Arabesque

An Exhibition of Paintings and Prints

by

Franco Orlandi

A Thesis Exhibition

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfilment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Fine Arts Studio Gallery, University of Waterloo

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 1997

© Franco Orlandi 1997

National Library of Canada
Acquisitions and Bibliographic Services
395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada
Acquisitions et services bibliographiques
395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced with the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-21537-7

Canada

Borrower's Page

The University of Waterloo requires the signatures of all persons using or photocopying this thesis. Please sign below and give address and date.

Abstract

"Arabesque" is an exhibition comprising paintings and prints completed during the past twelve months. The colourful, spontaneous and gestural works are executed in a variety of media and are expressions of an introspective, autobiographical content.

The exhibition is supported by an artist statement which describes my working methods and approaches to art, as well as outlining my motivations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents, Rodolfo and Maria Orlandi, for their generosity and patience. Also I would like to thank Connie Bartolo for her unrelenting kindness and support. I would like to express my gratitude for the inspiration and encouragement given to me by Carmelo Arnoldin, and to Stuart Oxley for his guidance. As well, I would like to thank my principal advisor, Jane Buyers for her intellectual stimulation, and Tony Urquhart for his interest in my work and his assistance.

Dedication

To my parents, Rodolfo and Maria Orlandi, and
to my nephew, Alexander and my niece, Ashley.

Table of Contents

Author's Declaration ii

Borrower's Page iii

Abstract iv

Acknowledgements v

Dedication vi

Table of Contents vii

List of Works in Exhibition viii

Artist's Statement 1

Reproductions of Works in Exhibition 12

Bibliography 21

List of Works in Exhibition

1. The English Save their Architecture for Special Occasions, (1997)
   47.5" x 94," Oval painting. Oil, acrylic, crayon, spray lacquer, oil stick, rhoplex medium, and collaged paper on masonite on plywood.

2. Nature vs. Nurture I, (1997)
   30" x 24," Monoprint. Watercolour, interference pigment, crayon on paper.

3. They See the Moon in Three Dimensions in Lhasa, (1996)
   47" x 68," Oval painting. Oil, acrylic and crayon on masonite on plywood.

4. Inspired by Wanting Water, (1997)
   18" x 24," Monoprint. Watercolour, interference paint, crayon on paper.

5. Where is Mr. Tambourine Man Now that We Need Him?, (1997)
   46.5" x 61.5," Oval painting. Oil, acrylic, crayon, spray lacquer, oil stick and rhoplex medium, on masonite on plywood.

6. We Boarded the S.S. Hendericks to Arrive Here, (1997)
   47" x 90," Oval painting. Oil, acrylic, crayon, spray lacquer, oil stick and rhoplex medium, on masonite on plywood.

7. Any Colour You Like, (1996)
   18" x 24," Monoprint. Watercolour, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

8. Bernini's Walk in the Vatican, (1996)
   11" x 17," Monoprint. Watercolour, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

9. Lucy, (1996)
   18" x 24," Monoprint. Watercolour, interference paint, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

10. Instigator, (1996)
    11" x 17," Monoprint. Watercolour, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

11. In Baroque Light, (1997)
    18" x 24," Monoprint. Watercolour, interference paint, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

12. F.A.M.A., (1996)
    11" x 14," Monoprint. Watercolour, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

13. Nature vs. Nurture II, (1997)
    18" x 24," Monoprint. Watercolour, interference pigment, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

14. *Tivivogliobene*, (1996)
    24" x 30," Monoprint. Watercolour, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

15. Giving None Away, (1996)
    18" x 24," Monoprint. Watercolour, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

16. Paperi, (1996)
    11" x 14," Monoprint. Watercolour, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

17. Bernini's Ingredient, (1996)
    11" x 17," Monoprint. Watercolour, crayon and *chine collé* on paper.

18. 1815: Wellington's Premature Ejaculation, (1996)
    47" x 70," Oval painting. Oil, acrylic, oil stick, crayon and rhoplex medium on masonite on plywood.

Artist's Statement

> Art has come back to being direct expression, leaving behind the business of racking one's brains out and feeling guilty for being a permanent and indirect symptom of contact with the world - Achille Bonito Oliva[1]

I came to Waterloo with a burning desire to paint, to paint expressively, from the heart, from the soul. However, after my first year, this desire was extinguished by a search for imagery which would communicate feelings of anxiety which I felt inwardly and which I perceived were coursing through society. I was not painting but rather sitting tormented at the canvas agonizing over whether my imagery would convey my socio-political ideas to the viewer. I felt detached from my work, as if I was grasping at straws. I was undergoing an artistic dilemma similar to Philip Guston in the late 1960s:

> So when the 1960s came along I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war [in Vietnam], what was happening to America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man was I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a fury about everything -and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue.[2]

The pursuit of a political and ideological content was affecting my art negatively. Removing these inferences from my work was like a new beginning, like springtime following winter.

---

[1] Oliva, The International Trans-avantgarde, (Milan: Politi, 1982), 11-12.

[2]Robert Storr, Philip Guston, (New York: Abbeville, 1986), 53.

It brought on an explosion of expressive paintings and prints, which are included in this exhibition.

I wanted to create, to express myself following the dictates of my imagination. This realization freed me to adopt a different way of working. Consequently, paintings were -and still are- created in one spontaneous sitting usually at night without the disruption of others to break my concentration. Working in unmitigated leaps and bounds -taking chances- followed by periods of reflection upon the work done is the new way of working. This procedure is repeated until the work tweaks in me an intuitive satisfaction. It is as if being with a lover, uninterrupted, without timetables, without the droning of the outside world, at the height of concentration.

I can identify with the art of the abstract expressionists, whose art, according to Harold Rosenberg, consisted of the will to paint, the memories of paintings and the man who stood in front of the canvas.[3] I am intoxicated by an urge to create and I feel like a vessel being emptied of its contents. It is a bacchanalian process initiated by a "blooming buzz of confusion," as philosopher-psychologist William James put it, which synthesises residues of my everyday experiences and the accumulations of peripheral vision -elements of conversations, media snippets, an encountered glance- into line and colour that textures the surface:

> a glimpse here, a spark there, a relation perceived, an experience remembered,
> a promising avenue developed, and gradually, after much reflection,

---

3 Harold Rosenberg, "Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion," in Anxious Object, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 39.

> concentration, uncertainty, setting aside and returning afresh, and long periods of gestation in the subconscious, the finished conception is born.[4]

When I return to the studio the morning after, the surprise of the first glance at the work can affirm the results or can initiate a surge of fresh energy to reengage in the painting. This element of surprise upon seeing the work anew is present also in the act of printmaking, a factor which sustains my interest in pursuing its expressive potential. Although I consider my prints as paintings on paper, I do make distinctions between the two processes. Pulling the paper from the plate is like the first glance at a painting the morning after. However, unlike painting, there is no retouching or reworking of the image -the image pulled is the final image. I have often been asked why I do not go back into the printed image. For me this would be a betrayal of any sense of spontaneity which is so integral to my art. For this reason, I have kept to monoprinting exclusively, moving away from intaglio and etching processes which for me yielded little expressive possibilities.

Like my paintings, my prints begin with the laying down of a free-flowing ground of watercolour pigment, which is left to dry overnight, and acts as an underpainting onto which subsequent crayon markings are placed. At times I work my markings directly on the wet surface of the plate, creating a softening effect on the otherwise crisp marks seen in Giving None Away. At other times, I work directly on a plate that previously has been pulled or apply watercolour washes on an uncleaned plate. When I arrive at the final image, I introduce an element of collage via the *chine collé* process -the process of gluing various coloured and

---

[4]John Hospers ed., Artistic Expression, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971), 53.

printed papers to the work. *Chine collé* adds to the surprise of a work whose formal elements can not be deciphered until the image has been pulled. The variety of textures of collaged rice paper adds density to the image and has often been construed as figural elements in the work. Unlike the less-direct, process-oriented methods of intaglio and etching, monoprinting offers spontaneity which facilitates my expressive tendencies.

My primary concern, however, is painting. Painting provides for a surface activity informed by the puddling of viscous medium, like rhoplex, by the stria of oil paint applied by various means, and the visual potential of colour accidentally or subsequently through movements of gesture. These are temporal signs of my presence in the paintings, elements which are lost to the printmaker in the process of running paper through the press. Printmaking also does not allow for impasto techniques or the building up of layers of material substance on the surface, which attracts me to painting.

One aspect of printmaking which I have carried over into my paintings, is working on an obdurate ground. For me, working on a sturdy material like masonite means I can attack the work with aggressive gestural marks, using crayons and oil sticks, which adds to the vitality of my work. Pressing down with force on masonite with oil sticks leaves residual chunks of the oil stick on the activated surface, providing a visual contrast to the flatness of the ground. This effect can be seen throughout my paintings, particularly in the large We Boarded the S.S. Hendericks to Arrive Here. Working on stretched canvas does not permit such acts of aggression since it is too responsive to the hand's pressure.

I see my venture into printmaking as a roaming in search of machinations for my creative impulses. This restless roaming relates to the notion of nomadism as articulated by

the eloquent Achille Bonito Oliva, art critic and principal spokesman of the Italian trans-avantgarde. In his book, *La Transavanguardia Italiana* - The Italian Trans-avantgarde, Oliva describes nomadism as,

> crossing every experimental notion of the avant-garde . . . [producing] a work no longer constructed according to a project and of an idea, but which forms itself before his eyes under the pulsion of a hand which dips inside the substance of art in an "*immaginario*" embodied somewhere between idea and sensibility.[5]

It was not until I began to research the art of the trans-avantgarde that I realized how the previous tailoring of my art to some preconceived agenda mirrored the "death of painting" in the late 1960s caused by abstract minimalist painting's collusion with the late modernist formalism of Clement Greenberg.[6] Oliva's notion of nomadism was developed to justify a return to the figure evident in the art of the trans-avantgarde, however, for me, it constitutes a rationale for crossing over the influence of trans-avantgarde figuration and moving towards an expressive, painterly abstraction.

For me, the use of abstraction is a means to parody Greenbergian, post-painterly abstraction, particularly its reductive insistence on the removal of any references outside the medium of paint. Greenberg has been influential for many Canadian abstract painters like Jack Bush and Kenneth Lochhead, especially since his 1962 visit to the artists workshop at Emma

---

[5]Oliva, The Italian Trans-avantgarde, (Milan: Politi, 1980), 29.

[6]For more information on the death of painting and its subsequent revival, see Thomas McEvilley's lucidly written book, The Exile's Return: Towards a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-modern Era, (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge Uni. Press, 1985), 6.

Lake, Saskatchewan. However, the gestural energy and surface tension in my work relates much more specifically to the gestural abstraction of Harold Klunder. In her catalogue essay for Klunder's 1985 exhibition of paintings at Concordia University, Sandra Paikowsky writes that for Klunder "post-painterly abstraction was too far removed from dynamic gesture, while minimalism was too rejecting of the traditional tenets of painting."[7] I can identify with Klunder's expressive sensibilities and share his enthusiasm for dynamic gestures. Reacting to minimalist emptiness, I see myself as a mannerist, like the 16th century artists who rebelled against the canons of renaissance perspective, harmonic proportions and natural colour.

To me, colour is the most definitive aspect of my work. These colours are a product of my past, of growing up in the 1960s and 70s. They recount the screaming colours of automobiles I saw as a boy: intense red Camaros, lemon yellow Dart Swingers, lime green Super Bees, purple Challengers, orange Barracudas, metallic blue Cutlasses. These colours also recall the brightly-coloured clothes that people wore and the ornate designs which were seen on television programmes like Laugh-in.

Using flashy colours from this bygone era form an integral part of my visual repertoire which has fed my disdain for muted and muddied colour. I am attracted to Jack Shadbolt's use of saturated colour, especially as seen in his late 1980s painting and his more recent work. Like Shadbolt, I "hunger" for strong colour which has diminished my need for brushes and the need for mixing colour on a palette.[8] Recently I have abandoned the use of a palette completely,

---

[7]Taken from an essay written by Sandra Paikowsky in Harold Klunder, (Montreal: Concordia University, 1985), 6.

[8]Scott Watson, Jack Shadbolt, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), 86.

opting to mix colours directly on the surface of the work by squeezing pigment from the tube or using oil sticks and crayons, or working wet-on-wet, all of which maintains the vibrancy of colour and the immediacy of the marks so important to my work.

Colour is applied flamboyantly, in linear marks and with a sense of "horror vacuii," which causes the eye of the viewer to move relentlessly over the richly textured surface in search of areas of calm. The excess of movement and energy of the painted and drawn marks, both lyrical and frenzied, relates to the conspicuous consumption which I see around. It is a sign of the troubling times in which I live.

The surface is invaded by a kaleidoscope of colours and repetitions of lines which create an effect of vertigo in the viewer. The surface has an opulence which shatters the work into a visual chaos, as seen in The English Save their Architecture for Special Occasions. In this painting, competition for the viewer's attention is played out between vigorous swirls of cadmium red and orange placed on top of brilliant blues and yellows, and neon pinks and oranges. The entire surface is fair-game to be activated by my exuberant mark-making which derives from my fondness of the colour and vigour in Willem de Kooning's art. In the process of the work's completion, empty space is often times completely engulfed by the migration of marks which seek an equilibrium of surface tension; however, as my work has developed, the all-over chaos seen in earlier works has given way to a balance between highly developed, active areas and more serene, open areas. In the more recent paintings and in many of the prints, the sense of vertigo dissipates into an atmospheric calm which allows the marks and colours to float suspended in space.

Music also plays an important part in my art, especially -but not exclusively- music

from the 1960s. As I listen to music in the studio, it stimulates the mood to create. Music awakens dormant memories residing in my mind and soul. These memories of thoughts and emotions, of places, people and events, come alive in my subconscious and materialise in meandering lines and floral designs which curve lovingly in the space of the work. Songs like "Strawberry Fields Forever," "I am the Walrus," "She Said, She Said," "All You Need is Love," and "Within You Without You," by the Beatles stimulate a sense of colour in me, which gives the work a psychedelic look reminiscent of the paisley age of the 60s. When I listen to the Beatles, I can almost smell the incense that wafted so thickly out the door of a neighbourhood boutique as I walked by as a child. Yet, other songs like "Hey Mr. Tambourine Man" by the Byrds, can cause me to wonder about the state of society today, about all the good will that seemed to exist then that seems to have evaporated now. The dichotomous effect which music has on me is echoed in the work in this exhibition through the dichotomy of the aggressive colour and formal aspects, and the lyricism of its content. Similarly, the content of my work, over the past four years, reflects a dichotomous shift, from socio-political commentary to introspective autobiography

My current autobiographically-based work involves images of scrolls and arabesques which act as manifestations of my Italian heritage and childhood recollections. Although the scrolls and arabesques first appeared spontaneously in my work, after executing a number of paintings and prints, I became aware of their personal significance to me. On a personal level, the scrolling arabesques often form the letter "M" or its flowing derivative which first appeared as a prominent feature in a painting from my second term at Waterloo. I came to realize that the "M" mimicked the first letter of my mother Maria's signature. I recall the beauty and care

that went into signing her name: she would imitate the sensuously rhythmic movement of her"M"s numerous times before putting her pen to the paper to write her name. Only after looking critically at prints such as Lucy and paintings such as The English Save their Architecture for Special Occasions, did I realise that this movement, which appears repeatedly in my work, stems from memories of her. I see the "M" now as a signifier of my mother in my work. The scrolling arabesques are also a synthesis of memories of a carved, wooden gondola, beautifully decorated with delicate scrollings and floral motifs made by my uncle in the 1940s, which I idolized and played with as a child.

The text, which appears in numerous works, is often in Italian, or the written translation of the Italian dialect spoken in my home, and stems from childhood memories. In the process of repeating these words on the surface, I am taken back to my childhood as if I were reliving the past. The print, Paperi, invokes memories of my father calling my brother and I "paperi," a colloquial word in our dialect which, in English, translates loosely into "little father" or "little grown-up." It is an endearing term used by my father to implore us to behave or when reasoning with us as "little grown-ups." Personally meaningful text is also part of the print, Tivivogliobene, which was done while listening to Lucio Dalla's Caruso. Dalla's song pulls at the heart strings and induced in me an emotion of love, which I have for my family and which exists between its members. This love is expressed through the text of the print.

Scrolling arabesques also refer to Italian cultural history. In Tivivogliobene, a cluster of scrolls resembling grapes flows from the lower left hand side. These flowing, scrolling arabesques are symbolic of the wine making process so important to the notion of being Italian in Canada, especially for first generation immigrants like my father. Wine making is to them

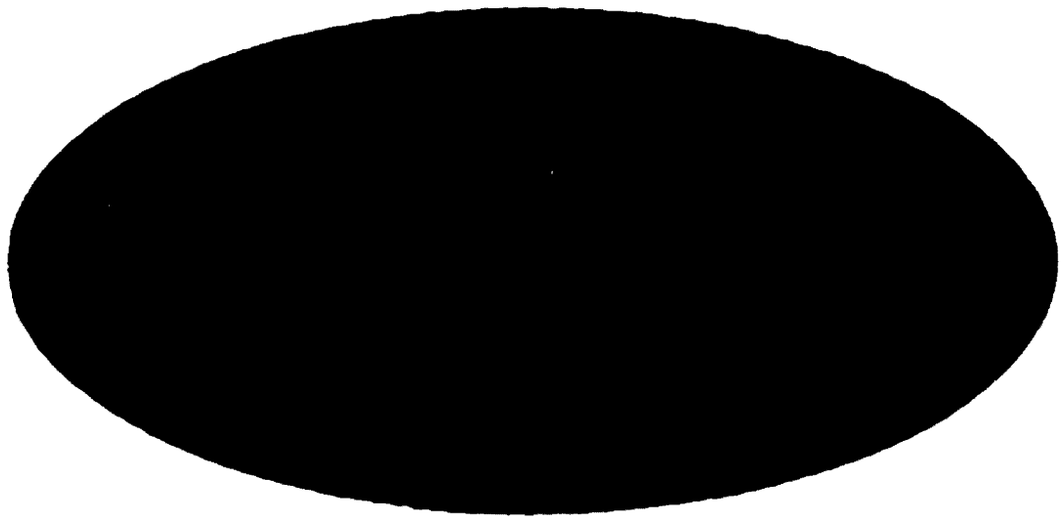
a reminder of their roots, a gateway to a surrendered past, or perhaps, it is a strategy to resist the effects of naturalization in a foreign culture. Although I consider myself foremost a Canadian, I feel a strong affinity to my Italian background. Similar to other artists of immigrant origin, ethnicity informs my art. By using wrought iron railings, which are synonymous with being Italo-Canadian, Toronto installation artist, Carlo Cesta employs his ethnicity as a vehicle to explore what it is to be of Italian origin in Canada and to explore attitudes surrounding the immigrant experience.

The scrolls and arabesques in my art refer also to Italian baroque and rococo periods of art history. I am attracted to the curling, twisting lyricism of the architectural motifs of these periods. Their sensuously energetic movements add vitality to my art as can be seen in prints like Giving None Away and Bernini's Ingredient, which was inspired by his classical architecture. The lyricism of baroque and rococo influences in my work have spilled over into the shapes of the paintings. The elliptical shapes of my paintings originate from my search for a compatible ground for the energetic arabesques and scrolls. I found rectilinear canvases imprisoned my active surface qualities. The incompatibility of the straight edges of the canvas with the swirling activity of the surface created a jarring visual effect, putting emphasis on the edges of the work rather than on the elements of line and colour within the work. While complimenting the formal aspects of my art and activating the space surrounding my paintings, the elliptical shapes make my paintings seem more object-like. For me, the sensuousness of the elliptical shapes and the whimsical nature of the arabesques compliment my search for elements which will negate the deadening effect of the severe austerity of post-painterly abstraction so prevalent in past Canadian abstract art.

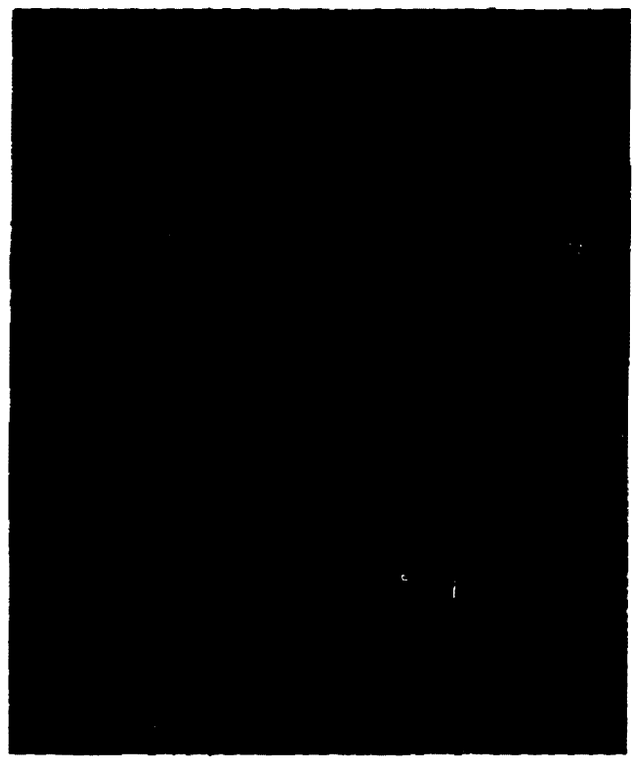
Appearing alongside the scrolls and arabesques have been spiked, radiating wheel forms which can be seen as deriving from nature. These forms resemble radiating suns, although they are suns which neither rise nor set in the space of the work. As in Inspired by Wanting Water, these forms, as if living entities, have metamorphosized steadily into life forms resembling protozoa as seen through a microscope. In more recent prints and paintings, an element of ambiguity has over taken these shapes, for while they appear to be organic, they can be viewed also as being from a mechanized world -a world of gears and pulleys. This ambiguity as seen in Nature vs. Nurture I, is indicative of the angst, which I perceive, in a society in the throes of technological change. My recent paintings and prints question this change and its effects on our lives.

My recent work has reestablished a link with the concern for the social. It seems that, like a farmer, I left the field of the social fallow for two years. Now I find that I can reintroduce social references into my work in a newly productive way. With the realization of the new possibilities which drifting inside the "*immaginario*" provides, art-making, especially painting, no longer presents itself to me as a restrictive preoccupation -all ground is, or can be, fertile ground.

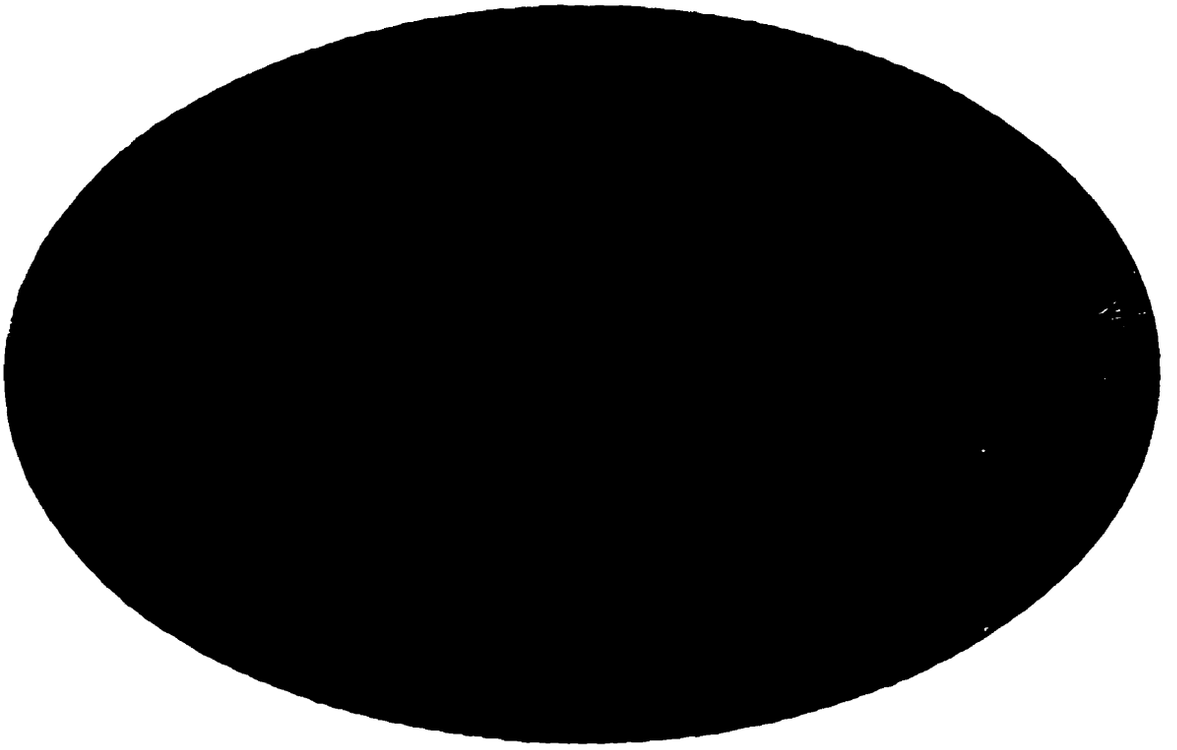
Repoductions of Works in Exhibition



1. The English Save Their Arcitecture for Special Occasions, 1997.



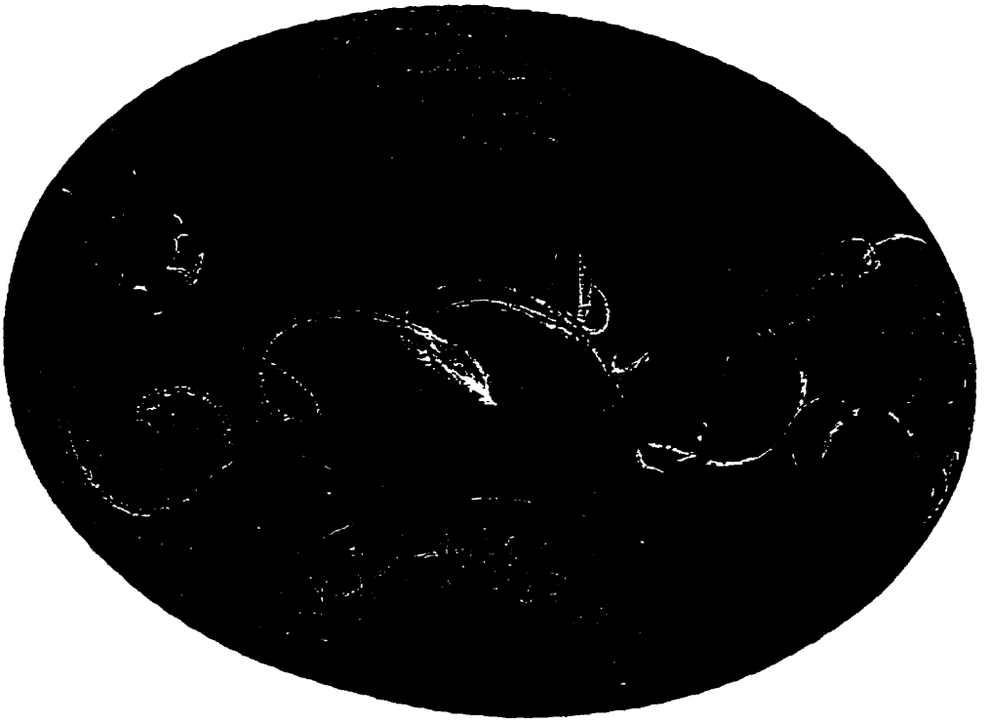
2. Nature vs. Nurture I, 1997.



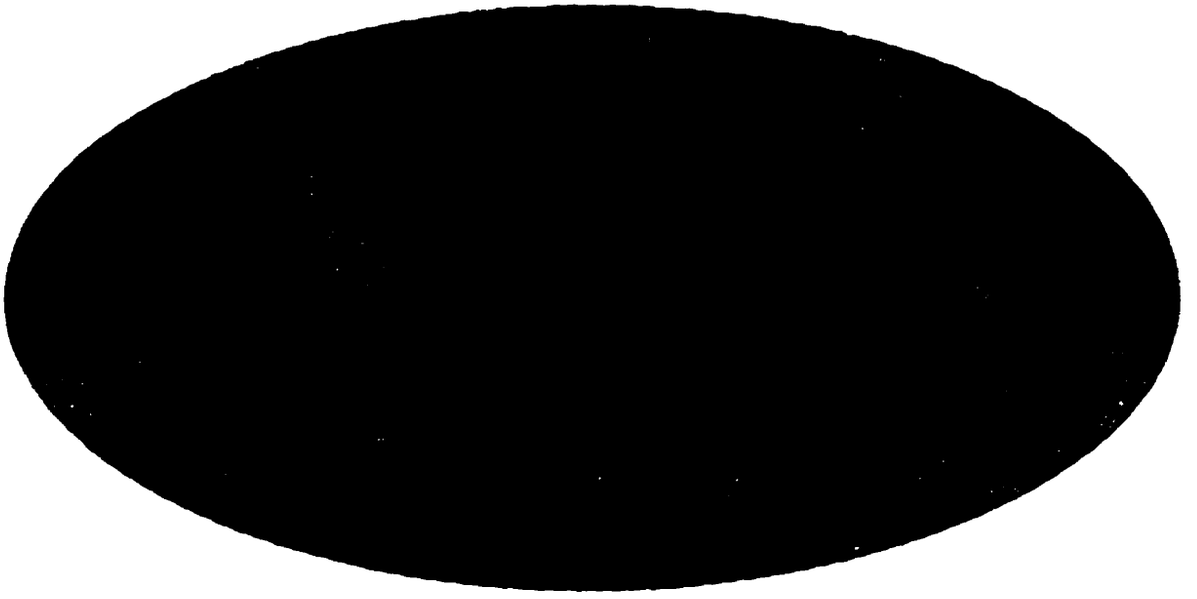
3. They See the Moon in Three Dimensions in Lhasa, 1996.



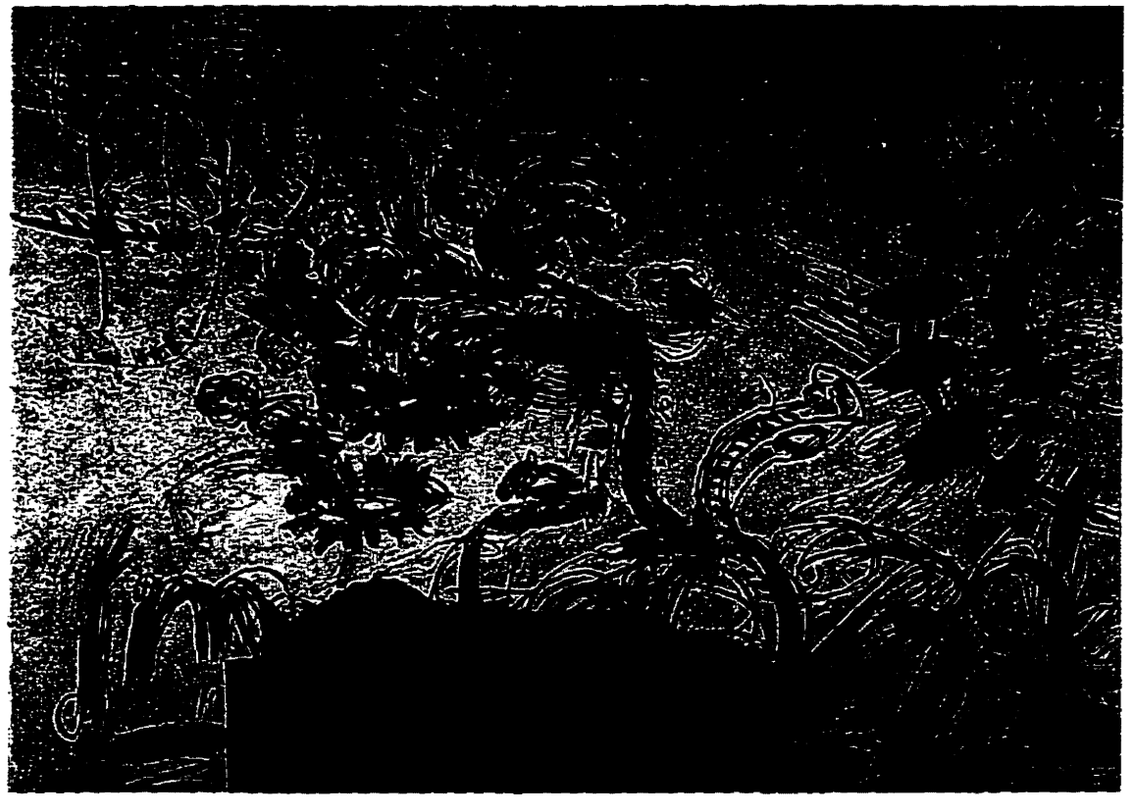
4. Inspired by Wanting Water, 1997.



5. Where is Mr. Tambourine Man Now That We Need Him?, 1997.



6. We Boarded the S.S. Hendericks to Arrive Here, 1997.



7. Any Colour You Like, 1996.



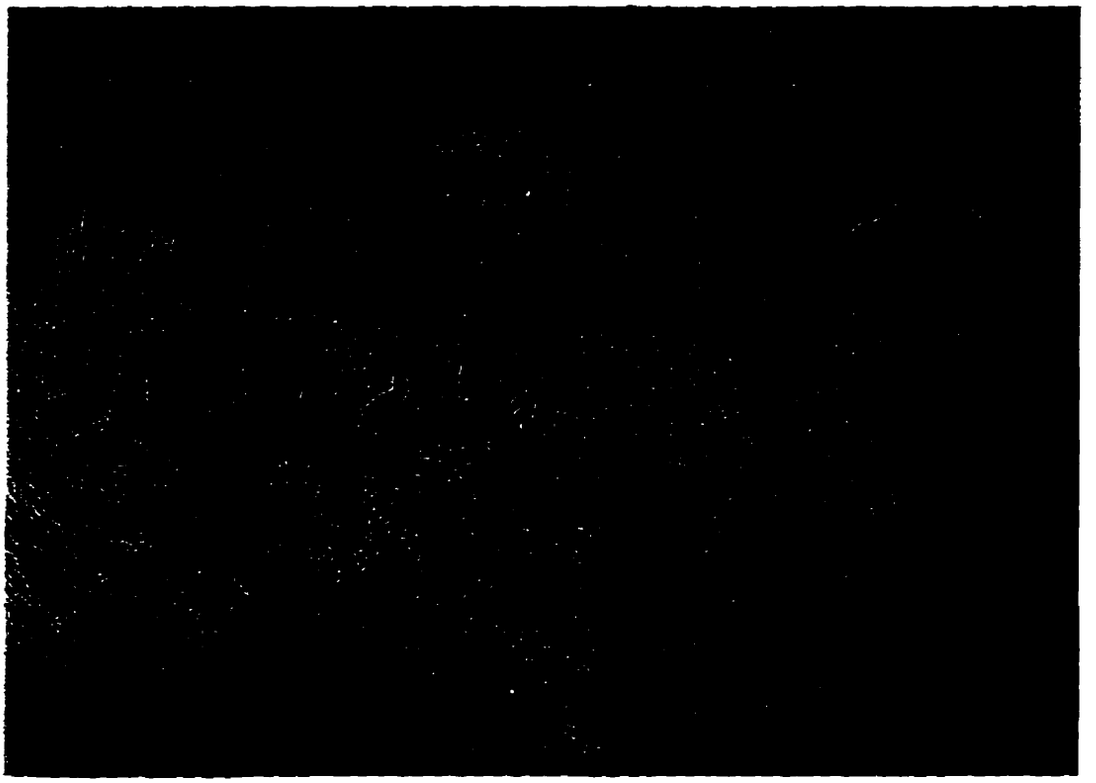
8. Bernini's Walk in the Vatican, 1996.



9. Lucy, 1996.



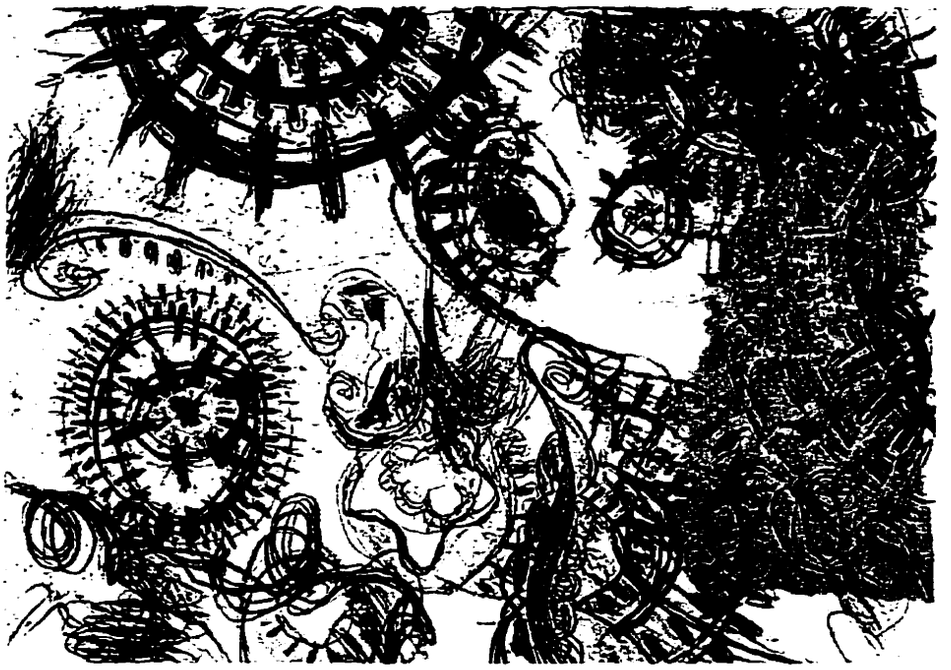
10. Instigator, 1996.



11. In Baroque Light, 1997.



12. E.A.M.A., 1996.



13. Nature vs. Nurture II, 1997.



14. *Tivivogliobene*, 1996.



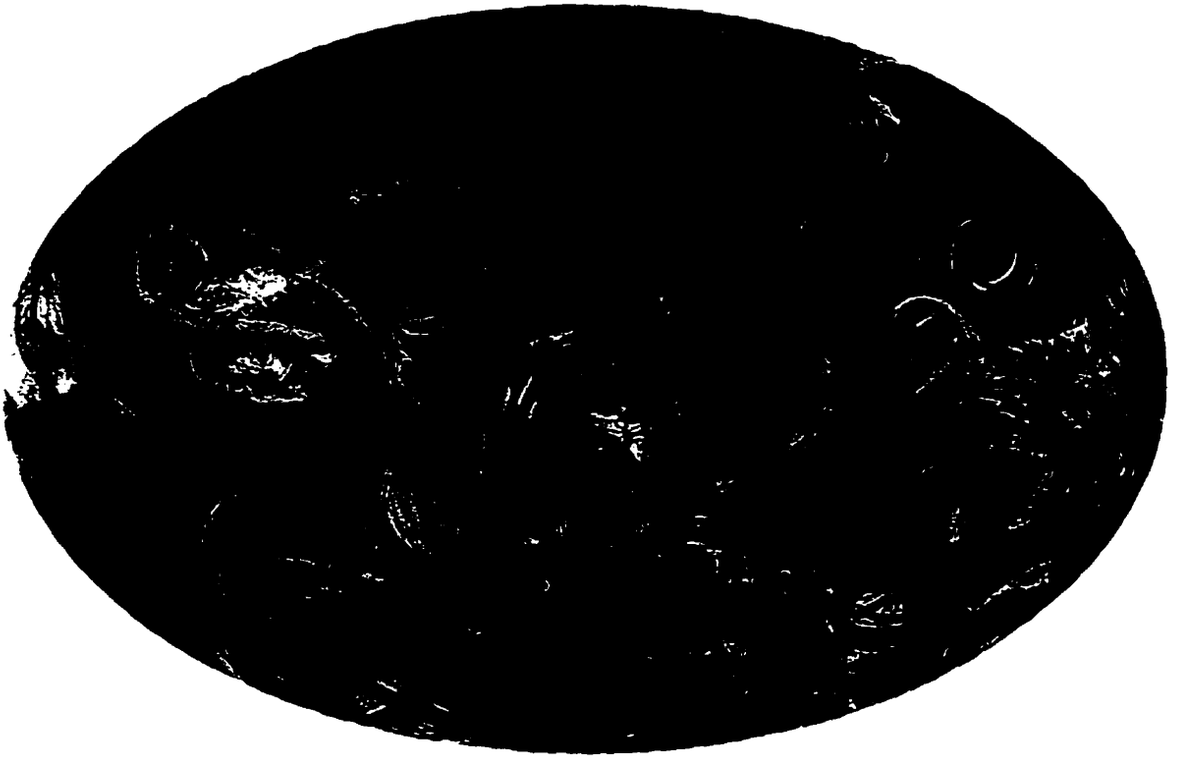
15. Giving None Away, 1996.



16. *Paperi*, 1996.



17. Bernini's Ingredient, 1996.



18. 1815: Wellington's Premature Ejaculation, 1996.

Bibliography

Hospers, John. ed. Artistic Expression. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971.

McEvilley, Thomas. The Exile's Return: Towards a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-modern Era. Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Oliva, Achille Bonito. The International Trans-avantgarde. Milan: Politi, 1982.

----------. The Italian Trans-avantgarde. Milan: Politi, 1980.

Paikowsky, Sandra. Harold Klunder. Montreal: Concordia University Press, 1985.

Rosenberg, Harold. "Action Painting," in Anxious Object. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1964.

Storr, Robert. Philip Guston. New York: Abbeville, 1986.

Watson, Scott. Jack Shadbolt. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990.