



Heide Fasnacht: Exploded View

Since 1997, Heide Fasnacht has been making sculptures and drawings that depict explosions of all kinds, from sneezes to volcanic eruptions—events too sudden, violent or self-consuming to be easily visualized. Keeping the human presence in these works to a minimum, she invites us to experience the sheer visual pleasure of catastrophe in freeze-frame.



BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

If a sneeze there is a measure of dismissal (small, but nothing to sneeze at) and of pleasure (see the short and strange digression Freed took, in odd partnership with Wilhelm Flais, to explore the connection between nasal evacuation and mental health).¹ Perhaps there is no post-warist in the common sneeze, though the connection to both Thrasos and Freud is hard to miss, but the relationship of sneezes to art? When Heide Fasnacht introduced the sneeze as subject matter for sculpture and drawing in 1997, pleasure, danger, sex and an arch kind of skepticism all entered the picture. However, sneezes interested Fasnacht mostly because they fall at the threshold of visibility, in the realm of things that, while not imperceptible, are more or less impossible to visualize in any stable, conventional way.

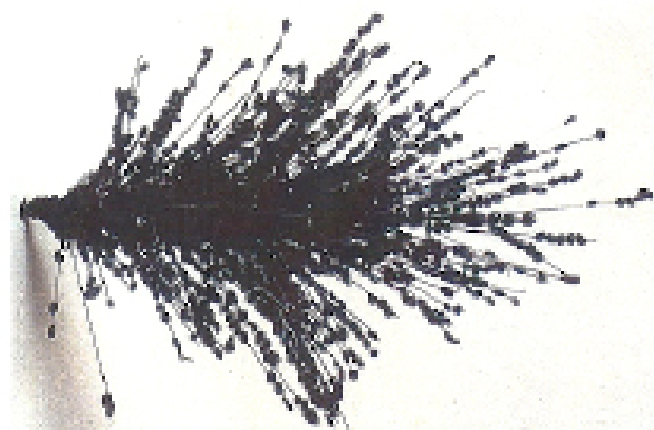
All kinds of explosive phenomena fall into this category, events too turbulent, fast and self-consuming for the leisurely pace of ordinary vision.

Above, Heide Fasnacht: Sneezes I, 1997, graphite on paper, 40 by 49 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photos in this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Bill Higney Gallery, New York.

Opposite, Doves, 2000, neoprene, Styrofoam, sign-out, approx. 2 1/2 by 20 1/2 by 16 feet, at Bill Higney Gallery. Photo by Deborah.

Fasnacht has long been occupied by subjects that resist capture and, when caught, are more readily apprehended in two dimensions than three—the geography of water space, for instance. Her current work, graphic and sculptural, has moved beyond the sneeze to take on geyzers and volcanoes, military explosions on sea and land, personal detonations and accidents, and fires benign and catastrophic. The transformation of the banal into the extraordinary, hallmark of any disaster worth the name, parallels the transformation of inert matter into speed-of-light energy in such events, providing an almost indigestibly rich metaphor for art.

This body of work (including the various Sneezes) began with frail-looking objects made with clumps of hand-drying polymer clay clotted around vectors of heavy-gauge wire. They render as solid form (but just barely) the misty stuff spewn in a variety of chaotic patterns (which in a sneeze issues mainly from the mouth); plumes of water and steam; smoke; and the particulate matter in detonations, incinerations and eruptions. Some of the sculptures are table-top sized, including recent examples made of bonded iron, a particularly dense material. Other sculptures are bigger, made with sprayed neoprene foam forced through bits of wire mesh that captured the wire armatures. In a spring, 2000 exhibition of Fasnacht's work at the Worcester [Mass.] Art Museum, a substantial *Sneeze* issued from one wall,



Above, Little Doves, 2000, polymer clay and wire, 28 by 25 by 8 inches. Collection Kenneth C. Frost, Boston.

Right, Big Bang (foreground), 1999, polymer clay, neoprene, graphite, metal, 2 feet high, with background left to right: Sneezes III, 1995; Firestorm, 1998; and Willy Wog, 1994-97, at Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass.

little black globe of clay clinging to airy, thin metal rods that spring both in an elegant but menacing burst. A considerable *Big Bang* (1999) erupted from the floor, its speckled and swirled, black-white-and-gray-toned clay parts reinforcing a connection to the black-and-white photographs, often from outdated textbooks, on which much of this work is based. The even more massive *Explosion* (2000) was pumped up with bursts of foam, then finished with a coat of graphite. Its powerful extension, slightly jibby surface and unclean overall demeanor make it seem both the image of an explosion and its charred, hapless-looking result.

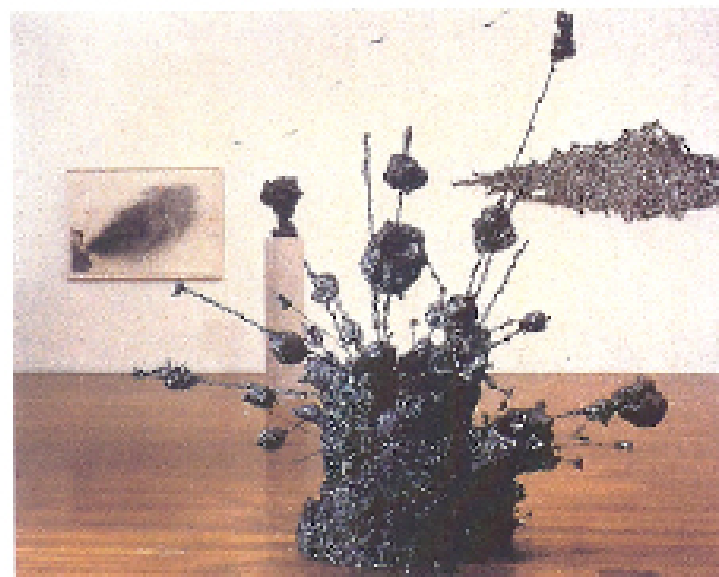
For a show called "Explosion" (also spring 2000) at the Bakalar and Huntington galleries, Massachusetts College of Art, Fasnacht created a massive installation titled *Doves*, as in "demonstration" or "demonstration"—though "demonic" applies, too. It involved reconstructing on site the full-scale, wrecked facade of a yellow brick row house, and then nearly blowing it away with monstrous billows of neoprene foam, shot from cannons to come boiling out from under the wall and through the ground-floor window in starbursts and capillower-shaped clouds of bubbly white gunk. Instead of beaded bits of clay on trails tendrils of wire, there were buckling walls, shattered glass, torn tax paper and crumpled Venetian blinds—all meticulously arranged to create the appearance of destruction. As with any kind of violence, things were exposed that are ordinarily hidden. Viewers could even walk around the back to examine the scaffolding, which made the whole construction seem like a prop, hence the more dramatic.

There were light touches, too, including a few stray bricks held midair by wire, a comic gesture that seemed straight out of "Krazy Kat," suggesting a new level of comedy to match the scaled-up magnitude of destruction. In George Herriman's classic comic strip, Ignatz Mouse barks *Krazy Kat* on the head with a brick, over and over, arguably as a sign of affection; in a novel called *Krazy Kat*, Jay Cantor imagines Ignatz complaining about the constraints governing his interaction with the *Kat*: "No matter what I did to you, even when I sent whole walls of bricks toppling onto your noggin, you always turned it into love. Do you know how flat and small that makes a fellow feel, kitty?" The specific unapprehensiveness that comes from unacknowledged anger (or passion) permeated the mapham in *Doves*, which is both funny and

viciously not funny, roaring mad and absolutely nuts, in the same measure.

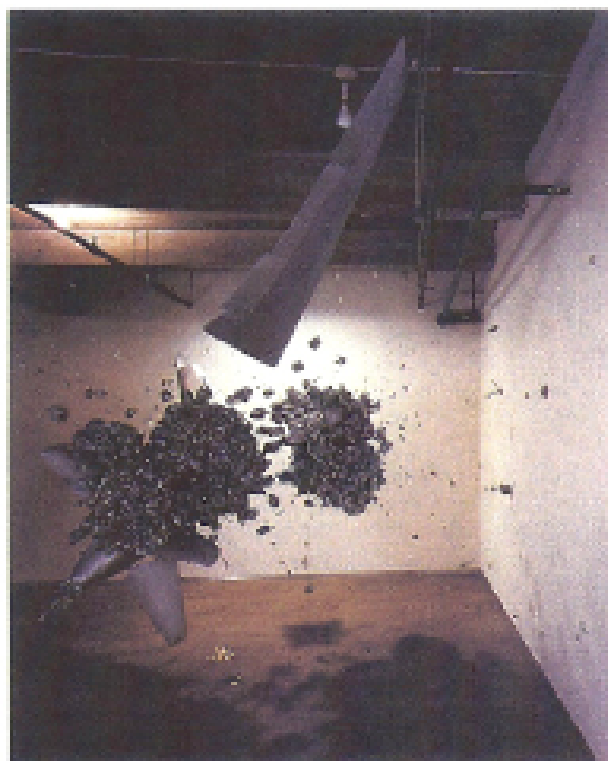
Doves was one of several works inspired in part by photo-documentation of buildings being deliberately blown up. At Bill Higney Gallery last fall, Fasnacht showed another such sculpture, this one made with carved Styrofoam and sprayed neoprene and painted a glittery charcoal black. Unlike the full-scale *Doves* in Boston, this sculpture (also called *Doves*) compresses a skyscraper to roughly 7 feet high, and shows it mid-detonation, its carefully detailed walls crazily skewed, smoke billowing. At once more abstract (like a film clip or a graphite rendering of something that happened somewhere else) and more tightly focused than the preceding work, this second *Doves* shares with the first small moments of sharp humor: stray bits of tiny furniture tumble down the facade, curtains flutter, a "floor" sign splinters and falls.

Also at Higney was a spectacular installation-cum-sculpture called *Exploding Plane*, the unfortunate jelliner's broken back, wings and stashed contents (including a few tiny suitcases) laid in midair by a



initially explosive network of gay wires anchored to ceiling and floor. Made, like the second *Doves*, of carved Styrofoam and gobs of neoprene forced through wire mesh, *Exploding Plane* is painted a gleaming aluminum gray. Whereas the imploding black hotel has all the dark, impossible gowdy of a collapsing aerial body, *Exploding Plane* (modeled, unlike the real-life-based *Doves*, on a crash fabricated for the movies) fractures along linear trajectories that seem to guide it straight toward disaster, with little cheap pirotechnics.

Fasnacht titled the exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum "Blow Up," after the famous 1966 film by Michelangelo Antonioni in which a fashion photographer inadvertently documents (perhaps) a murder, the (possible) victim and gunman visible only at extreme levels of enlargement. The cautionary lesson often drawn from the film—that close examination of visual data is liable, at a certain order of magnitude, to be self-defeating—has meshed neatly with popularized ideas about quantum physics and the limits it defines to positive determination of position and velocity at very small scales. But like subatomic particles, this popular conception of *Blow-Up* itself tends to waver on close inspection. The murder,



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at first hidden, is revealed, and confirmed, in the depths of a very long and waxy night, but both photographs and corpses are gone by morning; the problem isn't with representation alone. Fasnacht's reference, like her work, indicates longstanding awareness of the two-way traffic between imagery and object, and the accidents that occur in both directions.

In her present work, she has tended to make the drawings seem more solid and substantial—more real—than the sometimes scribbly, spatially difficult sculptures. Tightly constructed and heavily worked, the drawings are made, over weeks and months, from layers of cross hatching and parallel strokes, with results that are paradoxically dense and crisp. Steam and smoke are rendered solid enough to seem habitable. One or two sharply



Eden, June, 2000, soapstone, nitrogen, pigment, 10 by 14 1/2 by 21 feet, at Massachusetts College of Art, Boston.

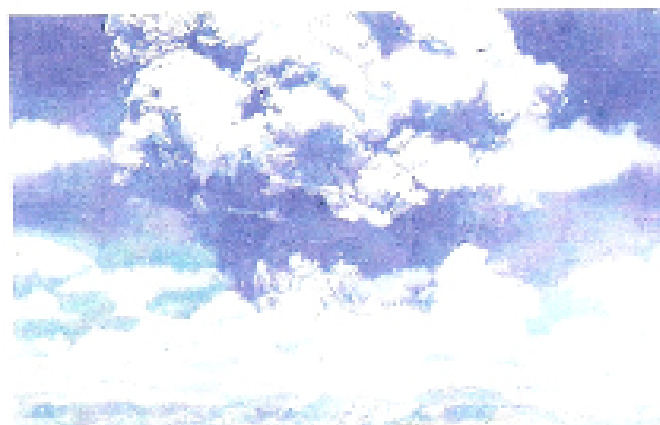
Left top, Exploding Plane, 2000, soapstone, nitrogen, pigment, dimensions variable, at Bill Magyes Gallery. Photo by Mercedes.

Left, Explosion, 1988, polymer clay, metal, 22 by 20 by 21 feet, at Bill Magyes Gallery. Private collection. Also Park Photo by Mercedes.

silhouetted human figures occasionally appear in the foreground, mostly to indicate scale, but they are ghostly by comparison with the capricious they witness. Until this year the drawings were all in black pencil, varying from soft, deep-black graphite to feathery silicopoint, and sometimes ranging widely in a single image. Naturally, these illusionistically rendered black-and-white drawings are much closer than the sculptures to Fasnacht's photographic sources, and some of the early examples even reproduce the benchy dots associated with offset reproductions (as with Ray Lichtenstein and Sigmar Polke); in a few cases, Fasnacht punched benchy-like holes right through the heavy drawing paper. In other drawings, she capitalized on small punctures and tears caused by the pencil, shading them as if they were prior physical facts—or as if drawing were a form of carving in stone.

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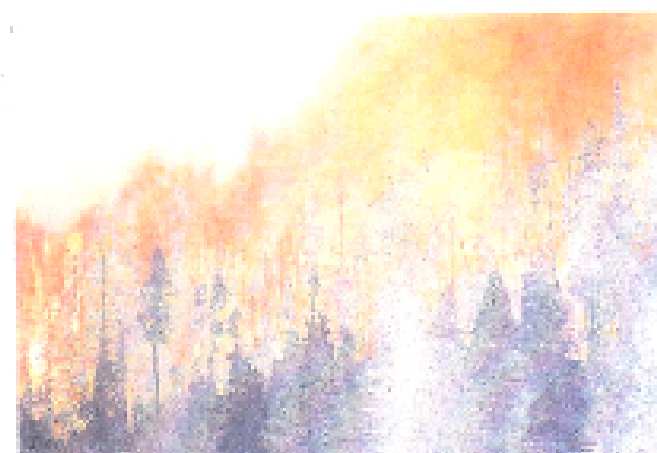
The latest drawings, though, including three of the four shown at Bill Magyes, are in full color (they are drawn with colored pencils), and they dispense with all connections to dusty textbooks and venerable newspaper photos. *Blue Pinatubo* shows a volcano in prodigious re-eruption. As before, there is no fallout, no wreckage, human or otherwise, just an immense, glowing, sun-stroked cloud of smoke and ash and a lush streak of countryside below, the blue of the sky and the green of the landscape as clear as an illustration in a children's book. Amid the incandescent, glowing reds and yellows of *Forest Fire*, the details rendered most solidly are the brightest point of flame, while the burnt trees are rendered to flimsy silhouettes, less substantial than the configuration that consumes them. The new



Blue Pinatubo, 1999, colored pencil on paper, 40 by 69 inches. The Progressive Corporation, 61A.

color range in the drawings, which has emerged at roughly the same time as the increased scale of the sculptures, is matched as well with an extended creative spectrum. Along with natural and military explosions, there are now more local and remarkable human disasters, including not only demolition jobs but also fires, plane crashes and even the explosion of the Hindenburg. But Fasnacht's rejection of tidily resolved psychological drama remains resolute. The drawings, by any definition, are epic; the labor (and the love) that have gone into them are evident, and they are deeply engaging. And, partly as a result of the deliberate nature of their construction, they are oddly static, perfectly poised between unimagable (and unrepresentable) physical disaster and inevitable visual pleasure.

Introduced by that foundational crosser, the work with explosives has opened new ground for Fasnacht, but it has ample precedent within her career, including drawings and sculpture based on schematic renderings of fundamentally uncatchable things. Using an outdated astronomical map, she fashioned a *Willy Wag* (1986-87) from little lumps of polymer clay held together by springs, producing an object as chunky, refined and reliable as our understanding of the cosmos. The floppy diagrams developed by cognitive psychologist Robert Schae to show the eye-scanning patterns of people viewing selected paintings were the basis of several



Forest Fire, 2000-2001, colored pencil on paper, 49 by 65 inches.

drawings Fasnacht made during the mid-'80s. In prior map-based work, and in earlier sculptures with less determinate references, Fasnacht showed a consistent interest in pliable and/or stackable materials that themselves slid between two and three dimensions, from layered blankets to industrial-grade black rubber to laminated wood. There are also drawings from the early '80s of shattering storm windows and splintering stairs that look forward to ideas only lately obscured. Some of this work has brought Fasnacht into close company with other artists—among the topics who have used maps, Bruce Nauman is of singular importance for his similar commitment to perceptual flip-sides and blind alleys. Cornell's Parker, who is pertinent for similar reasons, also shows Fasnacht's fascination with things exploding in mid-air (as do a number of younger artists, including Sarah Seo, Cai Guo-Qiang, S.V. Day and Matthew Rhode). All likewise possess a comparably dark sense of humor.

But in Fasnacht's recent work, a distinctive connection is forged, where-by flashes are shown to be blinding, explosive discharging. Time elapses more slowly for an individual in motion than it does for a still in any individual, according to the theory of special relativity.¹ "A tactile sensation is a blind spot; we touch in silhouette," writes Nabokov.² It is during the infinitely attenuated moment of maximal velocity, in the momentarily elevated blink of an eye, that Fasnacht's work makes its mark. □

1. In *The Life and Works of Albert Einstein* (edited and abridged by Lisa Tilling and Steven Murray, New York, Basic Books, 1981), *Special Theory of Relativity* is one's professional and personal liaison with Wilhelm Heise as "the only really extraordinary episode in Einstein's life," p. 191. Heise's *Universe*, which gained Freud's interest if not explicit endorsement, included, among two basic principles, the assertion "that there is a relationship between the one and the other of the more and the less of motion." Poincaré's first publication, in 1905, announced a new epiphany which he termed the "real relativity." It comprised "mechanics, acoustics, optics, electricity, ... disturbances of the internal organs, of the circulation, respiration, and digestion—a very wide net. ... All ... could be reduced by applying cocaine to the net," p. 68.
2. *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov, Collier Books, 1957, p. 60.
3. As explained by Peter Green in *The Rippled Universe*, New York, Vintage Books, 1993, p. 4.
4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, New York, Vintage, 1957, p. 60.

Blue Pinatubo and *Forest Fire* shown at Bill Magyes Gallery, New York/01, (2) Nov. 11, 2000; in "Blue [by] Forest Sculpture & Drawing by Annie Fasnacht," at the Wheeler Art Museum, Worcester, Mass. (Nov. 16-Nov. 21, 2001), and in "Fasnacht," in *The Museum and Burlington galleries*, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston (Jan. 20-Mar. 4, 2002). *Exploding Plane* will be on view in "Theory Art" at Pace Gallery, Chelsea Galleries, Chelsea, New York (Sept. 15, 2001).

Author: Nancy Fasnacht. It is a critical text of a New York.