

Forever Restless

An Interview with Jo Baer

by Catherine Somzé



Jo Baer
Korean, 1963
oil on canvas, 183 cm x 183 cm
Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

Very few women were accepted into the 1960s Minimalist art movement, but one of those few was Jo Baer, now almost 90 years old and one of the last star witnesses of a decade in New York that changed the face of modern art. Born in Seattle in the year of the Stock Market Crash, the life and work of the painter, who first trained to become a biologist, has been marked by sharp upheavals. Her trajectory almost spans the entire twentieth century, and reads like an adventure book featuring legendary names such as Sol LeWitt, Clement Greenberg and Andy Warhol.

In both the private and professional sphere, Baer appeared restless. She hopped from city to city, husband to husband and, most problematically of all for art purists, from one art style to the next. If her peers embraced her as a Minimalist painter, they didn't embrace her almost immediate rejection of abstraction upon institutional recognition. Shortly after the retrospective of her Minimalist work at the Whitney Museum, she moved to Ireland, resulting in what many described as career suicide. But swapping the vibrant New York art scene for the European countryside wasn't the sum of these parts. In 1983, she published the controversial piece *I Am No Longer an Abstract Artist* in *Art in America* — a manifesto about the obsolescence of abstract art in the face of a changed world. Her answer was “radical figuration,” a term she also later abandoned.

After a stop in London, Baer finally found a steady home in Amsterdam, where she has been living for more than 30 years. Her workplace is a light-filled studio situated in the attic of a building on the muted ‘canal of roses’, the Rozengracht. She remains faithful to themes and ways of making that took shape while she was living in proximity to ancient traces of human life in the Irish countryside. Each drawing and painting is a swirl of motifs taken from the history of art, from the Neolithic *Hurlstone* to Greco-Roman statues and Botticelli's *Venus*. Energetic and well groomed, she hops from the computer to the wall, where traces of paint can be seen. She still wants to make a few more paintings, she says, before it's too late. Her eyes and white hair shimmer in the light, and she speaks as if there is no time to lose.



Jo Baer tending orchids,
New York, 1971



Jo Baer
Memorial for an Art World Body (Nevermore), 2009
oil on canvas
183 cm x 153 cm



“Male purist abstract art was just easy to get. But as a woman I could also do female work. I sneaked in some feminine stuff, like colors.”

Catherine Somzé: Your career invites all kinds of epic metaphors. The seven lives of a cat, the phoenix who rises from her ashes.

Jo Baer: I don't ever get killed! [Laughs.] I've been pushed to the side many times, but that's fine. I like being in the margins. I am an "artist's artist," and I never painted expecting fame.

CS: But you were popular once, and then left New York at the height of your fame as a Minimalist painter.

JB: I left in 1975 because I was finished with all of that, because the paintings I was making were becoming baroque.

CS: That sounds like a paradoxical statement, given we're talking about Minimalist art.

JB: But I never meant to be an abstract painter. I grew up with Picasso and Matisse, and you had to be that kind of abstract artist. But Mondrian and purer kinds of abstract art were the big thing back then, when I moved to New York from Los Angeles in the late 1950s.

CS: So you felt the pressure to adapt.

JB: Somehow. You wouldn't do self-portraits or anything like that. I wouldn't have known how to do that either but, in any case, I wouldn't do it. Abstract art of the Minimalist kind wasn't very difficult to figure out either. I looked for some place that wasn't being used, and just decided to "move into it," as I once heard a writer for opera saying. Male purist abstract art was just easy to get. But as a woman, I could also do female work. I snuck in some feminine stuff, like colors. Sol LeWitt said to me, "why did you get these color lines?!" "Well," I said, "because I've used colors all my life. Painting is about color."

CS: But then you ran away from the spotlight.

JB: Well, I was around all these highly successful, world-famous artists who were in New York at the time — Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt and the others. I wasn't really impressed by their lifestyle. One of them even tried to pull down my jeans, even though my own boyfriend was standing right there!

CS: You said somewhere that you were more discriminated against as an artist than as a woman. But this painful anecdote seems to say otherwise.

JB: I didn't mean it that way. I was discriminated against as any woman was at the time. We are still not paid as much — our prices are lower — but I never felt I was discriminated against as an artist for being a female. The work was there. To give you an example, Lucy Lippard had a Whitney opening, and there were women there with whistles around their necks, and I asked them what was going on. "They are whistleblowers,"

she said, "the biennial should have at least 50 percent women representation." I told her then that I didn't have any trouble getting into shows, and she replied, "yes, but you're a good artist!" She wanted equal representation whatever the cost. I don't think that's good. Also, I was invited to the first all-women show in Hamburg, and I sent them a statement saying that I didn't want to be part of a women-only show. I didn't believe in constructing a ghetto!

CS: You stand for what you feel is right.

JB: I always have. And since my earliest childhood years, my determination has been the object of dismay. My family at that time didn't like me. And my mother, especially, was very upset with me. She would say things like, "you've never been part of our family, you always go your own way, you're just like your father!" She'd run after me to brush my hair, and I would lock myself up in the bathroom. Once, when they refused to give me food until I ate rhubarb, I went to all the neighbours and said, "they won't give me any food."

CS: It must have been hard on you.

JB: I think when a child is in conditions where she is not noticed or loved, she can go one of two ways. She either does what I did, or crumbles. There's nothing special about that. It's normal — children do that. It's just that I had no back up, that's all.

CS: You're a survivor.

JB: I am better than a survivor. To me, it was natural. And for some reason, I always ended up being a part of something. I was never a true outsider.

CS: What would you say to the youngest generation of artists?

JB: I don't know. I had a little piece of luck. What I was doing was good enough, at least as it turned out. The Korean paintings, which are now regarded as my breakthrough as a Minimalist painter, were rejected at first. Ivan Karp from the Castelli Gallery came to my studio and said, "these are the most aggressive paintings I've ever seen, and I cannot imagine anyone ever buying them!" And I had made 16 of them! They weren't shown until 1972. Anyways, I wasn't really impressed by the work of Minimalist artists at that time either. Their stuff wasn't even as good as what the Russians had been doing at the beginning of the century!

CS: In 1983, you published the essay *I Am No Longer an Abstract Artist*, in which you contended that abstract art had ceased to be relevant in the face of a changed world. Do you think the world has changed again, and

that it requires a new type of art?

JB: It does, but I don't have that much more time. I would love to do a few more works in the *Giant* series, but I haven't been able to paint for the last year, as I've been crippled with a bad hip.

CS: I'm sure there would be many young painters willing to assist you!

JB: I could have somebody else do the work, but the minute they go home I would want to fix it, and that would mean climbing on ladders and steps. When I'm really working, I go deep and I don't know where I am — I don't care, I fall over. I shouldn't be tempted. So, I wrote a book instead, and it's going to be published.

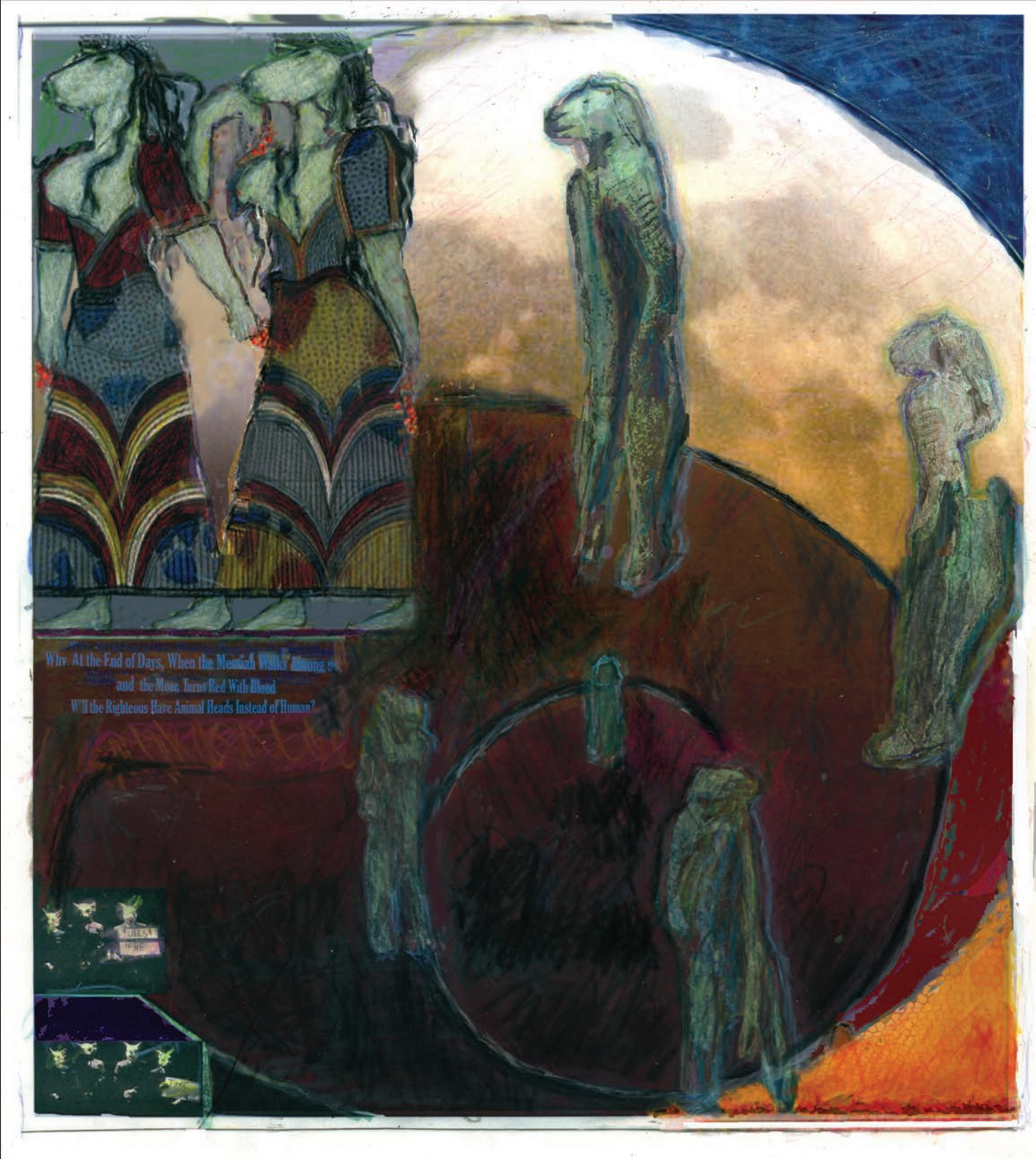
CS: You've always been a writer.

JB: I always wanted to know what I had done, in the sense that I never understood the thing that I do, and I have to promise you that I do not go looking for answers, because if I figured it out, I would only fix it and make it better. So, I leave it alone. But afterwards, I find the writing tunes me in. It's difficult to explain, but I put painting together to see if something is true or false. Not in a therapeutic sense, but as a kind of scientific experiment.

CS: Do you think you are ahead of your time again?

JB: I've taken actual steps to integrate my European work, and I've had great success. But where curators in their fifties or older are very antagonistic to the new work, the young people are climbing all over me from Bulgaria, from Russia. For them, I'm no longer an abstract artist.

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Jo Baer
Armageddon (Why at the End of Days, When the Messiah Walks Among Us and the Moon Turns Red With Blood Will the Righteous Have Animal Heads Instead of Human?), 2018
sketch for a painting
inkjet print on canvas
51,4 cm x 47 cm
7 + 2AP

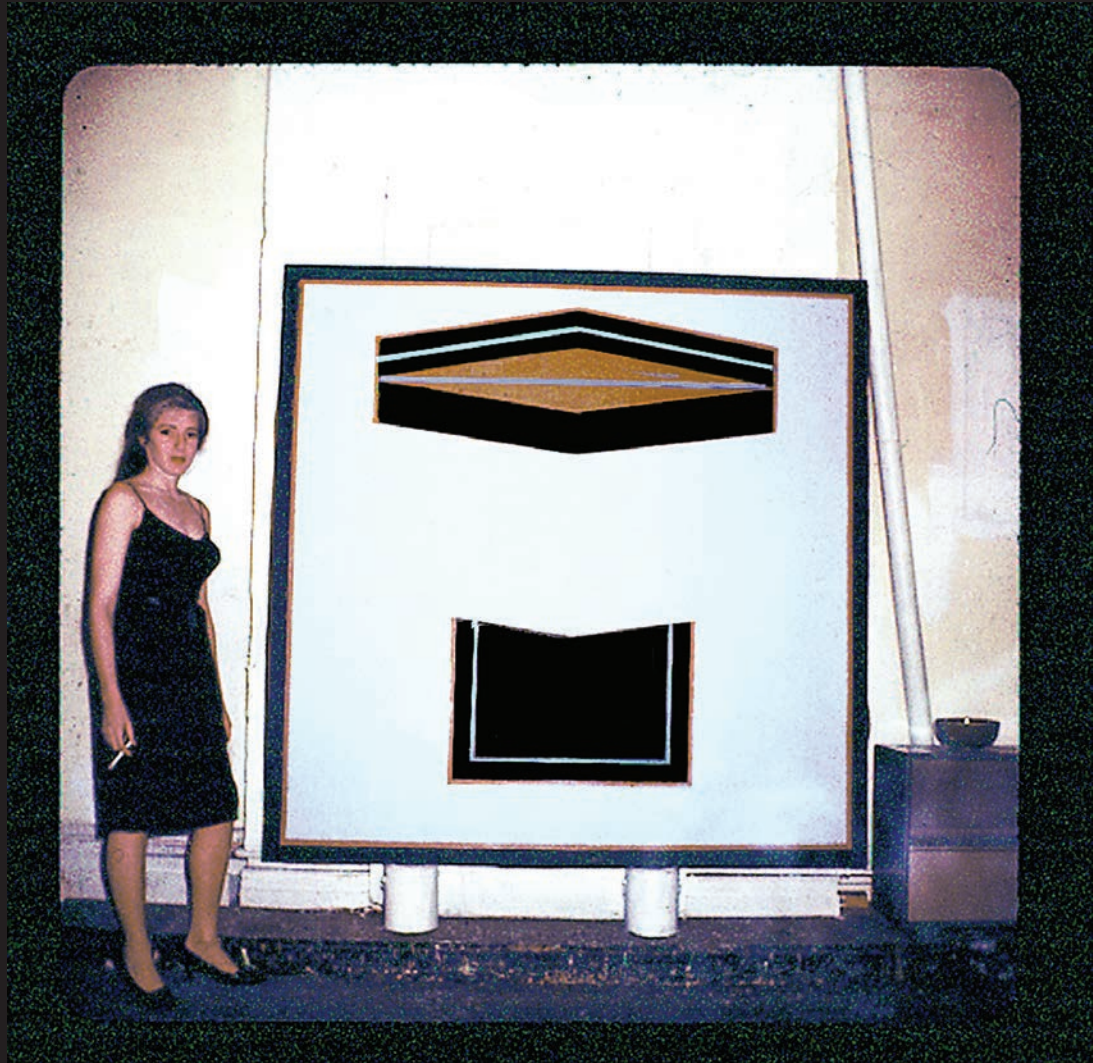
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin



Jo Baer
Untitled (Black Star), 1960-1961
 oil on canvas, 183 cm x 183 cm
 Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo



Jo Baer
Korean, 1963
 oil on canvas, 183 cm x 183 cm
 Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



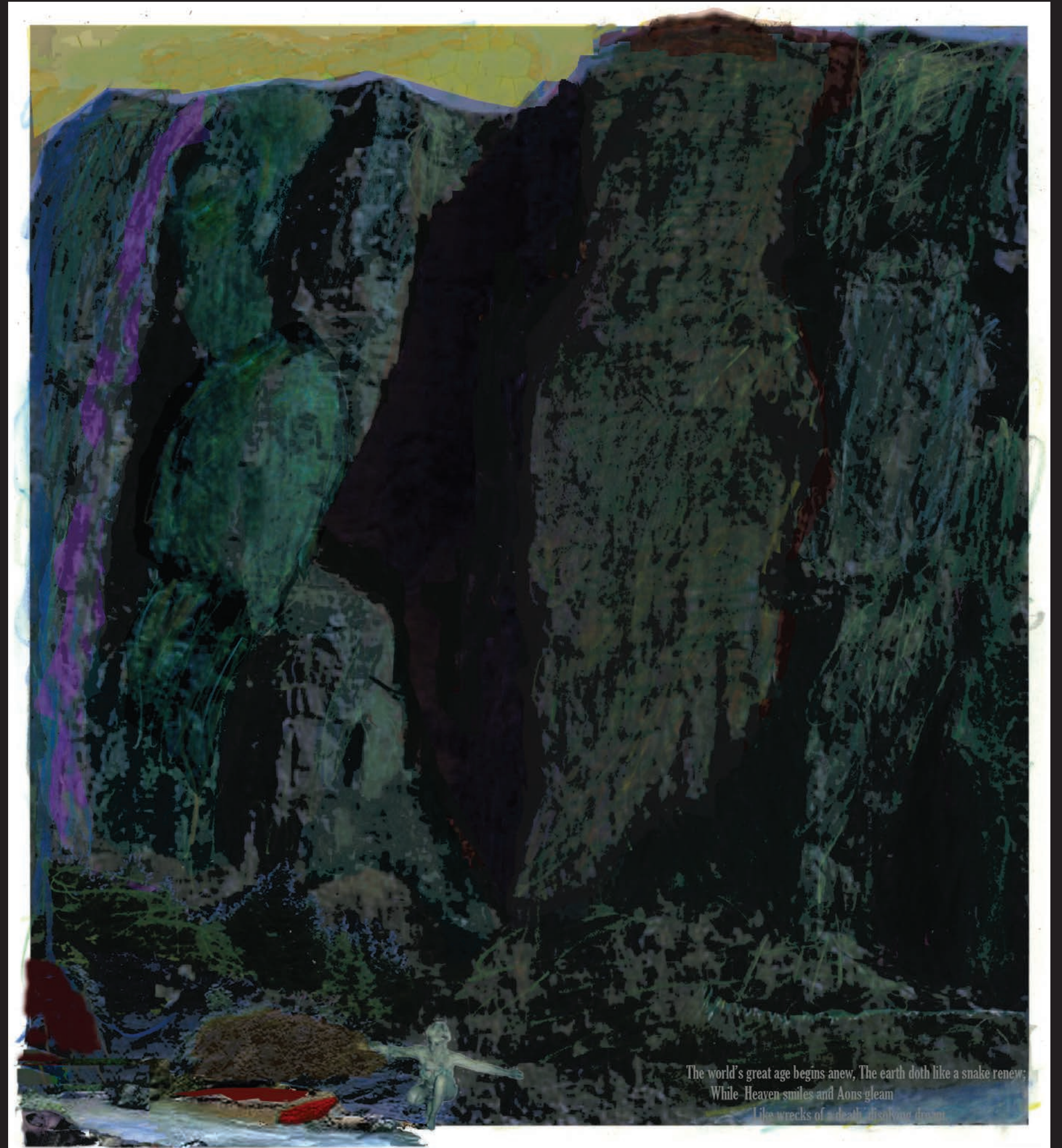
Jo Baer, 1959
painting destroyed by artist

Right page
Jo Baer

Primeval (The world's great age begins anew, The earth doth like a snake renew; While Heaven smiles and Aeons gleam Like wrecks of a death dissolving dream), 2018

Sketch for a painting
Inkjet print on canvas
51,2 x 46 cm
7 +2AP

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin



The world's great age begins anew, The earth doth like a snake renew;
While Heaven smiles and Aeons gleam
Like wrecks of a death dissolving dream