



**Harrison Burns**

**Paintings Noir**

**Selected Works 1974 - 1989**

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October 20 through November 21, 1990

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**R A B B E T G A L L E R Y**

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120 GEORGES RD., NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. 08901 201-828-5150

## HARRISON BURNS

### Education

- 1972 MFA, Douglass College of Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ  
1969 BFA, Atlanta College of Art, Atlanta, GA

### Solo Exhibitions

- 1990 Rabbet Gallery, New Brunswick, NJ  
E.M. Donahue Gallery, New York, NY  
1986 Bienville Gallery, New Orleans, LA  
1984 Iolas/Jackson Gallery, New York, NY  
Galleria Skira, Madrid, Spain  
1983 Union League Club, Chicago, IL  
1982 Iolas/Jackson Gallery, New York, NY  
1981 Galleria Cellorio, Almuñecar, Granada, Spain  
1979 Iolas/Jackson Gallery, New York, NY  
Galleria Fenicia, Almuñecar, Granada, Spain  
1977 Fischbach Gallery, New York, NY

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1990 *In Bloom*, Pfizer, Inc., organized by the Art Advisory Service, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY  
*Landscapes from the Port Authority of NY/NJ's Permanent Collection*, Port Authority Bus Terminal, New York, NY  
1989 *New York in New Jersey*, Rabbet Gallery, New Brunswick, NJ  
1986 *TV and the Artist's Imagination*, Home Box Office Inc., New York, NY  
1983 *Nocturne*, Ruth Siegel Gallery (curated by Michael Walls), New York, NY  
*Terminal New York* (curated by Ted Castle), Brooklyn, NY  
1982 *Fame*, Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York, NY  
*Rutgers MFA 20th Anniversary Exhibit*, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ  
1979 *Gold*, Penthouse Gallery, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY  
1978 *Works on Paper*, Susan Caldwell Gallery (curated by Michael Walls), New York, NY  
Martha White Gallery, Louisville, KY  
1974 Hunterdon County Arts Center, Clinton, NJ

Cover: *Murder in Malibu III*, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 52, 1986

## Harrison Burns: Paintings Noir

*"I am a complete video being. In many ways, emotionally, television is a 'figure' to me -- alive and part of my psyche. It is not a mechanical box, but something alive. With all visual images I inevitably 'TV-ize' them, even though the image may not have originated from TV."*

Many of us can probably identify with Harrison Burns' way of seeing the world. So much of what we think we "know" comes to us through the electronic media; we experience reality through the channels of communication.

It is intellectually popular to consider mediated experience as inauthentic at best, or as propagandistic or dangerously trivializing at worst. Television especially seems to have a mesmerizing quality that many observers consider deceptive and threatening. Television and other electronic media are discredited as being merely part of "pop culture," as opposed to "real culture."

However, in *Paintings Noir*, Burns' work demonstrates that mediated experience is the true modern reality, and that all its different levels and textures matter: content, style, medium and meaning. He makes no attempt to separate the feel of mediated communication from other, presumably more authentic, reality; he draws no line between so-called "pop culture" and the more traditional elitist notion of culture. "The whole question of 'pop culture' needs questioning," Burns notes.

Burns recognizes that, like television and motion pictures, painting puts itself between the viewer and the subject. He brings painting and electronic images together in a painterly style that is dominated by television. As he points out, "Watching TV is at the same time an abstract experience and a representative one, and I intend to embrace both of those elements in my work." The canvas becomes a video screen with pixels, raster lines and color bars. Subjects are repeated in ghost images and broken in two by vertical and horizontal hold bars.



*House of Wax III, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72, 1974*

*"Painting with oils and brushes just didn't give me the vision I was searching for, so I began to experiment with other techniques...I quickly rejected the airbrush because it produced too fine a fragmentation of color, but it was closer to what I wanted...(eventually) I gravitated to an industrial spray gun...I was able to manipulate the layers of paint in such a way that I could begin to make visual references to video images that are out of synch, or that have ghosts from interference.*

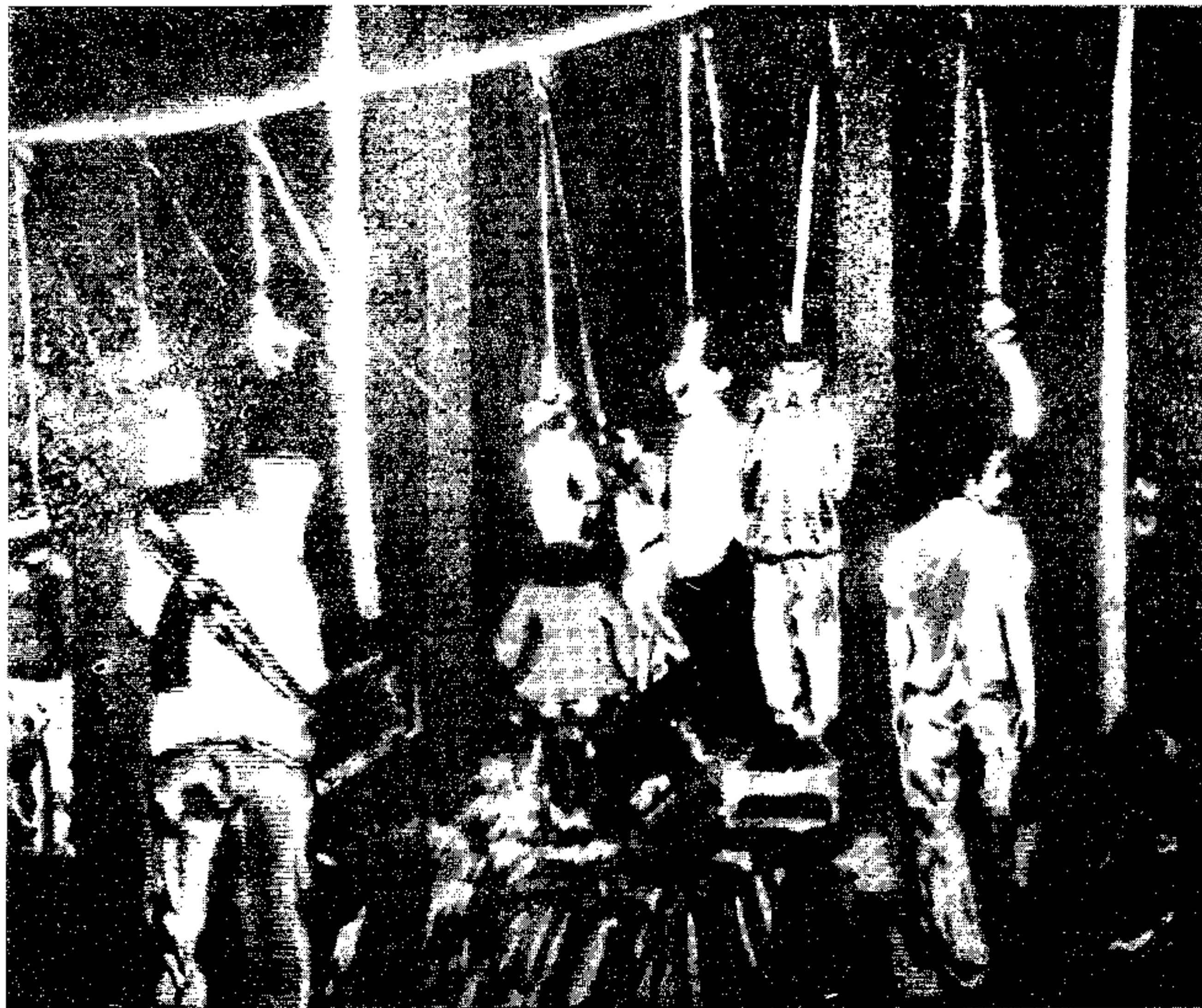
*"Also, in order to set the initial image (on the canvas) I had to make stencils from the drawings I used as a basis for a series of paintings. This gave me the ability to create several paintings of the same image, which was very appealing to me...just as a video image can change character, I could represent those changes in my paintings, in sort of the same way the Futurists represented speed and movement. I could split the image as if it were rolling on a monitor, or out of registration, change the color scheme, and make extreme distortions in the forms. It enabled me to explore an infinite variety of approaches to a single image."*

Burns' technique of repeating and manipulating the same image in a series recalls the approach of certain Pop artists.

*"I would have to say that a number of the Pop artists of the 1960s are an influence on my work, Warhol in particular. His exploration into 'series' works is an obvious influence. His methods are different from my approach...but I feel a definite kinship with Warhol conceptually."*

Moreover, the stylistic similarity to television images in Burns' work is not its only link to the popular media. Most of his images come from movies. "I was an obsessive moviegoer as a child growing up in North Carolina, cramming in as many as five or six movies a day," he remembers. His love of movies has evolved into a passion for television -- Burns describes himself as a "TV addict." At the same time, he has transposed his love of both movies and television onto canvas.

One particular genre of movies surfaced as Burns' favorite: the crime dramas of the 1940s and 50s that later became known as *film noir*. He believes that the "darkness" in *film noir* is found in both its technical aspects (lighting and other elements of visual production) and in its content (violent



*Execution in Iran II*, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 66, 1988

crime, mystery). "The light is astonishing," he says of these films. "It's more important to me than the content. I am attracted to the crime element, the romance and the poetry of crime, but it's the light that appeals to me the most."

Burns incorporates both elements in two of his recent series, *The Terminator* and *Murder in Malibu*.

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**"You receive video images one image after the next. You get numb to them; they don't mean anything. But if you stop one of them, or frame it, or paint it...it does take on a kind of reality."**

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*"With the Murder in Malibu series I simply wanted to take a common TV crime drama set in southern California -- naturally, the land of film noir -- and dissect it. So I did 10 drawings from the photos I took of a videotaped segment, and used eight of these to do a series of 24 paintings, three images for each drawing, a 'video' painting, a collage, and an oil version. I am now going through the same cycle with images from The Terminator. I have completed 39 drawings from the movie, from which I'll use perhaps 15 or 16 to produce a series of 110 to 120 paintings. Of this series, 25 are done.*

*"How might I respond to the question of violence and crime as the main component in these movies? Violence is such a part of the subject matter of this genre, and as I grew with my work I realized that it is such a part of American life in general that it has become my social commentary -- I expose it, examine it, paint it, turn it into an icon with mythical proportions."*

There is a vaguely disturbing quality in all of Burns' work that has been described by different critics as "dread," "sinister,"<sup>1</sup> "ominous,"<sup>2</sup> "mysterious,"<sup>3</sup> and "ghostlike."<sup>4</sup> It isn't just that the subject matter is violent (which in many paintings is not); Burns himself considers it part of the "TV-ization" of the images.

*"The violence is veiled. The veil softens the harshness and makes it less graphic -- that's what I want. I want it to be an image that grows on you gradually. You receive video images one image after the next. You get numb to them; they don't mean anything. But if you stop one of them, or frame it, or paint it, and so isolate it, then even though it's softened, through a period of time it does take on a kind of reality."*

In fact, over time Burns' work has tended to "bounce" from darkness and violence to light and serenity. "After 20 years of moving back and forth between those two concepts, it's fairly obvious that it's a cyclical pattern with me," he says, describing in turn the four years he spent on the "dark" *House of Wax* series, followed by years working on the lighter *White House* and *Taj Mahal* series, and then the menacing *Saturno* series.

Burns' more violent series began with *House of Wax*, where the images featured the sinister silhouette of Jack the Ripper. Later series in this vein included his *Piedad*, with images from Franco Zeffereilli's made-for-television movie *Jesus of Nazareth*, and series based on the films *Cat People* and *Kiss Me Deadly*.

But Burns credits Goya's "Black Paintings" as more of an influence on his choices of subject matter, including his series of paintings after Goya's *Saturno*. Although there are a number of theories about the man-eating figure in Goya's painting, for Burns it is an important image, and he sees it in his own way.

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**"Painting with oils and brushes just didn't give me the vision I was searching for, so I began to experiment with other techniques..."**

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*"I admire his work to such an extent that I have done two separate series of paintings that are direct references to him -- I literally 'redid' his Saturno in my own idiom. It is really about art devouring itself. By the same token, my series of works, Executions in Iran, are also references to Goya's The Third of May."*

Burns has a summer home in southern Spain, which he believes gives him some insight into Goya's painting. "Living in Spain off and on for 12 years

is perhaps a part of this," he says. "I respond deeply to the starkness of lights and darks that are such an important aspect of southern Spanish life. It could be called a 'Spanish influence' on my work."

Consider the range of familiar subjects that Burns brings together in his paintings: television, film, art history, politics, religious imagery, mythology, Hollywood glamour, and violence. By invoking the power of television, by collapsing media and reality, Burns transcends their familiar meaning and creates a new message of his own.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Ted Castle, "Harrison Burns at Iolas/Jackson Gallery." *Art in America*, December 1984, p. 170.
- <sup>2</sup>Robert Glauber, "Harrison Burns: A New Realism, A New Symbolism." *Arts Magazine*, March 1982, p. 127.
- <sup>3</sup>Richard Howard, personal correspondence with the artist, 1985.
- <sup>4</sup>Ronny Cohen, "Harrison Burns, E.M. Donahue Gallery." *Artforum*, October 1990, p. 170.



*Self-Portrait*, charcoal on paper, 30 x 22, 1988