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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College
of Imaging Arts and Sciences in candidacy for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts.

TRANSGRESSIONS AND DISTURBANCE

by

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November, 5, 1997

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**TRANSGRESSIONS
AND
DISTURBANCE**

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Finally, I am deeply indebted to my wife, Ala, for her patience and understanding, and for my parents for their sacrifice and support.

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is an attempt to identify and articulate some of the elements of the cultural and personal contexts which I regard as critical and necessary when considering the body of work I exhibited at the Thesis Show in the School of Art and Design in May of 1994. That set of external and internal, or cultural and personal conditions, as well as the physical space which D.W. Winnicott defines as "good-enough environmental provision"(D.W. Winnicott 1982, 71), is a basis and a prerequisite to one's creative self-realization.

The work in mention spans several years spent in Upstate New York. It was one of many stages of my life, when changing geographical location and ethnic background, I strived to balance the external with the internal, the social with the intimate, the creative with the subsistent. That time bears a particular significance for my personal life as an individual and an artist, since I just had undergone a turbulent metamorphosis merging my past with the new present in America.

As a person born in Europe, I was raised in an entirely different cultural environment, tradition, with a different sense of history and a hierarchy of values, than that of the people with whom I came to study

and work. I had had already over a decade of an artistic experience, with more or less significant accomplishments on the record. My work reflected my background, which immediately distinguished me from my peers, in sometimes ambivalent fashion. Hence, it became an important experience for me to face that new environment with all of its complexity, and react to it. It took place both on the formal, process-related level, as well as the conceptual plane. The latter was a result of additional psychological factors, like maturation, aging, and extending my life experience, which would most likely gained greater significance at some point anyway. However, the intensity of the change and the reaction to the new environment undoubtedly created a situation that accelerated that process.

Facing violence, terror and death, or its imminence and threat, on almost daily basis, either directly or through a variety of media, created a perception of life as a continuous conflict that leads toward the destruction of elements. Transgressions become an integral part of our existence. Defining a position from which I would address them, seemed like a central imperative for me as an artist and a human being. Harold Rosenberg likened artists to "... roaches in the cracks of society. Critical consciousness is the most annoying roach of all in the world that likes to think itself seamless." (D. Kuspit 1985, XIII)

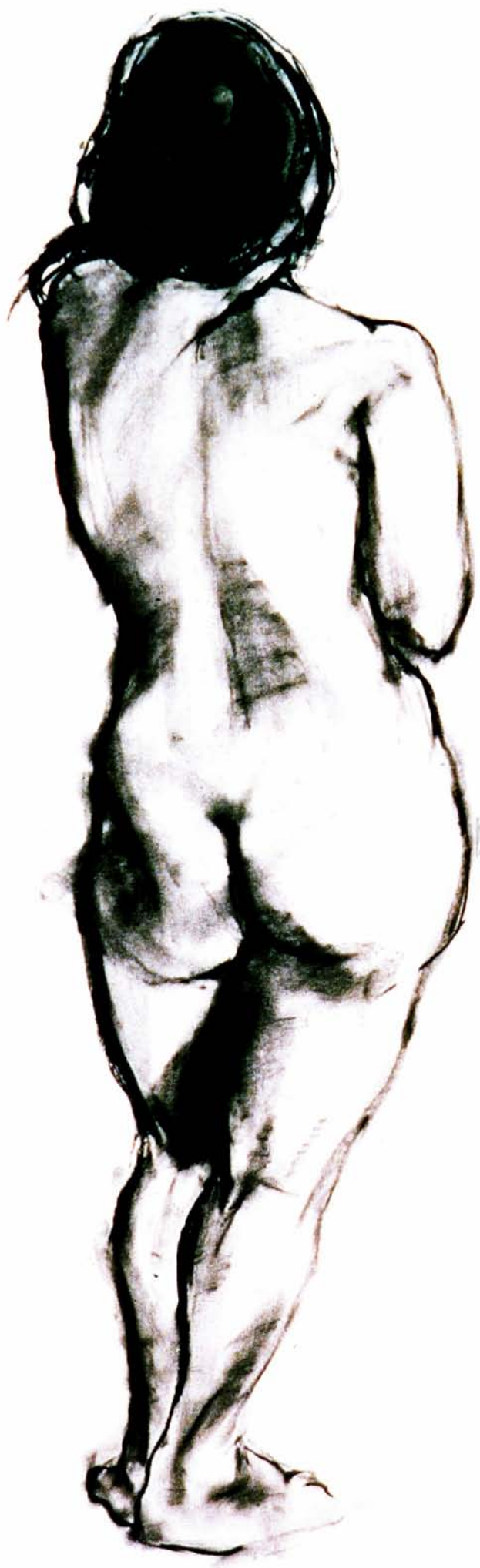
CHAPTER I

Inspiration and Interpretation

From early years of my engagement in art, the human figure was the central theme around which anything else evolved. It was partly a continuation of the European tradition, with its focus on man as a center of the Universe, thus functioning as a potential medium which offered temporary resolutions to the fundamental questions of human existence, or at least allowing their articulation; partly a direct reference to my physical and psychological experience and its resonance in the memory. The need for a tangible reference, and an object of analysis, found its direct realization in drawings which most often dealt with a life model, giving me an opportunity to study intricacies of its dynamics and internal relationships. It was a real living flesh, with all its vulnerability and strength, growth and decay, grace and imperfections exposed.

In some of the settings the model was in a conventional, or even banal pose, like *Standing Nude*, whereas in some a sudden exposure of sex was inviting a more expressive gesture and more dramatic use of the medium, as in *Figure*.

Drawing was the primary vehicle to initiate a dialogue with the human body, as well as to employ sometimes opposite formal means to a similar subject matter like in *Grey Nude* and *In the Corner*. The latter became closer in the organizational method and expressiveness to the



Standing Nude, charcoal on paper, 39 x 23 in., 1993



Figure, ink on paper, 39.25 x 27.5 in., 1993



In The Corner, charcoal on paper, 38 x 25.5 in., 1994



Grey Nude, ink on paper, 34 x 22.5 in., 1994

oil paintings which were concurrently produced. The model in a seemingly quiet, almost benign setting, becomes a violent swirl of dark and light, when the leisurely pose of rest and truce suddenly spreads its knees exposing vulnerable center, like a victim of rape pushed into a corner. Its faceless silhouette of a head dissolves in the darkness of the background. It might have tried to resist, but now its crumpled corpse is overcome and surrendered. It is basically an anonymous victim like thousands of others in Bosnia, or in Algeria. On the other hand it also contains an ambiguous hints of subconscious erotic relationship with the model itself. This drawing is one of more important of a series of works which marked a departure from a static and somehow emblematic treatment of the figure. It still has some of the formal elements of gestural rendering of human themes by Alberto Giacometti, whose work was a source of influence for me in the 80's. However it also displayed a tighter interplay between the figure and the background, both of which were becoming one integral structure.

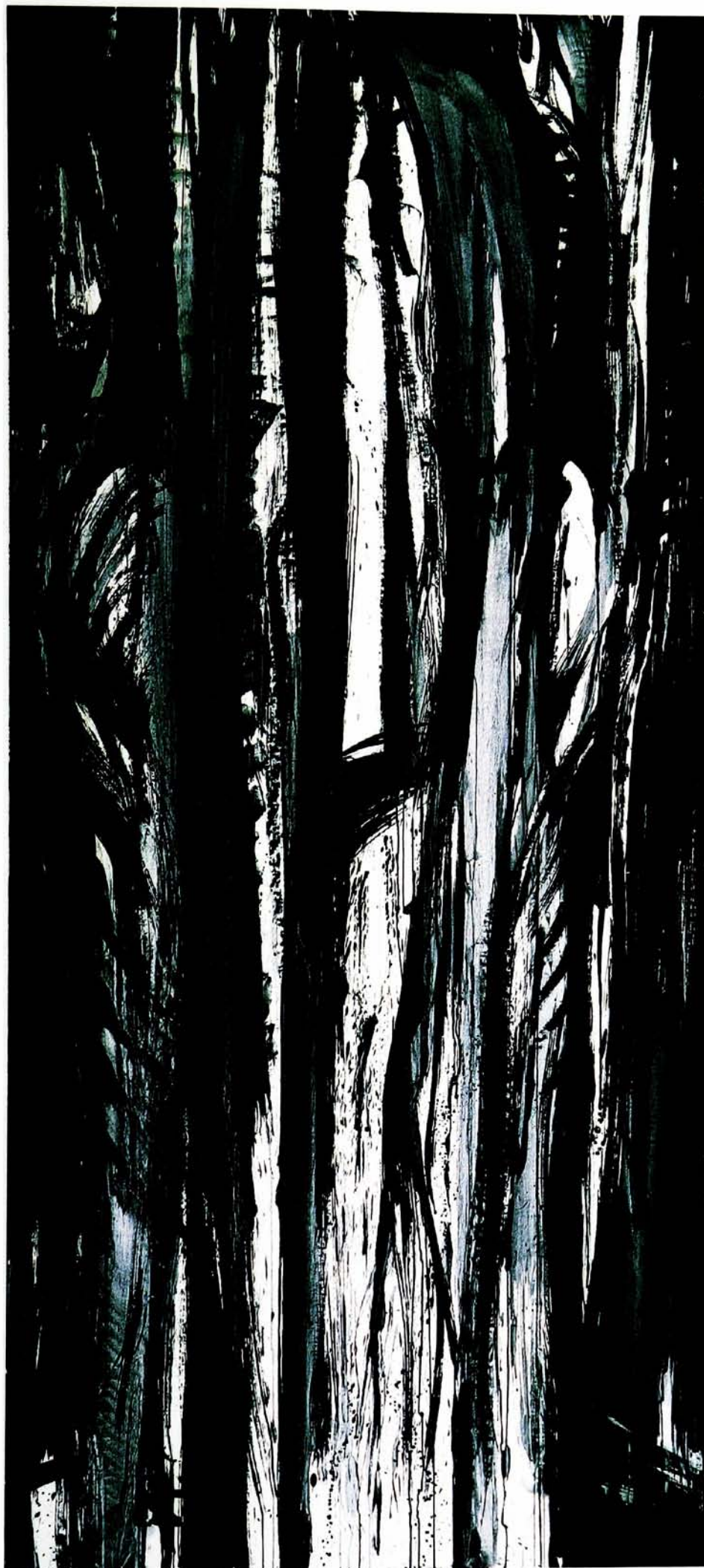
In a series of heads and portraits — like Head and Twisted — that transition led eventually to formally austere compositions of Plotters and Unplotters, where the basic conflict is represented by vertical and angular strokes intersecting each other, as if fresh wounds and ropes tightened and mingled together. Though formal execution might suggest an



Head, ink on paper, 28 x 22 in., 1994



Twisted, lithograph, 27.5 x 21.5 in., 1994



Plotters, ink on paper, 96 x 42 in., 1994



Unplotters, ink on paper, 96 x 45 in., , 1994

indirect homage to Franz Kline, especially in the case of *Unplotters*, there is no contextual linkage to his elegant and contemplative compositions. The force behind those two pieces was an explosion within the emotional space, driven by a sense of besieged and mutilated peace of mind. They seem to have some analogies to the work of Willem de Kooning, especially from the 50's, due to formal similarities in gestural passion that characterized the brushwork. The German Expression of the 70's and 80's with Anselm Kiefer and George Baselitz had also great influence on the formal as well as the thematic aspects of my work. Naturally, due to significant generational gap and vast disparities in individual and communal experience — their art often evokes memories and trauma of the WWII — my work cannot and need not share the same iconography and set of references as theirs. What I felt having in common with Kiefer, Baselitz and other artists like Golub, was a sense of great necessity to confront issues which the modern, post-industrial society with its overwhelming, hedonistic consumerism, preferred to dismiss. It became gradually more relevant in my view on art and its place in culture, that "Criticism is ... art's only way of remaining itself, of continuing to live with the greatest intensity." (D. Kuspit 1985, XIII). In other words it is a matter of individual responsibility to keep the flame lit. That was the point where my cultural and ideological baggage set me far aside the

American affection for the formalism in art.

In Leon Golub; Existential/Activist Painter, D. Kuspit recalls an early revolutionary Gabriel-Desire Laverdant who laid ground for “the idea of interdependence of art and society...”, where the former was “a means of revolutionary propaganda and activism”(D. Kuspit 1985, 3). Such a radical imperative for the interrelation between art and society was appealing to me from early on, however I was more inclined toward examination of the self within the social and psychological context, and its implications. The call for a direct submission to any specific ideological agenda never had much credibility for me, given my experience from ideologically centralized and controlled society in communist Poland. Nevertheless, my conviction of a necessity of responsibility of an artist as an active participant in the given time and place was grounded by a sense of perpetual conflict between forces predetermined toward self-destruction and chaos. The nature of their relationship seems to be particularly perverse, like the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. The victim starts identifying with the perpetrator, and reciprocally the assailant identifies with the victim. The act of transgression in which they participate transforms them with irreversible consequences, so their violent union is never meant to survive. The conflict is in fact unavoidable tragedy, never

resolved. It may become a real and tangible element of our condition when confronted in the art form. "For artist as for viewer, art transcends its artificiality and the scene represented becomes a lived experience." (D. Kuspit, L. Weintraub 1987, 77). It sometimes takes form of an intense and physical process of a dramatic and often brutal dialogue with the medium, as if recreating the violence and conflict of the subject matter. The artist becomes the perpetrator and the medium is his victim, both in a peculiar union, inseparable parts of an oneness.

In *Frequent Beauty — Seated*, a painting which preceded the actual thesis work, that sense of interdependence and union of hostile elements began to emerge. Originally, the piece started as a formal nude study borrowing heavily from some works by Picasso and Matisse from the 50's and 60's. It had evolved into more fragmented shape losing its original vibrant color and decorative character, though still preserving the sensuality and voluptuousness of the female model. Her skin turned into a cluster of charred scars, and body parts chopped from the corpse remained attached only by severed ligaments and torn tissue.

The title, suggesting an ironical, emotional detachment from the subject matter, emphasizes the psychological predicament of facing indifference toward violence and suffering. It attempts, in a sense to defy the stereotypical aesthetical self-indulgence of sizeable segment of the



Frequent Beauty - Seated, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 51.5 in., 1993



Black Meat, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 47.5 in., 1993

contemporary art, where “beauty” is often considered a condition for social acceptance.

In the past, a title of a work had little significance for me, basically attesting to a quite obvious subject matter. A figure was called *Figure*, an object was called *Object*. I did not see much room for any additional extra-pictorial, literary elements parallel to the visual.

However, around 1993-94, the title began gaining more significance as a sarcastic anti-commentary to the subject matter. I realized there was a new potential to generate greater ambiguity and confusion about the meaning of the work. That might provoke a reaction of repulsion or outrage, or both, as a potentially cathartic means of self-imposed penance, which could lead eventually to the revelation: conflict is a dominant factor of the human condition — on the material plane with its physiological banality and horror of flesh and blood; in psychological sense with its spiritual and mental alienation, which seems to be the only unwavering constant of our existence.

In the realm of artistic creativity we confront that predicament as “dialectic between the person the artist is and the artist he or she is — another manifestation of the interplay between union and separateness” (D.Kuspit, L.Weintraub 1987, 34). That interplay might be also illustrated as a never fulfilled desire to merge both, resulting in a sense

of perplexity and tragedy. Art might serve as a redemptive mechanism, for "The artist has ... basic attitude toward his or her life history and tradition: he or she works to 'prove' their 'immortality', that is enduring significance. This is the pathos of creativity."(L.Weintraub, D.Kuspit 1987, 34) This is also the pathos of life, since art is tightly connected to its innermost fiber and tissue. And pathos of decay and death, which we try to defy by living. This is the pathos of suffering and inducing pain, pathos of rape and interrogation, pathos of a point-blank execution. It verges on grotesque, or what Auerbach might call "strange sense of humor" with a wide open abyss of self-destruction and annihilation.

Two paintings, *Black Meat* and *Split* from 1993, still had some polite elegance and chiaroscuro effects of my early work, but the forms exploded with viciousness and fragmentation of the corpses. The human figure underwent even more drastic reduction than in the *Frequent Beauty — Seated*. It blew up into huge vomitous splash suspended in an indifferent field of tasty rich blacks and indigo blue, as if suggesting an inner space to emphasize its flashy testimony of violence. I regard *Black Meat* and *Split* as important transitional pieces between the earlier static figurative compositions and the later work, in which the entire constraint of canvas became engaged into a field of opposing



Split, oil on canvas, 55.1 x 24 in., 1993



Balls and Guts, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 47.5 in., 1990

forces where biomorphic elements violently interact with geometrical divisions.

Balls and Guts marked in a conspicuous fashion a departure from the earlier scheme of foreground-background compositions. Completed shortly before the main thesis work got started, the piece opened for me new venues and possibilities, not to mention new vocabulary in dealing with our own primal fears, paranoias and hallucinations.

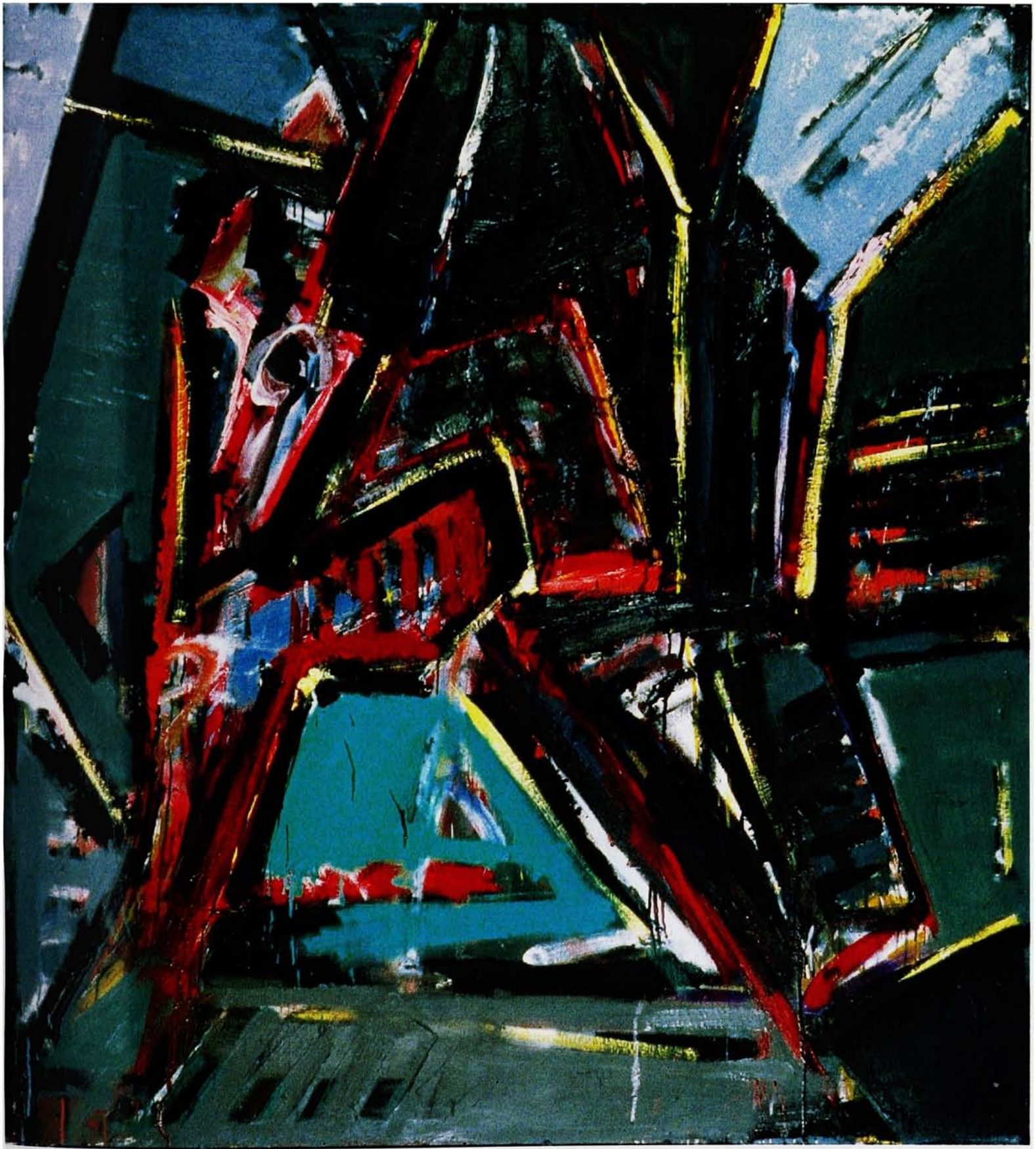
As the title suggests it represents images of bloody genitals and intestines twisted together, torn and mutilated. However, despite the gruesome subject matter, this painting was sometimes received as a joyful, with a sense of humor “visceral abstraction”, as if the use of warm hues of yellows and reds with gestural brush strokes and rich multi-layered textures sufficiently provided a perverse justification to subconsciously subdue a sense of rage and repulsion. It seems like the modern society, especially in the Western hemisphere, often chooses to “rationalize” the dark and feared depths of our existence by inverting their meaning and repressing the sense of threat that they pose. Such manipulation produces a substitute which may be appeased and tolerated.

With a strong sense of direction I continued to explore further those new ideas in a series of paintings. Some found their format as thesis

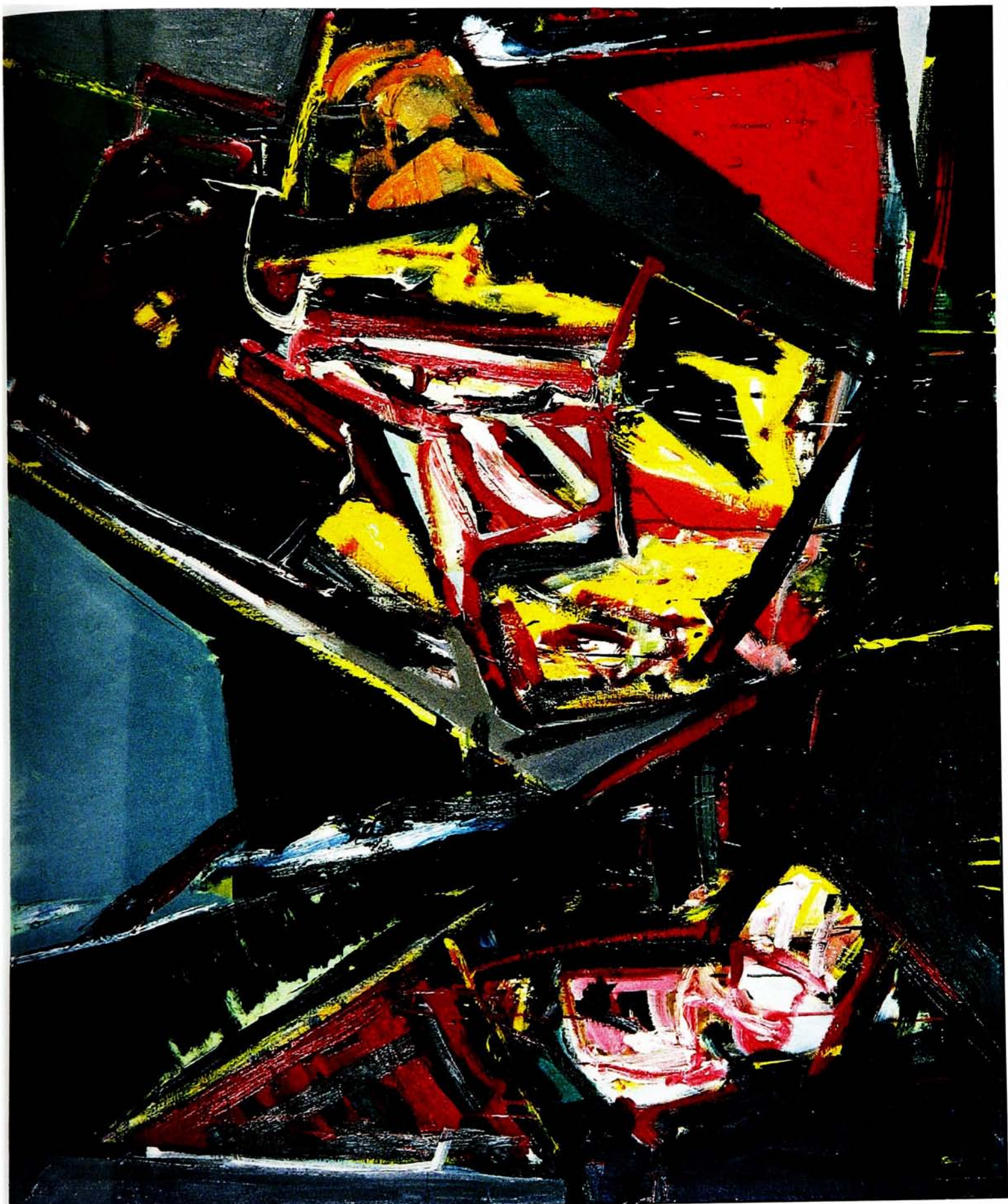
work, some went beyond it. They maintain an active thread connecting each other, and I recognize that element of continuum as intrinsic to my work. None of them emerged in a vacuum.

Groinkickers, the first in the series for the thesis, appears initially as an abstraction, but the figurative context is the core around which the rest is built. Two anonymous human figures clinched together in a mortal combat with animal ferocity and force. Violence is manifested in an attack on groins of each of the adversary, emphasized by angular shapes with thick strokes of black, red and yellow-white converging toward the center. Two focal points compete for attention: one pulsating with contaminated reds, and the other with an oversaturated, geometrically constructed field of Green Veronese. The entire canvas is bearing traces of a violent struggle, as if the surrounding matter became an extension to the infighting. The illusion of space and the relationships of planes are illogical in conventional sense, since the space itself is broken into pieces.

Groins (Beheaded) is based on a drawing of a decapitated human body with its hands tied with a barbed-wire. The head, separated from the corpse leans against the opposite corner. Triangular divisions suggest falling blades or tearing of body parts. Yellow becomes the color of the lifeless meat which used to be a human being. It seems like it stumbled



Groinkickers, oil on canvas, 55 x 51 in., 1993



Groins (Beheaded), oil on canvas, 43.5 x 51.5 in., 1994

on an invisible barrier and froze in paralysis.

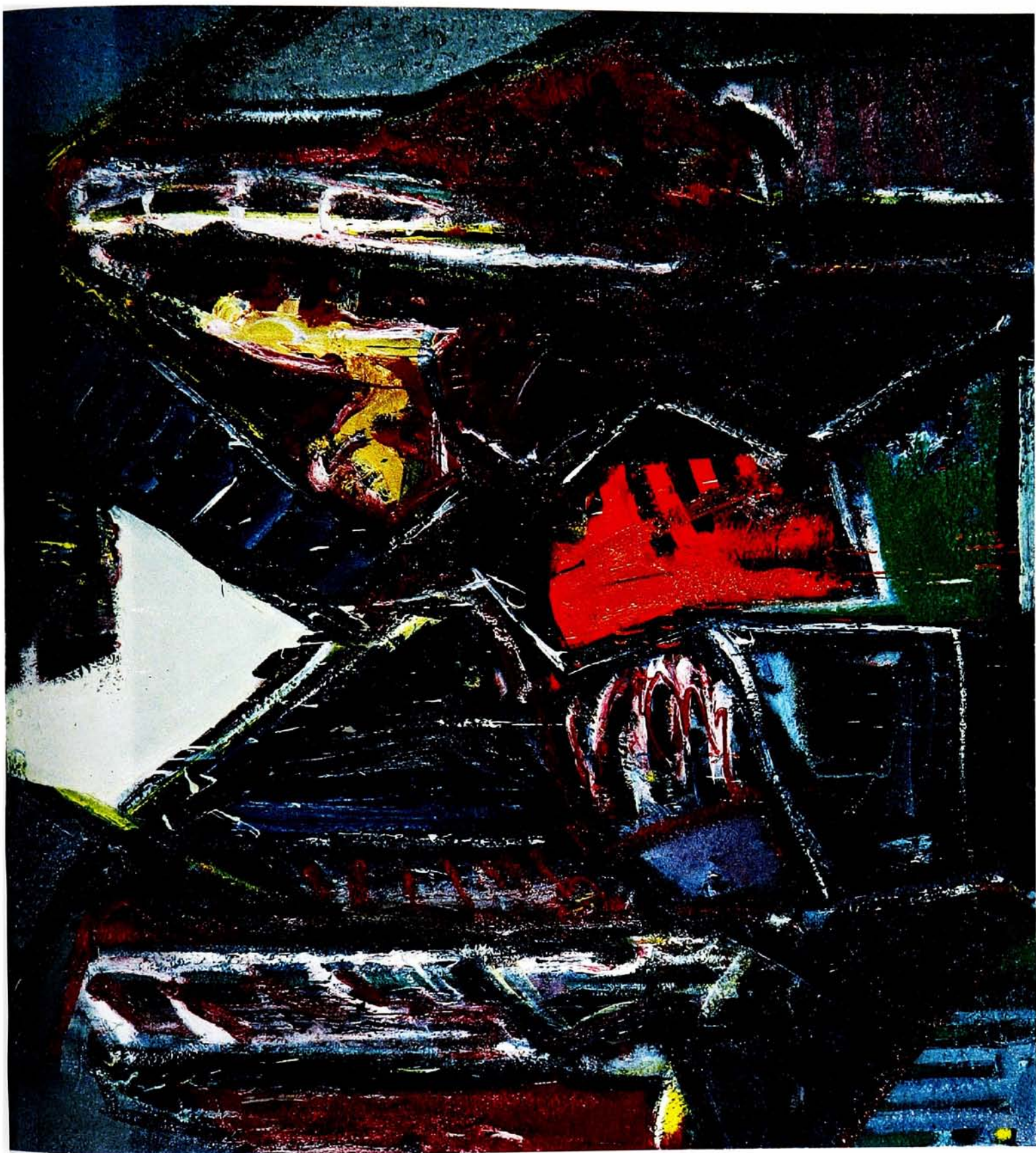
In Saudi Arabia beheading is a common punishment by law. Heads of the killed became trophies and symbols of warrior virtues during Vietnam war and in Bosnia.

In Groinkickers Series the thugs and victims engage their heads, jaws and teeth spilling orange like a poison. Although dead, they remain locked in a vicious grip of their joints, still trying to strangle each other in a spasm of hysteria.

The act of strangulation contains elements of perverse intimacy and close relationship between the assailant and the victim. It seems to be often driven by an atavistic impulse of against someone's throat.

Stranglers is depicting a human figure resisting strangulation. It is seen from the perspective of the perpetrator who towers over a kneeling victim. Hands which hold the choking grip are purple-gray, while those fighting for survival are bloody-white. They constitute the main focus of the composition, and the violence culminates there.

The last painting from the series, called Swirl , has more centralized structure and abstract treatment than most of the thesis work. The distinction between the foreground and the background gains some visibility with a central form resembling a rotating cross or swastika. Its wings are made of body parts, shattered limbs tied in its axis, crumpled

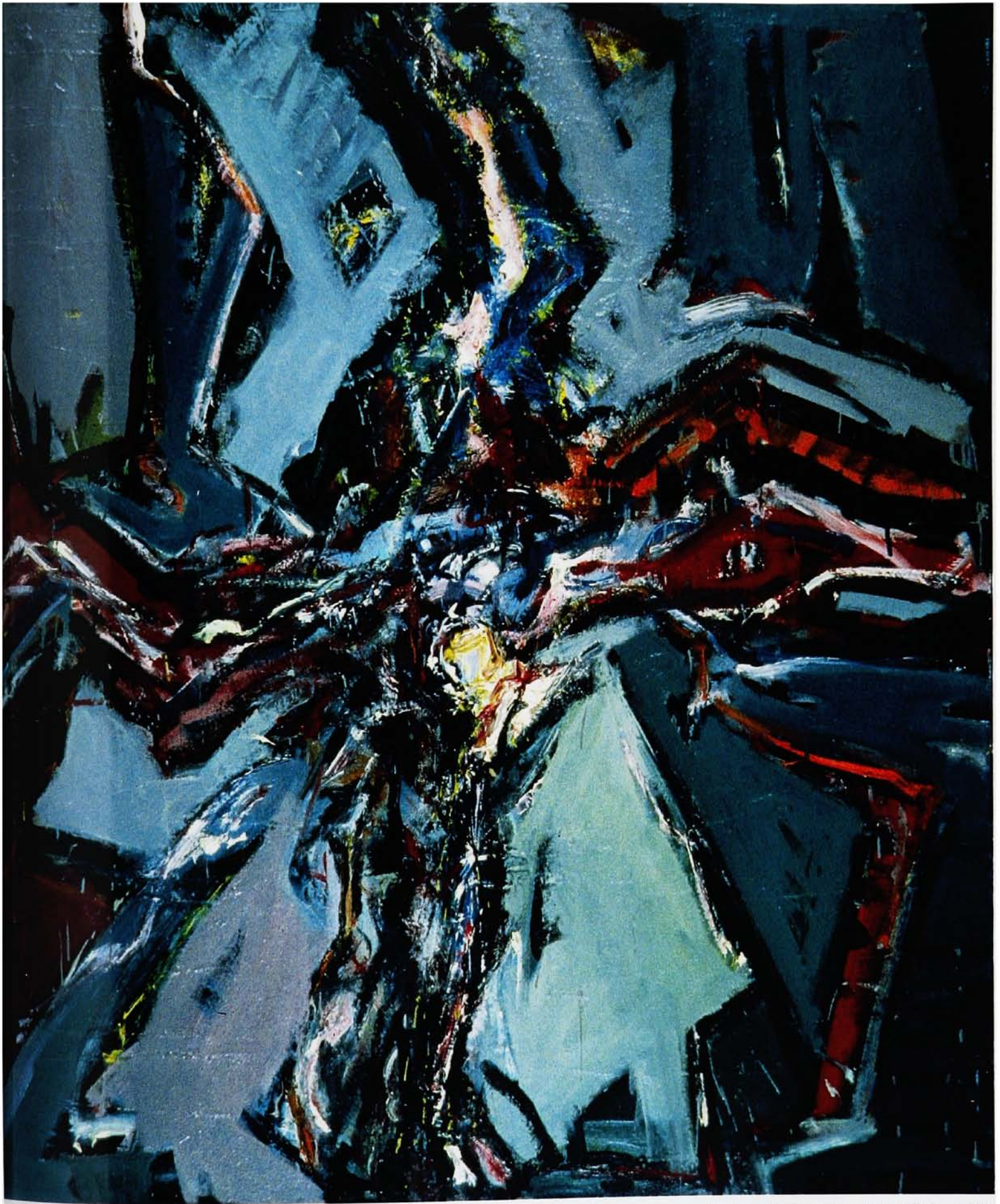


Groinkicker Series, oil on canvas, 51 x 55 in., 1994

and deformed. The contamination of the palette is pushing the overall appearance of the work toward monochrome.

Swirl is based on a series of figure studies overlaying each other. They evolved into a structure gradually more disfigured and dismembered. The surrounding area submitted itself into the rotary motion and became an extension to the cross. The horror is not explicit here. Tension and volatility of inner dynamics of the spin, with loose fragments flying along the core suggest hopelessness and tragic absurdity of the situation. The human figure lost its physical integrity and vertical orientation, and almost completely unrecognizable became a part of a horrific mechanism.

The formal resolution of the painting might appear contradictory to its gruesome context, in its subdued monochrome and rhythmical repetition of its divided spaces. It can offer an ambiguous perspective on violence as an organized, aesthetically satisfactory abstraction, when transgressions and conflict are repressed by the conscience seeking refuge in socially acceptable interpretations.



Swirl, oil on canvas, 55 x 47 in., 1994

CHAPTER II

Process

There is a dialectical relationship between art process and its product. It seems to me that the creative act bears its product from the beginning to separate from it at one point, as if acknowledging it as its closure. However the product continues to stimulate the continuity of the process, though in different circumstances and between different participants than in original intimacy of the artist's studio.

The preparatory work often preceded the oil paintings included in my thesis. Drawings offered direct and instantaneous contact and examination of the idea that initiated the process. They could become completely independent pieces from anything that followed, providing satisfactory resolutions, or could increase the challenge leading to more elaborate approach on canvas. However the technological preparations for each piece were almost always consistent, as if they played a role of a substitute of meditative stage of concentration.

As in *Groinkickers* the physical violence was not present at its beginnings. The work started as any other painting from the series. A rectangle of stretched canvas was initially covered with rabbit-skin glue gel. The excess of the glue was then removed with a knife leaving thin protective film. A pre-mixed gesso was spread over with a brush and a knife to give the painting its base. Such foundation with its white glare, often has challenging and intimidating qualities. It resembles blatant,

plain paper with its definite void, however open for my intrusion and creative intervention. It draws me in defying my relevance.

Groinkickers was originally constructed as a simplistic drawing of two humans entangled with each other in a vicious struggle. Their emotional and physical axes were underlined with medium size brushes diagonally juxtapositioning directions of their movements. At this point color did not play any significant role. The interplay of light and dark values of brush strokes was defining the visual, setting the composition in place and in motion, gradually building connections to the rest of the surrounding field.

To shorten the drying time of the first layer, a solution of 50:50 of turpentine and linseed oil was used as a painting medium. This allowed me to continue engaging the remaining elements with the central composition, filling spaces with flat color. The base layers often consisted of sharp and contrasting areas of reds, yellows or greens and blues. It was creating a different reference field for the subsequent coats of much more subdued and restricted colors. The main focus though was on a dynamic clash of elements in the central area of the painting which was forcing all surrounding masses and particles to converge in the middle. The only static plane is represented by a truncated field of Green Veronese providing an emotionally detached reference and contrast. To

emphasize that contrast the green was applied flat with a painting knife, while the figures were painted with thickly charged brushes or straight from the tube. At one point the painting was removed from the easel and laid flat on the floor. A fast drying painting medium was distributed over selected areas which were then covered with dirt and sand collected around parking lots and children playgrounds. The next day the painting was back on the easel with the excess of dirt shaken down on the floor. The new surface was not entirely bonded, making it possible to remove parts of it by scrapping with a knife or painting over with additional layer of color. Those fresh coats reacted sometimes chemically with each other, revealing unexpected traces of paint like an evidence of crime. The technique appeared to be similar to sculpture: addition and subtraction defining a perpetual process of extracting the esoteric shape and form of the dialogue between the material and the artist. Such process could be significantly extended in time, resulting in some works that evolved throughout a period of several years.

Swirl and Groinkickers Series were started in the late 80's. The first began as a conventional study of a standing nude. It evolved subsequently into a carcass-like shape aggressively splitting fields of yellow and blue. Directions of its limbs, hips and shoulders were underscored with thick impastos straight from tube, creating a dense web of over-

laying stripes of color. Old layers served as reference points to new colors, gradually stripping the identifiable human structure from its shape and form.

Groinkickers Series is built with probably the most layers of color and texture that I used in my work. They were often scrapped or pilled off. At one point the knife cut deep through several coats and exposed bare canvas. The excavated area was then covered with a protective film of white gesso to prevent fiber decay. Its substantially recessed plane in relation to the surrounding fields created another emotionally detached divider for conflicting masses of black, blue and dark green. In Groinkickers Series dirt and sand were often mixed directly with the paint, and forming a thick, textural compound with mud-like consistency, added to the absurdity and helplessness of the depicted subject matter. The choice of color was often based on contradictions between overlapping layers, functioning as a disturbing device to provoke a strong, emotional and aesthetical reaction. The use of bare whites and splashes of red on earthly hues in Stranglers was meant to provide such a situation between the painting and the viewer.

Most of the techniques and processes I employed in my thesis work were familiar to me early on, though not implemented on a wider scale like here. Mixing paint compounds or indiscriminate application of

dirt as texture never provided exclusive motivation to my work. They were not the basis for the creative act, but played supportive role to it. An interesting challenge laid in inverting some of their presumed aesthetical qualities, so spectacular in some works of Tapies, and expose their inferiority.

The palette I used in this body of work differed significantly from the paintings I produced in th 80's, where large, bold fields of color articulated the relationship between the figures or objects within abstract space. Here the medium was supposed to have physiological qualities denying aesthetical satisfaction, the latter being so important to the late Clement Greenberg. There was no deliberate calculation though, in defining this palette. It simply evolved in time, as a product of a personal and intimate relationship with those paintings. They had real and disturbing meaning to me, so the means I used could not be otherwise.

CHAPTER III

Closing Remarks

As Mark Tobey once stated there is "...no break between the nature, art, science, religion, and personal life".(B.Bowen, R.E.Fuller 1981, 10) Life and art can be a total experience, which continues as long as our senses stay receptive. Reacting to their impulses keeps our work valid and evolving.

During the course of this thesis I had a sense of imperative to move beyond my earlier field of work to explore contextually and formally new territories. It was prompted by an urge necessity to confront disturbing sense of perpetual conflict and tragic helplessness of human condition in social, as well as existential context. On the formal level, the premise of originality and novelty in art was less critical to me, than the artistic conviction, integrity and self-identification. Understanding my background and a reflection upon my participation in culture, allowed me to draw from the past while addressing the present. Winnicott writes that "In any cultural field it is not possible to be original, except on the basis of tradition."(D. W. Winnicott 1982, 99). Any concern about formal originality seems to be unsubstantiated, if it is not a result of a dialogue between the medium, the artist, and his innermost experiences. Such a process can become a vehicle to address the rejected and repressed regions of our subconsciousness, which can reveal hidden truths about ourselves, our existence, condition and culture.

"In my mind, and most of all in original and developed minds, there are two crucial elements, the basic formula with which it interprets the reality, and the peculiar sense of deficiency with which that mind always starts out along its way."(R.Harper 1965, 138)

That sense of deficiency, though intimidating, has a potential to overcome the void, accomplish the impossible: to overturn the predetermined verdict on life as a perpetual conflict and relative commodity, and restore its relevance and enduring significance.

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