

STEPHEN FARTHING THE FOURTH WALL



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STEPHEN FARTHING: THE FOURTH WALL

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Stephen Farthing

THE FOURTH WALL

PURDY HICKS · 2009

The Fourth Wall

RANDY LERNER

In writing this essay for a Stephen Farthing exhibition, I bring memories, conversations and a deep fondness for Stephen as far more than a painter, but as a friend. With this, I bring also a bias in favour of his work that I'll acknowledge at the outset. Having met Stephen in very much his previous life in England, while still at the Ruskin, I have seen his painting and studio practice since shift from several decades of hectic coexistence with his teaching-life, to a more serene but no less urgent blend of painting and writing. His studio is now a gathering place for friends and artists and was a crucial element in my own research into his long and well-traveled painting career.

Born and raised in Chelsea then Southfields, south London, Stephen Farthing went to art school at Saint Martin's and in 1969 went on to the Royal College of Art. During his second year at the RCA he spent a semester at The Cite Internationale des Artes, in the Marais, dividing his time between café life and the Louvre where he was able to pursue French literature and his burgeoning interest in court portraiture. Farthing spent the following year at The British School at Rome where he focused on the elaborate Roman

interiors which prepared him for the first set of paintings that he would begin the following year.

While living in rural Kent in the early Eighties, Farthing recalls reading Eugenie Grandet on the train while commuting to London to teach. The elaborateness of Balzac's description of the room in which Mrs G's chair was 'living,' coupled with the formal problem of rendering the space, became the core elements in this exhibition's earliest and most formative painting. Unlike *Las Minas*, in which Velasquez places an observer in the back doorway, Farthing subtly leaves the back doorway empty, thereby shifting the focus solely to the front of the scene. In order to do this, however, he acknowledges the imaginary space which exists between the viewer and the interior by treating it, as Farthing says 'as a proscenium arch that separates the invented world from real.' Whereas Velasquez was dealing with real world in which his goal was to show the painter in the midst of court portraiture, Farthing rather is dealing with Balzac's invented world in which he is capturing a scene from an ongoing narrative within the novel. His problem therefore is different, as is his solution:



Stephen Farthing photographed by Deena Feinberg, 2008

I was aware that I was after a moving target as the story is by definition moving along; Balzac is at liberty to describe all four interior walls as he has no issue of illusion. I needed to position the viewer somewhere to witness the scene but wasn't ready to forfeit one of the walls to make that happen. My solution was to treat one of the walls as transparent; it's the wall I refer to as 'the fourth wall.' I decided to paint the backs of the furniture and objects with the same level of detail as the fronts of other objects because the information that the fourth wall contained was still crucial to the scene; in the end, I was painting using multiple cameras, more as though I was filming a painting.

The Fourth Wall, as an exhibition, deals with not only with current work, but paintings and drawings selected from throughout his career. Having written an essay on the first painting series that Farthing made following his move to America (*The Modern Affair*, *Stephen Farthing Paintings 2000–2003*), I have looked to tie the work in this show together less as a continuous thought or set of themes, and more as a retrospective.

Notwithstanding, what a loose chronology does reveal is a distinct creative as well as intellectual continuity that is broadly discernible throughout the exhibition. Being concerned with how to organize his thinking on the flat surface of the canvas has always been the point of departure for Farthing, which makes the interviews that went along with the research for this essay so important. He has over the years had the courage to make his paintings and let them speak for themselves; in this essay, however, he reveals much of what was behind their creation, which adds a new and valuable dimension to our understanding of Stephen Farthing.

Having coupled his art-making with teaching from relatively early on in his career, Farthing has been in the midst not just of dealers and curators, but art students and faculty as well. His work is, therefore, uniquely informed by the rigorous analysis that many artists leave behind when they leave school. As Master of the Ruskin, for example, he was surrounded by the debates and dialogues that were addressing the massive shift in assumptions about every component of art-making, from materials to content. 'The digital and the internet- and the changing tastes and access



Boucher: *The Back Story*, 2008

to information- came at art schools like a shockwave in 1995 and so instead of leading with experience, I was out learning new skills and essentially presiding over a revolution ...' The point of these experiences in thinking about Farthing's work is that he is a painter, not unlike his contemporary Mark Tansey, who lives as much in the world of ideas as in the painter's studio. Indeed, Farthing's studio is essentially a mix of part library / part laboratory with stacks of books and computers competing for space with brush-filled coffee cans, compressors, charcoal and glues from Thailand not to mention an ever-present, oversized jar of Klein international blue grounds and endless tubes and small boxes of every conceivable shade of yellow paint on the planet. Examples of Farthing's blend of painting and research had been in books such as *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Art*, 1998 and more recently *Dirtying the Paper delicately*, 2005 in which he discusses the role of drawing from making cartoons and academic studies to the white stripe that runs endlessly down motorways.

The intellectual and analytical strain that has always run through Farthing's work helps explain the

principal changes in his most recent paintings. Focusing on *Boucher, The Back Story*, which is the most recent work in the show, it is the painting's historic narrative rather than the space or objects within the room that are the core elements of the painting. The subject, Marie-Louise O'Murphy de Boisfaily a 14yr old, soon to be, mistress of Louis XV painted by Francois Boucher. Farthing flattens the space in order to bring her to the forefront and with comparatively little attention to the figure, beautifully paints the drapery and upholstery and renders the divan with a slight degree of that same animation of his early interiors. The most compelling conceit, however, is his knitting together of language with the painting's formal structure by introducing the information regarding the sitter as both a decorative element and, as it's reversed, in effect the space's 'fourth wall.'



Mrs G's Chair, 1982

CHRONOLOGY / PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS

RL How do you make your paintings?

SF They're all and have always all been self-commissioned ... by some part of me that feels the need to resolve or at least explore my curiosities on a flat board or canvas

MRS G'S CHAIR, 1982

Describing the late '70s and early '80s as a period 'of nearly obsessive reading,' Farthing settled on a variety of interiors from the novels that were then preoccupying him. Tying together his drawings of interiors from Rome with a scene from Eugenie Grandet he created *Mrs G's Room*. The scene, which depicts the furniture and objects throughout the room as essentially characters, is as much illustrated as painted as Farthing is really animating the interior based on his interpretation of Balzac. The sense is that Farthing is in the scene amongst the characters as they bend and twist, glisten and flicker in silence. The pale palette enhances the austerity of the room but also allows the shadows created by the window light, for example, to focus on



Roomaramma, 1984

the books under Mrs. G's un-upholstered chair. It is a playful scene but also a moody and serious one which draws the viewer into the intimacy of what is, in the end, collaboration between painter and writer.

ROOMERAMMA TEA, 1984

To a certain extent, *Roomeramma Tea* picks up from Mrs. G's Room as again the image is set in a room without figures and also comes from Balzac- in this case, Old Goriot. The interior elements have also again been animated by Farthing although the palette is far more colourful and theatrical. Farthing's main focus is on the formal challenge that he faced in the rendering of the room:

In Old Goriot, there is discussion of the diorama- which had been invented around the time Balzac was writing this novel; and there is a moment when one of the characters refers to Goriot as Old Gorioramma. I recall this staying with me as it fitted with the idea of the fourth wall because dioramas are, in the end, little recreations or reinventions of the real world in space- as opposed to the flat surface. And so to solve the problem pictorially, I took the transparent fourth wall

Do we have
Things to look at
in Bed?

Things to Look at in Bed, 1984



The Cloudburst of Earthly Possessions, 1986

a step further by acknowledging my artifice by painting the doors and hinges and boot-scraper making clear the designated entrance to the invented world.

THINGS TO LOOK AT IN BED, 1984

The invented space is no more evident than in the *Things to Look at in Bed* where Farthing takes his painted diorama to his own reality in order to describe the confusion and chaos that his bedroom has become with the arrival his daughter (Constance Farthing was born in 1984). As he explains it, my 'bedroom went from a place of rest and safety to a sleepless dream-zone of contraptions like some sort of drug-induced Disney-room.'

THE DOWNPOUR OF EARTHLY POSSESSIONS, 1986

In 1985, Farthing is appointed head of painting West Surrey College of Art and Design in Farnham. In the autumn of the following year (1986) he was invited to be Artist-in-Residence at the Hayward Gallery while they were having an exhibition on the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci. As he describes it, 'For three months, I spent my mornings drawing in the exhibition space among the Leonardos. And I learned how



Gaddafi's Tent, 1988

slowly Leonardo must have drawn.' He explains that he then decided to force himself to draw more slowly by using an airbrush. The result becomes twofold as he forfeits the facility that allowed for the mimetic accuracy on which he had always prided himself, and also got him toward a conceptual rendering in which, as he describes 'I could enter the pre-psychedelic renaissance in which the heavens were inhabited by skeletons that were busy hurling down objects at deserving humans.'

GADDAFI'S TENT, 1988

In the case of *Gaddafi's Tent*, Farthing moves to soft architecture (tent) from hard interiors and is working off a photograph that he noticed on the front page of the Herald Tribune, when the US were reportedly trying to locate and bomb the Libyan leader. While the inside of the tent is decorated with an elegant wood table and high tech equipment, Farthing also captures the fighter jets in the opening down to the left to complete the visual ambiguity that one would have felt seeing the photograph in the newspaper. In the center of the painting, essentially in the doorway, are repeated



Turnerian Topography, 1990

animal heads that appear as rabbits from one side and ducks from the other. When asked why he used them, Farthing explained that it was clear that we were peaking into the Head of State's headquarters and there was in evidence signs of culture and sophistication combined with tools of war and aggression. And that despite Western biases of Gaddafi and his motives, he wanted to suggest that it may depends more on which side of the argument one comes at Gaddafi that will drive one's conclusion as anything else. That just as the animal is a rabbit if one sees it from the East, it may be a duck when viewed from the West.

TURNERIAN TOPOGRAPHY, 1990

This is one of a series of ten waterfall paintings that Farthing painted during his first year at the Ruskin School (1990). They were exhibited at the Otemae University Arts Centre in Kobe, Japan. The gallery space in which they were hung was designed by the architect Tadao Ando and the ten paintings were fit into a glass and concrete space that were positioned to be part of a broader view of reflecting pools. The idea for the series came when Farthing was researching John



The Knowledge, Kyoto, 1993

Ruskin having just become Master, and discovered that while writing about and championing Turner, he had gone to the site of Turner's alpine waterfalls paintings only to discover that Turner had not only not faithfully rendered the subject but had in fact created his own dramatized version which Ruskin thereafter calls: Turnerian Topography. To complete his own research, Farthing in turn made a trip that year to witness the waterfalls and it is from that, that we have *Turnerian Topography*. In the painting, Farthing uses various sizes of brushes and wood-graining tools to render the waterfalls with a limited palette. The long and winding brush strokes become particularly powerful as they elongate the vertical composition which is at once rushing and full of energy and yet strangely soothing.

THE KNOWLEDGE, KYOTO, 1993

The Knowledge is an example of group of mainly cityscapes that Farthing painted throughout the nineties. Somewhat connected to the distanced perspective of *Downpour*, they are ambitious exercises in wide-space drawing that contain massive amounts of information and yet have been pictorially simplified based on the

single point from which Farthing is seeing the space.

In 1990, I was stuck in Miami for a day en route to give a lecture in Mexico. With a morning free before my flight, I called a cab driver and asked him to give me a tour of Miami and his command of the City reminded me of the test that London cabbies take called the 'The Knowledge.' And then on a trip that year to Kyoto, where I was lecturing on behalf of the British Council on British Art, it occurred to me as I wandered the streets drawing the buildings that I was creating my own abbreviated version of the City.

Farthing goes on to explain that the yellow building in the center of the painting is a guitar shop next to his hotel and was therefore his personal center of the City. Finally, he went on to paint these deeply perspectival cityscapes of a variety of cities to include Liverpool and Sao Paulo, Montevideo and Washington as well as other cities he visited.

THE HEADLESS MONARCH SERIES

As is typical for Stephen Farthing, the process by which he arrived at the series of paintings and studies that he did of the decorative clothing and jewellery



Bling! Henry, 2008

that characterized court portraiture during the 16th century unlocks not only the paintings from the mid nineties, but the Bling series that he's painted over the last several years.

In 1974, Farthing was in Paris while a student at the Royal College. During this time he painted a version of the Hyacinth Rigaud portrait of Louis XV (when, incidentally the King is 15 years old). And then in 1995, he describes making a trip to the Royal Portrait Gallery to see the Ditchley portrait of Elizabeth I (which he wryly describes as the 'greatest ever conceptual portrait.) Farthing's observation of the Ditchley portrait, he explains, 'must have caused me to reference (I did go back and check,' he admitted) the Louis XV version of 20 years earlier when I realized that court portraiture is yet another invented world. And that the figure and the sitter's likeness were in fact secondary to the trappings of the sitter's royal or aristocratic standing and really, the greatest communication is in the understanding and rendering of the costume – whether 16th-century bling or the current gear.

1 | ROOMARAMMA 1984
oil on canvas · 173 × 251 cm



2 | **THINGS TO LOOK AT IN BED** 1984
oil on canvas · 159 × 277 cm

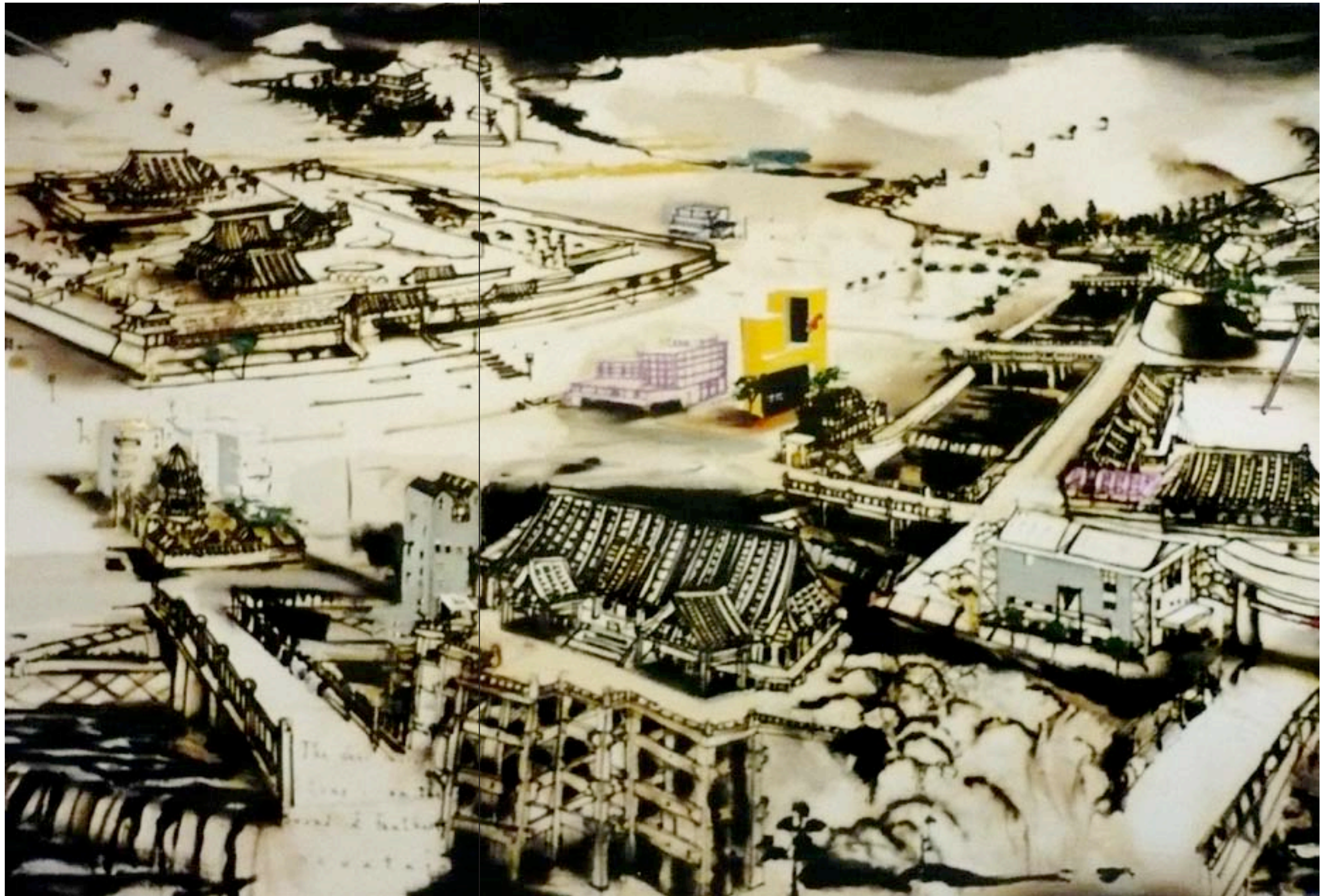
3 | 'SEE AS' GADAFI'S TENT 1987
oil on canvas · 173 × 206 cm

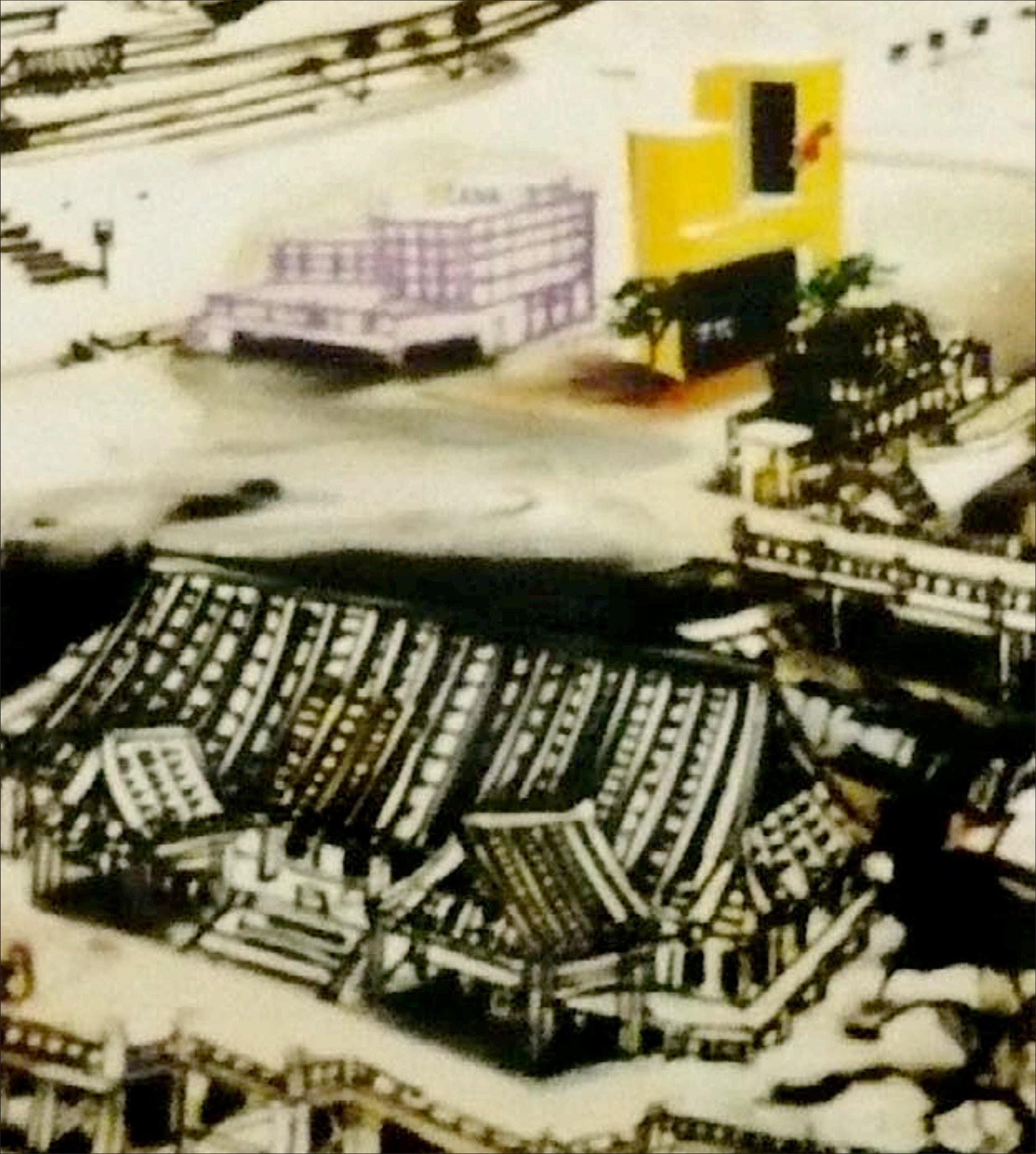
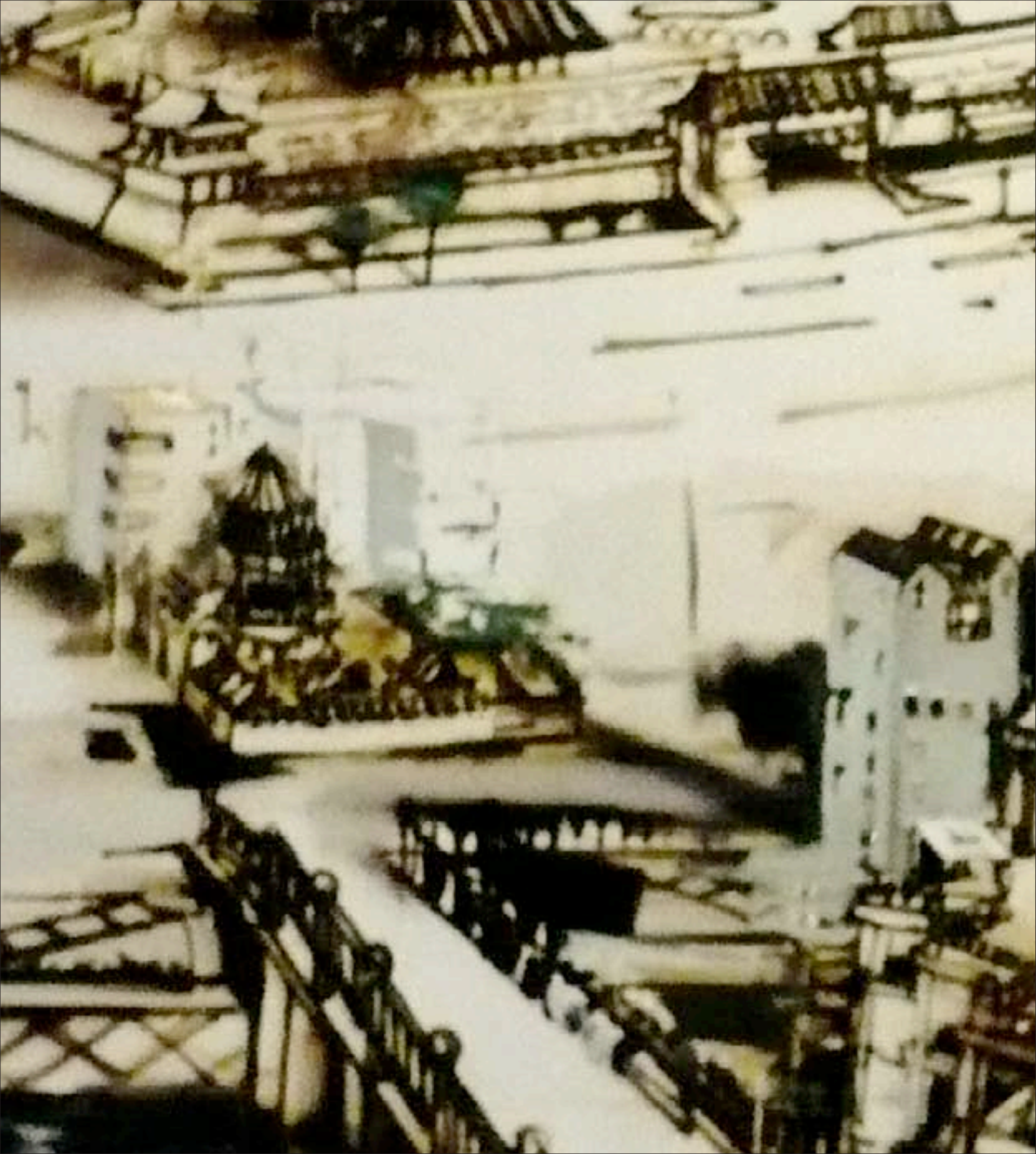


4 | CLOUDBURST OF MATERIAL POSSESSIONS 1989
oil on canvas · 173 × 207 cm



5 | THE KNOWLEDGE, KYOTO 1993
acrylic on canvas · 173 × 333 cm





6 | MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS 1996
oil on canvas · 206 × 173 cm





7 | TURNERIAN TOPOGRAPHY – FAIDO 1999
acrylic on canvas · 207 × 173 cm



8 | TURNERIAN TOPOGRAPHY 2 1999
acrylic on canvas · 207 × 175 cm

9 | **GROUND** 2001
acrylic on canvas · 40 × 50 cm



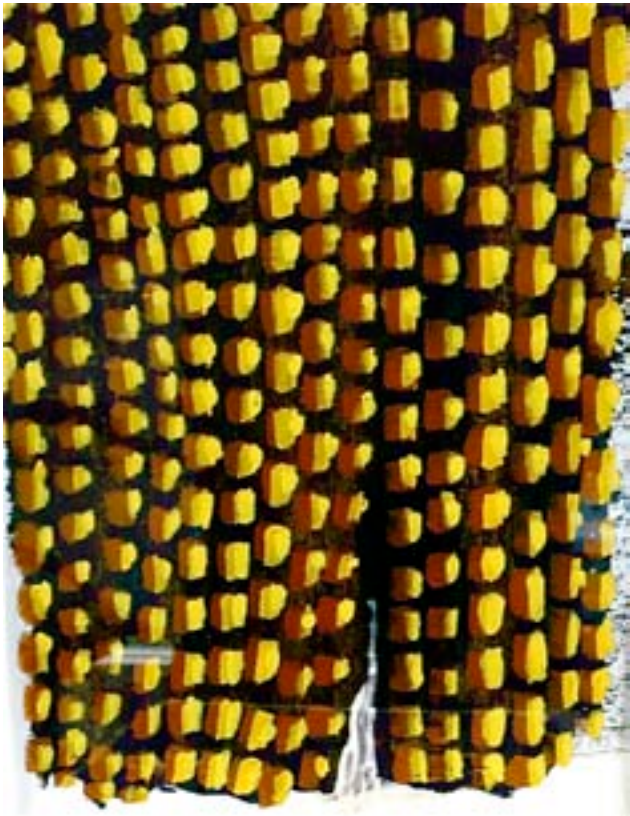
10 | A COWBOY'S SWEETHEART 2007
oil on canvas · 207 × 173 cm



11 | A PERFECT HAND 2007
oil on canvas · 207 × 173 cm



All the same size?



12 | **BLING 1** 2007
acrylic on board 38 × 28 cm



13 | **BLING 2** 2007
acrylic on board 38 × 28 cm



14 | **BLING 3** 2007
acrylic on board 38 × 28 cm



15 | **BLING 4** 2007
acrylic on board 38 × 28 cm

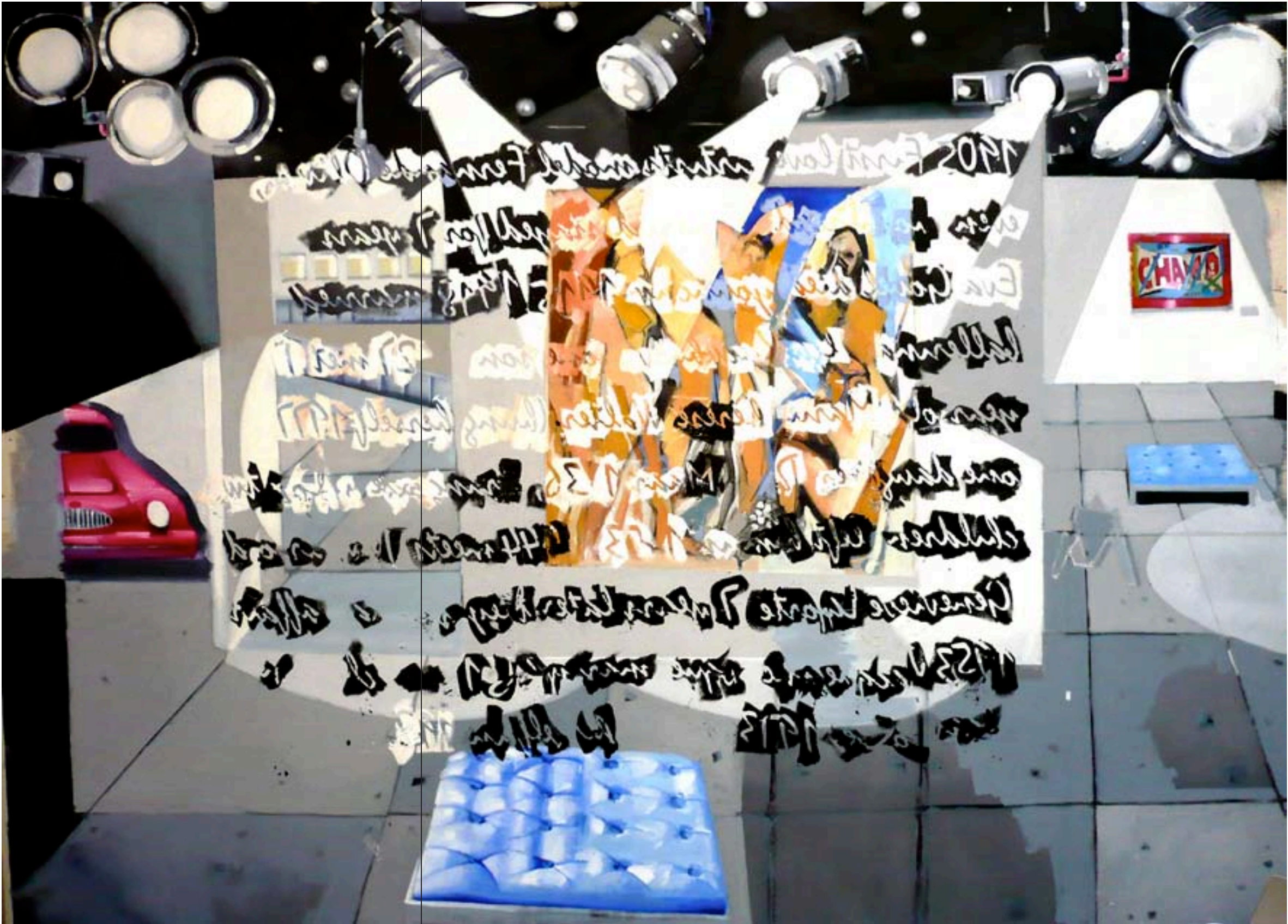
16 | **BLING! HENRY** 2007
acrylic on canvas · 76 × 101 cm



17 | BOUCHER: THE BACK STORY 2009
oil on canvas · 173 × 206 cm



18 | PICASSO: THE BACK STORY 2009
oil on canvas · 173 × 207 cm





19 | POLLOCK: THE BACK STORY 2009
oil on canvas · 173 × 207 cm



STEPHEN FARTHING

- 1950 Born, London
- 1969–73 St Martin’s School of Art, London
- 1973–76 Royal College of Art, London
- 1976–77 Abbey Major Scholar, British School at Rome
- 1989–90 Artist in residence, Hayward Gallery, London
- 1990–2000 Ruskin Master and Professorial Fellow of St Edmund Hall, Oxford
- 1998 Elected Member of the Royal Academy of Arts, London
- 2000 Elected Honorary Keeper of the Royal Academy Collections, London
- 2000–04 Executive Director, New York Academy of Art
- 2004– Rootstein Hopkins Research Chair of Drawing, University of the Arts, London

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- Arts Council of Great Britain
- Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford
- British Council, London
- Government Art Collection
- National Museum of Wales, Cardiff
- National Portrait Gallery, London
- Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan

RECENT COMMISSIONS

- 2008 Villa Park, for Aston Villa Football Club Birmingham
- 2004 Browns Town for Cleveland Browns Football Stadium, Cleveland, Ohio
- 1999 National Portrait Gallery, London, portrait of historians, past and present: Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, Sir Keith Thomas, Sir John Elliot, Lawrence Stone and Jean Thirsk

BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Farthing has exhibited extensively since his first solo exhibition held at the Royal College of Art Gallery London in 1977. His work, representing Britain, was shown at the Sao Paulo Biennale in 1989, leading to many further solo shows in the UK and abroad, including South America and Japan. He has also participated in many group exhibitions since 1975, including the John Moores Liverpool Exhibitions, in which he has been an eight time prize winner.

In 2000 he wrote *The Intelligent Persons Guide to Modern Art* (Duckworth, London). In 2005 he was co-curator of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition with Chris Orr. In 2006 he was the curator of *Drawing From Turner* at Tate Britain and he edited *1001 Paintings You Must see Before You Die* for Rizzoli Publications. In 2008 he completed a painted mural for Aston Villa Football stadium and edited *501 Great Artists* (Barron’s, USA).

Any acknowledgements and
logos could go here

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Back cover

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