

S U B J E C T S
P I C T U R E S

An Exhibition Curated by
P H I L I P M O N K

S H E L A G H A L E X A N D E R
J A N I C E G U R N E Y
N A N C Y J O H N S O N
S A N D R A M E I G S
J O A N N E T O D
S H I R L E Y W I I T A S A L O

Y Y Z

S U B J E C T S
IN
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An Exhibition Curated by
P H I L I P M O N K

1984

SHELAGH ALEXANDER

JANICE GURNEY

NANCY JOHNSON

SANDRA MEIGS

JOANNE TOD

SHIRLEY WIITASALO

SUBJECTS IN PICTURES: A YYZ exhibition curated by Philip Monk.

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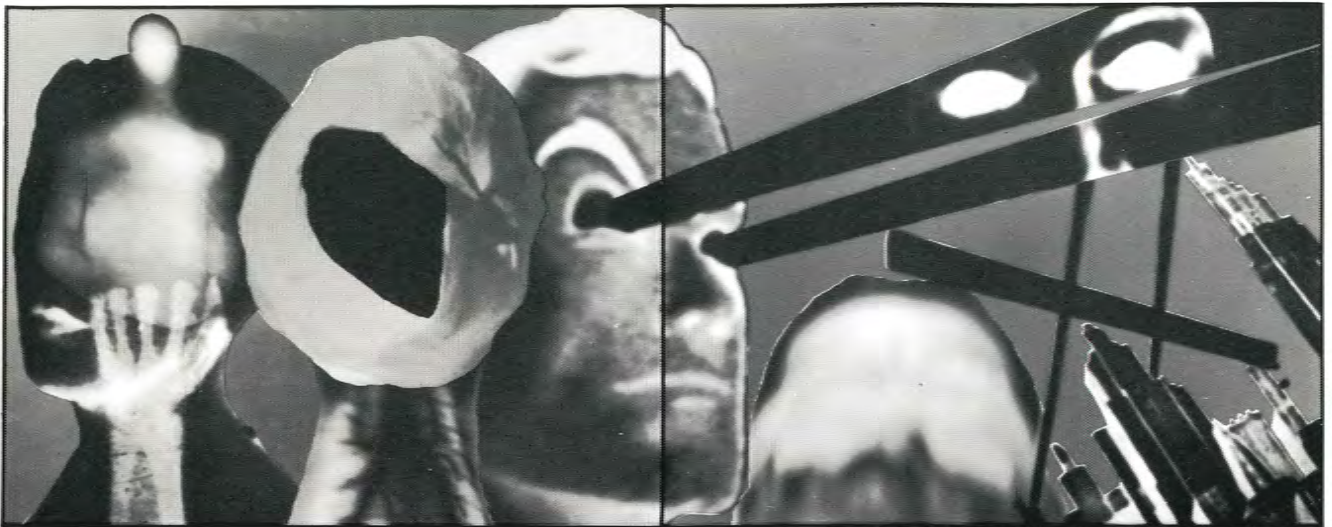
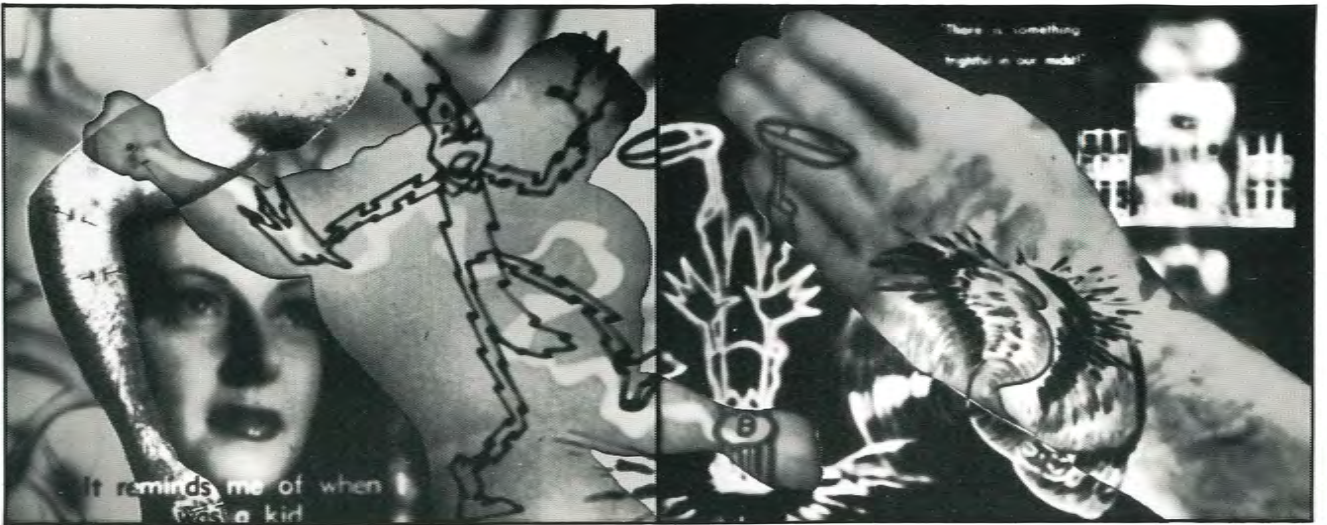
David Rasmus, pp. 24-27.

Alan Carrier, pp. 34 bottom, 35 bottom.

Robin Collyer, p. 39.

S U B J E C T S P I C T U R E S

For this exhibition, “subjects in pictures” is to be taken doubly. There are subjects *of* pictures and subjects *in* pictures. On the one hand, by “subject” I mean the general content or “meaning” of the picture. And by picture I mean an enclosed representation, whether framed in the medium of painting, photography or drawing. On the other hand, by “subject” I also mean an individual. The depiction of a man or woman in a picture is more than figuration, because that figure is represented in subjecthood, as an “individual.” The picture is a means of depicting subjects as content and representing subjects as individuals: in short, subject-matter and subjecthood.



Shelagh Alexander

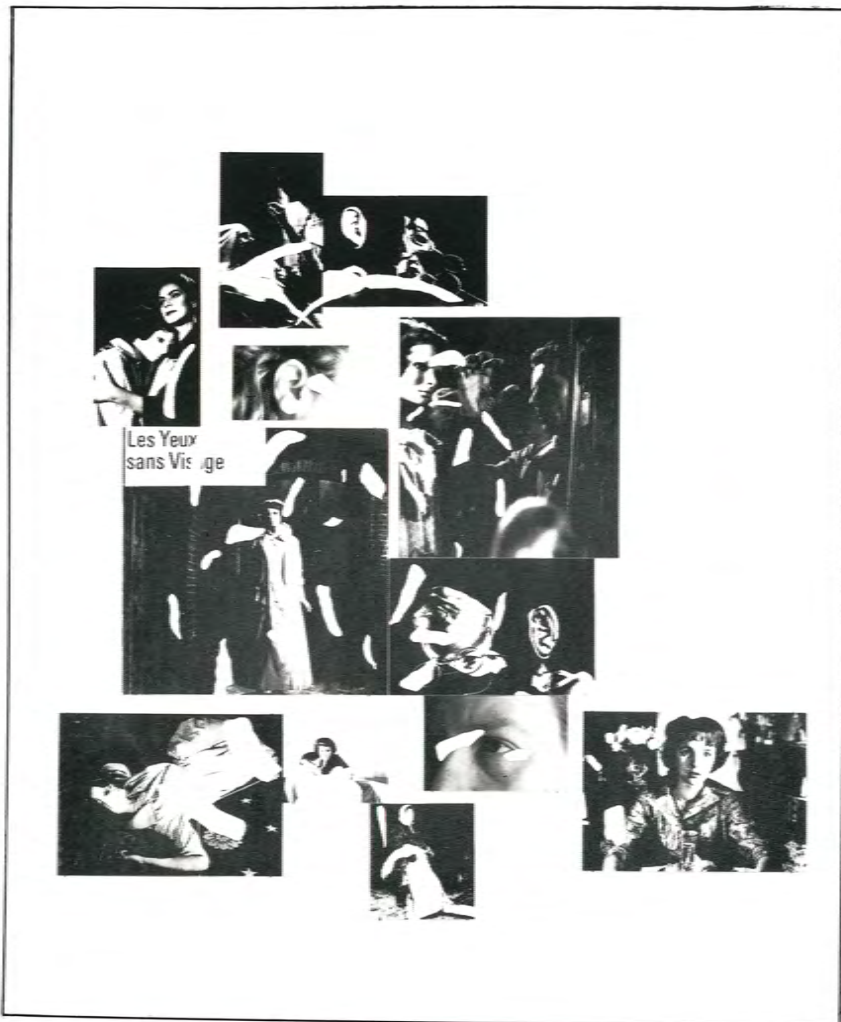
Loonytoon, 1984

We see nothing and tremble., 1984

compilation photographs, 106.6 x 243.8 cm each

The definition of the political “subject” as a free agent also lends itself to one who is *subjected*. By now we are aware that the image plays a part in this subjection. In subjecting the viewer to its look and construction, the image helps constitute a subject. That construction occurs as an ideological process, more in the unconscious than through consciousness. The individual is not fully and freely given as a subject of consciousness, an identity that one can possess. Nor is the image just the source and ground for its subjective counterpart in aesthetic reception. Picture and subjecthood are constituted and instituted: they are both constructed in representation. (The image here is more than its appearance in depiction. “Image” is really a shorthand for the expression “social relations of the image,” the social relations implied in what is depicted as well as the social relations that institute and disseminate that image. The image is placed here for our reception by an institution that greatly determines its interpretation.)

That the image can lead to subjection does not lend countervalue to subjectivity — that process of the fragmented ego’s “interior” consumption which pretends to escape the dominance of the media or the alienations of consumption and labour. For the purposes of this essay, subjectivity is accepted as a social construction.



Janice Gurney

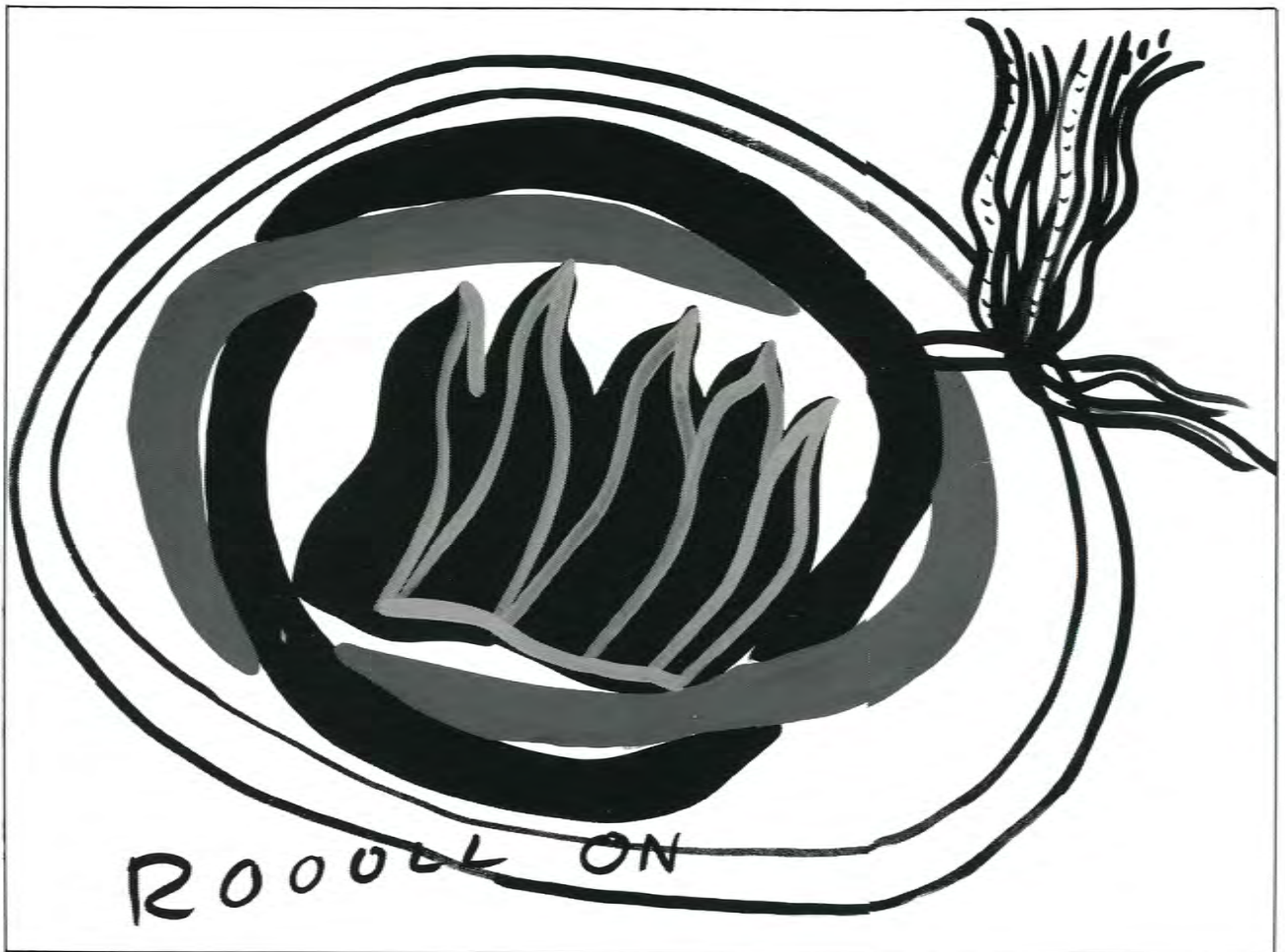
Eyes Without a Face, 1984

photo-stats, photographs, plexiglass and paint, 213 x 533.4 cm

The subject, like meaning, is never stable. The subject of women and woman as subject enter as a double disturbance in artistic practice and discourse. In this exhibition of six women artists, the work is conscious of, if it does not pursue it as a direct theme, the subjection of women in representation. But it is also much more, for the work takes itself as a site for the construction of subjectivity in general and for the questioning of identity.

Within representation, women's position can be contradictory. In the case of artists, women are mastering subjects; but as women they are traditionally mastered subjects. Therefore the artist is a mastering/mastered subject. The ultimate mastery that the dialectic of master and mastered implies, however, is denied by social reality, since it is not a movement of sublimation or overcoming but an impossible inhabitation of both positions at once. Moreover the contradiction is further complicated in art since the dialectic occurs within the look.

The work by these artists situates subjectivity in and as an order of representation. At one time or another they have variously addressed issues of representation, subjecthood and women's (and men's) position in the ideological presentations of mass media — advertising, film, television, the means by which viewers are situated and subjected to the image. We are subjected to the image, a "reality" that has the power to constitute our very selves. Whether all the works are as direct as this, all depict one form of the subjective moment, the conditions for the constitution of the subject — and its undoing. As such, they do not stand critically outside these images or inhabit their codes in appropriation. But they are critical in contributing to a non-subjective theory of subjectivity.



Nancy Johnson
Sketch for *Sustained Passion*, 1984
gouache on paper

Now is the time and turn of the image. The construction of the subject in subjectivity takes place through the image, *takes place* in the sense that the viewer is positioned in place socially by the image. If the subject is constituted primarily through language in the symbolic order, his or her identity is reinforced through the image, an image, however, that always carries a subtext with its look. But if as a subject one is the product of an image, a *process* has occurred. The works by these artists register and display the effects of the image, the process by which one is made into a product, or in other words a subject. The turning of an individual into a subject is an active and continual temporal process by which a static structure is instituted and social relations are maintained.

This process has its objective and subjective moments, or rather an objective structure and a subjective process. Or we could term the two: structural relations and subjective distortions. The works by the artists divide along these “objective” and “subjective” lines. (Objective and subjective are not to be opposed as absolutes in their conventional or idealist senses.) Janice Gurney and Joanne Tod rest on the side of the objective (the objective within representation, that is); Shelagh Alexander, Sandra Meigs and Shirley Wiitasalo “err” on the side of the subjective. And Nancy Johnson seems to occupy a middle ground between the two.



Sandra Meigs

The Night Tree, 1984

acrylic and modelling paste on canvas, 61 x 66 cm each

The paintings or constructions by Janice Gurney and Joanne Tod set up objective relations of power within the work as references to power relations outside it, but also as paradigms for relations between image and viewer. It is because of this structuring that their work also makes a critical intervention in practice and viewing. A work cannot be critical that does not account for its attraction or for its own apparatus of power. Just as work cannot be critical that does not account for its own complicity in commodity exchange through the production and dissemination of images. The commodity form is implicated in the look. The look invests in the image of depiction, but also in the “look” and image of the work itself — its form of appearance, which is its commodity status. Since this particular object (the artwork) carries all these investments, the structure of the look is also the site of a potential critique. The critique maintains itself within the same structure as the look, as a critique of the pleasure or dominance of the look, its investment in and as ideological figures. Gurney and Tod come at this from two different directions, within the structure or appearance of the work itself.

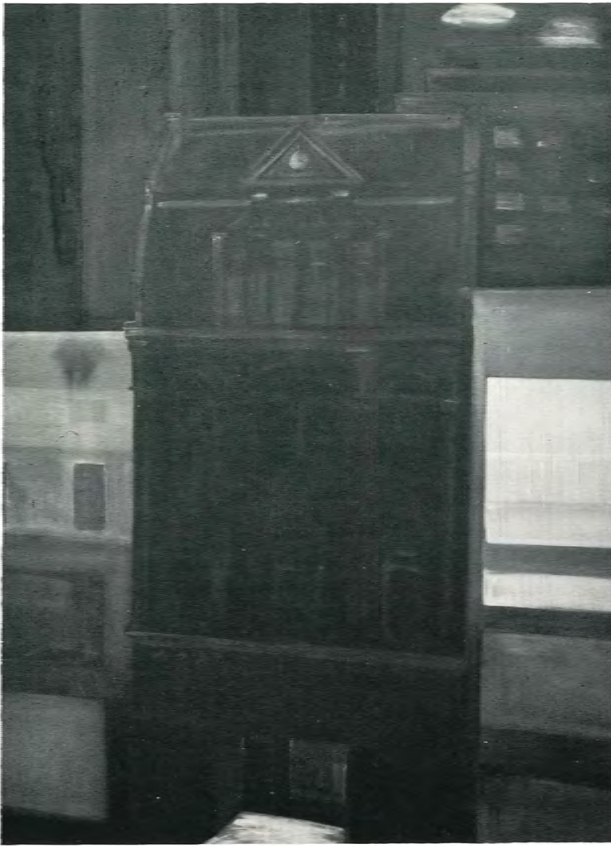


Joanne Tod

Second in Command/First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1984
oil on canvas, 137.2 x 152.4 cm each



The position of the artist as master of the image, but also one mastered by images outside her control, blurs the distinction between inside and outside that Shelagh Alexander, Sandra Meigs and Shirley Wiitasalo take up. That is, the objective structures of Gurney's and Tod's work set up the conditions for a subjective (ideological) process to take place. In their own case, that objectivity is shaken by the contradictory positions of the artist that have been described here. In the works by Alexander, Meigs and Wiitasalo we witness the image transformed, or we see an interior transformation that is *signified* by this image. The image is a signifier for that process taking or having taken place. We are not given an image that can be taken as objectively constituted in the mass media or that can be received as its subjective impression. It is neither appropriative nor expressive. The process of ideological transformation is more than implied: its dynamic process is taken over, distorted, exaggerated, ending often in catastrophe.



Shirley Wiitasalo
Cashstop/White House, 1984
oil on canvas, 122 x 167.6 cm each

This image of catastrophe marks a limit, a structural and social limit we could say, that could be posed by the first group of work, but not enacted. The catastrophe signifies a displaced action. But that action is more critique than compensation. Rather than create emblems of failed social intervention, powerlessness or nihilistic allegories of melancholy, representation becomes a site of activity, not of regressive character identifications, but of the aggressive struggle of representations against representation.

The middle term between these two types is found in Nancy Johnson's drawings. This work starts with the interiorization of the look, and ends in a look that is self-directed, but that directs itself to and from an image. Having said that there are two types to which a third is added does not point to an opposition or to a resolution in the third term. Each occupies a different position in a process.

The artists share a place (Toronto), a situation and a practice. But they share more than the abstracted structures and processes outlined above. Their mutual concerns are realized within the processes of content and the temporality of looking. And those have their site and source, positively and negatively, in the image.



SHELAGH ALEXANDER

That subjectivity is a process of construction reinforced at every moment can perhaps best be shown in a narrative. There, images and relations recur in a temporal structure. Subjectivity's appearance in and through the narrative is brought about by a process of construction and viewing that is similar to the construction of the subject or the capturing of the individual in ideology. Since the subject is already constituted by language, the image functions continually to reinforce it. That image of course is the received image, whether at its point of origin or reception. And the narrative composes itself by playing these images in line.

Shelagh Alexander's photographic work situates itself at the junction of the image and narrative and pursues two processes. On the one hand it elaborates a process whereby the subject is carried through and positioned in a structure of received images. On the other hand it deconstructs these images in a reconstruction of space. Her last three series of compilation photographs follow the subject through different narrative strategies. Text, the structure of the narrative, and image are in different ratios to each other in these series. The turn from language to image is effected from *Hero* (1982) to *Untitled* (1983), while the narrative series dissolve into a more singular construction of images from the 1983 work to *The Somnambulist* (1984).

In *Hero*, a three part circular fable, the narrative conducts the images as the images carry the text, the former generalized referents to the latter, contemporary images to a traditional fable. In the six sets of panels of *Untitled*, the images create the narrative where the text has been reduced solely to ironic counterpoint. Chronology rather than text supports the narrative structure. In the six panels of *The Somnambulist*, the representation is contained within a single frame; but a narrative is not completely absent. Narrative's "original" construction is condensed to a structure of received gestures. The images are decontextualized as their gestures and recontextualized as ideological figurations. Narrative seems to have disappeared as a format, but not without its effects still being present: the images signal its codes within the nuclei of their gestures. That is, the image as a repeatable and therefore ideological gesture or signal carries the narrative already encoded in its representational *relations*. Its effects are intensified by repetition, superimposition and condensation, a process by which gestures align along the line of a look.

Given the source of these images in movie stills (and the earlier series in film, family snapshots and wireservice photographs), narrative ghosts through any image. Yet the process of construction of these compilation photographs is not merely the coordination of image and text or image to a narrative chain. The format has to work within the *space* of compilation photography. Compilation photography is a printing process by which different negatives can be printed on the same sheet of photographic paper through a system of stencils. This is not the cut and paste of collage or surrealist juxtaposition. The technique produces a consistent photographic surface, and even if text enters, it is treated to the same photographic process. A unique space is created — seamless yet disruptive, and that is a space of intervention. The results of this method match the atemporality of ideology: time and history are condensed in this space. But since this space is a construction, time re-enters in a narrative reconstruction by the viewer, an act which shows the images to be historically grounded as social fabrications.



Hero, Parts 1 - 3, 1982
 compilation photographs, 76.2 x 101.6 cm
 each

This work then is both a construction of new imagery and a critical deconstruction of received imagery at the same time. But it is the active intervention of technique into the space of the traditionally received photographic image that poses this work critically to mass media and film. The montage method (the juxtaposition of photographs and film stills, or film stills alone) allows a range of intervention into a reality mediated by the photographic image.

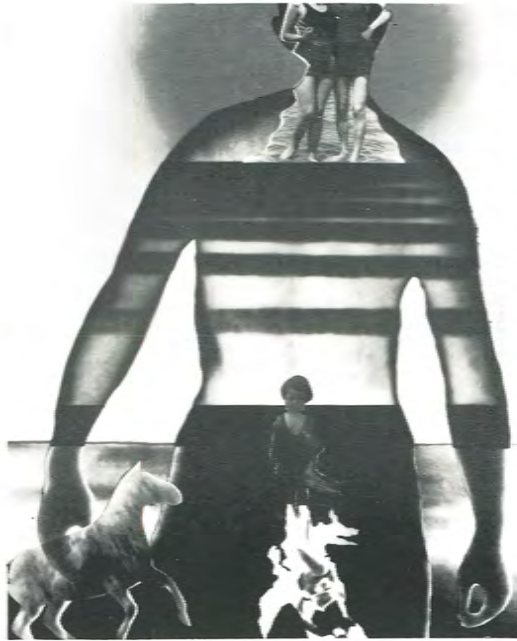
In the untitled exhibition of 1983, Shelagh Alexander montaged two orders of photographic “reality” — the family snapshot and the Hollywood movie still, both of which partake of the imaginary and the symbolic, to adopt Lacan’s schema of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. One is implicated in the other, the actual within the imaginary: the subject within the family snapshot is implicated and interpellated by the images of the Hollywood film. Thus the panels, which charted gender construction and sexual positioning through the periods of childhood and late adolescence in the two parts of the exhibition, showed this subject’s and subjectivity’s formation and sexual positioning in sociality and representation. And it sustained that process through the work’s own construction mimicking the devices of film. The temporality of this construction of the subject, which still positions one in a static structure, unfolds in the mythic exaggerations of Hollywood movies aligned to paternal authority. The narrative unfolds as the subject is folded up. As feminist film theoreticians have shown, film is a crucial place for the construction of women in the male gaze (the gaze of the cinematic apparatus enfolded in a dominant scopic ideology). This work by Shelagh Alexander, combining the archives of the personal in the form of family snapshots with the mythic, dominating archetypes of popular culture, is not a critique from without, but a complex registering within, where family and film merge in the authority of their images. Invested between the poles of family and film, its sites are the distortions of the imaginary.

If *Untitled* left a gap between desire and dominance in a patriarchal structure through which a utopian impulse might emerge — witness the symbolic overturning of the phallic giant in the last panel — *The Somnambulist* series seems to close it. Once again the change is signalled in the construction of the work. From one series to the next the spatial scene has disappeared in the image itself: now the images foreground themselves. In this disappearance the critique and gap dissolve; and real images are treated as unreal in their accumulation and exacerbation.

Of course the images are only real in that they were collected from an historically specific period — the films of the forties. Within that domain, reproduced here in *The Somnambulist*, cartoon and melodrama mingle. And history becomes the milieu in which the sleepwalker is absent in her presence.

The power of sight is represented here, a power and authority that is also the damage of sight. This is no dialectic of blindness and insight, but an opposition between power and lack of power. The power of the look is a look that cannot see itself: it is blind to the damage of its sight. Outside communication, what men and women share in that look is its blindness — those who are blind in its power and those who are “blinded” by it. Men and women share in its madness to different degrees.

What is played out over time in the structure of the narrative, reinforcing the social construction of the look, is now spread out synchronically over the surface of the image. Gestures are repeated across a system of representation that comprises cinema, a typology that leads the viewer to a genealogy of representation in society. The power and pathos of the image in *The Somnambulist* series is really a pathology of the image



Untitled, Part 1, 1983
compilation photographs
101.6 x 127 cm
each



Untitled, Part 2, 1983
compilation photographs
101.6 x 127 cm
each

For a number of years Janice Gurney has been patiently exploring a complex nexus of inheritances from the past — history, biology and tradition. She situates herself doubly to the images she receives, re-presents and represents, those that come to her as a social (socialized) individual and those that come to her as an artist. It is this double inflection that allows her work to question identity and power relations in history but also in the very situation and practice of the artist. As an artist she is maintained by tradition with the power of that position, the power of depiction. But as a subject she finds herself situated in a chain of representations throughout history, a position outside power, namely the representation of women. Some of these positions are personally inherited, others are structurally and socially imposed.

These positions follow two lines of descent, and Janice Gurney's work accordingly splits into a "matrilineal" and "patrilineal" series, each implicated in a different history. *Portrait of Me as My Grandmother's Faults* (1982) and *Interpenetration of Myself and Vida* (1982) align to the "matrilineal" in construction, while *Cloud Study* (1983) following on *The Battle of the Somme* (1980) align to the "patrilineal." Both series start from a representation by or of another, whether that representation or depiction is anonymous or personal. In the case of *Portrait of Me as My Grandmother's Faults*, the work starts from a tintype of the artist's maternal grandmother as a child; in *Interpenetration of Myself and Vida*, the ensemble starts from an amateur self portrait by a relative of the artist. Personal history (biology and class) and photographic and "artistic" representations serve as the basis for a construction in art.

The "patrilineal" work starts from the embodiment of another in history: the photograph of a grandfather as convalescing World War I soldier in *Cloud Study*; the naive battle scene paintings by a great uncle in *The Battle of the Somme*. Although this is a personal history of genealogy for the artist, this is a history of men's making from which women are absent. The reconstruction in representation here, unlike the construction in representation of the first series, leads to what the artist calls "reparation." Representation becomes a reparative intervention.

What unites these series beyond genealogy is a practice on the part of the artist. This is not only an artist who situates herself by these two series, this is a practising artist. In the line of work that comes out of the "matrilineal" descent, three relations are compounded in the making: image, material construction and history. In a way the white marks, traces, fossilized gestures could be taken as "standing for" these relations — and thus are a shorthand for the construction of the work. These are the constitutive gestures of Gurney's work, equivalent to the material construction of an image and identity. They trace marks that were there before, obscure them, and then serve as genetic templates over other images. They are a re-marking of what is proper to the artist in history and practice, predetermined by a previous image, constitutive of a new one. Given the reconstruction from destruction of the "patrilineal" series, the marks there assume a double gesture of an "attack and reparation."

The historical relation comprises the personal association of the artist Janice Gurney to the given image, but also the impersonal relation of the construction of representation of that image to the artist as subject. Identification and distancing take place then within a practice and in regard to the subject of the image. The use of one's own biological and cultural inheritance (for instance, the

double indication of the painted reproduction of an original tintype of the artist's grandmother) along with images by others (which include the tintype, the nineteenth century studio photograph and the nude depiction of the artist by another's hand) couples the power and authority of making, marking and depicting with a power and authority over others — those depicted. It is only by inserting herself doubly — by *representing herself* in the image of the child and further in identification with primitives and famine victims as both subjects and objects of representation, and by *placing herself* in the position of the photographer as the artist here — that representation can be beheld and used in its complexity, positively and negatively.

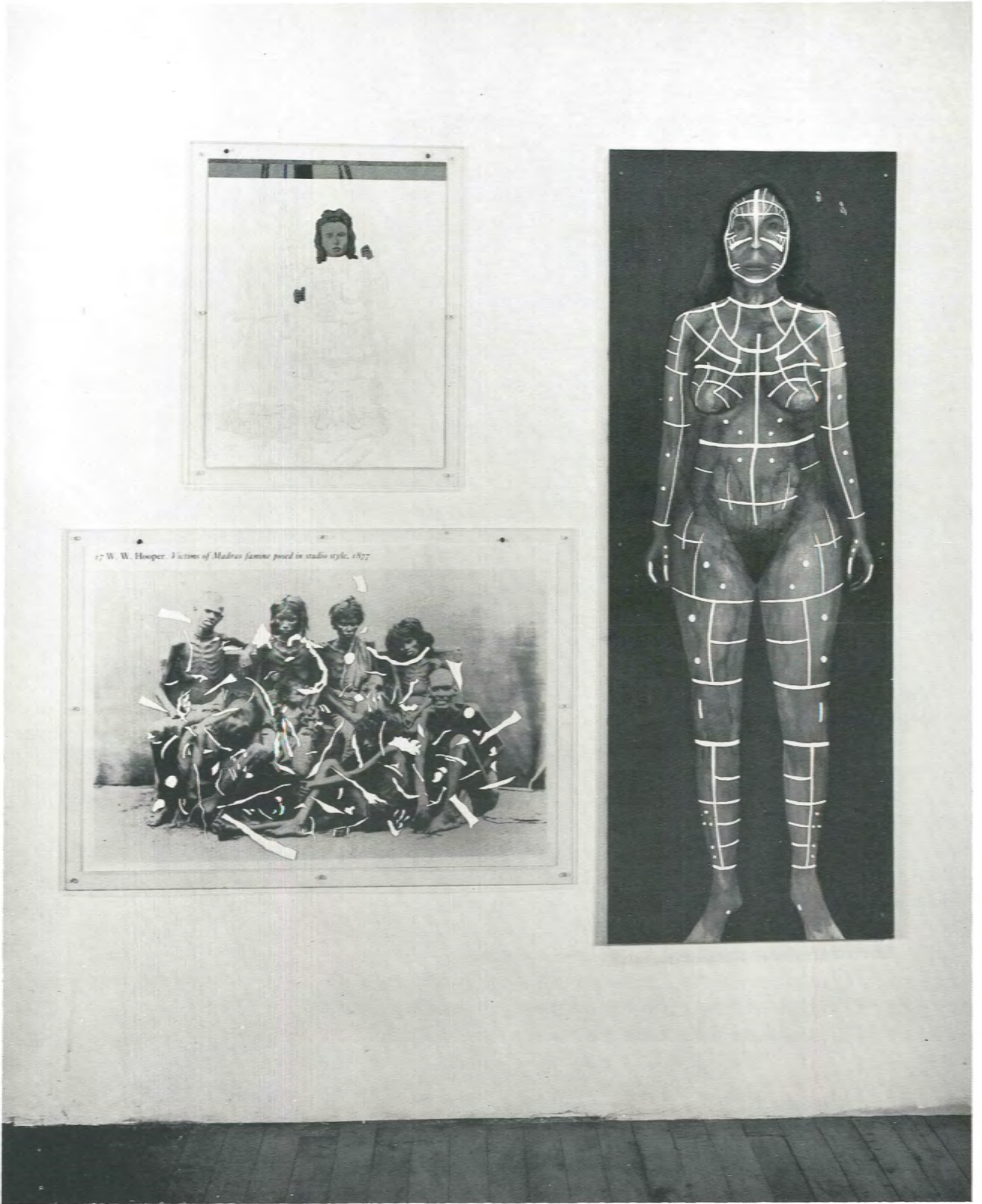
The inseparability of practice and representation leads to fragmentation all the same. Fragmentation is a condition of representation here, of appropriate distance in appropriating images by and of others. These are set in representational practices but not unified by the necessary mediation of the artist. Fragmentation runs through all Gurney's work, which itself lacks consistent style and medium, but this division takes different forms in the two series. In the "matrilineal" series, we find an overlaying and telescoping that reproduces structural positions: consider *Portrait of Me as My Grandmother's Faults*. Or we find a conflation of identity from two sources: a retracing of identity from another's representation as in *Interpenetration of Myself and Vida* in which the artist's self portrait aligns itself to the predetermined Vida self portrait. In the "patrilineal" series, "missing" or damaged elements are filled in as in *The Battle of the Somme*, or reparative gestures are made as in *Cloud Study*. The works are pieced together, constructed from an absence in the first, reconstructed from a destruction in the second.

The process of identification of one series and the reparation of the other come together in *Eyes Without a Face* (1984). In this installation of photo-stats, the fictional and documentary sources both concern the reconstruction of an identity damaged through a traumatic loss. The stills depict scenes from the Franju horror film *Les Yeux sans visage* (1959); the documentary photographs record a doctor's attempt to accustom World War I veterans to their facial disfigurement through the intermediary of a temporary painted plaster mask. This is a purely external remedy. Since the face is damaged in both instances, the difficulty of identity is registered in the look as a locus of interaction and separation.

The symmetry of the reconstructed faces is contradicted by the installation's fragmentation, which registers the divisions within the individual. The artist enters into identity with this fragmentation but as a difference: the colour photographs detailing the eye and ear of the artist corresponding and contrasting to the black and white stats of the plaster casts of eyes and ears. The eyes and ears indicate the fragmentation of the senses, as well as identity, but perhaps also mark a division between looking and understanding. Another identity is superimposed from a past construction. The white marks painted over plexiglass, transcribed from *The Anti-Graceful* portrait of the *Interpenetration of Myself and Vida* series, assume the function of the white plaster casts within the photographs. Once again, however, this reparative gesture is an identity in fragmentation, and does not indicate a desire for a lost unity. Rather, understanding is achieved through maintaining that division within the look.



Reparations installation, 1984
Untitled, The Battle of the Somme, 1980
Untitled, The Battle of the Somme, 1980
 acrylic on canvas, 167.6 x 548.6 cm
Interpenetration of Myself and Vida, 1982
The Anti-Graceful, 1982



Portrait of Me as My Grandmother's Faults,
1982, mixed media, 168 x 178 cm



Dominion Day, 1916, at Oldrail Military Hospital, Aberdeen



Cloud Study, 1983
mixed media, 183 x 239 cm

NANCY JOHNSON

The graphic notations of Nancy Johnson's gouaches sketch out the relations that issue in the look. This look has a history, and is pursued through the development of Johnson's work. This look facilitates the transfer of a secure identity maintained in a proximate physicality to a problematic identity established at a distance. In this latter, identity is held in an image or the look of another. If this identity is established as a separation in the history of each individual, the direction of Johnson's work has been to probe its ambiguities and seek a resolution on the levels of content, process and image.

It is language rather than the image that institutes that separation in the symbolic order. Language sets up the subject-object relation through its predicative capacity and its own inauguration. But it recruits the image to a special role. If language also enters Johnson's drawings, and if a psychoanalytical theory underlies the notions of identity and loss there, these drawings, all the same, are not diagrams. Drawing tries to overcome that separation through the pleasure of making and the pleasure of viewing, and in the mix of image and calligraphic text. Notably at times, as in some of the drawings of the *On Sensuality* series, this text is phonic. As in *Alive I* and *II*, its articulation signifies either the pleasure of repetition or an anxious cry at the threat of this cut of separation.

The "other" plays a role in this moment of separation. Recognition of the other is intertwined with a recognition by the Other. Recognition by the Other is a construction of identity in the look, the *View from Another* of the *On Sensuality* series. This recognition commences a history. For the diversity of the notion of recognition and the role of the other in a personal history, we can follow this sequence of statements by the artist about her work: *Bogeyman: An Original Revolution* (1981), a series of photographically collaged elements of drawing and text is "based on one's process of recognition, in this case through the mother-daughter relationship, of an objective material world. It is about the loss of innocent egocentricity." *Animal Love and Human Sex (Tenderness)* (1982), a series of small oil paintings, is "based on aspects of the physical relationship, the dichotomies between body and mind, the physical and emotional self, and the nature of connections with others." *It's a Wonderful Cause* (1982), a series of gouache drawings, is "based on the allure and security over truth." *On Sensuality* (1983), another series of gouaches, like the earlier work "concerns itself with the tangible difficulties of recognition and action, both private and public. The present work [*On Sensuality*] describes aspects of the physical self, alone and in relation with others, its chains and privileges."

This history springs from the initiating moment of recognition and develops when that basic structure repeats itself by taking different "objects" as its subjects. The alienating knowledge of material objectivity is at the same time a recognition of self, a realization of identity founded in one's own body (e.g. *Bogeyman*, *On Sensuality*). This recognition, sometimes disguised as a threat (*Bogeyman*), is a loss — a separation from the mother in the mirror and castration phases. Even when faced with that alienating



Alive I, 1983
Alive II, 1983
gouache on paper, 45.7 x 60.9 cm each

material reality, one still retains that “knowledge” as desire for the body, the mother’s body.

Recognition is a knowledge of relation that stems from separation. For a contrast, consider *A Confusion of I and Not I*. We pass from the relation to another — the sensual relation to the mother (*Alive I*), but also the sexual relation (*A Deployment of Alliances*) — to a relation to an outside that is initiated by a primary separation. This initiation models the relations of predication, of subject and object, of individual and society. The detachment of the ego is sublimated to partake in knowledge: of material reality; of truth (e.g. *It’s a Wonderful Cause*); of right action. Not only ontological, its aims are epistemological and ethical.

Following from the mature alliance of, for instance, *A Deployment of Alliances*, *Allies* (1984) no longer concerns the construction of the identity of the self through the agency of another. Now for the viewer, the identity of another, or of an action, is at issue and in question. That identity is not secure: it requires interpretation. Part of its insecurity lies in the fact that the interpretation is realized on the level of the image: it is derived solely from an image, or an identity is put in question by the image. Interpretative knowledge, which assumes the form of an action or ethical decision, attempts to take place through the image, in looking.

The two parts of *Allies* have similar structures. On the surface, a narrative account is carried by images and abbreviated statements from the full text that follows below each panel. Immediately we are confronted with the discrepancies of these two orders and the slight differences between the two forms of statements. But there is a deeper structure within the account that corresponds to moments that were emblematically represented in single panels of the earlier work.

For instance, the five sets of panels of Part II repeat the tripartite construction that represents separation. There is first a personal relation, in this case of a daughter to the father, who also serves as the authoritarian Other for another “audience.” Then there is the double disturbance of that “innocent” and “natural” relation in the death of the father, but also in the awareness of the daughter of the absolute opposite image of evil the father was in the eyes of others. That conflict composes the ambiguity of the piece that the subject ethically wishes to settle, which is the third moment of this process.

In Part II, the subject’s assurance is interrupted by another image that is held in the sight of others. On the contrary, Part I starts from an image and ends in engagement. But the three part construction is similar. It starts in Panel 1 with seeing an image on television: “I saw a man with my own eyes carrying a bleeding girl,” which turns into a representation in Panel 2: “She began to represent specific feelings to me.” This representation becomes directly connected in an *act* of reference by the pointing of the third panel: “She has become a tiny human face in the midst of a violent faceless world. Her face...”. The break occurs with the change to the contemplative mode of Panel 4: “It’s not that you deserve to live more than any others.” But a decision is made in Panel 5: “I would run to rescue you.” And a judgement is made in Panels 6 and 7 on the function of these images and the role that the image of the other plays. Yet that knowledge returns us to the structure of the earlier work: the alliance with another is predicated on the estrangement of yet another.



A Confusion of I and Not I, 1983
View From Another, 1983
A Deployment of Alliances, 1983
 gouache on paper, 45.7 x 60.9 cm each



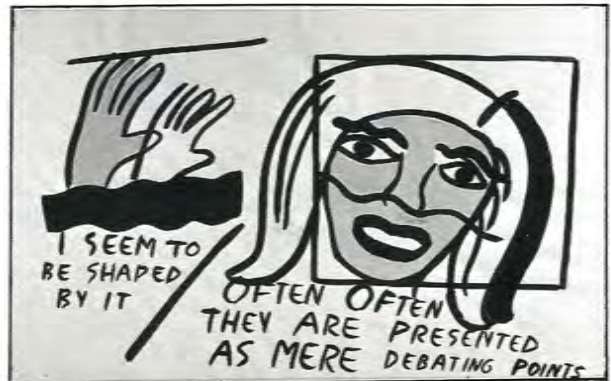
I SAW ON TV A YOUNG MAN CARRYING A BLEEDING SCHOOL GIRL. SHE WAS FROM THE VILLAGE OF MAALOT, ISRAEL, AND HER SCHOOL HAD JUST BEEN BOMBED. I SAW HER ERRATIC GESTURES, HER FEEBLE GROPINGS, AND THE LOOK OF INCOMPREHENSION ON HER FACE. IT WAS A FACE FILLED WITH PAIN AND AGONY.



THIS SCHOOL GIRL BEGAN TO REPRESENT A SPECIFIC FEELING TO ME. WHEN I THOUGHT OF A CERTAIN KIND OF PAIN AND AGONY, IT WAS THE PAIN AND AGONY ON THIS GIRL'S FACE. HER PAIN WAS THE PAIN I HAD WITNESSED, AND I WAS STIRRED. I STILL GET A GREATER STIRRING REMEMBERING THIS PAIN THAN FOR ANY OTHER UNWITNESSED PAIN.



IF IT HAD BEEN YOUR SCHOOL THAT HAD BEEN BOMBED, I WOULD HAVE RUN TO RESCUE A BLEEDING YOU. I WOULD RESCUE THAT GIRL BECAUSE I WITNESSED HER PAIN. I WOULD RESCUE YOU BECAUSE I KNOW YOU. NEITHER ONE OF YOU DESERVE TO DIE. BUT NEITHER DO YOU DESERVE TO LIVE MORE THAN ANY OTHERS.



THERE ARE MANY SITUATIONS THAT INVOLVE PERSECUTION AND THE LOSS OF LIVES. THERE ARE SITUATIONS THAT LEAVE OBVIOUS VICTIMS, WHERE THE VICTIMS ARE MERE DEBATING POINTS. THEY ACT AS ITEMS IN A DEBATE ABOUT POLITICAL AMBITION, OR HISTORICAL JUSTIFICATION OR COMMERCIAL GAIN.



THIS GIRL HAS BECOME A TINY HUMAN FACE IN THE MIDST OF A WORLD OF FACELESS VIOLENCE. THE MEMORY OF HER FACE ALMOST OVERWHELMED ANY OTHER DETAILS. IT ALMOST OVERWHELMED HISTORY.



I CARRY MANY IMAGES OF YOU TODAY IN MY MEMORY WITH GREAT CLARITY. I HAVE KNOWN YOU FOR SOME TIME NOW, AND I BELIEVE I AM FAMILIAR WITH YOU. MY SENSE OF WHO YOU ARE LEADS TO A CONTINUALLY RISING SENSE OF ALIGNMENT WITH YOU.



I AM GREATLY AFFECTED, EVEN SHAPED BY WHAT I WITNESS. MY FAMILIARITY WITH THIS FACE OR THAT CIRCUMSTANCE TAKES SIDES. THE UNVIEWED FACES SUFFER QUIETLY THEY EVOKE NO SPECIFIC FEELINGS. THEY BECOME THAT OF A VAGUE OTHER AND BY THIS ESTRANGEMENT, THEY BECOME THE ENEMY; THE UNFAMILIAR FACE OF THE ONE TO BLAME.

Allies, Part 1, 1984
gouache on paper, 56 x 86 cm each

SANDRA MEIGS

Sandra Meigs' installations are dramas in which actions are focused even though the whole subject may be dissolute or obsessive. They are false scenes, multi-media "operas" in which pseudo-melodramas of solitude are enacted: the madness of *The Maelstrom*; the limbo of *Purgatorio, a Drinkingbout*; the amnesia and confusions of *Semi Wind-up Bout*; the adolescent obsessions of *The Scabpicker*.

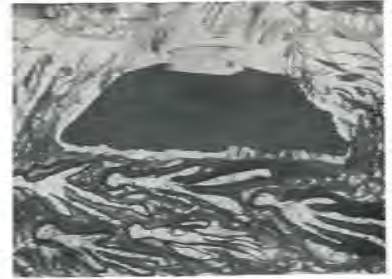
These dramas are played out in the space and time of installation, and its moments and actions are recorded in the different media of watercolour (or gouache) and film (and audio tapes). Film and watercolour expand and contract moments, focusing and dissolving the scenes in gestures and actions. But just as the whole is a false construction (the mock theatrical effect of the sets, the falsity of the scenic painting), the gestures do not add up to a totality of signification: the gestures dissect the scenes, but they do not necessarily flow from one to another. (The watercolours are studies for the films: details, closeups, medium shots, etc.; but they exist on their own as well, in all their "naivety," as separate records of gestures and "events.")

While these installations and scenes register interior "dramas," those moments are held in proximity to the body as the circle of its solitude. The circle of light of the film screen and watercolours of *The Maelstrom*, for instance, establish that space.

The Maelstrom (1980) initiates the theme of action and indifference that continues in later works, notably *Purgatorio, a Drinkingbout* (1981) and *Semi Wind-up Bout* (1982). To a lesser degree than in these others, that theme in *The Maelstrom* is hidden within another drama — a psycho-drama of language and things, a narrative of who and what comes to speech and disappears.

The installation consists of twenty watercolours and an approximately twenty-five minute super-8 colour film with inter-titles. In front of the film screen, a large wooden table rises and falls with a threatening clunk every minute throughout the film. A similar table appears in the watercolours where certain elements recur to structure a narrative: a chair at the end of a dock, a desk washed in light from a lamp, the glowing interior of a cottage. Through the narrative they transform into one another in a whirlwind of disaster, passed by ghost-like, floating figures, ending with the table as a malevolent force attacking and crushing human figures.

The chair, desk and interior of the cottage are positions for the body: they are objects but also determinants of behaviour. While none of the watercolour scenes appear in the film in their actuality, an equivalent state of consciousness is indicated in the inter-titles. They are speech to an absent body that corresponds to the



situations and spaces of the watercolours. The relation of body and speech to language and things breaks down. This separation is felt as a dizzying “maelstrom,” as words are pulled away from their objects and return in their materiality to the body. The narrative of the film moves inexorably from alienation from social conventions, from objects and nature and eventually turns to the confinements and restraints of the body, its “paralysis and nausea.”

The maelstrom is more than a metaphor for a threat of madness to consciousness and identity, which projects a phobic image to mask a nothingness. It is a limbo of inactivity. Both observer and observed are disconnected: the latter unconsciously performing rituals in the midst of activity, the former alienated from action through consciousness.

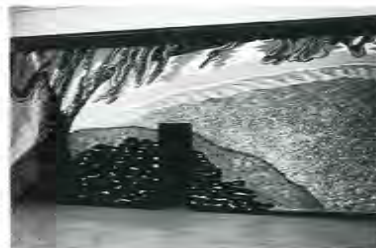
The settings of the installations are ritualized in the sense of behaviour being socialized. All the installations following on *The Maelstrom* are social scenes, individuals in society, private circles of light in a “maelstrom”: the bar of *Purgatorio, a Drinkingbout*; the spotlit ring of *Semi Wind-up Bout*. *The Scabpicker* reverses this in a move from light to darkness, but still the motion takes place from a public performance (the scenic painting) to a private space, the “other scene,” of the “scabpicking.”

Purgatorio, a Drinkingbout was to be a piece where the inertia and impotence of indifference could be broken: “Within the self and its surroundings, I saw a relationship between the will to act and the paralysis of that will, all operating within a state of indifference. This indifference was both the cause and effect of the state of paralysis. I saw Purgatory as a place where it would be possible to break out of that circle.”

The country-western song “Smokey the Bar,” by its nature repetitive, lends its melancholy and stock phrases to the work. The diminutive stage sets with their hints of catastrophe and melancholy match the sentimentality of the song. But the film breaks into the space and representation of the two. Screened between the stage sets, the film follows the watercolours from bar to rosegarden, where the song plays, to a questionable shooting that is the archetype of an act, back to the bar where we hear about a boxing match (which will lead to *Semi Wind-up Bout*).

The thirty-two watercolours set up vignettes for the film and establish sequences of gestures. The sequences elicited here show patterns and variations in sets and motions of hands. Or they lead to a transformation, an action that is a misunderstanding: the “Othello” sequence.

The film and watercolours were to be loci for the observation of gestures — gestures of repetition and transformation. The act, any act, was important, for instance, the shooting, because failure was consequential. The consequences of this failure is the subject of Meigs’ work: “The bar full of people was to be the scene of the individual’s purgatorial confession. But the individual’s actions had not been sinful in the religious sense. They merely existed, or had been intended. She/he did not confess for having done wrong. But rather, she/he was accounting for the uneasiness at the realization of her/his responsibility to initiate an action. The individual was to catch her/himself in the act. Any act. (A particular act was not important.) That is why gestures were featured. The gesture is the most minimal action. As a minimal, yet willed, event, the gesture contains personal signs, social signs, and worldly objective signs.”



The Scabpicker, 1984
installation



The Handkerchief from Othello (She tried to tell him)

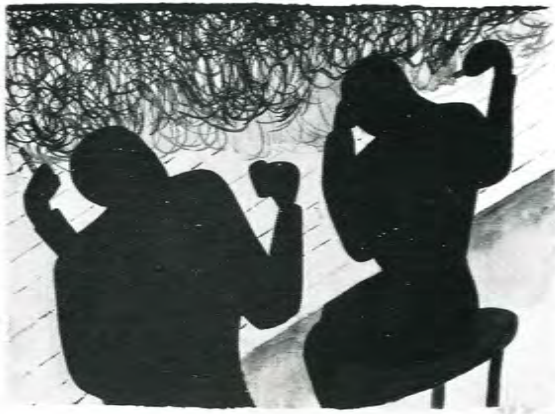
Desdemona's Handkerchief (A Fabricated Lie from Othello)

Desdemona's Handkerchief at the Bar from Othello

A Scene from Othello (The Handkerchief)

A Scene from Othello (Iago Drops Handkerchief)

1981, from *Purgatorio, a Drinkingbout*
watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm each



Series of Drinkers, Smokey the Bar
Series of Drinkers, Smokey the Bar (Getting Closer)
Red Hand
At the Bar, Before the Bout, O.K., No Kidding Bar Scene
For Purgatorio, a Drinkingbout (Kiss)
 1981, from *Purgatorio, a Drinkingbout*
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm each

JOANNE TOD



Generally there have been two types of images in Joanne Tod's paintings: images of interiors and images of women, images of objects and subjects. Both, however, can be taken as objects when they express commodity relations — the object in its own commodity form and the representation of women as “objects,” and they are thus potentially interchangeable. Representation itself can be taken as a commodity form through which women are constituted as subjects and consumed as objects.

Painting enters into this relationship. It is both image and object. Painting mediates one to the other while delivering an image to the viewer and the viewer to the image at the same time. It assumes a commodity form in the art market and it contributes to the circulation of images and thus to their commodification. All three objects then — the painting, the “objects” within the picture and representations of women — are subject to possession in a look. This look is more than just the gaze of the viewer: it is implicated in the fetishizing commodity form.

In Joanne Tod's work, “painting” also exists within the image. Paintings sometime appear in the settings of interiors and serve as signifiers, not of painting, but of “culture” in general, and that culture is one that is for purchase. Painting here is a signifier of prestige and an object of kitsch. And just as the objects within the painting's image can stand for the absence of women, so “painting” here stands for the artist. It more than self-referentially quotes the actual painting itself. Painting turns into a subject when it stands for the artist and an object when it stands in for itself.

The image then is no simple presentation, and relations do not exist only within it. Outside of its commodity status, we can determine at least three other relations in Joanne Tod's paintings: relations within the image; a relation of the artist to the painting (but also to the image); a relation of the viewer to the image (but also to the painting). These are not natural relations: the first as the objective support of vision, of objects in spatial relations; the second of the transparency of the artist to the work, the propriety of the name to the product or an artistic or authorial “vision;” the third of the immediacy and pleasure of viewing. Just as a depiction is already a social relation, these are all socially constructed positions. And we shall find that they enter into identity with one another through their status as constructions.

Initially we are presented with the reality of the scene that the relations within the image represent. Here in paintings such as *Self Portrait as Prostitute*, *Congruence* and *Johannesburg Suite*, the scenes are pared down to an almost abstract structure of objects in space. These scenes can be analyzed semiotically, the objects composing a system of signs, or sociologically, the objects indicating prestige value. In both cases they are objects/images that signify culture. Culture is displayed as an acquisition and as such is an ideological construction. It is a construction precisely because it partakes of the high and low in culture. For instance, *Congruence* (1983) combines a grand piano and a kitsch palette knife painting and reduces the ensemble to the title. *Congruence* here is far from the romantic or symbolist aesthetic of correspondence.

This structure is repeated in *Johannesburg Suite* (1983) where we find another fetishized grand piano and this time just the edge of a painting. The high/low opposition now is carried by the text written across the painting — the crude racist joke; but another opposition is alluded to: that of nature/culture in the leopard skin/piano opposition. Nature has been raised into culture through the animal skin, but even this has been culturally displaced as a commodity of exotic, singular value. That culture has been raised on nature is a distinction that supports racism, since culture has also been reduced to the “natural” in the form of the joke, a device that turns the other not only into nature but into a thing. If “congruence” is the agreement or consistency of two things, and a “suite” is a set of things that belong together, as in a suite of furniture, a retinue or a musical composition, culture and the other are reduced to the same *thing*.

As the objects and relations within the image stand for something else, they compose a system of representation. But they are also substitutes; they stand for another social construction: the image of women. As they stand to and for women, they represent and subject these individuals. They not only depict the relation of women to these things as women's practice, they depict this as a presumed "natural" role. Objects in a domestic setting stand for women's position even though the image of women may be absent. But if women are present, these figures stand in relation not only to objects but to other men and women outside the frame: offered to men as bearers of the look (and as cultural validators), and given to women as an identification to maintain social relations.

Some of these objects and images are already relations of power. For instance in *Deke Slayton Before Dinner Guests* (1982), a group of women is obscured by a direct image of power — the slide projection of a jet formation. But their gathering already implies a submissive social position. Women's fetishized adornment of class and power is also evident in *Self Portrait* (1982), where a woman, as if in a fifties fashion advertisement, steps down the portico of the Lincoln Memorial with the Washington Memorial in the background.

The artist identifies with the image and its implied social relations by labelling the painting a self portrait. Yet the painting bears no resemblance to the artist. It is only a self portrait in its ironic identification of the representation of women and the social function of painting. As a woman the artist fulfils both these roles. These contradictions are further aggravated in *Self Portrait as Prostitute* (1983). The earlier *Self Portrait* reappears in this painting, but now as decoration to a bourgeois setting. Through the same mechanisms of the first painting, the artist is presented here as a commodity prostitute ("self portrait as prostitute") as a purveyor of luxury goods to the bourgeoisie (*Self Portrait "as prostitute"*). But a further identification is established in placing the glamorous object of woman/picture in a domestic place, and thus the poles of contradiction — woman as object/woman in her domestic place, artist as woman/artist as object, i.e. the name and value of the work — align.

That one's place is a contradictory inhabitation that society cannot resolve is pursued in the image of what was excluded in *Johannesburg Suite*: the image of the "other." The diptych (1983) whose panels are separately titled *Identification* and *Defacement* shows the contradictory relations of power in both the product and practice of representation. In the two panels the same black woman poses in different wedding dresses; and across her eyes Joanne Tod's name has been printed. From what we deduced from the quasi-self portraits, this mark of power is also a token of identification. For in depicting this other, the artist depicts herself. With the double titling of the panels, neither the identification nor the defacement is simple: the whole is an identity in negation.

Identity and defacement are realized within the structure of the "other." This work reveals the logic of the "other" to be a logic of exclusion. Identity with another takes place then through an identification in what is the same (the woman moreover is reproduced twice), or rather in what is *made* the same. Even as a woman producer, the artist undergoes this reproduction.

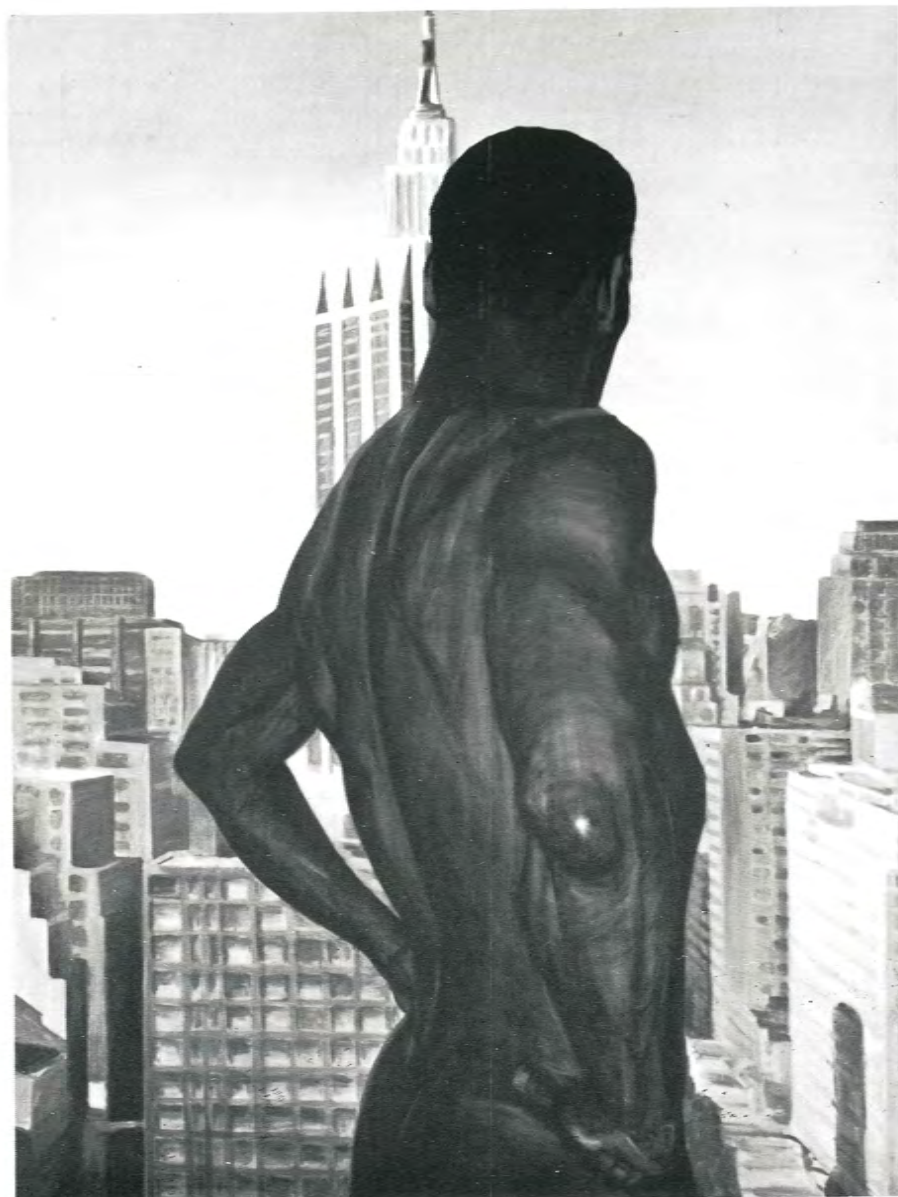


Opposite:
Congruence, 1983
 acrylic on canvas, 139.7 x 160 cm
Johannesburg Suite, 1983
 acrylic on canvas, 167.6 x 198 cm

Self Portrait, 1982
 acrylic on canvas, 140.3 x 153 cm
Deke Slayton Before Dinner Guests, 1982
 acrylic on canvas, 139.7 x 160 cm
Nemesis, 1984
 oil on canvas, 142.2 x 177.8 cm



Self Portrait as Prostitute, 1983
acrylic on canvas, 139.7 x 177.8 cm
My Father, Bob and I, 1983
oil on canvas, 127 x 142.2 cm



Identification/Defacement, 1983
acrylic on canvas,
144.8 x 86.4, 139.7 x 58.4 cm
August 14, 1984, 1984
oil on canvas, 120.6 x 162.6 cm

SHIRLEY WIITASALO

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 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,” the viewer to a content. 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 part 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, 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



Interior, 1981
Expansive Expensive, 1981
oil on canvas 152.4 x 182.9 cm each

the canvas itself: television is in the image, but the image is television itself. If *Interview* depicted the dissolution of boundaries in subjective construction, in *Interior* the dissolution has become total in the superimposition of the public on 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 the 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 the 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. Wiitala'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.

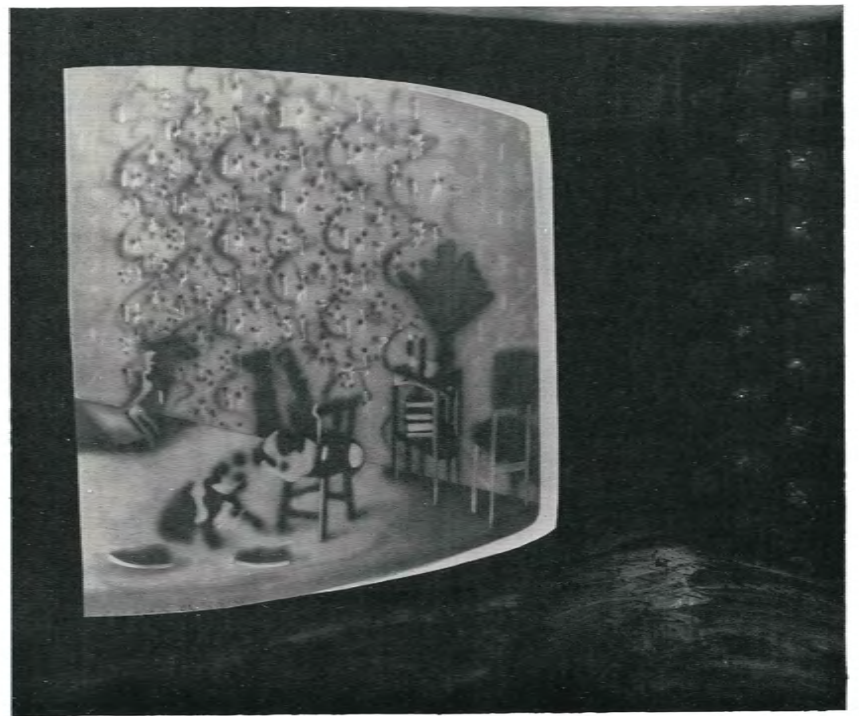
If we could characterize these paintings by their frames which mediated the inside and outside and the viewer to the interior on that analogy, another series of paintings from the same year maintain the frame with a difference. It is as if the frame itself were no longer secure: it begins to waver. Because here the frame itself is not so much a rigid container turning one in and 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.

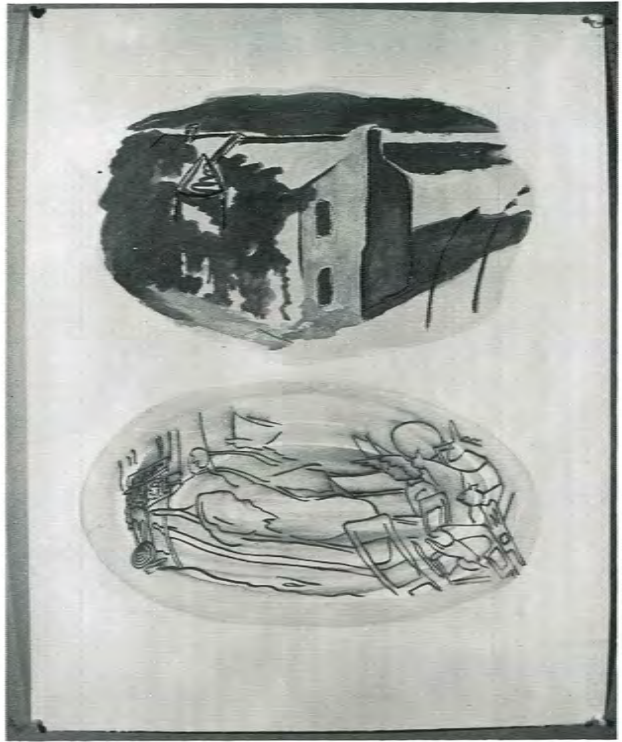
We note this in *Beautiful Garden*, *Mind Your Own Business*, *The Dream Goes On* (1981) and *Untitled* (1982). But the gouaches from 1981-82 better illustrate that the “balloon” is more than a convention; it is a sign of the process of distortion itself. That distortion should not be taken as signifying false consciousness. These are ideological *scenes*; they determine real activities and relations, even though 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 for the subject in the first paintings, there is no more in the second: there is only image.



Beautiful Garden, 1981
The Dream Goes On, 1981
Mind Your Own Business, 1981
Untitled, 1982
 oil on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 cm each





The Price, 1981
 gouache on paper, 71.7 x 92.7 cm
.034 Seconds, 1982
 gouache on paper, 65.4 x 73 cm
The Spell, 1981
 gouache on paper, 71.7 x 92 cm
Villains, 1981
 gouache on paper, 71.7 x 92 cm

Shelagh Alexander

- Untitled*, Part 1, 1983
 compilation photographs, 6 panels, 101.6 x 127 cm each
 Panels 3 and 4, Collection: Still Photography Division, National Film Board, Ottawa
- * *Loonytoon*, 1984
 compilation photographs, 106.6 x 243.8 cm
- We see nothing and tremble.*, 1984
 compilation photographs, 106.6 x 243.8 cm

Janice Gurney

- Portrait of Me as My Grandmother's Faults*, 1982
 mixed media, 168 x 178 cm
- * *Eyes Without a Face*, 1984
 photo-stats, photographs, plexiglass and paint, 213 x 533.4 cm

Nancy Johnson

- Allies*, Part I, 1984
 gouache on paper, 14 panels, 56 x 86 cm each
 Collection: Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa
- * *Sustained Passion*, 1984
 gouache on paper, 91.4 x 175.3 cm

Sandra Meigs

- The Handkerchief from Othello (She tried to tell him)*, 1981
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm
- Desdemona's Handkerchief (A Fabricated Lie from Othello)*, 1981
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm
- Desdemona's Handkerchief at the Bar from Othello*, 1981
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm
- A Scene from Othello (The Handkerchief)*, 1981
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm
 Collection: Ydessa Hendeles
- A Scene from Othello (Iago Drops Handkerchief)*, 1981
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm
 Collection: Ydessa Hendeles
- Series of Drinkers, Smokey the Bar*, 1981
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm
 Collection: Karen Mulhallen
- Series of Drinkers, Smokey the Bar (Getting Closer)*, 1981
 watercolour on paper
- Red Hand*, 1981
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm
- At the Bar, Before the Bout, O.K., No Kidding*, 1981
 watercolour on paper, 27.9 x 33 cm
- * *The Night Tree*, 1984
 acrylic and modelling paste on canvas, 7 panels, 61 x 66 cm each

Joanne Tod

- Self Portrait as Prostitute*, 1983
 acrylic on canvas, 139.7 x 177.8 cm
 Private collection
- My Father, Bob and I*, 1983
 oil on canvas, 127 x 142.2 cm
 Collection: Jared Sable and Nancy Hushion
- Identification/Defacement*, 1983
 acrylic on canvas, 144.8 x 86.4, 139.7 x 58.4 cm
- August 14, 1984*, 1984
 oil on canvas, 120.6 x 162.6 cm
 Private collection
- * *Second in Command/First Church of Christ, Scientist*, 1984
 oil on canvas, 2 panels, 137.2 x 152.4 cm each

Shirley Wiitasalo

- Interview*, 1981
 oil on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 cm
- The Glow and the Flow*, 1981
 oil on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 cm
- The Price*, 1981
 gouache on paper, 71.7 x 92.7 cm
- .034 Seconds*, 1982
 gouache on paper, 65.4 x 73 cm
- Villains*, 1981
 gouache on paper, 71.7 x 92 cm
- * *Cashstop/White House*, 1984
 oil on canvas, 2 panels, 122 x 167.6 cm each