

This catalog produced in conjunction with:

Heide Fasnacht: Past Imperfect  
November 19 - February 8, 2020

at Martin Art Gallery  
Muhlenberg College  
2400 Chew Street  
Allentown PA 18104

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Director: Paul M. Nicholson

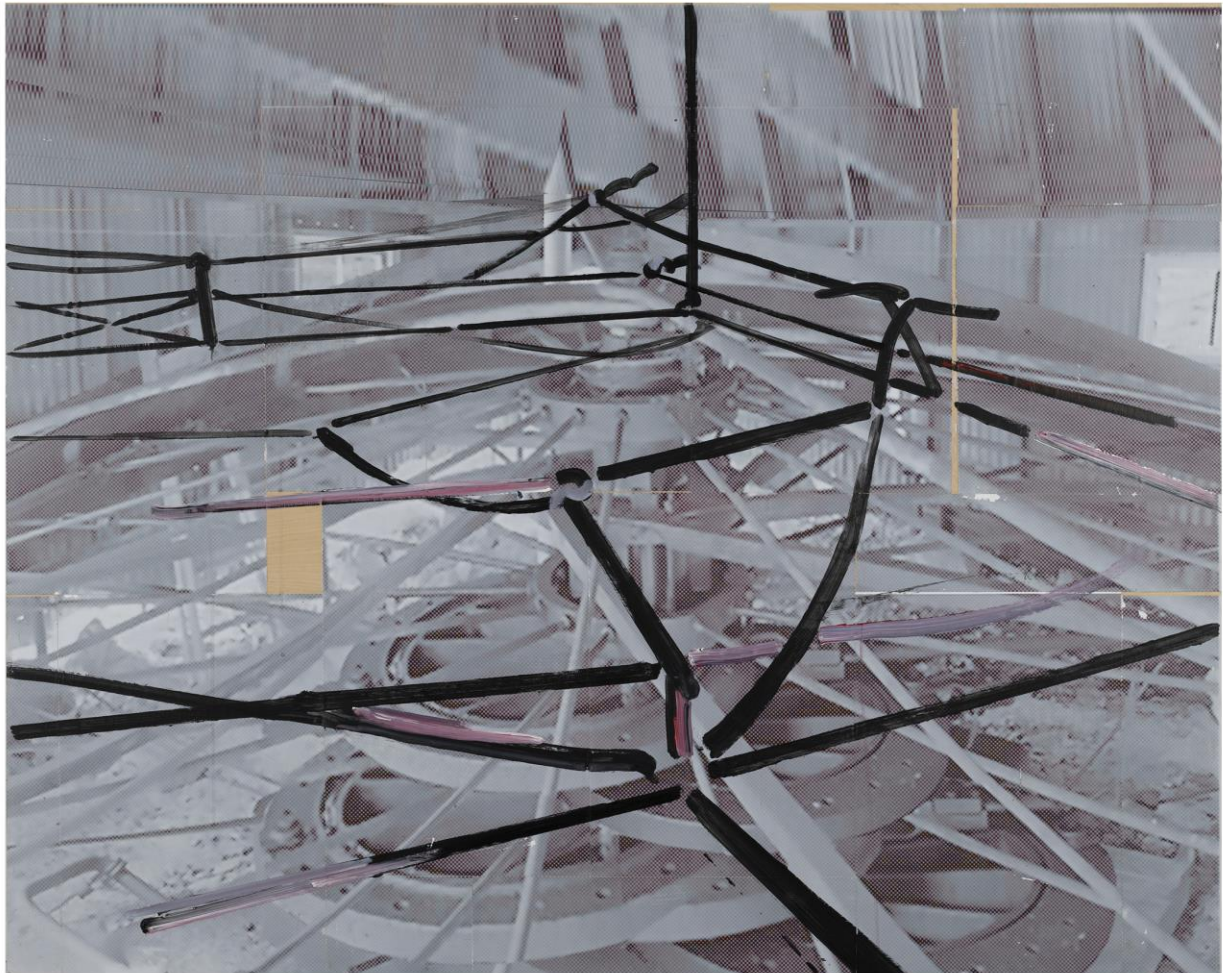
Gallery Staff: Hannah Betz, Rheanna Greenberg Bello, Kennedy Hinnant, Elliot Ohnmacht

Images Courtesy of the Artist

Cover: detail from *Jet Star*, 2019, 48 x 60"

All works are acrylic paint on manipulated photo, mounted on Wood Panel, 2019

# HEIDE FASNACHT PAST IMPERFECT



Gravotron, 48 x 60"

## Introduction

Paul M. Nicholson

Director, Martin Art Gallery

Heide Fasnacht's interest in the kinetic extends to the picture plane in *Past Imperfect*. Through works rendered largely in black and white, she combines two traditionally independent practices, photography and painting, to create a succession of double-exposure mixed-media works that explore sites of corporeal engagement.

Working from scanned negatives, she digitally manipulates found photography - and prints the image, which is tiled and collaged over wooden panels. She then applies paint to the surfaces, inexorably tying the two media together.

Loosely recognizable as landscapes, the works include industrial looking equipment interspersed with the occasional figure. Playground and carnival machinery are identifiable among her collaged photographic substrates. The addition of invented structural elements further activates the surfaces along with gestural and lyrical paint flourishes. Dabs and swirling marks obscure whether each scene is in the process of breaking apart or magically reassembling itself.

Our focus alternates between photographic and painted images, allowing for the emergence of improvised spaces of playful engagement. Complicated by their dystopian monochromatic tenor, the obliterated settings have a frenetic Rube Goldbergian feel. Ladders, tightropes, swings, and cats make these dreamscapes a kind of diagram that outlines the machinery of childhood.

Black and white photography sometimes conjures notions of evidence, the idea that a time and place has been captured, documented and preserved. Painting and drawing over the photograph is her way of not only revisiting the past, but expanding the possible future. By manipulating these frozen moments, Fasnacht challenges the nature of truth and the passage of time.



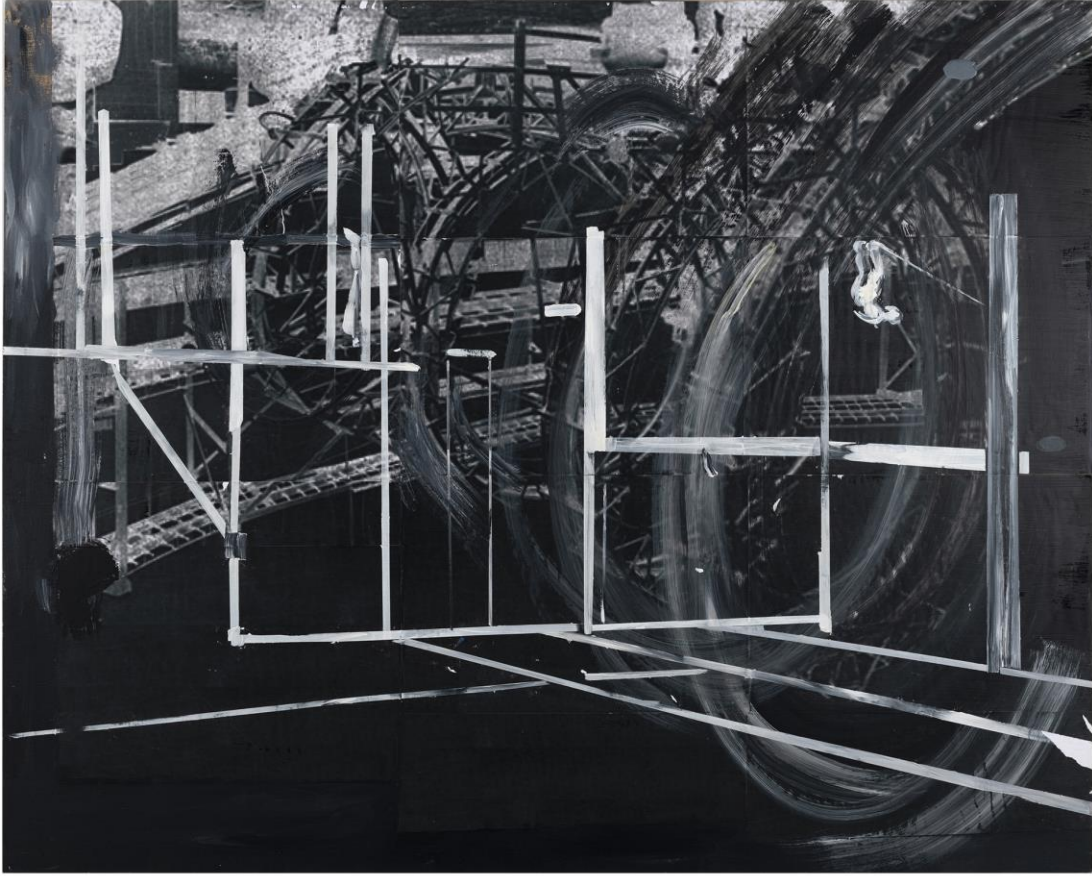
Mystic Timbers, 48 x 60"

Heide Fasnacht: Past Imperfect  
Nancy Princenthal

The pleasures afforded by the playgrounds and amusement parks of the nineteen-fifties and sixties were mostly in defying gravity—in flinging oneself away from the ineluctable pull of the planet. An experience of exhilaration now modulated by nostalgia, it is easier to capture in painting, with its access to illusory space, than in sculpture. And it is expressed with haunting power in Heide Fasnacht's new work, a series of photo-based paintings depicting the ghosts of swing sets and see saws, rollercoasters and roundabouts. Having alternated throughout her career between images (mostly on paper) and objects, Fasnacht has returned to her original medium, and to a subject that has been her most constant: actions propulsive enough to bring matter to the brink of dissolution.

Whether depicting human sneezes or test detonations of powerful bombs, Fasnacht concerned herself for many years with explosions, most of them controlled and all nonetheless violent. In rendering the demolition of public housing towers and Las Vegas hotels alike, she engaged the architecture of hope and fantasy, and of hubris. The structures represented in her new works were similarly built for happiness. They reflect as well interests she recently explored in a series of drawings executed in tape applied directly to gallery walls. Creating powerful optical illusions, these tape drawings delineated the struts and beams of imaginary, unfinished buildings, with sharply angled perspectives that wrenched viewers away from the coordinates of stability and safety.

The art-historical canon of painted transcendence of the earth—of ascension—runs to saints, angels and cupids rising heavenward amid blazing light and weightless clouds. That is not the tone of Fasnacht's new paintings, which are more often than not nocturnal. But their turbulent darkness is thrilling as well as melancholy. As if imagined by a post-Euclidean Piranesi, the space in these paintings flips, rolls and occasionally dissolves into the snow of old TV screens. The photographs that serve as their ground, inkjet-printed onto small sheets (no larger than 13-by-19-inches) that are tiled across big paired panels, are all taken from the Internet and then manipulated digitally. Fasnacht looks for old images that are degraded in some way—scratched, blurred, their emulsion puddled or burnt. She also looks for the suggestion of vertigo and other forms of disorientation. Most of the playgrounds and parks shown no longer



Monkey Bars, 48 x 60"

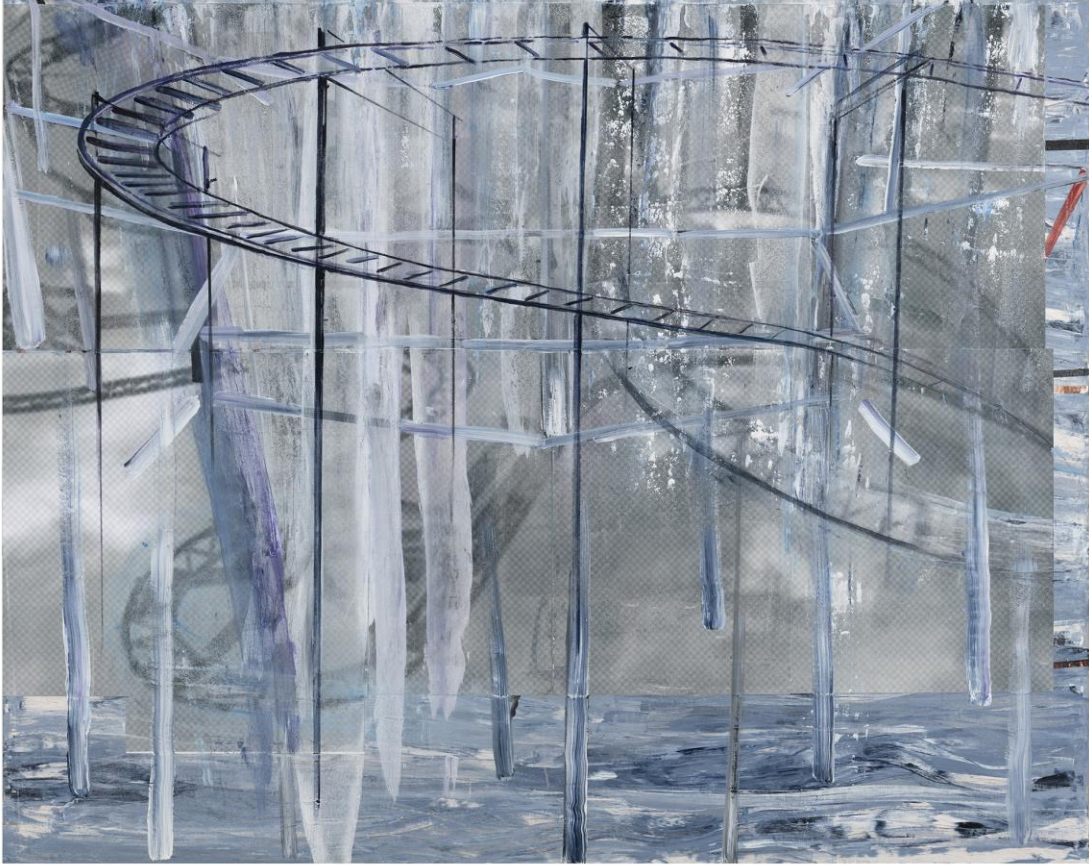


exist, and most are rural or, like those of Fasnacht's childhood, suburban. Layered over these fractured photographic grounds, which sometimes stop short of the support surfaces' edges, are passages of paint, brushy and loose. While the photographs are almost always devoid of people, small, sketchy figures appear in the paintings. Notional rather than fully descriptive, they mark the presence of bodies as plot points on warped grids.

In *Monkey Bars*, the titular metal scaffold is inverted, and screens the barreling image of a giant rollercoaster—it is based on a photo of Coney Island's famous Cyclone, with several loops added by Fasnacht; harrowingly, its enormous rings resemble concertina wire. The spatial drama of *Mystic Timbers*, even more pitched and also more buoyant, begins with an inverted tangle of black bars that hangs from above in the foreground; behind, a shadowy, upside-down rollercoaster hurtles into the distance. In *Alpen Geist*, an elliptical swoop of rollercoaster rails unspools like the DNA of a colossus, while cascades of paint pour down. On the other hand, in the pitch black *Jungle Gym*, a handful of bars, along with a few ghostly figures, are picked out in white in a setting as pitilessly spare as a scene by Beckett. *Big Jungle Gym*, too, features frail ladders to nowhere, along with an inverted flight of steps and the struts of a swing set missing its swings, all undermined by swooping grayish-blue brushstrokes. Almost inconsequentially, two diminutive figures make their hesitant way across this unsteady network, and a third tumbles toward the ground, negligible as Brueghel's Icarus.

Other depicted settings are steadier. Though *Desperado* is named for a rollercoaster, it features the skeletal rectilinear framework of what seems a house under construction, seen in a field at night. Fasnacht has printed the negative of the photo, so the grass in the foreground is bleached, and appears afire—or already burnt and ashy. Both devastation and a kind of joy can be seen in *Invertigo A and B*, which picture vast landscapes seen from above. Ladders and struts climb skyward; sections of the earth below are peeled back, like ripe fruit.

Fasnacht is an admirer of Rebeca Solnit, who wrote, of photographer Eadweard Muybridge's famous motion studies, that they depicted "not bodies as they might daily be experienced, bodies as sensations of gravity, fatigue, strength, pleasure, but bodies become weightless images."<sup>1</sup> Muybridge's legacy can be felt in Fasnacht's renderings of gravity's defeat, as can those of his photographs that, in Solnit's



Alpen Geist, 48 x 60"

description, capture “gestures—a gymnast turning a somersault in midair, a nude pouring water—[that] were unfamiliar and eerie stopped because they showed what had always been present but never seen.”<sup>ii</sup> Fasnacht, too, offers a portal to an experience known more to the body than the eye.

She is a great fan as well of W.G. Sebald, whose unclassifiable writing is illustrated with uncaptioned photographs; it can't be said whether they drive the narrative, or whether instead the narrative shapes our understanding of the photographs—nor which is more reliable. We may be reading an account of history, or of a dream. As with the French artist Christian Boltanski's use of anonymous found photographs that date to World War II, we are invited to consider unclaimed reminiscences, and to face the importunate smiles of subjects looking at the camera—at us—in the vain expectation of recognition. The problems of memory—its inescapable tug, its fallibility—run deep in Fasnacht's work, the new paintings in particular. The remembered joy of soaring high into the air on the long, long chains of a heavy metal swing, or of hanging upside down from metal bars seemingly far above the ground, is a mirror image of those frightening dreams so common in childhood, their solipsistic fears and threats precision tuned to the dreamer; in memories as in dreams, we are mercilessly alone. Fasnacht's paintings by contrast offer exits in every direction: every perspective is open, no horizon blocked. The shadowy atmosphere is of possibility, and of dangers that are willingly sought. But the sense of freedom is fragile, and—in a sharp departure from the happy chaos of childhood play—no two figures communicate.

In real life, the playground equipment and rickety rollercoaster rides of these paintings have been retired, easy targets for an ever more litigious culture in which every misfortune is monetized and every risk abated. The shiny scaffolds for weightless joy that Fasnacht evokes are as antique as Erector Sets. While they once summoned the rapturous screams of happy children, Fasnacht leaves us with the deafening hush of that experience's loss—and a keyhole to its bliss.

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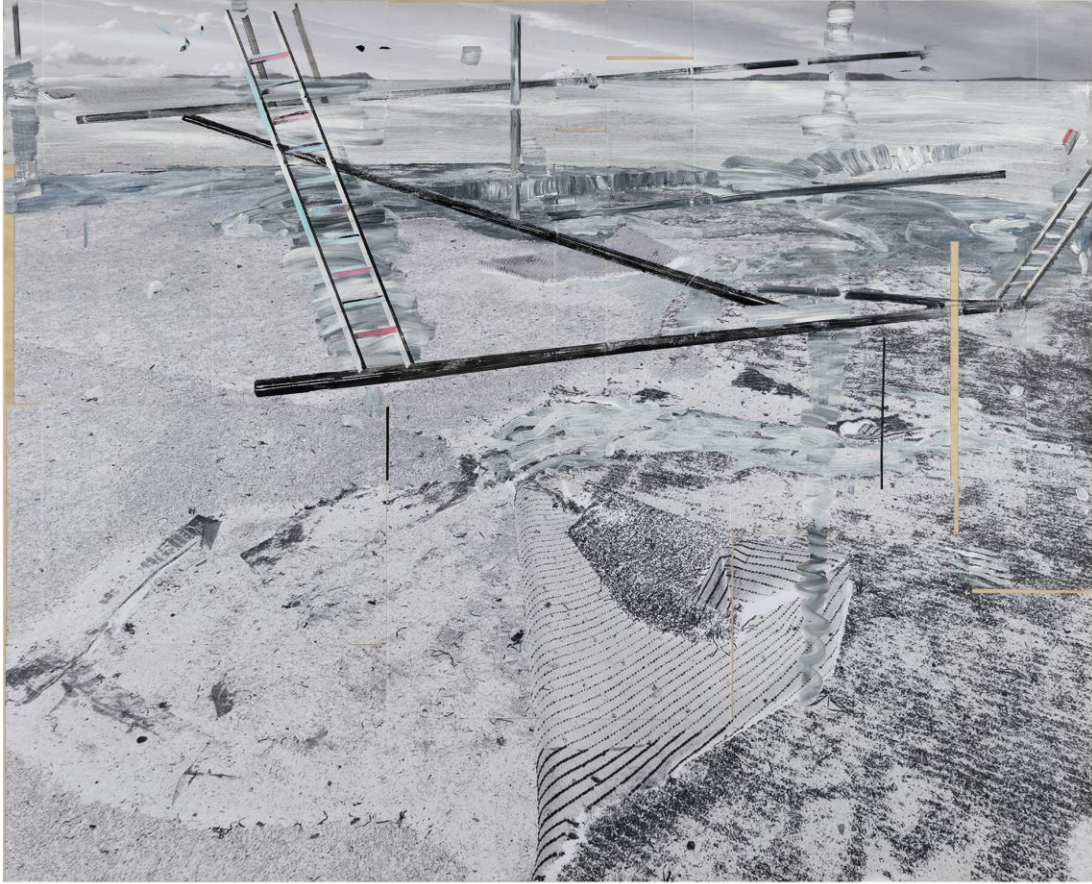
<sup>i</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York, Viking, 2003), p. 23

<sup>ii</sup> Solnit, p. 24

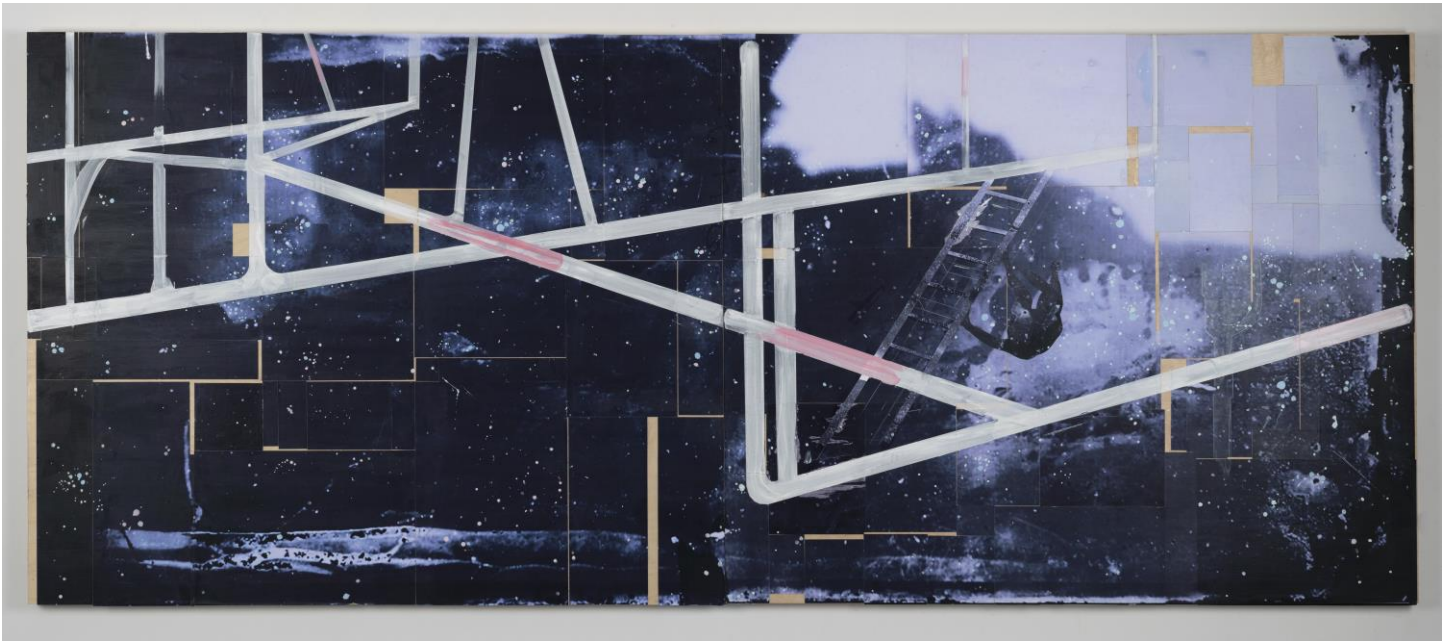
Nancy Princenthal is a New York-based writer. A former senior editor of *Art in America*, where she remains a contributing editor, she has also written for the *Artforum*, the *New York Times*, *Parkett*, the *Village Voice*, and many other publications. She is currently on the faculty of the MFA art writing program at the School of Visual Arts. Her previous book, *Agnes Martin*, won 2016 PEN/ Jacqueline Bograd Weld award for biography.



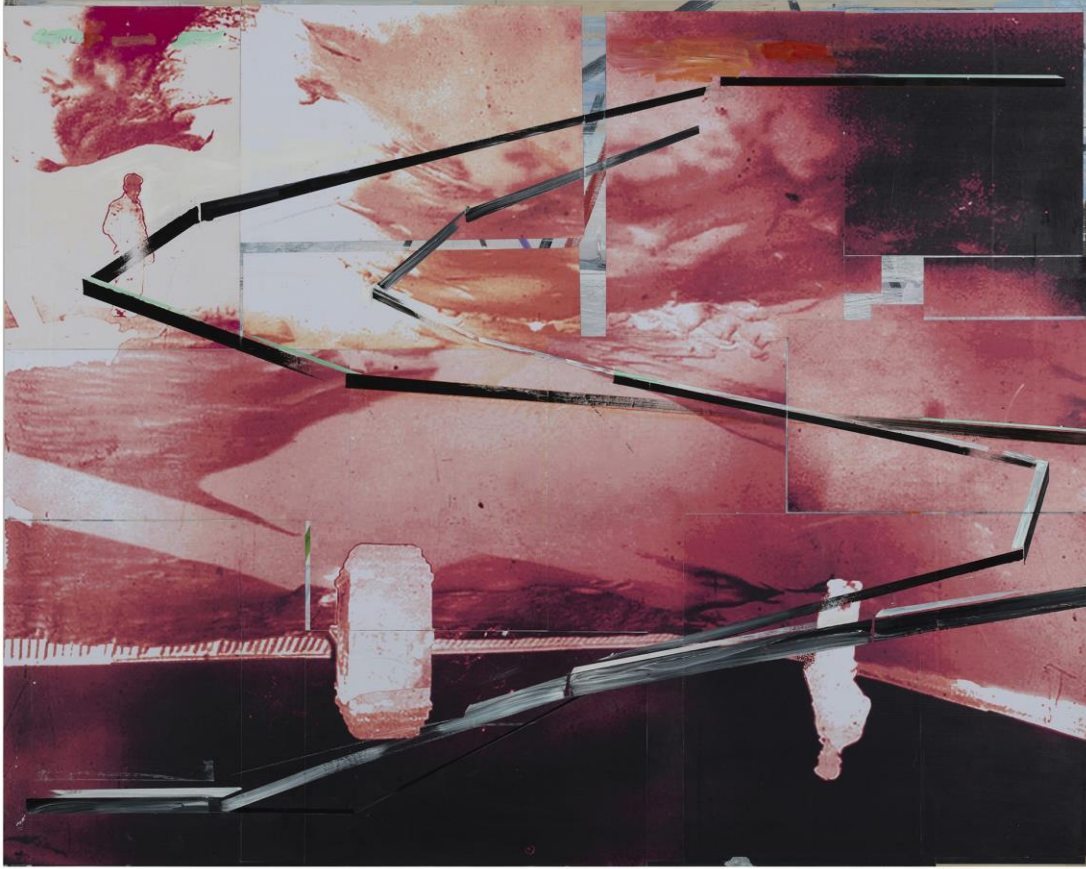
Invertigo A



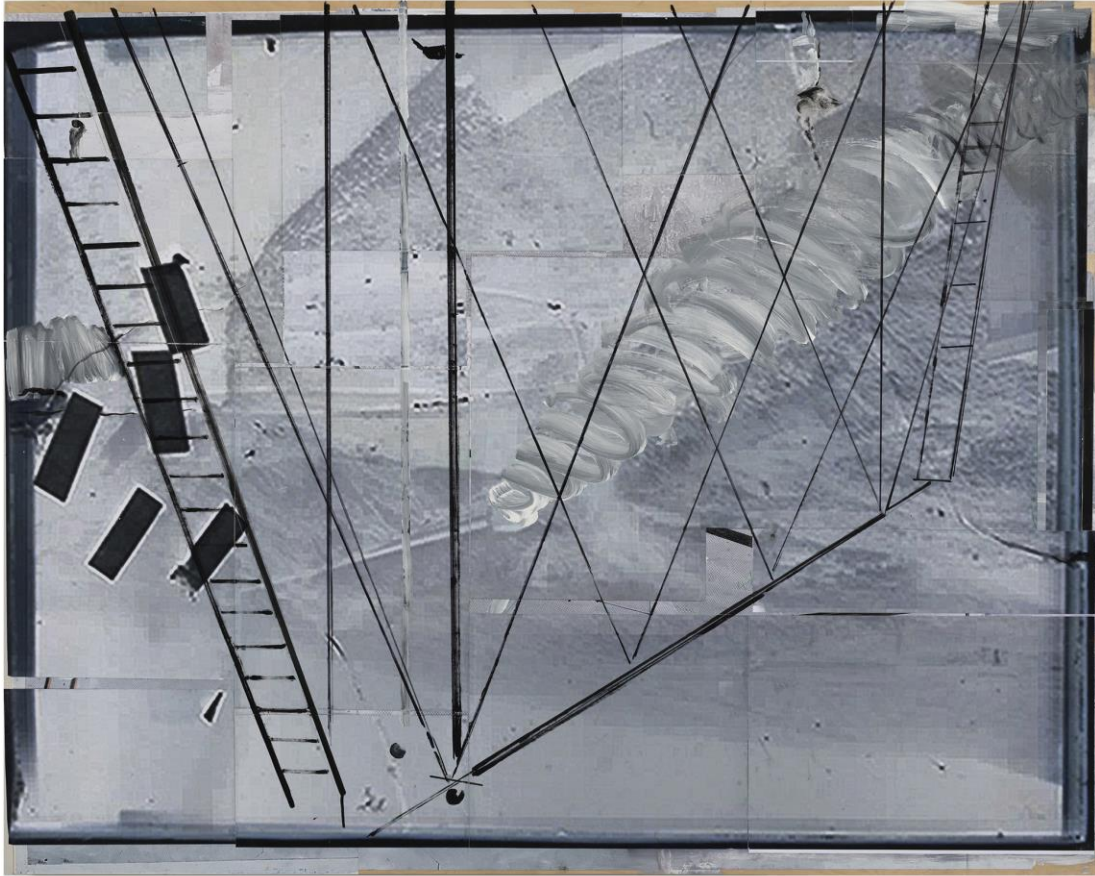
Invertigo B, 48° x 60°



Starliner, 2019, 48" x 120"



Turbulence, 48 x 60"



Flying School 48 x 60"





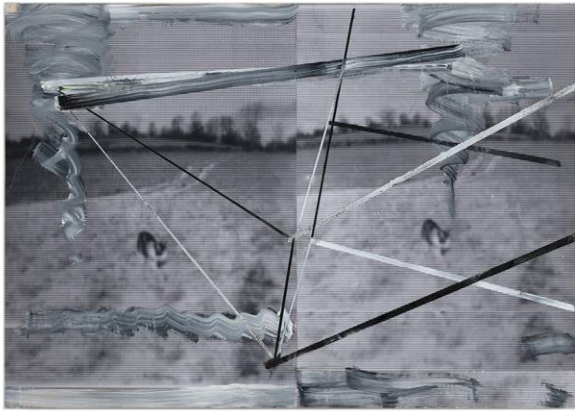
Drop Zone, 48" x 60"



Big Jungle Gym, 48" x 60"



Wicked Twister, 48" x 60"



Double Cat Diagram, 18 x 25.5"



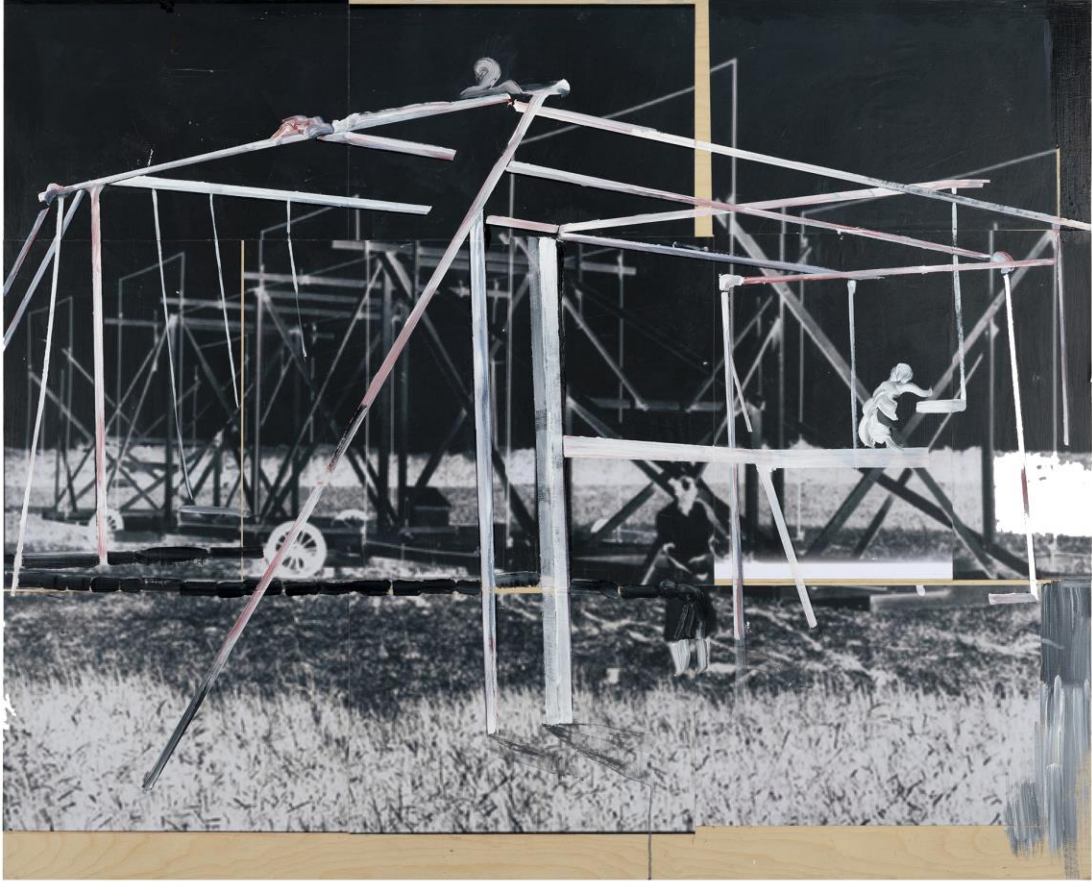
Rainbow Chaser, 18 x 24"



Swings and Ladders 18 x 24"



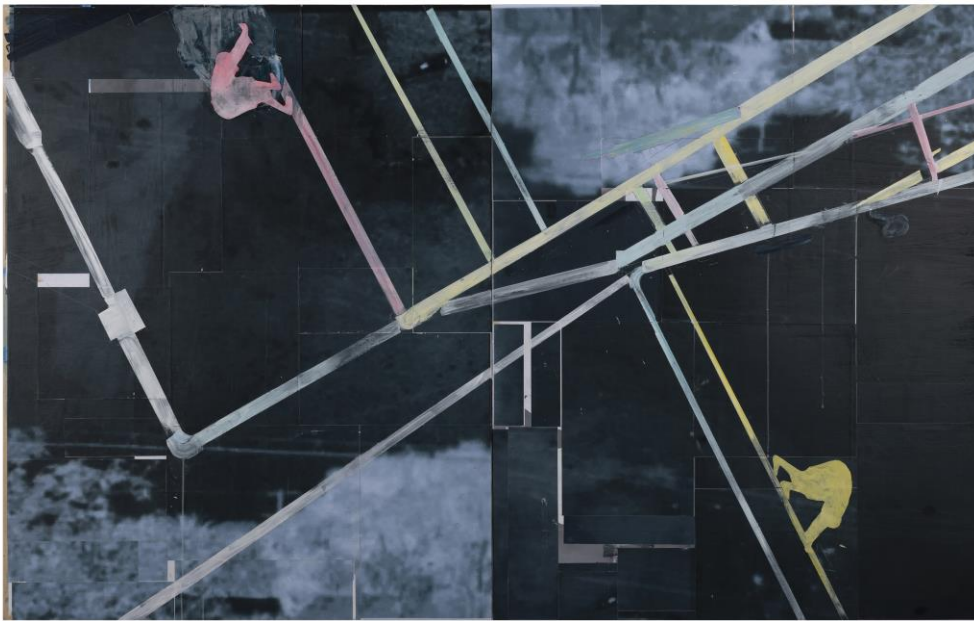
Flying School, 18 x 24"



Desperado, 48 x 60"



Jungle Gym at Night, 48 x 60"



Diverical, 60 x 96"

## BIOGRAPHY

**Heide Fasnacht** has returned to painting after several decades. This return has ushered in a commensurate new area of interest: the depiction of neglected and long forgotten playgrounds. This work is more personal in nature than her previous sculptures. The bodily feelings evoked by climbing and swinging include vertigo confusion, excitement, and mastery. These works limn vast and sublime spaces. All of this and more are explored through the more direct and fluid medium of paint.

Fasnacht has shown an abiding interest in states of instability. These concepts have been explored through large scale drawings and sculptures, photo-based work, and prints. The aftereffects of historical occurrences (iconoclasm), risk economics (implosions) and geological processes (earthquakes & implosions) are revealed in fracturing and damage. Deforming and reforming reveals fissures: damage and contortions on the landscape, in culture, in the built environment. Fasnacht's process reflects these shifting events in both content and process.

Since her first one-person show at P.S. 1 in 1979, Fasnacht has exhibited worldwide. She has been in exhibitions at MOMA, The Aldrich Museum for Contemporary Art, RAM Galerie in Rotterdam, Galeria Trama in Barcelona, The Worcester Art Museum, Preview Berlin, Qbox Gallery and Art Athina in Athens Greece, Kent Fine Art NYC, Socrates Sculpture Park, the American Academy of Arts & Letters in NYC, and many others. She is in many permanent collections including: the MFA Boston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, The Walker Art Center, The Dallas Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, and the Yale University Art Gallery. Fasnacht is also the recipient of numerous awards, including: The Guggenheim Fellowship, several National Endowment for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, The Gottlieb Foundation Grant, and two Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowships. She has taught at Harvard, Princeton, U Penn, UCLA, Parsons, and others. Further visiting lectures include Yale, The Whitney Museum, RISD and VCU.





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