



VERA KLEMENT

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY | ART GALLERY

VERA
KLEMENT



gvsu.edu/artgallery



Front/Back Cover: **Witnesses**, 2017 (detail)

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VERA KLEMENT



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1121 Thomas J. and Marcia J. Haas Center for Performing Arts
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gvsu.edu/artgallery



“Still Working At Ninety!”
— VERA KLEMENT

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by MAX KLEMENT

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VERA KLEMENT

MAX KLEMENT

Freelance writer in Evanston, Illinois

Artists grant us the rare privilege of seeing through their eyes. Vera Klement shows us a powerful, personal vision through both her eye and her mind's eye.

The expansive use of white space in Klement's paintings illuminates the objects on the canvas. They are not alienated from each other, rather they are in concert, in dialogue—sharing the canvas. The white canvas invokes a negative space, though silent and seemingly about nothingness, the gessoed white canvas makes the objects placed on it appear sculptural—three dimensional—and creates an entrance to an intimate personal space inviting us to step into her constructed world—a loved world, with all its flaws.

Klement's aesthetic, her personal vision, is heavily influenced by music and literature: chamber music, quartets, solo violin—in which the silence plays as important a role as the sound; poetry in which narrative is stripped away to its bare essence—the absence of words as powerful as the words themselves. Drawing upon her deep reservoir of the iconography of her internal vision, she creates the subjects of her paintings: trees, vessels, human figures; the deep, complex bark of a tree unadorned by branches or leaves; a torso distilled to its key elements, having the same mass and volume of her vessels. Her landscapes are objects as well as color fields and effects—the primal base upon which we stand upright: earth of clay; earth soaked in blood; earth lush with greenery—the foundation that allows for the soaring heights above.

Over time she has added variations on the vessel: tub, bell, boat; sometimes depicted upside-down, their holding, nurturing, living capacity waiting to be refreshed and renewed by the living landscape below. Despite the repetition of images in her paintings,

Klement says that she waits a year before making another painting of similar forms: a superstition which she believes stems from the Jewish prohibition against naming a child after a living relative.

Painting in broad powerful strokes—luminescent and joyous, painterly and colorist—she was influenced by her early artistic experiences in New York and the Abstract Expressionists, a city of high intensity and large gestures; then tempered by the flat restrained landscape and persona of Chicago. This forms the dichotomy in her paintings: the color field reminiscent of the midwestern landscape, of Lake Michigan vanishing into the distant horizon; contrasted with monumental iconic objects, painted with energetic, intense, brush strokes. The relationship between the two images in different genres and media causes them to interact as a diptych created at times by an actual separate panel, elsewhere implied by a piece of glued-on canvas.

Klement says she was also influenced early in her career by Edward Hopper and how he painted aloneness, the solitary figures in a shared space creating an unintentional community, not unlike the interaction of objects in her paintings placed on a bare white gessoed canvas, a Modernist view of a world without certainty or order.

To understand—to fully appreciate—her work, it's helpful to know a little of her biography. Vera was born in 1929 in the Free City of Danzig, now Gdańsk in Poland, and lived in nearby Zoppot—a resort town on the Baltic Sea. Danzig was designated as a semi-autonomous city-state by the League of Nations following World War I; the population was largely German, with much smaller populations of Poles, Russians, and Russian-Jews. By 1933, the Nazi Party had fifty percent of the Danzig Senate, and before long the

city was completely under their rule. Less than one year after she and her family fled Danzig for the United States, the Second World War began—in Danzig.

In her unpublished memoir *BLUNT EDGE—The Making of a Painter: Vera Klement*, she describes Zoppot and the themes that appear repeatedly in her work drawn on her memories of this childhood paradise.

Zoppot, my muse, my paradise lost, I remember you as in a dream—a luminous vision with a moderate climate and little humidity to diffuse the clarity of blue or sharpness of edge. A contrast of light and shadow, of warmth and coolness, of clouds forming gradually in the far distance to predict a rainfall several days hence.

Light and dark, beauty and evil, life and death, that juxtaposition that in time was to become the underpinning of my painting.. When the Nazis instituted their rule and the terrors began I learned about that dark side—the fright.

Light and dark, beauty and evil, life and death. I would add joy and sorrow. Klement’s work is joyous and exuberant; even in her paintings that speak of grief and sorrow those darker images are expressed with a painterly joyousness. These are the common themes to be found throughout Klement’s works over the decades, over a lifetime. She uses the German word *Sehnsucht* to describe her feeling of the “loss of my forest” a feeling of grief: an untranslatable word that suggests the nostalgic longing for what is forever lost, and for Klement always sought through her artwork—and never truly found.

Witnesses, 2017 (pg. 14) is an example of her use of trees to create depth without relying on traditional perspective techniques. Three trees of different width stand against a flat brown field, created by stamping a piece of cardboard dipped in paint repeatedly to build up a rich and dense surface, their gradual reduction in size, and their placement, creating the illusion of depth. Against the bare white of the gessoed canvas, they cease being “pictures” of trees, and become the objects themselves. The powerful paint strokes result in tree trunks that are beyond symbolism; they *are* trees: they beckon us to walk among them in that landscape. Beyond is that distant point ever-present in Klement’s work: that which we try to reach but which is forever just beyond our grasp.

In *Leafless*, 1985 (pg. 50), we are confronted by an intense image of grief: a bowed figure facing a tree, not merely an object, but painted almost as a formal portrait illuminating the inner being of her model. The illusion that transforms them into living things is their mass—their texture—rich with brushstrokes, oil paint thickened with encaustic wax. The female torso is painted on a piece of glued-on canvas gessoed a whiter white; she moves into the silent white opening of the canvas. And so, it becomes a painting of not one torso, but two, both living in their shared sorrow, their separation: from nature, from the homeland, from her beloved Zoppot.

...my sorrow at the loss of my forest... the sublime awe of that upward soaring space. It was a place of secrets and mystery.

Despite the unmistakable sadness of the figure, it is not painted in any formal manner that would indicate grief. Instead, the muscular, brilliantly colored strokes create the true contrast, the real meaning of the painting: where there is sorrow, there is joy.

In *Hollander Witness*, 1981 (pg. 30), Klement shows us a massive vessel, bulging in fullness, its volume and symmetry making it monumental. It’s both a pot and a landscape; a female form that holds, cares for, and nourishes—an alive and growing landscape with distant hills. Beyond the illusion of roundness, the powerful worked strokes of paint give it real volume and depth. It is no longer simply a vessel and landscape it transcends into deeper meanings drawn from the collective unconscious: the world; the womb; a primal nurturing form that dates back beyond memory. On the right is a glued-on strip of canvas: a green landscape, a field with narrow irrigation lines, shrunk to a supporting role. The vessel appears close, perhaps resting on a windowsill, while the landscape is distant. Klement says that she painted the landscape with Van Gogh in mind, tragically gone from this world too soon, like so many artists she has known.

Blossoming, 2018 (pg. 12). A bleak lifeless plain: dead, vacant, nothing stirs, nothing grows. The only features are the railroad tracks with traces of snow running into the distant horizon, their destination a hell of one sort or another—for so many the concentration camp—an absence, a meaninglessness, a place no longer alive. Colored a thin, pale, tan, it seems like a distant memory—something lost in time, overlooked, and yet always present; a forgotten witness to the glorious growth above. Painted as a diptych, the larger upper panel overpowers that awful, poisonous plain of death with a magnificent

bush, a wild eruption of life—a growth more powerful than death and despair, stronger than the worst of humanity. The bush forever blooms, grows, luxuriates; life always conquers death; the beauty of nature ultimately triumphs.

Boxed, 2014 (pg. 38) presents to us yet another side to Klement’s work: her personal commentary on our culture. On the bottom of the painting are two angled boxes: they appear to be vitrines with disembodied parts of a nude woman. Klement explains that she was thinking of Marilyn Monroe: the body parts are not that of a corpse, but represent women as sex objects, boxed in by our culture, by men. But should that critique of our culture stand alone, above is a distant and fecund field. A richly-painted green without true perspective, the viewers eye is drawn from the lower left to the upper right, directed away from the black deadly hill in the distance. The movement of the eye creates perspective, drawing it to the distant sun: brilliant, filling the world with life and hope. The field, the land of hope pulls us forward, striving for beauty, life, and joy.

In *Greening*, 2014 (pg. 18), Klement presents us with the image of a figure bursting with energy, built of layer upon layer of paint, the paint below felt rather than seen. Klement says that her brush “behaved badly” which accounts for the drips below the tree and splotches in the rose garden, following the unintentional vicissitudes of brush and wet paint. The tree trunk has extraordinary presence, its girth seems to swell from the canvas, its mass and plump bulging fullness making it into a subject, a figure, not merely a tree. The rose garden, framed by a white door, is distant—the doorway forever barring the passage of the figure, of the tree, to the lost garden.

Strange Flowers, 2014 (pg. 16) is an example of her use of the variation on a theme, in which the pot becomes a boat—in this painting a lifeboat, transporting its occupants from danger. Klement says that the star-like shapes which surround the boat are bomb-bursts, perhaps the explosions of anti-aircraft guns. The lifeboat is drawn in charcoal, and like her use of oil paint, she allows the drifting charcoal—the accidental gesture—to become part of the work itself. The title *Strange Flowers* is a take on “Strange Fruit,” originally recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939, protesting the lynching of Black Americans. The lifeboat, in her iconography the feminine which holds and nurtures, takes its passengers to safety; perhaps Klement wants to express that it is the feminine—women—who can bring to safety, nourish, and heal the victims of racism and hatred.

Carpeted, 2019 (pg. 10) makes use of repeatedly stamping a cardboard shape dipped in oil paint to create a dense intricate surface. *Carpeted* is clearly a return to her roots in Abstract Expressionism: as much as the main image is an object—influenced by a carpet in her home—it isn’t like her more figurative work. The panel on the right is a simple sky, in which the carpet is flying. She says that it is “a flying carpet,” the magic carpet of mythology, and that when she finished the painting “I looked at it and knew it was my last painting—and I was satisfied.” I leave it to the viewer to draw their own conclusions about what this painting means and how it fits into her oeuvre—her final painting of a magical flying carpet traveling in the sky.

The tree, the vessel, the torso and the distant field are icons I have gone back to again and again with deep conviction, although always differently and in a variety of relations with one another. They are common objects that serve as containers for my lost past. They are the shadow and light of the time and the place of my beginnings.

Max Klement is a freelance writer in Evanston

Special Thanks To:

*Nathan Kemler, Director of Galleries and Collections
Grand Valley State University – Allendale, Michigan*

*Joel Zwart, Curator of Exhibitions
Grand Valley State University – Allendale, Michigan*

*Henry Matthews, University Associate Galleries and Collections,
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Grand Valley State University – Allendale, Michigan*

*William Lieberman & Brian Gillham
Zolla/Lieberman Gallery – Chicago, Illinois*

*Bruce MacGilpin & Ingrid Fassbender
Icon Group – Chicago, Illinois*

Mary Antonakos

Peter Baker

Patty Rhea Rick & Jacquie Salomon

Max Shapey

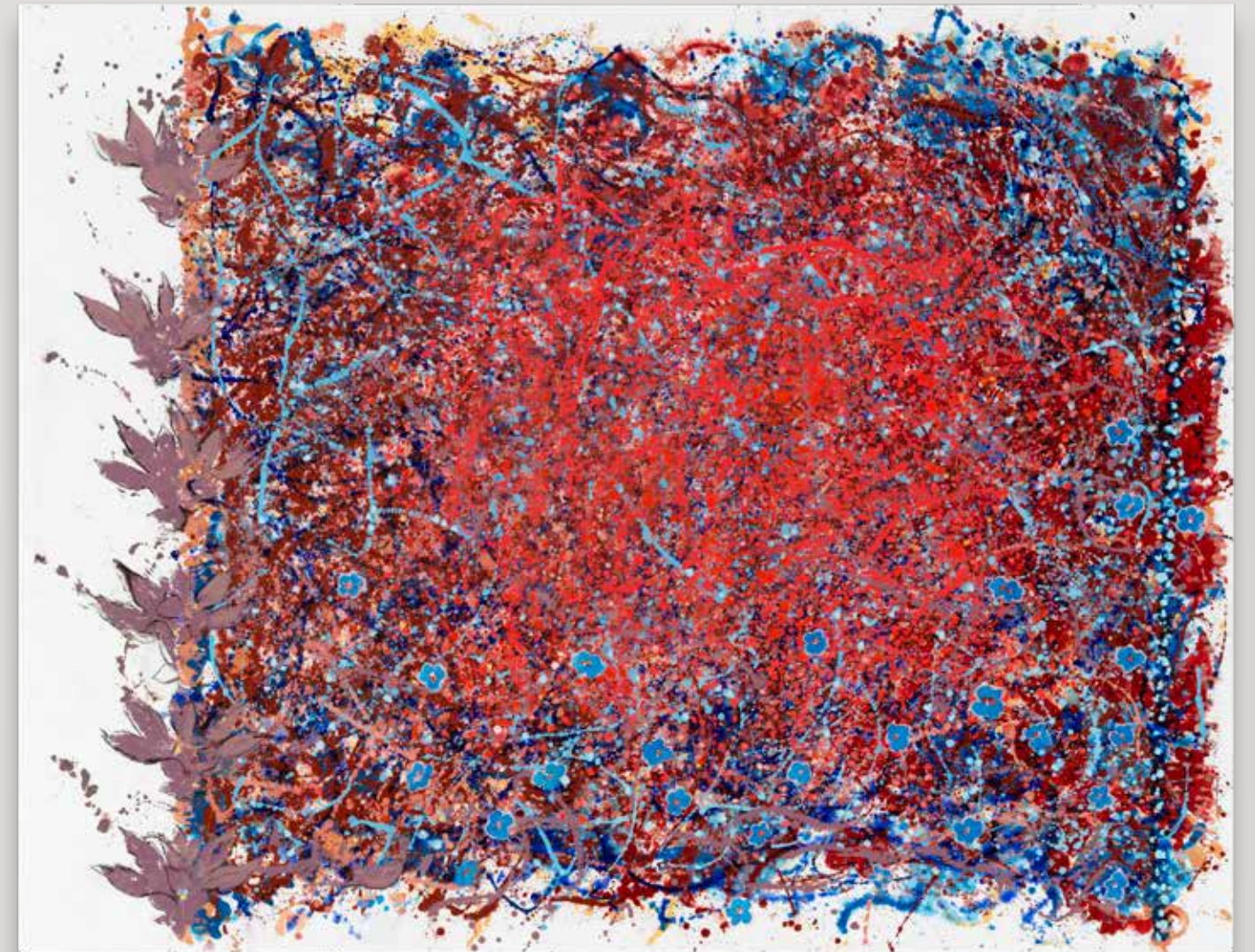
James Yood & Lorraine Peltz

EXHIBITION



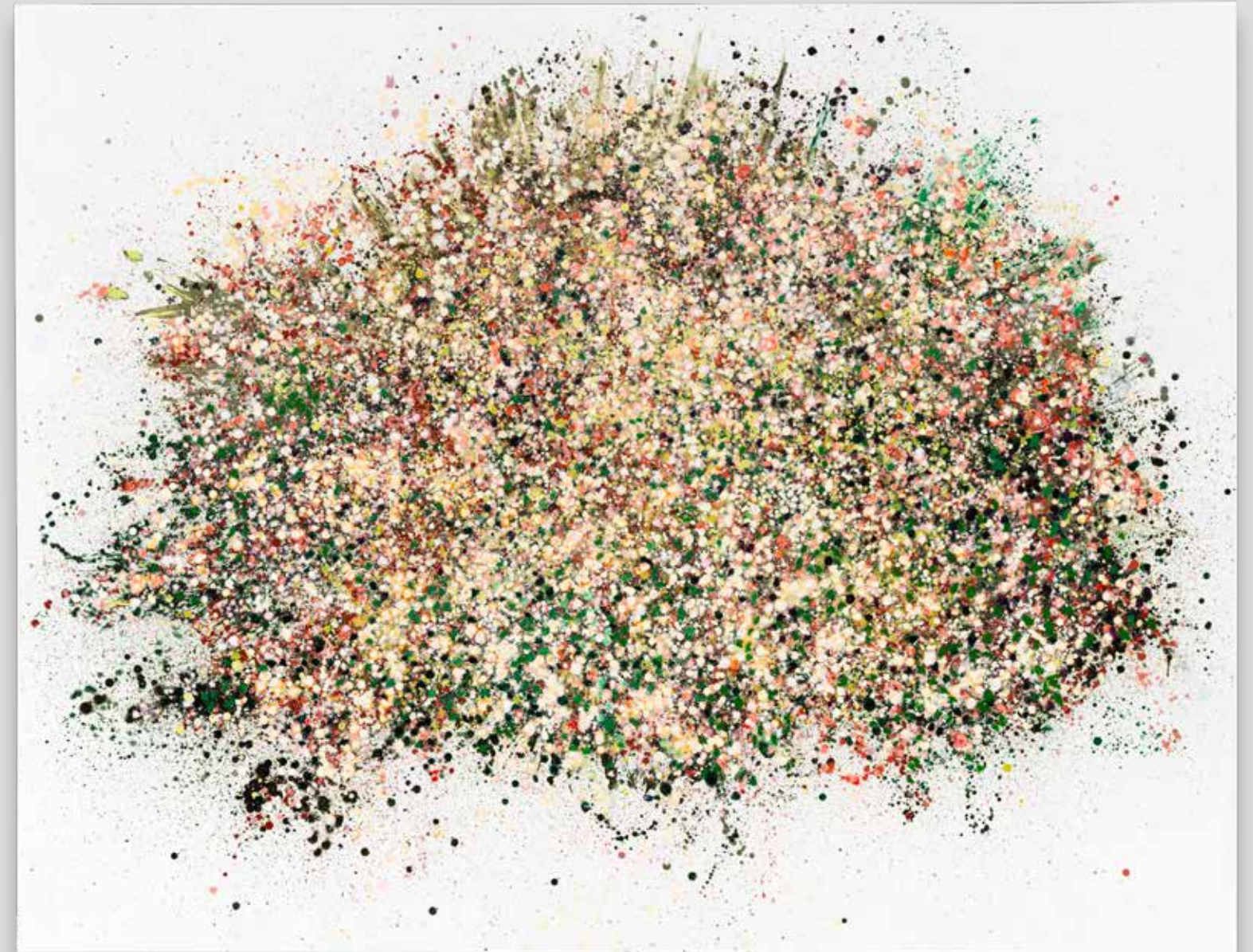
CARPETED

64" x 92" | 2019
Oil on Canvas



BLOSSOMING

Diptych | 64" x 82" + 18" x 72" | 2018
Oil on Canvas



WITNESSES

82" X 64" | 2017
Oil on Canvas



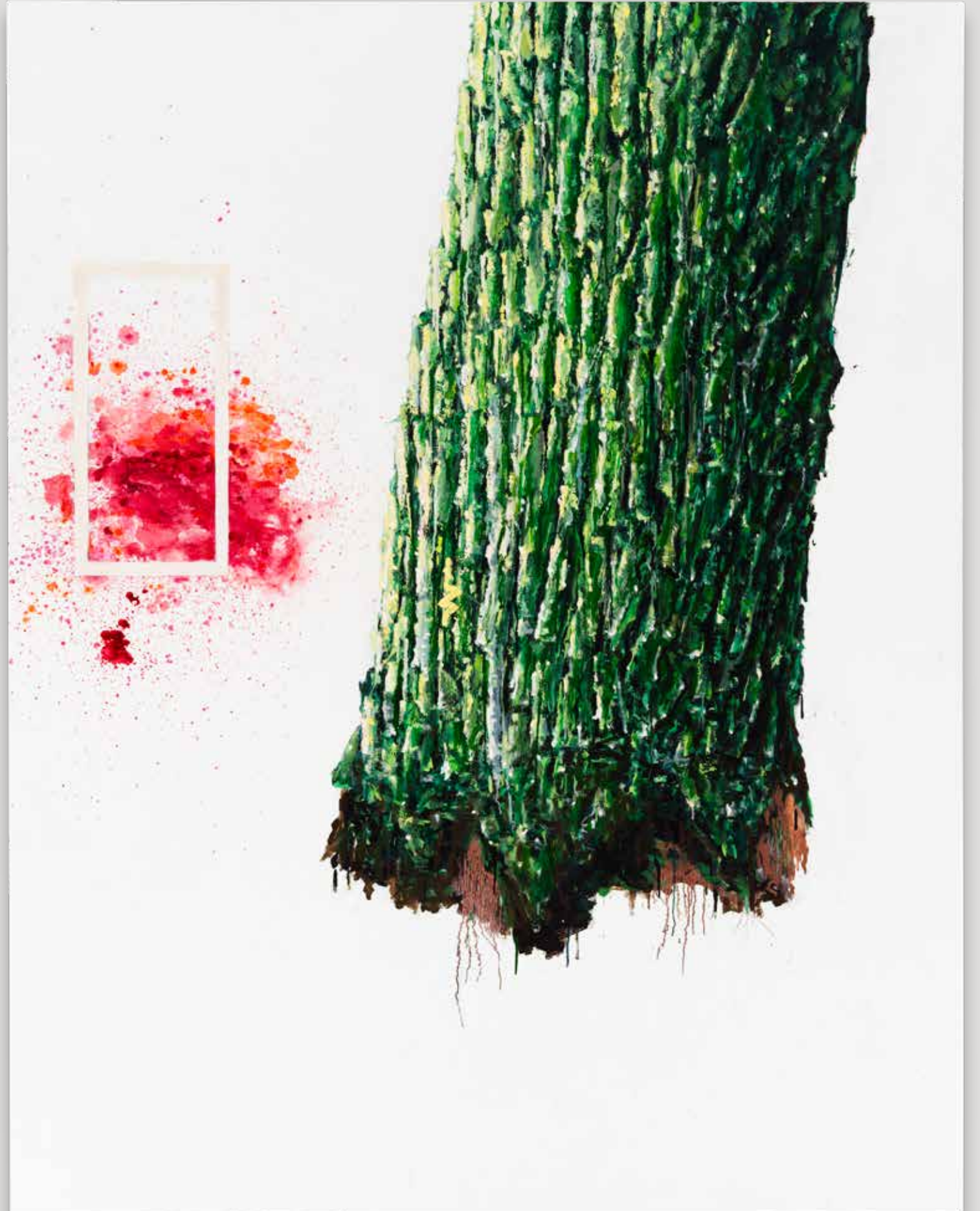
STRANGE FLOWERS

78" x 60" | 2014
Oil, Charcoal on Canvas



GREENING

84" x 66" | 2014
Oil on Canvas



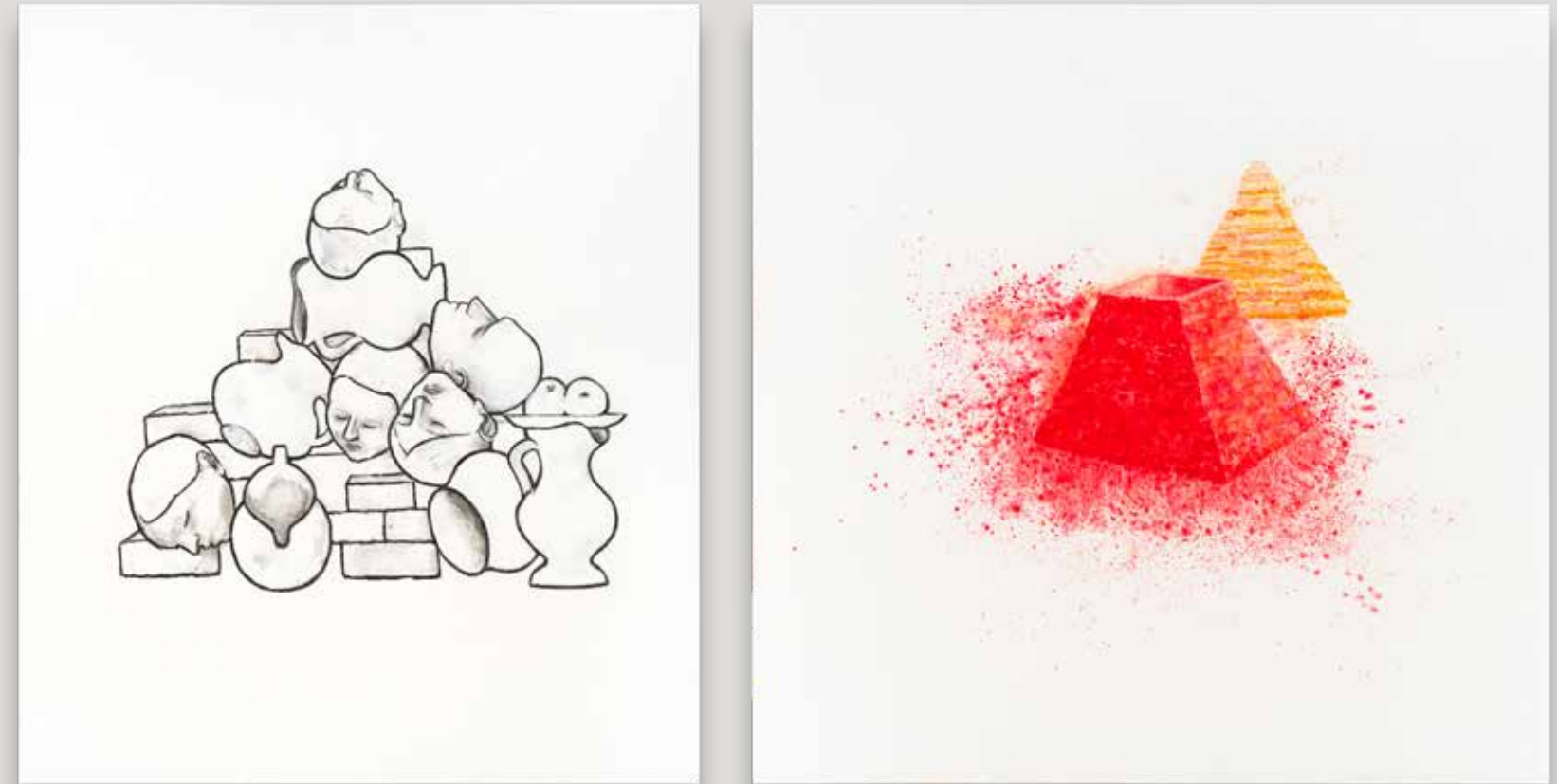
HEXENTANZPLATZ

Diptych | 88" x 55" + 48" x 24" | 2009
Oil, Wax on Canvas



A HEAP OF BROKEN IMAGES

Diptych | 82" x 72" + 82" x 84" | 2006
Oil, Wax, Charcoal on Canvas



NARCISSE #2

72" x 96" | 1999
Oil on Canvas



LIFEBOAT

108" x 72" | 1988
Oil, Wax on Canvas



KEEL

84" x 90" | 1983
Oil, Wax, Earth on Canvas



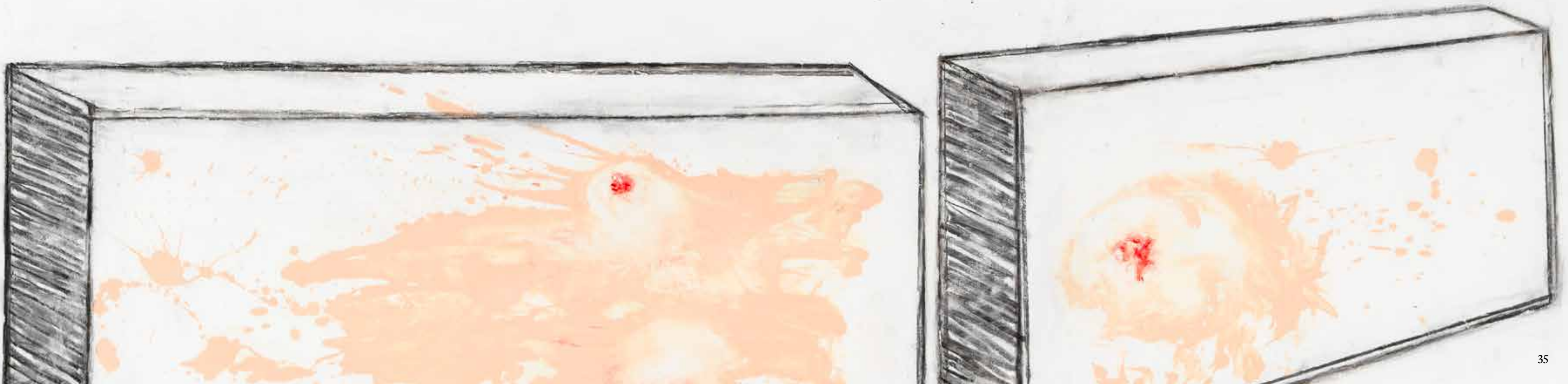
HOLLANDER WITNESS

72" x 86" | 1981
Oil on Canvas





SELECTED WORKS



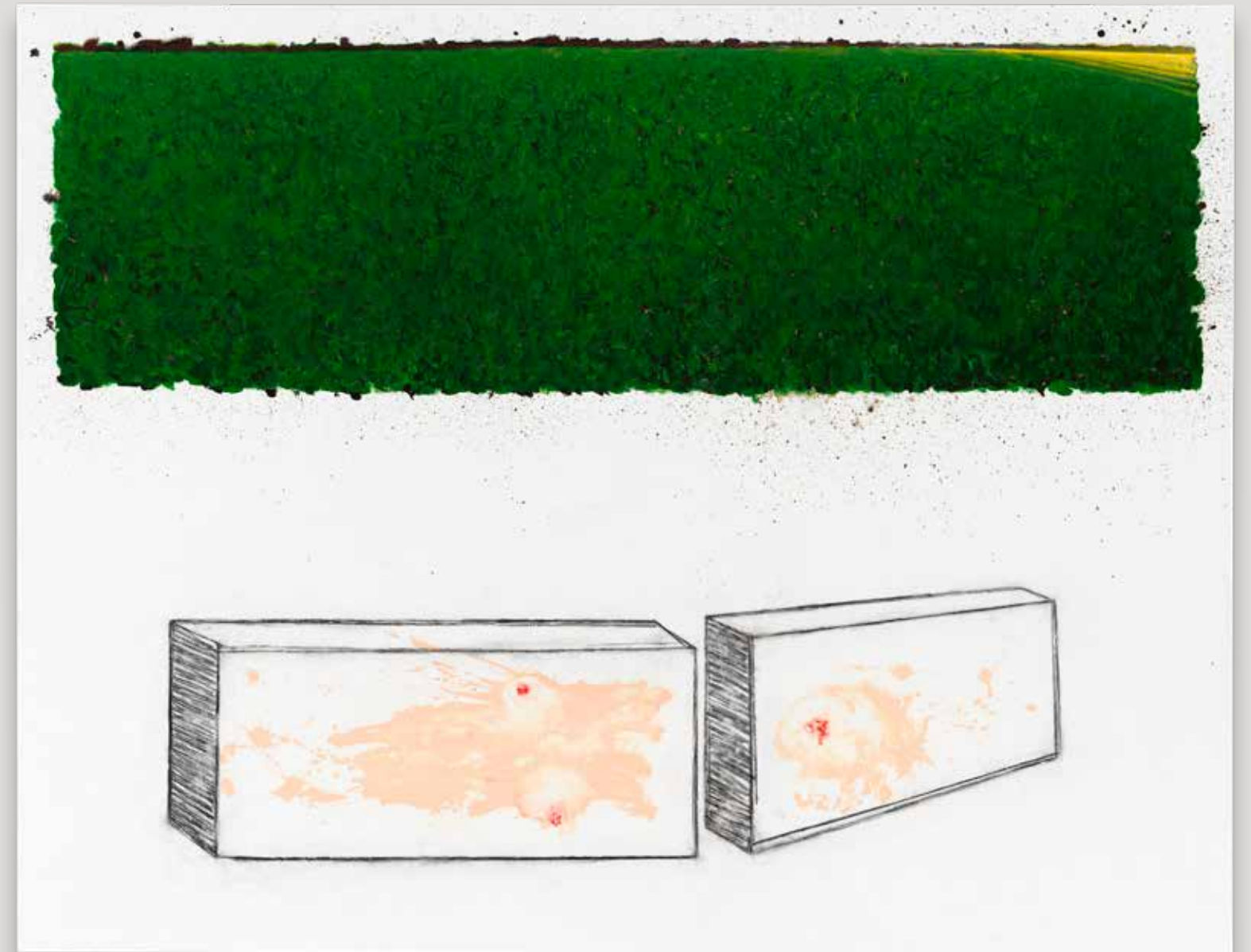
ENTWINED

82" x 64" | 2017
Oil on Canvas



BOXED

64" x 82" | 2014
Oil, Charcoal on Canvas



STRANDKORB

64" x 80" | 2011
Oil on Canvas



NEW HILL

Diptych | 72" x 84" + 20" x 88" | 1993
Oil on Canvas



WALL

66" x 72" | 1988
Oil on Canvas



RAISED ARMS

108" x 60" | 1988
Oil on Canvas



BETWEEN DOOR AND DISTANCE

72" x 108" | 1987
Oil on Canvas



LEAFLESS

72" x 96" | 1985
Oil on Canvas



ECHO OF HISTORY

72" x 90" | 1985
Oil on Canvas



RESUME

BORN
1929 Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk)

RESIDES
Chicago, Illinois

PROFESSOR EMERITA
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | 1969-1995

EDUCATION
Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture
New York, New York | 1950

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
Marianne Deson Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 1979, 1981

CDS Gallery
New York, New York | 1981, 1984

Roy Boyd Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993

Goethe Institute
Chicago, Illinois | 1983

Renaissance Society
Chicago, Illinois | Retrospective | 1987 (catalog)

Spertus Museum
Chicago, Illinois | 1987

Fassbender Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2001

Chicago Cultural Center
Chicago, Illinois | Retrospective 1968-1998
May 1999 (catalog)

Fort Wayne Museum of Art
Fort Wayne, Indiana | 2001

Block Museum of Art Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois | 2001

University of Arizona Museum of Art
Tucson, Arizona | 2001

Tarble Art Center, Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois | 2002 (catalog)

Abner Hershberger Art Gallery, Goshen College
Goshen, Indiana | 2003

Miami University Art Museum
Oxford, Ohio | 2004

Maya Polsky Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 2004

Printworks Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 2004

Daum Museum of Contemporary Art
Sedalia, Missouri | 2004

Metcap Bank
Chicago, Illinois | 2005

Alfedena Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 2007

Indiana University Art Gallery
Terra Haute, Indiana | October 2007
“Vera Klement Paint into Poetry”

Rockford Art Museum
Rockford Illinois | October 2008-January, 2009
“Vera Klement Paint into Icon”

Printworks Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 2009

Printworks Gallery
Chicago Illinois | May, 2011
American Sublime

Zolla/Lieberman Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 2012
Poem/Paintings

Zolla/Lieberman Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 2013
Early & Late Style

Governors State University, Visual Arts Gallery
University Park, Illinois | 2017
Body & Spirit

Zolla/Lieberman Gallery
Chicago, Illinois | 2017
UR-Forms

Grand Valley State University, Art Gallery
Allendale, Michigan | 2021 (catalog)
Vera Klement

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
The Jewish Museum, NYC
New York, New York | 1982 (catalog)
“Jewish Themes/Contemporary American Artists”

Terra Museum of American Art
Chicago, Illinois | 1987 (catalog)
“Surfaces”

Walter Bischoff Gallery
Munich, Germany | three-person | 1987

State of Illinois Building
Chicago, Illinois | three-person | 1989 (catalog)
“Locations of Desire”

Illinois State Museum
Springfield, Illinois | three-person | 1989 (catalog)
“Locations of Desire”

Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, DC | 1994 (catalog)
“Still Working”

Museum of Contemporary Art
Chicago, Illinois | 1996 (catalog)
Art in Chicago 1945-1995

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
(CONTINUED)

Herron Gallery, Indianapolis Center for Contemporary Art
Indianapolis, Indiana | 1997
4 Painters

Northern Indiana Arts Association
Munster, Indiana | 2004
That 70s Show: The Age of Pluralism in Chicago

Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College
Chicago, Illinois | 2009
Works from the Collection

Daum Museum of Contemporary Art
Sedalia, Missouri | 2009
LipstickTraces, Women from the Collection

Museum of Contemporary Art
Chicago, Illinois | 2009
Constellations, Paintings from the MCA Collection

State of Illinois Museum of Art
Traveling Exhibition | 2011-13
Luminous Ground: Artists with Histories

Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College
Chicago, Illinois | 2012
Beyond Photography

Governors State University
University Park, Illinois | 2012
Ways of Making: Painting

Illinois Holocaust Museum
Skokie, Illinois | 2014
Artist Panel: Creating A Legacy

Printworks Gallery
Chicago Illinois | Summer Show 2014

Illinois Holocaust Museum
Skokie, Illinois | 2015

AWARDS
Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award | 1954
John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship | 1982
National Endowment for the Arts Grant | 1987
Illinois Arts Council Grants | 1997 (also 1984 1987)
Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant | 1998
Camargo Foundation Residency and Stipend
Cassis, France | 2006

SELECTED COLLECTIONS
Museum of Modern Art
New York, New York

Philadelphia Museum of Art
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Art Institute of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

Museum of Contemporary Art
Chicago, Illinois

Grand Valley State University
Allendale, Michigan

Snite Museum, Notre Dame University
South Bend, Indiana

Louis and Clark Community College
Godfrey, Illinois

Illinois State Museum
Springfield, Illinois

Museum of American Art, Smithsonian
Washington, DC

The Jewish Museum
New York, New York

Philip Morris Collection
New York, New York

Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

Huntington Gallery, University of Texas
Austin, Texas

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

University of Arizona Museum of Art
Tucson, Arizona

Brauer Museum, Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana

Goshen College
Goshen, Indiana

Daum Museum of Contemporary Art
Sedalia, Missouri

Miami University Art Museum
Oxford, Ohio

Clay Center
Charleston, West Virginia

Kresge Art Museum
East Lansing, Michigan

Davis Museum, Wellesley College
Wellesley, Massachusetts

McCormick Place
Chicago, Illinois (commission)

The Union League Club of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College
Chicago, Illinois

Rockford Museum of Art
Rockford, Illinois

University Club
Chicago, Illinois

Illinois Holocaust Museum
Skokie, Illinois

Yad Vashem
Jerusalem, Israel



OUR VISION

Grand Valley State University (GVSU) holds the third largest art collection in the state of Michigan and has activated its collection for learning and curriculum integration. Spanning throughout all GVSU campuses and incorporated into every university building, art is on public display providing unparalleled access.

The GVSU Art Gallery empowers our community to engage with visual narratives that align with university values through diverse exhibitions and a borderless museum across campus. We utilize digital initiatives and active learning opportunities to spark conversations, action, and reflection on core themes of social justice, human rights, and empathy that align with the university's philosophy of liberal arts education.

VERA KLEMENT AT GVSU

In 2012, Vera gifted her first painting to Grand Valley and we continue to actively increase that collection. Vera's story is one that belongs to us all. A story of "light and dark, beauty and evil, life and death" (*BLUNT EDGE—The Making of a Painter: Vera Klement*). We greatly appreciate these gifts from Vera and thank her for her courage in sharing her personal stories that shed light on the human experience. This body of work will continue to inform our lives now and for generations to come.

FACING PAGE:
Vera Klement | **The East Was Red With Cockcrow**
1999 | Oil, Wax on Canvas
GVSU Art Gallery | 2012.98.1 | Gift of the Artist

ABOUT GVSU

Grand Valley State University educates students to shape their lives, their professions and their societies. The university contributes to the enrichment of society through excellent teaching, active scholarship and public service. At Grand Valley State University, we value effective teaching, liberal education, scholarship, university and community, and service.

Established in 1960, Grand Valley State University is a comprehensive university serving students from all 83 Michigan counties and dozens of other states and foreign countries. The university attracts more than 24,000 students with its high-quality programs and state-of-the-art facilities. Grand Valley provides a fully accredited liberal undergraduate and graduate education.

Grand Valley's main campus is located in Allendale, almost midway between downtown Grand Rapids and Lake Michigan. This contemporary campus offers all the amenities expected from a residential college. The Pew Grand Rapids Campus is located in the heart of Michigan's second-largest city, putting students closer to employment, internship, and community outreach programs. Students at Grand Valley also benefit from access to outstanding cultural, athletic, fine arts and recreational activities in both Allendale and Grand Rapids. The university also has a campus in Holland and centers in Battle Creek, Muskegon, Traverse City, and Detroit.

