

COLLECTING AT CENTURY'S END



Selections from The Maslow Collection

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*Exhibition curated by Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.
and Karen Evans Kaufer
Essays by Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.*

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Sordani Art Gallery, Wilkes University
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Cover: Robert Cumming, *Orbits Down/Eyes Round* (detail), 1990, oil on canvas

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INTRODUCTION

THE IDEA FOR THIS EXHIBITION and catalogue was inspired by a two-part project organized by the Sordoni Art Gallery in the late 1980s, the aim of which then was to highlight some of the masterworks of The Maslow Collection, Wilkes-Barre. The first of these, *American Art Since WWII from The Maslow Collection* (April 10 through May 8, 1988), focused on well-established, postwar American artists. The second, *Artists of the '80s: Selected Works from The Maslow Collection* (April 9 through May 7, 1989), concentrated on a younger and emerging generation of artists. This third event, *Collecting at Century's End: Selections from The Maslow Collection*, takes a somewhat different focus. Our motivation to revisit the Maslow holdings was to start with the collection itself and to ask questions about the kinds of art being collected at the close of the last century. So that's where we began, with those artists who entered the collection in the last decade of the twentieth century, some of whom, of course, the Maslow Family had begun collecting earlier. And while the majority of the works selected for this project did come into the collection in the 1990s, the viewer will note that a few included here predate that decade, a decision taken to illustrate shift or continuity within a particular artist's practice. Within these parameters, then, we began to consider those artists whose work could be grouped together visually and conceptually in coherent and meaningful ways. While the decisions were tough, we ultimately selected six artists whose work could be assembled into two groups—representation and nonrepresentation.

The first group presented in this catalogue, the nonrepresentational, includes the work of Willy Heeks, Terry Winters, and Melissa Meyer. Each of these artists responds, in unique ways, to the weighty tradition of 1950s gestural art inherited from Abstract Expressionism. The second group of artists, those whose work maintains recognizable figurative form, though in highly altered and self-conscious ways, deal with what has been characterized as the Postmodern characteristic of appropriation and pastiche, a borrowing and manipulating of the images of contemporary pop culture. The artists included here are Jane Hammond, Robert Cumming, and John Beerman. While organized into two distinct groups, there are correspondences and commonalities to be drawn between the groups, as the short essays in this catalogue are intended to articulate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PARTICULAR THANKS go to Robert Schweitzer, Curator of The Maslow Collection, for his thoughtful and patient assistance throughout the organization of this exhibition. His thorough knowledge of the collection and his insight into the broader conceptual issues of contemporary art were invaluable.

Finally, we are deeply indebted to Richard and Marilyn Maslow and the Maslow Family Foundation who have made this project possible through the generous loan of works of art and support for this catalogue.

Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.
Director

Karen Evans Kaufer
Associate Director

NOTES ON THE ARTISTS

WILLY HEEKS

Willy Heeks's work is vast and aggressive, dense in its network of pigment drips and tangled webs of paint, as in his monumental *Dome* of 1990. The surface—and surface is a crucial part of what is going on in his work—invokes the pleasure of the purely optical, the eye tracing the dribbled paint and thick layerings of color. In the tradition of Abstract Expressionism, literalness and reference to subject matter are absent; yet distinct shapes still appear to emerge and congeal, bubbling up from deep beneath a dense atmospheric surface. Forms pulsate, breathe, rise and fall, in and out of suggested depth. Tendril-like linear elements and biomorphic forms suggest some kind of connection to the natural world. Indeed, the artist himself acknowledges: “Nature has always been my grounding influence. But in my work I consistently peel away the obvious from my response to the world around me.”¹

At first glance, Heeks's compositions—much like the graffiti marks of Cy Twombly, to whom he has been compared—appear to be free of organizing principles. Marks do not look as if they were arranged according to any preconceived design but rather appear random, as if deposited by nature or by chance. As a result, the paintings invite the eye to travel where it will. Amidst this seeming disorganization and flux, however, the lingering eye uncovers another sort of patterning, a kind of underlying grid.² While forms and shapes tend to vanish and reappear, the grid provides a skeleton on which the artist embodies his order. So, while perhaps at first resonant of the Surrealist practice of automatic drawing, a form of controlled mark-making that was believed to put the artist directly in touch with the unfettered unconscious—and a practice and belief held by many of the Abstract Expressionists—there is more of a deliberateness in Heeks's work that questions the very possibility of pure ‘un’-conscious marking.

In the process of painting itself, layer after layer of paint is applied, each enhancing and partially overwriting but not deleting what went before.³ That is to say, each stage retains traces of earlier stages, like vague and elusive memories of earlier thoughts and feelings, but nonetheless perceptible, still present to our awareness in the final image. And these palimpsests of paint encourage the viewer to linger, to note the marks of presence and absence as they emerge and fade—resulting in something that suggests the dense complexity of our perception of surface and depth. That is, Heeks's procedure of painting catches the temporal flow of perception itself. The entire

pictorial surface of Heeks's work is the embodied sum of continuous and multiple perceptions through an extended length of time and space. And as for the viewer, we feel that the process of viewing, if even in the slightest degree, is a reenactment of the artist's process of creation.

TERRY WINTERS

Terry Winters, like Willy Heeks, makes use of slow, undulating biomorphic forms, yet here, as in *Schema* (60) of 1985–1986, these forms are both magnified and less gestural—magnified in the sense that Winters is fascinated with that which exists outside the realm of the visible (microscopic organic form) writ large, and less gestural in the sense that his images, as such, are devoid of emotion, absent of the subjective presence of their author. The result is something that registers as much viscerally—as organic pulsion—as visually.

Winters's forms are decidedly more overt in their reference to biological form, as in his series of woodcuts from 1989, *Furrows*, the very title of which refers to the kinds of microscopic lines, grooves, or wrinkles deep within the earth's structure. His images often derive empirically from such small commonplace natural things, dissected, probed, and subjected to an abstracting process.⁴ More than one commentator has made the analogy between Winters's imagery and the diagrams of scientific inquiry,⁵ like codes deep in the structural but invisible makeup of the natural world, like developing organisms or embryonic cells.⁶ This gives them the pose of pure objectivity. They are unemotional and without the introspective ego so central to Abstract Expressionism, from which Winters's images (like those of Heeks) derive in terms of painterly method. His forms are like glyphs in a "primordial soup . . . where new life forms are building up and breaking down."⁷

Also like Heeks's large canvases, Winters's work often recalls the diaristic marks of Cy Twombly. And there is indeed a parallel between image and writing in his works. In fact, the analogy with language has often been drawn in accounts of Winters's painting, as though his calligraphic but inchoate forms and the indeterminate space in which they float form some sort of prelinguistic writing floating up to the surface, then receding, embryonically reaching the point of meaning before fading away. "His diagrams explain, but the explanations are open-ended, not pinned down, mutable. Individual images—be they vaguely animal, vegetable, mineral or something strangely in between—don't coalesce into an illusion of seamlessness."⁸

The French writer and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, has referred to this prelinguistic signification as the 'semiotic,' a sort of unarticulated, uncoded flow of 'pulsions' within the subconscious, a prelanguage not yet meaningful (in the sense of communicable 'meaning' in stable terms and syntactic constructions). Kristeva's 'semiotic' is, in its "pre-linguistic immediacy," she argues, "a process, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral . . . unstable . . . and non-signifying"; it "precedes and underlies figuration . . . and spatiality," thus rendering meaning always mobile, unstable, fluid and prompting multiple and unfixed reader/viewer positions.⁹ There is much of this that characterizes the work of Terry Winters. While there is a decided pose of scientific objectivity in his images, an emotional displacement, there remains in his undulating and pulsating forms an unavoidable sensual—primitive—immediacy.

MELISSA MEYER

The gestural abstraction of Melissa Meyer, by contrast to both Willy Heeks and Terry Winters, is more luminous and more associative, her coiling and looping brushwork more emotionally demonstrative, and therein more directly reminiscent of the autographic gesture of Abstract Expressionism. Her painterly distillations of landscape forms, as in *Volterra* (1990), recall the lusciously wet surfaces of de Kooning and the lyrical allusions to nature in Joan Mitchell. There is, simply put, a more representational quality to these nonrepresentational images. In terms of laying on paint, the marks are more liquid in comparison to the other non-figurative pieces in this exhibition; oil paint is used as if it were watercolor. Her languid, sensuous strokes, their luminous effect, and the open and asymmetrical composition recall Monet's late *Water Lilies* series, her abstractions conjuring nature, as Monet did in more figurative form, from palette and light. Just as Monet's late Impressionist panels establish no horizon line nor a place for the viewer to 'stand,' Meyer strictly avoids any suggestion of a horizontal axis, placing the viewer in the midst where we seem to lose ourselves in the fundamental elements of nature. She, like Monet, finds that point where nature and individual sensation coincide.

Like those of Heeks and Winters, Meyer's surfaces are layered, though far more diaphanous and tranquil, but still welling with past perceptions and series of accumulations. But by contrast and more like the psychic energy of de Kooning and the hermetic private symbolism of Gorky, Meyer's subject is more autobiographical.¹⁰ But unlike her Abstract Expressionist forebears, however, her loose-limbed strokes, while freely executed, coalesce into discrete shapes, formed units, and frontal composition, at least more so than in purely gestural painting with its all-over linearity. Take, for example, the more solid and tectonic forms (à la Gorky) found in the monoprints X and XI. Her brush marks have an architecture that holds them together. So, as was the case with Heeks, there is a compelling dynamic at work here between seemingly random accident and direct intention. Meyer's painting contains the energy released by Abstract Expressionist action painting through solid and composed forms, yet without its "cumbersome expressive baggage."¹¹ There is a more subtle tempo to her convolutions of paint, a playful ebullience without becoming merely decorative; it is more like, as one reviewer put it, "the cursiveness of writing."¹²

JANE HAMMOND

Jane Hammond's work makes use of a very specific—and private—repertoire of found images. We find repeated throughout her work, in witty combinations, fragments and juxtaposed visual quotations, as in collage, from different historical periods and from both high and popular culture. Unlike the work of the three artists we have already considered—Willy Heeks, Terry Winters and Melissa Meyer and their links to Abstract Expressionism—Hammond's postmodern painting puts into question the very notion of spontaneity—even originality—and the subjectivity of the autographic gesture. Moreover, in circumscribing the constellation of possibilities by limiting herself to the use of her 276-image inventory, the artist voluntarily restricts, and thereby questions, freedom of individual

artistic choice.¹³ Hammond's art, rather, recalls the work of Robert Rauschenberg and his use of images appropriated from popular culture, 'found allusions' to the existing world, where the individual artistic presence and personality—located in the gestural mark—is erased, and 'self-visualization' in art is, instead, a matter of reflecting one's surroundings, as in Hammond's lexicon of visual fragments, creating a kind of hallucinatory reality. For Hammond, as one commentator puts it, it is a matter of "the incredible surfeit and constant assault of imagery that defines contemporary life."¹⁴

Hammond's work owes much to the Postmodern notion that our interpretation of the world is shaped by the language we use to describe our experience of it. Art in the Postmodern era was to function as a sign—the experiential was unimportant. And her paintings are indeed about reading, the emphasis is on artifice, games, and fiction; her pictures are texts, or better, webs of information. As such, Postmodernism is an aesthetic that cultivates the variety of incoherence, profusion, and open-endedness. The very possibility of fixed meaning, especially in language, is denied.¹⁵

Language is central to Hammond's work. A longtime book collector and masterly collagist, she views it as a system of signification consisting of a finite number of parts that can be combined and recombined in an infinite number of ways. In an interview with the artist in conjunction with an exhibition of her work at the Cincinnati Art Museum in 1994, she clarified her position: "It [language] is an inherited system as opposed to an invented system. . . . I . . . bend and shape them [her visual lexicon] as much as possible, the way you might inflect words with your own tone of voice or your gestures or your combinations or your own syntax but you don't actually invent words. I am interested in this idea of recombinative structure, something like maybe DNA—how parts can configure and reconfigure in myriad ways. . . . I wanted something that was open-ended and exploratory and investigative—the way Duchamp worked."¹⁶ This idea is to invoke—whether explicitly or implicitly—a theory of structural linguistics which claims that in the linguistic system there are only differences: meaning is not mysteriously immanent in a word (or *sign*) but is functional, the result of its differences from other signs.¹⁷ Hammond's art is similarly a vocabulary in which each image functions like a word, and like words the meanings of these images mutate depending on what surrounds them.

ROBERT CUMMING

Robert Cumming, like Jane Hammond, deals with a manipulation of the linguistic and the imagistic, while his work, quite often, deals more directly with the verbal as part of the image itself—words as the voice of the image. Take, for example, the series of lithographs, *Smooth Mind Suite*, from 1989. In the series each image is 'completed' with a part of the following text: "The Mind is smooth—no Motion / Contented as the Eye / Upon the Forehead of a Bust / That knows—it cannot see—." These words are taken from a poem by Emily Dickinson dating from c.1862.¹⁸ The viewer/reader is left to consider how the words relate to the obscure sculptural—architectural forms depicted. The intrigue, for both the artist and the observer, is lodged in the conceptual relation between verbal and visual. Given this, one might easily imagine a shuffling of the images in the order in which they are seen and 'read,' resulting, as with Hammond's lexicon, in a continuous

shuffling of meaning or set of meanings which has multiple possibilities. This fragmentary language—visual and verbal—with a continuous open-endedness would certainly be in keeping with Cumming's fascination with the eye/ear logic.

Cumming's images are hermetic with complex iconography to decipher. They may be thought of as descendant from a Dada heritage (à la Marcel Duchamp) where ordinary objects are taken out of their context of use/function and hence their recognized meaning, and made senseless, a misappropriation of functional objects. Then, they are subjected to a dislocating transformation, creating a gap between appearance and reality.¹⁹ Take, for example, his darkly humorous 1990 oil on canvas, *Orbits Down/Eyes Round*, a leering skull with teeth derived from both a mundane object, the ordinary household lightbulb, and seventeenth-century New England gravestones sculpted with images of winged death²⁰—manipulated into a punning visual hybrid of the everyday object given multiple and incompatible readings. This strategy is reminiscent of Dada's critical reexamination of the traditions and premises of 'Art,' of perception itself, and its production of an art at the service of the *mind* rather than merely the eye, as in Duchamp's 'readymade' visual pranks.

A similar strategy is at work in Cumming's compelling *Burning Box* (1990), derived, according to the artist himself, from a box he discovered in a museum in Amsterdam, dating from about A.D. 1000, containing a heraldic flame motif.²¹ But Cumming again manipulates the found object, transforming it into an architectural structure, seen like a model from semi-aerial perspective—it becomes a house aflame, with all the implications of doom, chaos, and alarm conjured in the mind-eye.²²

As with Hammond, there is an individual iconography at work in Robert Cumming's art where he is immersed in the world of certain objects and forms that have a particular fascination for him. He has described his practice thus: "I am basically a pragmatist beginning with the plausible, then unscrewing the top to see the inside, how it works."²³

JOHN BEERMAN

John Beerman also engages, though perhaps more optimistically, with the postmodern practice of appropriation and pastiche. Beerman's meticulous, smooth-surfaced oils recall the tradition of the nineteenth-century Hudson River School, and more particularly American Luminist landscape painting and that movement's link to the Transcendentalist philosophy that spoke of a universal harmony and spiritual presence in Nature. Indeed, the artist has acknowledged his debt to Luminist painters such as Fitz Hugh Lane and John F. Kensett and to the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The artist has stated: "The American Luminists' work reflect Ralph Waldo Emerson's words that 'all mean egotism disappears . . . and man becomes a transparent eyeball.' These paintings of stillness and silence, measured and exacting delineation of space, and the crystalline clarity of the light and objects depicted embody Emerson's concept."²⁴

Beerman's paintings are intimate, isolated views of land, sky, and water similarly filled with a crystalline light and charged with an almost surreal sense of stillness. There is no narrative, and the scenes are evaporated of all the signs of modern-life violation and human presence. Moreover, the

titles are cryptic, slightly moralizing. Yet Beerman's *Nature*, unlike that of his nineteenth-century forebears, is not expressed as pure manifestation of divine order. Rather, his images are altered—again the ordinary, or the seemingly familiar, is de-familiarized, put into a dislocating context. Take, for example, *The World Is Breathing* (1985). The scene is indeed calm, serene, a peaceful and motionless view of nature. Yet consider the deliberateness of its presentation, its bold, intrusive frame of faux marble; the image is given the look of theatrical production ironically paired with the idea of intimacy and private experience. His paintings are often set off with hand-built, glazed, marbled or gold-leaf frames, a postmodern device which contributes to their sense of uneasiness, or at least to their sense of vivid, theatrical performance, thereby generating a self-conscious awareness on the part of the viewer of his own condition of spectatorship. The frames are integral to the works, they provide a setting, “a stage where the story is told.”²⁵ Even more declaratively so in *Remember the Whisper*, an acrylic and oil on wood of 1987, where the image itself is fragmented and recombined as a kind of unconventional triptych, framed in a vertical pile, each section gradually diminishing in size. The presentation of ‘Nature’ is part of the content here, and underscores the nature of these paintings *as objects*, thereby denying us the ability to transport ourselves imaginatively into the depicted scene at the same time as seducing us into the work through the use of illusionistic space, magical light, and glossy surfaces. Beerman's landscapes are self-conscious about their own artifice, their own fiction, and in this they share an affinity with both Hammond and Cumming—they are landscapes of the *mind*, not efforts to define an actual scene; they refuse to permit the viewer to take the image as representing the ‘real.’ They “represent something beyond description, something beyond the image.”²⁶ Thus, we need to ask: are they invitations to the viewer to rediscover a sense of the divinity and redemptive power of Nature that has been lost in the modern world—this would seem to be the case with the much less self-consciously manipulated *Fisher Beach*, the most recent work in this exhibition (1998)—or are they meant to provoke the idea of an unsettling disjunction between man and nature, a rupture between ourselves and the landscape?

NOTES

1. Artist's Statement, *Artists of the '80s: Selected Works from The Maslow Collection*, exhibition catalogue (Wilkes-Barre: Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes College, 1989).
2. See Miles Unger, “Willy Heeks,” *Art New England*, April/May 1987.
3. See Mario Naves, “Willy Heeks,” *New Art Examiner*, April 1993.
4. See *Terry Winters: Painting and Drawing*, exhibition catalogue (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, 1987). See also, Prudence Carlson, “Terry Winters' Earthly Anecdotes,” *Artforum*, November 1984.
5. See Christopher Knight, essay in *Terry Winters: Painting and Drawing*, p. 26.
6. See Jerry Saltz, “The Embryonic Vision,” *Arts Magazine*, Summer 1993.
7. *Ibid.*, p.22.
8. Knight, essay, p. 28.
9. Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 89–136.

10. Tellingly, in place of an artist's statement to accompany her work in the 1989 Sordoni Art Gallery exhibition, *Artists of the '80s*, Meyer chose to reproduce the following quotation from Willem de Kooning: “I was really influenced by Gorky because I like his painting better than anybody's.”
11. Amy Fine Collins and Bradley Collins, “Melissa Meyer at Holly Solomon,” *Art in America*, July 1991.
12. *Ibid.*
13. See Judith E. Stein, “The Word Made Image,” *Art in America*, May 1995.
14. See Jill Snyder, “Inside the Soapstone Factory,” in *Jane Hammond: The John Ashbery Collaboration, 1993–2001*, exhibition catalogue (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 2001).
15. At the same time her work recalls the Surrealist pursuit of chance encounter, games, collaborations, and collage.
16. See “A Conversation between Jane Hammond and Jean E. Fineberg,” in *Jane Hammond*, exhibition catalogue (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 1994).
17. The seminal text on which the theory of structural linguistics is based is Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) (London: Collins, 1978).
18. This is the date of the earliest known manuscript of the poem. Its earliest publication date is 1914. As Dickinson's poems are without titles, they have been assigned numbers, a system that attempts to establish a chronology. Cumming here uses the second stanza of #305. See *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).
19. See *Robert Cumming: Cone of Vision*, exhibition catalogue (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, in collaboration with Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 1993).
20. See Robert L. Pincus, “Artist Intoxicated by Creative Process,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, June 6, 1993.
21. See Robert Harrison, “Robert Cumming,” in *Robert Cumming: Cone of Vision*, p.31.
22. *Ibid.*, p.11.
23. See “An Interview with Richard Armstrong,” in *Robert Cumming: L'oeuvre photographique, Photographic Works: 1969–80* (1994).
24. Artist's Statement, *Artists of the '80s*, p.10.
25. Quoted in conversation with the artist by John W. Coffey II in his essay in *Finding the Forgotten: Landscape Paintings by John Beerman*, exhibition catalogue (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1991), p.1.
26. *Ibid.*, p.4.

Willy Heeks, *Dome*, 1990
oil on canvas
88 x 78 inches



Willy Heeks, *Affirming Flame*, 1988
etching, screenprint, and drypoint
20 x 16 inches



Willy Heeks, *Untitled*, 1988
mixed media on paper
44³/₄ × 32³/₄ inches



Terry Winters, *Schema (60)*, 1985–1986
vinylic, graphite, and gouache on paper
12 × 8½ inches



Terry Winters, *Furrows*, 1989
woodcut, one of a series of five
27 × 21¼ inches



Melissa Meyer, *Volterra*, 1990
oil on canvas
80 x 78 inches



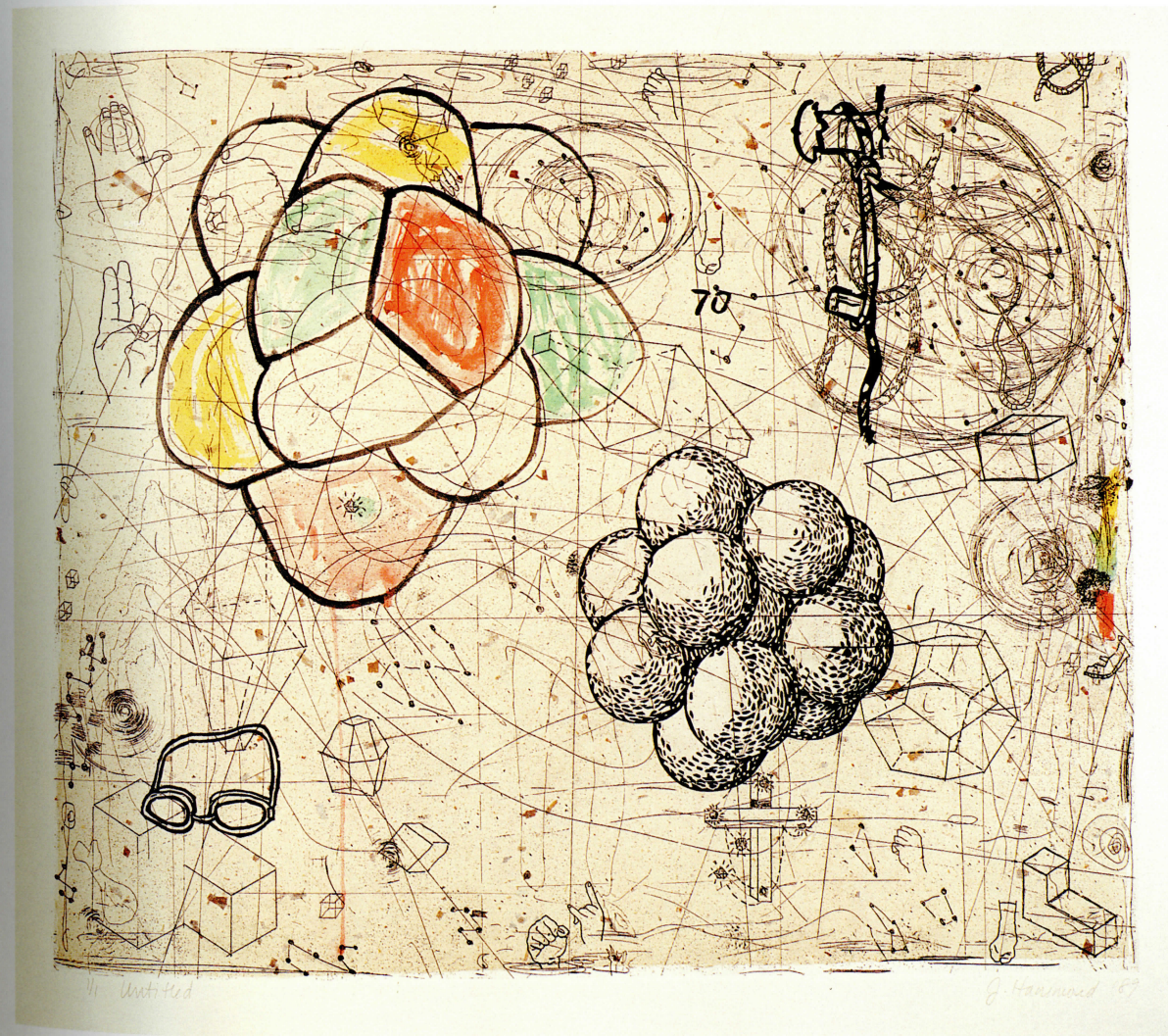
Melissa Meyer, X, 1990
monoprint
34 x 26½ inches



Melissa Meyer, XI, 1990
monoprint
37½ x 29¾ inches



Jane Hammond, *Untitled*, 1989
monotype
27½ × 32 inches



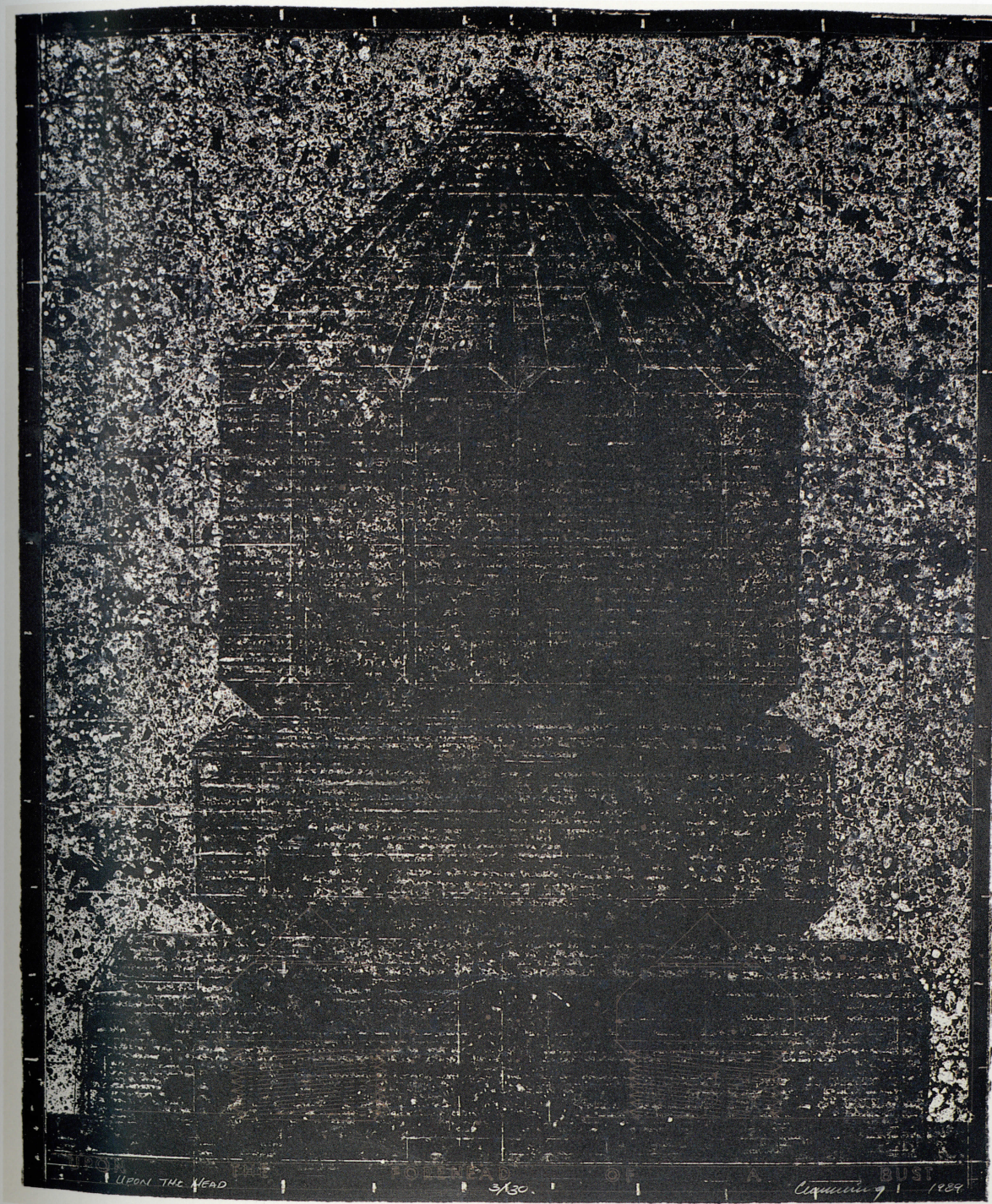
Jane Hammond, *Tuner*, 1993
mixed media on rice paper
35½ × 32½ inches



Robert Cumming, *Burning Box #2*, 1988
watercolor on paper
18 3/8 x 14 inches



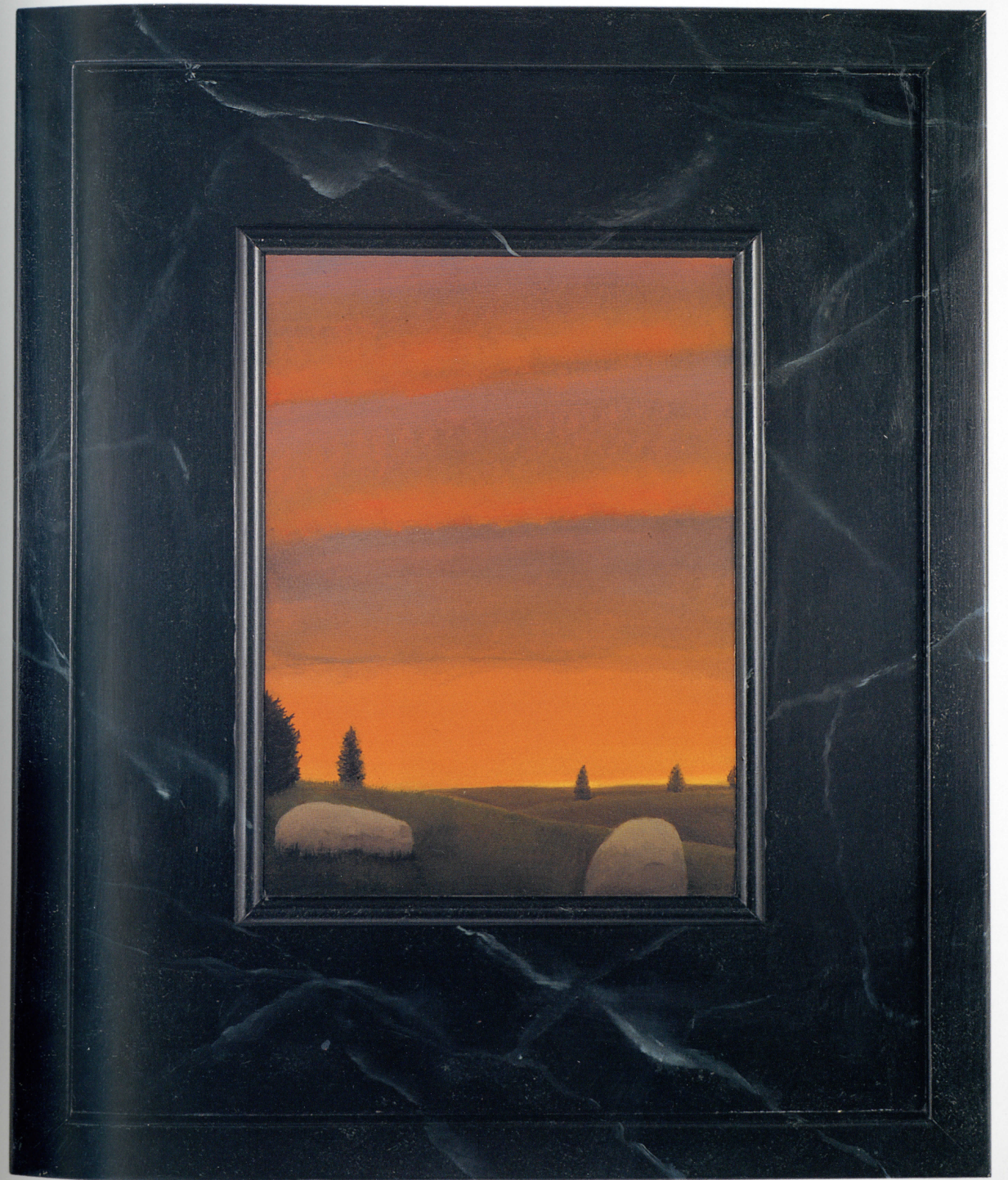
Robert Cumming, *Smooth Mind Suite*, 1989
lithograph, one of a series of four
27 x 22 inches



Robert Cumming, *Orbits Down/Eyes Round*, 1990
oil on canvas
96 × 72 inches



John Beerman, *The World Is Breathing*, 1985
oil on plexiglass and wood
9 × 12 inches



John Beerman, *Remember the Whisper*, 1987
acrylic and oil on wood and plexiglass
58 × 28½ inches



John Beerman, *Fisher Beach*, 1998
acrylic and oil on linen
36 × 42 inches



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

(Dimensions are given in inches, height precedes width.
Date in parentheses refers to year acquired by The Maslow Collection.)

WILLY HEEKS

Dome, 1990
oil on canvas
88 × 78
(1990)

Affirming Flame, 1988
etching, screenprint, and drypoint
20 × 16
(1991)

Untitled, 1988
mixed media on paper
44³/₄ × 32³/₄
(1988)

TERRY WINTERS

Schema (60), 1985–1986
vinylic, graphite, and gouache
on paper
12 × 8¹/₂
(1987)

Furrows, 1989
woodcut, series of five
27 × 21¹/₄
(1990)

MELISSA MEYER

Volterra, 1990
oil on canvas
80 × 78
(1991)

X, 1990
monoprint
34 × 26¹/₂
(1991)

XI, 1990
monoprint
37¹/₂ × 29³/₄
(1991)

JANE HAMMOND

Untitled, 1989
monotype
27¹/₂ × 32
(1990)

Tuner, 1993
mixed media on rice paper
35¹/₂ × 32¹/₂
(1993)

ROBERT CUMMING

Burning Box #2, 1988
watercolor on paper
18³/₈ × 14
(1990)

Smooth Mind Suite, 1989
lithograph, series of four
27 × 22
(1990)

Orbits Down/Eyes Round, 1990
oil on canvas
96 × 72
(1991)

JOHN BEERMAN

The World Is Breathing, 1985
oil on plexiglass and wood
9 × 12
(1985)

Remember the Whisper, 1987
acrylic and oil on wood
and plexiglass
58 × 28¹/₂
(1987)

Fisher Beach, 1998
acrylic and oil on linen
36 × 42
(1999)

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