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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

The Print as Proustian Madeleine

By

Brigid A. Mast

September 12, 1983

APPROVALS:

Adviser: Daniel C. Dickinson

Date: May 28, 1984

Associate Adviser: Signature not legible

Date: 5 Sept 84

Associate Adviser: Bruce Sodervick

Date: 9/14/84

Assistant to the Dean
for Graduate Affairs: Signature not legible

Date: 9/14/84

Dean, College of
Fine & Applied Arts: Robert H. Johnston Ph.D.

Date: 9/17/84

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September 12, 1983

To my parents,
who made the past two years possible,
and
to Missi, Phyllis, and Mary Ann,
who made them livable.

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I. Towards A General Aesthetic

To paraphrase an old saw: those who can, do; those who can't, theorize. As an artist, I have always found faintly amusing the efforts of aestheticians to define and categorize art. I take these things for granted and concern myself with the business of making art; to do otherwise would be to digress from the task at hand. This is not to say that I do not have my own aesthetic ideas -- of course I do -- but they are neither rigorously stated nor logically defended. They are of an intuitive nature and provide both direction and motivation for my art, but that is their only purpose. They are not universal philosophical statements. They are, however, relevant to this thesis, in that they provide a foundation for what is to follow. In this section, therefore, I will present, without support or defense, a brief summary of my own philosophy of art, with the understanding that it is intended to be taken in a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, sense.

Of all the definitions of art which have been formulated through the years, the one I find most satisfying, and to which I always return for guidance, is that of Leo Tolstoy, to wit:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling -- this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external

signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.¹

We shall define the aesthetic experience, then, as the communication of feeling through a work of art, and we shall say that the successful work of art causes the viewer to have an aesthetic experience.

Because the achievement of an aesthetic experience is contingent, not only upon the artwork itself, but also upon the viewer, it follows that general statements about works of art ("Painting x is a good painting") must be fallacious. A given work of art will be successful for some viewers and not for others. Furthermore, if we consider that group of viewers for whom a particular work is successful, we will see that the aesthetic experience varies from viewer to viewer. As each person is unique, so each brings to the work to be contemplated his own frame of reference, a composite of his own tastes, his previous aesthetic experiences, his prejudices and predilections, both learned and instinctive. Since different viewers will react differently to the same work of art, it follows that the feeling with which they will be infected will not be precisely that of the artist. It is conceivable, however, that each viewer will experience in his own way the feeling the artist is attempting to convey and since we are not philosophers, that is good enough for us. The aesthetic experiences will not all be precisely the same, but they will often be closely related. It should be obvious, then, that a finished work of art does not make a complete aesthetic statement, but rather provides the

stimulus for an aesthetic experience.

I have accepted this point of view implicitly in my thesis works; each of them is an attempt to provide the viewer, not with a complete picture, but with an aesthetic stimulus. I have chosen this approach because I do not wish my prints to be mere pictures, which the viewer looks at passively from without, as if he were peering through a window at a group of strangers. I wish, rather, to draw him into the picture, to break down the barrier between the viewer and the flat plane of the paper, to give him a feeling of "being there," so that he forgets he is standing in an art gallery and merges himself with the image. For this reason, I have attempted in each print to establish an atmosphere, a sense of place, with which the viewer can identify; for this reason, also, I have left out some important details, so that he can fill in part of the scene himself and thus relate it more closely to his own experience. My intent is that the suggestion of atmosphere will trigger a series of associations on his part, will imbue in him the memory of certain feelings -- will act, in short, as a Proustian madeleine.

The Story in Proust's Own Words

... one day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, I thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mine. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called "petites madeleines," which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory -- this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather, this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended these savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?

* * * *

And I began to ask myself what it could have been, this

unremembered state which brought with it no logical proof of its existence, but only the sense that it was a happy, that it was a real state in whose presence other states of consciousness melted and vanished

Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, has tried to follow it into my conscious mind. But its struggles are too far off, too much confused; scarcely can I perceive the colourless reflection in which are blended the uncapturable whirling medley of radiant hues, and I cannot distinguish its form, cannot invite it, as the one possible interpreter, to translate to me the evidence of its contemporary, its inseparable paramour, the taste of cake soaked in tea; cannot ask it to inform me what special circumstance is in question, of what period in my past life.

Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has travelled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell . .

And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church-time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Leonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime-flower tea . . .

. . . when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more

unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. ²

II. The Proustian Madeleine

As A Paradigm for the Visual Arts

Let us leave aesthetics aside for now and speak solely of the Proustian madeleine, for it is this concept which is central to this thesis. When Proust tasted the madeleine, it did not merely remind him of the madeleines of his childhood, did not merely remind him of his childhood -- it returned him, momentarily, to his childhood, causing him to re-experience a past state of consciousness. The cognitive memory of sitting on his Aunt Léonie's bed eating madeleines did not occur till later, and then only after a great deal of mental effort on his part; once that memory occurred, however, many other related recollections followed almost immediately, as if a mental floodgate had been opened.

The madeleine taste itself was a small fragment of Proust's childhood, but when he re-experienced it, that taste brought with it a host of memories and associations. His experience is not unique -- in fact, it happens so often that many of us take it for granted. It is current popular wisdom, for instance, that unhappy or depressed people tend to crave soft, creamy foods such as cream soups and ice cream. Why? Because these were the foods commonly given to infants and sick children, and so adults tend to associate them with comforting, nurturing, and parental love.

The madeleine incident struck a familiar chord in me because I spent a portion of my childhood in Ireland and Scotland and many of the foods I ate there are not regularly

available in this country. I experienced, during those periods I spent abroad, a very specific set of emotions; the disorientation and strangeness of being in a foreign country, the feeling of warmth and security which resulted from being surrounded by my large and good-natured family, and the sensation, delightful for a child, of being pampered and spoiled by my numerous relatives. It has been seven years since my last visit to Ireland, but whenever a relative comes to visit and brings a package of those bland Irish sausages; the dark and crumbly blood pudding; the brittle, almost tasteless cookies known as Marietta biscuits; the flaky sausage rolls; the little jars of thick, salty Marmite; packages of pilot biscuits; and above all, the tea -- the plain black tea which my Irish family drinks a dozen times a day but which, for me, is a special-occasion infusion of the highest order -- whenever I taste any of these, I feel at once the warmth and strangeness which I associate with Ireland, and I am overcome by a presence so strong that I can almost smell the fresh, damp air of the countryside where we lived.

The Proustian madeleine is not solely a function of taste, but can be stimulated by the other senses as well. Two common examples should suffice to make this point clear and to demonstrate the frequency with which Proustian madeleines actually occur in the general population, for I have experienced these phenomena repeatedly, and others often find them familiar. The first example is the antiseptic smell which always lingers in doctors' and dentists' offices; almost everyone, no matter how calm and collected they may be on the approach to the office,

experiences a moment of tension and fear bordering on panic when they first enter the office and smell that medicinal odor. This is an excellent example of the re-experiencing of a past emotion, for it usually carries with it no visual or cognitive residue of any specific event. The other example stems from the occasional replaying of old songs on the radio. Generally a record is popular for a month or so, during which it is played about once every two hours or so, and is seldom heard again. If it is replayed, several years later, it often triggers involuntary memories of the time when it was first popular. These recollections tend to be intense but non-specific; because the records are played frequently over a short period of time, one remembers the general feeling one had during that period. The most cheerful song in the world can be depressing if it is remembered in a depressing context.

Before we move on to apply the concept of the Proustian madeleine to the visual arts, let us use this last example to illustrate one of the points mentioned in the preceding section, the variation in aesthetic responses among viewers to the same work of art. Since a piece of popular music which is played constantly on the radio forms a sort of auditory wallpaper for a brief period of time, and since whatever aesthetic content the piece may have (in the case of pop music this is usually minimal anyway) will tend to disintegrate due to overexposure, the importance of the listener's emotions to the perception of the song is usually increased. Thus the song may seem cheerful to one person and sad to another -- indeed, may run the full range

of human emotion in different people -- because each of them was experiencing different emotions when they were first exposed to it.

Let us take up the aesthetic discussion once more, then, and apply these notions to the visual arts. The central proposition of this thesis is this: that a painting or print can act upon the viewer as a visual Proustian madeleine. By this I mean that it is possible for a work of art to stimulate the same kind of intense, generalized, noncognitive memory as Proust's madeleine.

Each of the prints in this thesis is an attempt to create a Proustian madeleine. I am not trying to produce Proustian madeleines for myself; even if I could do it, I would be merely establishing myself as a narcissist, not an artist. My purpose, rather, is to make prints which are Proustian madeleines for others. Obviously, my own instinctive responses to the images are important, but were these responses to constitute the entire creative process, the prints would be too esoteric to reach many viewers.

While the act of experiencing a Proustian madeleine is involuntary and intuitive, the act of creating one is deliberate and painstaking. In order to create works that will reach a broad range of viewers, I have to distill the images, isolating their most important and revelatory aspects and discarding much of the rest. This process will be discussed in detail in the next section, but there are two concepts central to my work which should be discussed here: the objective correlative and the importance of ambiguity.

The objective correlative, like the Proustian madeleine, is an idea which, though borrowed from literature, makes the transition quite nicely to the visual arts. The phrase was coined by T.S. Eliot, who defines it thus:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. ³

The finest example, of course, of the principle of the objective correlative in action is Eliot's own work, in which small particles of everyday life are intermingled with broader poetic statements to form a literary image which is both abstract and concrete. I have translated this objective correlative into the visual arts -- the focus of each print is sharpened by various details contained within it: peeling paint, grubby weeds growing by a dilapidated fence, the patterned vinyl coverings of kitchen chairs. These details combine with the broader composition of the prints to produce a sense of place -- in this case, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

In order to create an image which can function as a Proustian madeleine for a broad range of people, a careful balance must be struck between vagueness and specificity. While the image as a whole must be believable, if not realistic, and some concrete details must be supplied to establish a

convincing atmosphere to which the viewer can relate, a certain amount of ambiguity is necessary to allow each viewer to relate the image to his own experience. If the image is too complete, the viewer will be an outsider gazing at someone else's picture; if some information is left out, he can fill it in from his own experience. Allowing the viewer to participate as fully as possible in the work of art enhances his aesthetic experience.

III

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon your back, and waited;
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling
And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

from "Preludes"

T.S. Eliot ⁴

III. The Genesis of the Images

Only one of the prints was directly drawn from a "Proustian madeleine" experience; this is the only print in the set that is drawn from memory, rather than a photograph, and the only one in which the figure has clearly delineated features. It is a self-portrait (Fig. 1).

The incident occurred in the middle of last winter. I had been working on the thesis prints for some time, but was experiencing a "dry spell." I had become bored with the images I was working on and lacked the inspiration to come up with any new ones. I came home from school one evening, turned on the stereo, and flopped onto my bed in disgust. But when I heard the music, I was filled with a feeling of warmth and euphoria, by a vague stirring of excitement and anticipation that seemed very familiar. I closed my eyes and let my mind drift, and a random series of memories floated through my mind, until one of them suddenly clicked -- my euphoria was the same feeling that had always come with the first few days of May, when the cares of winter had melted with the last snows, the Indiana sun shone warm and friendly every day, and the dual pleasures of my birthday and summer vacation loomed near. Then, as if it was inseparable from springtime itself, the whole scene sprang up around me. It was the last day of school, my sophomore year of college, and I, having spent the night with a friend after quarreling with my roommate, was sitting up in bed in the ultramarine gloom of early morning, sipping coffee, watching my friend pack, and listening to this very record -- which she had just given me, as a birthday present. It would

be difficult to overstate the strength with which this image presented itself to me. I could feel the warmth of the bed-clothes against the coolness of the morning air, sense the airiness of the high-ceilinged room, and smell the mingled aromas of baby powder, musty clothes, and yesterday's pizza that always hung about it. The first surge of memory came as a total sensory experience; as it dissipated, it left a residue of purely visual impressions. I grabbed my sketchbook and made a few quick sketches, which I eventually developed into the finished print of the girl in bed. I regard that print, not as a Proustian madeleine, but as a record of one; it is the only one of the six thesis prints that is a straightforward depiction of a moment from my own past.

The other prints are more general in nature; they do not refer to specific incidents but rather to an overall feeling, a sense of place, which I can associate with several actual locations in which practically the same atmosphere existed. The recklessly exhilarating feeling of running down a city street at night, for instance, watching the lights and mottled buildings streak past me (figure 5), or the sensation of melancholy I know when going past an abandoned, dilapidated tenement (figure 4) -- these are experiences which are specific, not to a particular time or place, but to a certain situation. Indeed, what makes these sensations important, the essential element that leads me to believe that I can successfully arouse them in others, is the very fact that such experiences have repeated themselves, over and over, in many different locales. Thus each of the images contained within it the objective

correlative of the given sensation; the intangible is described in terms of the tangible. The sources of these images were old photographs, all but one from books and all taken of and by people I have never met, yet each of them describing a scene which seems intimately familiar. The soft, rumpled sheets of an unmade bed (figure 3), the harsh shadows cast by summer sunlight (figure 2), the sooty, squalid look of smoke-begrimed walls contrasted with the synthetic cheerfulness of flowered vinyl (figure 6) -- these were the elements that leaped at me from the photos: objects and environments which I had seen many times before, and which had become transmuted, in my unconscious, into symbols for entire states of being. I leafed through several hundred photographs, looking for these symbols, for my instantaneous responses were, at this stage, all-important. A day or so later, I would go back and review all the pictures I remembered. If the impression was still strong, I began making preliminary sketches. The photos I used as starting points all depicted scenes which stimulated my memory and made me feel as if I had taken them myself. In the sketches I attempted to isolate and amplify the elements which contributed to the *deja vu* effect. Once a final working drawing was obtained, I transferred it to a zinc etching plate (see Appendix), proofed it, and began working and re-working the metal to obtain the effect I wanted.

In each print I was searching for the objective correlative of the feelings stimulated by the original photograph. What elements of the image evoked those feelings, and how could I reproduce and enhance these stimuli in my own print?

I generally found that the objective correlative of each emotion combined overall qualities of the print with small but telling details. In the print of the two men with the drum set, (figure 2), for instance, the harsh, raking quality of the sunlight in the foreground is very important to the scene, but so are the dilapidated fence and scrubby weeds behind the men, the strong horizontals of the siding on the house in the background, and the uneven and almost illegible writing on the bass drum. While the overall composition and lighting make the first impression on the viewer, the smaller details reiterate and amplify the original feeling. Without these nuances, the print would be too vague to be meaningful. It is not enough for me to create a generic summer scene of men bathed in harsh sunlight; I am searching for a more specific feeling -- that of a run-down neighborhood lying dessicated beneath the summer sun, of a harmonica piercing the deadened air with a shrill vibrato. Then I let the figures dissolve, because the mere fact that they were there was more important than what they actually looked like as people. Furthermore, this dissolution, by flattening out some of the shadow areas, created the illusion that the whole scene was unreal, a facade - thereby heightening the ambiguity of the scene.

The nebulous quality of the figures in all the prints except the self-portrait insures that the figures will participate in, but not dominate, the scenes depicted. If the figures were more clearly drawn, the viewer's attention would be focused immediately upon them, drawing him away from the rest of the scene. Furthermore, if their features were clearly described, they would become a closed book: the picture would

be too complete for the viewer to penetrate with his own ideas and responses. Thus the vagueness of the figures not only counteracts the tendency for them to become visually dominant but also leaves as a very important element in the print an empty space which the viewer is invited to fill in himself.

The creation of these prints was a challenge for me because I was trying, through deliberate manipulation of images, to evoke an emotional response in someone else. Even those elements of the print not intended to be consciously noticed by the viewer had to be manipulated with care, since they contributed to the overall impression. Furthermore, because I was so intimately involved with the prints, the process of reviewing and revising them was very difficult. It is a heavy assumption, to begin with, that the images that move, stimulate, or engage me will have the same effect on others; I am not a disinterested spectator. Beyond that, my prints are intended to make a strong first impression -- but after working on the same plate for three months, I was the worst possible judge of that. Thus using my own instinctive responses to gauge the effectiveness of the prints was very difficult. None of these difficulties, however, were insurmountable.

Let us return to the definition of art discussed in the first part of this thesis. Surely the Proustian madeleine is an ideal mechanism to evoke my own past feelings, and, by reproducing images which act upon me in such a way, altering them to emphasize their salient features, I create Proustian madeleines for others. The memories triggered within each viewer may differ, but the atmosphere evoked will be roughly the same.

The creation of the Proustian madeleines rests, in turn, upon finding the objective correlative of each particular feeling, that is, finding the proper combination of visual elements to evoke the emotion. An important part of the visual objective correlative is a certain ambiguity which leaves the print open to viewer participation rather than allowing it to make a complete statement. Thus, the print does not merely sit on the wall, but reaches out to the viewer, engages him, stirs old memories, brings back forgotten feelings and emotions -- acts, in short, as a Proustian madeleine.

L'Envoi

Three days after I finished typing the first draft of this thesis, I tossed a week's worth of clothes into a suitcase and departed for New York. I was only planning to stay for a few days, but I forgot to come back; for three months, until the tyranny of the calendar compelled me back to submit this thesis, I literally forgot all about Rochester. The town existed in name only. No pang of homesickness interrupted the bliss of my new life; no vivid memories leapt, bidden or unbidden, into my mind. It seemed that my two years in Rochester had not left behind even a single Proustian madeleine. Even after I boarded the night train at Grand Central Station, even as the silent towns of western New York slipped unnoticed past my window, I had no clear picture of my destination. Rochester had dwindled down to a spot on the map.

Even before the bright lights and empty streets of the city began flying past me, I felt as if I had never left. With the soft lowing of the train whistle, the bell jar had descended once more.

Rochester, NY

September 9, 1983

Appendix -- A Note on Technique

All the prints in this thesis had as their first state a transfer etching made by the following process. I developed this method myself, through trial and error, because I wanted to transfer drawn images to the plate quickly and easily. The printed images resulting from this process alone are usually fairly clear but the values seldom print darker than a medium grey; thus, this method is suitable for establishing an image on the plate but not for producing finished prints in a single step.

The process itself is very simple. A photocopy is made of the drawing to be transferred. For best results, the photocopy should be as dark as possible and less than twenty-four hours old. A clean zinc plate is secured to a steady surface and the photocopy is placed, image side down, on the plate and is secured firmly so that it will not slip. Lacquer thinner is applied with a clean rag to the back of the photocopy. The paper should be just dampened, not soaked, as the lacquer thinner dissolves the toner. The paper should then be burnished. A burnisher or the back of a spoon may be used, but I obtained an excellent image by using a strip of scrap zinc, slightly longer than the width of the plate, as a squeegee, bearing down hard and making one pass over the paper. This method has the additional advantage of being fast, which is important because lacquer thinner dries rapidly.

When the paper is lifted up, the image should be clearly visible on the plate. If the image is patchy or indistinct, the plate can be cleaned with lacquer thinner and the above steps

repeated. When a satisfactory image is obtained, the plate is placed in a 20:1 concentration of nitric acid in water, and feathered or brushed continuously to keep the surface of the zinc free of bubbles. The plate remains in the acid bath until the visible image breaks down, usually thirty seconds to two minutes. It is not advisable to leave the plate in the acid for more than three minutes, even if the image is still clearly visible after that time, as the resulting print will be very dark but indistinct. Once the plate is removed from the acid, it can be proofed in the usual manner.

Once the image had been established on the plate, I strengthened it with line etching, aquatint, open biting, burnishing and scraping. The transfer method leaves a distinctive texture on the plate, and in some areas I simply let it stand; it can be seen in the central portion of figure 3, between the large bedposts (the pure black areas are aquatint, the rest are transfer etching), and in the steps and door in figure 5. The pattern on the bedspread in figure 1 was also added by this process, during the final stages of the print; because of the shallow biting produced by this technique, I double-dropped the print, which made the pattern darker as well as giving the whole print a rich, velvety quality.

Notes

¹ Leo Tolstoy, What is Art?, trans. Almyer Maude, (1896, rpt. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1960), p. 51.

² Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past, trans. C. Scott Moncrieff, (New York: Random House, 1934), I, pp. 34-36.

³ T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet," in Selected Essays, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950), pp. 124-5.

⁴ T.S. Eliot, "Preludes," in The Waste Land and Other Poems, (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 14.

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List of Illustrations

Figure 1 -- (Untitled: transfer etching, line etching, aquatint, open bite).

Figure 2 -- (Untitled: transfer etching, line etching, aquatint, open bite).

Figure 3 -- (Untitled: transfer etching, aquatint).

Figure 4 -- (Untitled: transfer etching, line etching, aquatint).

Figure 5 -- (Untitled: transfer etching, line etching, open bite).

Figure 6 -- (Untitled: softground, aquatint, line etching, open bite).

Figure 1



Figure 2

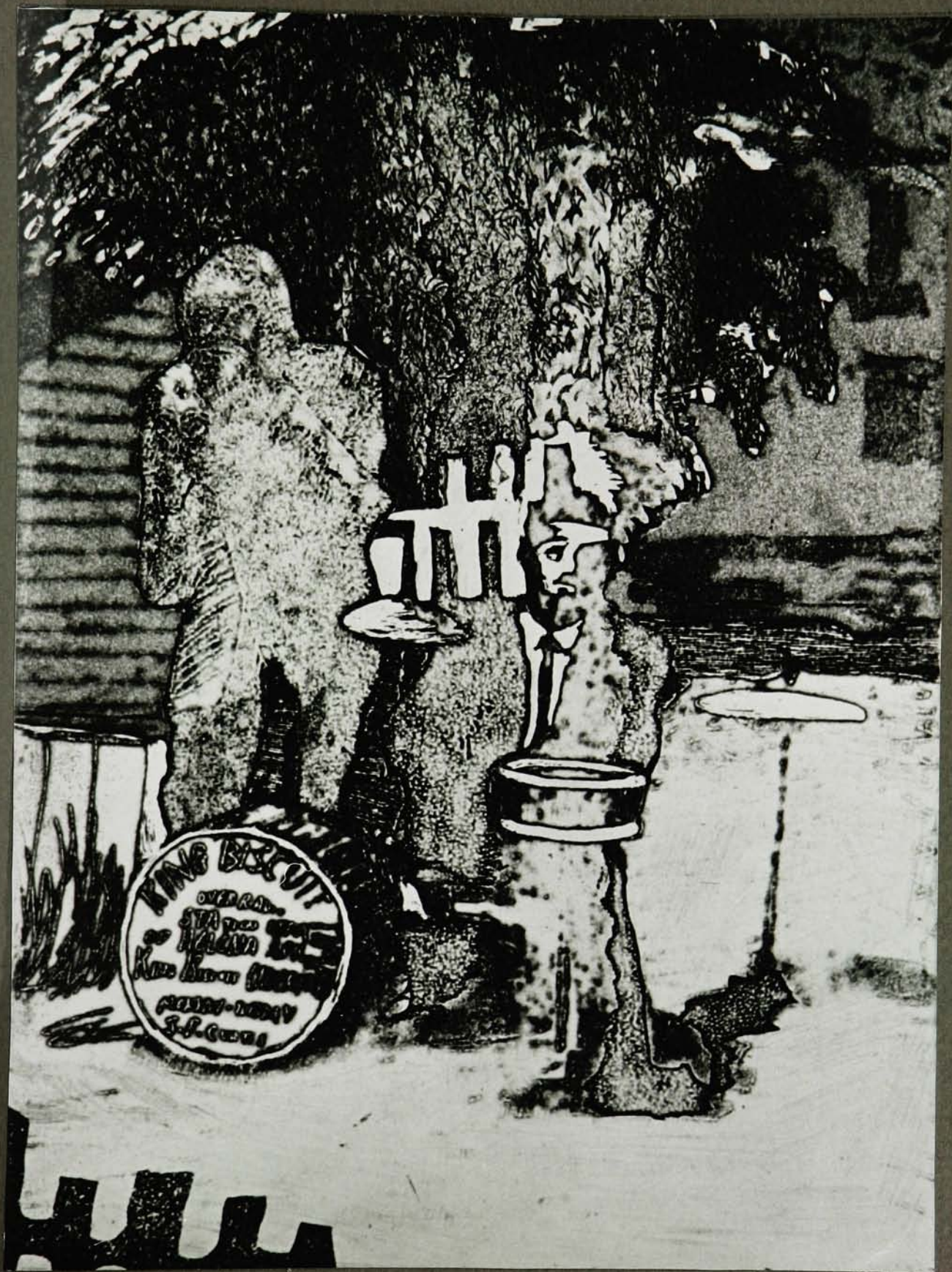


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

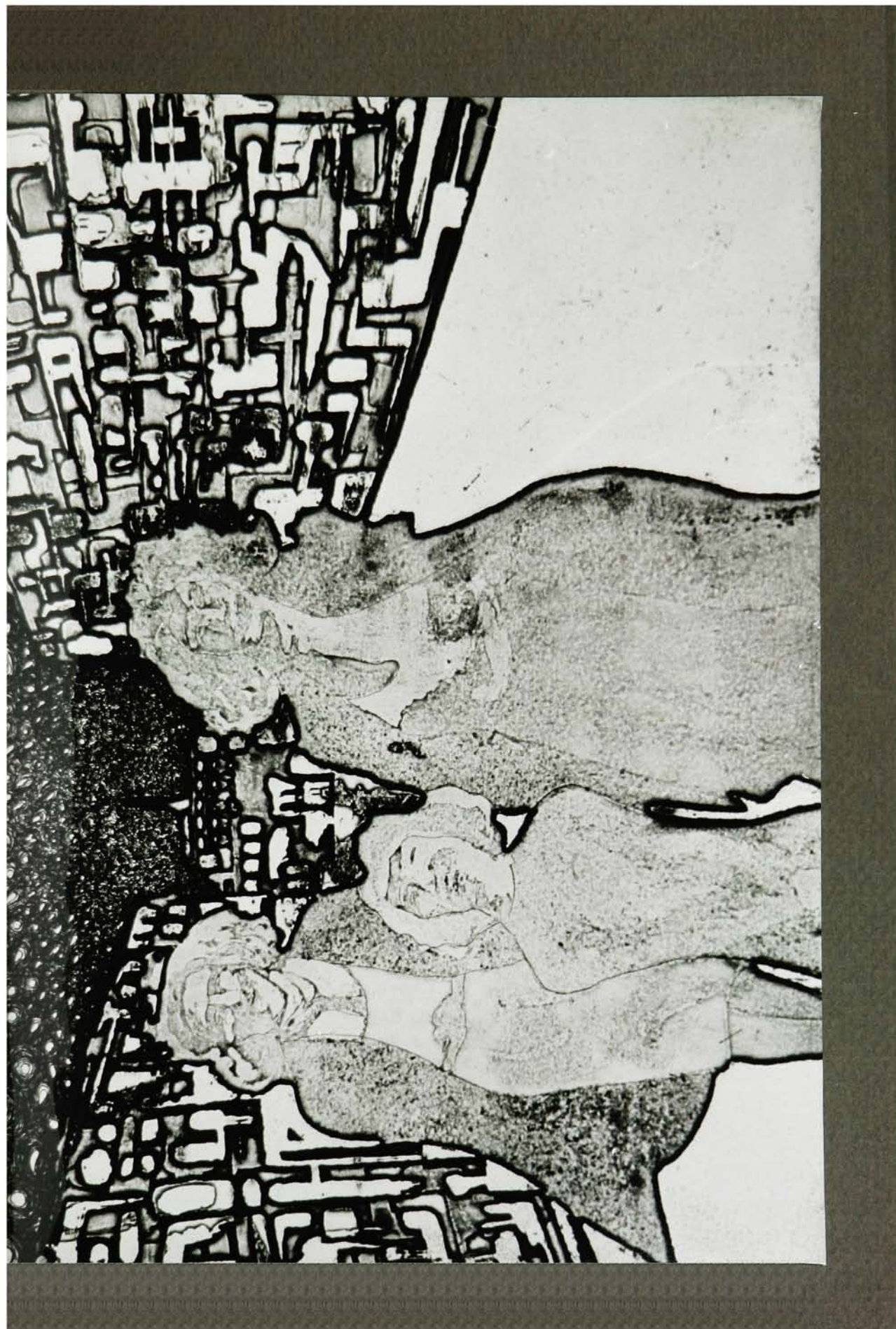


Figure 6

