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A Painting in Progress

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A Painting in Progress

Jerome Witkin

The last and perhaps best painting in my most recent solo show in New York (Kraushaar Galleries, 1978) was "The Screams of Kitty Genovese," a picture about hearing a victim's anguish. The work shows a young woman at night in her bedroom. It suggests that her privacy will be interrupted by a knock on an imaginary door. The woman's sudden and distracted pose places an interest outside the picture — but what occurs outside to cause this alarm? A siren? an ambulance? No, a scream!

At the time I made this painting, violence was becoming an important theme for me. My interest in violence as raw material was further encouraged by a story in the *New York Times* (November 10, 1978) by Frederick Morton. Called "Kristallnacht," the article gives a personal eye-witness account of that night in Germany in 1938. Morton was a boy at the time; yet he describes how storm troopers ransacked his home, ransacked the lives of his family, and removed his father to Dachau. This personal account moved me to tears.

Could I make a picture of oppression? How could this painting-to-be compete with so many thousands of World War II film images etched in our memory; compete with all the other stories of violence from the daily newspapers and the evening TV news, ingested with dinner?

I began with drawings. It is my habit to keep 9-by-7-inch sketchbooks in which I try out compositional ideas. I was suddenly occupied with filling up the pages of book after book. I was also looking at *Yellow Star* and other photographic works on the violence inflicted by the Nazis on the Jews of Eastern Europe; personal accounts such as Alexander Donat's *Holocaust Kingdom* and Terrence Des Prés's *The Survivor*. But these created in me more anger than imagery. Detailed accounts could merely illustrate, but not illuminate, a scene that is one place and yet many places.

However, chance soon turned events in my favor. In late November 1978 I met a most remarkable-looking man — short,

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Opposite page, notebook drawing, ball-point pen, 1979, by Jerome Witkin. A portfolio of sketches by Jerome Witkin appears on the following pages.

about twenty, and totally bald, wearing wire-rimmed glasses on a small red nose. He had a long slice of a mouth and a flimsy gray-brown beard that grew only from his chin—a beard resembling the tapered horns of a unicorn formed somehow of smoke. His name was Sebastian Niedecker.

"I'd like to paint your head," I said to Sebastian, using an expression that made sense to anyone interested in portraits. Sebastian immediately agreed but thought that the next day I would be painting a floral design on his bald head!

He brought along a wizard costume and sat in a great oak chair that I place in my "stage" with its hidden theatrical lights. As I looked at him, smiling in his long robes, it struck me in that instant that here was the devil and not some costumed wizard. Sebastian loved the idea! My collection of prop costumes turned this devil into a tailor—a tailor of all costumes of death.

In the six months it took to complete this large picture, I read many novels, diaries, articles, even the police blotters in the *New York Times*, to help me understand the violence in our era and its steady increase. I concluded that the devil was within each of us, the darkest side of each mind.

In October 1979 came a leave of absence, a trip to Europe, and a chance to see every Caravaggio in Italy and in the Louvre (Caravaggio being my favorite painter). I knew that this trip would give me fresh insights on how to proceed with a new version of the devil theme. Of all Caravaggio's work, the cycle of the life of St. Matthew in the Cointrell Chapel of Rome's Church of St. Louis dei Francese was the most remarkable. Only one of many marvels was Caravaggio's use of the light from a single central window to give movement and volume to each of his three scenes. The simple and clear choreography of the figures in their theatrical yet telling poses made us know that where we stood was holy ground. The lesson of this genius, in all his work, was that he *composed* on canvas, making big changes as he went, taking giant risks with changes as dramatic as the painted dramas themselves.

Returning to my Syracuse studio I prepared the largest canvas at hand, a 5½-by-10½-foot monster, and arranged to have two friends pose for me that week. Alex Rudinsky, a talented youth and recent graduate of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, arrived with his usual effervescence. As I do with all my models, I showed Alex sketches of the pose I wanted—in this case a dead rabbi—and asked him to act out his own version of the scene. Alex proceeded to create a marvelous and compelling pose considerably better than what I had thought up. Later, from my "Alex" drawings, my growing confidence, and the pose-gesture contribution of Newhouse student Jan Collins, the concept of a triptych developed. I worked out a 20-foot street scene interrupted in the central portion by a new version of the devil as a tailor.

The first painting of the series contains four life-size figures. A storm trooper is about to pump a bullet into the head of a distraught and screaming woman with bright red hair and a black dress. She is oblivious to the thug behind her. She kneels next to a

dead rabbi and gestures for a young girl to keep running. The running girl's face is fused into a shadow, which also contains the face of a roaring tiger. (So many of the diaries and verbal accounts of Europe's Jews saw their oppressors as beasts, not men.) The street is littered and dirty, in a state of disrepair. The colors are black and orange; the colors of Hallowe'en.

The third painting is one of apathy. The young running girl is dead, slumped at the corner of the street. A German mother and child have just stepped over the body in order to continue their walk. Flags fly as they move into a deepening darkness.



Ink on acetate, 1979.



Ink on acetate, 1979.



Ink on acetate, 1979.

Witkin: A Painting in Progress

~~or~~ Study for the Dead Boy' Witkin '79'

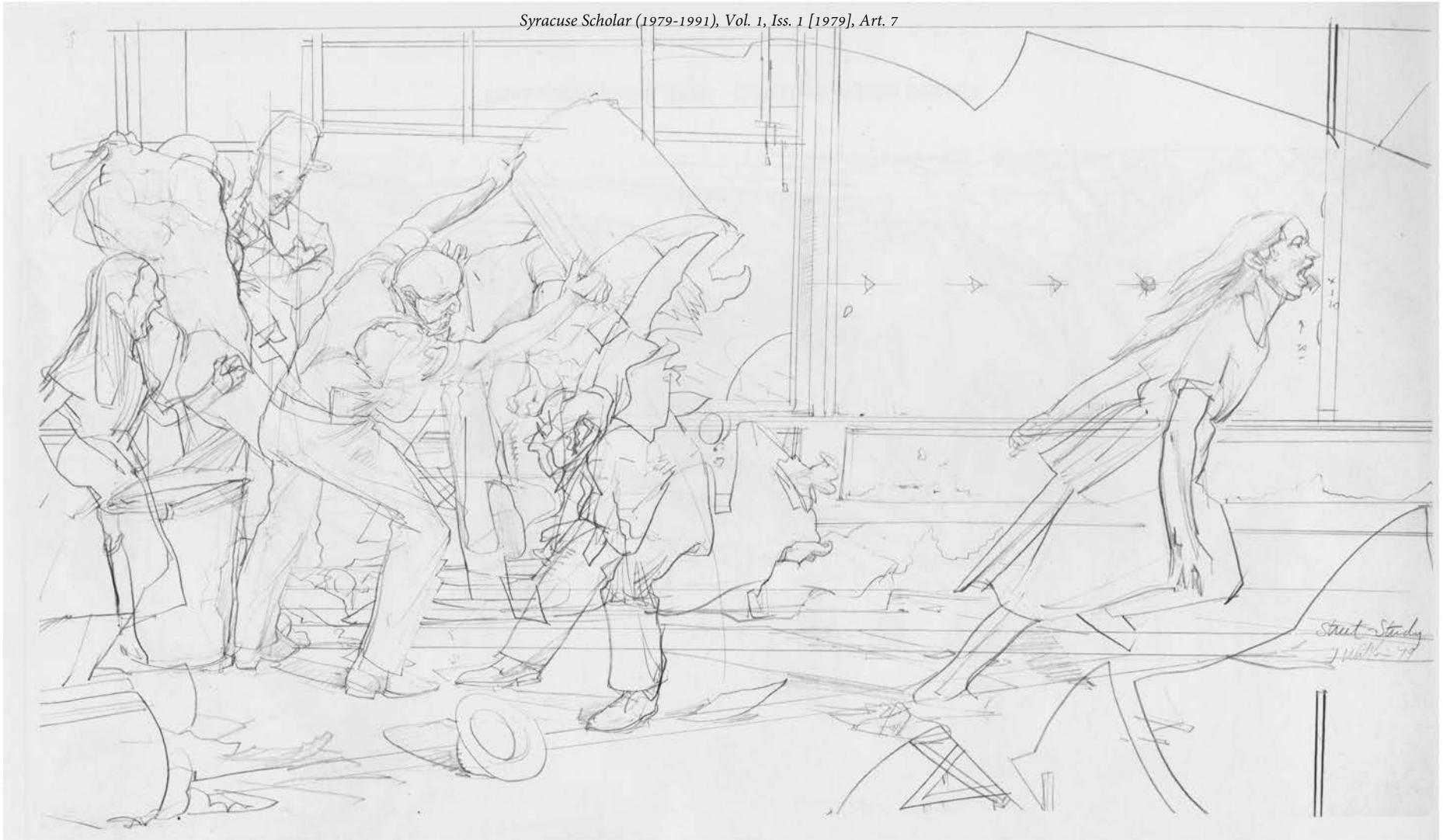




Ink on acetate, 1979.

Witkin: A Painting in Progress

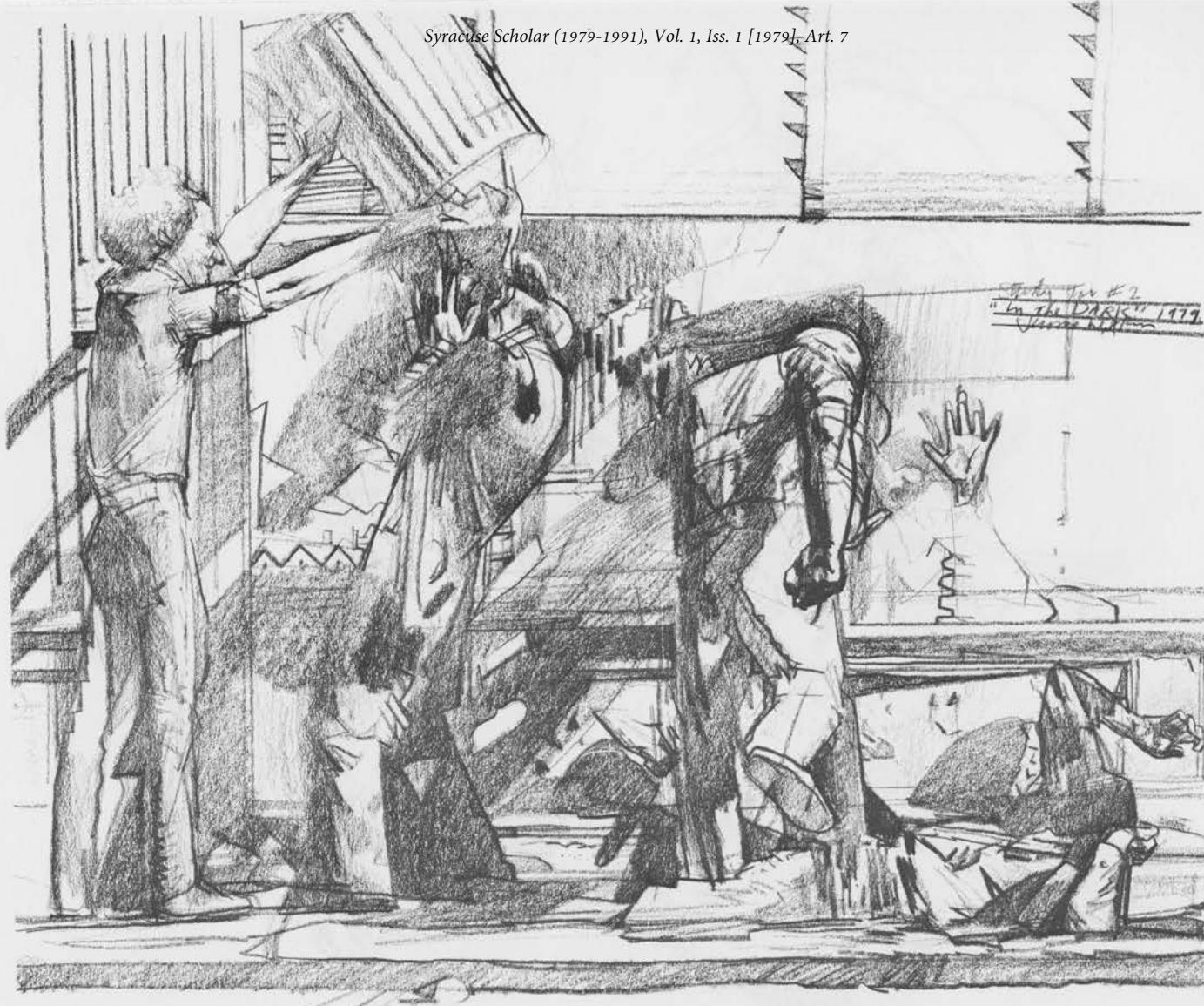




Pencil, 1979.



Prismacolor pencil, 1979. Collection of John Driscoll.



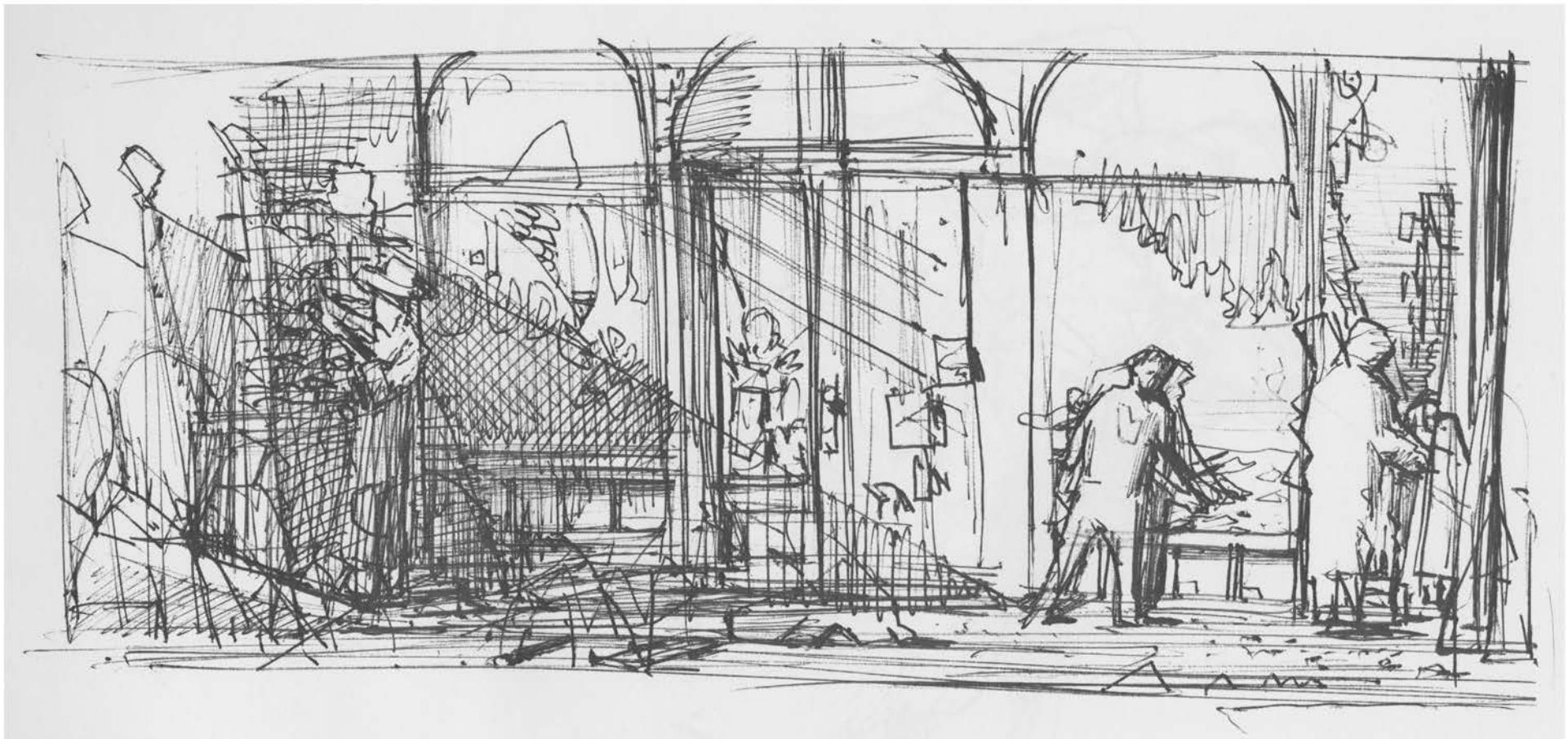
Prismacolor pencil, 1979. Collection of John Driscoll.



Notebook drawing, ball-point pen, 1979.



Notebook drawing, ball-point pen, 1979.



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