

Art On Paper

Vol. 4, No. 1
September-October 1999
US \$10/Can \$12

Special on Photography

Sudek/Brassai

A. D. Coleman:
A Primer for Collectors

William Mortensen:
An Exchange

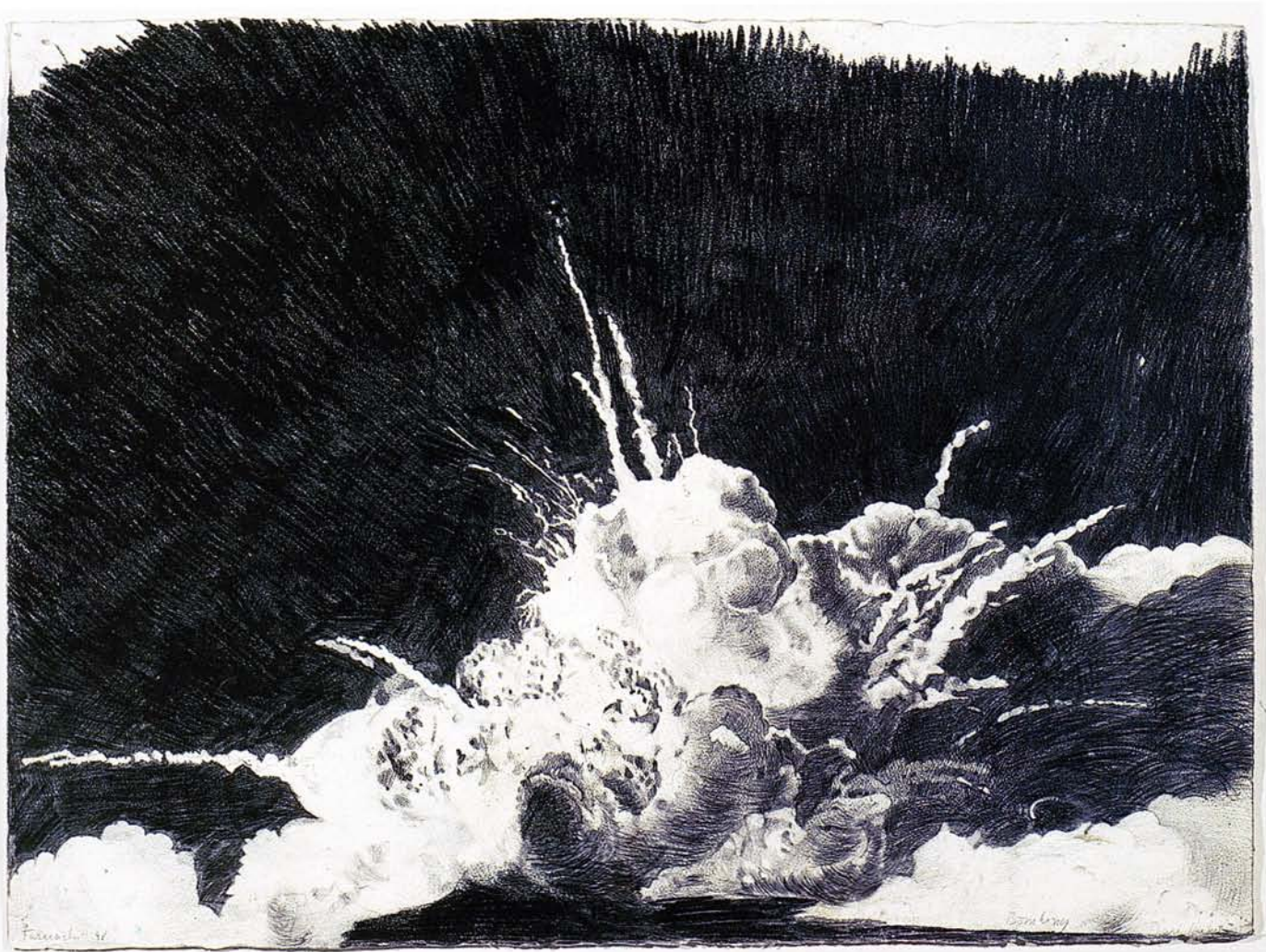
Index 1996-99



Blast Zones!

Heide Fasnacht's Recent Drawings

by Nancy Princenthal

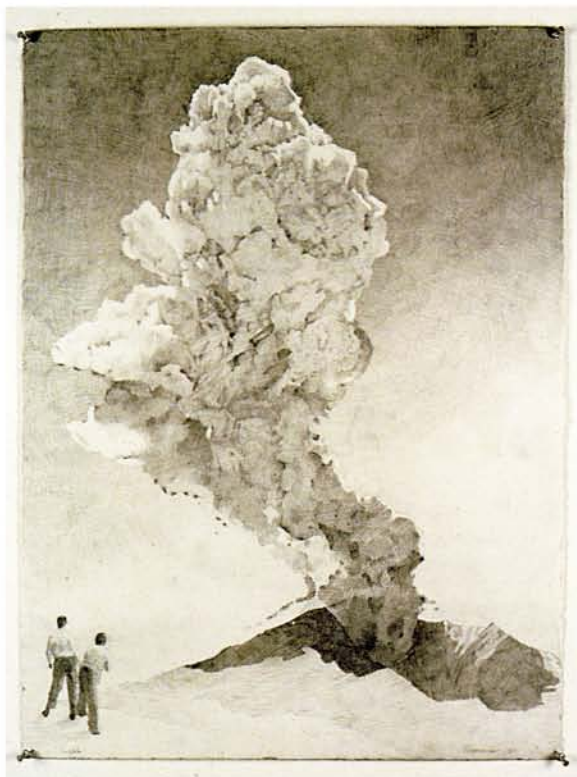


What did Eadweard Muybridge show us that we didn't know before? What exactly is it that stop-action photography captures? Nothing, really, because what we see are stable objects on inert pieces of paper: manifest immobility. And everything, because that's as close as we have yet gotten, or are likely to approach anytime soon, to picturing the way things work. Even scrutinized at the level of subatomic physics, energy can be seen only as wave or particle, but not, crucially, both at once.

Our visible world, full of animate things in continuous motion, is a complex structure of perceptual approximations. It is a puzzle that fascinates Heide Fasnacht, whose recent drawings, like the sculptures to which they relate, are static images of phenomena that have no meaning at rest. Mostly based on photographs from slightly dated science textbooks and magazines, they show volcanoes and geysers, sneezers, fire breathers, and bomb blasts on sea and land. These convulsive eruptions of bodies, and bodies of land, are massively (if sometimes only momentarily) consequential. Fasnacht says they are variants on "an accidental moment, a moment that changes everything," transformations she celebrates,

to rise from a sea of parallel strokes and unfold within a stiffly cross-hatched sky. But the big, full head of the explosion is executed in marks ranging from fastidious to quite serenely reckless, describing a pitted surface less evocative of smoke than of coral or pumice; at the very top, the blast cloud reaches improbably to a soft white peak, like meringue. *Old Faithful*, as its name suggests, is a sharp, precisely rendered image, two trees standing witness to a finely cross-hatched plume of water, a drawing straight and hard as a marble column. In the lighter but equally tidy surface of *Couple*, pencil strokes range from soft and feathery to cross-hatched and regular, the nominal subjects—two diminutive

(Page 45)
Heide Fasnacht,
Bombing, charcoal
on paper (22x30
in.), 1999. All pho-
tographs courtesy
Bill Maynes Gallery,
New York.



(Left)
Heide Fasnacht,
Couple, graphite on
paper (30x22-1/2
in.), 1998.

(Right)
Heide Fasnacht,
Geyser, graphite on
paper (30x22-1/2
in.), 1998.



in doubled paradox, by rendering ephemeral events as monumentally physical images on paper.

Fasnacht has always made finished drawings alongside—rather than simply in preparation for—her work as a sculptor, and her range and skill as a draftsman are formidable. Some of the recent works, like a drawing of a bomb blast over water taken from a photo of Pearl Harbor, are studies in refinement. Tiepolo-like tendrils of white smoke are picked out of a thick, inky sky, and the underbelly of an angry cloud is delicately drawn in curving parallel strokes, while tiny pinpricks texture the sky from behind, the careful grace of every mark belying the crude force of the drawing's subject. Another *Bomb* detonated over water causes smoke

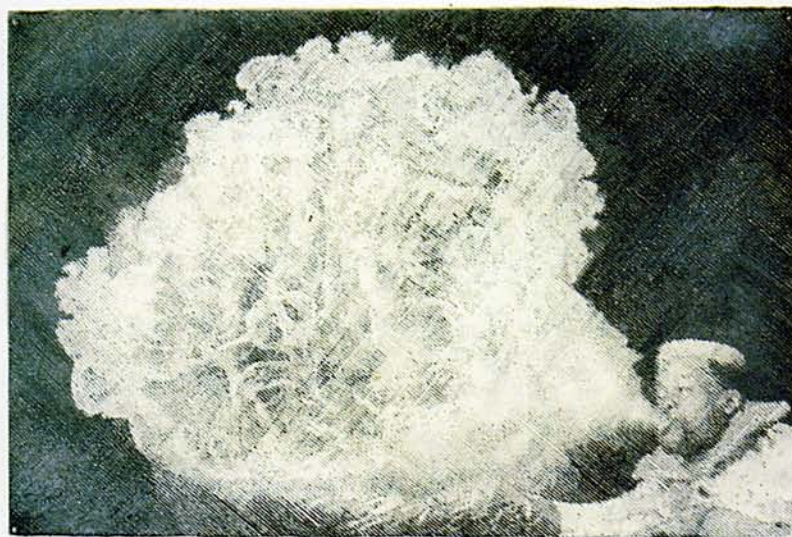
men watching a volcano erupt—ungrounded and insubstantial, transfixed but not engaged by the cataclysmic geothermal event and the gently towering, sun-struck mass of smoke that is its issue.

On the other hand, many drawings are rendered with considerable ferocity, the heavy paper worked and reworked almost to death, with an outcome that Fasnacht has some sport with; in a couple of the most recent drawings, minor tears in the paper are highlighted, even redrawn, as sharply shadowed dimples. More often, the holes that appear in the paper are produced deliberately (with a leatherworking tool) in regular patterns resembling the raster dots most familiar from offset newsprint reproductions and their Pop magnifications (in

many cases, the raster dots are rendered by pencil alone). The vigorously drawn *Geysir* is liberally perforated with such hole-punched passages, as if the propulsive energy of the skyward-venting shaft of water was blown right through the paper. In some drawings, such as *Human Volcano*, propriety is challenged more by subject matter than by technique. Here, the impossibly big, roiling cloud expelled from the fire-breathing subject's mouth is given considerably more attention than the performer's face. Indeed, if his expression can be discerned, it is one of staged amazement, as if he is willing himself to be a passive instrument of this phenomenon; his right hand reaches out in a broad, carnivalesque gesture of verification. More mundane, though hardly more prepossessing, is the apparently colossal sneeze that Fasnacht has re-

of geophysics and biology are compromised by unmistakable period details (e.g., men as observers in white shirts and skinny ties) and, even more, by a certain period-flavored political vulnerability (the dubious fascination with big bangs). On the other hand, Fasnacht is equally game about denaturalizing various conventional modes of realist depiction—and, especially, at mixing them up. There is, for example, the suggestion in some of the more heavily worked drawings that explosive events have left a physical register (in semiotic terms, these drawings are “indexical”); such images have the same relationship to their subjects as a rubbing does to a gravestone—or, in traditional photography, as a photo has to whatever blocked the light that struck the film. This kind of documentation works at cross purposes, in Fasnacht's drawings, with the masterfully

Heide Fasnacht,
Human Volcano,
graphite on paper
(40x60 in.), 1998.



recorded. Again, the main event is not the subject's face (which is discreetly cropped and pushed to the corner), but rather the billowing cloud of sputum exploding from his mouth. This image appears in two drawings, one positive (face and sneeze light against a dark ground) and the other reversed. The rendering, particularly in the first, is sharp and adamant, but both have a disjunctive, unreal quality that is characteristic, to one degree or another, of all Fasnacht's recent drawings: the weight of the graphite on the paper seems more believable, and far more substantial, than the science the photos support.

The competing authority of empirical observation and art-minded representation is, in fact, a central issue in Fasnacht's recent work. And both are made to perform (at something of a handicap) with the full weight of history behind them. Thus the ostensibly transcendent—and transparent—data

rendered illusionistic imagery and creates particular havoc when run across the photo-based patterns of raster dots. It hardly matters that the result of the science vs. art picto-machy is a foregone conclusion: it is, of course, a draw (with honorable mention, perhaps, to pun lovers, of whom Fasnacht is one). But both sides emerge with dignity intact, and perhaps even a few skills sharpened.

One direction these drawings point is toward work engaged with issues of visual reproduction in the mass media. Fasnacht is very interested, for example, in the Pop-Conceptualist hybrids of Sigmar Polke, whose densely layered drawings (and signature use of gridded dots at all scales) are relevant to her own. But she is equally drawn to work that addresses strictly perceptual problems, such as Markus Raetz's two- and three-dimensional studies, in all sizes, of the relationship between vision,

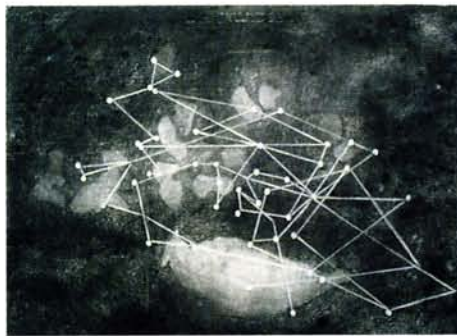
(Top)
Heide Fasnacht,
Rapid Eye Movement: Anatomy Lesson, charcoal on paper (22x30 in.), 1997.

(Bottom)
Heide Fasnacht,
Explosion at Sea, polymer clay and metal (14x8x10 in.), 1998.

brain, and body; also pertinent are Raetz's arch humor and deft (if extremely difficult) illusionism. But so, too, is the famously agonized work of Alberto Giacometti, whose sculptures, as David Sylvester writes, "are objects that do not merely crystallise transient sensations but show the conditions in which transient sensations happen. Their content is not only the what but also the how of visual experience: their subject is not only what was seen, but also the act of seeing" (*Looking at Giacometti*, New York, 1994, p. 15). The boundaries most painfully contested in Giacometti's work—between solid form and space, vision and memory—are the same ones Fasnacht finds so provocatively elusive.

Fasnacht also shares with Giacometti (and Raetz) a distinctive approach to the relationship between two dimensions and three, whereby conventional roles—the putative solidity and stability of sculpture, and the complementary abstraction and attenuation of drawing—are so thoroughly challenged that they sometimes seem to simply trade places. Certainly the way Fasnacht works the paper can be characterized as sculptural; all the current drawings seem more physically substantial, more built up, chiseled back, and polished than the sculptures to which they relate. Those that take the same subjects (explosions, eruptions) as the drawings are delicate, tensile, and visually elusive. Both wall-hung and freestanding, they are fashioned from bits of polymer clay clotted around bristling, bursting, blooming, and wilting configurations of wire. In some cases, the early stages of the recent sculpture involve forcing urethane foam through wire mesh, evoking the torqued Cartesian grids of digital design programs: solid form pulled out of pure line.

Blurring boundaries between mediums is a long-established practice for Fasnacht, whose sculpture has almost always involved working up from flat planes, starting in the early 1980s with laminated plywood and including, more recently, sheets of industrial-grade rubber. Often (exclusively, in the early work), the sculpture was hung on the wall. A body of work from the mid-90s consists of nodes of cast neoprene or modeled polymer clay held within networks of coiled springs: as with particle physics, the observer looks in



vain for certainty of position. Indeed, these sculptures are largely based on scientific observation, with particular reliance on fallible information. One source was an outdated map of the stars, rendered fictional by newer research (which still, necessarily, results in charts of the positions stars held millions

of years ago). Another was a series of charts of the patterns of eye movement (also a series of drawings) observed in viewers of famous paintings, as exhaustive in method as they are dubious in value. Similarly, perhaps, Rorschach tests have also served Fasnacht as working templates: assessing vision for psychologically diagnostic traits becomes, in her work, as much mirror as screen.

However deflected and otherwise guarded by irony, psychology is not by any means absent from Fasnacht's work. Even in the early, fully abstract wooden sculpture, she took advantage of emotional inclinations in the language of Post-minimalism, which tended to concern itself with problems of tension and compression, gravity and stress. The current work evokes a rondo of interconnected associations, beginning, inescapably, with anger. Just as inevitably, these drawings of geysers, volcanoes, and other cataclysms both natural and manmade convey a sense of terror—and perhaps, in turn, a touch of sublimity. And hardly more obscure, in these images of rapturous detonation, is a reference to sex. All are made the more potent by a generous dose of humor—humor as a vent for rage, and a stimulant; as a defense against fear; and as pure pleasure, the last not least. Awesome, erotic, risible, wrong, Fasnacht's drawings line up experience in some decidedly unexpected ways. But perhaps the most important thing they do is take time. "Drawing is a way to be held in a moment that is fleeting," Fasnacht says. Lavishing attention on events that take shape only as momentary ruptures, fashioning positive form out of punctures in the

perceptual field, she performs a definitive 20th-century transaction, and—like a photographer making imagery out of light—converts energy into visible mass.



Nancy Princenthal is a widely published art critic. She is a contributing editor to *Art On Paper*, for which she regularly writes the column "Artist's Book Beat."