

TURPS

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Issue Twelve

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EMPIRIC OR PICTUR- ESQUE?

JOAN KEY
ON
AMIKAM
TOREN

'Why is the ground more important in a juridical system, whereas in painting, the paint is more important than the canvas?'

It is only then that the problem of the association of ideas discovers its meaning. What is called the theory of association finds its direction and its truth in a casuistry of relations, a practice of law, of politics, of economics, that completely changes the nature of philosophical reflections.'⁽¹⁾

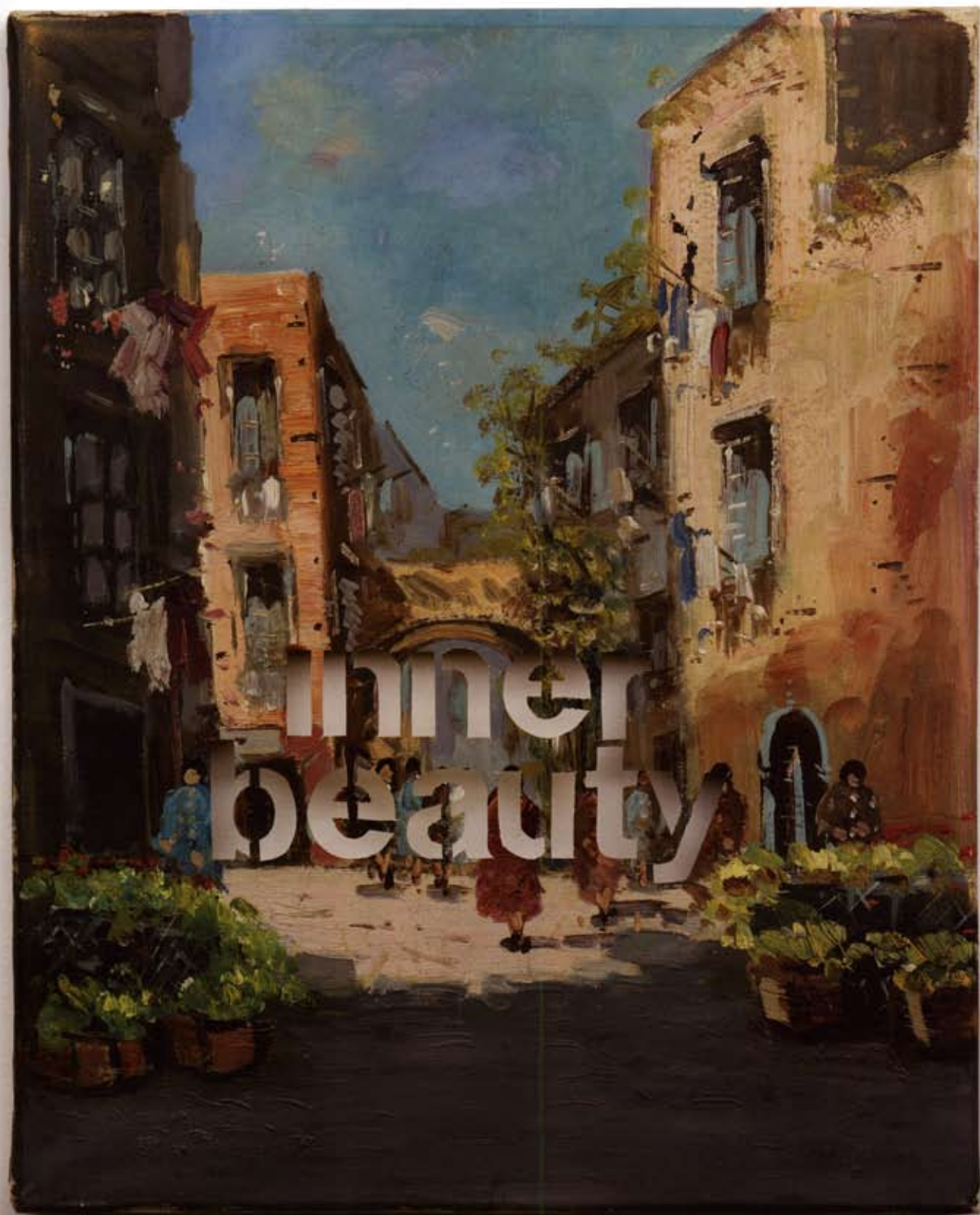
The opening of Gilles Deleuze's essay *Hume* compares the Eighteenth Century philosopher David Hume's view of the world to a visual experience imagined in the future, or at least a science fiction account of the future. Hume's 'vision', he says, resembles that of an 'alien being' travelling through space; it is as though the philosopher is looking at a site which stands in relation to himself as one of pure exteriority. This creates a 'peculiar' impression for Deleuze, as if Hume sees *'a fictive, foreign world seen by others but with the presentiment of strangeness also one of familiarity, that this world is already ours, and those creatures ourselves'*.

Making sense of this world, as alien being, entails a dual process of attending to specific evidential incidents and attempting to establish their relations. The registrations of this enquiring gaze are, involuntarily, accompanied by associations, a 'delirium' of complex thoughts, the 'casuistry' of relations bringing into question the very structures which might have offered explanations: the Self, the World and God. Enquiry and the effort to legitimate its outcomes bring more questions and associations which in turn bring not only disappointment at loss of trust in stable reference points, but also a question

of the point of replacing one structure with another in order to come to an understanding of the feeling of intimacy that mixes with Hume's strangely blank account of experience.

Acceptance of the limit of explanation brings a sceptical discretion, especially to diagnoses of relation that engage sequential incidents in observation as causal links. Deleuze characterises Hume's logic: *'causality requires that I go from something that is given to me to the idea of something that has never been given to me, that isn't even giveable in experience'*. Inferences, extrapolations, expectations *"the principle of habit of fusion of similar cases in the imagination"*, such considerations merge into beliefs. Deleuze gives some instances, *'for example, based on some signs in a book, I believe that Caesar lived'*. Beliefs become ungovernable, moving with fluidity, from one thought to the next, but in this process of elaboration laws, politics and economics encounter shifting grounds: qualities that might have been considered to be based in specific, verifiable experience assume cosmic and fantastic qualities.

'Empirical account' and 'picturesque view' are phrases connoting different descriptive traditions in narrating visual impressions at the time of the formulation of a modern concept of subjectivity of which Hume's work forms a part. The first term supposes a human capacity to witness, come what may; a 'bundle of sensations' to which the subject brings an immediacy of disinterested response as basis for more regulated judgements. The second term, the 'picturesque', implies an image 'set up' for the subject's interested gaze, something already pictured and framed, recognised from an optimum viewpoint. This subject includes in visual judgement, a desiring research of a familiar choice, one that fits a pre-conceived form whatever pleasures or terrors it may contain.





Above: **Armchair Painting - Untitled (witness appeal)**
 2008
 Oil on canvas
 81.5 x 94 x 5 cm

Previous page: **Armchair Painting - Untitled (inner beauty)**
 2008
 Oil on canvas
 50.5 x 41 cm

Both courtesy of the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London



Armchair Painting - Untitled (Wallbound)
1991
Oil on canvas
49 x 64.5 x 5 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

Enlightened civil society expected its subjects to act as moral and critical witnesses aware of the potential for illusion in the impression of whatever was seen, taking into account questions of viewpoint, optic capacity, and the imaginative and rational bases which subtend the testing and judgement of appearances of reality. The accountancy of 'seeing' and 'believing' produces an association of ideas in which the question of ground is crucial. At the same period there is enormous popular interest in idealised or fantastical constructions, panoramic spectacles of picturesque character, in which disbelief is willingly suspended. The use of lenses for both scientific and phantasmagoric purposes raises in a most immediate way the question of 'ground': at once

emphasising factual possibilities of distance and proximity in telescopic and microscopic visual experience, but at the same time providing ever greater scope for projections, of Magic Lantern, Fantoscope imagery, that feel paradoxically magical but real.

Painting illustrates the problem of 'ground' in a most literal sense because, within its structure, it contains a ground as invisible substrate to the 'picture'. Within painting the juridical idea of ground as evidential resource takes on a more elusive relation to the illusion of the surface it supports, with the resulting 'casuistry' Hume then describes. Caspar David Friedrich provides a concise analysis of this effect in his painting of figures, seen from behind, looking out over fabulous painted



Neither a painting nor a chair

1979-80

Sawdust, ash, PVA on chair, chair

10 panels each 117 x 61, chair 87 x 38 x 36 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

illusions of sea, light, ships. We see what the figures see in paint, but they, within their black forms, flattened to the ground, contain small lit optical chambers where the image is not painted illusion but interior sensation ⁽²⁾. Between dark figure and light ground there is an encounter, for the viewer 'of the painting', with a scene that has always already been seen, and which plays out ethical differences in witnessing and picturing.

Hume's understanding of the importance of politics to our resolution of this difference finds echoes in the practise of Amikam Toren, whose paintings often seems to deal discretely

with a reflexive relation between the sensible observation of empirical experiment and the 'picturing' processes that may result. Toren's investigatory working processes suggest that he does not feel free in any self- expressive way to commit to painting, but constrained by responsibilities placed on the citizen of civil society to act as moral witness, forming rational judgements in a disinterested manner based impeccably on empirical observations. Although Toren makes the rules of process by which his works are formed, those rules in themselves suggest the science of empiric enquiry: a proposal,



an experiment, and a method to record discovery. This deliberated framework in turn suggests that because of the transparency of means, made evident in the work, the result can be offered to the sceptic observer as having already fulfilled certain tests of verification. However, when considering the outcomes factually positioned in Toren's work, painting itself creates doubts on the level of 'grounds'.

Toren's principle suggests that, if the painting is to represent objects, the essence of objecthood may exist literally in underlying substance that bodies forth the apparent surface of the object.

It should then be possible, by investigatory process of reduction, to find the 'ground' of the object. The object choices Toren makes for his reductions tend to be carriers of illusion in themselves, as if illusion may also be reduced to essence, for example a newspaper, the canvas used in painting, the glove that takes on the movement of the hand, or a printed cardboard box. These familiar things may be reduced to pulp, suspended in transparent emulsion, and coated onto the blank surface of a series of canvases or 'grounds', as if to provide specimens. The painting's ground would, without recourse to illusion, simply convey to

Hand In Glove
1996
Pulped glove and pva on canvas, glove
170 x 137 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

view the essence of the object destroyed in the process of its own investigation.

In these experiments, surfaces, such as varnish, polish, print, glaze and their intimate grounds of wood, leather, paper, porcelain are first combined or pulverised, and then spread out as if for research. Residues become evidence, such as the mask of facial hair, shaved off and collected daily. Labels and dates, certifications and counterparts offer to reason some kind of guarantee, that this was once that, and the transformation in state was not a question of taste but the result of a necessary enquiry - what does this thing look like if its appearance is freed from known patterns of association formed in the 'casuistry of relations'? This research of 'ground' could be a philosophical end in itself. Something of Karl Marx's understanding of the 'enigmatical character of equivalent form', rehearsed as dialogue of coat-value to linen-value, could be relevant to the close relation Toren proposes: the relative value, for instance, of a teapot-ground to a painting-ground makes comparative reference to different commodity forms and their associated production values. But, if the result failed to represent, was disappointing, became an abject form, lost its former powers to signify, what enigmatic equivalence could explain or contain the logic of Toren's experimental terms? ⁽³⁾

Knowing Toren's processual approach to picturing, 'picturesque' would be an unlikely description of his work. The idea to explore the possibility, first about 1995, when, on a visit to Anthony Reynolds' gallery in Dering Street, I found a small video monitor playing repetitively a clip from John Ford's film *Stage Coach*. Behind the monitor was a blank white panel, arranged as if to stage the presence of the monitor, and extend its illusionist screening into the space of the gallery, which also contained *Narrative Painting Number 2* made of painted letters cut

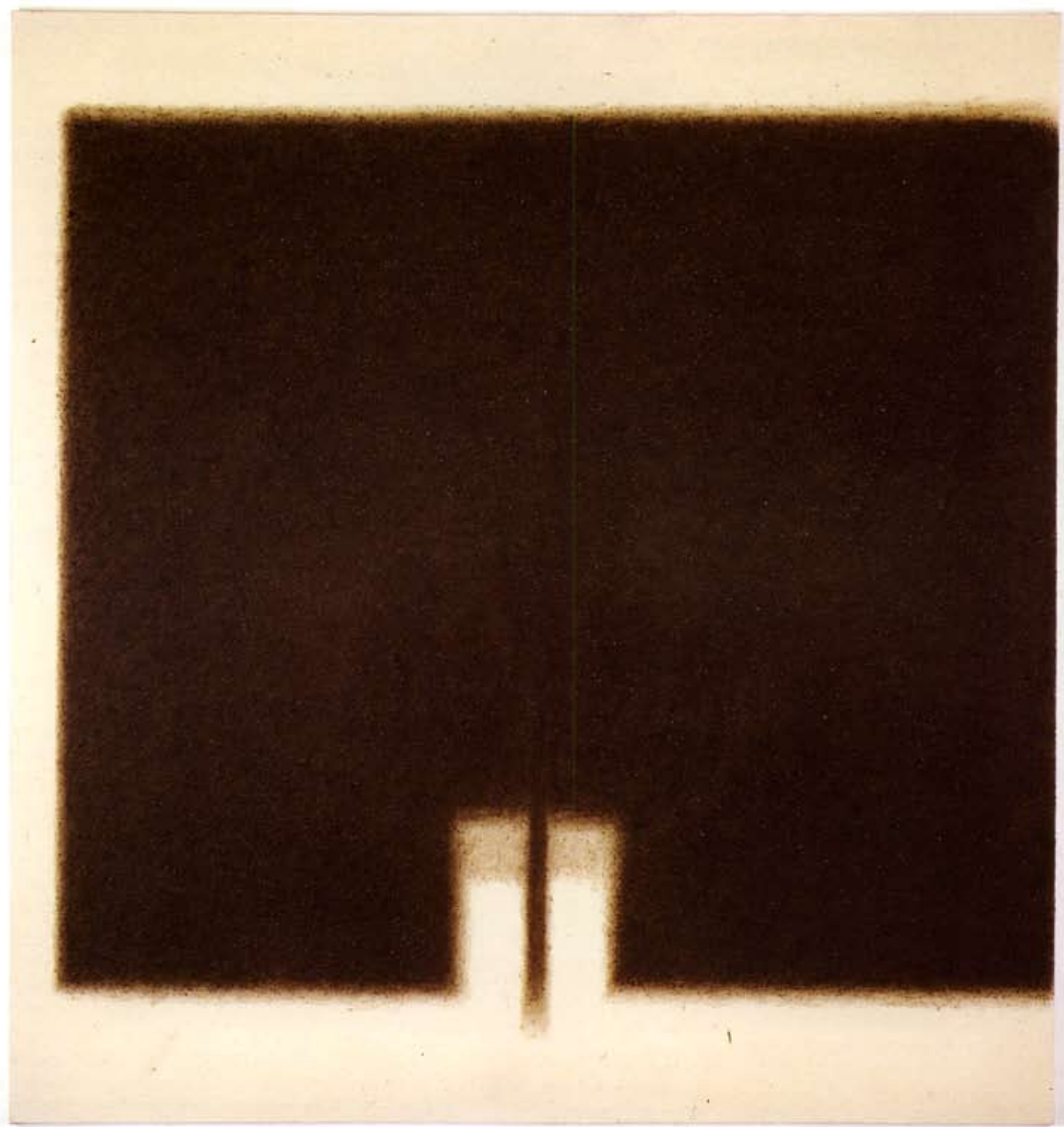
from paintings. Strangely, the richly modelled black and white image on the miniature screen made me think not so much of the Wild West, but of something older, more romantic: Cinderella off to the ball. Perhaps Cinders in her coach was equally desperate, but there were blonde curls to be enjoyed along with flying bullets. There could be no doubt that illusion was important to this work: the doubled image of the inside of the ancient coach (cushioned, erotic) associating with the interior of the modern plastic monitor (brittle, pragmatic); the boxing of the epic film on the small screen re-iterating the Camera Obscura's boxing of the miniature image of the external world, the danger of the gunshot sounds reminding of the on/off play of the shutter/guillotine.

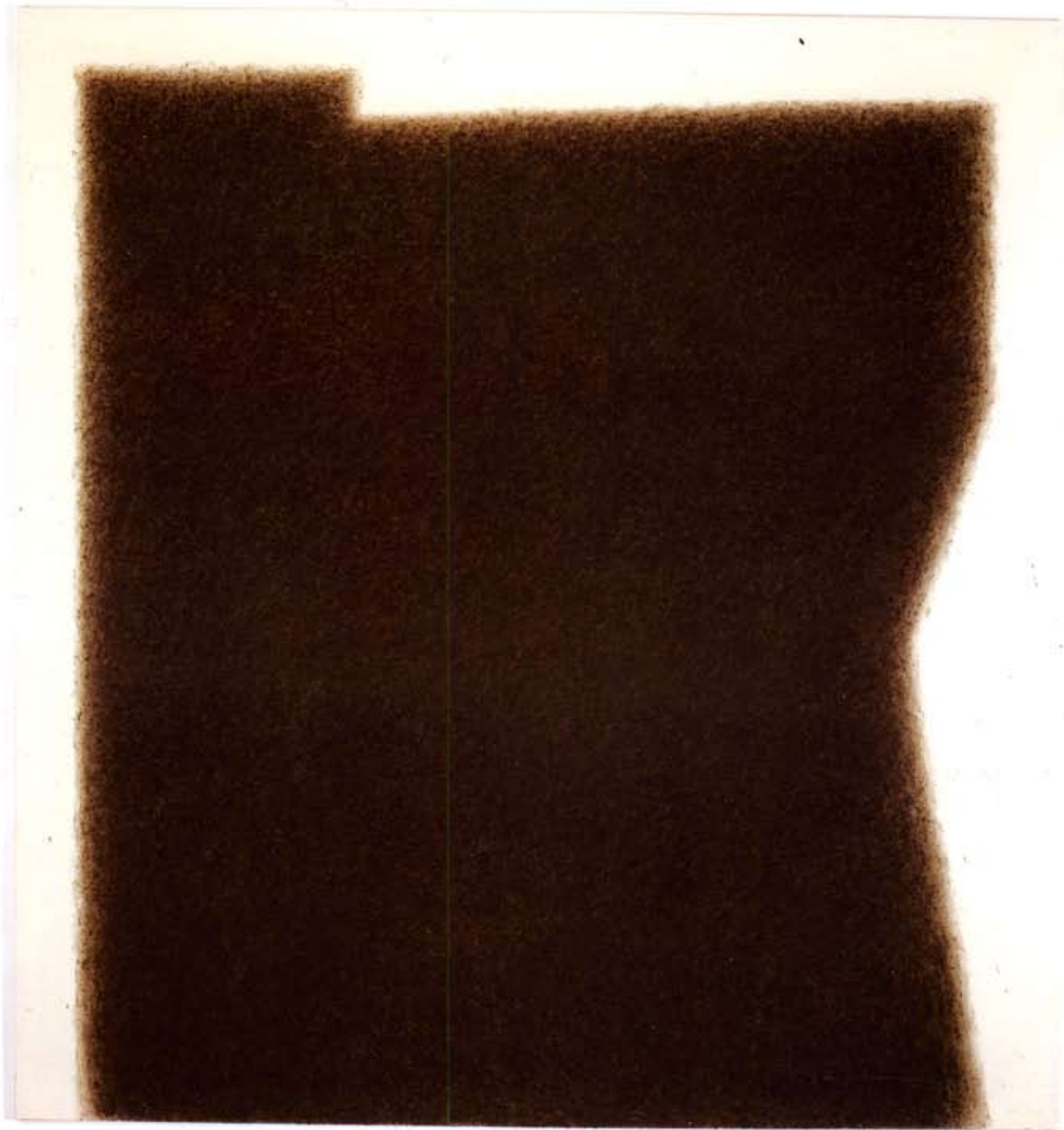
The gallery experience of this set-up was far from cinematic, but cinema remained a point of reference. Cinema is an architecture set-up for projections, offered impersonally, as already 'pictured', for any paying spectator to see the film and experience an anticipated mixture of pleasure and fear. It was difficult to relate this work to Toren's more material researches, most specifically in paintings such as the *Of the Times* series of 1983 whose typographic styles would often refer to Modernist research of relations between figure and ground. This video work suggested intrigues about the picturesque which are less concerned with the determination of 'ground' but with maintaining an indeterminate screen, a functioning interim surface allowing projections of light and mind to coalesce. Toren's use of film raised a question: could the methodical relation of image and ground of Toren's paintings have 'picturesque' intention, when 'picturing' had appeared to be so critically disturbed within his painterly practice?

The picturesque motif does not foreclose on curiosity by verifying what it purports to represent in any immediate

Opposite: *Of the Times* (Friday 4 November 1988)
1989
Newspaper and PVA on canvas
220 x 235 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London





allows the displacement of exchange to take place; the mysterious story of how the picture came to be owned by Toren. The work's completion signals a remove. This inevitability functions as an imaginary of loss in picturesque elaboration; if Toren departs from the picturesque effect for reasons of 'ground' it is in the way he brings finality, and concomitant loss, into question by replaying exchange through the token of the *Armchair Paintings*. The completed labour of the first artist is exemplified in the transactional fact of exchange, how the paintings come to be in Toren's possession, but Toren re-opens the pictorial finish by actually cutting open their surface to re-engage in precisely the same labour of making a picture to be exchanged.

In a much earlier example of work with canvas ground, *Untitled*, 1973, the labour of mechanical weaving is 'unwoven' by Toren to provide a different ground for speculation ⁽⁴⁾. In this intervention painting itself is pre-empted, stilled by a craftwork of 'drawn thread'. The inspiration that might lead paint to be applied to ground is disrupted by a preliminary question of the work of painting and of weaving. The woven canvas is not blank but a surface in which ideas of work become 'deliriously' speculative. A similar displacement is played out in Toren's more recent video work, *The Bag of Carrots*, where the frustrating stasis of the filmed image creates a tension with the development of the text, not only as a storyline that is failed by the film's title, but as a radical differentiation in the labour of making the soundtrack and the labour of making the film, given emphasis by any speculative expectation of filmic movement being so radically denied satisfaction in the duration of the projection of the still photograph that is the content of the film.

The inference in much contemporary radical practice, that the

revelatory value of such stasis is an unreal or impossible expectation to place upon the artwork, defeats the conjuring trick of what it is to be an artist in Toren's terms. But 'conjuring' has other senses: a desire for something felt as absent to become co-present. The series of ten panels and a chair of 1979-80, *Neither a Painting nor a Chair*, plays with such absence. The title's negative formulation suggests a possible alternative equivalence: 'both' a painting 'and' a chair. It would be impossible to say how this reversal could be explained except to point to another image, a photograph of Toren contorting himself to sit on one of the paintings in the series as if it could support the weight of his co-presence with the flatness of its being. From the look on Toren's face this could be a sceptical comment on picturing a chair or using a picture. His eyes glare at the viewer through the lenses of his spectacles as if to deny either personal folly or the power of illusion. Yet even if he saw a chair quite clearly, he took the precaution of using a support. But what is that sturdy support: the wanderer's walking stick, the magic wand, the stick that ritually sounds three times to mark the beginning of theatre/start of play, or a mystic extra chair leg, or... given the multiplicity of real and imagined legs in the picture... something else again?

The play of 'strange and familiar' in Deleuze's account of Hume's alien gaze suggests the combination of such qualities in Freud's essay *The Uncanny*. Freud recounts sensations of an uncanny affect, using Hoffman's example of the child's fears of the alien view, as he describes another instance of belief in optical mobility through space as their eyes go to the moon with the Sandman, but also remain firmly in their place ⁽⁵⁾. Toren's contorted figure poised in illusionistic space, as if on the chair, has, in its prosthetic combination of lenses and stick, something of the Sandman's conjuring tricks. This image relies on what Deleuze refers to as a

'strange battle' in the empiricist world between fiction and Nature: *If it is true that the principles of association shape the mind, by imposing on it a nature that disciplines the delirium or the fictions of the imagination, conversely the imagination uses these same principles to make its fictions or its fantasies acceptable and to give them a warrant they would not have on their own*'. Therefore the painting can, if Toren wishes, act as painting and chair, both flat illusion and substantial object that will support his weight. Viewers may want to distinguish between Toren's legitimate and the illegitimate claim, but Deleuze cautions that in coming to conclusions we are not cursed by error, or falsehood, but by an inability to verify convictions our passions have lead us to believe we legitimately hold.

Toren's practice plays out the suggestion of empirical methodology enshrined in enlightened institutions of civil society, but the implication of the frailty of that methodology in its association with the picturesque is also a responsible concern. The exchanges of politics and fantasy occurring in processes of verification and the practical ways in which the problems of society are posed within the disciplines of law, politics or economics is difficult - at issue is the question of what could possibly constitute the rule of a more humane society if unreason is included in the formulation of its rules. Deleuze offers suggestions on a Humean basis: that it is understood that civil law is not just a matter of 'limiting egoisms' by establishing contractual obligations, but an invention in itself, at once institutionalised but artificial.

If the unpredictable play of passions that emerges from 'the delirium of associations' can be dealt with as a matter of 'the complex relation' between human nature and the objects of its choices, Deleuze proposes that the judicial and cultural needs of members of civil society can be dealt with on the basis of a 'reflection of the passions',

one that teaches about the sentiments of others: the superficial fluctuations of resemblance, taste, contiguity, causality and the serious 'calculus' of desire, possession, power they produce: *'Does the throw of a javelin against a door ensure the ownership of an abandoned city, or must a finger touch the door in order to establish a sufficient relation? Why, according to civil law, does the ground win out over the surface, but paint over the canvas, whereas paper wins out over writing? The principles of association find their true sense in a casuistry of relations that works out the details of culture and law'*. Gilles Deleuze, Hume.

NOTES

- (1) Deleuze, Gilles: 'Hume' in *Pure Immanence, Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman, Zone Books, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London England, 2001.
- (2) Freidrich, Casper David: For examples of this motif see *Woman at the Window* (1822) and *Moonrise over the Sea* (1820-26). On the on/off play of vision and darkness Freidrich writes, around 1830: 'close your bodily eye, so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring to the light of day that which you have seen in the darkness so that it may react on others from the outside inside'.
- (3) Marx, Karl: 'The Form of Value or Exchange-Value' in *Capital*, Volume 1, ed. Frederick Engels, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1970.
- (4) See 'Craft' catalogue exhibition at Richard Salmon Gallery 27t September - 8 November 1997 and Kettles Yard, Cambridge 15t November - 4 January 1998 published by Richard Salmon, London, 1997.
- (5) Freud, Sigmund: 'The Uncanny' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Volume XV11 (1917-1919) Trans. Alix Strachey, Vintage, London 2001.



Orange Forms - Joan Key
2012
Oil on canvas
Three canvases each 150 x 190 cm
Courtesy of the artist