

**W**hat are we saying when we dub someone a *realist*? The term has many meanings—some complimentary, some contradictory.

Most obviously, we mean that in the artist's work there is recognizable subject matter. But although we know what we are looking at in Magritte, Delvaux and Dali, we do not call them realists. With artists like Millet, Courbet or Hogarth, the fact that characters and settings are clearly depicted is relatively unimportant. These artists were primarily interested in showing their contemporaries the harsh realities of peasant or slum life in contrast with the luxury of the nobility. For them, realism meant using art as a weapon for social change. More recently, the works of Sloan, Bellows, Shahn, and Levine all involve the same kind of crusading. But how different that is from the Socialist Realism of Nazi Germany aimed at promoting racial purity or of Stalinist Russia in which idealization of the boy-meets-tractor syndrome was the only acceptable art.

On a more subtle level of distinction are those artists who present realistic scenes we can read with no apparent trouble, but in whose work are buried references to people, events, prejudices, or social mores of the period that are lost to us today. They were easily understood by everyone at the time they were done, but now only specialists understand the point the artist was making. Most now only see a realistic scene of people in sometimes strange circumstances.

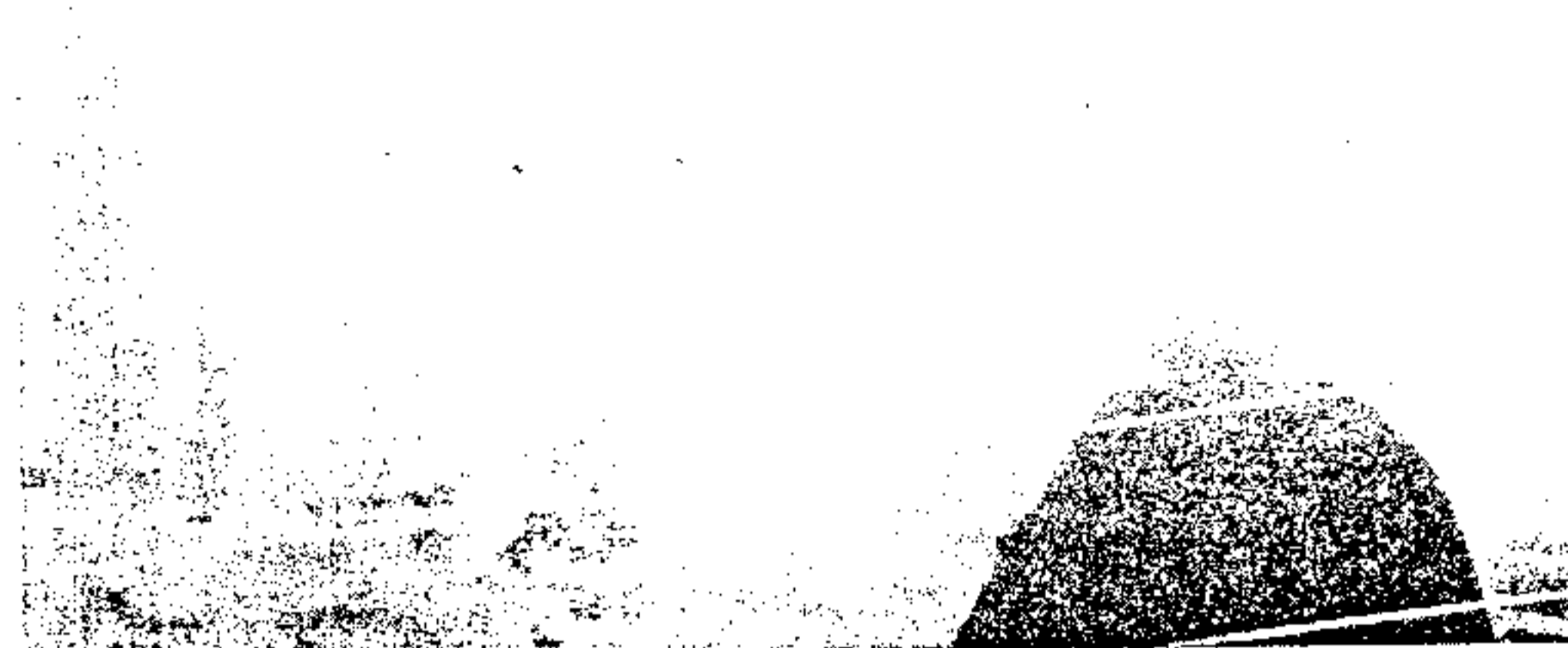
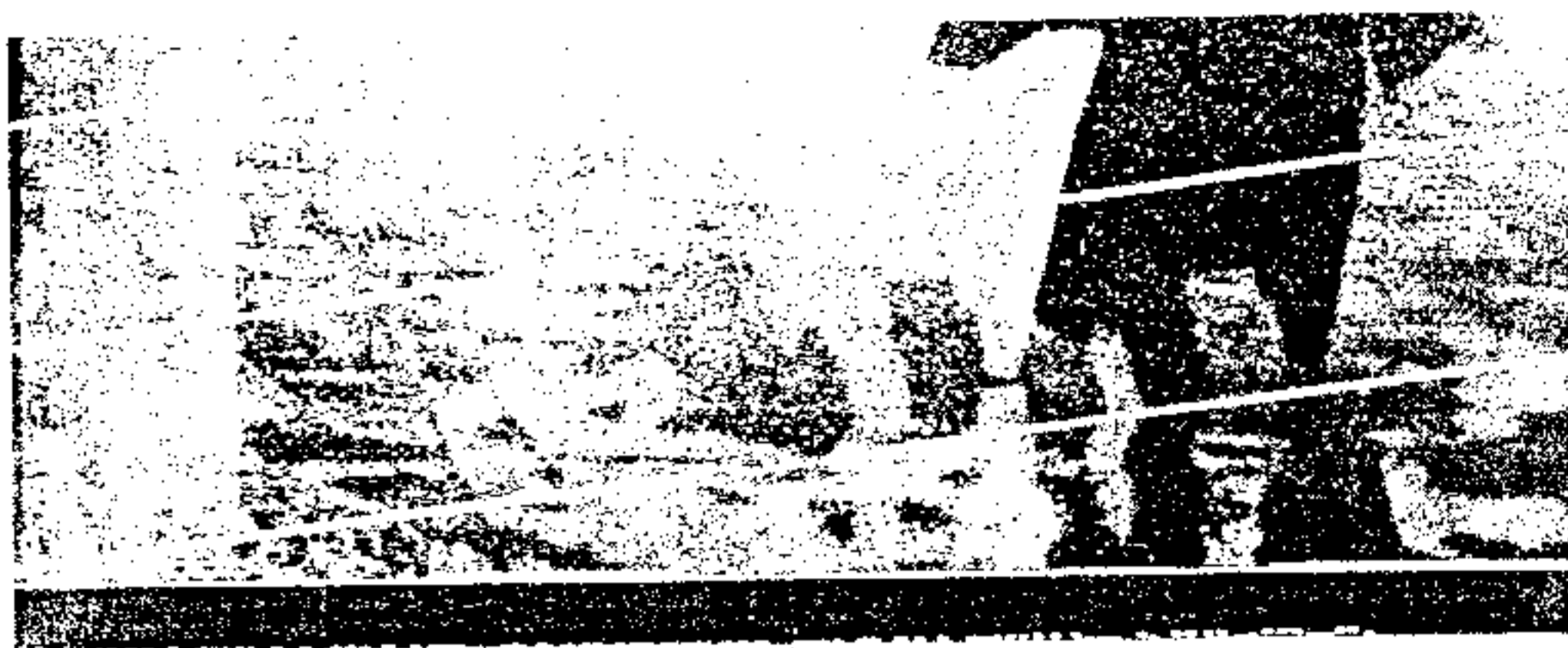
Example: Daumier called one of his most famous lithographs *Rue Transnonain*. In it we see a man in his nightshirt sprawled out next to a bed. There is another vague figure on the floor in the background. Is the man drunk? Sick? Dead? The title tells us nothing. But every Parisian in 1834 knew that on the night of April 15th, looking for suspected rabble-rousers, police broke into a house at that address and murdered an entire innocent family. How many people who look at the print today get Daumier's point?

There are important and enduring aspects of realist painting for artists despite the number of times critics have pronounced it dead. In all such work there is "narrative" content. The artist tells us something about the subject matter. There are usually reference points within a work that help set it in time and space, that often give us clues to the artist's feelings about the subject. In the crudest sense, artists use realist techniques to convey rather specific and limited information.

And that, by way of a rather lengthy introduction, brings me to the work of Harrison Burns. For the past ten years he has been fascinated by the strange and uniquely contemporary "reality" that is television. Burns feels that a whole generation has grown up whose parameters of vision were shaped largely by the proportions and restrictions of the television tube. They see the world as a constantly shifting series of long shots and close-ups, complete with snow, roll-over, ghost images, and all the other electronic garbage that distorts so much TV reception. The ability to bring almost anything and anyone into our immediate presence, the nervous fuzz that engulfs most things shown on the tube, plus the unnatural range of colors the American system of transmission causes—for vast numbers of people, these have become the new reality. They see life as TV shows it, and when life differs from the TV image, they are put off, bored, or confused. Today this is "... the medium through which all the world apprehends itself most readily," in Richard Howard's sharp phrase.

A TV image is the starting point for Burns' paintings and drawings. It is part of a new realism, an image lifted from the tube—either from a news report or a film—but it is merely the point of departure for a multi-part process, both artistic and intellectual, that first simplifies the image and then complicates both it and its implications.

Burns grew up in a home sympathetic to his artistic interests and ambitions. By the time he was five or six, his mother told him he would probably be an artist. Apparently, by his own admission, it never dawned on him to be anything else. After graduating from the Atlanta College of Art with a BFA and going to Douglas College of Rutgers University, he fell under the forceful influence of Rauschenberg. There were very early combines, then a period of black and white still photography, next some filming. Then he wanted to get back to painting and drawing. It seemed to him that all his technical experience with cameras



Harrison Burns, *House of Wax*, 1975. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 72".  
Courtesy Iolas-Jackson Gallery.

Harrison Burns, *Pietà Study*  
(detail), 1980. Charcoal on paper,  
22 x 30". Courtesy Iolas-Jackson Gallery.



## HARRISON BURNS: A NEW REALISM, A NEW SYMBOLISM

ROBERT GLAUBER

Harrison Burns uses paint as the living grammar of his visual images. His subject matter, whether derived from the movies or reality, has a symbolic content far more significant than its outward appearance. The resultant works tell us something allusive about contemporary life.

and photography pointed to some utilization in his canvases. He started to take photographs from his most changing and readily available source, movies on TV. Then he started to make the photos into paintings. All of this happened in 1969 and 1970 while he was still in graduate school.

Most of Burns' early work in his current style was logically based on film-images. Growing up in a small Southern town, he became a child of Hollywood, strongly influenced by its imagery. And what images were stronger than the *complete* escapes—the horror films? There were many paintings derived from the exotic situations such films required. Then Jack the Ripper came along in "House of Wax." For three years Burns explored this fugitive figure in a long series of dark and dramatic canvases that combined the explicit violence of the murderer and the vagueness Burns made of the TV projection. He further distorted the already distorted realism of the film.

These TV-derived motion picture images became the first dark canvases, the ominous, swirling subjects and treatments that, in Burns' thinking at the time, grew from the same roots as Goya's "Black Paintings." He calls Goya his "parent" and on his frequent stays in Spain, where he has a home, Burns studies Goya on his native soil. Yet you will look in vain for a direct stylistic relationship to Goya. It is more the emotional and expressive impact, the grueling drama of, for instance, Goya's *Saturno* from which the influence derives. (*Saturno* is, not accidentally, one of the very few images Burns has ever used which is purely art-derived.)

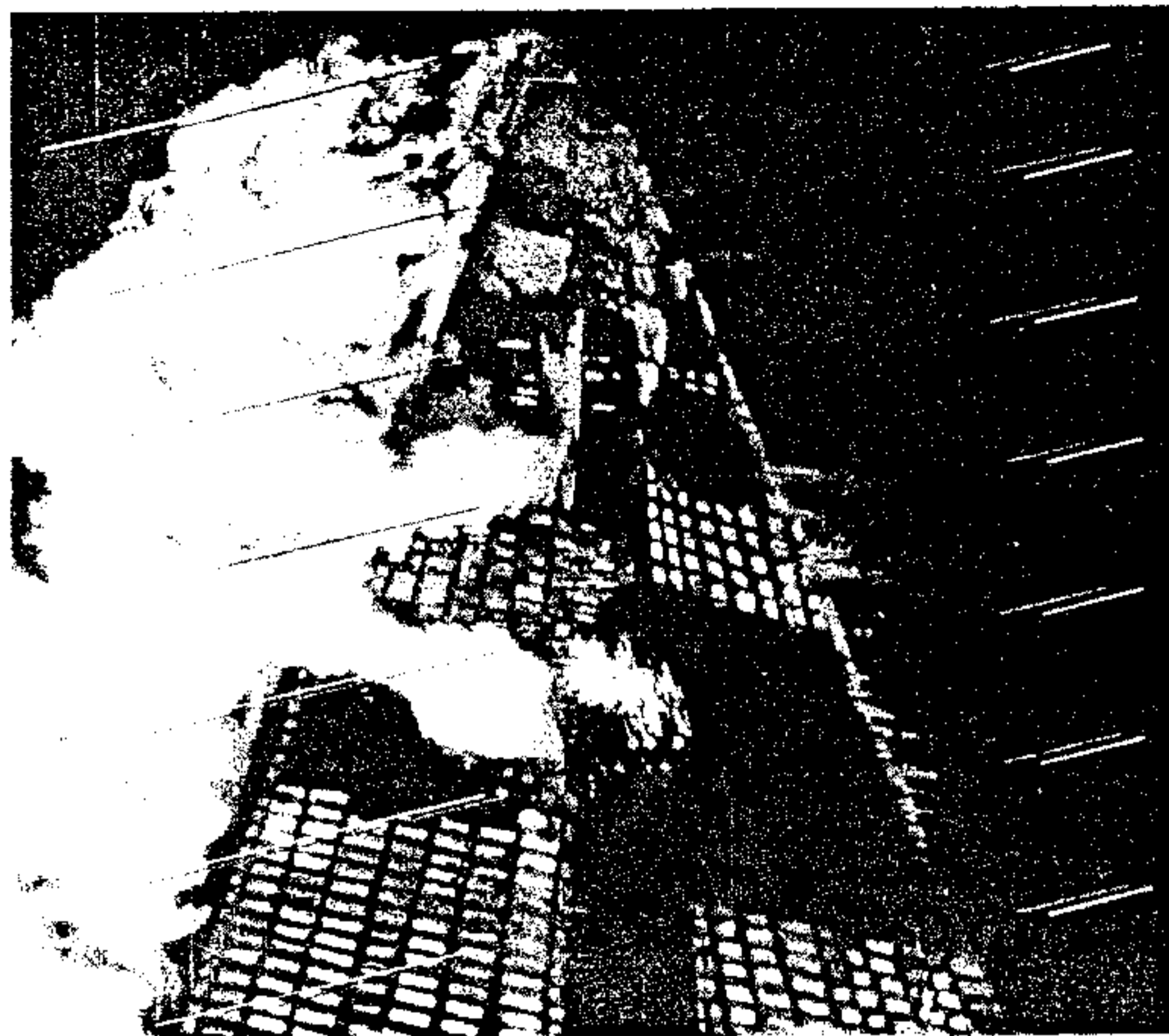
There were, of course, contemporary artists whom Burns admired, but it is hard to pin down concrete ways in which any of them are reflected in his work. For example, he has enormous admiration for Jasper Johns as a draftsman. Johns, he feels, has made him a more scrupulous, a more critical draftsman himself. But Burns prefers to feel that his style is largely self-induced. He has strong prejudices against being linked with any one school or any particular artist. He sees himself primarily as a symbolist. Despite his "realistic" approach, he rejects the notion that painting is a tool merely to describe something. His subject matter, whether derived from the movies or reality, is always regarded as having a symbolic content far more significant than its outward appearance. Burns seeks to combine the two and, when the two are joined successfully in an image, the result tells us something allusive about contemporary life as well as something personal about the artist. For Burns, all painting is a symbolic act of autobiography.

Shortly after the long series on Jack the Ripper, Burns saw Nancy Kissinger on a visit to the Taj Mahal that was widely covered by TV news. Suddenly there was a switch to another story with the White House in the background. The juxtaposition of the two intensely white buildings soon gave rise to another series—as bright and light as the previous ones had been dark and somber.

Naturally, the first White House paintings were white, as were those of the Taj Mahal. The buildings were then transformed into pale colors followed by brighter and stronger ones, culminating in a canvas of the White House which showed it a brilliant red. Burns was asked if the red White House implied that the President had Communist sympathies or leanings. The question surprised him. Such a possible reading had never occurred to him. Burns saw a red White House as an exercise in irony. The White House symbolizes power and all power is essentially bloody

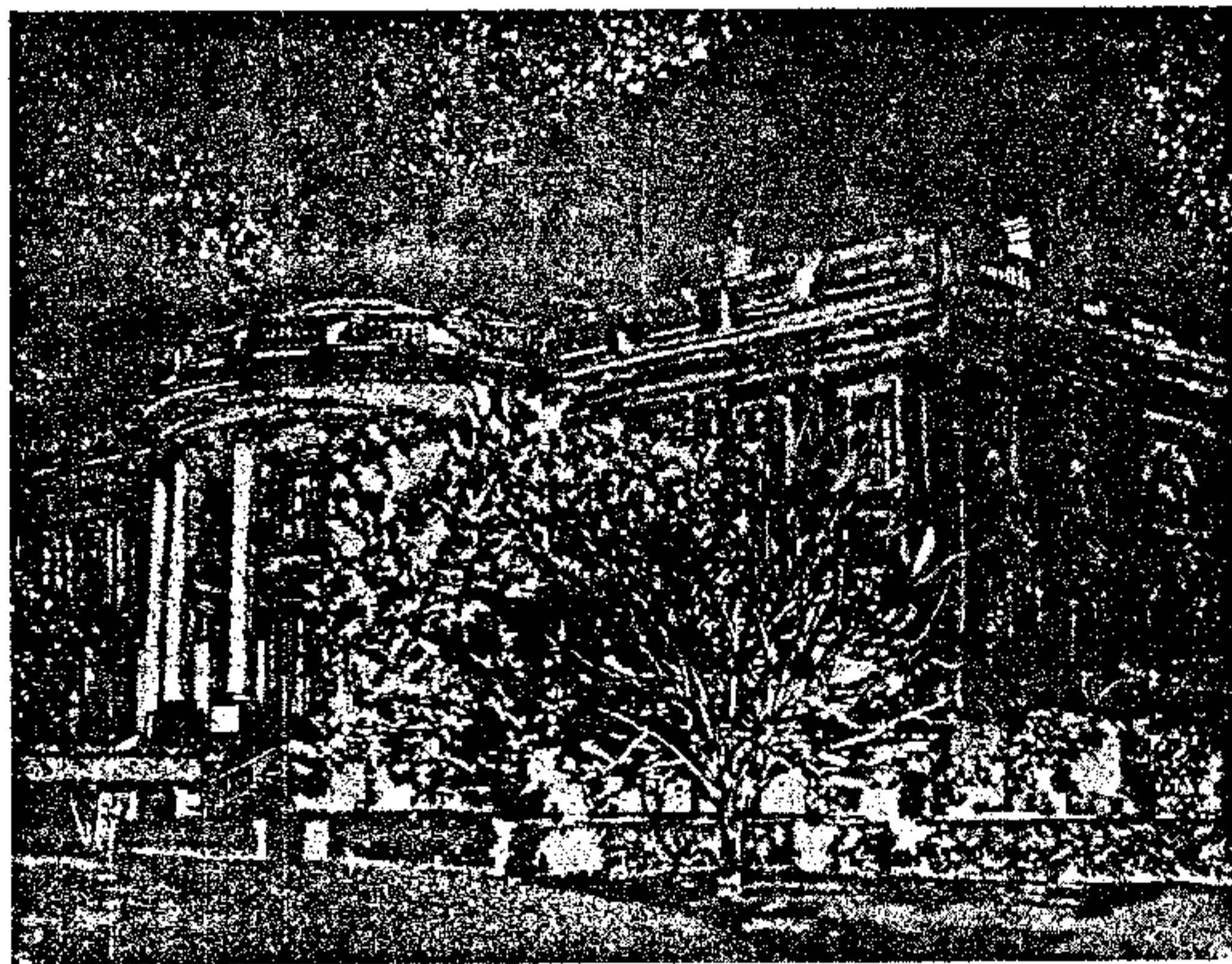
Almost without exception, all initial images are selected for their potential development into series. By now, Burns had worked out a complex technique for developing an idea through a series of paintings. There are nine separate and distinct steps in the process:

- 1) A photograph is taken of an image from a television show.
- 2) A meticulous pencil or charcoal drawing is made of the essential sections of the image.
- 3) The drawing is then rephotographed as a 35mm slide.
- 4) The slide is projected and studied for compositional possibilities.
- 5) Stencils are made of the section of the slide-image that will remain constant as the series is developed.
- 6) The canvas is prepared with a brush and the general tones of the work laid down.
- 7) The stencils are set in place and their images sprayed. (Burns uses a spraygun because he feels the surface it creates is as close as he cares to get to the



Harrison Burns, *The Towering Inferno*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 46 x 60".  
Courtesy Iolas-Jackson Gallery.

Harrison Burns, *White House, South Portico*, 1975. Acrylic and oil on paper with collage, 22 x 30". Private Collection. Courtesy Iolas-Jackson Gallery.



quality of a video image.) 8) A group of paintings is now developed with variations in both composition and color. The first canvas is always a monochrome gray with the order of the colors in the series dependent on mood, accident, and the availability of new shades and colors. 9) Finally, the stencils themselves are used to make collages, reinforcing their own images, mirroring them or acting as abstracted forms.

Burns is color-blind in the red-green spectrum, a handicap for an artist in some ways. He sees color, of course, but with the reds and greens there is sometimes a confusion of values. Perhaps his sensitivity to actual color is not as traditionally fine-tuned as some artists', but this problem, he thinks, has helped him develop a system that produces his own kind of color symbolism. As stated, the first painting of a series is always gray—many types of gray from warm to cool. This allows the image-form to take hold of the imagination.

As in television, the colors are often "unnatural" in their combinations and their brilliance. Burns frankly strives for lurid ef-

fects. He uses color to assault the viewers' sensibilities and, symbolically, to underline his once-removed report on reality. An acid green outlines a misty purple. A dim blue is fractured by gaudy orange. A whole range of graded greens glows against a scaly silver-yellow. Browns cascade across surfaces from the warmest to the vilest. White, intense and eye-searing, breaks through a whole range of blues, purples, and reds. The contrasts are always high. The emotional impact is always immediate and intentional.

There are times when the paint is thin and delicate. At others, it is slathered on like whipped cream on a Viennese pastry and for the same reason—to add an extra dimension of sensuality—for Burns is very much concerned with sensuality; with sexuality, if you will. It does not appear in any explicit way. The works are never conventionally erotic (though he is toying with the possibilities of such a series if he can find the right image), but there is a lushness, an invitation to touch and caress, a steaminess that informs both colors and images. Burns always tries to generate a very basic sort of animal heat in his work.

His images cover a wide range, from the explosion scene in "The Towering Inferno" to a series paying tribute to Ava Gardner. Burns has a special interest in the mechanical, the constructed. Like Léger, he is fascinated by the technical world, but unlike the French artist he is occasionally critical of that world and often ambivalent about it. In *The Towering Inferno* he deals with the dangers. This dramatic scene from the popular late-night rerun film symbolizes the potential danger of all towers, whether it be in the confusion of tongues as at Babel or in an uncontrollable fire as in the canvas. The fire is deadly and impersonal, but the painting of the fire is coolly wrought. It is another example of Burns' irony; another example of subject as reality and symbol.

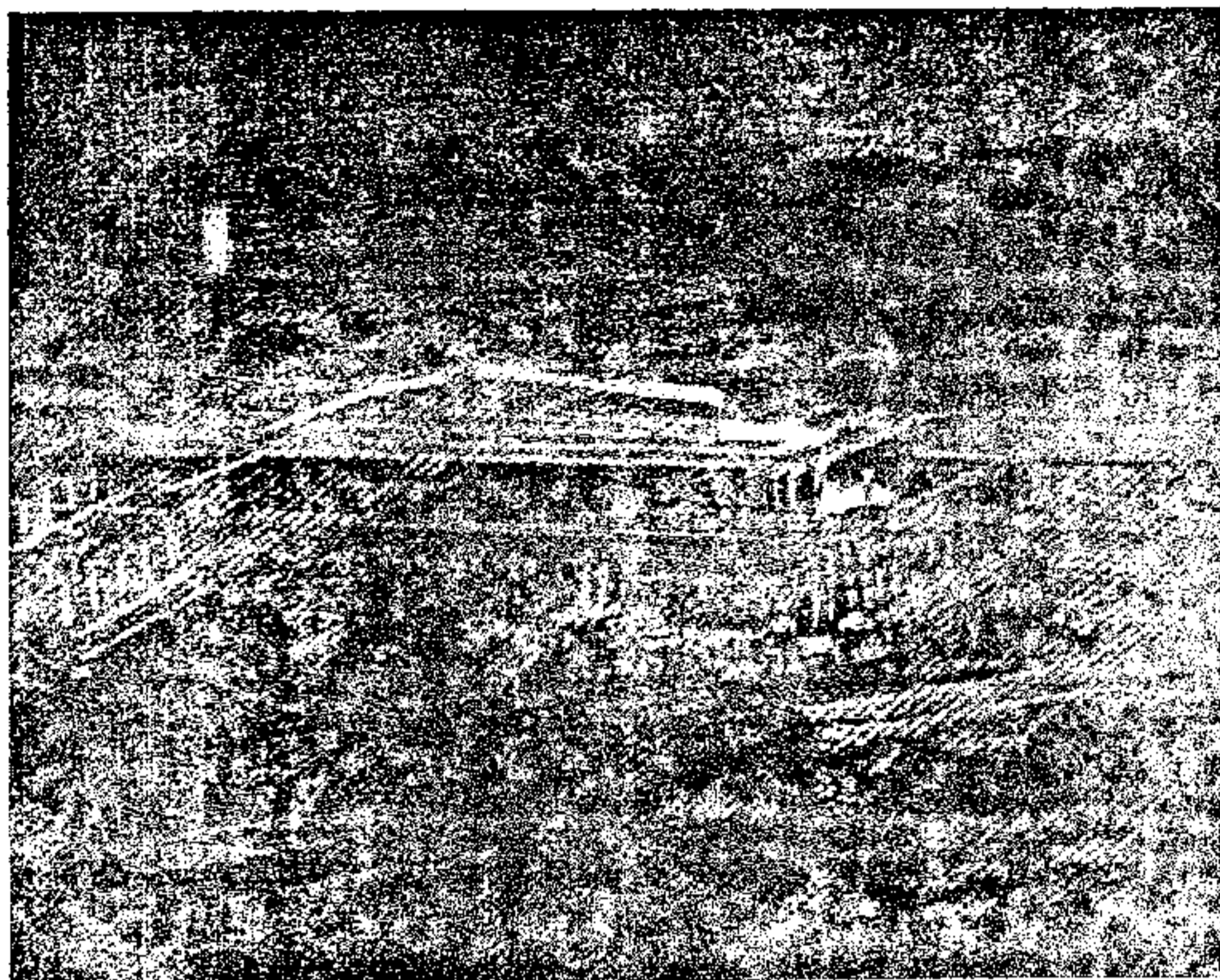
The Ava Gardner image is more personal. Gardner and Burns both come from rural North Carolina; both spend a great deal of time in Spain. In "The Barefoot Contessa" she was such a personification of sultry femininity and so beautiful that Burns was never fully able to lose her image. So he did a long series of paintings on paper (shown in 1981 in Spain) in which, using essentially the same image in each, he explored through color shifts the almost endless range of moods her face could be made to project. Some of his Gardners are subtle and winning, some are harsh and striking, a few intentionally indeterminate. For Burns, they are all Gardner, the symbolic dream-woman.

The Gardner series is a good example of how Burns uses paint as the living grammar of his visual images. As there must be, there are rules to his grammar—hence the complex process by which Burns makes a painting. But since his aim is always symbolic communication, he feels that though he enjoys experimentation, anything that comes too close to complete abstraction would be wrong (or at least unsatisfying) for him. "Abstraction lacks specific reference points for the viewer," he told me, and a specific reference is always needed to unravel his symbol.

In a way, this makes Burns something of a romantic: his concern for the surface, the emotional and expressive outlook, the mood of his paintings. It is an appellation he does not reject. He is interested in magic. When he combines the two, a personal sort of fantasy emerges. His canvases start with the selective realism of the TV image, recognizable and particular, but it is never the coldly detached reality the Photo-Realists prefer. It is reality as the basis of dreams and passions; fantasies that spring from what he sees on the tube but filtered through his imagination. I have sometimes wondered if it is not an indirect descendant of Surrealism.

If all this sounds a bit mystic, well and good. There is about Burns something of the mystic. Not in the conventional sense of incense and mantras, but of an artist who sees painting as a kind of mystic and ritual act, one over which he does not always have complete control. This may be, at least in part, a reaction to his color-blindness. He is never absolutely certain what some of his more startling color combinations look like. Thus some element of chance accrues as he works, and chance has mystic overtones for him. Typically, Burns is less reluctant to admit the effects of chance on his work than many other more self-contained painters.

Since Burns always organizes his conceptual approach to an image in terms of a related group of paintings, it will be helpful



Harrison Burns. *Fort Knox*, 1976. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72".  
Courtesy Iolas-Jackson Gallery.



Harrison Burns. *Ava Gardner #1*, 1981. Acrylic on paper, 22 x 33".  
Courtesy Iolas-Jackson Gallery.

to trace in some detail the development of a recent series. The image is Mary grieving over the dead Christ. It came from the Franco Zefferelli television production done in 1977, "Jesus of Nazareth." It is an agonized Mary, head thrown back, mouth open in a wordless scream. For some, the image was essentially religious, so they rejected it. But Burns (not a conventionally religious person) was attracted to the poetry of the figure as well as to its formal rhythms and its potential layers of meanings for others. Inevitably, it made Burns think of all the women who have grieved over dead men. For me, it was the student at Kent State keening over the prone figure sprawled at her feet. For others, it may well be other pietàs.

Burns believes, deep down, that when he selects an image, he does so for its political and social implications. He does not pretend to see all the potentialities in an image and is gratified when others find interpretations that had not occurred to him. For Burns, this pietà reflects the general climate of violence in

which we live. It has a quality of social irony that applies alike to Jesus and Mary and to all other victims of oppression. Burns rejects the notion that he make a *specific* social comment (as, for instance, Daumier and Bellows did), but also feels that "you cannot make a statement in art about the times in which you live that is not, at base, a political statement."

The series is properly called *Piedades* in the Spanish form, which was the title used when the works were shown in New York. Here is the development. Mary cradled the dead Christ in her arms and Burns took his establishing photograph. From this, the charcoal drawing eliminating most of the background was made. Burns wished to depict a mother and her grief, not a specific religious or historic event. The first painted version was a literal rendition of the drawing, monochromatic and direct. This was followed by increasingly complex versions of the basic image achieved through color changes:

Yellow—the image tripled with bar of electronic "interference" across the top. (The original version of this canvas no longer exists because Burns repainted the top of the canvas to make it more lively, more textured, and to bring it down vertically into the image. This reworking in mid-series is not unusual.)

Blue—very severe, restrained, and much simpler than the yellow version.

Cherry red—the Madonna's face more in contrast with the background, the tragic element more oppressive. It seems more "expressionist." A "roll-over" bar cuts through the middle.

Green—shadowy figures in blue and red like TV ghost images surround Mary and Christ.

Purple—essentially a slight variation on the yellow canvas but in more somber hues and more subtle relationships, whispering where the other cried.

Multicolor—with the central image now two shadow-like figures broken up by vertical bars of unrelated colors; somewhat as if a theatrical scrim has been lowered between subject and viewer. The drama is now suggested rather than implicit.

There is a shift of shape as Burns moves to a long horizontal form in several sections, combining aspects of all the primary color canvases. Collaged elements have been added. The Mary-Christ group is further abstracted. Heavy textures have been used to lead the eye across the large form and to satisfy the need for fresh elements. The new format changes the entire mood of the image.

The subsequent works in the series returned to the original photograph. A new charcoal drawing was done, a variation on the Madonna figure that now shrieks in emotional agony. Burns was surprised by the impact of the new drawing. It was more disturbing than he originally intended. Consequently, though the new pieces followed the same order, they were more searing in color, more jagged and disturbing in composition, with fragments of newspaper applied as collage, bits of torn stencils laid down, paint slathered on in a thick impasto to produce crudely textured surfaces that catch the light at unexpected and hard angles.

The TV screen is finally lost. The image lifted from it is still there but fractured, distorted, abstracted in ways that sometimes suggest the image-fracturing of the Cubists. Burns is now fully concerned with psychological reality and emotional response, with a commentary drawn from the darker corners of his own psyche's reaction to death and loss.

Music has taken over the work. There is a quality of frenzy, of grief expressed as rage. This is the dark and elaborate complexity of the Gypsy *cante jondo* the artist so often hears in his Andalusian retreat. Now Burns is painting straight out of his Spanish experience. North Carolina is forgotten. He is recording death as what Lorca called "black pain" in the land where "the dead are more alive, dead, than any other place in the world."

When completed, there were 27 works in the *Piedades*, from the simple first charcoal sketch to the final upheavals. Burns had exhausted the image, the idea, and himself. From start to finish, the series took two-and-a-half years.

Where Burns will go now is not quite clear. Some shift in direction seems in the offing. There is a restlessness in him that he has not been able to resolve. He paints. Exhibitions come



Harrison Burns, *After Goya's Saturno*, 1978. *Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 68"*.  
Courtesy Iolas-Jackson Gallery.

Harrison Burns, *Taj Mahal*, 1977. *Acrylic on paper, 22 x 30"*.  
Courtesy Iolas-Jackson Gallery.



regularly. There have been three one-man shows in New York (the most recent is currently at the Iolas-Jackson Gallery. There have been shows in Spain. Invitations to group exhibitions are more numerous than he cares to fill. He is represented in many important collections across the country. So that aspect of Burns' career is solid and satisfying.

He continues to teach at Rutgers Preparatory School with high enthusiasm and has been there since his graduate school days. True, this cuts into his studio time, but the gratification he gets from working with young people is his safe anchor in the rough waters of the New York art scene.

The pietàs were a catharsis for Burns—as they have been for many viewers. Now, having ritualistically purged himself (and us), like a Greek dramatist, he will have to start again—to set up a thesis, develop an antithesis, and explore in fresh ways some other corner of his heart-psyche and ours. The problem, as always, is to find the symbolically fruitful image.