

**JAY BACKSTRAND · PAINTINGS**  
**1977 - 1983**

This exhibition was curated by Terri Hopkins. The installation was by Tad Savinar.

The Gym Exhibition Program is sponsored by Marylhurst Art, the Art Division of Marylhurst College for Lifelong Learning, an accredited liberal arts college. Kay Slusarenko, Chairman; Paul Sutinen, Program Assistant; Terri Hopkins, Exhibitions Director. Marylhurst, Oregon 97036, telephone (503) 636-8141.

This catalogue is part of a series of exhibitions, catalogues and public forums on contemporary Northwest art sponsored by Marylhurst. We greatly appreciate the assistance of the Oregon Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts, our Art Advisory Board, and members of Friends of The Gym in making this publication possible.

© Marylhurst College for Lifelong Learning.  
essay copyright by Anne Griffin Johnson.

ISBN 0-914435-11-6

Designed by Claudia Nix.

Cover: *Dreams of Power, Dreams of Peace* (1978),  
acrylic, oil, and wax on canvas, 88" x 120".  
Photograph by Al Monner.

**JAY BACKSTRAND · PAINTINGS**  
**1977-1983**

**February 19-March 17, 1984**

Essay by  
**Anne Griffin Johnson**



**The Art Gym, Marylhurst College for Lifelong Learning, Marylhurst, Oregon**

---

## Introduction

Jay Backstrand has been painting professionally for over twenty years. This exhibition presents a selection of paintings from the past seven. The exhibition is intended to be a representative rather than comprehensive view of Backstrand's work during a period when the artist's ideas and approach to painting underwent significant change. We are grateful to Anne Johnson for her carefully considered interview with the artist, and to Jay Backstrand for sharing his thoughts on his art for the catalogue. We would also like to express our appreciation to the collectors who have generously made works available for the exhibition, Lisa Andrus, Anne and James Crumpacker, Allen Gates and Dr. Herbert and Shirley Semler. Finally, I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity these past months to study and think about Jay Backstrand's art, and to work with the artist in making the selections for this exhibition. My thanks to Jay for agreeing to do this exhibition at Marylhurst and for all the work he has contributed to the project.

Terri Hopkins

Exhibitions Director

"It may be naive to ask what we can learn from Othello, but it is decadent not to."

Annie Dillard  
*Living by Fiction*

---

## An Interview with Jay Backstrand October 9, 1983, by Anne Griffin Johnson.

**AJ:** Let me ask you, where do you draw the line on what you want to reveal to your potential audience about your personal history and what's behind the paintings?

**JB:** I guess my feeling is that, if who I am is really there in the paintings, they won't need an explanation. I try to get on the edge of whatever I'm feeling and thinking about the work, and I try to stay true to that edge. As I change, as my personal concerns change, it's reflected in my work; but I don't think people have to know specific personal things. Even if they know it, it's not going to change anything, really, except in a kind of soap-opera light.

**AJ:** How much do you ask of the viewer? Who is your ideal viewer?

**JB:** Just somebody who responds to what's there, instead of somebody with expectations, somebody who's looking for something.

**AJ:** How does this viewer gain access to the paintings? Haven't your paintings been called complex, obscure, inaccessible—

**JB:** And "difficult"? But I think they are very easy.

**AJ:** Some people do find them difficult and feel they are missing things they need to know to be able to understand the work—

**JB:** Because they are working too hard. They're looking for something, rather than responding to what's there in front of them. I feel I use the language very simply. It's very clear: if I layer something, then there are layers; there are things in the way of things.

**AJ:** Then how do you respond to trained, formal analysis or appreciation of your work? It's interesting to me that artists whose work has intensely personal content are often happiest talking about their work in entirely formal terms, rather than the larger stuff, meaning and so forth. They also seem to prefer being evaluated on the level of formal achievement.

**JB:** Oh, I like to be appreciated on that level. In order to get that other stuff out, there has to be a level of formal quality that draws people in and sustains their interest. I remember once hearing a poet say that all beginnings are ridden with clichés. Any ideas, probably all the ideas I have, are very common in human experience. What I have to do, is qualify them by a quality, a uniqueness; and part of that is purely formal control. I guess what I would like to do is be able to draw from any parts of the language of visual form that I want to and put them together in a way that's unique—and I don't mean high-minded unique—I want to try to put it together in a personal, sincere way that has some meaning beyond my personal concerns.

**AJ:** Is control an issue or a theme in any larger sense? What are the ramifications of keeping control?

**JB:** The boat series, for example *Dreams of Power*, *Dreams of Peace*, is about autonomy. A single shell is a very difficult boat to balance; it's extremely sensitive. You can't let it drift, you can't let go of it. It has to be balanced and under control all of the time or you'll turn it over or catch an oar and flip yourself over. You have to watch for a wake. It's something that requires real balance, but it's also extraordinary experience about time and about control. I thought it was a nice metaphor for staying in

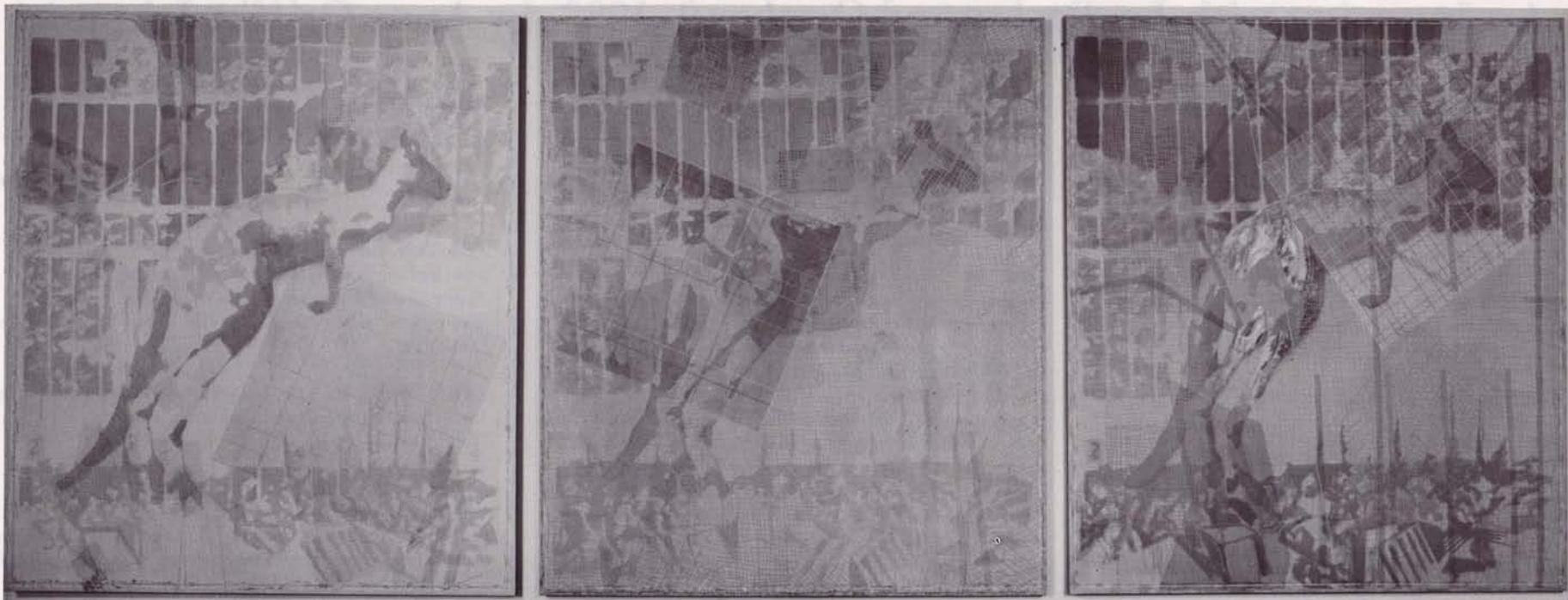
balance, staying in harmony, being able to move as an independent human being. I thought those boats were beautiful, and I always wanted to row one.

**AJ:** You've already rowed out in those paintings, haven't you?

**JB:** Yes, that was a time of letting go of old stuff and also looking at what it meant for people to be autonomous. I have seen the way people entrap themselves, create things to tie themselves up—obsessions, limitations.

**AJ:** Then do the veils and grids between the boat image and the viewer have to do with those obsessions and limitations?

**JB:** Yes, the same thing goes through all my work. Anytime you try to formalize something to understand it, you create various limitations. The layers are a metaphor for the way experience limits our ability to grasp or wholly understand anything. Looking at one of my paintings, people see something: it's attractive in color, or they identify an image. They walk up to it and it breaks down. They move away, get some distance, and begin to see it again. In Antonioni's film *Blow-up*, the man starts blowing up that photograph trying to identify the murderers, trying to identify those two people. He knows who they are, but he wants this to prove who they are. In the process of pinning it down, the closer he gets, the more impotent he becomes. The idea with the paintings was that the closer you get to it, the harder you try, the more they break down into bits of information, and you lose the whole.



*Passage* (1978), acrylic, oil, and wax on canvas, three panels 78" x 68" each.  
Photograph by Al Monner.

**JB:** *There was a Crippled Man* was the first work done after the Fountain Gallery fire, and it represents a starting point for all the work in this show. It has to do with boundaries we set up. The kangaroos were really sentinels, a sort of protection, a kind of animal instinctual protection against things that are out there that are also kind of primitive. It was also about the transparency of all that, about that thin space between something being rational and being irrational, like membranes, like layers between dreams, layers between ideas.

When I was working on *There was a Crippled Man*, I was looking at and becoming aware again of the fact that everything is a product of the mind. Asteroids and all that, for example, are really in a sense fictitious. We have construed their existence. We have observed phenomena and named them, but it is all based on what happens in the human mind. In my own way, I was dealing with that idea of the subjective construction of the whole world, trying to paint layers of information about phenomena occurring simultaneously, and trying to put them in an order that's readable and also to deal with the idea of movement from the subconscious to the conscious and to dream states, all that kind of stuff.

**AJ:** So, when you begin, do you begin with a structure of mind that you want to illustrate, or are you engaged in a process of learning about mind and world?

**JB:** I would say I'm learning. There are relationships in those parts that I put together that seem to have a gestalt—a meaning larger than the sum of its parts—that has power for me personally, and power in terms of my observations of the world. It develops in the process. I have to work the same idea over a number of times to get at the one that works.

**AJ:** How do you sort out the ones that work and the ones that don't? How do you define success?

**JB:** There's a point at which there is continuity for formalist reasons: balance and light, color and space, and all that sort of thing. The parts fit together, and there's nothing else I can do with that idea and I have to move on. There is a lot of early European painting that is compelling to me because of its simplicity and because of the power and design. I don't mean design in the decorative sense; I mean design in terms of idea and formal structure. It is very close to modern work in that it's fairly two-dimensional, fairly flat. And it presents to you a lot of levels of information on almost the same visual plane: those who paid for the work, those who were part of it, those were dreamt about, all in the same space, from Christ to the saints to the governors and donors.

**AJ:** Are there any twentieth century or contemporary artists that you consciously draw from at this point?

**JB:** That I consciously draw from—no.

**AJ:** I remember a painting a few years back where you metaphorically killed off Francis Bacon.

**JB:** Oh, yes—that's because what I saw in his work was that mixture of spatial concerns and irrationality and internal violence that compelled me for a long time. As I worked through my own compulsions, I got less interested in him and also less interested in looking at somebody else, rather than just dealing with who I was.

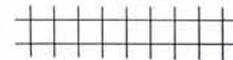
**JB:** *Dreams of Power, Dreams of Peace* (the first of the boat series) and *Passage* and the *Companion* all have something to do with facing death. I read Ernest Becker's

book, *The Denial of Death*, about that time and was almost overpowered by it, by his observations about how societies, through ritual, religious or otherwise, start teaching children very young how to deal with death, whether it's conscious or unconscious. I think today one problem for people is that without knowing what they buried, they bury the awareness of death and how it makes you alive, how you can use it and derive energy from it. *The Companion, His* and *The Companion, Hers* have to do with this, with our dark side of the unconscious or death or all of those things. We carry with us our beginning and our end. The consciousness or unconsciousness of that makes people run, walk, stand still, jump—makes them do all sorts of things that they quite often deny. Casteneda talks about the shadow, that animal running alongside of you: it's there.

I also wanted, in all these paintings, an image that was almost retinal, that just vibrated there, that was there when it wasn't there.

**AJ:** Is that connected with the way we approach death?

**JB:** Well, in a sense, metaphorically, it deals with it by disguising things but still keeping things transparent. It's like there is an awareness of these things just below the conscious level. We set up these screens and we screen out and filter that kind of primitive or primary concern. Joseph Beuys was interesting to me because he got himself into a kind of primitive experience with himself, and he also looked at how people see death and how it can make you alive or dead in the sense of whether you can handle it or not.



**JB:** *Reflections on a Desperate Image* is a transitional piece. The center panel uses transparent washes and referential marks that reflect previous paintings, but I looked for a more physical sort of surface in the outer panels. I was trying, experimentally, to extend the experience out into the world. That's why I used sticks that press against the painted eye and lie against the floor. It's a physical connection between an image which is painted on a canvas, which is abstract, and the physical world. Also, the sticks impose on the viewer's space. They are confrontive that way. And there is something physically disturbing about having that stick lie against the eye of an image. The eye is access and barrier. We take in over 80% of the information we register through our eyes, but we filter it, like everything else, through our experiences and distort it like mad. Those kinds of distortions can be illuminating, though, as well as creating barriers.

*Reflections on a Desperate Image* is about painting too, about paintings that are a kind of desperate attempt to order things. And, also, painting today is in a desperate state—probably always has been. We are always trying to redefine it, trying to find a place for ourselves. Some people say it's dead. It's impossible to kill painting, simply because people have to make images. There are going to be people who have to reorder things, whether anybody else is interested or not. I don't think mechanical means, like video or that stuff, is ever going to do it.



**JB:** In *Dreams and Skeletons*, I was trying to deal with the idea that when you move something from a dream or fantasy state into the real world, when you try to actualize it, it hardens, loses its ambiance, becomes something else. I used a kind of relief construction here as a metaphor for that breakdown of content. That content is really the mind and can't be projected out into the world wholly. It can only be put out in parts, and you have to formalize that content whatever it is. And, of course, by making the construction architectural, I tried to express the way that happens, how content is formalized.

This time, different than other pieces, I wanted to lay out the parts of an image side by side, rather than overlapping. I mean, there would be overlays in each one of them, but each would have a different level of content. It's like upper, middle, and lower brain. There's the

primitive, animal stem, dense, hard to penetrate, but potentially volatile and always there. Then there is the intuitive, emotional, sensitive self, more pliable and related in more parts to the rest of the world; and there is the upper brain which is really abstract, extremely complex, sort of honeycombed. Each panel, as an image, has a different density.

**AJ:** Was this a starting point for you? You didn't carry through to the end thinking about illustrating the three parts of the brain—

**JB:** No, no, no—that just came in the process of putting it together.

**AJ:** Did those definitions of brain act as limits or organizing factors for the three compositions?

**JB:** No, that's just something that hit me now. I just started looking for something. I had a feeling about some relationships that I want to deal with, some different experiences of color relationship and density of surface that I wanted to lay out side-by-side and work on simultaneously. The underlying relationships are expressed after the fact quite often for me.

**AJ:** So the limits for each of the panels are intuitive. You just scout the territory—

**JB:** It's interesting, at one point I was thinking Father, Son, Holy Ghost—what does that mean, what are they doing? And then the idea came of laying out those frames which were like windows or doors opening to the image, offering a way of access; and then those reliquaries with the scalpels in them offer the viewer a tool. In one way or another, we dissect things in order to understand or absorb them.

**AJ:** So the scalpels are in the viewer's space and refer to the viewer, not to the image.

**JB:** But they're also inaccessible. They're in little wire cages, which is where we put most of our primitive instincts about cutting things up, including people.

**AJ:** And that's parallel to the screens and veils in earlier paintings.

**JB:** Yes.

**AJ:** What about the little, tight, floating geometric shapes, as opposed to the bigger transparent screens that you were using earlier? Where do those come from?

**JB:** Those I refer to like metal, like little sheets of metal, really impenetrable. They're metallic paint. They're like blank places in your retina, little places where you just don't see: your blank spots.

**AJ:** Why are these blank spots so geometrically ordered?

**JB:** Oh, that's really a formal thing, a kind of rhythm that works across all three panels and relates them to each other.

**AJ:** Their placement doesn't seem to have any rational structure.

**JB:** A random order.

**AJ:** They come across as random, and yet the shapes are pure ideas, pure products of the mind—

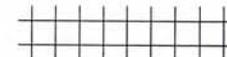
**JB:** But pure ideas are really random—

**AJ:** And they can also be blind spots.

**JB:** Right, yeah. Sometimes there's just no place to put ideas. [Laughs] Except away.

**AJ:** You just sort of float them out onto the edges.

**JB:** Yes, right.



**JB:** The *Joe Hill* pieces are all black and white, and they're all drawings. In them, I was starting to tap into my earliest art. When I was eight years old, I did the backdrop for, of all things, a blackface show. I did all the posters and I did the backdrop. Well, the backdrop was eight feet high, and to an eight-year-old child, that's like me now painting something fifteen feet high. But I did all of it for this school sing-along thing. Well, it's very important,



*Hunting for Joseph* (1981), acrylic, oil, wax, wood, and wire on canvas, 78" x 180".  
Photograph by William Grand.



*The Desperate Image: Without Papers* (1982), acrylic, oil, wax, wood, and masonite, 98" x 85".  
Photograph by Judith Muzzy.

because I couldn't sing. They wouldn't let me sing, because I was totally flat, but they made me stay in chorus all the way through ninth grade, because it was required. Anyway, I made all these plaid shirts in the posters and in the backdrop. Well, all the grids and stripes in my work—it came to me, they were all plaid bow ties and plaid hats. And I realized that that big singular image—didn't matter what it was—was very powerful to me. And I did it for the whole school. It was one of the few times I felt I had any power.

Joe Hill was somebody who was very ambiguous. I mean everybody's tried to manipulate who Joe Hill was to suit their own purposes. The unions wanted to resurrect him as a hero not too long ago, and the Utah State Prison System, which put him to death, did not. When you read about him, he's either a lecherous, nasty, weird dude or he's this poet and saint. I got into the idea of letting that image roll. I was always fascinated by Chinese opera masks—they have a mask for every nuance of personality—and I thought, well, I'd just let those things roll. And that's when I started doing the Joe Hill things.

The *Desperate Image* paintings followed. I knew they would be too big for anybody to show. They were going to be big composite heads which I'd been thinking about for a while and for which I had actually done little collages. I would say these are the first paintings that I really made just for me. And they're that big head.

I also brought in the architectural thing again. You know I started out to be an architect. I studied architecture only six months, but the issue that was there, and the issue that's still there, and the issue that is something all artists are trying to express, is something about space. I heard Frank Stella say in an interview that whatever an artist does, it's about space. And it just clicked. I said, yeah, no matter what kind of artist, there's that relationship of the being, of the self, to space. It's the space between notes. It's the space between words. It's the space between you and the next person. And it's somehow trying to control or formalize that experience of space, which is a thing I never understood about color before. Before, colors fused things together. I hadn't allowed them to separate. In fact, I think that's what people are quite often trying to do: they're trying to fuse with that image, rather than allow it to be something separate.

**AJ:** Well that's one way of defining space. It can be compressed or dense.

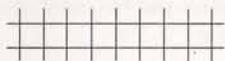
**JB:** Yes, and I'm just saying that where people get confused is that they can't accept that that's a kind of space too.

**AJ:** They think that flattening eliminates space as a pictorial element? And perhaps don't feel that, say, a field projecting color or visually expanding on the wall, up-down and side-to-side, expresses a kind of space?

**JB:** Yes.

**AJ:** Paul Klee said the function of painting is to enlarge space.

**JB:** Wonderful, yes—a beautiful idea.

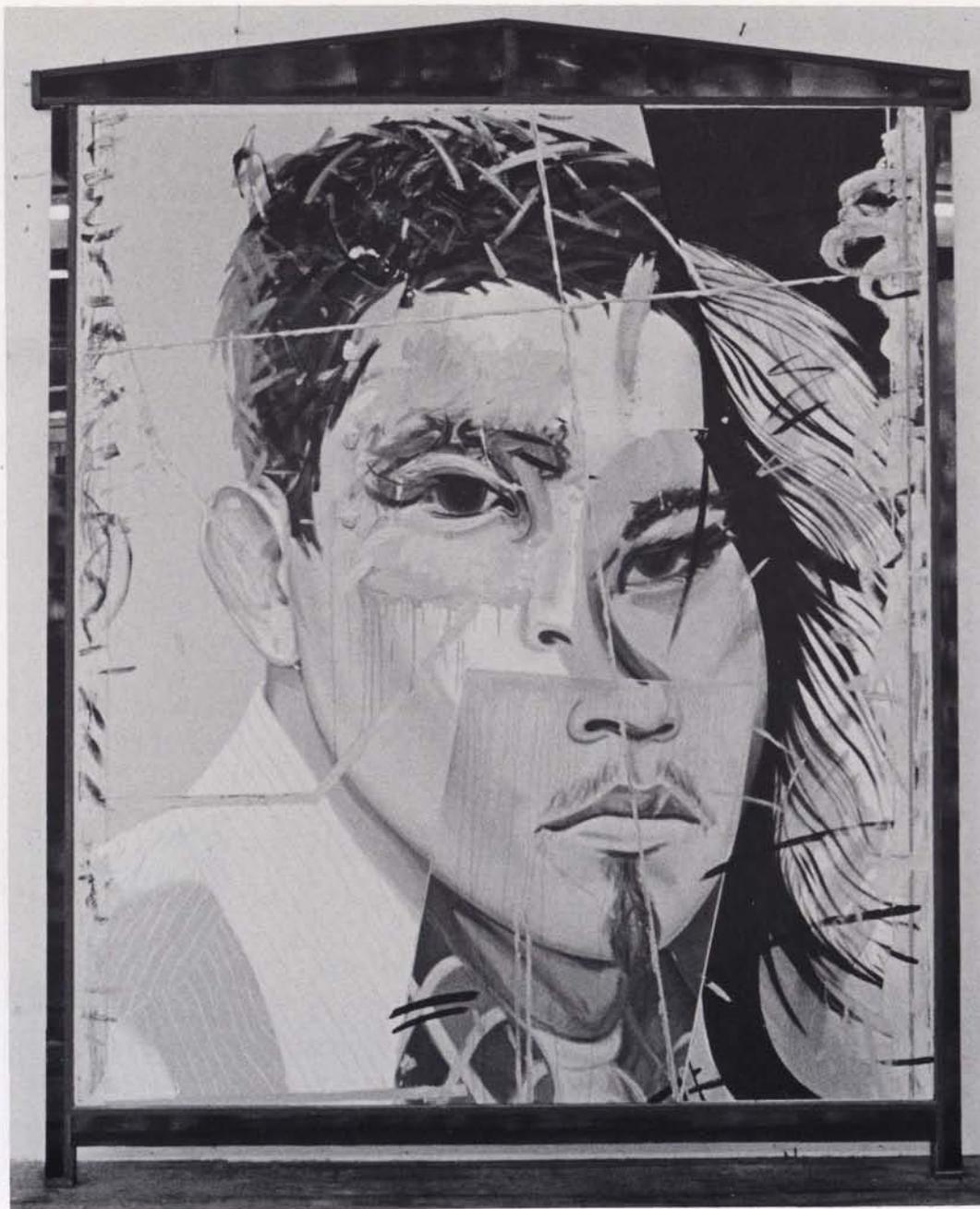


**JB:** *Pink is a Dangerous Color* is a self-portrait. I didn't realize it was a self-portrait, of course, until it was all over with.

**AJ:** I can see why, yet there's a unity in this head in spite of all the parts coming from different sources. It does become the image of a particular person. How did it come to look like a self-portrait to you?

**JB:** Well, there were fewer barriers in this piece. And there was just something about the shape of that head and the shape of my head when I was young—the hairline—everything—the mouth and part of the nose—and the fact that that mouth and nose are hispanic, that that one eye and that stylized, formalized, abstracted hair are oriental, and that the larger part of the head is caucasian-European: it was sort of at that point. Also, the eye—the other eye—is feminine. And there's that coherence through color—I mean that it's all greens, which is the color I wore as a kid. My mother said green was my color.

At one point, this piece was just painted out *alla prima*, but it looked too much like an illustration. I realized that what I needed was that interruption of the image with the purely physical quality of paint. I never want to get away from that, because it's a reference to the fact that it's just an illusion, some material applied to a surface, which in itself has integrity, power, interest. I always liked to just put bits of paint down just for the sake



*The Desperate Image: Pink is a Dangerous Color* (1983), acrylic, oil, wax, wood, and mirror, 92" x 76".



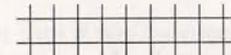
*The Last Disguise* (1983), acrylic, oil, wax, and wood, 84" x 73".  
Photograph by Judith Muzzy.

of putting them down. No good reason.

*Pink is a Dangerous Color* is an artistic reference as well as one to being feminine: people have said pink is a very difficult color to deal with; but also it has to do with feminine aspects of personality and male sensitivity and trying to put all the parts together successfully in a personal way and in every other way and also just in a painting.

**AJ:** I wonder about the tone of these paintings. They're astonishing images—disorienting, witty, sometimes shocking. Do you intend them as grotesques?

**JB:** I don't see them as grotesque. Some people might, because they're disturbed by dislocation or distortion, and they keep wanting to fit everything into a rational system, which they can control and feel comfortable with. I'm just saying you can't do it.

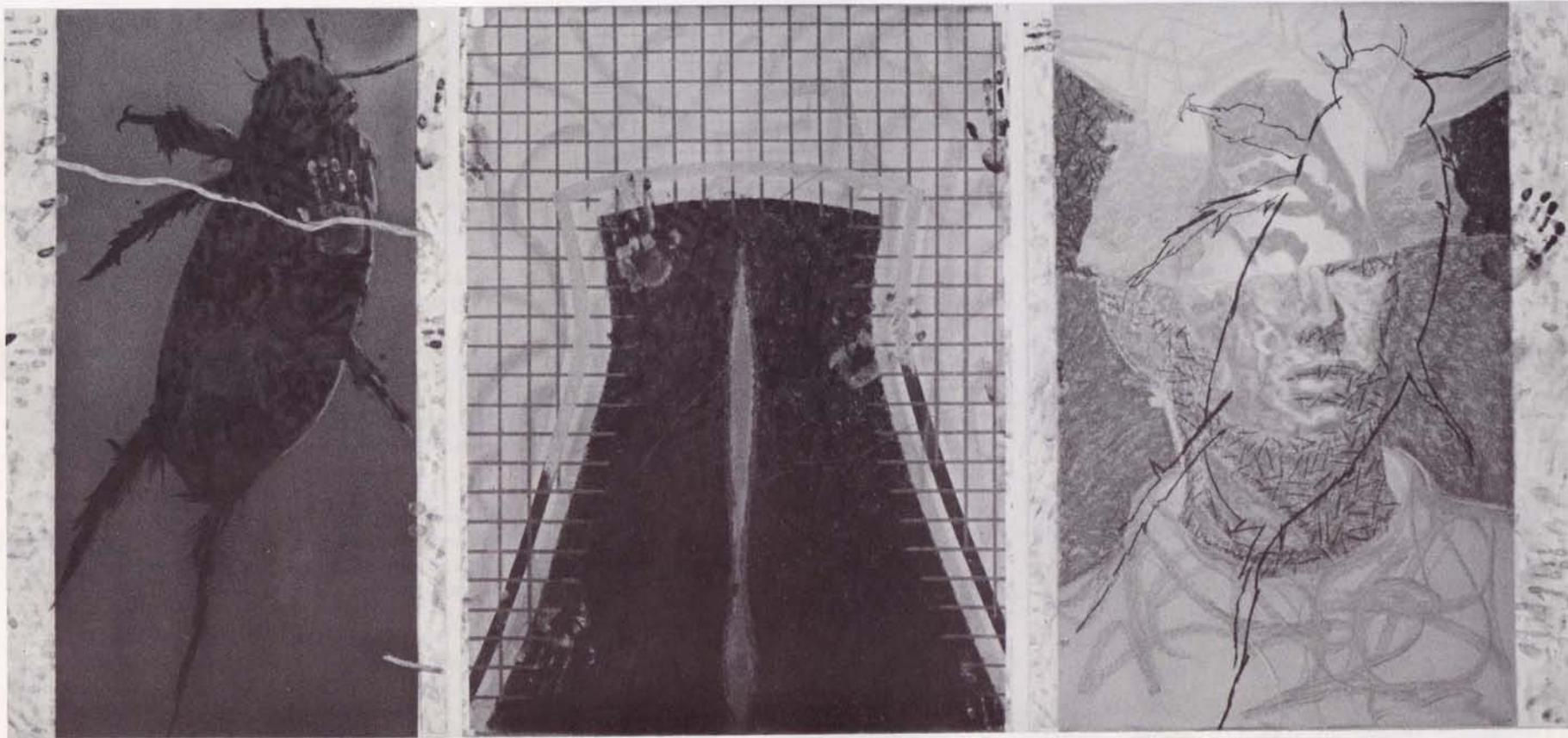


**JB:** Early in 1983, when I was working on *The Last Disguise*, I thought that maybe the barriers were breaking down, that the images would become clearer and more direct, simpler. It was a transition piece. I wanted a more fluid painting, something more integrated.

In the newest work, *Toward the Watershed*, there are two simultaneous things happening. One is the watershed reference. In the law of entropy, before things are completely burned out, there is a watershed state in which things are sort of neutralizing each other. This side of the painting really has to do with issues of power and uses the cooling tower as a kind of metaphor for a struggle over and about power. On the other side, the left, is a cockroach, a spectral animal-image, a reference to nature. In this painting, I wanted the signature of the image to be more primary and more easily read—just boom, there it is.

**AJ:** Do you feel that when your work tends more toward the political and social, it needs to be more simply and clearly put?

**JB:** Yes, but the inner struggles are still metaphors for what happens outside. One whole series is called *Posters for an Undeclared War*. It has to do with the kind of struggles—not just personal, but social and political—that aren't always necessarily definable.



*Toward the Watershed* (1983), pastel, dry pigment, and charcoal on paper, 50" x 96".  
Photograph by Judith Muzzy.



Poster for an Undeclared War (1983), oil and wax on canvas, 78" x 68".

**AJ:** Before we end, I want to ask you what you think about the present-day use of art and its power.

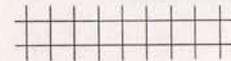
**JB:** Art is mostly abused today. I think people want to try to absorb its content, rather than let it exist. This culture wants to do that with everything: to absorb—by the way the media deal with things—to absorb people's lives and spit them out again, absorb the content of a tragedy and then just dump it out or put it in a box again, and, in a way, make people's lives two-dimensional.

**AJ:** Then what do you see as its proper function? How is art best used today?

**JB:** Well, to illuminate, to enrich, enrich our experience of ourselves—if it doesn't do that, it's not worth much.

**AJ:** It's been said that the history of the world—social, economic, military, you name it—would not be any different if none of the art of the past existed. What do you think about that? Do you think art sort of leaks into history by way of individual consciousness?

**JB:** Oh, no. No, it doesn't. And I don't expect these things I'm doing to do anything at all, absolutely nothing at all, except on an individual basis. It's individuals who come to look at a work of art, and if it enriches their experience of being alive, without necessarily changing anything, then it's done something.



## Biography

Born in Salem, Oregon, 1934.

Studied at Oregon State University (1952-1954), the University of Colorado (1956-1957), the Portland Art Museum School (1958-1961), and the Slade School of the University of London (1964-1965).

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1981 and 1982.

Portland Center for the Visual Arts, 1981.

*Northwest Artists, A Review*, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, 1980.

*American Drawing in Black and White*, Brooklyn Museum, New York, 1980.

Fountain Gallery of Art, Portland, Oregon, 1978 and 1980.

*Art of the Pacific Northwest*, circulating exhibition organized by the Smithsonian Institute and exhibited at the National Gallery, 1973-1974.

*Western Annual*, Denver Art Museum, Colorado, 1971. Salt Lake City Art Museum, Utah, 1971.

University of Oregon Art Museum, Eugene, 1967.

American Embassy Show, London, England, 1966.

*Art West of the Mississippi*, Colorado Springs Fine Art Center, 1966.

Portland Art Museum, Oregon, 1963.

*Biennial of American Painting and Sculpture*, University of Illinois, 1969.

### SELECTED AWARDS

Purchase Award, American Academy, 1982.

National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, 1982.

### SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Seattle Art Museum, Washington.

Metro-Media, Los Angeles.

Smithsonian Institute,

Permanent National Gallery Collection.

State of Oregon, State Capitol Building, Salem.

## Catalogue Listing

In the following descriptions of dimensions height precedes width.

*There was a Crippled Man* (1977)

acrylic, oil and wax on canvas

three panels, 78" x 60" each

Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Allen Gates.

*Passage* (1978)

acrylic, oil, and wax on canvas

three panels, 78" x 68" each

Courtesy of Anne and James Crumpacker.

*The Companion (Hers)* (1978)

acrylic, oil and wax on canvas

90" x 84"

*Dreams of Power, Dreams of Peace* (1978)

acrylic, oil, and wax on canvas

88" x 120"

Courtesy of Dr. and Mrs. Herbert Semler.

*Reflections on a Desperate Image* (1979-1980)

acrylic, oil, and wax on canvas

three panels, 60" x 50"

*Ice Fall* (1981), study

acrylic, wood, wire, and masonite

26" x 73"

*Hunting for Joseph* (1981)

acrylic, oil, wax, wood, and wire on canvas

78" x 180"

*The Desperate Image: Without Papers* (1982)

acrylic, oil, wax, wood, and masonite

98" x 85"

*The Watershed* (1983)

acrylic, oil and wax on canvas

90" x 190"

*The Desperate Image: Pink is a Dangerous Color* (1983)

acrylic, oil, wax, wood, and mirror

92" x 76"

*Posters for an Undeclared War* (1983)

(one painting from the series)

oil and wax on canvas

78" x 68"

