

A Discussion of Traditional Art
Categorization and New Ideas for A More
Equitable Way of Classifying Art

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Which is more important in an art work, the materials used to make it, or the final piece itself? Art exhibitions and competitions would seem to stress materials first. Art works are usually categorized by materials used, such as drawing, painting, sculpture, etc. The problem with this type of categorization is the similar overlapping properties between each group. For example, where does one draw the line between watercolor and drawing when a work is done in washes? This type of classification discrepancy happens repeatedly.

A more appropriate way of comparing and classifying art, and one to which I shall refer later, would be to relate the art work to a subjective or objective approach. This would put the importance on the final art piece itself and not the materials used.

When one enters an art competition he or she is confronted with a form to complete. These forms usually ask the artist to classify art work in terms of medium. The artist then declares under that specific technical category.

Painting can be subdivided into oils, acrylics, and watercolors. Each of these mediums lends itself to certain characteristic effects and properties of expression. Oils, for example, are slow drying and traditionally characteristic of a thick buttery application and built-up paint as with Phillip Trusttum's "No" (fig. 1). He applies the paint in an aggressive manner with heavy textured brush strokes. Acrylic is a quick drying water-thinned polymer base medium which frequently lends itself to staining properties when applied to raw canvas.

Gretchen Albrecht shows this effect with her work, "Cushioned Fall" (fig. 2). By staining the canvas with built-up layers of acrylic paint she obtains new translucent colors.

Transparency is the main characteristic of water color. Water color calls for a process of laying down thin transparent washes over one another. Jack Kellam works with this process in "Spring Thaw" (fig. 3). He creates areas of fluid washes against areas applied by dry brush.

In many cases, a major characteristic of drawing is its linear quality. As with Thomas Sqouros' work, "Farewell Amelia" (fig. 4), it is a medium prone to quick, spontaneous, emotional movement creating forms through use of lines.

Monotype is a printing process closely related to painting due to its directness of application. One draws or paints directly on a plate with the same spontaneity as drawing or painting, creating a reversed image when printed. Though it has its own properties, it incorporates many of the techniques in printmaking, drawing and painting, achieving a different effect by combining the main characteristics of each of these processes. "Monto Pincio" (fig. 5), a monotype by Maurice Prendergast, employs the linear qualities of drawing, the directness of painting and the reversal of imagery when printed.

Often one equates massive forms in space as characteristic of sculpture. Mass, volume, and texture are the main properties of the materials used in George Carlson's "The Hunter" (fig. 6).

The medium of fibers often incorporates a functional use, as with clothing and coverings. However, it utilizes the properties of pattern, texture, and repetition of design (fig. 7).

Each medium has its own distinct characteristics and limitations. However, properties of materials vary greatly and are not a constant, concrete factor. It becomes evident, then, that all media can be approached in a variety of ways.

Oils, though prone to thick applications of paint, can also be approached as washes. Helen Frankenthaler's work, "Three Red Balls" (fig. 8), demonstrates oil applied in thin transparent washes as one would approach a water color. This example also characteristics drawing with its linear qualities. Acrylics, though a water thinned paint, not only can be applied for a staining effect, but also can be approached as thick built-up paint, which ordinarily is considered characteristic of oils. This is strongly represented by Bob Naley's "The Rock" (fig. 9). Here the paint is applied so heavily that it has a texture to it.

Although, as I've indicated, drawing lends itself to linear qualities, it can also be approached with a tonal application. In Whit Connal's "4-64" (fig. 10), the emphasis is placed on using a drawing medium for its effectiveness in tonal changes. As another example, Brush and ink is considered a drawing medium, yet in Jack Youngerman's work "1407 Study" (fig. 11) the quick bold expressive strokes of the brush imply massive forms and have little in common with the linear quality of "Farewell Amelia" (fig. 4). The expressive quality and boldness of form in "1407 Study" is very similar to Robert Motherwell's "Elegy to the Spanish Republic LVIII" (fig. 12) which is done in oils. Both have qualities of strong contrast, bold masses and quick, spontaneous, emotional movement.

Maurice Pendergast's monotype has the linear qualities of a drawing, the built-up qualities of oil paint, the thin overlaying of washes,

as with watercolor, and the final reversal print in paper as with printmaking. Which category is it? With this intermeshing of different group qualities, monotype has no distinct of its own, and therefore is difficult to categorize by medium.

Though sculpture lends itself to massive volume forms it can also have linear qualities. Beverly Pepper's sculpture (fig. 13) is very linear with a light airy feeling. Linear is the main property of drawing. Again, into which category does it fit?

And what of fibers? Though it is frequently approached as a medium for functional purposes, in "Romanica" (fig. 14) by Peter and Ritzi Jacobi, the fibers medium of paper and goat's hair is handled in monumental size/emphasizing mass, volume, form and texture. Is it possible, then, that this should be considered sculpture?

The main properties of each medium fluctuate in and out of each other, many times creating few concrete characteristics which can be applied to any one medium.

When a work is judged in a competition, the judge is not looking only at the process by which the final art piece was executed. He or she is judging the total impact of the piece. The work is judged according to the impact of the response which the work conveys. An artist precipitates this response through two different approaches, either objectively or subjectively.

This form of classifying would be more definitive in terms of intention. An objective approach emphasizes an intellectual response to art: classical and formal. A subjective approach emphasizes an intuitive, emotional response dealing with ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

Almost all art can be classified as objective or subjective no matter what the medium.

All art media are approached in either an objective or subjective way, though some more than others. Oil painting can reveal strong emotion as in Philip Truttum's "No" (fig. 1); through his spontaneous thick application of the paint and strong bold forms, he creates an intense statement through an emotional intuitive process. The strong contrast and bold forms of Motherwell are also achieved through a subjective approach to oil painting.

However, this medium can also be approached in an objective manner. Audrey Flack (fig. 15) uses oils to achieve photo realistic images. Her approach to painting is objective, intellectual, formal, and classical. Clark Richert's "Quark Theory" (fig. 16) approaches acrylics in an objective way with his systematic intellectual method of working. Acrylic used in a subjective manner is represented by Albrecht's "Cushioned Fall" (fig. 2). The bold and subtle masses in this work result from an intuitive pursuit.

Squoros' "Farewell, Amelia" (fig. 4) is an example of drawing in a subjective manner. Its repetition of line creates the feeling of spontaneous movement and charged atmosphere. With Aristide Maillol's drawing, "Reclining Nude" (fig. 17), the objective approach is revealed by his classical handling of the figure in terms of mass and forms in space. It is an intellectual pursuit to the figure where the depiction of Squoros' figure results in an emotional, intuitive response.

Sculpture is also undertaken in either a subjective or objective way. The classical formal style of Hugh Honoun in "Sappho" (fig. 18) is an objective approach to sculpture. Whereas George Carlson's form

of sculpture (fig. 6) is a subjective emotional response. Its simplicity of form and texture creates a sensitive, moving piece.

Classifying in terms of medium seems arbitrary and restrictive. When an artist does an art work, he or she is approaching the work in either a subjective or objective way. The judge bases his or her decision on the impact of the response they get from the work, not the medium used. The artist chooses the medium best suited for self-expression, but the final work itself is what the judges base their decision on, not the process which the artist used to create it.

Each viewer or judge has a preference for the type of work to which they best relate. With categorizing and judging in terms of objective and subjective it would be easier to choose a judge who would better understand and relate to one area over another.

In keeping the categories broad, as with subjective and objective, one is applying broad general subheadings instead of binding classifications with vague meanings; as with the materials divisions. Classifying in terms of approach could open the possibility that the artist decides which category he would enter. It would also leave the artist free of tight, binding classifications. It would be important to let the artist decide into which category his or her work fits, and not let someone else assume the artist's intention.

There are no absolute rules or standards as to what art is. With such a broad subject as art, it seems contradictory to further break down this area into the confining and often arbitrary subheadings of media. Categorizing art in terms of approach, as with subjective and objective, leaves the choice to the artist. This type of categorizing is less of a constraint and is open to all forms of art.



3. Jack B. Kellam: Spring Thaw, watercolor.

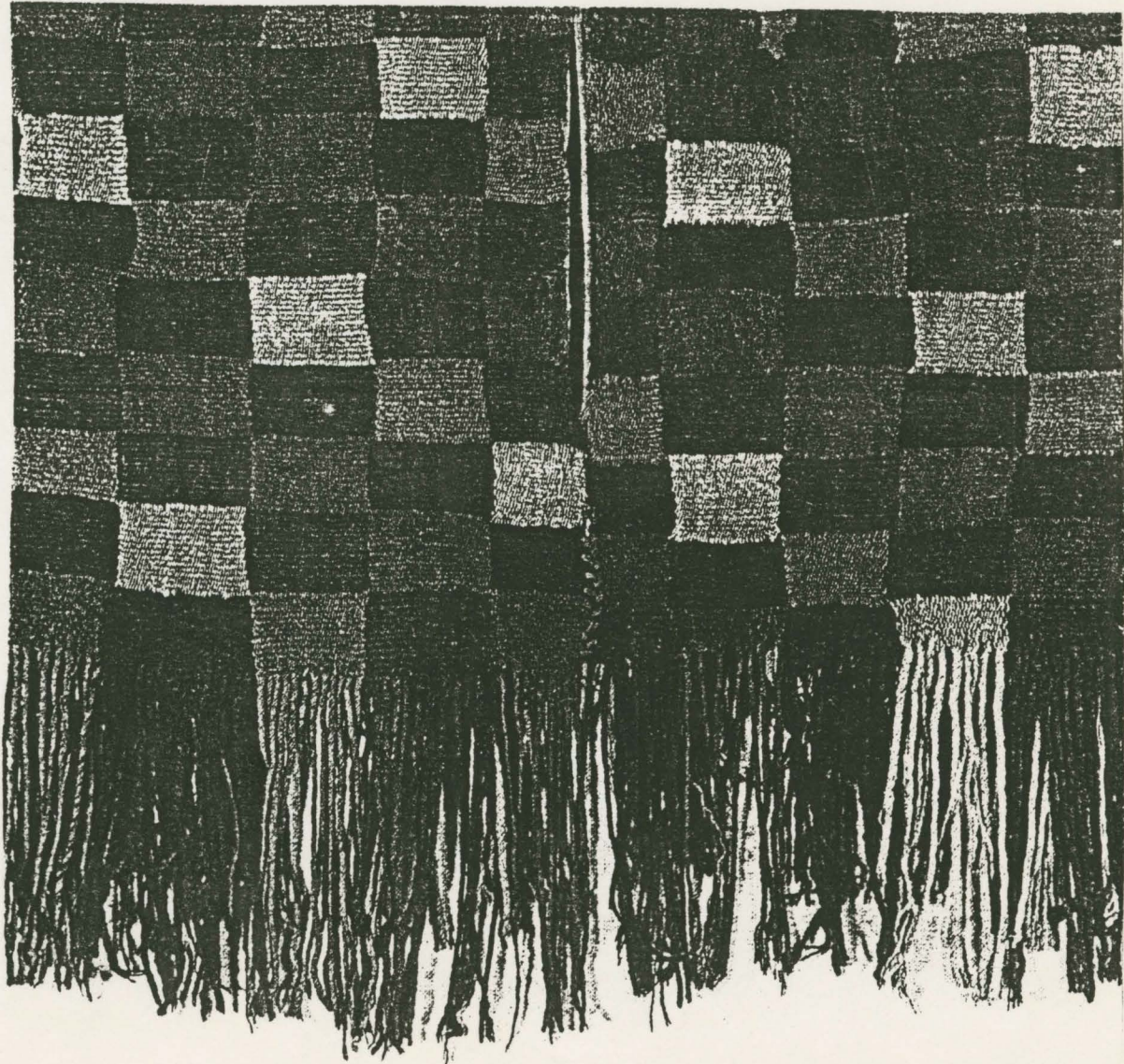


4. Thomas Squires: Farewell, Amelia, lithograph crayon.

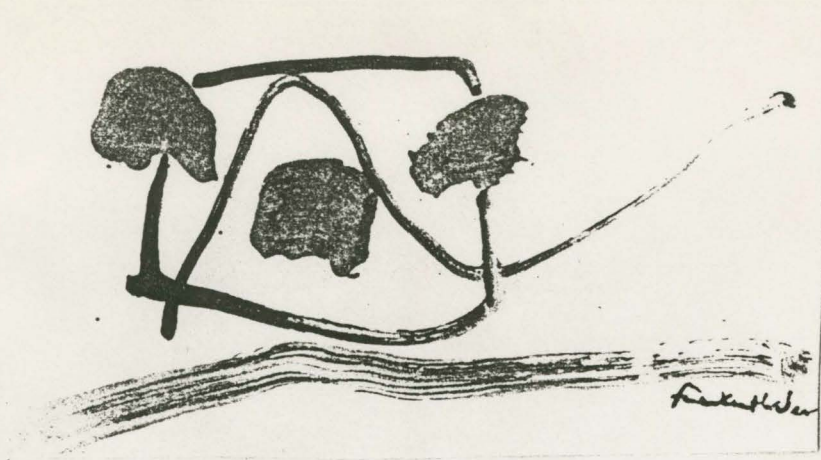


5. Maurice Prendergast: Monte Pincio, 1898, monotype.

6. George Carison: The Hunter, 1976, bronze.



Tunic from Peru.

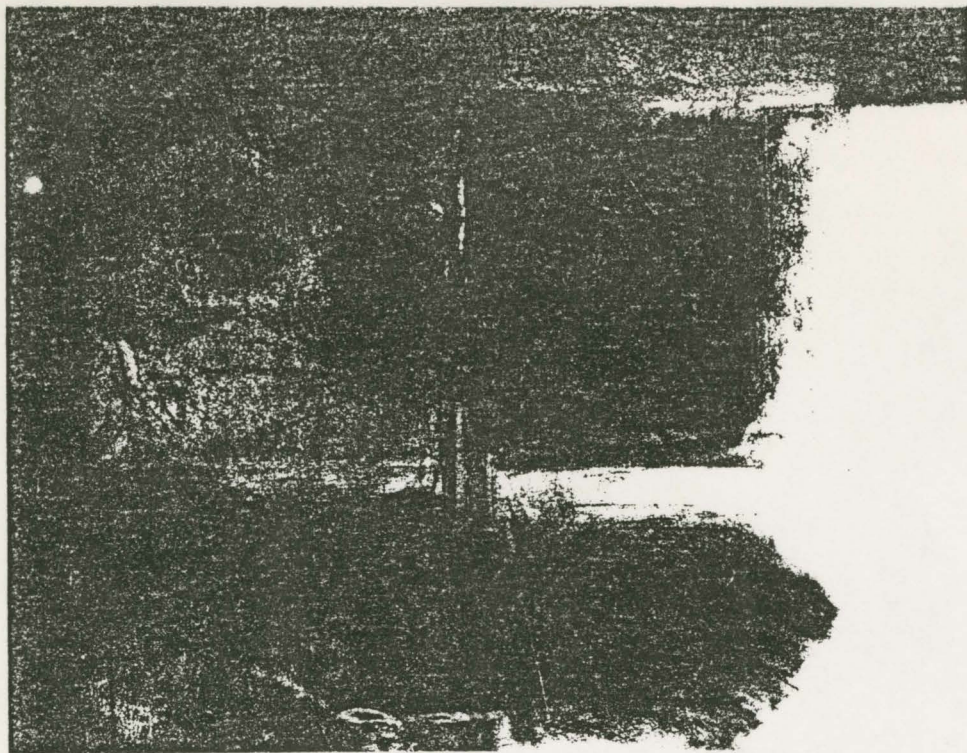


8. Helen Frankenthaler: 3 Red Balls, oil on paper.

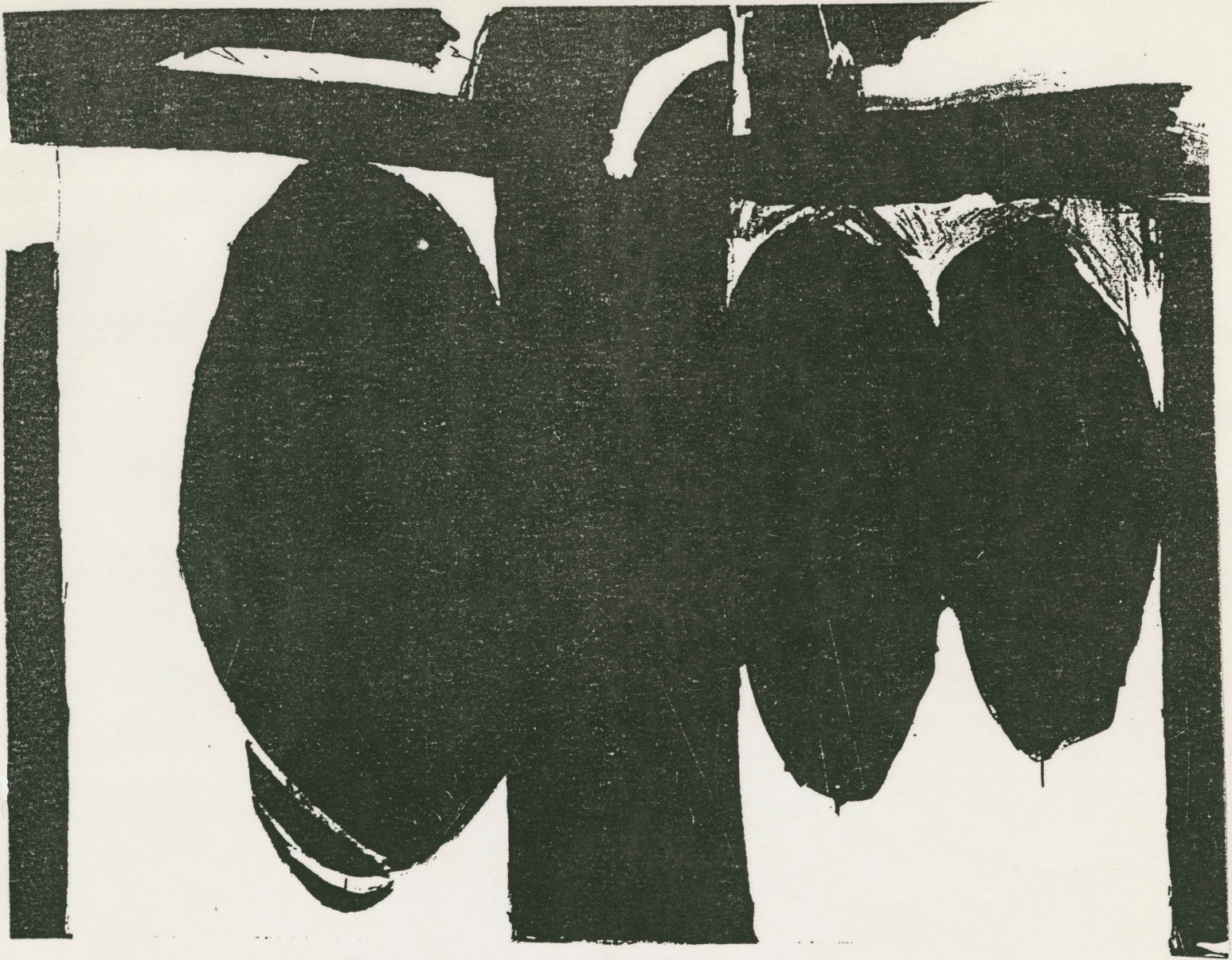


9. Bob Naley: The Rock, acrylic on canvas.

10. Whit Connal: #4-64,
1964, charcoal.



11. Jack Youngerman: 1407-Study, 1964, ink and brush.

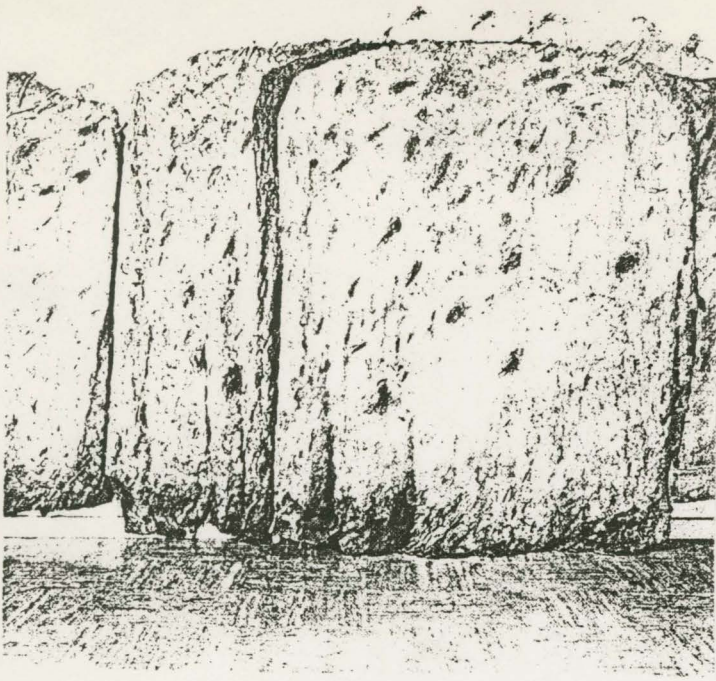


12. Robert Motherwell: Elegy to the Spanish Republic
LVII, oil on canvas.

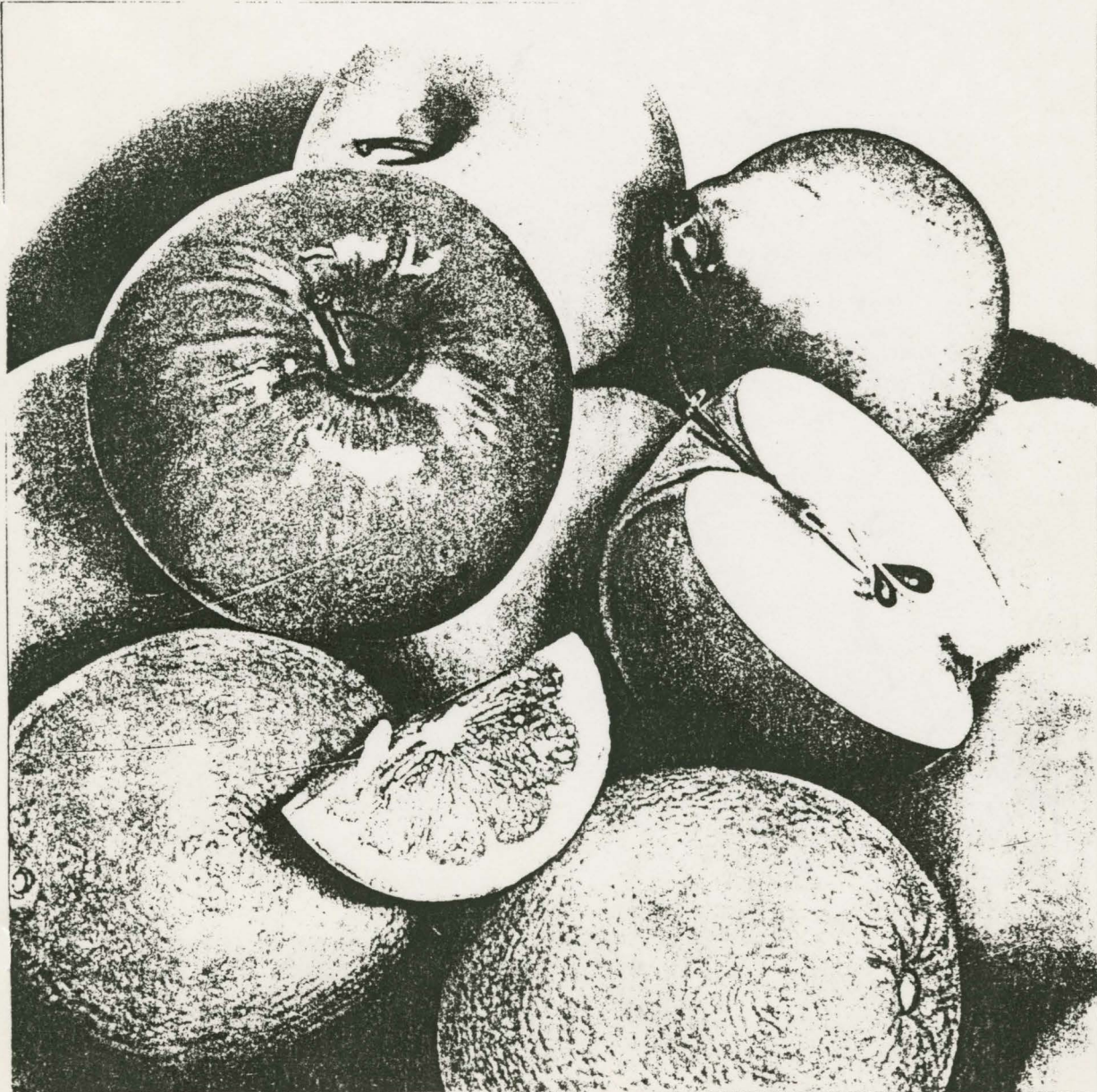


13. Beverly Pepper,
sculpture.

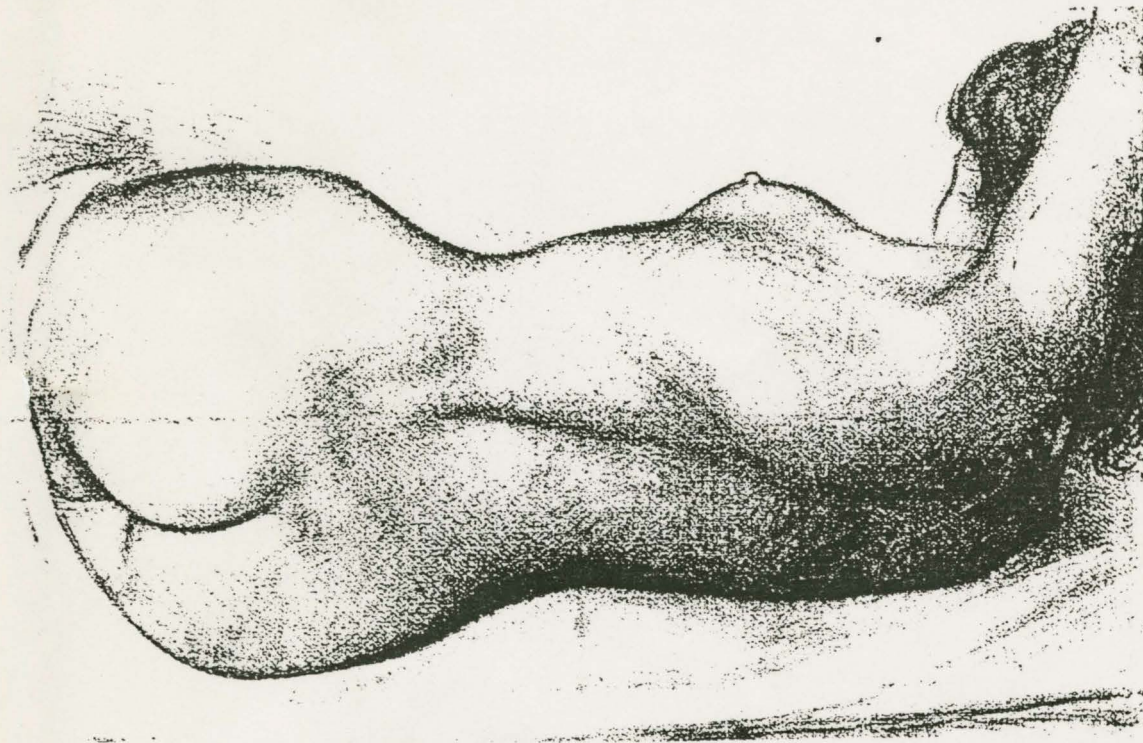
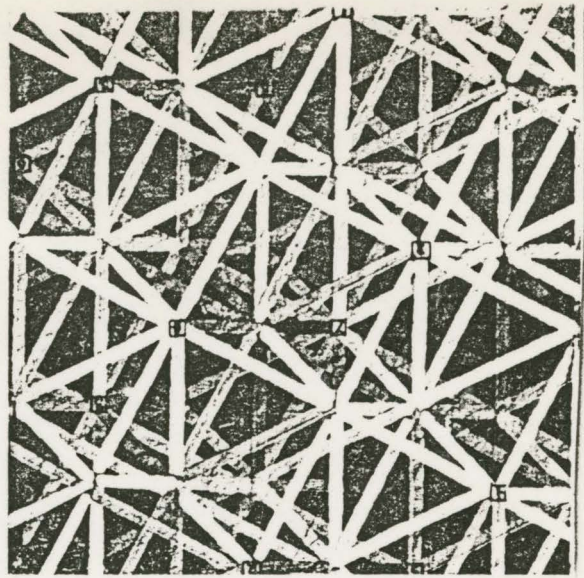
14. Peter and Ritzi Jacobi: Romanica, paper and goat's hair.



15. Audrey Flack, oil on canvas.



16. Clark Richert, detail
from: Quark Theory,
acrylic on canvas.



17. Aristide Maillol:
Reclining Nude.

18. J. H. Dannecker:
Sappho.

