

Alexandra Dikeakos  
& Gloria Massé  
Paintings

*The Charles H. Scott Gallery  
Emily Carr College of Art and Design  
October 5 to 28, 1984*

## GLORIA MASSÉ

A single episode in a person's life, whether experienced at home or abroad, can nurture massive feedback of images and emotion difficult to convey to others. The phenomenon is popularly known as a "peak experience."

Although such episodes are perhaps no more common among creative people, the developed and honed skills of artists and poets can articulate these rare and pleasurable sensations. Gloria Massé has devoted much of the past two years to the task of expressing in paint one such experience.

It had been a third trip to India for her—part of a broader, unspecific pursuit of art and history in a subcontinent which is itself an infinite metaphor for humanity. Initially, in 1972, she chose it as a destination for the absolute counter it would provide to the Windsor, Ontario life style she had established for herself and her daughter. Massé was then working as a children's librarian and afraid her ten-year-old would become a "TV junkie." Resigning from the job and liquidating her retirement savings, she and her daughter went. Unlike so many Westerners, she was less attracted by the spiritual or meditative impetus, remaining instead an acute observer.

The culture shock resulting from that first experience abroad had its more or less predictable effect and, in this case, extricated both mother and daughter out of a complacency which has never resumed. Massé resolved to become an artist—another signal decision—after years of amateur sketching without instruction.

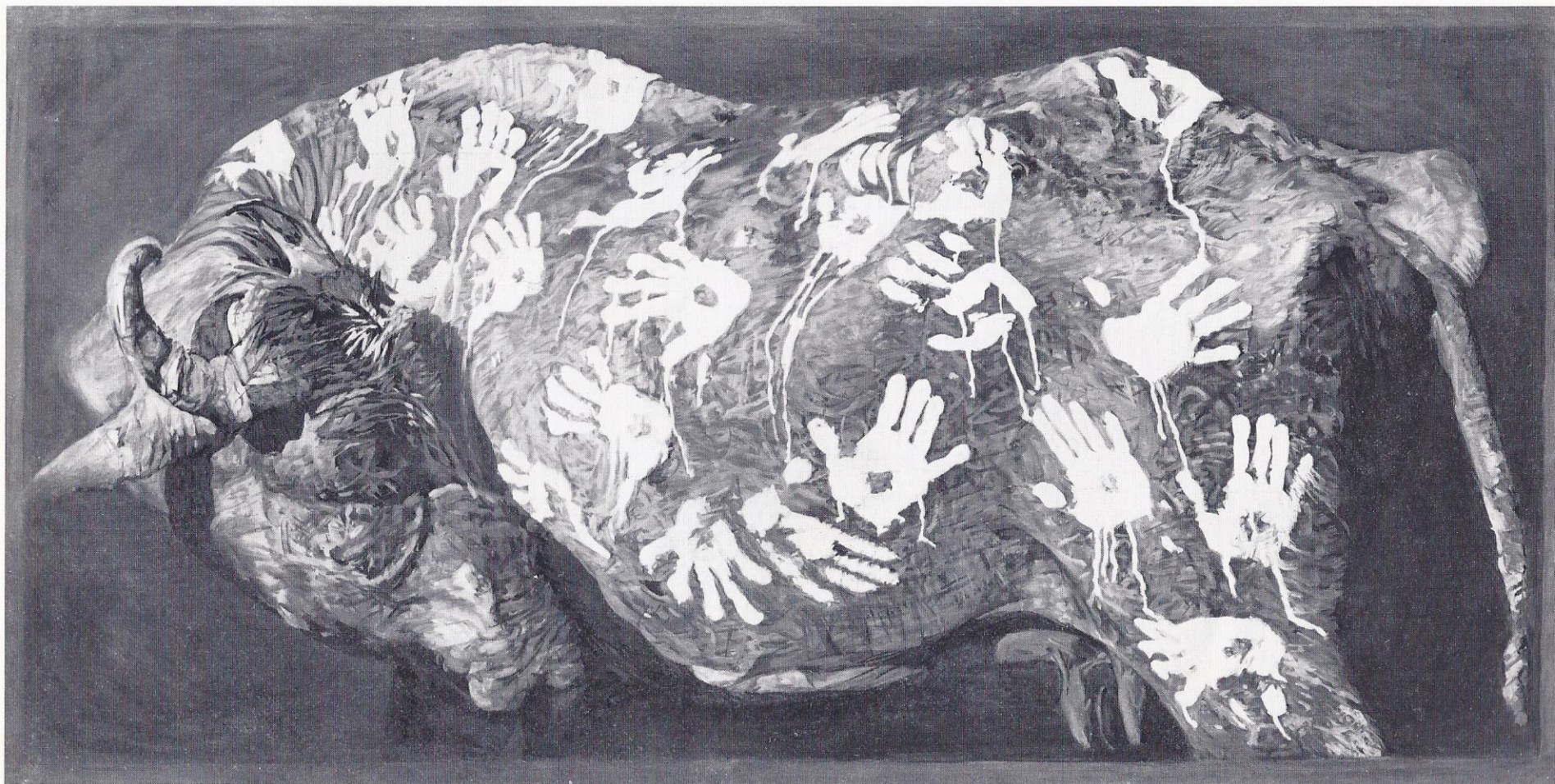
On their return to Canada, Massé made arrangements to qualify for entry into the Fine Arts department at the University of British Columbia. Her strongest inclination was to draw constantly, but she also responded to the diverse tutelage of Bert Binning, Gathie Falk and Susanna Blunt and was significantly affected by the ideas of Marjorie Halpin, who taught an art and anthropology course that helped put things in a different context.

Typically, Massé had to wait out the dilemmas of improving her craft of drawing and painting to match the high level of her anticipation, and learning how to isolate significant experience, usually a slightly delayed reaction, in rational terms, which positively "woke her up, visually." As a result of this particularly catholic training, Massé seems to be unaffected by currently popular art preoccupations which have taken on strong programmatic or partisan overtones, although her present style and approach can obviously be characterized.

The eighteen works in this exhibition might conveniently be tagged as a certain level of photo-realism; the rendering is sufficiently tight and the source material, on many occasions, indisputably photographic. However, unlike some photo-realism with smooth and undifferentiated surface, Massé's effects are



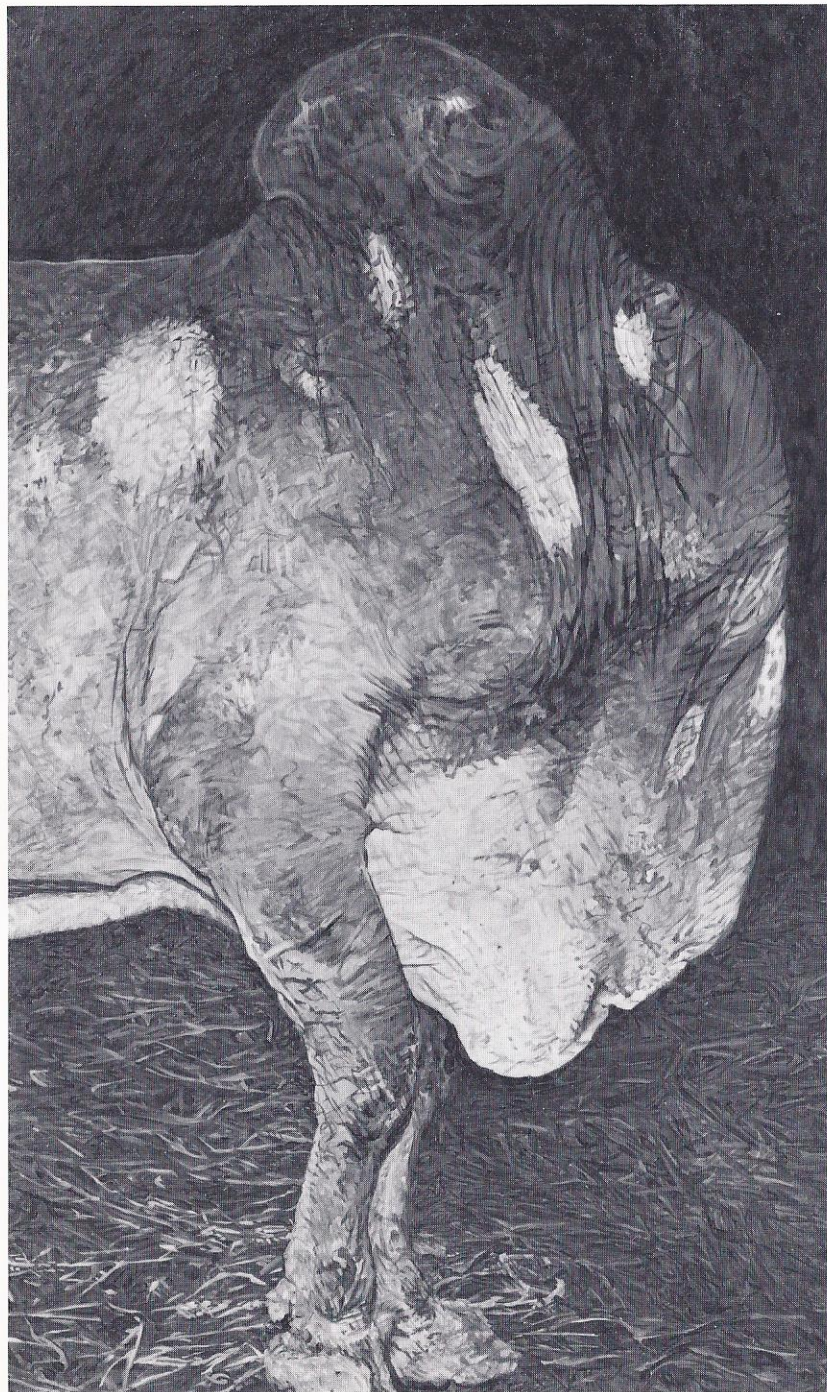
Gloria Massé, *Horns, Red and Green Tassels*, 1983, oil on canvas, 114.5 x 68.5 cm.



Gloria Massé, *Water Buffalo, Handprints*,  
1982, oil on canvas, 82 x 165.2 cm.



Gloria Massé, *Buffalo Torso (Green)*, with *Light Hand Image*,  
1983, oil on canvas, 119.2 x 152.5 cm.



Gloria Massé, *Bullock Spotted, Head Turned*,  
1983, oil on canvas, 153.5 x 91.5 cm.

achieved by a combination of broad and very fine brushwork that is sensitive both to the textural qualities of the subjects and to the pictorial qualities of the canvas. The handling is supported by an ability to select a composition in which modern eyes can discern an abstract structure underlying the vivid reality and colouration of the images.

This is not the imagery of *National Geographic* magazine, nor is it the full-colour vernacular art we might associate with Hindu devotions. There is a treatment of the potentially exotic content which does not merely exploit the sheer bizarreness of an alien culture. Massé has travelled the distance from India to Canada to bring us the visual residue of a particularly strong experience. The present series of works originated in her witnessing and becoming profoundly involved in a Hindu festival entailing the decoration and celebration of sacred Brahma cattle, which took place in the village of Mahalunge, three or four hours' drive from Bombay. Massé was living and travelling in this region in 1980-81.

Village festivals such as the one Massé witnessed are common throughout India. The parading and pampering of Brahma cattle celebrates the symbolic (and symbiotic) mix of fertility, sustenance and energy accorded these animals; they are sacred and respected in a manner hardly grasped in the West. The cattle are ubiquitous in both urban and rural India, some working partners to an extended family, others completely free-ranging. Massé likens their constant presence and physicality to the automobiles that surround us in our society.

She describes the sensation of this day-long confluence of humanity and animals as visually and perceptually transcendent:

*They were like golden cows, just gleaming with powderings of turmeric<sup>1</sup> in the sun. . . . We arrived at the village where all of these bullocks from the countryside were being gathered. They had a long gulley and on either side of the gulley all of the women and children were standing, or riding on little homemade merry-go-rounds, and everyone was dressed very gaily and all the men were wearing white and dancing and throwing red powder at each other and playing village instruments. The bullocks were lined up ten, twenty, even thirty abreast. Five hundred—at least five hundred bullocks in this gulley. . . all gleaming gold in the sunshine. . . . It was very festive and the bulls were making a lot of noise and stomping around, especially because the men who blew the horns were blowing them into the animals' ears, sometimes just to get them excited, in case they were tending to be docile. And the red powder that the men throw at each other which symbolizes fertility—this is done just when the crops are going to be planted—was going on the bullocks too, and just making an incredible bright scene.*



Gloria Massé, *Bullock Backs, Pink and Gold*,  
1983, oil on canvas, 118.5 x 152.5 cm.



Gloria Massé, *White Bullock, Fingerprints*,  
1984, oil on canvas, 112.5 x 241.5 cm.

Caught up in the spectacle, Massé became totally aware of these living, breathing, sculptural "paintings," the colour and movement as innocently vital an experience as anything produced in a Western "high-art" context. Impelled to move among the human and animal participants, she photographed details at close range, sometimes standing up to her knees in churned earth and excrement.

Profoundly affected by the experience, she was moved to painstakingly revivify this memory in paint. In the weeks which followed, Massé continued her study of this phenomenon, even hiring painted animals (and their owners, holding them in check) in order to produce drawings and paintings. She was also permitted to apply her own decoration to the living canvasses, but ultimately the process was costly, diverting owner and beast from valuable work in the fields. Most of the experience was retired to her personal image bank. Massé was so little satisfied with her original work that she brought only one completed painting back to Canada.

Only in hindsight, far removed from the experience of that euphoric spectacle, was she able to complete the bulk of these works in Vancouver. Massé sees the series as a whole and, to convey the sense of immediacy and physicality of this experience, has asked that the paintings be suspended in the gallery space so that viewers can move among them to see them in much the same way that the animals were originally witnessed.

Massé is loathe to explore the deeper psychosexual and animistic implications of this experience, preferring the immediacy of her original, unforgettable perceptions.

If anything, this series is a commentary on the difficulty and loss, through transliteration, which harasses cross-cultural communication, but it is also a strong testament for the efficacy of painting at a moment when it is frequently being put to exhausted, puerile or ulterior use. The value of this body of work, if it cannot convey the sound, the smell, the heat-energy of that lost moment, is to finally transmit, through painting, the lingering, obsessional quality of a single sublime experience.

T.L.

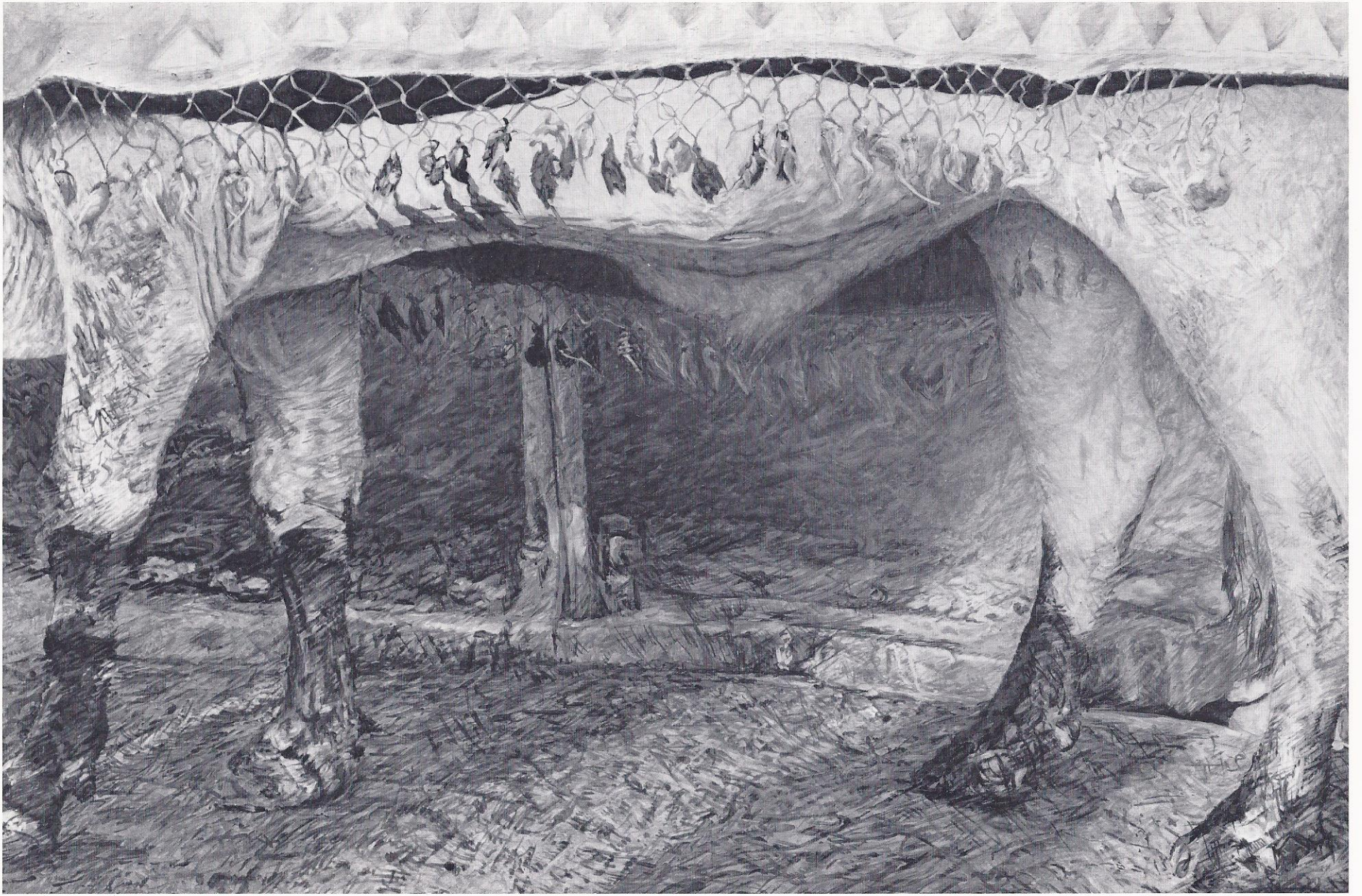
#### *Notes*

1. A gold-orange spice valued in Indian cooking; also having spiritual significance.





Gloria Massé, *Portrait of Two Bullocks*,  
1984, oil on canvas, 61 x 99 cm.



Gloria Massé, *Bullock Legs, Underview of Torso with Embroidered Cover*,  
1984, oil on canvas, 116.7 x 160 cm.

GLORIA MASSÉ

Born: 1942, Windsor, Ontario.

Education:

University of British Columbia, B.F.A., 1979.

Awards, Commissions:

Canada Council Arts Grant "B", 1979.

Mural, Extended Care Unit, U.B.C., 1979.

Exhibitions:

- 1977 *Collage*, group exhibition, A.M.S. Gallery, U.B.C., Vancouver, B.C.  
1978 *Class of 7 & 8*, graduate exhibition, A.M.S. Gallery, U.B.C., Vancouver, B.C.  
1979 *Three Women Painters*, A.M.S. Gallery, U.B.C., Vancouver, B.C.  
*Vancouver Fresh—5 Vancouver Artists*, Kamloops Public Gallery, Kamloops, B.C.  
*B.C. Artists' Show*, B.C. Credit Union Building, Vancouver, B.C.  
1982 Paintings and drawings, one person exhibition, Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, B.C.  
1983 *Vancouver Island Invitational*, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.  
1984 *Three Vancouver Artists*, Isaacs Gallery, Toronto, Ontario.

LIST OF WORKS

*Neck of Bullock, Cloth Cover*

1982, oil on canvas, 182.9 x 91.4 cm

*Water Buffalo, Handprints*

1982, oil on canvas, 82 x 165.2 cm

Private collection.

*Baby Buffalo Torso with White Image on Side*

1983, oil on canvas, 68.6 x 114.3 cm

*Buffalo Torso (Green), with Light Hand Image*

1983, oil on canvas, 119.2 x 152.5 cm

*Bullock Back with Turmeric*

1983, oil on canvas, 116.8 x 152.4 cm

*Bullock Backs, Pink and Gold*

1983, oil on canvas, 118.5 x 152.5 cm

*Bullock Hump, Violet Hands*

1983, oil on canvas, 116.8 x 152.4 cm

*Bullock Spotted, Head Turned*

1983, oil on canvas, 153.5 x 91.5 cm

*Horns, Red and Green Tassels*

1983, oil on canvas, 114.5 x 68.5 cm

*Horns with Gold, Red Paper*

1983, oil on canvas, 114.3 x 68.6 cm

Collection: Gathie Falk

*Stone Bull, Flowers*

1983, oil on canvas, 83.8 x 167.6 cm

*Bullock Legs, Underview of Torso with Embroidered Cover*

1984, oil on canvas, 116.7 x 160 cm

*Bullock Neck Garlanded*

1984, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 68.6 cm

*Portrait of Two Bullocks*

1984, oil on canvas, 61 x 99 cm

Collection: Cindy Mason

*Portrait of Water Buffalo*

1984, oil on canvas, 68.6 x 83.8 cm

*White Bullock, Fingerprints*

1984, oil on canvas, 112.5 x 241.5 cm

*White Bullock, Red/Green Horns*

1984, oil on canvas, 114.3 x 68.6 cm