

Steve Higgins Gallery 1.1.1.
School of Art
University of Manitoba

February 1-25, 1987



Steve Higgins Gallery 1.1.1.
School of Art
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada





UNTITLED
Encaustic/Wood 96" x 144", 1985

In an age of accelerated information, contemporary art has reached a crisis point. Even a superficial look at the past fifty years has seen the walls of the studio, the artist's traditional refuge from the outside world, literally shattered. The "real" world has entered the territory of visual art and visa versa; the architect becomes involved with sculptural concerns; the sculptor re-evaluates the architect's discipline; the painter becomes a film-maker; the film-maker turns social activist; the performance artist entertains; and the environmental artist abandons the ivory tower to decorate for the new Medicis...government, institutions and corporations.

Unlimited choices of expression do not necessarily result in artistic freedom. If the move to appropriate or inhabit non-Western "motifs" has appeal, in an attempt to regain a lost spiritual content, taken out of its cultural context, how does one differentiate between the shaman's fetish and a pile of sticks? Conversely, what sense can be made of theoretical architecture if the practical issues of building and function are never confronted? The question is not merely the appropriation of a form or discipline, but its application by the artist in a public context.

Steve Higgins has, over the past seven years, produced a remarkable body of work in the public arena. These temporary projects have not been monuments, i.e., the embellishment of status and place (commonly misinterpreted as the role of "public art") but rather, they have functioned within the public realm. Higgins' concerns have not been with the identification of his work as "art" but as a mediation between the site and viewer. The sites for these projects have been critical, so they may be considered "site-specific", but they involve issues larger than astute positioning. Higgins has also operated in an area of public work (recognized conventions of labour) instead of imposing a "work" in public. If this work appears to be architectural (I prefer the term "structural"), it is because that is the "language" of public space (and progress) in our culture.

An untitled work, installed outside the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1980 is a primary example. An unpainted wood construction, 180' long by 8' high by 10' wide, it ran parallel to the exterior wall of the gallery. In spite of its size, it appeared fragile against the imposing tyndal stone clad prow of the gallery. But instead of being subordinate to the

architect's view of "building", it provided an alternative structural reality. A ramp, along the outside of the work could be passed along, depositing the participant at the doors of the gallery. By walking along it, one could ignore the approach designed by the architect and take a route which was perhaps more psychologically satisfying or frustrating; slightly elevated and against a human-scaled wall.

The irony is that Higgins' structure, if not fully understood as art, is accepted by the public as a familiar part of the urban environment, where hoardings signal some eventual activity; construction or demolition.

Higgins took a different approach for his work at the Sculpture Triennial in Melbourne, Australia in 1981. Here a network of channels, earth ramps below grade and plywood barricades crossed the La Trobe University campus. In comparison to the Winnipeg project, it was visually complex, unreadable as a unified structure, except from the air.

There is an obvious comparison with earthwork of the late 60's and 70's, but unlike Robert Smithson's *"Spiral Jetty"* which set up a model of man-kind "nature" or Robert Morris's *"Observatory"*, a site for contemporary ritual (having no specific religious function), Higgins' Triennial work is unmistakably "functional". These were not places for the burial of kings or cosmological foundations. They resembled military trenches; the pastoral setting of academia transformed into a potential battlefield.

For the "3+3+9" exhibition at The Art Gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto, in 1981, Higgins constructed a wood trestle which ran along the water's edge from the base of the Harbour Police observation tower, past their headquarter building to the edge of a marina. Higgins' work was quite fitting for Harbourfront, which since its "discovery" in the early 70's, has made claim to restoring the waterfront for the people. As a result it has been under constant construction for 10 years, as development plans "improve" the area. Higgins' 128' long wood structure would have gone unnoticed if not for an aggressive element he introduced. A plastic pipe, which ran along the length of the structure, channeled a tape loop of recorded sounds of the urban environment; indistinguishable from the "real" sounds except on those occasions when it was obvious there was no "source" for the sound. Once it was identified as the source (although impossible to confirm, because

there was not direct access to the site), the structure became potentially threatening. Higgins took the idea of a non-passive structure for an exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1982. This was a departure from the previous projects because the work was located inside the gallery. Rather than being tamed by the "site", the scale of the work and active sound elements disrupted the neutrality of the exhibition space.

In each of these projects Higgins had taken the position of politicizing the site or space. These massive temporary structures were in direct conflict to prevailing or understood conditions and assumptions we make, such as permanence. Anyone seeing slides of Higgins' 1981 project at Harbourfront would be hard pressed to identify the location, as both major landmarks, the observation tower and Harbour Police building have disappeared in re-development. Higgins revealed an inherent dynamic of our cities... nothing lasts forever ("forever" is now measured in decades), even if it is concrete and steel.

Steve Higgins' current work has moved from "anonymous" structures to specific references. The La Trobe trenches and passive intrusion of the Harbourfront work has given way to a real threat in his *"Rocket-Powered Vehicle"* of 1984. Although it appears to be model-like, in comparison to the outdoor projects, the 48' long trestle of *"Rocket-Powered Vehicle"* both penetrates its exhibition space and serves as a support of a sinister vehicle/house, ready to be propelled along its track. If we do not see the vehicle activate, like "defensive" missile systems, its purpose is quite obvious. Higgins' rocket vehicle is no toy. It is aimed at our knees.

"M-16", however, marks a shift, not only in the obvious physical manifestation of Higgins' work, but also his concerns; one which has moved from an area of public work to social accountability. *"Rocket-Powered Vehicle"*, in spite of its direct reference to function and potential power, still retains an air of neutrality. We can and do admire the products of high technology (the latest supersonic aircraft or missiles) from a purely aesthetic view-point. The seduction of design and engineering can be separated from the ultimate purpose and function of these objects. This is not the case with *"M-16"*. It is a crude, almost distasteful object because of its sole purpose... to kill. From a distance we see

the form. Closer examination reveals that it is a facsimile, carefully constructed from wrapped wire. As a result of this process, Higgins has created something quite different from the original or what might be mistaken as an exercise in reproduction. (For example, the weight of the original, approx. 6 lb. has increased to 40 lb.) The science of ballistics has given way to a threat of mass and form. If looks could kill, then "M-16" is testimony.

A related work, *"Rock 'N Roll, Mary Jane, and Love Beads"*, develops "M-16" as icon within a cultural context (albeit, a perverted context). The title betrays the power of language to both conceal and identify meaning. "Rock 'N Roll" was a term used by American troops in Vietnam to describe the firing of the M-16 on automatic...the weapon being used indiscriminately, to blanket an area, rather than direct fire towards a specific target. "Mary Jane" was a 60's colloquial term for marijuana, and a reference to the widespread use of drugs by American troops during "search and destroy" missions. "Love Beads", another 60's reference, was applied to the taking of enemy ears as trophies, to be worn around the neck. The Vietnam experience transformed the "honour" of combat and duty (to defend one's country) into acts of personal aggression.

At the centre of this ritual, Higgins has identified "M-16" as a contemporary fetish object. "M-16" is a symbol of a "final solution", not exclusive to the Vietnam context. "Ve go shopping"

Arnold Schwarzenegger in **Commando**

Both "M-16" and *"Rock 'N Roll..."* address the myth of the gun and indirectly, the cultural myth-making of American film which serves as the litmus for acceptable conduct. The "six-shooter" of the American West (itself a mythical place and time) has become synonymous with "frontier justice"... the gun being the means by which a balance of power was achieved... justice being interpreted as retribution. This concept of justice as retribution has re-emerged from a period of "enlightenment" because of the current perceived breakdown of the judicial system's inability to deal with social disruption. The Charles Bronson character in **Death Wish** dispenses "justice with a gun", circumventing the judicial system, when that system appeared to be inadequate in applying effective sanctions.

But in both the mythical American West and **Death Wish** there is a distinction made between good and evil. The real-life example of Bernard Goetz and his shooting of a group of youths in a New York subway blurs that distinction. The question which is being argued is whether Goetz faced a real or potential threat. His actions were applauded by a segment of society as justified. The "war-zone" is now seen as encroaching on our urban life. It is not a question of good and evil, it is one of survival.

In **Commando**, Arnold Schwarzenegger's character has only the slimmest of reasons to unleash a new version of "frontier justice". His "Ve go shopping" comment (another intentional understatement) serves as the prelude to extended carnage and of course, a "celebration" of the means. If he kills, then it must be justified. This attitude has been reinforced from the crude advocacy of survivalist publications and "solider of fortune" magazines (the new gun for hire) to the transformation of G.I. Joe, originally an everyman serving his country, to G.I. Joe, A Real American Hero. Heroism is no longer an act of selfless bravery, but a vigilante practice of aggression.

If "M-16" and *"Rock 'N Roll..."* represent icons of the "new frontierism", then Higgins' work on paper and encaustic address the social consequences as historical metaphors.

"The False Dmitry" is based on a 17th century incident in Russia. A Polish claimant to the Tsarist throne had occupied the Kremlin. In the Russian counterseige, the Kremlin was re-occupied by the Russians. Dmitry was executed, his body burned and his ashes fired from a cannon towards Poland. The maxim of "he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword" does not adequately convey the complexity of the issue. Higgins suggests that the politics of power is both ambiguous and self-consuming, a classic example being Fidel Castro's rise to power. Initially viewed as a democratic populist (by the United States), he was supported and endorsed as a liberator after the successful overthrow of the Batista regime. Castro's move towards a communist model was seen as a threat by the United States, who has attempted, directly and indirectly, to instigate his overthrow. Although the story is not complete, one can speculate that this cycle of power politics will continue.

In a large encaustic work from 1985, Higgins incor-

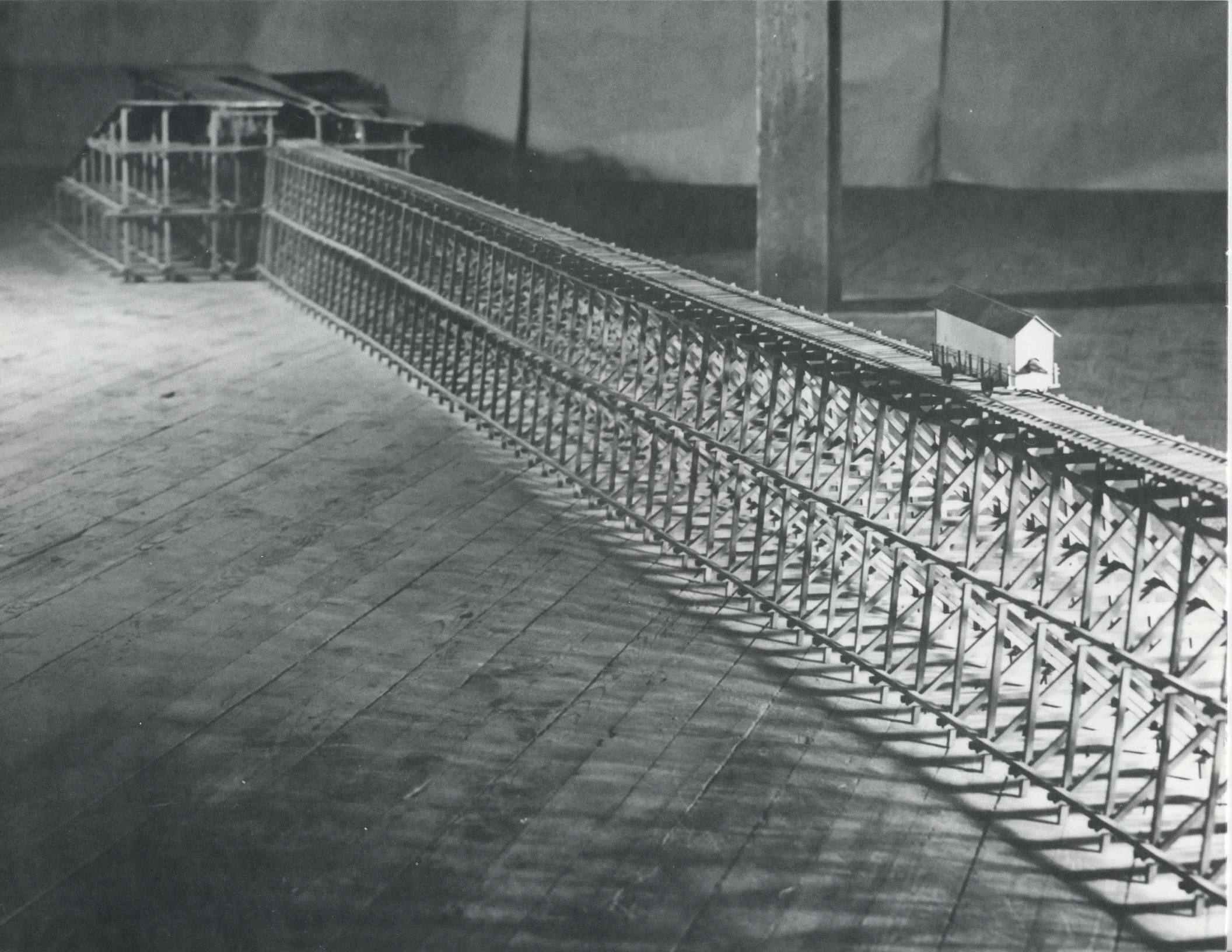
porated a series of images illustrating the outcome of total aggression, as a "final" solution...specifically the bombing of Hiroshima. His sources included a U.S. military photograph of A-bomb burns on a woman's back, thermal images of a figure and sword burned onto a building during the blast, and the remains of a theatre destroyed by the explosion. The original media images are too loaded for mere appropriation and rather than using familiar visual signifiers (the "mushroom" cloud for example), Higgins has chosen to focus on the human consequences. He has transformed them into a poetic but powerful gestural statement.

If Higgins' site/structural works have a brute elegance because of his honesty of materials, his current work is brutal because of the anti-aesthetics of the subject matter. Both are confrontational and both provide visual evidence which is doubled edged. Higgins has consistently strived to operate outside the insular concerns of conventional art making and to place his work in the larger context of social and personal experience.

Ihor Holubizky
Toronto



UNTITLED
Encaustic/Wood 96" x 144", 1984





DETAIL
Vehicle 11" x 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 3"

ROCKET POWERED VEHICLE
Wood/Metal/Light/Motor/Solid Fuel Rocket
21" x 48" x 41 feet 1984



M-16
Wire 10" x 39½" x 3", 1986



DETAIL



ROCK 'N ROLL, MARY JANE, AND LOVE BEADS
Wire/Wood/Encaustic/Tar/Grass, 35" x 59", 1986

BIOGRAPHY

Steve Higgins was born in Spokane, Washington and became a Canadian Landed Immigrant in 1974. He Graduated B.F.A. Cum Laude from the University of Washington, Seattle, and received his M.F.A. from Wayne State University, Detroit. Steve has exhibited in Australia, Japan, Spain, Brazil, England, Holland, and extensively in the United States and Canada. His works are represented in both private and public collections. Steve is presently teaching at the School of Art, University of Manitoba.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to Ihor Holubizky for writing an insightful essay, to Bob Talbot who photographed the works, to Leo Simoens who designed the catalogue, and to the staff of Gallery 1.1.1., Dale Amundson, Grace Eiko Thompson and Tom Wood for their help and involvement.

CREDITS

Exhibition Curator: Dale Amundson
Catalogue Essay: Ihor Holubizky
Catalogue Photography: Bob Talbot
Installation Technician: Tom Wood
Catalogue Design: Leo Simoens

Funding Assistance from
the Manitoba Arts Council.

WORKS IN EXHIBITION

THE FALSE DMITRY

Charcoal, 35" x 69", 1984

UNTITLED

Charcoal/Conte, 35" x 62½", 1984

UNTITLED

Encaustic/Wood, 96" x 144", 1984

UNTITLED

Wood, 61" x 29" x 3", 1985

UNTITLED

Encaustic/Wood, 96" x 144", 1985

M-16

Wire, 10" x 39½" x 3", 1986

SIREN IN SOUNDPROOF BOX

Charcoal/Conté, 30" x 22", 1986

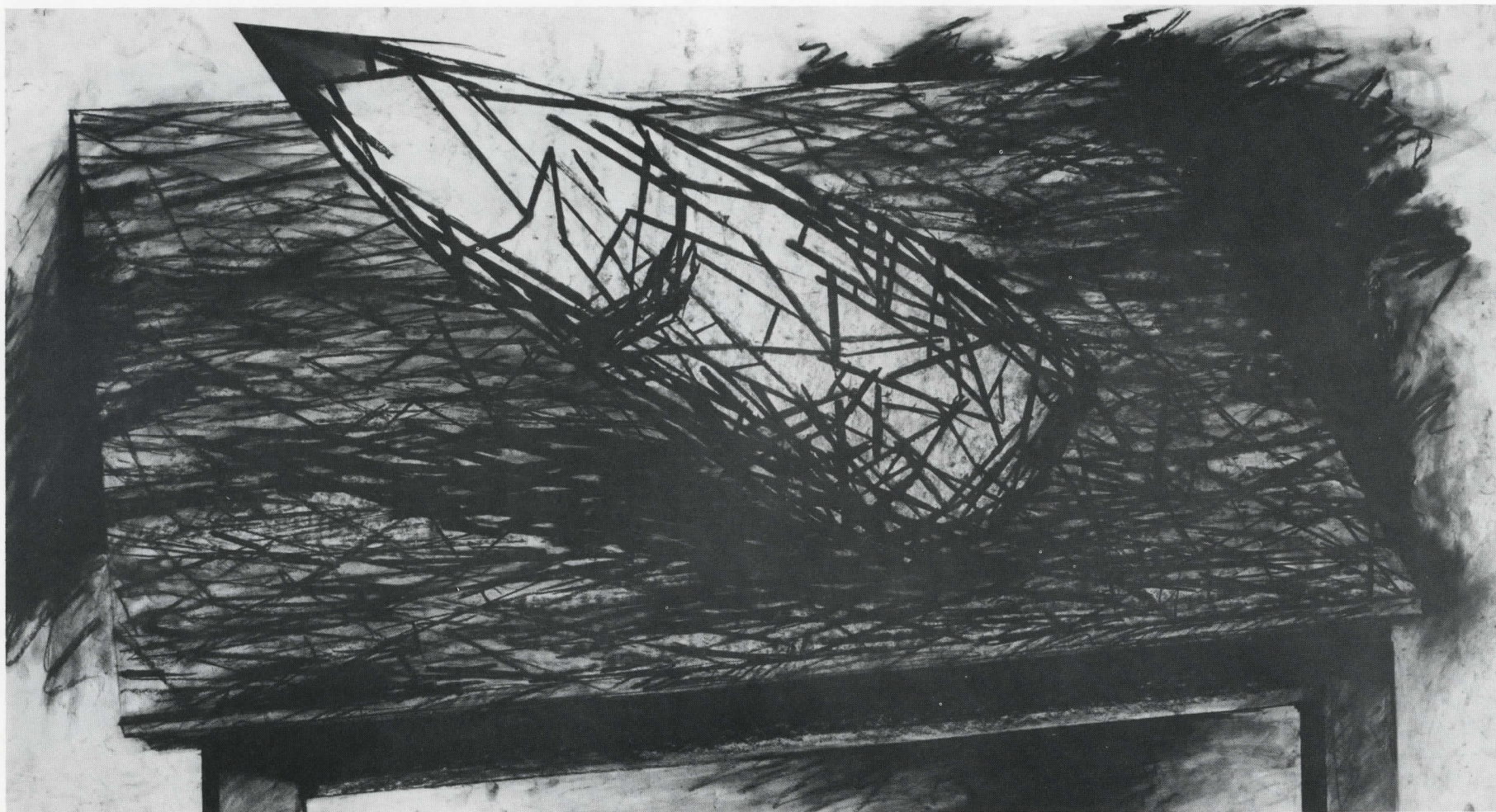
BLACK-OP BUSHMASTER

Wood/Encaustic/Metal and Grass 27" x 15", 1986

ROCK 'N ROLL, MARY JANE, AND LOVE BEADS

Wire/Wood/Encaustic/Tar/Grass, 35" x 59", 1986

©Gallery 1.1.1. The University of Manitoba



UNTITLED
Charcoal and Conté 35" x 62½", 1984



THE FALSE DMITRY
Charcoal 35" x 69", 1984

UNTITLED (maquette)
Wood 61" x 29" x 3", 1985



