

SOCIAL INTERCOURSE

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Problem in Lieu of Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2002

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Greco, Paul, Social Intercourse, Master of Fine Arts (Printmaking), May 2002, 23 pp, 5 illustrations.

This thesis explains the stories and concepts behind each piece that was discussed on the opening night of my MFA Exhibition. The works, entitled *Film Noir*, *Brains*, *Trains*, and *Beer*, *The Boy Next Door*, *Peterbuilt*, and *10-50, H-1*, was discussed more specifically and in greater detail. Speaking in public has always been a difficult task, especially on the subject of my art. My images deal with the highly intense subject matter of violence inflicted onto others as a result of human social behaviors. These vile social behaviors are translated into colorful and humorous lithographs, etchings, and drawings.

These images are displayed to the public for individual interpretation. This thesis discusses audience interpretation before the literal meaning is revealed, how much information should be revealed to the viewer, and how this information manipulates the aesthetics of the piece.

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## INTRODUCTION

An artist can provide the viewer with as much content as he or she chooses to disclose. My artwork focuses on the role of social practices and I create images about human social behavior. To most viewers, my artwork begins as an appealing, aesthetically pleasing, and humorous image; however providing the viewer with a significant amount of literal information changes their response. The image suddenly transforms into a grotesque and gruesome monster. So the question simply is: Why does this artwork instantaneously transform into this hideous and repulsive representation? It is nevertheless the same image. With this increased amount of information only the interpretation has transposed. The viewer embraced the image initially; yet when the significance is revealed, the viewer's perception is manipulated. Possibly the hideous content of the work and the whimsical imagery are in conflict.

So what about Artemisia Gentileschi's painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*? Gentileschi reinforces this piece with strong visual images. In this painting, one woman is holding down Holofernes while another is cutting his throat. When most people see this painting they accept the bloody and violent appearance of the piece. Is it because Gentileschi was straightforward with her audience or did she create a powerful and shocking composition? In my opinion, she went directly to the malicious validity of her agonizing convictions about men and the audience was fascinated with this heroic and revengeful feminist devotion. Perhaps Gentileschi has created an image through myth and time, which keeps the viewer at a distance.

The same is true in Francisco de Goya y Lucientes' *The Third of May 1808*. Goya is absolutely telling a story through a strong visual statement. The visual narrative is revealing the anguish and pain these men suffered. There on the ground lie three dead men in a pool of blood and the others, hands in the air, about to be executed. Again most people observe this painting and accept it as a documentation of history. Goya was probably forming a political statement, perhaps he opposed the executions and in doing so, he gave voice to many dissenters. But has Goya gone too far with this piece? Has he revealed too much? Goya pauses the image for a moment; the bullet is at rest in the gun chamber; the man stands helplessly with his hands in the air and with this foreshadow, the audience can anticipate what happens next.

So I ask myself, should I embrace the visual ideas, methods, and styles of Gentileschi and Goya and be more direct with content? Or should I choose the concept Paul Delaroche derived in his painting *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*? In this painting, Delaroche informs his audience only of the minute prior to the execution. There is no blood or gore just a young woman that is blindfolded surrounded by two grieving women, a priest, and her executioner. Delaroche gets his gruesome point accomplished eloquently; that the woman is about to have her head removed. He does this with two factors: the man holding the big ax and by the title of the piece. But did Delaroche, Goya, or Gentileschi succeed in explaining their efforts with visual assistance only or did they fall short?

If I move in the direction of being more straightforward and honest with the audience using written, oral or more visually direct presentations, the playfulness and humor of my art is challenged; yet humor is something that I want to keep in my work.

So the unanswered question is: Where is this delicate balance between a considerable amount of violence and brutality (the actual meaning of the piece described in more detail with a written or oral presentation) verses a significant amount of information (visual only), leaving the viewer with less information?

Throughout the past six years, my artwork has consisted of two distinctive commentaries. The first suggestion is the visual work itself inspired by witnessing violence and brutality, offers the viewer substantial information and reveals the true meaning of the piece. The second suggestion, the imagery lacks substance and therefore creates an image that no one understands.

This inconsistency in viewer interpretation has created many obstacles concerning ideal imagery representation, and this is a problem that must be explored. The images produced are not to create social commentary or moral criticism; it is not meant to be violent and grotesque, but only to record my past experiences. In creating my images, a stabbing to the head is my catalyst, as a beautiful sunset inspires a landscape painter. Perhaps there is a somber poignancy attached to the work and to only illustrate these experiences without the aid of a written or oral presentation may cause the image to fall short of its true intent.

I want the work presented to the spectator in a manner that permits them to determine their own perspective concerning the subject matter. The questions are:

1. How much information should an image reveal to the viewer and should the image be more direct, letting the viewer in on more of the story?
2. Can this extra information be expressed by visual interpretation only?
3. Or should this information be given by a personal artist talk?

In order to answer these questions, some of my work will be exhibited without any audio or narrative assistance; visual interpretation only, engaging the viewer to make the decision what work is all about. Second, I have chosen five pieces to talk about in greater depth. This discussion will take place on the opening night of the exhibit. The five pieces selected are: *Film Noir*, *The Boy Next Door*, *Peterbuilt*, *Brains*, *Trains*, and *Beer*, and *10-50, H-1*.

I have always been fascinated by viewer reaction to my work and to propose the most accurate means to exhibit the work will improve audience participation. And I must make something very clear, this audience participation will only be a response or a contribution to the work, not its catalyst. My M.F.A. show will consist of color lithographs, etchings, and drawings all based on my past experiences as a paramedic, combining many historical events and personal images.



## SOCIAL INTERCOURSE

"Ambulance 55, Engine 55, you have a shooting 8585 Orem, Key map 537A Alpha time out 21:10. Ambulance 55, be advised subject has a GSW to the head and to proceed with caution. "

We were about two minutes out from this location and when we arrived, a large crowd had gathered around a man lying face down on the ground. At the scene, there were no P.D.<sup>1</sup> ground units, just a Fox<sup>2</sup> in the air circling the scene with a short tight pattern. We got out of the unit and proceeded toward the crowd. There on the ground was an approximately 18-year-old black male, lying prone, slumped over a large railroad tie (being used as a border at the apartment's playground) with a gunshot wound to the back of the head.

As I moved closer to the individual, the crowd became more restless and began demanding that I do something. Sizing up the situation, it was obvious that this individual was shot once in the back of the head by a large caliber handgun. There was no doubt in my mind that this young man's life had been cut short by this violent act, but I never made it close enough to check him for a pulse. Instead the crowd became even more impatient, almost to the point of a riot.

On my second size-up of the scene, I observed that I was the only Caucasian there, as my partner was African-American. Mixed in the crowd was the victim's family.

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<sup>1</sup> P.D. – Police Department vehicle.

<sup>2</sup> Fox Unit was the Houston Police Department's radio code name for a surveillance helicopter.

They were demanding that I do something, but there was nothing that could be done as this individual's upper portion of his head had been removed by a 9-millimeter bullet. The family, oddly enough, was also screaming that he committed suicide, but I knew that this was a drug deal gone bad. I recognized this because the individual was shot in the back of the head and because possible witnesses in the crowd were saying that a drug deal had occurred. (My instincts told me that he probably attempted to take both the money and the drugs and being an 18 year-old, he probably did not have much experience in this field of work. Unfortunately, this young man was probably dealing with a professional or professionals that didn't tolerate this kind of behavior; and with this low level of tolerance, and without hesitation, proceeded to shoot him in the back of the head).

By this time, the situation was getting worse. By-standers were now coming towards us repeating their demands. They began saying that I was not doing anything because he was black and that I was white (this was so far from the truth). There still were no P.D. ground units available and the helicopter was still making a circle around the scene with its bright light shining down on us. The Fox unit was so low you could feel the heat coming off the light. By now my partner and I were in lots of trouble. We had no ground units in the area, and the crowd was now becoming a mob.

Fortunately, the helicopter pilot realized that we were in trouble and made a quick and rational decision that to this day I will never forget. The Fox unit came in low and with its rotors, dusted the crowd, sending debris everywhere. With this action came a reaction, it gave us enough time to run like hell, leaving behind all of our equipment.

The drawing *Film Noir* (Fig. 1) was created from this experience, and documented an event in history – this is what my art is all about. In the drawing, symbols are used to depict what I was thinking at the time of the incident. The light beaming down onto the individual who has his hands raised, symbolizes the so-called light at the end of the tunnel. What if this individual was alive for this split second and he believed that the helicopter's light was the pathway to eternal life? Did he have peace seeing the light? Being a drug dealer or not, no one deserves to die this way. So again, if he saw the light, did he believe that it was the path to his spiritual ending and could he have seen the Christ figure hanging down from the helicopter, with his hand extending, inviting him to move toward the light? The depth of the piece that leads the viewer to the color backdrop and the helicopter represents the only help we had at the scene, our only escape. My eyes were focused on that helicopter.

How much information should be revealed to the viewer and should the image be more direct, letting the viewer in on more of the story? In the piece *Brains, Trains, and Beer* (Fig. 2), most spectators agree, initially, that the image is aesthetically pleasing. "The colors are beautiful and has a humorous appeal," one person commented. Others explained the composition of the piece was well balanced and exhibited good harmony. But *Brains, Trains, and Beer* deals with a much more complex issue than aesthetics.

This image is about a 16-year-old Hispanic male that was walking home one night. This drunken individual was returning home from a bar, using a railroad track as guidance. About half way home, he decided to rest, and rest he did. Unfortunately he fell asleep on the path that was to get him home – the railroad track. The call came in at

approximately 23:58 as a train/pedestrian<sup>3</sup> accident. When we arrived on the scene, I observed that the train had stopped about 75 to 80 feet in front of where the cops and train engineers were standing. As I got out of the unit, I remember turning to my partner and saying, "I definitely smell brains and alcohol", a mixture that is very unique and indescribable; we were still approximately 40 feet from the actual scene. Entering through the police crime scene tape, we immediately determined that we carried all this equipment (life pack, med-box, gurney, etc.) for no reason. His head was crushed; steam formed from his warm blood hitting the cold air and ground. The individual was a 10-50, H-1, 10-50 meaning he had expired, H-1 meaning the deceased was a Hispanic male, dead less than twenty-four hours.

How could anyone fall asleep on a railroad track? Why did he not hear the loud warning horn? The train engineer explained he blew the warning horn and pulled the brake the instant he saw him lying on the rail. Why didn't he wake up? Could someone be so drunk they couldn't hear a train's irritating air horn or for that matter see the bright light coming towards him? These were some of the questions running through my head in that split second witnessing this expired individual's decapitated body lying on the tracks.

The title of this combination woodcut and etching, *Brains, Trains, and Beer* represents some of the things I saw and smelled when we first arrived. The word Train, Train, Train coming from the background towards the viewer, obviously represents the locomotive. The nervousness of the lines represents the vibrations created by the train's diesel engines and the steel wheels meeting rail. And the alarm clock, ringing its alarm

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<sup>3</sup> Train/pedestrian accident meant that an individual was struck by a train.

bells, represents the approximate time that the event took place. The alarm clock also attempts to ask the question, why did he not wake up? The figure in the picture plane runs out of the borders, with the top of the head missing. This was intentionally done because it was the top of the head that was decapitated. I was never in danger on this run, no one was ever trying to kill me, I simply thought it was strange that an individual could not hear a train's horn; and that brains, trains, and beer combined with super cold air created a steamy, misty-like cloud that formed around this young man's head; it was like being in a dream.

In the piece *The Boy Next Door* (Fig. 3), crayon, oil pastel, movement and contrapposto of the bodies help in creating what occurred on that tragic night. There appears to be humor in this piece but it is far from being funny.

Ambulance 46, stationed in the Third Ward<sup>4</sup> area of Houston, was dispatched to an assault call at a Catholic Church dance. Arriving at the scene, we saw people walking out to their cars because their dance was over. A police unit was already on the scene, so we headed toward the police cruiser. Standing with the officer was a young black male, approximately 16 or 17 years old, with a laceration just above the right eye with minimal bleeding. This was a simple and routine task; cleanse and bandage the wound and then get the ALS Unit<sup>5</sup> back in service – that's all there was to it. But as we were doing this, a light blue, 2-door Ford raced into the parking lot creating a loud disturbance. At first we paid no attention to this reckless vehicle, but all of a sudden, shots rang out and there was barrel fire coming from the vehicle's windows. Everyone scattered quickly, some hiding

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<sup>4</sup> Parts of Third Ward was notorious for drug deals, shootings, and stabbings, District 46 being one of the busiest districts in the city.

<sup>5</sup> ALS Unit – Advanced Life Support Ambulance was always manned with two paramedics.

behind cars, walls or whatever they could find, to avoid being hit. When I saw the cop was hitting the ground, I decided that this was no better time than now to take a dive. On the ground, I heard and felt pellets raining down on us, some pellets hitting a metal roof close-by, making one hell of a noise. The sound of gunfire was all around us, and then the sound changed. The gun sounds grew louder and echoed, as if they were shooting in our direction. Suspecting that the individuals in the car were the ones who initially assaulted the boy, we all came to the conclusion that they were shooting in our direction with the rifle and the shotgun was being discharged into the air. They came to finish what they started.

After the car was clear of the scene, we all quickly got up to make sure there were no injuries. No injuries so far. Then over the radio, the dispatcher called for another ambulance to respond to a shooting at the Diamond Shamrock gas station, about a block or two from our present location. Still shaking, I jumped the call and informed the dispatcher that we were already 10-97 (on the scene), "we'll take the shooting." We got in the unit and drove about a block to the gas station. There was a large group of kids who had gathered around and moving through the crowd was difficult. Lying on the ground was a young black male, conscious and alert with no signs of trauma (usually signs of a victim shot with a small caliber weapon). When we approached the victim, I observed a small entrance wound in the lower left abdominal quadrant with minimal bleeding. We proceeded to load and go,<sup>6</sup> transporting him to the only trauma center in Houston, Ben Taub Hospital. Before we departed, my supervisor 1182<sup>7</sup> arrived on the

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<sup>6</sup> Load and go was a situation when the patient needed to be transported to the hospital as quickly as possible (never waiting on manpower assistance) and all I.V. lines were started in route, not at the scene.

<sup>7</sup> 1182 was the southeast quadrant's ambulance supervisor.

scene and jumped in the back of the unit. We could still hear Engine 55's sirens heading towards us for manpower assistance, but in a load and go situation you don't wait for the cavalry.

Still shaking, I attempted to start two lines in route. Doing this, I realized that the patient was a by-stander standing next to us during the initial assault call. He was an innocent by-stander having nothing to do with this call; he was at the wrong place at the wrong time and was caught in the line of fire. With a burst of adrenalin, the wounded individual ran two blocks down to the gas station and finally collapsed. He only had one entrance wound, no exit wound, again typical for a small caliber shooting; the bullet just bounces around inside accounting for all the internal organ damage. About halfway to the hospital, this young man's life ended. My supervisor, three trauma specialists, a team of experienced and caring nurses, and I did everything in our power to bring him back, with no success. 10-50, B-1, hence *The Boy Next Door*.

During a summer drawing class, some of my peers felt that my work should provide more information to the viewer. At that time, I disagreed with them, but I tried it anyway. That is when I sketched the image *Peterbuilt* (Fig. 4). I put more information into this image than any of my other pieces to date. *Peterbuilt* has some extremely long narratives incorporated into the picture plane. The expanded narrative not only informs the spectator of the action taking place, but it strongly contributes to the aesthetic appearance and composition of the piece. There are four speakers involved; my account of what I witnessed on arrival, an empathetic narrative of the woman who was killed,

what the grieving husband saw, and the truck driver involved in the accident.<sup>8</sup> In my artist talk Monday night, I began reading my account aloud. This is what I saw.

"When I arrived on the scene, her body was basically a bag of bones. She was bent, twisted, and rolled up. I could not tell which limb was what. Was it an arm? Was it a leg? I quickly checked her for a pulse – no pulse. Monitor read aystolic with intermittent beats, a dying heart and shallow was her breath sounds, about every ten seconds, just a body reaction to trauma. Her airway was crushed and full of blood. Her eyes fixed and dilated with a dead appearance. Her skin pallor and cool to touch. To a bystander, there was a strange odor in the air. To me it was obvious; it was the smell of brains, 10-50, W-1."

The woman killed (read by Elvia Perrin): "I got out of the car from the emergency lane not knowing that I was in the lane of traffic. I was mad as hell at him. Then there it was, four headlights and the annoying sound of an air horn"....Hit!

The grieving husband (Eric Tosten): "She demanded that I stop the car, so I did. We were both yelling at each other. Then suddenly she reached for the door handle, opened it and got out. She was still yelling at me and me at her. I could see the glare in her eyes through the car window. Then I heard a loud sound, an air horn perhaps. I reached over and lowered the window and tried to talk to her. Her crying eyes looking at me, her sad, crying eyes....Hit! Empty window, loud screeching and skidding of tires, brake lights of a semi in front of me. Braking cars behind me. Her body being dragged underneath and through the wheels then rolling into the lanes of traffic. The last thing to

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<sup>8</sup> The night of the gallery talk, three readers situated in the audience read each person's account of what they witnessed.



see of her were her crying eyes, her crying, forgiving eyes. Oh my God what did I do? What did I do?"

The truck driver (Matthew Morin): "I saw her for an instant. Her eyes wide and open. She began to weave as to try and dodge me. I applied the brakes hard and began to skid side to side. I was doing the speed limit, I am sure. Stop truck! Why is it taking so long to stop? I can't believe this is happening....Hit! Oh my God, she's hit my left side and thrown into the air. Her feet fly by my side window. Oh my God, she hit my truck mirror! She flips around and I see her frightened eyes before me for a split second, then she is gone. It is dark and now I see only headlights in front of me. A crowd gathers of stopping motorists. I get out of the truck and I can't believe what I saw. She appears dead with a glassy blank stare...Sirens blare. Lights flashing. Lots of questions. What happened? How fast? Did you try to stop? — I heard nothing."

With all this information given, two of the students (the two that most pushed me to do this) could not read or even look at the image. They left the room in tears. Possibly this was too much information. But after the artist talk, many people came up to me and said they had no idea my art was so intense and complex. Most considered the images simple and humorous. After realizing the true meaning behind each piece, most said they now viewed my work from a whole new perspective.

The piece, *10-50, H-1* (Fig. 5), is more direct visually than all my other pieces. I believe this piece is strong with its visual representation. This image has violence, blood, and high-energy emotions, enough information to suggest that a violent act has taken place. This multiple layered color lithograph virtually narrates itself using action, color placement, and facial expressions.

One afternoon, I was filling in at Station 18, the busiest station on the East side of Houston. We responded to a possible suicide call at a residence. On arrival, everything around us appeared normal except that Engine 23 was already on location. Walking up to the house, I remember hearing everyday sounds: cars, birds, children playing, etc. But as we approached the front door, we could hear yelling, crying, and screaming. At that point, my partner and I did not want to go through this same scenario again. But of course we got paid for this shit and we had to do it, we chose to do it, so we entered the scene, going from your world into mine.

I will never forget this incident. When we entered I remembered seeing blood at the edge of the door threshold and the victim lying in the middle of the living area. This visual sign immediately alerted us there was a large amount of blood loss. This was a long way for blood to travel, a violent path to follow. Entering, I could see the body lying in a large pool of blood. The body was in the supine position and approximately half his blood content, 2 to 3 units<sup>9</sup> were lost. Engine 23's captain stopped me halfway to the body and informed me there was no pulse or breath sounds detected. He also told me the family was demanding that we do something. To assure myself that this individual had expired, I evaluated the patient's ABC's: airway, breathing, and circulation. Walking to the body, the blood was sticking to the bottom of my shoes creating a gross, aggravating sound. As I got closer I could see the patient's brain about halfway out of his head. At this time, there was really no reason to check him for a pulse, but I did it for the family. The body was warm to touch with no apparent respiratory activity. He had some focal

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<sup>9</sup> The human body contains an average of six units of blood.

activity<sup>10</sup> with the body twitching about every five to ten seconds, his face raising off the floor with each twitch, blood oozing slowly off his right cheek with each movement.

And as Engine 23 informed me, there was no pulse. It appeared this 16-year-old boy shot himself in the head with a large caliber handgun and, in my disbelief, he did this in front of his mother, brothers, and sisters. He not only killed himself this day, but he also destroyed the spirit and life of his entire family forever. How could he had done this? How selfish of him, I thought and over the love of a young woman. He was only 16, there was so much more, so many things to do and achieve. What was he thinking? Again, all these things were racing through my head in a matter of seconds.

But the worst was being surrounded by everyone: Engine 23's crew, my partner, and the grieving family. They were all waiting for me to make a decision (this is why the image appears to be looking up at the characters that surround the deceased). The family was still yelling at me in Spanish but I could not understand them. A Spanish-speaking firefighter was translating their message as quickly as possible and this took up too much of the family's time, and they resorted to violence. The mother and one of her sons attacked me for obvious reasons – I didn't meet their demands. My partner and I had to exit quickly and without our equipment. Engine 23's crew followed, bringing the equipment with them. We then waited outside, in our unit, until P.D. arrived.

Depression, love and suicidal tendencies are all powerful emotions. I learned something new everyday being a paramedic, and that day I learned that mental illness is strong, realistic and extremely influential. Powerful enough for this young man to put a

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<sup>10</sup> Focal activity – the focused section of the body experiencing some movement or spasms. For example the focal activity of this individual was his right side.

gun in his mouth and blow the top of his head off. Powerful enough to do it in front of his only world and his only peace – the people that loved him the most. *10-50, H-1.*

## CONCLUSION

It has always been difficult to discuss these past paramedic experiences seriously. I usually joke and laugh in attempt to conceal the pain these events have caused. I look back now and I say to myself, "I can't believe I did this shit for a living!" but I did and there is nothing that I can do to change the past. All these images have odd and unusual stories behind them, and will be with me forever. Many listeners at my opening Monday night explained to me that they initially thought my art dealt with a more humorous subject matter. Some had absolutely no clue that the substance represented in my work was of a serious and somber nature. Some explained to me that, in the future, they now were going to approach my work in a different manner.

Throughout the years, my past and present art professors have struggled trying to persuade me to explain the work with more detail and accuracy. I have been fighting them every step of the way. This information is sometimes difficult and haunting to revisit. Viewer interpretation is so important to me; I do want the viewers to know more.

I have always had a fear of speaking in front of people, especially on this subject. But every time I display my work, I am inviting people to revisit these past fears and emotions, so it is only fair to reveal more information. I refuse to misinform the audience any longer. It is time to involve the viewer more. In my opinion, the opening night talk was successful and accurately informed the audience about the true meaning of my work, and in the future, I intend to present my narratives more to my audiences in order to solve this problem.

During the opening of my show Monday evening, I began my talk by explaining that when I injured my back, I thought it was the end of the world. But after many years

of creating these grotesque images I have finally realized that this devastating injury was not the end but only the beginning. Without these past experiences, my approach to image making would never have been possible. It is all part of a process and sometimes we have to travel down some rough roads to reach our destination. I believe that I have found the means.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1, *Film Noir*

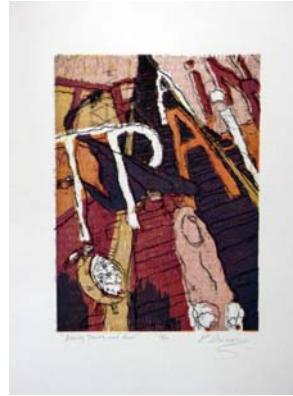


Figure 2, *Brains, Trains, and Beer*



Figure 3, *The Boy Next Door*



Figure 4, *Peterbuilt*

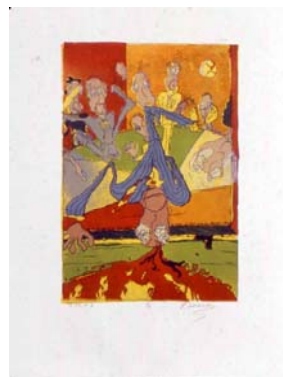


Figure 5, *10-50, H-1*