





*The clearer we are, and the more brightly lit,
the more we are awash with ghosts and dark visions.*
—Italo Calvino¹

In *The Periodic Table*, a collection of his autobiographical stories, Primo Levi dedicates the last tale to carbon, an element whose molecules take on astonishingly different manifestations ranging from graphite to diamond. Still more amazing, this element, through the complex chains of combination it forms, is essential to the existence of life on earth. When Margaret Priest drew this story to my attention, it was not lost on me that graphite has been her constant medium of choice.

In 'Carbon' Levi selects an atom of that very stable material as his protagonist, enabling him to annex for his story a huge vista of time. Being a finite human narrator, he settles for just a segment in the atom's life. He traces it from the moment of its release by a workman's pickaxe from aeons of captivity in a limestone rock face, then through its travels as a carbon dioxide molecule on the winds around the earth's circumference, its incorporation into a vine leaf by photosynthesis, its transfer from a grape into wine into a human stomach and re-excretion as carbon dioxide, its further passage through a cedar tree, a woodworm, and finally into a glass of milk digested by the writer, so that it becomes the nerve cell that fires to enable Levi to mark the end of his story with a dot. With this story, Levi positions his own present moment of living and writing within a universe that extends far beyond our measurable range of space and time.

It is with a deliberate purpose that I begin this paper on Margaret Priest by discussing Primo Levi. The modes of procedure of the writer and of the visual artist show some significant affinities.

Levi takes the elements of the periodic table as the chapter headings for his book. These elements elicit memories of decisive moments in his and his friends' lives, as the explorations of a young chemist lead us to consider the overlapping worlds of matter and human relations. Levi is an exceptional literary figure who grounds his sense of wonder at the world in the perspectives of his profession, organic chemistry. He is also one of the most famous recorders of human suffering. As a survivor of Auschwitz (he owed his survival to scarlet fever, to being one of the weak and sick left behind when the Nazis herded their prisoners away on a death march from the advance of the Soviet army), Levi has written a searing memoir of the dehumanization perpetrated by the Nazi regime.

The significance of Levi in relation to Margaret Priest lies partly in his age. He belongs to the generation of her parents, and she began the current body of her work when the death of her mother in her hundredth year left Priest as the sole repository of her family's memories (her father had died earlier in 1995). Partly also in the similarity of their artistic projects: gathered under the title *House* is an installation of drawings and objects that crystallize Priest's experiences in childhood and youth, a meditation on how the fate of her parents' world catalyzed the experiences of her own life. The show centres around the image of the modern house, a motif she has exploited consistently throughout her career, but now she goes in search of the roots of this lifelong obsession. As in Levi's stories, we move through a succession of particular encounters that take us from wonder at the materials and sights of the world, to the anxiety that attends human hierarchies, desires, and hopes, and beyond that to the vision of an entropic molecular world that is accessible to us only through the mediation of our bodies and brains.

AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF FRAGMENTS

Italo Calvino writes, speaking about Primo Levi's approach to writing and its scope:

*In other times the term 'encyclopaedic' supposed a confidence in a global system that embraced within a unique discourse all other aspects of knowledge. Today, on the contrary, there is no system that holds; in place of the circle to which the etymology of the vocable 'encyclopaedia' refers, there is nothing but a whirlwind of fragments and debris. The persistence of the encyclopaedic tendency corresponds to a need to reassemble, in ever-precarious equilibrium, the heterogeneous and centrifugal acquisitions which constitute the entire treasure of our uncertain knowledge.*²

The installation *House* lays out a sampling of fragments from one individual's mental universe, which we are invited to interpret, and upon which we may project our own. The items range from drawings to three-dimensional renderings of objects, from simulated architectural samples to texts. They are thus more heterogeneous than the elements in Margaret Priest's earlier shows. The imagery comes from the domain of general knowledge and most of it will be recognized by most viewers. While its range of reference creates an encyclopedic dimension, the rationale for the specific selections, we discover, comes from the contingencies of the artist's life. The work lies between public statement and private memory.

On the walls are drawings hung in pairs, one of each pair based on an architectural photograph the other on an image of the outcomes of war. The architectural images here are all views of Mies van der Rohe's early masterpiece of house design, the German pavilion for the 1929 Barcelona World's Fair. Mies's classic designs are the culmination of modern architecture as serene abstract composition. The 'house' becomes a composition where ceilings, floors, wall panels of precious materials such as marble or glass and slender steel support columns are arranged as pure forms in a continuously flowing space. In her earlier series of paintings and drawings of architecture, Margaret Priest has investigated both domestic and institutional spaces. The specific tone of authority evoked by an institutional interior could be suggested by carefully distilled plays of light or by the heightened transcription of organizing grids, textures and volumes, as in the vertiginous studies of the interior of the banking hall of Mies's Toronto Dominion Bank.³ Ideal and timeless photographic images of iconic modern homes – views of the minimalist interiors and patio windows of Richard Neutra's houses – became at her hands screens onto which a gamut of historically contingent desires and associations could be projected, through changes in colour, or pattern, or of what was seen through the window.⁴ When recently she began to ask herself why modern architecture should have been for her such an important object of desire – why "I have toiled in the mines of modernism for so long" – Mies took on a particular significance. At school in the 1950s, learning German, she had felt a normal ambivalence about the country lately locked in deadly combat with her own. At the same time, pictures of the Bauhaus and of German modern architecture between the wars filled her with amazement that Germany had produced such marvels of design. Was this not a potential promise of healing for Europe and a challenge to supersede the drably standardized design of the kind of British working class housing estate on which she herself had grown up?⁵

The drawings in the current show re-engage with these images of hope from her youth. The Barcelona Pavilion is transfigured: the spatial ambiguities created by cropped planes and patterns of reflection and shadow suggest a dream-like, timeless place, as does the erasure of all human presence or evidence of use, including the furniture (gone are the famous Barcelona chairs), and of the surrounding buildings, leaving the structure framed directly by nature, by glimpses of shrubs, trees and water. Mies's pavilion is a paradise, perhaps a paradise lost.

The second image of each pair of drawings addresses us differently. Where the receding perspectives of the pavilion suggest spaces into which we might be sucked or even flee, the forms in the contrasting drawings advance rather menacingly to meet us. The plaster shards of a shattered ceiling (juxtaposed with an image containing Mies's long flowing ceiling slabs) is perhaps still falling; the scattered fragments hover in an indeterminate space. Next to the view of Mies's steel roof-bearing columns that punctuate space along a travertine floor and into a courtyard, we see the blast of an underwater explosion that sends a mushroom cloud into the air – water, steam, and ash. Two other intruding images are a silhouetted view of a freshly launched doodlebug framed through the window of a companion Heinkel He-111 bomber (the material of war stories that evoke both heroism and fear), and an image of the 'utility mark' that ruled civilian life on the home front. The utility mark was required on clothing and furniture from 1941 until 1952, to guarantee that items conformed to the economy and austerity required by the war effort. Its precociously modern-styled design logo then signaled both drabness and pride.

The way the works are executed delivers an even darker burden of meaning. The graphite drawings are small and precise, positioned eccentrically on large white fields of heavy wove paper, emphasizing their objecthood. Yet their contents are eerily alive. Forms are bathed in a coruscating light, pavements become bleached out in areas, metal and glass forms picked out with gleams and scintillations that suggest energy coming from within. An obsessive attention is lavished on the texture and pattern of the materials of Mies's building – onyx, travertine, glass, water. These patterns swarm and boil as though the energies that went into their formation were again released from the stone – energies that are both rendered and literally enacted by the artist's ferocious attack on the paper with the graphite. The drawings, while based on photographs, deliver much more than a photograph. It is a shock to find what happens in them to the immaculate modernist building. The geometry of the building is countered by an autonomous life of matter. This is very evident in the drawing with the pool, where the water pulses with surface ripples that may be the result of wind, but that act to swallow the reflected forms of the building into its serpentine coils. The foliage in the background in this same drawing coalesces into circular formations like the growth of mould or the dispersal of bubbles in boiling water. Similar forms are accentuated in the plume of the explosion where the forces locked up in matter are fully unleashed.

As the materials and light take on this life of their own, seemingly defying any human agency, it is hard to pick out how this has been done. How can the graphite wash over the smooth ceiling plane surfaces with such imperceptible gradations of light? Only by means of innumerable soft touches with a set of fine tipped pencils, from HB to 7H, that just graze the tooth of the heavy paper, and elsewhere build up into mats of high-density carbon. How is it deposited into these patterns that pulse with the rhythms of organic life? By hours and hours of repeated dotted or curled or stabbing strokes that create the textures and patterns parallel to those of paving stone, marble and foliage. So intricate, repetitive and endless is the process that Priest likens it to disciplines of meditation. And so compelling is the artist's immersion in the particular textures she is rendering that she risks become psychologically merged with them, like a camouflaged insect.

At the same time there is a rococo quality to the rendering of these natural forms in their lightness and their teeming life. They call up the obsessive penmanship of Samuel Palmer's drawings and etchings, the detailed life he gives to every plant and cloud. This graphic legacy has inspired an English current of eccentric artists, through Richard Dadd and the Pre-Raphaelites to Stanley Spencer and Lucien Freud, all part of Margaret Priest's inheritance. In her drawings the clean lines of the modernist building act as frame or container for uncanny natural forces, which break through again and again. The formless eats into the architectural forms from within. In the wartime drawings the formless runs rampant, or else is veiled in the uniform fog-grey silhouettes of the utility symbol and guided missile.

ON DÉCOR AND DYING

The locked battle between the form and formless in Priest's drawings is a close cousin of the *informe* invoked by Georges Bataille. Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss locate Bataille's *informe* in operations by artists that brush modernism against the grain.⁶ Priest operates on modernism, not with an outright purist negation of all meaning but with a delaying tactic that allows us to linger in the realms of desire and loss, before we awake to the overriding tenor of entropy and the absurd.

The formless insidiously claims the objects at the centre of this installation. We look down at a large wooden crate on which seven assorted objects are scattered as though they have just been unpacked. A money box in the form of a house, a toy locomotive, an architect's model of a mansion, a fragment of plaster from a wall, a book, a banana and a pair of shell casings of the kind that people saved during the war and used as mantelpiece ornaments. These objects and the crate are all made of wood. They hold an uncertain status, neither literal objects (although they are made to life scale, as we see from the shells, the banana and book), nor traditional sculptures (they are not carved by the artist, but executed through artisanal and industrial replication processes). They inhabit the same realm as the cast – they are eerie facsimile apparitions where the agency of a maker is suppressed. The smooth, brown, oiled cherrywood is blatantly organic, related to the warmth of the body, asking to be touched or handled. They have the look of something internal to the body now expelled. There is a hint of regression to childhood in the presence here of toys – the locomotive and the money box. But they all share the same organic substance. That substance, wood, is a humble one within the terms of the fine art tradition – more often 'treen' (small functional household objects carved in wood by local artisans before the advent of industrial manufactures) than masterpiece or monument. In an age of technological media it is a regressive choice.

That these objects allude to obscure fragments from someone's life is borne out by the labels. Each object has an engraved steel luggage label, ready to be tied on with a piece of sisal string. Inscribed on one side is a title and on the other a phrase that relates the object to the field of subjective desire. For the banana we find the title *On Austerity and Audacity* – recalling the arrival of the first bananas as luxury items in the UK after the wartime blockades – and the phrase 'what I dreamed of.' And why have these particular objects surfaced from the past? Some seem to be possessions that have survived the hazards of time and transatlantic migration. When she moved to Canada, Priest brought with her Sherban Cantacuzino's *Modern Houses of the World*, a book that inspired her as a student. Some are childhood relics: 'I didn't keep dolls or teddies,' she has commented, 'Just two things that my father made for me – a locomotive and a money box in the shape of a Tudor house.'⁷ This house, she explains, was carved by her father from memories of Chester, the Welsh border town from which his family hailed before their move to the industrial town of Sheffield and his later move to Dagenham. Another much larger house model we see is of Tyringham House, a country seat designed by Sir John Soane, the eccentric neoclassical British architect whose idiosyncratic placing of stripped down geometric form makes him, like his French counterpart Etienne Boullée, famous as a precursor of modernist architecture. The label bears the title *Of Chance and Charity* and the phrase 'where I didn't belong, but I came from,' an elusive reference to the fact that, due to the bombing of London, Tyringham became a charity hospital for evacuees, and it was there that the artist was born at the beginning of 1944. The objects, then, are a chance accretion of souvenirs with personal and only partially accessible narratives – her father's gifts, expressions of his class origin; the artist's birthplace with its ironic relation to her subsequent home in a council estate; a wartime child's first taste of a tropical fruit.

The texts in the installation are also fragments of time and place brought to us through sharp details of sight, sound, smell – and particularly of human gesture, swift, clumsy, or defensive – in the choreographies of everyday life. Banal events trigger traumatic memories for the adults, fears or disappointments for the child. These flashes of memory deal with experiences that are sites for the artist's recognition, either at the time or in retrospect, of the contingent, sometimes hostile structure of the world that she and her family had to survive – her parents' working class austerity, her father's enduring shell-shock from a traumatic wartime injury, the medical procedures she herself endured to correct the 'deformity' of her severe scoliosis.

Beneath the formal perfection of the drawings and objects in this installation, it is the formless that carries the burden of meaning. Architectural inventions, human presences, moments of time, are all states of matter, of materials and their continual reconfiguration through the pencil marks that have been applied over and over again, fuelled by the artist's obsession. Like ashes and diamonds, Priest's graphite drawings and wooden simulacra are compounds and allotropes of carbon. They register the passage of human lives flowing through materials and molecules. And these could also be any lives, any molecules. Primo Levi tells us, about the tale he has spun about his carbon atom, that 'the number of atoms is so great, that one could always be found whose story coincides with any capriciously invented story. I could recount an endless number of stories about carbon atoms that become colors or perfumes in flowers; of others which, from tiny algae to small crustaceans to fish, gradually return as carbon dioxide to the waters of the sea, in a perpetual, frightening round-dance of life and death, in which every devourer is instantly devoured; of others still which instead attain a decorous semi-eternity in the yellowed pages of some archival document, or the canvas of a famous painter...'⁸ or the installation *House*, by an English woman who is now a Canadian artist.

NOTES

1. Cited in Carol Angier, *The Double Bond: Primo Levi. A Biography*, London: Penguin 2003, 473, from Giancarlo Borri, *Le divine impurità: Primo Levi tra scienza e letteratura*, Rimini: Luisè, 1992, 50.
2. Italo Calvino, 'Afterword, The Four Paths of Primo Levi' in Primo Levi, *The Search for Roots*, London: Penguin, 2001, 223–24.
3. George Baird, 'Two Drawings by Margaret Priest,' in *Margaret Priest: To View From Here*, Hamilton, Ontario: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1996, 40.
4. The two painting series inspired by the Kauffmann House and the Berger House are discussed by Ihor Holubizky, in *Margaret Priest: To View From Here*, 6–16.
5. Author's conversation with the artist, 2 April 2011.
6. Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York: Zone Books, 1997, 15 and *passim*.
7. All information on the objects in the installation is from the author's conversation with the artist, 20 March 2011.
8. Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Schocken Books, 1984, 232.



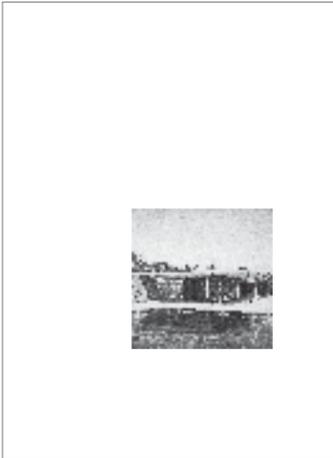
CODA: SYNCHRONICITY

1941 – Primo Levi has just completed a chemistry degree from the University of Turin, with a graduation thesis on the asymmetry of the carbon molecule. As an Italian Jew he is debarred from work in the professions, but has been given a job under a false name to aid the war effort by finding a way to extract nickel from an asbestos mine. Four years from now he will be liberated, a near corpse, from the ruins of Auschwitz.

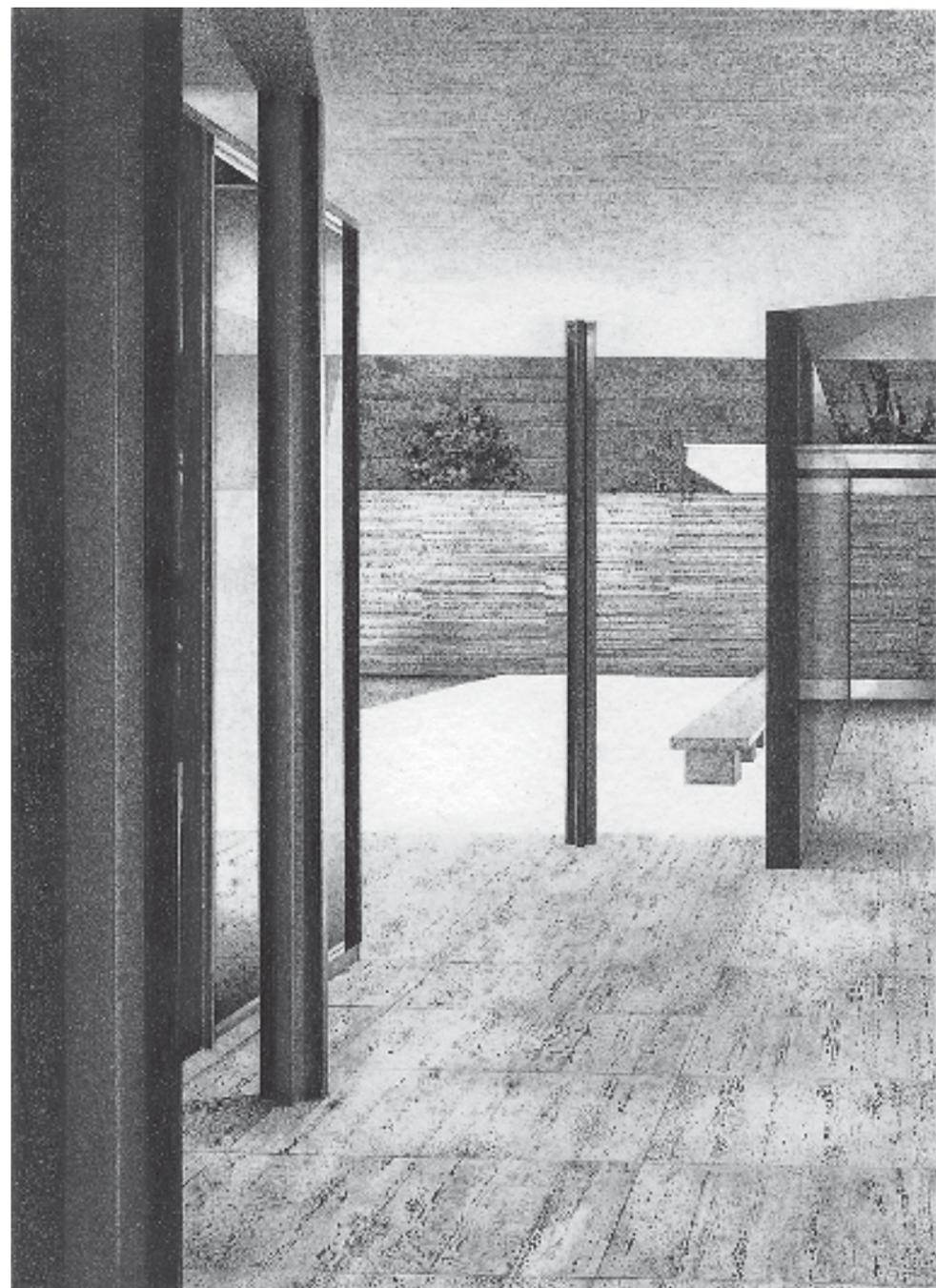
1941 – Mies van der Rohe, the son of a stonemason who became the acknowledged leader of German architectural modernism, is living in Chicago, having arrived three years earlier to head the architecture school of the Armour Institute. He is designing the campus of the new Illinois Institute of Technology, harnessing the large available spaces of the American landscape to a severe, symmetrical grid. He has left his homeland, where Nazi tactics forced the closure of the Bauhaus while he was director. The flowing, onyx-screened spaces of his elegant Tugendhat villa, seized from its Jewish owners, now house the design offices of the Messerschmitt aircraft factory. Four years from now he will once again design a house in the pure language of essentials – the Farnsworth house in Illinois.

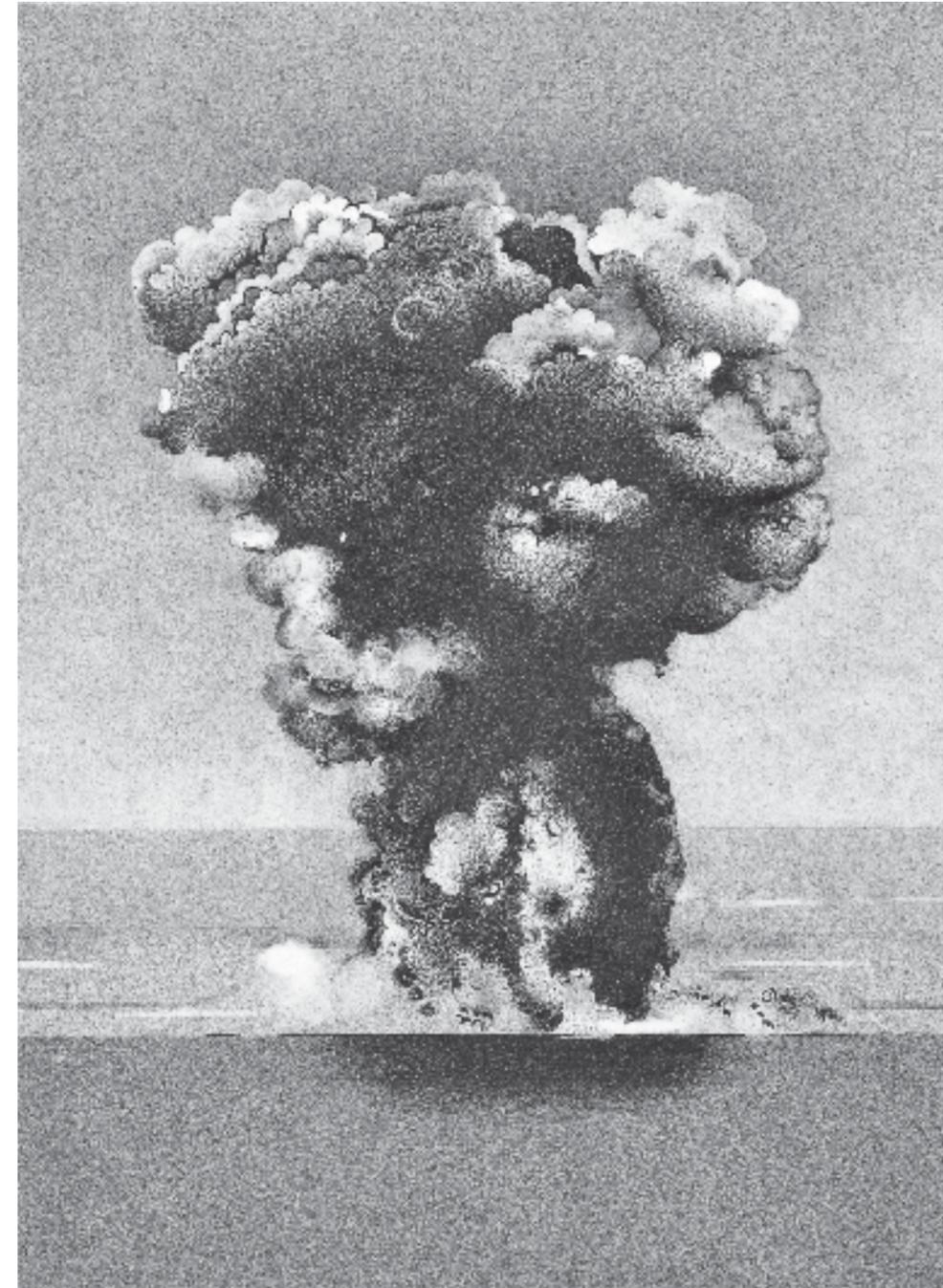
1941 – Arthur Priest, a railway employee married to a stonemason's daughter, is at the controls of a locomotive hauling a train to the Temple Mills yard, in the east end of London. German bombers that follow the guiding lines of river and railway often discharge their load onto the tracks below. A direct hit on the roof of his cab buries Arthur under the wreckage, where he is left for dead. Fortunately a co-worker insists there are signs of life, and he is taken to Whipps Cross Hospital. Gradually he is mended. Less than three years from now his daughter Margaret will be born.

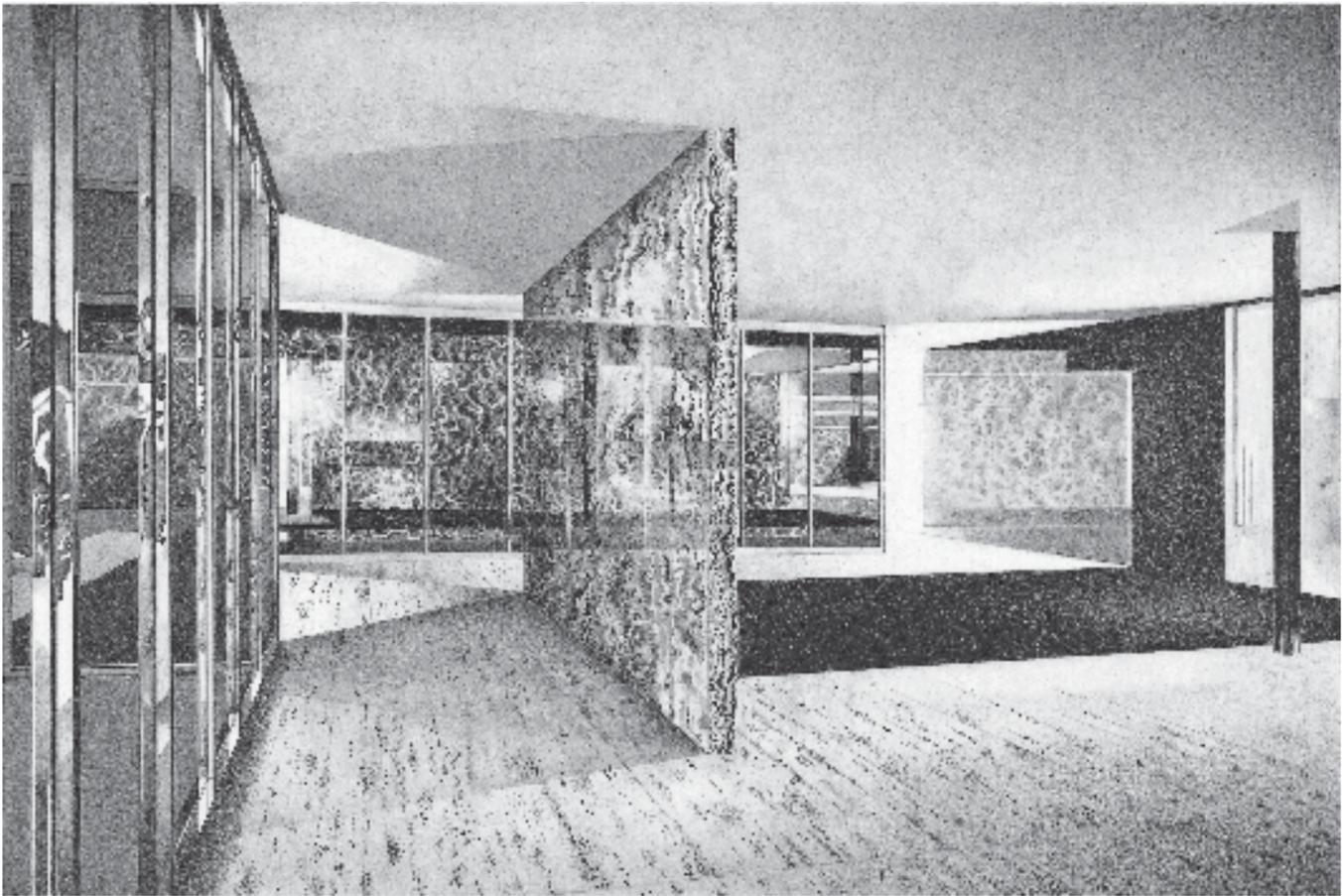
Barcelona Pavilion I, 2008

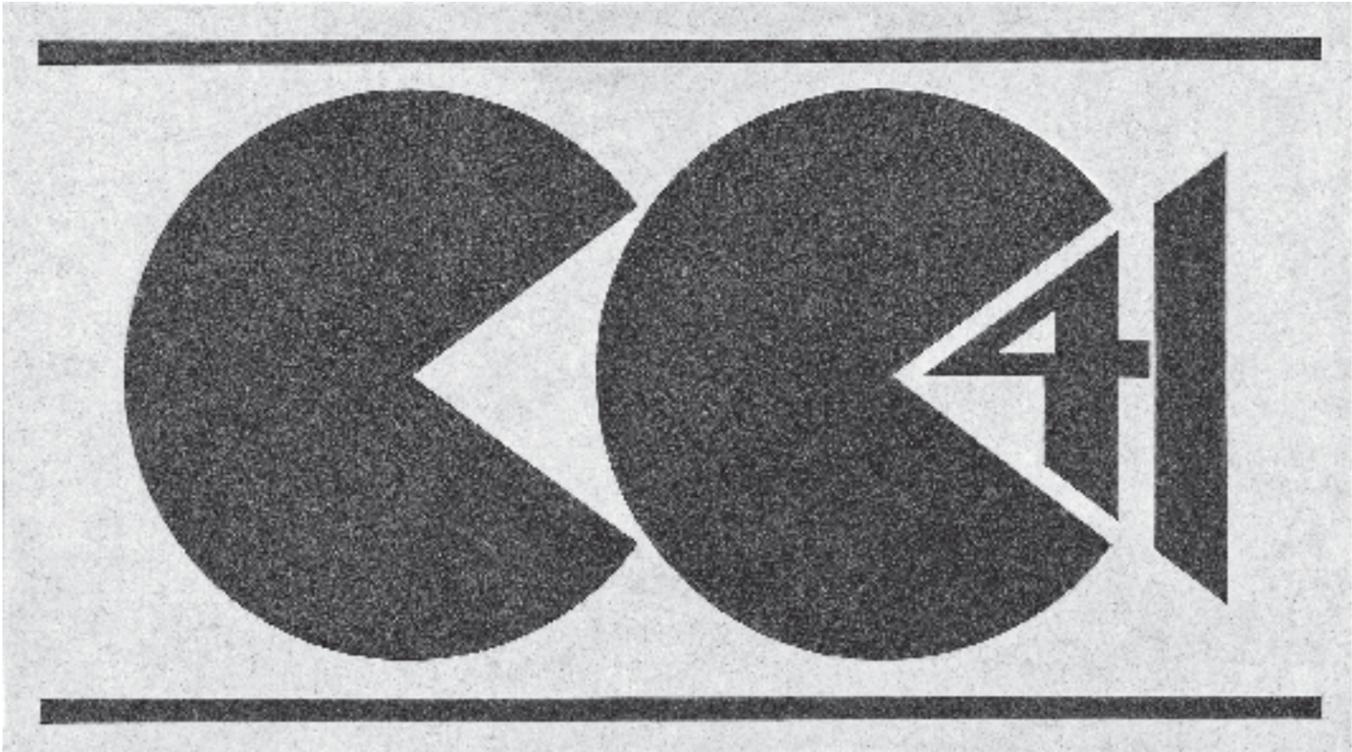


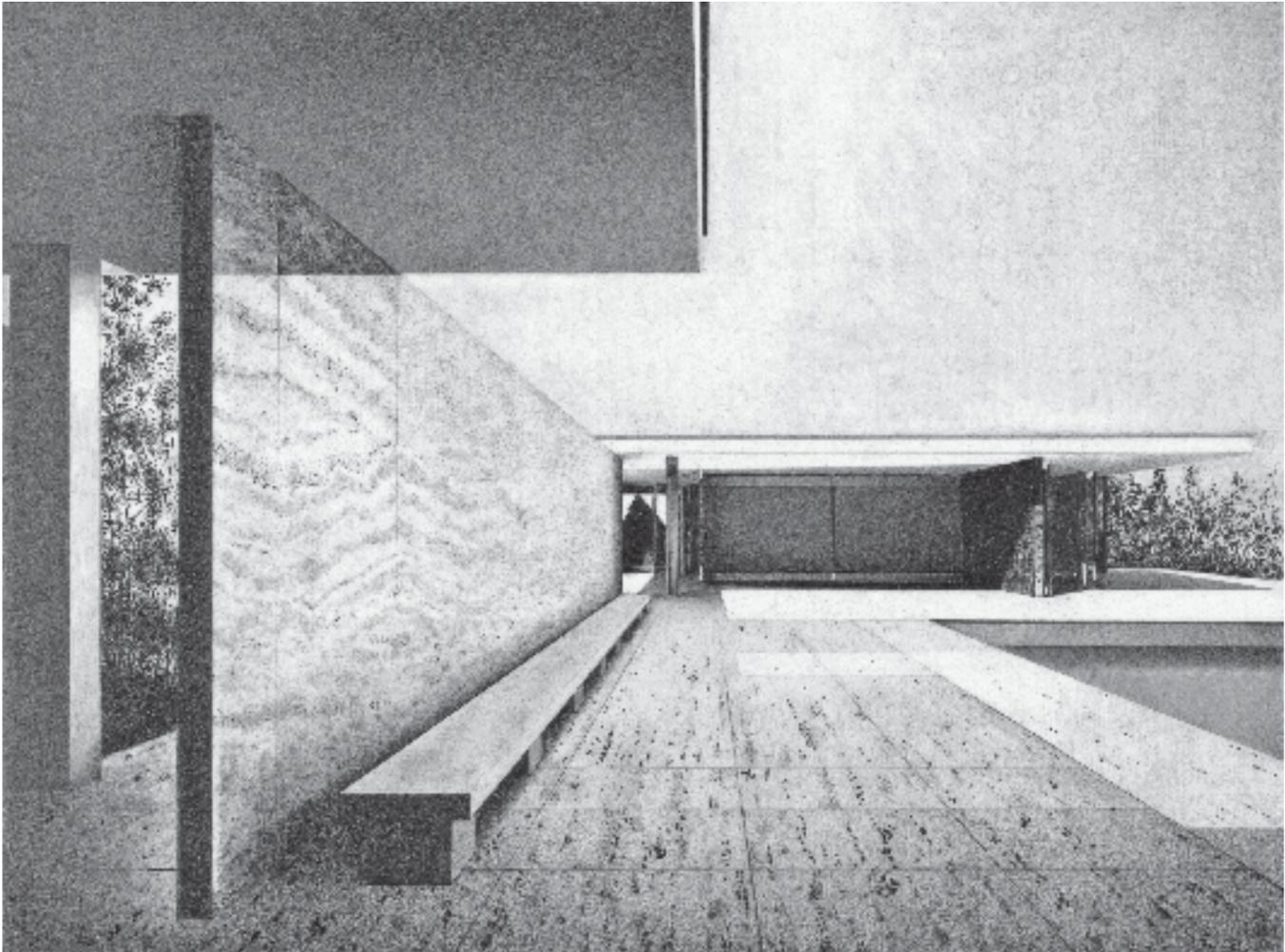


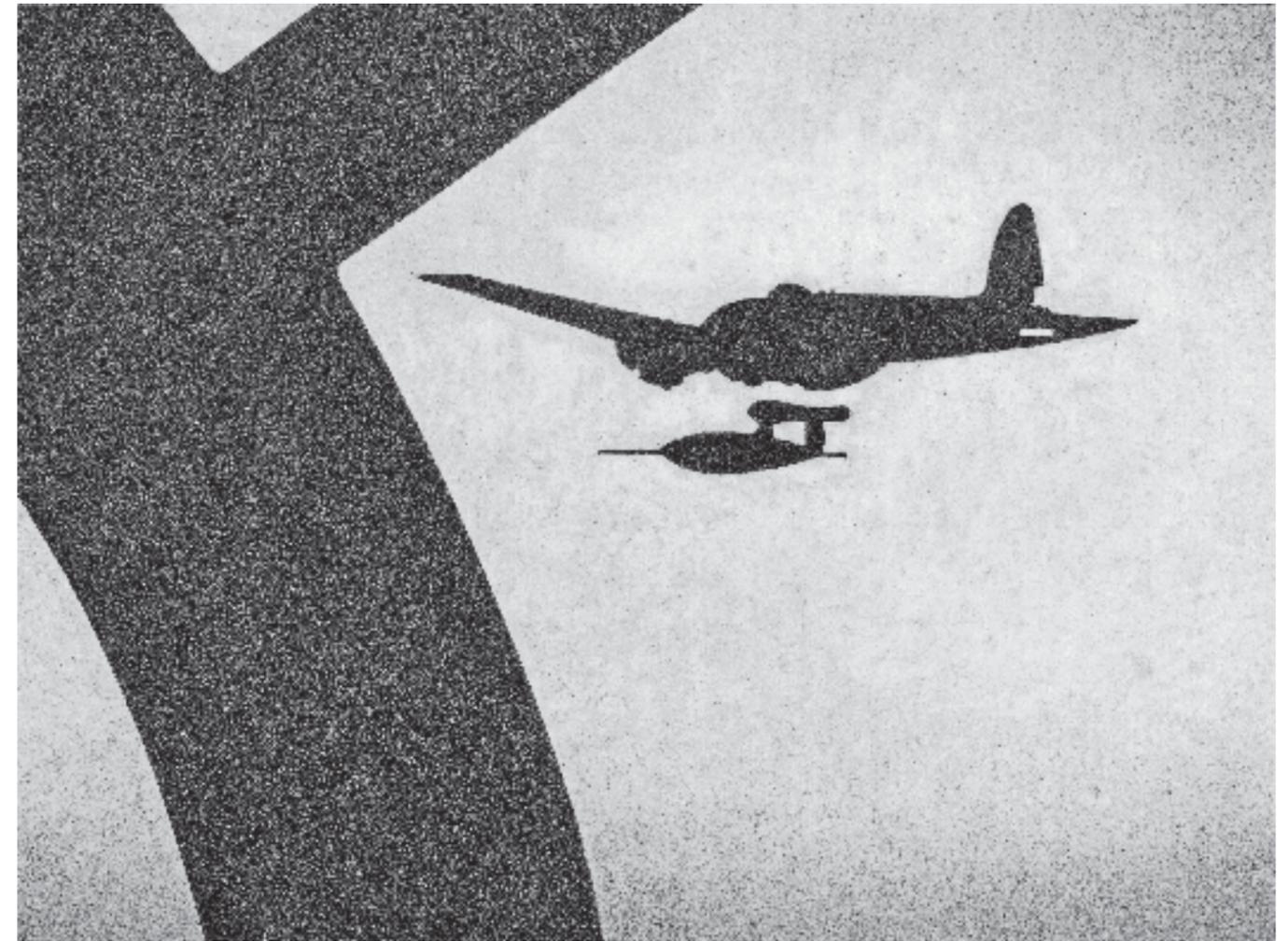












Pair of WWII Shell Cases, 2010



Money Box, 2010



Fragment of Rubble, 2010



Modern Houses Paperback, 2010



Works

DRAWINGS

Barcelona Pavilion I, 2008
Image Size: 9 × 9 inches
Paper Size: 30 × 22 inches
graphite on handmade paper

Implosion on Land, 2010
Image Size: 9 × 9 inches
Paper Size: 30 × 22 inches
graphite on handmade paper

Barcelona Pavilion II, 2009
Image Size: 9 × 6½ inches
Paper Size: 30 × 22 inches
graphite on handmade paper

Explosion at Sea, 2010
Image Size: 9 × 6½ inches
Paper Size: 30 × 22 inches
graphite on handmade paper

Barcelona Pavilion III, 2010
Image Size: 6 × 9 inches
Paper Size: 30 × 22 inches
graphite on handmade paper

CC41 Utility Mark, 2010
Image Size: 5 × 9 inches
Paper Size: 30 × 22 inches
graphite on handmade paper

Barcelona Pavilion IV, 2010
Image Size: 6¼ × 9 inches
Paper Size: 30 × 22 inches
graphite on handmade paper

Doodlebug (V-1 Flying Bomb), 2011
Image Size: 6¼ × 9 inches
Paper Size: 30 × 22 inches
graphite on handmade paper

OBJECTS

Pair of WWII Shell Cases, 2010
7¼ × 1 inches each
cherrywood

Money Box, 2010
4½ × 4¾ × 6½ inches
cherrywood

Fragment of Rubble, 2010
4½ × 4 × 1¾ inches
cherrywood

Modern Houses Paperback, 2010
7¼ × 5 × ½ inches
cherrywood

Margaret Priest



Margaret Priest was born and educated in England, where she received her MFA from the Royal College of Art in London. She has exhibited in museums, public galleries and private art galleries in England, Europe, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and the USA since 1970. Priest's work is in numerous public and private collections including the Tate Gallery, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Canadian Centre for Architecture. She is a recipient of the Governor General's Award for Architecture for her large-scale permanent, site-specific commission *Monument to Construction Workers in Cloud Park*, Toronto. She is Professor Emeritus at the University of Guelph and a visiting lecturer at universities and schools of art and architecture in Canada and the USA.

RECENT PUBLIC GALLERY EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Celebrating Women Artists in the Permanent Collection*, The MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, ON, Canada
- 2010 *The Blind Architect Meets Rembrandt*, curated by Alexander Pilis, McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton, ON, Canada (publication)
- 2009 *Radical Regionalism*, curated by Ihor Holubizky, Kelowna Art Gallery, BC, Canada; Museum London, London, ON, Canada, 2006 (catalogue)
- 2008 *1979*, a featured exhibition for the reopening of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, Canada
Drawing Up a Storm, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, PEI, Canada
- 2007 *Strange Events Permit Themselves the Luxury of Occurring*, curated by Steven Claydon, Camden Arts Centre, London, England (catalogue)
What is Line?, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, USA (catalogue)
Nexus: Histories and Communities, Kelowna Art Gallery, Kelowna, BC, Canada (catalogue)
- 2000 *Made Space*, curated by Gavin Morrison and Fraser Stables, Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland (catalogue, touring)

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arts Council of Great Britain
Art Gallery of Ontario
British Council
Canadian Centre for Architecture
Dallas Museum of Art
Tate Gallery
Yale University Art Gallery

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Border Crossings: E.C. Woodley, 'Lost Perfection: Drawing and Dreaming in the Art of Margaret Priest,' feature article, Winnipeg, MB, Canada, Issue No. 115, Fall 2010

Hunter and Cook: Peter Bowyer, 'Tubular Ghosts,' journal, Toronto, ON, Canada, Issue No. 02, January 2009

Radical Regionalism: Local Knowledge and Making Places: Ihor Holubizky, exhibition catalogue, Museum London, London, ON, Canada, April 2006

Atopia Journal: Lee Rodney, 'Made Space,' interview, Edinburgh, Scotland, Issue No. 99, 2000

For more than 40 years, Margaret Priest has worked at the intersections of architecture, design and urban histories, examining and interrogating its social dimensions in the public and private realms, through drawing, objects and sculptures, and public art commissions (proposed and realized). Priest's work has never been obvious or literal, even in a shift from a pictorial form – utilizing extant architectural photography as a source, where the 'social body' is implied without depiction – to 'abstracted' and 'primary form' constructions where the 'social body' is inflected and implicated. Priest does not moralize nor demonize, yet delivers us 'a message.' To cite Lewis Mumford, she recognizes that 'mind takes form in the city [as the body of architecture, to lean on the title for a series of her works]; and... urban forms condition mind.' By extension, for Priest, this embraces social behaviour and being.

Ihor Holubizky, 2010
Senior Curator, McMaster Museum of Art

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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