

# Marilyn Murphy

*Realism Subverted*

Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery

**January 19–March 3, 2017**

In honor of Marilyn Murphy's retirement in 2017 after thirty-seven years of teaching at Vanderbilt University, this exhibition is supported, in part, by the Department of Art, with additional support provided by the College of Arts and Science and the Ewers Gift for Fine Art.

## Director's Introduction

Marilyn Murphy likes to play with perception and the act of seeing. Rooted in an artistic tradition that has continued to mine the popular culture of cold war America, her aesthetic is largely informed by surrealism, but not limited to it. In her deftly rendered drawings and detailed paintings, Murphy raises the curtain on a world that is quietly subversive and, in many instances, layered with humor. Domesticity often figures prominently with foods such as pies, JELL-O molds, and puddings, perhaps revealing an artistic sweet tooth. Furthermore, huge shifts in scale within her compositions contribute to a sense that we have stumbled into an alternate reality.

*The Observers* (2006) is an excellent example of this puzzling world. One figure in a lab coat, employing a microscope extending from an erector set-like boom arm, and a second figure, looking closely on with knitted brow, set the tone in this featured work of art. The observatory, albeit a miniature one, is a perfect metaphor for Murphy's practice and a means for her to address the importance of looking. The positioning of the left figure's hands in a gentle cupping attitude seems to suggest that touch, as much as sight, is critical to deciphering the object's purpose. Murphy adds layers of additional meaning in *The Observers* by depicting a keyhole-shaped door, transforming the entire enterprise into a mystery to be unlocked.

As an educator, Murphy has had a noteworthy imprint on thousands of students. Vanderbilt University has been her professional home for much of her adult life. While her own practice has always been central to her as an artist, teaching has grounded it. I speak for myself and many of my colleagues in saying that she will be greatly missed.

—Joseph Mella

## Artist Statement

My drawings typically include one or two figures involved in an improbable action or working at some curious task. While occasionally my art has a political element, many pieces in this exhibition comment upon the act of seeing, the creative process, or some aspect of human experience. Strong lighting and shadows create a sense of mystery while the identities of the men and women are obscured in order to direct the focus of the viewer toward their activity.

Film noir and magazines from the 1940s and early 1950s often inspire my work. Having grown up on the Great Plains, I frequently include the action of the wind in my work. Often the objects are beyond reach or curiously out of human scale to create a dreamlike atmosphere where the objects can be read as symbolic or actual.

## Artist Biography

Marilyn Murphy is an artist and a professor of art at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Her oil paintings and drawings create curious situations implying larger stories that often explore dualities both formally and conceptually (safety and danger, peace and turmoil, fire and water). Her work has been shown in more than 380 exhibitions nationally and abroad. She has had a mid-career survey at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts as well as a two-person exhibition of her work at the Huntsville Museum of Art with Bob Trotman. Her work is represented by Cumberland Gallery in Nashville, Adler and Co. in San Francisco, Carl Hammer Gallery in Chicago, and Blue Spiral Gallery in Asheville. [www.marilynmurphy.com](http://www.marilynmurphy.com)



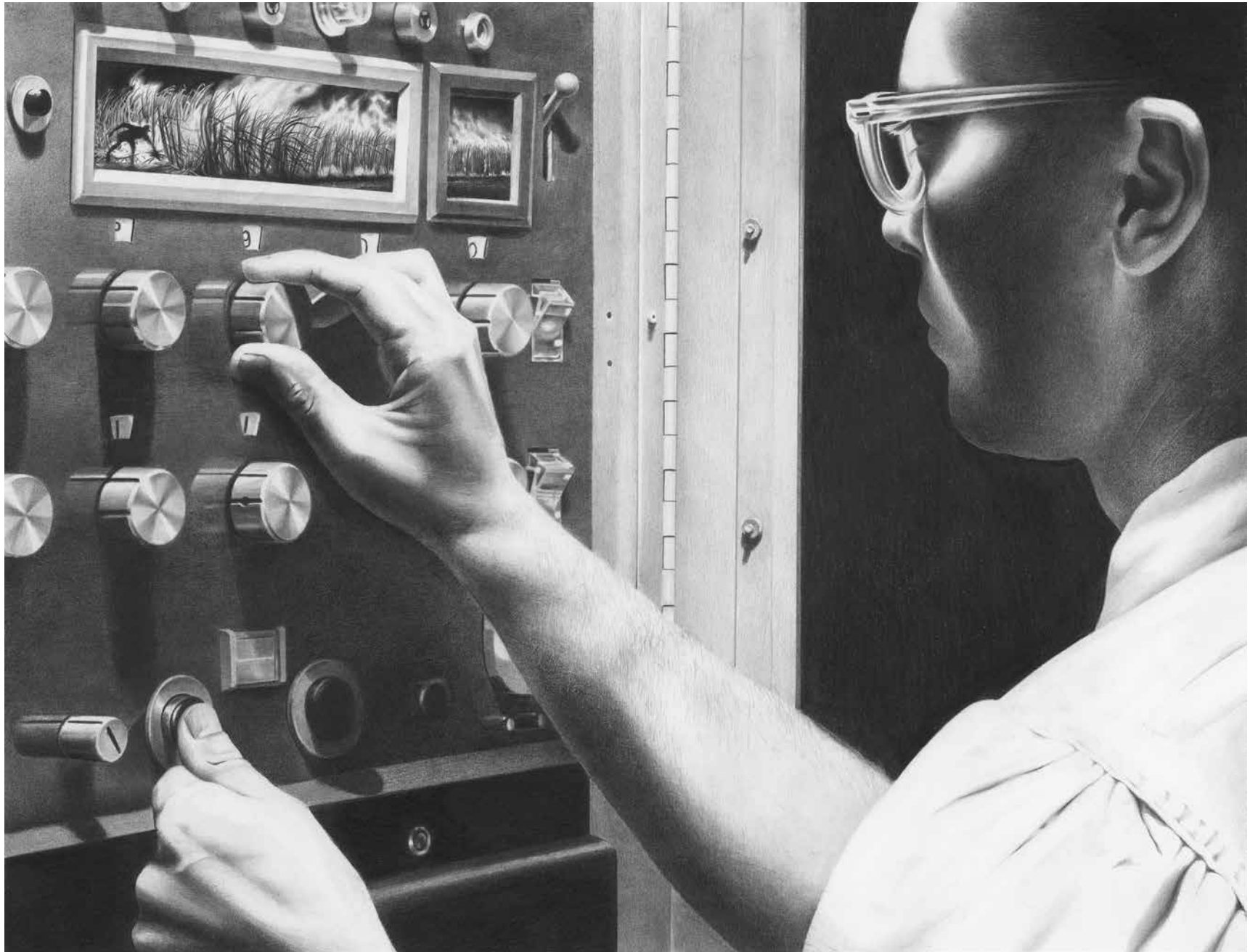


### The Dust Devil Is In the Details

Marilyn Murphy is a daughter of the center—the very center of America. She grew up in the southern Plains and has lived and worked in the South for most of her adult life. Still, her art is a product not of two places, but of one continuous spirit, if one modified locally. Oklahoma and Tennessee are separated only by Arkansas; Tulsa and Nashville are practically at the same latitude. Murphy captures the strange anomie of this extended region, the solar plexus of the country, where southern culture transforms into the pioneer spirit, personal dreams and memories fixate on homegrown myths and anxieties, and the ghosts of the past mingle with the ghosts of the present.

Often, it takes more than one glance to pick up on the peculiar situations. But there they are. A cabinet or beaker may go flying off into space. A baked good or chemistry experiment may yield illogical results. A housewife's smile or the poker face of an intern may betray the glimmer of something more sinister. Never mind the boardroom or the bedroom; have the workplace and the kitchen been infiltrated? The luminous radiance that inflects Murphy's pictures, rich as it may be with nostalgia, adds to the frisson of unease. It may reflect, figuratively and literally, the glossy tonality of postwar film and photography and certainly befits the long skirts and tidy haircuts of the Truman and Eisenhower years. (Truman and Eisenhower, of course, were products of Murphy's literal Middle America.) But it is a bit too vivid and too real,

*Oasis*, 2009  
Oil on canvas  
48" x 36"



*Cane Fire*, 1989  
Graphite on paper  
19" x 25"



shiny to the point of hallucinatory. Everything, no matter how ordinary at first glance, has an aura that makes it somehow heavy and weightless at the same time. Buildings seem lighter than air; sheets of paper descend like flocks of birds; forest fires break out in oscillations.

It is easy to declare Murphy a homegrown fantasist. Clearly, her work derives from dreams and the skewed perspectives of childhood. These are, among other things, the reassembled impressions of a mid-American baby boomer, brimming with free-floating anxiety (and thus with free-floating objects), haunted by sneaky Communists and weightless astronauts. All that's missing from Murphy's vocabulary are poodle skirts and mushroom clouds. Not only does Murphy studiously avoid the more clichéd images of her youth—no gingham-clad kids doing duck-and-cover here—but also she gracefully avoids the predictable strategies of suburban surrealism, the attenuated narratives, the photo-album/golden-age sitcom quotations, the Populux citations, the incessant conjuration of tract-home alienation and enforced patriotism. To be sure, this kind of material dances in the shadows cast by the vast machines looming in Murphy's backyards and the storms brewing in her desserts. She focuses her attention on these rather more universal apparitions. Her weird world is indeed specifically American and, in certain places, specifically part of her childhood or her present, and specifically mid-century, but it refuses to rely on the inside jokes of her nation or generation. Instead, Murphy invents images

*In the Clouds*, 2016  
Oil on canvas  
48" x 36"





*Air and Dreams*, 2008  
Oil on canvas  
38" x 61"



and sets events in motion that could exist and happen now as well as then, and perhaps even a century ago. The toasters would be different, but the toast would not, and neither would the cryptic markings the toast might bear.

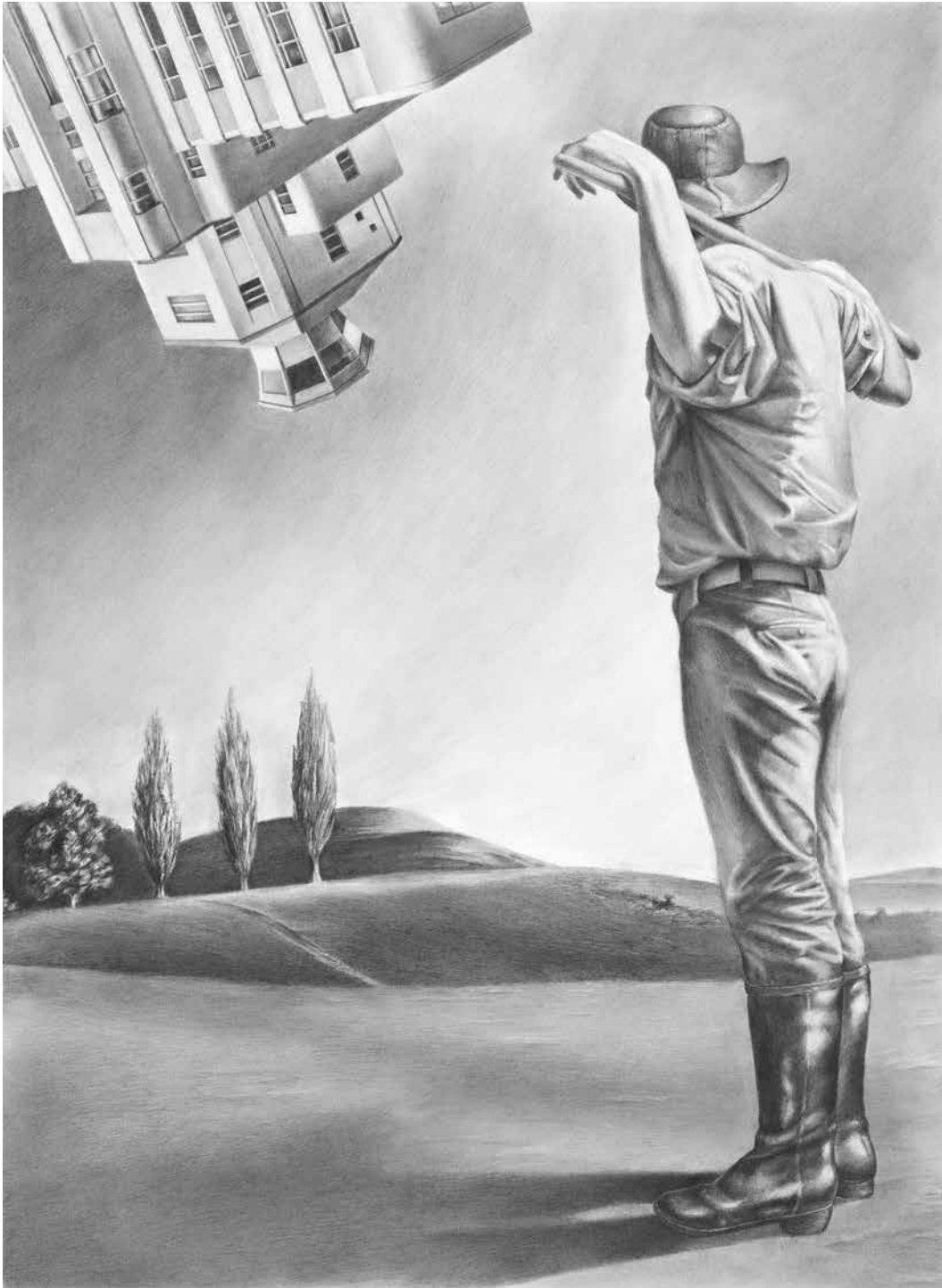
Murphy is a surrealist (if more of a small-town than suburban one), and key to her strategy is the cognitive clash between her pedestrian pictorial elements and the absurd circumstances in which they engage. In this respect, one could situate Murphy stylistically, spiritually, intellectually, and formally halfway between René Magritte and Mark Tansey. The Belgian (capital-S) Surrealist and the New York neo-classicist establish between them a continuum of cockeyed storytelling, a continuum on which Murphy locates comfortably. It is a manner of picturing the world so that the world turns in on itself, retaining all its components but profoundly upending the logic according to which those components interact. Magritte reduced his imagery to flat, almost cartoonish ciphers, illustrations of, even proposals for, credible and incredible events. Tansey, relying on the techniques of “traditional art” not just for pictorial credibility but for artistic authority, describes elaborately staged, highly climactic moments—grand reveals, sight-gag punch-lines, seemingly historical turning points—that turn on a conceptual phrase or philosophical conundrum. Murphy is (quite deliberately) less rhetorically ambitious, and more comfortable with the domestic and personal implications of her choice of visual tropes. She thus argues for a feminine sensibility, more intimate

*The Observers*, 2006  
Graphite on paper  
30" x 22"





*Storm Chaser*, 2013  
Colored pencil on paper  
30" x 22"



and less driven to prove a point. But she is no less pictorially ambitious and no less concerned with the human condition, especially as it manifests in the modern age. Murphy is just as adept—as deft, as self-aware, as knowingly handy—as Magritte and Tansey are at universalizing specifics, elevating the banal, and ultimately sabotaging our sense of the quotidian.

Finally, it can be said that Marilyn Murphy disdains entropy. The world she re-creates out of the world she's known does not fall into routine, but constantly falls out of it. The normal keeps springing a leak. Its diversions and misbehaviors are ominous, but never quite as ruinous as they threaten to be. Neither nature nor culture may be on its best behavior in Murphy's pictures, but she allows them mischief almost as if to dissuade them from anything more catastrophic. We already know the bad results of the world going topsy-turvy, Murphy figures; let's see what the good results, the fun and even beneficial results, are. Murphy's Law has been amended; if anything can go wrong, it should.

—Peter Frank

*Peter Frank is an American art critic, curator, and poet who lives and works in Los Angeles. He was the senior curator at the Riverside Art Museum and an art critic for Angeleno magazine. He is a frequent contributor to The Huffington Post.*

**Aerial Architecture, 2016**  
Graphite on paper  
30" x 22"



*The Plumper*, 2011  
Graphite on paper  
22" x 30"





*The Dunker*, 2011  
Colored pencil on paper  
30" x 22"



*Action Still Life*, 2011  
Graphite on paper  
30" x 44"

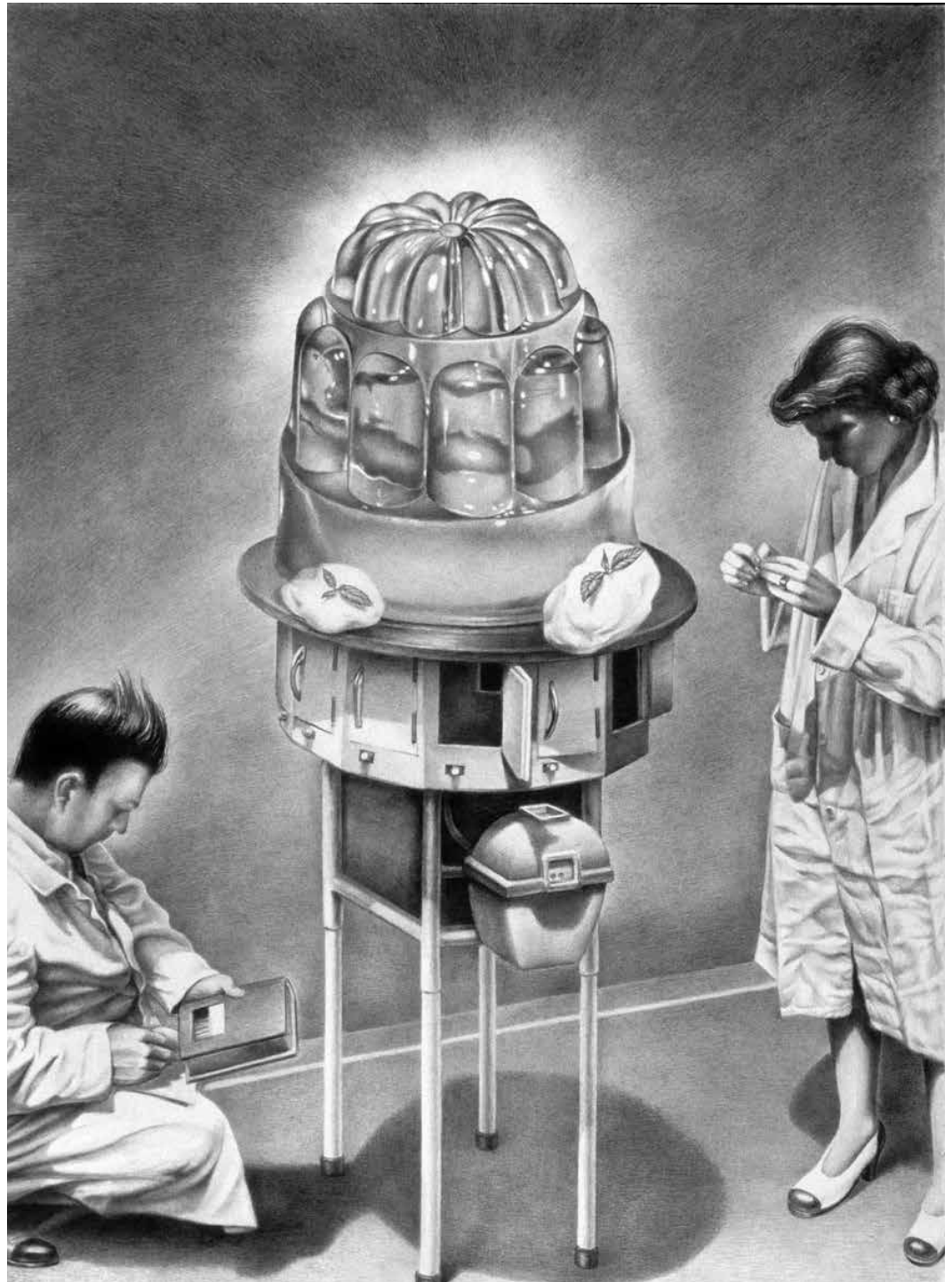


*Intermission*, 2016  
Oil on canvas  
40" x 30"





*Box of Tricks*, 2014  
Graphite on paper  
30" x 22"



*Popular Science*, 2005  
Graphite on paper  
30" x 22"



*Let It Go*, 2012  
Colored pencil on paper  
30" x 22"





*Studying Vincent and the Mystery of Vision, 1991*  
Graphite on paper  
25" x 19"



*The Trade*, 2014  
Graphite on paper  
38" x 44"

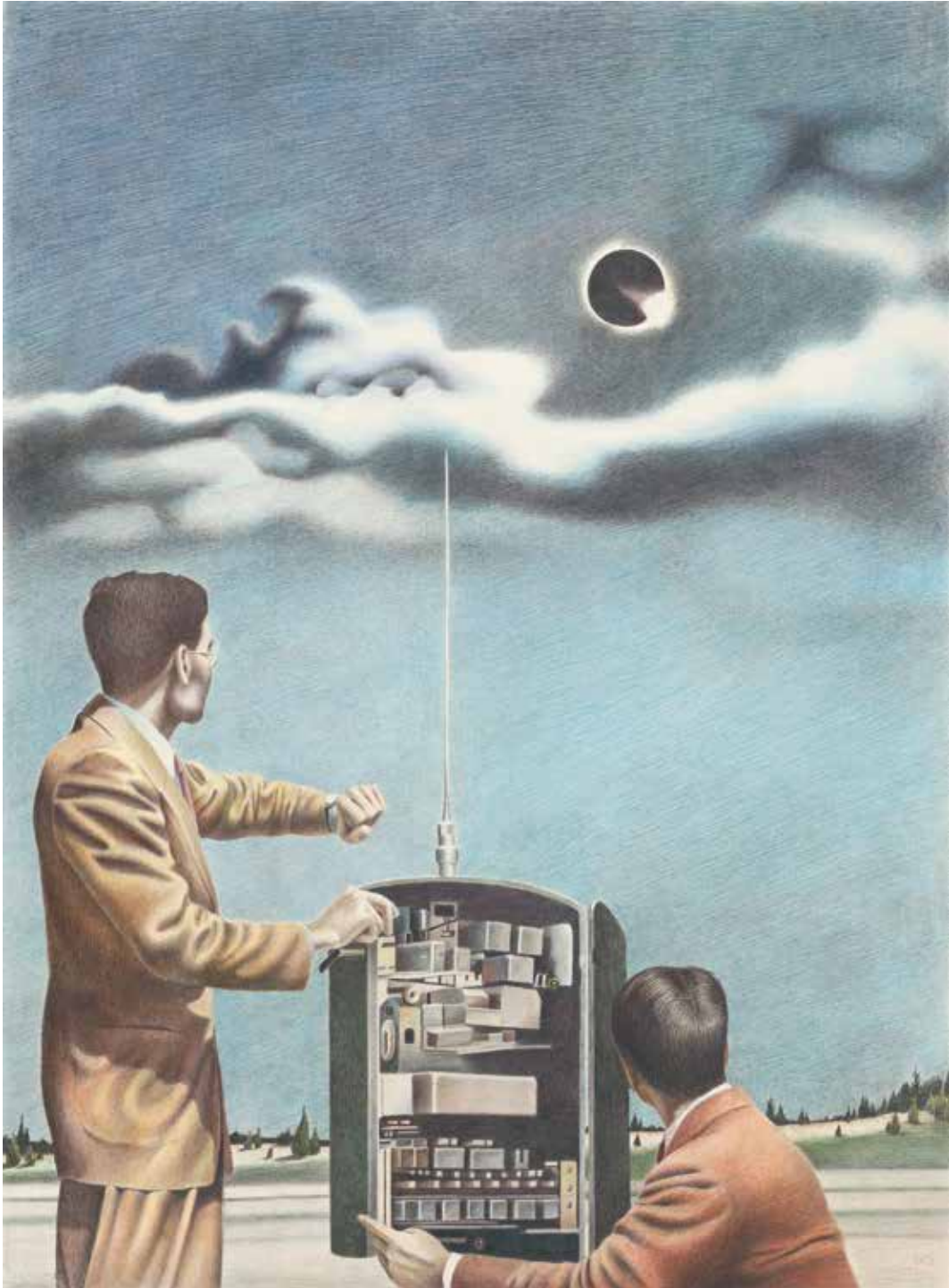


*Lychee, 1989*  
Colored pencil on paper  
25" x 38"



*The Lost Scroll*, 2003  
Oil on canvas  
50" x 38"





*Eclipse*, 1985  
Colored pencil on paper  
30" x 22"

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## Exhibition Checklist

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## Representation

Adler & Co Gallery, San Francisco, California  
Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, Illinois  
Cumberland Gallery, Nashville, Tennessee  
Blue Spiral Gallery, Asheville, North Carolina

## Selected Collections

Boston Museum School, Boston, Massachusetts  
The Bridgestone Collection, Nashville, Tennessee  
Siena Art Institute, Siena, Italy  
Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, Tennessee  
Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, Alabama  
State University of New York, Potsdam, New York  
Oklahoma Museum of Art, Norman, Oklahoma  
Imagery Collection at Benziger Estate Winery,  
Glen Ellen, California  
Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville, Tennessee  
Oklahoma State Collection, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery, Nashville, Tennessee  
Metro Nashville Arts Commission, Nashville, Tennessee

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