

The Art of PG Thelander



Made with No Loss of Time

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edited by Necmi Sönmez and Louise Lidströmer

SKIRA

Contents

<p><i>Cover</i> <i>All Inclusive</i>, 2016 Oil on canvas, 137 x 184 cm</p> <p><i>Page 4</i> <i>Mr. J.D. with Family B</i>, 1973 Oil on canvas, 200 x 100 cm</p> <p><i>Design</i> Marcello Francone</p> <p><i>Editorial Coordination</i> Vincenza Russo</p> <p><i>Copy Editing</i> Doriana Comerlati</p> <p><i>Layout</i> Galia Traverso</p> <p><i>Translations (from Swedish to English)</i> Elisabeth Andreasson (text of Øystein Hjort), William Jewson (text of Jacqueline Stare), Dr. Niklas Lidströmer (<i>Chronology and Medals</i>)</p> <p><i>Photo Credits</i> Thomas Wingstedt Jan Almerén, Louis Huch, Louise Lidströmer, Niklas Lidströmer, Börge Kamras, Ronny Karlsson, Arne Nilson, Lucien Szczucki, Lars-Helge Thelander, PG Thelander</p>	<p>First published in Italy in 2018 by Skira editore S.p.A. Palazzo Casati Stampa via Torino 61 20123 Milano Italy www.skira.net</p> <p>© 2018 PG Thelander © 2018 the authors and the heirs of authors for the texts © 2018 STUDIO L², Stockholm © 2017 Skira editore</p> <p>All rights reserved under international copyright conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.</p> <p>Printed and bound in Italy. First edition ISBN: 978-88-572-3784-8</p> <p>Distributed in USA, Canada, Central & South America by ARTBOOK D.A.P. 75 Broad Street Suite 630, New York, NY 10004, USA. Distributed elsewhere in the world by Thames and Hudson Ltd., 181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX, United Kingdom.</p>	<p><i>A special thanks to</i> Andreas Hjort</p> <p>Despite detailed research it was not possible to definitively ascertain the current owners of specific works by PG Thelander. For this reason the illustration captions do not list the collections.</p>	<p>9 Made with No Loss of Time The Evolution of PG Thelander's Work <i>Necmi Sönmez</i></p> <p>15 Paintings</p> <p>157 Prints Fascinating Multiplicity of Meaning Excerpts from Øystein Hjort's Text on PG Thelander</p> <p>175 Works on Paper PG Thelander's "Bagatelles" <i>Jacqueline Stare</i></p> <p>207 Sculptures A Conversation with PG Thelander <i>Elsemeyer Frock</i></p> <p>227 Medals The Medal Sculptor PG Thelander <i>Lars O. Lagerqvist</i></p> <p>Appendix</p> <p>238 Chronology</p> <p>260 Selected Solo Exhibitions, Awards and Prizes, Public Collections, Selected Printed Sources</p> <p>263 Contributing Authors</p>
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Made with No Loss of Time The Evolution of PG Thelander's Work

Necmi Sönmez

The Orders of Metaphors

Over the last half century, artist Pär Gunnar Thelander has produced a puzzling body of paintings, prints, sculptures, medals and paper works. He has created a new, enigmatic language of contemporary painting that is profoundly dramatic and closely tied to the inscrutable complexities of human existence. A pivotal theme in PG Thelander's work is the incompatibility between what we see and the way we linguistically designate it. At an early point in his career, he developed a precise technique for creating concrete metaphoric images inspiring the titles of his works. The combination of image and title has never presented a unified meaning. Thelander's language keeps the lines of communication to emotional interpretations open through the fact that, since the 1960s, each decade of his works has laboriously reconstructed the astonished ignorance with which we first see something – that moment before we link up with what we actually see, so that it becomes dissolved in the abstracting purpose and constraints of our mastery of the everyday.

Made with No Loss of Time offers a first comprehensive survey of PG Thelander's versatile and extensive oeuvre from the early 1960s to the present day. The book is structured around five sections of images organized in chronological order that document Thelander's evolution during the last five decades.

This is a dilemma: it is difficult, with Thelander, to come to some general and meaningful assessment of his work. What are these introverted compositions doing in our well-ordered, categorized contemporary art history? How shall we interpret them, anyway? I feel benevolently inclined to declare Thelander's work multifaceted and full of a delightful enigmatic fantasy. While saying it, however, I immediately begin to wonder whether "enigmatic" is the right word to characterize the nature of his image-making process. But then, is "fantasy" the right word? And that is how and where the confusion starts: in just naming and assessing what there is to see. How strange! How unexpected! These are reactions to be found in a lot of exhibition catalogues and reviews of Thelander's works, which bear titles like *Carrot-Woman-Man* (1970), *Waiting for the Ice Age I–VII* (1976–98) or *Wer bin ich wirklich?* (2014). Obviously his titles do not help us understand the unfathomably silent incompatibility between image and text. Thelander's art reflects a fundamental conflict in the human perception of things. What we see in his works and what they symbolically mean beyond the concrete moment are in no way identical.¹ He uses the dilemma of linguistic identification in reverse, not as a soluble problem, but as a multiplication of possible interpretations and readings. It is this basic approach and extremely dedicated focus on his own image-making process that has underlined the unique position of PG Thelander in the contemporary Swedish art scene since 1960.

How Does It All Hang Together?

Thelander's works channel a playfulness that mitigates the sober formality of the artist's education at the College of Arts and Crafts and the Royal Acad-

¹ In his interpretation of Velázquez, Michel Foucault formulates this as follows: "But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by sequential elements of syntax." Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (London, 1970), p. 9.

emy of Arts (both in Stockholm, his native city), notably under the mentorship of Olle Nyman.² This formal rigour is discernible in the artist's works, which engage with the thematic of craft firmly indebted to the legacy of mid-century Art Informel, Nouveau Réalisme and Pop Art. Thelander cites Marcel Duchamp (*Elephant-Duchamp*, 1968), Jean Dubuffet (*Man III*, 1974) and Robert Rauschenberg (*Goat I*, 1990) as a triumvirate of artistic inspirations;³ to these one might also add Larry Rivers, although the absence of text crucial to the semantic operation of that artist's work donates an important distinction. By contrast, Thelander's works are more introverted, multilayered, departing from his earlier *La Belle Gabrielle* and *Gustav Adolfs Square* (1967–74) series in which foregrounded representational elements emerge and recede from their expressively rendered colourful settings.

The interweaving of figurative and representational themes initiated in *La Belle Gabrielle* and *Gustav Adolfs Square* gives way to a more subtle dissolution of structure and form in the artist's most recent *Nudism* (2014–16), *Grand-Tour* (2016) and *Mushroom Picker* (2016) series. His recent works explore a unique vocabulary of metaphors and formal techniques, notably in the layering of narrative elements to achieve textual, pictorial and imaginative variety. In works such as *Nudist* (2017) and *All Inclusive* (2016) we see animals like penguins and peacocks over a white-gray ground with quotations from art history. Both elements create a rhythmical surface with puzzle-like structures. While the handling of composition and the apparent looseness of its application suggest a degree of enigmatic spontaneity, there is also a sense of deliberation in these paintings: see for instance the superimposition of compositional forms in *Banana and Degas* (2017). Indeed, it is this unusual mediation between figurative impulse and conceptual thinking that makes these late works so visually satisfying.

By the way: it goes without saying that no text about Thelander, including this one, can avoid the image-term contradictions that the artist's works leave so deliberately open. How then do we reconcile images of such fragmented reality with the notion of *conditio humana*, if by that term we mean the traditional practice of representing an ageless artistic research, whether truthful or idealized?

Experience with Serial Working Process

In the 1970s, Thelander's paintings,⁴ drawings and etchings⁵ seem to spring directly from a sharp critical observation, which continuously gains new surprising aspects from nature and reality. Against the rigid formalism and technical neatness of the Stockholm art scene of the decade he launched a new exhilarating freedom, a freedom allowing a reckless play with proportions of reality, filled with a mysterious figurative glow in a presumed Nordic landscape. Creating a specific atmosphere is one of the main subjects of Thelander's artistic evaluation, where the transformation process with its metaphoric reloaded landscape elements opens up a new resonance space for observers.

Invoking psychological, hermetic themes and Arcadian visions, the beauty of nature has long served as a mirror of humanity in which the individual's sense of self is diminished in the face of an overlapping experience of the sublime. Emerging out of the discourse of eighteenth-century philosophical thought, this notion of sublime became associated with the Romantic tradition as we know from writings of Immanuel Kant. "Being in nature" opens a new solitary communion with the world. In this way the artistic involvement with the landscape opens out into its own field of signification. Thelander's different experiments with landscape affirm this vision. While his work of the early 1970s remains landscape-figure oriented, it offers to the recipients a different emotional experience and sensation. His *Waiting for the Ice Age* series conjures up an unusual atmospheric meeting of animals, geometric forms, quotations from art history and landscape formations. The elemental forms of *Penguin* (1982), *Turtle* (1983) and *Elephant* (1984–85) series are similarly suggestive and create a private, hermetic mythology. These series are conceptual; one picture is generated out of the other, one figure out of the other. The process begins with a key figure drawing (like a penguin, a turtle or an elephant) as a matrix. That motif is the basis for subsequent transformations and is repeated many times in a process that the artist has varied from composition to composition. He develops variations while repeating the motif in parallel. In the mind, an image, an idea arises of what he is drawing.⁶

Pictorial Fragility

Thelander's drawings do not originate as sketches or a design in the sense of a preparation for the work proper; they are autonomous, serially oriented artistic articulations. Every motif is at the same time the image of a preceding motif and the matrix for a drawing to come. In the process, the drawing becomes detached at ever greater distance from the original, absent picture. The pictorial fragility makes diverse developments in the same series possible. In this instance the serial working procedure by principle harbours a "to-be-continued" option. Even though the artist has fixed, by his first drawing, the point of departure, and in the number of paintings the finish of the run, there is in principle no reason why it should not be continued.

With liberal candour the artist applies the serial principle to *Vie et opinion philosophique* (1993–97), *Wheelbarrow* (2002–03) and *Oil Drums* (2011) series. These paintings, each relating to certain human conditions, are a response to his own artistic form repertoire. Here the compositions are multilayered and have their own spatial effect both within and in the context of the general artistic evolution. The wall becomes a visible backdrop. Out of the pool of numerous visual leitmotifs (carrots, penguins, herrings, dogs, geometric forms) accrued over years, the artist selects the kind of motifs that will enter into a reciprocal dialogue. Here the multilayered image dichotomy is significant, since in formal terms the canvas orientation – figured through the vertical-horizontal

² Karl Haskel, *PG Thelander Lord of the Flies* (Trelleborg: Skogs Förlag, 1996), p. 276.

³ PG Thelander in conversation with the author, Stockholm, July 20, 2017.

⁴ *PG Thelander – Paintings* (Stockholm: Edition STUDIO L², 2017).

⁵ Øystein Hjort, *PG Thelander – Graphic Works 1964–1975* (Malmö: Förlag Bo Alveryd, 1975); Karl Haskel, *PG Thelander Grafik 1958–1996* (Trelleborg: Skogs Förlag, 1996).

⁶ PG Thelander in conversation with the author, Stockholm, July 21, 2017.

axis – is crucial to each painting in these series. The mainly vertical compositions are leading us to reflect upon the interrelationship between subject, medium and process. Leitmotivs consequently assume a more conceptual definition, hinging on a confrontation between artist and canvas in which the distinction between subject and object effectively dissolves.

Restructuring the Relationship between Image, Space and Imaginary Landscape

In the *Catafalque* (2013–14) and *Nudism* (2014) series PG Thelander's works affirm the view that painting still holds a capacity for expressive revelations, an attitude that runs clearly counter to the ironic guise often apparent with more conceptual and new media-based modes of the contemporary art scene. In this instance, the conceptual appears at the opposing end of a spectrum in which painting of this particular vein has occasionally been mischaracterized as old fashion, mannered or otherwise representative of a method of working at odds with the widespread turn towards the digital and web-based forms of recent artistic research. But is painting truly anathema to the logic of a photographic oriented practice? Here again, Peter Doig offers a point in case, while Neo Rauch instigates a sophisticated semantic play that disassembles the grammar of painting through the staging of iconic symbols.

The paintings of Thelander from recent years are works of expressive depth and formal intelligence, revealed through the skilful handling of graphic elements and the balance of compositional structure. Like the compositions *All Inclusive* and *Grand-Tour-Piero* (both from 2016), each image offers a moment of reflection, their diversity confronting us beyond their surfaces. In his latest works – for example *Banana and Degas* (2017) or *Turtle with Metro* (2013–17) – Thelander develops his own narration with a restructuring of the relationship between image, space and imaginary landscape, thus achieving an intermeshing of the objectively seen and the subjective perception of the conscious and unconscious, and creates sublime morphologies of irresistible image transformations.

Considering the way image, drawing and copy relate, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes that the word “image” is of ill repute, owing to the long-standing fallacy that a drawing is a transfer, a copy of something, and that the picture in the mind is a kind of drawing in our private cubby-hole. The philosopher argues: what if the picture is nothing of the kind? Then drawings and paintings should not be of the thing itself, no more so than the picture is. The following definition of Merleau-Ponty may be offered to put Thelander's intentions in the last five decades in a nutshell: “To look at human beings from the outside is what makes the mind self-critical and keeps it sane. But the aim should not be to suggest that all is absurd, as Voltaire did. It is much more a question of implying, as Kafka does, that human life is always

under threat and of using humour to prepare the ground for those rare and precious moments at which human beings come to recognise, to find, one another.”⁷

PG Thelander's works are traces of *vita activa*.⁸ Each decade offers a moment of reflection between figurative and abstract elements, between expressive and introverted image transfer, between the presence and absence of human conditions in which the eye never keeps still but rather dances from one pictorial element to the next. The five decades of Thelander's artistic work, each evolving upon the other, set a reciprocal sustaining of tension. By constructing an unexpected fiction within an image, he has created impressive series of works that are particularly expressive and suggestive.

I am deeply indebted to PG Thelander and Louise Lidströmer for their cooperation. This is stimulating and thought-provoking in so many ways; and no less so for their committed, constructive and cordial presence in our collaboration.

Düsseldorf, February 2018

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, translated by Oliver Davis (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 89–90.

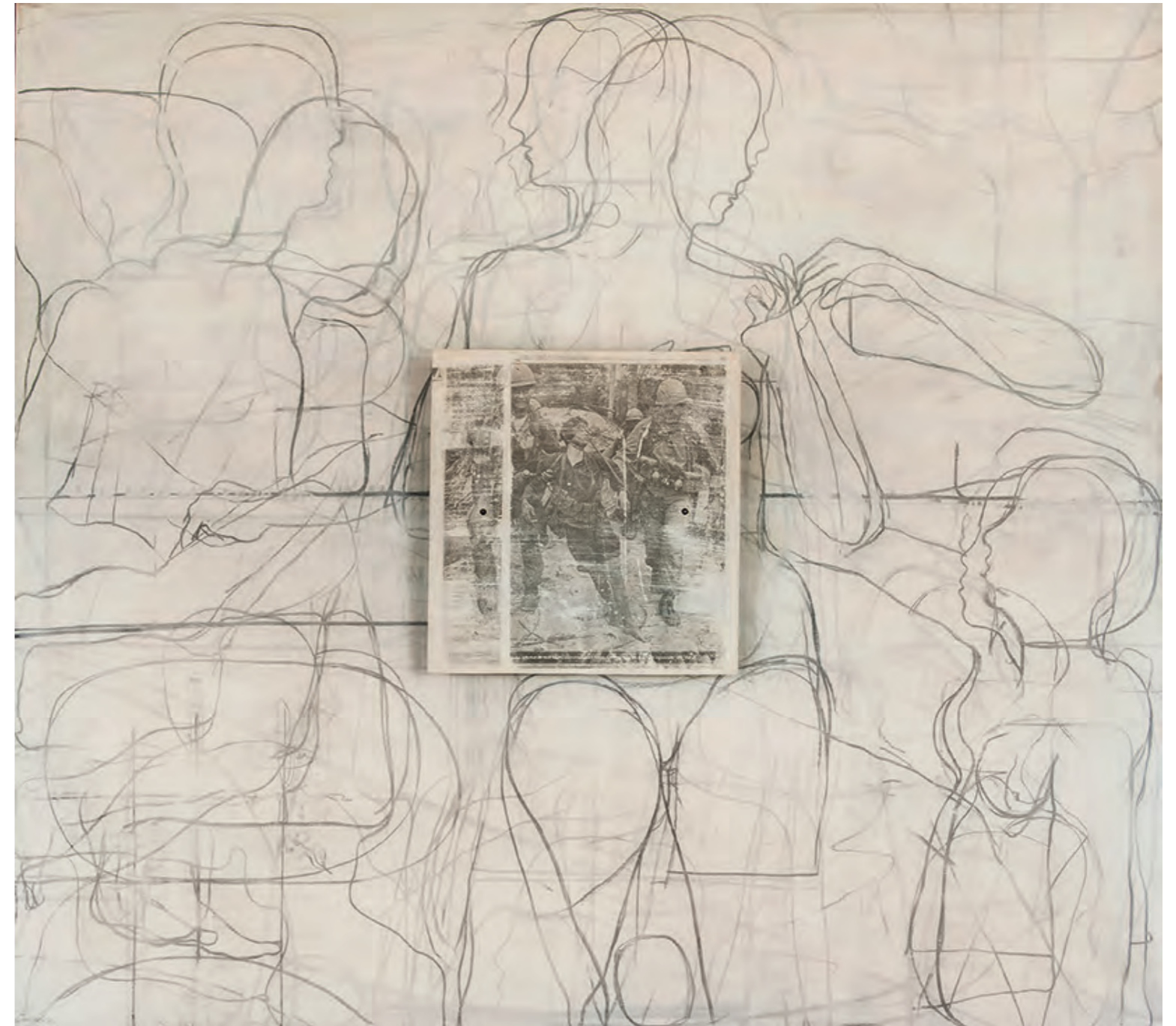
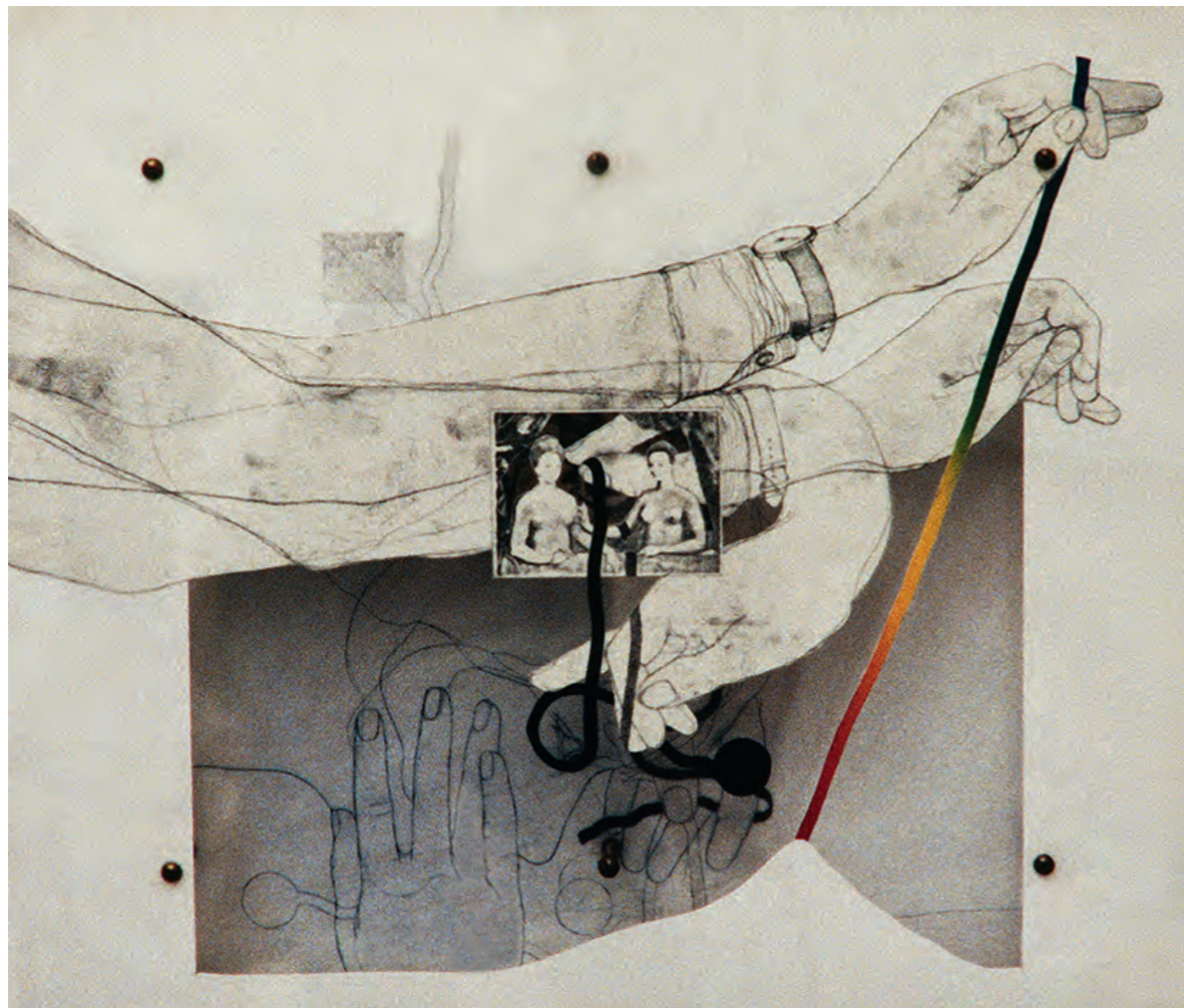
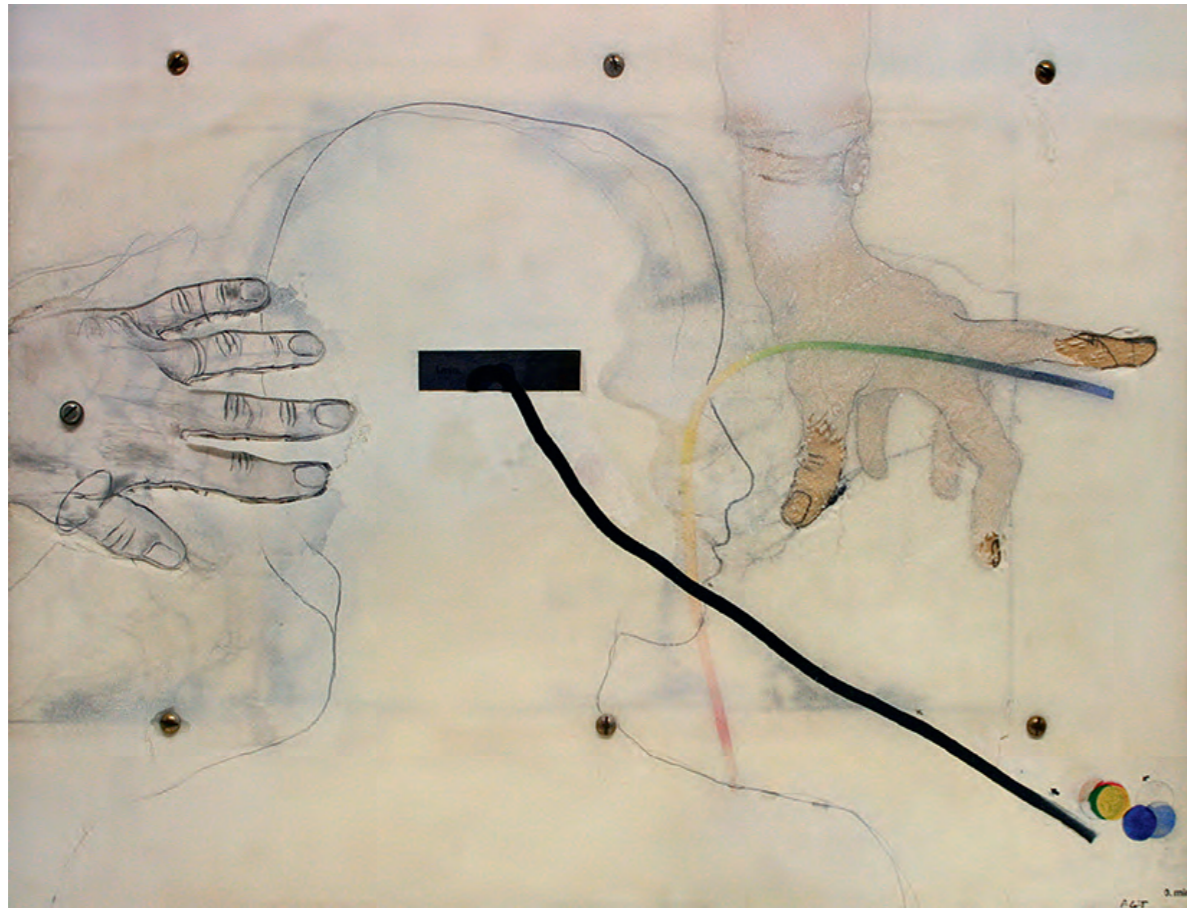
⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Vita Activa oder vom Tätigen Leben* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960). Original title: *The Human Condition* (1958).

Paintings



Concentration-Paris, 1962
Oil on canvas, 27 x 22 cm

New Year, 1963
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 cm



From her Searching VI, 1967
Oil on Plexiglas, 55 x 65 x 10 cm
La Belle Gabrielle, 1967
Oil on Plexiglas, 55 x 65 x 10 cm

The Birth of Venus (after Botticelli),
1969
Oil, charcoal and plate on canvas,
132 x 147 cm



The Family, 1969
Oil and charcoal on canvas,
100 x 130 cm



The Tub I, 1969
Oil and charcoal on canvas,
70 x 90 cm



Carrot-Woman-Man, 1970
Oil and charcoal on canvas,
190 x 190 cm



The Birth of Venus I, 1970
Oil and charcoal on canvas,
190 x 250 cm



Gustav Adolfs Square I, 1970-74
Oil on canvas, 190 x 250 cm



Gustav Adolfs Square II, 1970-74
Oil on canvas, 190 x 250 cm