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# Heide Fasnacht: Exploded View

*Since 1997, Heide Fasnacht has been making sculptures and drawings that depict explosions of all kinds, from sneezes to volcanic eruptions—events too sudden, violent or self-consuming to be easily visualized. Keeping the human presence in these works to a minimum, she invites us to experience the sheer visual pleasure of catastrophe in freeze-frame.*



BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

In a sneeze there is a measure of dismissal (small, but nothing to sneeze at) and of pleasure (see the short and strange digression Freud took, in odd partnership with Wilhelm Fleiss, to explore the connection between nasal evacuation and mental health).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps there is no *petit mort* in the common sneeze, though the connection to both Thanatos and Eros is hard to miss, but the relationship of sneezes to art? When Heide Fasnacht introduced the sneeze as subject matter for sculpture and drawing in 1997, pleasure, danger, sex and an arch kind of skepticism all entered the picture. However, sneezes interested Fasnacht mostly because they fall at the threshold of visibility, in the realm of things that, while not imperceptible, are more or less impossible to visualize in any stable, conventional way.

All kinds of explosive phenomena fall into this category, events too turbulent, fast and self-consuming for the leisurely pace of ordinary vision.

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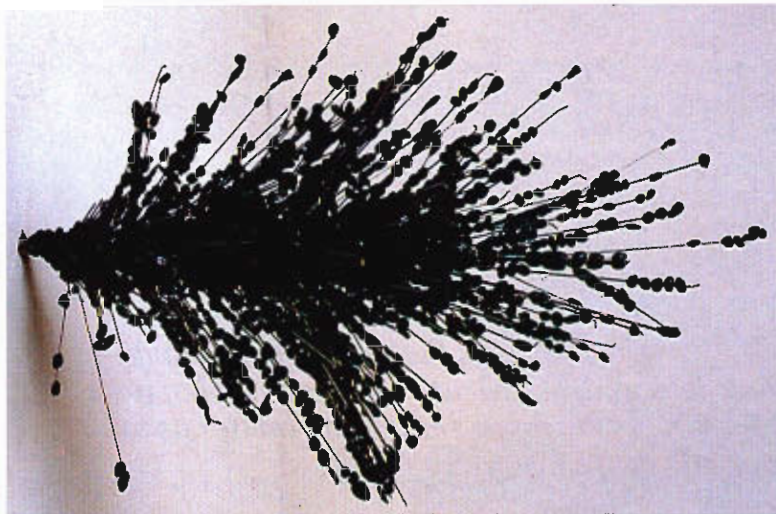
*Above, Heide Fasnacht: Sneeze I, 1997, graphite on paper, 40 by 60 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Bill Maynes Gallery, New York.*

*Opposite, Demo, 2000, neoprene, Styrofoam, pigment, approx. 9 1/4 by 10 1/4 by 10 feet; at Bill Maynes Gallery. Photo Liz Deschenes.*

Fasnacht has long been occupied by subjects that resist capture and, when caught, are more readily apprehended in two dimensions than three—the geography of outer space, for instance. Her current work, graphic and sculptural, has moved beyond the sneeze to take on geysers and volcanoes, military explosions on sea and land, planned detonations and accidents, and fires benign and catastrophic. The transformation of the banal into the extraordinary, hallmark of any disaster worth the name, parallels the transformation of inert matter into speed-of-light energy in such events, providing an almost indigestibly rich metaphor for art.

This body of work (including the various Sneezes) began with frail-looking objects made with clumps of hard-drying polymer clay clotted around vectors of heavy-gauge wire. They render as solid form (but just barely) the misty stuff spewn in a variety of blasts: sputum (which in a sneeze issues mainly from the mouth); plumes of water and steam; smoke; and the particulate matter in detonations, incinerations and eruptions. Some of the sculptures are table-top sized, including recent examples made of bonded iron, a particularly dense material. Other sculptures are bigger, made with sprayed neoprene foam forced through bits of wire mesh that augment the wire armatures. In a spring, 2000 exhibition of Fasnacht's work at the Worcester [Mass.] Art Museum, a substantial Sneeze issued from one wall,





Above, *Little Sneeze*, 1997, polymer clay and wire, 10 by 15 by 9 inches. Collection Kenneth L. Freed, Boston.

Right, *Big Bang* (foreground), 1998, polymer clay, neoprene, graphite, metal, 8 feet high, with (background, left to right) *Sneeze III*, 1998, Pinatubo, 1999, and *Milky Way*, 1996-97; at Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass.

little black gobs of clay clinging to shiny, thin metal rods that sprang forth in an elegant but menacing burst. A considerable *Big Bang* (1998) erupted from the floor, its speckled and swirled, black-white-and-gray-toned clay parts reinforcing a connection to the black-and-white photographs, often from outdated textbooks, on which much of this work is based. The even more massive *Explosion* (2000) was pumped up with bursts of foam, then finished with a coat of graphite; its powerful extension, slightly glittery surface and unkempt overall demeanor make it seem both the image of an explosion and its charred, hapless-looking result.

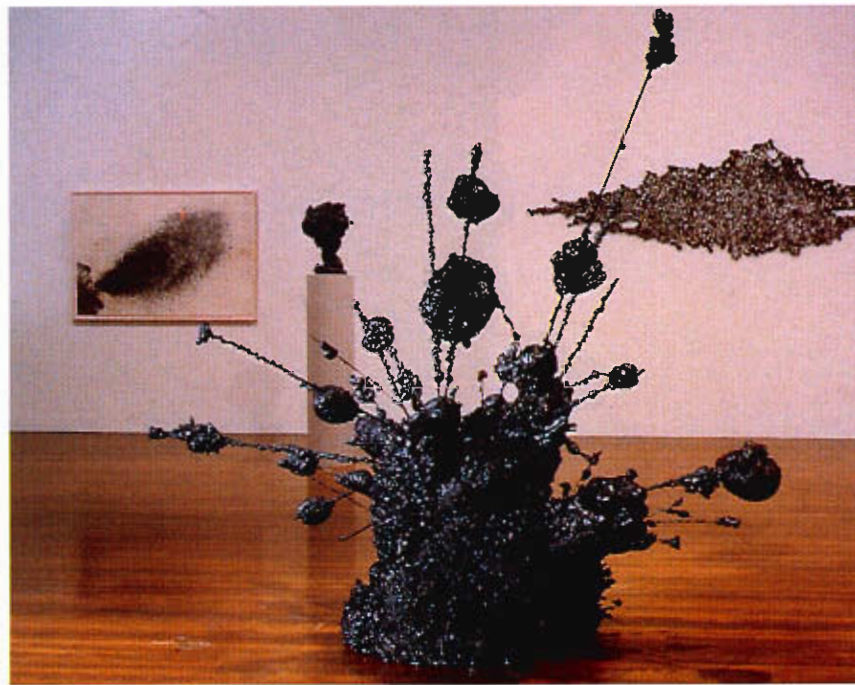
For a show called "Rapture" (also spring 2000) at the Bakalar and Huntington galleries, Massachusetts College of Art, Fasnacht created a massive installation titled *Demo*, as in "demolition" or "demonstration"—though "demonic" applies, too. It involved constructing on site the full-scale, wrecked facade of a yellow-brick row house, and then nearly blowing it away with monstrous billows of neoprene foam, shot from canisters to come boiling out from under the wall and through the ground-floor window in starbursts and cauliflower-shaped clouds of bubbly white gunk. Instead of beaded bits of clay on frail tendrils of wire, there were buckling walls, shattered glass, torn tar paper and crumpled Venetian blinds—all meticulously arranged to create the appearance of devastation. As with any kind of violence, things were exposed that are ordinarily hidden. Viewers could even walk around the back to examine the scaffolding, which made the whole construction seem like a prop, hence the more dramatic.

There were light touches, too, including a few stray bricks held midair by wire, a comic gesture that seemed straight out of "Krazy Kat," suggesting a new level of comedy to match the scaled-up magnitude of destruction. In George Herriman's classic comic strip, Ignatz Mouse bonks Krazy Kat on the head with a brick, over and over, arguably as a sign of affection; in a novel called *Krazy Kat*, Jay Cantor imagines Ignatz complaining about the constraints governing his interaction with the Kat: "No matter what I did to you, even when I sent whole walls of bricks toppling onto your noggin, you always turned it into love. Do you know how flat and small that makes a fellow feel, kitty?"<sup>2</sup> The specific unhappiness that comes from unacknowledged anger (or passion) permeates the mayhem in *Demo*, which is both funny and

violently not funny, roaring mad and obstinately mute, in the same measure.

*Demo* was one of several works inspired in part by photo-documentation of buildings being deliberately blown up. At Bill Maynes Gallery last fall, Fasnacht showed another such sculpture, this one made with carved Styrofoam and sprayed neoprene and painted a glittery charcoal black. Unlike the full-scale *Demo* in Boston, this sculpture (also called *Demo*) compresses a skyscraper to roughly 7 feet high, and shows it mid-demolition, its carefully detailed walls crazily skewed, smoke billowing. At once more abstract (like a film clip or a graphite rendering of something that happened somewhere else) and more tightly focused than the preceding work, this second *Demo* shares with the first small moments of sharp humor: stray bits of tiny furniture tumble down the facade, curtains flutter, a "Hotel" sign splinters and falls.

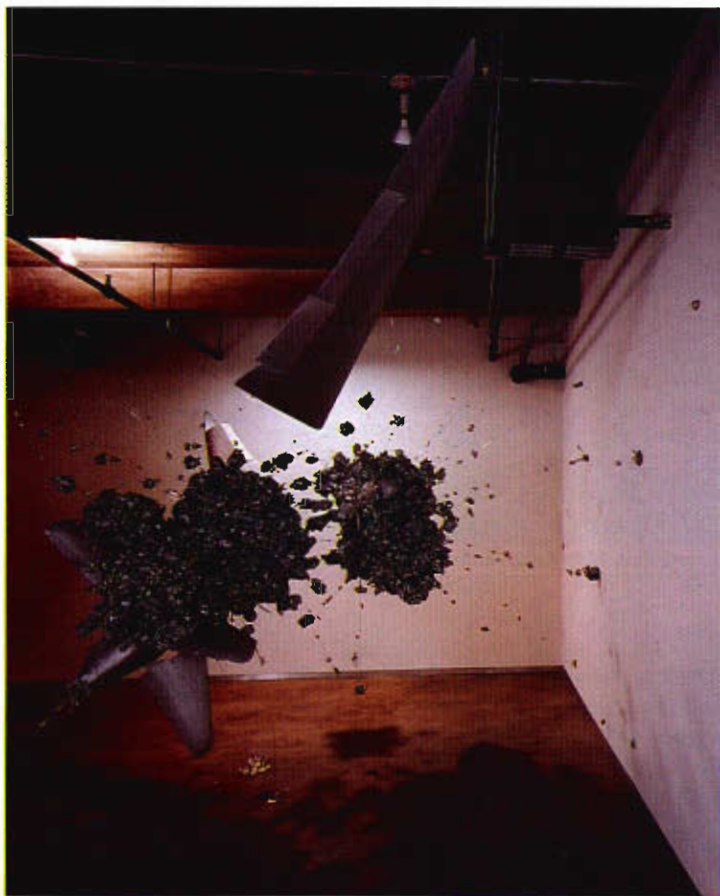
Also at Maynes was a spectacular installation-cum-sculpture called *Exploding Plane*, the unfortunate jetliner's broken body, wings and shattered contents (including a few tiny suitcases) held in midair by a



suitably explosive network of guy wires anchored to ceiling and floor. Made, like the second *Demo*, of carved Styrofoam and gouts of neoprene forced through wire mesh, *Exploding Plane* is painted a gleaming aluminum gray. Whereas the imploding black hotel has all the dark, impossible gravity of a collapsing astral body, *Exploding Plane* (modeled, unlike the real-life-based *Demo*, on a crash fabricated for the movies) fractures along linear trajectories that seem to guide it straight toward dazzling, sunlit disappearance.

Fasnacht titled the exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum "Blow Up," after the famous 1966 film by Michelangelo Antonioni in which a fashion photographer inadvertently documents (perhaps) a murder, the (possible) victim and gunman visible only at extreme levels of enlargement. The cautionary lesson often drawn from the film—that close examination of visual data is liable, at a certain order of magnitude, to be self-defeating—has meshed neatly with popularized ideas about quantum physics and the limits it defines to positive determination of position and velocity at very small scales. But like subatomic particles, this popular conception of *Blow-Up* itself tends to waver on close inspection. The murder,





**The explosive transformation of inert matter into speed-of-light energy provides an almost indigestibly rich metaphor for art.**

at first hidden, is revealed, and confirmed, in the depths of a very long and woozy night, but both photographs and corpse are gone by morning; the problem isn't with representation alone. Fasnacht's reference, like her work, indicates longstanding awareness of the two-way traffic between imagery and object, and the accidents that occur in both directions.

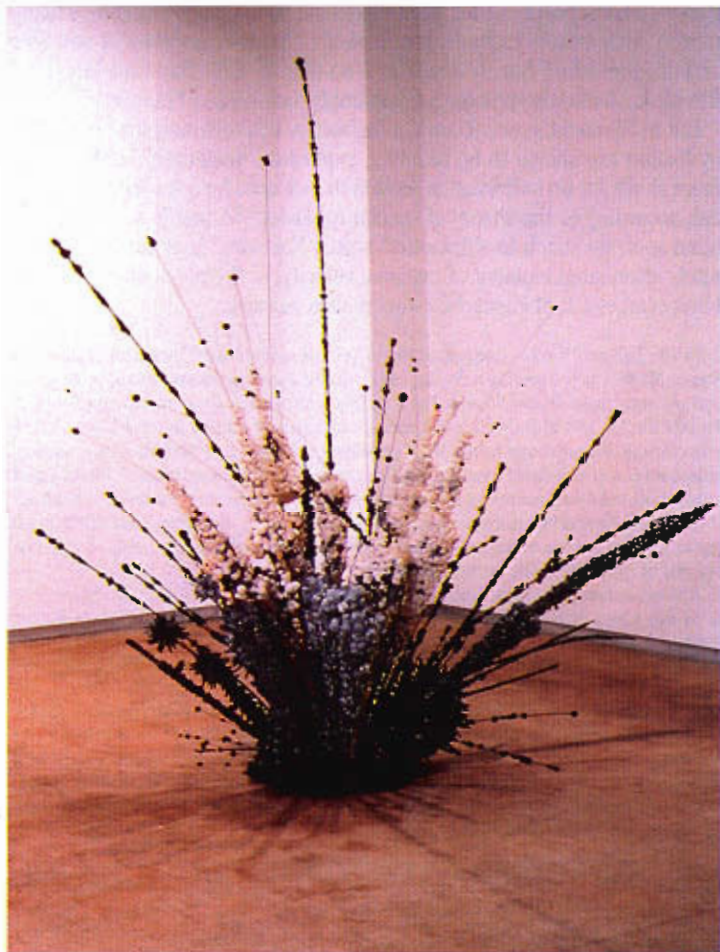
In her present work, she has tended to make the drawings seem more solid and substantial—more real—than the sometimes scribbly, spatially diffident sculptures. Tightly constructed and heavily worked, the drawings are made, over weeks and months, from layers of cross-hatching and parallel strokes, with results that are paradoxically dense and crisp. Steam and smoke are rendered solid enough to seem habitable. One or two sharply



*Above, Demo, 2000, neoprene, Styrofoam, pigment, 16 by 14 1/2 by 8 1/2 feet; at Massachusetts College of Art, Boston.*

*Left top, Exploding Plane, 2000, neoprene, Styrofoam, pigment, dimensions variable; at Bill Maynes Gallery. Photo Liz Deschenes.*

*Left, Explosion, 1998, polymer clay, metal, 3 1/2 by 5 1/2 by 2 1/2 feet; at Bill Maynes Gallery. Private collection, New York. Photo Liz Deschenes.*



silhouetted human figures occasionally appear in the foreground, mostly to indicate scale, but they are ghostly by comparison with the explosions they witness. Until this year the drawings were all in black pencil, varying from soft, deep-black graphite to feathery silverpoint, and sometimes ranging widely in a single image. Naturally, these illusionistically rendered black-and-white drawings are much closer than the sculptures to Fasnacht's photographic sources, and some of the early examples even reproduce the benday dots associated with offset reproductions (as with Roy Lichtenstein and Sigmar Polke); in a few cases, Fasnacht punched bendaylike holes right through the heavy drawing paper. In other drawings, she capitalized on small punctures and tears caused by the pencil, shading them as if they were prior physical facts—or as if drawing were a form of carving in stone.



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The latest drawings, though, including three of the four shown at Bill Maynes, are in full color (they are drawn with colored pencils), and they dispense with all connections to dusty textbooks and venerable newspaper photos. *Blue Pinatubo* shows a volcano in prodigious mid-eruption. As before, there is no fallout, no wreckage, human or otherwise, just an immense, glorious, sun-struck cloud of smoke and ash and a lush streak of countryside below, the blue of the sky and the green of the landscape as cheery as an illustration in a children's book. Amid the luscious, glowing reds and yellows of *Forest Fire*, the details rendered most solidly are the brightest point of flame, while the burnt trees are reduced to flimsy silhouettes, less substantial than the conflagration that consumes them. The new



*Forest Fire, 1999-2000, colored pencil on paper, 40 by 60 inches.*



*Blue Pinatubo, 1999, colored pencil on paper, 40 by 60 inches. The Progressive Corporation, Ohio.*

color range in the drawings, which has emerged at roughly the same time as the increased scale of the sculpture, is matched as well with an extended narrative spectrum. Along with natural and military explosions, there are now more local and namable human disasters, including not only demolition jobs but also fires, plane crashes and even the explosion of the Hindenburg. But Fasnacht's rejection of tidily resolved psychological drama remains resolute. The drawings, by any definition, are epic; the labor (and the love) that have gone into them are evident, and they are deeply engrossing. And, partly as a result of the deliberate nature of their construction, they are oddly static, perfectly poised between unimaginable (and unrepresentable) physical disaster and irresistible visual pleasure.

Introduced by that foundational sneeze, the work with explosives has opened new ground for Fasnacht, but it has ample precedent within her career, including drawings and sculpture based on schematic renderings of fundamentally unchartable things. Using an outdated astronomical map, she fashioned a *Milky Way* (1996-97) from little lumps of polymer clay held together by springs, producing an object as clunky, refined and unstable as our understanding of the cosmos. The loopy diagrams developed by cognitive psychologist Robert Solso to show the eye-scanning patterns of people viewing selected paintings were the basis of several

drawings Fasnacht made during the mid-'90s. In prior map-based work, and in earlier sculptures with less determinate referents, Fasnacht showed a consistent interest in pliable and/or stackable materials that themselves slid between two and three dimensions, from layered blankets to industrial-grade black rubber to laminated wood. There are also drawings from the early '80s of shattering storm windows and splintering stairs that look forward to ideas only lately elaborated. Some of this work has brought Fasnacht into close company with other artists—among the legions who have used maps, Bruce Nauman is of singular importance for his similar commitment to perceptual flip-sides and blind alleys. Cornelia Parker, who is pertinent for similar reasons, also shares Fasnacht's fascination with things exploding in mid-air (as do a number of younger artists, including Sarah Sze, Cai Guo-Qiang, E.V. Day and Matthew Ritchie). All likewise possess a comparably dark sense of humor.

But in Fasnacht's recent work, a distinctive connection is forged, whereby flashes are shown to be blinding, explosions deafening. Time elapses more slowly for an individual in motion than it does for a stationary individual, according to the theory of special relativity.<sup>3</sup> "A tactile sensation is a blind spot; we touch in silhouette," writes Nabokov.<sup>4</sup> It is during the infinitely attenuated moment of maximal velocity, in the momentarily eternal blink of an eye, that Fasnacht's work makes its mark. □

1. In *The Life and Works of Sigmund Freud* (edited and abridged by Lionel Trilling and Steven Marcus, New York, Basic Books, 1961), Ernest Jones describes Freud's professional and personal liaison with Wilhelm Fleiss as "the only really extraordinary experience in Freud's life," p. 186. Fleiss's bizarre theories, which gained Freud's interest if not explicit endorsement, included, among two basic principles, the conviction "that there is a relationship between the mucous membrane of the nose and genital activities." Fleiss's first publication, in 1897, announced a new syndrome which he termed the "nasal reflex neurosis." It comprised "headache, neuralgic pains widely distributed . . . disturbances of the internal organs, of the circulation, respiration, and digestion—a very wide net. . . . All . . . could be relieved by applying cocaine to the nose," p. 188.

2. Jay Cantor, *Krazy Kat*, New York, Collier Books, 1987, p. 50.

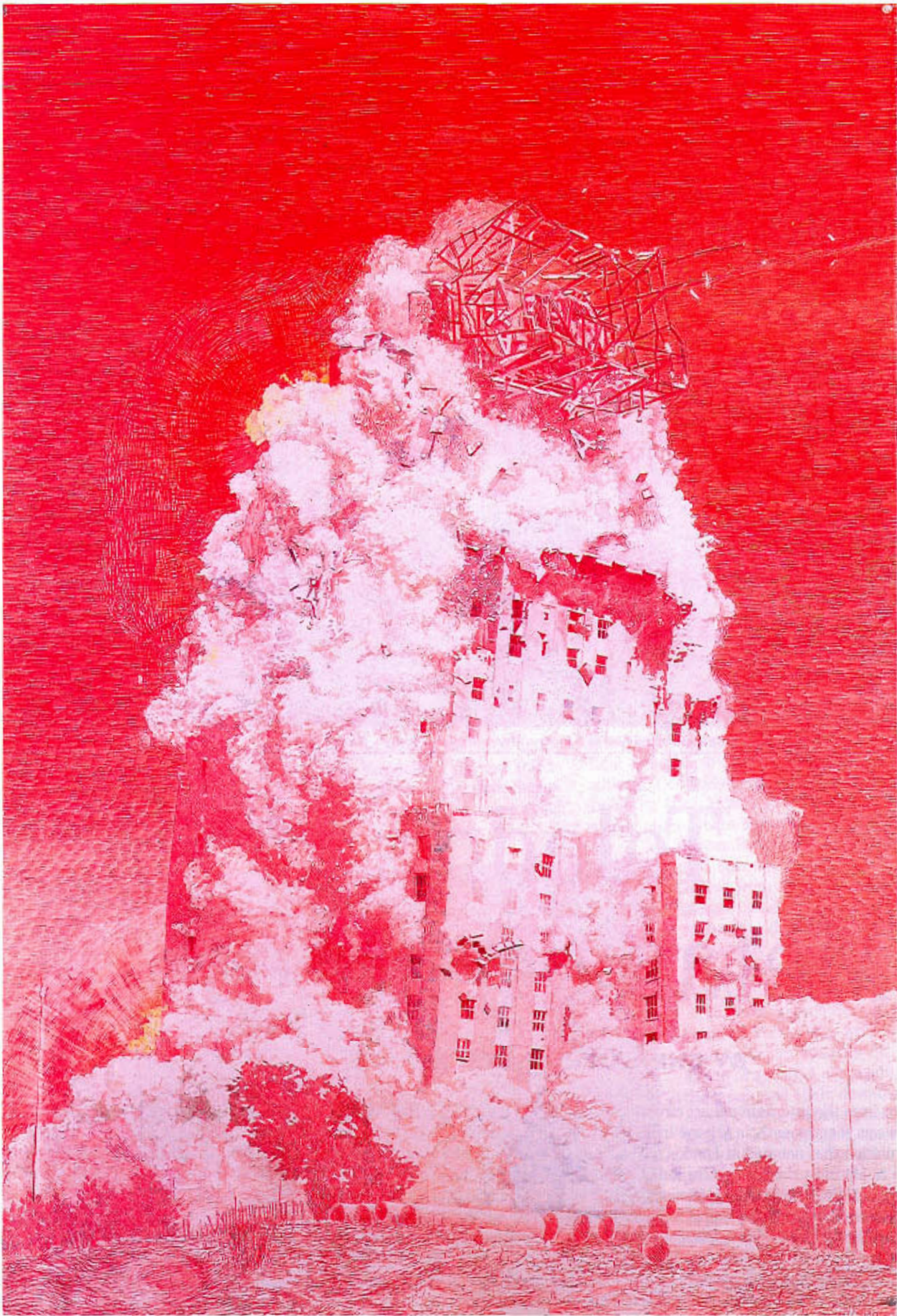
3. As explained by Brian Greene in *The Elegant Universe*, New York, Vintage Books, 1999, p. 4.

4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, New York, Vintage, 1990, p. 98.

*Heide Fasnacht's work was shown at Bill Maynes Gallery, New York [Oct. 12-Nov. 11, 2000]; in "Blow Up: Recent Sculpture & Drawings by Heide Fasnacht," at the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass. [Mar. 18-June 11, 2000], and in "Rapture," at the Bakalar and Huntington galleries, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston [Jan. 20-Mar. 4, 2000]. Exploding Plane will be on view in "Energy Inside" at Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa [June 1-Sept. 16, 2001].*

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*Hotel Demolition,  
2000, colored  
pencil on paper,  
60 by 40 inches.  
Private collection,  
New Jersey.*