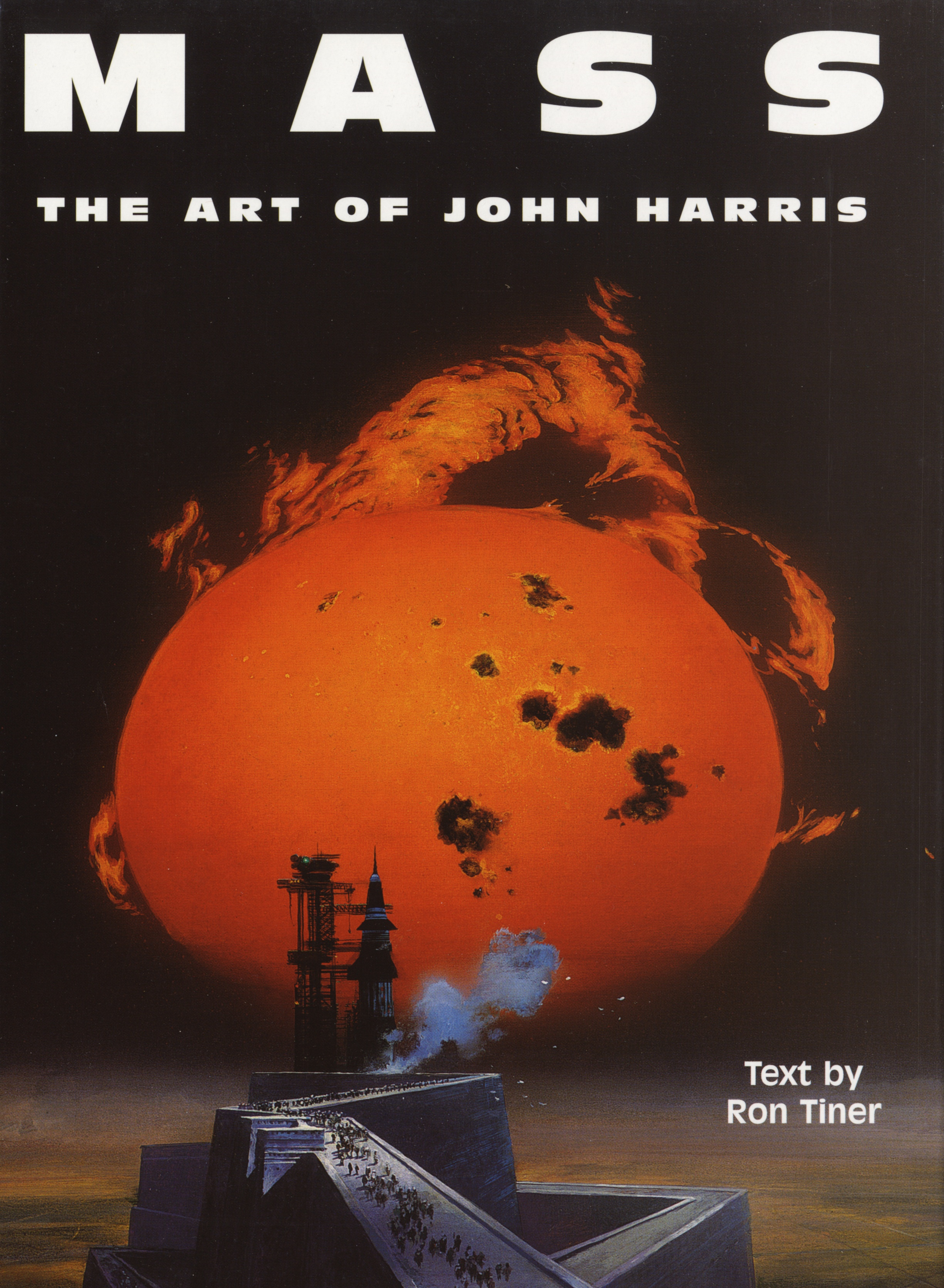
MASS

THE ART OF JOHN HARRIS



Text by
Ron Tiner

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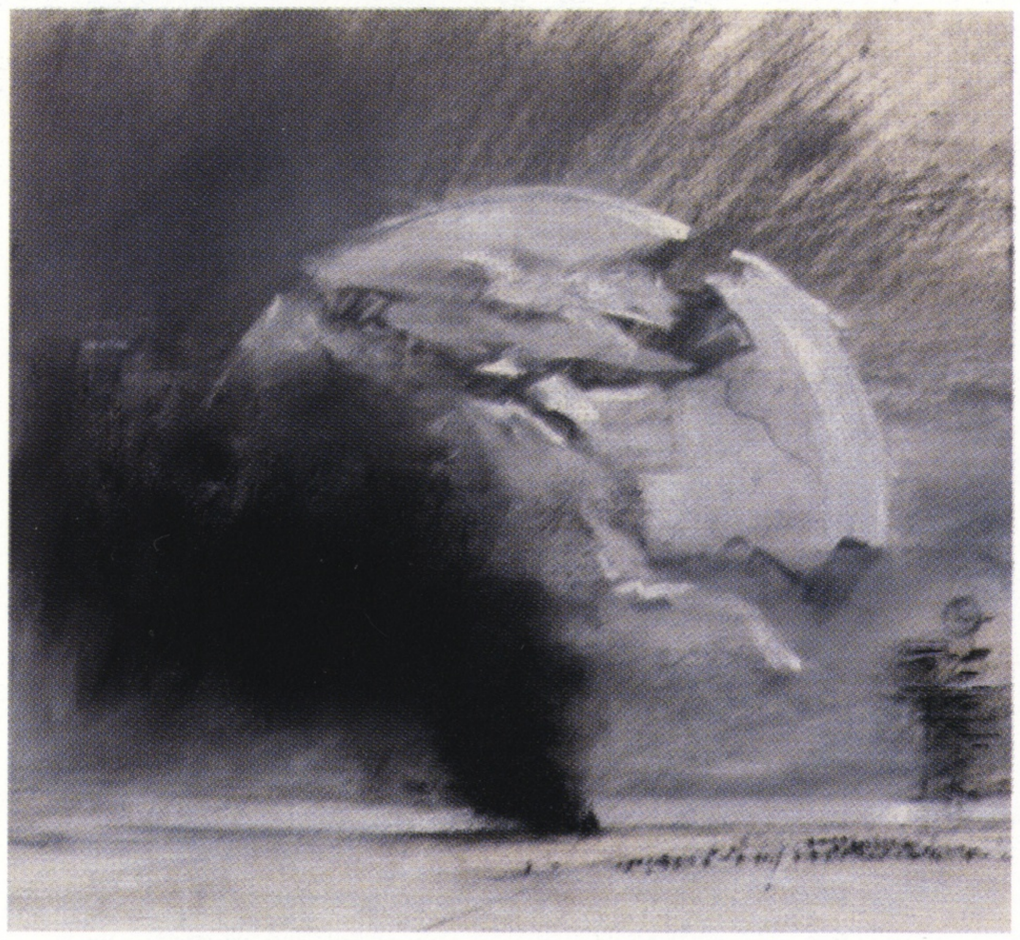

Paper Tiger

This book is dedicated to my wife, Sarah,
and our children, Sophie and Ben.

'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

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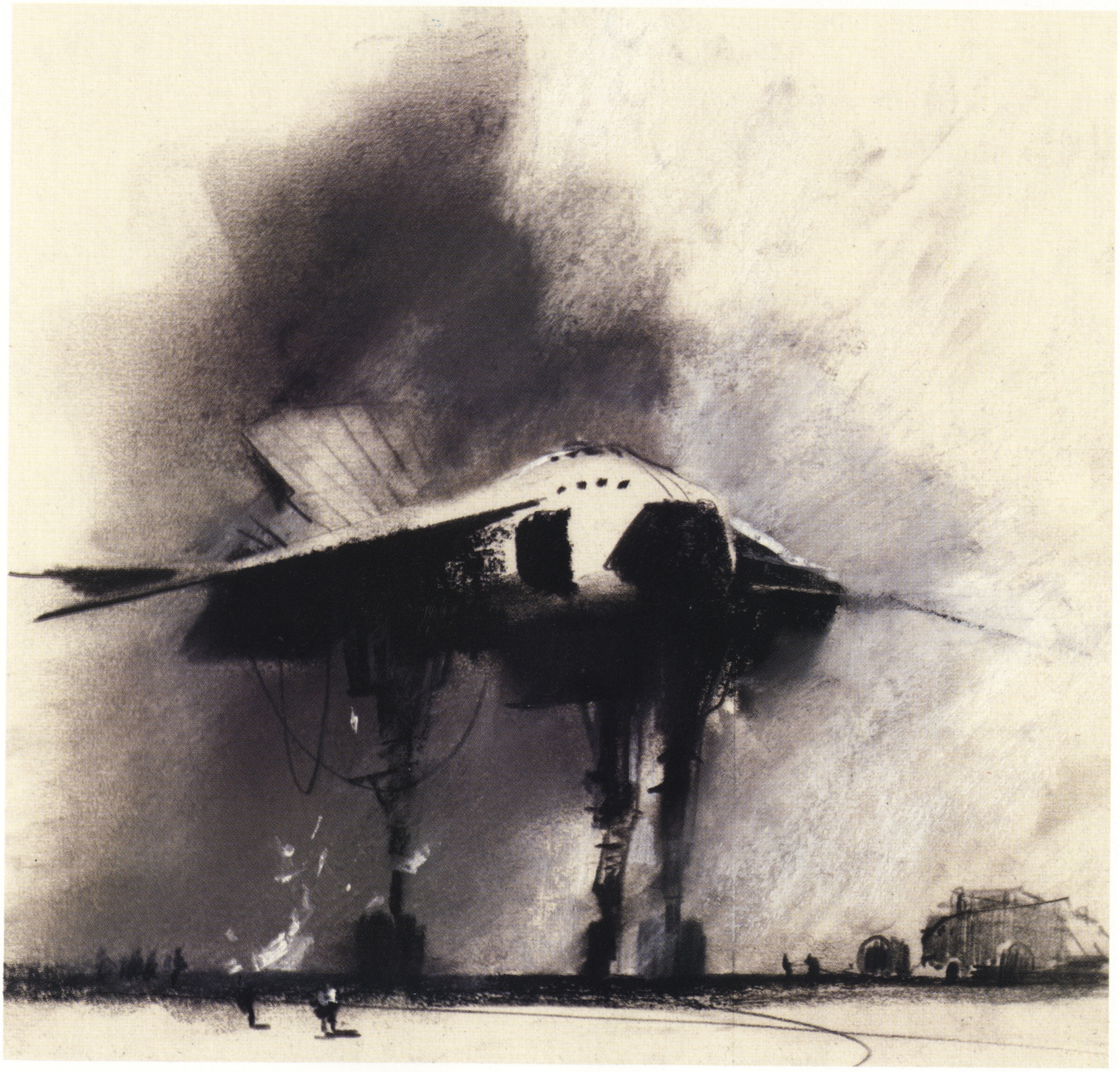
PAGE 2
THE WELCOME
Acrylics on board
81 x 51cm (32 x 20in)
A cover in the *Best of Trek* series for ROC, New American Library.

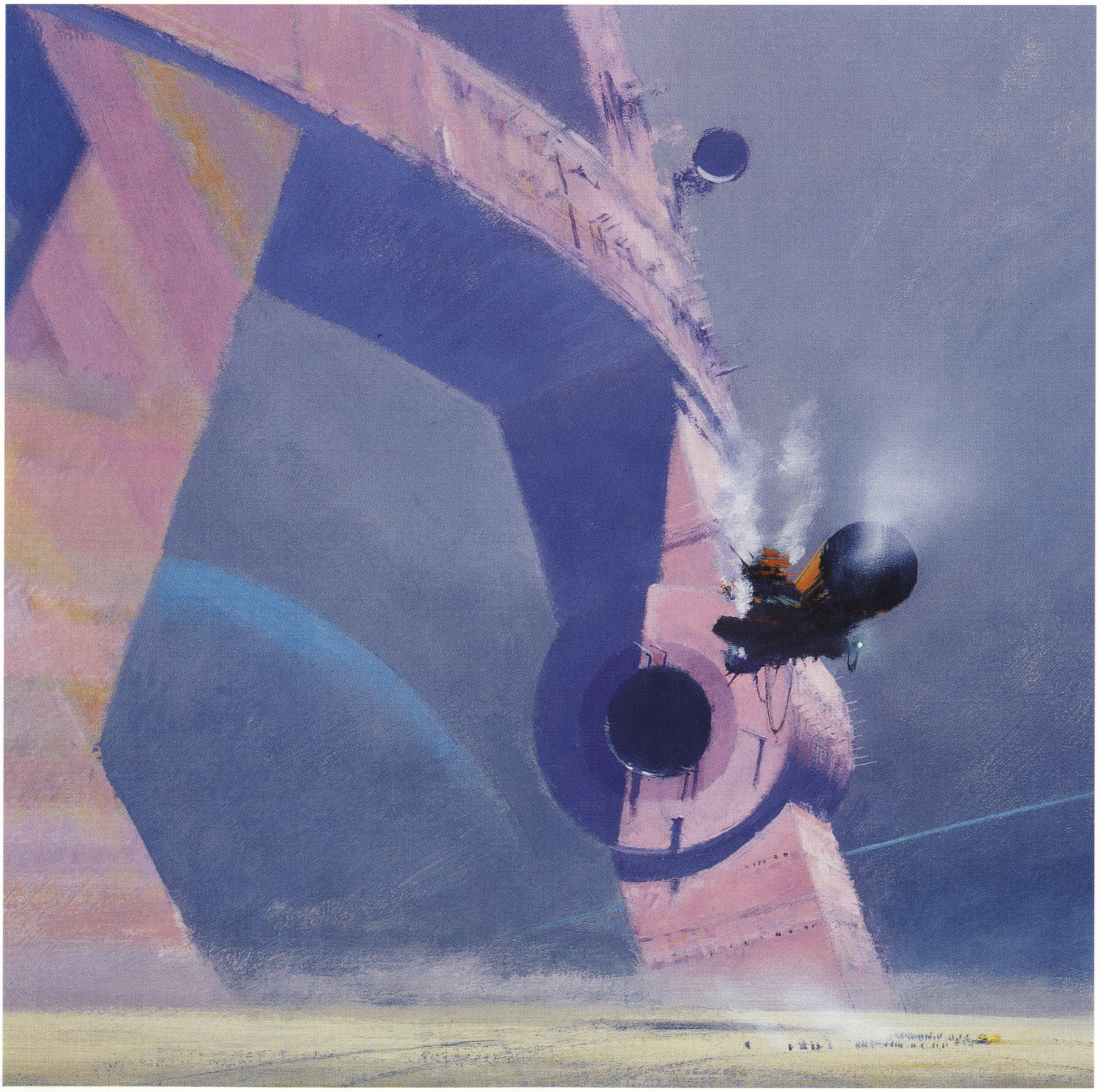
CONTENTS

Introduction: Imminent Thunder 6
The Origin of Images 14
The Roads to Mass, and Beyond 56
Finding the Image 94
Index of Paintings 110
Acknowledgements 112



INTRODUCTION
Imminent Thunder

To stand in front of a painting by John Harris can be like witnessing a moment of silence preceding a monumental cataclysmic event. Planetary bodies and vast megalithic structures of incalculable mass hang weightless, as though poised on the brink of some fateful occurrence of cosmic proportions. In talking about his art, he speaks of that silent moment before a thunderstorm when, as he says, the air seems to crackle with expectation: he aims, in much of his work, to capture what he terms crackling reality, or a sense of imminent thunder.





RIGHT
WEAPONS OF CHAOS
Book 3: Colors of Chaos
Acrylics on board
81 x 66cm (32 x 26in)
A passing ship is caught in a web of disruptive energies. 'Often, my images emulate dramas that can be found in the natural world, such as the everyday warfare that is waged in the oceans of Earth, between sedentary predators such as the octopus and unwary passers-by.' Cover for a novel by Robert E. Vardeman published by Berkley.

LEFT
CURRENTS OF SPACE (DETAIL)
Acrylics on board
30 x 51cm (12 x 20in)
Nomadic groups move over a plain, dominated by a structure so vast that one foot lies behind the viewer while another is hidden below the horizon. 'I was always impressed by the way a ship disappeared over the horizon, revealing the curve of the Earth. A variation of this motif reappears in *Burning Watchtowers*.' Cover for the novel by Isaac Asimov published by HarperCollins, UK.

OVERLEAF
THE FAR SHORE OF TIME
Oils on canvas
56 x 76cm (22 x 30in)
'Technically, this represented something of a breakthrough for me, in that the resolution of the image came at the very last moment of painting, resulting in a soft painterly quality which dominates the work.' Cover for Frederik Pohl's novel published by Tor Books.

John Harris was born in London on July 29, 1948, the son of a salesman. The only child of his parents' second marriage, he had a typical upper-middle-class education – prep school in Surrey followed by boarding school in the Welsh marches – from where, on the recommendation of his art teacher, he went on to do a foundation year at Luton College of Art. Throughout his life there have been a number of personal encounters and serendipitous events which have been instrumental in setting the direction of his life and work, and this was one of them.

Another occurred when, in 1967, he transferred to Exeter College of Art & Design to study Fine Art and first encountered the tutor Mike Garton, who was responsible for giving Harris what the artist now sees as the essential painterly perception of the importance of light. Harris's choice of the course in Fine Art – rather than in Illustration – and his subsequent experience under the tutelage of Garton were absolutely crucial in terms of giving him the equipment to do what he wanted to do with his imagery.

He graduated in 1970 and went to London where, despite his Fine Art training, he tried to get work doing book-cover art. He was commissioned







LEFT AND ABOVE
WORLDS and WORLDS APART
Acrylics on board
81 x 46cm (32 x 18in) each
This is a pair, both visually and conceptually. 'The domain of orbital space seems to have a flavour all of its own. For me, its chief characteristic is one of "sideways drift". In both of these pictures there is the implication of a floating movement against the background of a static object, which itself *appears* to move against a larger background.' Covers for the novels by Joe Haldeman published by Macdonald, UK.

by the publisher Gollancz to produce a painting for the cover of a book by Clifford D. Simak, and this first commission was followed by two more. 'They were dreadful,' he remembers with a wry smile, 'so I went underground to lick my wounds.'

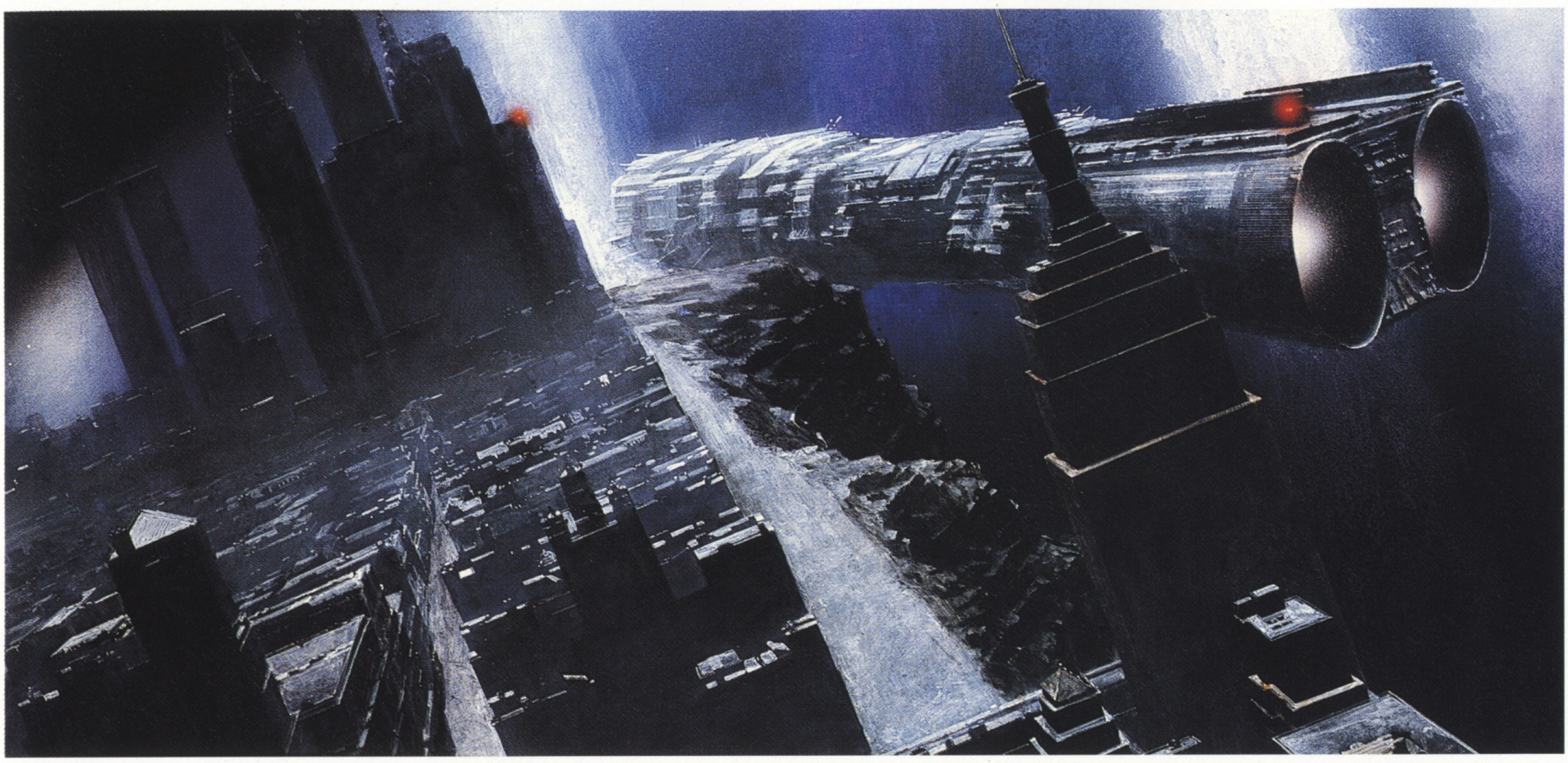
All this time he had been becoming increasingly interested in matters spiritual, and in due course, in 1972, he went abroad to study – and later to teach – Transcendental Meditation under the guidance of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. He did this until 1977, and is firmly of the opinion that these years were the most valuable and enriching of his life, that it was entirely as a result of this period practising the techniques of TM that he was enabled to pick up the imagery that was in him. In short, this experience gave him, he believes, the mental equipment to work as an artist.

He then returned to Exeter and worked as a designer for a printing company. It was at this time, while continuing the practice of meditation, that he began to create in his mind the dreamlike images which were

RIGHT
MICRODRIVE
Shellac inks on board
81 x 46cm (32 x 18in)
A cover painting for a computer user's manual, commissioned by Sir Clive Sinclair. It was designed as an ironic contrast to the simplicity and intimate scale of his early computers.







ABOVE
CITIES IN FLIGHT 2 or OKIE CITY, TRADING CONTACT
Shellac inks on board
25.5 x 51cm (10 x 20in)
This was the middle of a set of three paintings illustrating James Blish's classic series *Cities in Flight.* They first appeared in *Alien Landscapes*, published by Pierrot in 1978; the book, containing the work of several other well-known science fiction illustrators, was the first real exposure of John Harris's imagery.

subsequently to fuel the main trend of his work. 'Those images just wouldn't leave me alone,' he says, 'and they remain the major impetus and motivation behind my work.'

He began to put together a body of pictures and eventually went back to London once again to 'have another crack at doing work for money'. The first agency he went to was Young Artists, later to become known as Arena, and they took him on; he is represented by Arena to this day.

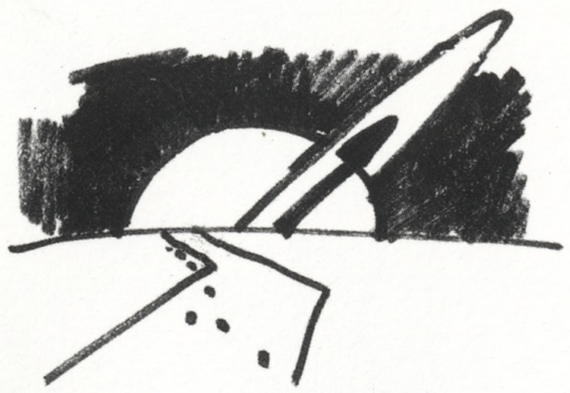
Now occurred another of those serendipitous events. He had hardly had time to deposit his portfolio with the agency than Philip Dunn of Pierrot Publishing arrived in search of artists to illustrate a projected book featuring imaginary worlds from the pages of science fiction novels. Harris was commissioned to produce three paintings for it. Dunn was impressed enough by the results that he immediately gave him a nine-month stipend to embark on a series of paintings on a theme of his own devising.

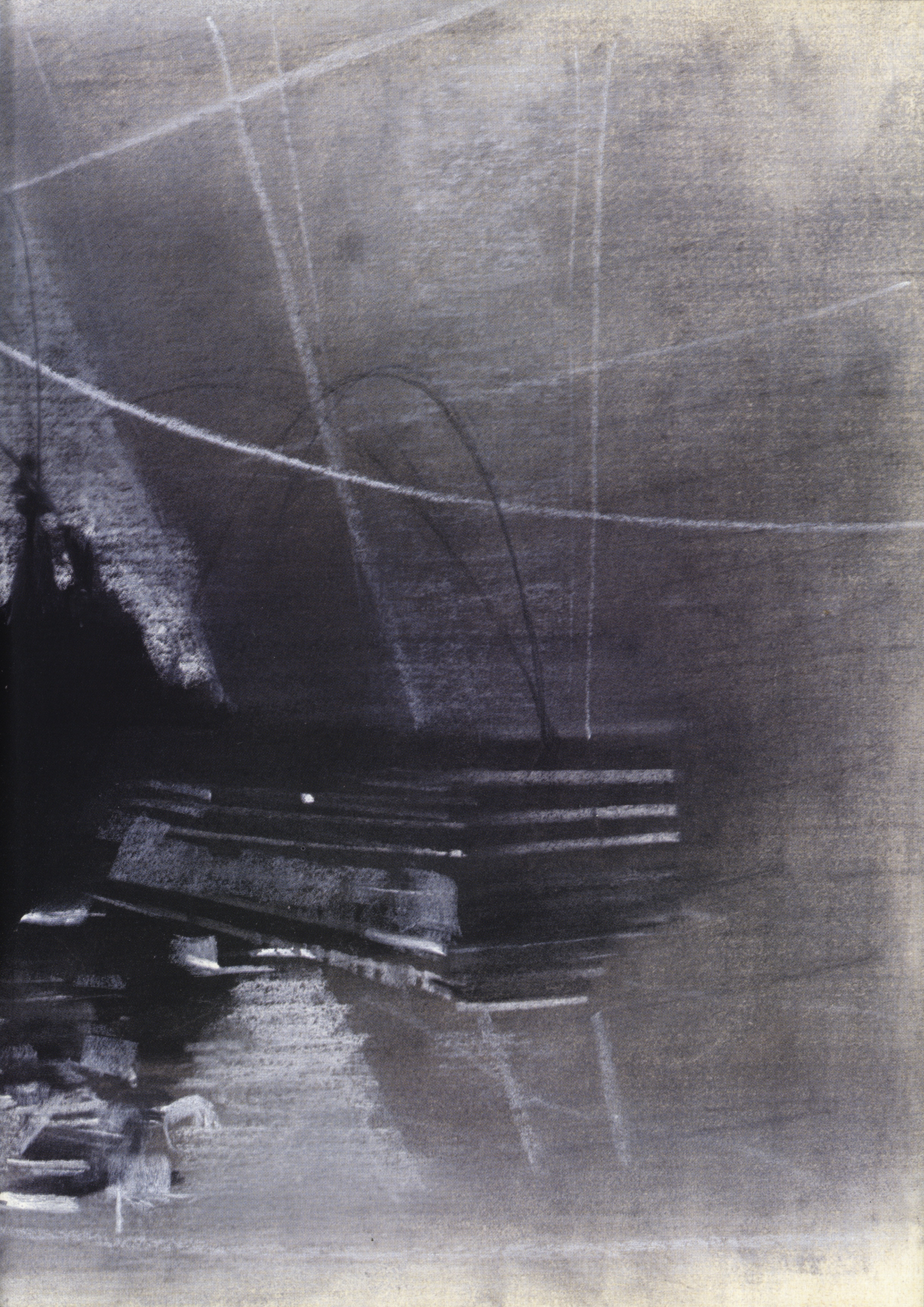
The resulting twenty-five paintings constitute the body of work entitled *Mass*. Although they were not published at the time – Pierrot Publishing folded before they could appear in book form – they have been exhibited at various times and locales (his first one-man show of them was in 1984, at Double Vision Galleries), and have led to numerous other commissions over the subsequent twenty years. The series is published here for the first time, and is accompanied by many of the other spectacular images that have made John Harris the subject of admiration and envy by his fellow artists the world over.

Take a deep breath.

You're going to need it.

LEFT
BURNING WATCHTOWERS
The Best of Trek 16
Acrylics on board
61 x 40.5cm (24 x 16in)
'This is one of my favourite images. It is partly because, in spite of the obvious drama and alarm of the scene, there is a silence pervading the picture. It may have come about partly because the tower in the background is beyond the horizon and therefore it implies a great distance from the observer, who may be able to see, but not hear, what is happening.' Published by New American Library.





THE ORIGIN OF IMAGES

Among the factors which contribute to the development of an artist, one decisive early influence is almost invariably the school art teacher. In John Harris's case this person, a Welsh teacher of art called L. Morton Seabourne, was a classic example of those intellectual eccentrics that the British public school system used to specialize in but who, sadly, don't seem to exist any more. Seabourne had been an artist and reporter in the Allied desert campaigns of World War II – the same campaigns, as it happened, in which Harris's father had taken part. He wore brogues and baggy brown corduroy trousers, an old tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows, and a polka-dot dicky-bow tie. He had a tremendous capacity for enthusiasm. He also had the most appallingly bad teeth, which he kept clamped firmly together when speaking, giving his pronouncements a gritty, bitten-off quality.

Harris recalls him with great affection. 'I was fourteen when he got his teeth – or what was left of them! – into me. There were three of us in my



RIGHT
AFTER THE FALL
Shellac ink on board
46 x 28cm (18 x 11in)
This is a later version of the last of the *Okie City* trilogy. It was eventually used for the anthology *100 Best Science Fiction Stories*, published by Sphere Books.

LEFT
A MILLION OPEN DOORS
Acrylics on board
40.5 x 28cm (16 x 11in)
Cover for the Tor Books edition of John Barnes's novel.

OVERLEAF
PHOENIX (DETAIL)
Acrylics on board
46 x 38cm (18 x 15in)
A cover commissioned by publishers Tor Books. As can embarrassingly happen to an artist, Harris is no longer certain which book it was used for.









year who were, as he saw it, potentially painter types, and he cornered us. He had us working together continuously in an almost competitive way, working on the same project but vying with each other to see which one could make a better job of it than the other two.'

The projects they were given were surprisingly varied, ranging from the forward-looking and self-expressive to the simple copying of images from commercial advertising. One example of the latter that Harris confesses to remembering particularly well involved a large-scale colour poster for a steamy film starring Brigitte Bardot: it featured a lurid image of the actress with her head thrown back to expose a great expanse of snowy throat. There were many other purely mechanical exercises of this sort. 'I found that sort of thing terribly easy,' he says. 'The dexterity that was necessary was right up my street.'

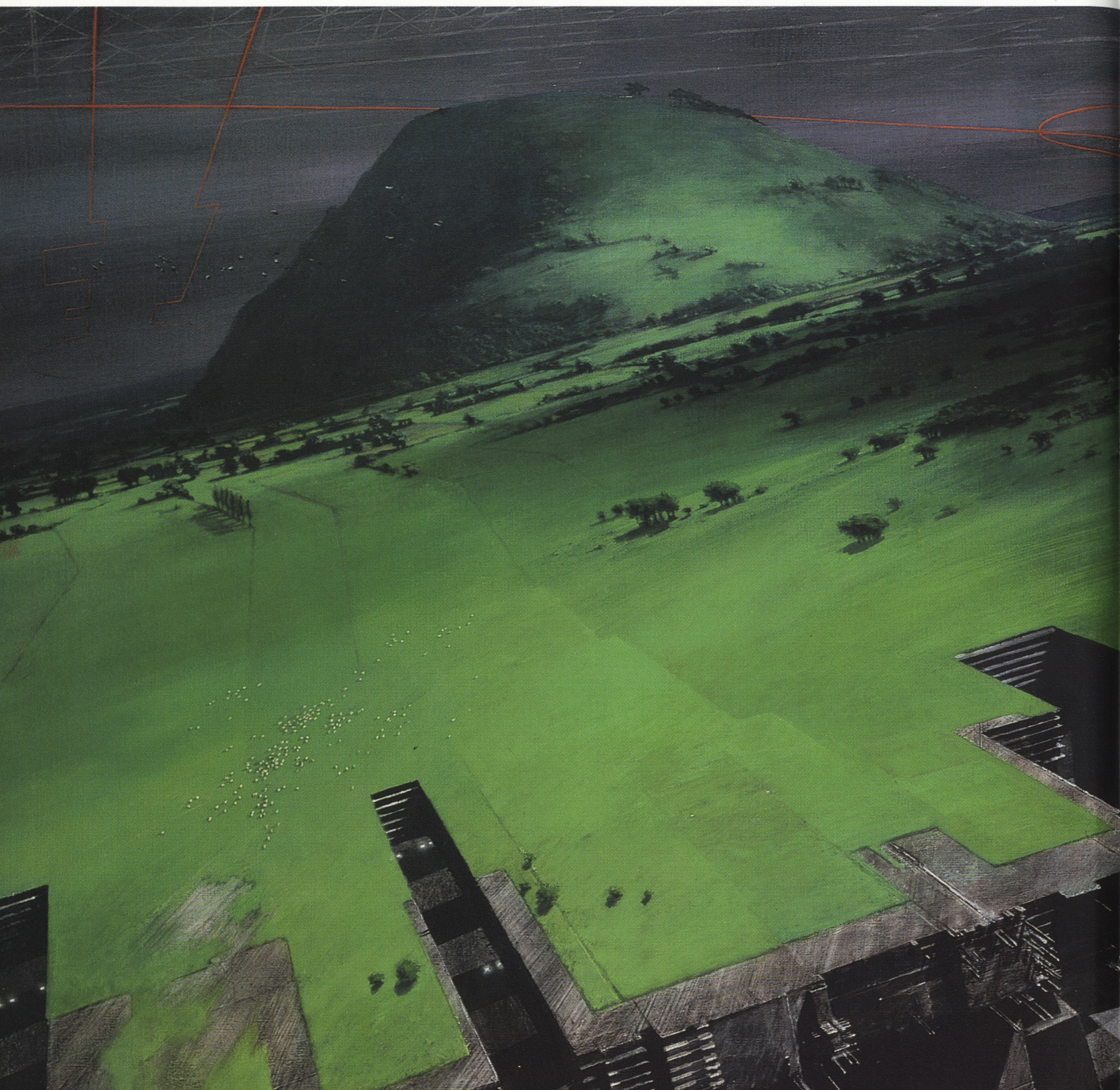
But there were some tasks they were given to do which had him floundering. One was to stretch some paper and splash paint on it, simply to enjoy the experience of manipulating colour. He found that, without a pre-set goal, he could not understand what he was expected to do. He would watch with envy the other two pupils absorbing themselves in the sensual experience of applying and juxtaposing colour – and to this day he still finds himself thinking about some of the images that one of them in particular, a boy called Russell Hall, used to produce. Russell had a particularly sharply defined aesthetic, exemplified for Harris by a distinctive shade of green which he placed adjacent to a range of silvery greys in a subtly meaningful way. 'I knew there was something there that it was important I should be able to do, but I just couldn't do it.'

At the time, despite Seabourne's confident pronouncement that 'You're going to be a painter!', the young Harris had ambitions to join the Royal Air Force. He was fascinated by the idea of flying, and so was studying physics with a view to gaining a qualification which would enable him to become a pilot. Closely associated with this ambition was a great interest

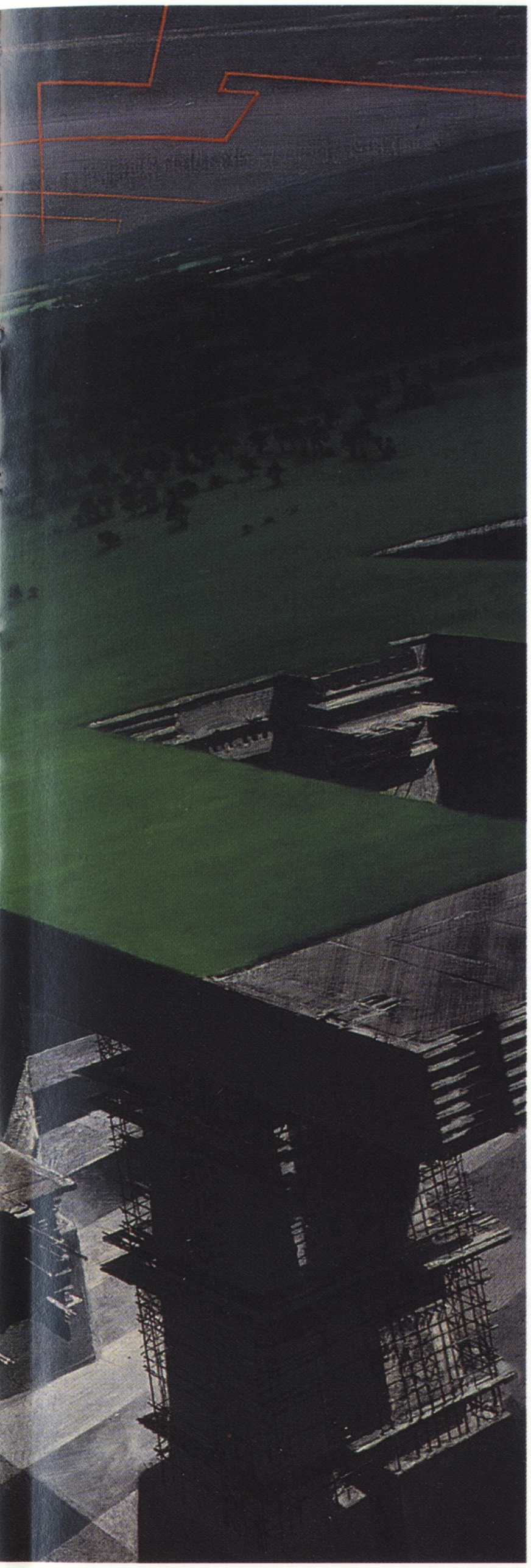
ABOVE
FLAGS
Shellac inks on board
28 x 61cm (11 x 24in)
A poster commissioned by Richard Williams for Shell UK and designed to accompany the animated film and TV advertisement. It shows the North Sea drained of water, revealing the astonishing structures of the oil rigs beneath the water line.

RIGHT
EARTH MADE OF GLASS
Big Planet
Acrylics on board
46 x 35.5cm (18 x 14in)
Cover for the Tor Books edition of the John Barnes novel. This is one of those images which was simply the product of the original title of the book.





ABOVE
THE SINCLAIR MURAL
Oils on canvas
One of two canvases, each 122 x 183cm (48 x 72in). These two paintings were sketches for a mural that was to be placed on the ends of two buildings set at right angles to one another at the entrance to a car park. The total width would have been 20m (66ft). When viewed from the centre of the car park, the horizon would have appeared as a consistent diagonal line. Sadly, the mural was never actually carried out.



in astronomy and space travel. He therefore saw art lessons as a pleasant diversion rather than a preparation for later life.

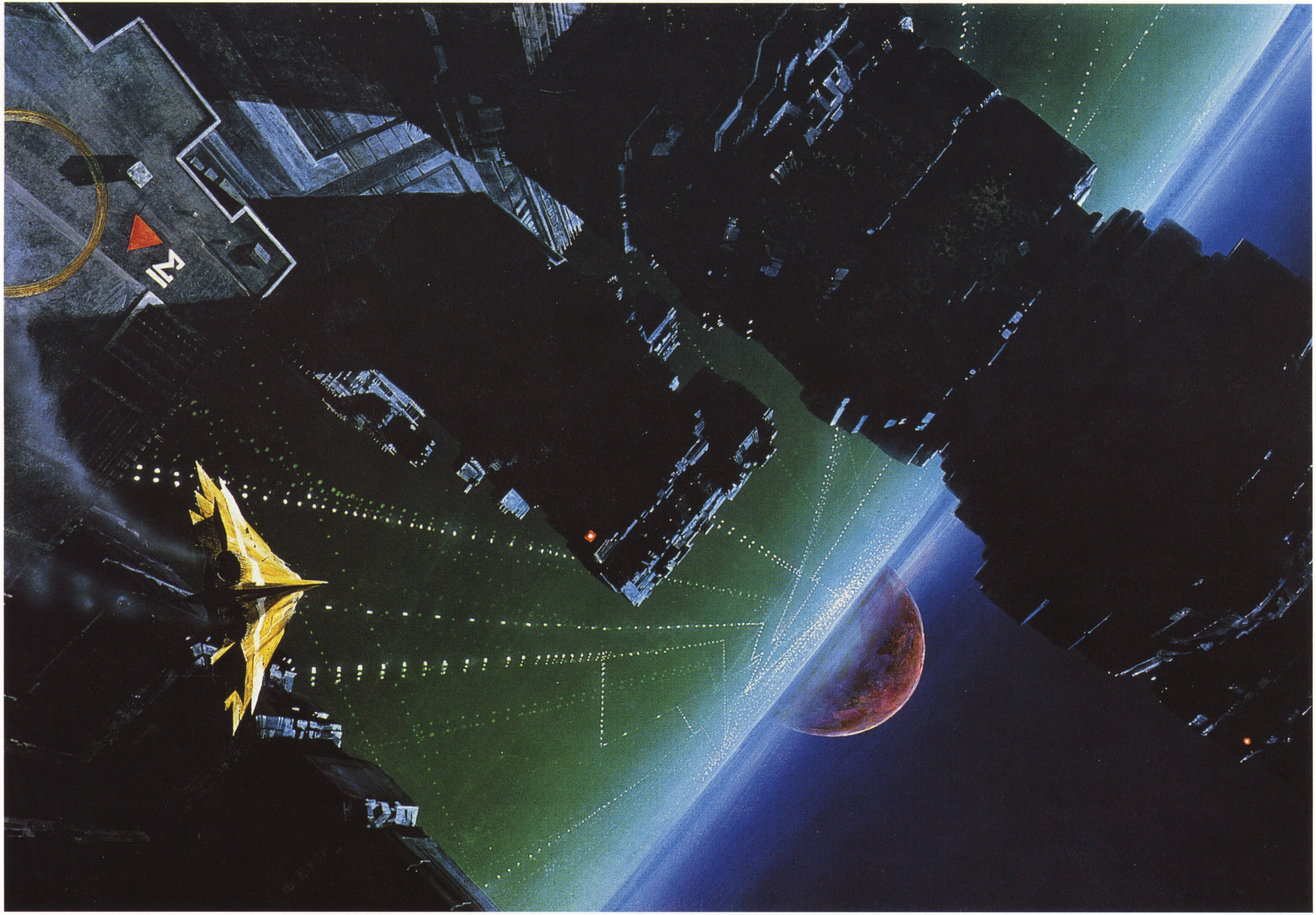
But then the physics master died. It was a small school with only about a hundred pupils, and was very poor academically as well as financially. The physics master was not replaced, and Harris's studies in astronomy, along with his flying ambitions, had to be abandoned.

Around this time, when he was aged about fifteen, he discovered what was to him an extraordinary film, *The Universe*, made by the Canadian National Film Board around 1962, about the Milky Way Galaxy and how it was being observed through the Mount Palomar telescope. The images contained in this film fired his enthusiasm and became a source of tremendous inspiration to him. However, they were all photographic images. He did not immediately make any connection between image-making, as he understood it through the efforts of L. Morton Seabourne, and his interest in astronomy. He had never seen any artistic representations of astronomical subjects, and nor had he read any science fiction. To him astronomy and art were separate things.

He was deeply stirred by the film's beautiful images of the Andromeda Galaxy and of our own Milky Way, among others, and by the feeling, created through special effects, of rushing through space. He became infatuated by the notion of space and the vast distances and volumes implied by it. It was inevitable that he would eventually discover science fiction, and he started to read Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and the books of Arthur C. Clarke; when he later discovered Chesley Bonestell's



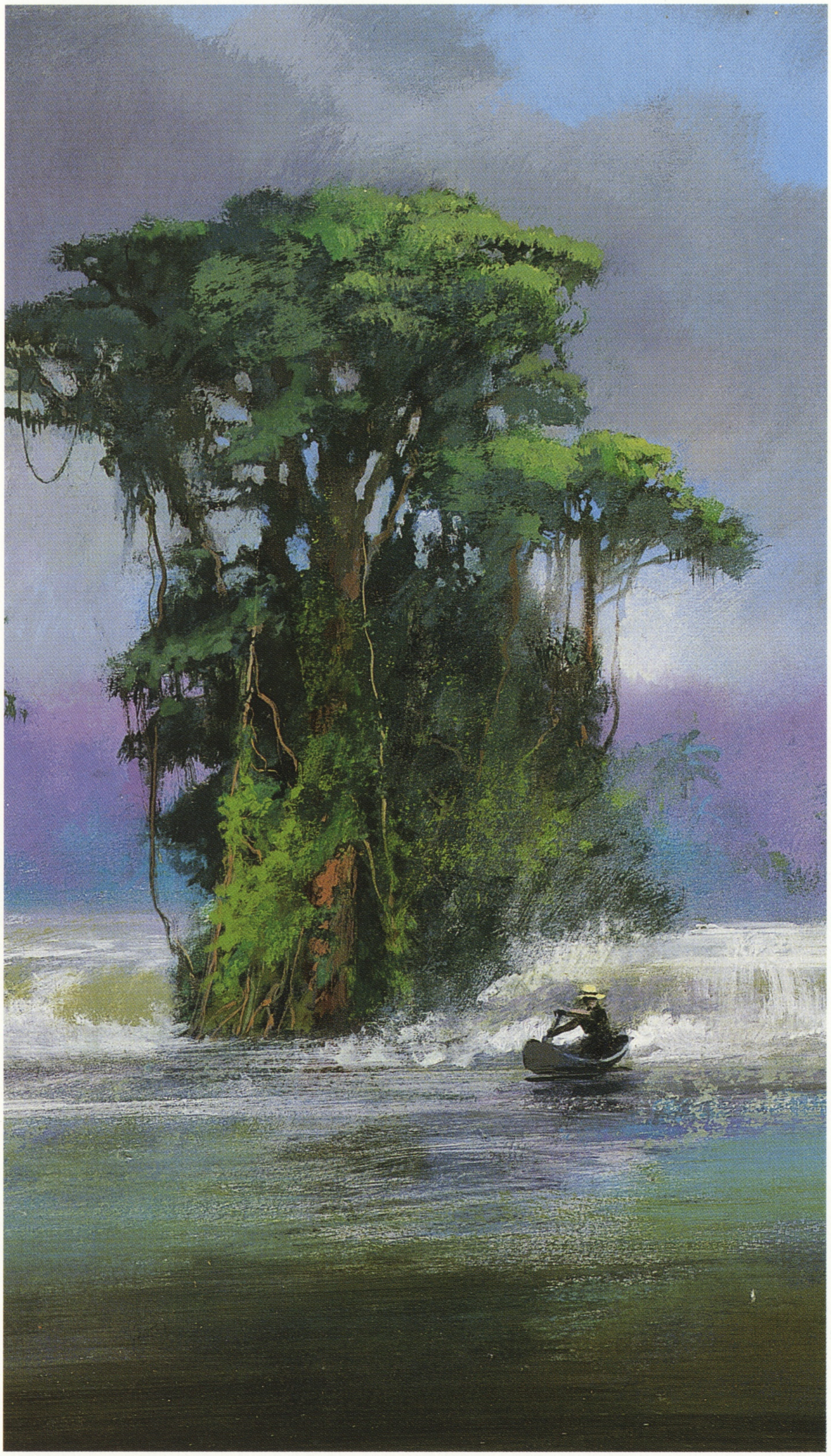
RIGHT
THE CORRIDORS OF TIME (DETAIL)
Acrylics on board
38 x 56cm (15 x 22in)
The Somerset Levels provided this landscape for the cover of Poul Anderson's vision of the Neolithic Age visited by time travellers. Published by Random Century.





LEFT
DRUNKARD'S WALK
Shellac inks on board
63.5 x 40.5cm (25 x 16in)
Cover for an edition of the classic Frederik Pohl novel published by Grafton Books. Another early ink painting. To induce a sense of vertigo is still a constant challenge.

ABOVE
WAITING FOR CLEARANCE
Mystical Paths
Oils on canvas
81 x 61cm (32 x 24in)
This takes the theme of departure. The image of vapours rising from idling engines creates the feeling of anticipation.

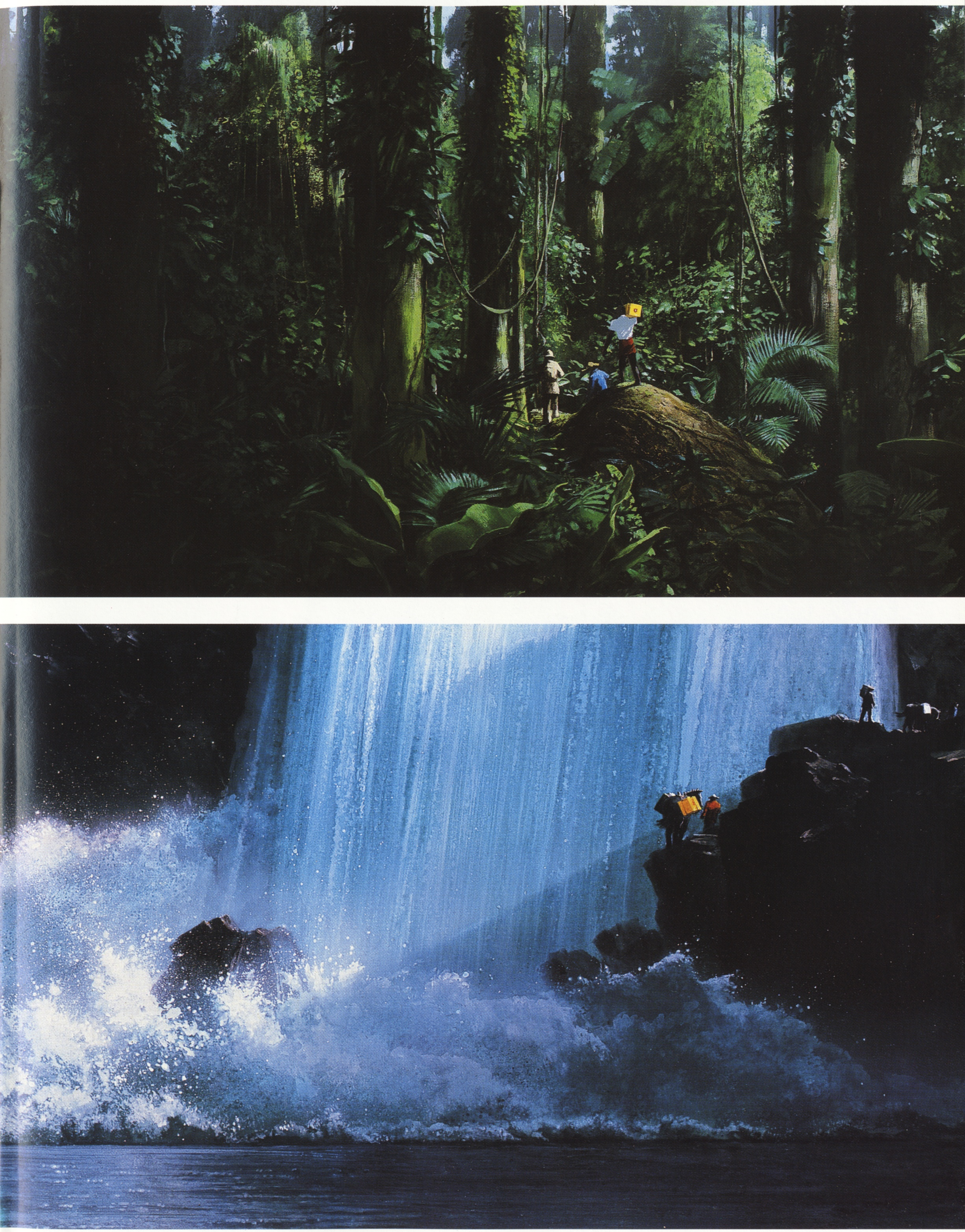


LEFT
MAD WHITE GIANT (DETAIL)
Acrylics on board
43 x 30.5cm (17 x 12in)
A cover for the book by Benedict Allen, who bravely throws away his maps before going to a distant place and simply absorbs himself into the life of the people there. This adventure of Allen's was in South America, and was published by HarperCollins.

paintings of the landscapes of distant planets his enthusiasm developed into an obsession. He found it impossible to separate it from spiritual ideas, so impassioned did he become about this whole theatre of ideas and experiences.

Even now, at the age of fifty, it is still like that for him. Bonestell's empty moonscapes of Titan, brightly lit by the Sun, with their stark shadows under an intensely black starry sky, still give him a tremendous feeling of transcendence.

RIGHT
THE HERRENHAUSER SERIES
Jungle (above) and Waterfall (below)
Shellac inks on board
51 x 76cm (20 x 30in)
This series of eighteen landscapes was commissioned by an advertising agency on behalf of a German brewing company. Using the motif of a yellow crate, the paintings were intended as metaphors to show that, just as some of the most beautiful and exciting places in the world cannot be reached by package tours and jet aircraft, there could be no shortcuts to brewing excellence. 'This was the first commission I received in which I could indulge my sense of epic landscape – a nice combination of the imagined and the real.'







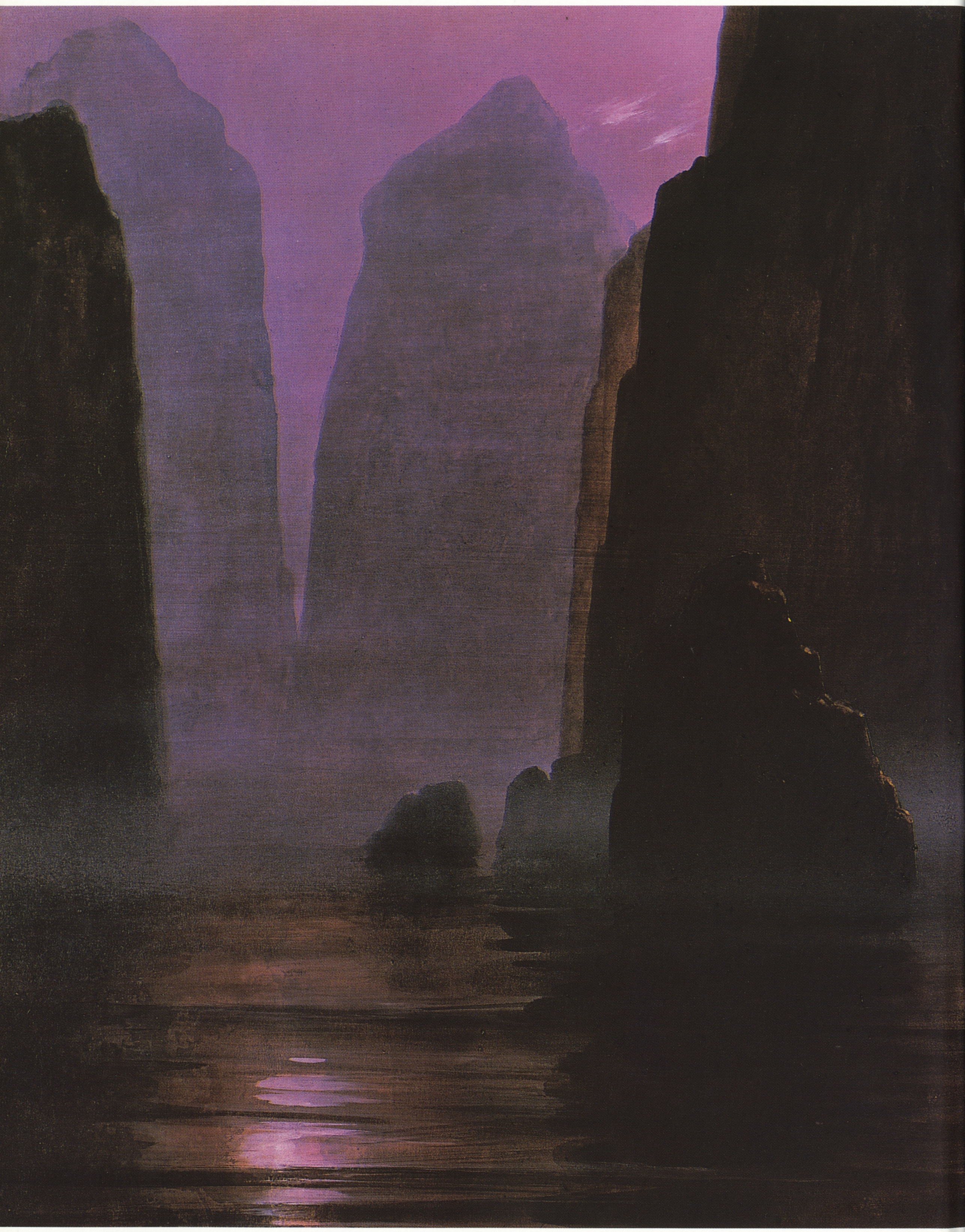
ABOVE
THE HERRENHAUSER SERIES
Rapids (above) and Junk (overleaf)
Shellac inks on board
51 x 76cm (20 x 30in)
Two more illustrations for the series of ads commissioned by an advertising agency on behalf of a German brewing company. For all its limitations, the technique of painting with shellac inks came into its own when describing water.

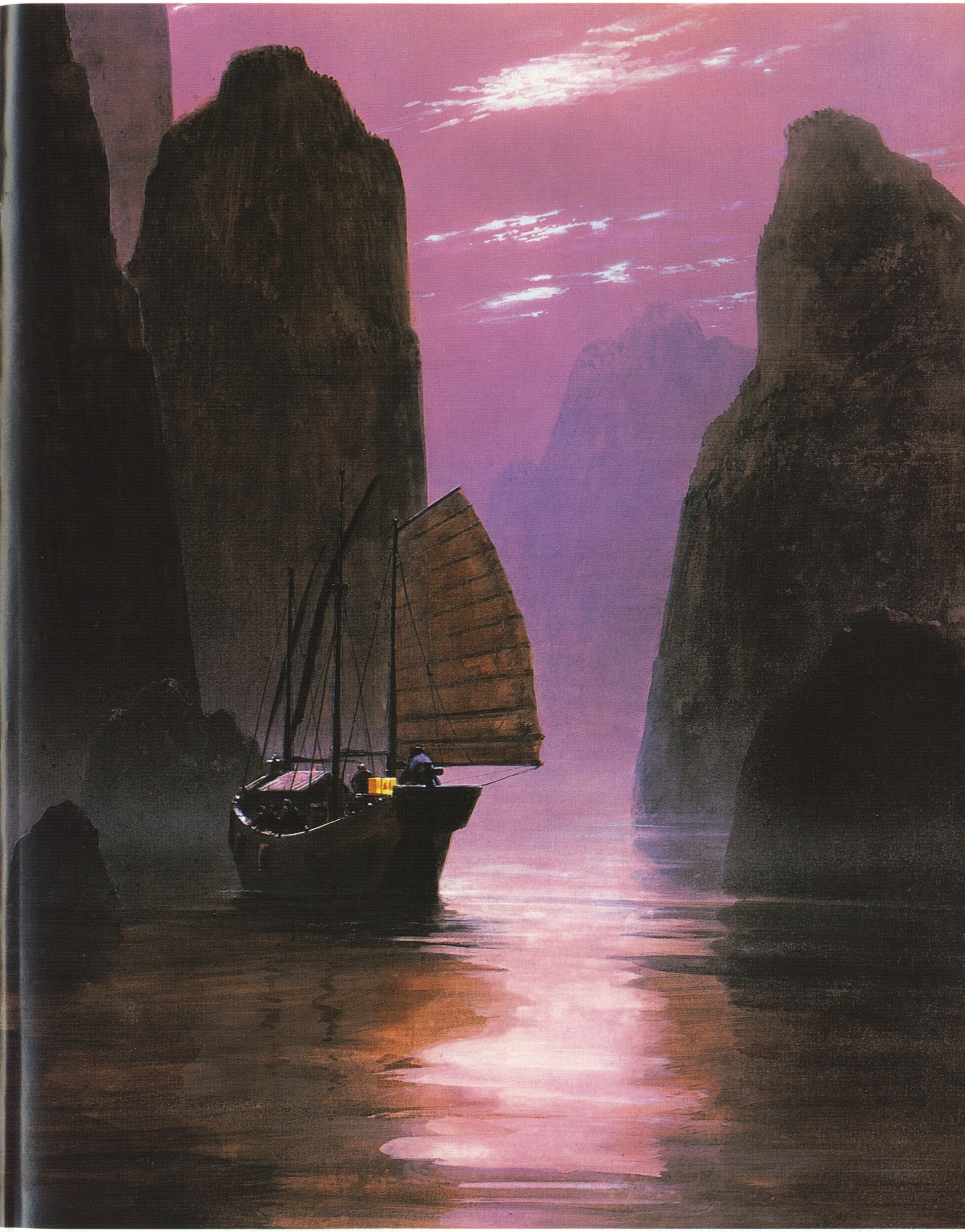
This was the point at which the two things came together: astronomy and art. At about the same time Seabourne advised Harris to apply for a place at an art college. And so it came about that in due course he arrived at Luton Technical College's Art Department to begin his pre-diploma studies with, as he puts it, minimal drawing skills but a consuming urge to make images. 'I just wanted to do my own pictures of what I thought it would be like to be standing on one of the moons of Jupiter, or flying between the rings of Saturn. It all seemed enormously thrilling to me.'

He spent the next eighteen months under the guidance of the artist Anthony Slinn, a remarkably prolific painter who worked somewhat in the style of the post-abstract expressionists. Slinn's influence can still be detected in Harris's work now, in his love of texture and strong clear colour. He remembers one series of paintings by Slinn which particularly impressed him: they were improvisations, done in a style reminiscent of the work of the US painter Robert Rauschenberg, on a Holbein painting of King Henry VIII. Harris often wonders what Slinn is doing now, and regrets that he made no effort to remain in touch.

In the early 1960s the London art scene was dominated by the Pop Art movement, but the paintings of David Hockney and Peter Blake were quite alien to Harris. This was not where he wanted to go at all; he had begun to be interested in traditional English landscape painting, so Pop Art, with its fascination for the icons of mass urban culture, simply did not appeal to him. In particular, he had discovered the work of the landscape painter Ivon Hitchens, and was inspired by Hitchens's seemingly magical

LEFT
CONSCIENCE PLACE
Acrylics on board
76 x 51cm (30 x 20in)
Cover for a reprint of Joyce Thompson's novel published by Dell, USA. 'I'll grab any opportunity to paint trees.'





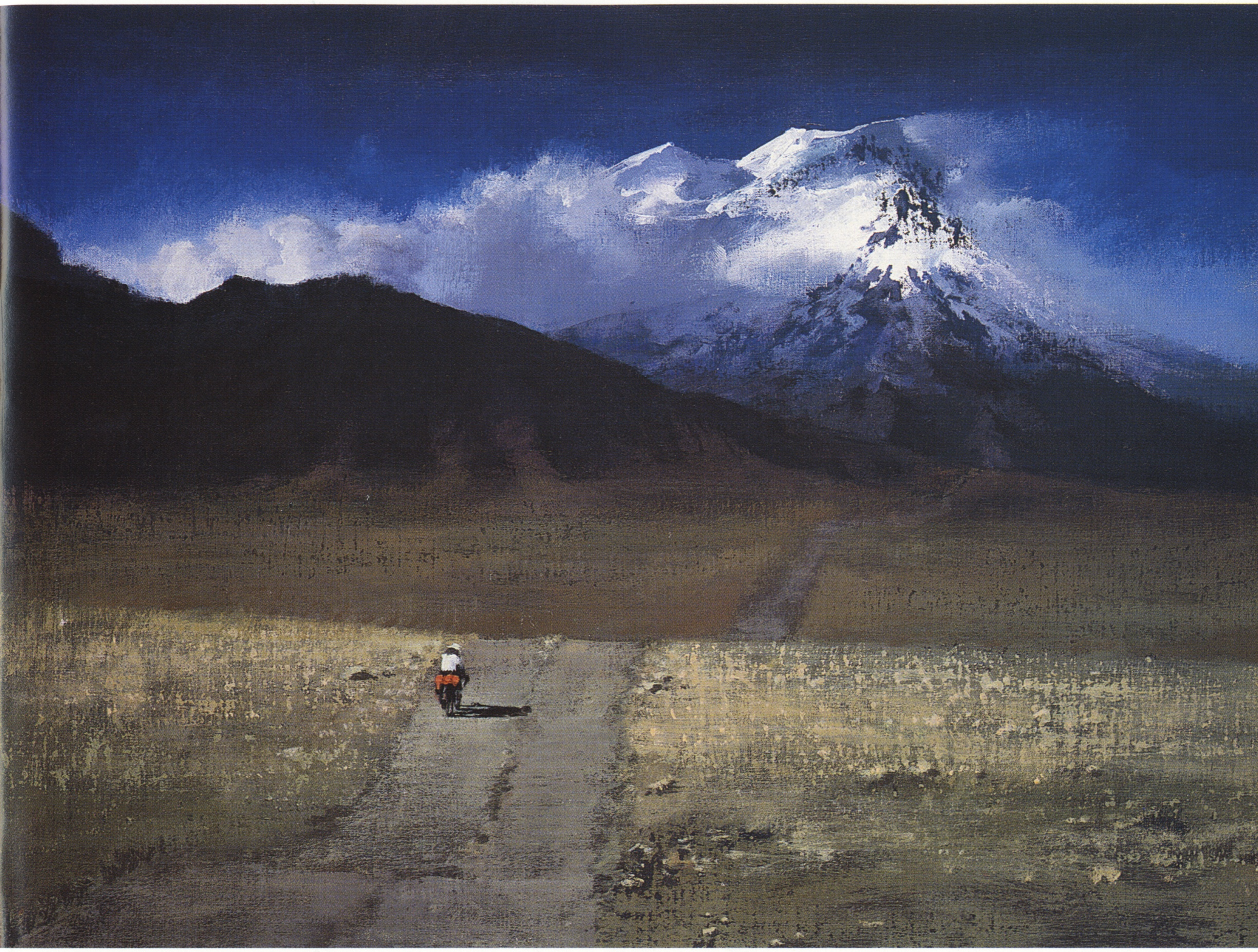


LEFT
THE HERRENHAUSER SERIES
Rope Bridge
Shellac inks on board
51 x 76cm (20 x 30in)
For this picture in the series the artist was able to draw on his experience of living in one of the more remote cantons of Switzerland. Below centre, the preliminary study in charcoal.





LEFT
IN ETHIOPIA WITH A MULE
Oils on canvas
28 x 33cm (11 x 13in)
A cover for the Flamingo edition of the book by Dervla Murphy. 'When looking at a photo reference, once I am sure of the direction in which the photographer was facing – north, south, east or west – I find I can somehow absorb the spirit of the place and know it as though I've actually been there. I then put it away and improvise on what I have absorbed of the spirit of the place.'



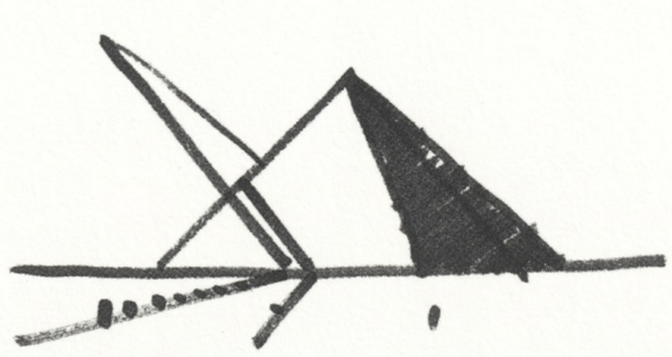
ABOVE
FULL TILT
Oils on canvas
38 x 46cm (15 x 18in)
Dervla Murphy again. The cover illustration shows the author on her way to India by bicycle. 'My aim in this painting was to convey some of the sense of loneliness that Dervla must have experienced on her journey.'

ability to create the atmosphere – almost the smell – of the English countryside. Another artist who made an indelible impression upon him was the visionary landscape artist Samuel Palmer. It was the visceral quality of their work that struck a chord with Harris.

So there were now two strands to his artistic ambitions: the first was concerned with astronomy and the imaginative possibilities of space travel, and the second was landscape painting. These two threads have remained the basis of his art throughout his working life.

He thus deliberately chose to apply for a diploma place at a college of art that was far enough away from London to remain uninfluenced by Pop Art trends. He chose Exeter College of Art & Design, in the southwest of England, where he determined to study Fine Art. The alternative degree course was Illustration, which option would have been for him, he feels, disastrous. Some years later he did in fact return to the college as a tutor on that same Illustration course and found there was a tendency to concentrate on the processes and techniques relevant to a commercial setting: this was an entirely different way of thinking from his own. 'I was interested in vapour, and light, and scale,' he comments, 'and the direction

of illustration is more literal. There are a number of tremendously skilful and sophisticated illustrators at work today, and I admire their wonderful techniques, but I always have the feeling that their work is rather heartless. Although I respect their abilities, what they produce doesn't resonate with me. My work is all about atmosphere and, although I can't exactly say where that resides in a painting, I do feel that it is where the heart lies. No matter how skilful or witty or whatever a painting is, if it doesn't have that mystery ingredient then it doesn't work for me.'



His time as a Fine Art student at Exeter College of Art & Design did not begin auspiciously. The British art-education establishment was beginning to lose its sense of direction and to ask itself what art was for: what was its meaning and purpose at the beginning of the last third of the twentieth century? With one exception, whom we shall encounter in a moment, all the teaching staff were followers of this fashion for rethinking what it was to be an artist, and they set out to put under pressure the students' perception of themselves and their preconceived notions of the art they produced.

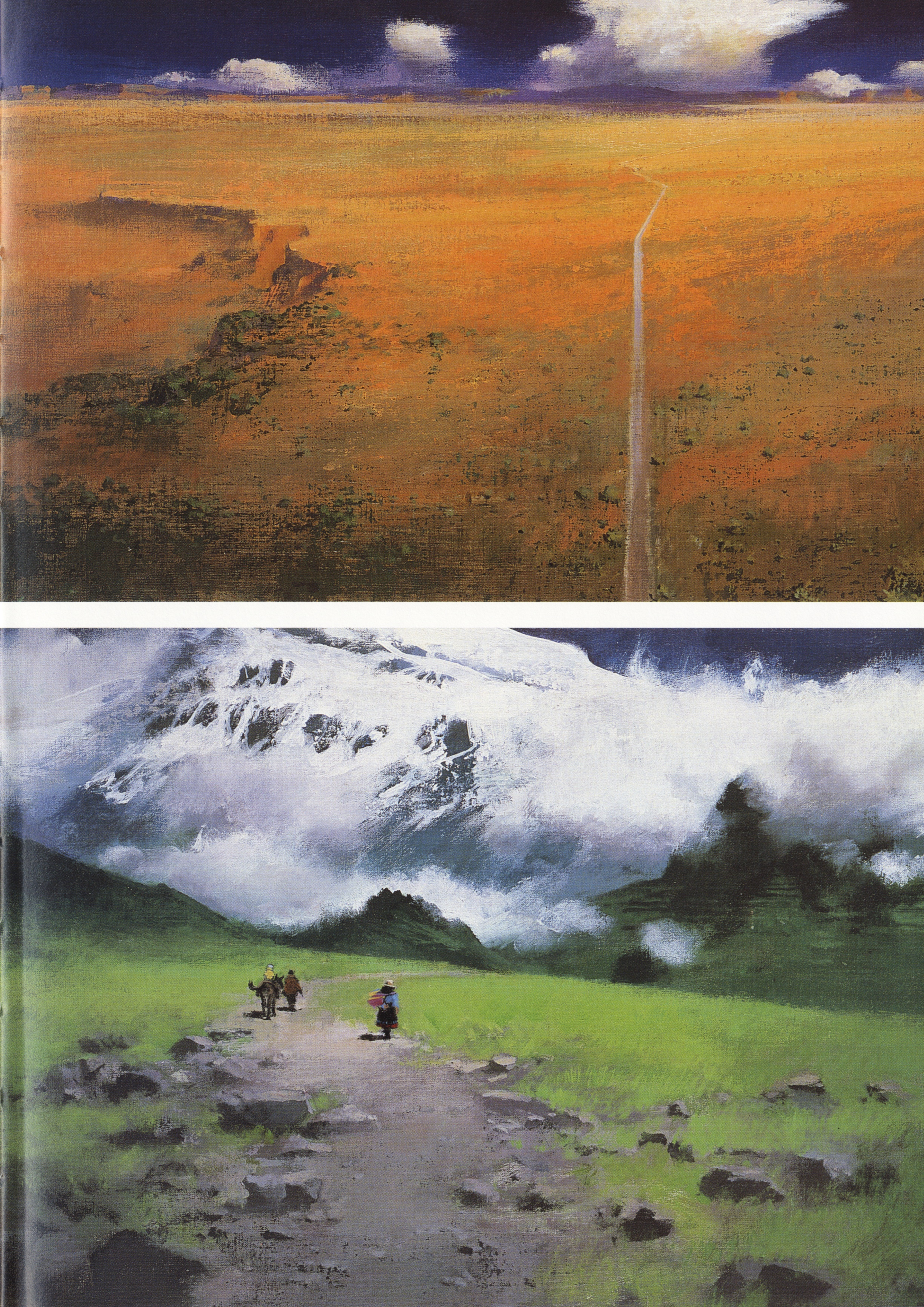
Harris believes that the tutors did not really know what they were doing – that the students, at the age of seventeen, were far too young to cope with so destructive a regime. Whenever a student showed a predilection for an artistic activity or a strong sense of identification with some idea or process, the staff would set about breaking it down with the intention of building it up again in the form which they thought was appropriate for contemporary art.

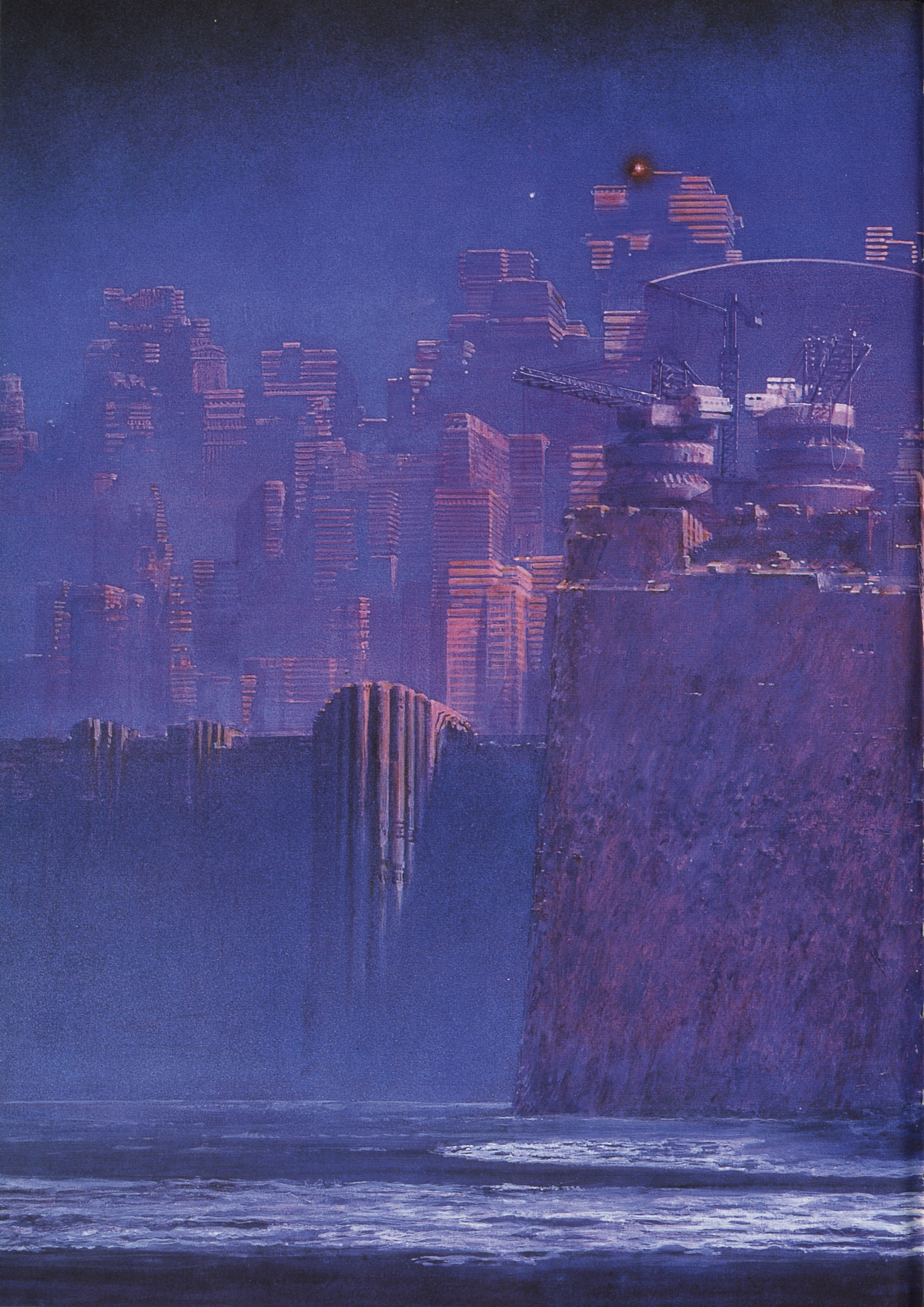
RIGHT
SAVAGE PILGRIMS
Oils on canvas
33 x 46cm (13 x 18in)
Another travel book, this time by Henry Shukman about New Mexico. 'I was trying to express the feeling I remembered from having crossed the northern tip of New Mexico: a feeling of being right on the very top of the world, and space seems just an arms length away.'

BELOW RIGHT
EIGHT FEET IN THE ANDES
Oils on canvas
38 x 46cm (15 x 18in)
Again a cover for a book by Dervla Murphy. A friend of the artist once claimed that he knew intimately one of the places that the artist had painted for this series, even though Harris had done it entirely from imagination! 'This one's looking east in the late afternoon,' he says, 'but don't ask me how I know.'

BELOW
EARTHLY DELIGHTS
Oils on canvas
33 x 46cm (13 x 18in)
This landscape is typical of the area along the Surrey–Sussex border in which the artist grew up. The painting was commissioned for the cover of the book by Constance Laux, published by Zebra USA.











RIGHT AND ABOVE
ASTROPOLIS
Acrylics on board
81 x 51cm (32 x 20in)
One of a series for *The Best of Trek*, edited by Walter Irwin and G.B. Love and published by ROC, New American Library. The initial study (shown above) is executed in charcoal and chalk, and illustrates the open-ended process which begins the search for an image.

This experience proved disastrous for many of them: in the year-group above the one that Harris joined, almost one-third of all the students failed to complete their course. 'The trouble was that the staff were very good at the breaking-down part of the process, but they didn't know how to build up a new way of thinking. In fact, I don't think they really knew what to aim for.'

Students had to justify verbally, in terms acceptable to the tutors, the value of the work they did. They were required to plead its validity in the context of mid-twentieth-century art values, and justify its relevance to modern culture. But Harris was not interested in breaking new ground; he was interested in traditional painting. He felt there was still an enormous amount that could be done – originally, creatively – within the realm of representational painting. And he still feels that way: 'Just because J.M.W. Turner, Samuel Palmer and Ivon Hitchens did these wonderful paintings of mood and colour, this does not imply that no one else can do such paintings without being a plagiarist. Revolution does not have to be total. There are still huge possibilities within the realms of representative landscape painting. I didn't feel that the people who wanted to do action painting or Pop Art were wrong: it just didn't resonate with me.'

He doubts whether it truly resonated with many of the other students either. 'I can't believe that everybody was wedded to that revolutionary spirit: it's a rare thing. I think that those individuals who are seen to be great – Picasso, Pollock, de Kooning – are rare people. And when, out of thirty students in a year-group at a provincial art college, twenty-five are trying to be at the cutting edge of the modern art revolution, something is not quite right.'

PREVIOUS SPREAD
RUN TO THE STARS
Shellac inks on board
51 x 71cm (20 x 28in)
The contrast between the stillness of the background and the eruption of the craft out of the water provides the drama for this early (1980) inks painting for the cover of Mike Scott Rohan's novel.





There was, however, one tutor at Exeter College of Art & Design who had a completely different attitude, who spent all his time drawing traditionally, and with a quite rigorous and vigorous discipline. His name was Mike Garton.

Harris immediately identified with Garton's approach to painting. The two men, tutor and student, were of a similar nature. Garton, a farmer's son, was an ex-student of the avant-garde painter David Bomberg. He felt there was great value in an approach to painting which involves a reassessment of what the human eye actually sees – and that in drawing and painting it is

LEFT
THE CHAOS EQUATIONS
Acrylics on board
76 x 51cm (30 x 20in)
Cover for an Ace Books edition of the novel by Robert E. Vardeman.

BELOW
FOOTFALL
Acrylics on board
46 x 38cm (18 x 15in)
Cover for a Sphere Books reprint of the novel by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle.



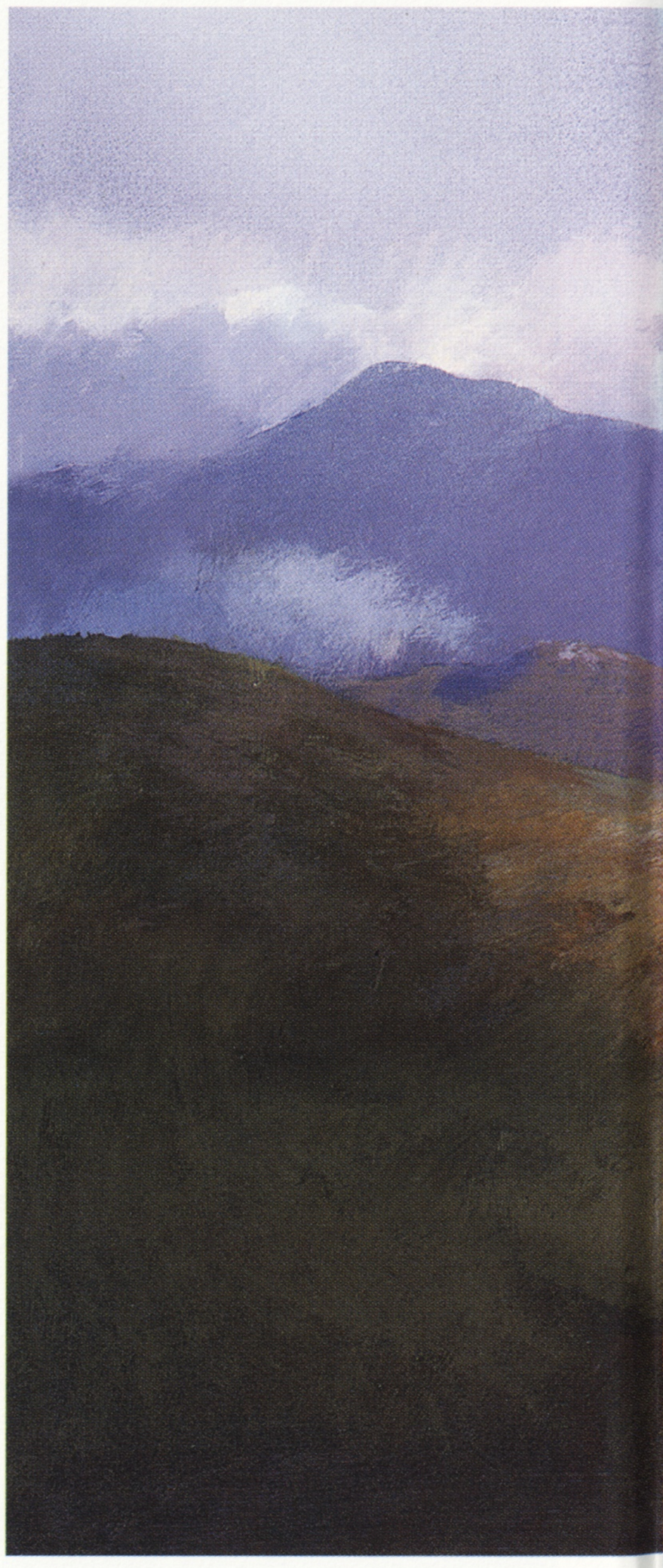
what you see, not what you know, that is important. Garton was particularly excited by the complex range of colours and patterns in trees, and his method of working involved drawing across forms, recording accurately what was seen while deliberately refusing to allow the intellect to recognize and consciously differentiate the leaves or branches, the sunlight or shadow.

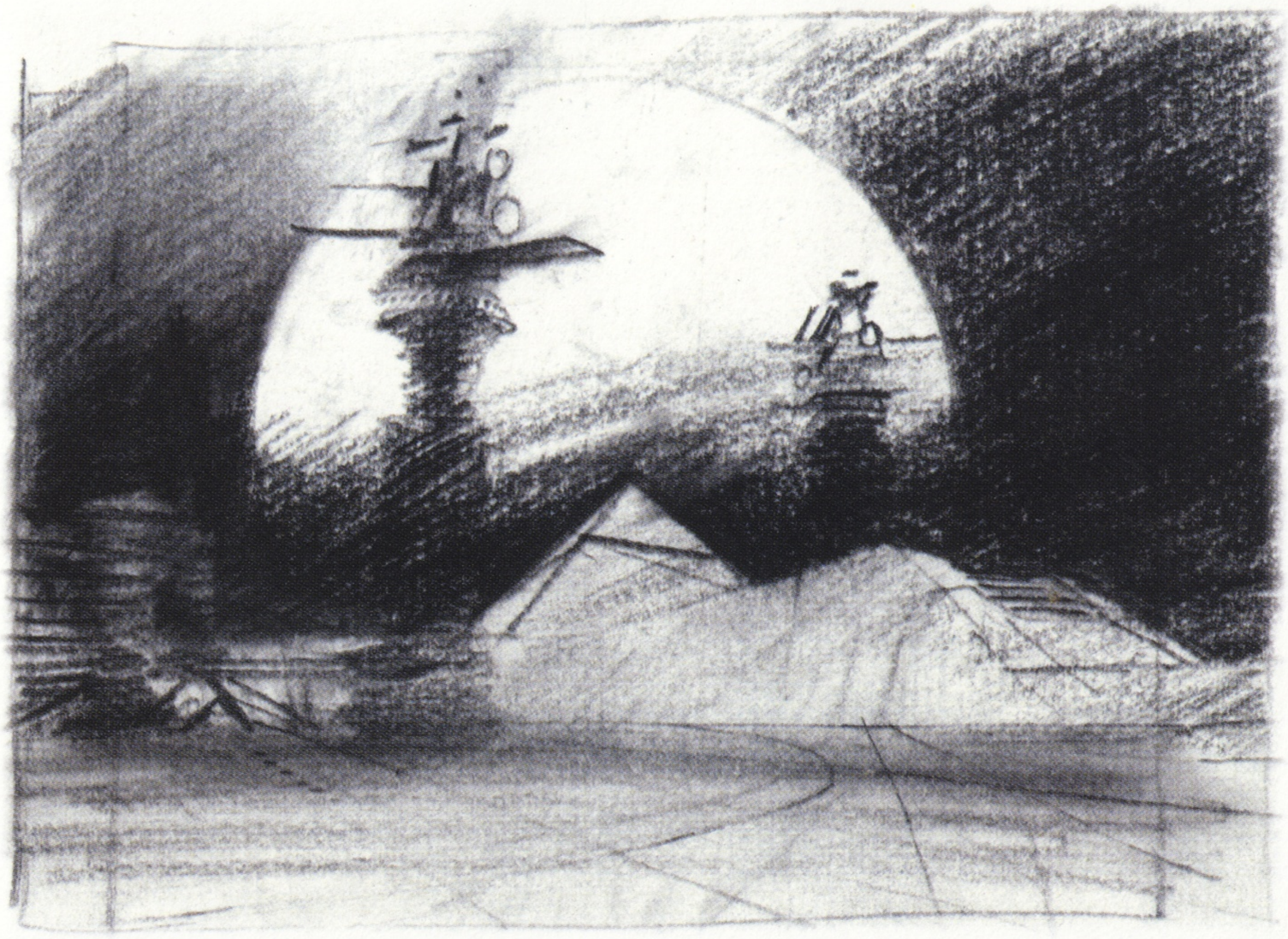
It might seem that this mindset would be at odds with the notion of painting fantastic pictures of space, but in fact Harris intuitively realized that, if one could apply the same kind of vision to imagined imagery, that imagery would partake of the same credibility as reality itself. His ambition became to draw or paint as though it were actually there in front of him something which had been seen only in his mind, and to do so by simply painting what he saw rather than what his conscious mind knew must be there.



BELOW LEFT
BURNING OFF ARCTURUS
A rough for *Dreadnought Star Wolves 4* by Don Puckey. Published by Warner Books.

BELOW
CROSS-STITCH
Acrylics on board
30.5 x 43cm (12 x 17in)
This cover illustration required a painting of a Scottish landscape. Since the 1970s the Scottish Highlands, particularly around Glencoe, have been a favourite haunt of the artist. This scene, painted from imagination, represents an amalgam of a number of places he has come to know well. Published by Random Century, UK.





LEFT
THE LOST CITY
Inspired by the Ray Bradbury classic *The Martian Chronicles*, this sketch hints at the past glories of an ancient and alien culture now long deserted.







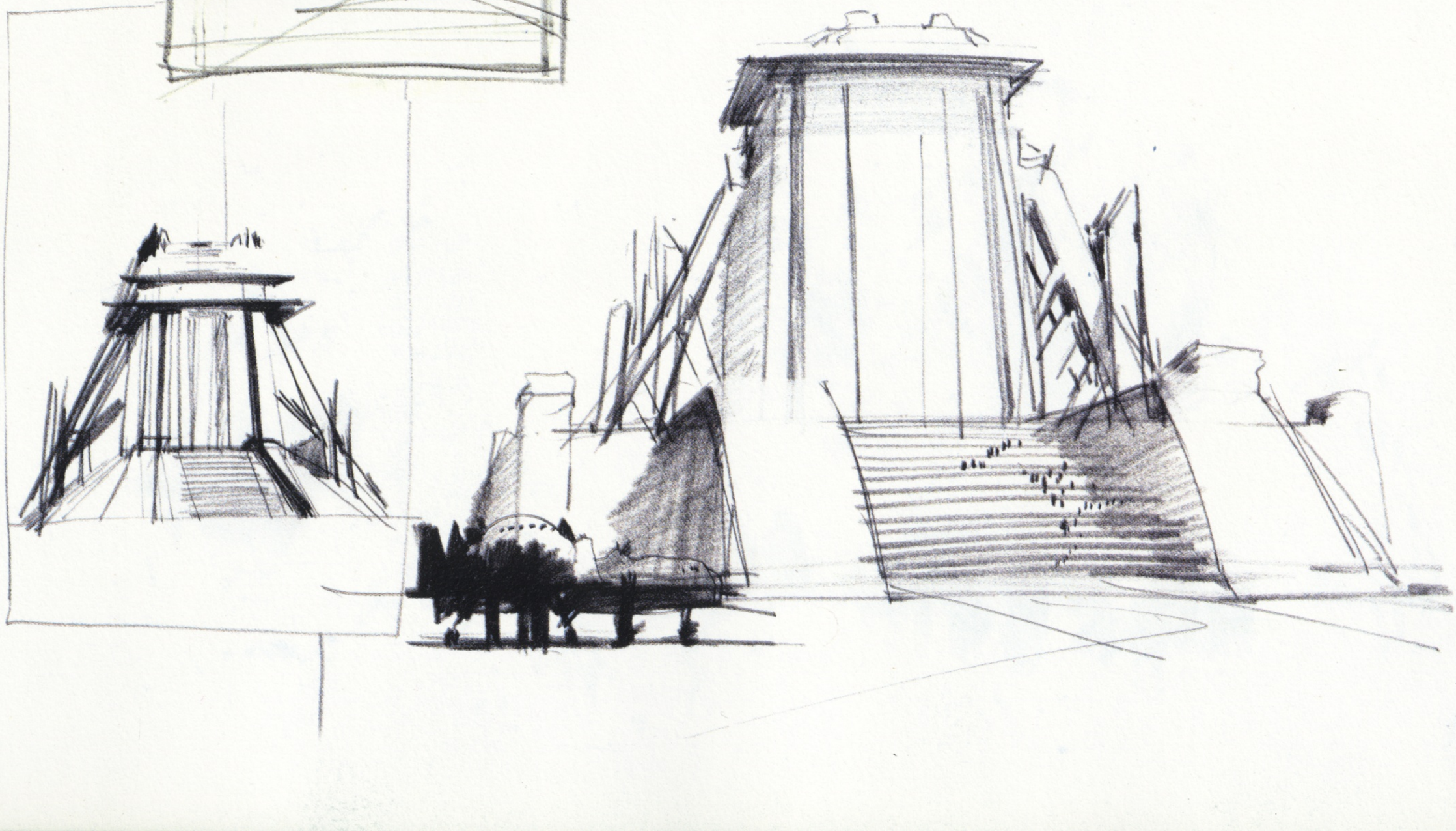
He found many of the things he was given to do at Exeter tedious and uninspiring. One project was to draw an object so that it could be constructed from the information in the drawing. He took a holly leaf and tried to analyse its incredibly complex, three-dimensional geometry by means of an isometric drawing – without ever having done an isometric drawing before and not knowing how to go about it. He built a cube and placed the holly leaf inside it, then tried to pin down in space every eighth of an inch of surface. 'God, it was tedious!' he says. 'Actually, that epitomizes everything I had to do at art college – they were effortless to do if one just did them by intuition, but the moment you put rules down about how to do something, my creativity, my energy, my power as an artist – whatever that is – just dries up. I can't do it. I can work only in a chaotic, fluid, rambling fashion. It's the way I am.'

At the end of the course he graduated with a very mediocre pass, partly because he had spent a great amount of time on an enormous – and what he now views as a quixotic – project: building a perspex box which he intended to fill with a starscape by drilling tiny indentations so that, when you shone a light up into it, the refractivity of the perspex would make

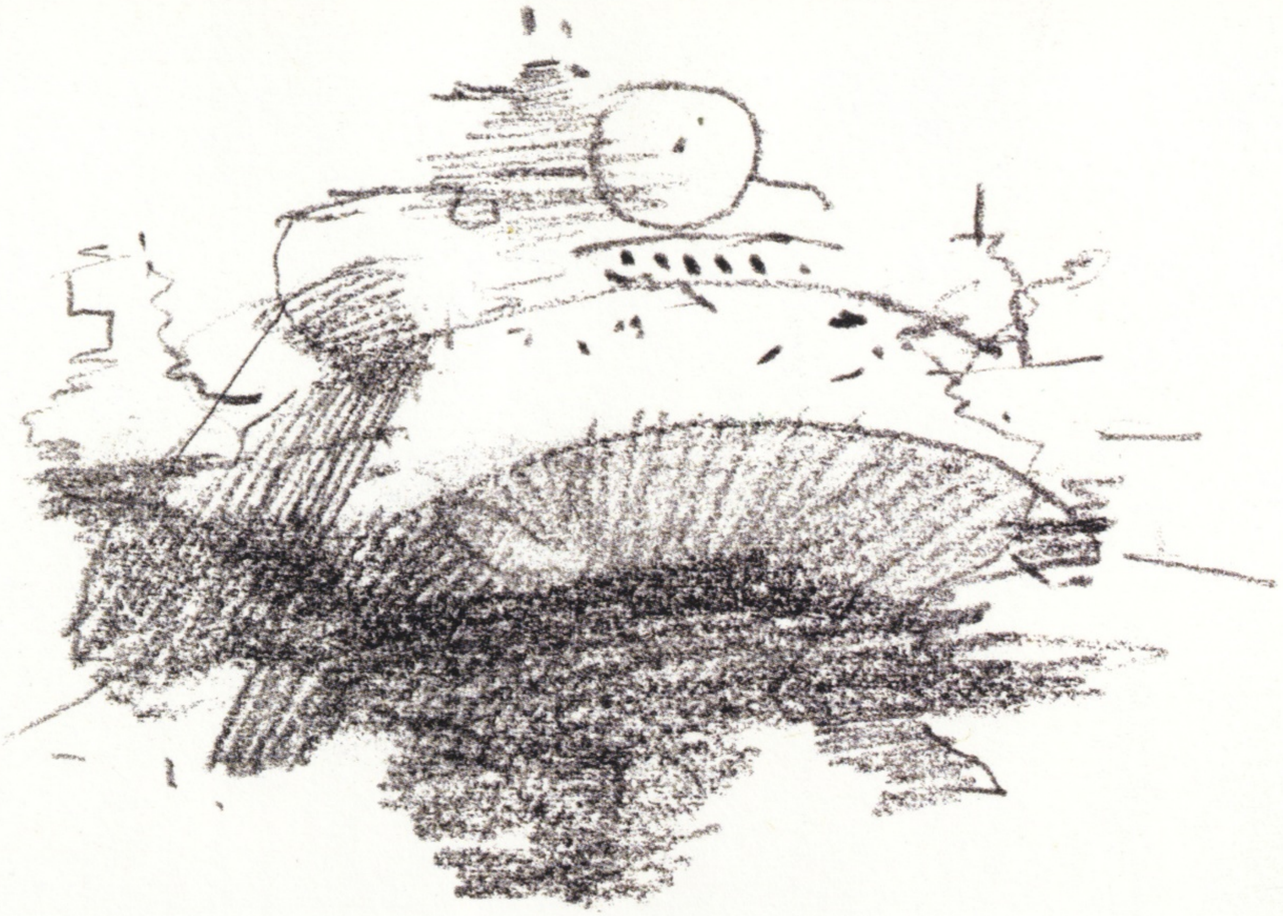
PREVIOUS SPREAD
THE STARS LIKE DUST
Acrylics on canvas
46 x 61cm (18 x 24in)
Cover for a HarperCollins edition of the novel by Isaac Asimov. The contrast between the coarse heavy solidity of crumbling masonry and the vacuum of space is a constant source of possibilities in imagery.

RIGHT
TEMPLE
Acrylics on board
71 x 51cm (28 x 20in)
Cover for a volume in the series *The Best of Trek*, edited by Walter Irwin and G.B. Love and published by ROC, New American Library. The motif of crowds on steps seems to have a special significance. It occupies a central place in the paintings from the planned book of the *Fire* series. Below, preliminary studies.







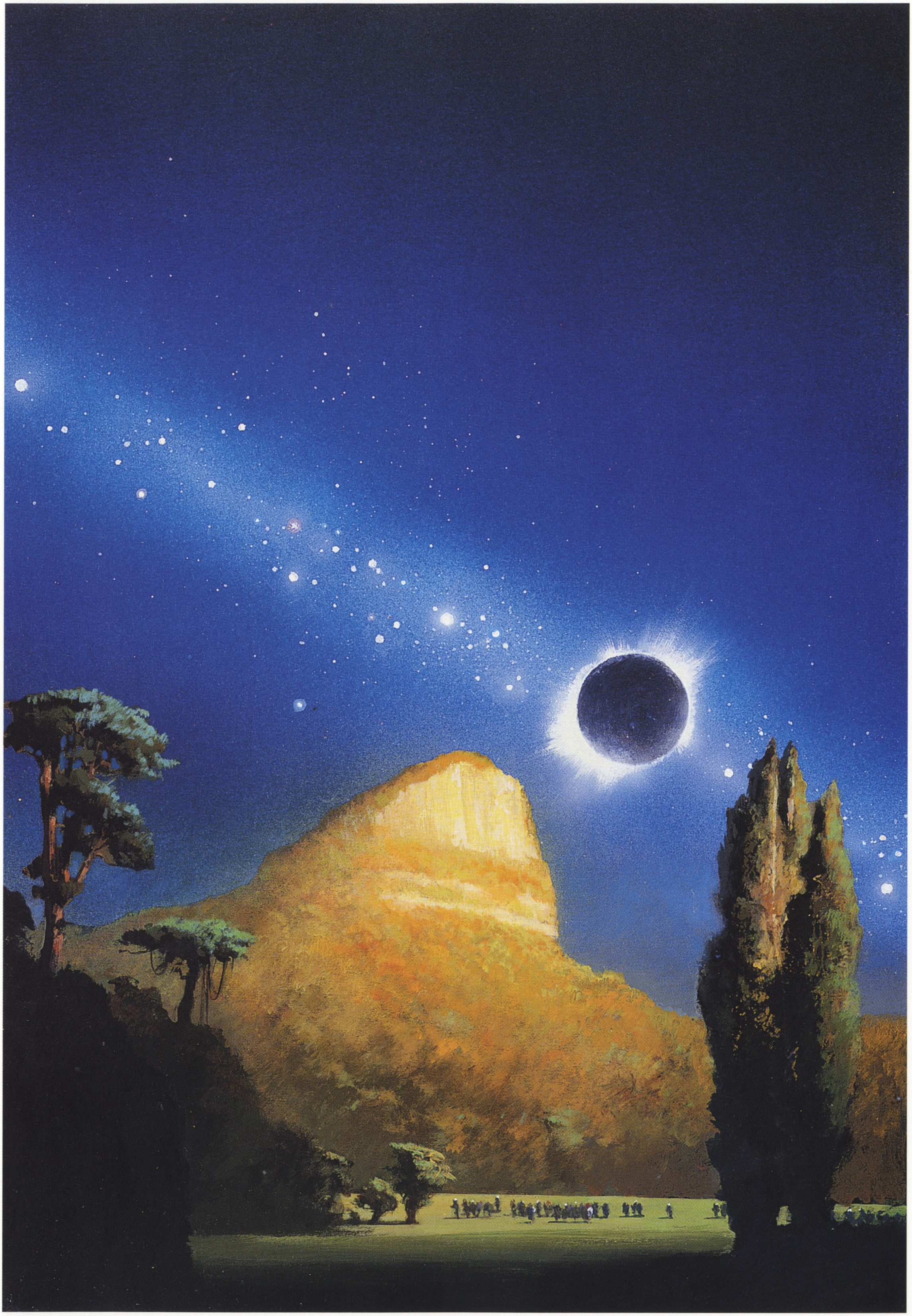




LEFT
TRITON
Acrylics on board
76 x 51cm (30 x 20in)
Cover for a Grafton Books edition of the novel by Samuel R. Delany. A companion piece for *Dhalgren*.

RIGHT
DHALGREN
Acrylics on board
76 x 51cm (30 x 20in)
Buildings on fire that do not burn, was the haunting image from the novel by Samuel R. Delany that the artist chose for this cover. Published by Grafton Books.

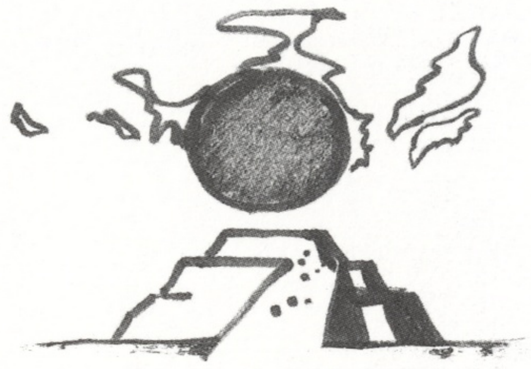




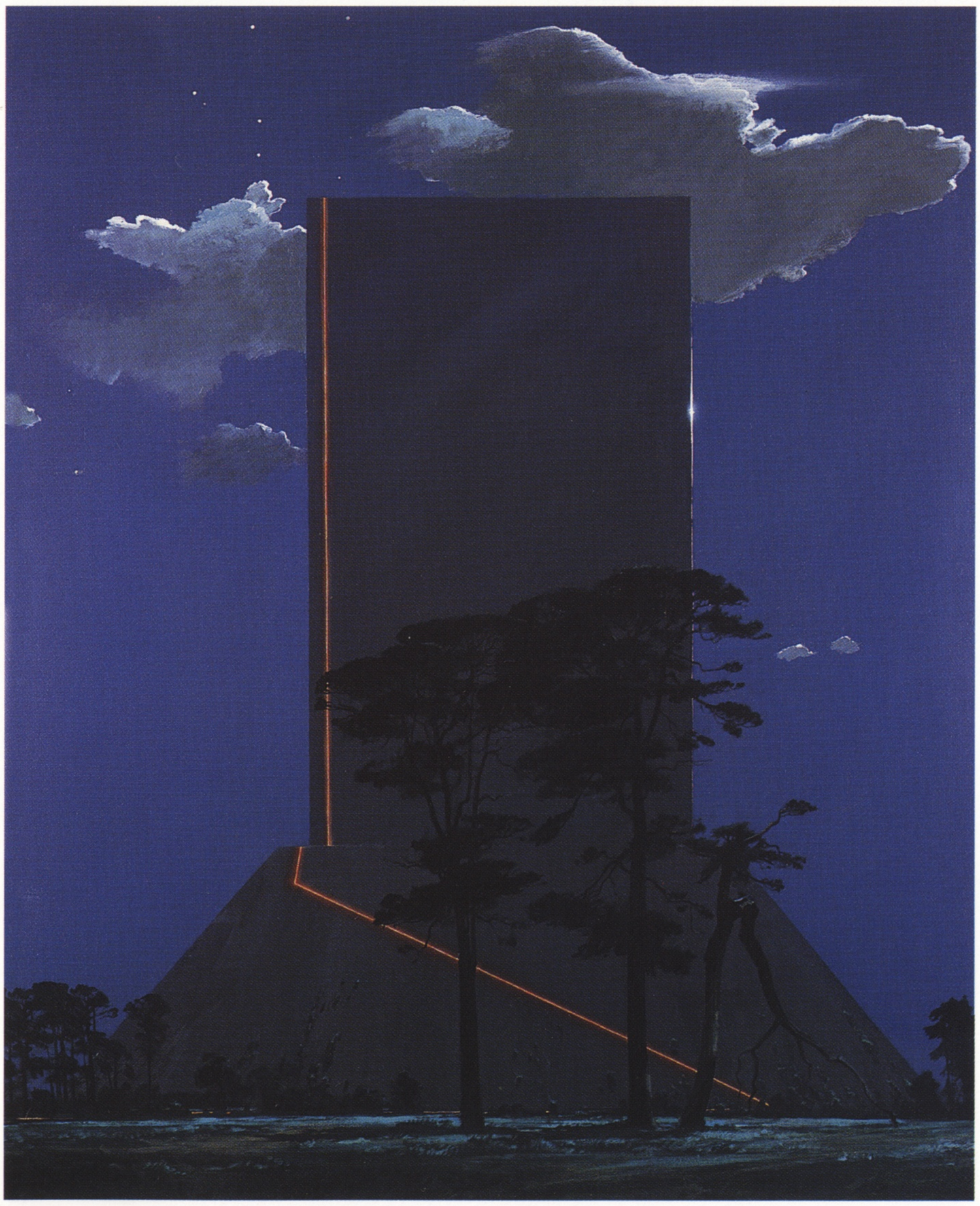


LEFT AND ABOVE DETAIL
THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION
Acrylics on board
46 x 30.5cm (18 x 12in)
Another Grafton Books cover for a Samuel R. Delany novel, harking back to an era of magic and mystery when the world was young.

them glow in the dark. The result would, he thought, look like a galaxy of stars. 'I was still so excited by my feelings about astronomy and space that I didn't really care about what I was going to do with my life as an artist. I just wanted to explore all that marvellous imagined experience. The box idea was a complete waste of time because it didn't really work. But the photographs of it looked pretty good.' He remembers his tutor saying, 'This is the coffin you're going to bury yourself in, is it?'

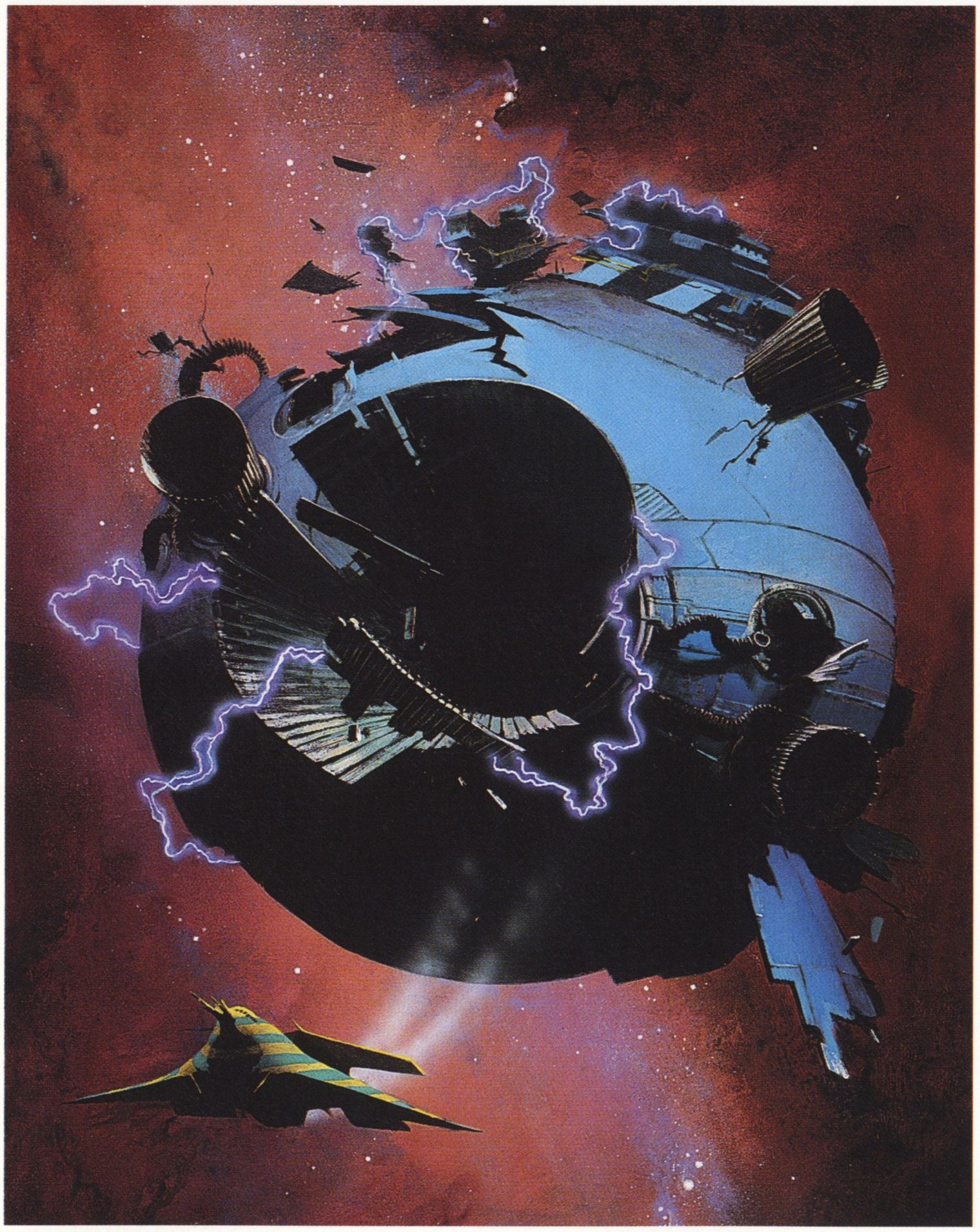


At the end of the course at Exeter students were required to exhibit the work they had produced. Harris had by this time created a number of paintings and drawings on astronomical themes. At the diploma exhibition a local writer, William West, approached him and said: 'I don't know whether you're any good or not, but at least you're trying to say something, so if you're interested I'll give you an introduction to an artists' agency in London.'



RIGHT
A DREAM OF STARLIGHT
Acrylics on hardboard
89 x 61cm (35 x 24in)
This allegory represents our constant aspiration to greater and greater achievements, very often at the expense of Nature – even though a part of that aspiration is to be more integrated into Nature's great scheme. The soulless artificial structure in the background, consisting of a pyramid surmounted by a *Space Odyssey*-style obelisk, is in stark contrast to the three foreground trees.





ABOVE
THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE (DETAIL)
Acrylics on board
46 x 28cm (18 x 11in)
The title of the novel – by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle – refers to a particular bright star being embedded in a dust cloud, the whole assemblage giving the appearance of a hooded man with one blazing eye. Published by HarperCollins, UK.

LEFT
BREAK-UP
Acrylics on board
51 x 33cm (20 x 13in)
Cover for an Ace Books edition of *Galactic Warriors*, the second volume in David F. Bischoff's *Star Hounds* series. When compared to the similar, rather dread image of *The Chaos Equations* (page 40) this takes on an almost comic look, in which the sound of *ping!* can be clearly heard.

RIGHT
STRENGTH OF STONES, FLESH OF BRASS
Shellac inks on board
61 x 40.5cm (24 x 16in)
Cover for a reprint of the novel by Greg Bear published by Ace Books.





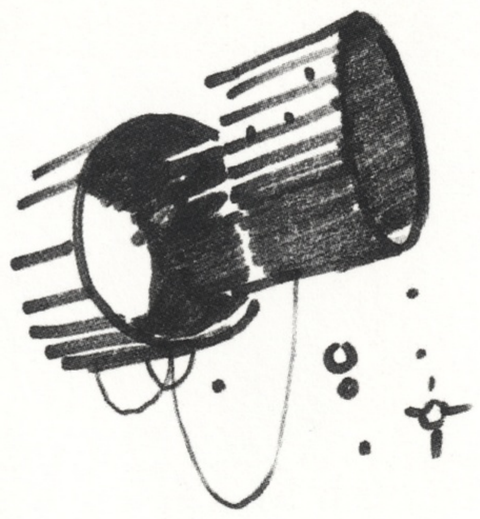


ABOVE
THE LAST LAUNCH
This sketch is a variation on the theme of departure as used in *The Best of Trek*.

This was an offer Harris could not refuse, because by this time he was deeply in debt, his parents having declined to finance him through his art studies. He was accordingly sent to Steven Fry, who had offices in Wardour Street. During his years at college Harris had produced a great number of observational drawings; while these were very important in developing his understanding of and skill in manipulating light and shadow, they did not constitute a commercially oriented portfolio with which to impress a publisher. So he took with him a selection consisting of a few drawings and a ceiling design that featured an image of the astronaut Ed White floating in space at the end of a golden cable – 'I found this a tremendously poetic image.' He calculated that, by placing this image on a ceiling and distorting it somewhat, he could make it look, when viewed across the room, as though it were actually standing out from the surface. In other words, he thought he could play the same sort of trick with it that Holbein did in his painting *The Ambassadors*, in which the artist included a grossly distorted image of a human skull which could be clearly read only if the painting were hung at the top of a flight of stairs and viewed diagonally from below.

Through Fry he was introduced to Christopher MacLehose, then of the publishing house Victor Gollancz, from whom he got a few commissions for book covers. But the need to support himself and pay off his debts made it necessary to find some way of making a regular income. He got a job as an exhibition designer for St Pancras Library, in northwest London, and subsequently became a librarian there.

But by this time there was something else happening to the young John Harris, something that had nothing to do with the practical problems of everyday living.



LEFT
THE AGE OF PUSSYFOOT
Shellac inks on board
63.5 x 40.5cm (25 x 16in)
Cover for an edition of the novel by Frederik Pohl originally published as *The Age of the Pussyfoot* by Grafton Books.



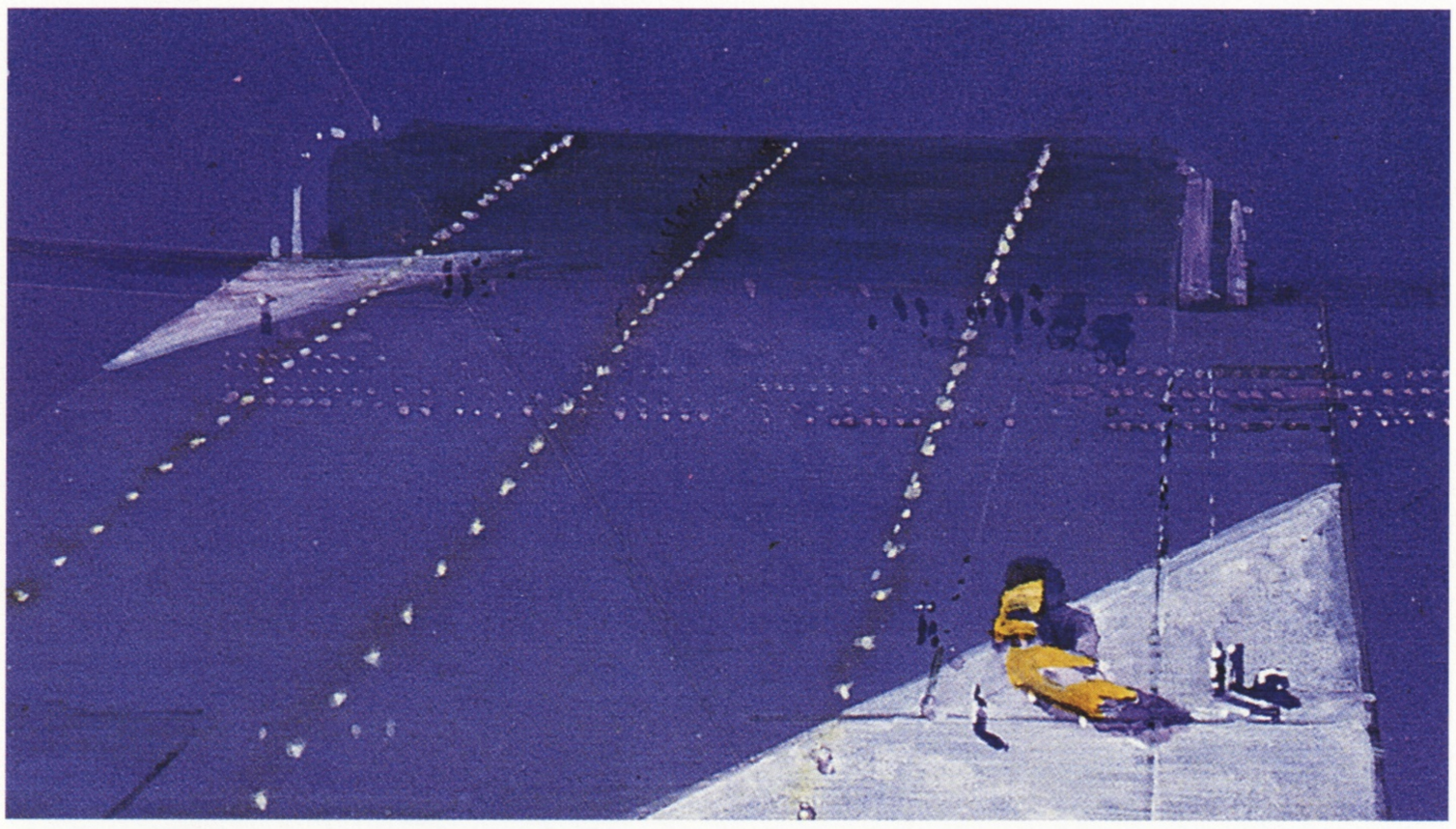
THE ROADS TO MASS, AND BEYOND

Now in his early twenties, John Harris, reference librarian at St Pancras, still had not decided what he was going to do with his life. The notion of being an artist seemed to have faded. Perhaps he would have remained permanently in the library service had it not been that his life had developed another dimension of great importance to him. He had experienced a number of visions.

These were not simply stirring dreams, nor were they the flights of an unusually vivid imagination. They were genuine visionary experiences, each one of which left its mark on his thinking and had a profound effect on his inner life. Moreover, every one of them involved, at least in part, some allusion to his thoughts and feelings about space and the stars. In one he seemed to be standing in a desert watching the rotation of the Andromeda Galaxy – this despite the fact that he knew, even as he watched, that the period of rotation of that galaxy is something of the order of two thousand million years. In another vision he stood in the playing fields of his old school and looked up to see with a dreadful rush

THE MASS PICTURES
These pictures form a loose collection of images that are connected by the common themes of vastness (in both time and space) and of possible futures for mankind. Originally intended to form the backbone of an illustrated piece of fiction, they were completed between 1978 and 1979, although many have been repainted since.

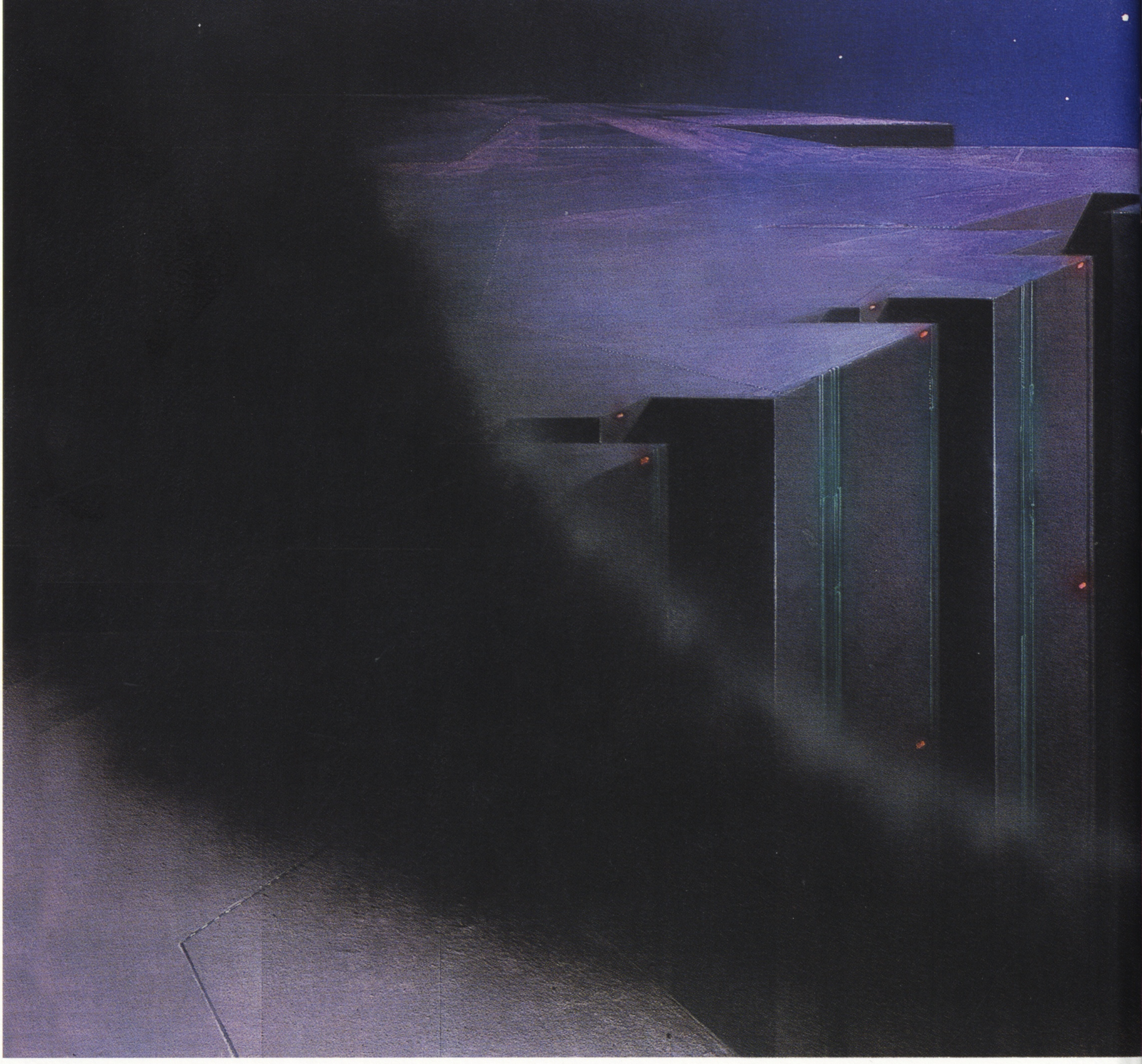
RIGHT
MASS: THE WALL
Oils on hardboard
152.5 x 122cm (60 x 48in)
This is one of the earliest versions of an image which appears again in the most recent of the artist's projects, *Fire*. In the form shown here it was used on the cover of the operating manual for the Sinclair ZX81 computer.



BELOW AND DETAIL LEFT
MASS: AIRPORT
Shellac inks on board
30.5 x 61cm (12 x 24in)
These structures, provoked by thoughts about space-saving in future airports, feature a vertical stacking facility and runways which rotate so that aircraft can set off in a predetermined direction, thus avoiding overcrowding in the skies above. This picture was painted when the Boeing 747 was a state-of-the-art flying machine.





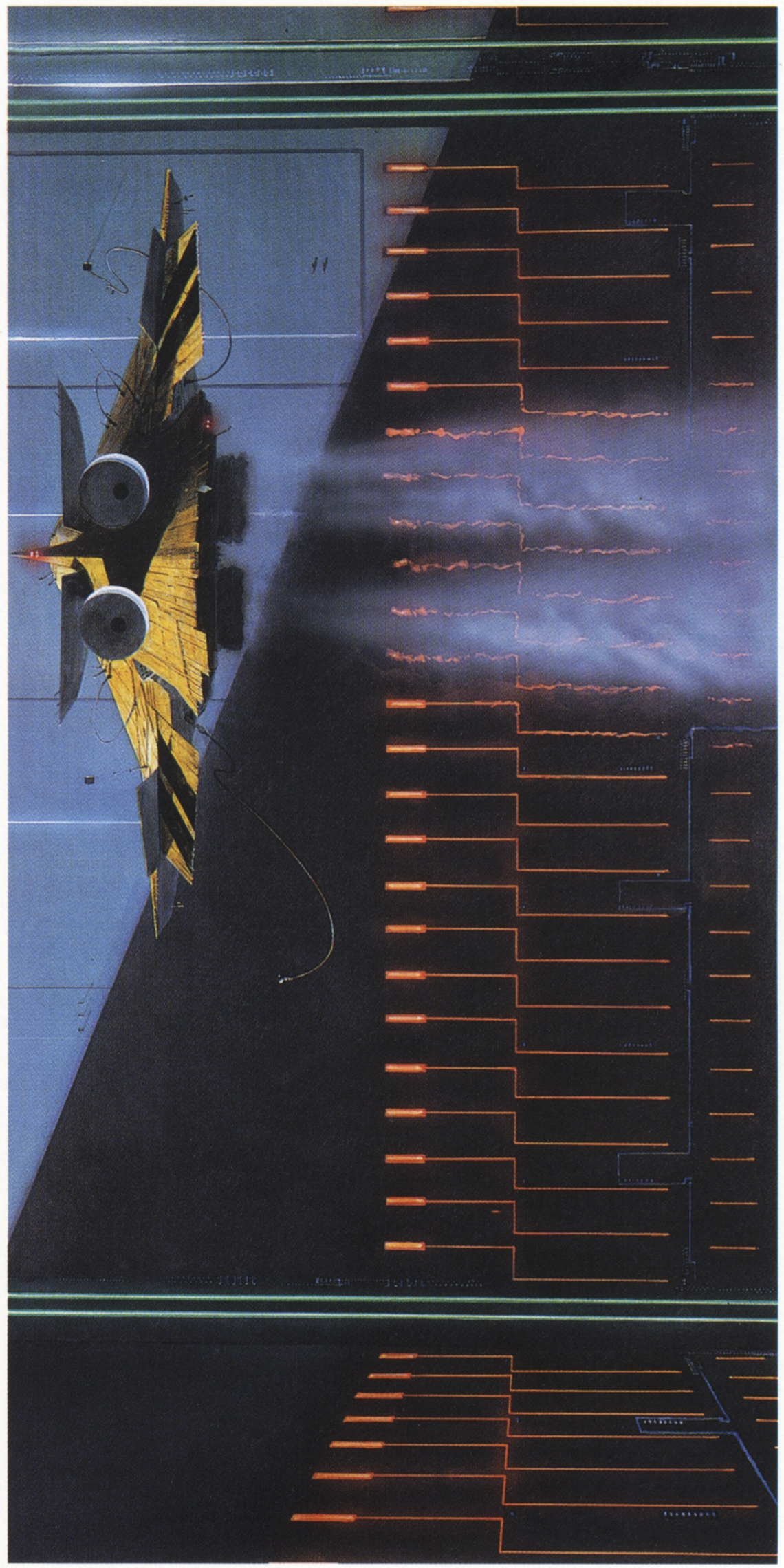


of fear and alarm that the Moon was falling towards the Earth, getting bigger and bigger, obliterating more and more of the starry night sky as he watched. (Many years later this vision would give rise to his painting *Mass: Inside the Roche Limit: Quiet Night* – further discussed below.) But these experiences, though they were both awe-inspiring and terrifying, did not at the time urge him towards painting.

He had always had a tendency to suffer from migraines, and during one of these attacks he had an overpowering visionary experience which left him utterly convinced that there are vast dimensions of being, far beyond what we are and what we see. It led him to a study of Buddhism, and this in turn led to an interest in mysticism and meditation. Eventually he decided to seek out the Indian mystic Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, whose Spiritual Regeneration movement had become the subject of a great amount of media attention three years before when the Beatles had briefly shown an interest in it. After studying meditation techniques in Exeter and London, Harris left St Pancras Library and set out to meet the guru in Italy

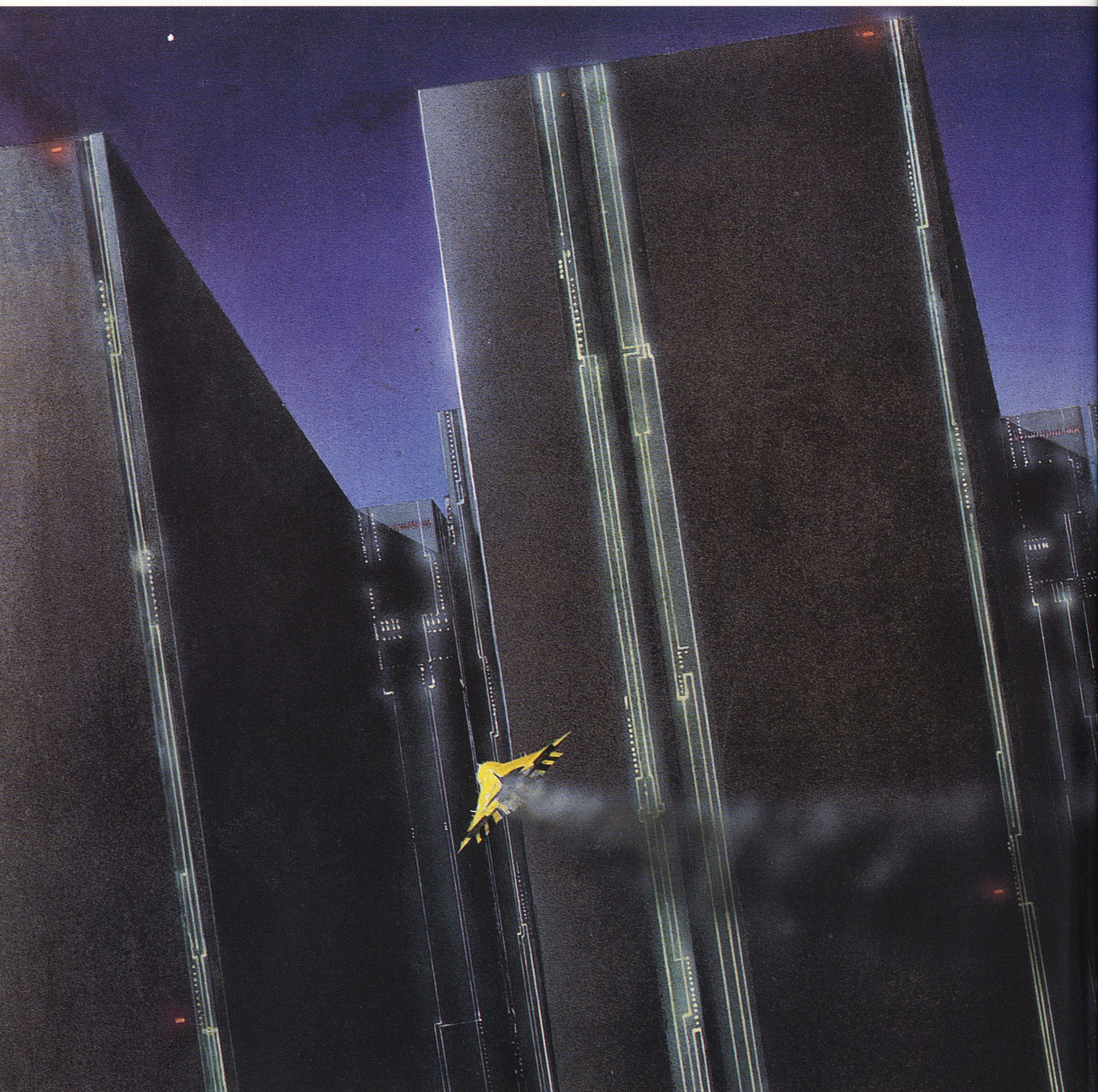
MASS: PEGASUS 1, 2 AND 3
Shellac inks on board
38 x 76cm (15 x 30in) each
PEGASUS (Processor for the Extrapolation of Gravitational Anomalies in Space with Ultralase Systems) is a gigantic computer. Built on an airless moon, it plots the distortions of space created by the movement of billions of stars. Even with nanotechnology, such a computer would be so vast that signals travelling along its circuits – even at the speed of light – might take years to effect the complex calculations. The ultralase system – a variant of hyperspace technology – was invented to speed up the process. The trilogy of paintings was conceived as a storyboard to show the experience of a flight into the computer, expressing the plunge (above), drift (overleaf) and rise (right) of a craft on its approach, prior to installing its flight program.





with the intention of travelling on afterwards to India. As it turned out, he stayed with the Maharishi for five years and was himself a teacher of meditation in Spain, in Italy and finally in Switzerland. He found the philosophy very fulfilling and became deeply involved in the movement. 'It enabled me to express in practical ways what I am. So my real training, my real education as an artist, wasn't at art college. It was those years I spent sitting on my butt or running around doing the Maharishi's bidding.'

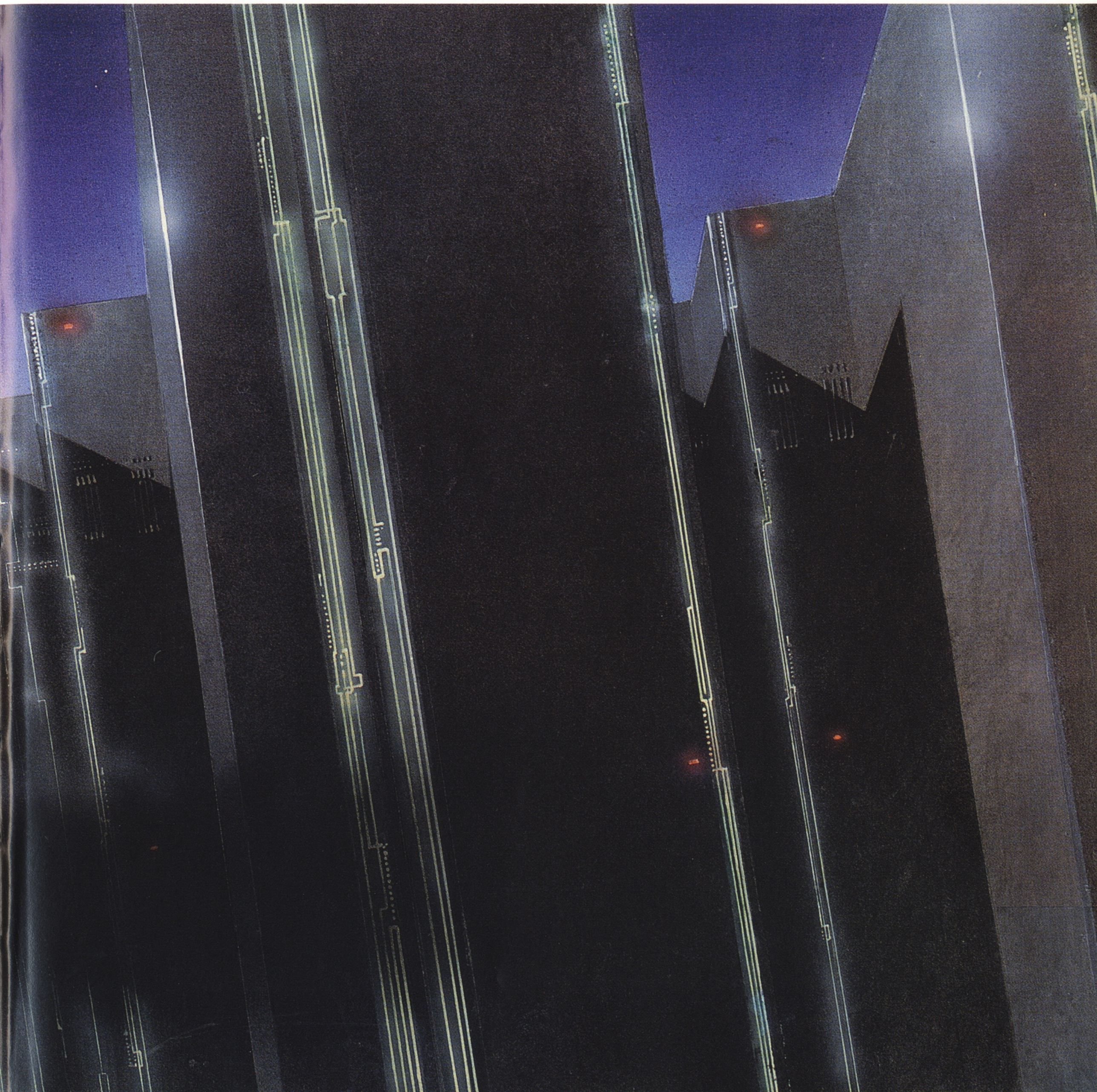
As the years passed, however, the movement got bigger and bigger until it became an almost monstrous thing, with thousands of people struggling desperately for the attention of one man. Harris began to perceive herein a greed for experience that could never be satisfied. 'It became something I would not have wanted to get into had it been like that when I first found it. I began to feel trapped.'



He still had images inside his head that would not leave him alone. The complete alteration in his way of life, from conventional librarian to monkish ascetic, had not changed that. They were still the same kind of images, too. They were to do with the feeling he had had ever since his early schooldays concerning space and the predicament of humankind standing on the surface of a planet, regarding the stars.

The way of life for members of the Maharishi's movement was indeed almost monastic. They would get up at six o'clock every morning, have a cold bath, do yoga asanas, then meditate. This was followed by more asanas and more meditation before they went down to breakfast. The period of time between getting up and eating would be about four hours. The same routine would be followed in the evening.

One summer Harris began getting up even earlier. They were at the



time in Switzerland, and he wanted to watch the sunrise over Lake Lucerne: the vaporous atmosphere between the mountains there gave daybreak a wonderfully dramatic quality.

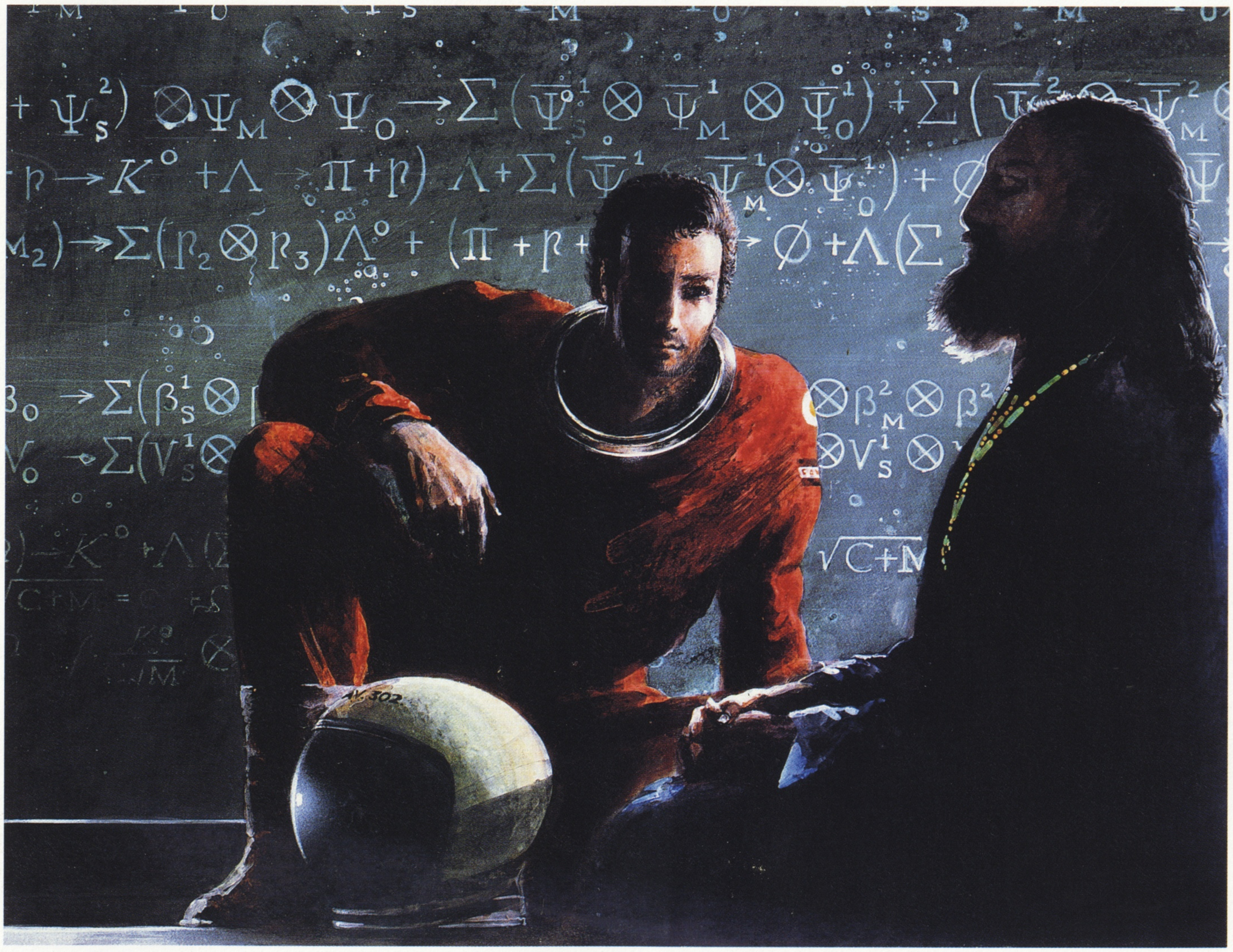
He was staying in a hotel which the movement had bought – a sister establishment to the Hotel Sonnenburg, just across the road, in which Mahler and Wagner had often stayed. Both were grand old nineteenth-century hotels, decaying and crumbling, but nevertheless still very beautiful. They stood close to the edge of a two-thousand-foot cliff that dropped sheer to the surface of the lake; sometimes the residents could look down and watch as below them Swiss Air Force planes did low-flying exercises over the water.

To observe the sun put on its daily pyrotechnic dawn display over the mountains he had to get up at about four-thirty in the morning. He began making sketches, and found he could capture the light and vapour of the scene quite naturally. With this came the realization that he had the means to express and get out of his system some of the thoughts and images that had assailed him for so long.

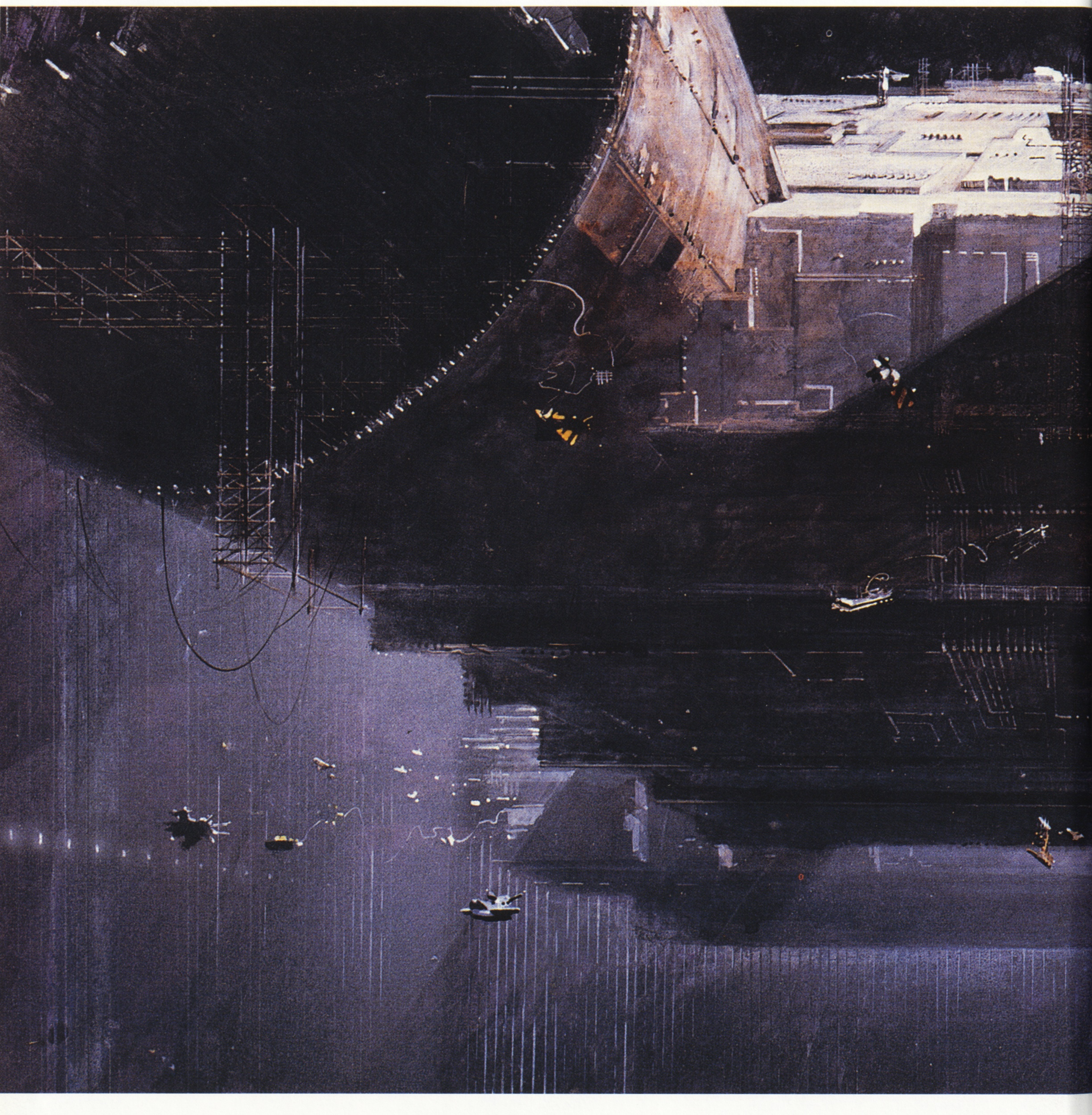
He was not the only one to have this sort of experience. Among the group with him in Switzerland was a man who had been a concert pianist. This man had been subjecting himself to the strict regime of yoga and meditation known as rounding for about six months, and so had not been

RIGHT
ZX81
Oils on hardboard
183 x 137cm (72 x 54in)
Commissioned by Sir Clive Sinclair, this is a companion to *Microdrive* (page 11).

BELOW
MASS: THE SPACEMAN AND THE GURU
Shellac inks on board
40.5 x 51cm (16 x 20in)
The man of action goes looking in the outside world for his answers, only to discover, on returning home, that the village sage has come to the same conclusions. In this painting it is evident that it is the spaceman who is listening to the sage, but the artist now feels each would have much to offer the other.

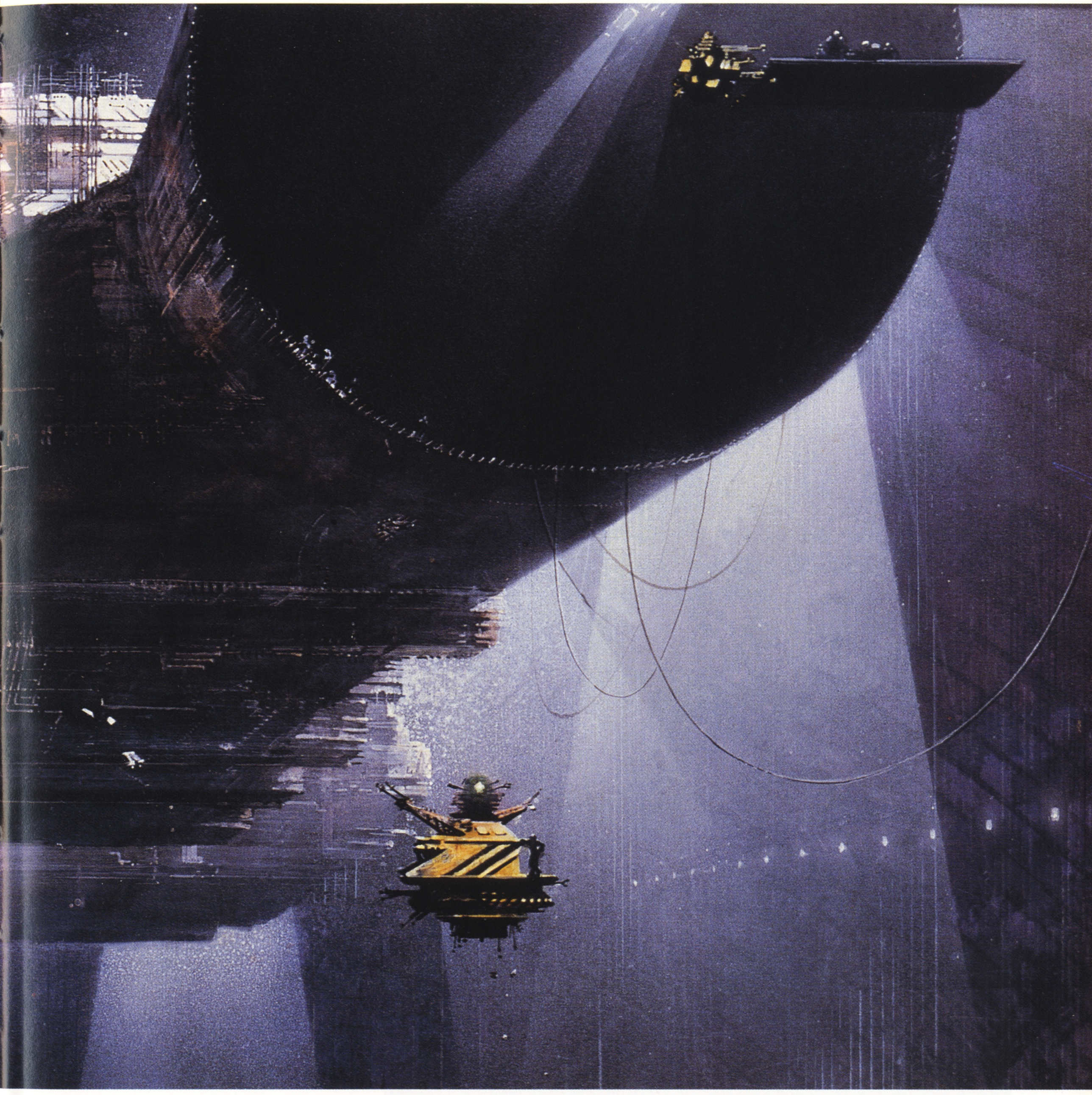






MASS: THE BUILDING OF FTL1
Shellac inks on board
30.5 x 61cm (12 x 24in)
When the dream of faster-than-light (FTL) travel is finally realized, a vast, balloon-like, orbital hangar is created to house the construction of the prototype vessel. The shipbuilders can work unhampered by either spacesuits or gravity.

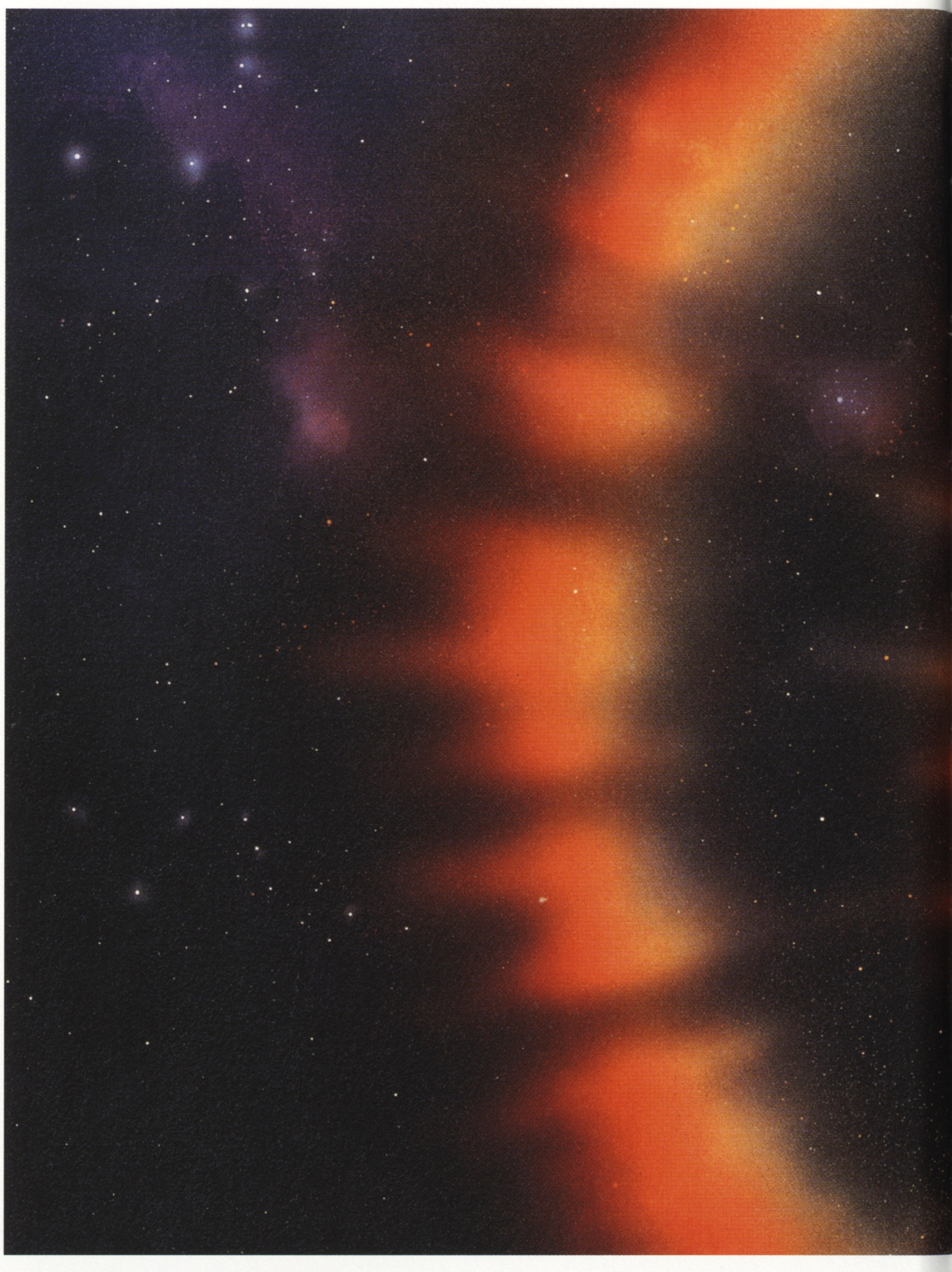
able to keep up his daily practice at the piano. For someone who had kept himself in concert readiness for many years, not to do his daily practice routines would normally be considered disastrous; quite apart from anything else, the muscles of the fingers would lose the ability to operate as they should. But this musician found to his astonishment that, when he came to sit down at the piano again, he was if anything better able to play than he had been before. He asked the Maharishi about it, and was told that this should not come as a surprise to him: ultimately technique is the result not of practice but of perception.



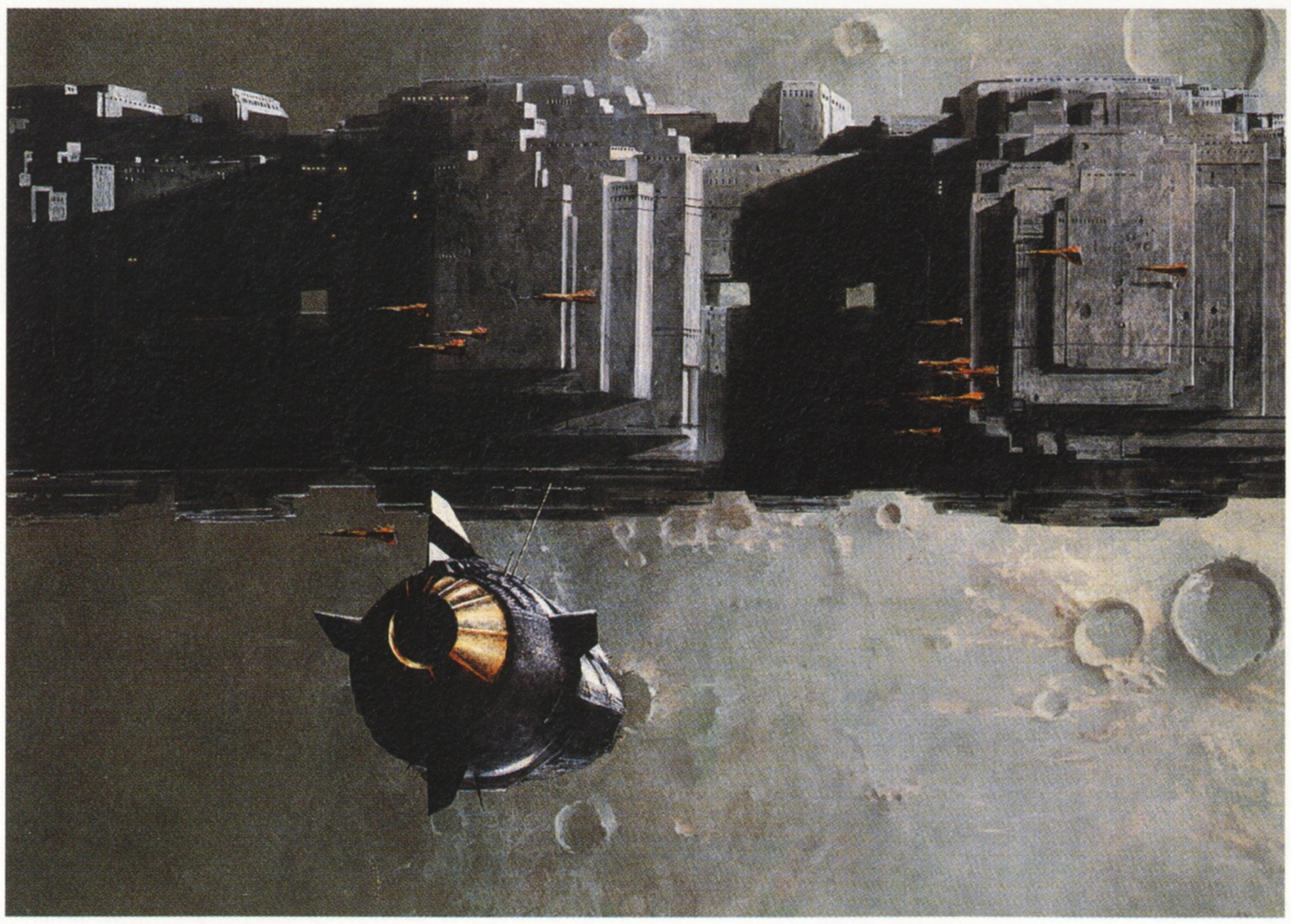
The truth of this struck John Harris very profoundly: 'Of course. If a technique has integrity it has nothing to do with training, it has nothing to do with practice, it has to do only with vision.'

He had not picked up a pencil or a brush for years – in fact, he had forgotten all about doing art – and yet he found when sketching the Lake Lucerne sunrises that he was able to express virtually anything he wanted. This had come about simply because his perceptions had become enhanced as a result of the years he had spent in meditation and spiritual study.

RIGHT
MASS: TEST FLIGHT OF FTL1
Re-entry into Hyperspace
Shellac inks on board
33 x 63.5cm (13 x 25in)
Just as a stone falling through air makes a splash when hitting water, so it may be that, when the spaceship re-enters normal space from the thinner medium of hyperspace, it might create a splash of light.



BELOW
MASS: ORBITAL PENITENTIARY
Shellac inks on board
38 x 51cm (15 x 20in)
Improvising on the grim notion of a spaceborne oubliette to which criminals can be dispatched and simply forgotten, this painting shows a ship carrying a new inmate towards the black, fascist-style architecture of a prison complex, while wardens cruise like sharks in the shallows.





'It was a revelation,' he remembers. 'I thought, "I am a painter. I can do this." So I came home and did indeed start to do it.' Those images of objects possessing enormous size or of forces possessing enormous power were filling his mind, and he felt this was something he must deal with. Accordingly, he left Lucerne and came back to England with the specific intention of playing out the images on canvas until they were gone.

Supporting himself by working as a designer in a printing workshop in Exeter, he began to build a portfolio of paintings. These he took to the London art agency Young Artists (later to become known as Arena), who took him on at once. The first person to whom the agency showed his work was Philip Dunn of Pierrot Publishing, who was in the process of compiling a sumptuously illustrated book to be entitled *Alien Landscapes*. Harris was offered the job of painting three double-page spreads depicting James Blish's Okie Cities – far-future cities that have detached themselves from the Earth and sailed off to become nomads wandering through space,

OVERLEAF
MASS: FLOATING CITY
Shellac inks on board
38 x 51cm (15 x 20in)
Within the context of the *Mass* series, this painting was the first in which the artist was consciously painting light and air in the manner of a traditional landscape painter. In the future that is conceived here, the solution to gravity-free engineering has been discovered. This would undoubtedly represent a liberation for us and also allow the surface of the planet to recover from excessive urbanization.





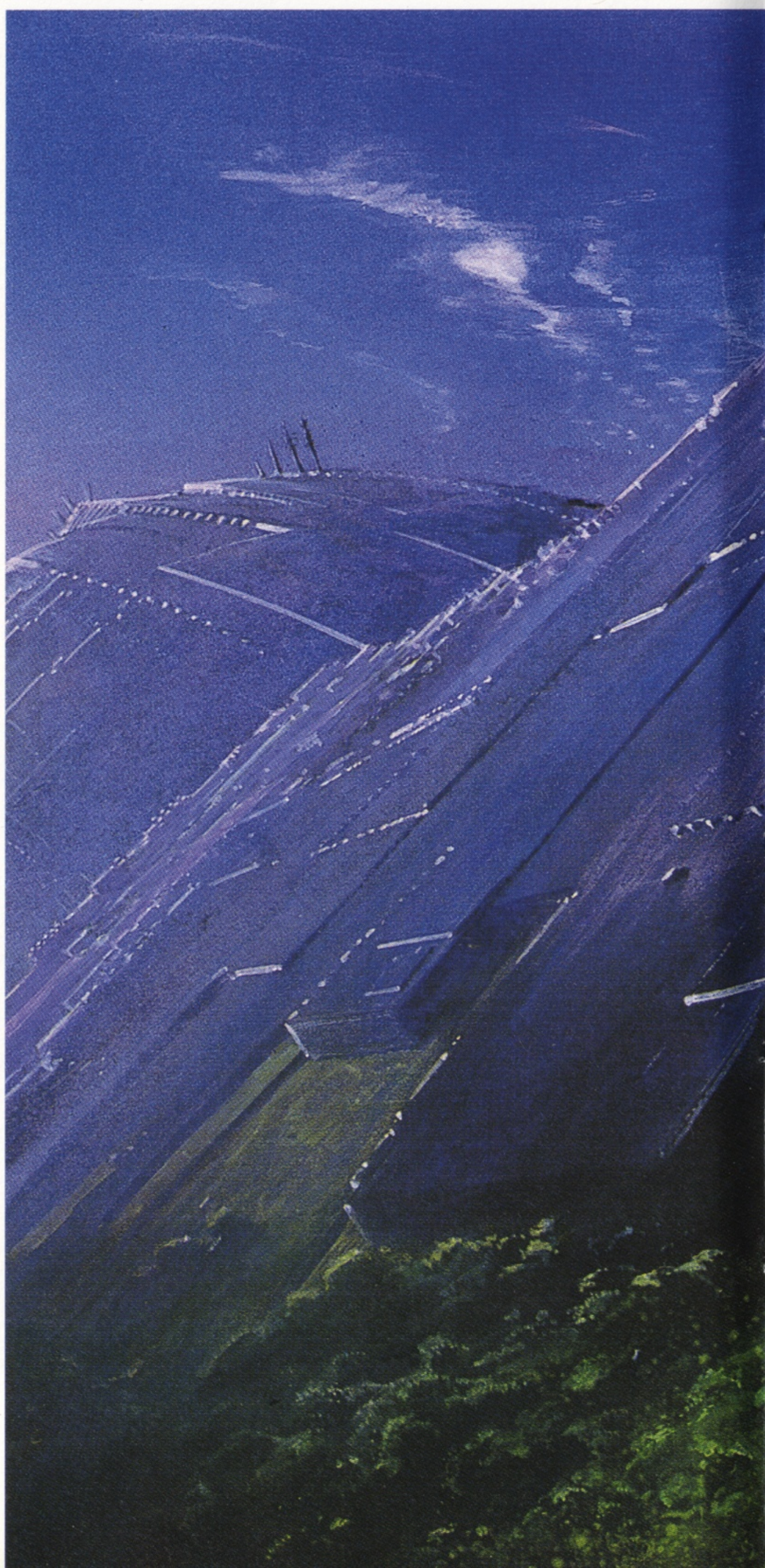




ABOVE
MASS: PLANETFALL
Shellac inks on board
33 x 63.5cm (13 x 25in)
Even after faster-than-light travel has minimized journey times, the discovery of a habitable planet would be a cause for celebration: hence the fireworks. This was another opportunity for the artist to recall his early years spent living on the south coast of England and to paint that very special effect of the sunlight reflecting off the sea.

LEFT
GRAVITY PIT
Charcoal sketch for a cover for *Closed Systems* by Zac Hughes, published by Signet.

RIGHT
MASS: SHEPHERDS ON A WRECK
Shellac inks on board
30.5 x 61cm (12 x 24in)
Generations come and generations pass, but Earth abides forever. Long after the first colonists have landed on a new Earth, their descendants have either turned their backs on, or forgotten, the technology that brought them there.





as depicted in Blish's series of novels begun with *Earthman, Come Home* (1955). For Harris this was the ideal project for the moment, so perfectly did it embody all the major elements of his vision. He was inspired.

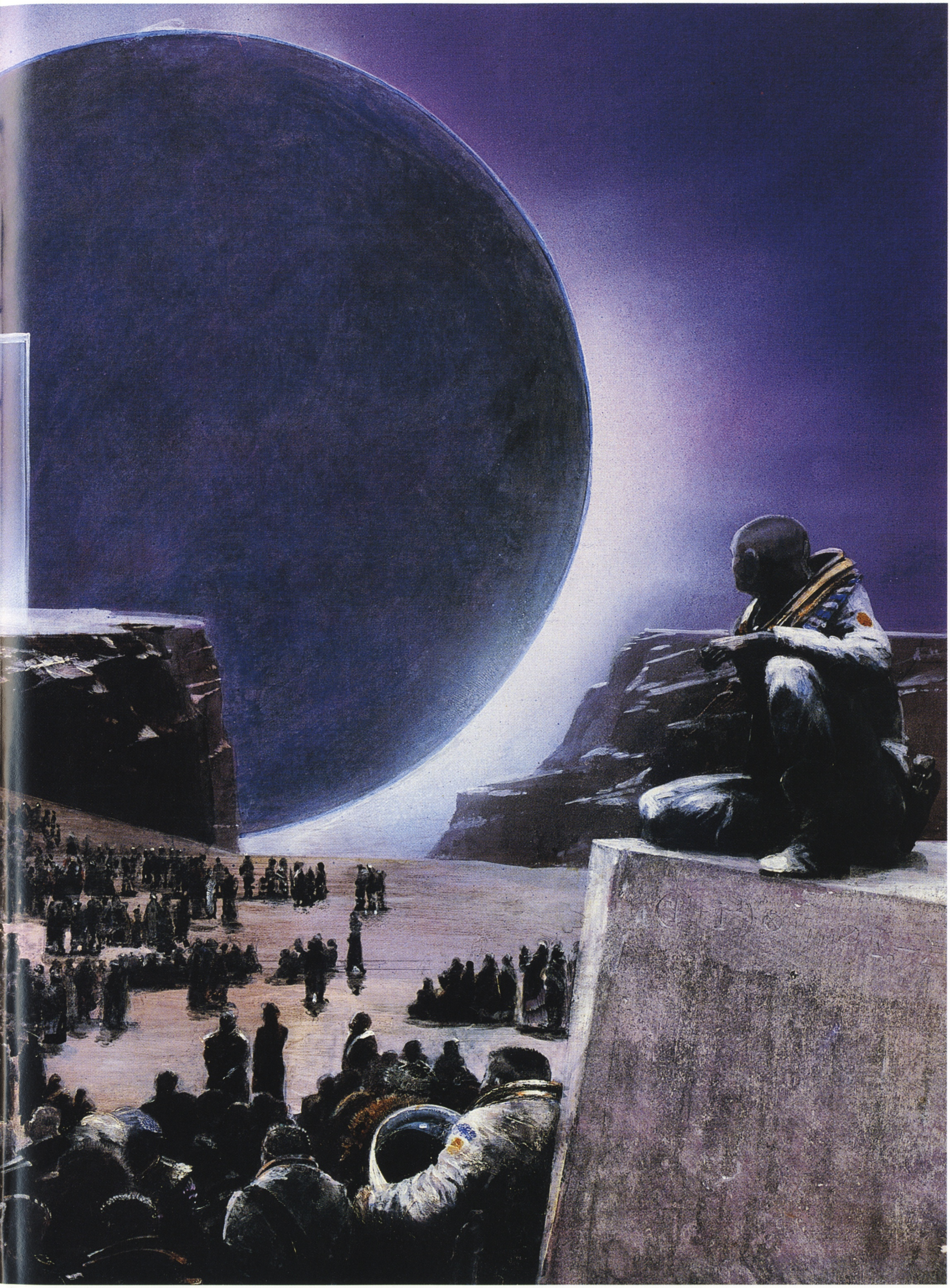
Dunn gave him a small advance with which he was able to rent a tiny, two-roomed cottage, and on the kitchen table he produced three panoramic images which remain today a definitive turning point in science fiction art. Although the original paintings themselves are surprisingly modest in size, they are remarkably expressive of gigantic scale. They evince a terrifying grandeur in showing, first, in *Okie City, Lift-off*, an industrial city wrenching itself from the Earth's crust, turning and slowly rising from the crater it leaves in its wake; then, in *Okie City, Trading Contact* (see page 13), a spaceborne New York encountering a massive trading vessel; and thirdly, in *Burning City (After the Fall)* (see page 16), a floating city aflame and fragmenting as a result of attack by raiders.

This exciting sense of scale and drama was a new and unique quality that Harris brought to the project. Conversely, there was something very special that the project brought to him: it served to crystallize much of his thinking and to clarify his sense of direction. From this point on he knew it was possible to endow his paintings with the sense of wonder and terror that had always been for him a vital element of the subject matter.

Dunn was hugely impressed by these three paintings, and offered Harris a retainer for nine months to paint any pictures he wanted. And so was created *Mass*, the series of images published here in its entirety for the first time. These images were, to Harris, rather like a continuous narrative













ABOVE AND DETAIL RIGHT
MASS: LEVIATHAN
Oils on canvas
A triptych of canvases measuring a total of 1.83 x 4.5m (6 x 15ft)

about his vision of humankind, no longer tied to its own planet, contemplating future possibilities. 'The pictures themselves were a clumsy attempt to put down, almost like a storyboard, what I saw as man's relationship with the Universe.'

Perhaps the most important to him of the *Mass* images is the one of the Moon breaking up, *Inside the Roche Limit: Quiet Night*. He does not claim truly to have created this image, because, as we've seen, it was born from a vision – a vision he believes he will never forget, describing the experience of it as one of the most terrifying he has ever had. 'The image just would not leave me alone, and so I eventually sat down and painted the thing.' Although the image had come to him much earlier in life, it is typical of those that had exerted pressure on him to forget about his quasi-monastic life with the Maharishi and come back to England.

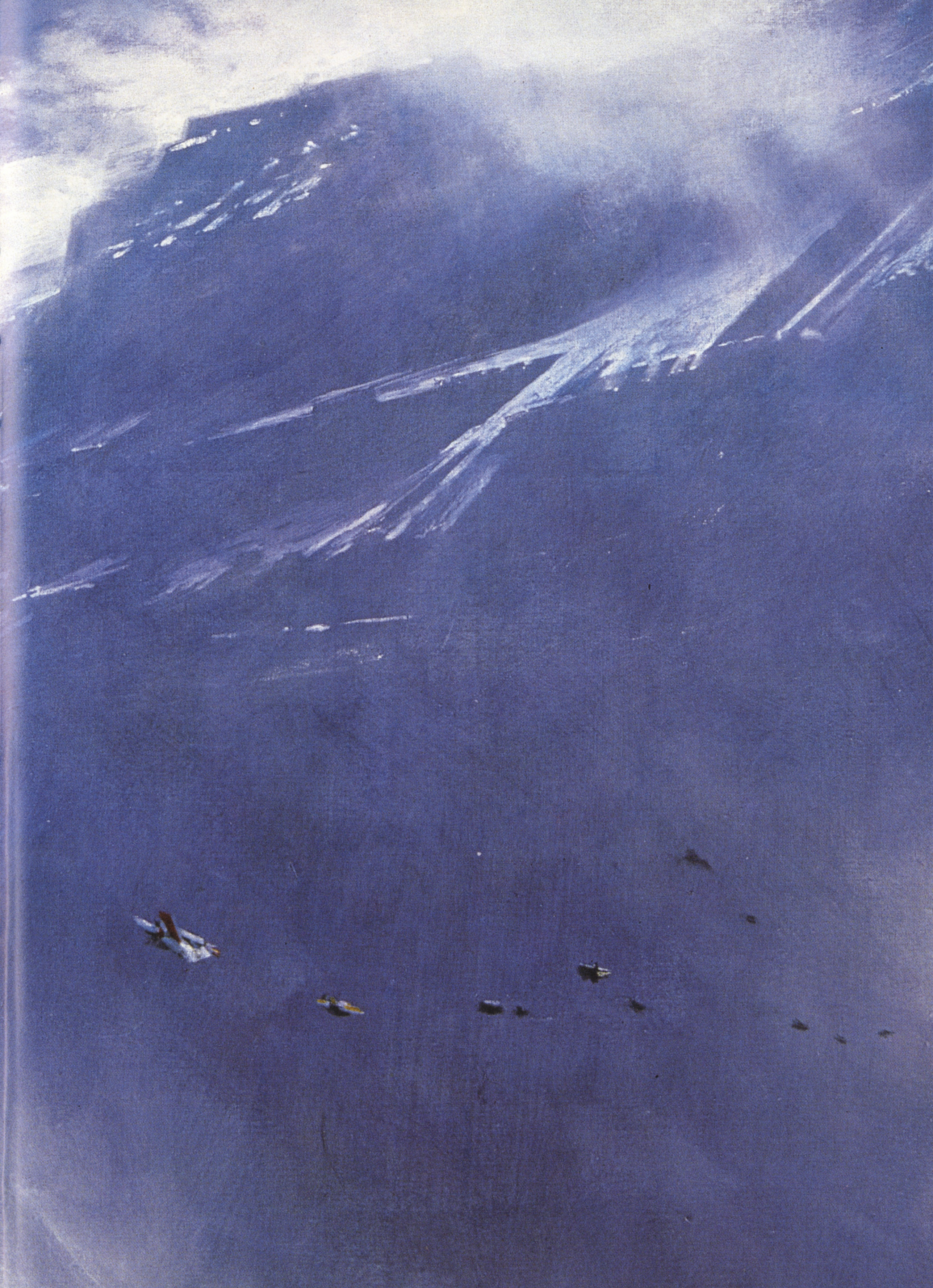
Eventually he was able to leave his tiny one-up one-down cottage and rent a larger studio. This greater space enabled him to produce paintings that were of a huge scale. One of these – *Leviathan*, a triptych that measured 1.83 by 4. 5 metres (six feet by fifteen feet) and showed a spaceship just tantalizingly visible behind clouds – was bought by the computer-design whizzkid Clive (now Sir Clive) Sinclair, and other commissions from Sinclair's company followed. 'From then on, I was home and dry. People started to see and to identify with what I was doing.'

He believes that this was largely because he was not interested in or a part of the popular culture of science fiction illustration: he was simply painting pictures of what he internally saw, and painting them in such a way that his emotional involvement with his subject was expressed. This made a huge difference, and it meant that people who were not interested in science fiction *per se* could relate to them.

The main reason people can respond so readily to his work is, he thinks, because humankind's view of ourselves and our place in creation has undergone a profound change in the last few decades, largely because of one single achievement: the emotional climax of the Apollo 11 Moon mission of 1969, when for the first time a human being stood upon the surface of another world and contemplated the Earth.

PREVIOUS SPREAD
MASS: CRYSTAL HENGE
Shellac inks on board
30.5 x 38cm (12 x 15in)
In the far future, Stonehenge may be rebuilt in crystal, measured to within one millionth of an inch, so that we may at last perceive and understand the intentions of the original builders.

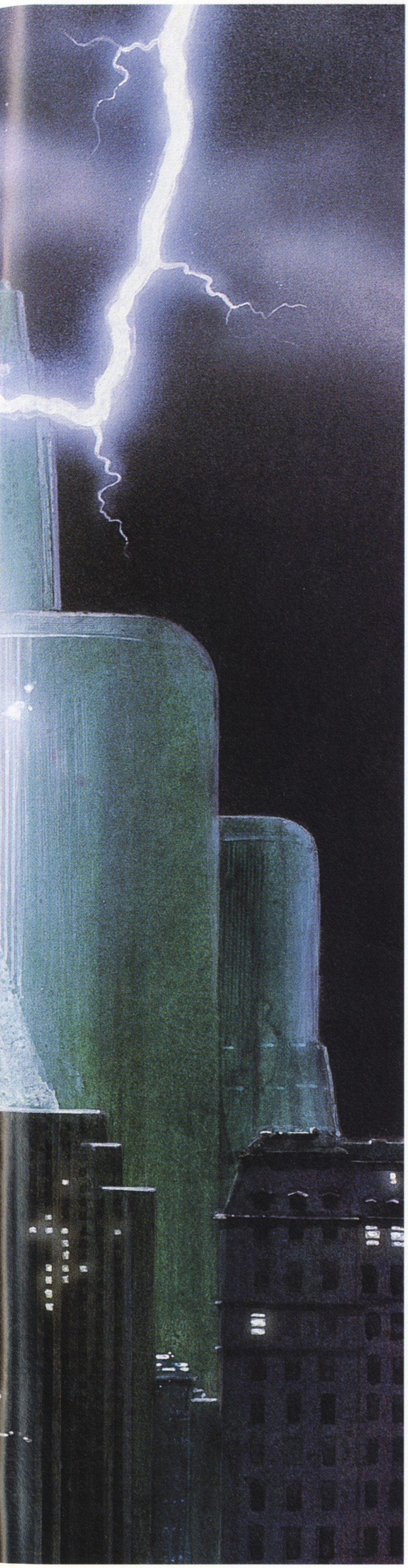
OVERLEAF
MASS: INSIDE THE ROCHE LIMIT: QUIET NIGHT
Shellac inks on board
25.5 x 38cm (10 x 15in)
This is the first version of Harris's recurring image of the Moon falling towards the Earth. It was painted in very fugitive colours, and the original has now almost ceased to exist. (The artist has since painted a second version in more permanent acrylic colour.) The Moon's surface is beginning to break up as the stresses created by its proximity to the Earth take effect. 'And,' Harris notes, 'it would all occur in utter silence, because sound does not travel through space.'





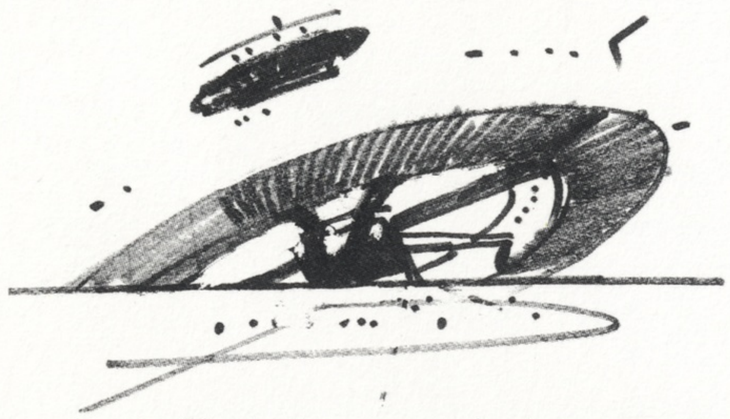



HOTEL
SCHROEDING



Harris cites an anecdote concerning one of the early astronauts to walk on the Moon – he now forgets exactly which astronaut it was, but thinks it was Rusty Schweickart. During his moonwalk the astronaut looked up and, raising a gloved hand at arm's length, eclipsed the Earth with a single thumb. For Harris, this one symbolic act epitomizes the enormous shift in human perceptions that the Apollo landing brought about: *everything* that since the dawn of human consciousness had been the place in which we by our very nature belonged – our entire world – could be obliterated from sight by something so trivial as a thumb.

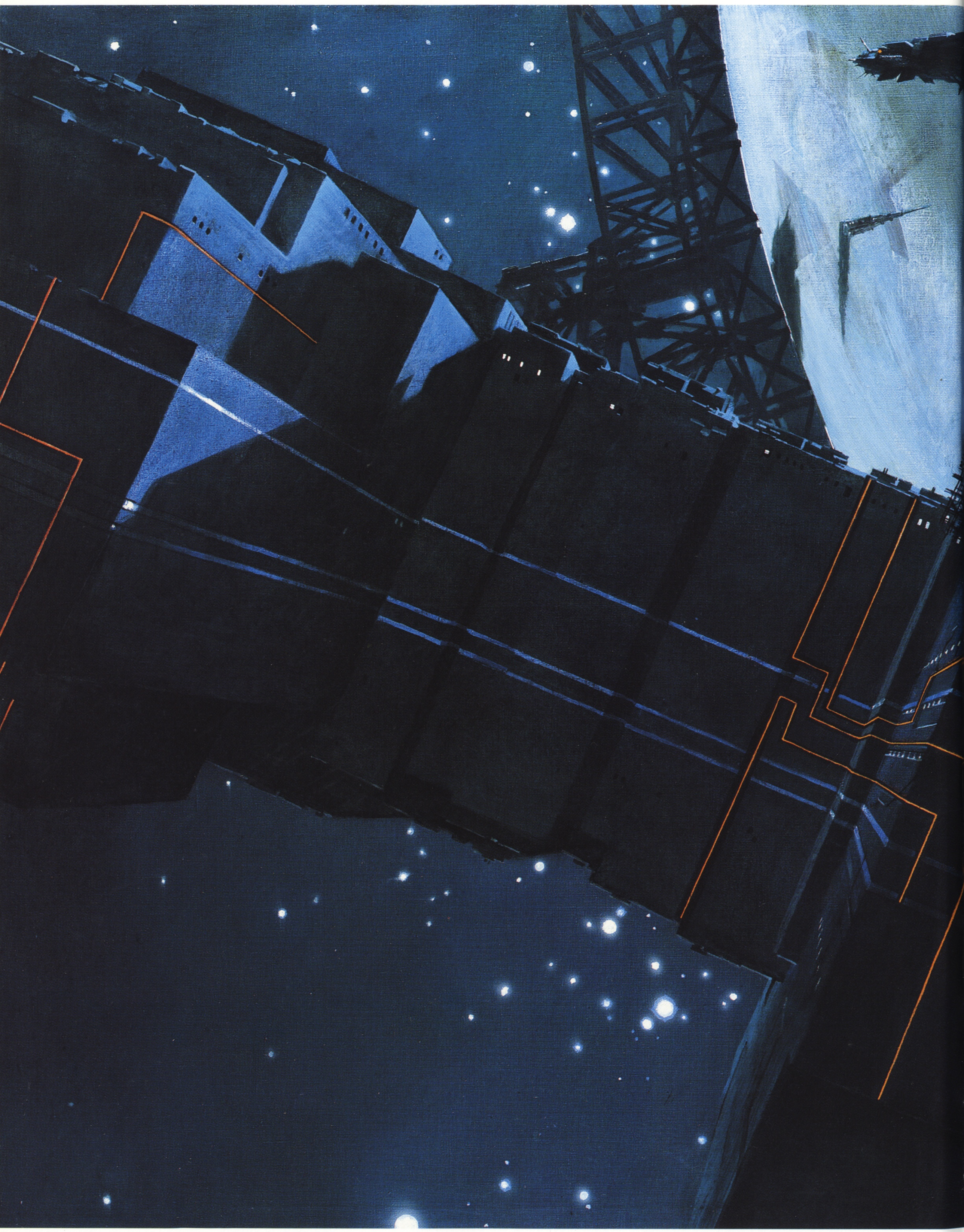
'And everybody was aware of that,' he stresses. 'Perhaps that is the chord that is struck by my work.'

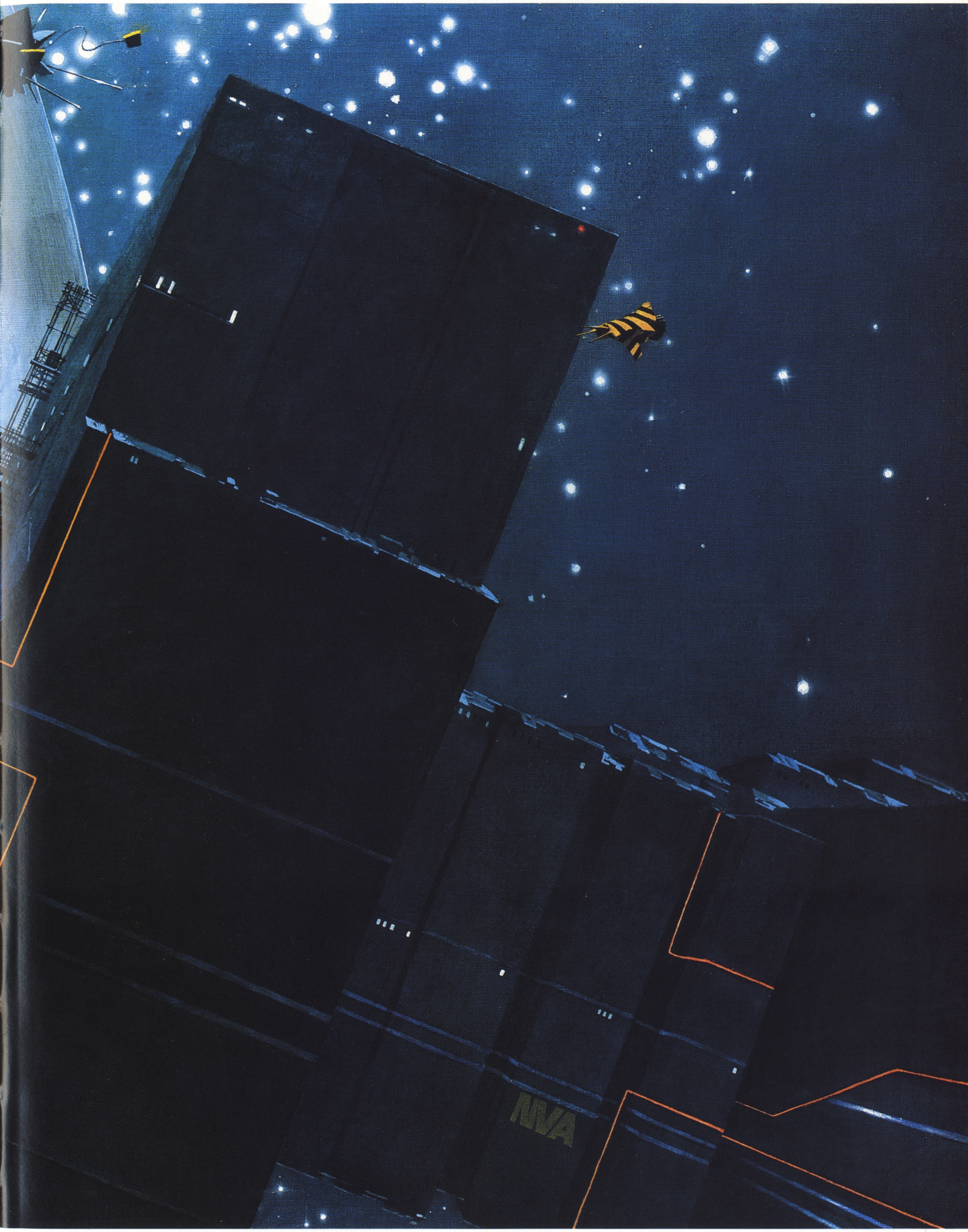


For a dramatic example – albeit in special circumstances – of the sort of emotional effect Harris's paintings can have we must skip ahead a few years, to 1985. In the early 1980s a close friend of his, a remarkably dynamic character by the name of John Graham, had gone to the United States and started a computer software company that became very successful. Graham began to act as a patron to Harris. While on a visit to see Graham, Harris took transparencies of some of his work, including a selection from the *Mass* series, to NASA's Houston headquarters. As a result he was invited, as part of the Space Administration's program to maintain a record of the career of the space shuttle as seen through artists' eyes, to produce a painting of the launch of the shuttle Discovery. This was, incidentally, the first time a British artist had been commissioned by NASA to record such an event.

When in 1985 he duly visited the site to see Discovery being launched he was greatly impressed and inspired. The enormous gantries, rising four hundred feet above the Florida swamplands, seemed mind-bogglingly big. Indeed, everything about the complex had a gigantic scale which struck a familiar chord, hinting at the enthusiasms and obsessions of his youth and the early wellsprings of his art. In addition there were the multicoloured lines painted on the tarmac to aid navigation around the site: great sweeping curves criss-crossing the vast areas of open space like an immense alien calligraphy. Similar images had already appeared in his work. In short, he felt at home here.

LEFT
MASS: CATHEDRAL 2
Shellac inks on board
46 x 46cm (18 x 18in)
This is the second of two closely related images illustrating the paradox of Schrödinger's Cat (which illustrates the Uncertainty Principle's tenet that observing an experiment alters its outcome). In the first painting, the lightning bolt misses the cathedral; in the second, seen here, the cathedral is struck.




NVA



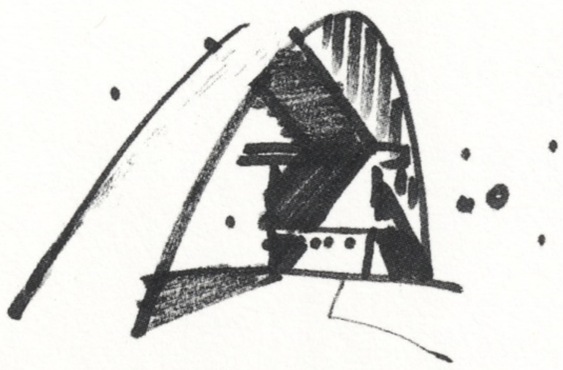


LEFT AND RIGHT
RINGWORLD
Oils on canvas
33 x 46cm (13 x 18in)
Cover for an Orbit edition of Larry Niven's novel, published by Little Brown, UK.
Left, charcoal study.

PREVIOUS SPREAD
TRANSMISSION STATION
Oils on canvas
122 x 183cm (48 x 72in)
Commissioned by NVA Consultants for the foyer of their new offices in the mid-1980s.

The launch Harris witnessed, Discovery mission 51C or 51B (he can't now remember for certain), was to be immediately succeeded in the shuttle launch sequence by a Challenger launch. Although his painting, entitled *Aftermath: T+60* (i.e., take-off plus sixty seconds), was completed in good time, because of delays at US Customs it failed to arrive at Houston until a few days after this subsequent launch – the infamous launch during which Challenger exploded across the sky, killing all seven of its crew, casting a nation into mourning and inflicting a wound from which the manned space program has yet fully to recover. NASA's Houston operation was in grief at the time *Aftermath: T+60* arrived, and when the painting was unveiled – to reveal its haunting, funereal ambience, reminiscent of Turner's *Burial at Sea* – it understandably had a deep-felt impact on the staff there. It hangs now in the Smithsonian Museum Art Gallery in the Kennedy Center.

OPPOSITE
AFTERMATH – T+60
Oils on canvas
122 x 122cm (48 x 48in)
Harris was commissioned by NASA to record a launch of the space shuttle in August 1985. The launch took place at 7.30am, and the painting catches the effect of the morning sun shining through the pall of dark smoke just one minute (60 seconds – hence the title) after take-off, when the shuttle itself is out of sight. The funereal atmosphere of the picture was uncannily prescient of the tragedy that occurred just after the next shuttle launch – of the ill-starred Challenger.



By the time Harris had completed *Mass*, he had accumulated a sufficient body of work to fill a stunning portfolio. His agent showed these images to a number of publishers, several of whom immediately recognized that there was something here they could use, and so he began to receive commissions for science fiction book covers.

OVERLEAF
RINGWORLD THRONE
Oils on canvas
44 x 66cm (18 x 26in)
Another *Ringworld* cover for Orbit, published by Little Brown, UK. Larry Niven's vision of an artificial planet forming a continuous ring around a sun presented real pictorial difficulties in conveying the scale of the thing. The solution Harris found was to show it as if still under construction.







Initially he was excited by the prospect of producing cover art, because he thought it would give him the opportunity to do paintings that he would otherwise not have done of subjects close to his heart – and, glory of glories, to be paid for the privilege! But he quickly became disenchanted with the form: the restrictions and limitations involved in cover illustration directly affected his ability to be truly expressive. He soon came to perceive that his art has in actuality nothing to do with illustrating other people's fictions.

He felt that his vision was being diluted – subtly yet in some ways quite profoundly – by the compromises required in the commercial world, that the pictures he was producing were simply generic science fiction illustrations, in no way expressions of anything he wanted to express. 'The moment that started to happen, I lost something essential to the imagery. And it was only when I was free of commercial and economic restraints that I could produce any images that related to that magic.' The more he went on making the compromise, the more uncertain his grip on his original vision became. He eventually found that he was beginning to repeat himself. When he recognized that this was happening he decided it was time to get out and start exploring different avenues.

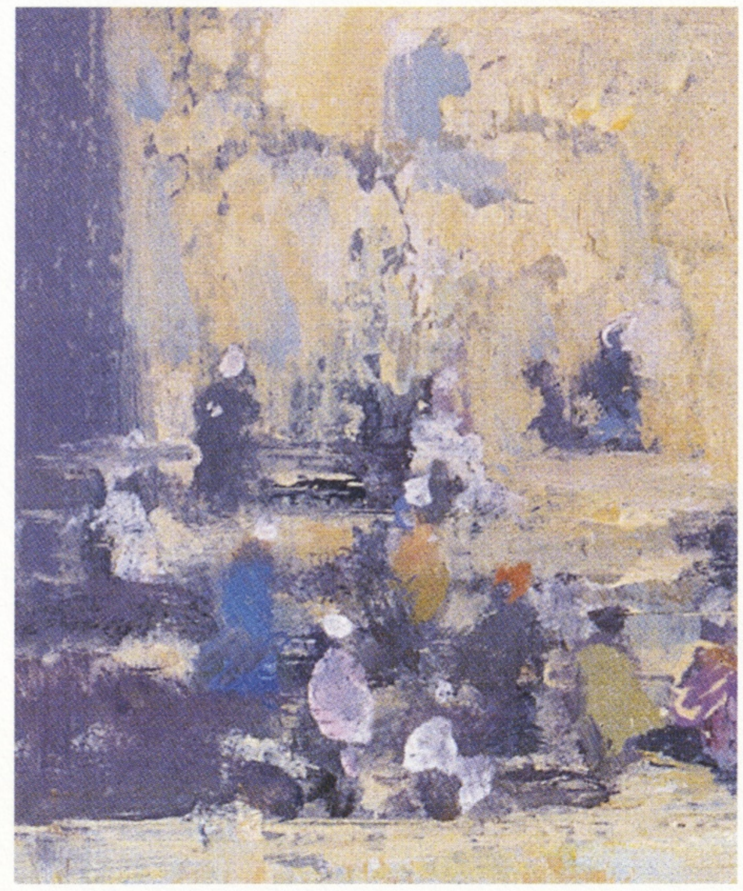
He had been feeling more and more strongly an urge to explore that other side of his creative impulse: landscape.

His approach to landscape painting is unusual. He very rarely sits down and paints what is in front of him; instead, when he sees something that seems to have potential, he turns away from it and does other things, allowing the seed of the image to germinate in his mind. The resulting paintings, although obviously figurative landscapes, are, he insists, less about the actual subject matter than about light and shadow, colour and space.

He has produced a very great number of landscapes – far more, indeed, than he has science fiction paintings. They featured at first on the covers of books by travel writers, very prominent examples being a series of paperbacks by Dervla Murphy and Peter Mayle's pair of enormously popular books on Provence. Then, in the early 1990s, his moody Home Counties landscapes began to appear on the covers of books by writers of women's fiction. In all, he has painted over three hundred book covers, a remarkable total for an artist who has done so much other work.

In the relaxed, freewheeling state of mind that he adopts when doing his landscape pieces, he is constantly thinking of ways in which he can use the natural, ordinary perceptions of familiar landscape to inform the other side of his work – the paintings based on imagination or vision. It was as a result of this process that the *Fire* project was born.

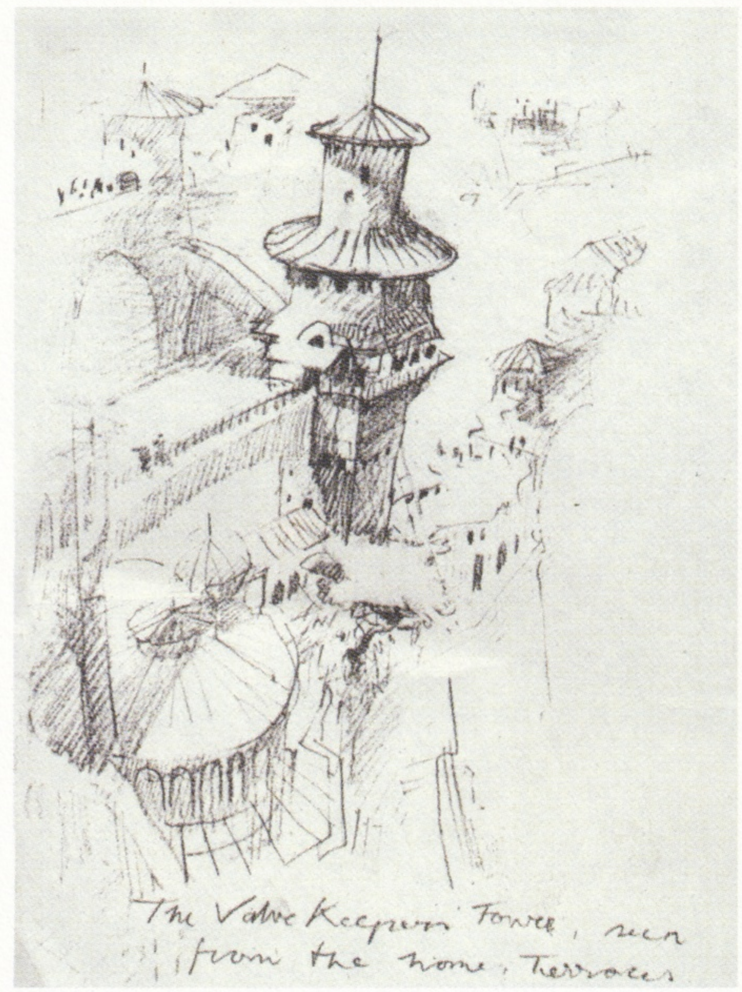
In *Mass* he had been concerned with concepts of vast scale; where these were realized as huge, impersonal artefacts, they might imply horrific societies, totalitarian states and ideologies which he found repellent. Now that he and his wife Sarah had two children he found that, largely as a result of his feelings about them, he had become less interested in the fates of empires or worlds and more concerned with things on a human, individual, personal scale.

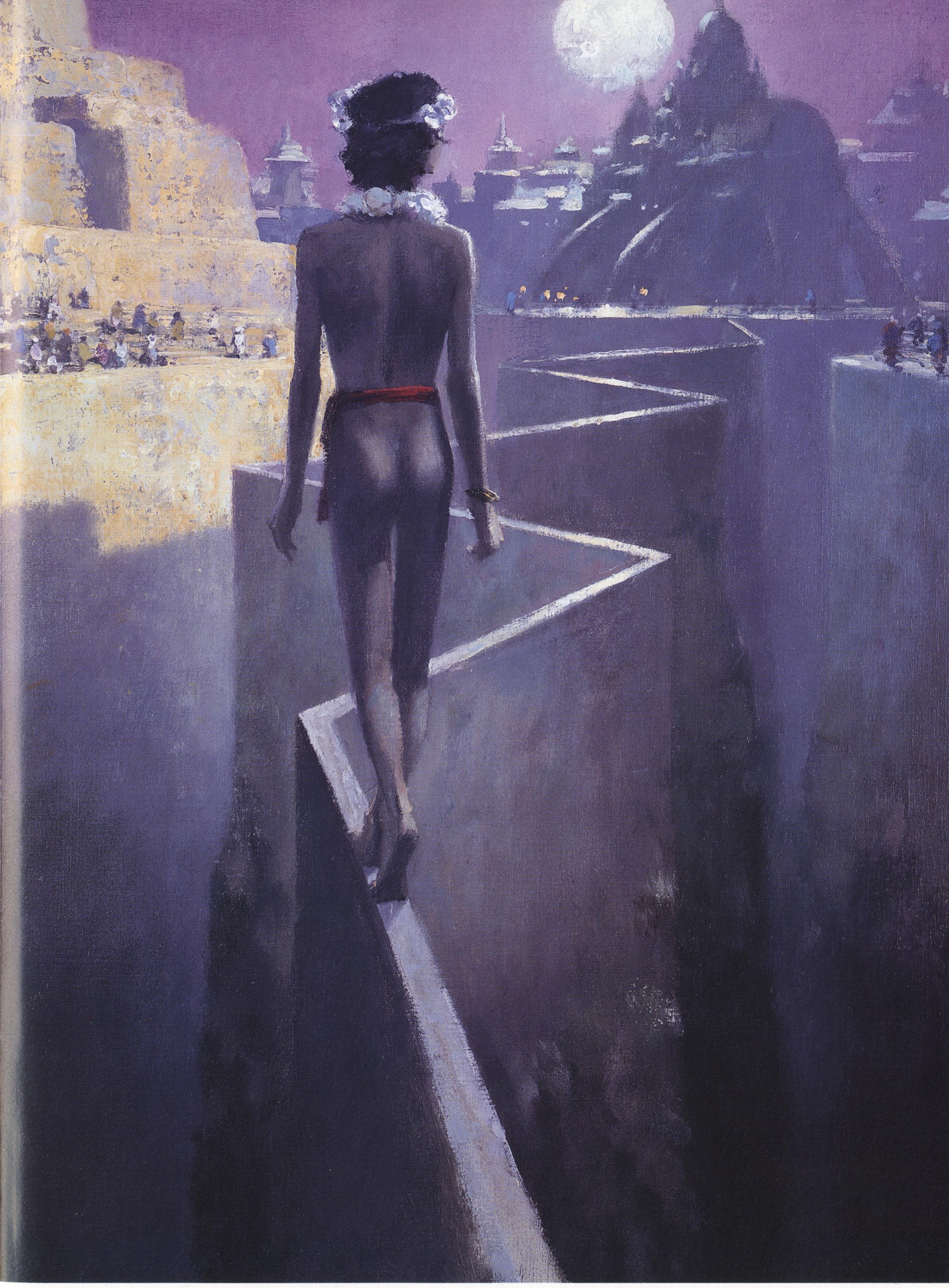


FIRE
Published here for the first time are just three examples from an epic series of paintings about an imaginary city and a civilization that exists inside the crater of an active volcano. They have a timeless quality in their mellow richness of colour and strange, otherworldly atmosphere. The paintings, with accompanying text, are to make up a forthcoming book.

RIGHT AND DETAIL ABOVE
FIRE: THE ZIG-ZAG
Oils on canvas
51 x 35.5cm (20 x 14in)
This haunting painting is the second version of an image which the artist produced while creating the *Mass* sequence, and it was from this that the concept of the city called Fire gradually grew. It represents one of the two rites of passage for the citizens of Fire.

BELOW
FIRE: THE VALVE-KEEPER'S TOWER
Charcoal study









He painted a picture of a naked girl walking towards a temple-like building along the top of a narrow wall with a vertiginous drop on either side; he titled this painting *The Zig-Zag*. He started to seek a context in which he could place this image. What first came to his mind was that this could be a postcard sent from the city visible in the picture's background. He began to visualize the structures that were beyond the margins of this first image, gradually building up in his mind the concept of a city – called Fire – built inside an active volcano.

Once again, as he came to feel increasingly familiar with this city and to extrapolate a society that could inhabit it, he found himself being assailed by cascades of images that he felt compelled to paint. The number of paintings on the theme, some very big, others surprisingly small, is growing daily. Many of the images are deliberately Victorian in flavour and painting style, as if they were from a traveller's artistic log done in a time when electronic communications had not conquered distance, so the environment the paintings depict could be on Earth…although the whole series is saturated with an almost off-planet feel.

There is no advanced physics-based technology in this imagined land. The buildings are all very sturdy and solid. The machinery that controls the restless energies of the seething volcano in whose heart the city exists is bulky and functionally cumbersome – no sophisticated electronics on view here – yet therein lies a paradox, for no equipment devised by modern human civilization is capable of doing what these devices do. Although the people of Fire obviously have access to the prodigious energy source they control, enabling them to do things they would not otherwise be able to do, this still does not go to explain why these machines – which look as if they could have been built at any time in the past, present or future – can function as they do, unless of course there is an additional, unseen spiritual factor involved in their operation…and in the dynamics of Fire's society as a whole. It is with this spiritual aspect that the themes of the pictures – not to mention the accompanying text which Harris has been constructing as he paints – are concerned.

The assemblage is conceptually absorbing and visually spectacular. We await its proposed book publication with eagerness.



PREVIOUS SPREAD
FIRE: CELEBRATION OF THE HIVE
Oils on canvas
51 x 61cm (20 x 24in)
A view of the interior of the city during the Rite of the Hidden Sun. So familiar is John Harris with the exact layout of this city – built entirely in his imagination – that he can paint scenes such as this as surely as though he were actually there with his easel.



ABOVE AND DETAIL RIGHT
FIRE: CLEANING THE DUCTS
Oils on canvas
76 x 107cm (30 x 42in)
One of the machines that clean the drainage channels in the volcano after an eruption. Technology in the city of Fire is not evidently sophisticated – the machines appear crude and cumbersome – yet those machines must perform practical functions in an environment so hostile that our own hi-tech devices would be baffled. Despite the rough bulkiness of the machinery, an almost ethereal quality pervades this painting.

THE ROADS TO MASS, AND BEYOND





FINDING THE IMAGE



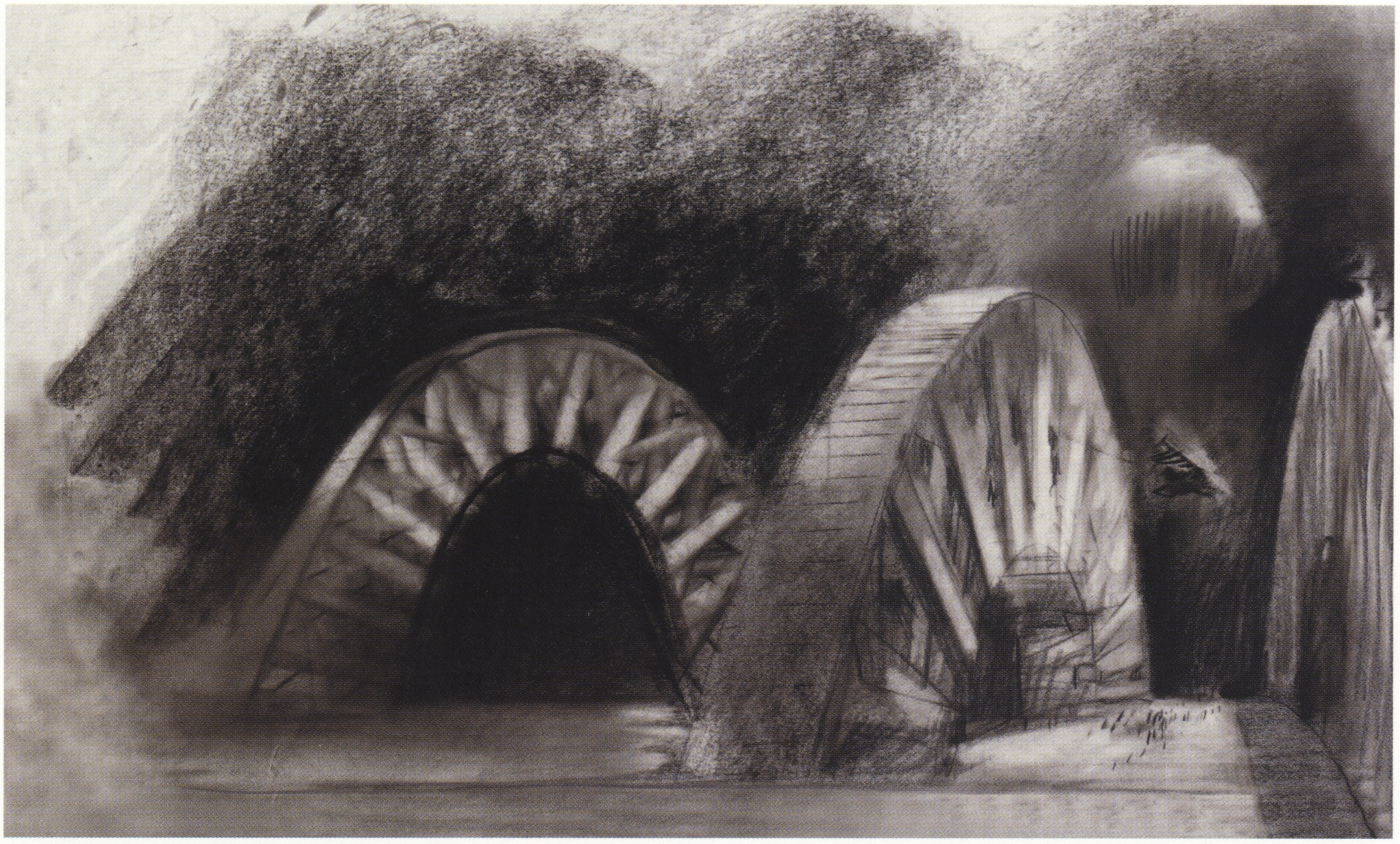


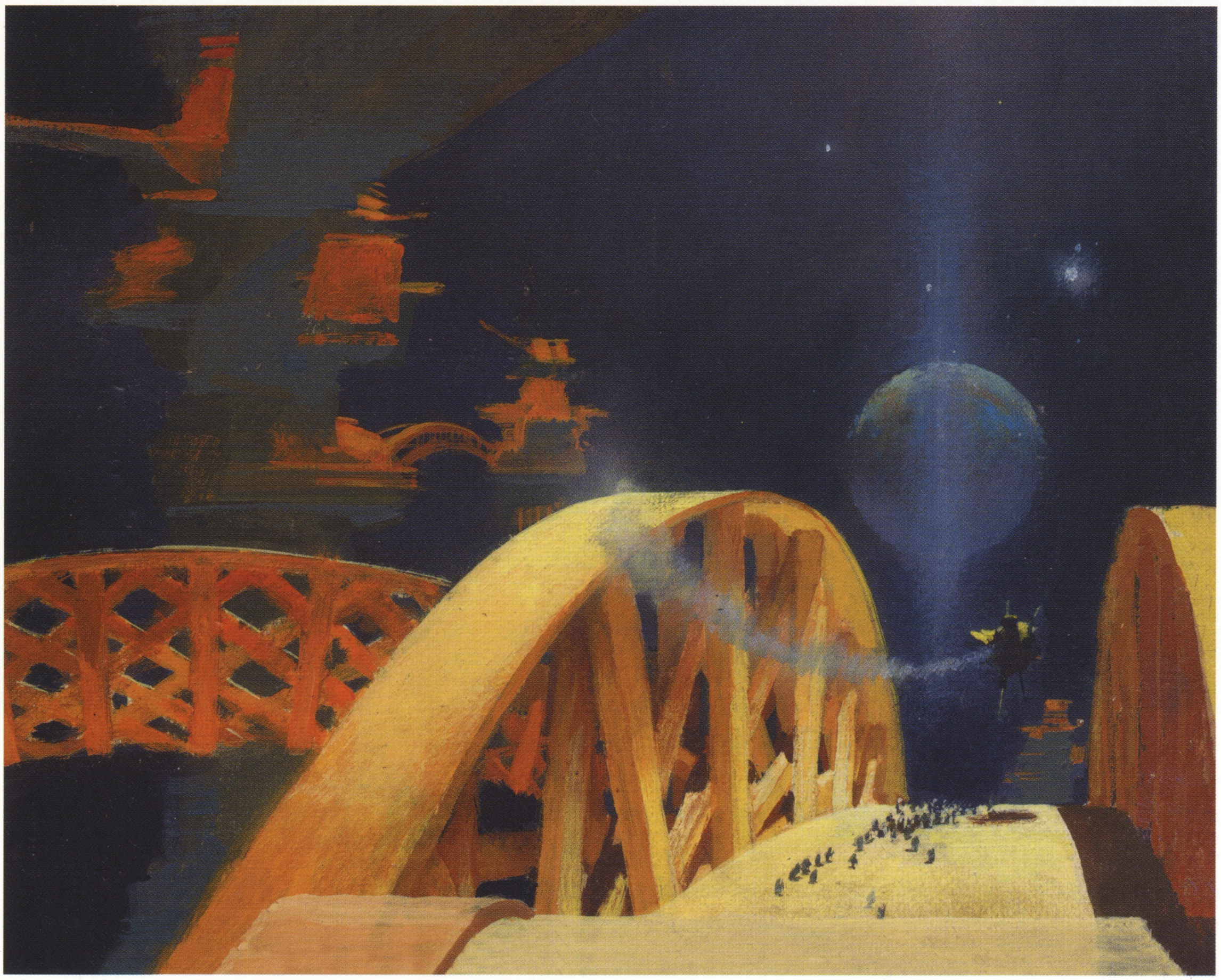
PREPARATORY AND EXPLORATORY DRAWINGS

John Harris has a uniquely open-minded approach to the creation of an original painting. Usually to the accompaniment of music, chosen because it occupies a similar area of feeling to the image he needs to make, he begins to make marks with a very soft drawing material such as charcoal or pastel. What begins to take form on the paper is atmospheric rather than objective, and he deliberately holds back the resolution of the image for as long as possible, concentrating on atmosphere and light. Often these first sketches are surprisingly slight, and yet the spirit of even his most complex paintings is almost always evident in their preliminary sketch. The medium of charcoal and chalk is often maintained in the second stage, as is seen in these sketches for *Pebble in The Sky* by Isaac Asimov. By the time of the stage of the colour rough (bottom right), the process of consolidation is virtually complete.

John Harris's approach to picture-making is in many ways unique. Of course, not every image is created according to exactly the same procedure – indeed, the very word 'procedure' seems alien to his whole attitude towards painting, which for him is an intuitive occupation, a matter of finding the image. When an idea begins to take form in his mind, the materials he chooses for the initial work are always very soft – Conté pencil, charcoal or pastel – because they are 'open-ended': they provide him with maximum freedom to take the idea in any direction, so that the process of consolidating the image is kept at bay for as long as possible.

Of course, in having to make his living as an artist he has, like any professional in this field, frequently found himself frustrated by the need to ignore an image that arose unbidden in his own mind in favour of an idea described to him by someone else – in other words, often he must conform to a brief he has been given. But this is a perennial problem for any imaginative artist who for economic reasons must work within the commercial sphere.





Images for his personal work – such as that of the girl in *The Zig-Zag* – tend to present themselves fully formed to his mind and cry out to be made. Here the searching process is simply that of finding the mood within which to focus them. The image in this instance was, he felt, a psychological archetype, and its surrounding mood comprised feelings of vertigo and moonlight and an urging to reach a desired place. What followed was a process of continual drawing to get that feeling right. The same procedure was applied to the image of the Moon breaking up in *Inside the Roche Limit: Quiet Night* and to others in the *Mass* series, and it is his general mode of operation for his personal art.

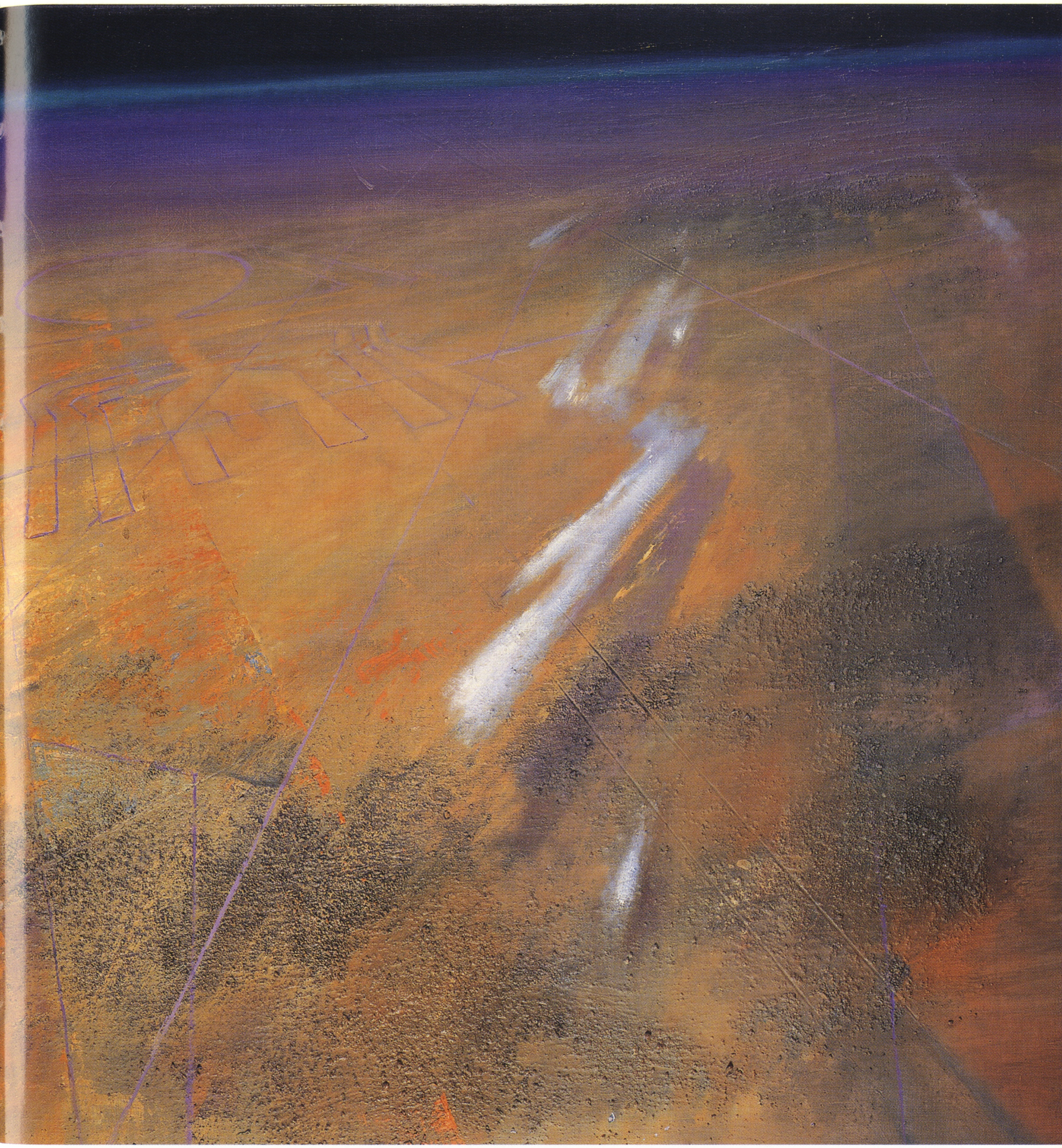
The other type of searching involved in his creative process is more painterly than visionary, and is a matter of seeking for the image within marks that have already been made. Here music, too, can play a part, because often he uses certain kinds of music in order to induce images. When he is required by a publisher to create, say, an image that has a spirit of individuality rather than something that must accord with a tight brief, musicians such as Brian Eno – whose work contains sophisticated ambient sounds, full of textures and spaces – can have the effect of bringing into his mind the first embryonic vestiges from which an image may begin to grow.

What first goes down thereafter on the paper is rather like a texture or frottage. Having established his mindset within the realm that will be the theme of the painting – space with rocky edifices floating in it, say – he picks up from the marks he has made the beginnings of something visual that relates to his conception of the atmosphere he is aiming to create. From this point on, the image-making goes through a process of what could be called clarification, during which he holds back the image itself from the surface for as long as possible – until the last moment, when he puts in a few tiny touches of detail which make it click into focus.

He believes that one of the most crucial elements of the process of creating an image that has emotive power is this matter of leaving things open-ended for as long as possible while riding solely on feeling and atmosphere, and then, only when the painting is very near completion, starting to consolidate the still nearly abstract imagery into some physical structure, such as a space vehicle or a disintegrating world.

There are practical problems involved in this process, of course. One is the need to satisfy the publisher's insistence on seeing a finished visual before the final artwork is painted. At first Harris got round this by making a tiny version of the picture he intended to paint. However, he found that in doing this he was losing something vital from the final image – its spark, its flair, its magic. By way of analogy, many writers complain that their publishers demand a detailed outline ahead of time, so that the writing of the final book becomes a sort of painting-by-numbers exercise and the resultant text is inevitably – because of the writer's loss of interest – flat. There is little adventure in a journey that has been mapped out in detail in advance; the adventure comes via the exploration of unknown terrain. Harris himself puts it thus: 'You can't shoot the same bullet twice. It doesn't quite work if you've gone over the ground already.'





A VIEW FROM ABOVE 1
Oils on canvas
122 x 183cm (48 x 72in)
This and the painting on page 108 refer directly to the artist's experiences of mysticism and meditation, and relate to his interest in the artefacts of the ancient world. In particular the Nazca Lines of Peru have a particular fascination, if only because of the unanswered questions which they provoke. Here, the desert landscape is seen as if in a lucid dream.



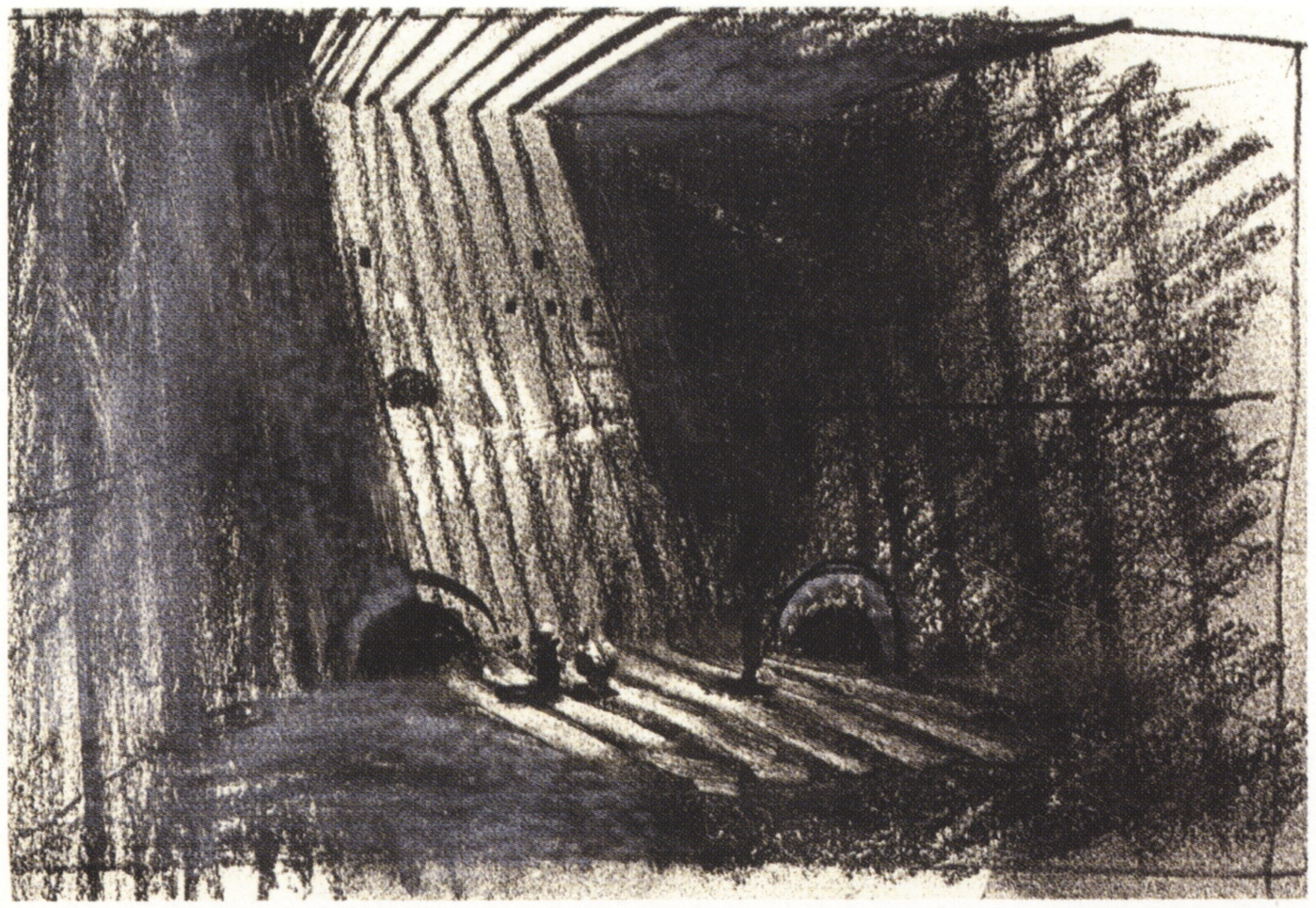
ABOVE AND OPPOSITE ABOVE
STUDIES FROM THE CITY OF FIRE
Charcoal and chalk sketches.

More recently he has adopted the practice of waiting until he has begun the final painting on canvas before letting the publisher see anything; when it has reached a stage at which the flavour of the image is evident, he sends a copy of it to the publisher, thus obviating altogether the need for a colour rough. It is of course a risky way of working because, in the remote event of the publisher disliking the idea in its entirety, then Harris has expended a lot of effort in vain, but he thinks it's worth the hazard.

For his current project, *Fire*, he has locked himself into imagery that is almost predictable: he has, in effect, created a brief for himself – to depict in each new painting a part of what can be recognized as the city that appears in the already completed pictures. Here the challenge is to find surprises. The way he does this is to 'dream' himself into the city. Every new scene he paints has an exact location within his previously visualized city complex, so he is virtually in the position of a landscape painter who has been given a brief to go out and paint what he sees. Harris's task, once the locale of the scene has been established, is to create the unexpected in terms of the lighting, mood, context of figures (if any), colour and so on to keep the painter inside himself amused.

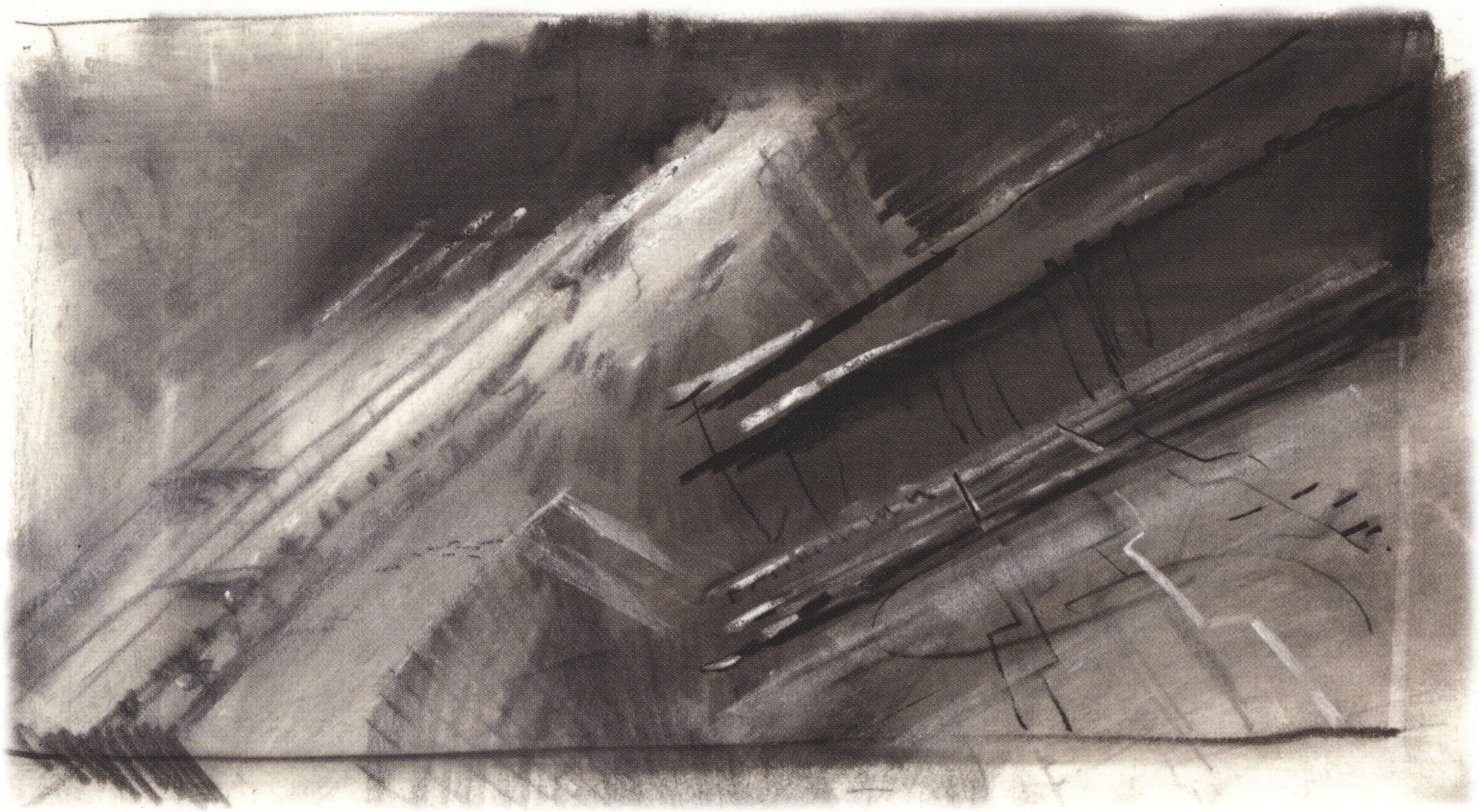
With the *Mass* pictures the process was rather different. They were done very early on in his career as a painter, and he had not learned how to go about the capturing of images. Painting as a way of expressing him-

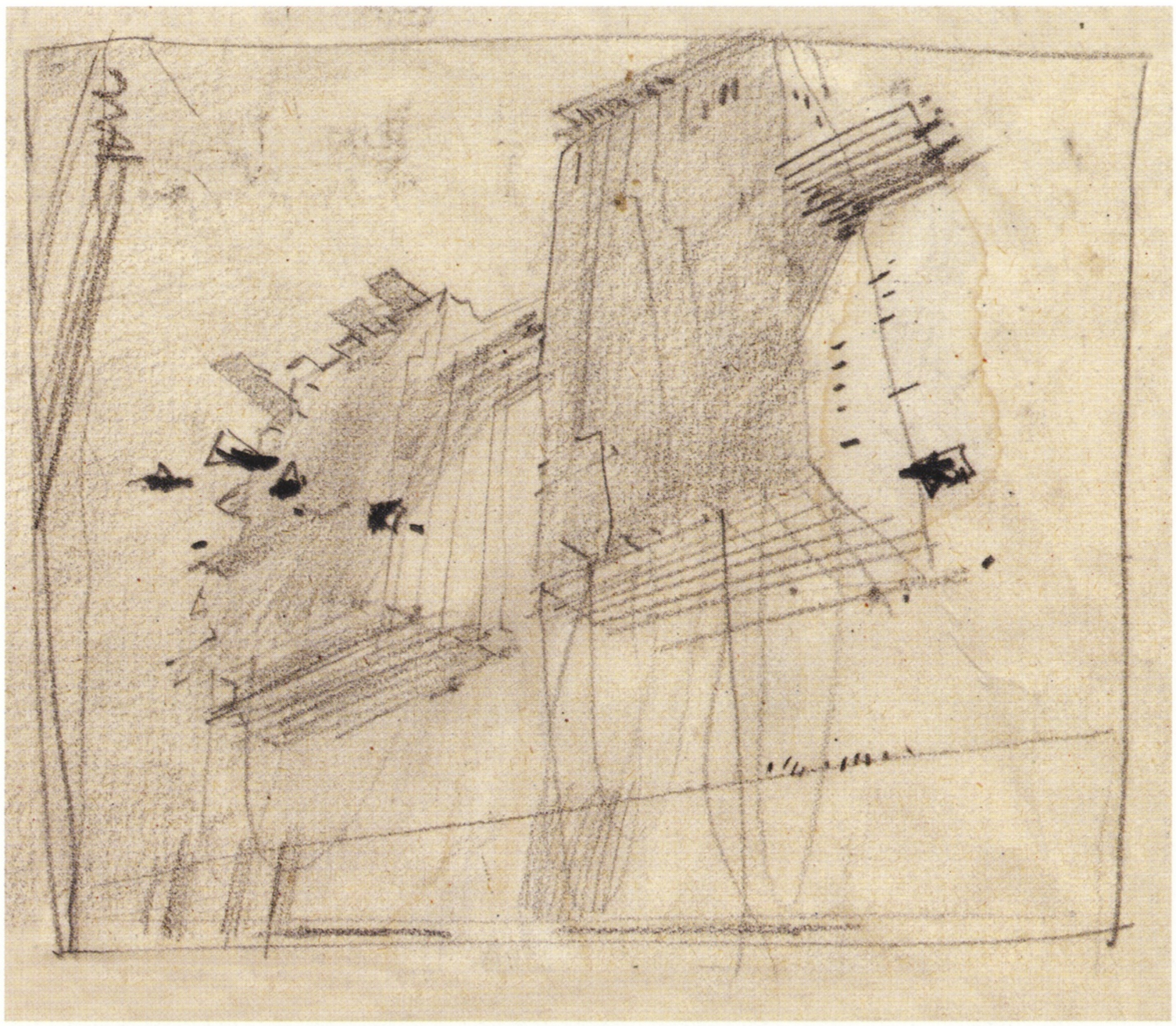




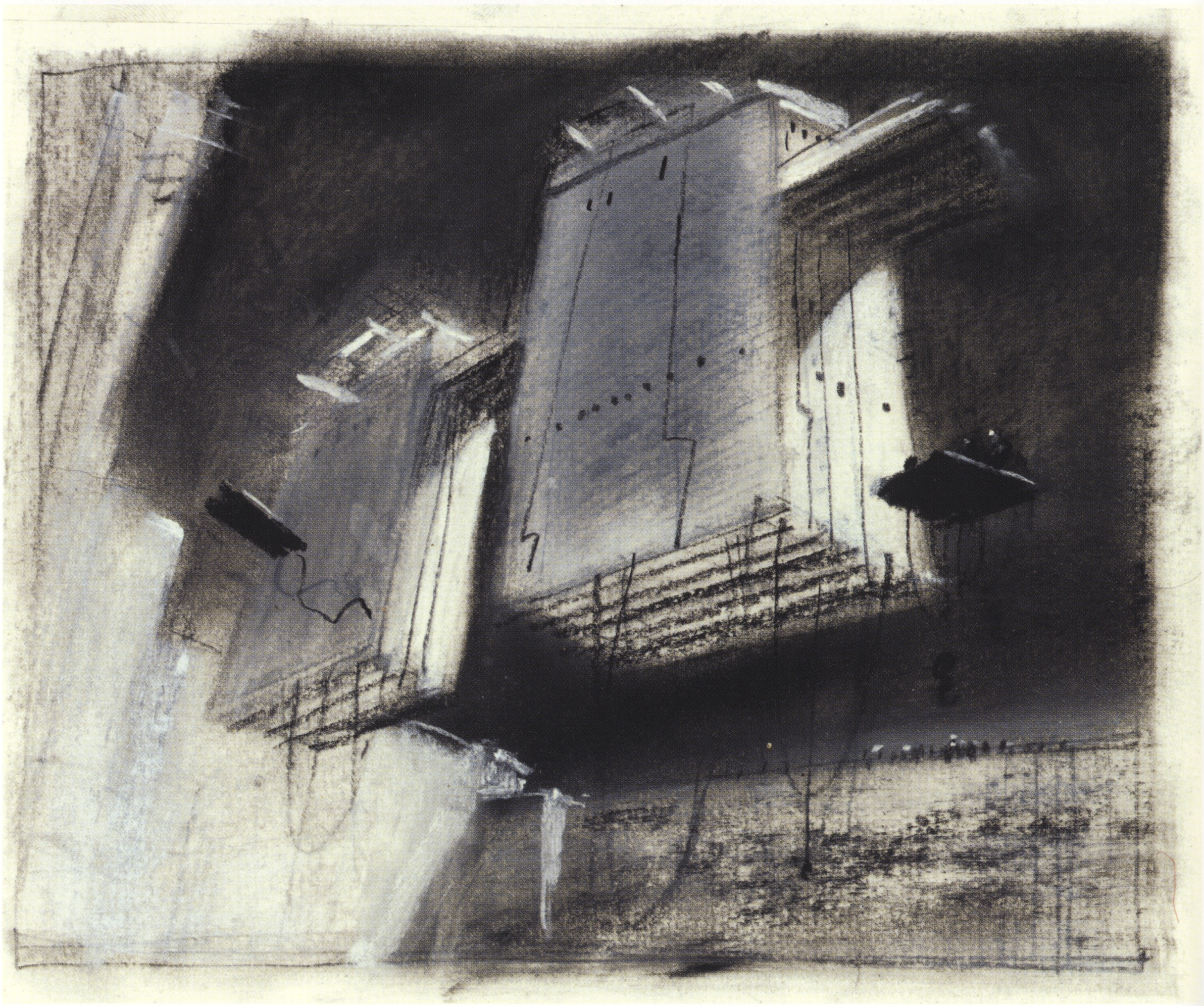
self was completely new to him, and so there was a great deal of hard work involved in getting the images right. As we've seen, he had as a starting point an instinctive feeling, based on his visions, about weighty structures in space, and he would doodle on paper little thumbnail sketches of concrete blocks lit with a hard light, while all around him music was playing. Music has proved to be the direct route to the place in his mind where these instinctive feelings can become transmuted into visual images. At the time it was the deep chords of Vaughan Williams's Fifth Symphony that helped him bring into focus the huge concrete blocks, with slack lines hanging from them, floating far above terra firma. Not for him the shiny wall of metal, finely honed and polished, with electronic equipment all over it that science fiction illustrators without number have produced; these were rugged chunks of masonry that looked as though they had

BELOW
UNTITLED STUDY
Charcoal sketch inspired by the shifting chords of Vaughan Williams's music.



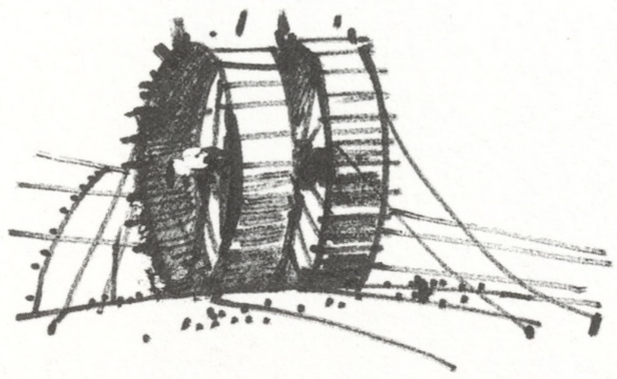


THE BUILDING OF ATLANTIS
Oils on hardboard
76 x 91.5cm (30 x 36in)
The theme of weightlessness revisited in an ancient context. After the initial sketch (left) which provided the basic concept, the second rough (below), showing a darker sky, was seen by the artist to move away from the flavour of the initial vision. A much higher tonal key was needed to create a more airy mood. In the final painting (right) an atmosphere of sunlight and air can be seen to dominate. (Detail bottom right.)





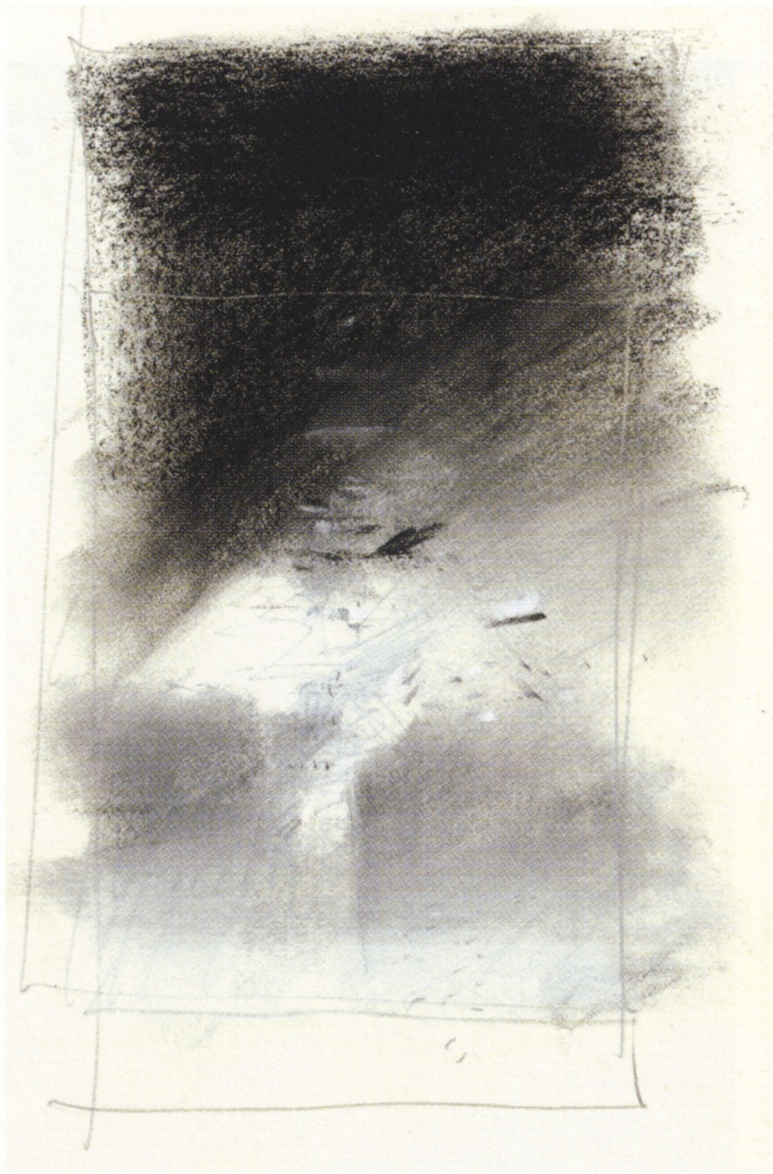
come from a demolition site. It was contrast that heightened the feeling of space: the crude lumps of reinforced concrete – broken at the edges, with cracks all over them and bits of metal sticking out at odd angles – contrasted with the silkily smooth surrounding emptiness. He has returned to this theme again and again, most recently with the painting entitled *The Building of Atlantis*.



A stage is reached in the exploratory process with soft dry materials at which the visual expression of the idea is sufficiently resolved for him to put them aside to begin the final artwork. The moment when he puts aside these drawings and takes up a brush is signalled for him by a frisson of recognition, when the amorphous charcoal and pastel work becomes consolidated enough to link up with the first impulse.

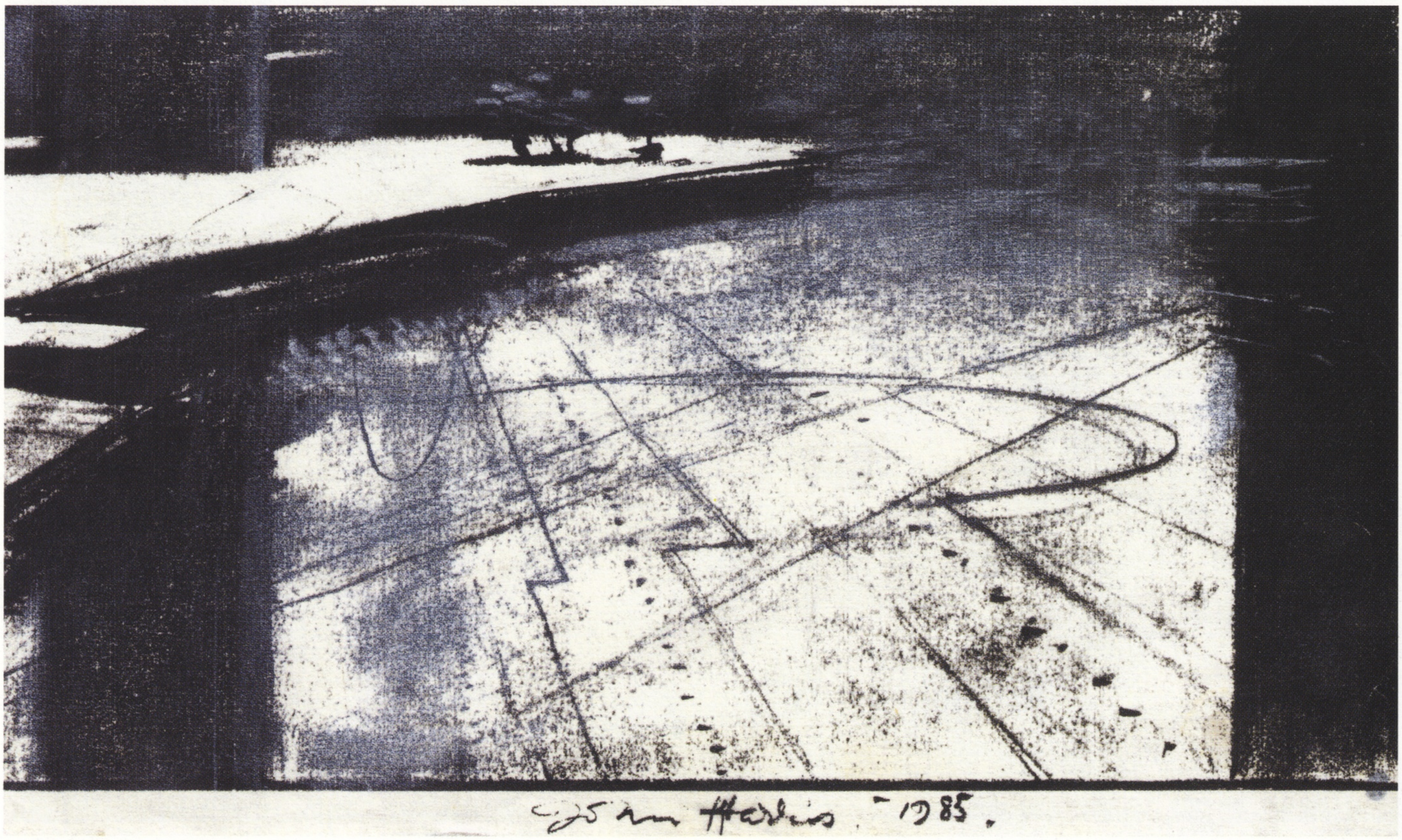
Nowadays Harris's choice of materials for finished artworks is purely pragmatic and varies very little, but over the course of his career he has tried a number of different media.

At first his selection was governed simply by what he knew he could do with them. 'Although I'd gone to an art college I didn't know how to use paint at all. We were left to struggle and find our own way. But the way I came up with initially was the most appalling way of making a painting. I couldn't have found a more cumbersome and difficult process: I was using shellac inks on a basis of body colour.' He would lay down on card a tone,



RIGHT
DRIFTGLASS
Starshards
Acrylics on board
76 x 51cm (30 x 20in)
The cover for a HarperCollins edition of the Samuel R. Delany story collection. The sketch (above) illustrates the vagueness of the drawings.

BELOW
ARTIFICIAL PLANET
Early drawing for a painting commissioned by Imagination which illustrates the artist's obsession with projecting planes.





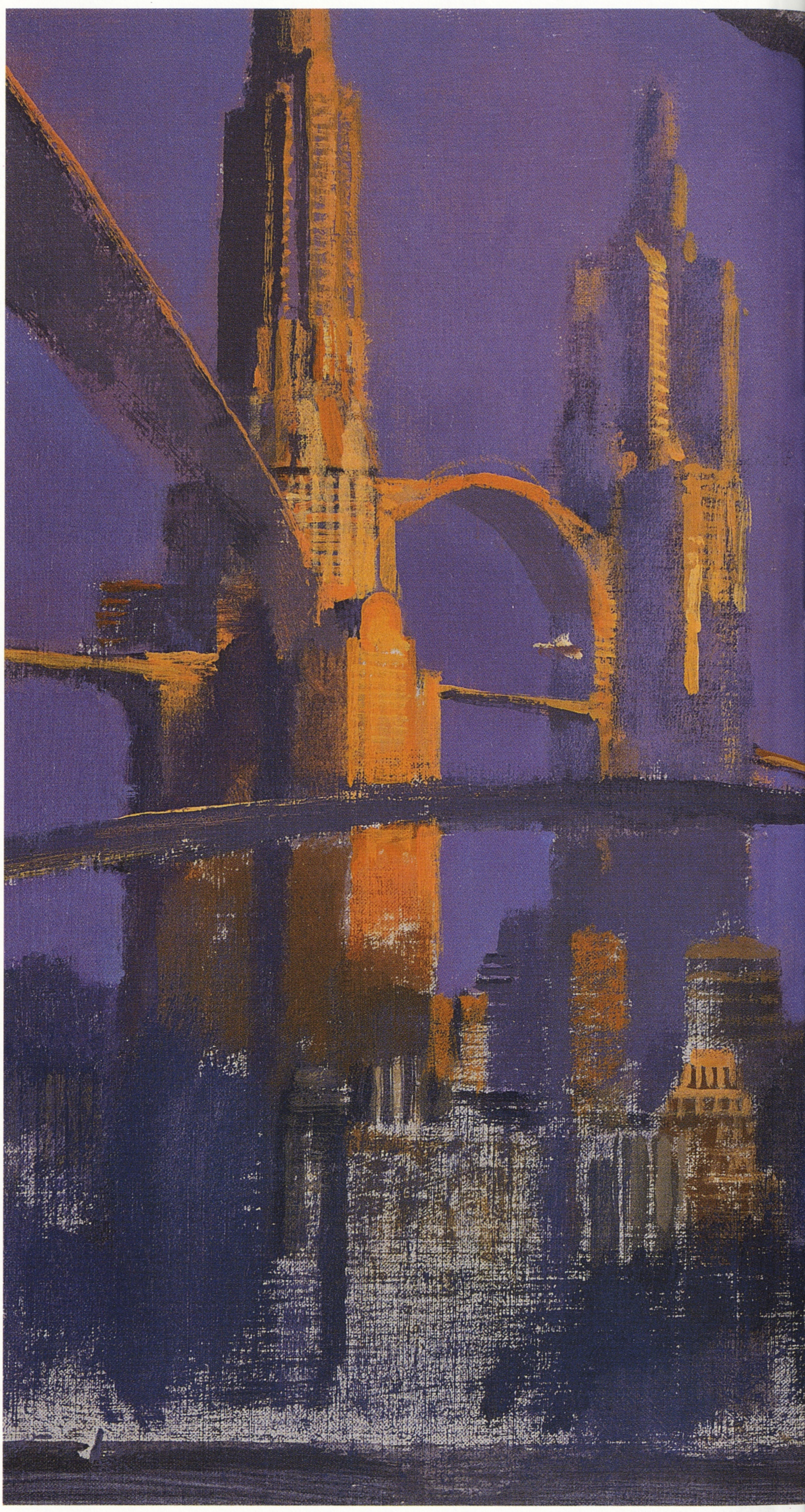
RIGHT

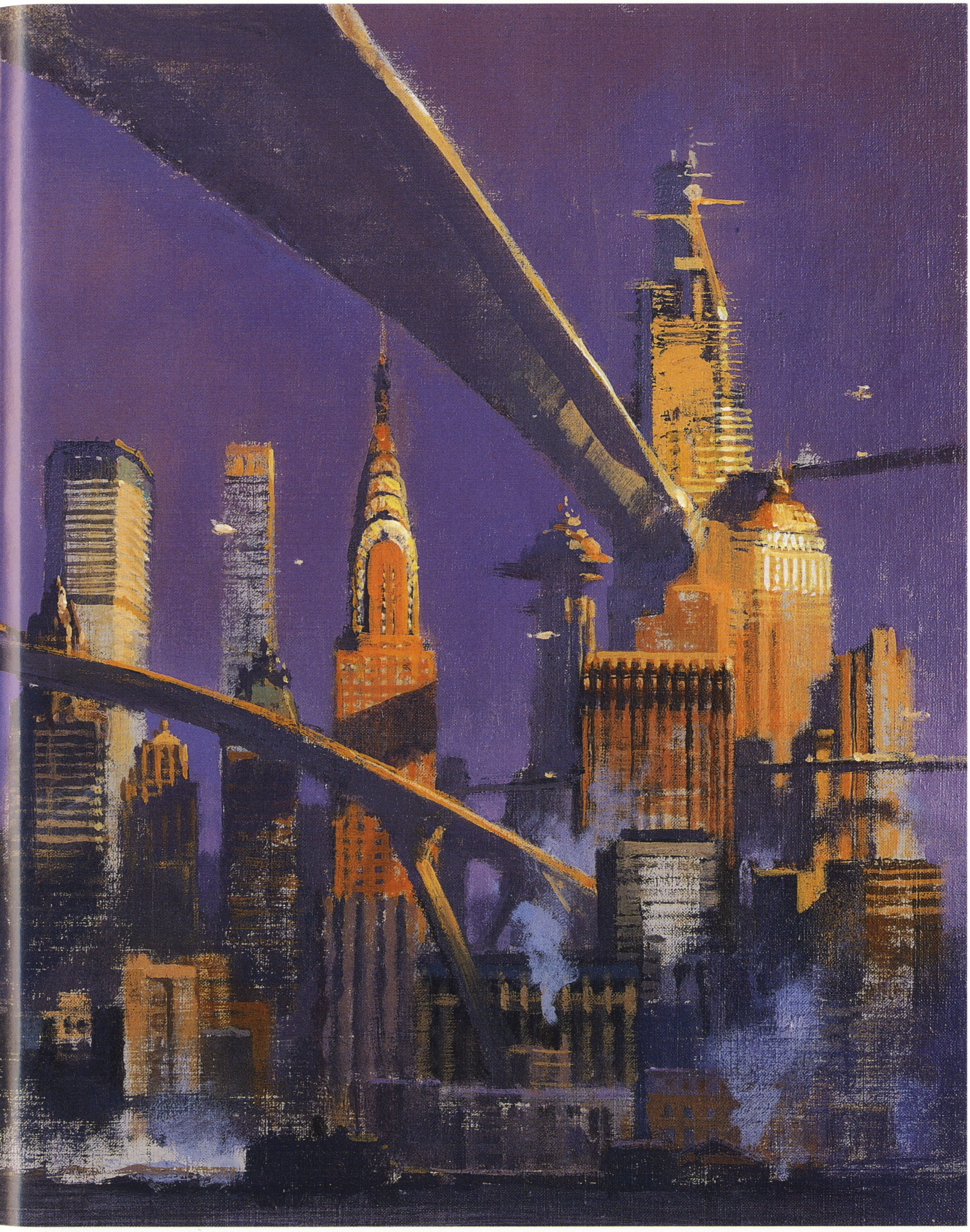
THE SIEGE OF ETERNITY

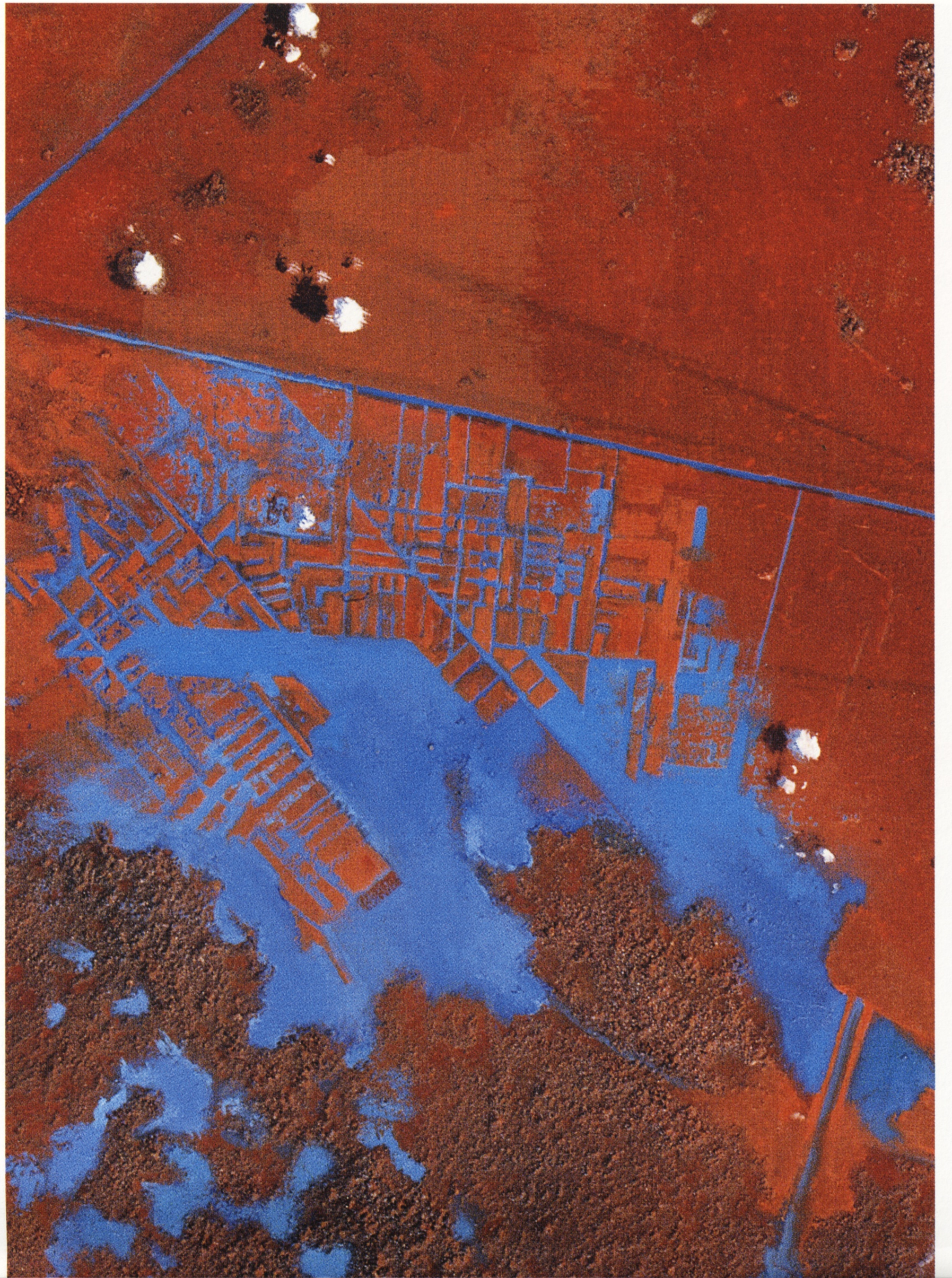
Oils on canvas

33 x 46cm 13 x 18in

Looking over the Hudson River to Manhattan in the year 3000. This was painted as the cover for the Tor edition of the Frederik Pohl novel.









usually a blue to create a sense of astral light. Next he would paint white ink on to the blue wherever he wanted a bright light. He would then build up the image using shellac inks on top of that skeleton.

He found that shellac inks had one great virtue for him: their luminosity. But they had great disadvantages, too, one of which was that he found it impossible to rework any areas. He believes that much of the imagery in *Mass* was compromised because he could not alter anything during the later stages of the work. 'I would have changed a lot of things if I had known how to. But I didn't know how to, so the images represent a first statement.'

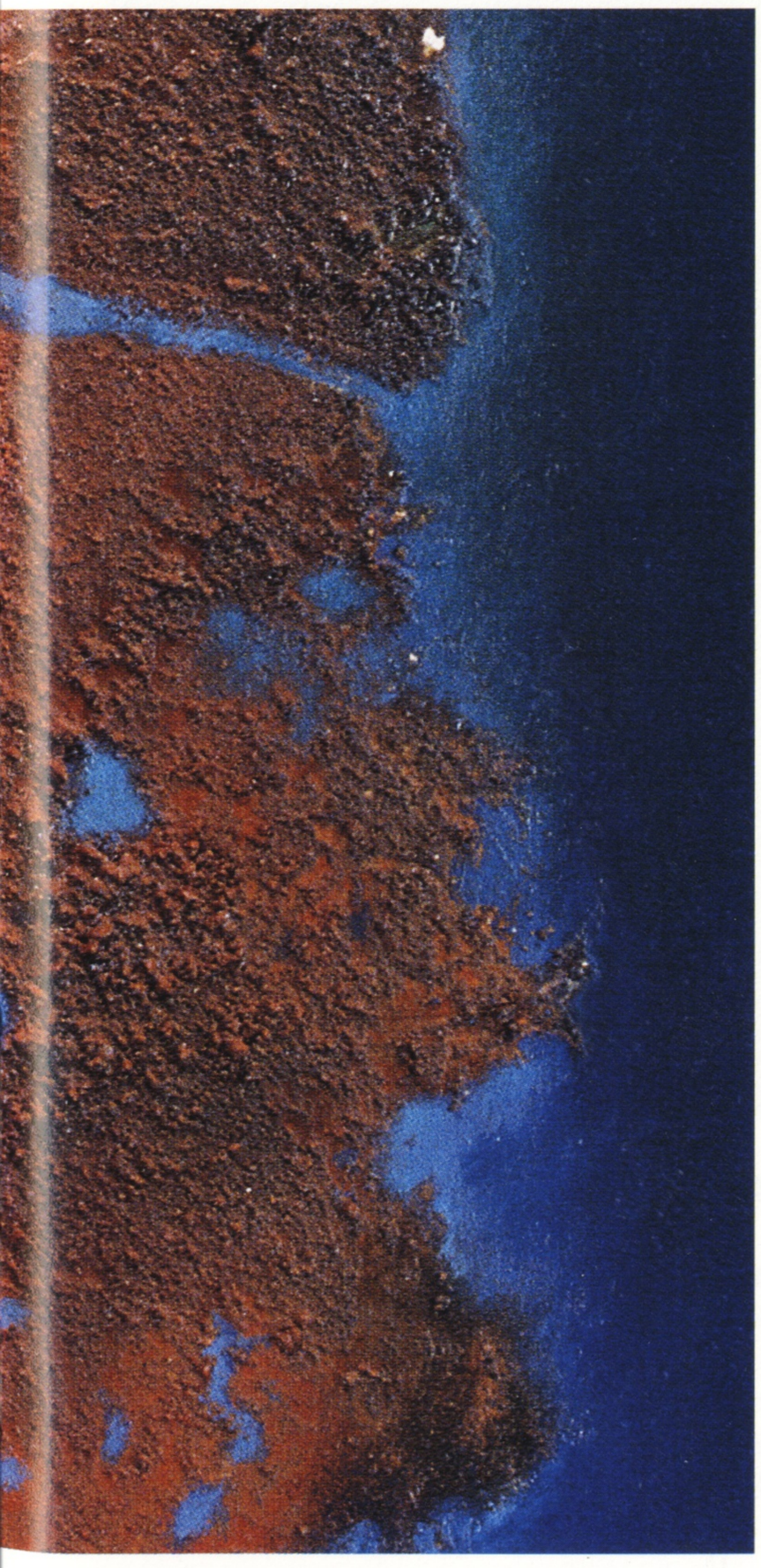
The *Mass* series remained the core of Harris's portfolio for many years, and he counts himself very fortunate that his friend and patron, John Graham, bought about a third of the paintings and regularly stimulated him to do more on the same theme. But here another, and critical, disadvantage of using shellac inks came into play: they are so fugitive that, if pictures done in them are hung in a normally lit room, within six months they will start to fade – if hung in direct sunlight they fade within weeks. As a consequence, many of the original *Mass* paintings quite literally no longer exist: they have faded beyond recognition. Happily for us, most were not sold and all were photographed on to transparency. Also, he has returned to the theme from time to time and painted them again, this time in acrylics or oils on a much bigger scale.

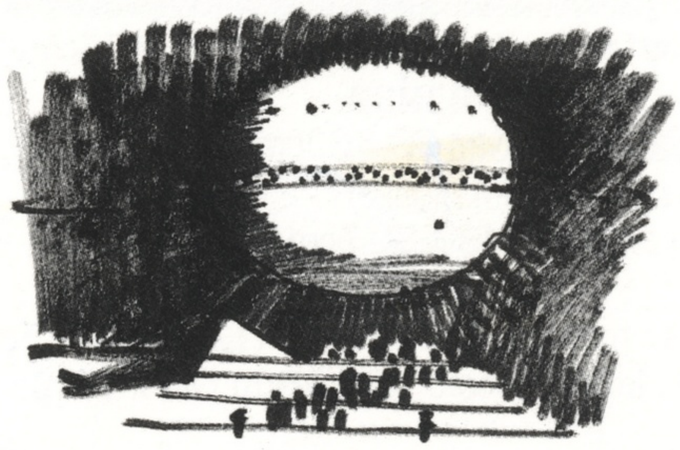
He continued to use shellac inks for about seven years, then discovered acrylics and the tremendous freedom they offered. It would be another seven years before he switched to oils. He finds now that, with the option given to him by oil paints of completely changing the totality of the canvas at any time during the painting process, he can do anything with paint that he wants to do.

As a support he now uses only canvas, but for many years he used card, which he found a very unforgiving surface, even when primed with emulsion, because it has no texture. Today he uses a very finely textured linen. His canvases are frequently very large, although sometimes, in view of the sense of enormous scale they embody, their size can seem surprisingly modest – often no bigger than sixty-one by ninety-two centimetres (two feet by three). His early paintings in the Mass series are even smaller, averaging merely thirty by fifty centimetres (twelve inches by twenty).

Working now in oils, materials that have been tried and trusted for hundreds of years, he has found a technique which he can use with great facility. In fact, today he never thinks about technique at all. He just goes for the feeling…

LEFT AND DETAIL BELOW
A VIEW FROM ABOVE 2
Oils on canvas
91.5 x 152.5cm (36 x 60in)
In talking about this painting, Harris suggests that the famous lines drawn in the Nazca desert, which can be understood as representational designs only if seen from above, might be a test of the earthbound novitiate's ability to transcend normal perception and intuitively grasp their meaning.





Index of Paintings

After the Fall Shellac ink on board 46 x 28cm (18 x 11in) 17
Aftermath – T+60 Oils on canvas 122 x 122cm (48 x 48in) 84
Age of Pussyfoot, The Shellac inks on board 63.5 x 40.5cm (25 x 16in) 54
Astropolis Acrylics on board 81 x 51cm (32 x 20in) 38, 39
Break-up Acrylics on board 51 x 33cm (20 x 13in) 52
Building of Atlantis, The Oils on hardboard 76 x 91.5cm (30 x 36in) 103
Burning Watchtowers: The Best of Trek 16 Acrylics on board 61 x 40.5cm (24 x 16in) 12
Chaos Equations, The Acrylics on board 76 x 51cm (30 x 20in) 40
Cities in Flight 2 Shellac inks on board 25.5 x 51cm (10 x 20in) 13
Conscience Place Acrylics on board 76 x 51cm (30 x 20in) 28
Corridors of Time, The Acrylics on board 38 x 56cm (15 x 22in) 23
Cross-Stitch Acrylics on board 30.5 x 43cm (12 x 17in) 42–3
Currents of Space Acrylics on board 30 x 51cm (12 x 20in) 6
Dhalgren Acrylics on board 76 x 51cm (30 x 20in) 49
Dream of Starlight, A Acrylics on hardboard 89 x 61cm (35 x 24in) 51
Driftglass Starshards Acrylics on board 76 x 51cm (30 x 20in) 105
Drunkard's Walk Shellac inks on board 63.5 x 40.5cm (25 x 16in) 24
Earth Made of Glass: Big Planet Acrylics on board 46 x 35.5cm (18 x 14in) 21
Earthly Delights Oils on canvas 33 x 46cm (13 x 18in) 34
Eight Feet in the Andes Oils on canvas 38 x 46cm (15 x 18in) 35
Einstein Intersection, The Acrylics on board 46 x 30.5cm (18 x 12in) 50, 51
Far Shore of Time, The Oils on canvas 56 x 76cm (22 x 30in) 8–9
Fire: Celebration of the Hive Oils on canvas 51 x 61cm (20 x 24in) 90–91
Fire: Cleaning the Ducts Oils on canvas 76 x 107cm (30 x 42in) 92–3
Fire: The Zig-Zag Oils on canvas 51 x 35.5cm (20 x 14in) 88–9
Flags Shellac inks on board 28 x 61cm (11 x 24in) 20
Footfall Acrylics on board 46 x 38cm (18 x 15in) 41
Full Tilt Oils on canvas 38 x 46cm (15 x 18in) 33
Generator 20 x 15cm (8 x 6in) 111
Herrenhauser series: Jungle Shellac inks on board 51 x 76cm (20 x 30in) 27
Herrenhauser series: Junk Shellac inks on board 51 x 76cm (20 x 30in) 30–31
Herrenhauser series: Rapids Shellac inks on board 51 x 76cm (20 x 30in) 29
Herrenhauser series: Rope Bridge Shellac inks on board 51 x 76cm (20 x 30in) 32
Herrenhauser series: Waterfall Shellac inks on board 51 x 76cm (20 x 30in) 27
In Ethiopia with a Mule Oils on canvas 28 x 33cm (11 x 13in) 32
Mad White Giant Acrylics on board 43 x 30.5cm (17 x 12in) 26
Mass: Airport Shellac inks on board 30.5 x 61cm (12 x 24in) 58
Mass: Cathedral 2 Shellac inks on board 46 x 46cm (18 x 18in) 80–81
Mass: Crystal Henge Shellac inks on board 30.5 x 38cm (12 x 15in) 74–5
Mass: Floating City Shellac inks on board 38 x 51cm (15 x 20in) 70–71
Mass: Inside the Roche Limit: Quiet Night Shellac inks on board 25.5 x 38cm (10 x 15in) 78–9
Mass: Leviathan Oils on canvas A triptych 1.8 x 4.5m (6 x 15ft) 76–7
Mass: Orbital Penitentiary Shellac inks on board 38 x 51cm (15 x 20in) 68
Mass: Pegasus 1, 2 and 3 Shellac inks on board 38 x 76cm (15 x 30in) each 60–61, 62–3
Mass: Planetfall Shellac inks on board 33 x 63.5cm (13 x 25in) 72–3
Mass: Shepherds on a Wreck Shellac inks on board 30.5 x 61cm (12 x 24in) 72–3
Mass: Test Flight of FTL1 Re-entry into Hyperspace Shellac inks on board 33 x 63.5cm (13 x 25in) 68–9
Mass: The Building of FTL1 Shellac inks on board 30.5 x 61cm (12 x 24in) 66–7
Mass: The Spaceman and the Guru Shellac inks on board 40.5 x 51cm (16 x 20in) 64
Mass: The Wall Oils on hardboard 152.5 x 122cm (60 x 48in) 59
Microdrive Shellac inks on board 81 x 46cm (32 x 18in) 11
Million Open Doors, A Acrylics on board 40.5 x 28cm (16 x 11in) 16
Moonlight Acrylics on board 51 x 76cm (20 x 30in) 112
Mote in God's Eye, The Acrylics on board 46 x 28cm (18 x 11in) 52
Phoenix Acrylics on board 46 x 38cm (18 x 15in) 18–19
Ringworld Oils on canvas 33 x 46cm (13 x 18in) 84, 85
Ringworld Throne Oils on canvas 46 x 66cm (18 x 26in) 86–7
Run to the Stars Shellac inks on board 51 x 71cm (20 x 28in) 36–7
Savage Pilgrims Oils on canvas 33 x 46cm (13 x 18in) 35
Siege of Eternity, The Oils on canvas 33 x 46cm (13 x 18in) 106–7
Sinclair Mural, The Oils on canvas 122 x 183cm (48 x 72in) 22–3
Stars Like Dust, The Acrylics on canvas 46 x 61cm (18 x 24in) 44–5
Strength of Stones, Flesh of Brass Shellac inks on board 61 x 40.5cm (24 x 16in) 53
Temple Acrylics on board 71 x 51cm (28 x 20in) 47
Transmission Station Oils on canvas 122 x 183cm (48 x 72in) 82–3
Triton Acrylics on board 76 x 51cm (30 x 20in) 48
View from Above 1, A Oils on canvas 122 x 183cm (48 x 72in) 98–9
View from Above 2, A Oils on canvas 91.5 x 152.5cm (36 x 60in) 108–9
Waiting for Clearance: Mystical Paths Oils on canvas 81 x 61cm (32 x 24in) 25
Weapons of Chaos, Book 3: Colors of Chaos Acrylics on board 81 x 66cm (32 x 26in) 7
Welcome, The Acrylics on board 81 x 51cm (32 x 20in) 2
Worlds Acrylics on board 81 x 46cm (32 x 18in) 10
Worlds Apart Acrylics on board 81 x 46cm (32 x 18in) 10
ZX81 Oils on hardboard 183 x 137cm (72 x 54in) 65



GENERATOR
20 x 15cm (8 x 6in)
Pastel study for a large painting that is in progress.

Acknowledgements

So many people contribute to an artist's career that it would be impossible to mention here all of those who have helped me. But with particular regard to the content and production of this book there are some to whom I owe an irredeemable debt.

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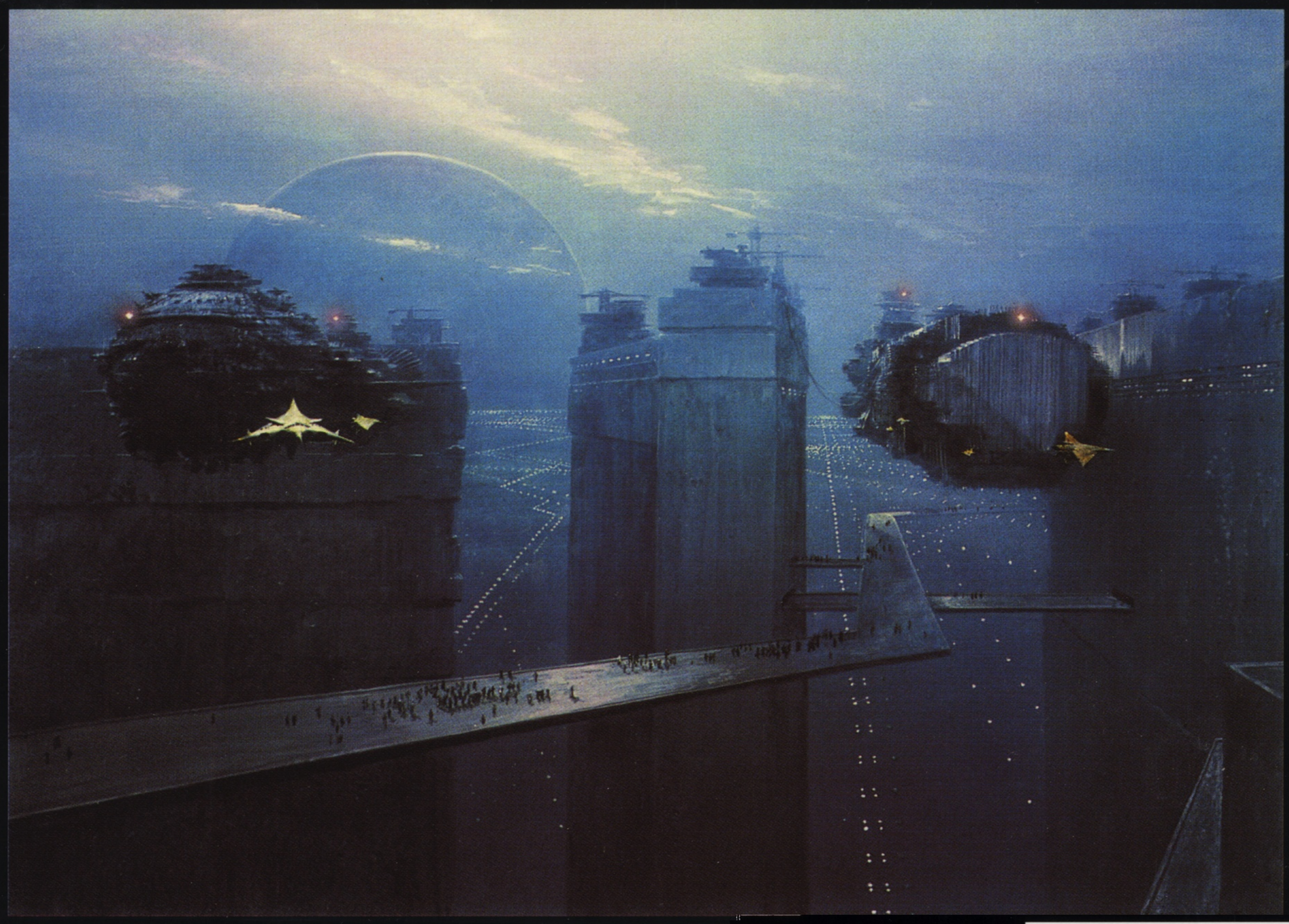
MOONLIGHT
Acrylics on board
51 x 76cm (20 x 30in)



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