



PETER DARACH

Cover: Anne & Jack by L.H. Panel of Child's Song.

Artspace Gallery
Aberdeen

PETER DARACH
Me and My Family

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Peter Darach

"Bravery and composure in the face of a powerful enemy, great hardship, a problem that arouses aversion — it is a *victorious* condition which the tragic artist singles out, which he glorifies. In the face of tragedy the warlike soul celebrates its Saturnalias; whoever is accustomed to suffering, whoever seeks out suffering, the *heroic* man extols his existence by means of tragedy — for him alone does the tragic poet pour this draught of sweetest cruelty"

(Nietzsche: *Twilight of the Idols*).

"With idea, with sound, or with gesture, the *Duende* chooses the brim of the well for his open struggle with the creator. Angel and muse escape in the violin or in musical measure, but the *Duende* draws blood, and in the healing of the wound that never quite closes, all that is unprecedented and invented in a man's work has its origin"

(Lorca: *The Duende*).

Fate has framed the work in this show: it marks the opening and closing of a chapter in the artist's life. Two years ago, Peter Darach moved to a steading near Dunfermline, with his wife Anne and his two sons Tim and Jack. Bonnyton Farm was a vessel in which they all embarked: Peter turning a barn into the studio for the large paintings that are the backbone of his work, and Anne creating a space for her printmaking. Periodically, swallows dipped and wove the length of the studio; and in winter the colour-dusted wings of butterflies lay on the floor. Six months before this exhibition opened, Anne died, despite all her determination to live, from a savage and insidious spread of cancer. The blow was tragic, not just because of Darach's personal loss, nor because Anne's writing and printmaking was cruelly nipped in the bud, but because it was the final blast of a wierd and fatal wind that coursed through this passage of his life, driving the painter before it and filling his canvas. (Darach actually works on cardboard and hardboard; a flatness against which the images stick like wet leaves blown in a storm.)

Fate leaves its fingerprints — if we choose to read them — on all our lives; but the sort of conspiracy with fate that certain artists establish through their work gives an extra twist to the twining of art and life: it is a kind of divination in which, through the work's aperture, or the loophole of its creation, the bare outline of a force that is not so much within or without us as *through* us is gloved at its thinnest. 'Only an artist can divine the meaning of life,' wrote Novalis: but the cruelty of this privilege is that the artist is himself bait for the trap whose catch we enjoy. Darach's paintings are riddles to which he knows no more answers than we can; but their ripples spread forward as well as back: he is faced with the hindsight of images whose premonitions now make a terrible sense.

Unlike music's tendency to penetrate, to seduce us, painting has to be seduced; we have to feel — and sometimes force — our way into it. These are big pictures in every sense, and they don't yield at first sight. They have a breath-taking, luminous lyricism — look at '*Cats Treasure*' or '*Cat's Adventure*' if in doubt — but it is balanced by a passionate awkwardness, a Delphic and fragmentary obscurity. Their discourse is faithful to source: sometimes exact, immediately and self-evidently 'right'; sometimes rough-hewn and unfinished. Their sense is striking, brilliant in some passages; in others we have to dig and sift it out from a resistant matrix. But neither the apparent ease, nor the clumsiness, are careless: Darach is an archaeologist unearthing images, but never cleaning them up into a spurious tidiness. As Olson said:

"Whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle
And the dirt
just to make clear
where they came from."

Description of a Difficulty

Darach's paintings are about figures; they concentrate, in an almost obsessive way, on relations between figures: but these figures don't always declare themselves openly; they remain raw and unrefined, still caught in the net of brushstrokes that first conjured them up. Their existence can be tentative, elusive; but not

necessarily fragile on that account: requiring, rather, our collusion to bring them into being; having an effect that is all the more potent for depending on our peripheral vision — just as the shadowy elements in a dream may have more gravity than those more readily definable. They don't step out into an illusory, naturalistic light; they are true to their imaginal roots, to the opportunism of fantasy, to memory's torque. For eyes accustomed to the staging of fantasy, to the enactment of psychic reality in terms borrowed from the outside world and returned to it at a due rate of imaginary interest, many of these figures will appear distorted, grotesque: the human body — not just any body, but a known and loved body — is strung, stretched like treading, or condensed into a few mnemonic lines. The feel of the painting veers between a luminous sensuality, a form breathed onto the surface, a mist of colour almost hovering off it (Darach's use of spray in the later paintings is masterly); and a blunt, contrary awkwardness, a kind of counter-painting, from which the figure barely emerges: the economy of their surface, the smoothed flatness of the board actually encompass an extraordinary variety of mark, so that the energy feels as if it is *in* the painting, not just at its surface.

Some of the paintings (*Cat's Adventure*, or *Ride In A Broken Bed*, for example) do have an effect that is immediately compelling; not in any facile or effortless way, but rather in the way that one senses behind the initial difficulty of a poem the struggle of an invisible catch in the net. The trick is, to let go of the rational eye, with its demands for clarity and definition, and to 'see' with feeling: in a sense, these are frankly subjective works (subjective in the way that Kierkegaard meant when he wrote 'Most men are blunted I's'), and they appeal to the exercise of a corresponding subjectivity in our response to them. In *Me And My Angel*, for example, there is a monstrous figure between the artist and the muse/model figure on the right: it is gross, grotesque, indefinite; on the threshold of legibility it threatens to exist. At first sight it sticks in the eye; it resists recognition, is totally indigestible: it is meant to be as unwieldy and recalcitrant for us as it was for the painter. For Darach it is an image of the warped wretchedness that being an artist entails (what Cocteau called 'professional deformation'). It is perhaps something like an awful, dreadful presence that is at once conjured and exorcised ('Every angel is dreadful' is how Rilke opens the Second Duino Elegy, which has a lot to say about our radical discomfort in relation to what lies beyond the bounds of us.)

Within the same painting sometimes a single 'figure' will comprehend, hold together as focus, other subsidiary or eccentric figures: in *Lovers Changing Places* the central figure, with its stumpy oriental stance (one of its sources is the image of a Chinese poet) is a pivot, around which revolves a ghostly frieze of presences — youthful and gracious in the right, haggard and dead on the left. Or in *Jack's Birth* the left-hand group or conglomerate of images is, in every sense, 'held' by an embracing, comprehensive figure. In other paintings there is one particular feminine presence that seems to promote herself or to gain ascendancy: for example, the extraordinary white figure whose lap and legs soar out from the grey background in *Child's Song*. In many of the more recent pictures, painted in the shadow of Anne's death, a luminous woman sings out. In her glowing red basque she dominates *Ride In A Broken Bed*; full of sexual glamour, she straddles the heraldic male. In the series *Cat's Dream* and *Cat's Treasure* she appears in more and more radiant form — shadowed always by more painful or broken figures — until she reaches an apotheosis in the astonishing *Cat's Adventure*.

The space in these paintings is not the familiar theatrical space of an externalised inner world; the illusory rhetoric of a 'figurative' space in which psyche speaks a language borrowed from, or tributary to, an outwardly perceived reality — an 'inner' world ventriloqually projected onto the outer: it is a truly imaginal space, one in which the image is refracted through memory and desire. 'Fantasy' means at root 'to make visible'; but this 'vision' is not seen and then somehow transcribed: it trails from the tip of a brush, it arises from a blind, restless probing. Forms are found, tested, broken, melted down and re-cast: the result may be both *recherche* and spontaneous, for although fragments of their history survive (the relics of a figure to the left of the artist in *Me And My Angel*, for instance), they have been metamorphosed — almost as if they were an iconographic scaffolding to be removed once their purpose was served.

Darach doesn't like to be seen 'rummaging around': the actual surface of the paintings is smooth, pared down; yet this flatness contains an amazing range of emphasis and inflection, and passages that look effortless are sometimes hard-won. This compression of the surface — in places it has been sanded down and repainted — means that the painting cannot be unpeeled, and none of the usual archaeology of the image can be deduced: traces of the original drawing, blocked out in black wash, work on the same level as the finishing touches (as in dream the recent day-events are fused with earlier memories).

The initial shock of Darach's paintings — a shock compounded by their alternate generosity and stubbornness — the roughage that prevents their being assimilated too quickly, lies in their mix of clarity and obscurity; a mix in which the clarity — bold and imposing, or in a kind of numinous suspension — gradually becomes mysterious, while the obscurity — gauche and lopsided, flickering shadows in the cave of the mind's eye — seems more and more essential. It is only by exercising our 'negative capability' — Keats's term for the capacity to tolerate uncertainty and confusion — that we can begin to feel out their sense; and even then there are some paintings that will remain obstinate and defiant to the end.

Household Names

'The spirit's life and being, therefore, consists in the carrying, birth and upbringing of oneself. Only insofar as a man leads a fortunate marriage with himself and brings up a fine family is he fit for marriage and family life in general. The act of self-embracing.' (Novalis, *Fragmente*.)

The world of Darach's paintings is rooted in a domestic mythology: the figures in it are at once familiar and impersonal. All the women are Anne, and at the same time they are not to be identified solely with her, but *through* her; they have the look and the feel of her, they conjure her vividly and they are also strangely translated: like some of Picasso's women, they are sometimes outlandish or displaced, as though they don't fit comfortably into the world. Some of these women give themselves to us, but with an ease that is seductive, even dangerous. What is given — to the eye — in one place, is taken away at another; below the waist they are flagrant, alluring, but above we run into difficulties: what their radiant nakedness discloses is as slippery, as ambiguous as the offering Goya's *Maja Desnuda* makes of her body to the anonymous spectator's gaze.

These women are glamorous, full of power; they are earthed angels, their messages are prophetic, fit for a king (but the artist's crown in *Me And My Angel* is tinted with irony): they connect with the male, they ride him, they tangle with him; but the connection is various in character. If it is dominant, triumphant in *Ride In A Broken Bed*, in *Revolving Dance* it is more ambiguous: He and She are in a ring (a circus ring, a wedding ring), she appears to have the upper hand; but they are both equally caught up in the roll of the green (there is an echo of this in the green enfolded arms of the recumbent male in the former painting, and there a feminine figure is slipped close behind his head, almost as if emerging from it . . .). It is sometimes as if what the man seems to encounter outside him has a secret dependence on him: indeed Darach's paintings are like altars to the anima, icons of his own reflected soul.

In the later paintings the aerial lightness of these women is shadowed: there is another side to their allure. In *Ride In A Broken Bed* the flamboyant left-hand figure is balanced by a more disturbed — and disturbing — figure on the right (yet the brown outline of the corsage is still there as a reminder). In *Cat's Dream* the open invitation of the right-hand figure's bottom half is accompanied by a more pensive leaning figure, while her upper half is ensnared, dislocated in her dream, so that the two seem almost to share the lower limbs.

In *Cat's Treasure* (and 'cat' was one of Anne's alter egos) the lovely sensual figure is echoed by a dumb and broken black form below. These sinister doubles are conscious now, for they are painted in the face of Anne's decline; whereas before they were mysterious and premonitory. In *Inside Or Out* the tension appears at its cruellest: on the right the deadly body-snatcher (who has already made his presence felt in *Changing Places*) threatens a Persephone-like girl, whose form is already warping and buckling. Who is the ambiguous masquerading figure on the left, gagging the figure below and at the same time warding off the underworld apparition on the right? I cannot say: one of the difficulties with these paintings — and their corresponding dividend — is that personalities are multiple. Anne is Anne, and Peter is Peter, but they are also each other, as in any real marriage; or the 'identity' of Anne is distributed across various personae; or the same figure has the capacity to hold different aspects. The Portuguese poet Pessoa, who actually wrote under three or four pseudonyms, each with a distinct personality, wrote:

"And just as things are splinters
Of being, and are dispersed,
I break the soul to slivers
And into different persons."

One of the clearest paintings in the whole show was finished after Anne's death. *Cat's Adventure* is stunning: I think that anyone struggling with Darach's work — as one does have to — should refer to this as a kind of touchstone; it has an uncanny authority. It is a brilliant, electrically charged triple (or quadruple, if you include the marginal left-hand figure) portrait, an extraordinary tribute to her creative contradictions, to the enigma left in suspense by her death. Amongst her papers was found this poem:

*"You wonder why I can
straddle this fence so easily
It's my secret
At night I'm a dancer
doing high kicks
In the daytime I'm
a strong man
with the circus."*

Tickets for a Trip to the Self

I have dwelt on the strangeness of Darach's work because that is the refusal it presents to first glance. It is also the obol one must pay to cross over to the shadow-realm of Hades; and the laws of the underworld are not those of everyday reality. There is a strong element of will in his contrariness, but it is often a will bent back on itself; an acute sense of when a painting, having once flowered, tempts one to close it up by working it out too far. Sometimes you have to play hide-and-seek with yourself, paint with the left hand (or, as happens once or twice, incorporate your real child's handiwork), trick yourself or let yourself be tricked: the distinction is impossible, for as Novalis said: 'The greatest magician would be he who could so bewitch himself that his sorcery would appear to him a strange, autonomous phenomenon. Could this not be the case with us?' Honesty is less the impulsive saying of what first comes into your head than the dogged detection of what lies behind. The 'compound of mistakes, stumbles and repeats of the same mistake' out of which much of Darach's work springs is not the by-product of nonchalance, but the result of an excruciating attention. It is the monstrous (what *shows up*) that portends: just as the excommunicated aspects of psyche appear in the distorted, heretical forms of 'psychotic' art, so the profound repercussions of his painting are due to his engagement with an imaginal reality that follows rules different from those in the daylight world.

The strangeness is not without precedents. If you want to follow their trail, there are echoes of Picasso, Beckmann or Schiele. There is a close parallel, for example, between Schiele's *The Family* (1918) and *Me And My Family (Jack's Birth)* (1981); though what in the Schiele is carried through or across the differentiated figures by the composition, is translated by Darach into a compound figure, a familial organism, in which the identities of 'mother', 'father' or 'child' can no longer be fully distinguished. The tradition — it is boldly European — that Darach belongs to, belongs to him, because it is his nourishment, he has digested it: it is the sounding-board that gives his individual voice a harmonic resonance. But no amount of precedents soften the jolt, the psychic shock that some of these big paintings produce. The imagery challenges you, you struggle with it, you take it in, and as you do so, you find it haunting you, until you begin to wonder how you did without it: that is the signature of an art that is profoundly touching.

The 'subjective' is a problem for all of us, whether we like it or not: it has become a kind of ghetto, into which is gathered everything that does not pass the scrutiny of objectivity. To the extent that its imagery bends or breaks the bounds of representation, and to the degree that it abandons the alibi of the perceptible, it enters the realm of what Darach calls 'irrational reality'. If it appears deviant or devious, that is partly because our culture has never accorded it the same recognition as the outer reality from which it is supposedly segregated; so that it has had to make itself felt indirectly, through disturbance and disruption of the conventions of that outer-orientated picture of reality. But just as one sees the fit of even the most far-fetched translation of outward perception, so there is an equivalent motion of the soul that feels the truth of imaginal reality. One can feel this pull in Peter Darach's work; the gravity of a man who dares to bring into the light of day images excavated from the depths of his own experience.

David Maclagan, May 1983.



Revolving painting picture dance.



Jack's Birth. Drawing No. 2. Pencil.



Jack's Birth. Drawing No. 3. Pencil.



Around the bush.



Top of the tree.



Garden path.



Give the dog a bone.



The poet struggles uphill while the angels sit by.



Hen woman and 3 others.



2 figures.



(Annunciation).



Ride in a broken bed.



Casting off II.



Moon rising: 3 constellations.



Whirlpool Assailant.



Child's Song.



Taken back in May.



Picnic with Thunderbird at Jack's birth.



Me and My Angel.



Lovers silently changing places in the snow.



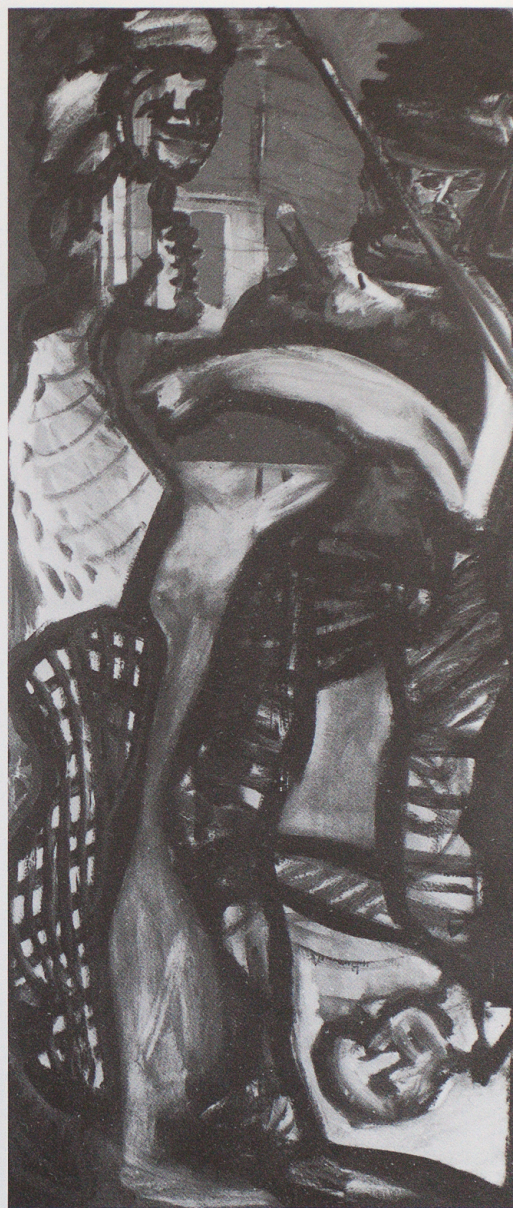
Inside or out.



Last glance back.



Cat's Dream.



Artist and friends.



Cat's Treasure.



Cat's Adventure.

Anne and Tim



Mr. Sun and Mrs. Moon by Tim. Black chalk and white paint on paper.



Untitled monoprint. Coloured with pastel.



19/91. Etching.

*The huntsman brings a gift to the Gods playing to
determine the length of his life.*



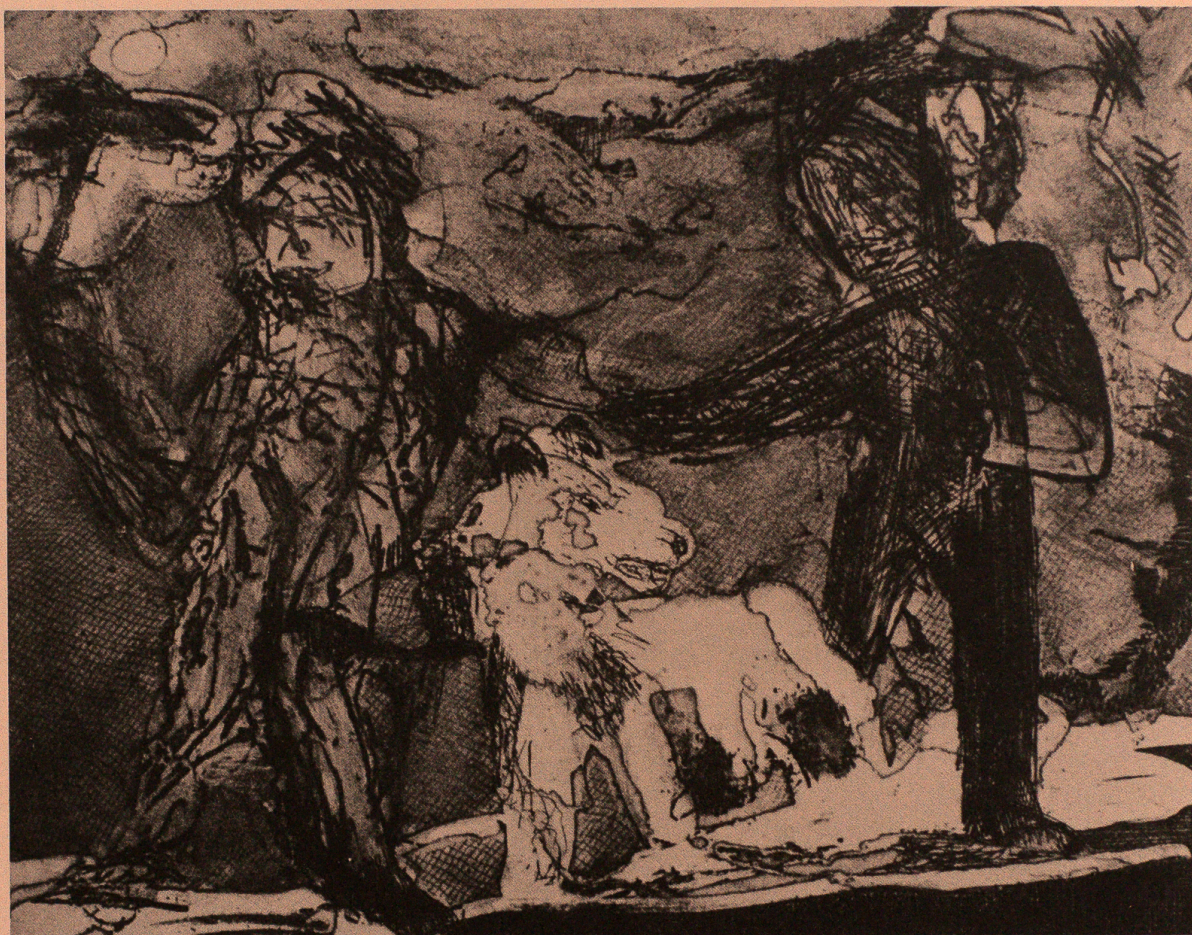
Untitled. Unfinished etching.





Wrecked boat. Monprint. Black on off white.

◀ *Head and little figure.* Monprint. Black on off white.



he knows the road and will go with you
he will take with him a steal-coloured dog with white spots
and with a head which is white between eyes and muzzle
he will carry a stick with a wooden bird attached to its top
if you happen to pass a juniper bush
he will stop to pluck off several sprigs to store in his coat pocket
he will lead you over a narrow bridge
and then a goose flying slowly overhead will cause him to stop
and turn around
and YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN NOW



Grotesque figures (3-3-83) by Tim. Red felt pen on yellow paper.

◀ *Following the man with the juniper stalk. Coloured etching with poem.*

Catalogue

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Picnic with Thunderbird at Jack's Birth.

Oil on board. 8'0" x 8'0".

p. 17.

2

Child's Song.

Oil on board. 8'0" x 8'0".

p. 15.

3

Me and My Angel.

Oil on board. 8'0" x 8'0".

Self-portrait on card, collaged on.

p. 18.

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Revolving painting picture dance.

Oil on board. 6'9" x 8'0".

p. 7.

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Lovers silently changing places in the snow.

Oil on board. 8'0" x 8'0".

p. 19.

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Inside or out.

Oil on board. 7'0" x 6'0".

Atomic submarine painted by Tim,
collaged on.

p. 20. *Not in exhibition*

7

Ride in a broken bed.

Oil on board. 8'0" x 8'0".

Tim painted the child.

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Artist and Friends.

Oil on board. 7'0" x 3'0".

Portrait on card, collaged on.

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Taken back in May.

Oil on board. 6'3½" x 4'0".

Collection: *Scottish Arts Council*.

p. 16. *Not in exhibition*.

10

Cat's Dream (An Olympia).

Oil on board. 8'0" x 8'0".

Tim painted the cat.

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Cat's Treasure.

Oil on board. 8'0" x 8'0".

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Cat's Adventure.

Oil on board. 8'0" x 8'0".

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Last glance back.

Oil on board. 7'0" x 6'0".

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Whirlpool assailant.

Oil on board. 7'0" x 3'0".

p. 14. *Not in exhibition*.

Catalogue — *Small Pictures*

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Casting Off II.

11 ½" × 25".

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8

Top of the Tree.

14" × 12 ½".

p. 10.

10

Paying for a painting with an apple.

12 ½" × 11 ¾".

12

Lovers at night.

10" × 11 ¾".

13

Visitor bonfire night.

11 ½" × 18 ¾".

19

Sketch for a Child's song.

18 ¾" × 12".

22

Lovers I.

(Sketch from Rops). 12" × 15 ¾".

24

Lovers III.

9 ¼" × 13 ¼".

34

A few moments in the dark with 2 girls.

14 ¾" × 11 ½".

35

The game (being sick).

14 ½" × 11 ½".

37

You must not shoot the swallows.

14 ½" × 11 ½".

39

Moonlight.

10 ¼" × 11 ½".

43

Hen woman and three others.

14 ¾" × 16 ½".

p. 11.

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4 figures, 2 very close together.

15" × 11 ¾".

73

Something leaving home.

12" × 16 ½".

74

Moon rising: 3 constellations.

14 ½" × 20 ½".

p. 13.

81

The poet struggles uphill while the angels sit by.

12 ¼" × 13 ½".

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Garden path.

12 ¼" × 13 ½".

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83

Give the dog a bone.

12 ¼" × 13 ½".

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84

(Annunciation).

14" × 15".

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101

Around the bush.

12" × 16 ½".

p. 10.

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2 figures.

15 ¼" × 18".

p. 11. *Not in exhibition.*

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