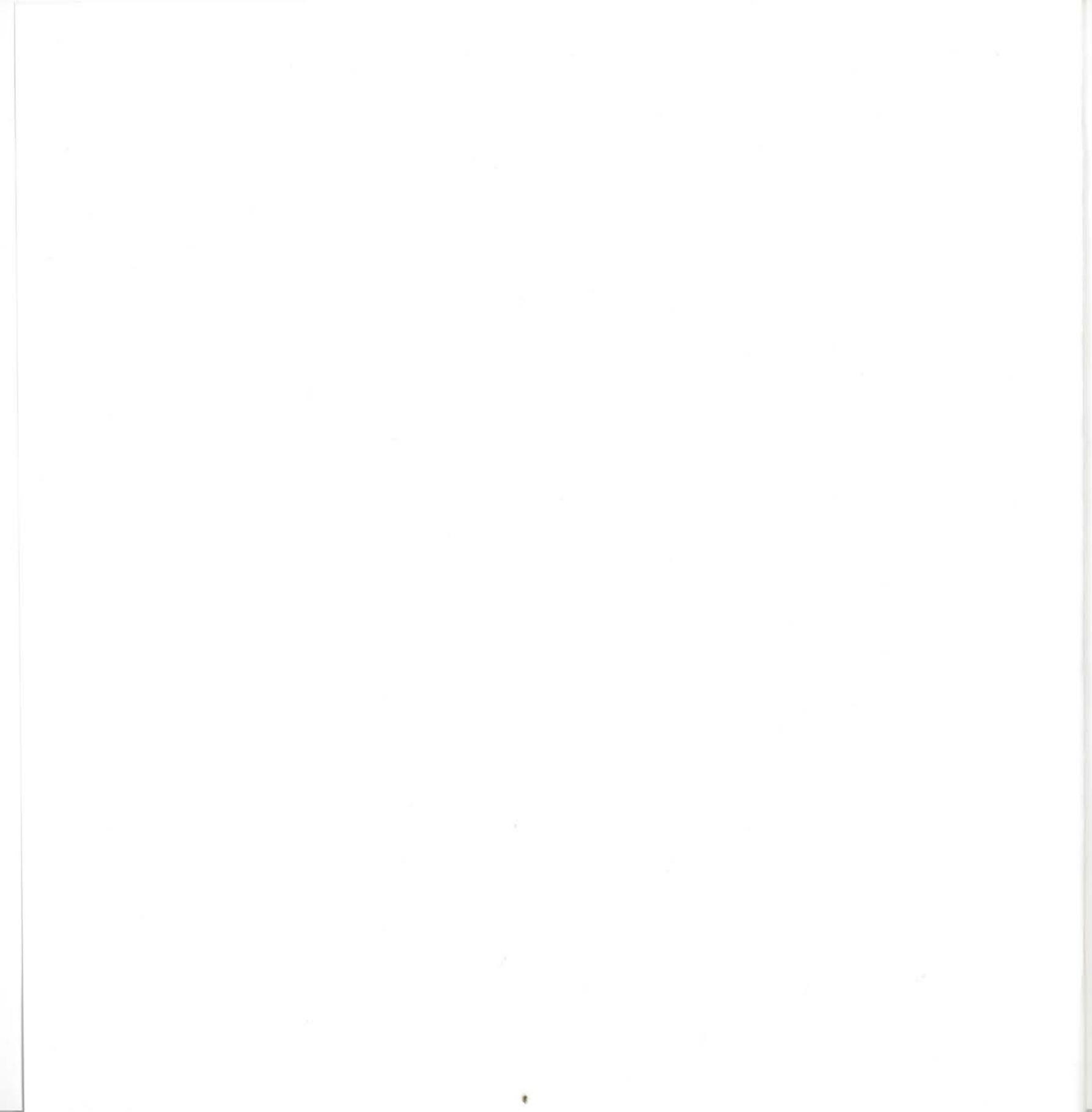


THEN
AS
NOW



THE

A

NO

Exhibition Curated by

Ronald R.

and K.

C

Ronald R. DeMier, Ph.D.

2005

March 20-May 20

Sordoni Art Gallery

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

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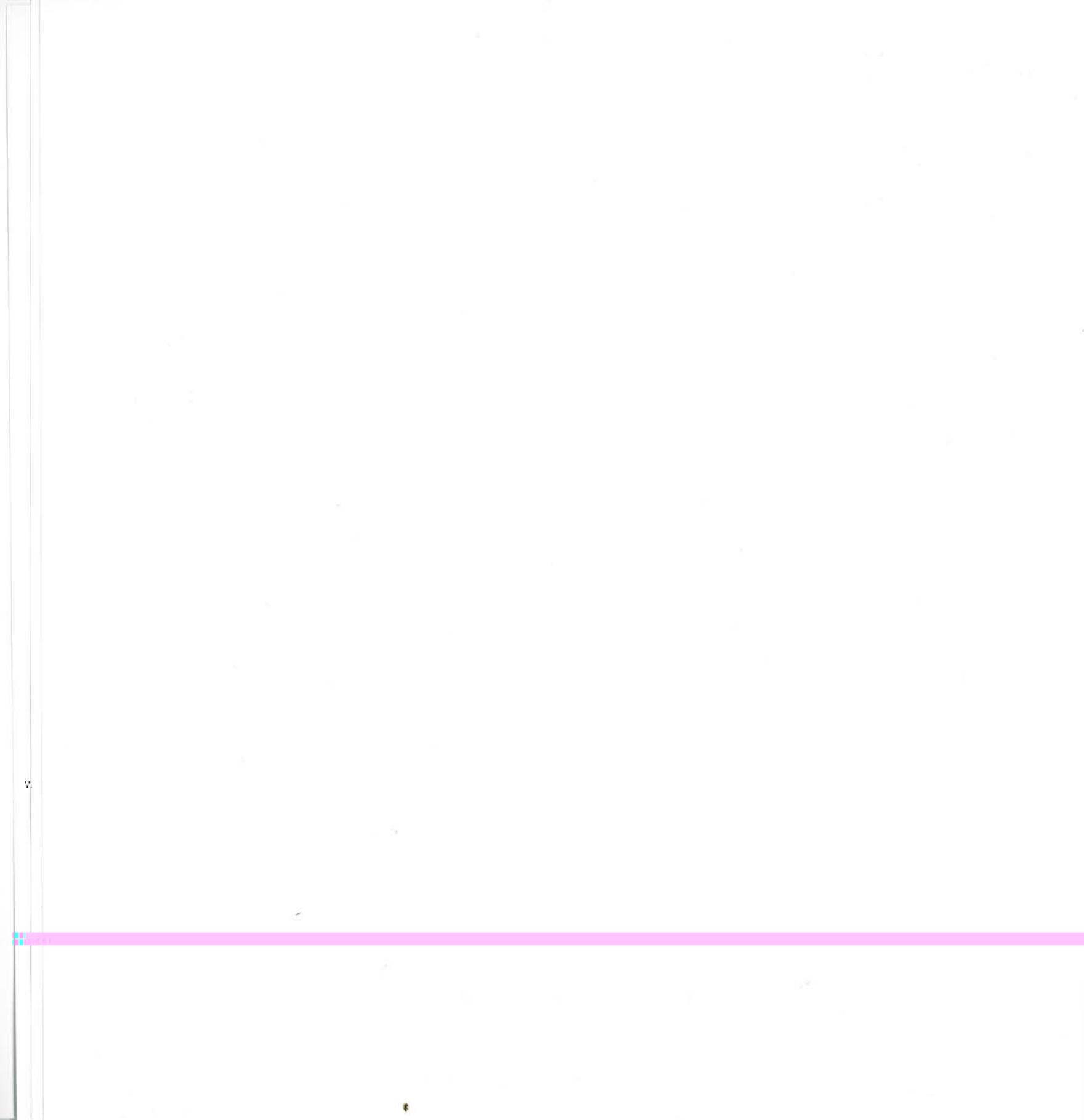
It has been a privilege to find a place where to work with the artists included in this exhibition. I would like to thank the representatives, including PPCW's Michael Hirschman and Kristin Johnson, New York City; Gallerie V in Chicago, and the Seven Bridges Ensemble in Greenwich, Connecticut, all of whom have given generously of their time and expertise. I am also grateful to the collectors whose richness would not have been achieved without their efforts. This exhibition is non-profit.

11. *Then as Now*, The Times, London, by www.artsite.com

March 2005

Patricia P. Rossini, Ph.D., Director
Director

Karen Evans Kayford
Associate



Go backwards into the future so that your face is lit up by the past.

—Odd Nerdrum

Having survived the formalist reductions of Modernism and the theoretical acrobatics of the Postmodern, painting is now in the company of the Real, that is to say, it is "open to the world," prompted by optical experience and pictorial illusion, "only its kind skilled simulation." Against this, painting is not a representation of reality, and recognizable subject matter.¹ But it is a different and a very sort of real; it both is and is not a representation of reality. There is recognition, but it is not based on likeness beyond likeness. In some instances, as is the case in this exhibition, recent painting has deliberately positioned itself—self-consciously and self-critically—within the genealogy of its own tradition, appropriating, referencing, and recasting Old Master forms, figures, and styles in a visual and intellectual dialogue with Art History, mining historical allusion with contemporary self-awareness. As one critic has recently put it, "It brings together the spirituality and humanism of the Old Masters and the innovation and playfulness of modern art to create New Old Master art."²

Of course, at some level all works of art are about art. And particularly in the appropriation mania of the 1980s, this came in part in its pilfered references from the past, its ironic parody and clever pastiche. As Tom McEvilly succinctly announced in 1992: "In the beginning was the Word—and since then there's been quotation."³ The act of quotation, on this view, was thought to affect a critique of the Modernist cult of originality—of the

pointless and futile search for originality. Fiction is constructed on the past. Yet for the postmodern artist, the past is not a source of inspiration nor reactionary surrender to pictorial styles and techniques. It is a source of knowledge, a wellspring of meaning, a complex number of genealogies and epistemologies, a process of negotiations, including nostalgic memory, authority and authority, and that always problematic issue of influence's priority. In this exhibition, the past is not a source of meaning, but rather a means to ask, in its active intervention in, and manipulation of, the material of the past, recontextualization or precedent as origin. To put it another way, Is meaning transferred from original to imitation, or do Art's meanings necessarily shift over History's span? This is a central issue for postmodern art, where a new poetic style, he argued, may be achieved through quotations and oddly retains parts of their originality. So that the tyranny of time is almost overturned.⁴ What I wish to argue here is that the new images assert that it is that certain forms of expression may appeal to the past, while not entirely submitting to it. These images, while neither past nor present, nevertheless, at issue is a productive collision

between, as Walter Benjamin writes in *The Now and the Then*: "It isn't that the past is never present; it is that it is not always present casts its light on the past: rather, the past comes into the present like a flash of lightning."⁵ What exactly, then, is conceived in this intimate coupling of "then and now, past and present? This is what this exhibition seeks to answer.

The term 'neo-pre-Modernism'⁶ might best describe the strategy or situation at work in the painting of Swedish-born, classically-trained artist Odd Nerdrum whose seemingly retrograde figuration and painterliness—and, as one critic put it in 1964, his "old masterly gravy"⁷—earned him the reprobation of his instructors and fellow students at the Art Academy of Oslo. The critic is referring to Nerdrum's reframing of the forms, color, and textures; and the drawing almost religious tenebris⁸ and overtentious subject matter of that seventeenth-century Dutch Master. The painter explained his choice of artistic ideals: "I have always found Rembrandt's world more humane than Picasso's.... The lifespan of a work of art is proportionate to its content."⁹ But as Donald Kuspit has effectively argued about Nerdrum's use of the past, his "traditionalism is not nostalgia . . . but a way of aging the present, making clear that it is born with a patina, that it is time-bound—bound by time from the beginning of its appearance."¹⁰

'Neo-pre-Modernism' describes a kind of rebellion against the formalist and rationalist authority of Modernism, in painting which, like Nerdrum does, seeks to restore the spirituality of a pre-Modern utopia with renewed emphasis on ritual, myth, nature, and significant human values. The artist positions his archetypal narratives, as in *Hermafrodite* of 1992–96, as a defense against a loss of being within the contemporary world, where nature is

subordinated to reason." For Hermafrodite 1992–96, the artist uses oil paint on canvas, and the composition includes the body as visible and physically present, "living flesh and blood." Here again, the antithesis of reason. What we see consistently in Nerdrum's work—interiorized colors and textures, era bodies and other natural substances, consisting of mass and weight, are usually plausible and convincingly portrayed—"a mix of sweat, blood, and flesh." As the painter himself put it,¹¹ "I'm like Nerdrum, with his visionary and allegories, Steven Assael arranges contemporary figures in urban settings, but in a sensibility informed by Masters, calling to mind the Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque eras. *At Mother* (2005) is a gothicized, pietistic attached to a sculpted plastic form with moving doors that open and close. When open, the doors feature the arrangement of figures emerging into a miraculous golden light. The figures resemble saints in their pale, luminous, ethereal qualities, going to the dead past. The panel

conversations (holy conversation) altarpieces of the early Italian Renaissance, in which saints from different epochs are joined in a unified space and seem to be conversing either with each other or with the audience. The artist, like old Bloom might have put it,¹² "and they turn in our heads like a wheel in a void."¹³ And indeed Assael's *dramatis personae* are to find in the contemporary underground world of 'Goths,' pierced, tattooed, hystericathic, visceral edge, with a visceral edge, which is bathed in the glow of an ethereal light that sets up a tension between the terrible and the spiritual, betrays the artist's own empathy compassion for these modern

ern-day ascetics.¹² "Light," Assael explains, "has a mystery about it. It reveals and at the same time no one knows where it comes from or where it goes. . . . People thought of light as having a mystical quality [so] they used them to see something more clearly. . . . So light was associated with truth, and truth was something that was revealed."¹³ As in the chiaro-scuroed images of the past he simulates, the oscillation of light and dark structures have profound emotional and psychological meaning, catching the ambiguities of the defia
of these stumbed roughs and their vint kerability and desire for identity and recognition.

Brett Bigbee, a graduate of the University of the Arts' Academy of Fine Arts, an institution with a notable legacy of American Realism and later The Fauves, adopts a much subtler and more distilled approach to Old Master traditions. Bigbee's laconic domestic idylls and tender images of his own family recall the linearity, geometry, frontality, and quiet stillnesses of an iconic Piero della Francesca *Madonna*, the perspicuous and brilliant use of colored light in Netherlandish painting, and a recasting of Botticelli's allegorical *Venus*, as in the portrait of his wife, *Ann with Plant* (1990–91). Bigbee painstakingly works a traditional method of painting, tirelessly building up layers of colors, glazes, and carefully wrought detail, producing visual illusions with an eloquence that evokes a heightened reality veiling a more fundamental truth.

In contrast, Nerdru
is going to give you in this interpretation is finer, more smoother, more orderly than the real world of Nerdru's "excrement, blood, and flesh." Bodies are without structure, the skin is like a surface that has no skeleton; that skin is smooth, without wrinkles, blemishes, or the interior space as

chieved or warned, there is no distortion in the window glass.¹⁴ It is an ideal, a construct—neither wholly real nor wholly imagined.

Sharon Bowar makes similar reference to the allegorical painting of the Italian Renaissance, and to the artist's teacher, Rembrandt van Rijn and Jan Antonie van der Salter Alma-Tadema, in her *Saint Lucia* (2002).

Saint Lucy, patron saint of the blind, typically shown

gouged out in martyrdom (witness to her faith), stands here on a ledge overlooking a composite view of today, a

lifelike scene of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception for the temple of Santa Maria della Consolazione in Todi, Italy, and a distant view of the Gothic church of Santa Fortunato, located near

the site of the image of the painting, not a platter but a vase of grape leaves in which we can just make out the artist's own eyes gazing out of the painting in the distance right of center detail in the otherwise monochromatic (colorblind) canvas.¹⁵

While sharing in some of the same formal characteristics of Bigbee and P

paintings of Bo Bartlett are

significance—the divine hand of Gudain, the infinite in the finite. Here in *Golden Boy* (2003) a young, innocent, preadolescent male child, half-nude, from the waist up, stands—obvious christological reference—suspended in midair, busily on the viewer's surface, arms extended in cruciform gesture, a faint glow of ethereal light encircling halolike around his golden hair. The mortal child—shaman, prophet, visionary—gazes directly but nonconfrontationally out of the canvas to engage the viewer as precious hero-saint bathed in the light of divine revelation. As Suzy Gablik¹⁵ aptly observed: "The recalling and setting up of sacred signs is the even more urgent task of an artist in times estranged from symbol and sacrament. . . . Before art can be successfully re-mythologized, we must, as a society, suspend our disbelief."¹⁶

Suspend belief itself is what is required by the allegorical realism of Julie Heffernan and Thomas Woodruff. In *Mission Poesy*, painting, fantasy, magic, and operatic complexity take wing, as in a gothic cathedral, and a veritable lexicon of symbols and hermetic codes, all in a sentimental illustration. The writer tells us: "When one tries to source Woodruff's stylistic choices and iconography, things get complicated. Victorian or fly-by-store painting surrealism? French academic painting? Heavy metal album cover? Valentine or opera? . . . That's the point here: there is that little is to be gained in the parsing of visual sources; it is a whimsical mélange, a personalized polyglot Babel, that derives from the artist's own culture with more than a few concessions to over-the-top camp and kitschy moral allegory. *Mission Poesy* (*the Reviewer*) is one installment in a series of eleven gothic-peaked canisters—vases—a nod to traditional history painting—collectively titled *All Systems Go*. In each canvas, amidst the canisters, creatures, costumes, and colors, Woodruff's

inevitability of transport to the unknown, a reminder of the transience of the here and now, and so a kind of twenty-first-century *vanity*. Amid the pageantry and semiotics of myopia, excess, perverting beauty and flora and fauna of Oz, is the ever-present reminder of fragility and impending mortality—as the series of eleven unfolds, we count down from ten to blastoff. Sharing some of the sentiment of *Golden Boy*, Woodruff himself explains: "For me, one of the most important issues facing my generation of artists is learning how to feel again. . . . Recalling and healing with art." ¹⁷ This generation has made the visual arts suspect and appear elitist. The experience of looking has been deadened. Artists have confronted this very cultural taboo in our society but still seem to be fearful of sentiment.¹⁸

Also drawing on symbols, language, and imagination, Julie Heffernan's fantasy-fueled hybrid art is a celebration of femininity and its performance in the canon of western art history. In her "Private Baroque" interiors the artifice of Culture is cast aside in favor of Nature's whimsicalities, as in *Self-Portrait as Hedevly Body* (2002), where a female figure, a gyno-cyborg, addresses a visiting friend. She is presented like painting itself, or like an *objet d'art*, aesthetic beauty, and is staged for collective display, and the viewer. The woman in the room, however, is associated with unbalance by being situated across the sumptuous and dissonant room with a Whiite repast in a language replete of past visitations. Heffernan strips the vocabulary away from its historically male bias toward a didactic syntactic and insistently female voice.

of Dotty Attie. *In the Atelier* of 1990–91, composed of fifty-seven panels, each six inches square, reproduces in fragments, and takes its name from nineteenth-century French academic painter Henri Fantin-Latour's *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter* (1870), a painting that famously immortalized Fantin-Latour's circle of avant-garde friends and colleagues, including Monet, Renoir, and Bazille, depicted gathered around their seated colleague, Manet, who, brush in hand, is himself poised in front of a canvas to paint, we are told, a copy of a painting by another friend, Fantin-Latour's painted pastiche of a painting. In the four panels at upper left, Attie has extracted and displaced quoted details from a number of other paintings, pastiching them as fragments and interspersed with bits of text that form a narrative of her own invention, one with multiple endings. Confirmed in the culminating grouping of panels at lower right, the violence against women, as we read/view, there is an unsettling feeling of scanty and missing detail, like a crime scene to be forensically stitched together in the voyeuristic imagination. Moreover, the combination of word and image activates a tension between the artist's present role as a spectator and her own social world and her place within the heritage of a male-dominated art system. In the difference between the available modalities of attending, viewing, and reading, distance is established between Then and Now, between copy/past and present. Old Masters mediated through a layer of present (female) voice, that text itself alluding to the silencing work of violence against women.

The net of borrowed references is cast even wider by Vincent Desiderio, *Woman Student with Bo Bartlett and Brett Buffet*, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art., where he now teaches. His *Complaints* (2002)

while making oblique reference to the nineteenth-century Romantic era's fascination with the irregular and the abandoned in Théodore Géricault's portraits of the *Wounded* more directly borrows from medical textbook photographs of human experience. In a painting in which each other either side of a central figure, a woman who has herself replicated, documentary images of individual bodies suffering from incurable—and visibly distorting—diseases, such as leprosy, tuberculosis, and syphilis, are shown in detail, the artist has extracted and displaced the medical reality of the body, the body as a vessel of disease, and the body as a vessel of death. On the left, Downs (labeled "Downs") shows a woman with enlarged hands, feet, and face, and on the right, Downs (labeled "Downs") shows a woman with a shriveled body, suggesting the loss of consciousness or their own irregular reality. Or perhaps their unreality signals for the artist a deeper reality, one that is not visible to the eye, but is nevertheless real.

Incidentally here that the artist's own son, who appears in several canvases, himself suffers from a physical disability. Likewise in McLennan's work it is the same Old Master painting that is borrowed but the subject matter tends to alter dramatically. This thinning of Depression-era pulp fiction, in which the recurring presence of the female body, the female face, and the female figure, the nazi—villain or hero—lends an unspecified, allusive and open-ended drama. In a group of four paintings collectively titled *Reckless Flings* (2002), the artist has

incorporated here that the artist's own son, who appears in several canvases, himself suffers from a physical disability. Likewise in McLennan's work it is the same Old Master painting that is borrowed but the subject matter tends to alter dramatically. This thinning of Depression-era pulp fiction, in which the recurring presence of the female body, the female face, and the female figure, the nazi—villain or hero—lends an unspecified, allusive and open-ended drama. In a group of four paintings collectively titled *Reckless Flings* (2002), the artist has

memory and mood. Over images of antique statuary, library desks, old books, and library shelves, the words, *Persakan*, *Frenzied*, *Forgiven*, and *Forgotten* are

printed, charging the series with associations, metaphor, and...
as a shudder of anxiety.²⁰

Old Master tradition connects myth and now modern...

inform the works in this exhibition. The artist's palette is all the art of the past imagined, the present and the past all have equal weight. In a recent interview with Suzy Gablik, Bo Bartlett has stated: "I guess I pick and choose from a lot of different artists; it's a bit like [making] a quilt, where you pull from all these different sources." You learn from looking at the things you like, and you draw from all of them. But it isn't a contrived postmodern approach, or anything like that."²¹ In similar tone and approach to the past, Steven Assael remarks: "I think it's more like... everyday, existing at the same time, everything exists equally."²² But it is Vincent Desiderio who has perhaps most succinctly characterized the postmodern era's compulsive consumption of images as "cultural pollution."²³ Faced with an embarrassment of riches in information—styles, formal idioms, techniques, and motifs—what is one to paint? How is it possible to create something new, something distinctly related to one's own time? These seem to be the questions.

Christian Vincent, *Field of Frames*, 2004. Christian Vincent, as-architect, sketchbook in hand, surveys a panoramic landscape composed of all but discarded frames. Art's skeleton, even the dead, it's searching for an idea with originality, something that can convey that will be new, to which he can give his stamp of authenticity. As one critic writes, "He must always create an infinite number of times, but he must create new ones. He needs to decide if he must reject the conventional language of the past, referenced by the antique frames, in order to go forward."²⁴

Critic and historian Donald Kuspit has aptly characterized the situation facing the group of artists presented by this exhibition, arguing that

"the precursors flood us, and our imaginations end inabyss drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such life is wholly evaded."²⁵ And this, perhaps, is one conclusion that may be drawn from this exhibition, that innovation of any kind is a necessary result.

The precursors flood us, and our imaginations end inabyss drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such life is wholly evaded.²⁶ And this, perhaps, is one conclusion that may be drawn from this exhibition,

that innovation of any kind is a necessary result.

certain compelling honesty about each of the works on

may they not live, that betrays a healthy suspicion about slavish imitation and yet a collective affirmation of

painting's adequacy to lived experience and its way

to face the force of what it means to imagine.

uncertain place of the ethical, the template that

NOTES

1. This exhibition began as a paper entitled "Painting the Present: Contemporary Realism and the History of Art" which I delivered at the annual conference of the Association of Art Historians (UK) in 2004 at the University of Nottingham.

2. Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 182–183.

3. Thomas J. McEvilly, *Art & Object Identity* (London: A. P. M. Dohrn, Ltd., 1992).

Contemporary Art, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, 1996, p. 8.

4. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York and Oxford, 1973, p. 141.

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Theory of Kraszna-Krausz's 'Theory of Progress,'" quoted in Christopher D. L. Johnson, "The Suppression of the Aura: The Now, The Then, and Modernity," in *Negotiating Rapture*, ed. Richard Frerichs (Chicago, 1996), pp. 52–53.

6. Thomas MacMullan, 1992, n. 136.

7. Jan Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum: Storyteller and Self-Revealer*, Aschehoug, Oslo, 1998, p. 22.

8. Ibid., p. 23.

9. Wald Kuspit, "Odd Nerdrum: The Art of the Immediate," *ARTS Magazine*, November 1984, pp. 120–21.

10. Pettersson, p. 102.

11. Ibid., p. 145.

12. Never working from photographs, he depicts his sitters in periods of human contact with his sitters.

13. "Steven Assael: Revealing Light," *The World & I*, August 1997, p. 124.

14. See Ken Greenleaf, *Montreal Sunday Telegram*, January 9, 1994, p. 4E.

15. Bowar's canvas is replete with borrowed fragments, including the paricision of a sculpted terrace wall (itself a replication) surrounding one of the gardens on the *Isle of the Heart* in San Simeon, California; Islamic geometric floor tiles, derived from fifteenth century *wall mozaïque* from Cairo, the design itself borrowed and copied in pattern books; and a collection of reproductions of paintings that encompass six centuries of

and perhaps most recognizably, a replication of the *Basket of Fruit* of 1598.

16. Suzi Gablik, in Bo Bartlett, exhibition catalogue, *Bo Bartlett: PPOW*, NY, 1998.

17. Bill Arning, "Administering Sentimentality," *Notes on Knaak*

Sandwiches: Works, Atlanta College of Art Gallery and City Gallery at Chapman, Atlanta, 1997, p. 12.

18. Ibid., p. 12.

19. Fantin-Latour himself, in *Paintings*, 1870, p. 12.

20. The artist explains: "Each is emblazoned with the word 'vaguely German'—an adjective which partly describes the picture, while

denying its depth and perspective. The flat surface is... sized, yet around and behind it, the old three-dimensional illusion

continues happily to assert itself. Communication with the viewer

December 1, 2004.

21. Bo Bartlett, quoted in "Painting the World: A Conversation

Art, Columbus, GA, 2002, p. 22.

22. Painting the World: A Conversation, p. 22.

23. Vincent Desiderio, quoted in "You Just Can't Stop Painting," *Course*, Mia Fineman, New York Times, September 1, 2004, p. 34.

24. Robert Fishko, in exhibition catalogue, *Christian Vincent: Recent Paintings*, Forum Gallery, NY, 2001, p. 10.

25. Here Kuspit is speaking specifically of *Bo Bartlett*, but the implications I think are broader. Kuspit's more direct

flooded with light and color, like all of Bowar's work, is also flooded with light and color, like all of Bowar's work, is also

and perhaps most recognizably, a replication of the *Basket of Fruit* of 1598.

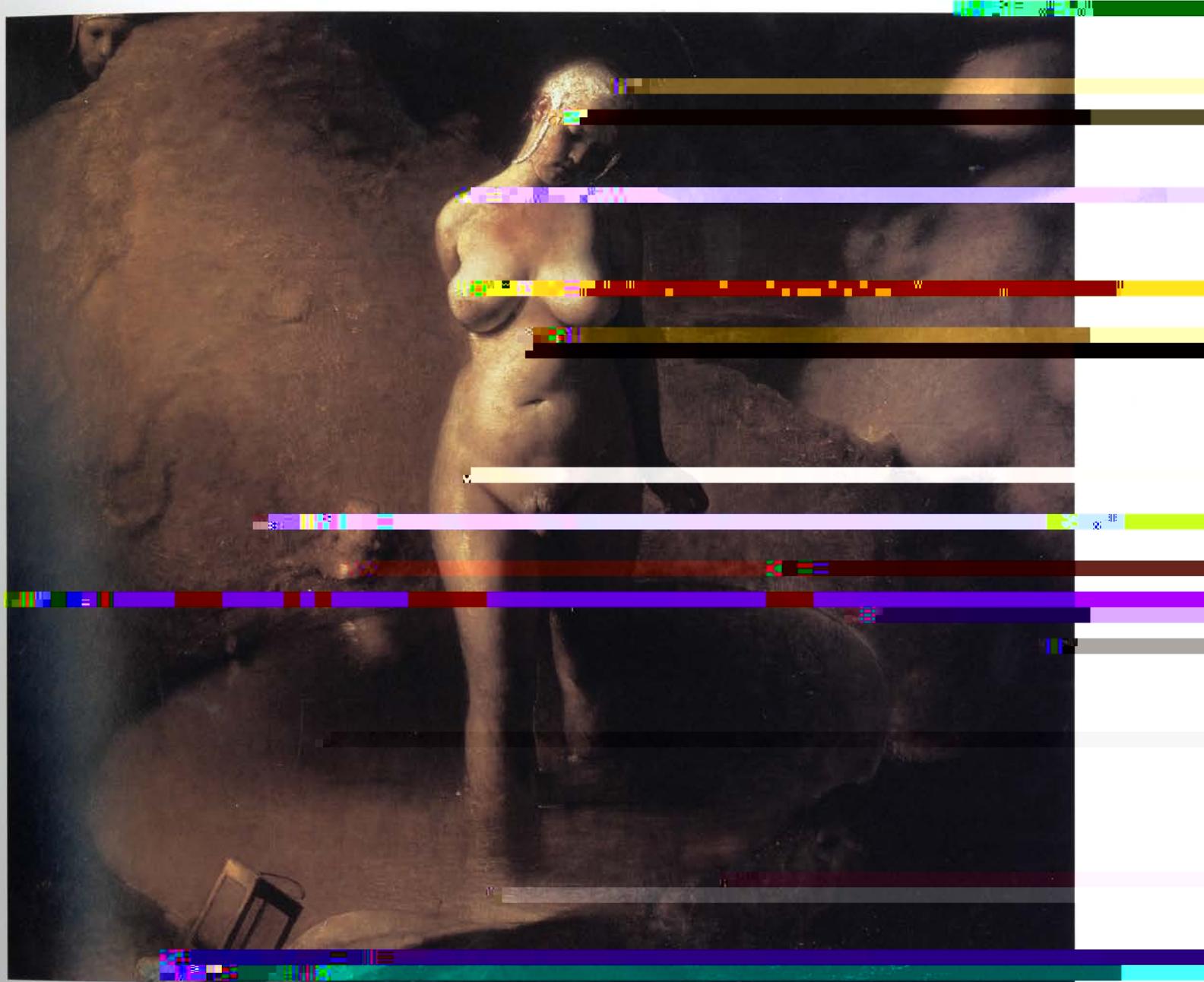
18. *Lai of Ligeia* (1567) is a camouflaged moralizing tale of the land of

plenty.

26. Bloom, p. 23.

27. See note 13.

Odd No. 1925, "White" = 1925
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

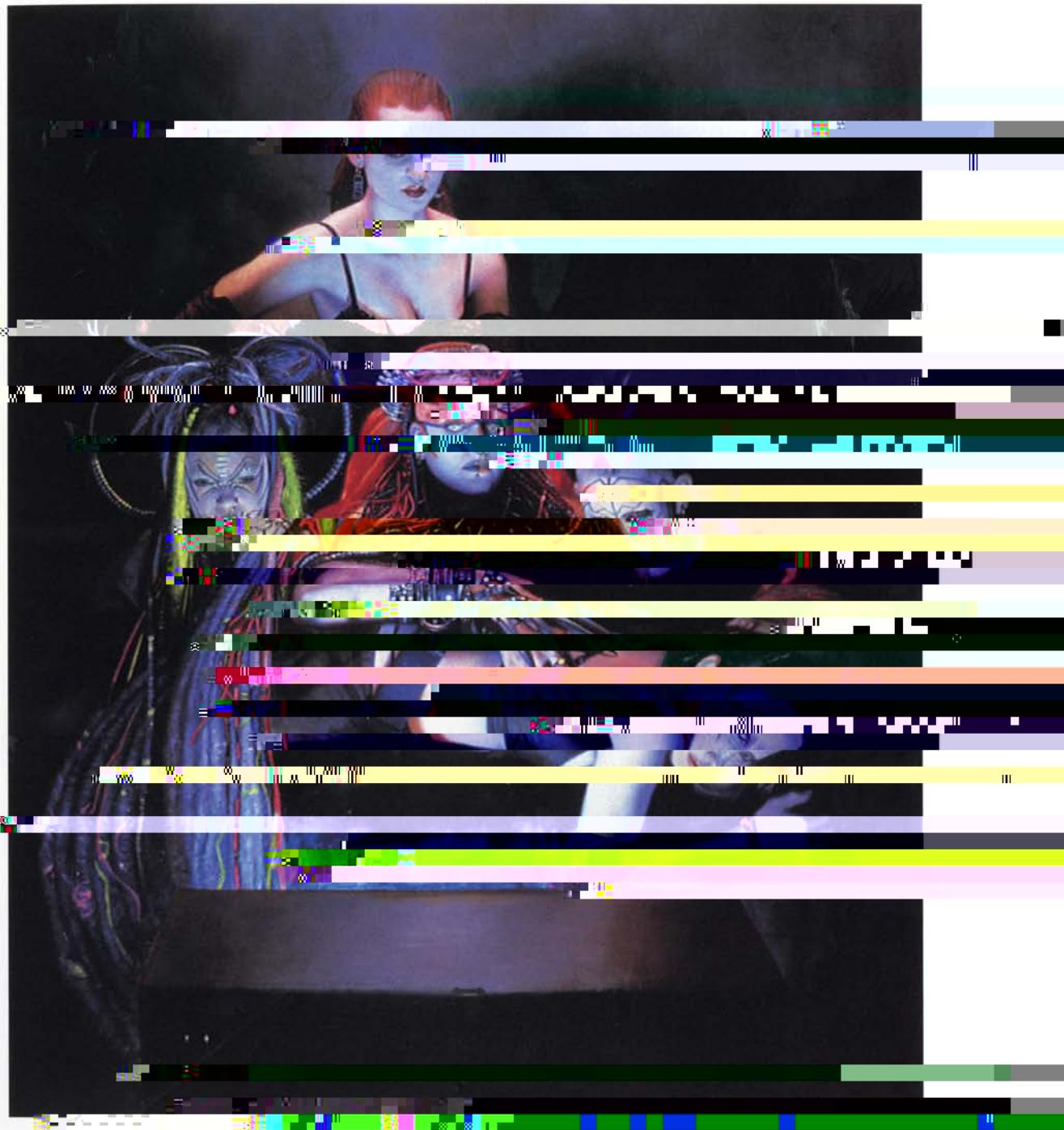


Steven Assael. *At Work*. 2001. oil. 8' x 16'.

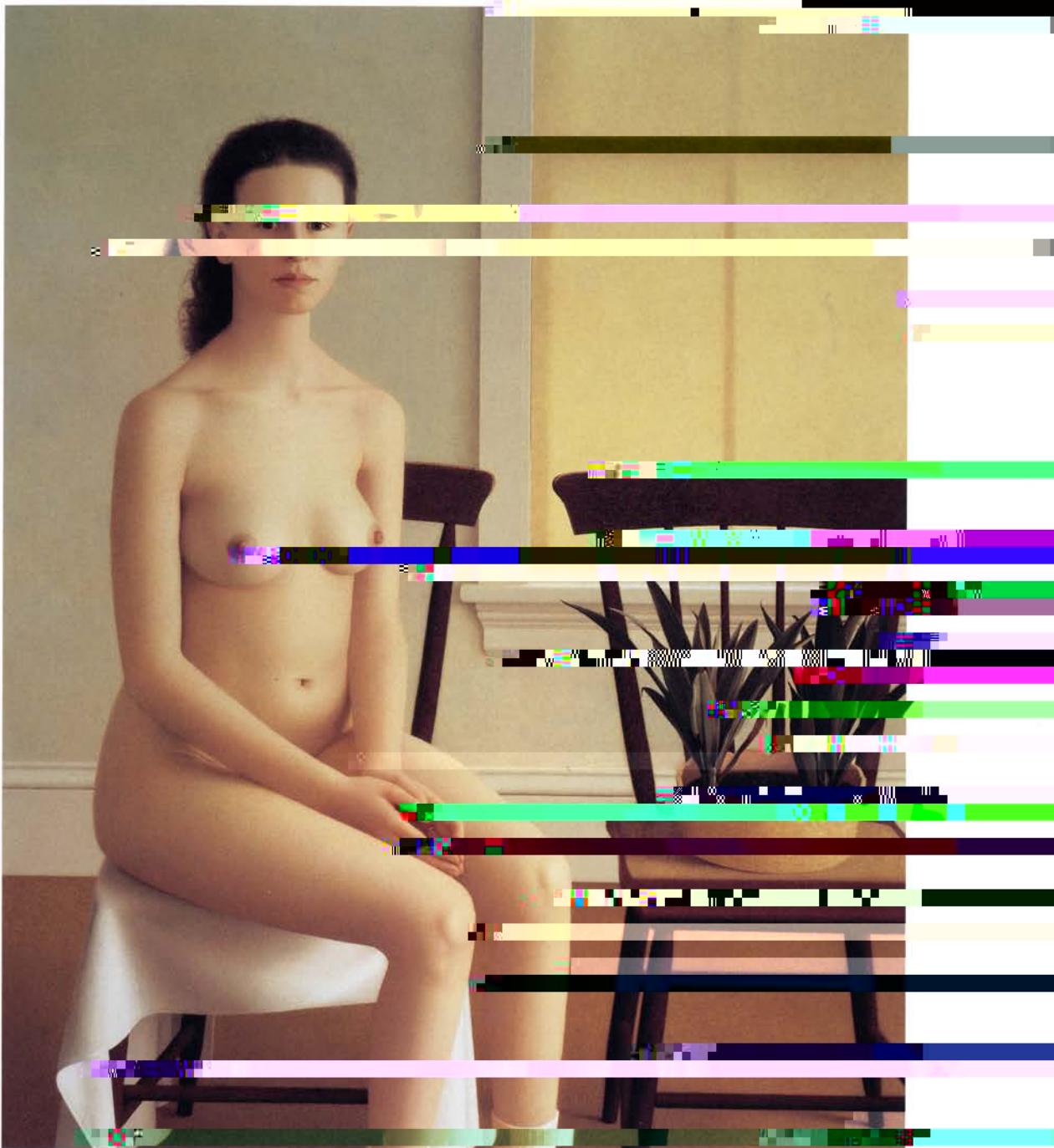
Courtesy of the artist.



Steven S. DeNiro
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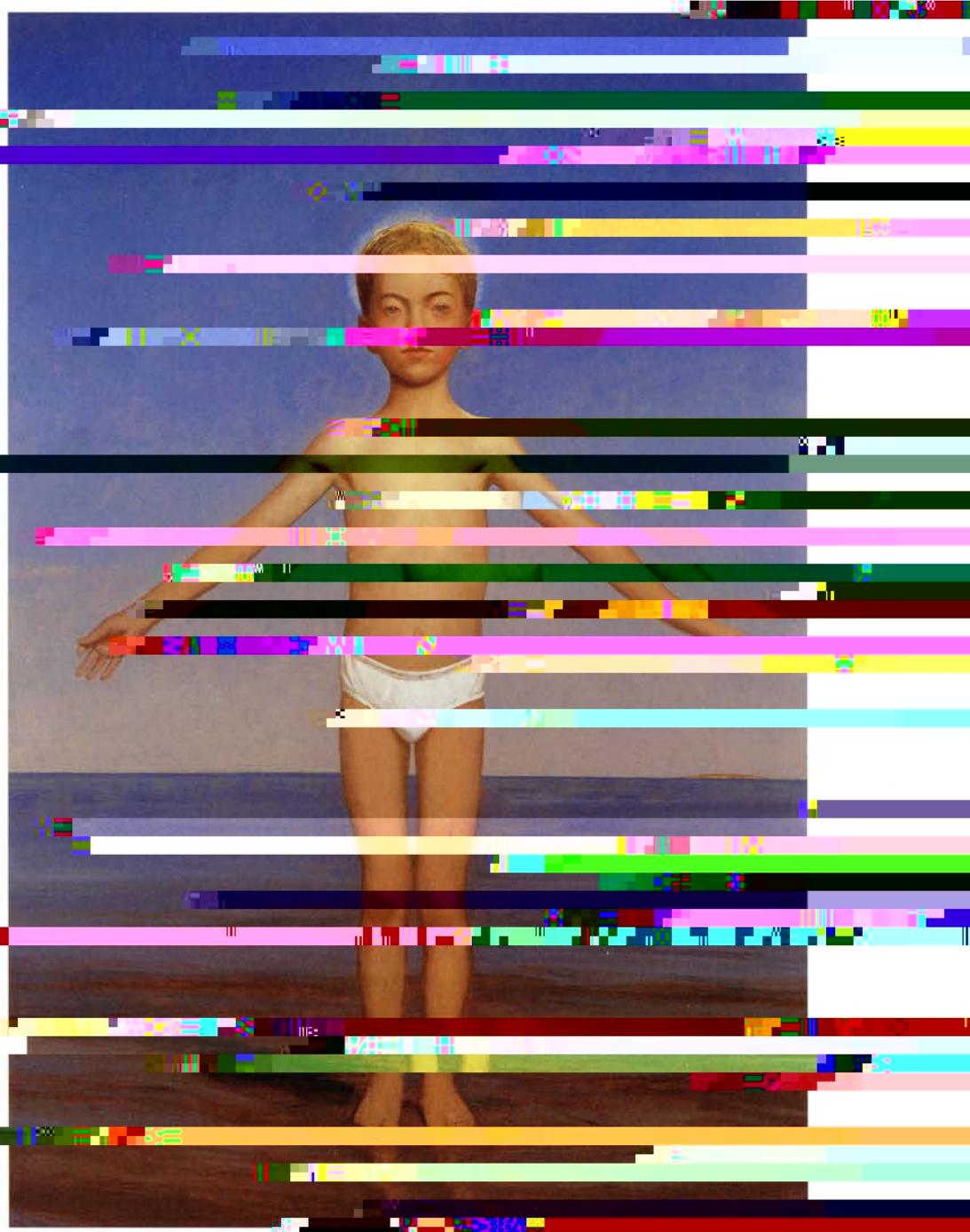
Brett Bigbee, *Ann with Plant*, 1990–91, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm
Seven Bridges Foundation



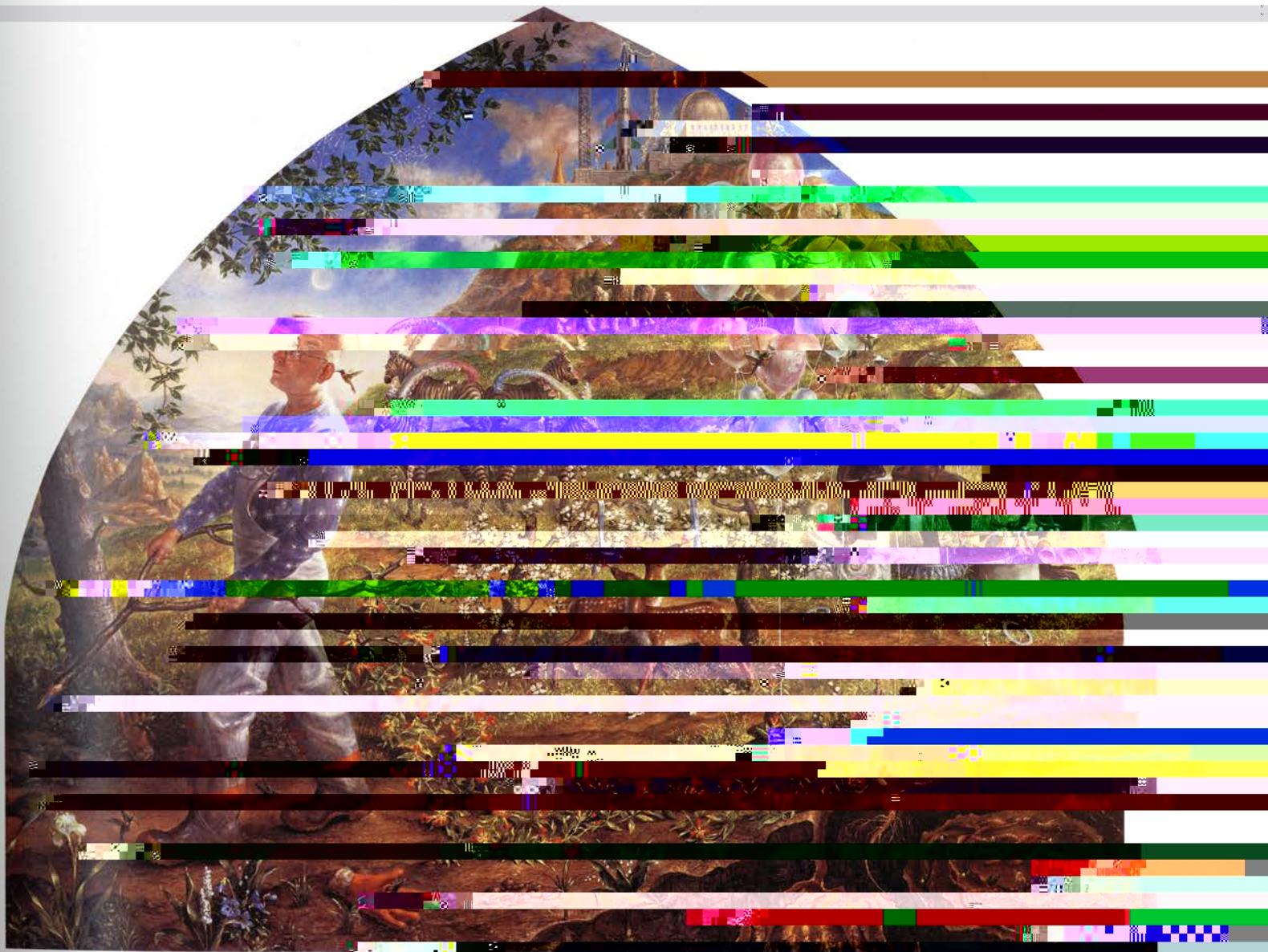
Sharon Bowar, *Santa Lucia, 2000, Offender*, *Offender*
Court: *18-01-01-A-CR-13*




P.D. Burdett, *Golden Ray*, 2002, oil on linen, 83½ × 57 inches
Courtesy P.P.O.W., New York



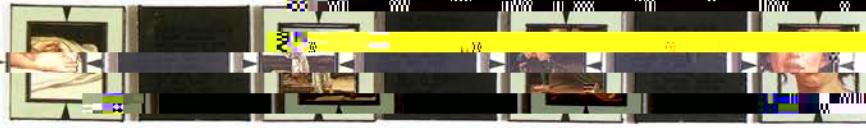
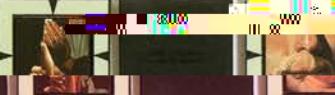
Thomas Woodruff, *All Systems Go: Mission Possible*, 2000
Courtesy PPOW, New York



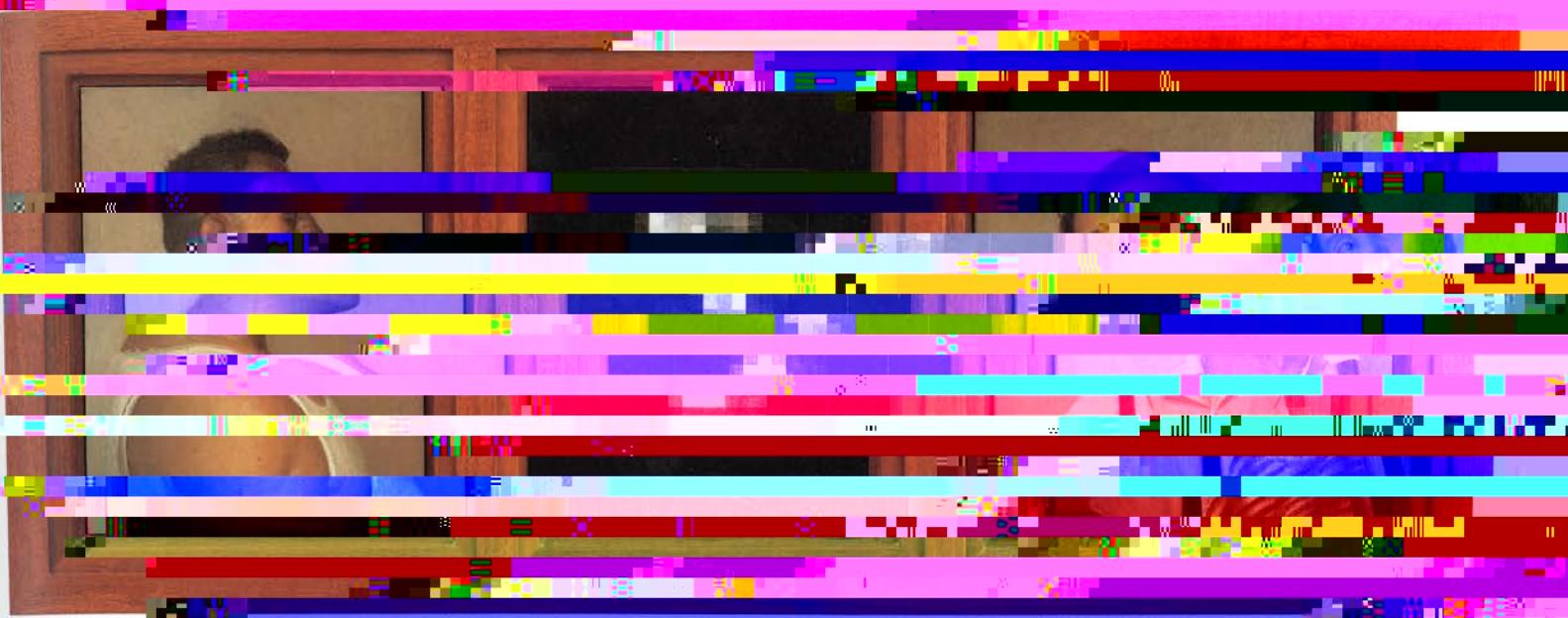
Julie Herrernan, ©
Courtesy of the artist, Paragon Art



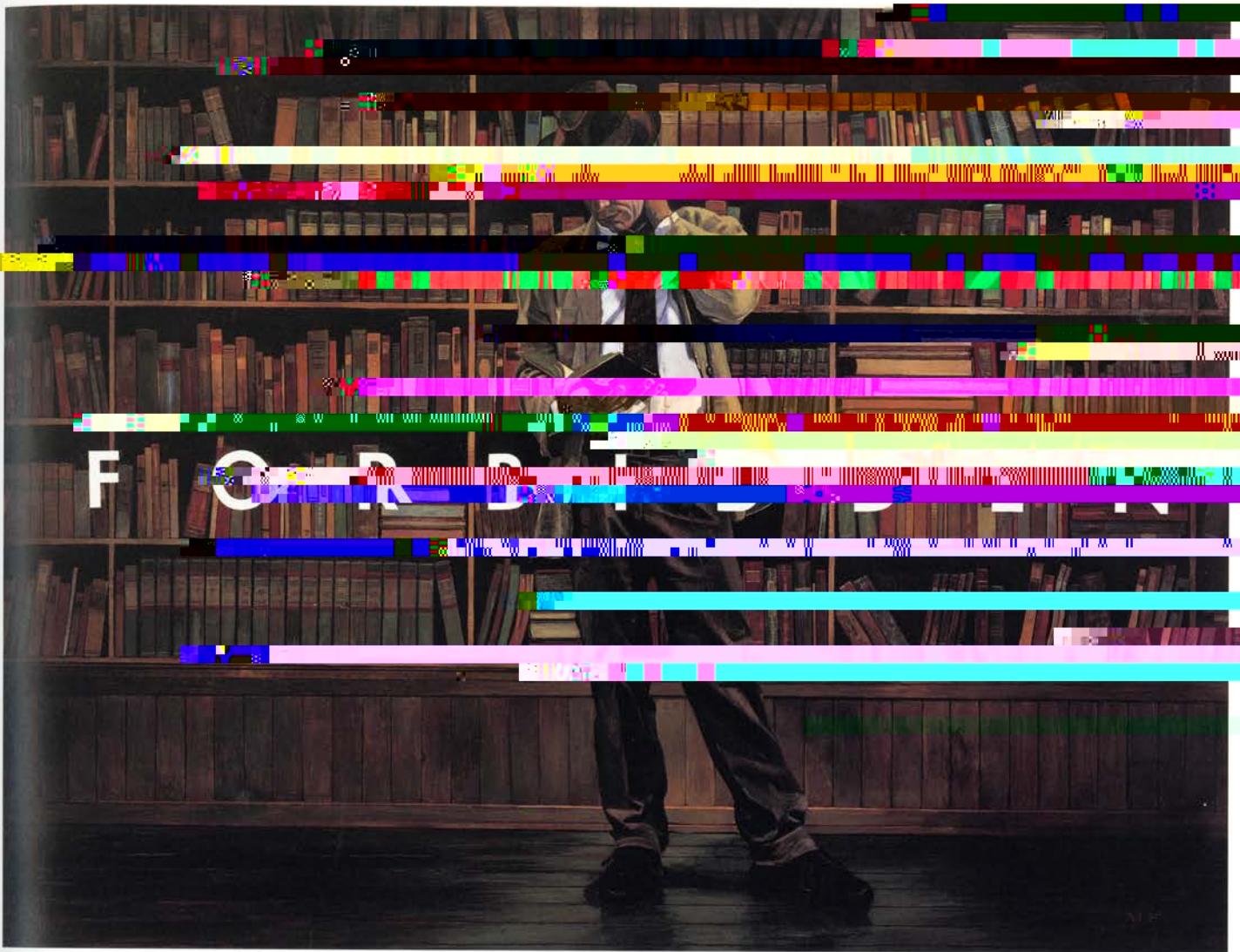
Dec. 19, 1967
Courtesy, PDDW, N.Y.



Vincent Desiderio, *Contemplative Discourse*, 1998, oil on wood, 11 x 25/4 inches,
Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, New York



Michael Flanagan, *Reader Series*, 1990
Courtesy, PICA, New York



Christian Vincent, *Field of Flowers*, 2001, oil on canvas, 100 x 120 cm
Courtesy Fortuny Gallery, NEW YORK





EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Dimensions are given in inches, height by width by depth.

Steven Assael

Metter, 2001

oil, wood panel, canvas

110 x 156 x 42

Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

Brettigie

In the Atelier, 1990–91

57 panels, each 6 x 6

Courtesy PPOW, New York

Bo Bartlett

Golden Boy, 2002

oil on lin

Courtesy PPOW, New York

Brettigie

Ann with Plant, 1990–91

oil on canvas 53 x 42

Seven Bridges Foundation

Connecticut

Sharon Bowar

Santa Lucia, 2003

oil on canvas 48 x 40

Courtesy of the artist

Vincent Desiderio

Contemplative Distance, 2002

oil on wood, 11 x 25 1/4

Courtesy, Milwaukee

Michael Elmanian

Reader Series

10 panels, each 10 x 10, 10 x 12, 10 x 32

Courtesy PPOW, New York

Julie Heffernan

Say You Can't Read My Day, 2003

oil on canvas 68 x 54

Courtesy PPOW, New York

Oded Narlman

White Hermaphrodite, 1992–96

oil on canvas 80 1/2 x 83

Christian Vincent

Fair of Frames, 2001

oil on canvas 38 x 34

Courtesy PPOW, New York

Thomas Woodruff

All Systems Go: Mission Poesy (Diviner), 1999

oil on wood 10 x 10 x 10

Courtesy PPOW, New York

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Then as Now

March 26-May 22

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Featuring: Steve Auer, David Attie, Paul Baeuerle,
Brett Bigbee, Sharon Bowles, Vincent Desiderio,
Michael Flanagan, Julie Hofferter, Odd Nordrum,
Christian Vincent, and Thomas Wodzicki

Opening Reception:

Saturday, March 19, 2005, 6-8 p.m.

Sordoni Art Gallery

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Friends of the Sordoni Art Gallery, First Liberty Bank,

Pennsylvania Council on the Arts,

Andrew J. Cawley, Jr., Esq.

Business Council: Bender Dental, Creative Business Interiors,
First Liberty Bank and Trust, Quaker Oats, Westmoreland Club.

Front: Christian Vincent, *Field of Frames*, 2001,

oil on canvas, 84 x 110 inches

Courtesy of Sordoni Art Gallery, New Jersey