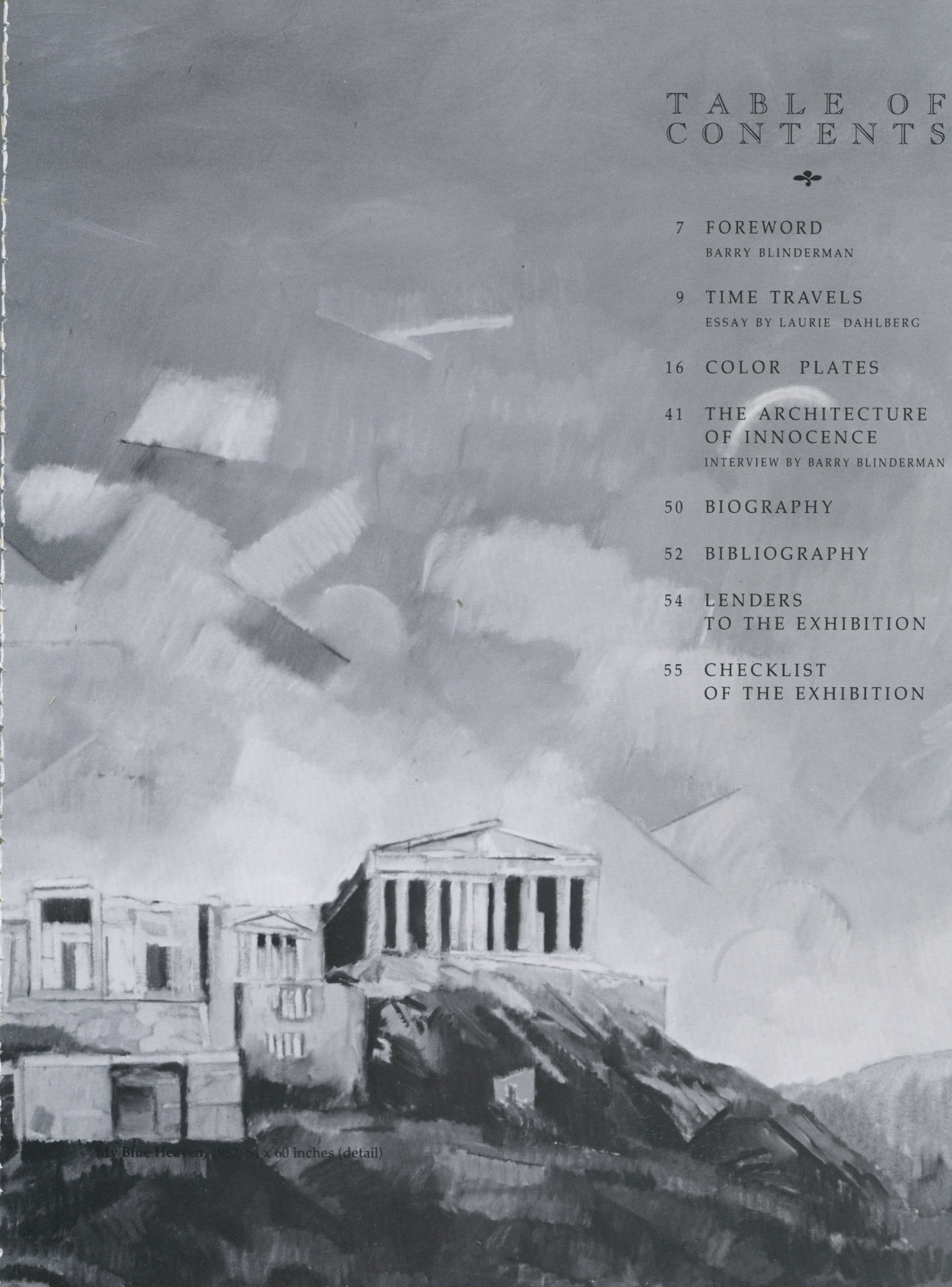




MYTHIC TIMES

Duncan Hannah





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## FOREWORD

BY BARRY BLINDERMAN

Wandering through a room full of Duncan Hannah paintings spanning the past decade, I am struck by the consistency of vision, the whispers and winds of other times and places. Hannah's canvases — the lush yet melancholy palette, the stillness of Poussin, the faraway grace of Puvis de Chavannes — are dreams of a restless soul brought to life. Charting a path toward sanctuary walked by many an orphan of the 20th century, Hannah paints what Jack Kerouac termed "lostness," the detachment from time and surroundings through which one tunes in to a quiet inner station.

Viewing Hannah's trains and houses, children and trees suffused in electric twilight, we partake of moments singled out like pearls on a string — all connected yet each distinctive. To truly enter Hannah's sanctums of solitude, one must be willing to check cynicism at the door and allow an unfettered exhilaration to be the reward.

This exhibition and catalogue are the result of generous contributions of time and effort by many people. I should first like to thank my staff at University Galleries for their collective dedication and individual abilities: Laurie Dahlberg, Curator, who authored the wonderful catalogue essay, co-curated the exhibition, and administered the loans of artwork; Education Director Peter Spooner, who produced superb educational materials for the show and organized the fine ancillary exhibition of Modernist works to complement Duncan's work; Assistant to the Director Teresa Buescher-Borman, for her attention to the details of the exhibition and catalogue; Carrie Stapleton, who transcribed my interview with the artist; our graduate assistants Anna-Maria Watkin and Patrick McDonnell, who coordinated the installation of the exhibition; and to our student interns Debra Spencer, Suzanne Silagi, Paula Swearingen, John Carney, Tracey Frugoli, Marianne Alexander and Suzanne Galusha, who enthusiastically took care of all the large and small tasks heaped upon them.

I would also like to thank Charles Cowles, Sara Blumberg and the staff of Charles Cowles Gallery, for their invaluable assistance in arranging the many details of loan procurement, shipping and photography of works on the New York end; Jon Oulman and Sara Fitzmaurice of Jon Oulman Gallery for their assistance with Minneapolis loans and other materials; Bill Dooley, Director of the Moody Gallery at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, for sharing my appreciation of Duncan's work enough to host the exhibition at his institution; to Karen Smalley, who provided archival materials and assistance with the interview; to Ron Jagger of Phyllis Kind Gallery for providing assistance and photography; to Kathleen Jones and Bob Erickson of the Krannert Museum of Art at the University of Illinois and Matthew Kubiak and Sandra Beye of the Bloomington Public Library for their assistance regarding the loan of paintings and prints for our ancillary historical exhibition; and to the generous lenders of the works in the exhibition.

Thanks are also due to those people who contributed so much talent and service to the execution of the catalogue and poster: to Jean Foos, who designed the poster; to Jeanne Lee of ISU Printing Services, who worked tirelessly to finish the typesetting in record time; to Dan Addington, our designer, who dropped everything to help us meet our publication deadline; and to Tom Nauman of Wagoner Printing, whose attention and patience throughout the project will earn him a special place in Printer's Heaven.

Finally, I am grateful to Duncan Hannah, for his dedication to this project, for his many helpful suggestions, and for sharing with all of us his vision of the mythic times in which we live.



***Less disappointing than life, great works of art do not begin by giving us all their best.***

— Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, 1919



We have come to expect a great deal from contemporary art; it should provoke us, entertain us, challenge our intellect, permit us to cleverly detect its lineage (but never appear derivative), and briefly allow us to enjoy the fantasy that maybe after all, there is something new under the sun. Sometimes in our rush to consume its outward presentation, we neglect the point that good art is not simply a delivery; the viewer's own intelligence, emotion and experience provide the catalyst for the realization of its purpose. Duncan Hannah's paintings induce musings upon an inner life; stopping short of this invitation for self-reflection, we may marvel at his obvious love for laying down brushwork and color, track his many modernist influences, or puzzle over his intentions, but miss the point of his work entirely.

Hannah's work creates psychological, interior space—imaginary, magical scenarios that we may have experienced in reality, daydream, or vicariously—through books, movies or someone else's reminiscence. He provides for us a haven where we can stage our greatest desires, re-enact our memories, changing the outcome, if we like—a place where even threat and uncertainty—often just as important to the potency of a good fantasy—are controlled by ourselves. Hannah's paintings contain the impetus for a personal, private reverie; they may offer us the scene, the props or the characters, but insist we supply our own plot.

***You can dream freely . . . when looking at a painting. When you read a book, you are a slave of the author's thought.***

— Paul Gauguin, 'Notes Synthétiques,' c.1888



***Some books have pictures and some pictures have books.***

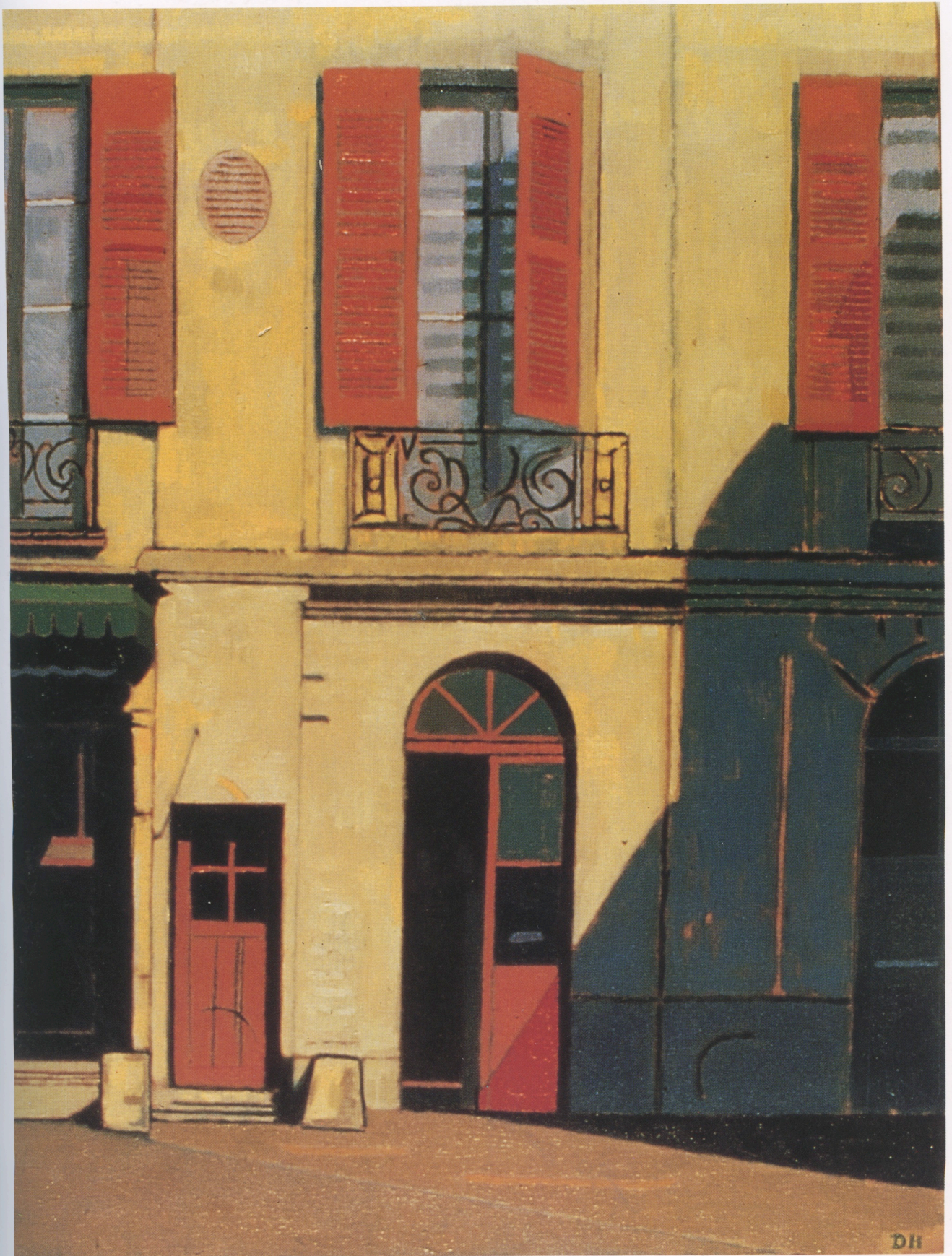
— R.B. Kitaj, in *Cambridge Opinion*, 1964



Strictly speaking, Hannah is considered a narrative or literary painter. However, rather than fulfilling our expectations of the storytelling function of "narrative," his work compares more suitably with a single line of poetry or prose. In this respect, Hannah possesses consummate skill in showing us worlds in a few glass marbles. For in Hannah's work, landscapes are not simply interpretations of the natural world, architecture is not merely a descriptor in a scene, and human beings are not just characters. Instead, these elements, though they may hold a practical place in the composition, possess a latent animism lurking behind their painted facades. So taken in the spirit of suspended reality which is requisite in viewing Hannah's paintings, the pair of sheep in *The Border* (1988) assume anthropomorphic qualities that hint at some passing spell or Kafkaesque transformation; the foreboding, vertiginous *Blue Staircase* (1987) exerts a compelling force upon us to ascend to an unknown, perhaps chilling fate; and in *Spellbound* (1986) the state of enchantment which saturates the child and the landscape seems to emanate from a curiously empty, though self-possessed house.

To move from one point to another—mentally or physically—to leave certainty behind and allow yourself to see through fresh eyes, or to return to a familiar place, and see it again through your cumulative experience—crossing territories known and unknown helps us develop a psychological





Mediterranean, 1981, 44 x 32 inches





Night Flight, 1982, 48 x 60 inches



# THE ARCHITECTURE OF INNOCENCE

INTERVIEW BY BARRY BLINDERMAN

**BB:** I've always felt that although you don't paint the Hudson River, your feeling for that area carries over into your work. You went to school at Bard College on the Hudson, and you certainly must have been moved by that experience. Do you feel a kind of spiritual closeness with the area?

**DH:** Yes, all my dreams take place there. The dorms at Bard are 19th century mansions covered in ivy, overlooking the Hudson with the blue Catskills in the distance. I was sort of a pantheistic dandy among six-hundred hipsters in Arcadia. The sixties had just ended and disillusion had not yet set in. Maybe that's where I got the idea of landscape as a place to lose your mind. We did a lot of experimentation there, in the woods, by the waterfall, in the deserted village—getting high, getting off. Whistler said that every painter needs a river, and the Hudson has been mine for twenty years now. I'm still only two blocks from it.

**BB:** You say you dream a lot about Bard and the Hudson River. What kind of dreams are they?

**DH:** Well, I'm in the womb of nature, and I have to get from one place to another—for an erotic rendezvous, which usually doesn't take place.

**BB:** Nature seems to be a very soft, sexy, lush, secret place for you.

**DH:** Yes. Secret, comforting, safe—as opposed to New York City. Yes, I think of it as a safe harbor.

**BB:** A lot of your paintings present figures not in awe of nature, but with expressions of an inner daydream.

**DH:** I always think of landscape as a place where drama happens, whether it's a pantheistic drama, a sexual drama, or a decisive spiritual drama. I like the human presence or the implied human presence.

**BB:** In your paintings, you put things in a different time to try to get to a different, unspoiled place of the imagination. You offer the viewer a shift, you take them back to a time where they could think about innocence.

**DH:** Yes, that's true. I carve off a lot of contemporary life to get at what I want. I don't necessarily go back—most of my paintings could take place today, and while they don't relate to my life in New York City, they do relate to my interior life.

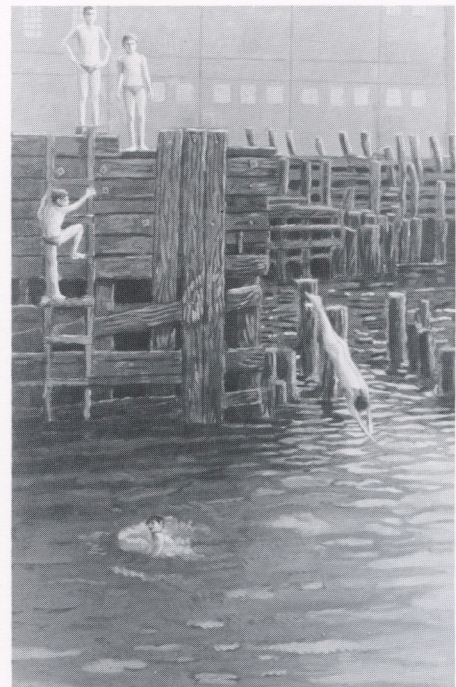
**BB:** As in the painting *Ring Around The Rosie*, the time of your childhood seems to be your reference point, a time when you still had prop planes and so on, but never BMWs or digital watches.

**DH:** It's an archetype for me. For instance, when I think of a schoolgirl, I think of a plaid skirt and white socks, mary-janes and a cardigan sweater, a white shirt with a Peter Pan collar and a pageboy haircut.

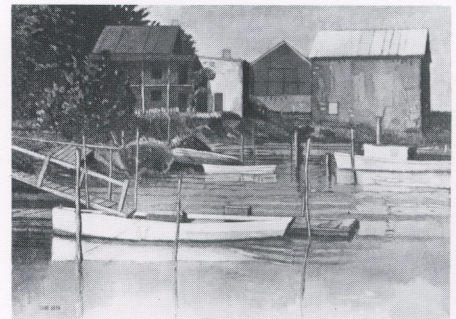
**BB:** Was this archetype a conscious decision, or did it just evolve that way?

**DH:** I've been conditioned by so many different things—books, movies and so on. You find you have an empathy with something and when that feeling keeps happening, you realize it's a pattern and feel even more strongly towards it. I have more feeling towards this kind of schoolgirl than a Steven Spielberg schoolgirl.

**BB:** People who are familiar with your paintings remark about this displacement and innocence and dreaminess which we associate with childhood and nature. That's the feeling I get from the people in your paintings. They are not thinking about anything specific, but they always look like they've disappeared. The girl in the painting *Midway* seems as though she has mirrors in front of her eyes. She is looking within herself, instead of looking in front of herself.



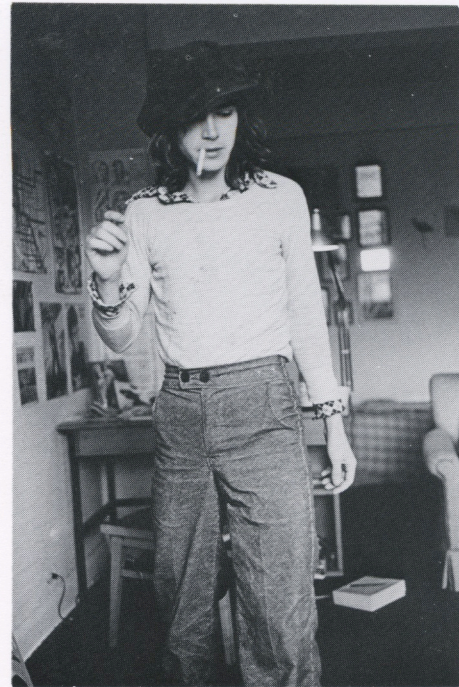
**Boys of the Hudson**, 1989, 78 x 50 inches



**In the Shallows**, 1989, 36 x 50 inches



- A Sea of Faces: A Portrait Salon*, City Without Walls, Newark, NJ  
*Three Landscape Painters*, Center Gallery, Chicago  
*Flames*, Kamikaze, New York
- 1985 *New Art, Modernism*, San Francisco  
*Inaugural Exhibition*, Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago  
*Forbidden Dreams*, City Without Walls, Newark, NJ  
*Trains and Planes*, Jayne Baum Gallery, New York  
*Photo Synthesis*, One Penn Plaza, New York  
*Fashion Moda Benefit*, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York
- 1985-86 *The Figure in 20th Century American Art: Selections from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, traveling exhibition
- 1986 *Oneiric*, Semaphore Gallery, New York  
*Short Stories*, One Penn Plaza, New York  
*New Romantics*, Bridgewater Gallery, New York  
*Selections from the E.F. Hutton Collection*, Metropolitan Museum and Arts Center, Coral Gables, FL  
*Drawings*, Knight Gallery, Charlotte, NC  
*Semaphoria*, Semaphore East, NY  
*The Embellishment of the Statue of Liberty*, Barney's, NY
- 1987 *Art Against AIDS*, Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York  
*Fire*, Alexander Wood Gallery, New York  
*The Self-Portrait*, Robeson Center Gallery, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ  
*Worlds Within*, Semaphore Gallery, New York  
*Movietone Muse*, One Penn Plaza, New York  
*Bar Hopping*, HBO Headquarters, New York
- 1988 *Rebop*, Paula Allen Gallery, New York  
*Interiors*, Procter Art Center, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
*Blue*, Jon Oulman Gallery, Minneapolis  
*William Copley*, Roger Brown, *Duncan Hannah*, Gloria Luria Gallery, Miami
- 1989 *Art Works for WestPride*, Apple Bank, New York  
*Nicholas Africano, John Bowman and Duncan Hannah*, Jon Oulman Gallery, Minneapolis  
*Benefit for the Museum of Contemporary Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago  
*Auction for Action*, Simon Watson Gallery, New York  
*Diffa Auction*, Bergdorf Goodman, New York  
*Jennifer Muller Benefit*, Bess Cutler Gallery, New York
- 1990 *Benefit for the New Museum of Contemporary Art*, The New Museum, New York  
*To My Valentine*, Jon Oulman Gallery, Minneapolis  
*Benefit for the Carl Apfelschnitt Fund*, Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York  
*Amnesty International*, Germans Van Eck, Blum Hellman, New York



Duncan Hannah, New York City, 1973



# CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works oil on canvas

**Pepe Le Moko, 1977**  
24 x 19 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York

**The Haunted Bookshop, 1979**  
25 x 25 inches  
collection of Conley Brooks, Jr.,  
Minneapolis

**Mediterranean, 1981**  
44 x 32 inches  
collection of R. Stephen Lynch,  
New York

**Northern Lights, 1982**  
38 x 50 inches  
collection of John P. Arnhold,  
New York

**Boulevard, 1982**  
50 x 36 inches  
collection of Conley Brooks, Jr.,  
Minneapolis

**Adventure, 1982**  
60 x 50 inches  
collection of Carol and Arthur  
Goldberg, New York

**Night Flight, 1982**  
48 x 60 inches  
collection of Carol and Arthur  
Goldberg, New York

**My Blue Heaven, 1982**  
54 x 60 inches  
courtesy of the artist

**Solitaire, 1983**  
36 x 36 inches  
collection of John P. Arnhold,  
New York

**Someone to Watch Over Me,**  
1983  
40 x 30 inches  
collection of Chase Manhattan  
Bank, New York

**Christmas, 1983**  
50 x 70 inches  
collection of Dr. Lloyd Harris and  
Jill Werman, New York

**Mythic Times, 1985**  
48 x 60 inches  
collection of Flora and Sydney  
Biddle, New York

**Midway, 1986**  
60 x 80 inches  
collection of Don and Denise  
Devine, Rumson, NJ

**Evening Shadows Fall, 1986**  
64 x 54 inches  
collection of Lita Hornick, New  
York

**City of Cats, 1987**  
54 x 60 inches  
courtesy of the artist

**Gare St. Lazare, 1987**  
50 x 66 inches  
courtesy of the artist

**Homesick, 1987**  
36 x 54 inches  
collection of Tom von Sternberg,  
M.D. and Eve Parker, Minneapolis  
courtesy Jon Oulman Gallery,  
Minneapolis

**Vagabondia, 1987**  
78 x 60 inches  
private collection

**The Blue Staircase, 1987**  
60 x 48 inches  
collection of Phyllis Kind  
courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery

**Swing, 1987**  
54 x 40 inches  
collection of Catherine Vance  
Thompson

**The Middle of Nowhere, 1988**  
22 x 28 inches  
collection of Frederick W.  
Wackerle

**André Derain, 1988**  
54 x 40 inches  
courtesy of the artist

**Betrayal, 1989**  
54 x 54 inches  
collection of Harvey Schulweis,  
New York

**Boys of the Hudson, 1989**  
78 x 50 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York

**I Looked Up, 1989**  
60 x 44 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York

**The Boy in the Tree, 1989**  
48 x 48 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York



**The Letter, 1983\***, 44 x 48 inches  
collection of Metropolitan Museum  
of Art, New York



**Lavender, 1989**  
60 x 44 inches  
collection of Richard Hedreen,  
Seattle

**In the Shallows, 1989**  
36 x 50 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York

**Ring Around the Rosie, 1989**  
78 x 60 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York

**Crete, 1989**  
26 x 30 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York

**Immortal, 1989**  
70 x 50 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York

**Ash Wednesday, 1989**  
60 x 44 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York

**Let the Moon Hang Low, 1990**  
34 x 26 inches  
courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery,  
New York