

Orpheus Looking Back

A celebration of Maurice Blanchot

There in the panic of the night's long fright...
when the waste breath of dreams
spreads stale dew inside the window panes...
the hours when diamond-edged thought
cuts through the mirror where
our few done deeds can shine back comfort
down that dark frame
inside the frameless picture
is that the house of God?

John Lavery



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Orpheus Looking Back

A celebration of Maurice Blanchot

Curated by John Lavery

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In order to see, something must remain as if always unseen: the lens, the glass, light, the image as image. In order to read, in order to arrive at the meaning of what is read, something must remain as if always unread: the syntactic support of the semantic, the smallest words whose task is to sustain and to produce the movement of signification, carrying the reader to the end. Blanchot's writing is suffused with the thought of an unlawful seeing and with a moment opening onto a terrible opacity. In his fictions eyes are opened by the night so as never to close in the same way again, and are closed by the day so as never to open in the same way again. They tell of the night in the night and of the madness of the day, and of why telling can suffice for neither. And in his reflections upon fiction and literature, he insists on a look standing as the origin of writing where what is seen is not something added to the world, to the day, to being, but rather something subtracted, not yet and now never a *thing*. It is there too in the descriptions of fascination, a condition Blanchot calls "passion for the image".

For the most part, we are content to say that the image comes after the thing, indeed that the thing's no longer being here is the condition for the possibility of the image. In the image, something (the image) comes close as something else (the thing of which it is the image) withdraws. The thing, not here and because not here, is here in the image. The image gives both the thing at a distance and that distance itself. My contact with the image is contact of distance at a distance, and thanks to the image I have control over the indefinite absence of the thing. The image is thus productive, allowing me to construe absence as no more than interval and the really absent thing as ideally recuperable. To all of this, however, Blanchot contrasts a "second version of the imaginary", one that experiences in the image the impossibility of the step from real absence to ideal presence. A thing falls back into its image as though the image preceded it, as though it were precisely what the thing had to conceal or overcome in order to be the thing it is. In Blanchot's first novel, *Thomas*, wandering in the night, senses just such a falling back and senses as well that these images into which the things disappear constitute the night's darkness. "You cannot see in the night": this is the truth underlying the law the insomniac transgresses. "The insomniac cannot avoid seeing in the night": this is the other truth, the law by which the insomniac is excluded from any productive relation with the things of the day. If, in the night, a thing cannot be seen, in receding into its image its not being seen is seen. And this is fascination, the necessarily non-productive *idée fixe*. Fascination no longer refers to a relation in and from which a thing is distanced and so mastered. It is no longer a matter of the thing in and through the distance I keep from it, but the thing holding me at a distance, *its* distance, the distance - the image - at the heart of the thing. From providing "a limit at the edge of the indefinite", the image now comes as itself the indefinite (unlocatable, senseless) object of fascination. To be fascinated is to be no longer capable of diagnosing or thematising what it is that fascinates; but what it is that fascinates just is what makes such constructive thinking possible. Hence the ambiguity of the image...

To reveal what revelation destroys. To see the thing as it is just before it becomes a thing, and to look just before one is permitted to look. What in all of this of the work of art? How can it be said to belong with fascination and so to the second version of the imaginary? What does it mean to regard the poet as a daytime insomniac? Surely Orpheus in singing of Eurydice either confirms that the work belongs to the day, to the ideal representation of what is now forever lost, or succeeds in establishing a relation where none was supposed to be. But Orpheus's task is to bring Eurydice home. It is a task set for the artist; if he should succeed, art will be assured of its future and its destiny, its ability to act in and on the world. To turn to Eurydice in the night is not only to lose her, it is also to betray this future. From the standpoint of the day,

Orpheus's impatience is unforgiveable. He turns because he desires another relation and because his desire already is another relation. And subsequently, in place of Eurydice as the work in the world, there will be only a song that sings of this other relation. Instead of its masterful future, art will belong henceforth to "Orphic space". Writing begins with Orpheus's gaze.

In Blanchot's hands, writing ushers in a thought that would be always somehow less than a thought. Yet a writing that would serve the production of books and dissertations and that would bind ever more tightly the legible and the intelligible must protect itself from thinking about its beginning. "The first person who ever wrote, cutting into stone and wood under ancient skies, far from responding to the demands of a view that required a reference point and giving it meaning, changed all relations between seeing and the visible.... I suppose the first reader was engulfed by that non-absent absence, but without knowing anything about it, and there was no second reader because reading, from then on understood to be the vision of an immediately visible, intelligible, presence, was affirmed for the very purpose of making this disappearance into *the absence of the book* impossible." (from "The Absence of the Book" in *The Gaze of Orpheus* p145). Again we run up against a paradoxical precedence as though it were Blanchot's theme. But what of the things Blanchot makes, the books, stories and essays he writes? How do they begin to be about all of this? How does "The Absence of the Book", for example, begin to be about the impossible experience of the impossible first reader? Organised in 19 numbered sections, it can give the impression of attempting to inaugurate some sort of programme, a consideration of the theoretical possibilities of writing's responding to the thought of its ruinous but exemplary beginning.

With Blanchot, it can sometimes seem as though everything is already there in the first sentence with both what the sentence says and with what, as first sentence, it has to accomplish. One such opening, the opening of "The Absence of the Book", reads "Let us try to question ourselves, that is to say, to welcome under the form of the question that which cannot reach (or come up to) the point of questioning" (*"Essayons de nous interroger, c'est-à-dire d'accueillir sous forme de question ce qui ne peut arriver jusqu'au questionnement"*). Self-interrogation, the philosophical exercise *par excellence* is here thought in terms other than interrogation. The form of the question is to be read as inadequate to its allotted task and, in this inadequacy, as bearing witness to what cannot be questioned but only welcomed. There is nothing particularly surprising in such a thought. At a certain point questioning, even questioning of oneself, must cease; to question properly is to attend to this point, this limit which might be called the unquestionable. Philosophy, acknowledging an end to questioning, thinks of this limit as its own. Blanchot's opening hints at something different: questioning as welcoming, as passive response rather than active interrogation. On one reading, all philosophical questions could be reconsidered as already indicating just such a response, and Blanchot can be said to have if not a theory of the question then at least a means of challenging the logical priority of the question and the dominance of the activity of questioning. The opening is an invitation to philosophy and the we it names and addresses is we who question and are concerned about our questions. Questions implicitly *invite*. Blanchot invites us (*"Essayons de nous. . ."*) to a questioning that is to welcome what is not invited: the uninvited, the stranger. On another reading, we are very close perhaps to a thought of the other and to the suggestion that, in attempting to question ourselves, we are forced to acknowledge that what resists thematisation, invitation, and interrogation in this fictionalised and abstract self is a pre-thematic and pre-originary responsiveness to the other. And so, already, before we have even begun to read the first numbered section, we find ourselves implicitly at home in at least two of the philosophical or critical debates with which Blanchot is concerned and to which the rest of "The Absence of the Book" may be seen to contribute.

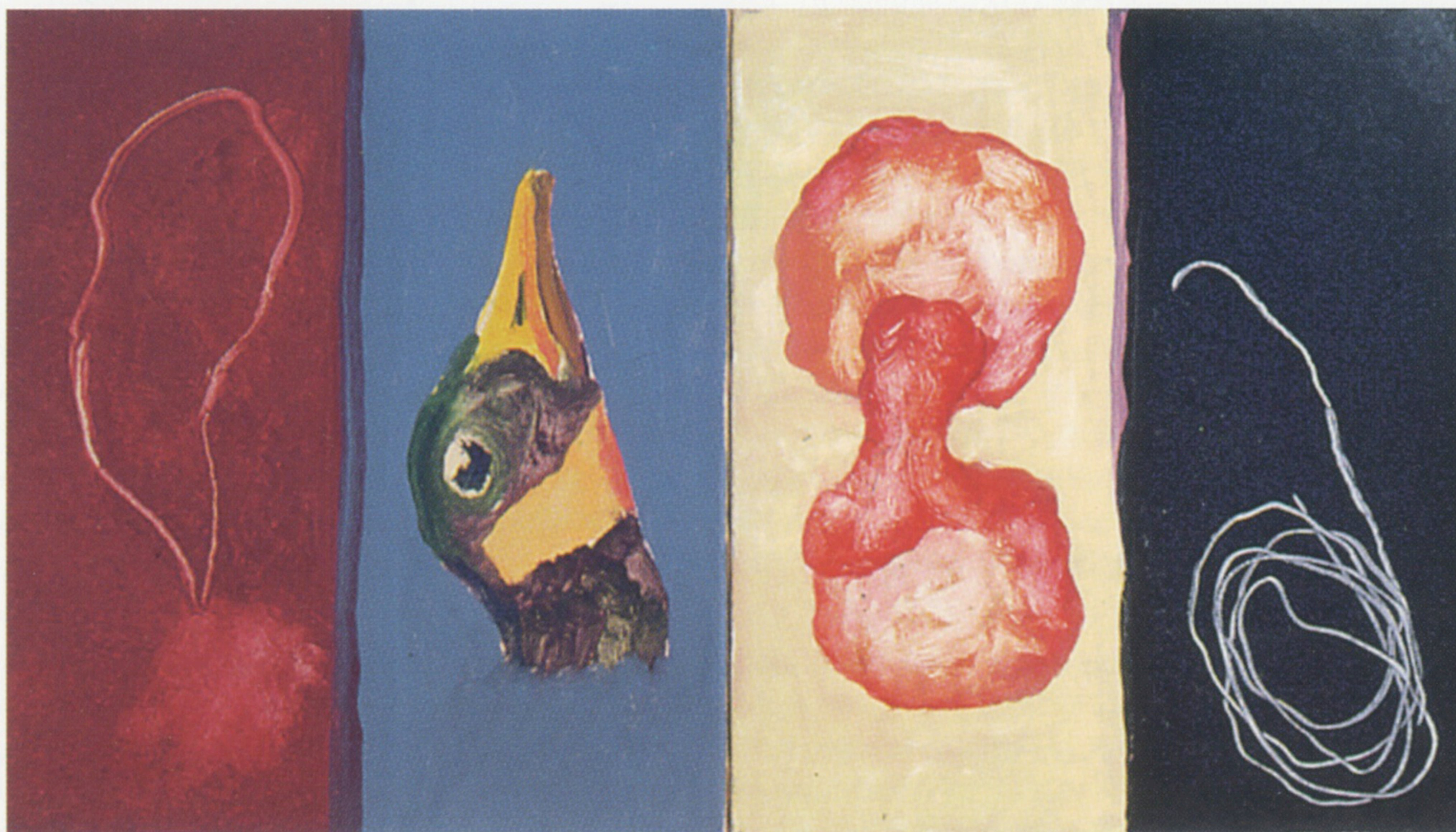
And yet we must be wary of importing either the grand theme or indeed the grandness of the unthematizable. Blanchot never quite begins philosophically or with philosophy. The opening sentence begins with an invitation not a question, and the invitation works in such a way that the reader is never brought finally to the question itself or to any question at all. Although the invitation is an invitation to question, it also replaces the question itself, the question with which we might have expected to begin and the question to which we might have expected this invitation to introduce us. Quite literally, what never reaches the point of questioning, what is never presented as the X in "what is X?", is nothing but this opening sentence, and the we that is to be questioned and welcomed as what cannot be questioned is not so much the we of the critical or philosophical reader, let alone of the subject or self that would be its abstraction, as it is the "we" implicit in the opening word. It is the "we" through and beyond which we readers and subjects have to read if we want to get anywhere at all.

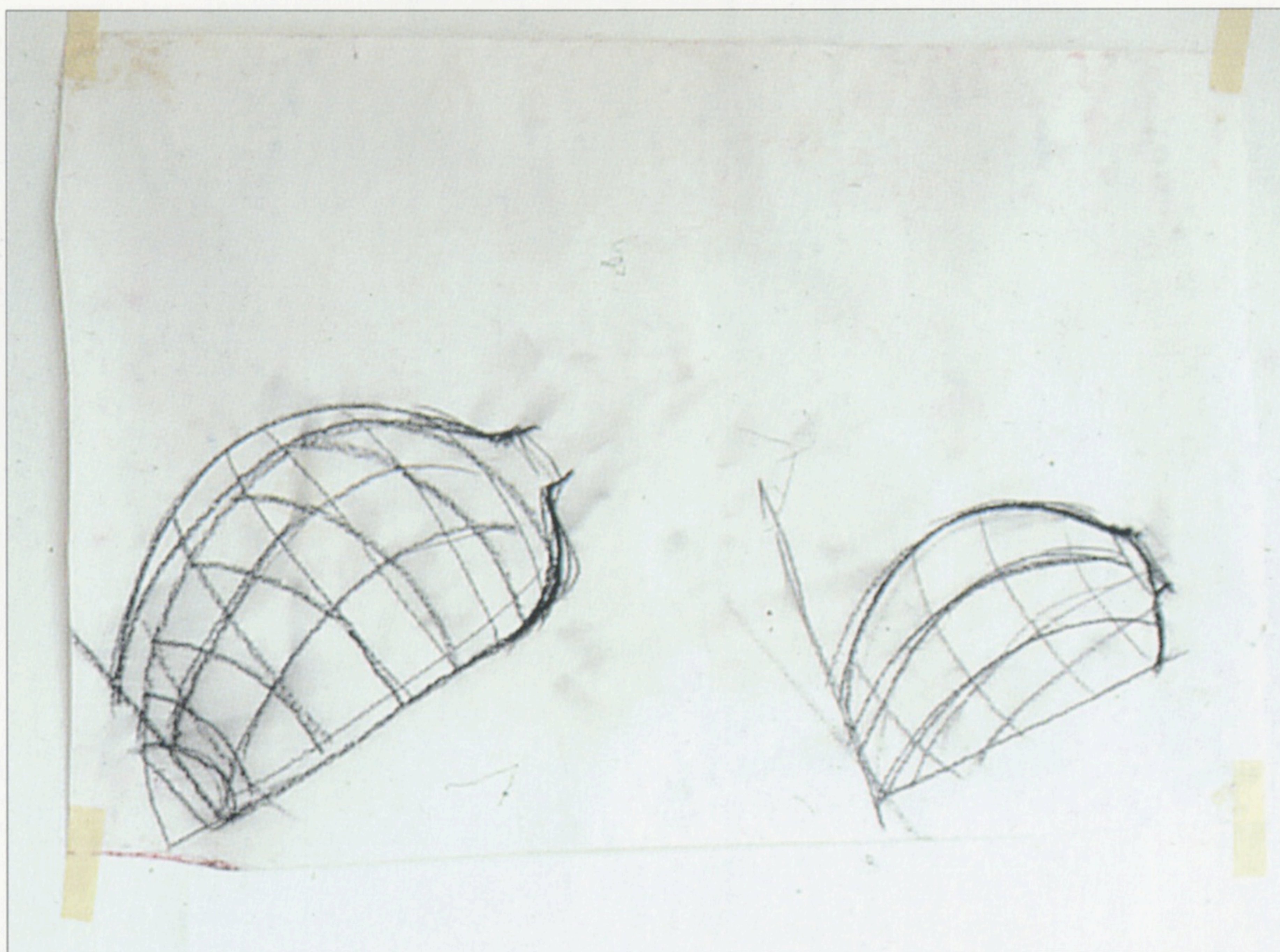
If we were really to read and think about this opening of Blanchot's we would not be able to proceed because the "let us" would have us attend to what we never attend to, the unwritten and unreadable "let us begin" presupposed by every story and every philosophical or critical undertaking. It is not incorrect to think of some of Blanchot's fictions as attempts to tell the story of this impossible opening sentence, this ruinous beginning, as though the sentence were also a name or something - named, nameless, unnameable - that might *tell*. The sentence remarks upon its inability to reach the point of questioning which is also its inability to reach the point of welcoming and of being welcomed by itself. In speaking of itself the sentence speaks of what precedes it, of what remains necessarily concealed by each and every opening sentence including this one.

The key term in all of this is perhaps the preposition, Blanchot's "jusqu'à", and what is at stake is the unrealisable dream of a writing that would take us up to the "up to" as if to read it for the first time and so to know, for the first time, what prevented both philosophy's interrogative domination of all that is, with its subject and its sense of controlling the unquestionable, and philosophy's recognition of the failure of this interrogation, with its substitution of and by another sense and subject, a passive but responsible welcoming of the other. Always with Blanchot, there is this extraordinarily fragile syntax; every "jusqu'à", or "de..à", every seemingly insignificant moment of advance, must be read as an interruption and must interrupt the reading if the thing the essay, tale or thought is about is to be taken seriously. To take seriously what prevents both a thought of the whole and a whole thought. It is a writing for the sake of what cannot be told and what henceforth makes the demand to tell an exquisitely violent one.

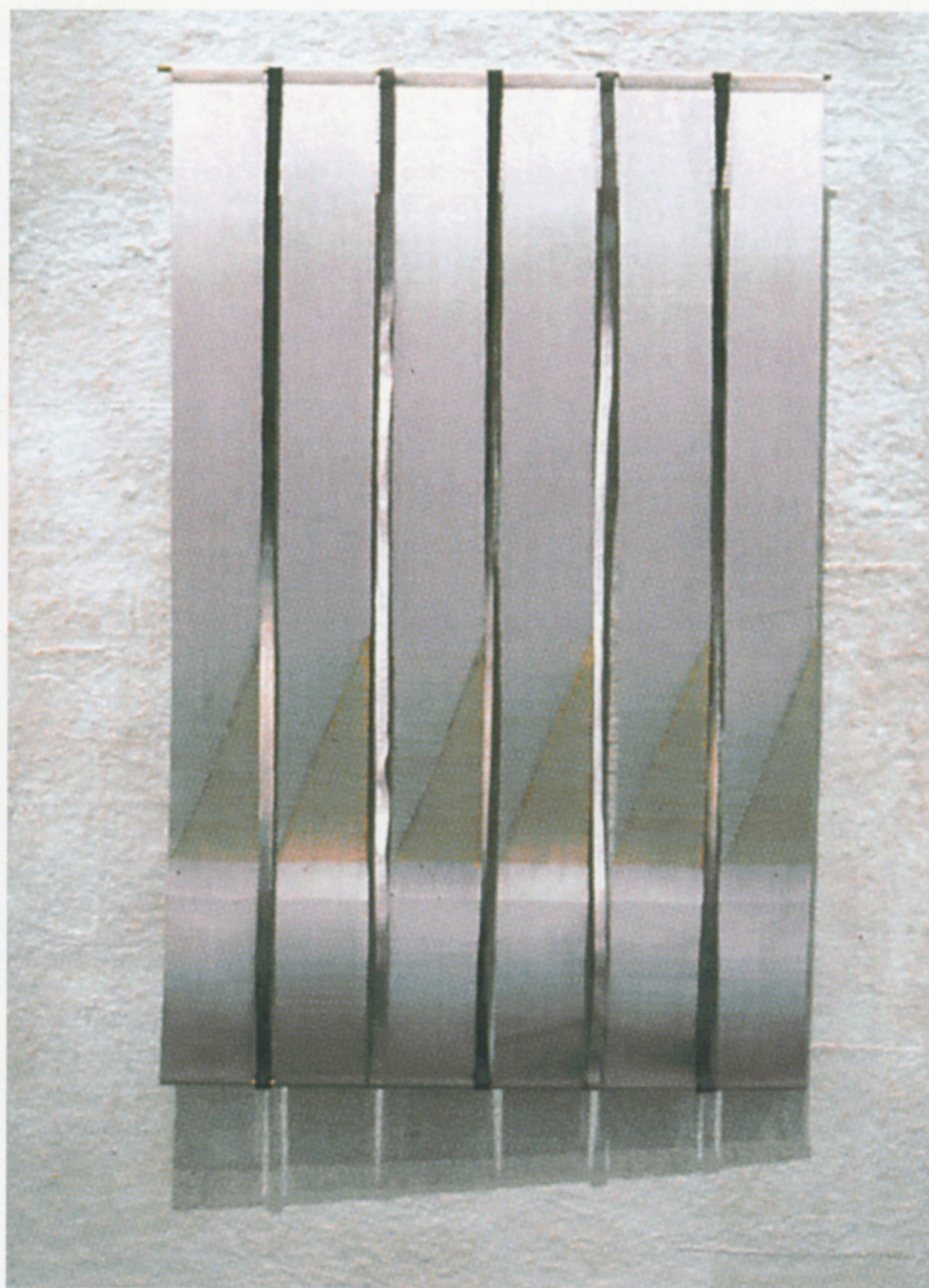
If to read Blanchot as though he were a philosopher is not to read the opening sentence, that sentence when read can never quite explain either why this must be so or how things do stand between Blanchot and philosophy. We are left stranded on the verge of a tantalising thesis (be it about questioning, alterity, or writing) in a text that endlessly warns against the temptation to formulate or to endorse it.

... the unreadable first word or sentence, the irrecoverable beginning, the image ... the work of art ...





Daniela Granzin
Study for 'Familiar body' 36cm x 78cm





Beth Harland
Where distance holds us I Oil on canvas 30cm x 42cm 1997

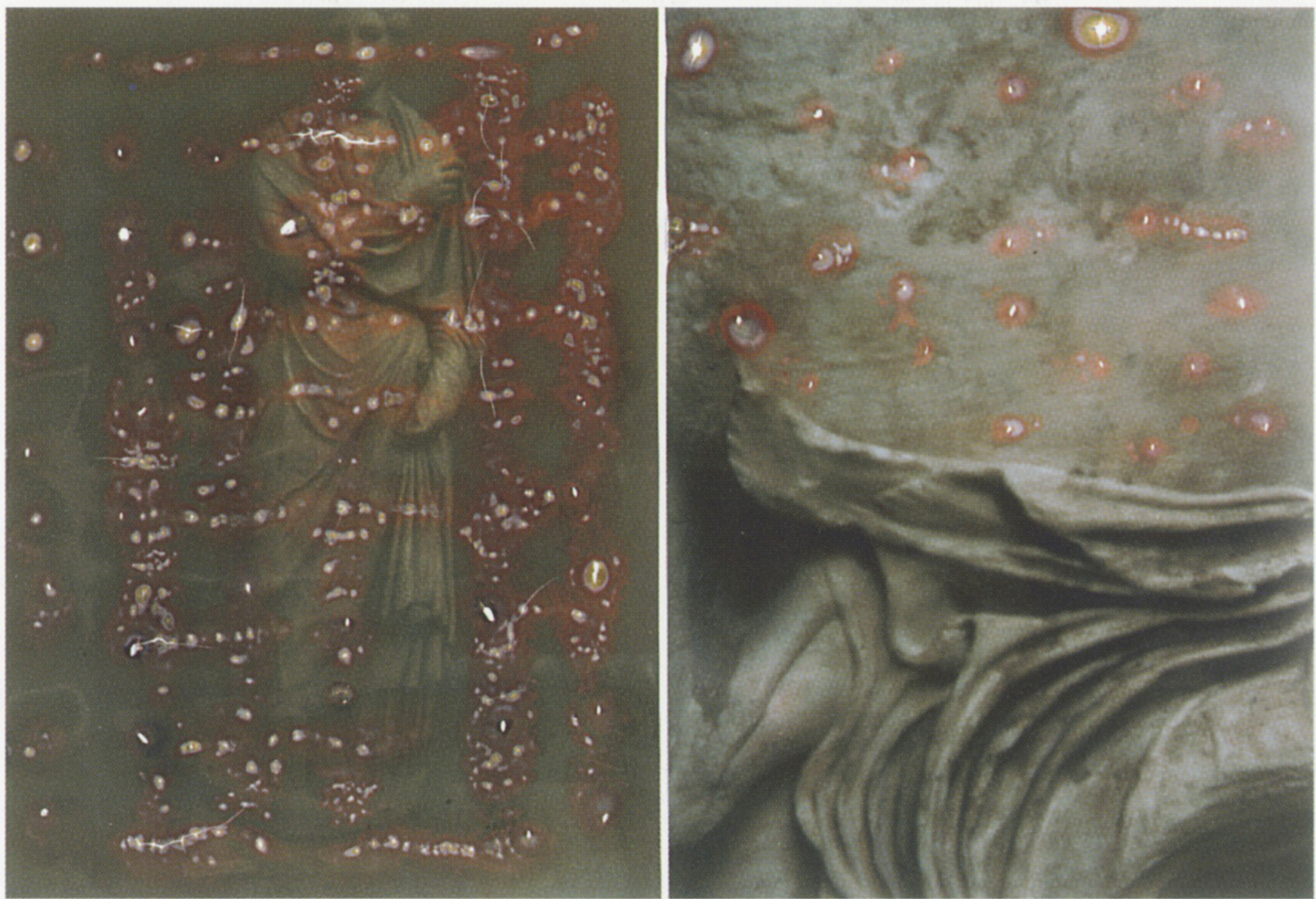




Tracy Hetherington
Untitled Plasticine Various sizes 1997

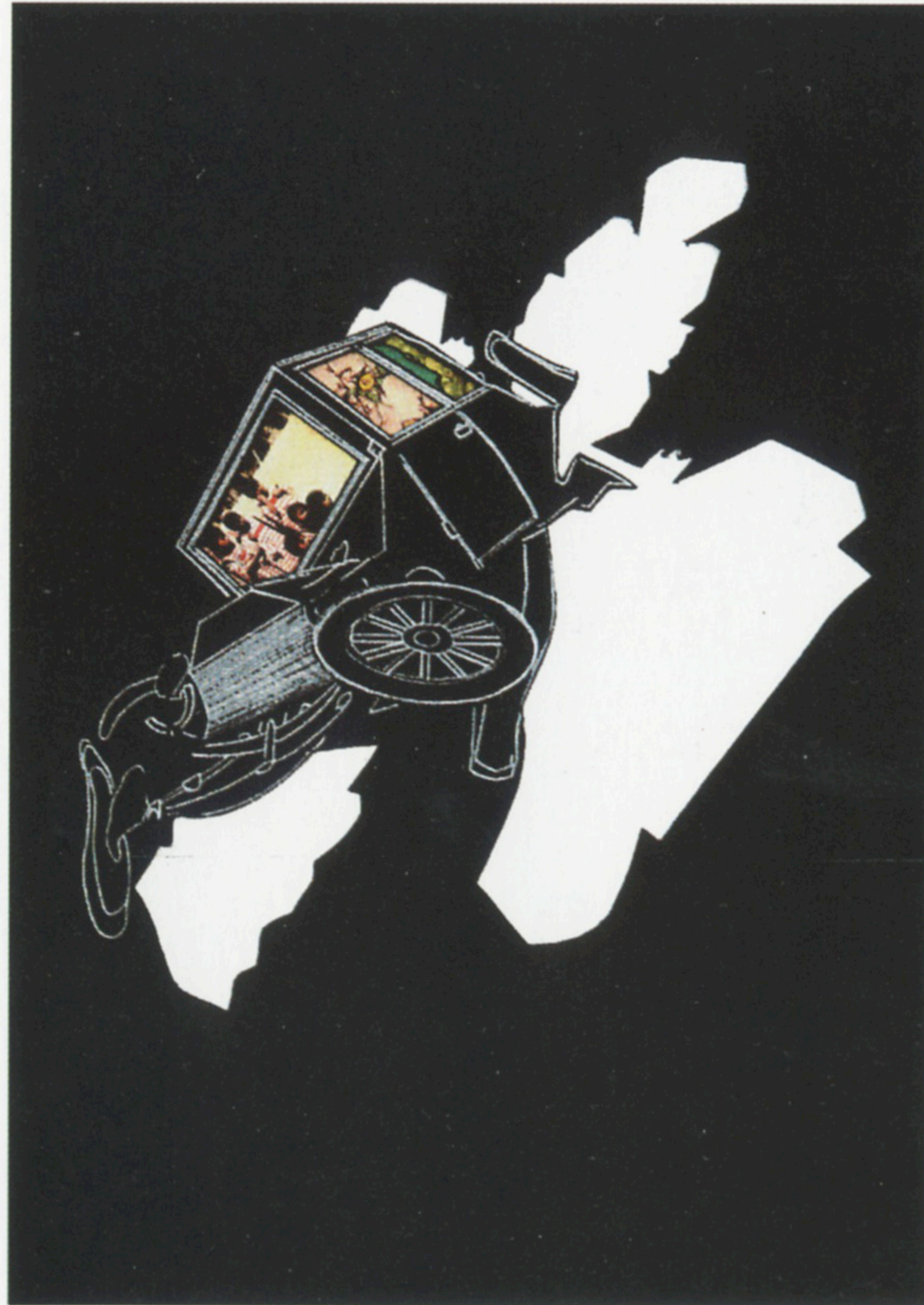


Speaking isn't seeing — You say it so calmly — It does roll easily off the tongue — I say it calmly for it is not about storming in and saying, don't look! — So, it's not about negation, the accent is on separation — To separate speaking from seeing — Go on then — Let's talk about stretching the limits of what, in any given period, can be seen and said — Now you're talking, but stretch your talking, make it more than tongue wagging — Stretched to the limits speech utters the unseen and sight sees the unspeakable — Ah, I see — Then there is a turn around — You see but you don't see — You see, both seeing and saying become separate, distant from each other — But, it's got to be said, through this separation they become close, they envelop each other — So there is a wagging — A toing and froing — Between distance and closeness — Between separation and envelopment — Things are going in two directions at the same time — Sight stretches speaking as speaking stretches sight — Then, the unforeseeable happens — Seeing turns towards that which isn't seen by sight — At the same time, the unutterable happens — Speech presents itself as "sight free from the limitations of seeing".





Yiannis Papadopoulos
Flight Hand made paper 49cm x 37cm 1996





Paul Whittaker
"Neither here nor there" Silver gelatin print on paper 30.4cm x 19.5cm 1997

