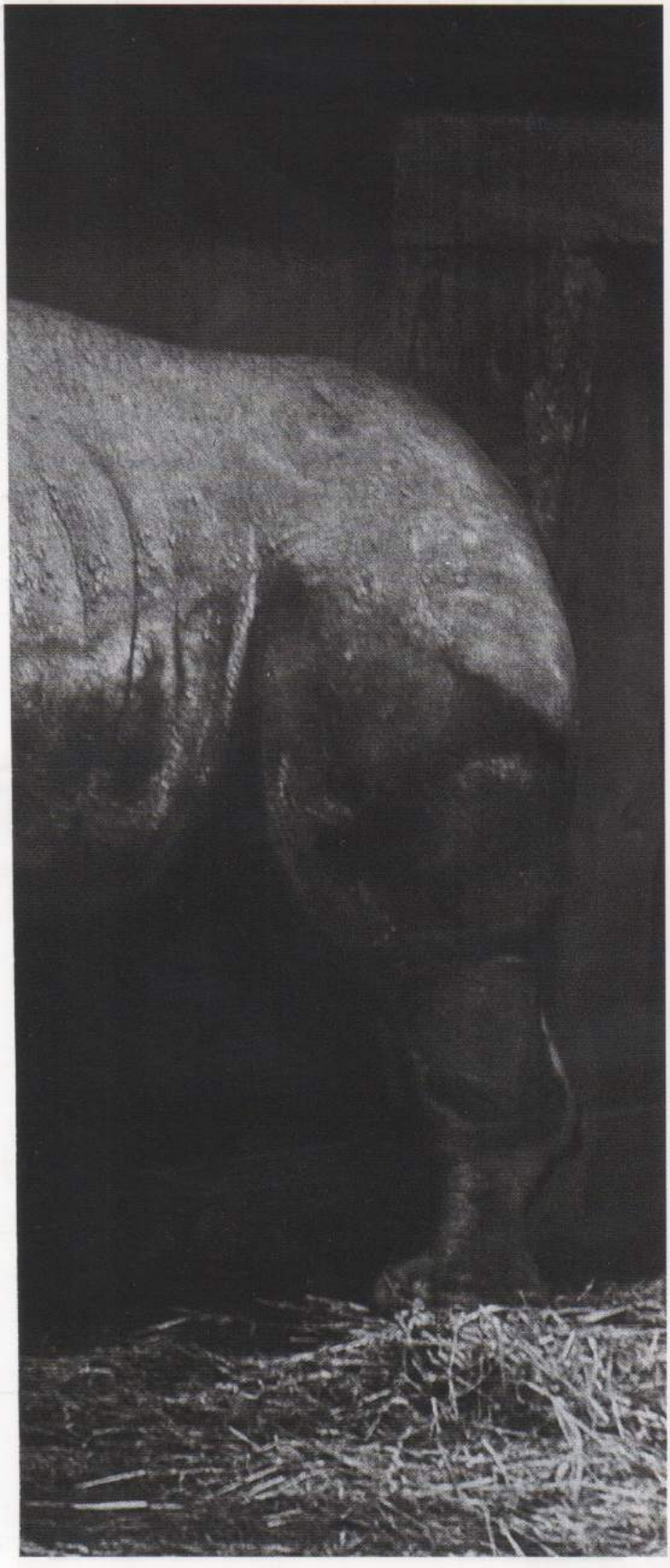
Slow Time

A traveling survey provides welcome exposure for the work of Craigie Horsfield, whose photographs and videos are as visually absorbing as they are conceptually ambitious.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL



The very substantial book accompanying a currently traveling survey of Craigie Horsfield's work begins wordlessly—and, for a photographer and video artist, elliptically—with 24 pages of modest drawings from 1968 and '69. Executed in colored pencil and ink on graph paper, they progress from desultory fillings-in of selected squares to precise but faint geometric lines that build, midstream, to an eruption of fanciful, quasi-alphabetic markings before receding in conclusion to scratchy remnants.

This graceful prefatory dance with legibility is telling. Throughout the more than three decades represented by the work on view, Horsfield, English born and now based in London and New York, has addressed himself to problems of reception. Though he has recently been included in Documenta (2002) and the Whitney Biennial (2003), he is not well known in the U.S., where he hasn't had a solo show since 1996, nor even in his native country, where he has had just two shows in seven years. There is, then, a slightly paradoxical quality to his deep involvement with the question of how to engage with viewers, and also with subjects; of how much to satisfy appetites for information and for visual pleasure. "Relation," the show's title, is the central concept of Horsfield's densely elaborated artistic philosophy. "No self is conceivable in isolation and consciousness is born in relation," he writes in the book's introduction. Elsewhere, he expands: "Resembling thought as much as it resembles the material world, [art] is understood only through the negotiation of language that we enter into together with others."

Since the images in the exhibition are both psychologically resonant on fully independent terms and, for the most part, gorgeous in the extreme, this insistence on their entanglement with words is, at first, perplexing. Looking seems all that's called for, a swoon the proper response. But it is precisely the work's exceeding richness in scale, glamour and emotion that suggests that Horsfield's very generosity as an image-crafter is a conceptual strategy. Defying photography's conventional physical boundaries can be seen as a metaphor, in his work, for exploring contested areas of social space, a commitment that has been increasingly consuming. The resulting collaborative projects, based on his immersion in troubled or marginalized communities, include films and videos (which tend to be long) and installations of photographs with text panels (likewise). Both test attention spans as vigorously as they provoke moral sensibilities, an equivalence that is surely intended. "Slow time," a term the artist borrowed from historian Fernand Braudel's notion of "slow history," names another key element of Horsfield's esthetic vocabulary: the temporal register in which the work is made and received, magnifying the details it arrests.

Horsfield's biggest prints, which are black and white and measure nearly 9 feet square, go beyond monopolizing attention to swamping it. Made from negatives that can date back 30 years and more, though not printed until the late '80s at the earliest, these big silver prints considerably antedate the large-scale, mostly digital color photographs by Andreas Gursky et al. that have come to prominence in the past decade. Many were taken during a seven-year period Horsfield spent in Poland in the '70s, though others were shot in England and elsewhere. Works included in the survey are of ill-assorted things: a rhinoceros at the Oxford zoo standing

Craigie Horsfield:* Zoo, Oxford, January 1990, *1991, gelatin silver print, diptych, approx. 6 by 9 feet overall. Private collection, courtesy Frith Street Gallery, London. All works this article unique prints, © Adagp, Paris.

Though he believes that art involves a "negotiation of language," Horsfield's work is resonant on independent terms, and gorgeous in the extreme.

Plaça de toros La Monumental, Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, Barcelona, October 1995, *1996, gelatin silver print, 35½ by 34⅛ inches. Collection Monica de Cardenas, Milan.*

patiently in profile, a bullfight, tightly framed portraits, street scenes and landscapes, the metal lid of a box of hypodermic needles, a Weston-like nude shown from the back and looking like a bell pepper, a wildly crowded ballroom seen from high above so the frenzy is contained and remote. They span the years 1969 to 1990 and were mixed up chronologically for the exhibition's installation at the Jeu de Paume in Paris (where I saw it), though they share a powerful sense of anachronism. A deeply shadowed, averted man's face, crowned by a thatch of white hair, seems unmistakably of the 19th century, though in fact the subject is the artist's father, who was blind; a young woman who stares demurely away from the camera has the high arched forehead prized in medieval Europe. All are irreproachably dignified, and almost all—the landscapes, the people, even the inanimate objects—seem somehow captive and doomed, a status for which the prehistoric-seeming rhino is the emblem.

For an indexical medium—a medium that more or less put indexicality on the map (as media theorist Peter Lunenfeld has argued in noting that the 1839 birth date of Charles Peirce, who formulated a semiological system in which the term indexical was coined to describe an image physically dependent on its subject, coincided with the year that both Talbot and Daguerre went public with their "photogenic drawings" and daguerreotypes, respectively)—photography is very hostile to the touch. Its surfaces are, as a rule, extremely vulnerable; fingerprints are often deadly, as is extended exposure to strong light. In any case, everything valued in a photograph is behind the surface. Though this is as true of Horsfield's photos as any, and though their vulnerability is only exacerbated by their size and, especially, his preference to show them without protective glass, they are irresistibly textural—the blacks velvety, the grays soft and thick as flannel.

In their insistent tactility, Horsfield's black-and-white photographs stress the medium's tendency to simulate night vision, when color is suppressed and acuity diminished, and, in extremes, groping replaces sight. Many of these prints, even those not shot at night, seem like nocturnes. But it's more complicated than that, since in almost all, extreme enlargement and darkroom manipulation have not only blurred contours but also caused the values to be slightly out of whack; highlights are gray and flat and the darks are brilliant, or they're oddly equivalent. Space tends to be compressed, since there is very little or no atmospheric recession. Quotidian and even impoverished though many of the settings and subjects are, Horsfield lends them an air of rarity; his exacting printing processes are partly responsible for the very small editions in which the photographs are released (many are unique).

Some of these qualities pull away from the political inclinations that have led Horsfield to his recent collaborative work, but all support the insistence on close, sympathetic attention, clearly revealed in such community-based projects as the interviews, still photographs and videos undertaken in Barcelona (1993-96) and El Hierro (2002-04). In a struggling community in Barcelona, Horsfield conducted interviews with residents who related experiences that included making a living as a street musician, serving in the military, and surviving the variously damaging legacies of the Spanish Civil War. On El Hierro, the westernmost of the Canary Islands, which lie between Europe, Africa and the Americas, Horsfield's subjects—or, as he would prefer, collaborators—spoke of

Anke Bangma, Witte de Withstraat, *1998, gelatin silver print, 50½ by 34 inches. Princeton University Art Museum.*

La Paloma, Carrer del Tigre, Barcelona, February 1996, ***1996, gelatin silver print, 58 inches square.***

the challenges of finding work and of finding potable water; they talked about traditions of dating and dancing, and concourse among men and women, family members and neighbors. In both cases, text panels paired with photographic portraits document the conversations. The volubility of both projects' speakers mitigates the silencing so often associated with work done in peripheral cultures by developed-world artists, bringing Horsfield's "relation" to vigorous life, and reflecting an outlook that catalogue essayist David Ebony calls "neither wholly optimistic nor Utopian, but . . . ultimately hopeful."

The photo portraits in these projects are straightforward and fairly modest in scale. While astute, they don't upstage the speakers' words. Nearby, though, was a series of ravishing digitally output color photographs that fairly cried out for attention. Called "Irresponsible Drawings," these studies from 2003-04, most again modest in size, are of deceptively humble still-life subjects: fruits and vegetables, bottles, fish, flowers. But their powers of seduction are formidable. Shadowed softly if at all, the various domestic objects don't seem subject to particular conditions of light but rather generate their own low-wattage glow. Equally preternatural are the colors: a *Red Cabbage* is an impossibly regal shade of purple; a big-bodied pumpkin is blanched to a ghostly white; a

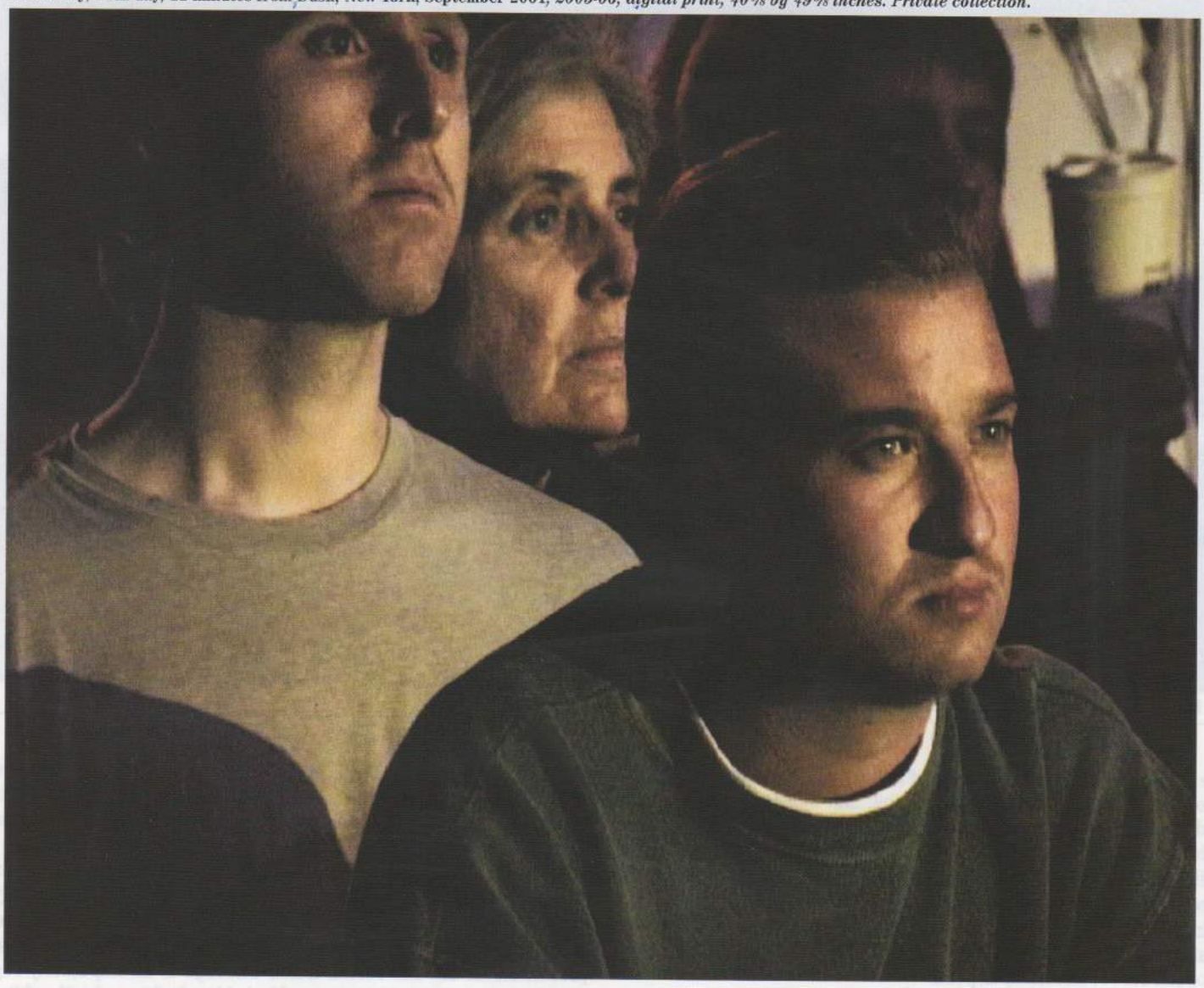
Close-cropped shots show people gazing reverently at something we can't see—in fact, it is an absence, of the World Trade Center towers.

skinned fish head is a lurid, meaty red; a blue glass bottle is so saturated in hue it is nearly phosphorescent.

The longish exposures involved in making these images correspond to the natural processes of decay many of them depict. Often the subjects are highlighted against dark grounds, as is conventional in representing precious objects like luxury handcrafts or jewelry, an association confirmed by the prints' generous if somewhat funereal black wood frames. Both only enhance the subjects' mournful, vivid presence. As if mirroring the exaggeratedly slow-motion video portraits Bill Viola has made for flat-screen monitors, Horsfield makes still photography approach the condition of moving pictures. Comparing his "Irresponsible Drawings" to paintings by Chardin and Zurbarán, art historian Carol Armstrong (a catalogue contributor) calls the work "embarrassingly beautiful," aptly identifying the uneasiness Horsfield surely means to engender (witness their title) with images so opulent they almost seem to blush.

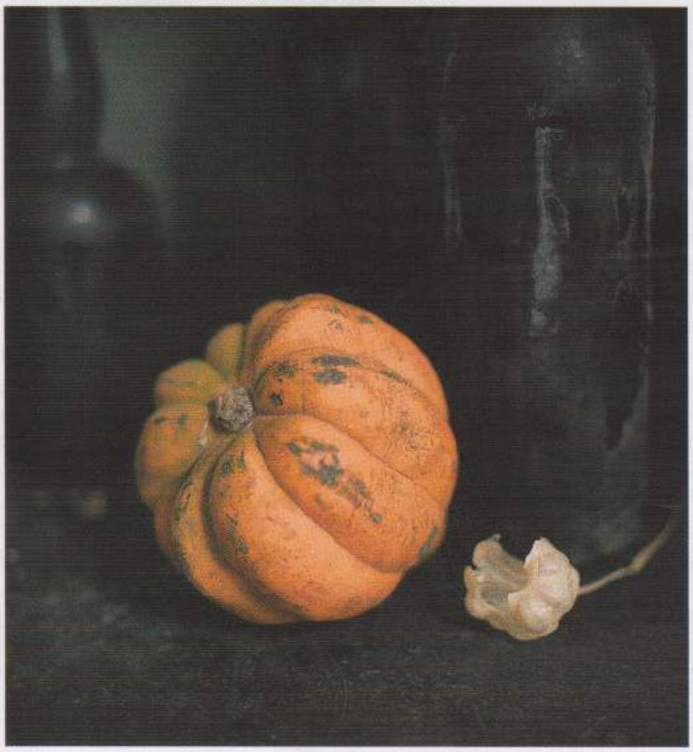
Shameless beauty is put to more deliberately provocative use in a series of bigger (roughly 3 by 4 feet) color photographs called "Broadway" (2005-06). Bathed in a slightly infernal red glow, these close-cropped shots show handfuls of people gazing solemnly, even reverently, at something we can't see. In fact, they're looking at an absence, of the World Trade Center towers: the "Broadway" photographs were taken in Lower Manhattan just days after 9/11 (though printed later). Each captures too many faces for the intimacy of portraiture, and too few to suggest the feverish energy of a crowd; rather, they seem to show congregants, worshippers. A little ironically, their almost uniform raptness, and apparent obliviousness to the camera, make these subjects—they are, notably, also viewers—seem scripted or scored. Unlike the dispassionate work of a documentarian like Beat Streuli, Horsfield's street photographs, and not in the "Broadway" series alone, have the kind of emotional drama associated with staged pictures.

Broadway, 14th day, 12 minutes from Dusk, New York, September 2001, ***2005-06, digital print, 40⅛ by 49⅜ inches. Private collection.***



On the Plateau between San Andres and the Volcanic Edge, the Road of the Virgin, El Hierro, August 2001, ***2002-04, digital print, 40 by 50 inches. Collection Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Learsy, Conn. All photos this article courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.***

Pumpkin, Garlic Flower, ***2003, from the "Irresponsible Drawings" series, digital print, 10½ by 9⅘ inches. Private collection.***



Some of the language used to frame Horsfield's work, by both the artist and his critics, comes from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and also from the vocabulary that has developed to account for culture in the age of the Internet: "rhizomatic," "matrixial" and "stickily connected" are terms applied to the social projects in particular. The slow (up to 9½ hours long), hypnotic videos in this show, including extended reflections on the social and physical landscape of El Hierro, and of Lower Manhattan in the wake of 9/11, exemplify the artist's inclination to meander, branch and interconnect. In the late '60s, when his career began, physical reductiveness and conceptual concentration were ways to signal artistic, if not political, provocation. Now, those imperatives are as often answered by work that overwhelms the senses, with hybrids of still and moving imagery that are as discomfiting as they are mesmerizing. Alfredo Jaar's rapturous images of tragic places (as in his recent *Muxima* video, and stills of Robben Island) belong to a nascent form that could be called the political sublime. It is a form that Horsfield's work, with its split focus on social constraint and visual exaltation, has surely helped define. □

"Craigie Horsfield: Relation," curated by Régis Durand and Véronique Dabin, opened in 2006 at the Jeu de Paume in Paris and traveled to the Centro de Arte Moderna José de Azeredo Perdigao/Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, before concluding at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, where, in a greatly expanded form that includes a forum for public discussions, it remains until June 3. The accompanying book, with essays and interviews by Horsfield, Carol Armstrong, Bracha Ettinger, Slavoj Zizek, David Ebony and Serge Guilbault, was edited by Catherine de Zegher.