

TWS: What is allegory?

TWS: Traditionally, a painting has been regarded as an image; an image which captures the primary forms of man's experience, forms that are instantaneously recognizable to everyone. Beyond this primal level of recognition, paintings or images simultaneously reflect the conventional subject matter of the era, place and time in which they were made. In this aspect they treat the myriad stories and allegories of any given culture, and, perforce, their immediate comprehensibility is limited to that culture. When an image conveys the idea of concrete persons, objects and events, it is called a narrative or story. But when the image deals with abstract ideas and general notions such as Truth, it is called a personification or symbol. A combination of symbols and personifications is an *allegory*. Thus, an allegory, and not simply a painting, is worth a thousand words since it contains and explains them to the literate viewer.

To confuse the issue, some images may contain both narrative (real) and allegorical (symbolic) elements which, when read together, help define the proverbial thousand words. The identification of these canonic symbolic forms is called *iconography*, or the description of images. Ultimately, this process only provides the viewer, or reader, of the image with an explanation of the literary sources which are quoted within it. The final step needed to decode the work, to reveal its intrinsic meaning, is called *iconology*, or the scientific study of images. As the noted scholar Irwin Panofsky described it, iconology seeks to discover how the "essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts." Although the three steps of reading have been separated out, in the actual work of reading an image the "three operations of research merge with each other into one organic and indivisible process."

Since the reading of a visual allegory demands humanistic literacy, encoded images intentionally were selected by the patron (rather than by the artist) to speak to a chosen group who were uniquely able to comprehend the intrinsic meaning. For the most part the allegorical schematics were composed by humanistic scholars and were subsequently handed down to the artists to execute. The elect could be so broad as to include all Christian believers or so narrow as to exclude all but the patron and his immediate circle of retainers. Some allegories serve to make the ineffable palpable while others help condense the epic into digestible chunks. Frequently, however, allegories were employed to subvert the blind ambition of a ruler under the guise of a charming mythological anecdote. There is power inherent in allegory if the mind of the reader is agile enough to release it.

TWS: How are allegories read?

TWS: Nancy Witt's pendant paintings "Hagar" and "Sarai" are typical of the traditional allegorical form. The artist orchestrates specific symbols and metaphoric connections so that, like a magician's endless handkerchief, ideas are drawn out successively but of one fabric. "Hagar" and "Sarai" might best illustrate the adaptation of traditional allegory within a contemporary *Weltanschauung* (world view). Taken from the book of Genesis, the story of Abraham, his wife Sarai and concubine Hagar prefigures the coming of Christ in fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham. Sarai (whose name means princess) was the legitimate wife who was barren, while Hagar, though a slave, was fecund. The birth of the bastard, Ishmael, to Hagar angered Sarai. Hagar fled "from the face" of her mistress into the desert and only returned at God's command. By divine intervention Sarai conceived and bore the son, Isaac, the refiguration of Christ. Nancy Witt adapts biblical chapter and verse into her compositions utilizing the pairing to compare the status of the two wives. Sarai, the princess, is seated upon a pedestal and is shod, albeit in Adidas running shoes; Hagar is discalced. The legitimate bride holds her bouquet while the cast-off spouse abandons her nosegay. Sarai (named Sarah after she conceived) holds dominion over a real landscape while Hagar holds sway over a painted backdrop. The same rope binds them as do identical bridal costumes, but while Sarai is resplendent in white (signifying her virgin state), Hagar's garb suggests a shroud, her offspring doomed to obscurity.

The operatic stage provides another quotation to fortify the biblical legend. In Richard Strauss's *De Frau ohne Schatten* (The Woman without a Shadow), the central character is unable to conceive until she regains her shadow. Sarai, although seated in the sunlight casts no shadow, while Hagar's darkened visage looms almost menacingly over her artificial domain. The reversed signature on the painted landscape suggests that the artist views Hagar as a mere reflection of the true reality that is Sarai. Seen in the context of the 1980's, Witt's work can be read as the conflict between the traditional and the new in the realm of painting, womanhood, and

allegory.

Many of the works in the exhibition rely on classical settings not only for idyllic mood but also for the chain reaction of classic responses which they trigger (e.g. Paradise Lost and Found, Innocence vs. Experience). Both James Childs and Lennart Anderson stage their allegorical follies midst the leafy glades of some Elysian Field, circa The Golden Age of Man, replete with nubile maidens and heroically nude athletes of virtue. However, while Anderson's noble savages strike the languid poses of nymphs long frozen on the friezes of Greek pots (and they are equally as static symbolically), Childs' foreground trio of fraternal beauties seems only recently to have abandoned their togas to sing the University of Minnesota fight song. Atop Childs' human pyramid stands the Amazonian personification of the Star of the North: Minnesota — worshipped, yet fettered by her subjects. These simultaneous allusions (Amazon, Minnesota, Woman), their particular arrangements and subtle twists of meaning hint at a more complicated scheme for Eden than pure nostalgia allows us. Similarly, Ferroni, Blell, and True invest both Art and Arcadia with intrigue.

TWS: What, then, is "Reallegory"?

TWS: "Reallegory" (re: repeat, re: about, real, allegory) is a contemporary trend which responds to the popularly-held criticism that modern art is either facile and simplistic or dense, esoteric and mute. The "Reallegory" artists have selected realistic style for its familiarity and accessibility, and have adopted the allegorical mode for its capacity to communicate a time-less complexity of messages. They aspire to a rarely attained aesthetic middle ground where virtuosity and artifice serve up poetry and politics for all takers (according to their ability to receive, of course).

"Reallegory" is another step in the continuing evolution of "art about art" (a "hall of mirrors" extension of "art about life"). Through it, traditional symbols and motifs are excised from their original sources and re-contextualized. New meaning is achieved while old meaning is reconstituted. "Reallegory" allegorizes allegory.

TWS: All right, why is "Reallegory" happening now?

TWS: The Age of Enlightenment produced the modern era, and through the momentum of constant self-examination we have reached our own Age of Skepticism. We question everything because our identity is reflected in the answers. We inevitably question the nature of power in the world because its attainment or its loss determines our value. Our fascination with this inquiry has made the issue of power — where it resides, how it functions — the dominant theme in our lives and in our art. This gives us a clue to the timeliness and new potency of allegory.

In the recent past the development of rarified art forms (minimalism, conceptualism, performance) has both alienated audiences and afforded third party interpreters (critics, curators, collectors) a greater role in determining meanings and values. The artist's power has diminished. "Reallegory" manifests the artist's return to power as he reclaims interpretive control over his work. Further, the "Reallegory" artist is training the forces of his rejuvenated "weapon" (his instrument of power is meaning) upon a host of internal and external juggernauts: politics, economics, religion, sexuality, art itself. His intent is to deconstruct, to gain as his target diminishes. His goal is to resolve conflicts. Art is ever hopeful.

TWS: Be specific.

TWS: Okay. For example, Cindy Sherman's photograph (#109, 1982) addresses latent prejudices which we retain as vestiges of archaic power systems.

An androgynous-looking woman has been "chosen" or "accused." She ingenuously asks, "Why me?" Because she is shorn and unembellished we sense her innocence, her elevated status, her unjust indictment. We know from history (Joan of Arc to Madame Mao) that women, in answering to a higher calling, may transcend their stereotyped passive role only by submitting to a process of sexual neutralization. The dominant male culture demands it. Sherman's woman has been duly purged but to no avail. She is a perpetual victim of male power (and fear) and the "Catch 22" of neutralization simply maintains the status quo. She may now look like a boy, but she can never be more than an altered, perverted girl (and "no girls allowed").

When we learn, however, that the chosen woman is, in reality, the artist herself, we realize that we have been operating on the basis of our own learned prejudices. The subject is not a victim at all. Sherman has selected

herself, dramatized herself, in order to reveal our false assumptions and our servitude to the authority of tradition.

In keeping with the functioning of allegory, interpretation beyond the obvious role-playing level is possible only with special knowledge. Sherman's work is not particularly ironic until we know that she is her own subject, and that she is engaged in a charade of her own design. In a maneuver consistent with our contemporary Age of Skepticism Sherman has employed a traditional form against a traditional power. Yet, by virtue of this "subversion within the system" strategy, she, too, remains a captive of tradition (just as we do in reading her work). This, then, is the essence of our modern dilemma. Are our truths "new" or merely "now"? And can we only know them in the shadows of our lies?

TWS: You spoke earlier of metaphoric target practice . . .

TWS: Yes, Komar and Melamid . . .

TWS: No, Fischl and Tansey . . .

TWS: Of course, their antagonists are in the process of shooting, literally and figuratively. And a light reading of these works may provide us with an entertaining and sophisticated brand of visual punning. But these everyday, situational dramas are, nonetheless, permeated with allusions to the human struggle for authority.

Mark Tansey's "Homage to Susan Sontag" at once conjures up Sontag's critical potshots at photography, photography's imagined return volley (capturing her soul in a compromising position — caught in the act of intimate self-adoration?), cheap pulp, cheap shot, and Jacques-Louis David's "Death of Marat." Eric Fischl's poolside horseplay may certainly be

read as a harmless "Squirt" squirting. But, isn't this a sinister SWAT-team pose; aren't guns (penises?) lethal? Why are the eyes blocked out like in the old crime and scandal rags? The boy climbs out of the womb's wetness and aims to kill? This is an ominous Oedipal inversion which defines love as the most covert form of control.

TWS: "Reallegory" looks and reads like very serious business.

TWS: It is. And it isn't. As with Fischl and Tansey, Komar and Melamid can be funny (both "ha ha!" and weird). They satirize the political state as a smiling, lecturing (and absolutely extinct) dinosaur — more absurd than threatening. Or they pickle the Communist dream like a dead fetus in formaldehyde — even the Red Guard laughs at the aborted impossibility of a Peoples' Monarchy. Yet, while everyone's laughing, the fact remains that this particular form of totalitarianism — ridiculous as it may be — reigns supreme by institutionalizing its own death.

TWS: Summation, please.

TWS: Stop. Look. And listen.

TWS: Is it truth or irony that makes you speak so simply?

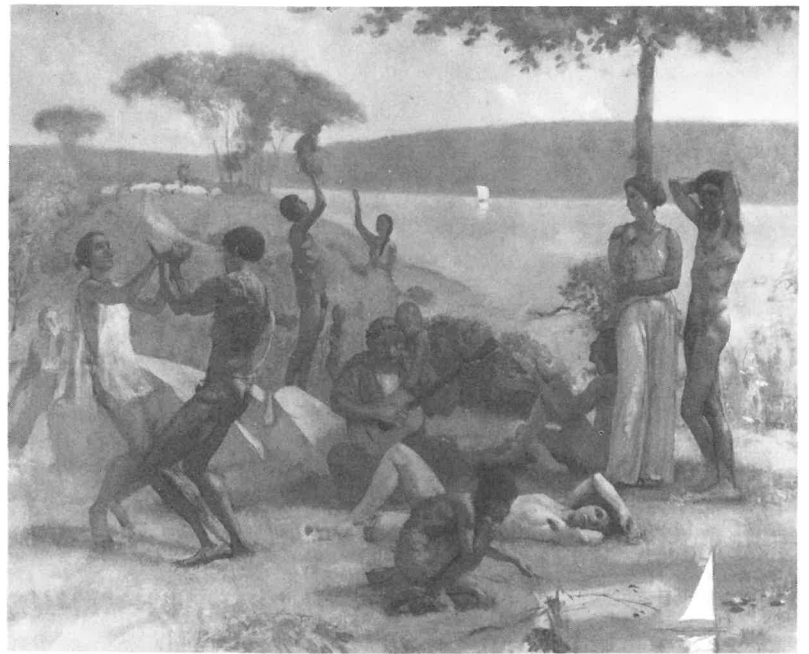
Thomas W. Sokolowski
Chief Curator

Thomas W. Styron
Curator of American
and Contemporary Art



Nancy C. Witt, *Hagar and Sarai*

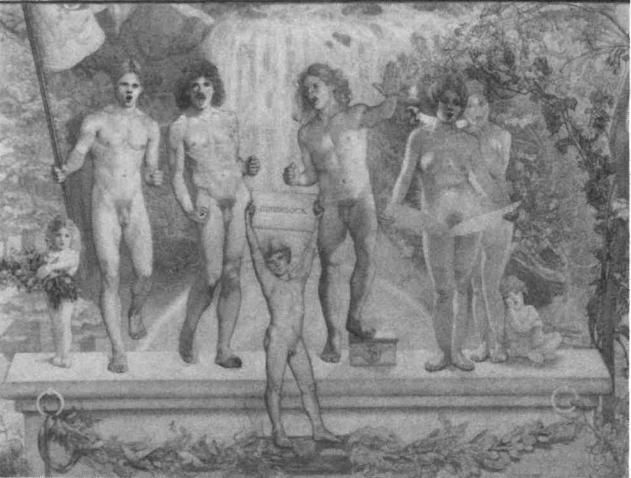




Lennart Anderson, *Idyll I*



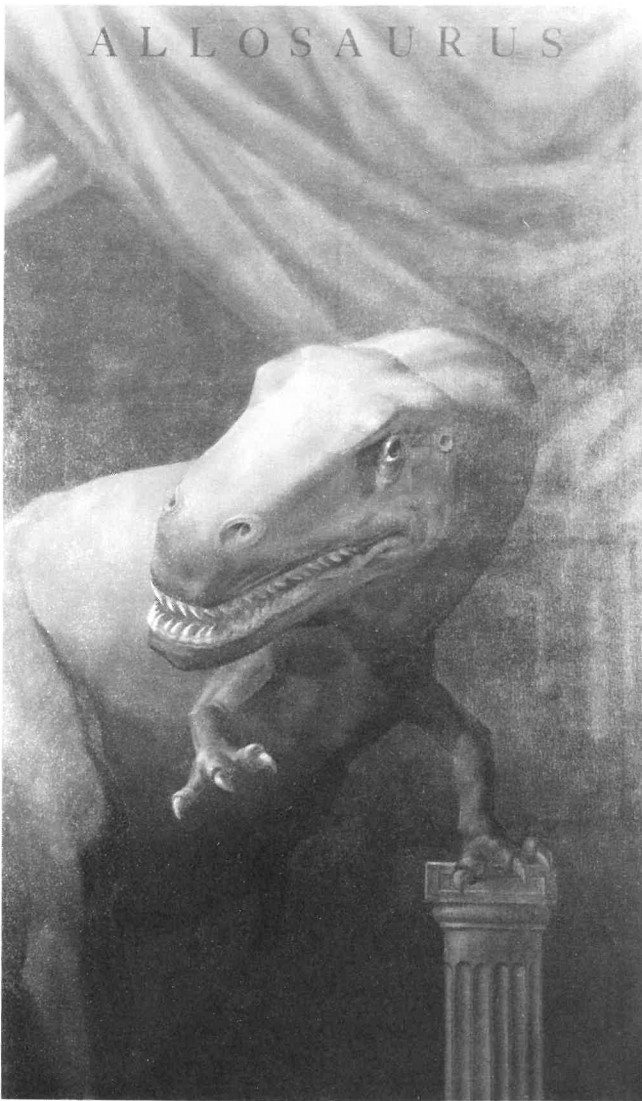
Dianne Blell, *Love Fleeting Slavery*



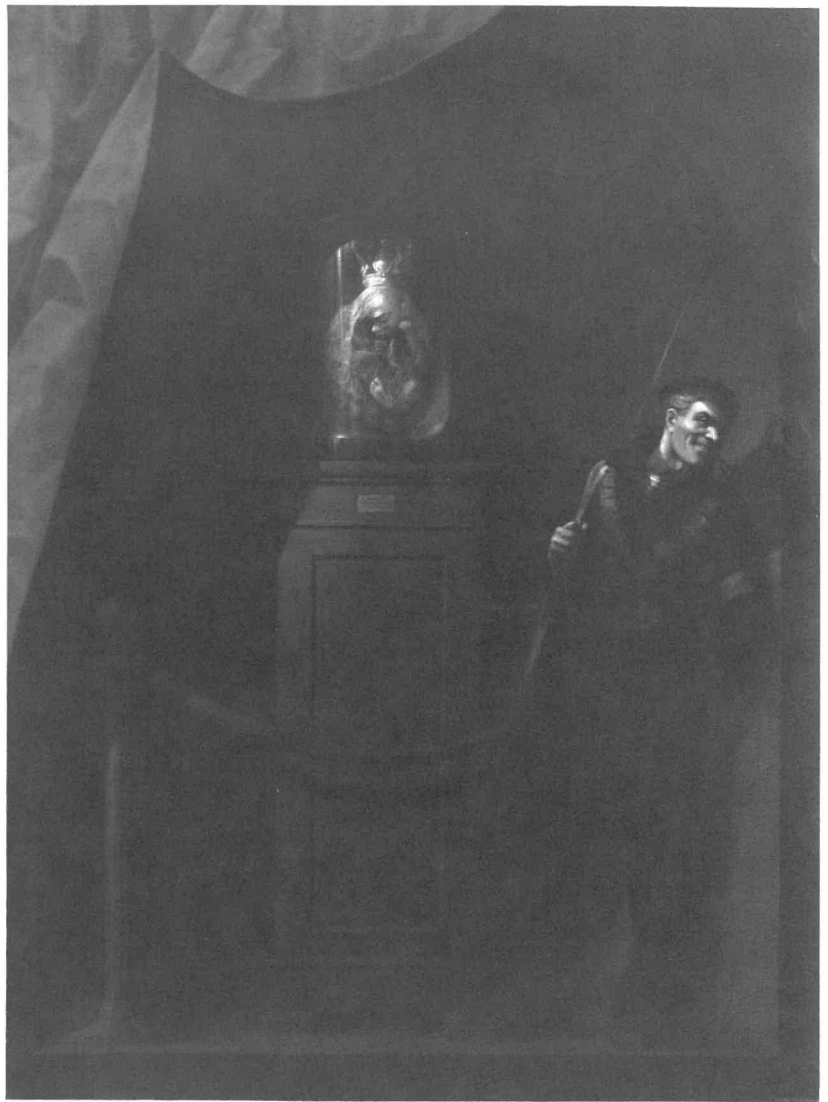
James Childs, *Star of the North*



Tommasi Ferroni, *La Naiade e il Tritone*



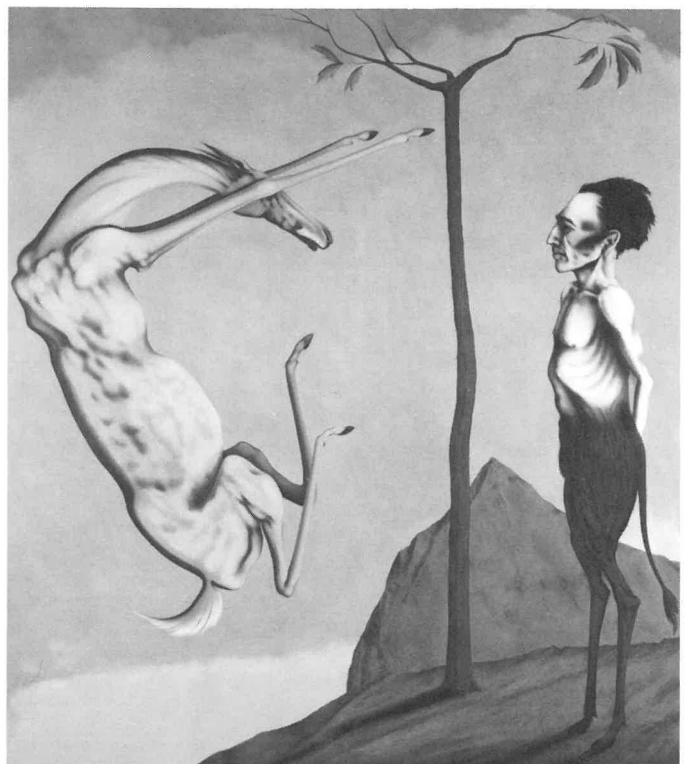
Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *Ancestral Portraits: Allosaurus*



Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *A Visit to the Museum of the Revolution*



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #109*



David True, *Imprisonment*

Exhibition List

Lennart Anderson

Idyll I, 1981
acrylic on canvas
68 × 84"
Lent by Davis and Langdale Co.,
Inc., New York City
photograph: Studio/nine, Inc.

Diane Blell

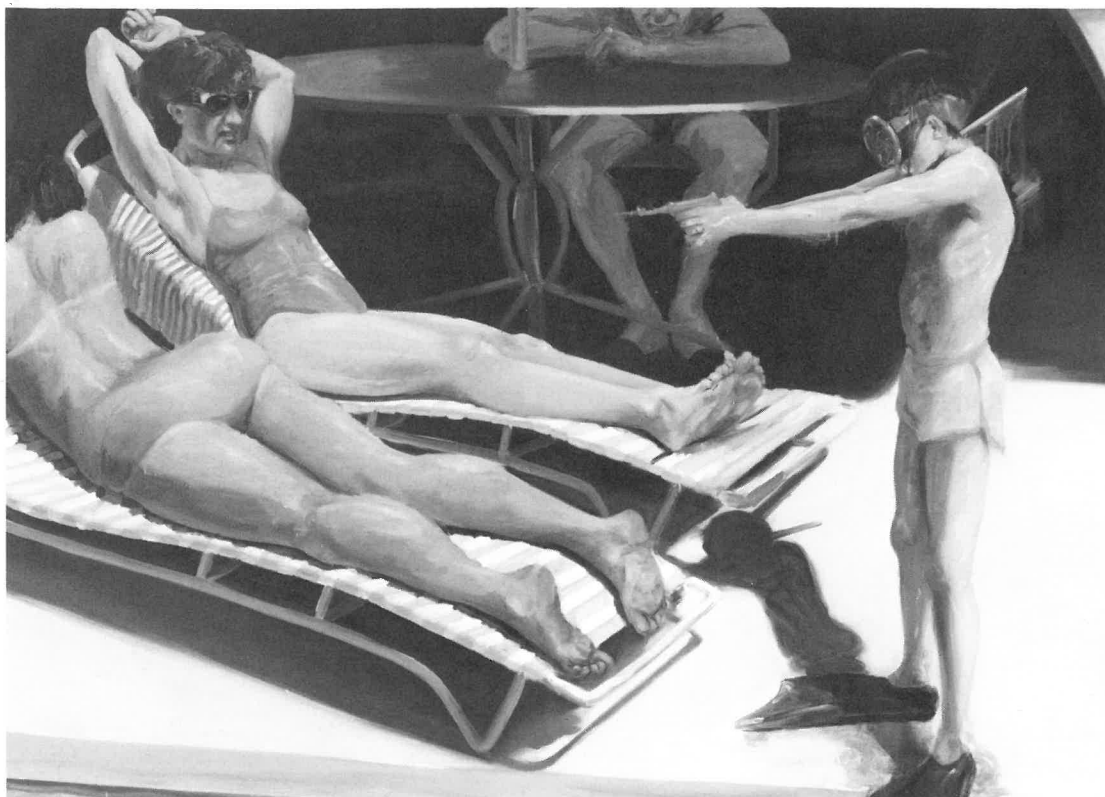
Love Fleeing Slavery, 1982
Cibachrome
41⁷/₈ × 54¹/₂"
Lent by The Lannan Foundation,
New York City

James Childs

Star of the North, 1980
pencil on paper
89 × 30"
Lent by Tatistcheff, New York City
photograph: Parker Cane

Tommasi Ferroni

La Naiade e il Tritone, 1982
oil on canvas
39¹/₂ × 55¹/₄"
Lent by Monique Knowlton,
New York City



Eric Fischl, *Squirt (for Ian Giloth)*

Eric Fischl

Squirt (for Ian Giloth), 1982
oil on canvas
68 × 96"
Lent by Dr. Allen Logerquist,
New York City
photograph: Zindman/Fremont

Vitaly Komar

Alexander Melamid
*A Visit to the Museum of the
Revolution*, 1981-82
oil on canvas
72 × 54"
Lent by Joel Cooper, Norfolk
photograph: D. James Dee

Ancestral Portraits: Allosaurus,
1980

oil on canvas
95 × 55"
Lent by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts,
Inc., New York City
photograph: eeva-inkeri

Cindy Sherman

Untitled #109, 1982
color photograph
36 × 36"
Lent by Metro Pictures,
New York City

Mark Tansey

Homage to Susan Sontag, 1982
oil on canvas
54 × 90"
Lent by Dr. Allen Logerquist,
Courtesy of Grace Borgenicht
Gallery, New York City
photograph: Larry Bercow

David True

Imprisonment, 1981
oil on canvas
84 × 72"
Lent by Edward Thorp Gallery,
New York City
photograph: Zindman/Fremont

Nancy C. Witt

Hagar and Sarai, 1981
oil on canvas
48 × 36" each
Lent by the artist



Mark Tansey, *Homage to Susan Sontag*