



ROBERT YOUNG
A CORNER RESERVED



1 VIEW WITH 2003-04, egg tempera, acrylic and oil on linen, 62 x 45 in.

ROBERT YOUNG

A CORNER RESERVED

ART DEALERS ASSOCIATION OF CANADA
ASSOCIATION DES MARCHANDS D'ART DU CANADA

**ODON
WAGNER**
CONTEMPORARY

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ROBERT YOUNG: INSPIRATION, ALLUSION AND EVOCATION

By ROBIN LAURENCE

In 2012, as Robert Young reflected on the process of creating his large and complex painting *Axis Mundi*, he wrote, "I'm generally not very purposive, intentional or goal-oriented -- rather I trust to inspiration and try to keep out of the way."¹ Because Young's works appear to be so carefully composed and meticulously executed, and because they are filled with such particular references -- whether art historical, philosophical, literary, political, musical, or architectural -- viewers might find his assertion of non-purposiveness difficult to believe. Yet, he describes his way of working as "not so much making a picture as attending while it comes into being"² -- and here we must empty our own

to vocation, and the important continuities of art history, but also about the inexplicable -- the deep mysteries that underlie the shapes and forms of our daily lives.

Despite his apprehensions about the concretizing nature of verbal language, Young is extremely well read, thoughtfully articulate, and sincerely appreciative of those who look closely at his art in order to write about it. He fully acknowledges the sources of his images and allusions, whether they originate in Byzantine icons, Gothic tapestries, Renaissance paintings, Constructivist designs, Buddhist koans, American blues singers, or a wooden asparagus crate picked up at a local produce market. At the same time, he is concerned about too-literal interpretations of his work based on these sources. In *Mystique: Povera*, for instance, Young has adapted and juxtaposed the ragged and patched central figure from Giotto's 1330 painting *Allegory of Poverty*, a 1975 news photo of the imprisoned left-wing militant Ulrike Meinhof, and a still shot of the Japanese actress Hideko Takamine from the 1960 film *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*. In contrast to the "iconicity" of these three figures, each frozen in a moment of renunciation, reflection or hesitation in a way that conveys something of the archetypal, Young has borrowed a nude from the 20th-century American artist Isabel Bishop. He observes that Bishop painted women in a natural and uninflected way, neither idealized nor eroticized. As signalled by this figure's naked, awkward, and unpretentious pose, she might be "the raw material from which the other three women are made."⁴ Together, all four figures suggest a meditation on the contemporary condition of women -- although this is a barely adequate description of Young's immensely complex and subtle play of emotional, formal and philosophical elements, of art historical traditions, geometric patterns, contrasting perspectival systems, natural and built environments, and unexpected framing devices.



2 EIGHT POUNDS TOO 1986-87, oil on linen, 40 x 40 in.

minds of expectations and preconceptions in order to understand that Zen condition of "yieldedness" to which he alludes. Certainly, the academic impulse to nail down meaning with words threatens to diminish visual art's expressive power and inherent mystery³ -- and mystery is significant here. Although themes and ideas hover and then coalesce in his mind as he paints, Young puts his collage-like compositions together intuitively, believing that ultimately they will make deeply felt -- although not necessarily easily articulated -- sense. His paintings are not only about the nature of painting, the commitment

Evident in Young's recent series of paintings, *Axis Mundi*, *Taberna*, and *Booth Portal*, is his affectionate attention to and appreciation of the everyday, especially within the context of the modest house and garden he shares with his wife Miyoko. The way sunlight slants through an open kitchen door, the classical line of a lintel above a stained glass window, the overhanging branches of a cedar of Lebanon in the front yard, the healing qualities of certain herbs in the garden, the reflections in the glass of a framed art work that hangs near him, the corner of the living room where he often sits and thinks -- all have found a place in these works. Such components evoke a contemplative existence and contribute to

a sense of the sanctity of the home, the providential nature of shelter, and the interpenetration of life and art. At the same time, Young is again playing with opposing systems of representation and abstraction, and seems to relish the tensions that occur when the illusion of three dimensions and the essential flatness of the picture plane contradict or contest one another. He takes apart certain architectural elements, creating a magical sense of transparency while also honouring the way his house is physically put together. As well, he quotes architectural elements from biblical, literary, and art historical sources. In recent years, one of Young's recurring motifs has been a walled stairway, borrowed from Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation*, ca. 1450, and evoking the sense of a cloistered or sacred space as well as posing a perspectival conundrum.

Arcanum of Providence is one of a number of mixed-media works based on an old, gnarled crab apple tree in Young's front yard. Having roughly transplanted the tree twice after he bought the house, Young found himself sitting in the corner of his living room many years later, looking out at it through a succession of natural and architectural frames and arches, represented here as a series of apertures positioned at different angles from each other. He imagined himself having a conversation with the tree, which posed the question of which of them would outlive the other. A significant aspect of all Young's paintings based on the crab apple tree is their geometrically patterned surrounds, inspired by elements of Islamic decoration. The patterns, which shift "woozily" between flatness and the illusion of depth, call up the use of geometric patterns in sacred art and architecture around the world and across the ages. Young's paintings seem to reiterate religious vocations in times past when geometry was used as a contemplative practice, although again he has arrived at this imagery intuitively rather than purposively. "I have a growing sense, which I can't describe or defend, of the purity, the spiritual qualities of geometry," he says.

An earlier series of works deploy the recurring form of a box as a vessel for Young's self-directed passage through the history of painting, from ancient Roman frescoes through Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* and on to a Vladimir Tatlin still life and a wooden tea chest directly rendered in the studio. These boxes function as both formal and allegorical devices (although the artist might contest the word "allegorical"), serving Young's investigation of different modes of representation and, at the same time, his meditation on a number of existential questions.



3 IN WEIGHT POUNDS 1986-87, oil on linen, 42 x 42 in.

What endures in Young's work is the sense of many shifting and shimmering planes of being -- intersecting, overlapping, contradicting, and confounding each other. Instead of proposing a single means of making sense of who we are, where we are, and why we are here, Young shows us a myriad of approaches -- his own and those of artists who have preceded him by decades and centuries. Ultimately we are left with a profound and generous sense of the wonder of it all -- the wonder and the mystery.

Robin Laurence is an independent writer, critic and curator based in Vancouver.

¹ Robert Young, "Change of Title" (artist's statement), August 2012.

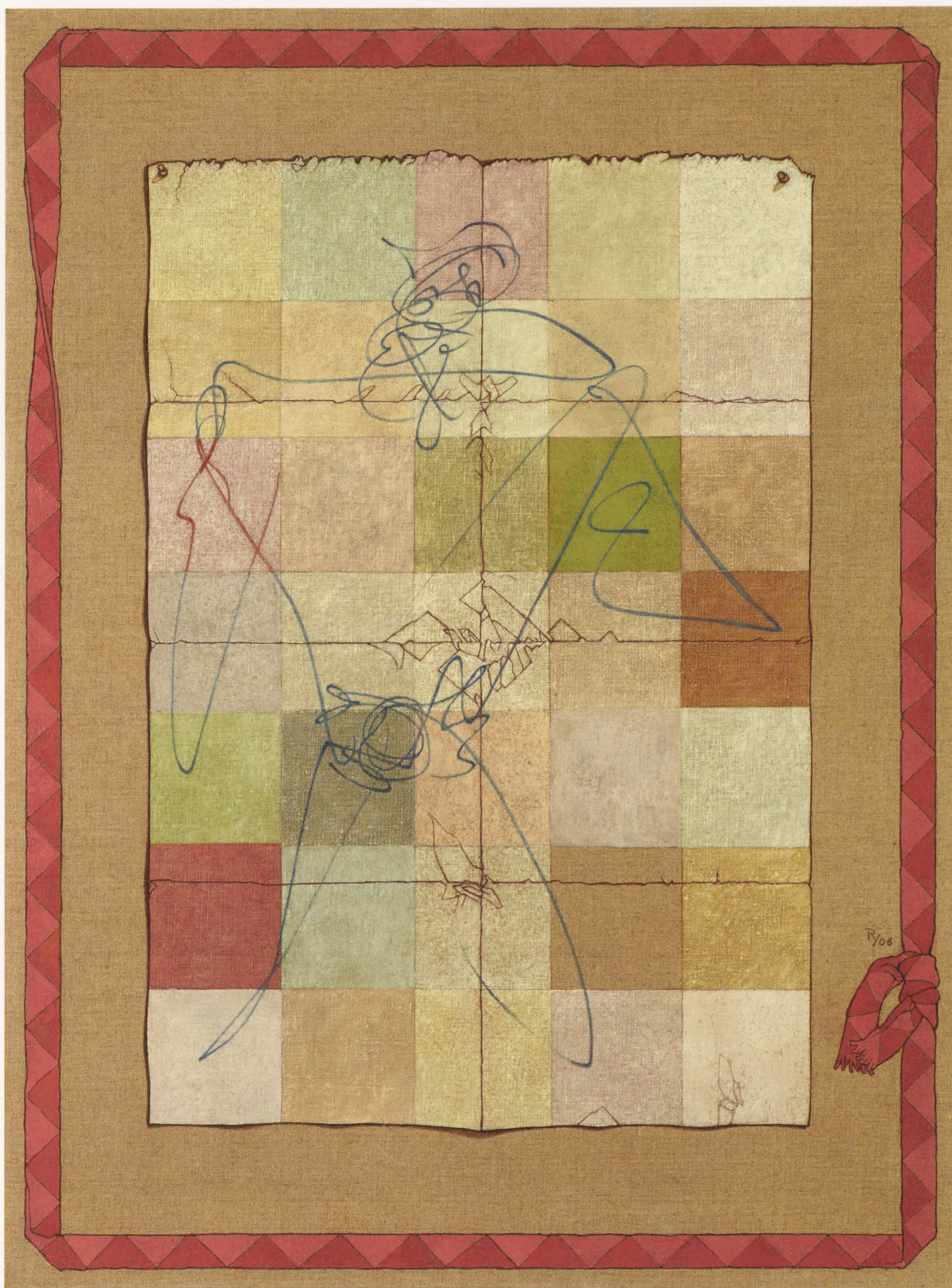
² Ibid.

³ Robin Laurence, "(T)art and Its Orthodoxies," from Robert Young: In My Small Pavilion (Vancouver, Atelier Gallery, 1993), p.2.

⁴ Robert Young in conversation with the author, January 7, 2014. Unless otherwise cited, all direct and indirect quotes by the artist are derived from interviews conducted January 7 and 11, 2015.



4 THE SEMIOTIC FALLACY 2006, gouache and acrylic on linen, 40 x 32 in.

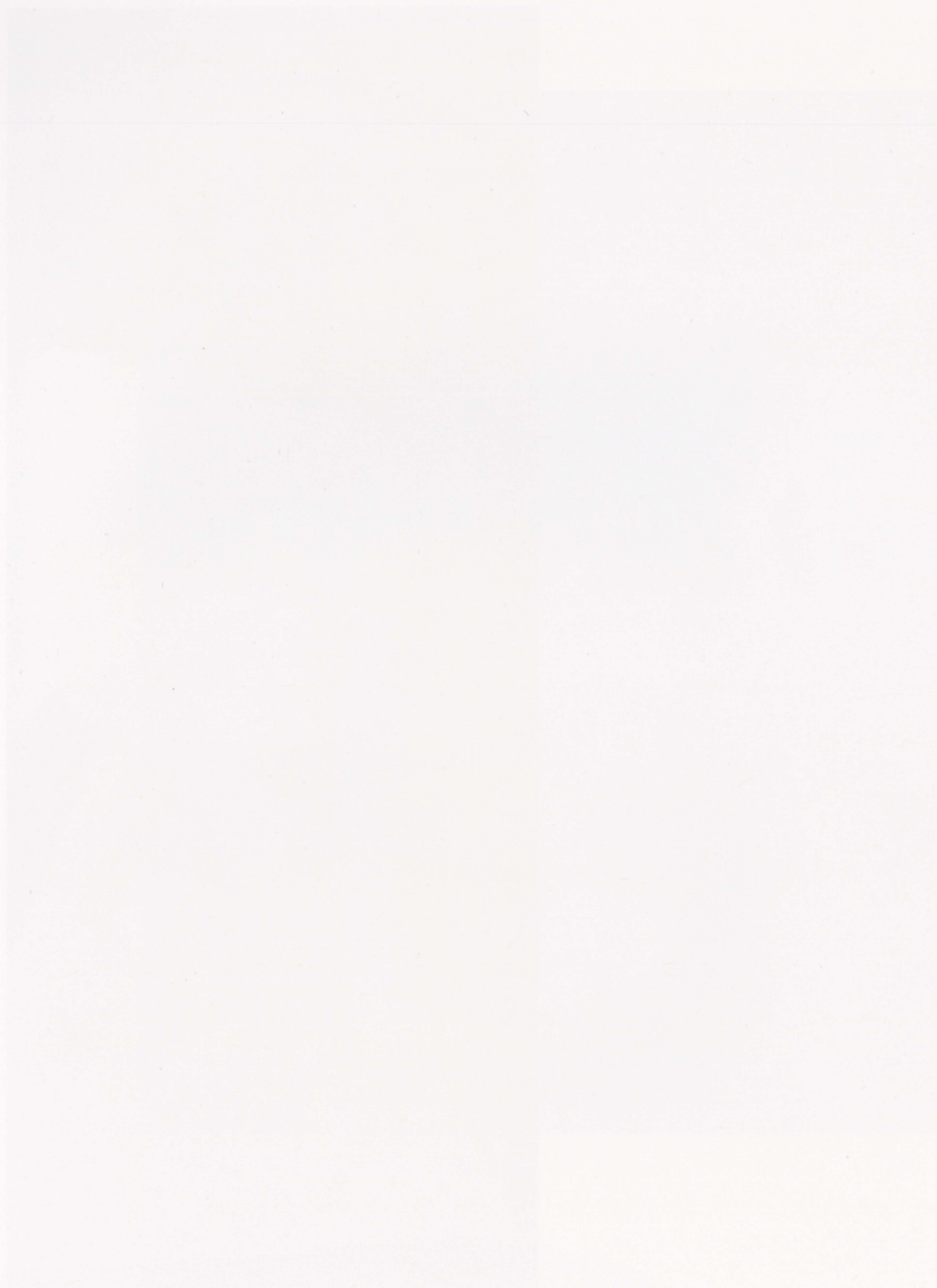


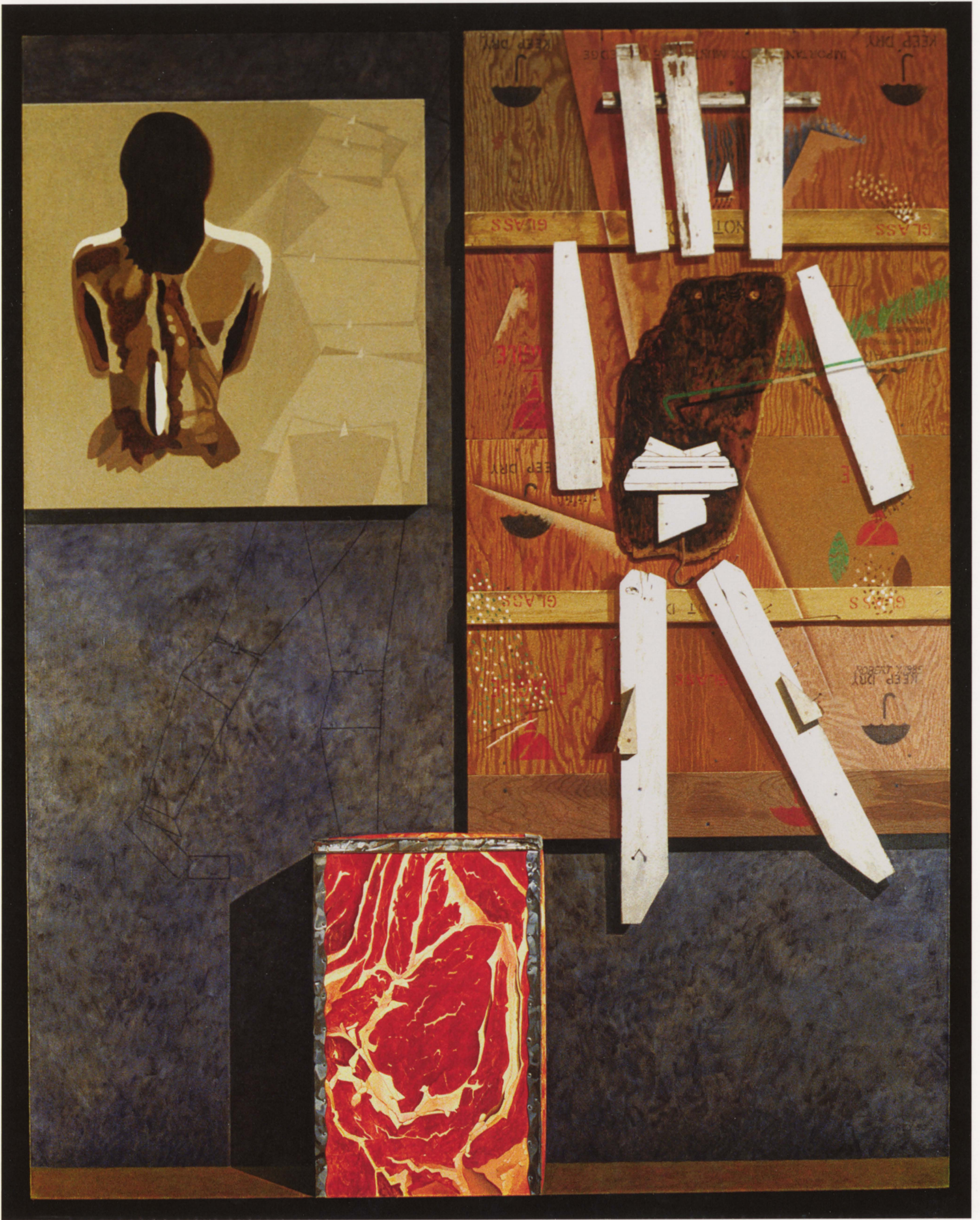
5 JEREMIAH 2006, gouache and acrylic on linen, 40 x 30 in.



6 SWINGING IN A PALINQUIN 1989, oil on linen, 54 x 42 in.





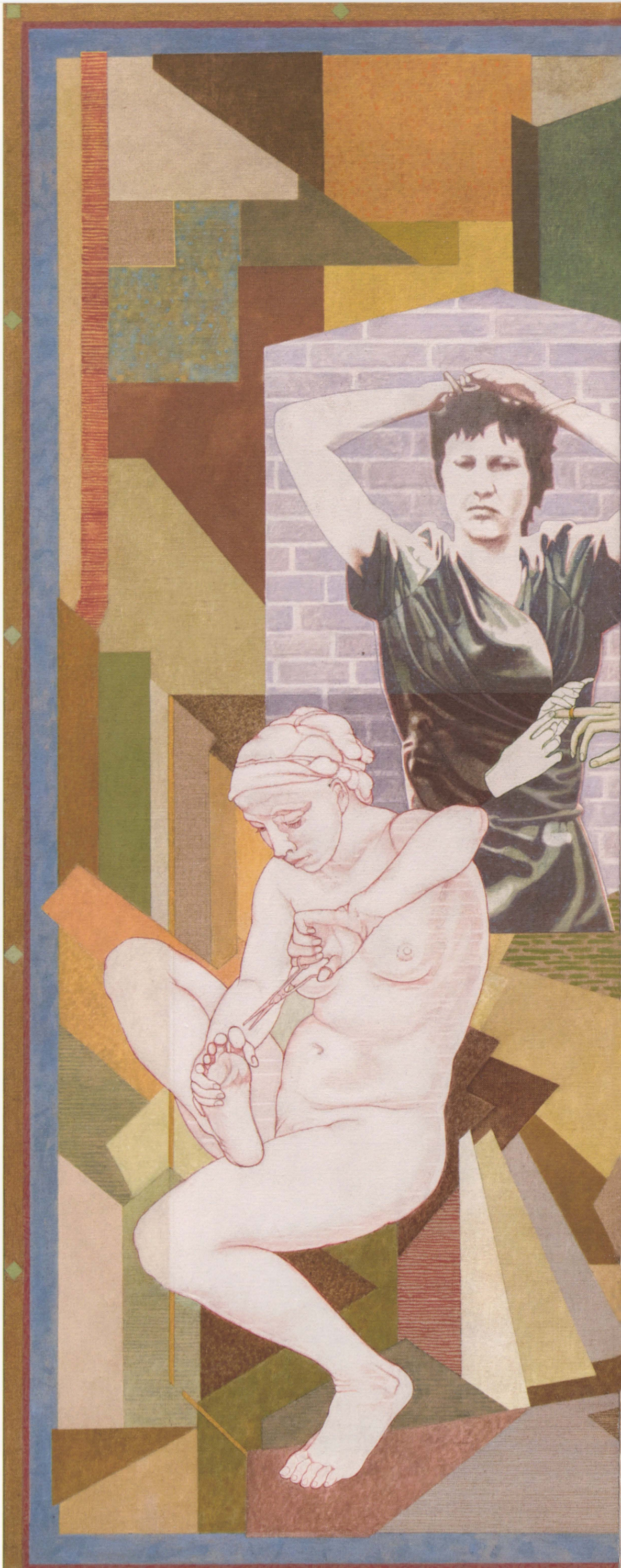




9 AXIS MUNDI 2011-12, egg tempera, acrylic and oil on linen, 59 x 47 in.



10 MYSTIQUE: POVERA
2008-09, egg tempera, acrylic and oil on linen.
48 x 60 in.













13 ABSOLUTE SIGNAL 2002, watercolour, gouache on paper, 65 x 47 in.



14 THE ARCANUM OF PROVIDENCE 2002, egg tempera, gouache and watercolour on paper, 60 x 40 in.

BIOGRAPHY

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 1938 | Born in Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 1962 | University of British Columbia, B.A. Honours, Art History |
| 1964 | The City and Guilds of London School of Art, Certificate of Merit |
| 1966 | The Vancouver School of Art, Advance Diploma in Graphics |
| 1982-1998 | Associate Professor, University of British Columbia |

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

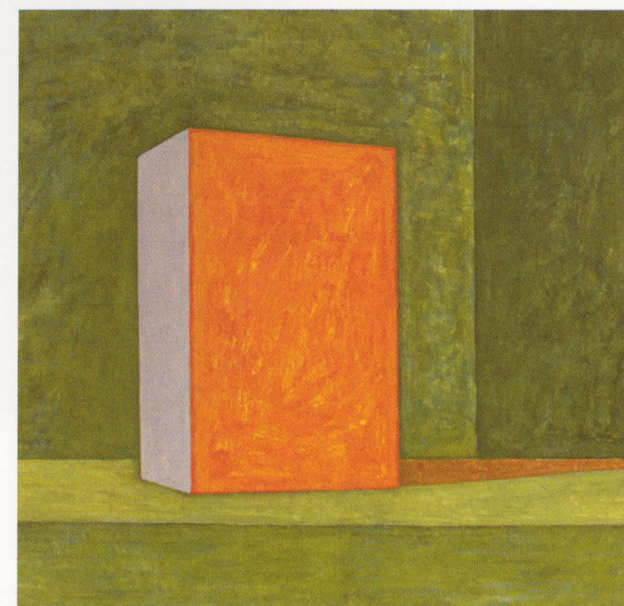
| | | | |
|-----------|---|------|--|
| 2015 | Odon Wagner Contemporary, Toronto, ON, Canada | | The Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| | Davidson Galleries, Seattle, WA, USA | | |
| 2014 | Gordon Smith Gallery of Canadian Art, North Vancouver, BC, Canada | 1982 | Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON, and Calgary, AB, Canada |
| 2011 | Simon Fraser University Gallery, Burnaby, BC, Canada | | Redfern Gallery, London, England |
| | Gallery at Evergreen Cultural Centre Coquitlam, BC, Canada | 1981 | Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 2010 | Winchester Modern, Victoria, BC, Canada | | Confederation Art Centre, Charlottetown, PEI, Canada |
| 2009 | Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, BC, Canada | 1980 | Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, BC, Canada |
| 2007 | Atelier Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada | 1978 | Art Gallery of Southern Alberta, Lethbridge, AB, Canada |
| 2003 | Atelier Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada | | Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 2001 | Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, AB, Canada | 1977 | Marlborough-Godard Gallery, Montreal, QC, Canada |
| 2000 | Atelier Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada | | Glenbow Alberta Institute, Calgary, AB, Canada |
| 1998 | Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, AB, Canada | 1976 | Marlborough-Godard Gallery, Toronto, ON, Canada |
| 1994 | Atelier Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada | | Centre Culturel Canadien, Paris, France |
| 1992 | Simon Fraser University Teck Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada | 1975 | Redfern Gallery, London, England |
| 1990 | Paul Kuhn Fine Arts, Calgary, AB, Canada | 1974 | Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 1989 | The Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada | 1971 | Canada House, London, England |
| 1987-1988 | The Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, AB, Canada | | Redfern Gallery, London, England |
| 1984 | Atelier Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada | 1970 | Jaffa Gallery, Doncaster, England |

TWO-OR-THREE-PERSON SHOWS

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|------|---|
| 1988 | The Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art & Design, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 1987 | PS 122, New York, NY, USA |
| 1985 | Atelier Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 1979 | Art Core, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| | Pumps, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 1971 | Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, England |
| 1970 | Kingston Art Gallery, Kingston-Upon-Thames, England |
| | Morley College Gallery, London, England |

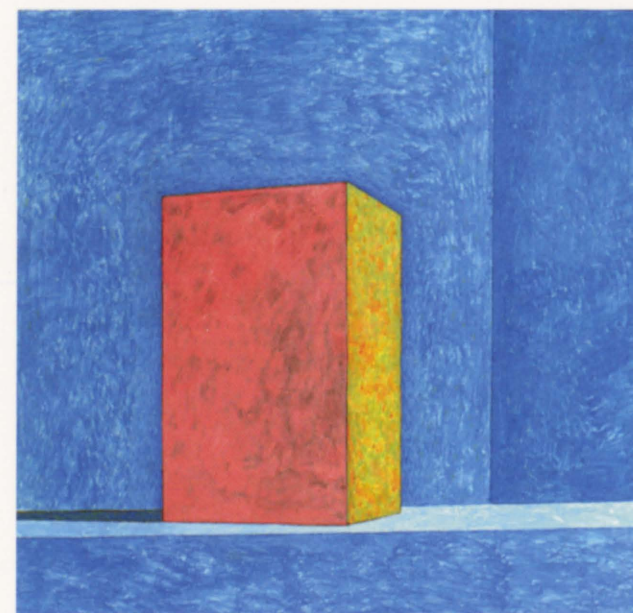
SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

| | |
|------|---|
| 2015 | Art Toronto, Odon Wagner Contemporary, Toronto, ON, Canada |
| | The Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 2014 | Art Toronto, Odon Wagner Contemporary, Toronto, ON, Canada |
| | The Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 2012 | Gordon Smith Gallery Of Canadian Art, North Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 2006 | <i>Printmakers at the Architectural Institute of BC</i> , Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| | Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, BC, Canada |
| 2005 | Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, BC, Canada |
| 2001 | <i>Prints from Canada's Pacific Province</i> , Dublin, Ireland |
| 2003 | Artists For Kids Gallery, North Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 1998 | University of Alberta Edmonton, AB, Canada |
| 1996 | Muttart Public Art Gallery, AB, Canada |
| 1995 | Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, AB, Canada |
| 1994 | Atelier Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 1993 | Malaspina Printmakers Annual Member's Show, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| | Artropolis, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| | Atelier Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| | Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada |
| 1992 | Paul Kuhn Fine Arts, Calgary, AB, Canada |
| | Malaspina Printmakers Annual Members Show, Vancouver, BC, Canada |



15 UNTITLED (YELLOW BOX)
1986, egg tempera on panel, 16 x 12 in.

- 1991 20th International Graphic Art, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia
Community Arts Council of Vancouver, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 1990 Whatcom Museum of History of Art, Bellingham, WA, USA
- 1989 Muttart Art Gallery, Calgary, AB, Canada
18th International of Graphic Art, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia
MacDonald Stewart Art Centre and 9 other centres, 1987 through 1989
- 1988 Olympic Arts Festival, Paul Kuhn Fine Arts, Calgary, AB, Canada
- 1987 Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 1986 The Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada
Pitt International Galleries, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 1985 Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, BC, Canada
- 1984 Queensland Art Gallery, Australia .
- 1983 Malaspina Printmakers Annual Members' Show, Vancouver, BC, Canada
Bau-Xi Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada
London Regional Art Gallery, London, ON, Canada
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 1982 Canada House, London, England
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, Canada
- 1981 MacDonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, ON, Canada
Art Gallery of Brant, Brantford, ON, Canada
Robson Square Media Centre, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 1980 Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary, University Art Gallery and Museum, University of Alberta, AB, Canada
- 1976-80 Malaspina Printmakers Annual Members Show, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 1976 Vancouver Art Gallery, BC, Canada
- 1975 Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montreal, QC, Canada
- 1974 Redfern Gallery, London, England
Bradford Print Biennale, Bradford, England
- 1973 The First British International Drawing Biennale, Middlesborough, England



16 UNTITLED (BLUE BOX)
1986, egg tempera on panel, 12 x 12 in.

NOTABLE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| Art Gallery of Greater Victoria | Elton John Collection | Tate Gallery Modern Collection |
| Art Gallery of Ontario | Esso Resources | Toronto Dominion Bank |
| Bank of Nova Scotia | First City Finance Collection | University of Alberta |
| Banff School of Fine Arts | Glenbow Alberta Institute | University of British Columbia |
| Bell Canada | Imperial Oil Collection | University of Calgary |
| Beaverbrook Art Gallery | London Borough of Camden | University of Guelph |
| Burnaby Art Gallery | Mississauga Library | University of Victoria |
| Canada Council Art Bank | Montreal Museum of Fine Arts | Vancouver Art Gallery |
| Canadian Broadcasting Corporation | National Gallery of Canada | Winnipeg Art Gallery |
| City of Vancouver Collection | Nickle Arts Museum | Various Private Collections |
| Confederation Art Centre | Provincial Government of British Columbia | |
| De Beers Consolidated Mines | Simon Fraser University | |

Front Cover: TABERNA 2013, egg tempera, acrylic and oil on linen, 66 x 54 in.

Back Cover: ALCOVE WITH HARUNOBU WINDOW 2004, watercolour and gouache on paper, 46 x 34 in.

CREDITS

| | |
|------------|--|
| CURATORIAL | Odon Wagner, Rafael Wagner, Caitlin McCullough |
| LAYOUT | Caitlin McCullough |
| DESIGN | Angela Wagner |
| PRINTING | Solisco Québec |

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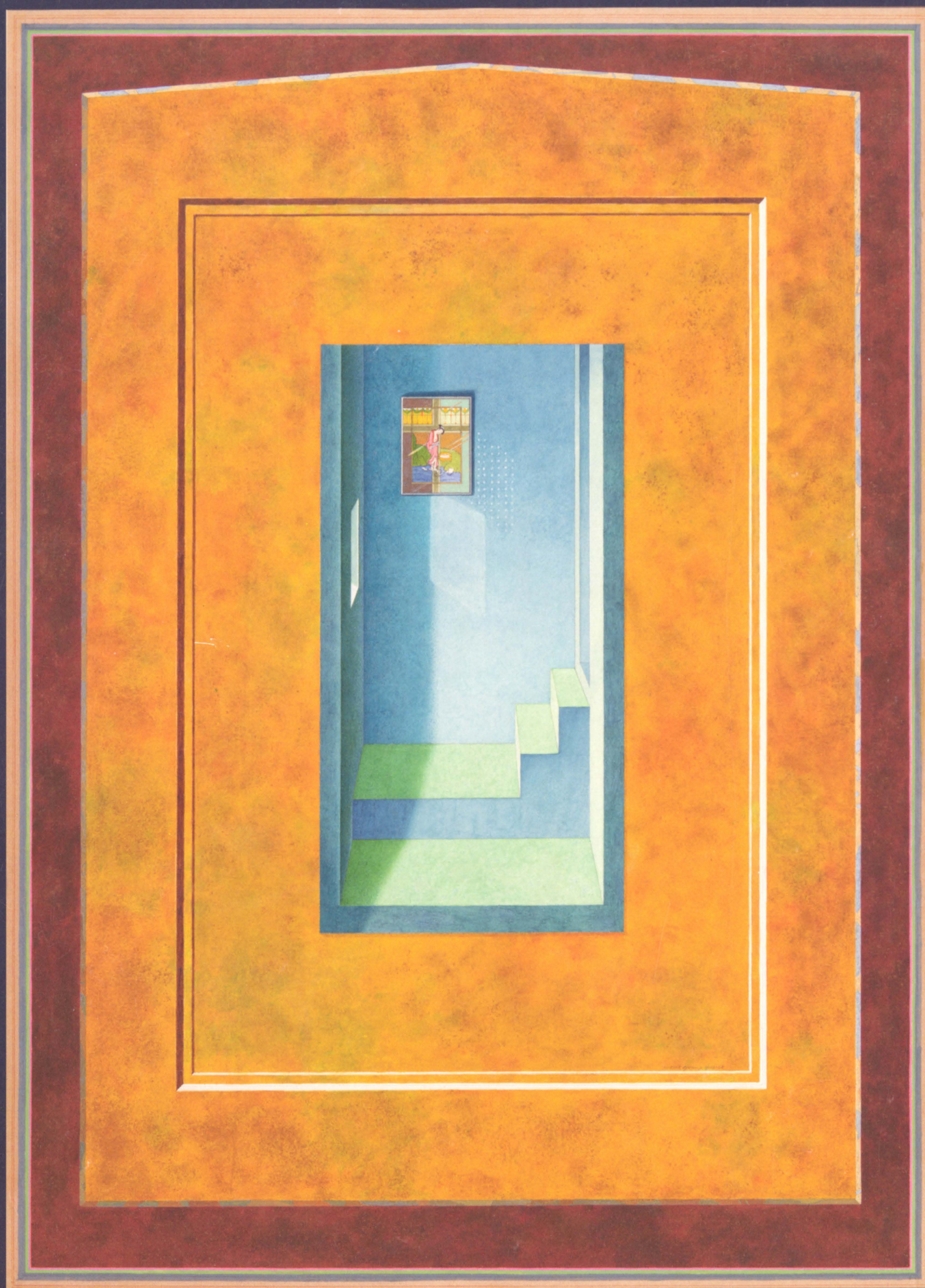
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