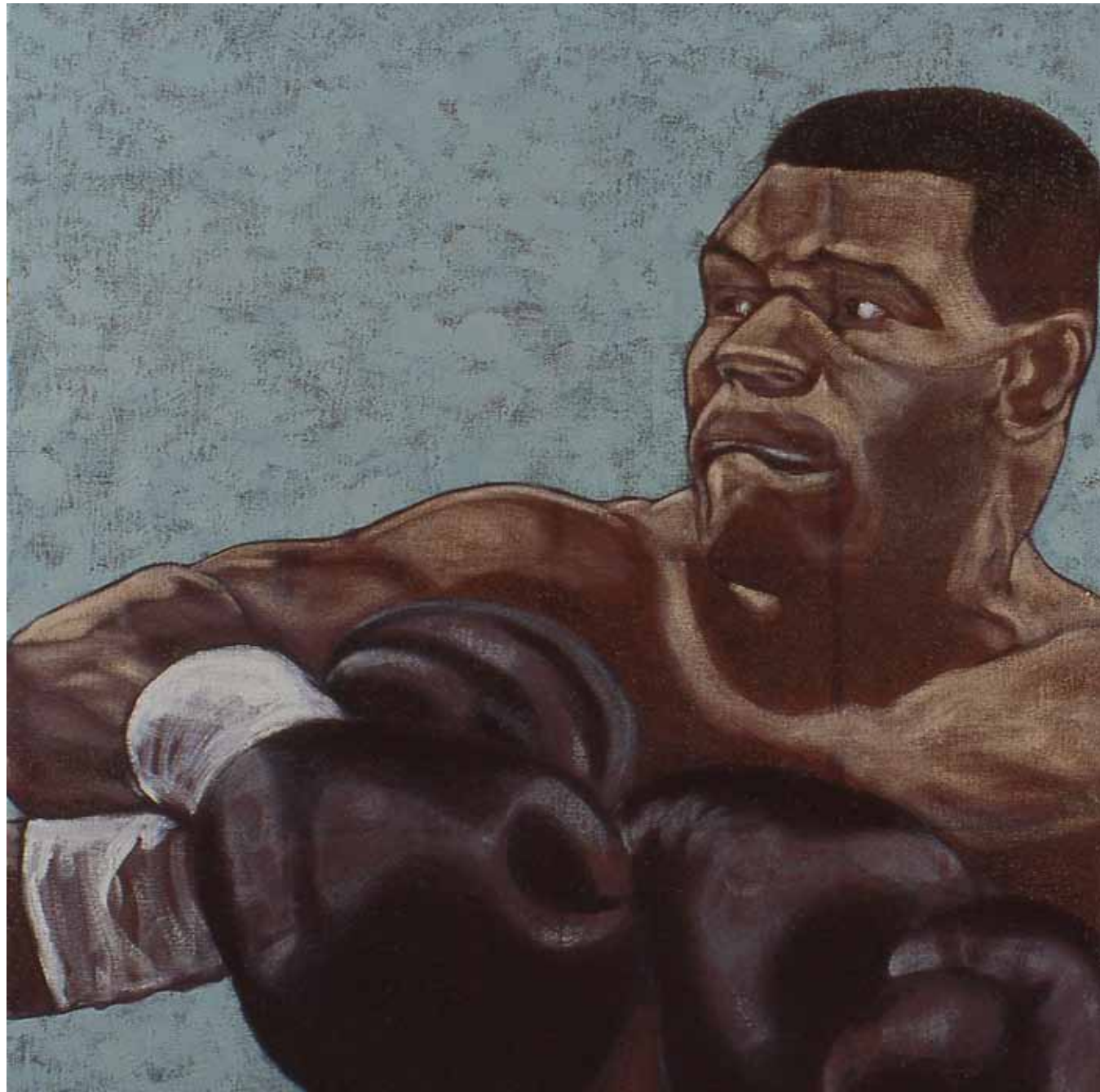
*Painter*, oil on canvas, 12" x 12", 1989.



It was my last summer in the Armoury studios, and we were left to our own devices to finish our thesis work. I had enough work for my graduating exhibition coming up in the fall, but the last critique had left me feeling very flat. We had to write a thesis statement, but mine had been rejected: Faculty didn't think the theories I alluded to were relevant to the paintings. I rewrote it to no great effect. I started making very small paintings, fragments, hoping to paint my way out of the malaise.

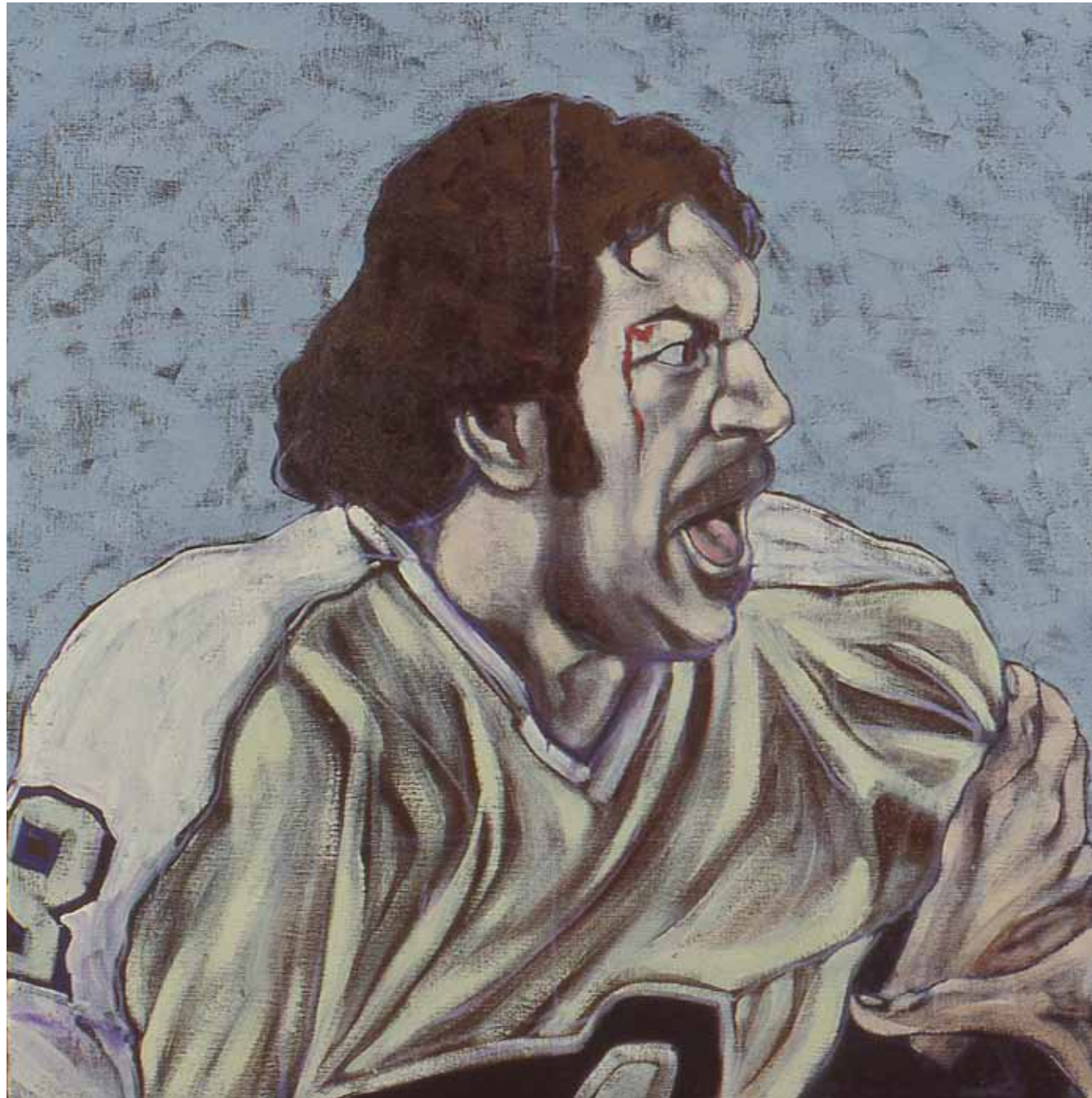
My marriage was cracking from the tension of one person being in school and the other employed at a mind-numbing job—a classic situation. I was starting to cannibalize my life for subject matter and I could see that *that* might not end up being all that interesting. We agreed that M. would quit his job to pursue his own projects, as soon as I could find any kind of job, after graduation.

*Plums*, oil on canvas, 12" x 12", 1988.



That summer I went for a job interview at Camosun, a community college in Victoria with a small art department. I was totally unprepared. Not having ever really taught, I hadn't thought about curriculum. The chair of the committee, Ralph, was enthusiastic about my work, but as he pointed out in a very kind phone call later, If I had *had more* teaching experience, they might have hired me. It was a Catch-22. When M. came home from work that day I told him the results. In his mind we had already moved to Victoria and we had started the next phase of our lives. I was equally upset, but it was as if he was the one who hadn't gotten the job. We had an argument and I went on a long bike ride around Stanley Park.

*Mike (Tyson)*, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1989.  
Collection of Tim Rattel.



After graduation I kept in touch with my friends still in the program. I had gotten used to having a constant dialogue about contemporary art. David V. had started painting from images he found from media sources. He pointed out the relationship between photo-editorial choices and the history of painting. For one of his installations for his grad show, he was working with an image he had clipped from the front page of the *Globe and Mail*, of young people with flags, briefly victorious, mounting the base of the *Monument to the People's Heroes* in Tiananmen Square. Another colleague, Gary B., was staging his photographs, constructing a miniature diorama of a contemporary war scenario which alluded to Watteau's *Voyage to the Isle of Cythera*, using G.I. Joe dolls for his figures. Over lunch he would interpret Adorno and Wittgenstein for me, which as before with these kinds of things, I absorbed by osmosis.

We all went to a talk by Benjamin Buchloch at the Goethe Institute, which had mounted an exhibition of some small works on paper by Gerhard Richter. He showed us slides of Richter's *Baader Meinhof* series and talked about the necessity for contemporary history painting. All the Vancouver luminaries were in the audience, and the moment felt important. The small photographs had paint on them, and I was struck by the materiality. It seemed to me that if I could get back to some sense of how paint could mediate an image, it might open up something new, offer me some relief from my disenchantment with my current work. There were enough images out there, I didn't need to make new ones. I could compile and interpret ones that already existed. It gave me a new lease on painting.

Dave ('The Hammer' Schultz), oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1989.  
Collection of Tim Rattel.



I'd moved into a communal studio on Hastings which gave me 150 square feet and one wall, for seventy-five dollars a month. Tia, the woman who held the lease, was a dancer and she slept in the back with her cats. She would practice her choreography early before any of us arrived, and then be gone for the day to look after an elderly woman across town. Most of the people renting the space had day jobs and were there intermittently, except for a guy named Joey. He was making small blurred paintings sourced from photographs. We didn't talk much, so I didn't know if Gerhard Richter was an influence for him. He would eye my paintings suspiciously, or that is how it seemed. I wondered if he thought I was copying his strategies.

*Liz (Taylor)*, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1989.



Over the year I had volunteered as a UBC representative at the Perel Gallery, a student-run gallery for Simon Fraser University which functioned much like an artist-run centre. We (mostly women) curated and hung the shows, wrote the press copy, hosted the openings, and cleaned up afterwards. I could see that the students and faculty at Simon Fraser were more collaborative and the space itself, an old building on Hastings, felt like a real studio. It had creaky wooden floors that we would repaint with grey boat paint between shows. I wrote the press releases for the artists I had lobbied for. They were short, my first attempts at describing what someone else had done. It seemed easier than writing about my own work.

*Anonymous Hockey Player*, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1989.



I had read an essay that Jeff Wall had written a few years before, titled "Gestus," where he talked about how the gestures of the modern body were "physically smaller than those of older art, more condensed, meaner, more collapsed, more rigid, more violent." It corresponded with what I had been interested in so far, but I had a ways to go if I wanted to break out of my own schemas. I was looking for daily currency, and in those days that meant the newspaper. There was lots going on in 1989. I clipped all kinds of subjects, but I would eventually sort them into four categories: Politics, sports, disasters and animals. With a few exceptions I didn't often find public images of women, unless it was a depiction of people grieving, or Margaret Thatcher.

*Philippe Rushton, No. 1, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1989.*



My former advisor, Wendy, phoned me with some news. Landon, a painter whose work I knew well from Toronto and who taught at Emily Carr College, was going on maternity leave. They needed a woman painter to temporarily replace her, and here I was with a new-minted MFA.

I just had to drop off some slides and a CV to Terry Johnson, the dean. I sat in on the class I would be teaching, a group critique. Landon made it look easy; she was energetic and performative.

The one-on-one tutorials came naturally to me, that was fine: asking questions, finding out what people wanted to do, making suggestions, offering context. But my own group critiques were very painful; it would take a few years to learn how to animate a group. In the meantime it was a foot in the door.

*Philippe Rushton, No. 2, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1989.*



I didn't know enough about gesture, or about oil paint, to interpret my newspaper sources with any relevance. My paintings were feeling thin. I felt like I needed to understand the gestures in older art before I could conjure the modern body.

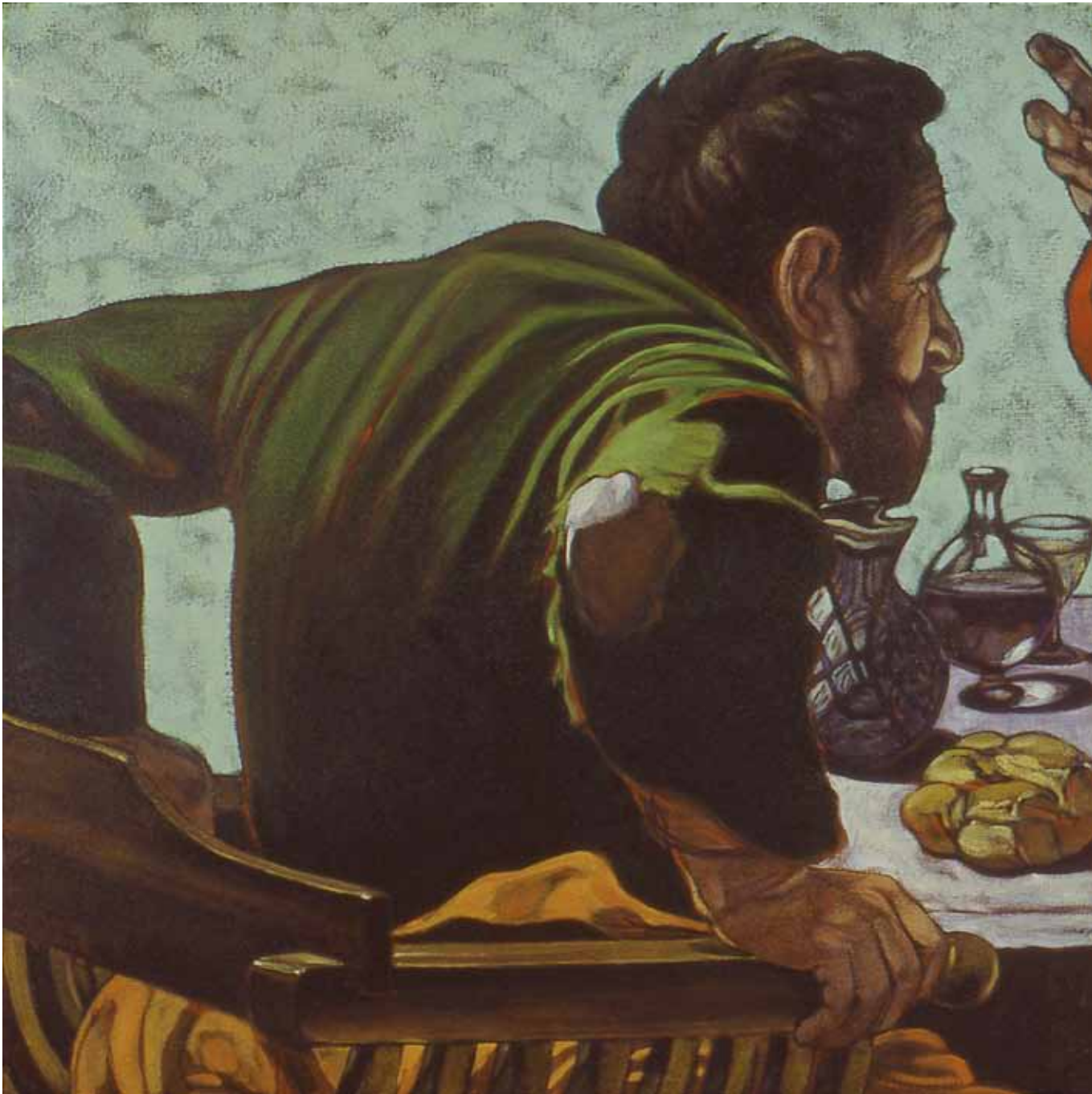
I'd bought the catalogue for the *Age of Caravaggio* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art when I'd visited New York four years before. I hadn't found the text all that helpful—it wasn't the New Art History—but the catalogue had great reproductions. A painting by Caravaggio seemed closest to a photograph, and I thought that by copying, I would learn something.

*Who's Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue* (diptych, left side), oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1989.



UBC offered me a summer course to teach, a six-week painting and drawing class for pre-qualifying BFAs. I heard, again through a back channel, that the faculty committee had wanted newer blood, but Wendy, my advisor, made my case. It wasn't like I'd been around the block; I was still trying to get some experience.

*Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (diptych, right side), oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1990.



There were the obvious dramatic gestures in Caravaggio, but often in the same painting there were prototypes for what I thought might be something more modern. The elbow of the surprised disciple, as it met the architectural frame of the original painting, was the point of my cropping. It seemed to me as important as Jesus's sign, the way the figure was caught by the edge.

My work was included in the next iteration of Artropolis, the open-submission show that happened every three years. It always attracted a broader audience than most of us were used to. The West Vancouver senior citizen's newspaper decided to feature the well known artists Gordon Smith and Jack Shadbolt (senior citizens) visiting with me (young emerging artist). It felt like I had already been emerging for quite a while, but that was my fault. They took our photograph together. Gordon and I reminisced about doing a jam painting ten years earlier at the Abideau Summer Workshops in Sackville, back when I was a post-painterly-abstractionist and his teaching assistant. He was the nicest man I ever met, and we stayed friends. Jack seemed skeptical. I thought maybe he considered me just a copyist, which strictly speaking I now was.

*Apostle*, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 1989. Collection of Vicki Moulder.



1989 was the heyday of speakers visiting Vancouver. The institutions still had enough funding for visiting artists. In addition to the usual suspects on the conceptual front (Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, Joachim Gerz, Victor Burgin, Terry Atkinson, Gerald Ferguson), the feminists were present (Griselda Pollock, Martha Rosler, Linda Nead, Mary Kelly, Mary Scott). There was a Women's Advisory Committee at the Vancouver Art Gallery, spearheaded by Judith Mastai, and a feminist reading group organized by students originating from Simon Fraser University, along with the first SFU Summer Intensive: The Critical Practice of Art, organized by Anne Ramsden. Mary Kelly and Griselda Pollock were the seminar leaders, and their work focused on gender difference: how it is structured into language and how a social history of art can reveal that.

The participants in these events were faculty, students, and engaged members of the art community. They convened often, heterogeneously, with what seemed (now we look back) to be momentum. The term most commonly used to describe the dominant form of the artists' production was "scripto-visual", which usually involved the photograph, video, text, and installation. The work was always engaged in a critical analysis of the structures of the world from a feminist perspective.

It wasn't overt. Theory was more than a subtext. Material concerns were self-consciously considered. The work was often abstract, and often beautiful. You could never say it was agit-tational propaganda or a bumper sticker for feminism.

*Liberty*, oil on canvas, 65" x 30", 1989.



In a practical way I wanted to get back to a full figure in a frame, to understand again what a complete gesture of the body might be. I wanted to find the antidote to the female figures I'd studied in the history of painting so far. Liberty had potential but she had some problems; her rising figure seemed phallocentric, she had an antique face, and her breasts were too available. My attention was drawn to the figures at her feet. As fallen figures they seemed objectified as males, erotic despite being dead. I thought if I took them out of the theatrical space of the original painting and separated them into individual paintings, I might work my way towards a female gaze.

*Deadman*, oil on canvas, 30" x 65", 1989.



One of the older male instructors in the Painting Department at Emily Carr had a heart attack so I was given a couple of his courses, temporarily. This bumped me into a new category where I actually had a salary with benefits, a six-month contract. Optimistic, M. quit his job at the Post Office and went on a cross country train trip to shake it off. He had some ideas for a Canadian novel he wanted to write.

Feeling like I was now experienced, I applied for jobs in Nova Scotia, Saskatoon, Cornerbrook—or Vancouver, if we were lucky. But I thought if I could just teach and make my work, we could live anywhere.

Mary Kelly was coming back to do a second workshop on psychoanalytic feminism, so I signed up. I was awash in theory. It gave me a framework to understand the conditions we were all in, a gender-biased world. Although I have to admit that I balked at the semiotic diagrams on the chalkboard.

What I remember best was MK's methodology for group critiques. It seemed modeled on a Panofskyian approach I had desperately researched the previous year, when I was trying to run my own group critiques in a painting class. Asking us a series of questions, she would walk us through an accumulating structure of analysis when looking at an object: materiality, stylistic and iconographical relationships, historical contexts, and finally synthesizing the collected information into some possible interpretations. Those meanings were not necessarily conclusive, but animated the work. The process could animate the worst work in the world.

All the participants had installed examples of recent studio work, which surrounded us as we paced through our seminar meetings. Part of each day was spent rotating through each piece, using MK's critique method. As the only painter in the group, I was apprehensive. But when we got around to my work, I was stunned by what she helped us unpack—a set of considerations that I had only intuited when I put it together.



I needed to take a closer look at the work of Delacroix, to see why I was attracted and irritated at the same time. I'd always had a visceral reaction to *The Death of Sardanapalus*, and was relieved to read feminist analyses later that articulated that for me. But I had been taught earlier that Delacroix was the father of the modern brushstroke; I would still die to see his sketch for *The Lion Hunt*. I'd read Edward Said's book *Orientalism* and wanted to figure out what the "other" was that Delacroix had portrayed. I'd read critiques of Charcot's photographic series on the "insane", and had been attracted to the portraits by Géricault of the same subject. I wondered how much any artist was self-projecting when he was painting. I didn't think Delacroix had the same problems as I did, wanting to be the subject, and the painter of the subject, at the same time. But maybe he did.



I tracked back to Frans Hals, who was an earlier father of the modern brush-stroke. In a monograph on the artist, I found some writing that I copied out in my sketchbook. The author was describing *Malle Babbe*, a portrait of a particular woman who lived in Haarlem, rumored to be a witch. "His brushstrokes convey the confusion which must have filled the disordered brain of this street type . . . the mouth, crude as that of an animal, is wide open, as if amplifying the shrill shout which will echo as long as this canvas holds its paint"\*.

The only self-portrait I could find of Frans Hals was a small face in the background of a painting of a group of officers, painted a few years later, *Officers and Sergeants of the St. George Civic Guard* (1639). It didn't seem to be painted much differently from *Malle Babbe*, using the same brushstrokes from what I could tell as I copied them, stroke for stroke. Frans Hals wasn't insane, but he had probably mismanaged his finances, over the years. His wife had to move into an alms house when he died. She'd borne him eight children. That had probably left her feeling a bit crazy.

Artist (Frans Hals)/Artist's Subject (*Malle Babbe*), oil on canvas, each 18.5" x 18.5", 1990.

\*H. B. Baard, *Frans Hals*, Harry N. Abrams, 1982.

Collection of Paul Collins and Maria Roques/Lorretta Dalziel, respectively.



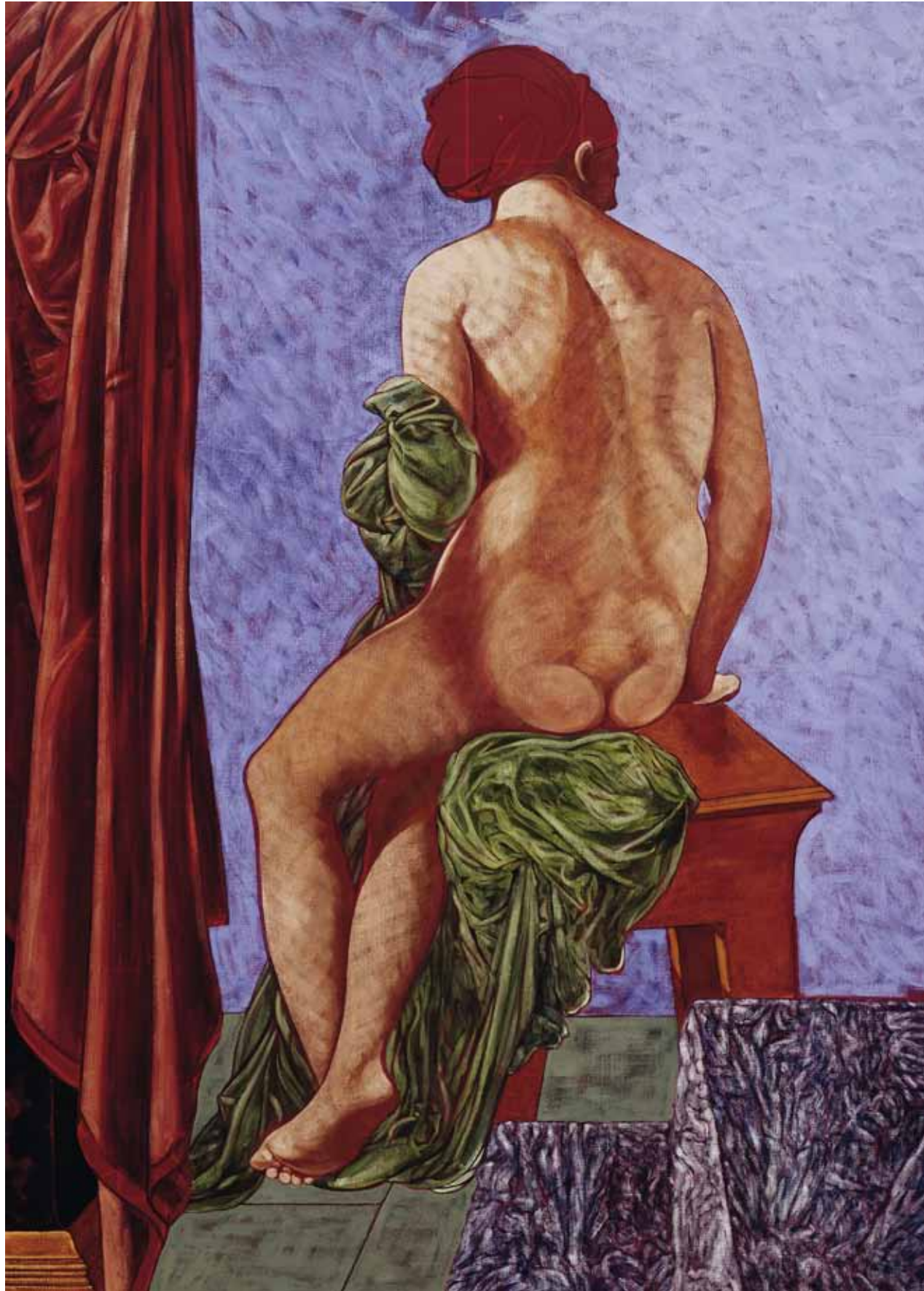
I wish I'd written down the source, but I took some more notes from either an essay or a talk by Margaret Iverson, who discussed "identificary mobility across positions" and the "collapse of the subject," and ultimately "a positive reassessment of the process of identification." Copying a painting had started off as an exercise, but in a narcissistic way I was falling into the faces of these artists, pretending I was them. It seemed like this would give me plenty to do. I felt rich.



In the foundation and introductory painting classes that I was now teaching, I found myself with students intent on painting the nude—which seemed to me such an uninteresting thing to want to do. A model sitting or reclining for several hours inevitably has to take a passive pose, which as a communicative gesture I felt was limited. I spent hours in the library putting together slide talks on what I thought was a deconstructive history of the nude, in an attempt to explain to the students why a naked female body wasn't relevant to contemporary art. I would talk about clothes as worldly referents that could convey context and narrative. I would set up the model and make them paint everything around it, leaving a negative space for the figure, to try to help them get over it.



*Rebuild No.1/Rebuild No. 4*, both oil on canvas, 60" x 84", 1991.  
Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, PEI.



I had moved into a new studio, subletting part of my colleague Landon's space in a large warehouse building above a print shop, whose analogue machines ran all day. She and the other artists in the building were more advanced than me and they set the bar. In the beginning I kept to myself most of the time, but one day I ran into Ian W., who said he would sell me four large stretchers he was rejecting; he'd moved on to a better, more archival brand. They weren't exactly a format I'd been planning, but I decided to make up a project that would work. It was a default move but I was tired of fabricating my own stretchers.

*Rebuild No. 2*, oil on canvas, 84"x60", oil on canvas, 1991.  
Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, PEI.



By this point I'd had two or three curators from the artist-run centres over. I was looking for a solo exhibition. They were kind, but I could tell that they were just not that into the work. One of them told me to 'keep painting' and made a little painting gesture with an imaginary brush in his hand, as he left my studio. Although there had been a flurry of activity around painting in the city in the last decade, photography, video, and installation were on the rise. It was hard to see when or where I would ever exhibit my work. But I applied for small grants and one came through. It had never occurred to me to go to Paris, but when John, my old friend in Toronto, suggested I go, I realized I had some reasons to. I signed on to a brief and intense Berlitz class which reactivated my high-school French. For the first time in my life I went on a research trip.

*Rebuild No. 3*, oil on linen, 84" x 60", 1991.  
Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, PEI.



I had spent a year trying to rebuild nudes by Ingres. I should have known that my figure-painting students wouldn't take up my critique. My own attempts to break the nude down were failing to signify. The nudes were still nude.

While in Paris, I'd had an unexpected out-of-body experience in the Louvre, in front of Géricault's *The Charging Chasseur* (1814). Suddenly I was on a horse.

Since I had no exhibitions on the horizon, and gallery representation seemed far-fetched for the kinds of paintings I was making, I thought I might as well just paint whatever the hell I wanted. I could always roll it up later.

*Wounded Warrior No. 1*, oil on linen, 120" x 92", 1992.  
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, BC.



I spent six months on the first painting, and another six months on the next. At one point a local collector came by. He was decorating his new large home. He and his wife owned horses, and they wanted *Wounded Warrior No. 1* for over the fireplace. He said that as a successful business man he identified with the hero in the painting, as a fellow warrior. I realized he wasn't interested in my conceptual reasons for making the painting; I thought I was unpacking the hero. By that point the painting had actually been spoken for. I told him I would make another version for him, but only in pastel colours. I never heard back.

*Wounded Warrior No. 2*, oil on linen, 112" x 92", 1993.  
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, BC.



By this point I was teaching whenever I wasn't painting. I said yes to everything, since there was no job security. My marriage was faltering. Me being an artist and a teacher was more social than we would have thought. M., in a perfect world, imagined being a lighthouse keeper, preferably on an island, where perhaps he would write. I had grown up on a small island. I told him he was welcome to research that prospect (as manned lighthouses still existed then) but I was going to stay in the city.

My other revelatory moment in the Louvre was in front of *Madame Récamier* by Jacques Louis David. I'd read his biography by Anita Brookner which detailed how the painting was never finished; the artist and the sitter had had a falling out. He had pictured her barefoot and had blonded her dark brown hair. The miracle of the painting was the highly active brushstrokes behind her. It was a tumultuous time. Madame Récamier survived it; her salon became the centre for the leading literary and political lights of the day. That type of reading couch was named after her.

I was still working on the painting when the Art Bank of Canada came to visit. It was my second round with them and I wasn't expecting much. The visitors seemed pleasantly surprised. When I told them I hadn't been making much professional headway other than teaching, Ken, one of the jury members, said to just skip over Canada, go straight to Europe to exhibit. He made it seem so uncomplicated. The committee bought the painting. M. and I bought a new couch.

*Untitled (after Madame Récamier)*, oil on canvas, 73" x 102", oil on canvas, 1992.  
Collection of the Art Bank of Canada.



That spring, a position had opened in the Painting Department at school that described everything I had been doing for the last three years. I was thrilled to make the short list, ignoring my studiomate Al's rueful glance when I told him who else was on it. The big day of the interview started with early-morning group critiques with unfamiliar students, moved on to a noon-hour public presentation and finished with a two-hour interview with a committee of twelve. I had fun; I acted like I would get the job. As I left the building the dean told me I'd done a great interview. But I hadn't realized just how fat the other candidates' portfolios really were. What seemed like many weeks later, still waiting for official news, reality sunk in: Maybe I wouldn't be going back to Emily Carr to teach. I felt like I'd been wiped off the map. I took a sleeping pill and went to bed for a day.

188 Third Ave West studio, Vancouver, 1992.



Within a few days I left town to teach a summer painting-intensive at the University of Victoria, a make-up class for wayward students. I felt like I'd been charged with giving them grades their regular instructors were afraid to. I probably wasn't in the best of moods. The school gave me a studio and I made the couch painting which cheered me up a bit; I thought I was getting somewhere with that. A year later I would go through the same interview exercise at that institution, with similar results, stacked up against another fat CV.

As it turned out, when I got back to Vancouver there was sessional work waiting for me at Emily Carr. There would always be people on stress leave, having babies or sabbaticals. I still had more or less the same job, just no pay increase or permanency; I could live with that. At the suggestion of my friend John, whom I'd confided in, I called up Renée, who had gotten the actual position. I was curating a painting show and needed some advice. She invited me to her place for a glass of wine; within an hour we were best friends for life.

Nancy Duff (Emily Carr Class of 1993), *The Artist's Studio (after Gustave Courbet)*, Inkjet on vinyl canvas, 224" x 129", 1993.



I went back to Paris the following spring. I was there to collect more source material, but I was also compartmentalizing briefly into a different life. You could do that then, when the only way someone from work could reach you was to make a long distance call on a landline near where you happened to be. A person could barely fax.

One slow day at the Musée d'Orsay, I found myself alone in the room with *The Birth of Venus* by Alexandre Cabanel (1863). My reverie of mixed feelings was interrupted by the entrance of another visitor, a man. I left the room quickly. It was like when my Mom had caught me as a pubescent with Dad's *Playboy* magazines. I would slip them away one at a time to my room and copy the *Vargas Girls*, using a sharpened HB pencil on textured paper. Venus fascinated me the same way those poster girls did. I knew she was a bad painting, the antithesis of Manet's *Olympia*, painted the same year.

V. No. 1, oil on linen, 92" x 160", 1993.  
Collection of James Alefantis (Buck's Fishing & Camping).



My studio door on Third Avenue was just at the top of the stairs and Landon, who worked down the hall, was seeing a visitor out; it was the new curator from the Vancouver Art Gallery. On a whim she popped her head in to introduce him. I was startled, but we shook hands and he could see what I was working on, since it filled the whole studio.

A few weeks later Grant arranged a proper visit. He'd done his master's in art history at UBC, my alma mater, so we had some reading lists in common. He didn't think I was crazy or that I talked too much. He liked painting. A few weeks later he called again and said the VAG had a slot for me for February, four months away, a solo show. I went into shock. It didn't make sense. I guessed that another show must have fallen through. It was a big space, with twenty-five-foot-high walls. I realized that to activate the space I was going to have to make another painting, bigger than the one I was still working on, in less time. That was exciting.

V. No. 2 (second stage, seen on its side), oil on linen, 184" x 92", 1994.  
Collection of David Brock, Washington, DC.



That summer I returned to Paris, this time to work in my friend Paul's studio, alongside our mutual friend John. Like me they were both artists and teachers. I thought my work could change in a new place, working alongside different people, who weren't caught up in the same discussions I was at home.

Recklessly navigating through Parisian roundabouts, we would cycle out to Vitry-sur-Seine, on the city's outer edge, almost every day. My project needed to be portable enough to bungee onto the back of a bike. I wanted a new topic. I had come down after my big show and had the lingering feeling I'd become a kind of bumper-sticker feminist, trapped in the binary of warriors and nudes. I lit upon *Gilles*, by Antoine Watteau (1718-19), who I'd visited several times in the Louvre; he seemed neutral enough.

I was killing time, painting Gilles, over and over, in monochrome. I'd just seen Yves Klein's "IKB 3 monochrome bleu" (1960) at the Pompidou. The other consolidating event was seeing sixteen of Monet's *Rouen Cathedral* paintings all in one place in the Musée des Beaux Arts, in Rouen. I wanted that seriality, nostalgic for my roots as a perceptual abstractionist. Paul's French studiomates from down the hall scratched their heads and made no comment when they wandered in. I was just another North American fetishizing a history they themselves, as French Artists, felt burdened by. I'd have to go back home to try to explain what I was doing.

*Study for Gilles, versions 1, 2, 3, 4*, all oil on linen, each 24" x 18.5", 1994.  
Collection of Oklahoma City Museum.



Many said Watteau was painting himself. Or his model might have been a friend of his from the Commedia dell'arte. The performer was dying of consumption; nevertheless, having just retired, was opening a cafe. It's posited that the original painting hung outside the cafe as signage. Watteau also died young from consumption a couple years later. Maybe they both knew they were dying. The painting seemed like a lighthearted treatment of death. I was jealous of their aesthetic melancholia, which was beginning to seem to me to be a male prerogative.

188 Third Ave West, Vancouver, *Gilles Versions 1 - 4*, oil on linen, each 120" x 92", 1994 - 1998.  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



The idea that painting was dead had been blithely mentioned to me once by an instructor when I was an undergrad, back in 1977. He was a theatre professor who had no vested interest in what he was saying, in passing; he couldn't have known how his comment had sunk in. I chose to ignore the idea until grad school, when it was hammered home. It didn't seem fair, just when women were slowly being given more public exposure as artists.

But it was hard not to see the correlation between painting's popularity and a 1980s bull market. Paintings sell best, at least theoretically. By the time I was teaching a seminar on painting, I had to make its death the main topic. You could say it was an outdated '80s discussion, but it had a longer history than that. Paul Delaroche declared painting dead in 1840, when he first saw a photograph. Alexander Rodchenko had "reduced painting to its logical conclusion" in 1921 when he presented the first monochromes in primary colours.

With a balanced reading list on the subject of the death of painting, you could cover the arc of the avant-garde over a hundred and fifty years. In the long run, in terms of the co-optation of the avant-garde, you were probably talking about the death of art if you took it to its logical conclusion. And everyone would still have to figure out how to be.

*Gilles No, 3*, 120" x 92", 1994-1998.

Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



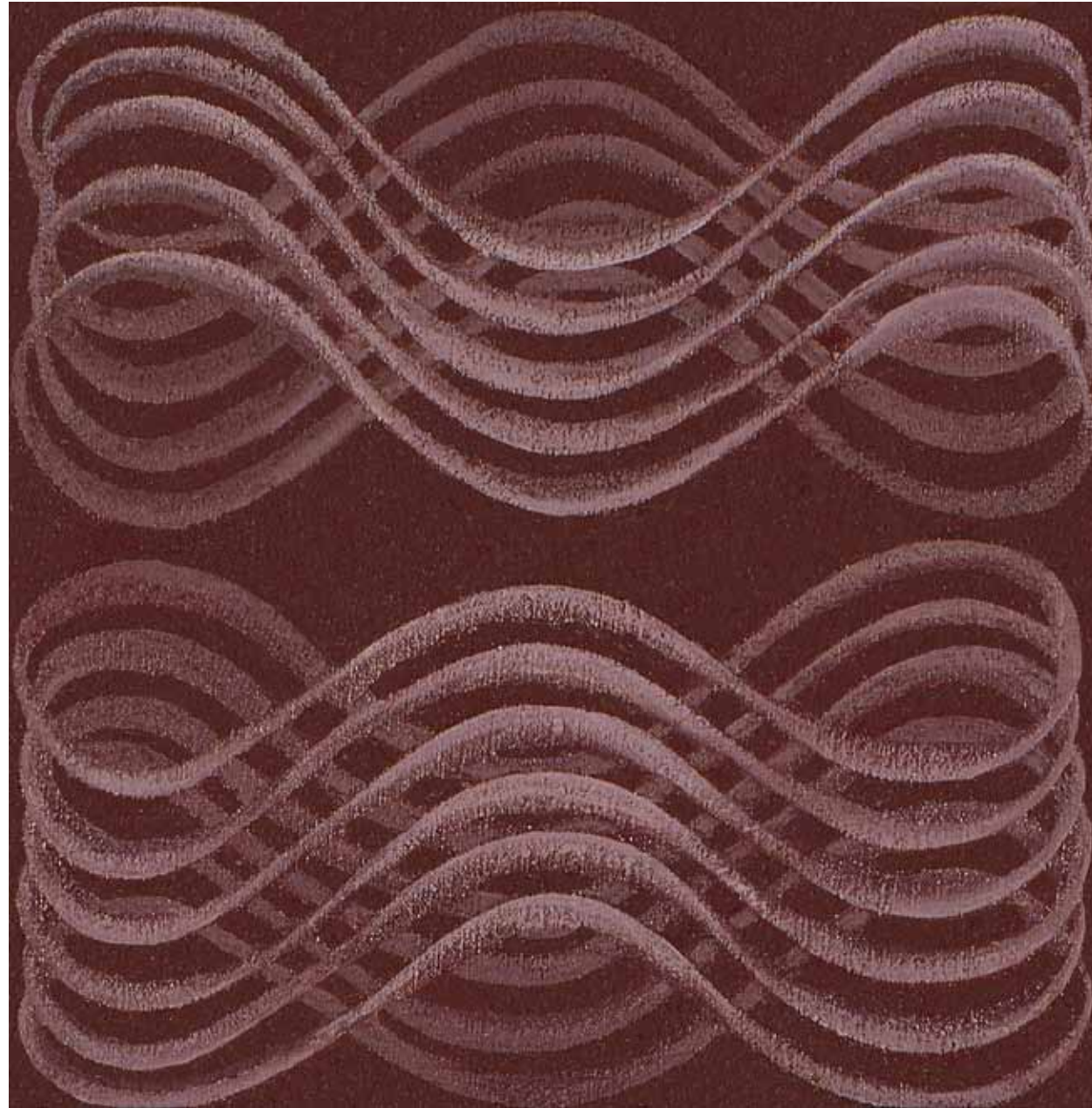
Like all artists, I would continue to send out applications to try to find places to show; things weren't going to lift off by themselves if you weren't on the A list. The general rule was to have at least ten sets of slides in rotation. Most of mine were returned. But it was always a good exercise, putting together a coherent page of images, writing up a statement, pitching the work in a cover letter. It helped me to synthesize, to myself, what I was doing. The more successful applications were for small grants, which I put towards my research trips. But most of the group shows I ended up in happened by peer referral.

*Closet Painting No. 1*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.



A friend must have recommended me as a visiting artist, and over a period of five years I visited a lot of smaller Canadian cities with fine-arts programs. I would give a talk and meet with their students. Each time I would imagine what it would be like to teach in their art departments and live in that city if a job came up, but I would always come back to the idea that I'd rather have job insecurity, or even be unemployed, to stay in Vancouver. I was settled there in so many ways. I felt busy enough.

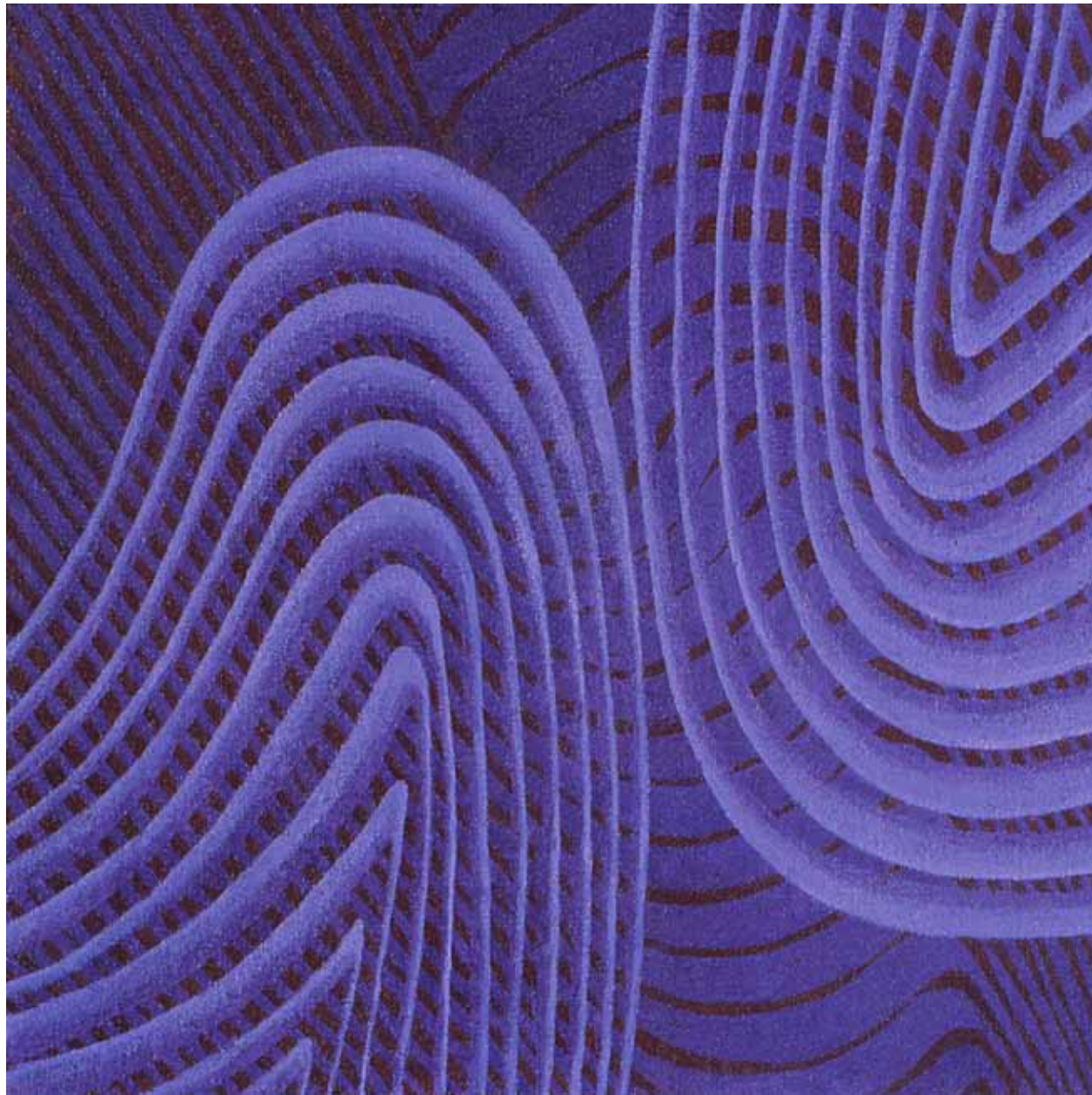
*Closet Painting No. 18*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.



I was lucky I had fallen in with Emily Carr College. Over the past seven years they had let me teach almost full-time in a number of subject areas and participate in meetings, admission portfolio reviews, student graduate committees; I was hanging student exhibitions, writing curricula, curating shows for the school's gallery, and running the visiting-speakers program. I wrote a lot of reference letters for students. I loved my job.

But that year I got a call mid-summer from Sally, the Dean. She was very sorry to tell me that faculty contract negotiations had gone badly; the school was in a financial crunch. Sessionals like me who taught full-time would no longer get a salary and would be put on a semestral stipend. It was a 30% cut to our household finances. I felt betrayed by the institution and so naive. I had lulled myself into a false sense of security.

*Closet Painting No. 19*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.



When I came back that fall to teach, they put me on the Faculty Association committee as the Sessional Representative, an ameliorative gesture. I would meet with the sessionals monthly and bring their concerns to the faculty table. For some faculty we were a thorn in their side. The two groups had conflicting interests: Sessionals just wanted job security; permanent faculty were more interested in maintaining sabbaticals and ensuring incremental pay raises. The sessionals would have to start itemizing everything we did as a budget-line item. Working to rule would take the heart out of things.

*Closet Painting No. 8*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.  
Collection of Pauline Choi.



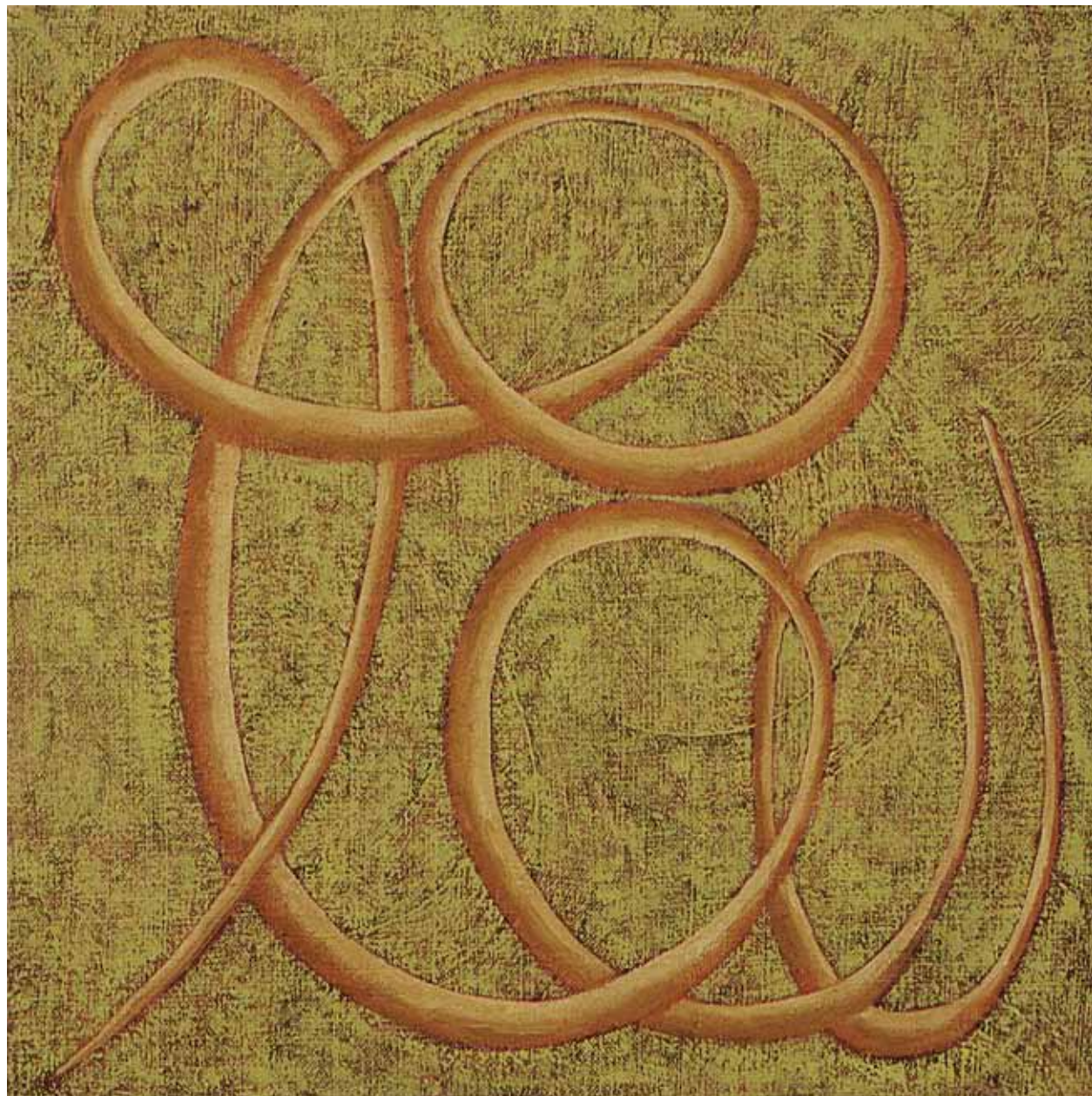
I had been thinking about abstraction, and how gender played out in my students' painting. There were some exceptions, but from what I could see, the young women tended to orient themselves to nature and the body and the young men were more drawn to cultural signs and architecture. I never wanted to interpret this as innate, but everywhere I looked there was constant reinforcement: in movies, advertisements, pop music, popular novels, computer games, children's toys, clothing. I guess I was like a dog with a bone when I kept bringing these observations up in class.

*Closet Painting No, 4*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.  
Collection of Al McWilliams.



A new batch of painters were coming up. Abstraction had gone away and come back, but now it was ironic. The younger painters (mostly male), were meta-critical; the work had cool surfaces like Andy Warhol's, and playfully absorbed the conceptualism of Lawrence Weiner and John Baldessari in its use of texts. I was jealous of them—I was falling out of time once again.

*Closet Painting No. 15*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.  
Collection of Janet Werner.



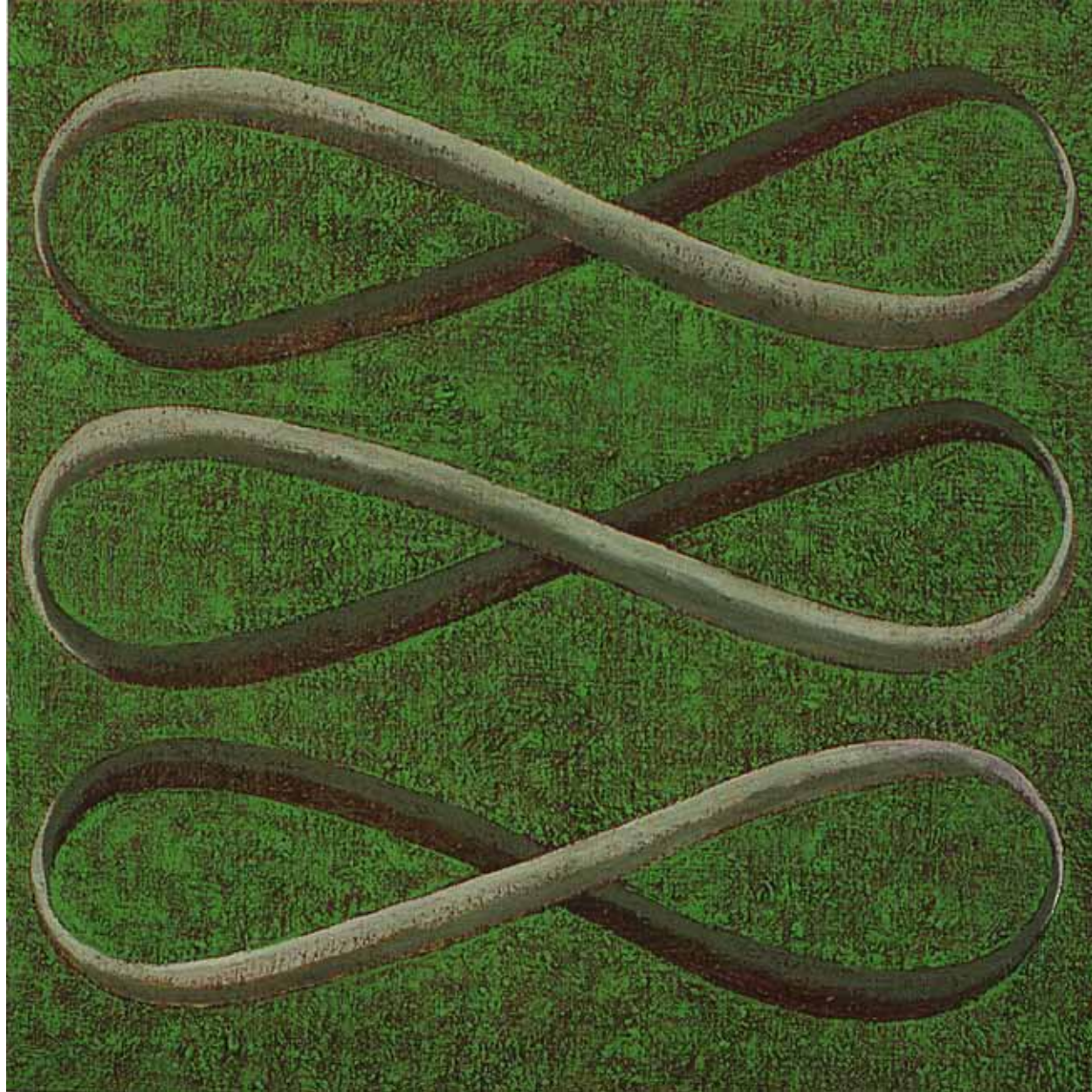
The large Gilles paintings were taking a long time to finish. Making the same painting several times over was losing its momentum. It was going to take years. In order to feel more productive, I started making some small abstract paintings. I must have thought I had all the time in the world for that kind of distraction, and it was another portable project to do while in Paris.

*Closet Painting No. 16*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.  
Collection of Rüdiger Bender.



I had spent so much time analyzing the construction of the brush-stroke in my figurative work, showing it as a learned, built thing. But still, random people would say “why don’t you make your own pictures”. I decided that if I was going to do that, I was going to try to see how dumb they could actually be—doodles, in fact.

*Closet Painting No. 7*, oil on linen, 12” x 12”, 1995.



M. had been renting a small office in the Dominion building, where he could write. For a few years it had been a good routine for him, walking across the Cambie Bridge to work. One day I came to pick him up to go to a movie, and in his haste to get his coat on and leave, he left the transom above his door open. The next day he came back to find footprints on the wall next to the door, on the inside, and his Mac LCII gone, along with his back-up floppy discs. I guess the intruder thought they were blank and could sell those too.

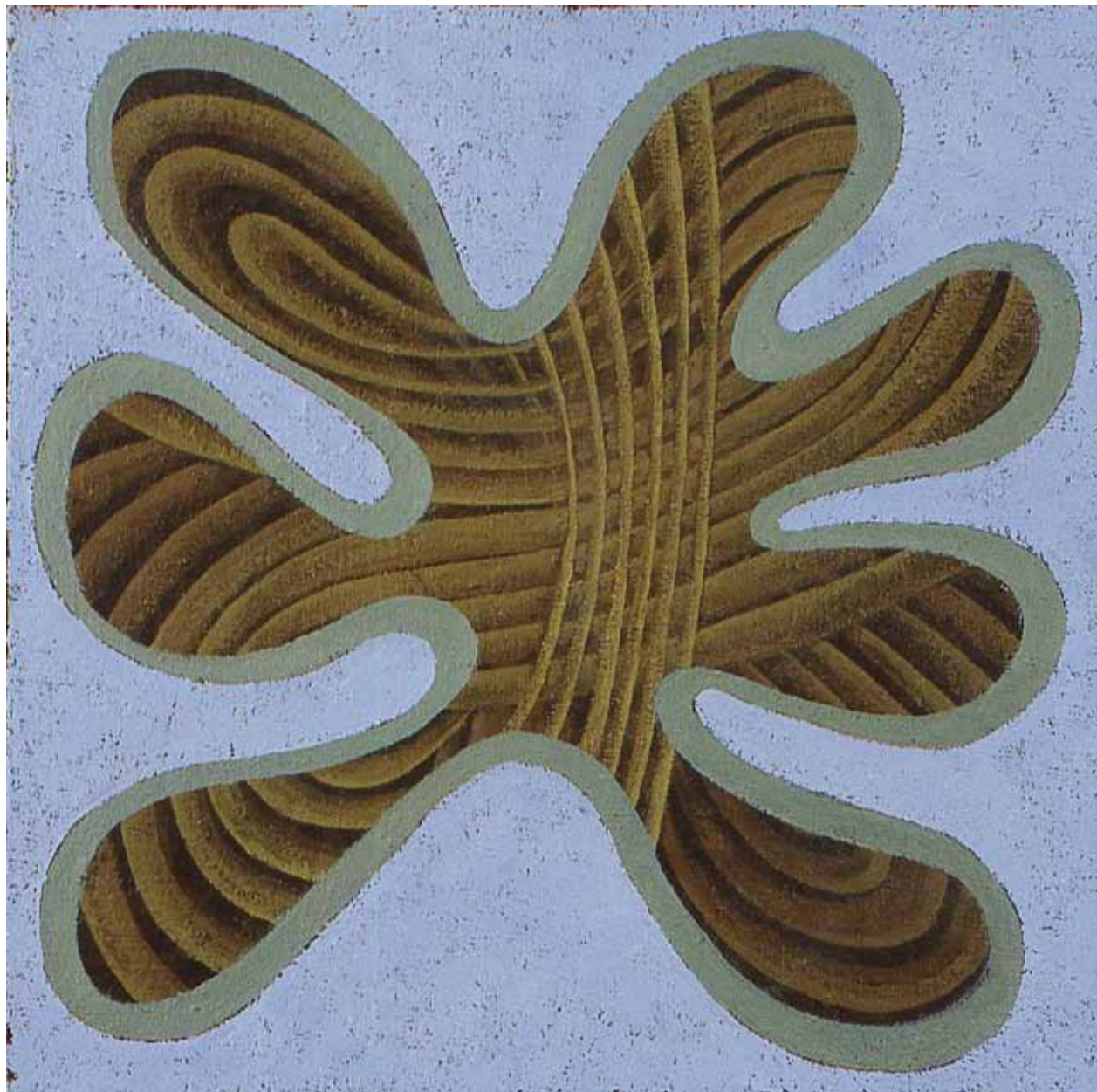
We bought a used replacement laptop, and I hoped that his handwritten first drafts could be used to reconstitute his lost writing. He had started reading the Frankfurt School, and his project had gotten more complicated. But it was all hard to talk about; we never finished that discussion.

*Closet Painting No. 10*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.



My packages of show-proposals to artist-run centres and commercial galleries were still being returned, practically unopened, sometimes without a cover letter. I think people just thought the figurative work was conservative, or just too big. They didn't have much patience for the artist's statement. But a couple of commercial galleries finally approached me, and we had a back and forth. One of the dealers took the big blue Gilles to the Miami Art Fair. In the pictures he showed me upon his return, the painting as it was hung looked just like I thought it would; sadly decontextualized in an art-fair warehouse space. I was terrified that if the dealer sold it, I'd have to paint it all over again, to keep the set of four Gilles intact.

*Closet Painting No. 21*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.



My idea was that somehow I would place all my history paintings in Canadian museums. This would do two things: The work would add to the roster of women artists in their collection and act as a surrogate for the historical painting the museums were all short on. I would give my paintings away, if they would take them. I was conflicted about selling paintings; the people who could buy them always liked them for all the wrong reasons. I had felt supported in other ways.

*Closet Painting No. 23*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.  
Collection of Morgan Gopnik and Tom Bondy.



I was on a lot of committees: several at school, a couple at my housing co-op, fund-raising at artist-run centres, and then at the Vancouver Art Gallery where they'd put me on the Acquisitions Committee as an artist representative.

I liked Robert's Rules of Order. They gave everyone a chance to speak. One of the artists on one of my committees accused me of being an "institutional cipher," when I got into an argument with him over a conflict of interest. He'd summed me up pretty well, I thought. But it didn't mean I was wrong.

I had helped curate a show for the Charles H. Scott Gallery at Emily Carr, and was asked to write the accompanying essay. I had written a couple of little reviews. Friends encouraged me to keep writing, and they would edit for me. Since it didn't seem like I'd be exhibiting soon again in Vancouver, it could be another way for me to register.

*Closet Painting No. 9*, oil on linen, 12" x 12", 1995.  
Collection of Pauline and Michael Shepherd.



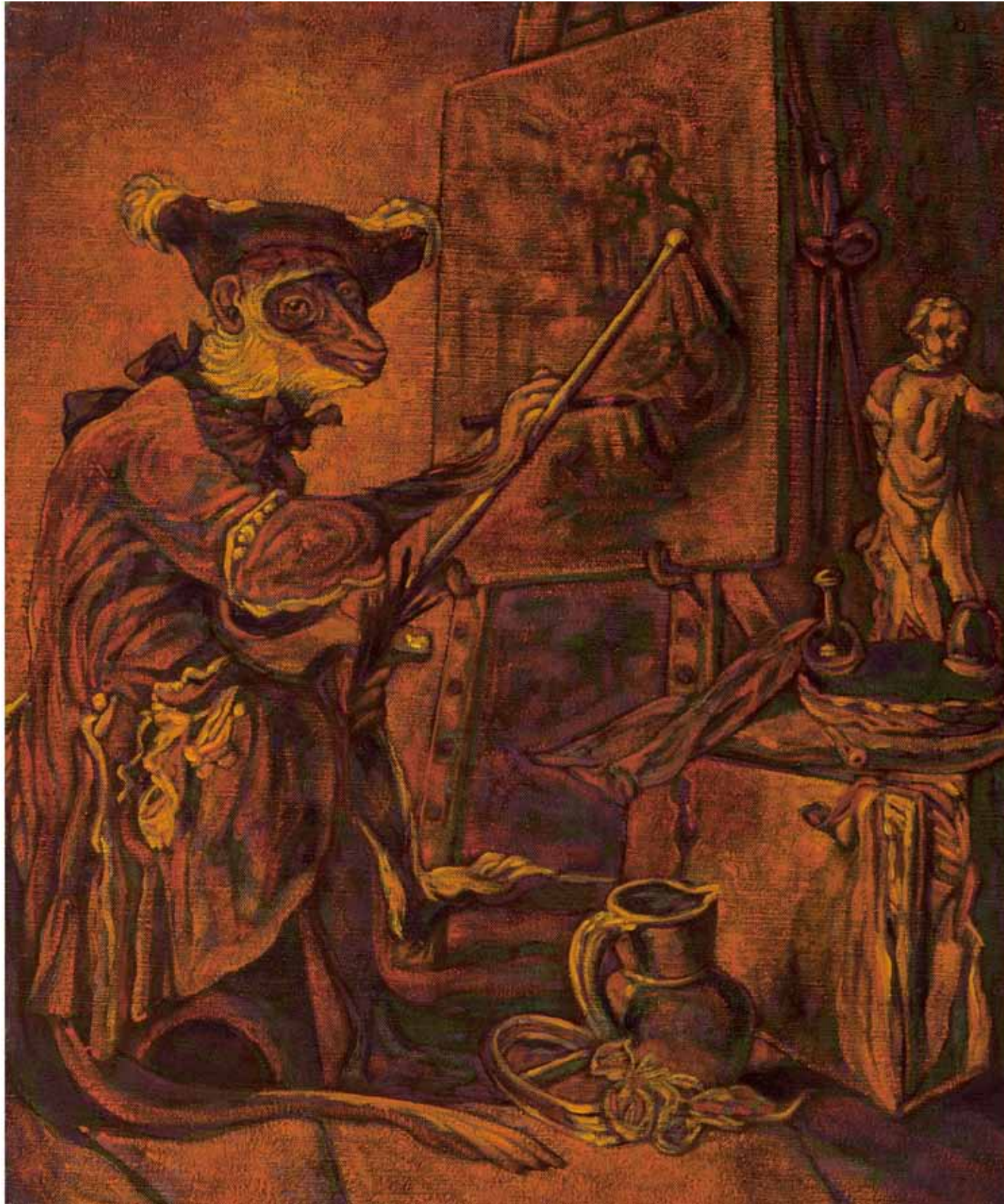
For complicated reasons that summer in 1998 I couldn't go to France. We were having money troubles. M. had given up his office in the Dominion building and we had given up our car. But we had air miles. I had a giant crate made and brought some paintings to Toronto for a month, setting up in my friend John's studio. This time I was going to get more aggressive and actively schedule visits with gallerists. Toronto seemed more like a painting town; Maybe I could find a solo show.

There was a strange moment when one visitor realized we'd had a correspondence two years before. Her gallery had requested a slide package, but after a few weeks they'd sent it back without a note. I had written back to let them know how rude I thought that was, figuring I had nothing to lose; it was a bridge I could burn. A couple of months after this visit, though, the gallerist phoned to say she wanted to exhibit my new work.

By the end of that summer my marriage with M. had fallen apart and I had to move out of Quebec Manor. I had met someone else in Toronto, but it was more complicated than that. Once the cards were on the table I was out of the house with a duffle bag bungied onto the back of my bike, in half an hour.

Psychologically it took a lot longer. I have dreams where I'm still leaving, today.

*Closet Painting No. 24*, oil on linen, 15" x 12", 1998.



Renée helped me find a cheap apartment in the West End, a stuccoed mid-rise building with a view to its mirror image of picture windows across the street, all lit each evening with tableaux of younger people in their starter apartments. I was preoccupied with replacing stuff I'd left behind: a mattress, some kitchen things, chairs. I was trying to stabilize. M. said I could have the couch.

*Monkey Painter*, oil on linen, 24" x 18.5", 1995-1997.



My new romance with B. was long distance and that gave me time. He seemed to be too good to be true; I reserved the thought that he might only be a catalyst for change. He was a journalist, a new-minted art critic in Toronto: I found it uncanny that if I wanted to read his writing I could go to the newspaper box down the street.

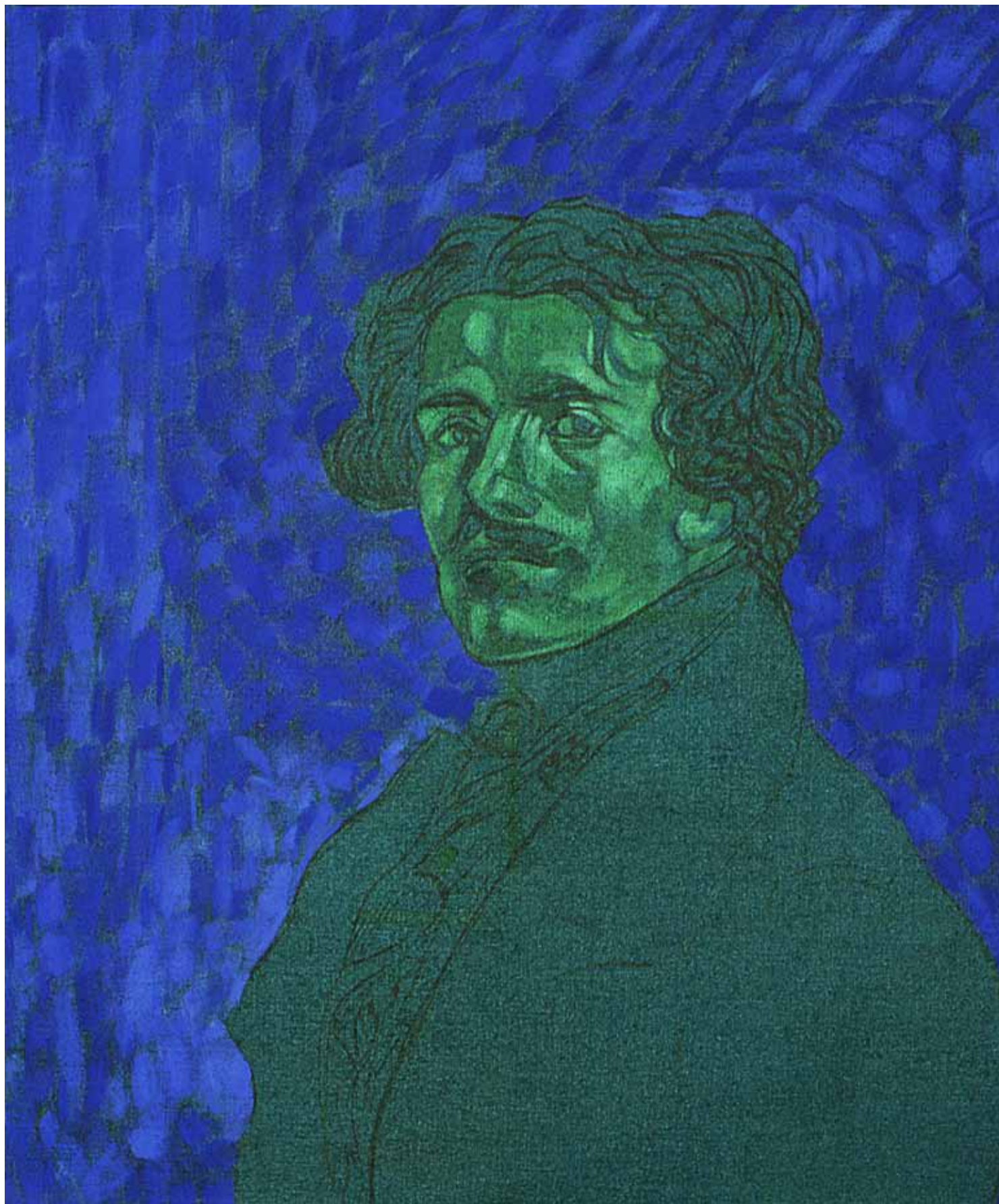
*Amateur Artist*. oil on linen, 86" x 56", 1998.  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



A clutch of boy artists, former students from our school, were making a splash in the city. It was hard not to notice how easy it seemed for them. Many of the women artists I'd admired in Vancouver were still treading water: juggling temporary teaching gigs, raising children, taking on the brunt of volunteer work, scrambling for studio time.

In my painting research I had seen and collected many postcards of self-portraits by artists. Although the few women artists I found might be holding a brush and palette, their features and pose seemed subsumed by conventions of femininity—passive and on display. Whereas the male artists all looked like prototypes for rock stars: hair and cravats fashionably askew, angrily aloof, and somehow more intact.

*Bitter Artist*, oil on linen, 55" x 44", 1999.  
Collection of Blake Gopnik.



The art in the city was breaking out of its photo-conceptual constrictions. Local curators were traveling and had been bringing in artists from China, India, Cuba and Iran. *Mirror's Edge*, an international exhibition curated by the galvanizing Okwui Enwezor, came to the Vancouver Art Gallery. First Nations artists were more visible, with confrontational paintings, installations, and films. The white Eurocentric core was being questioned and curriculum was changing. Over the previous thirty years feminism (which had become Gender Studies) had begun broadening the discussion about who could be an artist, but now it was one thread among many others. I still felt like I was at ground zero each fall semester, facing an incoming class of fresh(wo)men. Among the faculty at school, we wondered if we were in a “post-feminist” moment.

*Prescient Artist*, oil on linen, 26” x 22”, 2000.  
Collection of Tony Massett.

A second, identical version is in the collection of Roger E. Holland.



Our sessional committee had been wrangling with faculty and administration for three years. Finally two new positions were created to address our issues; we were second-tier employees, reliably available and on call year-in and year-out to teach classes full-time faculty didn't want to teach, with no job security. After some further wrangling, administration published the job openings as an in-house competition. The listing acknowledged that they already had competent people doing the work; the downside of that being we were now all pitted against one another. I guess we couldn't have our cake and eat it too.

After a couple of tense months the job committee arrived at a short list of two; I was competing with my colleague of ten years, Ingrid. We were apples and oranges, in terms of what we brought to the college. I bought a new pair of shoes for my review, but wore clothes everybody had seen a million times before. After the usual rigmarole of staged student critiques, presentations, and the lengthy interview, they announced they had decided to double the position, and hired both of us.

I understood due process, but emotionally it was hard not to feel that those last hoops we'd jumped through were moot. We'd both been working at the school ten years already. At least there were no flies on us.

*Artist's Horse*, oil on linen, 26" x 22", 1998.  
Collection of Alexander Nagel and Amelia Saul.



The gallerist had given me a date for my first solo exhibition in Toronto. I already had a lot of the work ready and shipped. Any last-minute paintings could be dismantled in my studio, rolled up in a sono tube and carried as luggage on a plane. I unpacked, re-stretched, and hung the work myself. The gallery was modest and a bit dark. We worked out a deal where I'd pay for shipping, invites, and stamps.

My friends and family came to the opening, and the show got a review. I wondered if it was a bit awkward, the critic being a colleague of B.'s at the paper. But he was a painting-positive writer with his vivid descriptions of the work. He got that I was a colourist.

*Fantasy Artist*, oil on linen, 47.5" x 36.5", 1997.  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

I had brought an oval stretcher home from my last trip to Paris a few years before. I had had no intention of using it; the French-made carved shape was a sculpture hung high up on the studio wall. It was perfect until I did finally stretch some linen on it, and did another doodle.



*Closet Painting No. 37*, oil on linen, 22" x 18", 1997.  
Collection of the Jeremy Jones estate.



It was hard to focus on larger projects. On a two-year probation for my new position at school, I was on five or six committees at any given time—academic standards and admissions, sabbaticals, visual identity, workload, to name a few. Any studio time I had felt as if I'd stolen it, and my studio was inadvertently social as we all crossed paths in the common areas. I would try to sneak in when I knew my studiomate, Renée, was teaching.

*Closet Painting No. 36*, 26" x 40", 2000.  
Collection of Allyson Clay and Greg Bellerby.



Otherwise we would talk a lot about everything: painting, boyfriends, school politics. She was raising her adolescent daughter, Amelia. I'd go over to their house for Friday-night dinners. If there weren't any work-related social events, other evenings I was happy to retire early, exhausted from all the meetings and the teaching. It reminded me of the ten-hour days I had when I had been a tree planter twenty years earlier. It was the busiest time of our lives.

*Closet Painting No. 32*, oil on linen, 26" x 40", 2000.  
Collection of Andre Seow.



Renée's work always encompassed a modernist critique, but she was a child of the mid-century. Our studio was full of analytical structures and vivid, coloured shapes: tea towels and Cartesian grids. I had always been an impressionable person.

Eventually we talked our way through my abstraction-distraction. Although I managed to exhibit the paintings once, I knew they weren't going anywhere. I'd hit a wall a few times before with that kind of painting. The ones I couldn't give away I unstretched. Luckily the stretchers themselves came in handy later on.

*Closet Painting No. 39*, oil on linen, 26" x 40", 2000.



Renée had been dating off and on, but needed encouragement. When she met Pietro, I told her he sounded like a keeper. They fell in love and I bought a small VCR/TV for my apartment, to fill my new social void.

*Closet Painting No. 38*, oil on linen, 40" x 26", 2000.



Over the course of my second summer in Toronto, B. and I went to Washington DC, for a short trip. He was going to write about an exhibition of the work of Mary Cassatt. I'd never been that far south. Washington looked like Ottawa, except bigger, hotter, and more troubled. Aside from Mary Cassatt there was the National Gallery's collection. It had a lot of French painting that I missed seeing in Paris, but it also had the English painters: Gainsborough, Reynolds, Raeburn, Lawrence. Except for George Stubbs, I'd never thought about them much. They were painters' painters, the 18th-century version of *Vogue*, depicting the aristocracy's lifestyle. There were more children than I was used to seeing.

*Artist Dressed As a Girl*, oil on linen, 67" x 53", oil on linen, 2001.  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



If I were to do a sociological study of why the English had so many paintings of children—usually sitting under trees in a landowner's landscape—the analysis would have to have been about class inheritance and colonial exploitation. But I was more interested in how the children seemed to transcend their gendered clothing. With their interchangeable, fresh faces, they hadn't become inflected by the demands of the binary yet. That became my new subject: a fantasy of the artist of the future, without the baggage.

*New Artist*, oil on linen, 69" x 54", 2001.  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



The premise for my next batch of works was a loose idea. I was at a point where I just wanted to paint what I felt like, subjects I hadn't seen that much of in contemporary art. Indulgently, I started painting dogs, in a sarcastic riff on the idea that if I had painted people's pets in a realistic manner, in realistic colours, I might have made some money.

*Artist's Pet (pugnacious)*, oil on linen, 30" x 21", 2001.  
Collection of John Armstrong and Sarah Quinton.



B. and I were getting serious. Although there was a charm to being in a long-distance relationship, I could barely afford it. It was hard to imagine leaving Vancouver, and I had passed my probation period at school. Nevertheless I started to apply for jobs near Toronto. I landed an interview for a painting position at the University of Guelph nearby, but didn't have to contemplate the idea of moving to Guelph for too long. After a more arduous interview process than usual, with a selection of candidates from across Canada, the committee didn't actually hire anyone. In the end, no one had met their standards.

*My Little Pony*, oil on linen, 82" x 68", 2001.  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



B. got a call from the *Washington Post*. They thought his writing about art was fresh and wanted him to come for an interview. So we made another trip. It was still swampy and hot. I decided not to worry about it until he was offered the job.

After spending our first summer together in DC, I went back to Vancouver to teach. Renée phoned me early one morning that September to tell me what she was seeing in real time on her TV: the first Twin Tower falling. I couldn't reach B. as the lines were jammed. He had been in the *Post's* newsroom at the time it happened, standing in a group transfixed by multiple TV screens, with the image on repeat. The arts section was sent home, as it wasn't immediately clear how they could be useful.

*Two More Boys*, oil on linen, 65" x 60", 2001.  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



The Toronto gallerist who had shown my work asked for a painting for a fundraiser for *Canadian Art* magazine. On a whim I made a landscape painting based on a Monet, interpreted as a red monochrome. It reminded me of images of the atomic bomb if you turned it sideways, but nobody ever got that. I wish I had installed it that way. There was a bidding war for it at the auction. Up until then my gallery hadn't sold anything. Feeling optimistic, they scheduled me for another show.

*Primary Landscape*, oil on linen, 32"x 37", 2000.  
Private collection.



My official life as a painter had begun in 1974 when my parents sent me at sixteen—protesting all the way—to an *en plein air* painting workshop in New Brunswick. I'd already made waves as a surrealist in high-school art classes; I didn't know what landscape had to do with me. My mother said I could have my father's unused paint box, if I would spend the time to sand and shellac it. I gave it three coats.

*Sliding Landscape* (chromeoxide green, violet), oil on linen, 26" x 40", 2004.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.



The class was a three-week boot camp. The professor, Edward B. Pulford, was a World War II air force veteran. Every day we'd get on a bus with a packed lunch, drive to a picturesque Maritime location, sit down with our folding easels and stools for three hours at a time, and paint what was in front of us, morning and afternoon. My first day was a disaster and I cried, but once we learned the function of a grisaille as underpainting I was up and running. On the third day or so the professor praised my clouds, and told me to go look at Constable in the library. I was in heaven.

*Sliding Landscape (grey, brown)*, oil on linen, 26" x 40", 2004.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.



After a year of art school I was back home for the summer working in a shop called Seven Seas Gifts and Garments at the Charlottetown Mall on the edge of town. My old high-school art teacher had commissioned a painting for \$75. She wanted a reprise from my surrealist phase. Although I felt I'd moved past that I agreed to do it. It was then that I realized how hard it was to make a painting that someone has asked for.

*Sliding Landscape* (cadmium, quinachrodone red), oil on linen, 26" x 40", 2003.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Washington, DC.



It was enough money to buy a train ticket to Toronto, to spend a week with my new boyfriend, Matthew. My mother insisted the trip be educational, so he and I hitchhiked out from the city to visit the Group of Seven at the McMichael collection in Kleinburg. Those painters' burnt-sienna grounds under punchy pale-blue patches of sky were a revelation.

*Sliding Landscape (diminished turquoise)*, oil on linen, 26" x 40", 2003.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.



B.'s new job took him to the Venice Biennale, his first time there as a critic. I found a plane ticket and tagged along. The title this year was *Plateau of Humankind*, curated by Harald Szeeman. The show was an overwhelming introduction to a broad swath of international contemporary art. As privileged press we got into the exhibitions early, before the crowds. At the Belgian Pavilion we saw the Luc Tuymans exhibition, curated by Thierry de Duve, probably the only painting show to be found that year. Tuymans was a painter I could still argue for, a diminishing group. The Canadians Janet Cardiff and Georges Bures Miller won the international prize for their video installation. They set the bar now, for how things were going to look.

*Sliding Landscape (blue grey)*, oil on linen, 40" x 26", 2004.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.



One day we got on a boat and crossed over to the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, to see an exhibition of Canaletto, a painter I'd appreciated in the past only for his brushstrokes. The Venetian scenes truly resonated now, seen in context. He was one of the first artists to paint for an international crowd of tourists, back in the 1700s. But it was his capriccios that really caught me; as invented landscapes and caricatures of Venice, they seemed truly abstract.

*Sliding Landscape (cadmium green)*, oil on linen, 26" x 40", 2006.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.



The large figure paintings from my last show had all come back to the studio, unsold. I was glad to receive them but was mortified for the dealers. I remembered them gently inquiring as to whether I'd ever considered making horizontal paintings. We knew landscapes were popular. I painted a blue capriccio, another monochrome.

*Fantasy Landscape* (diminished ultramarine blue), oil on linen, 28" x 40", 2002.  
Collection of Julian Lampietti and Meriwether Beatty.



I was cash-strapped, so the idea of making paintings purpose-built to sell was appealing. Like Canaletto I had a formula. Start with a coloured ground. Drawing with a brush in a related colour, sketch in the composition. Map-in three levels of tone with impasto in another colour. Obscure everything with a deep glaze, usually to reiterate the colour of the original ground. Repeat three times, refraining from glazing in the final layer. The highlights should be sitting on top. Almost like baking a cake.

*Sliding Landscape (cadmium green/ultramarine blue)*, 26" x 40", 2004.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.



But the empty oval stretchers from a previous project were still sitting around. I cut the shape out of a sheet of bond paper and started rotating it, first at a distance, looking at the rectangular landscape painting I'd just made. I then went back to my book on Canaletto, trying the cut-out on all the capriccios I could find. The tipped horizon lines were the antidote to my commercial impulse.

*Sliding Landscape (yellow ochre)*, 40" x 26", oil on linen, 2006.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Washington, DC.



B. and I had gotten married, and I was moving to Washington. Packing up. On a whim I sent a list of possible donations of my figure paintings to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, knowing that the director, Jeffrey Spalding, was always acquiring. What I didn't expect was that they assumed I was offering them all. I didn't correct them. I was now collected in depth, perhaps by default. This cut my shipping problems in half and my storage problems were over, at least for now.

*Sliding Landscape (diminished orange)*, 26" x 40", oil on linen, 2005.  
Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.



I was starting from scratch as a teacher in DC. But maybe I could go back to my original ideal of working part-time, and be more productive as an artist. I needed to make some cold calls.

Washington is a segregated city. I was ignorant of what that meant, as a Canadian. Later on I would realize that all American cities were segregated, and the problems ran deep. The Bush administration was just getting started. Given the Republican agenda and the ascent, over the last few years, of the one percent, it was hard to see how things were going to get better. The earlier trauma of the riots of 1968, triggered by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, was still palpable, thirty-five years later.

*Condescending Woman/Intractable Man*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2008.  
Collection of Lisa Blas and Thierry de Duve/Julian Lampietti, respectively.



But the city was also gentrifying. We arrived just in time to see the last of the streets lined with empty parking lots, liquor stores, and pawnshops, before they were supplanted by denser luxury housing and a raft of new restaurants. In the usual pattern of real-estate development there were initiatives for small art galleries with more adventurous programming, setting a fashionable tone for the changing neighbourhoods. The Corcoran School was right in the city, downtown near the White House. American University had its own fine arts department, so there was a feed of younger artists, curators, and gallerists wanting to get involved. People were optimistic about a revived art community.

*Comfortable Boy/Convivial Man*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2008/2005.  
Collections of James Alefantis/Kelley Waldrip, respectively.



My last exhibition at the Toronto gallery went strangely. Although I'd made the rectangular landscapes for them, the gallerists seemed uninterested and barely present. We didn't do a printed invitation; now everything was done with a listserv. They stayed in their office during the opening and didn't invite any clients. Luckily some friends and family came, so I had something to do while we sipped on our plastic cups with white wine. The postpartum after the show was worse than usual.

I knew that somehow I had to register in DC as an artist, if only to secure teaching work, so I began to look for someplace I could show there. James was a rising restaurateur, a patron of the arts who maintained an independent exhibition space. I sent him a package. He was immediately supportive and he liked the oval landscapes. We started planning a small show. He was energetic and had a lot of ideas.

*Apprehensive Woman/Laughing Man*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2005/2008.

Collection of Robert Moossy and Kipp Rhoads/Kirrin Gill and Thierry Lanz, respectively.



I managed to find some adjunct teaching work, first in Baltimore and then at the Corcoran College of Arts and Design. I was surprised to find that my skillsets were transferable; American students didn't seem that different from Canadians after all.

The only big change was working for a private institution, as opposed to a public one. There was not much faculty governance. With everybody on contract nobody could say what they actually thought. Faculty had low expectations. The upside was that there were hardly any meetings. The downside was yet to come, a few years later, when the Corcoran failed. Curricular overhaul couldn't rejuvenate diminishing admissions, and the repercussions of the Great Recession of 2008 eventually kicked in, with the lower returns from the Corcoran's endowment.

*Prescient Woman/Melancholic Man*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2008.  
Collection of Robert Moossy and Kipp Rhoads/Tanya Yudelman, respectively.



I did find a studio. A small group of artists had banded together and colonized a decommissioned high school in the southwest part of the city, a building built in 1906. I discovered later that Marvin Gaye had graduated from the school in 1954, just before the entire neighbourhood had been appropriated by the city for a highway. The building was one of the last hangers-on, a deteriorating landmark in a landscape of failed modernist housing developments in what had been a thriving mixed-income African American community. The halls were empty: I would ride my bike from the front entrance to a room at the other end of the building, a halved classroom with large north-facing windows. It was a perfect little self-contained studio. I bought a small fridge.

*Ruminative Woman/Worried Man*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2004/2008.  
Collection of Julian Lampietti/Patricia and Kevin Woods, respectively.



I made some more rectangular landscapes for James. We sold them at starter prices. In DC people collected more rugs and antiques than artwork; in a surrogate manner the paintings fit their decors, or so I imagined. I don't really know where the paintings ended up. I realized that if I were to make an actual living solely by selling my work at those prices, I'd have to make and sell a minimum of 50 paintings a year—after seller's commission, research, studio, and material expenses—to have enough money to pay D.C. rent, taxes, and health-care. I'd always managed to live on a college teacher's adjunct salary and the occasional small arts grant in Canada. Not surprisingly, we only sold one of the tilted oval landscapes. I immediately painted a copy to replace it, and decided to keep them together as a set.

*Bemused Man/Smug Woman*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2005.  
Collection of Julian Lampietti/Patricia and Kevin Woods, respectively.



I was teaching in an interdisciplinary program that was heavy on sculpture. There was a lot of pink insulation material stacked in corners of the studios, along with bits of plywood, duct tape, and detritus collected from the street. Students cruised dollar stores, Home Depot and the internet for their supplies, but the world at large also seemed like it was hitting a peak of available material excess. If you had a car you could drive around on garbage day and pick up all the raw materials you needed for your next project. With their money all spent on tuition, students often had no other option. Pedantically I felt the need to point out how the choice of materials would create signification. The students weren't necessarily politicized that way. They would pick up stuff simply because it was there.

*Verbal Woman/Attentive Man*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2008.  
Collection of Barbara and Aaron Levine/James Alefantis, respectively.



The art market was still booming, but it was hard to see how graduating students would intersect unless they took the big plunge, left their local social networks, and moved to New York or L.A., joining the wall-to-wall artists in those cities. The art world was a pyramid scheme. Occasionally one or two students would go on to grad school at Yale or Cranbrook; they might have a running chance at a life lived completely in art. I would urge the others to develop web-design skills, cultivate a niche craft, or intern at the museums, to build a back-up plan. The practical ones were doing a bachelor of education, but that always meant their studio practice was a struggle; too many course credits to juggle. But at least they would become teachers, helping people younger than themselves to read, write, and think in a visual way.

*Skeptical Man/Resigned Woman*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2005/2006.  
Collection of Adrian Bondy and Hanna Sherrill/Tanya Yudelman, respectively.



The students may not have taken me all that seriously. My generation had had it easy. I was just a painter, and when push came to shove, I was still making art about art. Trying to justify art school was becoming a stretch. But I had the long perspective, which was now my handicap. They were young and energetic, and at least some of them would know how to use a hammer by graduation. They could rebuild after the tsunami.

*Worried Girl/Critical Man*, both 22" x 18", oil on linen, 2008.  
Collection of Kirrin Gill and Thierry Lanz/Joseph R. Wolin, respectively.



The city sold our studio building. I had mixed feelings, but it seemed like a good cause: The Corcoran College had bought it, so that they could become a bigger school. I was teaching there and that all felt optimistic. Twelve-story glass condo buildings would be practically sitting on top of us, but that would pay the bills. Some promises were made that our little group could keep a toehold in the building. The husband of one of the artists was a partner in a big law firm and they were working on our behalf, pro bono, to make sure. We would have a few months before we would have to move out for the renovation. It would take a while for the Corcoran's plans to get drawn up. We were allowed to stay in the interim, as it was easier than hiring a security company. We were now squatting.

*Randall School, Washington, DC, 2006.*



But in a few months we received our exact move-out date. The next letter from the Corcoran explained that the building was now friable. We knew there were two feet of water in the basement. When I took my bike up the stairwell, the paint was peeling and I could smell the mold. The elevator was unpredictable, and it would be just a matter of time before the utilities would collapse. The Corcoran was weighing its liabilities.

*Randall School, Washington DC, 2006.*



I had a small digital camera that had been issued to B. by the Washington Post. I didn't take it very seriously as a piece of equipment. I had no idea what “digital resolution” actually meant. But I fell in love with the tiny illuminated images. Stalled on my painting in the studio I would wander the halls with the camera, exploring untenanted and unlocked classrooms. They'd become *ad hoc* storage for some of the artists, extra spaces for working projects out. There were leftovers from the building's previous lives. After having served for fifty years as the main high school in what had been a segregated part of the city, it briefly became a job-counseling centre. The gym went on to be a homeless shelter, and was still being used for that. The classrooms had also been used for city-government storage: they were full of roughly treated Knoll furniture piled in heaps, as well as some industrial metal cabinets and desks. In addition to some large bubble-wrapped packages, which I assumed were somebody's art, there were boxes of domestic objects someone had abandoned; the dregs of what looked like an elderly person's estate. All of it had been rifled through already; the good stuff was gone.

*Randall School, Washington DC, 2006.*



It was toward the end of the summer when I had a breakdown. I had decided I'd better make one last big painting, while I still had the space. A reprise of earlier work, the painting was going very badly. I hadn't done anything that big in a few years. I made the mistake of starting out with a black gesso ground, a colour I'd never used. Climbing up and down the ladder with reading glasses—on, to look closely at my source, and then off and down, to step back and see the painting from a distance—was taking its toll. It wasn't as easy as it had been.

*Randall School Studio View, Washington DC, 2006.*



I was crying every day in the studio. It was turning out to be a mid-life crisis. I was probably peri-menopausal. I'm not religious, but I said to myself, in a state close to praying, If I can just finish this one, please let it be competently painted, at least. I promised myself it would be the last big painting, period.

*Randall School Studio, Washington, DC, 2006.*



The next year I managed to show the painting, with the help of a young up-and-coming gallerist, Fabian. I turned it into a digital project, exploring all the colour-ways in which the painting could have been done. I billed the show as a meditation on the end of painting, and people took issue with that. It wasn't the first time my artist's statement had got up somebody's nose. One snarky reviewer said I was beating a dead horse. He was right though, to say I was navel gazing. Why not just let it be a nice painting of a horse? A local reporter went out of her way and interviewed my old friend John, who expressed skepticism about whether I was actually quitting. He knew I had bought some small oval stretchers: I still had some small portraits to do, before I was completely done.

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*Last Pony*, 120" x 98", oil on linen, 2006.  
Collection of the Confederation Centre, Charlottetown, PEI.



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This story is indebted to everyone who is in it.

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All art work, photography, photo documentation, and design is by Lucy Hogg with exceptions noted on pages 53 and 138. On page 198 photo of *Last Pony* in situ is by Frank Hallam Day, 2007. Photoshop is by Greg Galley, 2007.

Lucy Hogg 2022

For the record:

People, if they weren't referred to directly, were in the backstory.

Jo Acampora, James Alefantis, Vikky Alexander, Roy Arden, Jean-Phillipe Antoine, Kent Archer, Clifford Armstrong, John Armstrong, Grant Arnold, Carmelo Arnoldin, John Asimakos, Mowry Baden, Christine Bailey, Janis Ball, Michael Banwell, Marion Penner Bancroft, Laura Baird, Shannon Belkin, Stuart Belkin, Susan Berganzi, Fabian Bernal, Meriwether Beatty, Rüdiger Bender, Noel Best, Greg Bellerby, Russell Bingham, Jonathan Binstock, Lisa Blas, Sylvia Blessin, Tom Bondy, Dianne Bos, Osman Bozkurt, Janis Bowley, Chris Brayshaw, Roland Brener, Gary Brooks, Kerry Brougher, Lorna Brown, Hank Bull, Margot Butler, Simon Bunn, Ron Burnett, Amelia Butler, Alex Cameron, Eric Cameron, Kati Campbell, Neil Campbell, Kriston Capps, Carlo Chiarenza, Pauline Choi, Allyson Clay, Donna Clark, Bruce Cobanli, Barbara Cole, Dylan Collins, Mathis Collins, Paul Collins, Miquel da Conceicao, Elizabeth Connell, Denyse Cordrey, Sylvain Cousineau, Kenneth Coutts-Smith, Derek Cowan, Heidi Creighton, Ray Cronin, Harold Crooks, Randy Cutler, Veronica Cwir, Chris Czartoryski, Loretta Dalziel, Michael Dalziel, Richard Dana, Gary Michael Dault, Judy Davis, Heather Dawkins, Jessica Dawson, Frank Day, Stan Denniston, Jeff Derksen, Lisa Dillin, Wendy Dobereiner, Gary Dufour, Anne (Brooymans) Donald, Lynn Donoghue, Linda Rae Dorman, Nancy Duff, Cathy Durcudoy, Thierry de Duve, Martin Elder, Susan Edelstein, Anne Ellegood, Daniel Ellingsen, Cliff Eyland, Geoffrey Farmer, Andre Fauteux, Harold Feist, Lelah Ferguson, Sarah Finlay, Ian Fleming, Tim Folkmann, Monique Fouquet, Phillip Fry, Charles Gagnon, Monika Kin Gagnon, Alison (Hogg) Galley, Greg Galley, Carla Garnet, Ken Garnhum, Helen Geddes, Monique Genton, Robert Gerry, Adam Gilders, Kirrin Gill, Oliver Girling, Candy Girling, Janis Goodman, Blake Gopnik, Morgan Gopnik, Myrna and Irwin Gopnik, Terry Graff, Clement Greenberg, Paul Greenhalgh, Andy Grundberg, Milutin Gubash, Jason Gubbiotti, Serge Guilbaut, Sheila Hall, Virgil Hammock, Corinna Hammond, Richard Harrison, Muriel Hasbrun, Doug Haynes, Chris Hemeon, Lorraine Hemeon, Ydessa Hendeles, Karen Henry, Lucio de Heusch, Bill (Garth William) Hogg, Billy (Alan Stuart William) Hogg, Ian Hogg, Janis Hogg, Lianne Hogg, Lucille (Turnbull) Hogg, William Gourlie Hogg, Roger E. 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And over 2000 former students.

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