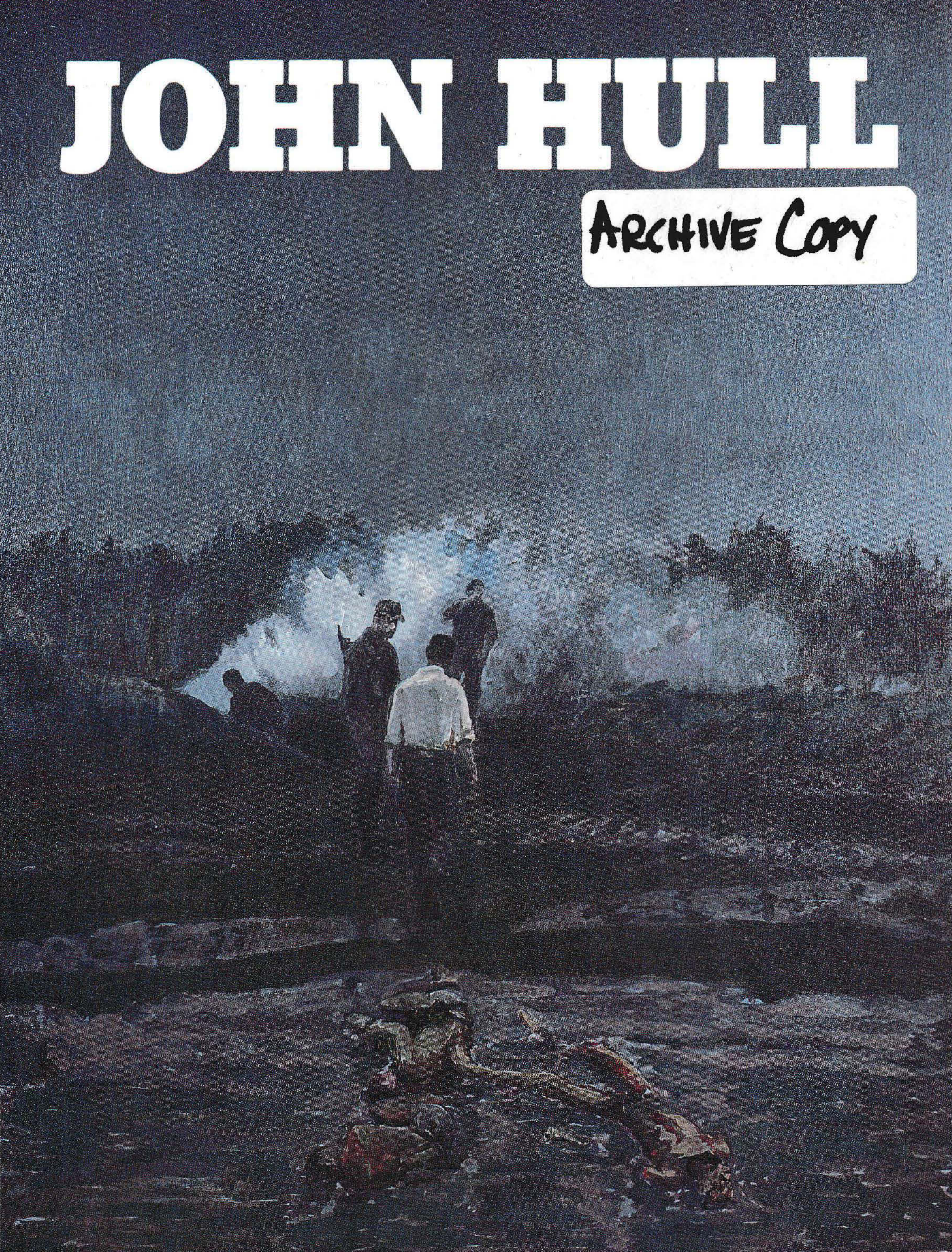

Currents

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Outpost of Progress: The Paintings of John Hull

Basically, it seems to me that at the heart, all great painting has to do with a painter's internal discipline. There has to be a sense of personal responsibility and a recognition of that contract that men have with other men. Without that sense of accountability and the faith in that contract it is impossible for an artist to take the close look necessary at the world he lives in and cannot therefore recognize the hard facts of existence that are shared with all men. Without a moral frame of reference, there is no way to make the world intelligible.

–John Hull, June 1982

The first paintings of John Hull's that I saw, in 1981, were somber, dramatic works, mostly small, of men committing unspeakable acts of violence in the darkness of a rural night. They were impossible pictures to look at for very long, because the activities taking place in them seemed, at first glance, so ordinary, so matter-of-fact, so utterly commonplace, that the nature of the violence wasn't immediately apparent. The acts of torture, once recognized, had no rationale that could explain or justify them. These early paintings were done in a kind of down-to-earth figurative style, reminiscent of the social realism of Robert Henri, William Glackens, or George Luks in the early 1900s rather than in a precise photo-realist style. The images in Hull's work were delineated just enough to make me see what was happening, become drawn into the work, and then upon close scrutiny be forced back upon my own inner, terrifying understanding of what I thought was going on.

These works are from a series entitled *Outpost of Progress*, after a story by Joseph Conrad of that title. In the paintings, momentous acts of brutality are reduced to the everyday; the men committing them seem to have no more concern for what they are doing than they might have in lighting a cigarette or eating a sandwich. One of these paintings, entitled *What We Are* (1982), is titled after an inscription on a number of medieval paintings about death, which reads, "What you are, we were. What we are, you will be." It depicts a group of men gathered at night in a winter wood, seemingly engaged in an execution by hanging. To the right of this central scene is a car, clearly a contemporary model, with a figure casually seated on it, legs resting on the hood, watching the activity. Light emanates from the clearing in which this macabre ritual takes place; the gestures of the men are familiar, relaxed, mundane, as if they were watching a game of checkers in the park.

The painting, *Outpost of Progress* (1982–83), shows two seated figures, one seemingly thoughtful, the other with his arm draped casually over the back of an empty folding chair, watching as three men carry away a limp, barefoot, and obviously mutilated body. Originally, the painting (which, like almost all of Hull's paintings, has undergone many changes before the final version) showed the victim to be female, but Hull changed it because he wanted to avoid the implication of sexuality or the specific complexities arising from male/female relationships in order to focus on the generic nature of violence. All of the figures in Hull's paintings consequently have been men.

The *Outpost of Progress* series differs from Hull's subsequent work because according to him it is about men who lack imagination. The paintings are about violence without responsibility, about people living in a closed society without recognizing the consequences of their acts. What does link these works to the later paintings is not so much their specific subject matter as the evolution of certain formal characteristics that are essential to engaging us in the experience of the work and the events depicted in it.

In all of Hull's works, the central activity takes place in the middle ground of the painting, at some distance from the viewer and far enough away so that the activity is somewhat ambiguous. In the earlier paintings, the activity was isolated by a pale circle of light of uncertain source, suggesting itself as a metaphor for "seeing" what is taking place. In later work, events also occur in the daytime, when the light is more evenly dispersed, sometimes so much so as to suggest the absence of any specific time at all. The event's distance heightens our sense of coming upon something unexpectedly and becoming unwilling and unwitting witnesses to it.

The Penitents, begun in 1982 and interspersed with two groups of work about soldiers (the *Dien Bien Phu* and the *Algeria* paintings), is a series about a group of people who are outlaws, people whose religious practices for the most part have not been common since medieval times. The images include flagellant processions, obscure nighttime rituals, and specific reen-

actments of Christ's suffering and death. The hooded figures, passionately absorbed in their activities, constitute a brotherhood whose secrecy, fervor, and determination are perfectly echoed by the formal intensity of the pictures. Especially in the most recent series of paintings of the subject, entitled *War at the End of the World*, after a book by Mario Vargas Llosa, the bleak, rock-studded landscapes, which could be anywhere but appear compellingly familiar, suggest that what seems foreign to us is in fact taking place at this very moment, not far from us, and in the same world we ourselves inhabit.

In the *Algeria* series the images of soldiers, practicing their craft elsewhere in the world, become part of our lives by virtue of Hull's focus on the smallest physical gesture as a means of revealing a psychological universe. These familiar gestures combine with generic landscapes to create the sensation of immediacy, of a real and concrete time and place. Hull says of this specificity that "the paintings are about men in the world, so the world has to be there."[1]

At the same time, the military paraphernalia, the scaffolds, uniforms, clearings, trucks, and makeshift buildings in the work belong to all soldiers and to all wars rather than to a specific situation. Hull was concerned that people having strong political feelings about the war in Vietnam would bring them to bear upon the paintings, so he titled them *Algeria* in order to put them at a distance, to enforce their universality, and to focus on larger moral issues.

For Hull, subject matter is essential to the work, and it's not surprising that his influences are, more than anything else, literary ones. He is an insatiable reader, brought up as a child on Dickens and other great writers whose work Hull's father read aloud to him. His most important influence is the work of Joseph Conrad, and many of Hull's titles are taken from Conrad's novellas and short stories, although Hull never literally depicts any of these fictional events. In Conrad's work, as in Hull's, it is the close attention to surface detail that gives the reader access to the essential, inner meaning of the work.[2] It is also the writer's concern with profound moral issues which emerge from the surface reality of the story that attracts Hull. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as in Hull's painting of the same title, the moral tale that unfolds explores the darkness as a metaphor for the subconscious, for spiritual emptiness, for evil, and for mystery itself.[3] Flannery O'Connor, another of Hull's favorite writers, is similarly concerned with what is hidden beneath the surface; "fiction," Hull quotes her as saying, "is the concrete expression of mystery."[4] In the writings of Jean Larteguy, Robert Stone, and Jules Roy, Hull has also found the kind of concrete description of the realities of war that he struggles for in his own work, and novels by Ford Maddox Ford, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor exemplify the fictional but specific settings and memorable characters that are both immediate and universal. Like these writers, Hull wants to create characters that are not only interesting, but ones that we will care about.

While literature has influenced Hull as much as anything else, both as a reader and as a writer—he worked as a newspaper reporter for several years—the experience of being in the Marine Corps in the early 1970s has definitely shaped the attitudes that inform his work. Hull feels strongly and positively about his experience as a marine. It was, he felt, "one of the few times in my life I was doing something for other people, a service. Most of my life I've spent in a studio, in my own world." In addition, all the reading he did about soldiers and wars of all kinds and the experience of watching military training films on television as a child, have left an impact on the work.

Visually, Goya's late paintings—concerned as they are with the extremes of human behavior, the forces of evil, and the ravages of war—are perhaps the most recognizable art-historical influence on Hull's work, and the *Penitent* series derives in large measure from Goya's 1793 painting of that same title. Hull has also been inspired by the works of Titian and Bellini, Caravaggio, Fra Angelico, and Corot, but more than anything else it is Max Beckmann's work and ideas that have had the greatest impact on his thinking. Specifically, he is interested in Beckmann's desire to penetrate the surface of things, or as Beckmann himself says, "What I want to show in my work is the idea which hides itself behind so-called reality. I am seeking for the bridge which leads from the visible to the invisible."[5]

To this end, Hull also is concerned with fictions, with telling stories, creating events that influence each other in a meaningful way. Hull wants "to make something real for others," and because the desire to understand and to describe is basic to human endeavor, the fictions Hull creates have the power to make us look into ourselves and to look with empathy at others. Because we are witness to the terrible events in his paintings, we are also made to feel that we are testifying to them.

What Hull calls "an appetite for the absolute" is essential to an understanding of his work, and he quotes Nietzsche in this regard: "It seems to me that the chief thing in heaven and on earth is to *obey* at length and in a single direction. In the long run, there results something for which it is worth the trouble of living—something that transfigures, something delicate, mad or divine." It is for this reason that the *Algeria* and *Penitent* paintings are both about men who consciously devote their lives to something outside themselves, who, as Robert Stone says, "se-

lect the worthiest illusion and follow it to the end." They are, according to Hull, "ordinary men, men at grips with contradictions—men suffering and dying for those contradictions—men vulnerable to retribution, privation, and death. The search for suffering and the remembrance of suffering are the only means we have to put ourselves in touch with the human condition."

The question Hull's work addresses, by using violence as its subject matter, is how one lives with atrocious acts. The penitents inflict violence on themselves and their fellow men by choice, as a result of religious conviction. Hull finds them interesting "precisely because they have the gift of faith, the ability to discern absolute meaning in life." They are people who do not think of themselves as individuals; rather their conduct is determined by folk ritual and tradition. The soldiers are also forced to live with their acts, to accept their consequences, because of a sense of loyalty to something greater than themselves, so that the issue of sin, of guilt and redemption, is complicated by this belief in a greater cause. Unlike murder, killing can be justified in the light of a belief in this cause. Hull says that in some way "all the paintings have to do with the notion of sin. The word 'sin' in the Bible is 'hamartia,' and what it actually means is 'missing the mark.' " For him, there is no single concept of right or wrong:

I accept the fact that men do things that are wrong. And they do them for good reasons and bad reasons. I'm not condemning these acts.... If you torture someone to get useful information out of them that's going to save lives, is that right or wrong? These are things that have happened, these are things that men do, and what I'm interested in is to look at it and try to accept it somehow.

Thus, Hull does not consider his paintings in any way to be political, and he assiduously avoids polemic of any sort in the work; rather, he considers them to be about morality. Worse than a sinful act, he says, is the man who does not recognize the consequences of that act.

The paintings address notions of responsibility, sacrifice and honor, mortality, faith, suffering and redemption, and morality itself. These issues are ones with which most contemporary painters are not concerned.

If Hull's reasons for painting seem unusual today, it is partly because he doesn't consider himself a "modern" painter. He says:

What I'm trying to do in making these pictures is to make a record of the experiences of the human heart. To do that I need to focus on those objects of my attention—to stare—to look hard and long at the experiences and events that occur in the natural world. The problem is to transform those experiences into evocative images, to give them articulate form. Observations, perceptions, and sensations are stored and recombined in the mind's eye. Memory transforms experience. The physical drama does not move us until we recognize its spiritual sense.

All of the paintings are difficult to look at, despite the fact that Hull is an extraordinarily skilled draughtsman with a phenomenal command of his craft. People sometimes find the paintings depressing or "morbid," but Hull says that "just because you don't want to look at it doesn't mean it's not there." Because the subject matter is so specific, Hull creates situations in which we care very much about what is going on, even though we may be frightened or upset by what we see. The questions raised in the work aren't answered for us, either; says Hull, "I wouldn't make these paintings if they were solved. But I believe that if you look at something long enough, maybe you'll understand it."

As for himself, even though he also finds it difficult to make the paintings and difficult to look at them, he says if he weren't hopeful he wouldn't make pictures. For John Hull, "painting is not a profession, it is a vocation, and as such is an act of love, an act of faith." For us, as viewers, it is also a way of seeing in ourselves and others a common bond and an ultimate understanding of our own humanity.

Marcia Tucker

Notes

1. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, have been taken from conversations between John Hull and the author in the fall of 1984, from a lecture that he gave at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, in April 1984, and from letters to the author.
2. Paul O'Prey, Introduction to Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 1902 (London and New York: Penguin English Library, Penguin Books, 1983), p. 16.
3. Ibid., p. 18.
4. In a letter from Hull to the author, November 16, 1984. The quote is from *Letters of Flannery O'Connor: "The Habit of Being,"* ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1979), p. 144.
5. Max Beckmann, "On My Painting," lecture given in London 1938, and published in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel Chipp (Los Angeles and Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1968), p. 186.

Cover: *To The River*, 1984 (from the *Algeria* series). Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36". Collection Edward R. Downe, Jr., New York. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson

The Island, 1983 (from the *Algeria* series). Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 32″. Courtesy the artist

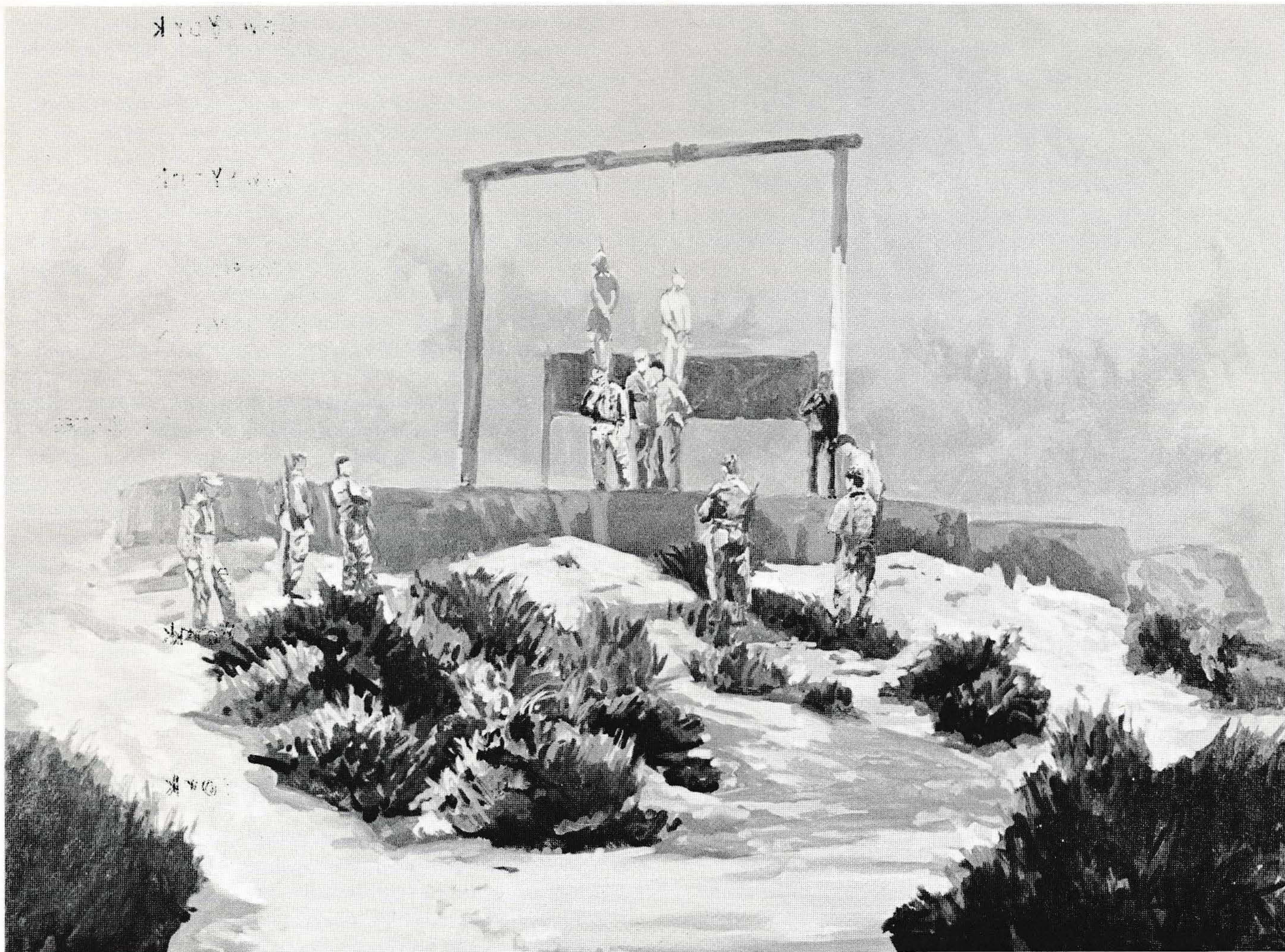
Born in 1952, New Haven, Conn. Attended Yale University, New Haven, Conn. (B.A. 1977), and University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Ill. (M.F.A. 1981). Lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Solo Exhibitions

1983 Nancy Lurie Gallery, Chicago, Ill.
1981 Krannart Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Ill.
1977 Trumbull College, New Haven, Conn.

Selected Group Exhibitions

1984 *Personal Visions*, Janus Gallery, Los Angeles, Calif.
Religion and Mythology, N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago, Ill.
1983 *Chicago Artists*, Museum of Northern Illinois, DeKalb, Ill.
1982 *Critical Perspectives*, Institute for Art and Urban Resources at P.S. 1, Long Island City, N.Y.
Nancy Lurie Gallery, Chicago, Ill.
1980 *4 Painters*, Krannart Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Ill.



The Execution, 1984 (from the *Algeria* series). Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48″. Collection Edward R. Downe, Jr., New York

Articles and Reviews

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Kuspit, Donald. "Critical Perspectives," *Artforum* 20, no. 8 (April 1982): 81–83.

Moser, Charlotte. "Chicago, Bluster and Brawn," *Art News* 82, no. 5 (May 1983): 100–102.

Tucker, Marcia. "An Iconography of Recent Figurative Painting," *Artforum* 20, no. 10 (Summer 1982): 70–75.

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