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The Terence Netter 9/11 Series Exhibition Catalog

Jan Siesling

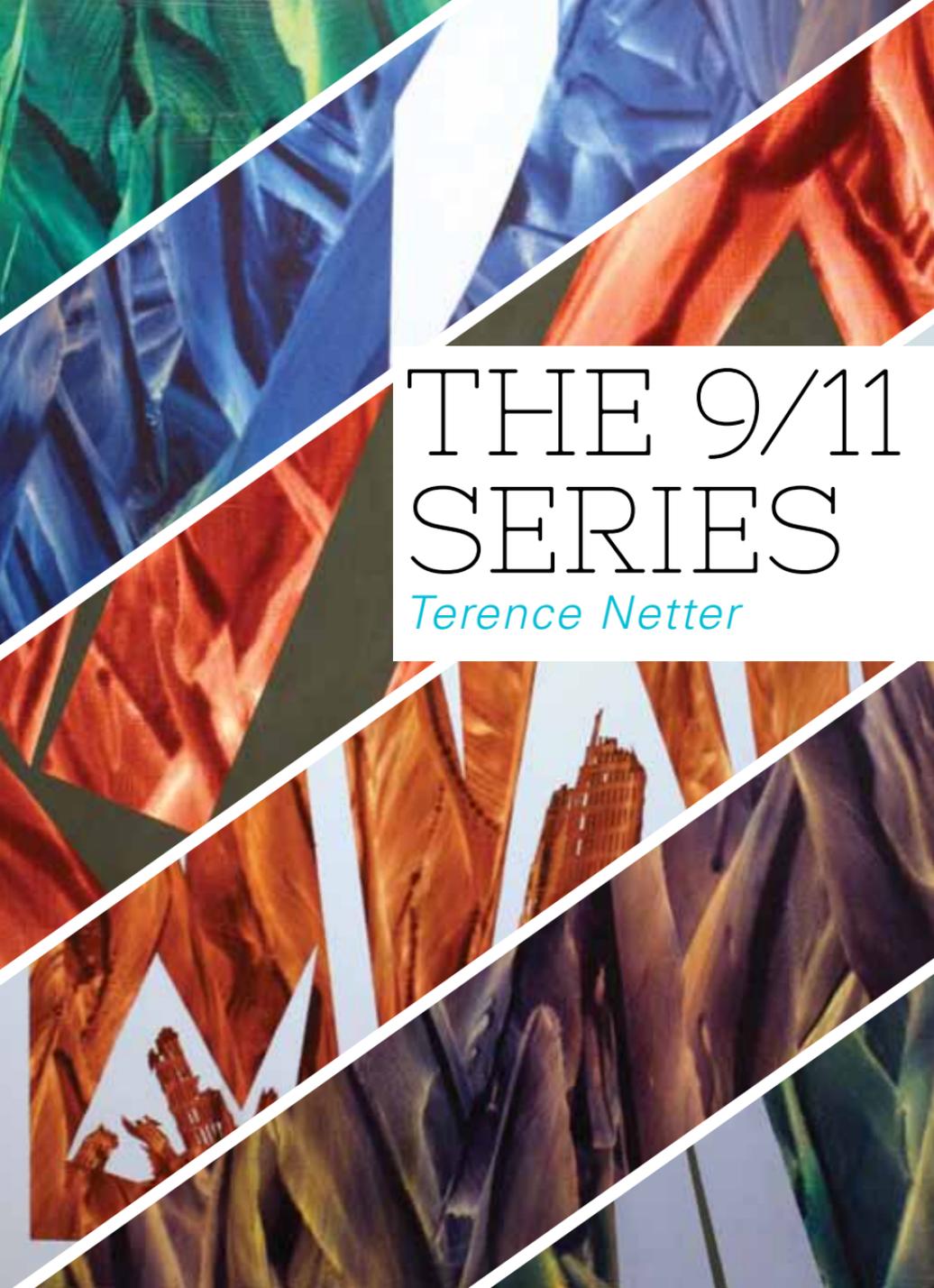
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THE 9/11 SERIES

Terence Netter

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*Text by Jan Siesling
Introduction by Douglas Mackaman
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Introduction

It was by chance that I met Terence Netter in the first place, because we had come to our cherished Loire Valley to different villages, for different reasons. Yet we were both university professors and both eager to teach students in France. And so it felt natural when our paths finally did cross, in the summer before the terrifying, slow motion, autumn that began with al-Qaeda's 11 September 2001 attack on the United States.

Black Lightning, 2002
Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

Collection of Douglas
Mackaman and Margaret
O'Hara



When the attack came, the France that Terry and I both loved held its breath in solidarity with our country. I well recall my phone ringing on that morning, with the Marquis de Vibraye on the line from his home, Chateau de Cheverny. Charles—who had known New York City well and fallen in love with “The Twins”—was sick with grief for our country. His voice broke as he told his plan to go to the village of Pontlevoy, where our university’s new study center for US students was to be established in the historic abbey there, and raise his family’s American flag to show support.

Symbolic gestures start wars and end them. They also help assuage people’s broken hearts and withered nerves on the long journey between salvos of attack and treaties of peace. Terry Netter knows this as an artist, as a philosopher and as a life-long teacher. Because I was to inaugurate the new study center in Pontlevoy—which had come to be called “The Abbey Program”—for my university (The University of Southern Mississippi) in September 2002, exactly a year after al-Qaeda attacks, I knew that the stakes were high indeed where the right symbolism was concerned. I called Terry.

I asked him to do a painting that might be something stunning and strong around which the energies and anxieties of my students—who would come in September—might find some comforting and organizing orbit. In a systematic thoroughness that Balzac, Zola or Monet might have applauded, Terry produced not one but 6 pictures, painted in a furious summer in France, and known since as “The 9-11 series”.

I saw the paintings and was speechless. Shortly after, it was 11 September 2002, I was in front of 38 students of The Abbey Program, joined in the abbey’s chapel by hundreds of townspeople. Terry Netter stood up and spoke as our resident New Yorker, offering in his gravelly, gadfly’s voice, an insistent invocation in the name of the peace and beauty that he assured us would arise out of all the ashen debris.

We left the stone chapel after a moment of silence together, walking into the sunshine of an autumn afternoon in the Loire valley. And then we went into a majestic 18th century room of the old Abbey, where this series of paintings was first exhibited to a stunned and grateful world.

*Dr. Douglas Mackaman
September 2011*

TERENCE NETTER

The 9/11 Series

Written by Jan Siesling

Out of the Blue, 2002
Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

*Collection of Douglas
Mackaman and Margaret
O'Hara*



The First Showing

At the beginning of September 2001 “Glowing Peace” received, after years of testing and contesting, from an international panel of floral experts united in Manhattan’s highest tower, the Highest Rose Award of the year for its exceptional size, beauty, strength, and fragrance. The next day a handful of young men perpetrated the most terrifying terrorist attack of modern history, killing peace for years to come. The shock of outrageous defeat shook the world more than the victory of a blood red flower. It was the beginning of a grim war, of blind revenge, a whole nation standing against one man, one name, one idea. A decade of destruction and despair later, peace is not yet glowing.

Holocaust, 2002
Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

Collection of Douglas
Mackaman and Margaret
O'Hara



Peace is the job of art, the work of art. Art is more necessary than ever before.

It takes tremendous artists to combat the spirit of war: Rubens, Goya, Delacroix, Picasso... After September 11, 2001 we have met many American artists who pondered about an artistic response to the political debacle. Few have persevered. The task seemed too great, the mountain too high. Art, says the American culture, is frivolous. Let it be entertainment, fun, cool, but not serious, please. That's what we are happy to pay for. Let it be good business, we say, and not talk about it. Art, as the alternative to war, death, crime, politics or religion, is left out of the team that decides about the making of society. Art is left to the children in kindergarten and the grandparents on holidays in Italy or France, frivolous countries. This country pays great lip service, but little attention. Nevertheless, art goes where it is told not to go. There are tremendous artists around; they represent America at its best.

So it happened in France... Not in Paris, but in a millennium-old village in the green Loire valley; not in the government or in the parliament, but in an ancient abbey, now a school; in 2002 A.D., one year after the heartbreaking event. There lived and worked the American painter, Terence Netter from New York. He exhibited on the white walls of the monumental Benedictine monastery a series of paintings inspired by the worst disaster that had struck his native city. And there, between the classic cloister and the gothic chapel on the morning of the 11th day of the 9th month of the year an exceptional memorial

ceremony was held, organized by Douglas Mackaman, the director of the brand new program of international studies of the University of Southern Mississippi. Over fifty American students attended in the morning breeze, along with their professors and administrators, and a hundred and fifty French villagers, from the mayor to the priest, the grocer to the barman, the room maids to the gardeners, but also two holocaust survivors and the widow of another, a marquis and marquise, owners of a splendid chateau, a virtuoso violinist, a world famous photographer, the director of a Shakespeare play and a cook, to name a few, not to forget the theologian. This last one was a good speaker and he had things to say, and he said them, in simple idiom, and in prayer and song, as Americans do. Thus all were sincerely moved as they contemplated the paintings that bore the weight of the back wall with their silent message. Strong emotions need silent witnesses to last. That's what art is for. In their colors and their lines there was preserved the shock and the anger, the confusion and the fear and the complaint, far beyond words; there was life and future too, all intertwined. It was the 9/11 series.

Now America is preparing the ten year remembrance of the Islamist attack, and Douglas Mackaman has decided to revive the memory of this first gathering, so vividly alive with all those who were present, and to offer the emotion of this little group of paintings to a selection of American venues. This gives us the opportunity to take a closer look.

The Artist

We have to say a few words about Terence Netter and his place in art, because this series belongs perfectly to the style he worked out over the years, and of which this series is the crowning achievement. We suggest, moreover, that it brings to a close thirty-five years of work and announces a new and apparently contrasting period, a second youth.

Ruins, 2002
Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

Collection of Douglas
Mackaman and Margaret
O'Hara



Netter's career starts in the sixties, and when we compare his early works to those of his New York colleagues of that time we are not disoriented: he belongs to the Abstract Expressionist School, its second generation; its members are his friends. Like them he creates his personal plastic vocabulary. His forms tend strongly to abstraction, but his thoughts are concrete. He has never disavowed his philosophical (even theological) training or his educational vein. The titles of his works speak for this. They refer to Christian as well as cosmological and psychological concepts (*Passion, Big Bang, Animus et Anima*), not forgetting Western art history (*The Last Supper*). When scrutinizing the works with attention, we discover that in the context of what seems pure design, representational forms filter in: bodies, faces, trees, stars... They are often done in the technique of collage, reality breaking into the imagination. Sometimes we see nothing but them. They invite the spectator to a conversation, a discussion about the topics of our time. Or the topics of all time. The oscillation, often in the same painting, between abstract forms, vividly smeared down on the canvas not with the brush but with a unique handling of the paint (about which later), and the stylized representation of concepts concerning us all, will be a constant in Netter's art through the years. The abstract gesture painting brings to the eye flows of energy, oceanic fluidity, pure growth, cosmic extension, constellations, everything beyond the human reach in macro or micro worlds. The stylized representational forms introduce the human condition, the historical dimension, man's modest but essential participation in the universe. Currents and undercurrents.

Netter's technique is unique, his signature style indeed. He worked it out when he was a MFA student at George Washington University in the nineteen sixties. Its birth year was 1965, the event his first one man show at the Allan Funt Gallery, New York; the critic Stuart Preston commented "an abstract style of visionary power." He never stopped experimenting with it until well into the beginning of the new century. He compares it himself with Jackson Pollock's action painting, not the drippings exactly but in so far as the canvas is laid out on the floor of the studio, horizontally. Then the artist pours paint over it and, while the fluid spreads and covers the whole canvas, he attacks it with absorbent paper (newsprint) that he moves around, "cleaning" the surface as it were, pressing strongly and eventually pulling it off in strips. It is a sort of primal printing process, a variation of the monotype. The forms he was able to create in this way have no precise counterpart in reality, but evoke by their movement and extension now plants, then flames, here flowers, there hair, or water waves or sun rays, in other words portions of pure energy, rhythm, undulations, directions, life, all finally escaping our vocabulary.

This singular method, rich in potential, developing with time, would apply to Netter's American years; it has been the vehicle of hundreds of pictorial statements over the decades. Many more had to be discarded, though, because this technique depends intentionally much on chance, in its challenge and compromise with willful control. Risk is part of the game, and only the painter can decide if the result is worth keeping. The 9/11 series, being a very personal statement, is a product of Netter's American style, we are even tempted to say its culmination.

In the 90's, while still working as a university professor at Jacksonville, Terence Netter visits France more and more regularly. He and his wife Theresa will eventually buy a small and charming house in the tiny village of Vauvy between Blois and Saint-Aignan, not far from Tours. It is the ideal and idyllic place to paint, in the beginning for periods of a few weeks or months; later he will reside there half of the year. The new environment has had a dramatic influence on his style. Touched by the magic of the landscapes in the Loire Valley, the values in his painting are set upside down. The abstract evocation of pure form by free moving gesture, using all his hands and body, is replaced by a careful suggestion with the brush of the colors and light emanating from the wide fields of sunflowers and grass, from the moon and the deep sky, from the hills and the daffodils. Human ("hand") made nature has taken on the

canvases the place of God's cosmic nature. The representation of the land and its peaceful harmony, its rational regularity, its infinite simplicity, dominate the painter's inspiration. Realistic but highly stylized, these landscapes are, however, as conceptual as their abstract forerunners, if not more so. The difference in fact is not between abstract and real, but between active and contemplative. Inspired by the vision of the Loire region, these works are the result of (or the approach to) meditation. Not surprisingly two years ago, for a show first in Tours and then in New York, Netter called a group of them Zenscapes. Now he refers to all his French works by this name.

With these facts in mind we will take a closer look at the 9/11 paintings.

A Series

Terence Netter, then Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Jacksonville University, was sitting in his office when the attack on the Twin Towers occurred. He was, as he vividly remembers, “overcome by fear and sorrow; immediately saw it as a turning point in history as important as the conversion of Constantine.” He reacted as a painter by conceiving and carrying out a smaller and a larger work he called 911 and Ground Zero. They were shown to the public, when the New York Woodward Gallery reopened after having been shut down for almost a year because of the air pollution.

Victims, 2002
Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

Collection of Douglas
Mackaman and Margaret
O'Hara



During the fall of 2001 it also happened that Terence met Murray Wikol, the owner of the Pontlevoy Abbey that houses the Eur-Am Center, and Douglas Mackaman, the young founder and director of the USM Abbey Program of International Studies, the launching of which was decided that year in the same buildings. Both men encouraged the painter and invited him to show his work in the venerable Abbey buildings at the time of the solemn inauguration of the first semester of the program. There the artist decided to develop his 9/11 paintings into a true 9/11 series which would gain plenty of sense when shown in the very home of two genuine American institutions of international understanding and cooperation. Six new paintings of 5 x 4 ft size were started in the spring and finished in the summer of 2002, all done in his studio in Vauvy, France. They were for years to adorn the walls of the Abbey where hundreds of American students and professors came by and saw them every day. There took place the ceremony recalled in the beginning of this article. The six canvases were purchased by Dr. Mackaman in 2010 and made ready for their American tour in the fall of 2011. The two earliest paintings, we consider now as the upbeat for the actual series, stayed in the collection of the artist.

Eight paintings, each with its significant title, each in one dominant color, each presenting one aspect of the drama. At the same time, each painting in its way depicts all of the drama. Entering into one is entering into the whole. Each is made of an overwhelming emotion, but all emotions are destined to be one and the same. There is anger and there is anguish, there are cries and tears, and silence. There is the orange heat of the fire (*911*) and the dark-blue coldness of death (*Ground Zero*). There is the shock of sudden thunder on a beautiful day (*Black Lightning*, aqua green) and the painful incredulity of the awakening

from illusions (*Out of the Blue*, celestial blue). There are terrible associations (*Holocaust*, blood red) and inescapable realities (*Ruins*, rust and red brown), the somber state of mourning (*Victims*, purple) but also, counteracting despair, the certainty of a multicolored victory in the end (*Triumphal Arch*).

The last words of the last phrase must be correctly understood. They do not speak about victory in war. What Netter indicates as hope is the victory of humanity, of civilization, the essence of which, however human, is beyond the limits of nature or culture; it is meta-physical, transcendental or supernatural. Let's quote the artist's own statement: "...*The insignia in the upper right hand corner refers to the vision of Constantine before he won the battle that occasioned his conversion to Christianity...*" Let us not forget, Terence Netter is a professionally formed theologian and philosopher, his first position in society was that of a Jesuit priest. He has exchanged that status for that of the artist, but he has no less developed his capacity to see with flashing insight connections in history on a higher level. In this context the quote refers to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, which took place on October 28, 312 AD. Legend, largely based on historical facts, has it that the Roman emperor Constantine, in the night before the decisive battle against his rival Maxentius, had a dream showing him a Christian sign in the sky (a chi rho apparently, rather than the later adopted Cross). It read: *In Hoc Signo Vinces*, meaning In this Sign you will Prevail. Constantine's soldiers, having painted the sign on their weapons and capes, did prevail notwithstanding their desperate minority in number. This victory paved the way for the conversion of the Empire to Christianity, the beginning of a new era. In memory of the battle and his ominous dream, Constantine the Great, having become sole ruler of the West

and the East, built a triumphal arch on the Forum in Rome. You can still see it there (as well as the bridge, Ponte Milvio). Terence Netter, in his *Triumphal Arch*, decided to introduce the haloed form of the Cross (between the letters H and S) in his last 9/11 painting. The reference is not the Christian religion as it is practiced in our day and used by warmongers as a pretext against Islam, but the awesome symbol of a breaking point in history to which we are witnesses and which we must be willing to interpret. In that sense it is a sign of trust in human capacity, be it Islamic or Christian, to overcome destruction and terror, and to build a better future.

Netter's Arch is not constructed with stone or iron, if we take a closer look, but with (we might say) Nature, Color and Light surging up in the middle of a void. Much like a bridge over troubled waters, in fact. In the lower right corner, two rectangular forms recall the silhouettes of the Twin Towers as seen from an airplane. They are the "icon" of our collective memory, neatly designed in negative space, standing at the foot of the bridge to the future. The future is greater than the Towers and the greater it is, the better it will allow us in the end to positively interpret the immense explosions that stood at its origin. This last painting of the series offers the catharsis of the tragedy that unfolds in the seven other works, where the actual disaster is prominent. The simple signature form of the double skyscraper is frequently part of the composition, naturally not to our surprise, missing only in the canvas *Black Lightning* and in the one called *Victims*. In the other canvases the square angles of the towers appear, each time lacking reality but as emerging from a vision or a dream: four times as they looked before the attack, two times as the ruin afterwards. Both views are emblematic of the image we carry with us of

the fateful event: they compress the historical moment with its infinite causes and consequences to one moment, in fact to one day. So does the series of paintings; they picture our mind's condensed image of an infinitely complex happening, for ever central to our nation, assessing our national identity and our personal identity as subjects of that nation. That day time stopped. It was ripped off of the flow of history, of unconsciousness. We looked at the cutting edges of black holes. We saw the reality of negative energy in the universe, of non-existence. In Netter's 9/11 series this shock of confrontational consciousness is symbolized by the straight lines that meet at the sharpest angles like arrows of lightning and cut like cruel swords in the flowing masses of moving matter. They juxtapose positive and negative space, being and non-being, light and non-light, and so evoke the specter of absolute absence, the abyss of our own extermination.

Terence Netter, overwhelmed by the emotion of the day, outlined the reality of existential terror, the movement of sorrow. Like every conscious and caring human being, he had his own battle to fight, 9/11 attacked him personally. He accepted the challenge, he fought back: that is the singular privilege of art. It is art's task as well. Netter had a weapon: the style he had believed in for 35 years, a style he had sharpened like a sword to formulate his personal statement in the sharpest way, cutting through all the borders. Will it stand in the heat of the battle? The public will decide.

Art, Peace and Rebirth

Only art can fight terror and war. It must start in a personal battle. Just as the New York firemen offered their personal courage and skill and sacrifice, the artist must give all he possesses in a symbolic offering. Like them the artist must forget personal gain or fame, but his action must aim at the public good. His action is fragile and minimal and might very well be overlooked in the sea of violence. But that is not a reason to give up, because the artist's intentions are fueled by immeasurable love of life and therefore carry an everlasting potential. Art cannot change the past but it can change the future. It will if there is unfailing faith in the human cause. In other words: if the art is sincere. Art is the only field where sincerity is the path to victory. Nature is sincere. A rose is sincere. Art is our way back to the rose.

Triumphal Arch, 2002
Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

Collection of Douglas
Mackaman and Margaret
O'Hara



However powerful, the 9/11 series is not Terence Netter's last statement. From our point of view it is amazing to consider that his creativity heightened after the drama of 2001. Or do we uncover here a clear definition of creativity, which definitely includes change? The change was slow, but not accidental. In 2008, six years later that is, our artist gave us a last series performed in his well-known style of abstract action painting and collage: seven works, which were the needed counterpoint to the 9/11 series and in a true sense grounded in it. This series he named symbolically Creation and it is inspired by biblical Genesis. While 9/11 was bound by fear and sorrow, Creation explores the quest for freedom and joy. The idea behind this is not one of balance alone; it is also about spiritual growth. The fact is illustrated by a triptych the artist created in 2006. He called it Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis; the title is certainly homage to Hegel, Netter's favorite philosopher of the spirit of Time. The immensely quiet, renewed reflection in this triple painting on the impact of the events of the 11th of September is an unexpected "antithesis" of its predecessor of 2002, that emotional outpouring of suffering and angst in their loud expressive forms. Its minimalist subject matter is the change, under the immensity of the firmament, of Manhattan's skyline seen over the Hudson River, moving indeed. However, the change in the painting style is just as gripping. It is as if, suddenly, we look at a new man, in a new world under new stars. Suspense there is, again, having traveled though from the surface into the depth. Wisdom is probably the term I can use here. To place things in their proper context, we will add a few words concerning the painter's evolution since 2002.

A most daring and rare act of creativity it was, Netter's choice to paint in a completely new manner. A choice? Do we choose in these artistic matters or are we chosen? Unconsciously the event we call now 9/11 had allowed him to accelerate his talent. I may say Terence, after his Pollock-influenced first style, invented painting again, like any young artist who wants to change the world. He offered himself a *bain de jouvence*, or a second youth, in the Old World. And he took nature as his guide; its flowers and its trees, its rivers and its seas, its horizons. As an art historian I can't help seeing an analogy with the late and flamboyant Gothic style being rejuvenated by the young and refreshing Renaissance. At the end of the Middle Ages, just before Columbus invented America, a few brilliant young lads looking afresh at Antiquity, copying Nature, rediscovering Perspective, presented a new art to aging Europe. It proved to be a beginning. Ever-young Netter, after the cruel blow that hit his New York City and its emblems (art betwixt them), was able to bounce back and re-create a fresh view of the Past, the Far and the Beautiful; he presents it to aging America, hurt in its center. The essence of this art is peace. What else?

Art, Terence Netter seems to say to all, is our capacity for rebirth; it is like the phoenix, reborn from the flames.

August 24, 2011



Reproductions

Black Lightning, 2002

Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

*Collection of Douglas Mackaman
and Margaret O'Hara*

Out of the Blue, 2002

Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

*Collection of Douglas Mackaman
and Margaret O'Hara*

Holocaust, 2002

Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

*Collection of Douglas Mackaman
and Margaret O'Hara*

Ruins, 2002

Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

*Collection of Douglas Mackaman
and Margaret O'Hara*

Victims, 2002

Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

*Collection of Douglas Mackaman
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Triumphal Arch, 2002

Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 ft

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