

1992

Moving pictures

Melissa Ann McClure
Portland State University

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Melissa Ann McClure for the
Master of Fine Arts in Art:Painting presented July 24, 1992.

Title: Moving Pictures

APPROVED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:


James S. Hibbard, Chairman


Claire Kelly-Zimmers


Judy Vogland


Bernard Ross

My thesis work includes 10 large drawings that explore the narrative qualities of line movement. I use line in these drawings as a recording device to document both the physical activity of the process and the personal experience that the lines represent. Through this work I attempt to develop a language of visual imagery that is autobiographical in nature. A system of personal symbols and recurring forms make up the

structure of this visual vocabulary. Line movement and rhythm provides a sense of the dialog.

I examined the work of 20th century artists in related areas like Gesturalism, Automatic Drawing and Abstract Expressionism. I looked for ways that the personal narrative arises spontaneously through the artists' signature imagery. I was interested in the drama inherent in physically active kinds of mark-making. A map of the emotional landscape of the artist seems to reveal itself through gestural line drawing. Improvisational and accidental forms transmit visual messages from the internal consciousness of the artist.

Working in this active mark-making tradition, I became aware of recurring imagery and issues in my drawings. I found the theme of "duality" as a constant in my work. Force and complacency, containment and explosion, and spontaneity and control were evident, both visually and thematically, in every aspect of my drawings. I traced these issues through my films and short stories and used the input from all of these expressions to strengthen my visual awareness.

The narrative qualities of line movement, both real and implied, exist in a variety of art forms. Movement and rhythm seem to be the common experience that links all of the visual and performing arts. Dance, theatre, fiction, music and painting all rely on related movements to establish a sense of unity. Underlying movement can be experienced even if other common factors like language or representative imagery are ambiguous.

My interest in movement has led me to pursue gestural line drawing as a medium because it allows me direct access to visual ideas. I am able to simultaneously incorporate the rich information of memory with the immediacy of drawing. This work has become, for me, both a visual identification of myself and a search for a visual language to communicate the complexities of personal or interior space.

MOVING PICTURES

by

MELISSA ANN McCLURE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
ART:PAINTING

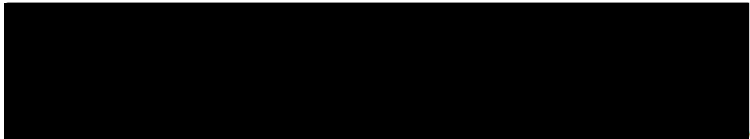
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1992

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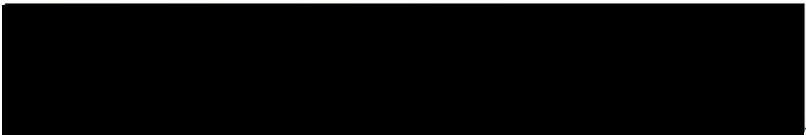
The members of the Committee approve the thesis of
Melissa Ann McClure presented May 26, 1989.



James S. Hibbard, Chairman



Claire Kelly-Zimmers

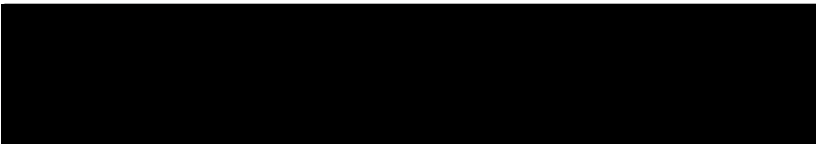


Judy Vogland



Bernard Ross

APPROVED:



Barbara Sestak, Chair, Department of Art



Roy W. Koch, Vice Provost for Graduate
Studies and Research

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INTRODUCTION

The drawings and prints that I am including in my thesis presentation are autobiographical in nature. My views of art and life have been shaped by the personal and social forces of my environment. My work draws from strong sensual experiences of the rituals and atmosphere that I believe are specific to Southern culture. My ideas are also strongly influenced by the ambiguities of racial interactions that were central to my life in Southern Alabama in the 1950s and 1960s. Benevolence and violence existed simultaneously in the people with whom I was close. Issues of confusion, ambiguities and imbalance are central themes in my work.

My work is also inspired by movement rhythm. In my life I have been extremely conscious of rhythms. Some rhythms are physical, like the sway of fans or the motion of porch swings. Other rhythms are environmental, like the intensity of the seasons, or the repetition of daily rituals. Contradictions and confusion in my life have formed a rhythm of their own.

My interest in movement has led me to pursue drawing as a medium because it allows me direct linear access to visual ideas. Line seems to be a strong communicator in drawing, even when recognizable subject matter is eliminated, because the line itself works as a symbol for the idea it represents. Because I view drawing as a verb--as an activity rather than

a product--the lines stay freshly connected to the forces that have set it into motion. I feel strongly about the non-objective use of line as a recording device for information because it documents both the immediate activity and also the experience that it represents.

The imagery that I use is not a literal reproduction of events or objects, but a linear expression of the ideas and memories that surround them. I think of this kind of work as a documentation of the power of these kinds of forces. With memory and intuition as shaping primary components, I have approached this series of works as both an expression of the chaotic experience of our culture and as a literal identification of myself. In the process, the imagery has evolved into a set of personal symbols and gestures that combine to form a system of personal language. I often use broken or divided shapes as symbols of division or separation. Small, frenetic spirals of line indicate the unraveling or compression of relationships. I also use images that appear to be split open, revealing both the interior and exterior space at the same time. These symbols and gestures continue to evolve and to present new options as I proceed.

DRAWN TO LINE: PROCESS AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

I begin with a specific concept in mind and not with a visualization of the finished piece. As I begin to put down lines and to enclose areas, possibilities for new shapes and areas of interaction evolve. If I become properly connected to the piece in the early stages, I can follow the rhythms that grow out of the process. I can choose to interject areas of interrupting lines or contrasting shapes. I can allow the newly-formed interactions to guide me through the piece. It is an intuitive process, and I find it extremely successful for me because the references are highly personal and also often ambiguous.

As the piece progresses, strong interactions between the shapes become more defined. The use of vigorous lines begins to set up physical tensions. Line movement is alternately broken and fluid. In some areas it is rough and repetitive, and in other areas it seems enclosed and resolved. An ambiguous relationship between these kinds of concepts appears in all of my works. Areas of confusion and areas of resolution are often indistinguishable. In my most successful pieces, I believe that an exciting sense of rhythm is developed and maintained within this duality of ideas.

Working on a large scale has become increasingly important to me. The physical, muscular movement of mark-making is

increased with full body contact with the process. A physical identification between the drawing and the body's movement heightens the sense of visual activity in the piece. I find that my arcs and lines have to be restrained some in the smaller works. In the smaller pieces, sometimes line becomes merely representation of movement rather than a recording of the movement itself. When physical activity takes on a less important role, it seems to diminish the impact of the drawing. When my work includes the greatest range of pressure, arc and length, the images develop not only as intentional application of line, but as a response to intuitive body movements.

The organic forms or symbols that I use in my work have also developed from this kind of physical connection with surface. An "egg"- or "heart"-shaped figure has evolved from the enclosing of arc-shaped lines. The simplest full arm mark that can be made with the greatest range of movement produces an arc. Two arcs facing each other produce an enclosed figure. The enclosed figure intersected with a vertical line produces a divided figure. I use this kind of divided figure and its many variations as a symbol in my drawings. It represents the concepts of division and unity and is related to these issues as they exist in both social and personal interactions. It is an ideograph, a symbol that stands for an entire concept, rather than a pictograph which stands for an object. For me, it has become a symbol that stands for the duplicity that exists in human relationships and is both biological and sociological in nature. I use it as an emblem that refers to

both the simplicity and complexity of these issues in our culture and in our relationships.

Around and within these symbols, I use line as a kind of emotional gesture. Line functions here as a record of process and activity. The lines serve as recorded motion. They are symbols, too, because they exist as relics of a kinetic activity. I see the use of these lines as a sort of documentation of information, like photographs. The activity is suddenly stopped and recorded. A fragment of a larger moment has been extracted and enlarged. In a way, it is like musical notation on paper. Lines have been composed and constructed to represent some other experience. The visual elements of sheet music have an innate beauty, and yet the symbols stand for movement, timing and emphasis.

I often turn to the use of film for the same discovery of movement that drawing affords, but within the infinite time and space that film offers.¹ There are some important connections between my drawings and the two films I have made during my time in the graduate program. Most of those connections have to do with "relationships" as subject matter, and with the qualities of movement. Film offers the added experiences of sound and sustained movement in time. It also offers me the possibilities of controlled audience response, to some extent. Because the experience has a planned duration and a

¹Yvonne Rainer, Work 1961-73, Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974. New York, New York University Press, 1974.

great many environmental control factors, I have a sense of both the participation and the responses of the viewer.

There is another property of film to which I am drawn. The process of film is almost always a collaborative endeavor, and it brings together the strengths of several contributors. It is therefore less of a "masterpiece" attributed to any one artist, and consequently there are fewer issues of ownership and possession involved. There is also more emphasis on the audience, and less emphasis on the product.² Ultimately, the success of the work lies in accessibility and not in its desirability as an acquisition. Still, my interest in film is much the same as my interest in drawing. The ideas of movement or implied movement in space or time, or both, have enormous possibilities in both formats.

When studying the film maker, Nancy Graves, I became interested in her older works, primarily drawings. These drawings were based on ideas of mappings or chartings of geographic sites. They are landscapes of sorts, but a new kind of landscape art which is at once an attraction to the natural characteristics of a site and an involvement with the biographical (or autobiographical) information contained there.³ It is a recording of both immediate and historical information. I became interested in the mapping qualities of her work and

²Lucy Lippard, From the Center, E. P. Dutton, New York, 1976. Discusses the films of Nancy Graves.

³Ibid., From "Points of View: Stuart, Demott, Jacquette, Graves."

saw in my own work a similar idea of documentation. My work has been a recording of time or event, rather than a record of place. Although my work has less of a physical connection with qualities of the earth, I use mark-making as a mapping of emotional territory.

Like Nancy Graves, I am working within the long tradition of Abstract Expressionism popularized in the United States with such artists as Gorky, DeKooning, Pollock and Lee Krasner. The new focus on gesturalism and automatic drawing as methods of illustration allowed such artists a greater freedom of emotional expression by focusing on personal experience as subject matter. Abstract Expressionism shifted the emphasis somewhat from art product to art-making process. These artists and others who have been exploring the interior landscapes and personal symbolism of Abstract Expressionism⁴ have opened the way for a new consciousness of imagery that is drawn from internal consciousness rather than from external structures.

I have been inspired by artists from this period of abstraction. The later paintings of Gorky, with their improvisational use of outline and accidental forms, have been important to my work. Similarly, I am drawn to the idea of transmitting body energy through brushwork that was explored by Franz Kline in his dramatic gestural paintings. This idea

⁴Sam Hunter and John Jacobus, Modern Art, Prentice Hall/Abrams, Inc., New York, 1985.

of calligraphic vocabulary has been a central theme in my work as well.⁵ I feel strong connections to process painters like DeKooning, whose fragmented images and flat biomorphic figures served as illustrations of dramas in his own life. The possibilities of this gestural style of artmaking were taken to extremes later, with Jackson Pollock's techniques of allowing the artist to be physically in the work itself. In my view, the resulting personal vocabulary of imagery grows not only from the strength of the artist's physical connection to the surface, but from the direct access to the spiritually-potent imagery of the unconscious. This use of expressive line functions as a tap to reservoirs of human experience.

⁵Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, New York, 1970.

THE WORK

Untitled, Figure 1 was the result of many drawings attempting to develop and refine the "divided shape" symbol. This drawing was a successful attempt to combine that shape with linear movement. The placement and restraint of the strong linear marks set up an acceptable sense of equilibrium. The heavy lines pushing into or being released from the main form provided a satisfying sense of ambiguity as well. Weighty, bulbous shapes were either being separated from one another by the forces of the massive lines or were attempting to come together in spite of these forces. I saw in this piece a strong reference to issues in my own life concerning unity and division and the nature of being unable to distinguish the two concepts in reality. In an early stage of the drawing, I felt that the distribution of calm, neutral space was well balanced with areas of vigorous movement. I completed the drawing here at this place of visual equality, afraid that any further marks would alter the balance of the piece. I did not yet have the confidence that I would be able to regain the perfection if it became obscured.

Although I felt completely satisfied with the completion of the drawing in Figure 1, it was still a drawing about a singular idea. It included only one visual concept, only one interpretation, and it seemed very much resolved. The delicacy

of the lines and relative control of the shapes resulted in a kind of complacent visual state that I had wanted to push further. The ideas I had were much too complex for the simplicity of this kind of presentation. I wanted to include more information.

In Untitled Figure 2, I used the "divided shape" again, and around it a more frenetic use of line. When the first state of visual resolution arrived this time, I added more lines, created new shapes and pushed through to the next stage, the place I never allowed myself to reach in the first drawing. I managed to achieve fewer controlled ambiguities than in the previous work, but more expressive line qualities. Fracturing and containment were still communicated by the divided shape symbols.

A stronger sense of rhythm was achieved in the drawing in Figure 2 by placing an emphasis on the use of frenetic line movement. More frequent emphasis points produced a more consuming sense of movement. While the first drawing sang quietly, this drawing was clearly shouting. I made a copper plate etching from this same drawing. Most of the lines of the etching were dry point application and required a lot of muscular activity to implant them onto the surface of the plate. This excessive movement was extremely satisfying to me, and I decided to apply the same heavy, active line-making process to my next drawing on paper.

In Untitled Figure 3, I explored two new concepts in the drawing process. The first idea was the increased use of

physical movement and pressure, which required a larger working surface to accommodate it. The change of scale gave me more freedom of movement and a much greater physical connection to the surface. I was able now to act out the rhythms to create full arm strokes. I was also able to respond to the rhythms that were created by this activity, and I could anticipate the visual turns that the drawing would take.

The process of drawing on paper has become the ideal medium for me. The activity of drawing allows direct access to visual ideas, and the results are immediate. Painting has never worked well for me because of the time it takes for me to complete a piece. Because I am a working mother, my time is always available in only small amounts. I have sought the medium that allows the greatest range of expression and is, at the same time, "time-economical." This same economy is important to my ideas of action drawing and physical movement. Drawing on paper also provides the perfect resistant surface for aggressive mark-making.

I began to consider the use of color to accentuate compression in the drawings. The drawing in Figure 4 was successful in this way because the repetition of blues provides a strong visual connection between the shapes. The complementary color scheme that I have chosen increases a sense of dynamic movement. The shapes here are tightly layered. They seem to be crowding forward, and a kind of visual pressure is developing.

The "divided shape" here functions as a whole shape that

has burst open. This seismic disturbance has spewn lines into all areas of the drawing. It was much later that I would realize the inward source of this volcanic explosion of line. At the time of the drawing, the concept of pressure and extension was very real in my own life. I was finding layer after layer of overwhelming responsibility, fear and grief inside myself. It was a difficult time of a very painful transition. At the same time, a curious explosion of personal growth and strength was born, and I was being propelled forward with that momentum. I see the duality of issues--both inwardly drawn and outwardly expressed--in my work at that time.

Untitled Figure 5 is the third in this series, and I feel that the combinations here of bold, frantic line and a more limited application of color produce the most successful member of this new, large-scale series. The repetition of shapes here works as a more harmonious composition. There also appears to be a magnetic attraction of the shapes and a subsequent piling up of the figures onto a plane near the viewer. The sense of compression is increased here, as a force from behind has pushed and squeezed the objects against one another. A crushing instant of movement or of sound or energy has been recorded at the height of its intensity. The piece might sound like many layers of instrumental sound falling together. I see it as the crest of a wave frozen in motion just in front of the viewer. It was clearly a moment from my past. It was as if many pieces were synthesized in one recording. In my mind as I viewed the drawing later, I saw the bold, forceful

delivery of a Baptist sermon as it reached its orgasmic conclusion some heated summer night, with the congregation and choir and pastor all propelled forward to the edge of emotion, united as one mind, and shouting, sweating and weeping our repentance. It was a hot, grand delivery all around.

Recovering from that purging, I began another series of drawings that used the same repetition of forms but exhibited a composition that was much less aggressive. In the drawing of Untitled Figure 6, the use of the divided shape is more restrained. The symbol itself is prominent, and it occupies a larger proportion of the image area. By being a singular figure, it takes on a different meaning than when used in combination with other similar shapes. It is also free of the compression that is so important in the previous drawings. I chose to provide the surface with specific and controlled areas of rest. I reduced and modified the symbol of the divided figure into multiple/repetitive units that I placed in a kind of suspension around the main figure. An idea of channels containing information was developing here. The small figures were congealed in these channels and embedded around the divided shape. These new "contained and embedded" drawings made me aware of some important directions that my work could take, but the first few drawings after this one were less successful to me, because they lacked the linear energy of the previous works.

I applied the suspended forms idea to monoprints, Untitled Figure 8. I was looking for ways to restore the spontaneity

of the action drawings with the more pronounced use of the divided shapes. I was also searching for color that could clearly illustrate temperature extremes. The atmospheric qualities of the monoprints were rich and heavy, like sultry weather. I applied the suspended shapes around the main figure in these lurid colors. Something about the raucous smell of mimosa and magnolias on stagnant afternoons was happening here in this congested space. I wanted the area around the main figure to be festooned this time, rather than heavily embedded. A duality existed here in the festive use of line and color and the raw "sliced away" presentation of the figure. In this piece, animated exteriors peeled open to reveal complex interiors.

Untitled Figure 8 is a sequential group of drawings that I developed as an attempt to deal with issues of extended line. I wanted a drawing to include a build-up, a climax and a resolution in one viewing, similar to experiences of theater, film or literature. It would be possible to include all of these elements in one drawing, but I wanted each section to be contained, a complete concept. Each one would be a separate visual idea. The progression, however, would produce a narrative experience. The sequence would exist like a complete piece of music or the abstraction of an entire day. I chose the colors for this piece to communicate a certain density, like murky waters or sullen, heavy atmosphere. There is a turbulent sense of motion brewing in the first drawing. Then a churning of the shapes and a quickening sense of movement develops.

Eventually the movement is relieved or completed in the end. I had in mind a specific day in my childhood. I saw it like the motion of a hand making circles under water. Heavy waves push out from the center. The stagnant afternoon pushes back:

Waterloo washes some rags in a tub on the back porch. She tosses the dirty water out over the steps. It evaporates in the heat before it reaches the ground.

My sister and I play with the tub as a Hollywood swimming pool. We dangle the doll's legs over the water. We use Waterloo's sun hat as a beach umbrella. The dolls can lounge in the shade.

Waterloo walks home at four. She puts on her hat and gives us the "bye-bye" sign. We wave back. She has on flip-flops, and the dirt spits up behind her every time. My grandmother says to put on our dresses so we can go into the post office right now. On the way in, we drive past Waterloo in our white car. We wave out the windows to her. Shouldn't we give her a ride? She's not going to the post office, though; she's going home. Does she have any children at home? Scads. What does her husband do? She doesn't have one, of course; she lives in sin. All Negroes do.

Waterloo comes back on Tuesday. She irons sheets all day for company. She sprinkles the water on and steam comes up over her face. She irons the bedspreads, too. My sister and I can't go into the bedroom where she's ironing; it's too hot. She doesn't use the fan because

my grandmother needs it while she's sewing. In the end, the sheets are stacked up on the kitchen chairs. They're still hot for a long time. You can feel them if you walk near the table. My grandmother says we can just stay out of the kitchen anyway if we're too hot, and go lay down and rest. My sister reads Today's Illustrated Bible because it's there. I listen to the sewing machine through the walls. Waterloo bakes a cake for our supper. Then she puts on her hat at four. She comes past our room and gives us the bye-bye sign. I wave, too. My sister doesn't wave, and I wonder why.

In Figure 9 I used many of the same visual elements of the previous sequential drawings, but I included them all in one drawing. I wanted the heavy, tumultuous lines and also the areas of rest or resolution. I also included a new symbol that had been developing. It is the white "fan" symbol, and it works to represent both the physical and the rhythmic aspects of electric fans in hot weather, and also the ideas of femininity and modesty that are traditionally associated with fans. A fan is a tool for relief and comfort in southern life, and it has certain hypnotic properties. It is a machine, too, however, and it becomes one's job to keep the baby away from it and to secure light objects that might become airborne because of it. It is an ominous, whirling gadget that sets the ground vibrating and might catch a skirt hem or the edge of the table cloth. It is also the coveted object in the household on sultry days. Bargaining and displays of power are ways to possess the

valuable appliance. I included in Figure 9 the atmosphere of murky air currents consumed and expelled by a fan. Then I included the vulnerable, organic "divided space" freeing itself from the movement.

I began and completed the drawing in Figure 10 after receiving news of the death of a man who had been very close to my family. My mother called from Atlanta to tell me of the death of a man named John (no last name), who had worked for my grandparents for more than 50 years. I knew him all my life, and he has represented a source of tremendous affection and paralyzing confusion to me. The drawing in Untitled Figure 10 is about this man and his connection to all of our lives:

It's so hot today that my grandmother has pulled down all the shades in every room. She hates to do this because it makes the whole house look exactly like a funeral home.

I hear the sound of hedge clippers outside. The sound is muffled by the shades. John, the yard man, is cutting down the rose bushes because it's that time. My sister and I have popsicles from the store. They're melting all over, so we have to sit on the porch, but it's hotter there. We watch John in the sun. He wipes his face with a rag about every five minutes. He cuts off a thorny branch and lays it down on a pile of others. He does that so gently, maybe because he is careful of the thorns. He doesn't look at us or wave. My sister and I

are afraid of thorns. We hate the rose bushes. They still have lots of blooms in all colors. But they are all coming down today, no matter what.

My grandmother says to go out there and pick up some of those roses that are still good. Why waste them in the heat? We'll bring them up to the church this afternoon when it's cooler. Don't be long.

John helps us to get the roses and he takes a lot of time to snip off the thorns so they won't stick us. He's smiling. He wipes his face. I bet you're real hot, aren't you, John? I bet I am. Why don't you come up on the porch and have a popsicle, too, John? I might just do that one of these days. He's taking the time to wrap up the stems in his clean handkerchief for us. My grandmother shouts 'don't be long' from the steps, but I can barely hear her. John has never been on the front porch, though, ever.

Later he comes to the back porch for some ice water. My sister and I can give him some. We know the way to do it. In an old mayonnaise jar. I hand it to him and I stand on the steps with him while he drinks it all. He puts the ice that's left in his other handkerchief and he says thanks. He hands me back the jar. After he goes back to work, I have to take the jar under the porch and break it in a box with all the other jars. Because you can't use it again. That's the way it is.

It's much cooler under the porch. The air is damp

and the ground is spongy. But there are spiders and pieces of broken glass everywhere. My grandmother is calling me from the house, and I don't want John to see what I've been doing.

I wanted to include in the drawing in Untitled Figure 10 some of the visual and emotional elements of that particular day. I included some of the sinister and frightening shapes that might be thorns or broken glass, and I tried to emphasize the thick interior space and the baking exterior that are both oppressive. The linear movement is burdened and confused. The use of color is sullen and heavy. There are references in this work to rituals and allegiances that become confused and remain unsolved.

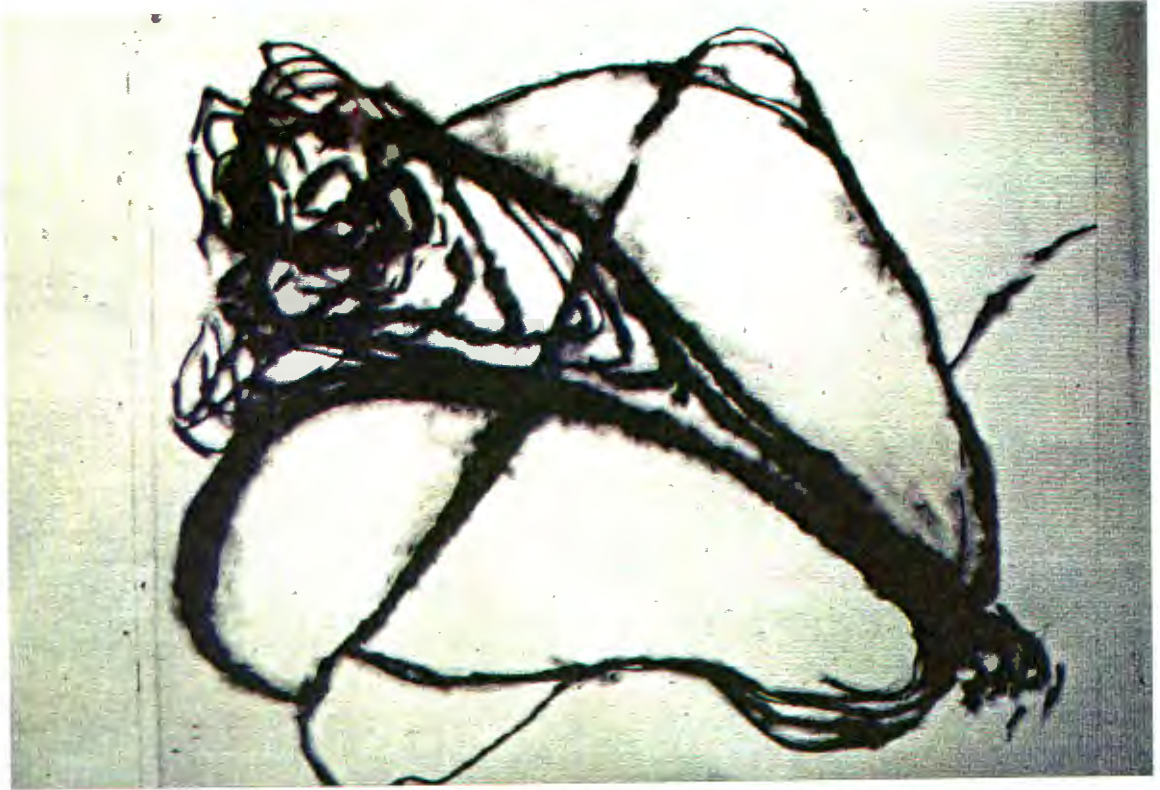


Figure 1. Untitled.

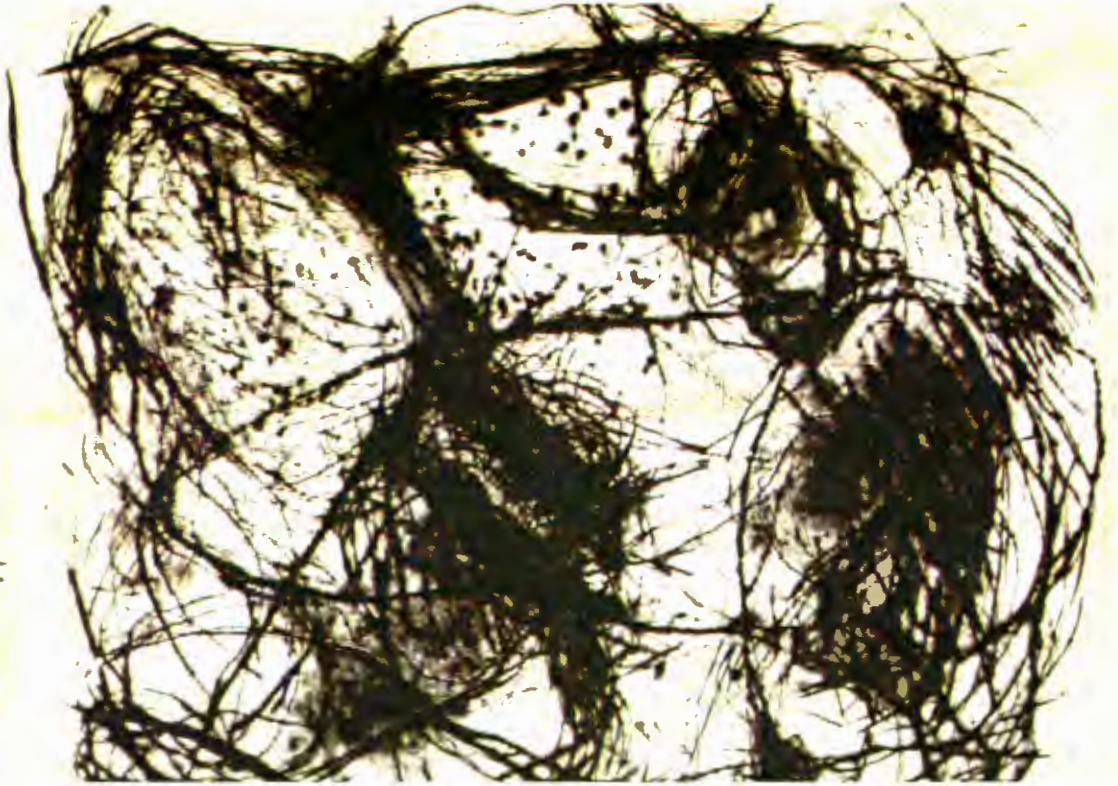


Figure 2. Untitled.

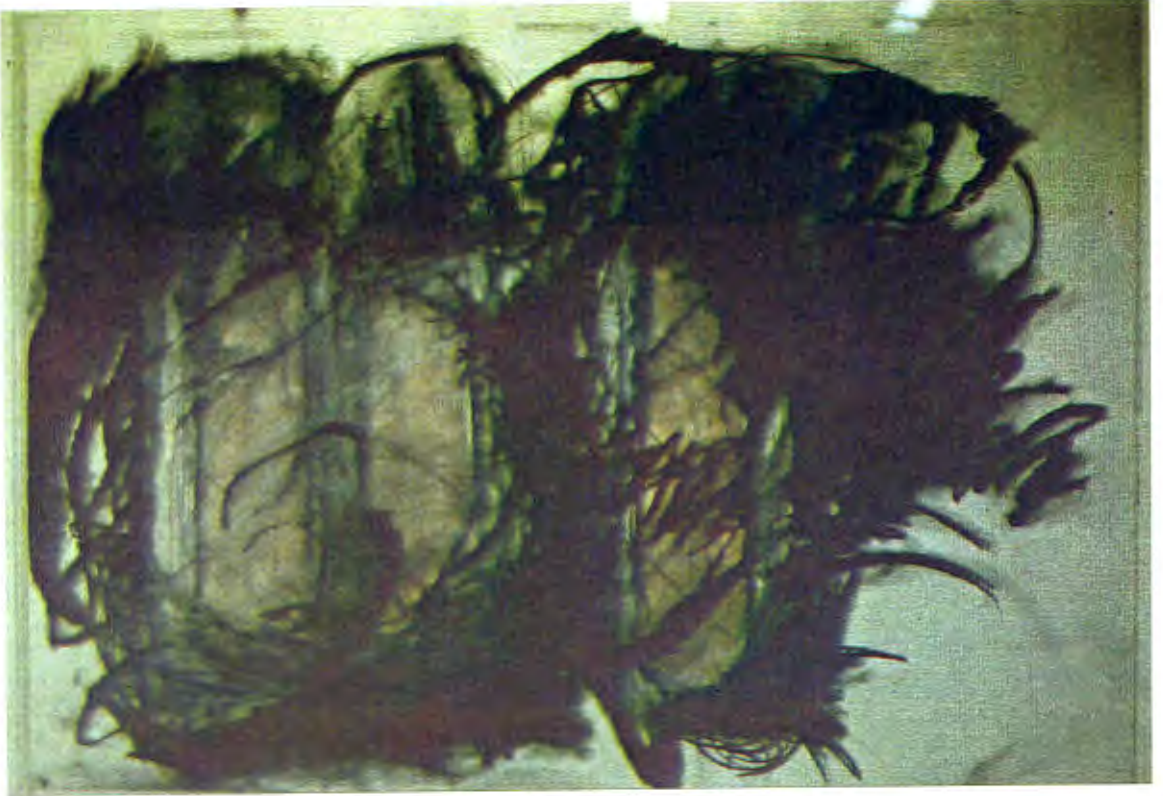


Figure 3. Untitled.



Figure 4. Untitled.



Figure 5. Untitled.



Figure 6. Untitled.



Figure 7. Untitled.



Figure 8. Untitled.

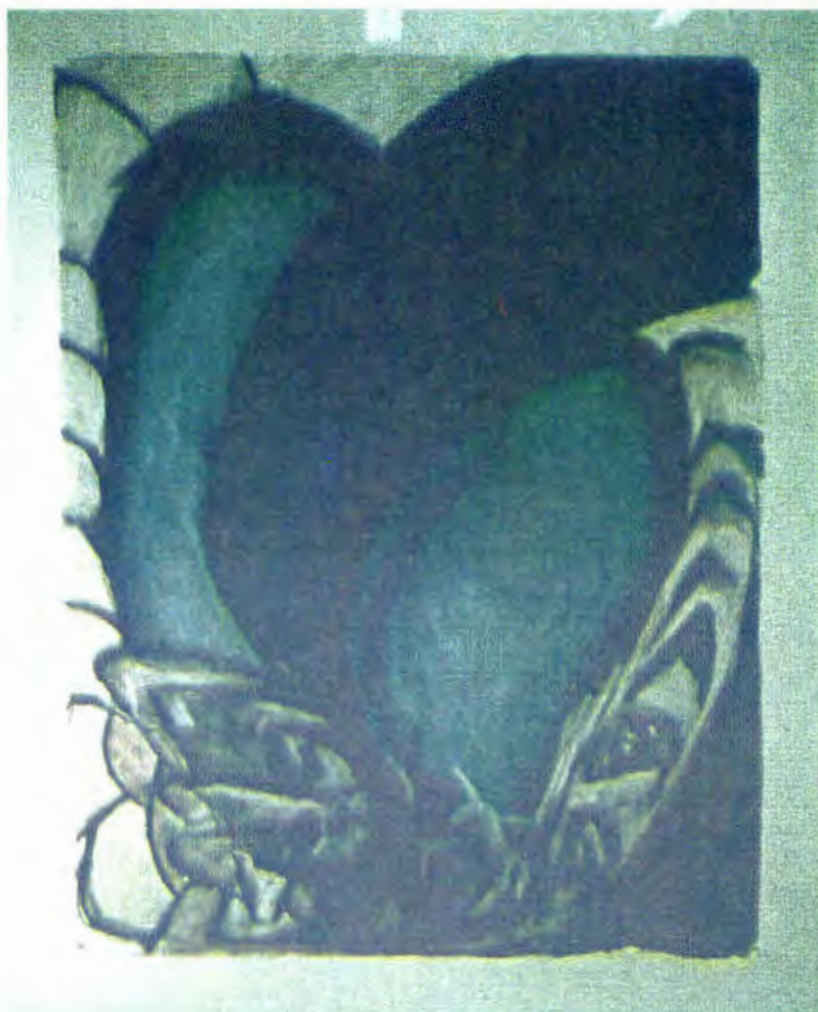


Figure 9. Untitled.



Figure 10. Untitled.

CONCLUSION

My thesis work has been an attempt to give physical existence to both emotional and sensory information. I have been working to find the most successful ways to incorporate the rich information of memories with the immediacy of drawing. I wanted to develop the strongest methods of documenting powerful personal dramas. Mark-making has become both a visual identification of myself and a search for symbolism that can communicate the complexities of personal or interior space.

For every successful drawing, I have at least three others that fail in one way or another. I have abandoned works that became consumed by their own line energy or by their own ambiguities. Still, these failed pieces have provided training ground for exercises in intuitive image-making. They were valuable as places to sort out both formal problems and the possibilities and limitations of new ideas. Each drawing gave me a new reference point to address in the next one. I found concepts that didn't work well in the drawings, but were easily workable in film or other mediums. I recognize in each work the potential for some new directions.

Some of the problems I have faced in my work are recurrent. They are weaknesses that materialize in a variety of ways, but manage to become issues in almost every drawing I approach. I have not succeeded in developing the flawless

working procedures, but I have found good ways to either minimize or incorporate the idiosyncrasies into the piece itself. I have tried to find ways of working that are compatible with both my philosophies of life and my obsession with intuitive drawing.

The work here has brought me closer to finding clear visual solutions to problems of communicating abstract concepts like movement, complex rhythms and the passage of time. I feel more confident in my ability to communicate with my own work now, and to recognize and manipulate strengths as I see them develop.

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