



RALPH FREEMAN

Cover: *Signscape*
33 x 51 cm
Oil & mixed media on board (detail)

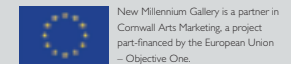
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ArtCred

RALPH FREEMAN

2003

More Than the Messages

There is a wall-piece in Ralph Freeman's studio, made from the backs of books. Their stiff carapaces have been spreadeagled, tiled over each other, like a section of ancient terracotta roof, then whitened. You notice the formal rhythms released from the backs of ordinary books – two equal rectangles separated by a narrow rectangle that rises into a half cylinder, reiterated until you forget what these objects are or were. The formal patterning asserts itself, tries to take over from the elements within the pattern, but these subordinate elements resist. They are objects that retain at least some shreds of their function, and therefore their history. They are not simply shapes that the artist has created for his own aesthetic satisfaction.

Nevertheless, these books have relinquished almost everything. They contain no words, no story, no messages. Or rather, they contain nothing but time, because they are clearly old. And some are stamped with Hebrew letters. Evidently, these are the remains of holy books.

– *Not that that's important*, he says.

How can it not be important? I think of the first line of a poem by Peter Redgrove, 'I chuck my Bible in the parlour fire'. If 'Bible' bothers you, put

'paper' – it's not the same. But what Freeman means, I think, is that how you feel about the typography is your business. Just because you see these letter-forms, don't jump to the conclusion that his work is about religion.

– *It is not about religion, or about the Holocaust or any of that, although some would say that it is political in a wider sense, in that it deals with bureaucratic procedures that still affect many lives today. It is about using materials that enable me to work.*

Looking at art, we're too concerned with subject-matter, with meaning and with what art is 'about'. Artists, on the other hand, talk about materials and process, about how art is made. Often, they find the idea of subject-matter as something separate from process not very interesting at all.

– *Standing in the National Gallery, I watch the tour guide in front of a painting tell people about the story, rather than about the way the painting is made. In fact, the story is just like collage, really. It's material you find and bring into your painting.*

This helps to explain why the materials that Freeman brings into his paintings and constructions – family letters and documents, books, envelopes – always have some personal connection. These materials are vested with a significance that stuff trawled from a beach or roadside would not have.

Think for a moment of the ways that Renaissance painters in the National

Gallery used the narrative moment – Titian, say, in his episodes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There is always the feeling that the story serves the painting, not the other way round, as in illustrative art. The story has been brought into the painting in order to give form to something else. To do this, it must have a contemporary resonance of its own. In those days, mythological or biblical narratives were an inexhaustible seam of material for art. Today, we're much more attuned to the aura of ordinary documents – headlines, lists of names, graffiti – less spellbound by the murderous mythical chastity of the goddess Diana.

Painting – any painting that's worth doing and looking at – takes its material, whether mythographic or quotidian, over a transformative threshold where it becomes a completely wordless something else. This is not a question of achieving intellectual meaning – no one spends their days moving viscous oil paint around on canvas in pursuit of rational meaning. Freeman works in different media, including construction and collage as well as oil paint, but it is the interrelationship between the painting process and the documentary-collage fragments that is perhaps the primary site of transformation at this moment.

You can't ignore the recurrence of specific source material for these fragments. In the catalogue essay for his exhibition at Tate St Ives in 1997–98,

titled *Foundations & Fragments*, David Cohen wrote eloquently about his use of family documents – or copies of them – often greatly enlarged, torn, abraded, overpainted. This series, or mode of working, is playing into its final phase. Like actors lined up for a curtain call, it's not mechanical copies but the original documents that are now appearing one last time – books, mottled cards and envelopes, the punctilious knitting of handwritten scraps of letters or passages punched out in typescript.

Through Freeman's years of involvement with this material, it has metamorphosed from graphic motifs back into authentic artefacts – the poetic opposite of the usual life-cycle of visual imagery. There are other changes, too. Compared with the austere tones of his earlier collage-paintings – blacks, dark reds, browns and greys – the paint colours are mostly lighter, cooler, and the emblems and logos not nearly so insistent. Under layers of pale grey, pale blue paint, they are sinking or surfacing, indefinite subcutaneous presences, like the shadows of underwater rocks.

Many of these pieces (and this is true of Freeman's work more generally) are compositionally based on a subtly reticulated orthogonal grid. This structure sets up complex symmetries and rhythms of a kind that aren't available through freer compositional approaches. It also creates a rhythmic play-off between different works seen side by side or across a room. There is

also the not-to-be-argued-with authority of the frame: this rectangle is part of the work's foundation – not just where a painting happens to end.

Eight years ago, when Freeman first showed the work that developed into *Foundations & Fragments*, there was good reason to talk about the historical moment in 1930s Germany where much of the collaged material originated. Its ordering in art could never be neutral, since it inevitably struck an echo with the methodical marshalling of bureaucratic information at which the Third Reich excelled – the passport stamps, the brisk signatures, *alles in ordnung!* But the documentary intensity of this project has been superseded by a less historically specific meditation.

And the *gravitas* of the grid is this: in the arena of extremes, once certain boundaries are broken, any of us could equally become the ones doing or the ones being done to. There remains only and always the ethical question about the strength of whatever kind of order it is that you can balance against the corrupt order of the state and the inverted order of lies. Order versus dissolution, containment versus release – I'm trying out these contraries as a way of thinking about his painting, when Ralph says, apropos not of its meaning but of its making,

– *It's all about finding the balance between hard edge and expression.*

Hard edge and expression come together in Freeman's work in one

particular form that is shared by his collages, constructions and (often much larger) oil paintings. The envelope – a shape that, either open or closed, is composed of a symmetrical arrangement of squares and triangles – appears in many guises, sometimes as an actual envelope, or a three-dimensional package, or a refulgent, upward-moving geometrical form. Its fragile contents are, perhaps, opened out in Freeman's spare, lyrical watercolours (which he calls drawings). Here the network-grid often gives over to a simplified balance of vertical or horizontal registers. There is a dialogue – this is what the 'drawing' is about – between deliberate design and the effusive, uncontrollable effects of watercolour pigment seeping into wet paper.

– *The envelope is a symbol of time. It contains something that is created in the present, sent to the future and received from the past.*

Is the envelope a metaphor for art? Maybe. In Freeman's work you find it as a graphic shape, a sign and a material object. And it functions by uniting the visual, the semantic and the documentary, making the point that art (unlike letters or logos) is always more than the messages it contains.

Michael Bird, July 2003

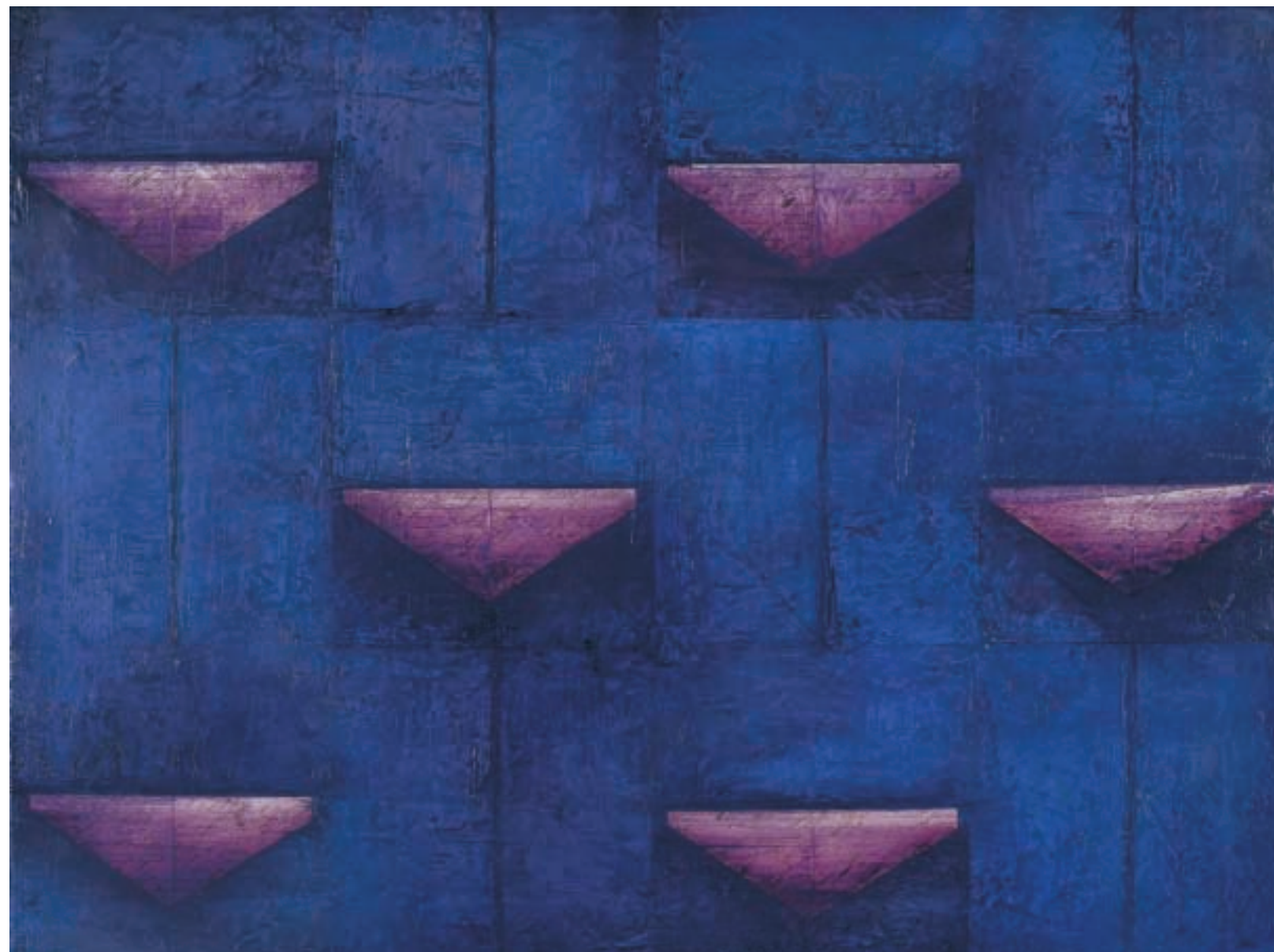
Enclosures II
29 x 38 cm
Watercolour with collage



Enclosures
29 x 38 cm
Watercolour with collage

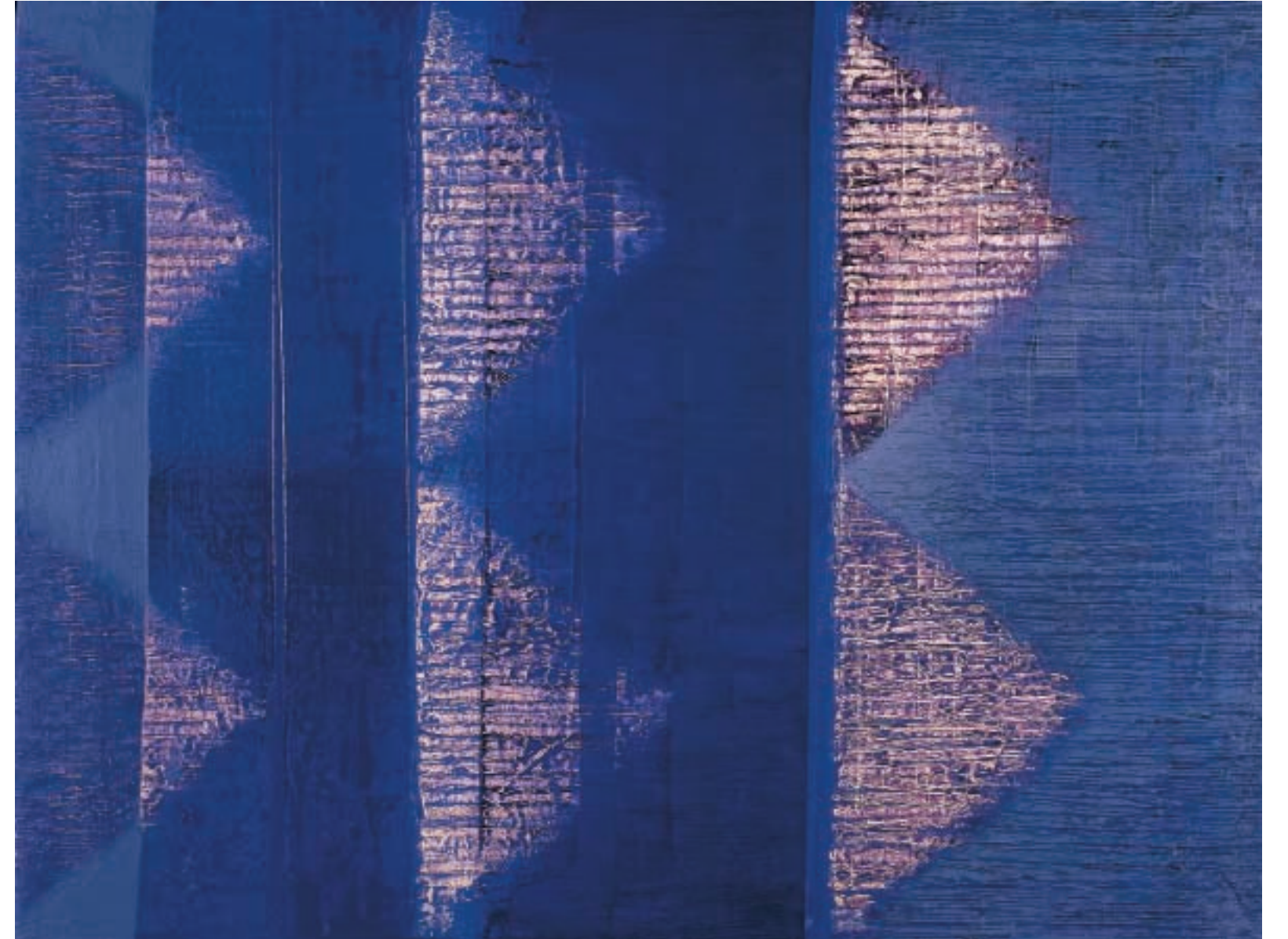


Notes from a City
76 × 102 cm
Oil with collage on canvas





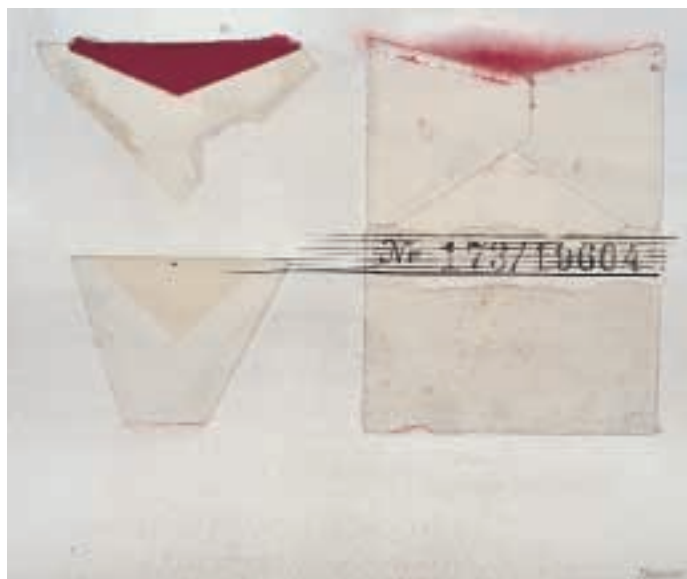
The Journey
55 x 60 cm
Oil with collage on canvas



Return II
76 x 102 cm
Oil on canvas



Missing
28 x 33 cm
Watercolour with collage



173 / 19604
28 x 33 cm
Watercolour with collage



Red Letter
92 x 92 cm
Oil with collage



Note on Black
29 x 38 cm
Watercolour with collage



Black Pocket
76 x 76 cm
Oil on canvas



Messages
76 x 76 cm
Oil on canvas



Grey Pocket
92 x 92 cm
Oil on canvas



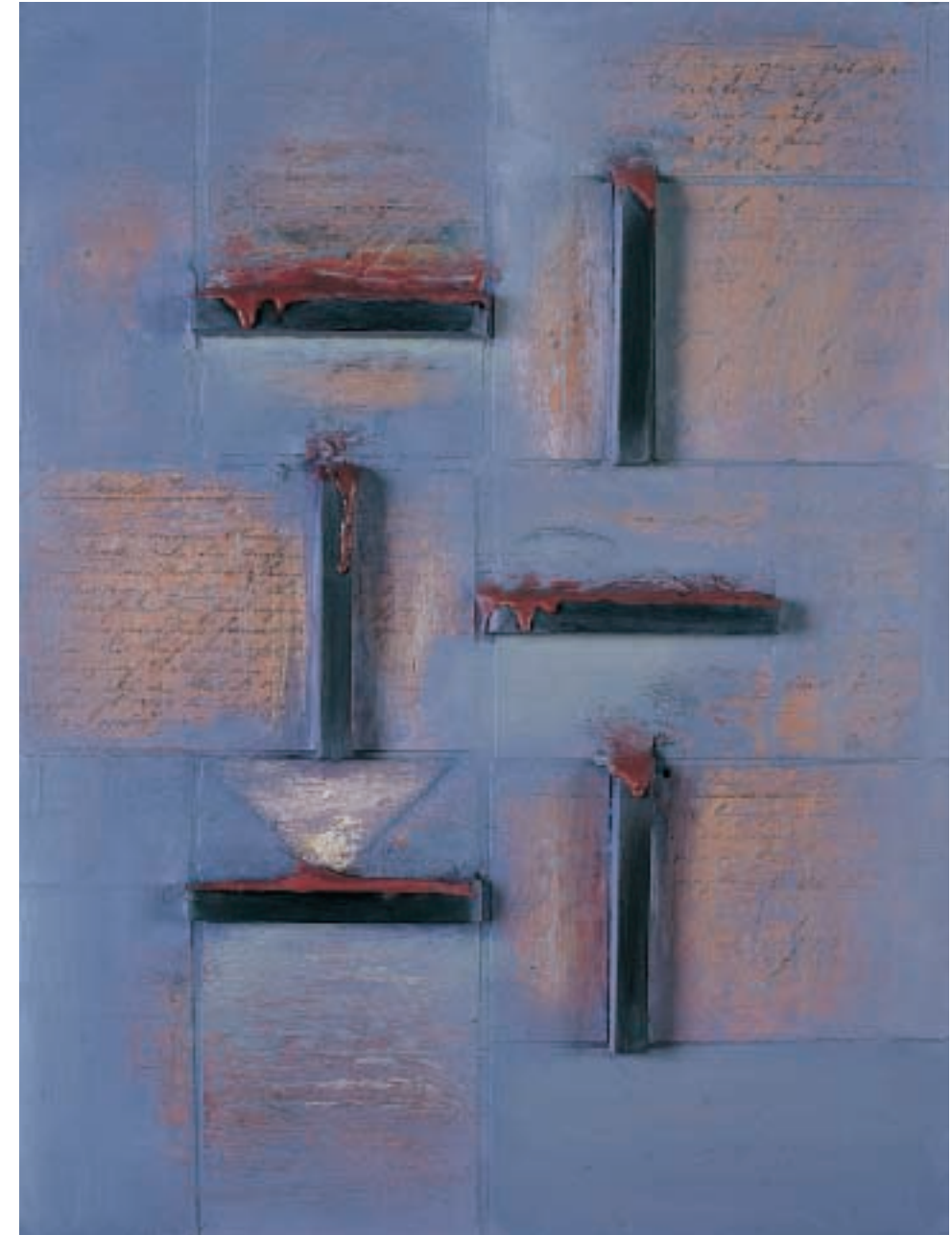
Without Words
38 x 62 cm
Mixed media construction



The Word
61 x 51 cm
Oil with mixed media
on canvas



Missing Words
42 x 53 cm
Mixed media construction



Notes on Notes
41 x 33 cm
Mixed media with oil on board



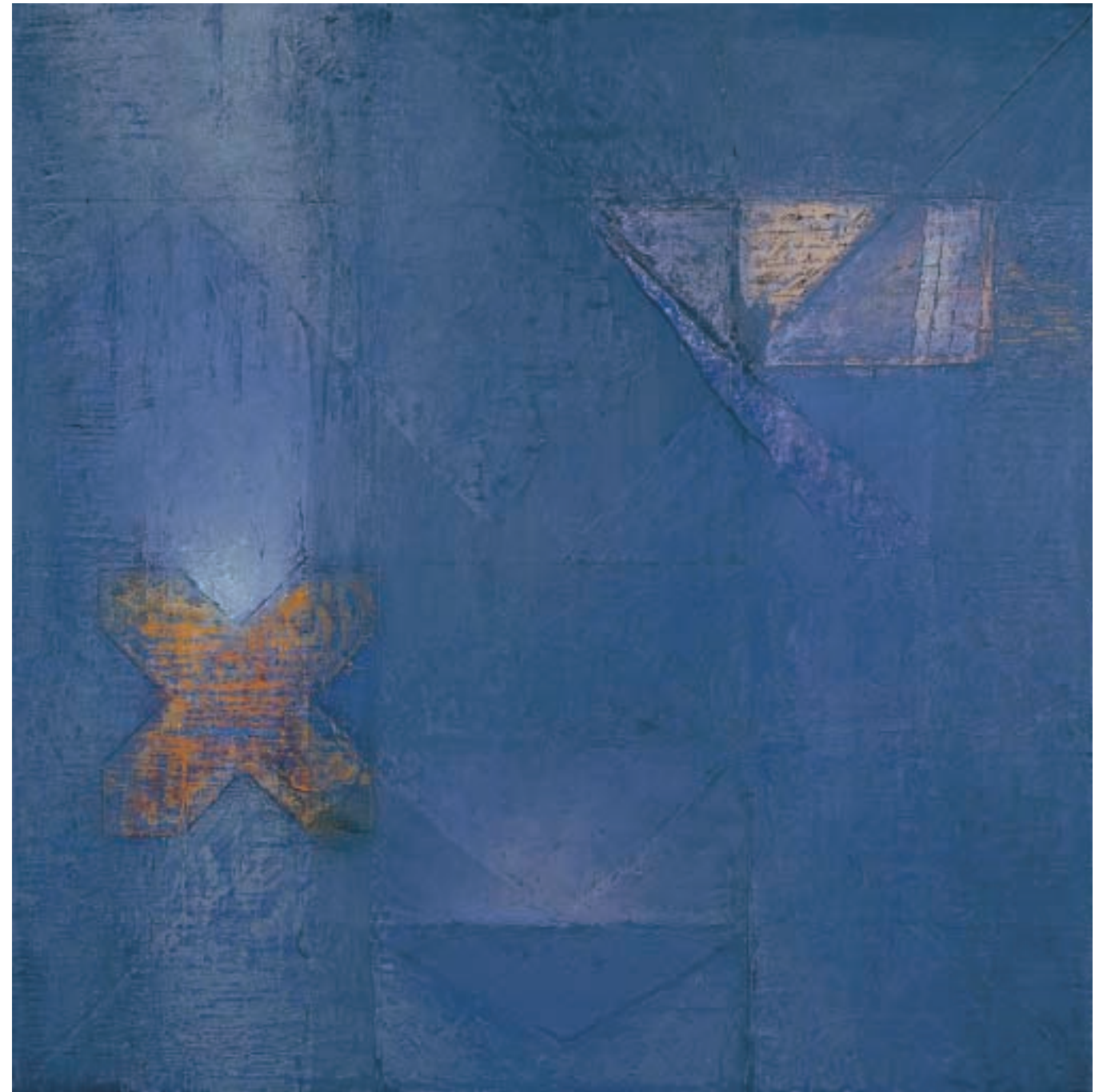
Enveloped
55 x 55 cm
Oil with collage on canvas



Signscape
33 x 51 cm
Oil & mixed media on board



Dancers II
46 x 74 cm
Oil on board



Note and Cross
61 x 61 cm
Oil with collage on canvas



The Crossing
61 x 61 cm
Oil and collage on board

Dancers ▶
66 x 74 cm
Oil and collage on board





The Letter
60 x 59 cm
Oil on canvas



Spine
60 x 39 cm
Mixed media construction with piano parts

Ralph Freeman

Ralph Freeman was born in London in 1945. He studied at St Martin's and Harrow Schools of art and has worked as an artist, jazz pianist/composer and designer in London and Germany. He has lectured at Bournemouth College of Art, the University of Central England and Central Saint Martin's College of Art & Design, and exhibited in Britain, Germany, Italy, Holland and the USA. In 1998, Tate Gallery St Ives exhibited the series *Foundations and Fragments*. He has lived in St Ives since 1988, works from one of the Porthmeor Studios and in 1998 founded St Ives Jazz Club.

Selected solo exhibitions

1983	Camden Arts Centre, London
1986	Artspace Gallery, London
1988	Louise Hallett Gallery, London
1990	Castello di Pomerio, Milan, <i>Man, Spirit, Energy</i> , a series of commissioned works
1991	Stuhlmann Gallery, Hamburg
1992	Royal Cornwall Museum
1996	Sternberg Centre, London <i>Foundations and Fragments</i>
1997 – 98	Tate Gallery St Ives <i>Foundations and Fragments</i>
1999	New Millennium Gallery, St Ives
1999	Gardner Arts Centre, University of Sussex <i>Foundations and Fragments</i>
2002	Freud Museum, London <i>Foundations and Fragments</i>
2003	New Millennium Gallery, St Ives

Public collections

Yad Vashem Museum, Jerusalem; Freud Museum, London

Selected group exhibitions & projects

1986	Civitella D'Agliano, Italy <i>Eight European Artists</i>
1986 – 90	Louise Hallett Gallery, London
1992	Royal Cornwall Museum. <i>Crossing the Boundaries (Four Cornish Artists in Europe)</i>
1992 – 03	Penwith Galleries, St Ives (PSA member)
1992 – 03	Newlyn Art Gallery (NSA member)
1993	Invited artist, Newlyn Festival
1993	Edinburgh Festival Demarco's European Art Foundation
1996	Hebden Bridge Arts Festival
1996 – 02	<i>Kunst uit Cornwall</i> , Amersfoort, Holland
1998	Prizewinner, <i>Critics' Choice</i> , Newlyn Art Gallery
1999	Falmouth Art Gallery <i>Aspects of Abstraction</i> (group of 4)
1999	Maidstone Museum & Gallery <i>The New St Ives Artists</i>
2000	Falmouth Art Gallery <i>Twenty Years of Contemporary Art</i>
2002	Jean Monnet-Haus, Berlin <i>Twenty Years of Contemporary Art</i>
2003	Harbour House Gallery, Devon <i>Conflict & Resolution</i>
2003	Adze Gallery, York

Publications

1988	<i>Recent Works</i> , Louise Hallett Gallery
1990	<i>Man, Spirit, Energy</i> , Albion
1992	<i>New Paintings</i> , Royal Cornwall Museum
1994	<i>Portrait of an Art Colony</i>
1996	<i>Drawing Towards the End of the Century</i> , Newlyn Art Gallery
1997	<i>Foundations and Fragments</i> , David Cohen, Tate Gallery St Ives
2000	<i>Twenty Years of Contemporary Art at Falmouth Art Gallery</i>
2000	<i>Arts Review</i> (October issue)
2001	<i>Behind the Canvas</i>
2002	ARTNSA
2003	<i>Ralph Freeman, More Than the Messages</i> , Michael Bird, New Millennium Gallery