

The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric, with a grid pattern of thin lines. The colors are muted, with shades of brown, black, and green. The text is overlaid on this background.

Per Fronth
BLOODLINES

Per Fronth

B L O O D L I N E S

Anderson Stewart Fine Art

in association with

Candid Arts Trust

L o n d o n

January 2000

Per Fronth's BLOODLINES by Brian Ashbee

The works in the current exhibition make an interesting comparison with Per Fronth's major project of 1998, "**Xingu Chronicles**". The earlier series was a meditation, in photographic emulsion and oil paint, on a tribe of Brazilian Indians in their natural environment. The current series is a meditation on the Hunt of the Duke of Beaufort, one of the most venerable in England, and it features both the animals and their owners in their natural environment.

As an artist, Fronth draws upon the expertise gained during his years as a professional photo-journalist, but with something more like the distanced gaze of an anthropologist: he has photographed many different cultures across the globe, so it should come as no surprise that he finds parallels between these two very different cultures, the Brazilian "primitives" and the English aristocracy. But the parallels he offers us in "Bloodlines" are, to say the least, challenging to a Western, especially English, audience. Few of us can be free from received ideas about fox hunting and the social rituals of which it is a part. We are more able to respond to images of Noble Savages in their tropical Eden, than to images of the English upper class at play, especially when that play is the sport of foxhunting, ("the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable", to quote Oscar Wilde), an activity seen by a majority of the people of the British Isles as socially divisive and barbaric.

But it is precisely such "barbarism" that interests Fronth, not merely in the sense of the cruel "blood"-sport which so enrages the Animal Rights activists, but rather in the sense of an atavistic ritual connecting its devotees to one another and to the land. The hunt is as much a rite of belonging for the English in their landscape of down and heath as it was for the Xingu in the Brazilian rainforest. Bloodlines, the title of the series, refers explicitly to this sense of continuous unbroken connection to the past. It is a complex phenomenon. First and foremost it is a genetic link; the hounds have an unbroken bloodline back to the 1740s, one of the longest in the world. But if the hunt is to survive; and at the time of writing that is by no means certain, it will be because of its human "bloodlines"; those of an aristocracy defending its privileges, husbanding its rights over the land of which it claims stewardship.

This duality linking the human and the animal is apparent in the opening work of the cycle, **Field I**. The Duke of Beaufort's mansion rises majestically behind the hounds, which wait impatiently for the hunt to begin. Three of the animals are engaged in what might equally be innocent play or a vicious dog-fight. Whatever the nature of the altercation, it is a momentary exchange; a few swift bites, and an obligatory snarl, and the ordered hierarchy of the pack will soon be re-established. Such a brief flurry scarcely troubles the serene authority of the architectural setting. But, the image seems to suggest, it is to just such mechanisms of power and control, of real or ritualized violence, that the aristocratic pile in the background owes its continuing wealth and splendour.

The duality of human and animal societies is even more apparent - and with lashings of irony - in **Generation II**, where the hound portraits are ranked like those of so many aristocratic ancestors ranged in their gilt frames in a country house drawing room. They are of course individuals - as those dog owners who commission "pet portraits" would insist - and Fronth has delighted in parodying canine portraiture of the most popular, sentimental kind. But they also represent a class, a race, a generation, just as their aristocratic owners do. They - both animals and human - are at the same time individuals and a type.

Genetic inheritance, or race, is only one of the many meanings contained in the "blood" of the series title. Other meanings emerge powerfully from images of the abattoir in which animals from the estate are slaughtered to provide fresh meat for the pack. **Blue Wall** recalls treatments by Rembrandt and Soutine of animal carcasses, though in this image Fronth has been discreet in his painterly interventions, the painter in him deferring to the documentary authority of the original photographic image, shot on colour negative film. But in *Dragging the Head*, (from a black and white negative) the colour and the broken textures become intensely expressive. Red, we are reminded, is the colour of blood, and a signal of physical arousal, either aggressive or sexual.

It is the colour that provokes action and movement. Fronth's fondness for adding a red band at the base or the margins of images alerts us to the potential for violence contained within them, while at the same time asserting the mechanism for its control. The red is usually geometrically contained in bands, or in squares or rectangles. Chromatically, it is a trumpet call to action; geometrically, it is disciplined by its boundaries. "Boundaries", both social and geographical, are what the hunt and its social structures depend on for their survival.

Such an argument might seem at first to turn on a verbal sleight of hand. But what are we to make of such a formalist vocabulary, applied by the artist in oil paint onto photographic images? Is it not the clash of two distinct visual codes, the formalist language of high modernism, applied to images deriving from a photo-documentary tradition? What can Fronth be thinking of here?

A clue is to be found in Fronth's earlier cycle, the **Xingu Chronicles**, where a red rectangle applied (by the painter) to the cheek of a Xingu girl functioned both as a facial decoration, applied to the skin of an individual, and as a modernist gesture of the artist, asserting the "skin" of the canvas and echoing its rectangular edges - a somewhat unnerving parallel between paint as a means of "primitive" social identification and modern formalist abstraction.

Modernist abstraction and the "primitive" facial decoration have a common link in the use of heraldic devices in coats of arms and flags, which function both as tools of social identity and symbols of political power. This link is apparent in **Man**, where the tripartite division of the canvas is similar to that of many flags, and the figure - in formal attire, top-hatted, raising a glass in a ritual gesture - is reduced to an icon. The glass of sherry drunk at the start of the hunt is an important part of the social ritual. Here, the heraldic structure framing the gesture of the raised glass and the titled hat, detach the image from its origins as photography and enshrine it as an icon celebrating a quasi-religious ritual. Religious? Surely not? But perhaps one should not forget that the transubstantiation of wine into blood is the foundation of the Christian communion. And the "sacrifice" of the fox, the quarry, was traditionally accompanied by the "bleeding" of novice riders. These "bloodlines" reach far and deep into the origins of our culture, however we might wish to suppress or renounce them.

Heraldic is a term equally applicable to the beast caught in mid-air, in **Movement III**, its triple symmetry as menacing and potent as three lions couchant in a flag - though whether this aerial movement is that of the hunter or the hunted, of attack or flight, is unclear - as is the question of just what dark terrestrial or spiritual power this potent image might be the emblem.

The themes of symmetry and repetition apparent in *Movement III* are a frequent concern of Fronth. Repetition is a device for showing that the particular is in fact one of a type. The artist is clearly fascinated by the tension between the unique individual and the group of which it is a part, and equally by the tension between the individual image and the series. Hence his interest in the series photographs of Muybridge, and his fondness for the work of Andy Warhol, evident in the blue riders of **Seconds**.

And perhaps there is also a link here with **Twins**: two individuals who happen to be genetically identical and in a harmonious alignment of posture and attitude. (Fronth is himself a twin.) And it might be significant that the artists has chosen a bluish tonality for both of these images, favouring repose and contemplation, rather than the rousing sepia/red that he often prefers.

Repeated imagery is not always so blatant: In **Movement II** it is disguised by the overlapping of the image, which turns the two galloping horses and their riders into a maze of flashing limbs. Their frenetic energy works powerfully against the strict formality and bi-lateral symmetry of the five panels. As in **Movement I**, only the legs of the riders are glimpsed, booted and spurred, and poised atop so much pounding flesh, bone and sinew, glistening with the colour of blood.

The Duke of Beaufort's Foxhunt

The Dukes of Beaufort first started kennelling hounds in Badminton in the 1640's for the purpose of hunting deer, changing to foxhunting around 1750. Most of the hounds in the Kennels today can be traced back to that date, making them the most chronicled animals in the world; 55 generations in a number of instances.

Until the 1800's, they hunted most of East and North Gloucestershire and much of Wiltshire. Today the area covered runs from Bath to Calne in the south, Malmesbury to Cirencester in the east and Nailsworth in the north and the Severn Escarpment to Bristol in the west, covering a hunting ground of 450 square miles.

Hunts go out 4 days per week from late August to late March - approximately 125 per annum with a close season of 5 months in the summer, the foxes breeding period. Most hounds hunt two days per week but can on occasion do three and are capable of covering up to 100 miles in a day. They hunt entirely by nose rarely ever seeing their quarry. Hounds are always counted in couples and around 65 couples are permanently kennelled at Badminton. The Huntsman and his staff ride two horses per day leading a mounted field with the Beaufort occasionally numbering over 200 horses.

The Beaufort Hunt is a self-funding hunt. It derives support from people of all backgrounds and claims to be a contributor to its rural community both financially and socially through charities and job opportunities. Farmers, seed merchants, saddlers, horse dealers, horsebox dealers, veterinarians and fencers are among the beneficiaries of the economy the Hunt instigates.

Annually over ten thousand people follow or support the Beaufort Hunt in one way or another. Nationally, nearly a quarter of a million people follow hounds at one or more of the 22,000 fixtures held by one of 311 Hunting packs that operate throughout the British Isles.

To these familiar devices of modernism - abstraction and serial imagery - we must add a third, by means of which the photographic image is transmuted into painting: that of facture. Fronth transfers the photographic image, after varying degrees of digital manipulation, to canvas, and works on it in oil. It is his search for a franker, more complete and personal mode of expression that has led him to move - very much against the grain of recent art history - from photography to painting. The process of painting serves a number of purposes: firstly, it allows Fronth to explore the painterly play of surfaces - to engage with the materiality of the painting medium, in contrast to the immateriality of its subject, which, in the final analysis, is that of all photography, namely light; secondly, it undermines the notion of documentary veracity implicit in the photographed image, in favour of a deeper notion of artistic truth ("nothing lies like a photograph", says Fronth); above all, it allows the artist to transmute these fragments of documentary reality into something more generic, something with the formal authority of signs.

Many of these images suggest the darker side of the hunt; nevertheless, Fronth is not blind to its lyricism. **Field IV** offers a vision of the English countryside, with its spreading oak and raking sunlight, which Constable would have recognized.

Field V suggests a more ambiguous nostalgia, and reminds me irresistibly of the monumentalizing photography of Sam Peckinpah's lament for the violence and comradeship of the Old West, "The Wild Bunch"; here, the posture of the huntsman seems deliberately to turn his back on us and our prejudices; seems, like Peckinpah's flawed heroes, intent on his passage into history, bearing in his bowed back the burden of a guilt and a knowledge which softens all the edges of the landscape and flushes it with a roseate glow.

The hunt is a complex phenomenon in which man, horse, hound and fox all play their pre-determined roles. Fronth is concerned to elucidate this complex symbiosis, not to descend to easy invective, but rather to undersign this age-old relationship between man and animal, and to tease out its implications. The riders here are not individuals but archetypes, part of a larger pattern of which they themselves may barely be aware. These images celebrate its lyricism, its energy, the manic exhilaration of its speed, while making us aware of its darker side. As such they issue a challenge to the spectator, perhaps most explicitly in the final image of the cycle, **Presence**. Here the central hound, its head surrounded by a halo like Christ's in a Rembrandt etching, directly confronts us, the spectator, as though seeking from us some clue to the meaning of their lives and the hunt which is its sole purpose.

If this remarkable series of works does indeed offer something of an answer, it is not a simplistic one, but a nuanced and complex one in which compassion, horror, irony and humour all play their part. The Hunt, after all, is as old as Humanity. Whether we like it or not, it is in our blood.

Brian Ashbee is an art critic and digital film-maker. He lectures at Cambridge University and is a contributor to Art Review, Contemporary Visual Arts and The Guardian. Mr. Ashbee resides in England and France.



Field I

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches



Blue Wall

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches



Dragging the Head

Version I
Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
44 x 64 inches

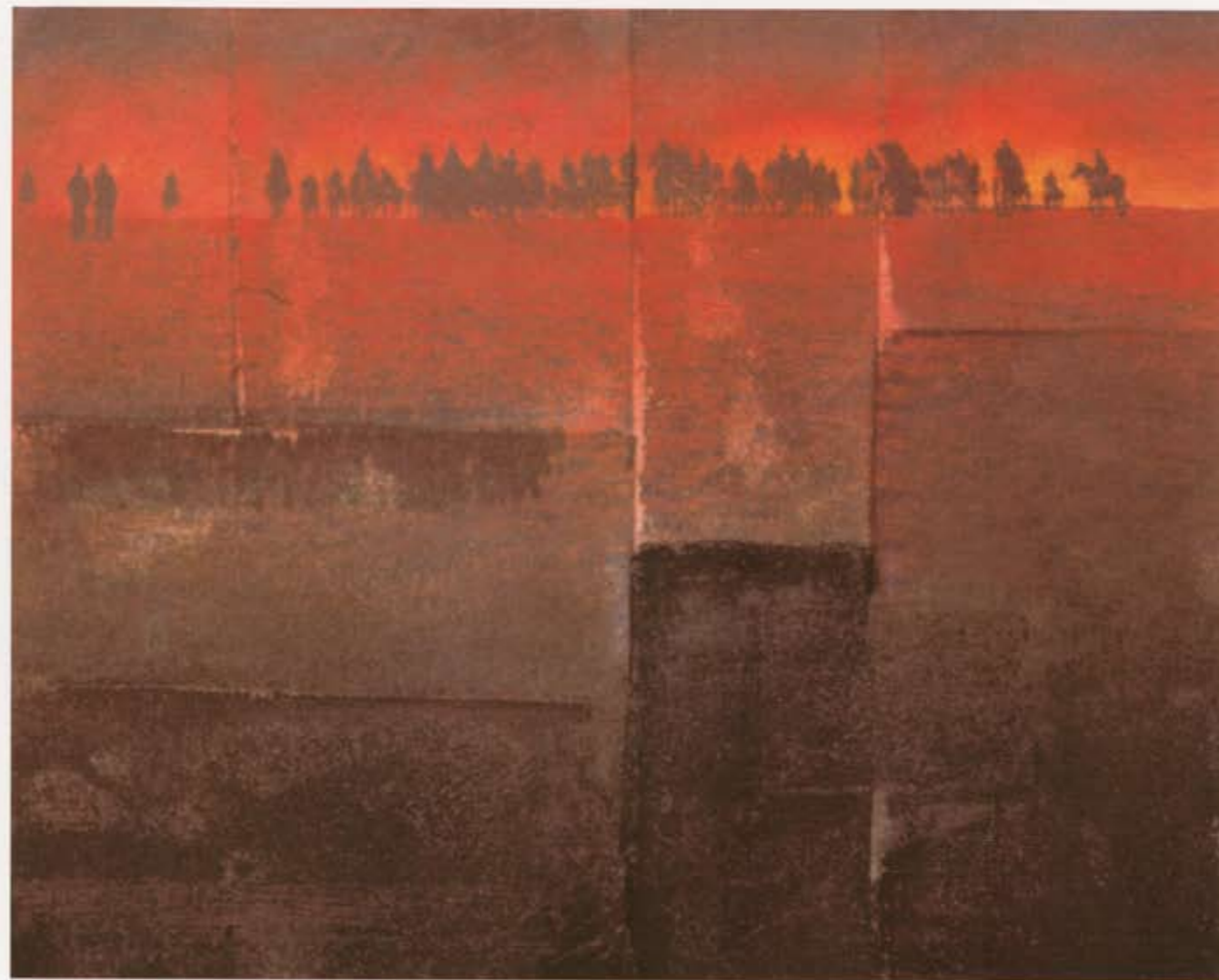
Generation I

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
16 x 20 inches





Man
Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
20 x 22 inches

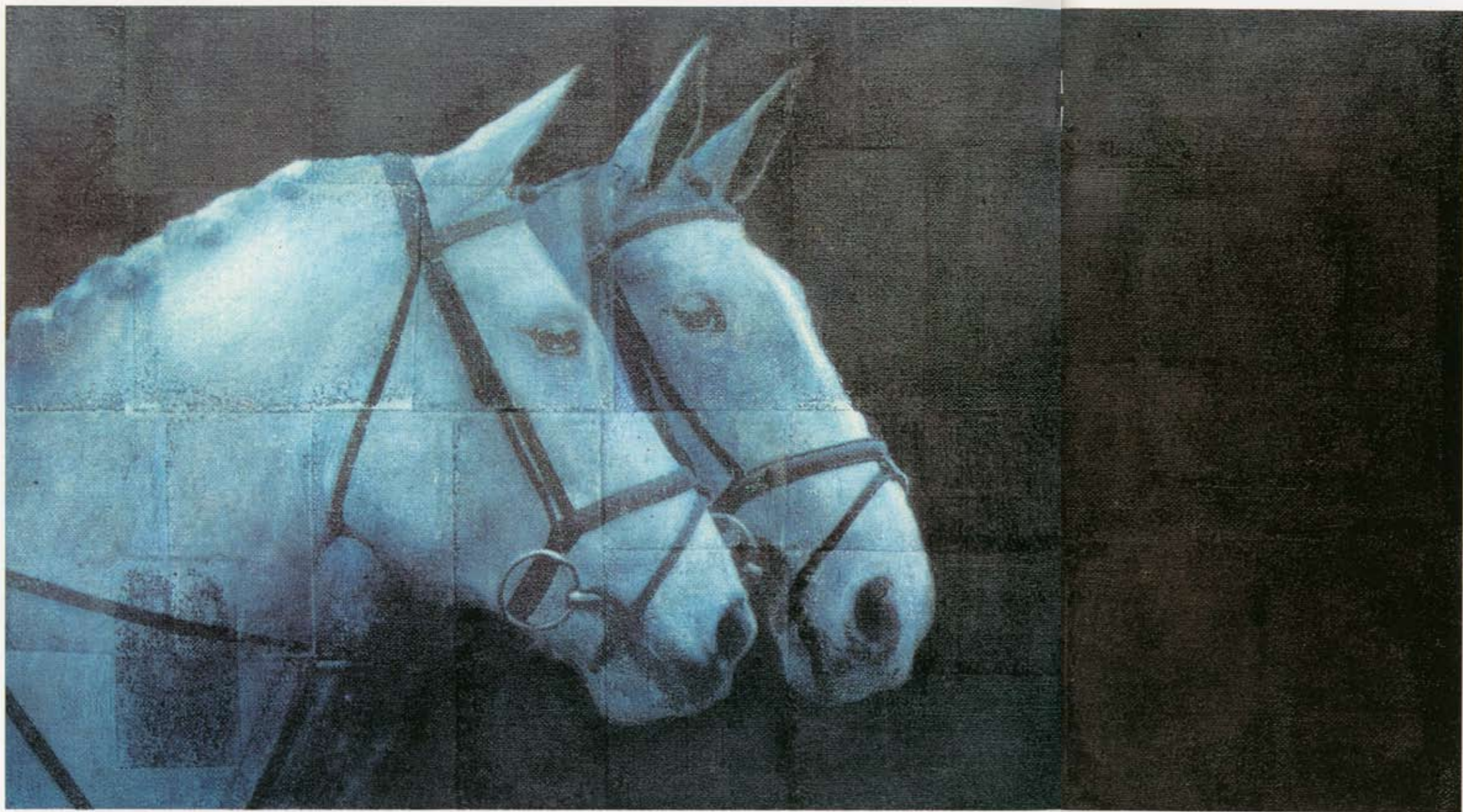


Field II
Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
20 x 16 inches

Distance

Phototransfer / Oil on paper
8 x 10 inches





Twins

Phototransfer / Oil on Paper
22 x 40 inches

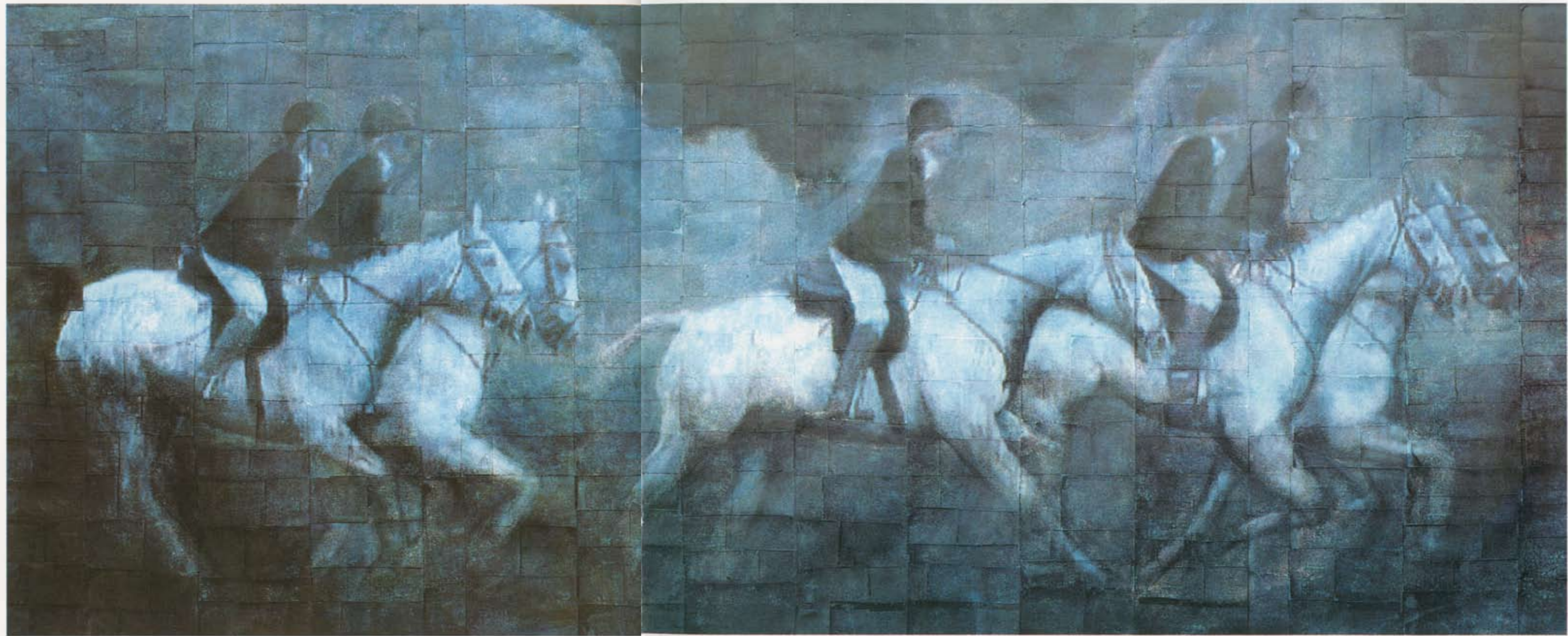
Movement I

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
64 x 84 inches



Seconds

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
62 x 154 inches





Movement II

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
16 x 60 inches



Movement III

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
84 x 64 inches



Field III
Phototransfer / Oil on paper
16 x 20 inches



Field IV
Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
20 x 30 inches



Generation II

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
ea. 20 x 16 inches

Field V

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
64 x 84 inches



Presence

Phototransfer / Oil on canvas
32 x 38 inches



Per Fronth

Born November 24th 1963 Kristiansand Norway

Self-taught photographer

Mentors: Arild Jakobsen, Kjell Nupen, Bob Blackburn and Odd Nerdrum

Solo Exhibitions

2000	Anderson Stewart Fine Art "Bloodlines"	London
1999	Dillon Gallery "lifedreams"	New York
1998	"Xingu Chronicles" Online presentation One Show Interactive Award Golden Pencil Award, Creative Director James Roven	New York
1998	Dillon Gallery "Xingu Chronicles"	Norway
1998	Galleri Ericson "Xingu Chronicles"	Norway
1997	Galleri Bi-Z, Kristiansand	Norway
1994	Bergen Kunstforening, Bergen	Norway
1994	Galleri Bi-Z, Kristiansand	Norway
1993	Meisner Soho Gallery	New York
1990	Tvedestrand Kunstforening, Tvedestrand	Norway
1988	Galleri Kick, Kristiansand	Norway

Selected Group Shows

1999	Green Art Gallery	Dubai, UAE
1997	The John McEnroe Gallery "An Invasion of Privacy"	New York
1996	ROOM "Fourteen Days - A Salon"	New York
1996	"Aamlid-skjoldet" donated to Setesdalsmuseet,	Norway
1995	Kodak Panther Generation Exhibition Part II /London, Invited Artist	England
1995	New York Academy of Art	New York
1994	Kodak Panther Generation Exhibition Part I /Frankfurt, Invited Artist	Germany
1994	Compuserve Artist Forum - first online exhibition	New York
1994	Art Fair Genth, Genth	Belgium
1994	Portraits by Artist	Los Angeles
1994	Art Fair Miami	Miami
1993	Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama Wakayama	Japan
1993	Copenhagen Photoweek/ '93 Copenhagen "Invited Artist"	Denmark
1993	Fronth / Nupen / Furuholmen, Galleri Bi-Z Kristiansand	Norway
1993	Artist Equity, 7th Regiment Armory	New York
1992	Copenhagen Photoweek/ '92 Copenhagen "Invited Artist"	Denmark
1992	The Printmaking Workshop	New York
1992	CB 313 Gallery "Working Papers"	New York
1992	Quart Rock Festival Kristiansand "Official Festival Artist"	Norway
1992	Fotografisk Vårutstilling	Norway
1992	Meisner Soho Gallery "A Limited Wilderness"	New York
1991	Høstutstillingen Oslo, "Debut at the Annual Norwegian State Exhibit"	Norway
1991	CB 313 Gallery "Art for Music's Sake"	New York
1991	OIS Salon Show	New York
1989	Galleri Kick, Kristiansand	Norway
1986	Galleri Meelhus "VG Photographers" Oslo	Norway

Collections (selected)

Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama
Assuranceforeningen Gard, Arendal
Museum of Setesdal
Fusion Group of Companies, Weston
Meisner Collection
Sting & Trudie Styler
Larry Konner
Benjamin Macklowe
Peri Gilpin & Christian Vincent
Christina & Hubertus von Baumbach
Mrs. & Mr. Peter Jebsen
Andy Jacobs
David Passerman
Yasmeen Ghauri
Lauren & Paul Savoy
Royal Norwegian Consulate General
Gill Holland jr.
The Printmaking Workshop
Mrs. & Mr. Nathan Kanofsky
Ola Mæhle, Oslo
Scandinavian Retail Group, Oslo
N&T Leo Burnett, Oslo
Norsk Plateproduksjon, Oslo
Dag E. Thorenfeldt, Oslo
Odd Nerdrum
Nikon Interfoto
Hotel Norge, Kristiansand

Awards

1997	Norwegian Photojournalist Association - Picture of the Year "Xingu Chief"	Norway
1993	Norwegian Fund for Photographers	Norway
1987	Amnesty International Award - For work on Iranian Refugees in Turkey	Norway

Japan
Norway
Norway
Florida
New York
New York
Los Angeles
New York
Los Angeles
Germany
United Kingdom
Michigan
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Commissions

1999	Hotel Norge, Kristiansand	Norway
1999	TV2	Norway
1997	Bico Company, Kristiansand	Norway
1995	Assuranceforeningen Gard, Arendal	Norway
1991	N&T Leo Burnett, Oslo	Norway

Bibliography (selected)

1999	"Black and White Photography: An International Collection" by James Luciana, Rockport Publishers,	Massachusetts
	Washington Times "Xingu Chronicles"	Washington DC
	Associated Press "Xingu Chronicles"	New York
	Paper Magazine	New York
	Aftenposten	Norway
	Verdens Gang	Norway
	Dagbladet	Norway
	Fædrelandsvennen	Norway
	Tique Magazine	Norway
	NRK Television	Norway
	TV2 Television	Norway
	Fotografi	Norway
	ArtSpeak	New York
	Photo Paris	France
	Ricochet Magazine	Houston, Texas



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Catalogs on Per Fronth:

"BLOODLINES",
Anderson Stewart Fine Art, London in association with
Candid Arts Trust, London
The Duke of Beaufort's Foxhunt
- essay by Brian Ashbee 2000

"lifedreams", Dillon Gallery, New York 1999
- essay by Malin Barth

"Xingu Chronicles", Dillon Gallery, New York 1998
Work among Indigenous peoples in the Xingu Park, Brazil
in conjunction with Rainforest Foundation International
- essay by Donald Kuspit

"Recent photopaintings and photoengravings"
Meisner Soho Gallery, New York, 1993

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