

*For Rachel.*

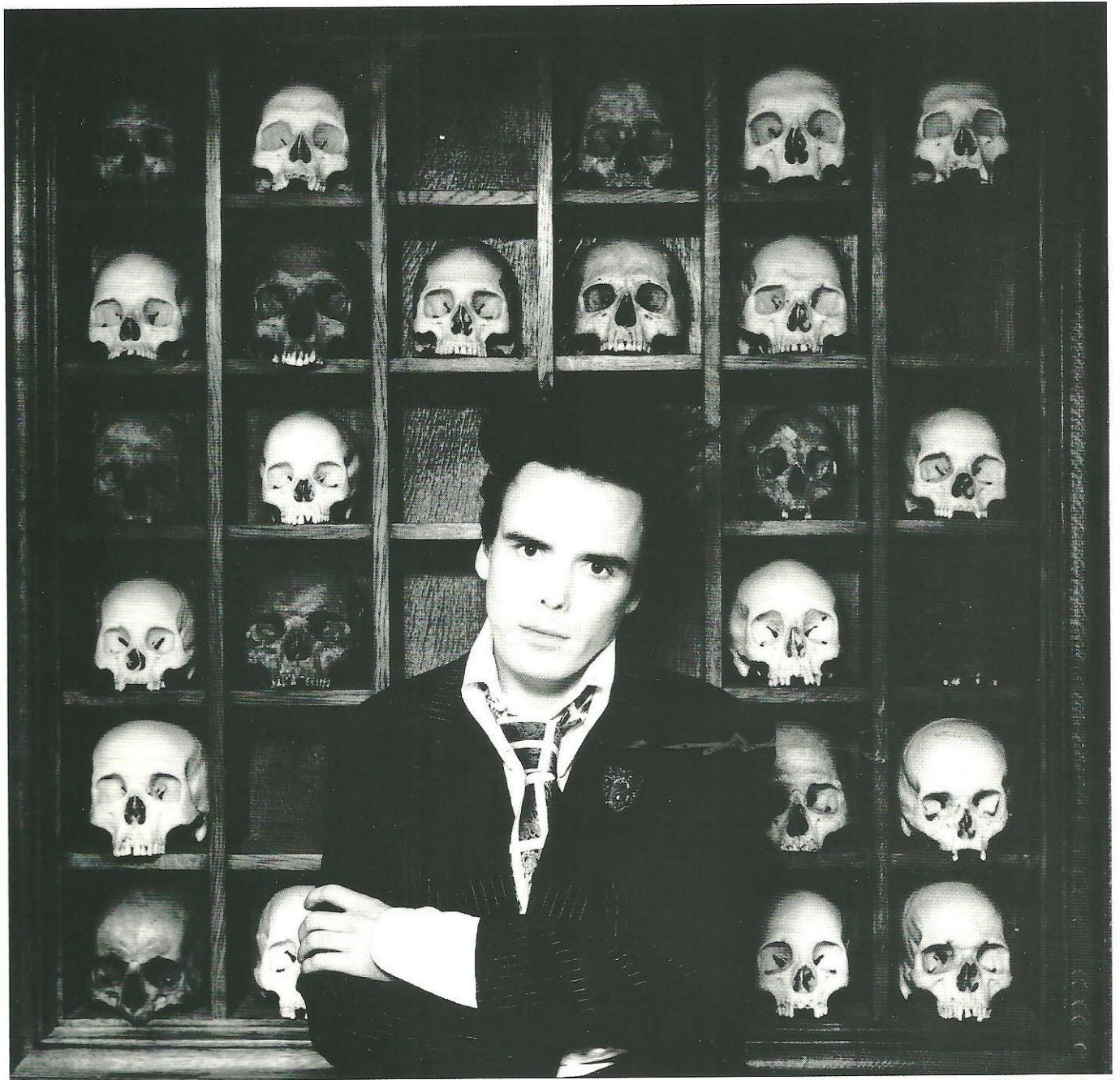
**Sebastian Horsley**

***The Great White Series***

**8th - 29th May 1997**

**Grosvenor Gallery**

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# INTRODUCTION

Occasionally, very occasionally, I am ambushed by the work of a new artist and left in a state of blissful shock. This was the case with Sebastian Horsley.

Although I am not in the habit of accepting invitations to luncheon from strangers, greed overcame me when Sebastian, having read my biography of Francis Bacon, sent me a letter inviting me to lunch at the Connaught. The Connaught! There was no hesitation. Though I wanted to cancel at the last moment, deciding it was too ridiculous a risk.

But instead of the pedant I feared, I was confronted in Horsley's home in Shepherd Market by an extraordinary, lithe young man, well-dressed in black velvet, a broad smile spreading across a pale face which was almost translucent. He told me he was a gambler on the Stock Exchange, and I suspected that he veered from triumph to disaster, confirmed by his assertion that "a man can make more money with less effort on the stockmarket than in any other profession," adding fervently "God forbid that one ever has to work for money or do anything *useful*".

To this day he remains an enigma. I know nothing of his background except that he was thrown out of art school and had a drink and drug problem. All of this was irrelevant, for on the walls of a large but otherwise empty room were the shocking paintings of the Great White Shark which has been his lifelong obsession. Diving with them off the coast of Australia, submerged in a steel cage, he gained the first hand experience, the vital element of danger, which surfaces in his paintings.

In one respect he seems to have fallen in love with the sharks. Recognising their beauty, he quotes Baudelaire - "There is no beauty without the open wound" - a phrase which might have appealed to Bacon. Plainly the shark is symbolic of the void that is his central vision, "the balance between being and nothingness". Like Bacon, Horsley is preoccupied with death: "it is only when you touch the abyss with your lips that you know you are a creature who will die. Real excitement for man is to feel the knife's edge between death and defiance of death".

When I posed the obvious dilemma: "What can one of your shark paintings achieve that a wild-life photograph cannot?" he reacted violently "They're more real, paintings can be carriers of ulterior meaning, so much more than a shark. A photograph can never entirely transcend its subject because it concentrates on the superficial. Perhaps painting is not really a reality but a way of getting rid of reality". Like many artists Horsley is a proficient writer and returned to this theme in his last letter: "A successful painting is one that is pregnant with impenetrable mystery ... to get over the sensation of life, the feeling all human beings have of being in a desert, weeping alone in an empty church".

I think, helped by these pictures, I know what he means. One of their strengths is that sense of mystery, of something more than reality an originality that goes beyond the subject matter. Of course luncheon at the Connaught was all right, but it was the sharks which left the more magnificent impression.

Daniel Farson  
Devon 1997

# THE GREAT WHITE SHARK EXPERIENCE

I had only learnt to dive a few months before I set off to South West Australia to spend several weeks on a small boat off the aptly titled Dangerous Reef. Our expedition leader was Rodney Fox, a professional diver who, having survived an attack by a Great White, decided to dedicate his life to the study and protection of sharks. He was the principal advisor to the film "Jaws". The other members of the expedition were marine biologists and film makers.

For more than two weeks we waited, ladling a trail of chum - chopped up entrails in a bucket of blood - to try to attract the sharks. The biggest fear at that stage was that they would not turn up - they are notoriously shy of any interference.

Almost nothing is known about the Great White - where it swims, where it breeds, how long it lives; less than 200 people worldwide have ever studied it in the open oceans. Great Whites are one of the most mysterious and elusive creatures known to man. Yet they are at the top of the ocean food chain. Now listed as endangered species in South Africa and Australia, scientists suspect that the entire marine ecosystem would be shaken by their extinction.

When the sharks eventually came steel cages were lowered into the waters for the divers to go down, in shifts of up to two hours. Appearing suddenly and silently out of the gloom, some of the sharks we saw - and which circled around the boat for several days - were more than 16 feet long. They would thrash and flail about the cages fighting for hunks of horsemeat. Often they saw the divers as prey, crashing into the cages to try and get at them. Once, while I was down, one of them severed my cages mooring rope almost setting it adrift.

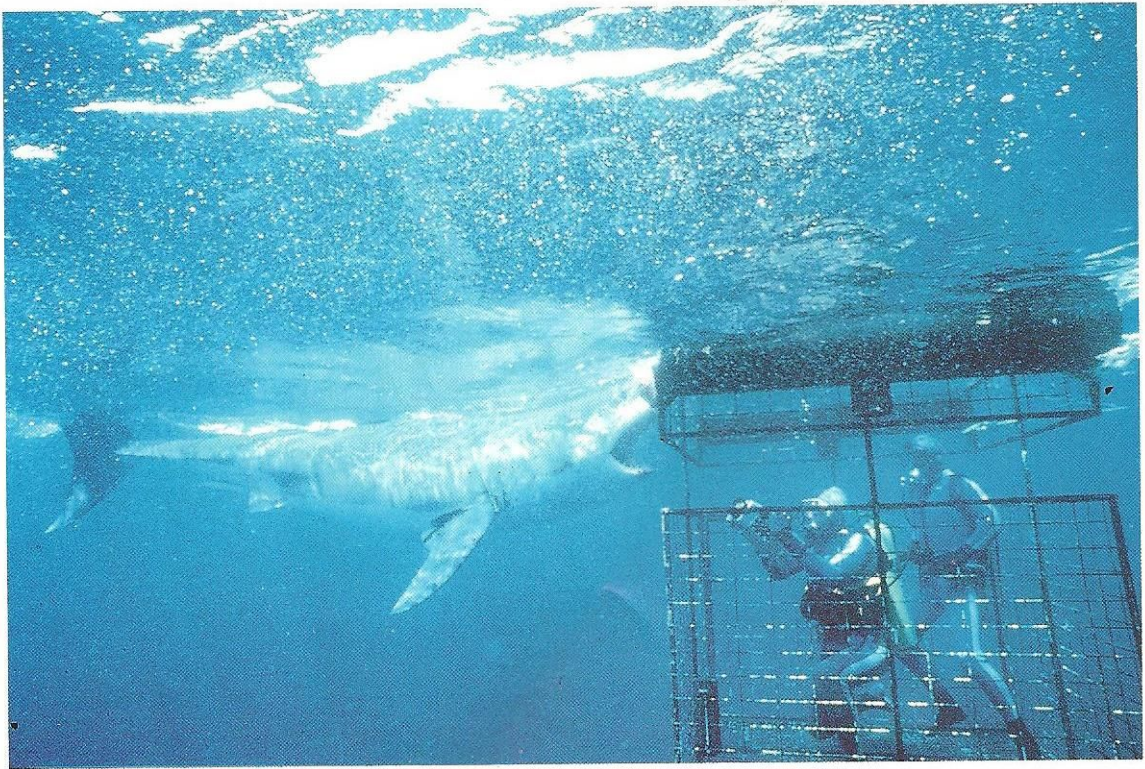
The sharks eyes are black and reflectionless, their gaping maws hung with tatters of flesh, their teeth - serrated and razor sharp - are constantly renewed. Their hide is rough enough to cut the naked hand and slashed with scars. Their size is awesome, yet they move with such speed and agility that a diver never sees them coming.

I have been fascinated by sharks since I was a child. To dive with them was a life long ambition. I have always been haunted by the Great White as an image of death, of blind instinct, of a ferocious power wielded with streamlined stealth. Fear made flesh, the shark is the perfect predator, a killing machine which has survived 400 million years.

In my paintings I wanted to capture their beauty - a beauty like the first touch of terror. I wanted to distil that haunting moment where violence and beauty merge, to paint a vision of the abyss, of the sense of void which has always been my central vision, of the knife edged balance between being and nothingness, to show how form emerges out of darkness and melts back into it. I think that it is only in extreme situations that ultimate realities reveal themselves. Alone in the cage, as night falls, and the great predators silently circle, the sensation of life comes across in its most acute and violent forms.

Sebastian Horsley







Additional Works

1. The Great White Series  
Dangerous Reef, South Australia  
signed and dated 1997  
oil on canvas  
101.5 x 76cm (doorway) £1,750
  
2. The Great White Series  
Dangerous Reef, South Australia  
signed and dated 1997  
oil on canvas  
76 x 101.5 cm (back gallery) £1,750

**The Great White Series**





**Study of the Great White Shark, No.1**

Dangerous Reef, South Australia

signed and dated 1993 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

175 x 129.5 cm

5000



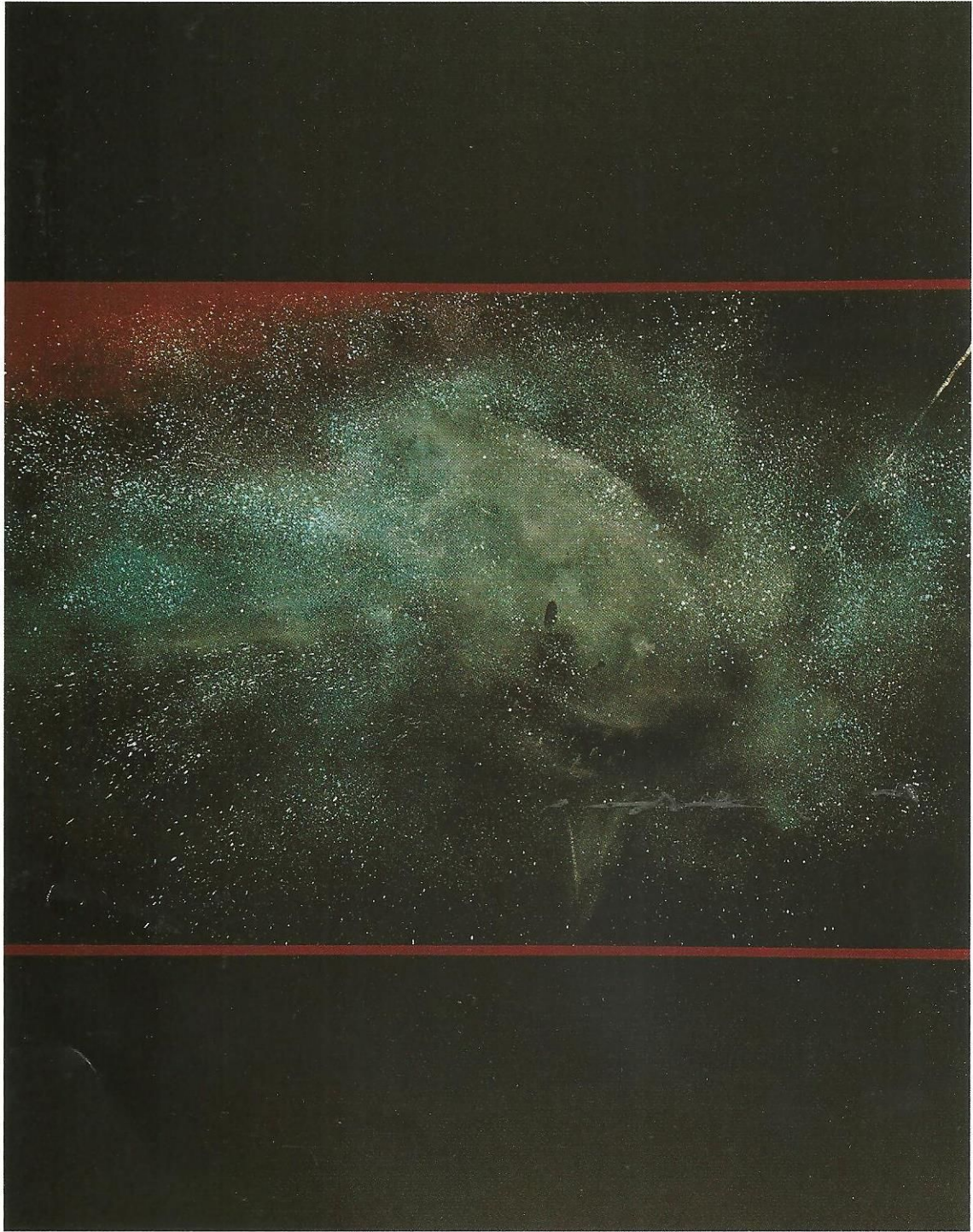


Reserved ●  
8077

**Study of the Great White Shark, No.2**  
Dangerous Reef, South Australia  
signed and dated 1993 on reverse  
oil and acrylic on canvas  
175 x 129.5 cm

5000





**Study of the Great White Shark, No.3**

Dangerous Reef, South Australia

signed and dated 1993 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

175 x 129.5 cm

5000





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**Study of the Great White Shark, No.4**

Dangerous Reef, South Australia

signed and dated 1994 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

203 x 152.5 cm

7000





**Study of the Great White Shark, No.5**

Dangerous Reef, South Australia

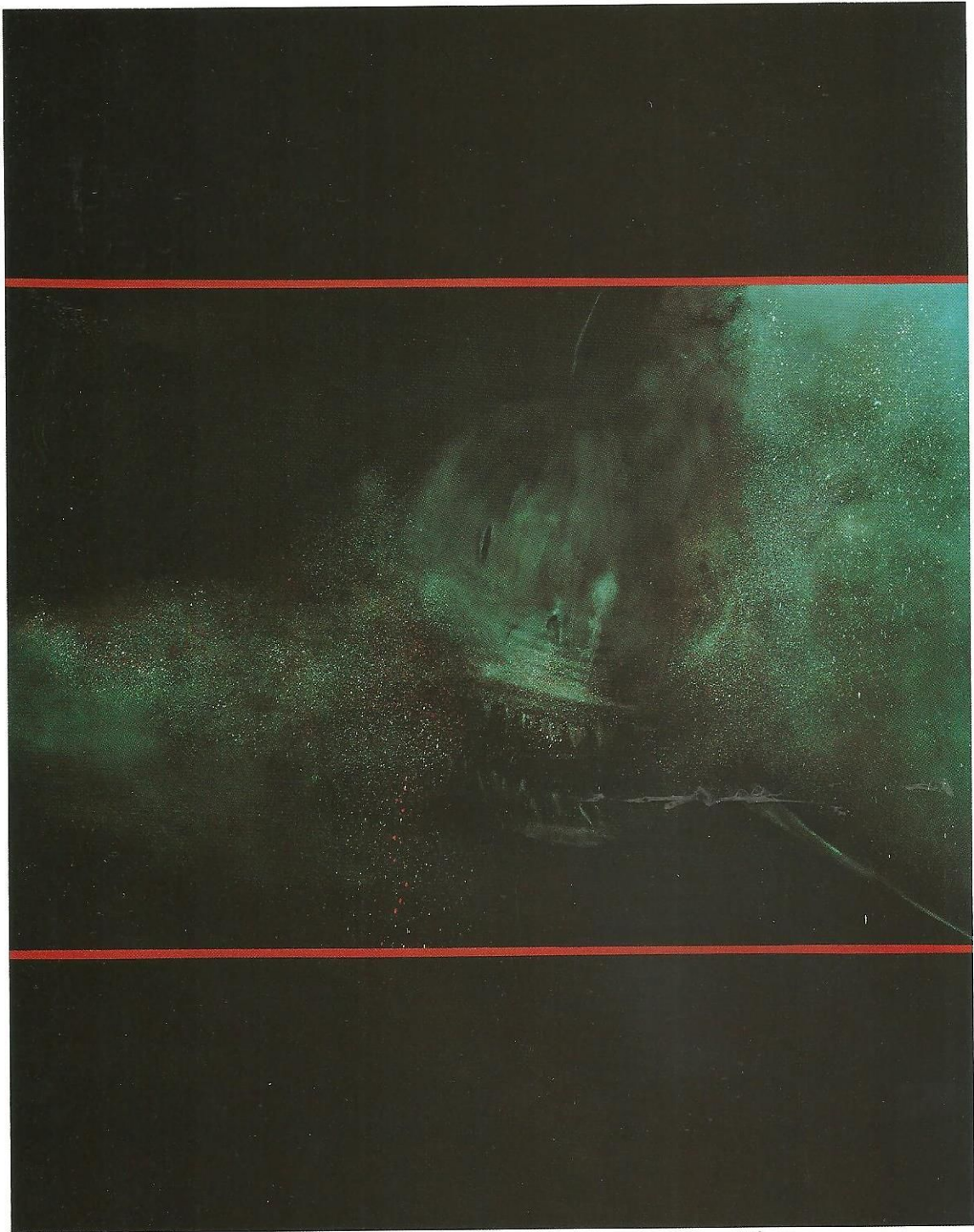
signed and dated 1995 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

203 x 152.5 cm

7000





**Study of the Great White Shark, No.6**

Dangerous Reef, South Australia

signed and dated 1995 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

203 x 152.5 cm

7000





**Study of the Great White Shark, No.7**

Dangerous Reef, South Australia

signed and dated 1996 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

203 x 152.5 cm

7000





Sold:

**Study of the Great White Shark, No.8**

Dangerous Reef, South Australia

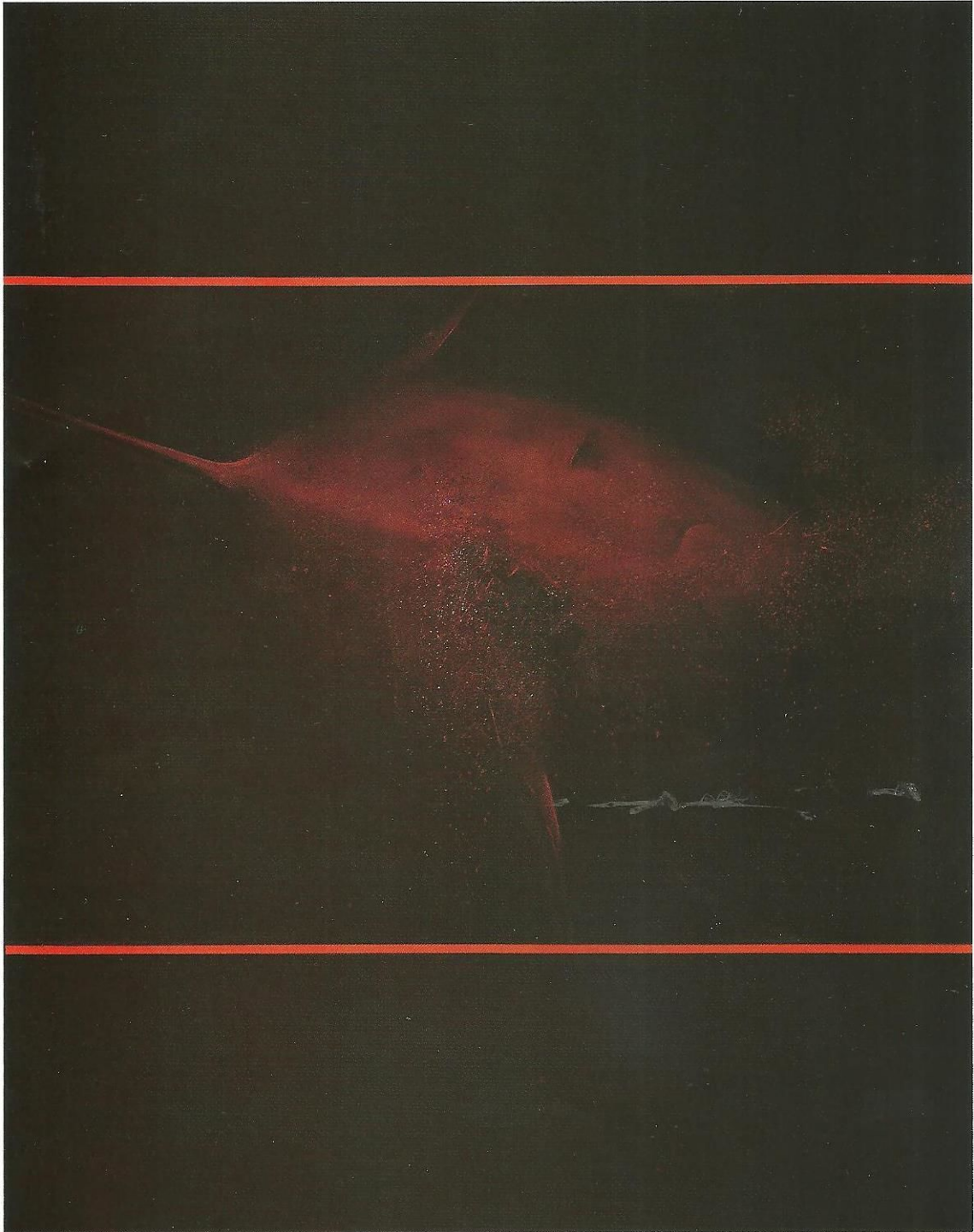
signed and dated 1997 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

175 x 129.5 cm

5000





**Study of the Great White Shark, No.9**

Dangerous Reef, South Australia

signed and dated 1997 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

203 x 152.5 cm

7000





*Sold:*

**The Ocean at Night, West Indies**

signed and dated 1995 on reverse

oil and acrylic on canvas

203 x 152.5 cm

7000





**The Ocean at Night (Blood in the Water)**  
signed and dated 1996 on reverse  
oil and acrylic on canvas  
203 x 152.5 cm

7000