

STEVE GALLOWAY:

OF TSETSE FLIES & CENTRIFUGES

Steve Galloway's paintings draw on everything from Greek mythology to Dr. Seuss to get their lofty messages across. Rick Gilbert decodes the indecipherable.

SET SOMEWHERE ON THE OUTSKIRTS of our recognizable galaxy, the universe of painter Steve Galloway is scattered over numberless chunks of swampland where grotesque events transpire in bizarre, bucolic tropics that William Henry Hudson might have imagined in a paranoid, malarial delirium. Hopscotching terrain that could be a vacation spot for Tarzan, a field station for Farmer John, or a staging area for the temptations of Saint Anthony, a madcap menagerie of pigs, loricates, herons, and simians scampers merrily, relaying messages from Dr. Livingston to Dr. Moreau. Amiable amphibians deliver lectures about vegetable intelligence, predator/prey relationships, and the butchery of the environment. In habitats where nature has been sliced and diced, lessons are imparted about mutation and contamination, oxygen theft, herd mechanics, and the algebra of populations. Instruction is accompanied by illustrations of peanut people with silly grins, pineapple men, and sentient carrots who scoff at eradication while whistling "Don't Fence Me In."

Though it may resemble our own world, Galloway's is really a parallel universe, beholden only to laws of its own. Familiar images—corks, pulleys, anthills, and tikis—lure us into thinking we are on home ground, but the similarity ends abruptly when the artist subjects these objects to incongruous juxtapositions that defy normal rules of physics. An image-maker par excellence, Galloway constructs dramatic pictorial situations that couldn't possibly exist outside a poet's imagination. As if repeatedly reshuffling a deck of cards, he has invented a distinct iconography from a select inventory of stock, off-the-shelf types aligned in improbable ways and thereby created a synthetic visual language based on the tension of opposites and the suspension of conventional perceptual expectations.

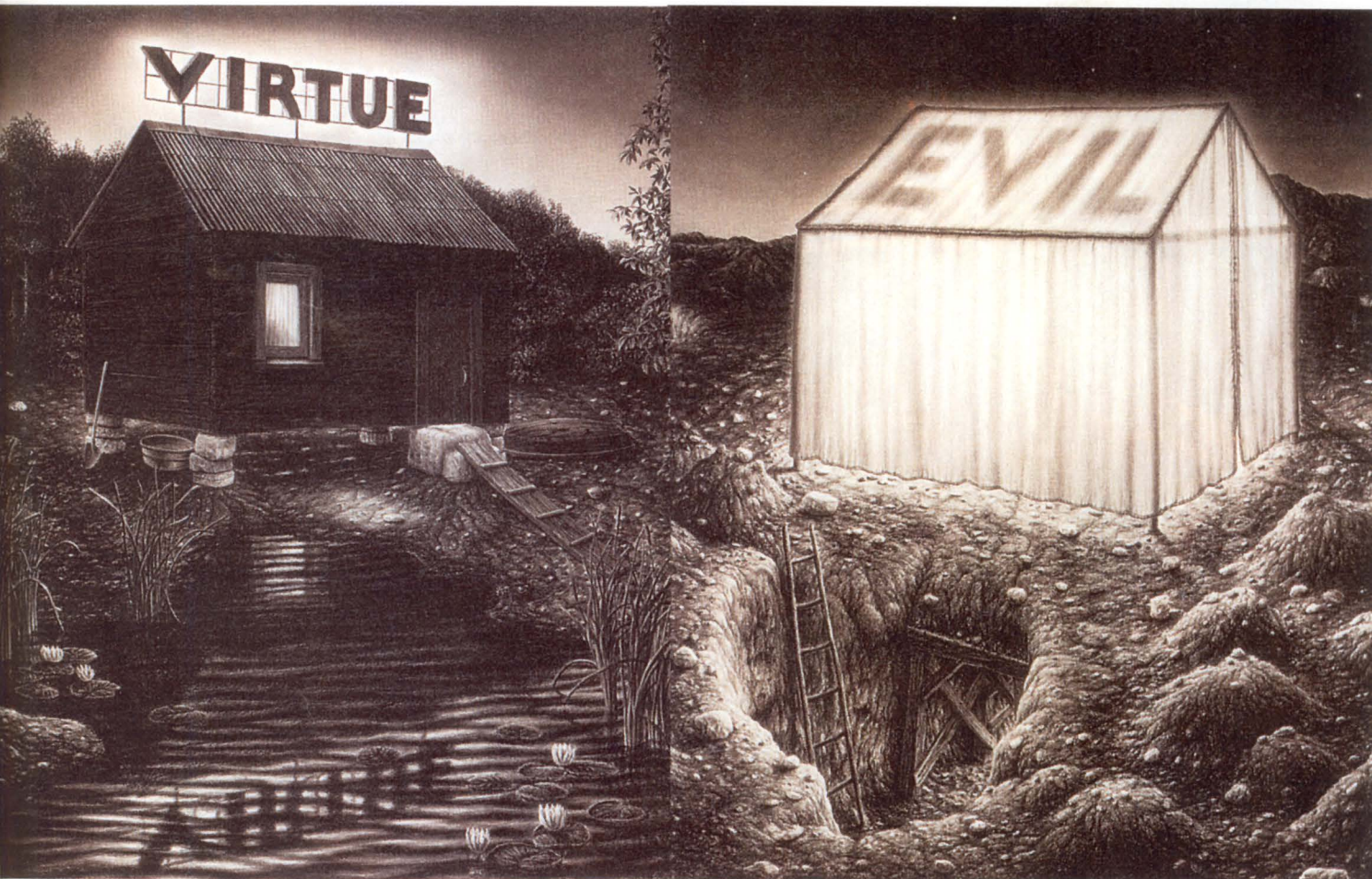
On the face of Galloway's double-sided *House of Hand*, a bayou diner, turned out à la mid-century theme eateries with figurative superstructures, sports atop its roof a huge beached alligator with an amputated human hand protruding from its propped-open jaws. Its severed wrist still drips with gore, a bloody-stump-as-appetizer to feed the hungry gars. On the obverse, a pair of men, lost in some reptile-infested everglade, doff their alligator costumes. The borders of *House of Hand* are decorated with an assortment of radiation creatures and entomological freaks—combinatorial bugs and aberrant pupae and larvae—while parodies of Easter Island tikis and Hottentot fetishes act as indecipherable symbols of some secret language of totem and taboo.

Incarcerated in a levitating reed-work cage, the subject of *Swamp Law and the Hunter* is Gaia's rapist; the savagery of the chase is turned against him when he is targeted for execution by a hastily convened animal commissariat hovering on the edge of oblivion. In *A Swagger and a Disorder*, we come across one of those human bodies with non-human heads, in the manner of Max Ernst or Rene Magritte. Under the watchful eye of a tuxedoed fishman, a rapt rat and an impatient monkey listen to a recital of sagacities or superstitions. Cartoon-like cameos of cooties, leering like meat-demons,

embellish the piece's border. In *Smokehouse Jig*, the legs of St. Vitus, or perhaps those of an unbalanced lumberjack, protrude from below the hem of an outhouse. A snakepit pocks a barren circle of denuded earth. As vipers nip at his heels and skeleton fiddlers play a torrid tune, he dances as fast as he can while the smoke of burning Rome pours from the outhouse roof.

What will happen when *The Paint of the Master Martyr* spills onto disaster's dire drip pan? Above an expanse of slag heaps and mounds of ulcerated earth, in a landscape only tangentially reminiscent of a sawmill or a sulfur works, a water-bottle-shaped rectangle droops like a bulletproof vest that has failed a firing test; the vest hangs from a hook projecting from a backboard suspended in mid-air, to which is fastened a spongy, fungoid funnel. The malleability of these geometric forms contrasts with the borax-blond harshness of the excremental earth—a sort

A
**FLOWERING
 MONKEY
 WRENCH
 MAST**



Virtue/Evil, charcoal and pastel, 26" x 21" each, 1998.



Proclamation of Higgs Merino, pastel on paper, 72" x 46," 1985.

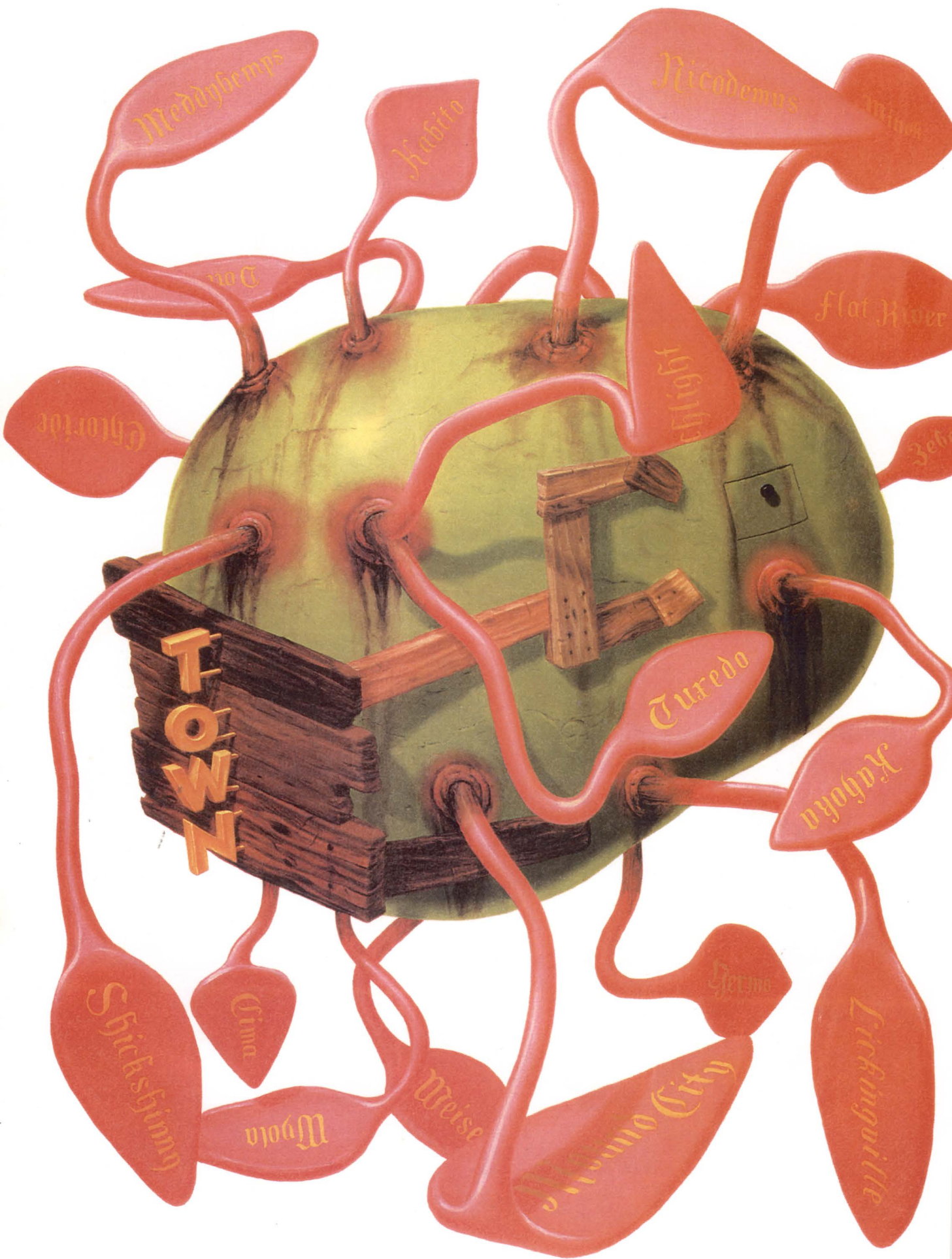


House of Hand (Side A), oil on panel, 51" x 60" x 6," 1993-4.

of bleached-out pine barren or toxic alkali flat, a garbage dump of spent mineral products, clumps of wood shavings, and refuse. In *Shipwreck Charlie and His Proud Ballast*, the ground is littered with a limp organic form, Rorschach-like in its anonymity, though it might resemble a star-headed mole or a scantily ciliated scrotum with the trunk of an elephant and a lump on its wrinkled brow. Charlie's vessel is high and dry; with corks for anchors, a flowering monkey wrench mast, and a figurehead shaped like a belaying pin, it may never leave port again.

Skating between playful innocence and sinister menace, Galloway's repertoire of brick rafts floating with ease, peacefully sleeping figures who actually serve as bait in traps about to spring shut, and tornadoes frozen in place and transformed into leafy topiaries finds the basis of its stylistic nonchalance in the work of old-time cartoonists like Rube Goldberg and Windsor McKay and in the design of toys like Mr. Potato Head and Cooties. Other whimsical influences include Dr. Seuss, Giuseppe Archimboldo, creator of portraits of people made from vegetables or from piles of books, and John James Audubon, the bird cataloger. Illustrations from vintage greeting cards, with their dozens of disparate pictures, and from childrens' encyclopedias, with their compartmentalized vignettes of geographical and anthropological phenomena, also come to mind in the presence of Galloway's art. The technique of incorporating paintings within paintings is routine with Galloway, as is his use of enigmatic inscriptions, and certain favorite shapes, like funnels and

EYEBALLS
GROWING
ON
VINES LIKE
GRAPES



Summer 1985

The Museum of Contemporary Art *Los Angeles*

Steve Galloway

*Interview by
Julia Brown and Jacqueline Crist*

JC: Have you always worked as an artist?

I've always drawn. The idea of being serious about art became clearer when I went down to Cal Arts. It was exactly the right kind of school for me.

JB: Has your work been in any way influenced by that school and by being in Los Angeles?

I tend to resist the idea that environment affects work, although I suppose it does. Cal Arts was an excellent place most of the time. It was difficult for people who were not self directed, but I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to do, and the school consistently provided the ways and means to do it. The best thing about the school was its range of disciplines and ideas, the visits of guest artists and a great teaching staff.

JB: Have there been any particular influences on the way you think about art?

I like so many different kinds of work that no particular area or person has had a greater effect than any other. The things that impress me the most are a directness of intent and a clarity of vision.

JB: Do you call your works paintings?

I usually call them drawings.

JB: What's the basis of your choice of materials?

My work is on paper, partially because I work in a small studio which effects what I can do, but mostly I simply like working on paper.

JB: Your drawings are large.

Yes, they're big, but they are easily storable. If they were paintings on canvas, I would run out of room. The larger I work the more interested I am by the force of an image.

I draw with pastel and charcoal because of their relatively speedy application on paper.

JB: Do you make a distinction between the pastels and the charcoal?

Generally the distinction I make is that the images are either all black and white or color. If they are black, I use a mixture of charcoal and black pastel. To get the richness of the blackest tones, I use pastel in conjunction with the charcoal. I think charcoal has a tendency to become thin.

JB: Is part of your choice of materials based on texture?

Yes. Some papers have a different way of achieving light and dark values — especially with charcoal. Paper texture is important with charcoal to gain subtle values of light and dark. With pastel a major concern is that it stays bonded to the surface. Materials definitely affect the way I work.

JB: How do you determine the size of your work?

Well, it keeps expanding. Ultimately the size I can comfortably accommodate in the studio determines the size of the largest works; otherwise the nature of the image is the great dictator. I can't go much further than the present size, I would have to make a hole in my studio floor to finish the work. I'm almost lying on the floor now when I work.

JB: Many of your drawings are in a number of panels. What makes you divide the imagery in that way?

I like the idea that the pieces carry on a visual conversation together. At times I want the work to be separate physically and yet remain connected by a central idea. At other times the physical constraints of the paper size forces me to use multiple panels.

JB: Sometimes one image is split, and sometimes there are different images — is that correct?

Yes. In one work there are two figures walking away from each other on separate panels; yet they appear to be on the same terrain. In another set of works three pieces are separate and distinct images although they appear together because of their size and color. After that, any conceptual connections they may make are unintentional.

JB: How would you describe your subject matter?

I find it difficult to do. That may be because I change the subject from piece to piece. What I am interested in changes from day to day. I like the idea of building a visual warehouse. My subject matter is truly variable.

JB: You often use images of nature and landscape.

Yes, I like to do that. The images are places that I have been or imagined. I feel bound to the landscape around me and the power of nature and the place human activities have in it.

JC: Do you go out into the countryside around Los Angeles?

I like the landscape here, and it appears in my work a lot, but I don't get out into it as much as I would like.

JC: You have talked before about your concerns for industrialization in society.

My concern is based mainly on the disappearance of so many jobs due to the modernization of factories and/or the "slimming down" process many corporations are putting their industries through. This is something I think about and incorporate into my work.

JB: Are you talking about the loss of the individual?

In this country and other democracies we have access to information. I am concerned about the values of individual expression and human liberties. These issues are very important in my work.

JB: What do the figures in your work represent?

The figures are images of individuals who demonstrate power. I put these anonymous figures in critical or humorous situations to address an idea of power.

JB: Is there any particular process you follow in your work?

Mostly I gather up an idea and toss it about — add and subtract things — and then when I'm ready to go, I make a preliminary drawing which I project on a larger sheet of paper.

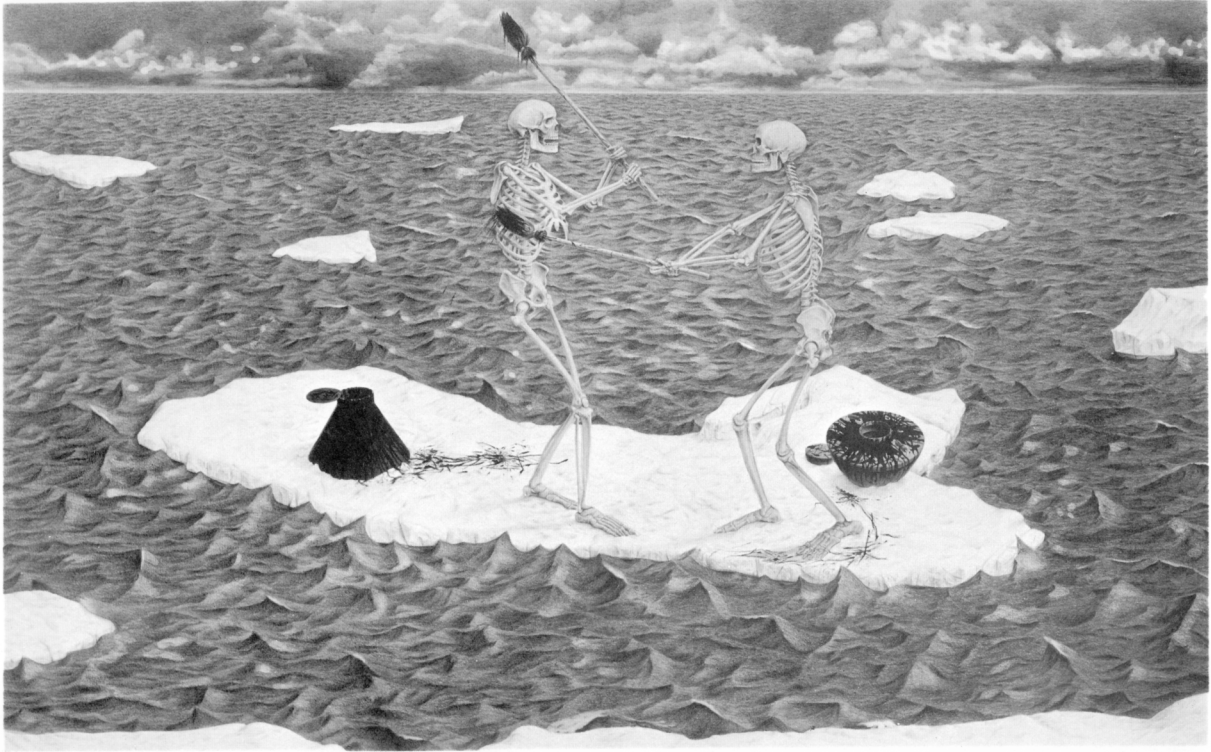
JB: Is there anything you want to say regarding your intention?

Well, I don't enjoy making statements about my intentions, I hope the work will convey it. My suspicion is that when you declare an intention, you have in a small way coerced a different response than people would have on their own.

JB: Do you intend for your work to reflect concern for the social and physical environment?

Sometimes it does. Mainly, I hope my drawings are an interesting brew of ideas.

Barrage of the State Ministers, 1982
Graphite on paper, 23 x 37 in.
Collection of Laura Lee Stearns, Los Angeles





LA PAINT

4 October – 8 March, 2009



Steve Galloway, *Didactic Painting #1*, (Museum of the High Approach), 2007

The Oakland Museum of California presents a selective look at the vast and vibrant Southern California art scene via eleven influential artists in LA PAINT. The exhibition opens October 4, 2008 and continues through March 8, 2009.

Curated by Chief Curator of Art Philip Linhares, LA PAINT highlights The Date Farmers (Armando Lerma and Carlos Ramirez), Brian Fahlstrom, Steve Galloway, Loren Holland, Hyesook Park, Steve Roden, Linda Stark, Don Suggs, Esther Pearl Watson, and Robert Williams.

The exhibition is the result of numerous Southland visits by Linhares to explore galleries, cultural centers, and studios, often pursuing suggestions from colleagues and artists.

René de Guzman, senior curator of art at the museum, steered Linhares to **The Date Farmers**, who collaborate to create groupings of painted images on salvaged corrugated metal and old signs. Lerma and Ramirez use commercial (Sponge Bob, Coca-Cola, and Playboy) and religious icons to explore American culture in images familiar to Mexican Americans.

San Francisco artist Younhee Paik suggested former classmate **Hyesook Park**, whose large, textured, monochromatic canvasses convey a sensitivity to nature and an appreciation of classical Asian landscape painting. Park sometimes incorporates assemblage in her work

Brian Fahlstrom's abstract paintings were first seen in the Orange County Museum of Art's 2006 California Biennial. His enigmatic paintings fluctuate between landscape, still life, and portraiture, never landing soundly on any one format. Fahlstrom is a confident student of the 19th and early 20th century European masters.

Linhares discovered **Steve Roden's** colorful abstractions in a group exhibition at the Luckman Gallery at California State University, Los Angeles. A composer of sounds works as well as a painter, Roden is inspired to color-code his musical notes and mix his media. He develops and imposes specific criteria for each of his paintings.

Surrealist painter **Steve Galloway** was introduced to Linhares by Los Angeles installation artist Michael C. McMillen. Galloway's meticulously detailed work depicts the clash of modern industry with nature, and other irrational juxtapositions.

Linda Stark has been engaged with the substance and function of paint for nearly two decades. Her powerful, symbolic work often conveys the emotional and psychological states of women, on surfaces sculpted in shallow relief. Stark's strong statements can appear deceptively simple.

Don Suggs, a Texas native, grew up in San Diego and earned his MFA from UCLA, where he now teaches. Suggs's work has varied so greatly over the years that the title of his recent retrospective at the Ben Maltz Gallery of the Otis Art Institute was "One-Man Group Show." His newest work, part of LA PAINT, features target-like concentric circles on round canvasses up to 60 inches in diameter.

Esther Pearl Watson's father was an eccentric who build space ships in his rural Texas garage. Various disasters forced the family to move often: Watson's faux primitive paintings provide a narrative of the family's saga.

Loren Holland is a 2005 MFA from Yale and a painter of personal narratives. Her work on paper has satirized sexual stereotypes of African American women. She recently moved her studio from her grandparents' garage in Compton to Long Beach.

Robert Williams, godfather of the so-called Lowbrow school of painting, began as an underground cartoonist. With sarcasm and glee, Williams created a subculture of unchecked greed, consumerism, and depravity, eschewing critical approval. He founded the freewheeling Juxtapoz Art & Culture Magazine in 1994.

The museum will offer curator and artist tours and programs for LA PAINT.

Visit museumca.org for details in September.

Preview celebration : Friday, 3 October, 5:00 – 7:30 p.m.