

Elena and Michel Gran

by **Tamara Faulkner**

April 22, 2004

The collaborative canvases of Elena and Michel Gran—they describe their process as “symbiotic”—manipulate not just space but time, melding the juxtapositions of objects in Picasso’s cubist collages and the airless solemnity of Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin’s 18th-century paintings. In *The Port*, an imaginary landscape on a desktop, a folded newspaper hat is set afloat on a sea of blotter paper; at first this looks like a typical trompe l’oeil scene, its edges set to protrude into the viewer’s space, the subject matter about to slide into cloying nostalgia. But the space is disconcertingly shallow, and the objects in it—frayed strings, books and boxes—seem weightless and flattened, painted with soft, brushless strokes in the earthy tones of a dim paneled library. The colors and textures of the late Renaissance press these objects into a false collage—and seem to give us the space to reconsider our own mental image banks. Hollis Taggart, 3 E. Huron, through April 29. Hours are 9 to 6 Monday through Friday and 10 to 5 Saturday; 312-475-9300.





ELENA & MICHEL GRAN

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CATTO GALLERY

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In ancient Greece an argument raged about which of two painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, was the most skilled. The result was a competition to see who could paint the most life-like work of art. First, Zeuxis painted a bunch of grapes so realistic real birds tried to snatch them. Then it was Parrhasius' turn. But when Zeuxis parted the curtain to look at his effort, he knew he was beaten. The curtain was not real: it was a painted illusion.

Thus began, so legend has it, the artistic tradition of trompe l'oeil (from the French to 'deceive the eye'). While the practice has moved in and out of fashion across the centuries, it has consistently fascinated audiences. Today, Paris-based painters Elena and Michel Gran are acknowledged as the finest practitioners of the art. They are taking trompe l'oeil into fertile new areas of exploration. The Catto is delighted to host their second show in Hampstead.

In a sense, all representational painting could be described as trompe l'oeil. It performs the same 'trick' of turning two dimensions into three. So we look at a canvas and think we see the ocean or the mountains or a vast crowd. But we don't. We see blobs of paint on a sheet of fabric.

However, true trompe l'oeil painting goes further. Its practitioners deploy mathematical rigour and total control over the nuances of light and colour to give the illusion of people and things bursting from the canvas or wall. The paintings often depict their subjects stepping outside their frames to make the effect even more fantastical. This is hard to do.

Elena and Michel have been refining their expertise for 50 years. The painters each have a background in set design, where illusion - 'fooling the eye' - is not just an artistic choice, but the goal of the work. Elena was born in St. Petersburg in 1942 into a family of painters and architects. She trained at the Academy of Theatre, Music and Cinematography St Petersburg within the Faculty of Arts. Michel was born in Moscow 1941, the son of a theatrical artist. The two met at the St Petersburg Academy and were married in 1964.

After graduation they made careers in set design, TV and book illustration. In 1966, they began painting together. Not side by side, but together - on the same canvas. Half a century later, they still work in the same way. The process has bonded them to such an extent that they often cannot remember which of them worked on any given section of a painting.

In 1981, Elena and Michel moved to Paris. Their collective reputation grew and earned them more than 20 solo exhibitions throughout France, Germany, Italy, England and the US. Today, their work belongs to private collections in the UK, mainland Europe, Japan, Australia, Canada and the US. The Louvre Museum also purchased a work entitled Red and Black for the French National Museum of Cards in 1996.

It's appropriate that The Louvre should choose to acquire a playing card painting. Elena and Michel have become recognised for their fascination with this subject. It's easy to see why. The playing card offers fertile raw material for the artist, connoting chance, luck and destiny. In the Grans' hands, packs of cards are often lined up alongside old books, technical devices and mathematical puzzles to form fascinating complex arrangements. Elsewhere, cards become a proxy for something else. In this new show, for example, we see cards stand in for flowers in Floral Arrangement.

The collection also sees the Grans revisiting another theme that features regularly in their work. You might call this 'still life with science'. Here are paintings that reveal a fascination for instruments of measurement - scales, weights, measures - and reimagine these objects in beguiling new arrangements. The most outstanding example here is New Gravitation, a wonderful tribute to the spirit of scientific enquiry.

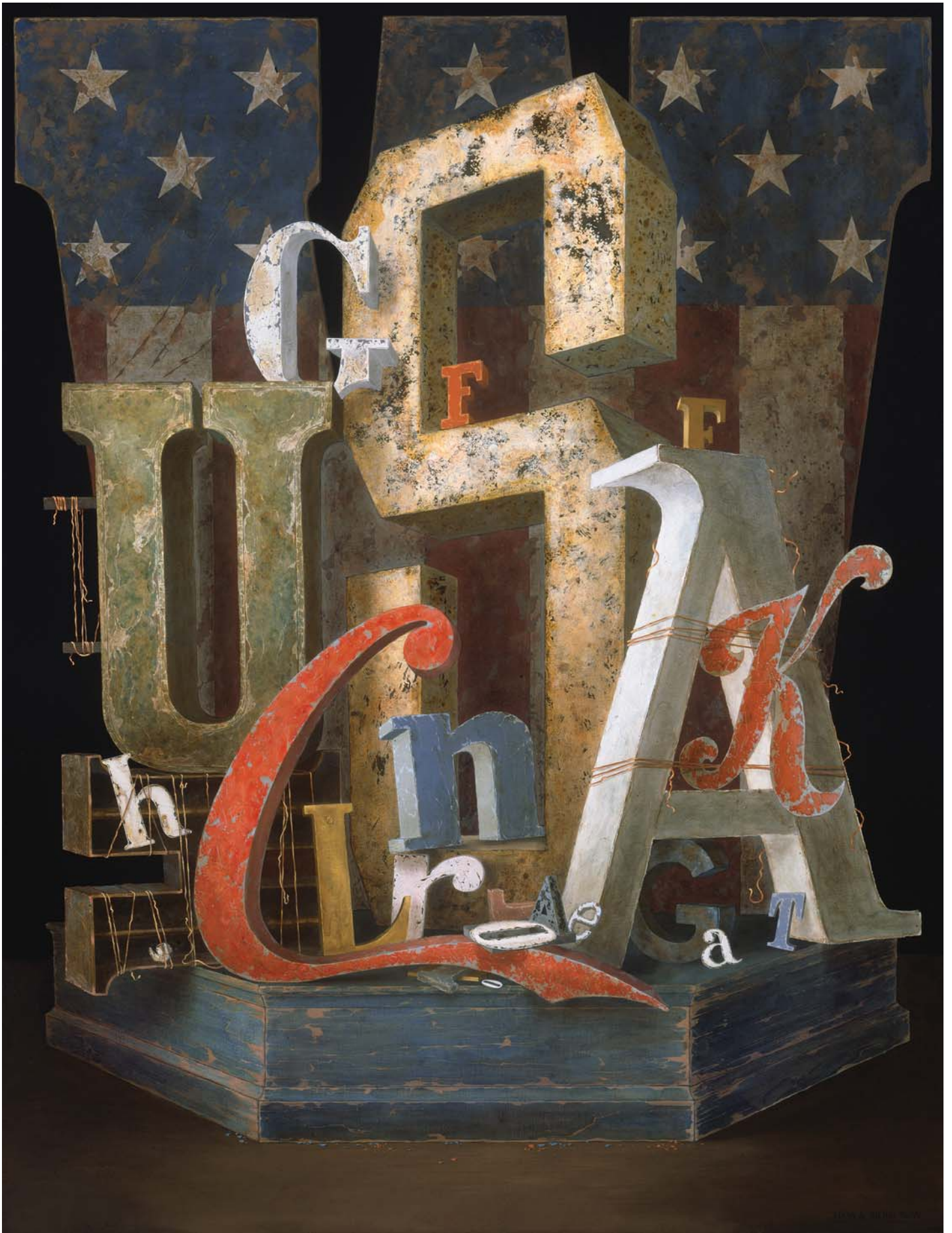
It's possible to see a world of art history in the Grans' paintings. The violin motif in Selected Works is surely a reference to the early cubism of Picasso, while Black And White suggests the meticulousness of Durer. Elsewhere, there are hints of surrealism in the bizarre juxtapositions of a work like Coral in which marine plant life competes for space with more of those scientific instruments.

Elena and Michel Gran are giants of the contemporary art scene, unique in their vision and peerless in their technique. The Catto is privileged to present their work to UK audiences for the second time.

GIANT CORNUCOPIA
130 x 97 cm



AMERICAN ALPHABET
130 x 97 cm



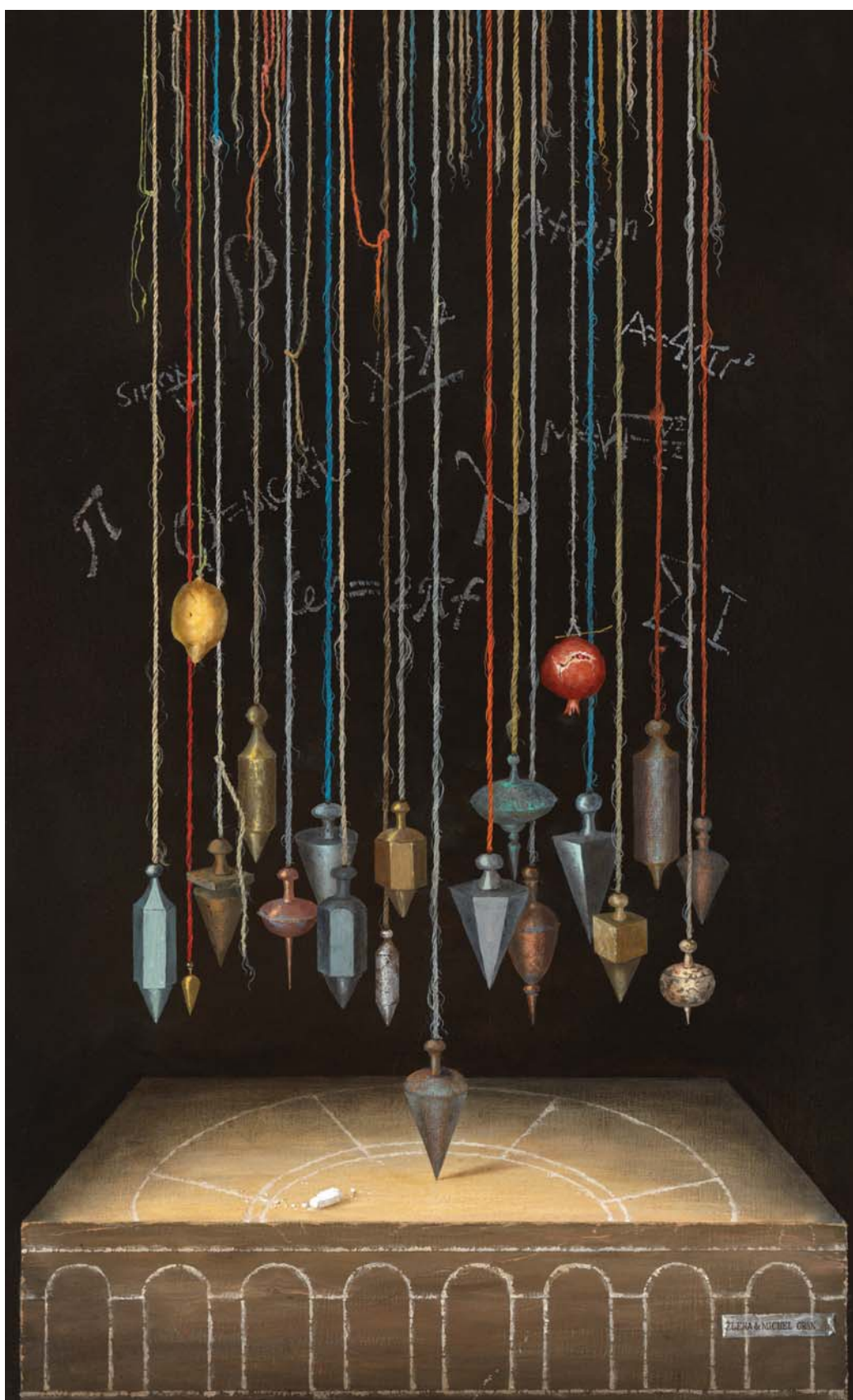


COLUMN
150 x 50 cm



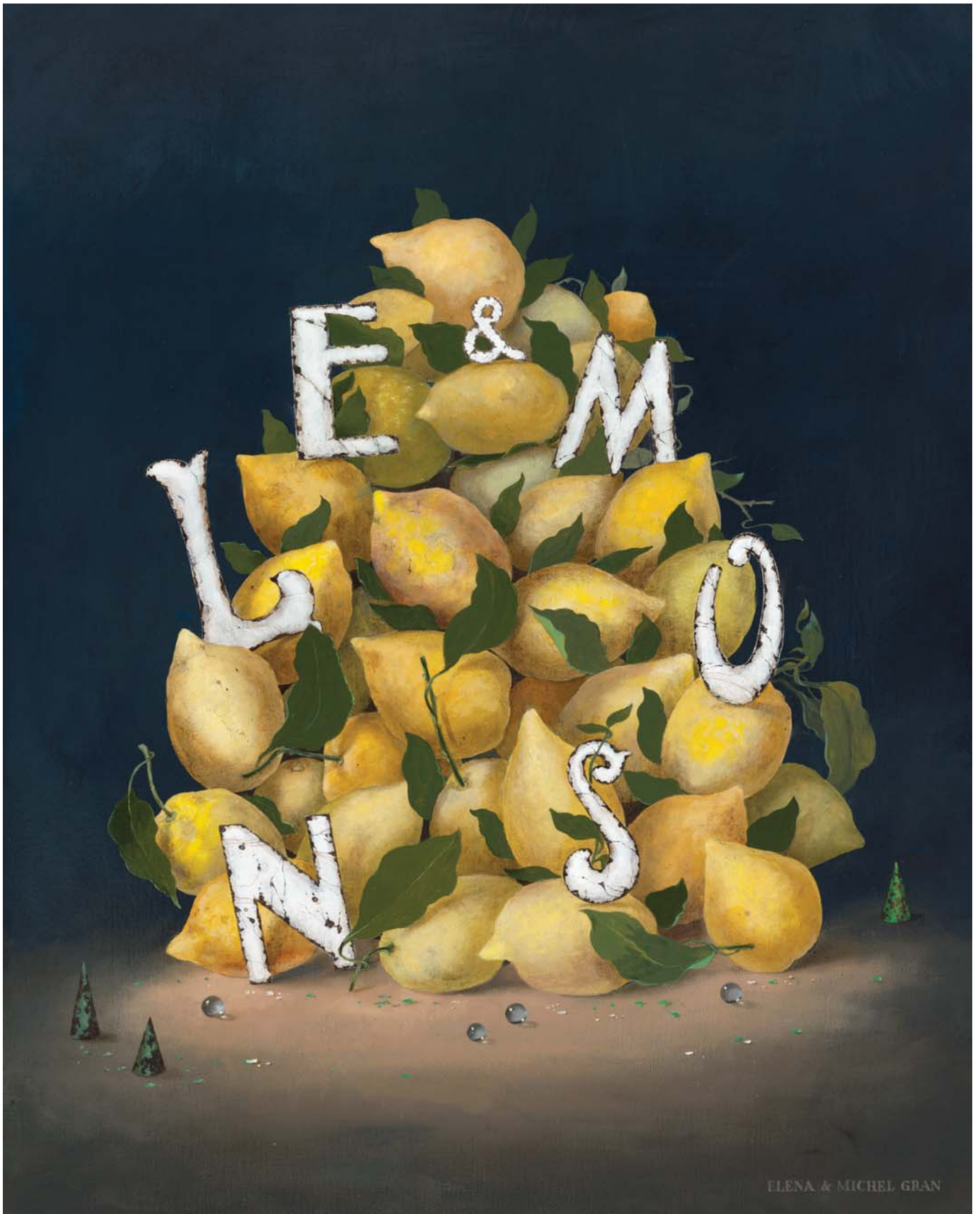


BLUEPRINT FOR A LINER
116 x 89 cm



NEW GRAVITATION
100 x 65 cm

LEMONS
81 x 65 cm



ELENA & MICHEL GRAN

HEAD OVER HEELS
116 x 89 cm





CONSTELLATION OF VIRGO
73 x 60 cm



CONSTELLATION OF LIBRA
73 x 60 cm

CORAL
116 x 81 cm





CONSTELLATION OF AQUARIUS
73 x 60 cm



CONSTITUTION OF PISCES
73 x 60 cm



CORNUCOPIA
65 x 54 cm



MEDUSA
147 x 115 cm

ARTIST'S SECRET
100 x 81 cm





SELECTED WORKS
65 x 81 cm



FABRICA OF CARDS
81 x 65 cm

BLACK AND WHITE
116 x 89 cm





PORTRAIT OF AN OFFICER
99 x 81 cm



RIBBONS
92 x 73 cm



MOUNTAIN OF CARDS
65 x 54 cm

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1986 Galerie Fiorovanti, Rome, Italy. Galerie 27, Grosseto, Italy.
 1987 Galerie Diessen am Ammersee, Munich, Germany.
 Galerie Cauvin, Billom, France.
 1988 Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, France.
 1989 Germering Community Arts Centre, Germany.
 Kunstgalerie of Herrsching, Germany
 1990 Guest of Honour at the Music and Painting Festival,
 Florence, Italy.
 1991 Galerie of Tourettes-sur-Loup, Nice, France

1993, 1995, 1997
 Galerie Michele Boulet, Paris, France.
 2004 Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York, USA.
 Hollis Taggart Galleries, Chicago, USA.
 2007 Sammer Gallery, Marbella, Spain.
 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2012
 Albemarle Gallery, London, UK.
 2013 Catto Gallery, London, UK
 2016 Catto Gallery, London, UK

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1982 First Participation in the Salon d'Automne, Paris, France.
 From 1991 – Sociétaires. (members)
 1987 First Participation in the Salon des Indépendants, Paris,
 France.
 From 1993 – Sociétaires. (members)
 1989 Monte-Carlo, XXIII Prix International d'Art Contemporain.
 "Beyond Reality ...", Galerie Saint-Hubert, Lyon, France.
 8th Salon of Angers, France.
 1990 Chateau Vascoeuil, France.
 1991 Arras Museum, France
 'Trompe-l'Oeil' exhibition Galerie Michelle Boulet, Paris,
 France.
 1992 "France – Japon" tour of Japan.
 'Trompe l'Oeil and Anamorphosis' – Exhibition at the
 Manège de Reims, France.
 "Beyond Reality ...", Galerie Saint-Hubert, Lyon, France.
 11th Salon of Angers, France
 Salon of Montmorency, France.

1993 Guest of Honor at the Saran Castle, Loiret, France.
 "Trompe l'Oeil" exhibition at the Grand Palais, Paris,
 France.
 "Contemporary Trompe l'Oeil" Galerie Michelle Boulet,
 Paris, France.
 1994 Salon of Montmorency – they win the City of
 Montmorency 1st Grand Prix, France.
 1995 Prix International d'Art Contemporain of
 Monte-Carlo at Monaco Museum.
 1996 "Trompe l'Oeil" Exhibition at the Manège de Reims,
 France.
 1997 – 2011 Still Life Shows and Summer Shows,
 Albemarle Gallery, London, UK.
 2012 – 2013 "Trompe l'Oeil / Réalité" Museum of Schafstall,
 Neuenstadt, Germany.



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