

Shirley Wiitasalo



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Philip Monk

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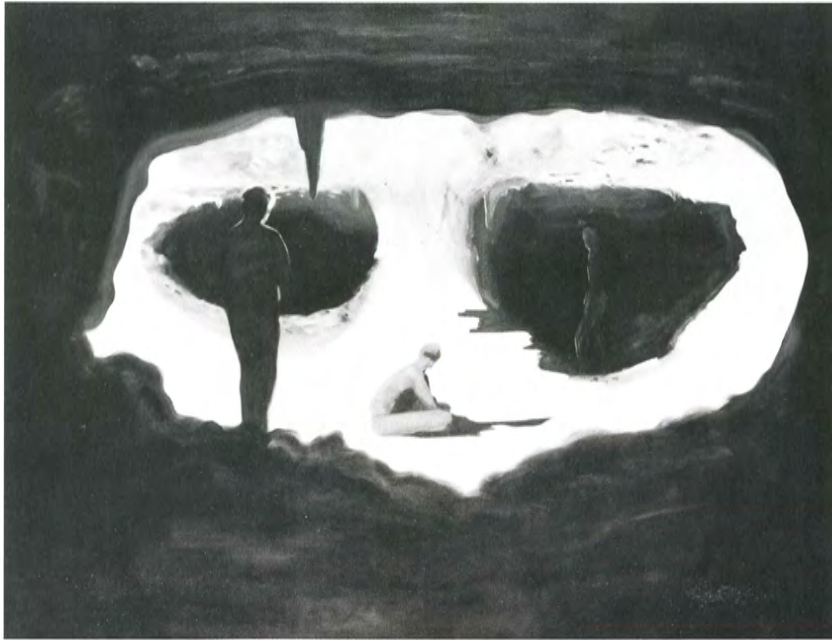


Figure 1

Black and White 1986

Oil on canvas

167.6 x 213.4 cm

Alison and Alan Schwartz, Toronto

Shirley Wiitasalo:

Disassembling Representation

We start with a description of a painting, *Black and White*, 1986 (figure 1, plate 15), its title descriptive, to a degree, of what we see. Black and white – a simple statement of the tonal values of the painting; yet we have no reason to think that the title may point to a simple solution, a moral clarity. For what we see is fairly anecdotal, a scene, the record of an outing: three figures, one standing, one sitting and one moving in the depths of a cave. We look out from one cave to the dual openings of another, or from one passage to two others. The foreground figure, back to us, stands just outside the large opening, looking at the seated figure or into the depths, while the two others seem to return his gaze.

Three figures, or perhaps three representatives of “looks.” But as that one foreground figure seems to act for us, introducing us into the space of the painting, so the *repoussoir* function of the inner frame, the mouth of the cave out of which we seem to be looking, introduces us to the look of seeing itself. It is as if we were seeing ourselves looking just at a distance behind our skull through the orbital sockets of the eyes. If we can begin to make that association and change of scale, what is seen through these eyes is not a scene but another skull, the two entrances becoming the two eyes of a white skull. We are surprised within appearance, and, as a mirror, the bleached skull turns our glance back on ourselves. In a standoff, face to face, an interview takes place between the living and dead, between the living or dead. Within these changes of scale and registers of seeing, we have a complex configuration of looking in and looking out, seeing and being seen. (On the analogy of three figures, what is the third look here? Or are they all captured within another look, not yet defined?)

We look again and, in the blink of an eye, witness another transformation, for that far cave/skull returns to a landscape element, the mushroom cloud of a nuclear

blast. This image, created from the light of its blast, presents the conditions by which we see: white against black/black against white. The image is made present by it, by being present in it inseparably. But that seeing is fraught with ambiguity; we no longer have the clarity of black and white. (If that seeing is fraught with ambiguity, so too is the morality implied in the title.)

An ambiguity transforms the image into a contemporary *momento mori*, the blast and the skull an inextricable conflation in the same form and vision. This is not the clear statement that the black and white of the title resolves itself into. As the skull can also be seen to be a mask, its circumference outlined by the foreground opening, so even in this ambivalence the element of willful deception creeps in. More than the discovery on our part of the mimetic accidents one finds in nature, that transformation above from cave to skull to blast is also a dissimulation: something is hidden within appearance.

While standing in front of a painting we presume a privilege of seeing without being seen, a position already subverted by the return of our gaze within the painting. Now through the image of the mask, the painting itself, as if an other, is brought to the possibility of seeing, while being looked at, without being seen. (The painting does not reveal all we presume it should show.) Or again, the whole surface, circumscribed by its frame, is a mask and therefore a deception. But as the outline of this mask is also the outline of the foreground cave, the latter circumscribes a mask for our seeing, masking our seeing. This mutual circumscription of masks – by a line that defines a duality on one surface – flips in and out of focus as figures within our viewing, as if to demonstrate that what is represented cannot be seen outside our seeing, or cannot be seen outside this depiction.

We are getting ahead of ourselves propelled by the emblematic richness of this one painting. But *Black and White* rehearses many of the themes of Wiitasalo's paintings from the early 1980s, those that were more media-directed in their imagery: the themes of seeing and being seen; of inner and outer; both of which are mediated by the frame which is an apparatus for putting things in place (i.e., representation), but which is also the site of distortion – the frame of consciousness in its positive and negative (i.e., ideological) senses.¹ (Wiitasalo has used painting partly as a commentary on other media, notably modern communications media, and to the degree that one medium reflects another – painting reproducing television, for example – her work plays upon the frame that divides and unites the two, as if one was the image and the other consciousness. The frame transmits the formal effects of the medium of painting as well as its subject matter. Internal frames, reflecting that of the painting, mediate inside and outside, public and private, personal and social, and thus stand for a broader social framing of our experience.)

Between the series of paintings from 1981 and *Black and White*, landscape imagery intervened, the topographic resources of which *Black and White* exploits.² This

seemingly radical shift, or escape perhaps, from the demonstration of the societal construction of the individual to landscape imagery is underlaid, nonetheless, by a constancy of themes, which accounts for the transformation, for instance, of the *frame* of the television to that of a landscape motif, here the mouth of a cave. This is not accidental. But as the imagery of any one painting is related to those of every other contemporaneous work, we should begin a brief description of the paintings that surround *Black and White*.

The Big Room, 1987 (plate 17), continues the cave imagery, but as with *Black and White* a geological form is anthropomorphized, in that the stalactites and stalagmites compose the teeth of a vaguely human mouth. *Green Mirror with Sculpture*, 1986 (plate 16), similarly reproduces an underground world, but one that has been stylized and shaped by a 1950s design sense as if it was a futuristic living room. *Panorama*, 1986 (plate 12), shifts the scene to an enclosure above the ground, perhaps a bar on top of a building. *Revenge*, 1987 (plate 18), depicts a confusing, tangled mass of root-like brushstrokes in front of a brilliant screen. And in *Famous Face*, 1987 (plate 19), a distorted face of a woman is the watery ground for floating debris.

Within the diversity of imagery and subjects described here, what are the themes that provide a unity to this group? Or rather than themes, what *form* of content provides us with a way of seeing these works? The form of content is not the inner or outer frame that allows us to see into these works. The form resides in a content inherent within the surface bound to the apparatuses of seeing and depicting. Shirley Wiitasalo is depicting something that can both be seen and not seen, which is representation itself in all its potential for simulation *and* dissimulation. She shows that one inhabits the other, dissimulation dissembling representation, but also that dissimulation may be the “ground” for representation itself.

Let us, however, first look at the content of these paintings and raise a conjecture based on what we initially see there. Three of the paintings depict caves, at least two of which, *The Big Room* and *Green Mirror with Sculpture*, have been denaturalized to the point of human inhabitation or tourist attractions. *Panorama* cues us to another tourist function, but the view now is not of nature but rather culture – the city and its intersection with nature, the mountain on the edge of the view. *Famous Face* shows a distorted funhouse face upon whose watery surface litter of that site floats. The famous face makes us look hard to realize that the image is that of Weegee’s well-known photographic portrait of Marilyn Monroe. Meanwhile *Revenge* seems to act out its title, as a revenge of the other (nature as characterized in horror films, for instance) bursting from the boundaries of the well-lit screen, through the very means of spectacle that (mis)represent it.

All these paintings then partake of the intersection of nature and culture in the spectacle. They are all examples of an artificial framing of the experience of nature. But in that that intersection is what we *initially* see, we have to interrogate when and



Figure 2

The Spell 1982

Gouache on paper

65.4 x 73.0 cm

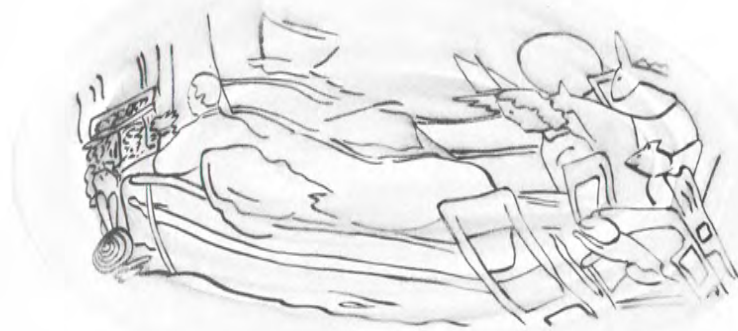
Collection of Air Canada

where the intersection becomes an interruption, even if that seam is unseen. This intersection or boundary disguises another effect. The outside is brought inside along and through the frame. That border of the seen/not seen is displaced to, displayed in, the frame. This interruption is not simply something that penetrates but rather is an involution of the outside (an outside on the inside) brought in through the frame (even though that frame is in the middle of the image) and spread over the surface. Thus the inner frame shaped by this involution takes on the form of an inversion that can be looked at as a distortion – the shape of an hourglass, for instance, or the shape of the mushroom cloud of *Black and White*.

While advertising superficiality, the paintings also present us with images of depth, and these often are given through the device of a reflective surface such as the three caves of *Black and White*, *Green Mirror with Sculpture*, and *The Big Room*; the watery depth behind/beneath the surface of *Famous Face*; the dark room of *Revenge* and the infinite potential depth of its screen; and, despite its view out, *Panorama*, whose enclosure is emphasized by the inner iris framing device (it is the cave's opposite in the sky). For the most part, as rooms they relate to the domestic interiors of 1981, and to the gouaches of the same period (figures 2-5) that are transformed by the threat of the exterior or by an internal breakdown, often signified by the distortion of the frame. We might want to know, however, as in the earlier works, what frames that depth? what apparatus creates its space? Given the recurrent images of caves, we also might recall other images and metaphors, particularly metaphors that have determined the nature of representation as a certain interpretation of *mimesis* in Western art and philosophy, namely Plato's allegory of the cave from his *Republic*.³

Representation has always been constituted in depth as seen through a frame. That which deviates from the correct measure of things in their space, that which deviates from a good and clear representation is a distortion of the truth, a falsity, something seen as if under a spell. We have only to think of Wiitasalo's *The Spell* (figure 2) as an image of this distortion.⁴

We have realized that the caves in Wiitasalo's paintings are complex, that they are not simple spaces, or spaces at all, since they turn into surfaces. *Green Mirror with Sculpture*, for instance, emphasizes by the insistence of its title not the space *per se*, but that which can reflect and double it – the mirror. And so it does; the mirror shows us a space outside the frame of view and also reveals to us the sculpture of the title. The mirror returns that space to a surface in an involution repeated in the shapes of the sculpture. But that involution is also an internal fold in the centre of the painting where image and "reality" meet to create a third image (a double involute) symmetrical around its dividing and uniting edge. That depiction of space takes place within a reflective surface, an illusion, in other words, a simulacrum, which is ultimately also the painting itself. In that the painting also multiplies those reflective depths, the secure foundations of representation are destabilized.



Schubert (M. L. 1982)

Figure 3
.034 Seconds 1982

Gouache on paper
76.2 x 55.9 cm
Collection of Carmen Lamanna

As if describing *Green Mirror with Sculpture*, we can think through the following quotation by Derrida:

Imagine Plato's cave not simply overthrown by some philosophical movement but transformed in its entirety into a circumscribed area contained within another – an absolutely other – structure, an incommensurably, unpredictably more complicated machine. Imagine that mirrors would not be *in* the world, simply, included in the totality of all *onta* [things] and their images, but that things 'present', on the contrary, would be *in them*. Imagine that mirrors (shadows, reflections, phantasms, etc.) would no longer be *comprehended* within the structure of the ontology and myth of the cave – which also situates the screen and the mirror – but would rather envelop it in its entirety, producing here or there a particular, extremely determinate effect.⁵

Wiitala's paintings mirror these other conditions Derrida describes. They variously effect them. The traditional status of representation is unsettled here in the uncertainty, the undecidedness, of the paintings' imagery, in the to and fro acted out upon its surfaces. We have seen, especially in *Black and White*, the duplicity of the image in its transformations within various looks. The turns of the image, as the turns of the subject in the 1981-82 gouaches, transform on the surface of the image; the image is a surface, and representation, in spite of the assurances of its framing devices, floats precariously there.

Dissimulation, distortion, deception appear on and through the surface. They are not the intentional effects of the depiction of a subject or space. Distortion distends the volume of a form on a surface (e.g., *Famous Face*), but that surface can also be pulled out of shape through a frame (e.g., the 1981-82 gouaches). It is the frame that transforms or distorts, or is distorted itself, and the frame is only the substitute for the apparatus of representation which thus institutes itself (usually unseen) within this distortion as a clear vision. In other words, distortion is a test for the (negative) limits of the correctness of representation. But in that what is unseen is also a distortion (of what is seen, and not shown, in representation), those limits break down and become an active site in themselves, measureless and unstable, forming images and consciousness positively and negatively.

Wiitala's paintings play out a whole repertoire of effects of surface that alternate between ambiguity and distortion. This may range variously from the distortion of part or the whole of an image as in *The Spell, .034 Seconds, Collection* (plate 14), and *Famous Face*. Or the distortion may take place through the integration of separate images on the surface as in *Interview* (as differing registers of representation; plate 1) or *Interior* (plate 2) and *Appearance* (plate 11). The latter two are examples of complications that arise through the ambiguity of inside and outside, an ambiguity between what is the "real" image and what is reflected, to which we may add the

ambiguity that reflection causes as in *The Glow and the Flow* (plate 3): is the image in the television set projected or reflected? All of these produce an ambiguity of reading, but that ambiguity is part of the staggering of seeing essential in works such as *Beautiful Garden* (plate 5) or *Black and White*.

It becomes obvious that the frame is a constant, if changing, theme within the period of work covered by this exhibition, and the recent work emphasizes that it cannot be dissociated from surface. Reviewing this work, notice the dominance of the television frame in the 1981 works: *Interview*, *Interior*, and *The Glow and the Flow*; the floating frame of the cartoon bubble or ideological cloud of a second series of paintings from 1981-82: *Beautiful Garden*, *The Dream Goes On* (plate 6), *Mind Your Own Business*, and *Untitled*, 1982 (plate 7); or the frame which becomes part of the distorted surface in the 1981-82 gouaches: *The Price*, *The Spell*, *Villains*, and *.034 Seconds*.

How many of the works from 1986 and 1987, like those from 1981-82, still utilize the frame, even if it is not so readable as the television frame of those earlier works? I have already mentioned the frame motif of the mouth of the cave of *Black and White*, which is repeated in *The Big Room* and *Green Mirror with Sculpture*, where it is doubled by the internal frame of the mirror. Similarly, a frame appears in the bright screen of *Revenge* and in the iris effect of *Panorama*. (One could say for these two latter works that the frame is produced through photographic-mechanical effects: the projection effect of *Revenge* and the lens effect of *Panorama*.)

The only painting of this group where we do not see an internal frame is *Famous Face*, although the original image was produced through the framing device of a camera and had its source in a mirror. It is thus doubly framed beyond or before the bounds of the image of the painting. But here this work makes evident the effects we have been discussing: it is distortion itself. Not only is the source image a distortion – Weegee's photograph; its presentation is as well; it has to be read against or within another distortion – the surface of water in which litter is awash. This trash points to a "disposability" beyond itself, to what is disposable to the viewer, namely, the movie star (disposable in two senses of available to and disposing of, but as an image). Like nature, the movie star is an archetypal Other (cf. *Revenge*); and as a woman, but here available only on the screen, disposable to the male gaze. This returns us to the themes of seeing and being seen, and to the dimensions of the image.

In earlier work, seeing and being seen intersected on the surface of the image, for instance, intertwined in the scrolling of the image in *Interview*. Now we begin to see what other appears through the image. This appearing *through* is no longer a *by means of*, a transparent mode of representation, where a content is delivered clearly to view by that apparatus. Rather it is what surfaces through another image, penetrating it as if from behind, but on the same plane. In *Black and White*, for instance, what is intertwined in black and white in the image is an interview between the liv-



Figure 4

The Price 1981

Gouache on paper

76.2 x 55.9 cm

Collection of Carmen Lamanna

ing and dead, an inter-view, a “seeing” that conceals “the dead under the appearance of the living.”⁶

If we take this emblematic painting as a key, a more obvious clue for what happens in these paintings, then we can fix upon that central shape that transforms into other images under our view. It is not the images themselves with their particular meanings that we want to interrogate, but the form as it appears in these other paintings. I have already drawn out the double involute that appears in *Green Mirror with Sculpture* where the space meets its reflection in the mirror to create a third shape. This image also appears in the pinched undulation of *Famous Face*, and in the overall shape of the central image of *Revenge*, as it thrusts itself into view. Its reappearance cannot be fortuitous. Nor is it lacking in an image like *Panorama* where the involution is merely inverted, so that the two arcs of the original blast make a circle. This image should then be taken as a counterpart to *Black and White* whose black sockets are mirrored in negative in the two bright glares on either side of the central image in *Panorama* (the split light of a reversed nuclear blast). If now we look back to *Famous Face* we find that it comprises the two, the involute and the circle.

In concentrating on this central image we begin to recognize the features of a face. Notice that what we face so often in this series (the same number of times as the caves, at times literally *as* the caves) is the human face: *Famous Face*, *The Big Room*, and *Black and White*. What begins to surface from these representations of depth are images of faces. The inner and outer are brought together in these ambivalent images, not through the devices of ambiguity necessarily, but through the means of representation. It is as if the representation of depth stands for consciousness and the image of the face is the exterior sign for it. But in bringing that secondary image to the fore, by revealing that it informs that image of depth, depth dissolves in the devices of the “secondary” surface, that which is read secondly and is presumed to be secondary as a dissimulation to the good and clear representation. What rises to the surface, as unwelcome as the refuse of *Famous Face*, is the mask, the mask which denies identity and consciousness in an unlimited repetition that conceals as much as it reveals. As part of a process that is not static, the mask transforms the image, as shown in *Black and White*. And that transformation is the threat of death, an image we recognize not only in the skull, but in the repetition of the shape of a nuclear blast throughout a number of these paintings. The reprise of this motif cannot now be discounted merely as a formal device to hang the painting or as a mere replay of the frame function in the paintings of 1981. It must be absorbed into the features of death that it begins to delineate.

Wiitasalo’s earlier paintings partook of an analysis of the frame and representation as the agency that determines the seen and unseen. She now takes that exploration to the dynamics of the surface itself, which is taken to be the very basis for representation. This practice unavoidably partakes of the deception it masks and reveals:

The illusionist, the technician of sleight-of-hand, the painter, the writer, the *pharmakeus*. This has not gone unnoticed: '... isn't the word *pharmakon*, which means colour, the very same word that applies to the drugs of sorcerers or doctors? Don't the casters of spells resort to wax figurines in pursuing their evil designs?' Bewitchment is always the effect of a *representation*, pictorial or scriptural, capturing, captivating the form of the other, par excellence his face, countenance, word and look, mouth and eye, nose and ears: the *vultus* [face].⁷

* * *

We know that there is only surface in Wiitasalo's paintings. Simply said, her paintings undermine that traditional notion of representation as depth. But her images are more complex. Her paintings ultimately deal with the relations between the image and subjectivity: how the latter receives or registers the former; how the image helps form the individual; what is seen in representation and what is not seen or left out. Moments of consciousness are acted out on the surface of these images, as these images. Consciousness is formed and informed by the modes or apparatuses of representation (these are at once a distorted surface, a means for viewing through, and a form of reproduction). "Consciousness" registers on the surface; consequently it takes place through the distortive aspects of that surface. (Even in the intervening landscapes, such as *Papago Park* [plate 10], the image is as imbued with an individual consciousness as the earlier images are of a distorted reality, and so while the image seems to have changed with these paintings, the aim has not; every representation of landscape is of a scene that has already been represented and socialized.)

Now to the questioning of the motivation of the frame of that earlier work, Shirley Wiitasalo aligns an interrogation of depth with this recent series of paintings. Here, however, that interrogation is only made more obvious through the utilization of the cave imagery. The frame is not absent; it has been transposed to the surface of the painting itself. In the earlier work, the frame always mediated an interior, domestic space to the exterior, but an exterior that was only mediation by representation. The subject of a dominating medium has always been aligned to the individual, private or domestic, in Wiitasalo's work. In the earlier work, the frame, in establishing representation, was also a device for misrepresentation; it did not transparently transmit a content, but helped form a consciousness.

What is unique about the current paintings is the degree to which they do not merely represent their theme or content as an image, but that the divisions we seemed to find mediated through the frame in the earlier work have been brought to the surface of the work as the image itself. Shirley Wiitasalo has been able literally to bring to the fore of painting, to the surface itself, the whole representational practice of painting. By so unifying image, practice and perception, she is able to present images, nonetheless, that are unsettling.

Notes

1. Paintings such as *Interview* (plate 1), *Interior* (plate 2), *The Glow and the Flow* (plate 3), all from 1981, or the gouaches from 1981-82 (figures 2-5); see the essay on this work reprinted in this catalogue, pp. 41-43

2. For instance, *Whitehouse*, *Appearance* (plate 11), *Papago Park* (plate 10), all from 1984 and *Untitled*, 1985 (plate 9), and the urban imagery of *Cashstop*, 1984 (plate 8), and *Spire*, 1985 (plate 13).

3. On the allegory of the cave, see Plato, *Republic*, VII, 514A-521B. For critiques of the origin of the traditional notion of representation in Plato's philosophy, see Luce Irigaray, "Plato's *Hystera*," *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985); Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981); especially the essay "Plato's Pharmacy."

4. Gilles Deleuze would define this distortion more positively as a simulacrum, a pure becoming: "Le pur devenir, l'illimité, est la matière du simulacre en tant qu'il esquivé l'action de l'Idée, en tant qu'il conteste à la fois *et* le modèle *et* la copie." *Logique de sens* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969, p. 10). The simulacrum is an event that plays upon the surface as an effect; thus the distortion itself would be that event. The title *.034 Seconds* (figure 3) perhaps marks the time of that event.

5. Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 324. On the anti-Platonic simulacrum see also Gilles Deleuze, *Logique de sens*, part of which is translated as "Plato and the Simulacrum," in *October* 27: pp. 45-56.

6. "The magic of writing and painting is like a cosmetic concealing the dead under the appearance of the living. The *pharmakon* introduces and harbors death. It makes the corpse presentable, masks it, makes it up, perfumes it with its essence, as it is said in Aeschylus." Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

7. Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

Plates



Plate I

Interview 1981

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 182.9 cm

Collection of Carmen Lamanna



Plate 2

Interior 1981

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 182.9 cm

National Gallery of Canada/Musée des beaux-arts du Canada

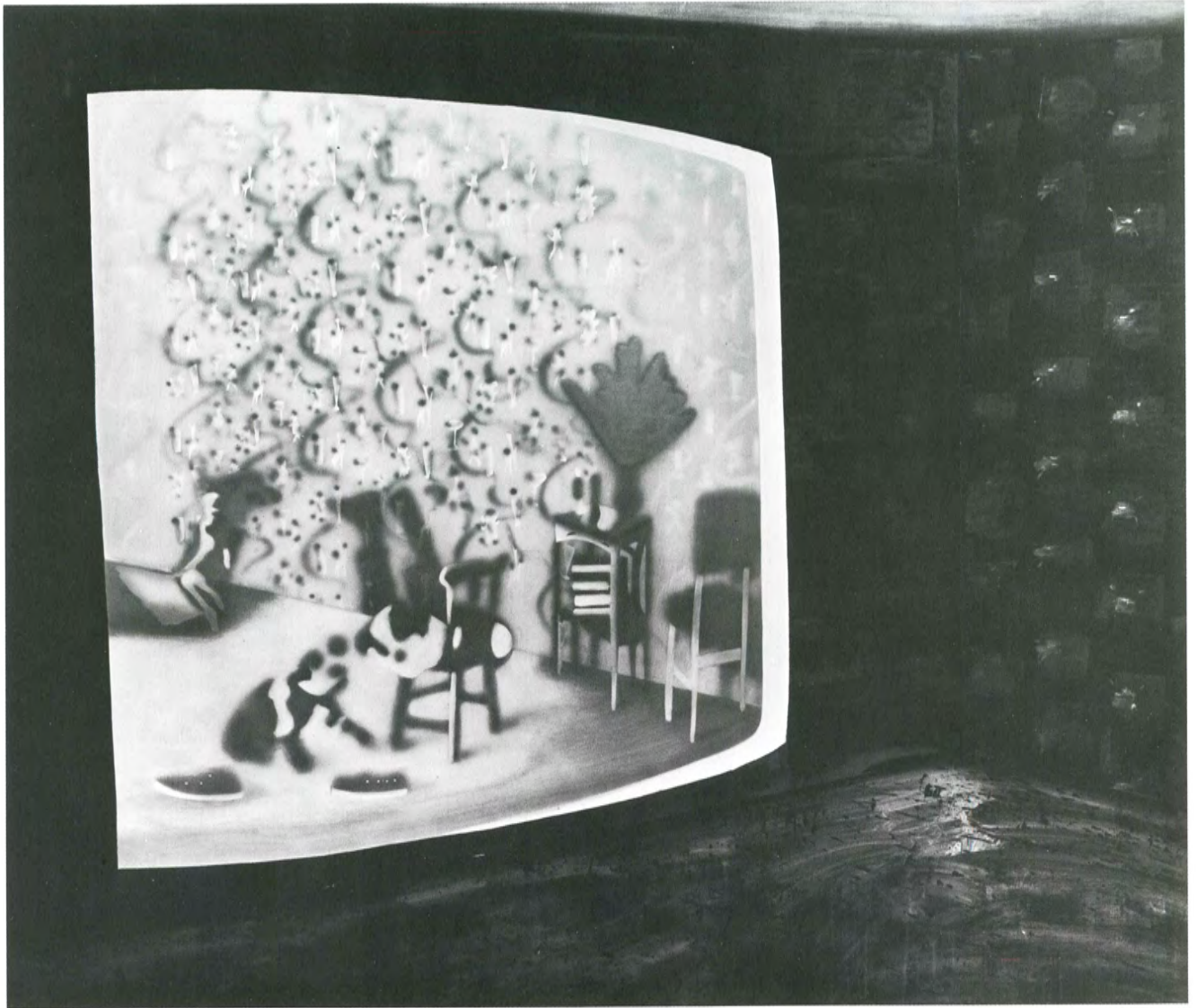


Plate 3

The Glow and the Flow 1981

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 182.9 cm

Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank/Collection de
la Banque d'oeuvres d'art du Conseil des arts du Canada

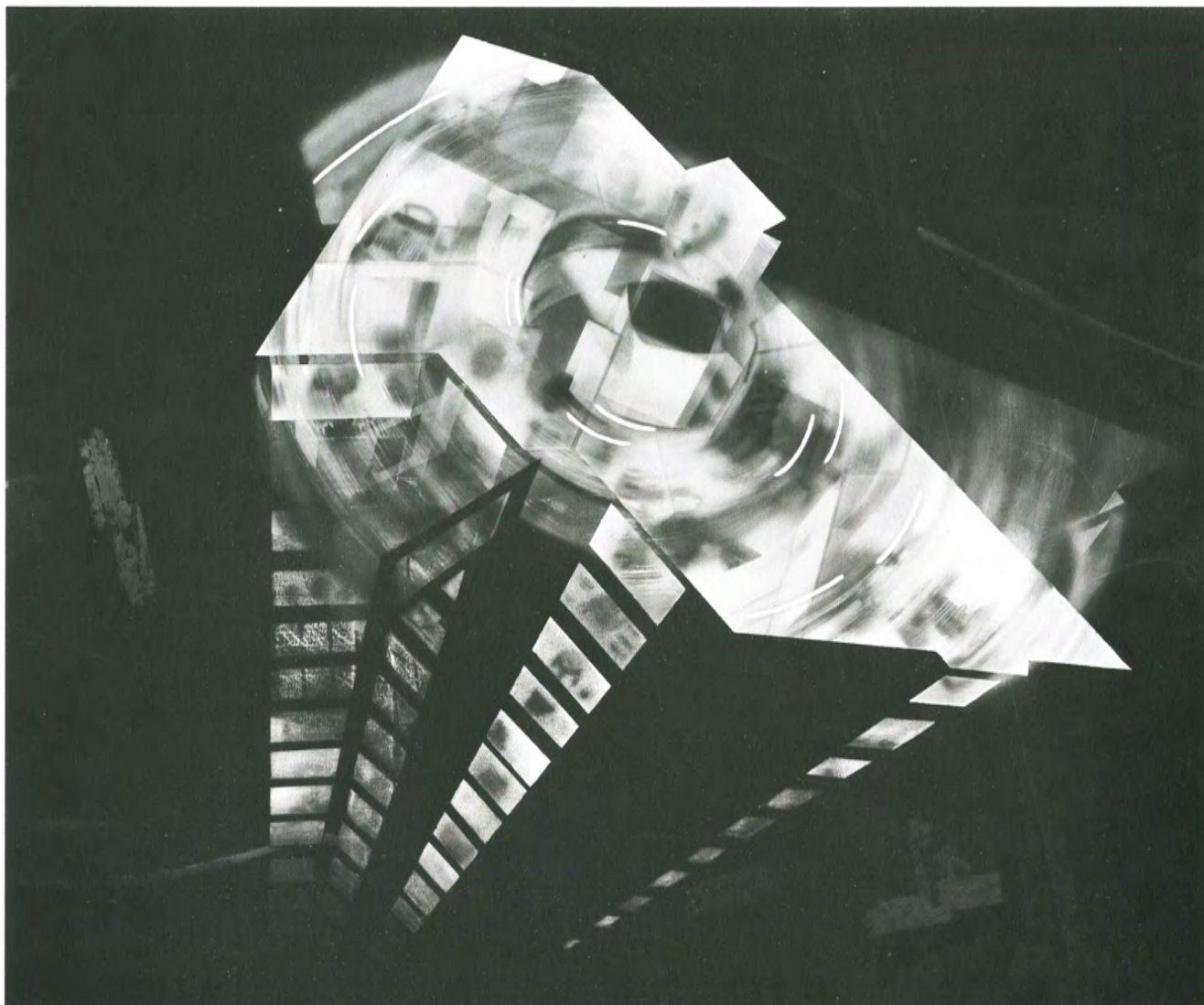


Plate 4

Expansive/Expensive 1981

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 182.9 cm

Petro-Canada Art Collection



Plate 5

Beautiful Garden 1981

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 182.9 cm

Art Gallery of Ontario

Purchased with funds given in memory of C. Alicia Forgie,
1986



Plate 6

The Dream Goes On 1981

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 182.9 cm

Collection of Carmen Lamanna

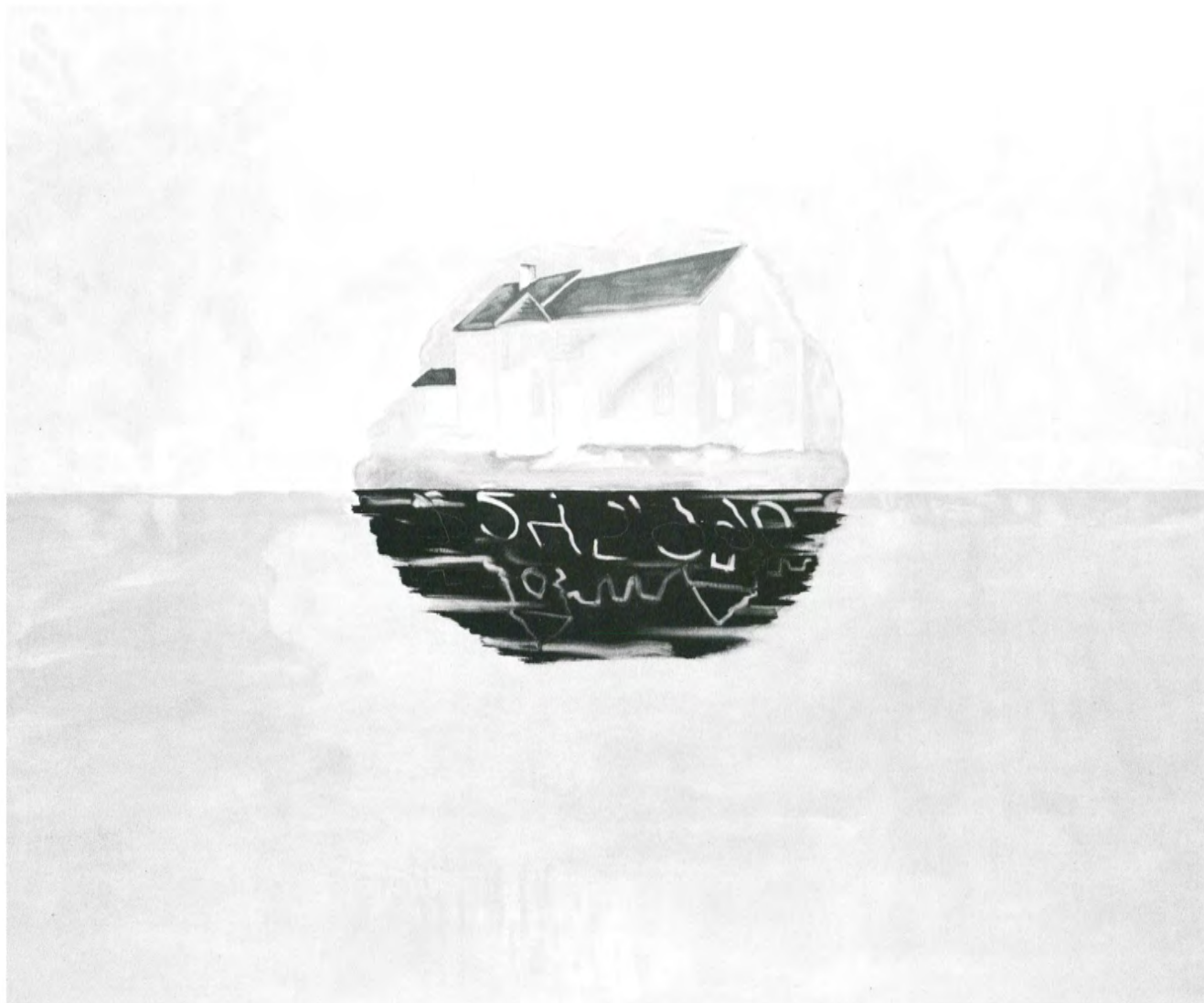


Plate 7

Untitled 1982

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 182.9 cm

Collection of Carmen Lamanna

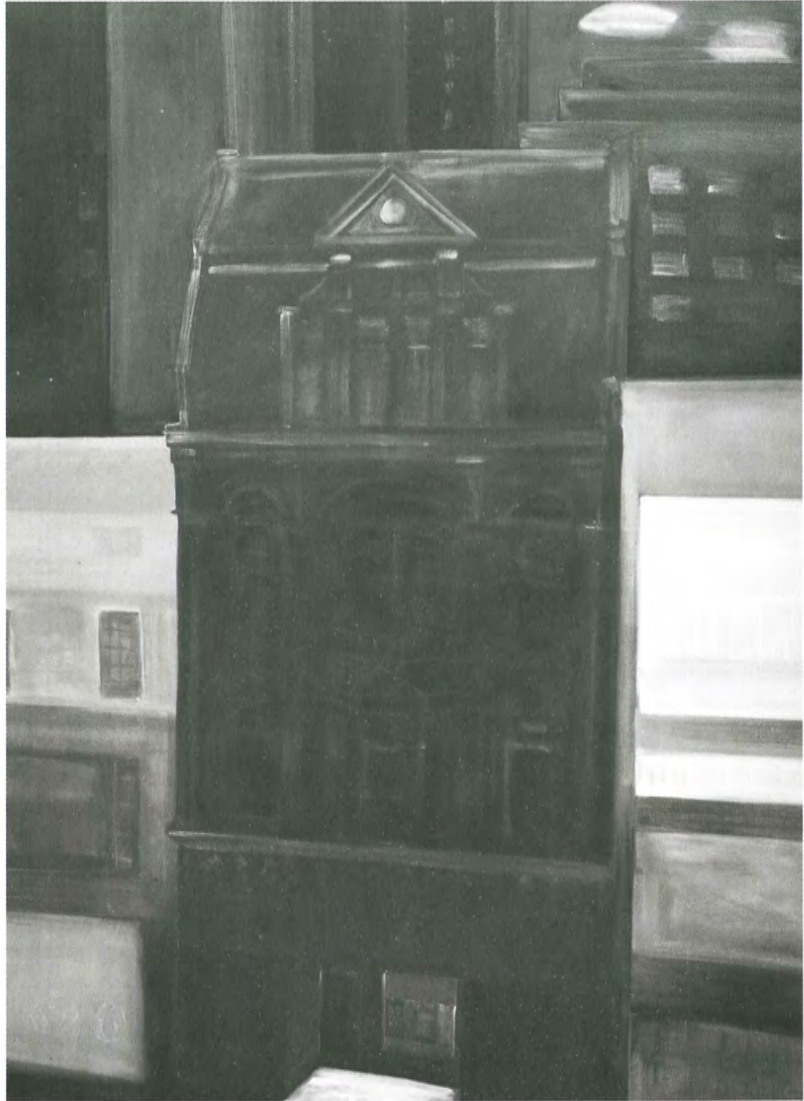


Plate 8

Cashstop 1984

Oil on canvas

122.0 x 167.6 cm

The Corporation of the

City of Toronto



Plate 9

Untitled 1985

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 198.0 cm

Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank/Collection de
la Banque d'oeuvres d'art du Conseil des arts du Canada

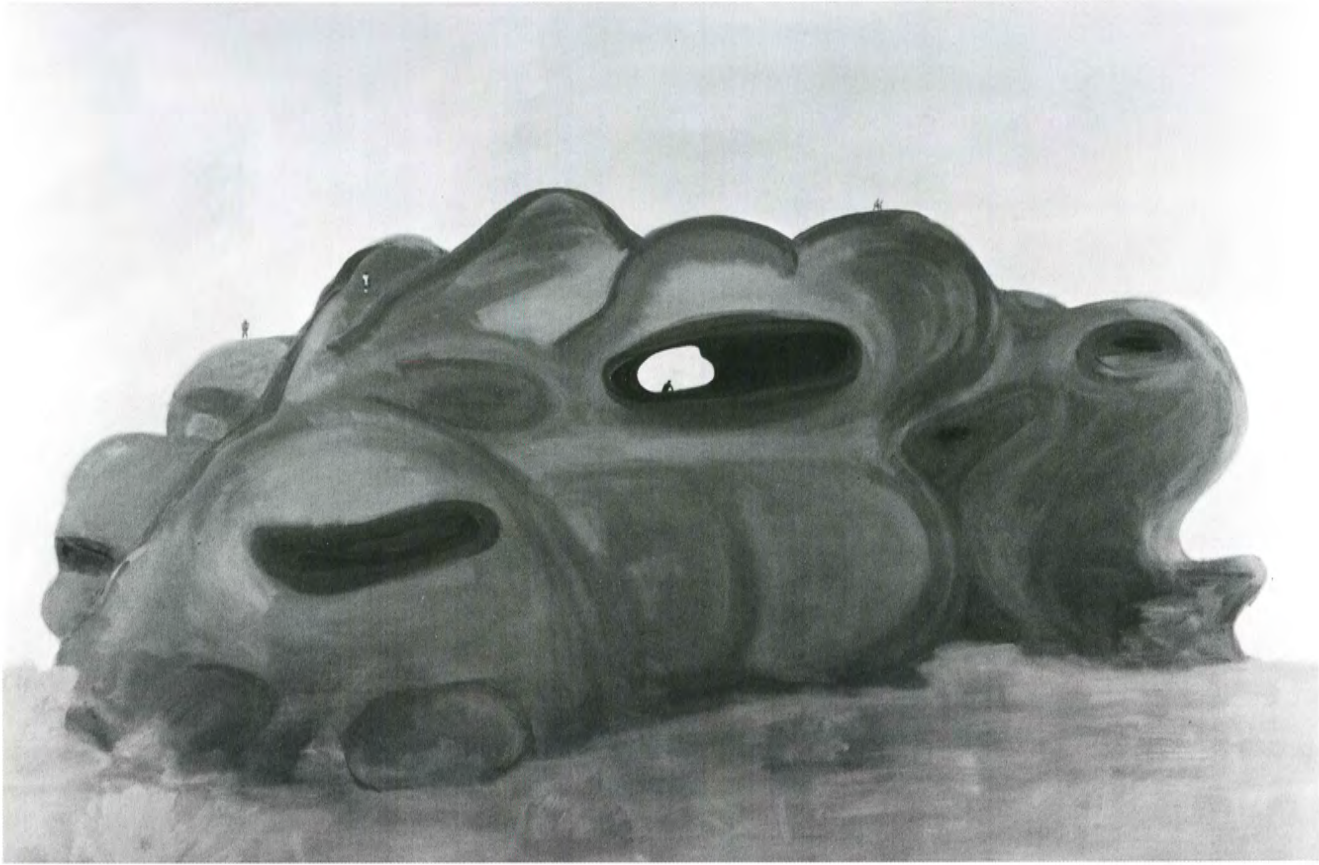


Plate 10

Papago Park 1984

Oil on canvas

121.9 x 182.9 cm

Collection of the Artist



Plate II

Appearance 1984

Oil on canvas

121.9 x 182.9 cm

National Gallery of Canada/Musée des beaux-arts du Canada



Plate 12

Panorama 1986

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 198.0 cm

Carmen Lamanna Gallery

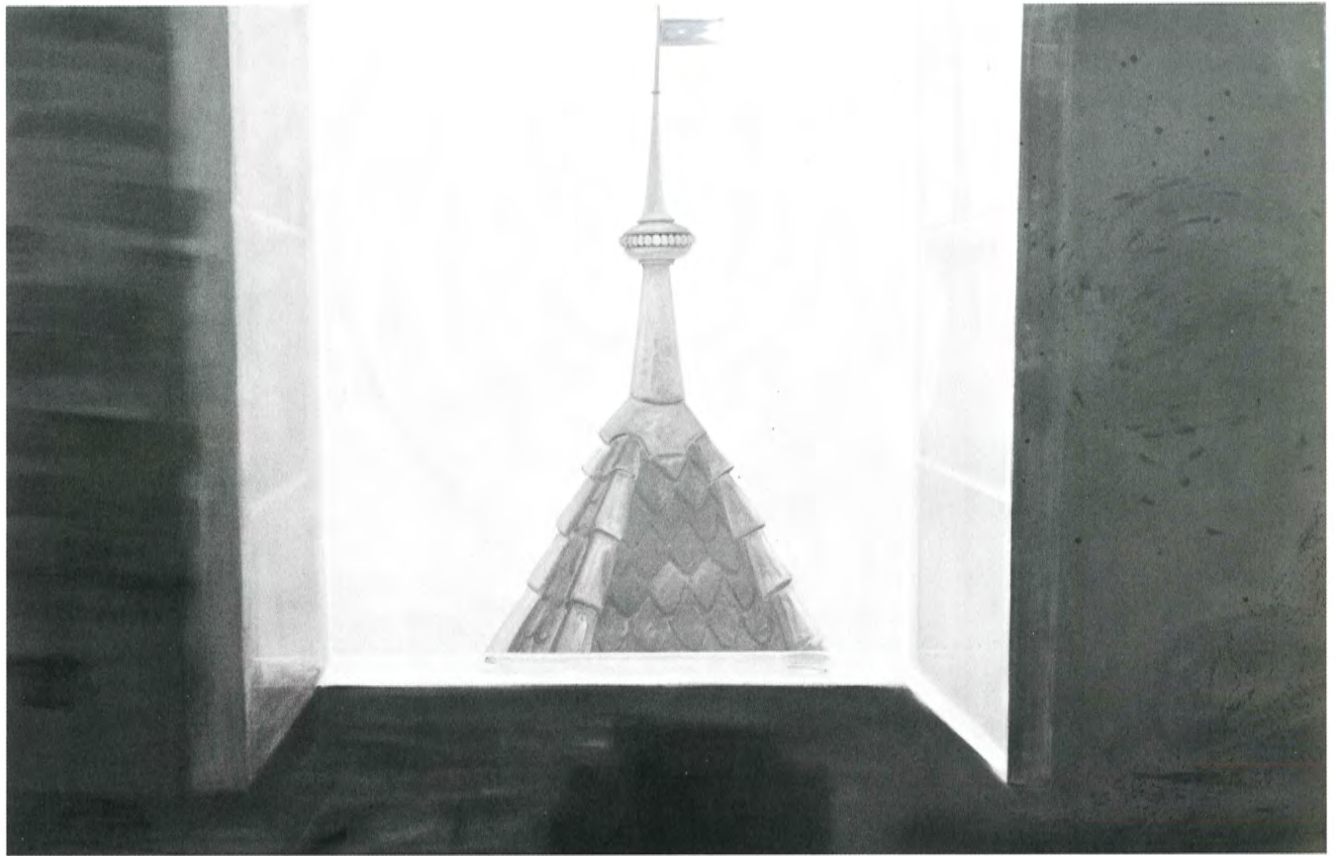


Plate 13

Spire 1984

Oil on canvas

121.0 x 182.0 cm

GALATEA

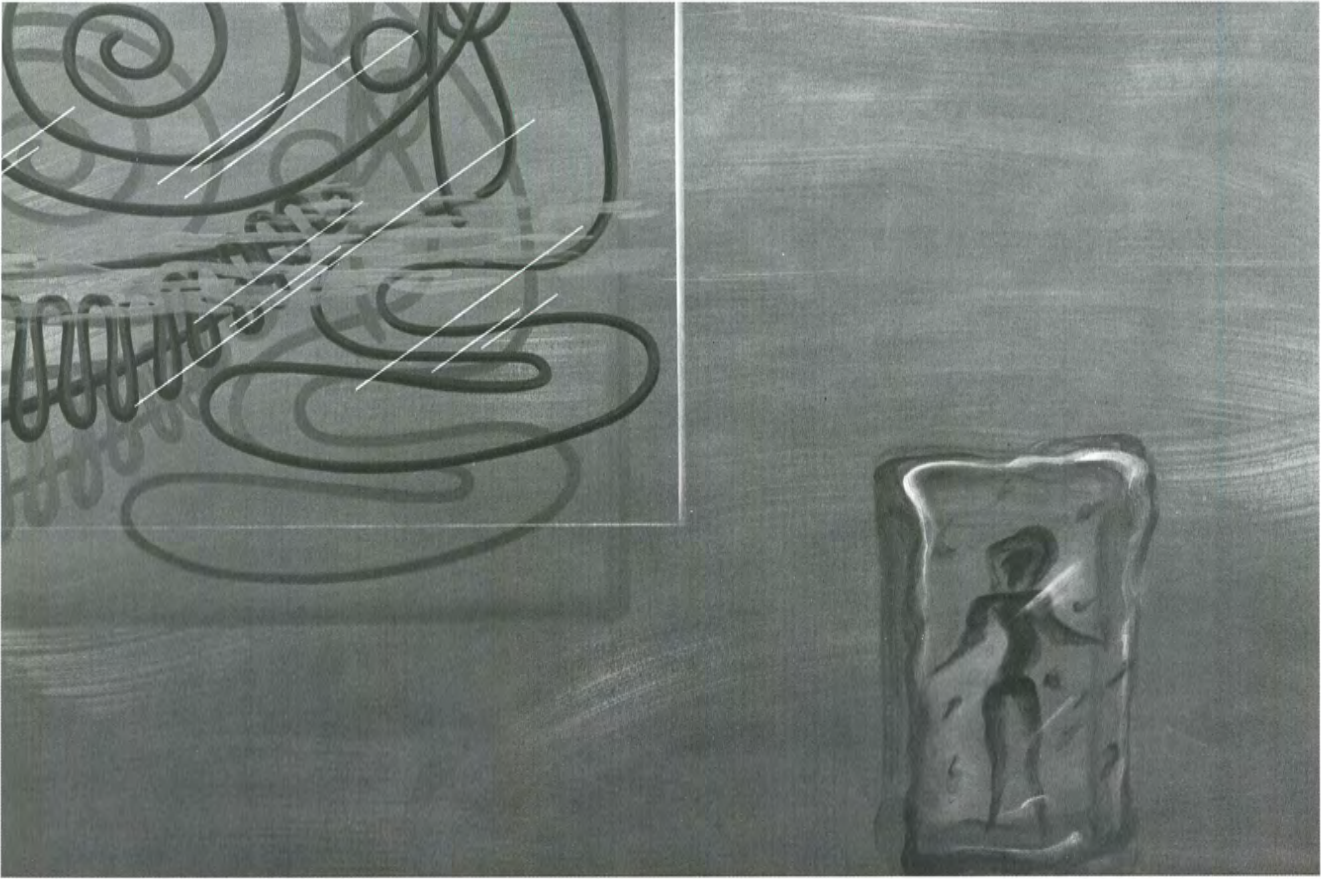


Plate 14

Collection 1984

Oil on canvas

121.0 x 182.0 cm

Carmen Lamanna Gallery

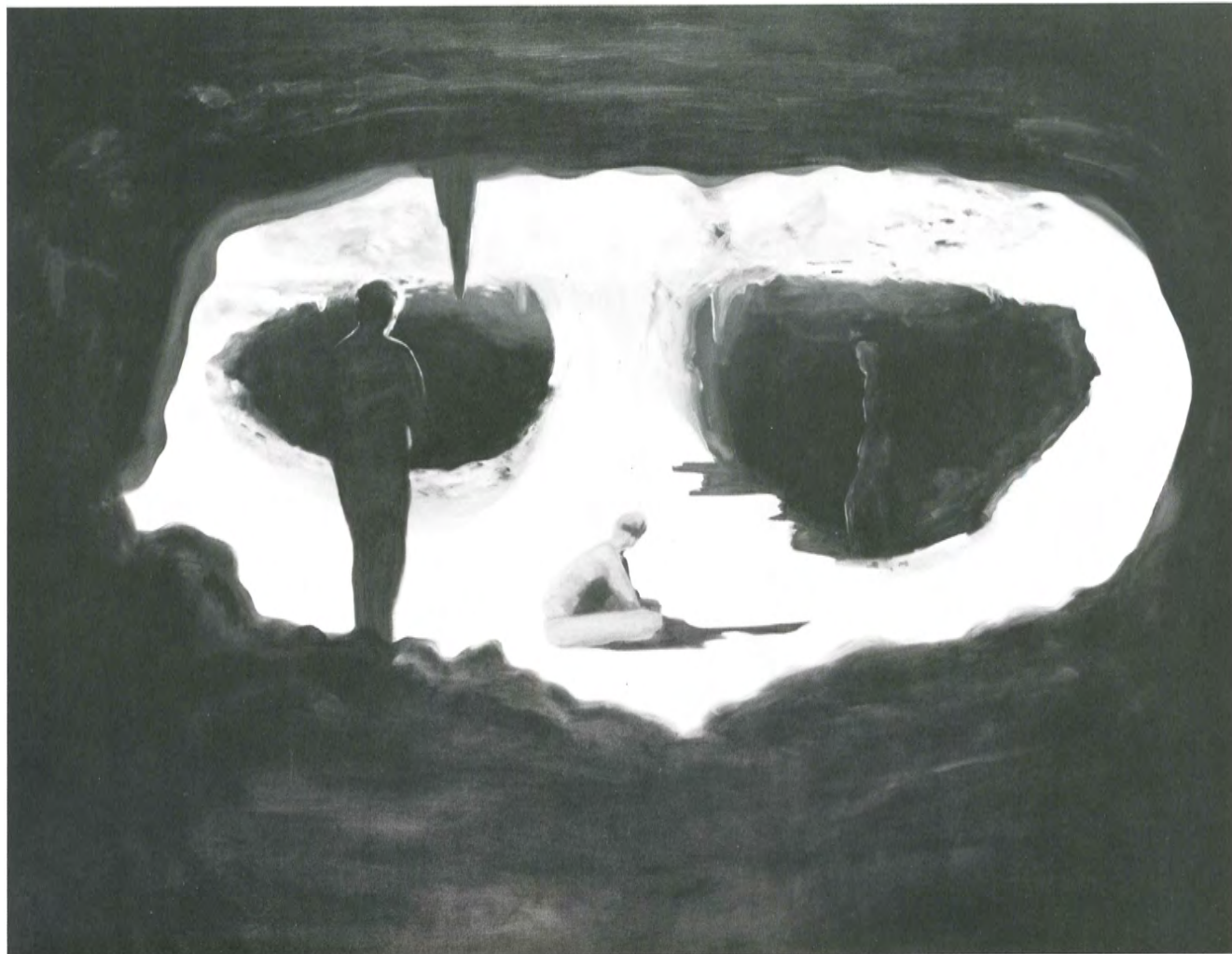


Plate 15

Black and White 1986

Oil on canvas

167.6 x 213.4 cm

Alison and Alan Schwartz

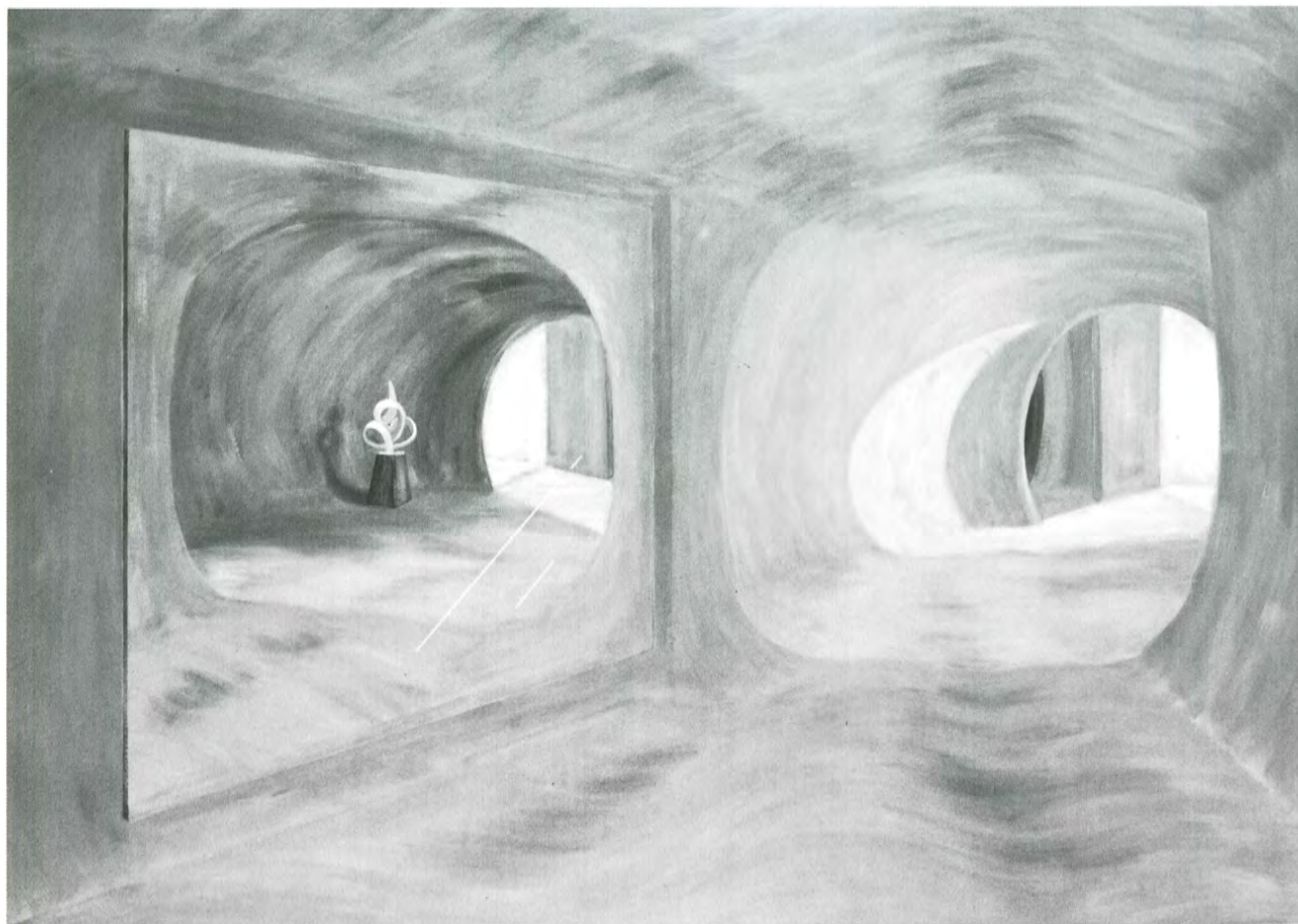


Plate 16

Green Mirror with Sculpture 1986

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 213.4 cm

Carmen Lamanna Gallery

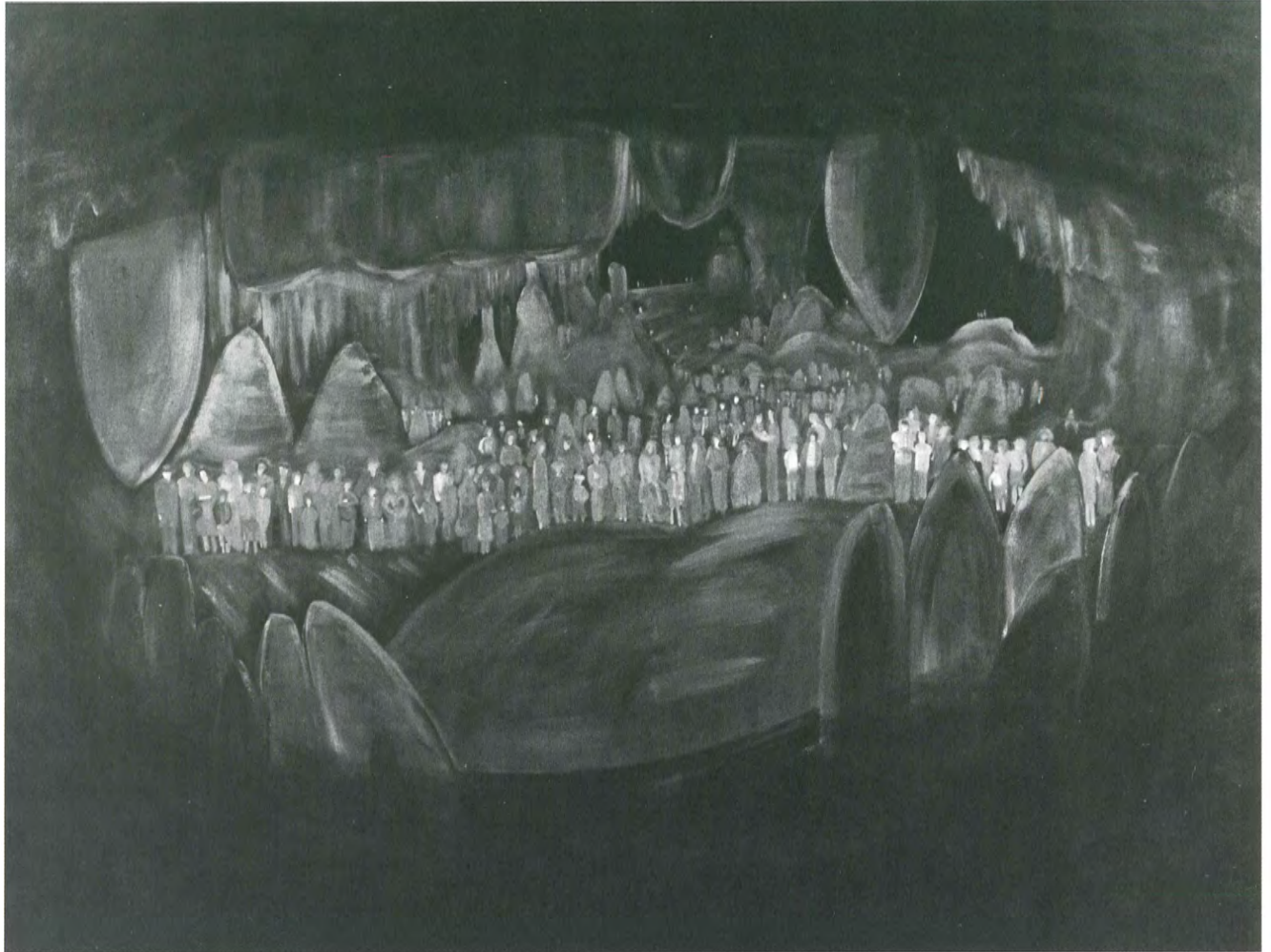


Plate 17

The Big Room 1987

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 198.0 cm

Carmen Lamanna Gallery

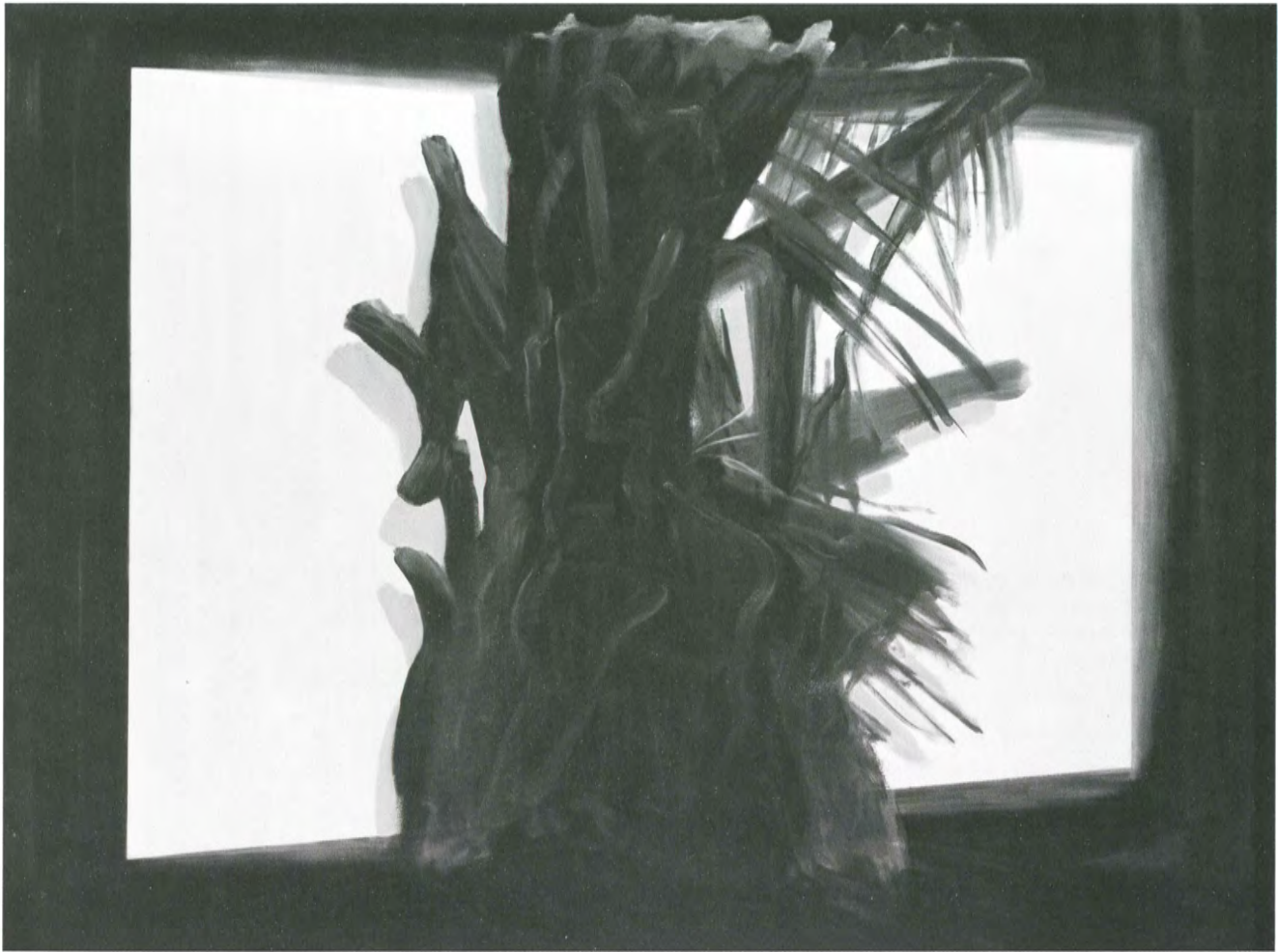


Plate 18

Revenge 1987

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 198.0 cm

Carmen Lamanna Gallery

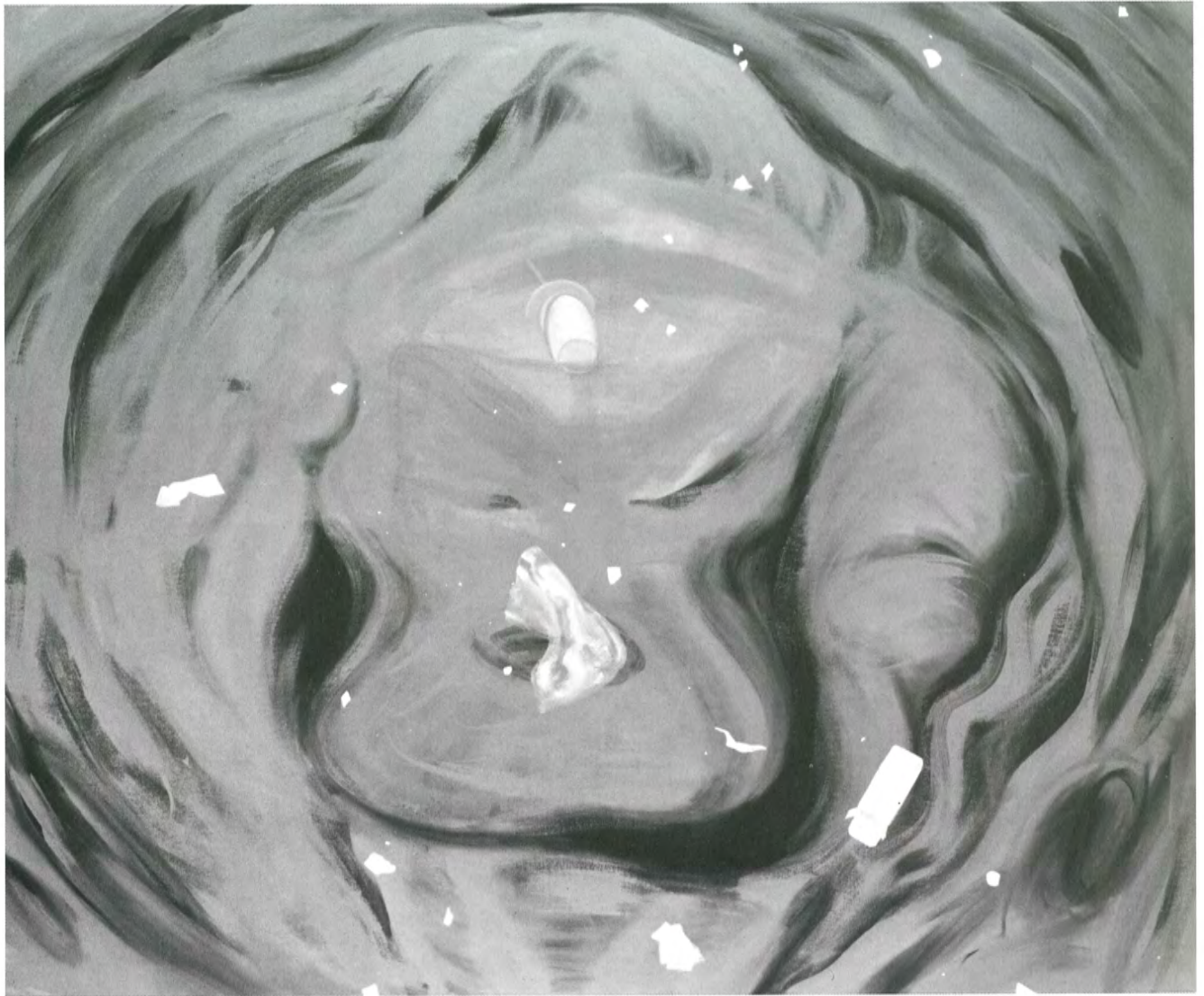


Plate 19

Famous Face 1987

Oil on canvas

152.4 x 182.9 cm

Carmen Lamanna Gallery

The Frame Between: Works 1981-1982

An exhibition of paintings is not a series of isolated instances, punctuations of vision and creativity. Together they compose a space, the space of an installation, a space that includes the viewer; and they construct a frame, that of the gallery. We can designate three spaces successively situated within larger frames: the interior "space" of the painting; the space of the gallery; the space of the "real." What are the relations between them? How are they demarcated? What makes the spaces of content or representation, of subjectivity, of objective reality? What mediates the public and private, the personal and the social? What constitutes the subject in these spaces, split between these relations?

What is between these spaces first presents itself as an absence: the frame. Since that which presents itself in an absence is a representation, the frame partakes of that construct, and in its turn has a constitutive capacity and function. And the subject is constituted in that split.

Mediation occurs through the frame. The frame is not only a container, it is a relay. It mediates the inside to the outside and the outside to the inside, the representation to a referent or reality, on the one hand, and the viewer to a content on the other. Shirley Wiitasalo's paintings address this mock dialogue. They are able to since the oils and gouaches are meant to be taken together as a whole in their presentation, but without that whole assuring a unified subject, in terms of a theme, the situation of viewing, or the viewer. Moreover, the frame is a constituent of her work, for instance, in the series of paintings from 1981: *Interview*, *Interior*, *The Glow and the Flow*, *Expansive Expensive*.

Within each of these paintings we find an internal frame. And in three out of four of the works, a television provides the internal rhyme to the external frame. In the fourth, the x-ray section of an apartment block acts to shape the domestic. The inner frame functions to divide but also to display the dissolution of the boundaries between interior and exterior, public and private, and so-called subjectivity and objectivity. It is a fulcrum in the vacillation between containment and catastrophe. But contrary to its appearance, dissolution is a sign of the construction of the interior by the exterior, of the private by the public.

The inner frame mimes the edge of the canvas, which is the literal division between outside and inside. By the evidence of the inner frame, however, that division between viewer and viewed is not as secure as the edge seems definitive. Thus *Interview* accounts and substitutes for the viewer by duplicating our conditions inside: a figure watches a television monitor as we look at his image. That identification is not assured because there is no coherent identity within the figure: television and figure merge and dissolve in the flickering roll of the image. An interview

takes place between looks: the image comes to view us, and in that viewing contributes to a construction of identity.

If *Interview* shows a production that is also a reception (the interaction of television production and viewing), *Interior* shows that transmission is already reception, and that the inside already mirrors the outside. In this painting the television image of the Reagan assassination attempt fills a living room and the limits of the canvas itself: television is in the image, but the image is television itself. If *Interview* depicted the dissolution of the boundaries in subjective construction, in *Interior* the dissolution has become total in the superimposition of the public and the private.

Between the production of *Interview* and the reception of *Interior*, *The Glow and the Flow* is a projection and a reflection, and perhaps depicts a condition logically prior to the other two, but which provides a basis for their operations. Reflecting the “mirror phase” of an absent subject, the image seems to occupy a nether world, where the boundaries seem distinct, but the source of the image is blurred: Is the image on the screen a television projection or a nursery reflection? Its ambiguity is precisely that both are sites of childhood gender formation. Moreover if it accords to the “mirror phase,” it is the origin of the misrecognition of the ego as a unified subject.

If the violence of the public subsumes the private (subjective consciousness) or the domestic (social construction) in *Interior*, that violence is reflected outwards in *Expansive Expensive*. The domestic breaks into the social in the form of a spinning apartment block. Whether that breakdown is a positive or negative reaction, the answer lies in the frame.

The frame institutes boundaries and mediates relations. But because the mediation is one of reproduction, a structure mediates or delivers the individual to the social. When this interior is a television set or a household, one realizes that the divisions between the so-called inside and outside are socially set, while the social continually breaks down that division at the same time, penetrating and determining the private. Wiitasalo’s paintings show the construction but also the fragility of the subject in construction. But her work also has an outcome: the tendency towards the catastrophic disruption of those boundaries that *Expansive Expensive* represents.

If we could characterize these paintings by their frames that mediate the viewer to the interior on the analogy of the relation of the inside to the outside represented within the painting, another series of paintings from the same year maintain the frame, but with a difference. It is as if the frame itself were no longer secure: it begins to waver. Because here the frame itself is not so much a rigid container turning one in or out as it is a balloon that has captured the interior. It is, so to speak, the caricature of a frame, so that the image has now become a cartoon and exaggeration of the idea of ideology.

We note this in *Beautiful Garden*, *Mind Your Own Business*, *The Dream Goes On* (all 1981) and *Untitled* (1982). But the gouaches from 1981-82 better illustrate that

the balloon is more than a convention; it is a sign of the process of distortion itself. That distortion should not be taken as signifying false consciousness. These are ideological *scenes*; they determine real activities and relations, although some may be dressed up: the clothing of the commodity in an imagination, as in *The Price*. And they are all performed in institutional settings: the domestic scenes of *The Spell* and *.034 Seconds*.

From the first paintings to these gouaches, the frame has been transformed from the fictive mark of a separation to the sign of dissolution. The passage from media imagery in the paintings to the cartoons of the gouaches has distorted the frame itself – from a structure to a process, from a view to an image. If there was a view of some sort in the first paintings, there is no more in the second: there is only image.

This essay first appeared in the catalogue *Subjects in Pictures* (Toronto: vyz, 1984).



Figure 5

Villains 1981

Gouache on paper

76.2 x 55.9 cm

Collection of Carmen Lamanna

Chronology

Shirley Wiitasalo

Born

1949 Toronto, Ontario

Education

1967-68 Ontario College of Art, Toronto

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1973 A Space, Toronto, Ontario.
1974 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1976 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1978 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1980 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1981 Forest City Gallery, London, Ontario.
Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1982 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1987 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1968 Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario.
1970 Scarborough College, University of Toronto, Scarborough, Ontario.
1971 *Toronto 4 + London 1*, Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1973 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
Canada Council Art Bank, Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris, France.
Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1974 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
Contemporary Ontario Art, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
1975 *Carmen Lamanna Gallery at Owens Art Gallery*, Owens Art Gallery, Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick.
1975-76 *Some Canadian Women Artists*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.
1976 *Ontario Now – A Survey of Contemporary Art*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Kitchener,

Ontario and Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario.
17 Canadian Artists – A Protean View, Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia.

- Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1977 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1978 *Nine Canadian Artists*, Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland.
1979 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1980 *Aspects of Canadian Painting in the Seventies*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta.
The Innovative Image, Art Gallery of Ontario (Art Rental and Sales Gallery), Toronto.
7 Toronto Artists, Artist's Space, New York.
Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1981 *20th-Century Canadian Painting*, organized by the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario (international travelling exhibition).
Paterson Ewen, Ron Martin, John Scott, Shirley Wiitasalo, Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
Other Places, Other Painters/Autres lieux, autres peintres, Sir George Williams Art Galleries, Concordia University, Montréal, Québec.
1982 *Canadian Horizons: Paintings from the Canada Council*, organized by the Canada Council in collaboration with the Alaska State Museum, Juneau (international travelling exhibition).
Canada Festival, Scottsdale Center for the Arts, Arizona.
Fiction, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (international travelling exhibition).
Robin Collyer, General Idea, Shirley Wiitasalo, Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
1983 Cedar Ridge Studio Gallery, Scarborough, Ontario.
Paterson Ewen, Ron Martin, John Scott, Shirley Wiitasalo, Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
The Parisian Laundry, Women in Focus Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia.

- 1984 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
Toronto Painting '84, Art Gallery of Ontario,
Toronto (travelling exhibition).
Subjects in Pictures, vyz, Toronto, Ontario and
49th Parallel, New York.
Amsterdam-Toronto, Fodor Museum,
Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
- 1984-85 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
- 1985 *Late Capitalism*, The Art Gallery at Harbour-
front, Toronto, Ontario.
Toronto Now, Sarnia Public Library and Art
Gallery, Ontario.
*Allegorical Procedures in Recent Canadian Paint-
ing*, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston,
Ontario.
- 1986 *John Brown, Magdalen Celestino, Rae Johnson,
Robert Wiens, Shirley Wiitasalo*, Carmen
Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.
- Salon Theatre, Toronto, Ontario.
Cable 10 Calgary, Alberta (June 26-27).
Banff Cable, Alberta (June 30).
- 1983 Saskatoon Telecable 10, Saskatoon, Saskatch-
ewan (February).
"New Canadian Video," Image Film-Video
Centre, Atlanta, Georgia.
Maison de la Culture de St. Etienne, France.
Halifax Cable 10, Nova Scotia (June 1983).
Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris, France.
"Okanada," Berlin, West Germany.
- 1984 "Video Refractions," London Regional Art
Gallery, Ontario.
- 1985 "Six Days of Resistance," Trinity Square
Video, Toronto, Canada.

Audio and Video Production

The Girl Can't Fly It, 1980

"Radio by Artists" series. Produced and di-
rected by Robin Collyer and Shirley Wiitasalo
for A Space in cooperation with the Fine Art
Broadcast Service.

Presented:

- 1980 Banff Cable Radio and Radio/Radio
Banff, Alberta 104.3 FM
January 17-28

Darn These Hands, 1980

"Television by Artists" series. Produced and
directed by Robin Collyer and Shirley
Wiitasalo for A Space and Rogers Cable tv.

Presented:

- 1980 Rogers Cable 10, Toronto, Ontario
(June 18-20).
- 1981 Video Roma, Italy.

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- Gale, Peggy. "Distance, Desire: Shirley Wiitasalo's Landscape Images." *C Magazine* 7 (Fall 1985): 24-27.
- Girling, Oliver. "Fiction: AGO, Toronto, April 3 – May 30." *Vanguard* 11 (Summer 1982): 55-56.
- Kuspit, Donald B. "Free at Last – Toronto Painting and Sculpture." *C Magazine* 4 (Winter 1985): 12-18.
- Monk, Philip. "Axes of Difference." *Vanguard* 13 (May 1984): 10-14.
- Monk, Philip. "Fiction: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, April 2 – May 30." *Parachute* 28 (Sept./Nov. 1982): 41-42.
- Monk, Philip. "Subjects in Pictures." *Parachute* 37 (Winter 1985): 14-23.
- Ramsden, Anne. "Recent Paintings by Shirley Wiitasalo." *Parachute* 17 (Winter 1979): 35-38.

Exhibition Catalogues

- Ammann, Jean-Christophe. *Kanadische Künstler*. Basel, Switzerland: Kunsthalle Basel, 1978.
- Graham, Mayo. *Some Canadian Women Artists*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1975.
- Grenville, Bruce. *The Allegorical Image in Recent Canadian Painting*. Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1985.
- Guest, Tim. *Late Capitalism*. Toronto: The Art Gallery at Harbourfront, 1985.
- Monk, Philip. *Subjects in Pictures*. Toronto: YYZ, 1984.
- Town, Elke. *Fiction: An Exhibition of Recent Work by Ian Carr-Harris, General Idea, Mary Janitch, Shirley Wiitasalo*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982.

Exhibition List

- 1 *Interview* 1981
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 182.9 cm
Collection of Carmen Lamanna
- 2 *Interior* 1981
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 182.9 cm
National Gallery of Canada/Musée des beaux-arts du Canada
- 3 *The Glow and the Flow* 1981
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 182.9 cm
Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank/
Collection de la Banque d'oeuvres d'art du
Conseil des arts du Canada
- 4 *Expansive/Expensive* 1981
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 182.9 cm
Petro-Canada Art Collection
- 5 *Beautiful Garden* 1981
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 182.9 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario
Purchased with funds given in memory of
C. Alicia Forgie, 1986
- 6 *The Dream Goes On* 1981
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 182.9 cm
Collection of Carmen Lamanna
- 7 *Untitled* 1982
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 182.9 cm
Collection of Carmen Lamanna

- 8 *Appearance* 1984
Oil on canvas
121.9 x 182.9 cm
National Gallery of Canada/Musée des beaux-arts du Canada
- 9 *Papago Park* 1984
Oil on canvas
121.9 x 182.9 cm
Collection of the Artist
- 10 *Collection* 1984
Oil on canvas
121.0 x 182.0 cm
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
- 11 *Spire* 1984
Oil on canvas
121.0 x 182.0 cm
GALATEA
- 12 *Untitled* 1985
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 198.0 cm
Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank/
Collection de la Banque d'oeuvres d'art du
Conseil des arts du Canada
- 13 *Black and White* 1986
Oil on canvas
167.6 x 213.4 cm
Alison and Alan Schwartz
- 14 *Green Mirror with Sculpture* 1986
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 213.4 cm
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
- 15 *Panorama* 1986
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 198.0 cm
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
- 16 *The Big Room* 1987
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 198.0 cm
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
- 17 *Revenge* 1987
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 198.0 cm
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
- 18 *Famous Face* 1987
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 182.9 cm
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
- 19 *Surface* 1987
Oil on canvas
152.4 x 203.9 cm
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
- 20 *Façade* 1987
Oil on canvas
203.2 x 152.4 cm
Carmen Lamanna Gallery

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(reference): p. 31

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