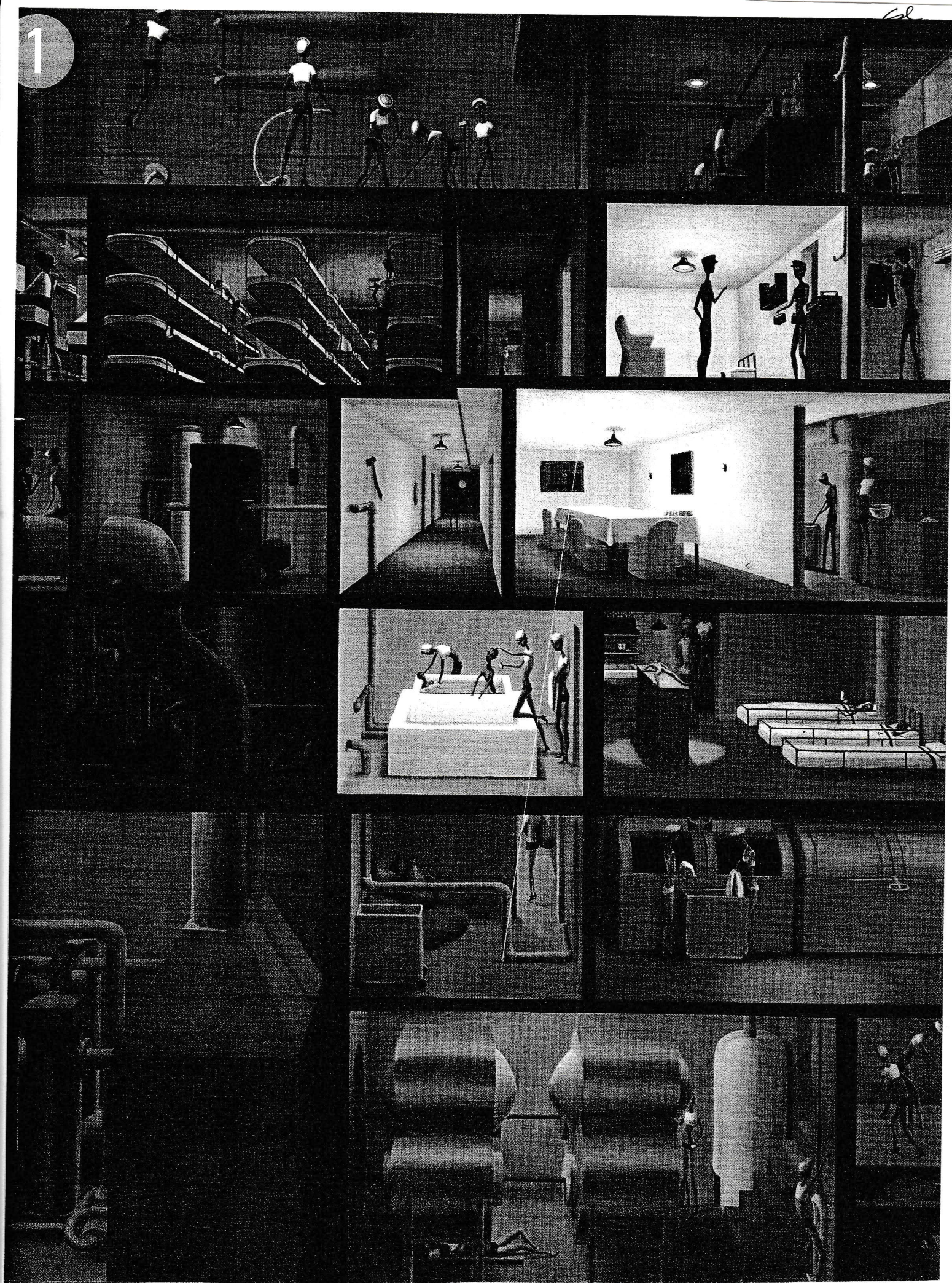


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TEMPORARY HEADQUARTERS

TEXT CECILIA DOUGHERTY
PAINTINGS HILARY HARKNESS

Temporary Headquarters, 2001. A recent addition to Hilary Harkness's series of oil-on-panel paintings on World War II themes. Depicting only women, the artist riffs on old war movies with their all-male milieus and vulnerable patriotic narratives.



Last August I went to Hilary Harkness's Manhattan apartment to see a work in progress called *Temporary Headquarters*. It was really hot, the middle of a heat wave in fact. It took forever to get a cab, so I was late, and when I finally showed up, I was confronted by a small blue-gray canvas filled with the most coolly rendered horrors. Even unfinished, the piece displayed a distressingly familiar catalog of the mechanisms of power, rife with amoral ecstasy, common sadism, nefarious sexuality, and the social perversions that make up any political universe. The work illuminates beautifully what Laurie Weeks calls "the fascism that is in our every cell."

Temporary Headquarters is set in the French countryside of the 1940s, in a house occupied by an army of what look like American women. The house is laid open, the front wall having collapsed into rubble in the foreground. Each story of the house is decorated in a particular period: The top floor is art nouveau; the middle floor is art deco; the first floor is deco as well, but moving into early Bauhaus. The scene outside is from the Dark Ages.

In the dark foreground of the painting, tiny women engage in torture, murder, and sadomasochism. A decapitated dog roasts on an open fire in the lower left-hand corner, attended by an armed guard. In the upper left-hand corner there is a small exhilarating patch of turquoise sea, punctuated by desperate leafless trees that appear to be painted with a brush of one hair's thickness. Set in the opposite corner is a perfect miniature church, emerging through an impossibly soft early evening.

Although Harkness produces only a few paintings a year, her work has found a market. Recent reviews seem to defend her on what I see as the transparently sexist grounds (and the mistaken impression) that she has betrayed the less palatable codes of feminism. She is said to belong to what academia has dubbed a generation of "post-feminists." She is, in fact, hard to place. Her work is original, honest, and idiosyncratic; in sum, her compositions might almost seem naive or maybe a few steps more developed than comic-book art. The paintings themselves are too engaging to work a trend, however. Rather than reverting to the female artist's relegated territory of self-abuse, Harkness, with her all-female armies, takes an intuitive dive into a more complicated political territory, where "female" actually means human.

Harkness is a young painter already being compared to Paul Cadmus, George Tooker, and Hieronymous Bosch, as well as more contemporary artists like Nicole Eisenman and Tom of Finland. I can add Raymond Pettibon, Amy Sillman, and G. B. Jones to the list, but Harkness herself has mentioned only Balthus. Her skills and insights are still maturing, most likely into an even richer and more entangled elaboration of the less delicate aspects of an unhinged female social reality.

I asked Hilary Harkness if her colors are based on observations from life. She laughed out loud at me and said, "No." A clear image of *Temporary Headquarters* stayed with me all day. I saw the painting in my mind's eye as I drifted off to sleep that night, notwithstanding the two fans blasting warm air around my head. Without thinking, I zoomed in for close-ups and fell, finally, into an untroubled sleep.

Rearguard Action! 2000. A battle-ship setting with soldiers engaged in axed morning activities. Watching these old films, Harkness became entranced by the men's uniforms, she invented a scanty regulation rival for her crew. The ominous mechanical innards of this ship are purely imaginary, while other Harkness naval cutaways are more realistic.

Taste of Salt, 2000. A social hierarchy shown in close-up in close quarters. The artist gets excited thinking what it would be like on a submarine, and she was pleased when this writer wondered whether the title of the painting might apply to semen.

Neutral Vessel, 2001. Harkness's paintings employ specific narratives that seem to come out only with study. Here, some women, who are pregnant and couldn't fight, are loaded on a cruise ship. But as submarines of several nationalities (both Axis and Allied) board the vessel, it is turning into a bordello.

Shore Leave, 2000. A send-up of horny sailors' off the boat. In an undetermined setting, one man has exploded from sexual tension and reveals a gutful of phalluses. The figure in evening dress and the half-dressed telephoner are disoriented by the event, but they themselves remain serious and in need of explanation.