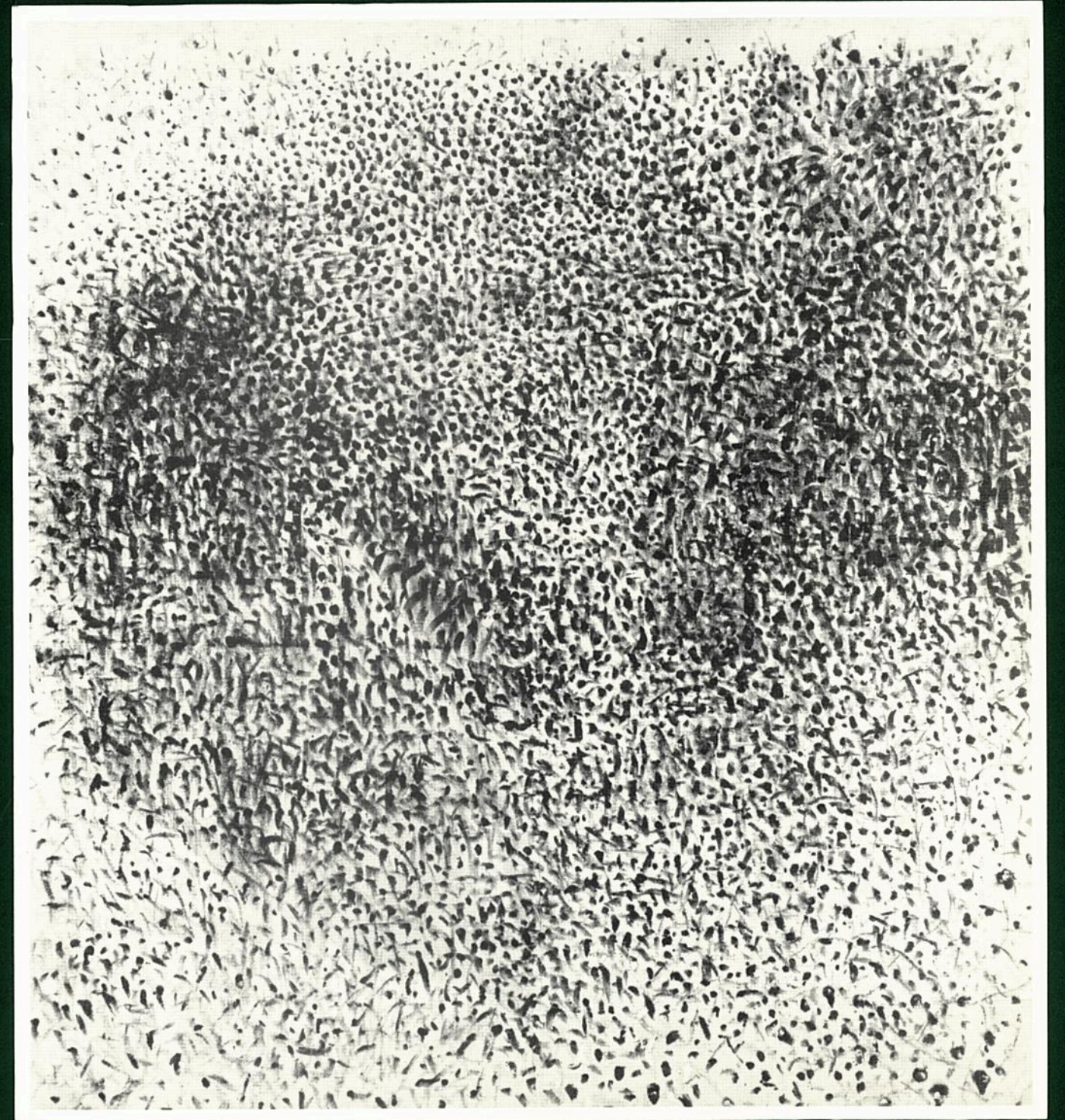


INUNDATIONS



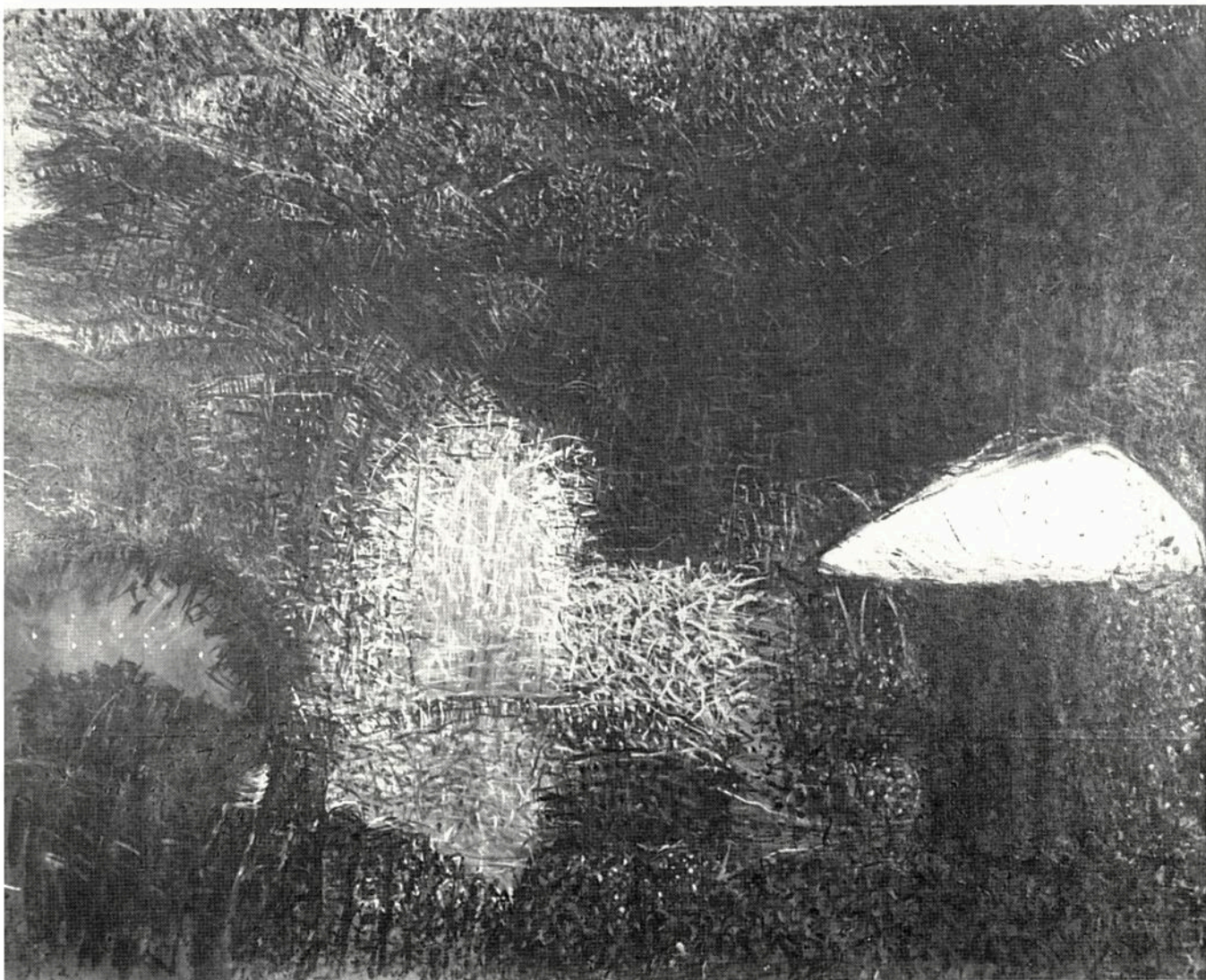
RECENT PAINTINGS BY BRIAN BLANCHFLOWER

INUNDATIONS

RECENT PAINTINGS BY BRIAN BLANCHFLOWER



THE ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



City Portrait/Transfiguration 1983-84

Exhibition dates:
6 April – 5 May 1985

Curated by Bruce Adams

Art Gallery of Western Australia
Perth Cultural Centre
Perth, 6000
Western Australia
Tel: (09) 328 7233

front cover:
Subterranean Light/Orcadian Nocturne
(canvas from installation) 1984

INTRODUCTION

Bruce Adams

This exhibition of recent paintings by Brian Blanchflower is the first public viewing in Australia of a number of large and significant works the artist produced abroad during an eight month period of concentrated activity in 1983/84. They are the fruits of a residency funded by the Visual Arts Board at the AIR & SPACE Studio in London.

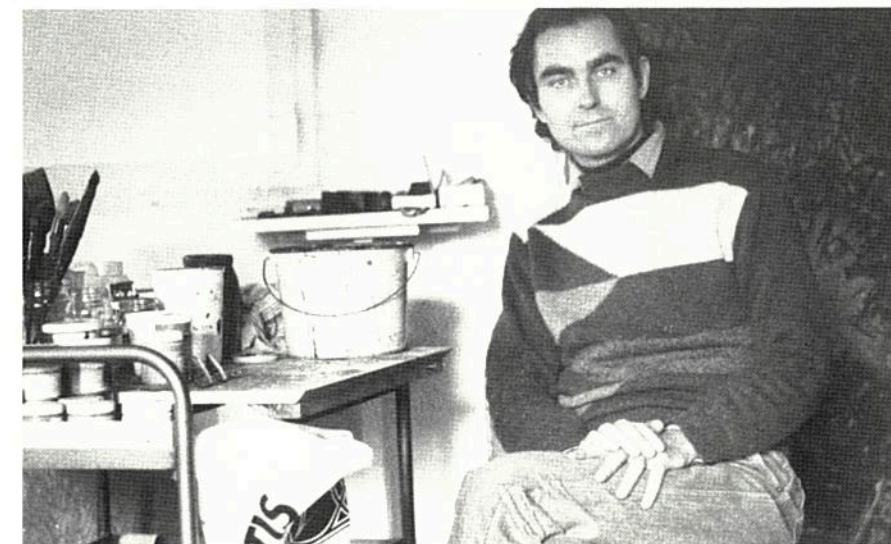
Blanchflower's paintings can be seen literally as fields of texture and matter. They are also romantic landscapes of the imagination, and they refer to the European aesthetic tradition of the sublime. Inherent in such work is the issue of place as a generative influence on the creative imagination. In his paintings the artist's felt responses to the varied cultural and environmental stimuli of new or rediscovered places become synthesised into imagery of much broader and more abstracted concern, imagery which however still functions as a personal narrative about changing sensibilities of place.

For Blanchflower the London residency enabled renewed contact with people and places which were influential upon his earlier work in England. But above all the studio's location in the heart of an intense metropolitan environment was itself a new and unusual stimulus upon an artist whose work in Western Australia has tended to address more isolated and abandoned horizons. The London paintings progressively became metaphorical portraits of an animate city the artist has described as a 'breathing organism', pulsating around its arterial river.

In London Blanchflower was able to look at current art from England, Europe and America, noting work by Baselitz, Beuys, Morris and others. Of more significance to his own painting, however, was the discovery of certain works of European art history. The

rich and problematic late works of Titian had dramatic impact on him, as did his seeing, for the first time, the cataclysmic, visionary landscapes of the 19th century artist John Martin. Around the same time he also came across a small exhibition commemorating the huge volcanic explosion a century ago at Krakatoa. In London, as he later concluded, "the potent spectre of catastrophe had a considerable effect on the work I did ..."¹

There is a dark and austere romanticism in all three of the large works Blanchflower painted in the London studio. In each work the artist has built up stippled surfaces of deep earth colours, with highlights of brighter colour suggestive of other elements and forces. Through the series there is a progressive shift from an initial state of almost sombre passivity towards a more activated pictorial drama. In *Deluge/Comet Entry* there is a sense of apocalyptic intervention, a world of natural disintegration and entropy. The areas of textured paint surge into each other across an expansive, panoramic field. The painting becomes the site of continuing inundations, a vortex into which one might become drawn and consumed.



The artist in the studio, London 1984



AIR & SPACE Building,
Rosebery Avenue, London E.C.1

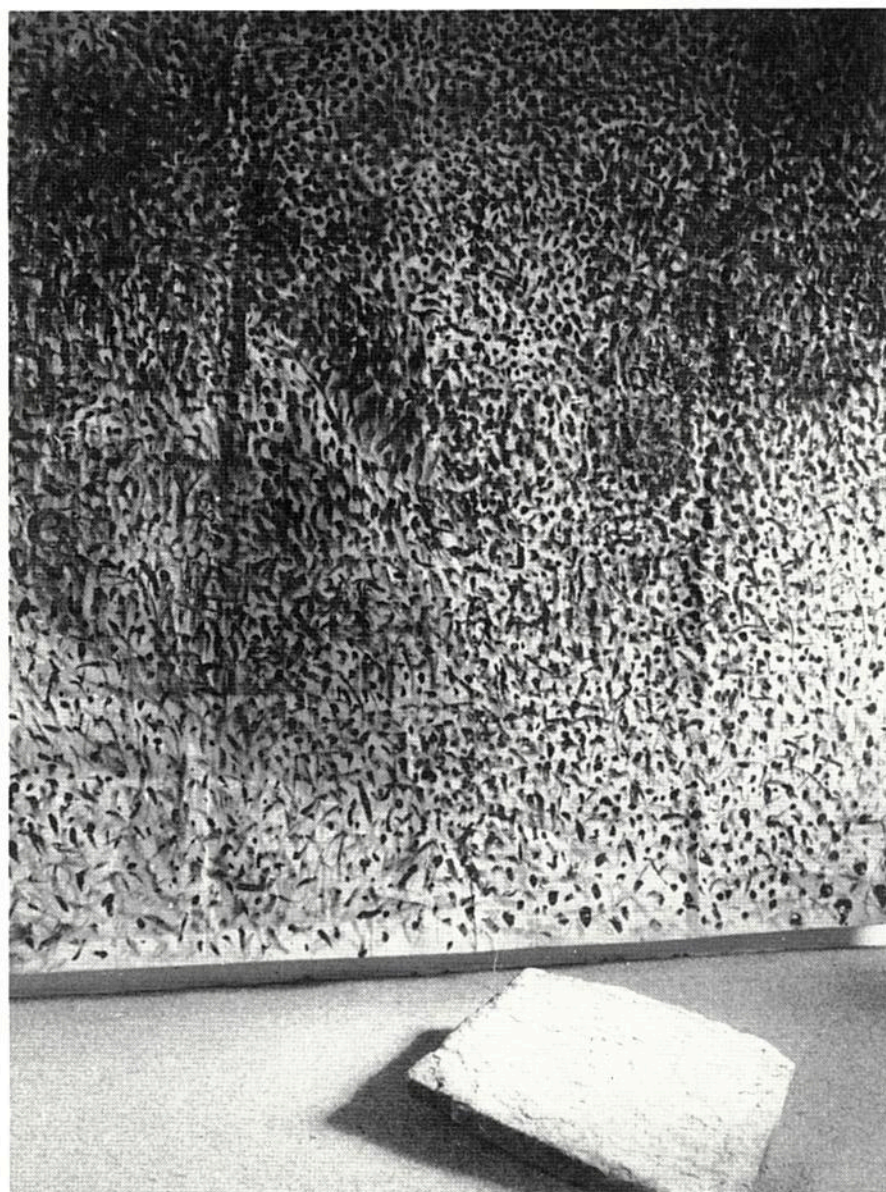
Like another painter of abstract fields of matter in flux, Ralph Balson, the Australian modernist of an earlier generation, Brian Blanchflower acknowledges the influence of the philosopher of astronomy, Fred Hoyle, whose writings situate human life not as the centre and measure of all things but as part of a complex pattern uniting all facets of the universe. Again like Balson, Blanchflower uses analogies drawn from the sciences to sublimate immediate personal reference in his work, to pan out towards a more transcendent view of earth and cosmos. In his London paintings, this cultural perception of the sublime is rendered in painterly fields of deep mood and epic proportion.

Despite the artist's stated wariness of programmatic art, it is tempting to read the three major London paintings as an interrelated narrative, a journey in which the artist's presence is replaced by a developing sequence of abstracted worldviews. Towards the end of the residency he removed himself for a brief period into a very different environment far from the urban centre. In the raw and exposed landscape of Orkney Blanchflower was again in the kind of megalithic landscape that had been a key reference behind much of his earlier work in England and Australia. His paintings about Orkney developed formal differences to the London paintings. The stippled surfaces became less dense and more severely monochrome, and the painted marks began to float openly across the

raw ground. In these paintings emerged lozenge forms, which echoed the natural geological cleavage of rocks in the Orkney landscape. In the installation *Blanchflower* prepared for the Pier Arts Centre in Stromness, an actual piece of Orkney stone was illuminated in front of his painting by shafts of light. The installation attempted a linkage of light and matter in a reverently subdued space. The Orkney experience was an affirmation of his romantic convictions, and of his fascination for cosmic, universalist theories of life and energy.

Note

- 1 Brian Blanchflower, 'Winters of Discontent', *Praxis M* No. 6 Spring 1984, p9



Subterranean Light/Orcadian Nocturne (detail of installation, Pier Arts Centre, Stromness) 1984



Rock formation, Orkney

FROM LONDON STONE TO ORKNEY LIGHT

Brian Blanchflower

From 1 October 1983 until May 1984, apart from a short spell in the Orkney Islands, I worked and lived in the 900 square feet top floor SPACE studio in Rosebery Avenue, London EC1. The studio, because it had to serve as living space for the family; dictated that I work on the walls in two dimensions — painting and drawing. Although the precise nature of the content was not predetermined, I nevertheless decided early on to work as large as possible in the space, the main feature of which was a 20 foot long uninterrupted plaster board wall to which I could staple canvas or paper. I also had to consider the transport of the work back to Australia — hence the use of canvas without stretchers.

London Stone/Southern Heat, the first painting I completed there, and the largest, turned out to be predominantly 'Australian', at least in its colour (oxides and black) and in its overall subdued energy, a kind of dark shimmering heat. A few months before our departure for London I had visited Walga Rock, near Cue. The atmosphere of that place and the presence of the Aboriginal rock-paintings had been a sublime experience which quietly began to pervade my London work without me having to direct it. The work also absorbed some of the geometry and grimey textures of my new environment.

London Stone/Southern Heat took a month to complete, working almost every day. In the painting process I adopted, using pure pigments, adding acrylic mediums as I went along, it was important to allow every mark made to remain visible in the final result, each day bringing in a new element of discovery. The work had to remain open to the situation I found myself in.

connection — a necessary ingredient in all my work — is indicated by the 'harbour-mouth' (or cave-mouth) section with its hazy stars. The painting is primarily concerned with the layering of time, much as one is drawn into a time-drama when confronted by rock paintings which have been worked on over a period of hundreds or thousands of years, layer upon layer, style over style.

this is paralleled in the painting process where, from elemental materials and marks, images and surfaces are created by means of energy. For a period chaos usually reigns until, if one wants to take it that far, those forms are transformed and one is left with a 'wholeness' in which, nevertheless, the basic elements are still detectable.

did in the late 1960s and the *Rock Pieces* of the mid-1970s. The 'cosmic' canvas, a key part of the installation, only dimly seen in a darkened room with a large lozenge-shaped stone in front of it, faced the constellation of 'The Plough' or, as I prefer to call it, 'The Wain', picked out on the opposite wall in black charcoal discs. The three windows of the room had been blocked in, then pierced to allow

staggering for such a small and somewhat remote place as Stomness. The small sketchbook drawings (some 250) were rarely done as specific studies for a particular painting, but more as a way of trying to pin down pockets of energy and activated space or sections of the earth's surface in a state of transformation. Most were done extremely rapidly and in quick succession, and are essentially a



Deluge/Comet Entry 1984

The second painting, *City Portrait/Transfiguration*, took nearly three months to complete, and changed drastically during that time. Although dealing more specifically with the city environment, at one point it started to take on the appearance of a cave. It became a transfigured man-made structure, as indeed London does, especially in the vicinity of the river. The city, with the Thames as a central primordial life-force, becomes a breathing organism on a huge scale.

The *London Stone* reappears in *City Portrait* as a hovering presence, its influence activating the geometric/organic structures which spread over the painting's surface. The cosmic

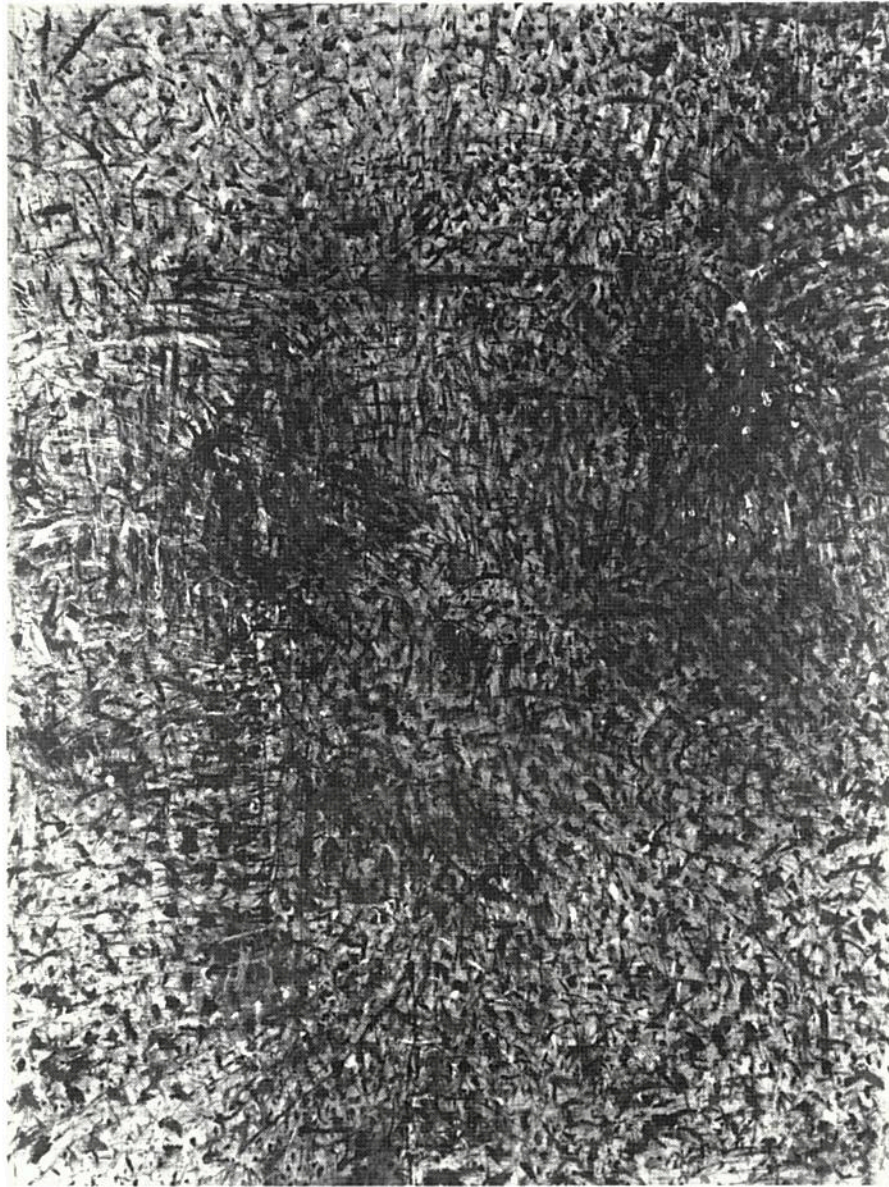
The third painting, *Deluge/Comet Entry*, is a world disintegrating. It is a world of natural forces — wind, water, volcanic eruption, the intervention of outside forces in the form of a comet. Organic forms and man-made structures are breaking up, melting, being regenerated by material from space ... Tsunami, Krakatoa, the Tunguska asteroid. Despite all this chaos and catastrophe I am not particularly concerned with 'last judgements' or 'end of the world' doom. It is those elements which I find difficult to take in the art of John Martin. It was more an awareness that nothing is ever totally destroyed, but only changes into something else or reverts back to basic elements. To me

The Orkney experience was, in many ways, the peak of my stay in the United Kingdom. I felt very much at home in an environment where the natural elements were in evidence all around. There was stone, sea, wind, rain and snow, together with some marvellous ancient sites such as Skara Brae, the Ring of Brogar (with its Comet Stone) and the mysterious earth-houses and cairns. *Subterranean Light/Orcadian Nocturne*, the installation set up at the Pier Arts Centre for the Midsummer Festival of St Magnus, contained many references to these experiences during my two week stay on the islands. There were also references to earlier work — in particular the free-hanging canvases I

shafts of natural light to enter the space and illuminate lozenge-stones, and in one case to project an image of the outside world onto a wall and, at the same time, illuminate the photograph of a peculiar stone, probably shaped by man, which I have called 'the Eye Stone' (found, incidentally, near a cliff edge many miles from any apparent human habitation). Ironically, I shall never know what the installation looked like in its final state, as I was back in Perth at the time it was exhibited. I heard that it had been faithfully set up as directed and 'looked as I intended'. Approximately two thousand people visited the gallery during the space of five days — a figure I found quite

development of charcoal drawings on canvas that I was doing in Perth prior to going to London.

I returned to Australia with confirmation of my concern for the 'deeper' spiritual implications of painting, whether or not a figurative or narrative element is present. For example, I had found that the paintings of Titian, particularly the late works such as *The Flaying of Marsyas*, are about the same things as those of Mark Rothko or even Samuel Palmer. To me, these visionary artists share an essential concern for deeply felt inner experiences of life, and yet they also express the most universal aspects of human life.



Orcadian Lozenge Drama 1984

BIOGRAPHY

1939 Born 4 October, Brighton, England

1956-61 Studied Brighton College of Art

1961-62 Long walks in south-west England and Wales, visiting prehistoric sites

1965-68 Travelled in Scandinavia, visiting rock-art sites in Denmark

1966-71 Taught art in schools and adult education centres in Liverpool and London

1968-69 Studied at Croydon College of Art

1972 Migrated to Western Australia

1972-81 Lecturer in Fine Art, Western Australian Institute of Technology, Perth

1978 Began researching Aboriginal stone arrangements and related sites in Western Australia

1983-84 Artist-in-residence, AIR & SPACE Studio, London (funded by Visual Arts Board, Australia Council)

1984 March/April artist-in-residence, Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney, UK (funded by the Scottish Arts Council)

EXHIBITIONS

Selected Group Shows

1975 *First Group Show*, Praxis Gallery, Perth, Western Australia

1977 *Praxis Progress Show*, University of Western Australia, Perth

Organised and exhibited in *Praxis New Works by Six Artists*, Western Australian Institute of Technology, Perth

1978 *Praxis Progress Show*, University of Western Australia, Perth

Organised and exhibited in *Praxis Small Scale*, University of Western Australia, Perth

The George's Invitation, Melbourne

1979 Invitation Sculpture Exhibition, Western Australian Institute of Technology, Perth

1980 Shell Invitation Print Award, Fremantle Art Gallery

Drawn and Quartered: Contemporary Australian Paperworks, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Photo-documents, Western Australian Institute of Technology, Perth

1981 *Australian Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

1982 *Critics' Choice*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Two Artists From Western Australia, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney

1983 *Continuum '83*, Tokyo, Japan (Hinoki Gallery, Ginza)

Twelve Australian Painters, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Western Australian Paperworks, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

1984 *Art From the Land: A Response to Orkney*, Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney

1985 *Five Painters in Western Australia*, Galerie Düsseldorf, Perth (Festival of Perth)



Individual Exhibitions

1971 Gardner Arts Centre, University of Sussex, Brighton, England

1974 *Space-Scape*, Old Fire Station Gallery, Perth

1979 Miller Gallery, Perth

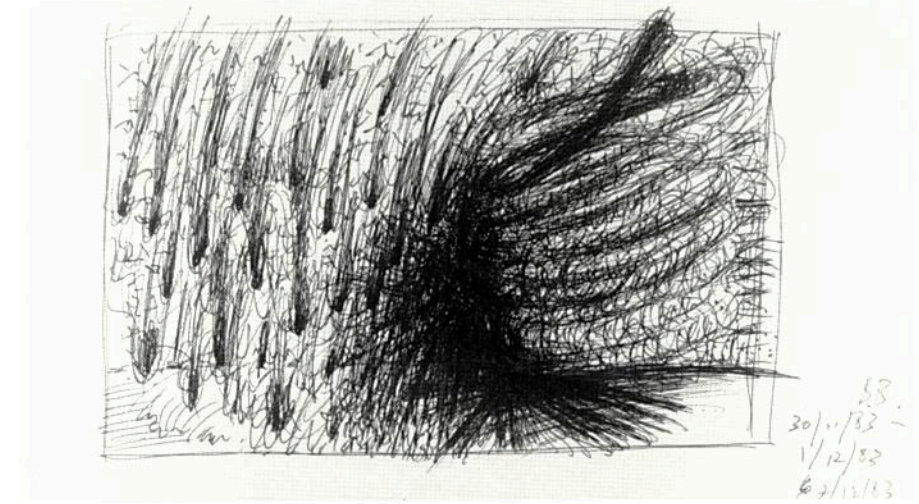
Undercroft Gallery, University of Western Australia (Survey of works, 1974-1979)

1982 Galerie Düsseldorf, Perth

1983 *Nocturnes*, Galerie Düsseldorf, Perth

1984 Open Studio Exhibition, AIR & SPACE, London

Mainly Drawing, Galerie Düsseldorf, Perth

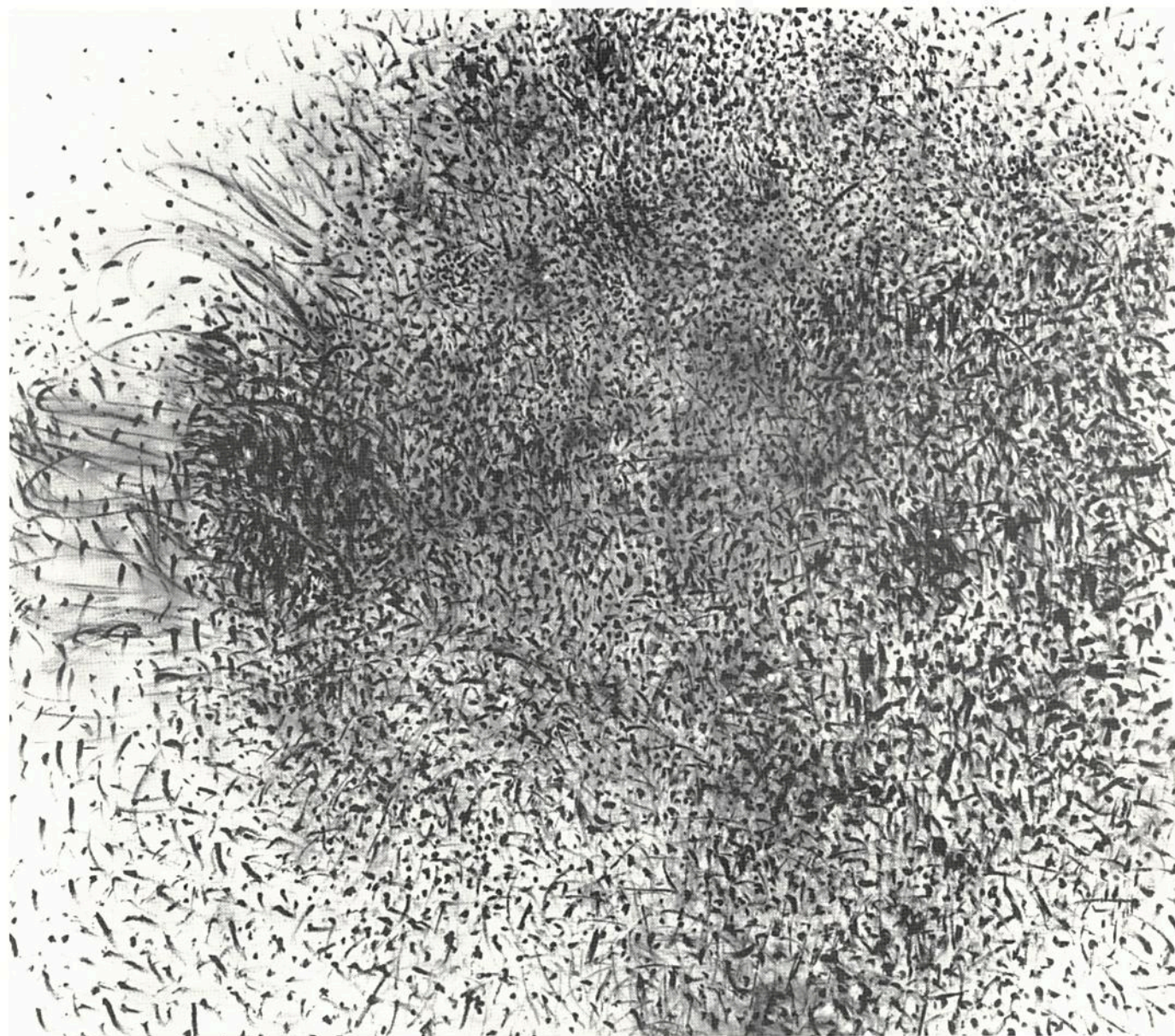


PUBLICATIONS

Leedermeg, 1979. Documentation of a ritual. Photography by Bruce Adams and Sue Paull, Parameters Publications (Praxis), Perth.



Drawings from the artist's sketchbook (*Winters of Discontent*) November-December 1983



Orcadian Light 1984

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ted Snell "Six Artists Working in W.A.", *Art and Australia*, vol. 16, no.4, 1979.

Murray Mason (Ed.) *Contemporary Western Australian Painters and Printmakers*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1979.

Bernice Murphy *Australian Perspecta* (catalogue), Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1981.

Tony Bond *Two Artists from Western Australia* (catalogue), City Art Institute, Sydney, 1982.

Tony Bond "Two Artists from Western Australia", *Art Network*, no 8, Summer 1983

Tony Bond "Brian Blanchflower : A European at the Interface of the Never Never", *Praxis M*, no 1, April 1983.

Ted Snell "From the Western Extremity", *Studio International*, vol. 196, no. 1002, London. 1983.

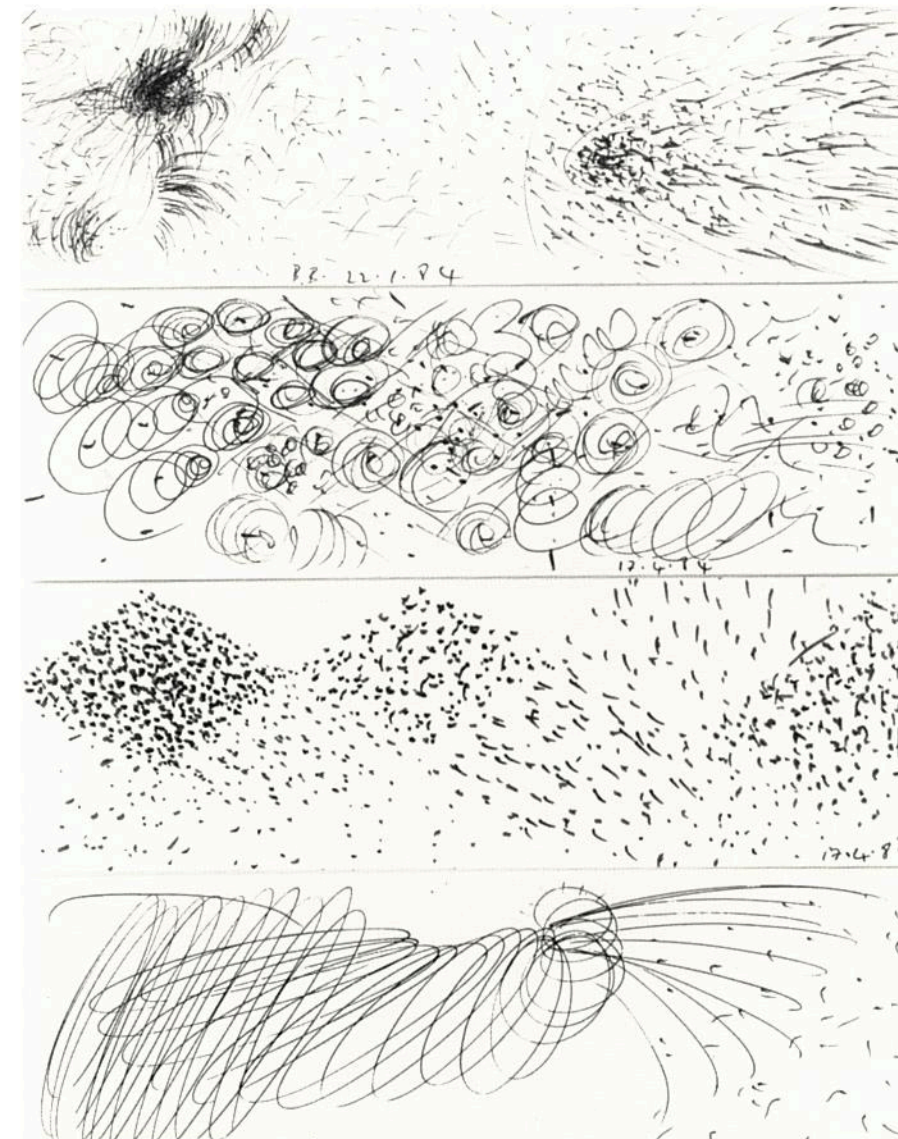
Brian Blanchflower "Winters of Discontent" (A personal account of the recent stay in London and Orkney), *Praxis M*, no. 6, Spring 1984.

CATALOGUE

All measurements are height before width. At the request of the artist dimensions are given in both metric and imperial measurements.

London Paintings

- 1 **London Stone/Southern Heat**
October-November 1983
acrylic, chalk and oilstick on flax canvas
180 x 584cm (71 x 230in)
- 2 **City Portrait/Transfiguration**
December 1983-February 1984
acrylic, chalk and oilstick on flax canvas
231 x 290cms (91 x 114in)
- 3 **Deluge/Comet Entry**
March-April 1984
acrylic, chalk and oilstick on flax canvas
185 x 492cms (77½ x 194in)
- 4 **Study for Deluge**
February 1984
acrylic and chalk on flax canvas
116 x 286.2cms (45½ x 112½in)



Drawings from the artist's sketchbook (*Deluge, Comet Entry and Transformation*)
January-April 1984

Orkney Paintings

- 5 **Orcadian Light** May-June 1984
(London/Perth)
acrylic and sand on cotton duck
247 x 275cms (97 x 108in)
- 6 **Orcadian Lozenge Drama**
July 1984 (Perth)
acrylic on linen
206 x 154.5cms (81 x 61in)
- 7 **Subterranean Light/Orcadian Nocturne** April 1984 (canvas from installation, Stromness)
bitumen-based paint, sawdust, oils and crayon on hessian
225 x 210cms (88½ x 82½in)

Sketchbooks

A selection of pages from the following artist's sketchbooks 1983-84

- (a) Yellow Book (*Winters of Discontent*)
- (b) Ring Book No. 1 (*Deluge and Comet Entry*)
- (c) 'Squirrel' Book (*Deluge, Comet Entry and Transformation*)
- (d) Pink Book (*Cosmic Seeding, Comet Variations*)
- (e) Ring Book No. 2 (*Lovers - Inundations*)
- (f) Ring Book No. 3 (*Comet Power*)
- (g) Ring Book No. 4 (*Sea Sounds*)

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