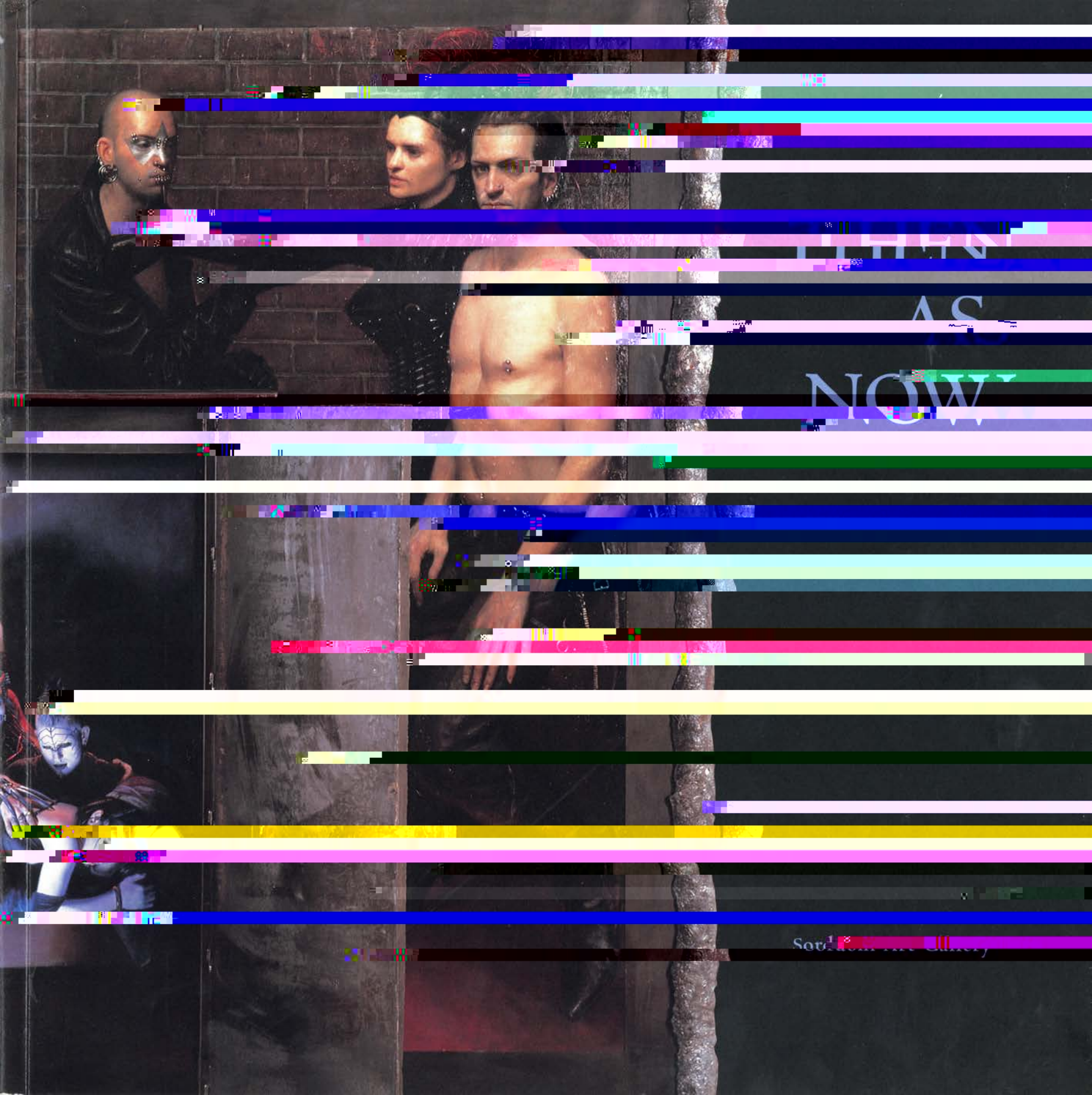
NOW

THEN AS NOW

THEN

A

NO

Exhibition Curated by

Ronald R

and K

Catalog

Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.

2005 E

N

Sordoni Art Gallery

Wil Wilkes University

Wilkes-B

Cover: Ste[illegible] Assisi, 4: Mother, 2001, [illegible] 2001, oil, wood pa[illegible]
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It has been a privile[illegible] to work with the artists included in thi[illegible] representatives, including PP[illegible] and[illegible] in Chicago, and the Seven Bridges E[illegible] wich, Connecticut, all [illegible] their tir[illegible] richness wou[illegible] eff[illegible]

This [illegible]

March 2005

[illegible]
Director

Karen Evans Kaufer
Associate D[illegible]

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 Post[illegible] painting is [illegible] the company of the Real, that [illegible] say, it is one [illegible] prompted by optical experience and pictorial illusion, once [illegible] and skilled simulation [illegible] again [illegible] ing styles and [illegible] tery, and recognizable subject matter.[1] But it is a diff[illegible] and baggy sort of Real; it both is and is not a re-pre[illegible] tion of reality. There is reco[illegible] but it is extended well [illegible] 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, reframing, and recasting Old Master forms, figures, and styles in a visual and intertextual dialogue with Art History, mixing 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 criticality of the Modern Masters. It is a New Old Master art."[2]

Of course, at some level, all works of art are about art. Visual culture, particularly in the appropriation mainstream of the 1980s, was certainly in its pilfered references from the past, its ironic parody and clever pastiche. As Tom McEvilley 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 [illegible] point [illegible] the past. Yet for the [illegible] ration nor reactionary surrender to picto- [illegible] and epistemological processes and negotiations, including nostalgia, memory, [illegible] ticity and authority, and the troublesome issues of 'influence,' 'priority' [illegible] to ask, in its active intervention in, and manipulation of, the material of the past, complicate the idea of precedent as origin. To put it another way: Is meaning transferred from original to quotation, or do Art's meanings necessarily shift over History's spatial and conceptual [illegible] issue for [illegible] wherein a new poetic style, he argued, may be achieved "that restores and oddly retains [illegible] images [illegible] assert [illegible] is that certain forms of expression may appeal to the past, while not entirely submitting to it. The [illegible] are neither [illegible] ther, at issue is a productive collision

between, as Walter Benjamin [illegible] the Now and the Then: "It isn't th[illegible] present casts its light on the past: rather, [illegible] which the Then and the Now come into a constellation 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 explore.

The term 'neo-pre-Modernism'[6] might best describe the strategy or simulation 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, colors, surfaces, and substances of Rembrandt and the glowing, almost religious tenebrism and portentous 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 proportional to its content."[8] 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."[9]

'Neo-pre-Modernism' describes a kind of [illegible] against the formalist and rationalist authority of Modernism, in painting which, like Nerdrum's, 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 *Hermaphrodite* of 1995–96, as a defense against a hostile contemporary world, where Nature is subordinated to Reason. For Nerdrum, science and [illegible] are profoundly at odds; thus nature, and the body as visible and physically present—shimmering flesh and blood—are seen as the antithesis of reason. What we see consistently in Nerdrum's work—interpreted in color and texture, are bodies and other natural substances, consisting of mass and weight, [illegible] visually plausible and convincingly portrayed—"a mix of excrement, blood and flesh," as the painter himself put it.[10]

Like Nerdrum, with his visionary and [illegible] allegories, Steven Assael arranges contemporary figures in urban settings, but in a sensibility informed by [illegible] Masters, calling to mind [illegible] Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque eras. *At Mother* (2005), a colossal triptych attached to a sculpted platform with moving doors that open and close. When open, the door panels feature the arrangement [illegible] into a miraculous golden [illegible] resemblance [illegible] belonging to the dead past. The panels [illegible] *conversazione* (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 [illegible] Harold Bloom might have put it, "but they remain in [illegible]."[11]

And indeed Assael's dramatis personae are from the contemporary underground world of 'Gothe,' pierced, tattooed characters [illegible] which—bathed in the glow of an ethereal light that sets up [illegible] between the tangible and the spiritual—betrays the artist's own empathy and compassion for these mod-

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 . . . that helped 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 profound emotional and psychological meaning, catching the ambiguities of the defiant, stumbling roughs *and* their vulnerability and desire for identity and recognition.

Brett Bigbee, classically trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, an institution with a notable legacy of American Realism, which includes Thomas Eakins, 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 stillness of an iconic Piero della Francesca Madonna, the pervasive and all-over brilliance of colored light in Netherlandish painting, and a recasting of Botticelli's allegorical Venuses, as in the portrait of his wife, *Ann with Plant* (1990–91). Bigbee painstakingly reworks 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 verging on hallucination. Bigbee's brushstroke is gone. Everything in this picture is finer, smoother, more orderly than the real world of Nerdrum's "excrement, blood, and flesh." Bodies are without structure, the [illegible] of the surface of the skin reveals no underlying skeleton; that skin is [illegible] wrinkles, blemishes, [illegible] of the interior space as [illegible]

chiseled or warped, there is no distortion in the window glass.[14] It is an ideal, a construct—neither wholly real nor wholly [illegible]

Sharon Bowar makes similar reference to the [illegible] allegorical painting of the Italian Renaissance, and to the [illegible] Painter Alma-Tadema, in her [illegible] *Lucia* (2003). Saint Lucy, patron saint of the blind, typically shown [illegible] gouged out in martyrdom (witness to her faith), stands here on [illegible] overlooking a composite view of Todi, a medieval town in Umbria, featuring the architectural sites of the Temple of [illegible] and the Gothic church of Santa Fortunato, cohoused here [illegible] the single 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 [illegible] otherwise monochromatic (colorblind) canvas.[15]

While sharing in some of the same formal characteristics of Bigbee and [illegible] paintings of Bo Bartlett are more ambitiously narrative in scope, grounded in the tradition of Grand Manner history painting, paintings that in its subject matter typically depicts serious or exemplary action and references the staged configurations and epic themes of scripture, mythology, and literature. Like the works within that tradition, Bartlett's paintings are designed to be about universal human experience, while [illegible]

significance—the divide between human, the infinite and the finite. Here in *Golden Boy* (2003) a young, innocent, prepubescent male child, seen from below, stands—the obvious christological reference—suspended immaculately on the water's surface, arms extended in crucifixion 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 redemptive revelation. As Suzi Gablik has 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 remythologized, we must, as a society, suspend our unbelief."[16]

Suspend belief itself is what is required by the allegorical realism of Julie Heffernan and Thomas Woodruff. In Heffernan's painting fantasy, magic, and operatic complexity take [illegible] and a veritable lexicon of symbols and hermetic codes, all in a sentimental illustrative style. The writer tells us: "When one tries to source Woodruff's stylistic choices and iconography, things get complicated. Victoriana or thrift store painting surrealism? French academic painting or heavy metal album cover? Valentine or operating manual? The point here 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 [illegible] culture with more than a few concessions to over-the-top camp and kitschy moral allegory. *Mission Poesy (the Pictomer)* is one installment in a series of eleven gothic-peaked canvases—a nod to traditional history painting—collectively titled *All Systems Go*. In each canvas, amidst the carnival of creatures, costumes, and colors [illegible] rocket ship, a metonym to symbolize the anxiety and inevitability of transport to the unknown, a reminder of the transience of the here and now and so a kind of twenty-first-century *vanitas*. Amid the pageantry 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 [illegible] Woodruff himself explains: "For me, one of the most important issues facing my generation of artists is learning how to feel a [illegible] reconnect the heart with the [illegible] tion has made the visual arts suspect and appear elitist. The experience of looking has been deadened. Artists have confronted every cultural taboo in our society but still seem to be fearful of sentiment."[18]

Also drawing on symbol, [illegible] and imagination, Julie Heffernan's fantasy-fueled [illegible] historical femininity and its performance in the canon of Western art history. In her [illegible] Baroque interiors the artifice of Culture is [illegible] as in *Self-Portrait as Heavenly Body* (2002), where [illegible] female figure, [illegible] among goddesses cavorting in a fresco[illegible] ceiling, she is presented, like painting itself, almost as an *objet d'art* of aesthetic beauty [illegible] for collection, display, and [illegible] Dislocated, put on balance by being made to assume the unnatural and disorienting viewpoint. While pastiching a language redolent of past visual traditions, Heffernan shifts the vocabulary away from its historically male bias towards an idiosyncratic 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 [illegible] their seated colleague, Manet, who, brush in hand, is himself poised in front of a canvas to paint, we assume, the very picture we are viewing. Fantin-Latour's painted panels [illegible] four panels at upper left, Attie has extracted and displaced [illegible] larged hands, feet, and face), and on the right, Downs quoted details from a number of other paintings [illegible] pa[illegible] and interspersed with bits of text that form a narrative of her own invention, one with [illegible] confirmed in the culminating grouping of panels at lower [illegible] 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. Meanwhile, the combination of word and image activates a tension between the artist's present role as a [illegible] 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—a distance is [illegible] between Then and Now, artist and copy, past and present. Old Masters mediated through a layer of present (female) voice, the text itself alluding to the silencing work of violence against women. [illegible] Forsaken, Forbidden, Forgiven, and Forgotten are printed, charging the series with associative metaphor and a shudder of anxiety.[20]

The net of borrowed references is cast even wider by **Vincent Desiderio,** former student with Bo Bartlett and Brett Busang at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art[illegible] where he now teaches. His [illegible] *Distant* (2002), while making oblique reference to the nineteenth-century Romantic [illegible]'s fascination with the [illegible] abandoned in Théodore Géricault's portraits of the [illegible] ...more directly borrows from medical textbook photo-[illegible] human experience. In [illegible] each other either side [illegible] photo[illegible]ph (itself replicated) [illegible]mentary images of individuals suffering from incurable—and visibly distin[illegible] megaly ([illegible] and the right, Downs [illegible] sciousness of their own irregular reality. Or perhaps their unreality signals for the artist a deeper reality: [illegible] the [illegible] here that the artist's own son, who appears in [illegible] several canvases, [illegible] himself [illegible] from [illegible] disease.

Likewise in Mylenda Flanagan's work it is [illegible] Old Master painting that is borrowed but the [illegible] tenor and [illegible] ambiance of 1940s film noir and Depression-era pulp fiction, in which the recurring presence of [illegible] nist—villain or hero—lends an unspecified, allusive and open-ended drama. In a group of four paintings collectively titled *Reader Series,* Flanagan invokes the [illegible] of time and place and an overall atmosphere thick with memory and mood. Over images of [illegible] line, industrial landscape, and library archive, the words [illegible]

Old Master tradition [illegible] sacred myth and now modern [illegible] patriarchy) and film noir, the [illegible]

inform the works in this exhibition. The [illegible] imagined, the present and the past all have equal weight. In a recent interview with Susie 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 interesting existing at the same time, everything [illegible] equally."[22] But it is Vincent Desiderio who has perhaps most succinctly characterized [illegible] era's compulsive consumption of images as "cultural [illegible]."[23] Faced with an embarrassment of riches in [illegible] information—styles, formal idioms, techniques, and motifs—what is one to paint? How [illegible] possible to create something new, something distinctly [illegible] to one's own time? These seem to be the questions [illegible]

Christian Vincent, *Field of Frames*, 2004

as-architect, sketchbook in hand, surveys a panoramic landscape [illegible] all but discarded frames, art's skeletal [illegible] its [illegible] searching for an idea with originality, something [illegible] can convey that will be new, to which he can give his stamp of authenticity. As one [illegible] "I can [illegible] created 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 [illegible] is available to least one, [illegible] to [illegible] on everything is to produce nothing of one's own."[25] The issue is framed, perhaps more optimistically (for poets) by Harold Bloom: "The precursors flood us, and our imaginations can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such [illegible] is wholly evaded."[26] And this, perhaps, is one conclusion that may be drawn from this exhibition, that innovation or authenticity in art may indeed result [illegible] practices, something beyond [illegible] certain compelling honesty about each of the works on [illegible] that betrays a healthy skepticism about slavish imitation and [illegible] a collective affirmation of painting's adequacy to lived experience and its willingness to face the force of what it means [illegible] uncertain place of the ethical, the [illegible] even the [illegible]

NOTES

1. This exhibition began as a paper entitled "Aligning 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 University Press, 2004, pp. 182–183.

3. Thomas McEvilley, *Art & Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity* [illegible]

Contemporary Art, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art & Design, 1996, p. 8.

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

5. Walter Benjamin, "[Re The Theory of Kr…] Theory of Progress]," quoted in George Didi-Huberman's "The … Suppression of the Aura: The Now, The Then, and Modernity," in *Negotiating Rapture*, ed. Richard Fra… s… t, Chicago, 1996, pp. 52–53.

6. Thomas McEvilley, 1992, p. 136.

7. Jan-Erik Pettersson, "Odd Nerdrum: Storyteller and Self-Revealer," As… Stanley Mus… for Mode… 1998, p. 22.

8. Ibid., p. 23.

9. Donald Kuspit, "Odd Nerdrum: The … of the … Immediate," *ARTS Mag…* September 1984, pp. 1… 92.

10. Pettersson, p. 102.

11. Bloom, p. 141.

12. Never working from photograph… periods of human contact with his sitters.

13. "Steven Assael: Revealing Light," *The World & I*, August 19… p. 124.

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

15. Bowar's canvas is replete with borrowed fragments, including the replication of a sculpted terrace wall (itself a replication) surrounding one of the … Gardens on the … of Hearst in San Simeon, California; Islamic geometric floor tiles, derived from fifteenth-century wall mosaics from Cairo, the design itself borrowed and copied in pattern bo… and perhaps most recognizably, a replication of … *Basket of Fruit* of 1598.

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

17. Bill Arning, "Admi… Sentimentality," *Wosegays'kna Khuckie*

18. Ibid., p. 12.

19. Fantin-Latour him… depicts Fantin-Latour himself with Baudelaire, Manet, and Whistler among others, gathered around a portrait of Delacroix.

20. The artist explains: "Each is emblazoned with … vaguely Gerin… -like adjective which partly explains 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 p…" December 1, 2004.

21. Bo Bartlett, quoted in "Painting the World: A Conversation … Art, Columbus, GA … 2002, p. 33.

22. "Painting the … of Experience," *The Art Newspaper*, …

23. Vincent Desider… quoted in "A Yo… Course," Mia Fineman, *New York Ti…* January 1, 2004, p. 34.

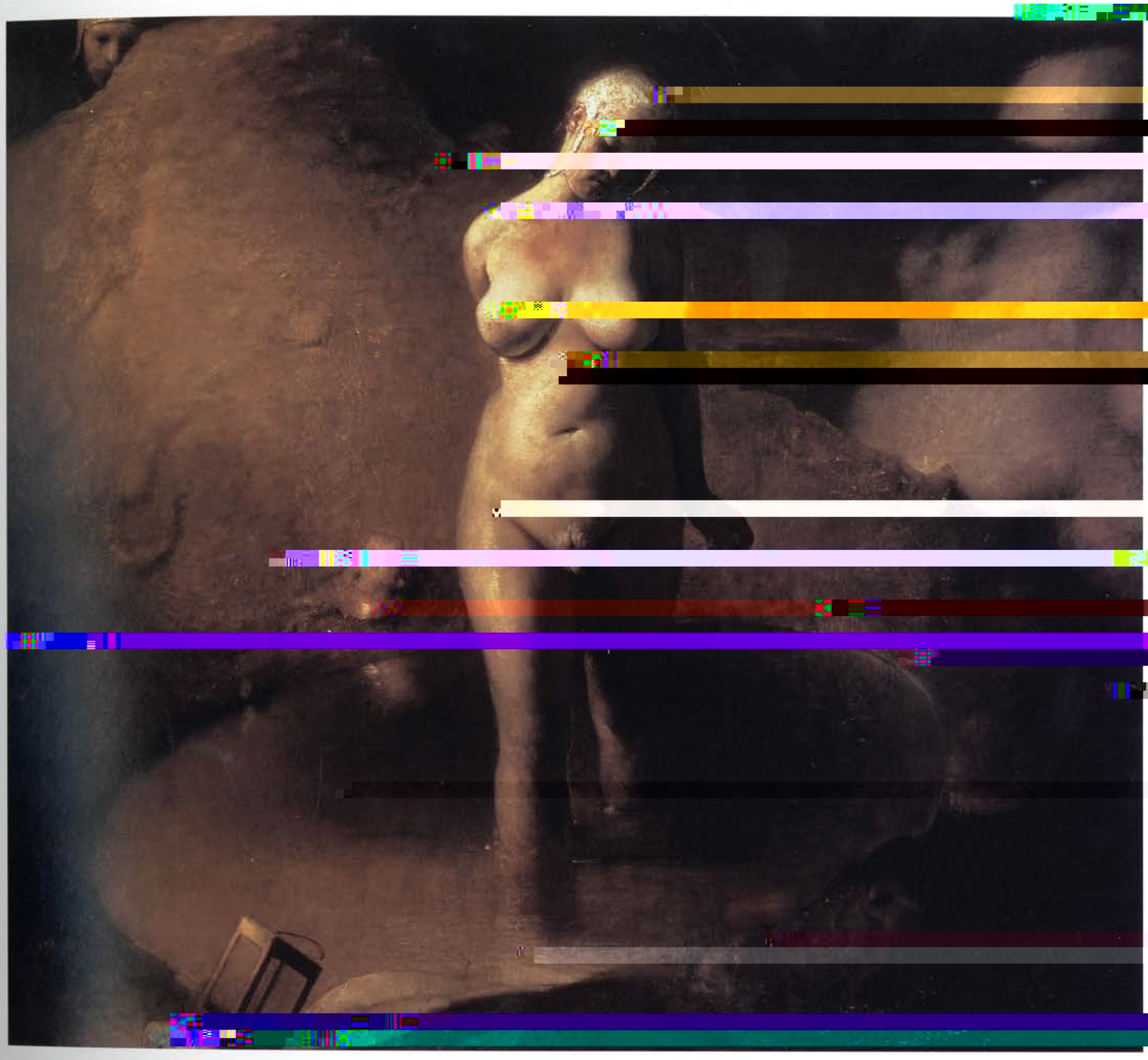
24. Robert Fishko, in exhibition catalogue, *Christian Vincent: Recent Paintings*, Forum Gallery, NY, 2001.

25. Here Kuspit is speaki… of Vincent Desider… but the implications, I think, are broader. Kuspit's more direct … flooded w… light and with art books … paintings that encompass six centuries of … *Land of Cockaigne* (1567), a cautionary allegorizing tale of the land of plenty.

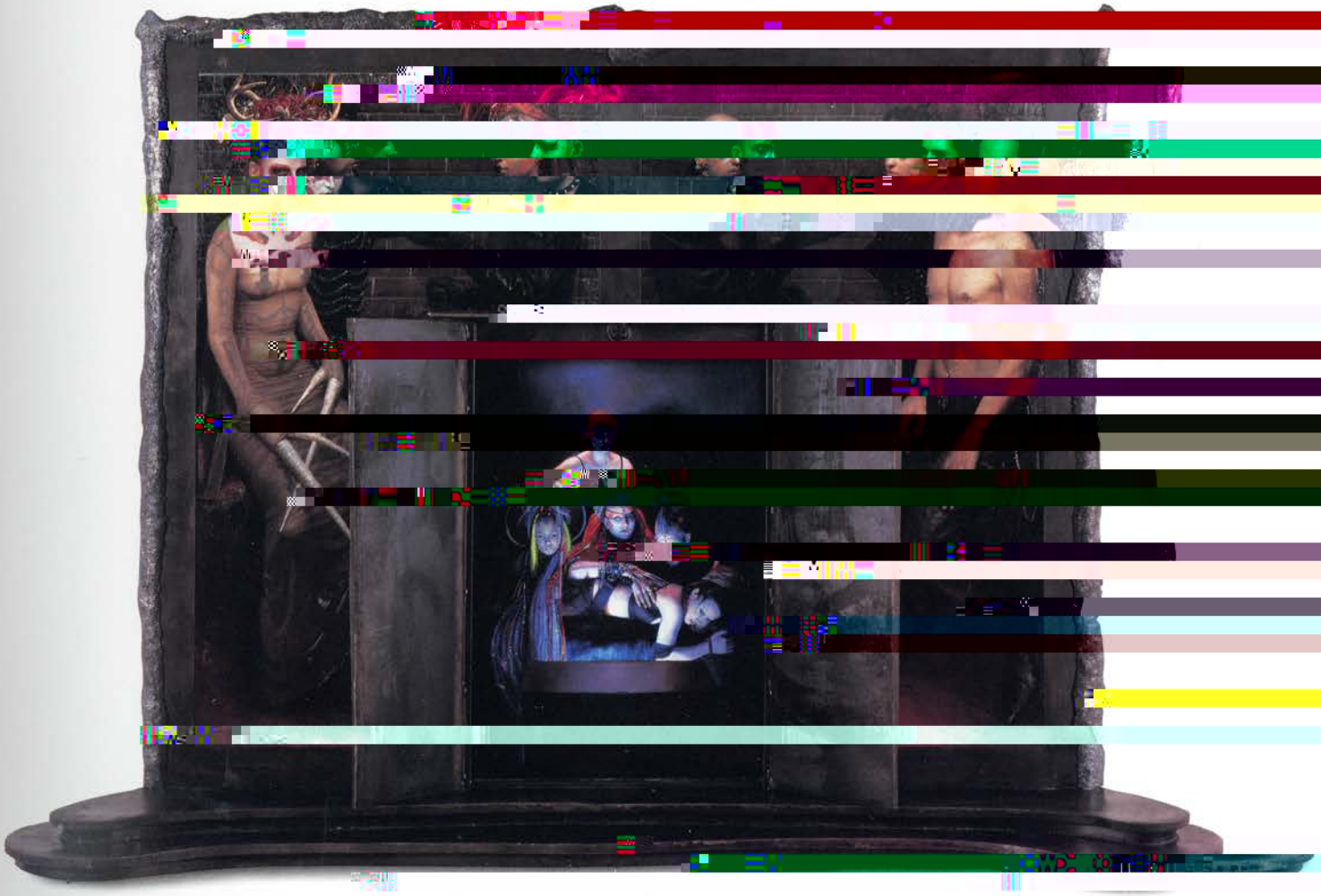
26. Bloom, …

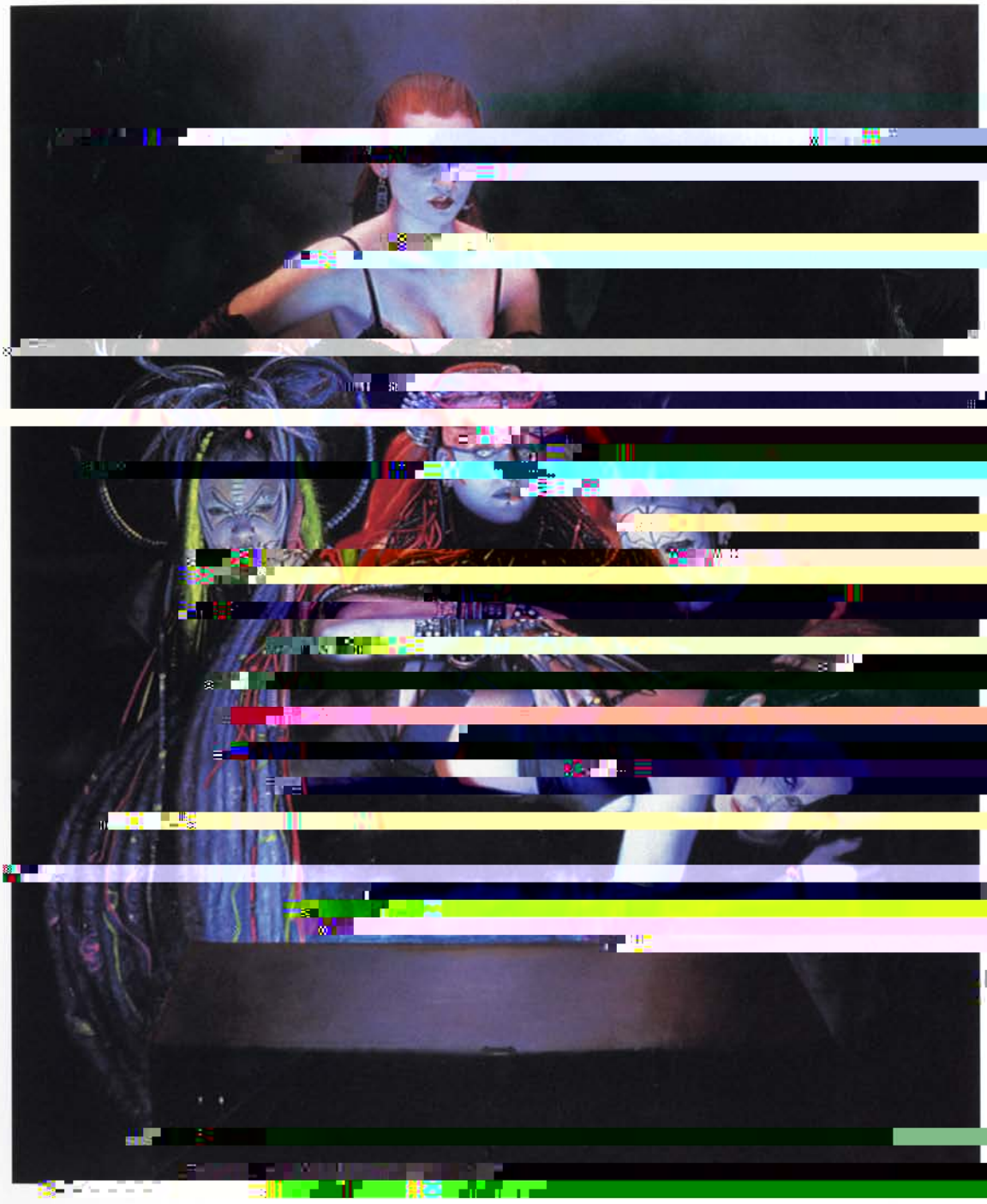
27. *Ex.* See note 7a.

Odd No
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

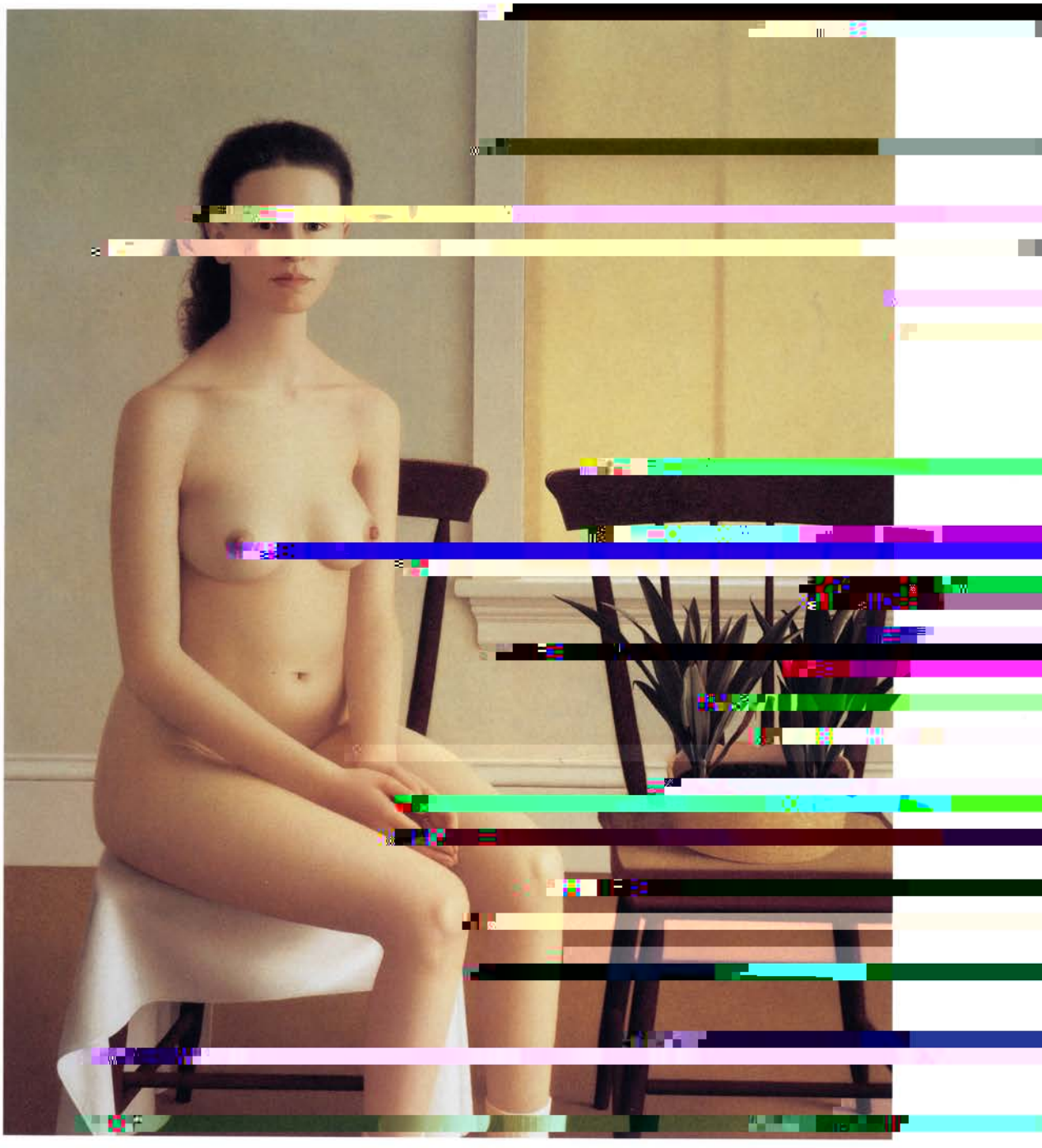


Steven Assael, *Alexandra*, 2006, oil on canvas, 72 × 60 in.
Courtesy [illegible]





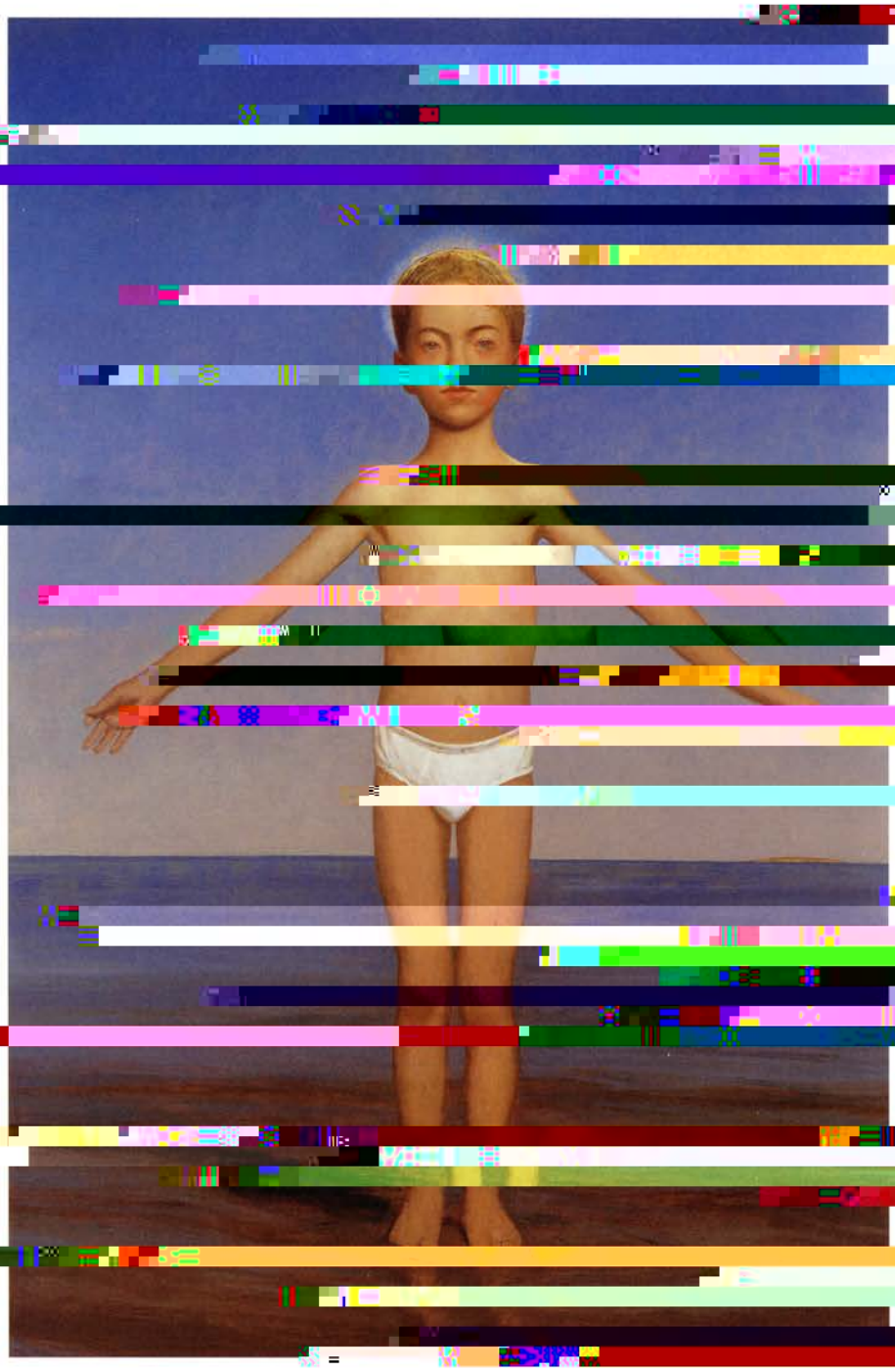
Brett Bigbee, *Ann with Plant*, 1990–91, [illegible] oil on can[illegible]
Seven Bridges Foundatio[illegible]



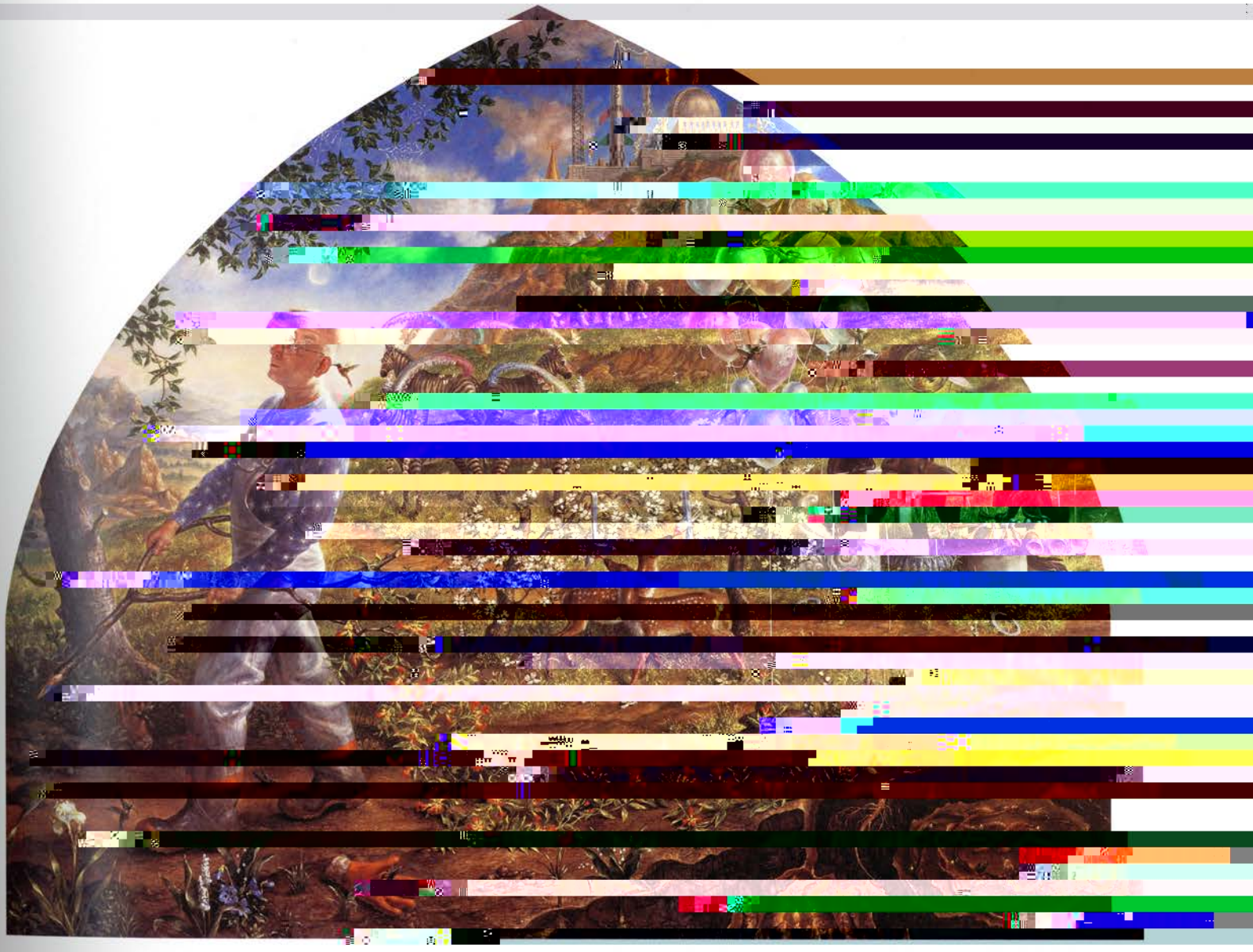
Sharon Bowal, Santa Lucia, 2008, oil on canvas,
Courtesy

Jo Baer

Courtesy PPOW, New York



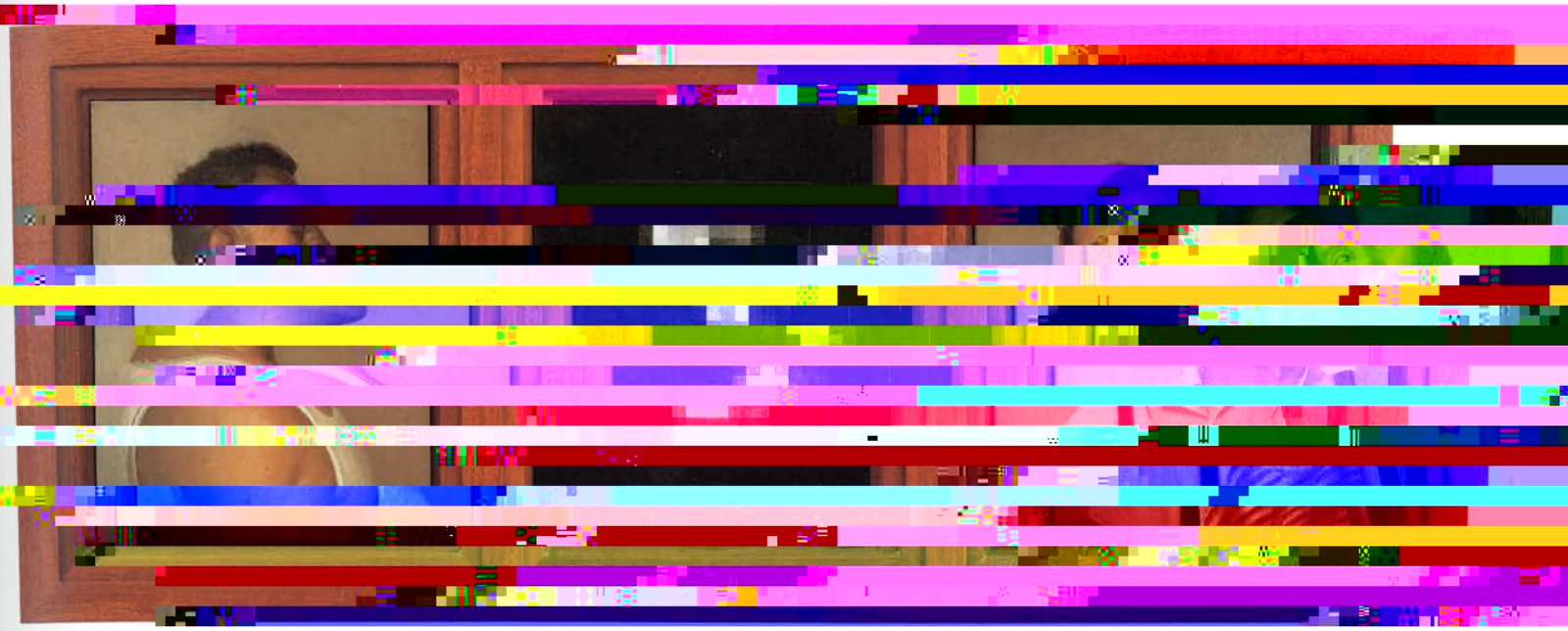
Thomas Woodruff, *All Systems Go: Mission*
Courtesy PPOW, New York



Julie Heffernan,
Courtesy of the artist. P

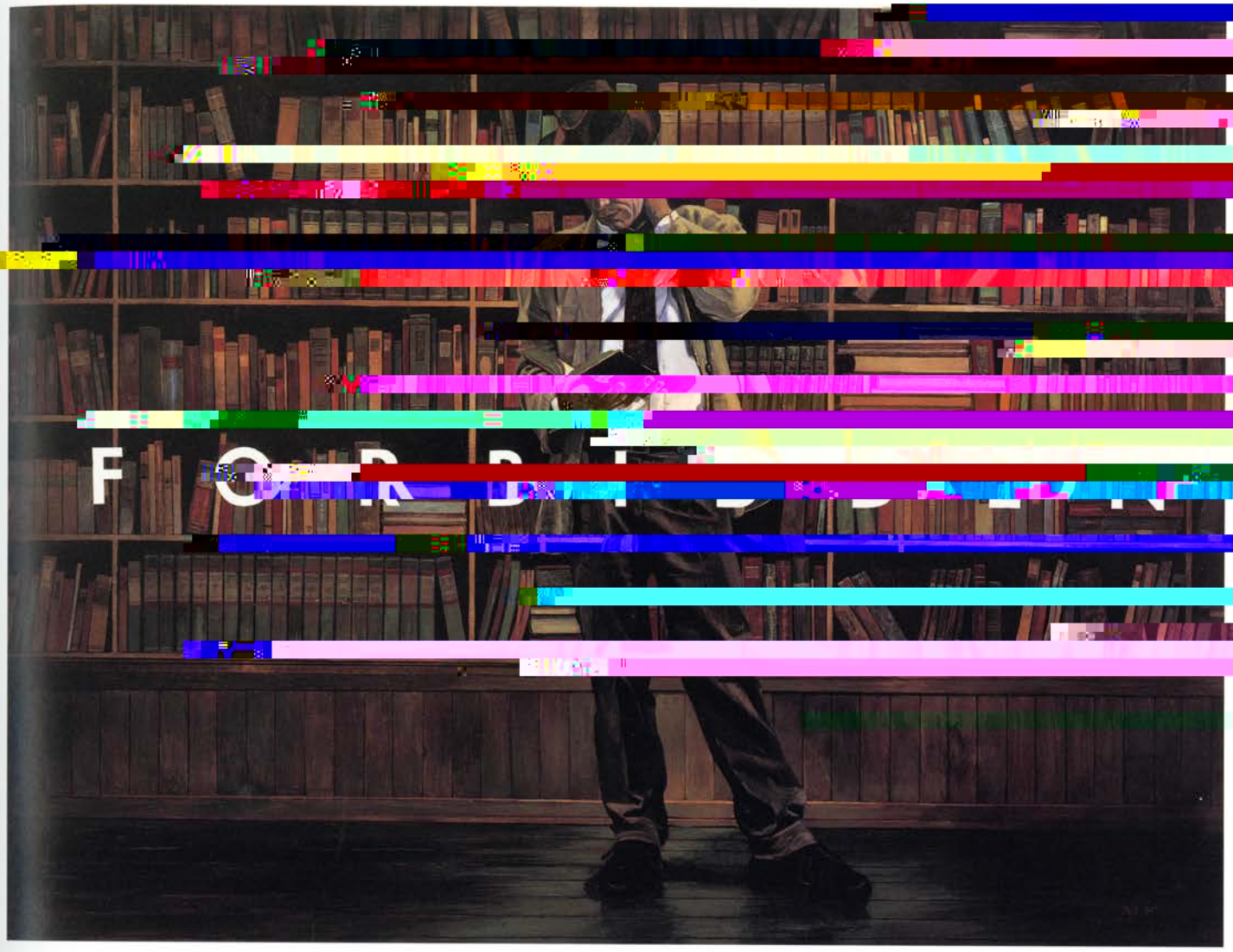
Courtesy POW Network

Vincent Desiderio, *Contemplative Distan*[illegible] oil on wood, 11 × 23¾ inches,
Courtesy [illegible]



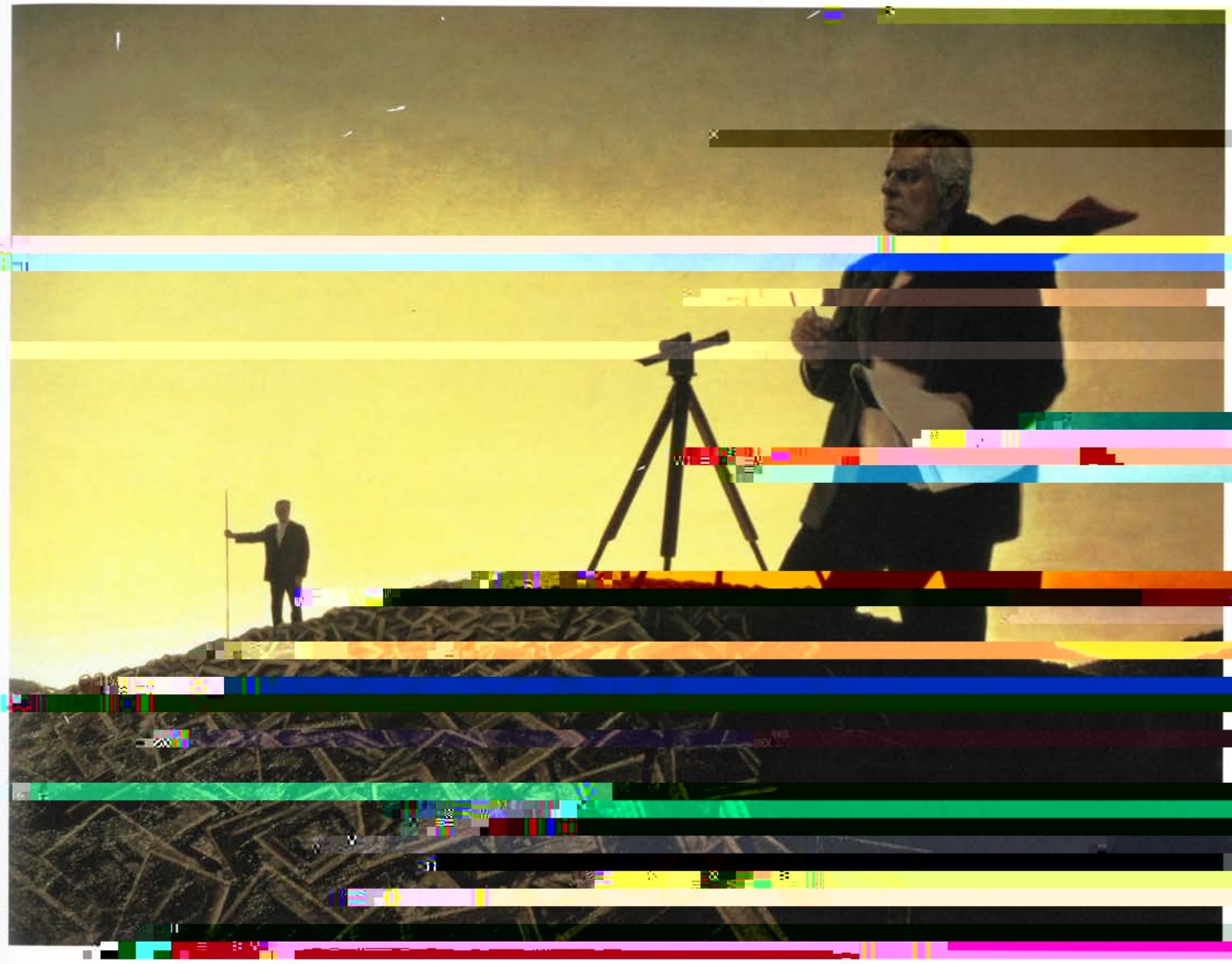
Michael Flanagan, *Reader S*

Courtesy P·P·O·W, New York


FOR

Christian Vincent, *Field of F*[illegible] 2001, oil o[illegible]

Cou[illegible]esy Fortuin Gallery, New York



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Dimensions are given in inches, height precedes width

Steven Assael
[illegible], 2001
oil, wood panel, canvas
[illegible] × 156 × 42
Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York

[illegible]
In the Atelier, 1990–91
57 panels, each 6 × [illegible]
Courtesy PPOW, [illegible] York

Bo Bartlett
Golden Boy, 2002
oil on [illegible]
Courtesy PPOW, New York

Brett Bigbee
Ann with Plant, 1996–[illegible]
oil on canvas, [illegible] × 42
Seven Bridges Foundation
Connecticut

Sharon Bowar
Santa Lucia, 2003
oil on canvas, 48 × 40
Courtesy of the artist

Vincent Desiderio
Contemplative Distance, [illegible]
oil on wood, 11 × 25 1/4
Courtesy [illegible]

Michael Flanagan
Raider Sees, [illegible]
[illegible] on [illegible] canvas, [illegible] × 32
Courtesy PPOW, New York

Julie Heffernan
Say Yerman as Heavenly Body, 2003
[illegible] canvas, 68 × [illegible]
PPOW, New York

Odd Nerdrum
White Hermaphrodite, [illegible] 92–96
oil on canvas, 80 1/2 × 83 [illegible]

Christian Vincent
Field of Flames, 2001
oil on canvas, [illegible] × 84 × [illegible]
Courtesy [illegible], New York

Thomas Woodruff
All Systems Go: Mission Poesy (Diviner), 1999
[illegible] on [illegible] canvas, [illegible]
Courtesy PPOW, New York

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Mindi Thalenfeld

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Then as Now

March 20 - May 22

Non-Profit Org.
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Wilkes-Barre, PA
Permit No. 96

Featuring: Stephen Antonakos, Dennis Ashbaugh, Brett Bigbee, Sharon Bowen, Vincent Desiderio, Michael Flanagan, Julie Heffernan, Odd Nerdrum, Christian Vincent, and Thomas Woodruff

Opening Reception:
Saturday, March 19, 2005, 5-7 pm

Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
150 South River Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766
(570) 408-4325
Gallery Hours: Noon until 4:30 P.M., daily
sordoni.wilkes.edu

The following Exhibition is supported by:
Friends of the Sordoni Art Gallery, M&T Bank,
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Business Council: Benco 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 Forum Gallery, New York