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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
the College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MYSTERY AND AMBIGUITY OF SPACE

by

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Date: *June 14, 1984*

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I. Introduction

"Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning clear as one can through pictures or sensations."

George Orwell

What makes any artist choose to deal with mystery and ambiguity of space in his or her work? Such notions in themselves are illusory and difficult to explain, let alone try to describe them clearly in written form. For me it is a fascination with that which is obscure, with the unexplainable. This is fundamental to an understanding of my own work as an artist.

The thoughts of Georges Braque become pertinent to this question:

The only valid thing in art is that which cannot be explained... To explain away the mystery of a great painting - if such a feat were possible - would do irreparable harm, for whenever you explain or define something you substitute the explanation or the definition for the real thing... There are certain mysteries, certain secrets in my own work which even I do not understand, nor do I try to do so... The more one probes, the more one deepens the mystery; it's always out of reach. Mysteries have to be respected if they are to retain their power... If there is no mystery then there is no "poetry," the

quality I value above all else in art...
But don't ask me to define it; it is something that each artist has to discover for himself through his own intuition...¹

Attempting to define and explain a concept can sometimes make an idea clearer, but it can also limit it and tie down its reality to something less than it is. This is the risk, as well as the challenge, any artist needs to accept in trying to communicate and reveal a level of meaning in a work of art.

Although meaning can never be revealed completely, nevertheless an attempt to communicate it, through an intuitive process of discerning, contributes to an understanding of a personal, individual sort of reality.

It may not only be impossible, but also undesirable to attempt to analyze a work of art completely; yet I will try to do it to a certain degree in this Thesis. Through my work in print-making, etching in particular, I will look at: the forms of structures employed, the ways in which spatial relationships are created, the use of linear systems in drawing, the selections of form and textures, and finally descriptive notes on

plate and color techniques. Hopefully this movement through selected prints will provide information on what is happening visually and also reveal some insights into their meanings. In addition, I will include my own thoughts and reflections as well as those of other artists from the past and the present.

II. Structure and Spatial Relationships

"In oneself lies the whole world and if you know how to look and learn, then the door is there and the key is in your hand. Nobody on earth can give you either the key or the door to open, except yourself."

J. Krishnamurti

I like structure. It is important to me. I like what happens within, around and outside of structures. Arbitrarily setting up limits and boundaries and then making choices to ignore, avoid, or utilize them are activities I enjoy in approaching my work. It is a mind game, a process, a particular style of working. The game is one that is selective and discriminating and is guided by its own set of rules. These criteria are based on individual choices, interests, and desires, and the style is best understood as an intuitive process.

One of the first moves I make in working is to invent spatial divisions by the use of diagonal, slanted, vertical and/or horizontal lines. Most often I employ and prefer to use a linear grid system wholly or in part over the zinc plate. The grid acts as a maze, a fragile system of lines that

holds together free-floating forms and random marks while also producing its own vibrations and movement within the work. The pictorial relationships created by this device provide a semblance of visual order, serving to unify the many disparate features within the composition. To a great degree, decisions concerning spatial divisions in my work depend on intuition, on moments of revelation, and on observation of natural systems of growth such as stemming, spiraling and patterning. Robert Motherwell, whose work successfully exemplifies a use of structure and space, articulates his thoughts on the subject:

Structures are found in the interaction of the body-mind and the external world; and the body-mind is active and aggressive in finding them. As Picasso says, "there is no use looking at random: to find is the thing..." It is natural to rearrange or invent in order to bring about states of feeling that we like, just as a new tenant refurnishes a house.²

For me, one of the most important reasons for inventing and employing structures is to provide a framework in which states of feeling and emotion can be transmitted. Structure is a medium that allows feeling to function, to be brought into

being; it encourages a freedom which permits the artist to explore, to search, and to respond within and outside of its arbitrary limits. It is not an end in itself but a means. For Jack Tworckov, system does not exclude spontaneity and fresh invention but provides an element of the mechanical, a structure whose existence could be acknowledged outside of himself. It was there whenever he wanted it. It could be lost, but found again.³ Through Cubism, Braque and Picasso also established systems to interpret the anatomy of space... Theirs was a search for formality and structure, for a sense of dynamic order in a pattern of rhythmic and harmonious form movement in space.⁴

In the muted-toned etching titled "Shifted Segments" (color plate #1), I was interested in enlivening the spatial element with free-floating forms and merging them with a stratified, more linear background. Although these forms seem to interact with the background on different levels, they also have a life of their own which remains decipherable and close to the surface. I sense the spatial movement and tension in the forms as they

appear to shift and slide freely across the surface and as they separate and break away from the stratified background.

The black and white etching called "Night Vision" (color plate #2) is concerned with a foreboding presence and the construction of an indeterminate space. There is a grid system working although not always apparent; there is a more conscious form element operating and emphasized by its brightness and sense of light; and there are disjointed linear systems that begin and end nowhere. An ambiguous space and the illusion of depth is evoked by the intrusion of a dense black form that virtually severs the composition in half. It protrudes in blackness from blackness, peering down and over the space below like a fiery-toothed dragon. Relief from this nightmarish environment and its redeeming element is the presence and activity of light which has its own force and strength. Depth and recession are achieved in the work, not by the traditional means of converging lines and shifting planes, but by the ambiguity of the forms, their relationship to each other,

and the range of tones achieved through the use of black and white. In these ways "Night Vision" becomes dramatic, containing some of the elements presented in drama: light versus dark, conflict and harmony, life and death, and love versus hate. These realities are also inherent to a great extent in nature and in life. Thus it becomes not only valid but essential that these images, responses, and emotions be given expression and representation in a work of art. For Picasso and Motherwell this statement proves true, "... I was simply immersed in it. My eyes saw it and my unconscious registered its vision, and then my hands passed on my sensation."⁵ "... the need is for felt experience - intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic ... if a painting does not make a human contact it is nothing."⁶ The ambiguities and ominous presence in "Night Vision" are not comfortable or easy to explain. They are, however, responses to an emotion that needed to be expressed and found its statement in visual terms.

III. Linear Systems

"Line is the generating element
of the creative act."

Georges Braque

Most of the work I create contains within it a very definite linear element. Because of its great versatility and adaptability, line lends itself to a variety of expressive means which I not only prefer but find necessary to use in my etchings.

If rendering is needed, line is ready; if scrawling is called for, it is there already in motion; if a feeling for delicacy is being elicited, line is there at its finest. Line has become a good friend to me. The more I prevail upon it, the more I discover and come to know its many facets. There are times when line has a mind and personality of its own and needs to be whatever it wills. At such times I find it best to back off and just let it go. The results are very often surprising and unpredictable. Sometimes line is playful, winding and twisting itself noisily around and around until it eventually tires and

becomes so quiet that its presence becomes barely perceptible. There are those moments also when line is loud, aggressive, blunt and strong and thus creates feelings of tension and discord in the work.

For Georges Braque, line is an important element in his graphic work:

These ... lines belong to the first creative hours of a world in which the forms become only gradually distinguished from one another, attaining awareness of their potentialities and limitations. They unravel themselves in order to be free to become themselves... It is the intention of Braque that line adventure with complete objectivity ... that this rhythm of lines shall have the energy to generate its own form suggestions ... full of a mysterious vitality.⁷

In the colored etching entitled "Resonance" (color plate #3), I was almost totally immersed in the excitement line offered in the variations of form. One's first impression of this work is that it is blurred or in a constant state of vibration. It consists of a complicated network of lines interlacing, interrupting, twisting in all directions over the surface. This network exhibits increased vitality and resonance by the use of a background grid made up of intervals of densely spaced lines. These rigid lines not only set up an additional

series of vibrations, but also suggest the feeling of musical counterpoint when played against the more fluid lines above it.

Music has been a strong influence in my life and in the life of my family over the years. There were always melodies, sounds and unusual noises around our house as a result of individual musical impulses - or simply the need to practice for lessons. Perhaps this is why I often sense analogies between art and music in my work. Such common elements as: variation, repetition, movement, dissonance and harmony are given expression through different media and forms, but I have found that they influence and enrich each other when allowed to interact. When I look at "Resonance," for example, I am struck by the feeling of sounds this work projects: sounds that blare and attract immediate attention, such as those perceived in the densely, cross-hatched patch of orange in the middle, left quadrant; or those that reverberate constantly and more subtly as in the linear-webbed rectangle of the lower right portion. More slowly perceived are the quiet noises seen as

spots of various shapes, sizes and densities scattered across the composition. Their sounds are those of distance or of muted echoes.

In contrast to the finely-tuned line in "Resonance," the etching titled "It Crossed my Mind" (color plate #4) contains a stronger, more aggressive treatment of this element. Line is bold and black and wildly active as it swarms and squirms near the edges of the picture. It is much like the movement of spiders on the ceiling of a dark cave. Its activity is unrelenting as it winds around, under and through the subtle grid structures. Its excitement is intensified by the criss-cross slash marks in the center of the composition. One could become almost completely dissolved in this frenzy if it were not for the luminous, vibrating membrane appearing quietly through the blackness. It becomes a resting spot, a place of relief and of light, away from the darkness of the cave.

From the beginning, this piece of work developed very freely on the plate and each step evolved with relative ease. Its meaning and significance remain unknown; but it is a work that continues to

fascinate me and is a favorite of mine in the Thesis production. "And only when you truly understand [a work of art] do you begin to realize how impenetrable its secrets are. There is a mystery in the creation of great art: a beautiful picture is not merely an image, but a representation of an existence, a life, a world."⁸

Finally, in comparing "Resonance" and "It Crossed My Mind" I become aware of their similarities: an ambiguous space, a strong linear quality, and a firm framework. Yet I am also struck by how differently they read. They differ a great deal in feeling: one is light-hearted, delicate, and lyrical; while the other is more demanding, darker and vigorous. Each work presents a unique response to reality and an expression of a particular vision. As Werner Hofmann says, "all we can ask of a picture is what it is ready to give us." Works can be read differently by different people not only because artists' intentions are different, but also because, over a period of time, the artists' means of expression become more deliberate and self-assured and hence assert themselves more vigorously.⁹

IV. Form and Texture

"When form is created, it exists
and lives its own life."

Picasso

I prefer a degree of ambiguity to a more obvious, defined image. It is a choice for subtlety, a preference for obscurity rather than for explanation. Nothing is ever quite what it seems to be in life. Why should this be different in art? According to Hofmann, "the more elementary and the less differentiated a form is, the greater and richer its range of meanings. The elaborate form has its price: it is more readable, the transient elements decrease, but the range of possible meanings shrinks."¹⁰

This year along with an interest in structure, space and line, I have become fascinated with forms that are torn, shredding, or in the process of disintegration. There is also a degree of pattern, texture and surface quality that I am intrigued with. Some patterns that appeal to me are those found in nature and in natural systems of growth, patterns in human-made materials and structures, and those

patterns created in textile and wallpaper forms. Inherent in pattern are various qualities of surface and texture which deal with such things as tactile effects, real or implied; variations, repetition, detail and enrichment. Enrichment is seen not as an end in itself or merely for decoration, but as a means to enhance reality. For Braque, "The subtlety of these tactile contrasts... adds yet another dimension to our enjoyment in the same way that combinations of texturally contrasted ingredients make a dish more appetizing."¹¹ The use of enrichment and various forms of suggestion stirs our imagination to feel and to grasp what our senses have once experienced. In the work of Antonio Tapies, one is brought into close contact with the tactile in terms of an image of time rather than of space, "... The corroded surfaces, fissures, and peeled areas convey a sense of stratification, of one level below another, which is rich in evoked antiquity. The ... surfaces seem worn by a duration greater than that of an individual artist."¹²

Both in "Shifted Segments" (color plate #1) and in "Resonance" (color plate #3), the image and

texture of shredding becomes very evident. I began each of these pieces by manipulating remnants of fabric in several ways: laying them side by side, overlapping, tearing and ripping edges, cutting shapes, pulling threads, and so forth. While all of this was happening in an obvious way, on another level I was quietly discerning the beauty of this intricate detail, the more subtle relationships of scale and positive/negative space, and the connections between movement and form. It was active absorption in this process that evoked a strong, emotional response and motivated me to select and use what I was seeing for my work.

The images that finally evolved and the ones I chose to incorporate into my etchings are discerned as metaphors; metaphors of time-worn, rather commonplace tapestries, which are interwoven with ambiguous configurations of line. These configurations surround and tend to tear at the already shredding forms. They are vital to the feeling of the compositions in that they suggest the presence of those intangible forces in nature and life that exert a power and force on us for better or

worse. This force has the ability to take matters out of our control and work on its own energy and authority, indiscriminately altering or transforming whatever it wishes.

According to Braque, "art is a method of representation, it is personal to the artist... ." All pictures must be considered on two levels, that of appearance and that of meaning. The level of appearance is the work with its plastic realities - color, line, form, and rhythm; the level of meaning is reached of necessity by going beyond the appearance to the deep aesthetic and lyric values, that is, from knowledge by seeing to knowledge by understanding. Thus, we enter into the abstract realm of symbols, separate from ordinary reality, which tend to become and do become ideograms, signs to be studied until their meaning becomes clear.¹³

V. Techniques

"Creative problems cannot be fully visualized in the 'mind's eye,' they must be discovered in the interaction with the elements that constitute it."

Betty Edwards

Why does one spend so much personal time and energy in trying to achieve something? What factors motivate a person to work hard and patiently for anything?

Perhaps we all have patience for different things at different times. Things that make a difference and matter a great deal to us motivate us to try to achieve them. Most of the time I work hard for something because, "I wonder what would happen if..." or "I'll never know unless I try." Even then perhaps I will never know. However, if one is willing to take chances, to stay alert, and to remain aware along the way, many wonderful events happen and may be captured if only one is present to them. Such freedom in creating involves certain risks and detachments from results. It involves an attitude of openness and of sensitivity to the moment. It involves letting go of preconceived

ideas for the possibility of change. These attitudes have become vital to me within the printmaking process, with etching in particular. They have exerted not only a challenge that has kept me unsettled, but a power, as well, urging me into areas of testing and discovery that I might otherwise have missed. As Robert Motherwell states, "Only an alive person can make an alive expression. The problem of inspiration is simply to be fully alive at a given moment when working."¹⁴

When I begin working on a plate, I usually mark in, with an etching needle, the definite linear divisions and structures that serve as a framework for whatever else is to appear in the work. Using a fine line I draw, scratch, and trace lightly over the surface of the plate that has been covered with a hard ground resist. I often trace pieces of cut or torn paper and fabric because of their hard and soft edges, their irregular, organic shapes and the contrast they provide to the more rigid structural systems in the composition. The back and forth play of these mechanical elements with the more natural, curved forms is a fascination I enjoy.

When the initial drawing is completed, I immerse the zinc plate in a slow acid bath, 10 to 1 strength, for about 3 to 5 minutes. After this, the resist is removed and I often proceed with a soft ground transfer. This technique makes possible the transfer of a variety of textures onto the surface of the plate which has been covered with soft ground resist. Impressions of such things as lace, ribbons, doilies, fabric, feathers, and foil are transferred to the zinc by running them through an etching press using light pressure. Once the textures have been carefully peeled from the surface, the plate is immersed in a very slow acid bath, 20 to 1 strength, for approximately 7 to 10 minutes. The resist is removed and a proof is taken. With this information I can make further decisions and choices concerning composition and technique.

Very often I like to use the hard ground resist in a "painterly" way. I choose an assortment of tools such as thin and broad tipped brushes, old combs, toothbrushes, sticks, and knives, dip them into the liquid resist and proceed freely on

the plate. What sometimes appear as a result of this activity are extensions of the already etched linear images, seen as rougher, thicker edges and contours; or the creation of new marks which ignore the previous drawings and are made by splashing, dripping, dry-brushing or trailing the resist over the surface. These activities combine the deliberate, intellectual way of working with the more spontaneous, intuitive mode; the controlled with the unpredictable. When the resist is dry, I add a few extraneous scratches and marks and place it in a 10 to 1 acid bath for about 8 minutes.

At this point, without removing the resist, I use the aquatint technique which is another way of achieving a range of tone in the work. This technique involves the use of spray paint, applied evenly or arbitrarily, over the exposed areas of the zinc. The plate is then placed in a 10 to 1 acid bath for 3 minute intervals with more spray added to the plate between intervals. The range of tones produced depends on the amount of spray applied and the number of times it is placed in the acid bath.

There is no logic to the way I use an aquatint: at times I spray evenly and carefully; at other times quickly and wildly; and sometimes I shoot just one or two areas heavily with the spray. A great deal depends on the impulse of the moment, the effects I desire to achieve, or the accidents, in the form of drips and blobs that result from using an aerosol spray. Trusting that these "purposeless" marks may add character to the print, I allow them to remain. For Robert Motherwell, "I don't exploit so called 'accidents' ... I accept them if they seem appropriate. There is no such thing as an 'accident' really; it is a kind of casualness: it happened, so let it be so to speak."¹⁵

In several of my etchings I was presented with the surprises inherent in the etching process. These "so called accidents" often resulted in richer surfaces, exciting textures and residual images. Such effects can be seen in both "Flight Path" (color plate #5) and in "Passages" (color plate #6). For Picasso the element of chance was vital in printmaking, "A further reason for his lively

interest in graphic techniques is their relative unpredictability, the surprises that proofs give rise to, the controlled play of accidents in printing. The fact that the plate comes between the planned effect and the final result, between the project and the product, can scarcely fail to provide a welcome margin to an artist so averse to purposeless development, so enamored of spontaneous deviations."¹⁶

When I finally accepted my proofs as finished, I editioned the plates in various mixtures of black and red etching inks. This combination of inks provided the warmth and density of tone I prefer in the black and white print.

The color techniques I tested dealt with selectively wiping areas of the plate with various colors and then double-dropping the plate, i.e., wiping the plate again in color and then registering it over the image that had been selectively wiped. This technique produces a rich blend of colors as well as a soft vibration of image created by the slight off-registering of double-drop. These effects can best be seen in "Flight Path" (color plate #5) and in "Passages" (color plate #6).

During this particular color printing process I would often take the "ghost" print of the plate. This is a more subtle color image of the print described above. It involves the transfer of inks remaining on the plate from the first printing onto another piece of dampened paper. Within the ghost-print process it is also possible to add further detail by selectively rolling and/or wiping the surface with color before the print is taken. Good examples of this process are seen in "Random Variations I" (color plate #7) and in "Improvisation I" (color plate #8).

The color choices I make and select for use in my prints are based on actual experimentation and mixtures of etching inks, on observation of colors found in nature, and on instincts and emotions at the time of printing. I create visual pictures in my mind, but it is most often through the actual interaction of the color elements in the printed image that I discover what I prefer and what is best for the image.

VI. Conclusion

"And yet you the artist are being
created and controlled too. The
work creates the artist as much
as the artist creates the work..."
MaryAnn Wenniger

Through this work in printmaking I have come to experience many of those wonderful events and unexpected phenomena occurring within the process. Not only has my work changed by the decisions and choices I have made along the way, but I have been changed by the work: the work has worked on me. It has unsettled me, that is, made me more aware and increasingly sensitive to what is happening within and around me. It has increased my confidence and ability to act on instincts, preferences, and impulses - and to trust them.

The work has stretched my ideas concerning art and the ability of an individual to make a unique, serious response toward life based on intuitions, perceptions, education, and personal experience. Life furnishes the stimulus for creative response: ugliness and beauty, human passions and violence, the sordid and the sublime,

the mysteries of death and life ... all have been,
and remain, the forces which impel an artist to
create.

To create freely, to comment, to outrage,
to inspire, to affirm or deny, to be fully visionary -
all of these are essential to the purposes and
nature of art, to human expression.



Plate
1. 20"x26"



Plate
2. 20"x26"

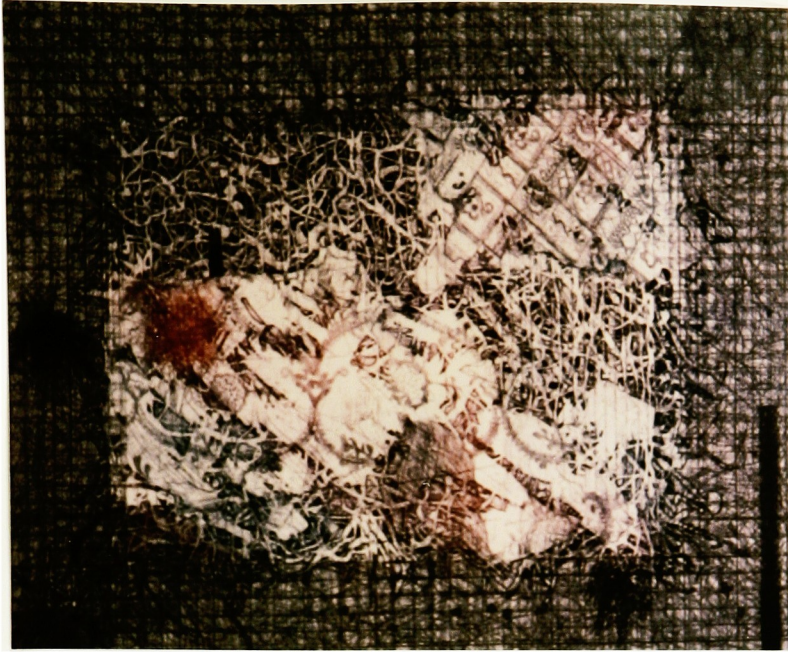


Plate 3. 20"x24"

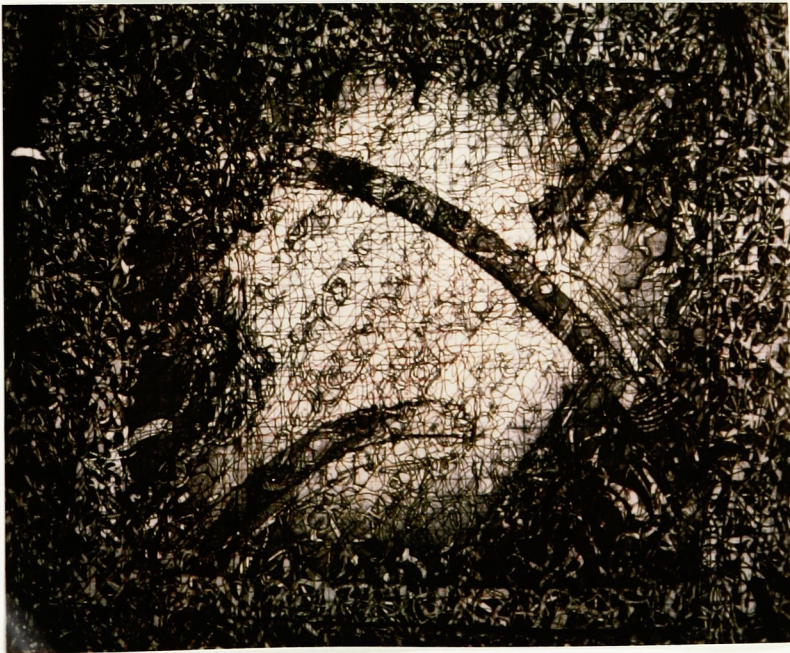


Plate 4. 22"x24"

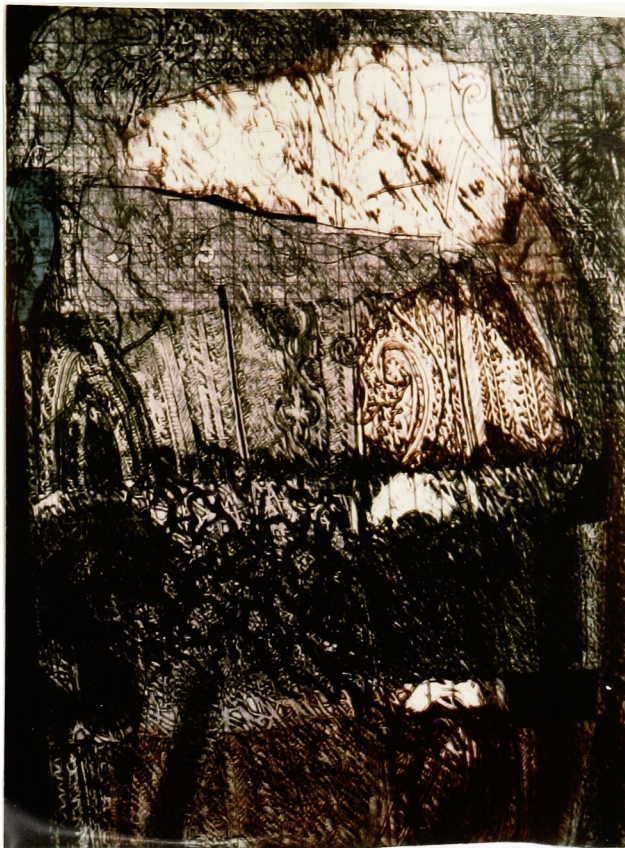


Plate 5. 18"x24"

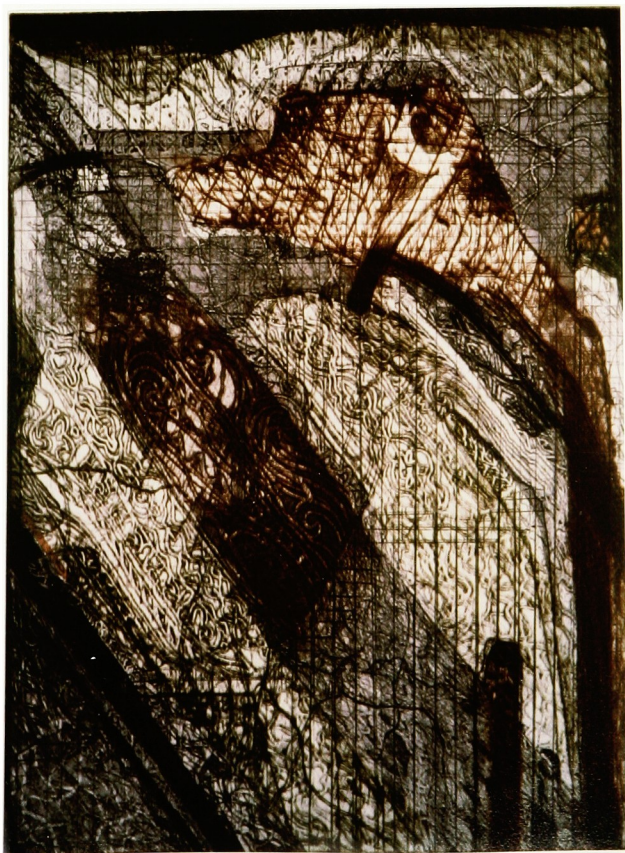


Plate 6. 18"x24"



Plate 7. 18"x24"

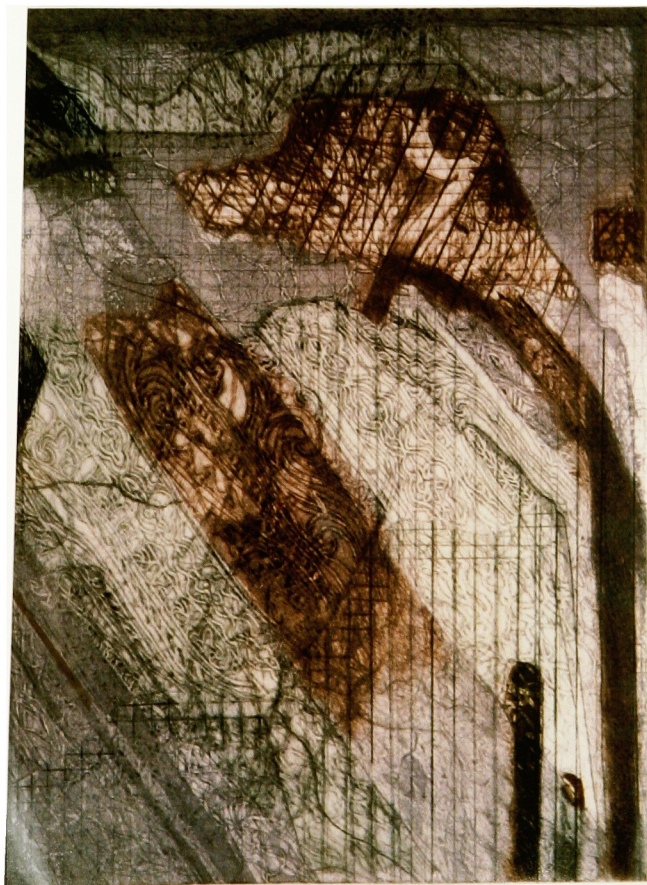


Plate 8. 18"x24"

Footnotes

¹John Richardson, G. Braque (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1961), p. 23.

²Frank O'Hara, Robert Motherwell (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), p. 37.

³Jack Tworkov: Fifteen Years of Painting (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1982), p. 16.

⁴Aaron Berkman, Art and Space (New York: Social Sciences Publishers, 1949), p. 142, 151.

⁵Domenico Porzio, Marco Valsecchi, Understanding Picasso (New York: Newsweek Books, 1973), p. 82.

⁶Frank O'Hara. Ibid. p. 45, 50.

⁷Werner Hofmann, Georges Braque: His Graphic Work (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1961), p. XIV, XV.

⁸Isabella Far, DeChirico (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968), p. 4.

⁹Ibid. p. X.

¹⁰Werner Hofmann. Ibid. p. XI.

¹¹John Richardson. Ibid. p. 18.

¹²Antonio Tapies (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1962), p. 2.

¹³Maurice Gieure, Georges Braque (New York: Universe Books, Inc., 1956), p. 7, 8.

¹⁴Frank O'Hara. Ibid. p. 54.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Picasso: Recent Etchings, Lithographs, and Linoleum Cuts (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1966), p. XII.

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