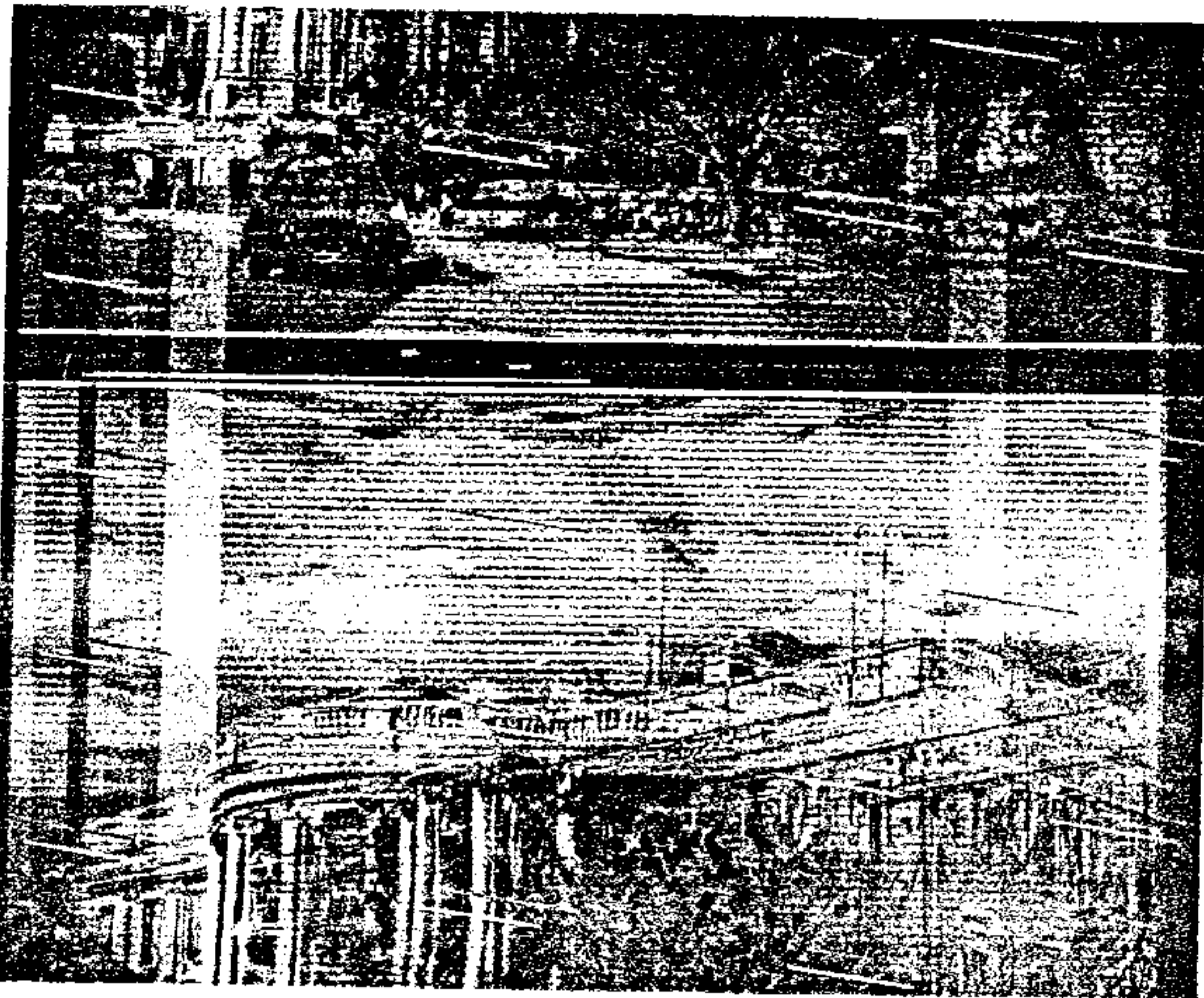


# HARRISON BURNS



Harrison Burns, White House—South Portico, 1977. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 66". Courtesy Fischbach Gallery.

Confronted by this series—between two large canvases, 34 small works on paper of identical size ranked in serried rows which enhance rather than inhibit our vertigo, like the compound-eye of the control-room—of television images of the Taj Mahal and the White House, edifices whose symbolic content (Beauty and Power) is so familiar that the merest allusion to their contours can be "read" at once and at will, the first suggestion is that we are to regard the two buildings as linked by some sort of analogy, beyond mere whiteness and beyond the mere witness of the omnipresent camera which feeds the omnipresent tiny screen. ("I was watching Nancy Kissinger at the Taj Mahal, I blinked," says Burns, "and there was Nixon on the Truman Balcony": such are the collages of technology which constitute our image-repertoire of imperium.) It is precisely our technology which has accustomed us to seeing through local conditions ("snow," "image drift," "ghost figures," "blips," "flip lines") to the content, through the medium in order to apprehend more matter with less art; it is only later that we discover to what a degree the television tube has taken over our taste for what used to be called reality. Is the suggestion true, though, that a despot's monument to a foreign woman who bore him a child every year for fifteen years is somehow to be regarded in tandem with our democratic

shrine to domesticity-as-government? Is there something in these pleonastic plasticities which is telling us that even now there is a Whited Sepulcher in the seditious tropical surround of Pennsylvania Avenue?

I think not. I think the painter has seized upon a subtler bond, even a simpler one, in his presentment of these celebrated structures, though surely there is a sly echo of a great political novelist's prescription that the exquisite Taj be transported slab by slab to the United States and reerected where "it might be wholly admirable; in India it is a building wastefully without a function." Naipaul's horror of Mogul waste and failure and oppression has not been lost on Burns, at grips with "actuality" for the last decade in his grasp of the medium through which all the world apprehends itself most readily. But the painter has an imprescriptible task which falls short of, or transcends, the novelist's explicitations. Harrison Burns is concerned, to the point or patch or plane of compulsive dramatization, with how we see something, not with what we see.

Burns has taken two of the most recognizable piles in all the world and made them dance. He begins with a black-and-white study, as all of us began with that apprehension, on our first television set; then he allows the shadows, the ghosts to creep in. The image slips and we no longer know, as the say-

ing goes, which end is up—reality divides and vision conquers, or the visionary reality condones our confusion. To these initial floundering, the chromatic fantasy contributes a further bewilderment: who ever saw such colors, such failed tinctures, until the first color-television sets made all our living rooms into mescaline dens?

I would guess that Fernand Léger was the last painter to be thus willing to accommodate the apparatus of the mechanical world we have spawned and spread from the Potomac to Agra; there is a kind of glee, a painterly euphoria in the way Burns takes to television. He can go very far in his assimilation of the preposterous device, so far that sometimes we gasp and implore him to hold back, for he has told us more about our habits of beholding than we care to admit, more than we dare to admire. What he enforces on us, in the great "realist" tradition we are beginning to recognize as the ultimate visionary project, is that we are not responsible for what we see—we are responsible to it only because of how we see it. Burns is demonstrating, in this exhaustive yet open-ended series, excruciatingly arbitrary yet excessively ordered, that in all painting of something, there is nothing—nothing but how we see. Only in the teratological parenthesis of abstract art is there a subject, a portrayed content. In all the rest of painting—and here Burns links himself to

Monet's cathedrals and haystacks—there is only the private eye, the personal view, the imprisoned self craning for a vision of what no one else may see. What Burns sees is startling, because we realize that we too have seen it, that what he has gleaned from the most tyrannical eidetic source in the history of the world to date is in fact a part of our own education, our own ethic. That is why, I think, he has chosen these two buildings, these stabled white elephants, the rhetorical mausoleum and the executive mansion. They work for him, and for us, precisely because they have no more than the meaning of familiarity, because they are susceptible only to the assertion of our claim to prevail over our experience which we call style.

In the large paintings here, Burns manages to evade the issue of his 34 views (one thinks of Hiroshige's 53 Stations of the Tokaido), which only this exhibition brings to a head, or at least to a headlong question: how many are necessary to achieve his peculiar fascination, his new beauty—can we "see" what he wants us to see (diaphanous, fragmented, blurred, overscrawled, split, dissolved, discolored, disgraced) in, say, any six of these pictures? In any three? It is the conundrum of series art, wherein each painting is superseded by a different version of itself and has not arrived at finality.

In this show, Burns' work collaborates very closely with catastrophe: we are in the presence of an undone art, where the preference is given not to the product but to the process. As Jasper Johns (Burns' favorite living artist) has said: "The work of art itself is an object that tells of the loss, destruction, or disappearance of objects." We need merely look around us, and our looking—so extreme, so outrageous is the enterprise practiced 36 times upon us—becomes a kind of listening; we hear the blood beating in our own eyes, as in the eye of the camera, the dark room which is the eye of Harrison Burns. (Fischbach, September 10-30)

Richard Howard