

Hans Broek



*To my dear sister Annemieke,
who introduced me to art at a young age.*

Hans Broek

Edo Dijksterhuis
Dominic van den Boogerd
Wilma Sütö
Hans Broek

HANNIBAL



The paintings Hans Broek made during his years at the *Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten* proved very popular with collectors. Expressionist canvases with generous impasto. Strength combined with a certain *sprezzatura*. A real treat for fans of the smell of turpentine and the distinctive brushstroke. So you can see how they deeply regretted that the production of these 'delicious' works was short-lived because Broek took a radically different direction, with smoother, less emphatic brushwork, producing – at least in their eyes – 'less painterly' works.

Deliberately casting aside a proven formula for success in the early years of one's career takes considerable guts. But then Broek wanted to be more than a master of his material, a virtuoso painter. Instead, he wanted to break through the skin of his medium. He felt his work should not be about pigment on canvas but about the world around him, the burning issues of his time, and the emotions they evoke.

Broek's quest to understand current events drove him to leave the country. His wanderlust is partly explained by *Fernweh*, a romantic-adventurous emotion, a sense that what you are looking for is just beyond the horizon, off the edge of the map. And – on a more subconscious level – by being an outsider in a foreign country, giving you a fresher and sharper perspective on your surroundings. What may seem mundane and go unnoticed by locals catches your eye and gives you pause for thought.

This is certainly true of the huge, racially tinged divide between the rich and poor that the artist experienced up close on Skid Row in Los Angeles, which is home to the largest population of homeless people in the United States. It also applies to the bleakness of individualised life in New York. To the tangible past on Suriname's plantations. And to the warm welcome he received from have-nots during his travels through Africa.

The uprooting also gave Broek cause for self-reflection, with the traces of slavery worldwide inspiring him to revisit his family history in Amsterdam. But this must also have prompted the question "Why represent all these subjects in paint?" While photography has always been his main resource – to document and research – Broek has never been or become a photographer. Nor did he switch to making videos or installations. He has always remained a painter.

These days, Broek does not shy away from the 'deliciousness' of his medium. In his recent work, the movement of his brush is easy to trace, and the paint is applied in deliciously thick layers. The artist has embraced the plasticity and expressiveness of painting again. Instead of being an obstacle to a committed gaze, painting only serves to enhance this. Just as the radically different led the artist on a path to himself, the slow timelessness of oils now serves as a door to the ever-changing present.



San Fernando Valley, Mulholland Drive 1997 60 x 100 cm, oil on linen



On the frontiers of civilisation

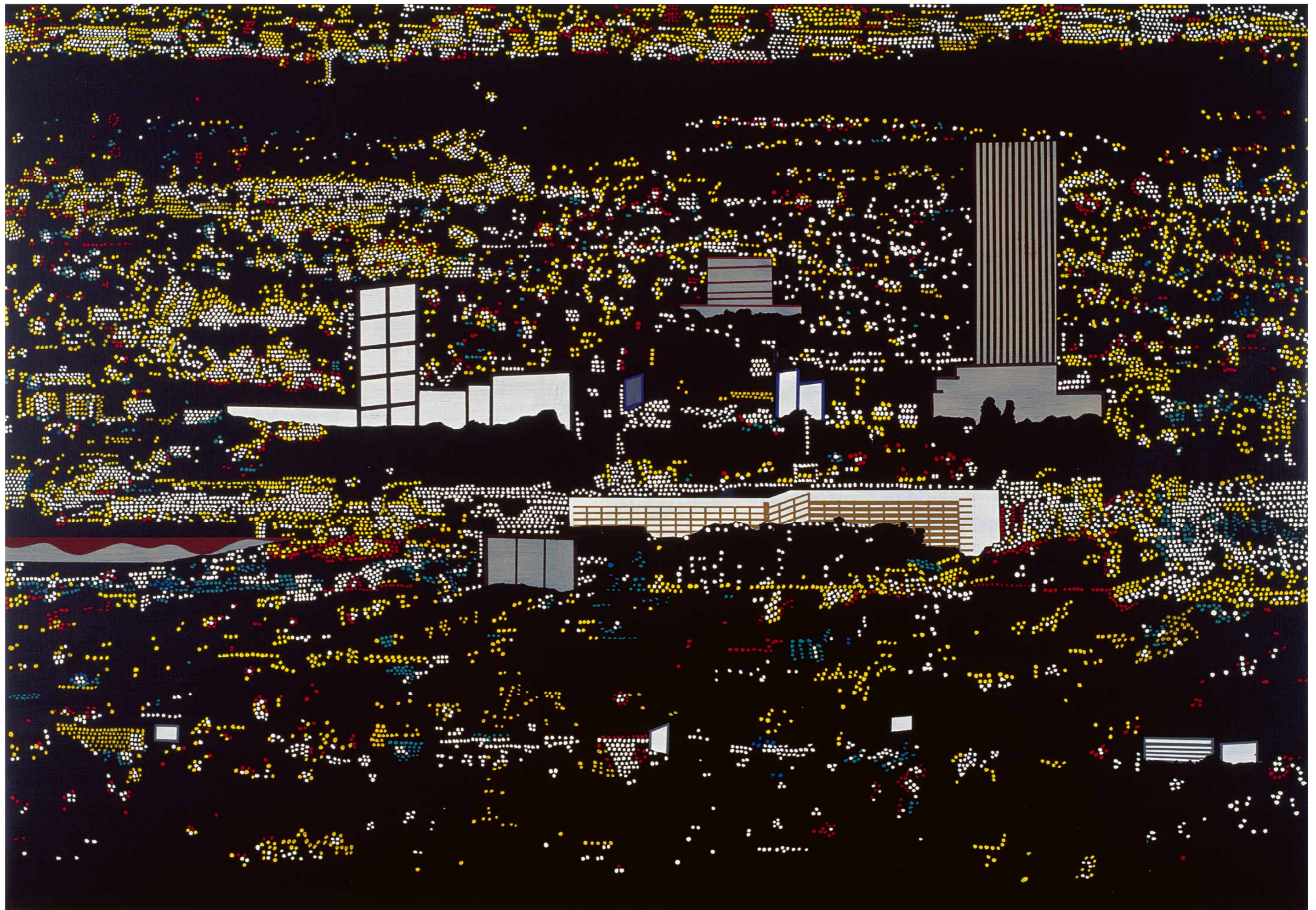
Dominic van den Boogerd



Cape Coast 2019 150 x 240 cm, acrylic on cotton



Universal City 1995 170 x 170 cm, oil on linen



Corporate Landscape 2005 150 x 200 cm, oil on linen



Turbulent paintings and guilty architecture

Wilma Sütö

The paintings of Hans Broek (b. 1965 in Veenendaal) raise a confusing question, yet one that also harbours hope: can art change the world? Make it more beautiful, even better? I personally believe it can, but the question is confusing because art has no practical use. It is not like a piece of soap which you can use to wash your hands, nor can it be used to stop a war. It can, however, open people's eyes.

Paintings depict the double meaning of our lives, silent witnesses of all that is beautiful and ugly. Sometimes they are an ode, sometimes an indictment, which can be expressed just as clearly without words. In my experience some paintings are loud and some are silent, just like you can have warm or cold art, with many gradations in between. Hans Broek's work is temperamental and on the warm side.

Broek paints as if he were laying bricks with a palette knife dipped in pitch. His paintings feature buildings that rise up like walls of rock. They are the slave forts, slave dungeons and plantations of Africa and Suriname. Many of these buildings from the era of slavery are still there today. It is the cruellest architecture, as Broek demonstrates in paintings that are simmering with contained rage. The paint has congealed but is turbulent nonetheless, casting black and white shadows. His vast canvas, entitled *Women's Cell, Fort Saint Anthony, Axim* (2020, collection De Pont Museum, Tilburg, the Netherlands) is an excellent example, seemingly scraped from reality. A stone gate with a tall iron fence blocks the view. You could peek in through the bars, but what lies beyond them is pitch darkness.

"Rembrandt's psychological depth and Vermeer's diffuse light did not exist in these slave dungeons", Broek points out when you discuss these paintings with him. "These functional buildings, which served as icons of power, are drenched in sorrow. Dark, and devoid of any empathy. How should we define the crimes, torture and rapes that were inflicted for over 250 years as part of official Dutch government policy? Savage? Even animals do not inflict such terror upon one another. Diabolical is perhaps more suited in this context."

Much as Armando painted 'guilty landscapes' after World War II, Broek paints 'guilty architecture'. Armando, who was an artist and poet, used the title 'guilty landscape' for nature that looks peaceful and idyllic even though it (previously) served as the stage for acts of destruction and death. The trees around Kamp Amersfoort witnessed the suffering of the 47,000 prisoners who were held here by the German occupying forces – but the foliage gives nothing away. Broek visualises the past in the present, zooming in on the tangible history of forts and plantations. The architectural typology of slavery proved a horrific eye-opener for him: "with a power structure which later inspired the Nazis".

Broek knows what he is talking about. He has spent the past few years studying professional literature, talking to historians, and painting for months on end in Africa and the Caribbean. He brought back sketches and photos from Senegal, Ghana, and Suriname to his studio at a former shipyard in Muiden. As a painter, he channels his revulsion into his work. "The Golden Age of the 17th century, including the fine arts which artists tend to draw on, and against which they measure themselves, has a darker side which we can no longer ignore", he says. "That is the only way to deal with it".

In 2020, De Pont Museum in Tilburg introduced his recent work during a retrospective that set tongues wagging. His paintings were the subject of much curiosity, garnering much praise, criticism and prejudice. Did the whole of history have to do penance from now on? Were these remote forts truly hellish or does our contemporary, politically correct gaze colour our interpretation? And, last but not least, why was a *white* man making (and selling!) paintings of this past, which is so traumatic for black people? So many questions, simmering with resistance against the trauma. Hopefully history will never again be a closed book – the roles of perpetrator and victim do not exclude mutual reflection. And professional reflections, in art, definitely deserve professional remuneration, otherwise artists will always be screwed one way or another: amateur paupers or hypocritical self-enrichers. Nonsense.



[P. 22–23] *Women's Cell, Fort Saint Anthony, Axim* 2020
200 x 325 cm, oil on linen



[P. 70–71] *Fort San Sebastian, Ghana* 2022
125 x 200 cm, acrylic and sand on linen

Art is rarely created for one single purpose. In addition to being eye-opening, Hans Broek's paintings are exercises in exorcism. Rather than using his canvases as blackboards for a history lesson, he sees them as an arena. His paintings are both a ritual and a settlement of scores, inspired by personal reckonings. Five years ago, Broek discovered that his family was a member of the Amsterdam Admiralty in the 17th century and, as such, was partially responsible for the West India Company (WIC) and the horrors of slavery. He discusses this past, which torments him, with composure, although his paintings are smouldering with activism: a dynamic of emotional containment, designed to override the *belle peinture*. Broek talks about the sound of his paintings, as if they were created during a performance; the turbulence of a musical trance. He mentions punk. He picks up sand, dust, and grit from the ground to mix in with his paint. "The canvas can also be ugly", he says, although he is selling himself short when he says this because Broek is a painter through and through, a consummate artist with considerable skills and talent. Instead of ugly, I prefer to think of his work as being *full of sound and fury*, in reference to Shakespeare who wrote that "*Life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.*"

Besides his raw paintings of dungeons and forts, Broek has recently also turned his gaze to the architecture that was built in the Netherlands during the era of slavery – canal houses, warehouses and palaces – as the epitome of wealth, prosperity, status and power. In the past, the Royal Palace on Dam Square was Amsterdam's city hall and home to the Society of Suriname, the offices of the trading company that owned and controlled the colony. Broek chose to call his paintings of this iconic building *Society of Suriname*. In his paintings, the Palace looms up under threatening skies, with a dark, unyielding silhouette, bearing the burden of the past, and outlined in meticulous detail against cloudy skies full of ghostly shadows.

In his solo exhibition at ROOF-A in Rotterdam, entitled *Herengracht*, and in *Watamula*, a group exhibition of contemporary art on the theme of wanderlust at the Dordrechts Museum (summer 2022), Broek showed two sides of the same coin. As you look around, you see plantation houses, slave forts and dungeons opposite paintings of the Royal Palace and a series of Amsterdam canal houses, built with profits from the WIC and the slave trade. Townhouses and their pious appearances! The streetscape looms up, with its façade serving as a backdrop for the viewer, partly in black and white, partly in the colours of the Dutch flag and the orange of the pennant – a bright, violent almost fiery orange as we know it from the price stickers in supermarkets: the colour of the Dutch lion and of the Dutch mercantile spirit.

In combining these extremes, Broek homes in on our zeitgeist, at a time when we can no longer remain deaf or blind to the imbalance of the past that is reflected in the imbalance of the present: a free, rich and safe world versus a violent one, devoid of resources and teeming with danger. On social media, people are sharing a poem by the Ukrainian-American writer Ilya Kaminsky from his anthology *Deaf Republic* about the gap between the two and how powerless this makes us feel:

We lived happily during the war

And when they bombed other people's houses, we/ protested/ but not enough, we opposed them but not/ enough. I was/ in my bed, around my bed America/ was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house./ I took a chair outside and watched the sun./ In the sixth month/ of a disastrous reign in the house of money/ in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,/ our great country of money, we (forgive us)/ lived happily during the war.

Kaminsky recently travelled to Rotterdam for Poetry International. He also attended the inaugural ceremony for a city dustbin lorry which had been painted with a line from his poem. The City of Rotterdam has been sharing art in Rotterdam's districts for over thirty years in this way, based on the premise that a poem is a message. A premise that also applies to Hans Broek's work, which bridges the gap between people in different worlds with paintings teeming with exorcising forces and powers. He depicts this guilty architecture as an amalgam of memories, reflections and emotions. People are sometimes said to have a heart of stone. Conversely, stones have memories and can be the bearers of a human heart. Each brushstroke and each brick of the forts and dungeons, palaces and canal houses in Hans Broek's paintings is a brushstroke and a building block with a human heart, beating with anger, dedication and compassion. In addition to serving as his manifesto, his paintings are also a monument to an ideal: a future in which we turn the tide of history and in which the beauty of creation is diametrically opposed to destruction.

This text is a reworked, longer version of Wilma Sütö's opening speech for *Herengracht*, Hans Broek's solo exhibition at ROOF-A. *Herengracht* ran until 18 September 2022. The Dordrechts Museum showed work by Hans Broek as part of *Watamula*, a group exhibition of contemporary art on the theme of wanderlust which ran until 8 January 2023.



Fort Muxima, Angola (orange) 2021 125 x 200 cm, acrylic on linen



Glendale 1995 45.6 x 41.2 cm, pencil on paper



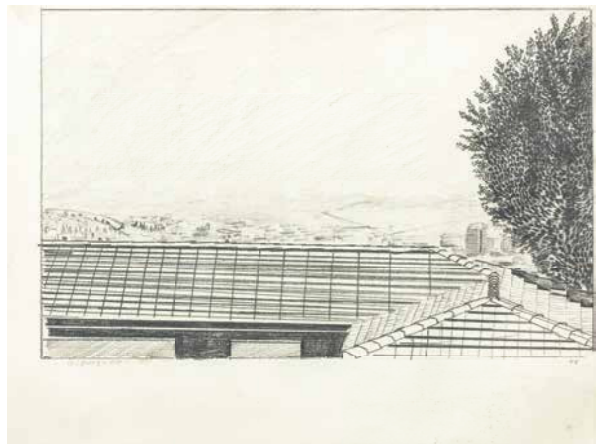
Glendale 1995 25.6 x 41.2 cm, pencil on paper



Long Beach 1995 22.4 x 36.2 cm, pencil on paper



Beverly Glen 1995 13 x 28.2 cm, pencil on paper



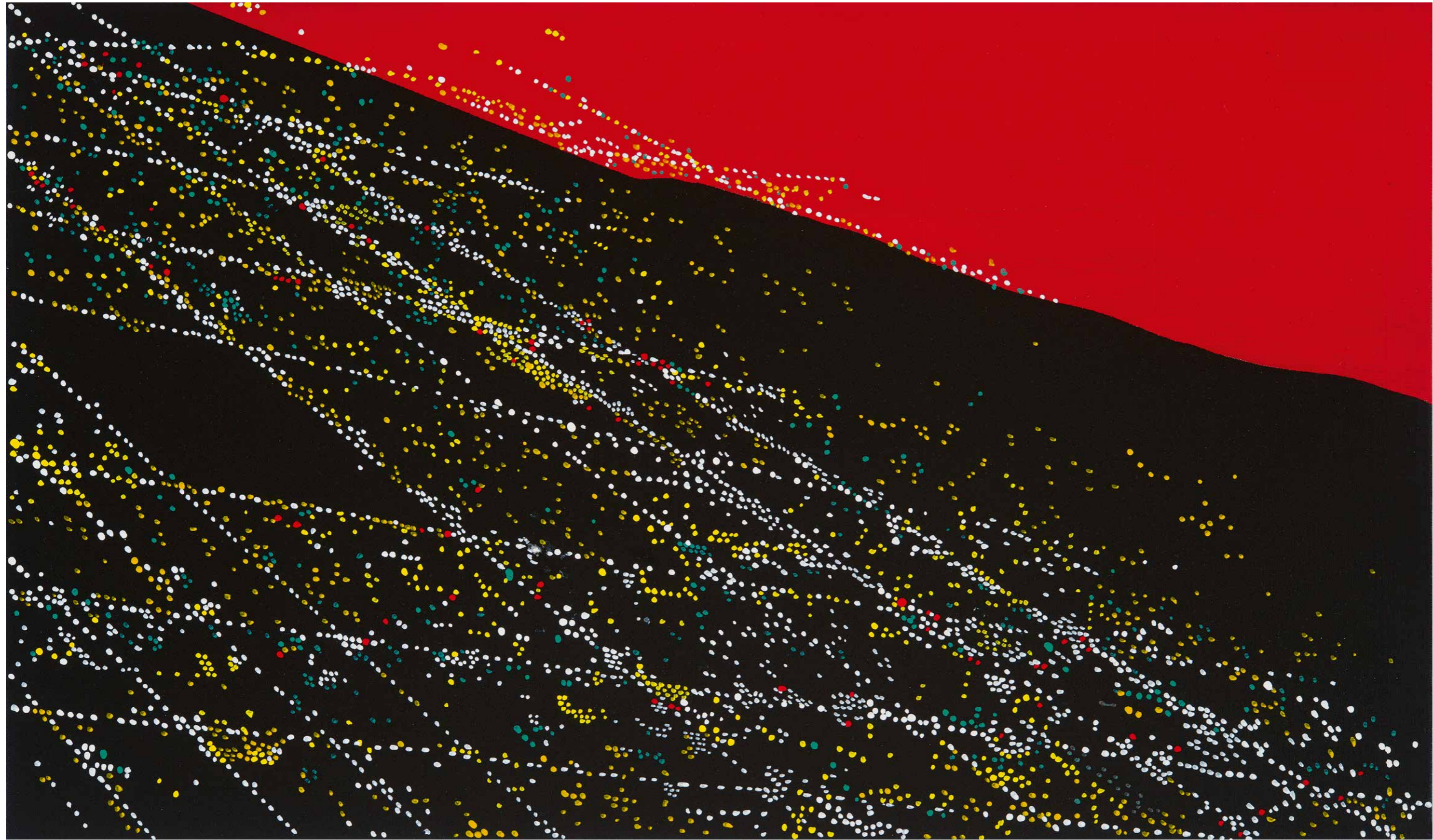
Glendale 1995 23.5 x 37.5 cm, pencil on paper



Volga 1993 150 x 280 cm, oil on linen



Kronstadt 1993 120 x 300 cm, oil on linen



Los Angeles 2009 60 x 100 cm, oil on linen