

THESIS

RECENT PRINTS:  
LANDSCAPE AND STILL-LIFE

Submitted by  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under our supervision by Karin E. Stack entitled "Recent Prints: Landscape and Still-Life" be accepted as fulfilling in part requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Committee on Graduate Work

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Adviser

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Department Head

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### RECENT PRINTS: LANDSCAPE AND STILL-LIFE

My investigations of the landscape are tied to observation but equally informed by memory and imagination. I am fascinated by creating light, space, and illusion, however, these interests are countered by my interest in formal qualities. I hope to achieve psychological impact and expressive effect while exploring isolation, emptiness, and disquietude in the landscape.

I am attracted to the intaglio medium because of the richness of the resulting images as well as to the process itself. Initially, I work from observation, then generalize, edit and invent.

I also explore still-life subjects using lithography in which I investigate compressed space and abstract shapes. I sometimes include ambiguously scaled houses within the still-life to evoke architectural space and present a question or tension.

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I approach printmaking as a response to the visual world. Regardless of subject, the visual concerns with which I am involved remain fairly constant; interest in light, space, composition, and mood pervade my work. I have decided to divide my thesis into two sections according to subject matter because the genesis of each series came about separately and because I work with two different print media when investigating these subjects. However, I hope the commonalities between my landscape etchings and still-life lithographs outweigh the differences between series.

LANDSCAPE

When I moved to Colorado from New York state to begin graduate school, I found myself in an unfamiliar landscape. The plains of eastern Colorado and the front range bear little resemblance to the enclosed northeastern suburbs of trees and hedges where I grew up—the subject with which I’d been primarily involved for several years. My commute from Denver to Fort Collins determined my relationship to the landscape, an experience of city, highways, overpasses, and open spaces. I made prints, mostly etchings, based on the landscape, but I felt very out of place and was forced to seek out subject matter. While the landscape around me made its inevitable appearance in my images, I also looked for sites

that bore a physical resemblance to the landscape I knew best (trees, suburbs, confined spaces) and a connection to my personal past (fig.s 1-8).

I came to realize the significance of memory in my work. I am simultaneously attached to and divorced from the visual world, the “real” world. I use a combination of realism and imagination in creating my images. My work is both tied to the visual world as I experience it and equally wedded to my interior world and remembrances. Though fairly illusionistic, my images are not specific; they are not portraits of a location. Instead, I hope to convey a feeling of a place, a memory of a place. These are nowhere/anywhere ambiguous landscapes, a character built from atmosphere, indeterminacy and moody light.

I am fascinated with creating light, space, and volume. My work is firmly within the academic tradition, the classical tradition of optical realism and illusionism. My fascination with creating a renaissance window and “holing through” the picture plane, however, is combined with and contradicted by my interest in abstraction and attention to the formal characteristics of my images. These concerns include surface and texture, markings, handling of materials, and, most importantly, cropping and composing of shapes. I hope to create a dynamic tension between abstract shapes and three-dimensional space in my prints.

I make decisions based on both illusionistic and formal qualities, and I am not satisfied with an image until both sets of demands are satisfied. I am frequently reminded that “A picture, before being a war-horse, a nude woman, or some sort of anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order” (Maurice Denis). While this late 19th century formalist idea reflects a dismissal of subject, I hope to combine subject matter and illusion with an ordered arrangement of shapes/colors.

While both realism and formalism determine many of my decisions, my images are also subject driven. My interest is the built landscape, the intersection between the natural and human. Several themes reappear in my landscape prints: isolation within a community, the

emptiness of cities and suburbs, the disquiet and unease that I feel in the places I work from, and the psychological effect and expressive power of architecture.

To achieve psychological impact and expressiveness I exploit my fascination with light and shadow. The blank and familiar landscape becomes evocative and mysterious in low light situations. Intaglio processes appeal to me due to the range of value and the richness of black inherent in the medium.

I am also drawn to etching and intaglio because of the process itself. The intaglio process demands working on a metal plate, in reverse, blind, never knowing quite what the print will look like until it is pulled. This separation from the finished product demands that decisions and changes to the plate be made in a conscious, direct, and committed fashion. Also, since the product cannot always be controlled, many surprises and accidents occur in the process. I like to see this as a collaboration with the medium itself. Technical processes are possibilities, not impediments, to image-making.

I almost always use a visual reference as the catalyst for an image. I begin from observation, either directly onto the plate, from thumbnail sketches, or from drawings made on site. However, rather than accept the visual world as the final arbiter for decisions in the work, I discard my initial referent fairly early and turn to the internal demands of my image. I edit, generalize, combine, move, exaggerate, and synthesize from different sources of information. I use memory and imagination to dictate these decisions.

In 1997 I explored working from memory alone, without using observation. I call this sub-series "Imaginary" and found that it quickly led to a dead-end. I began repeating myself almost immediately and realized the resulting images were too generalized and that my ability to imagine spaces was fairly limited. This reaffirmed my need for a visual referent. It also affirmed my need for a connection to past and to home. I have increasingly returned to sketches and snapshots of the northeast as source material for my work.

I intentionally create enigmatic, ambiguous places in my etchings. I hope that my prints evoke different interpretations and a variety of questions in my viewers. Just as I'm not interested in portraying a specific place, I don't intend to orchestrate a specific psychological response in my viewers. Instead, I hope to prompt personal reactions, a variety of responses according to individual memories, histories and psychologies. The divergent reactions I receive to my landscapes, from "peaceful" to "threatening," encourages me.

## STILL LIFE

I became attracted to lithography because of the drawing involvement inherent in the medium. I began working directly onto the stone from observation with few if any preliminary studies. I find my still life subjects around my house or on my studio desk. Part of my initial interest is in investigating the materials and exploring the direct and immediate mark-making possible with rubbing crayons and scraping.

I began using simple volumes such as boxes in these still-lives and noticed the connection with buildings. I added little houses to evoke an architectural or landscape space in conjunction with the still life space and played with this ambiguity of scale. I also explored placing houses near precipitous edges or on unstable surfaces, investigating the psychological effects of these relationships (fig.s 9-14).

One of my interests in my still life series is the flattening of space and the tipping up of the picture plane. In these works, as in my landscape prints, a tension between clarity and ambiguity exists. Spatial shifts and breakdowns play against the stable description of space. Perspectival systems coexist with subtle inversions or rejections of these systems.

There are, of course, several levels at which my still life series can be read. In a sense, my subject has come full circle from my initial landscape investigations as I continue to explore similar themes of home, place, and how I am situated in the world.

## INFLUENCES

To give credit where credit is due, I am indebted to many artists who inspire and inform my work.

I am influenced by the work of Edward Hopper, particularly his etchings of the everyday landscape at night (fig. 15). My work bears similarities to his in attention to silence, emptiness, and loneliness of the American landscape. Additionally, my work is informed by his interest in pictorial structure, systems of diagonals and verticals which organize the abstract shapes in each image, as well as organizations of value.

I am influenced by many artists who work with this expressive power of architecture. Piranesi's series of invented fantastical prison interiors (*carceri*) create a strong psychological effect almost solely by the use of heavy, looming architecture and a simultaneously confining yet limitless space (fig. 16).

Wayne Thiebaud and David Hockney explore the vernacular, local, built landscape of northern and southern California, respectively, in both paintings and prints. Each edits and exaggerates from their chosen landscape in order to infuse their personal visions and sense of place (fig.s 17-18). Their work informs my investigations of the urban and suburban landscape.

I am also influenced by the landscape investigations of April Gornik, who creates evocative invented places. Her landscapes have a power and psychological impact, often majesty and grandeur combined with uneasiness and a sense that recently something has gone wrong (fig. 19). I value the ambiguity in her depictions.

From Rembrandt I learn again and again that metal is malleable. It is possible to work back and forth, adding and removing parts of the image. The medium allows more flexibility than is immediately apparent. The education that comes from looking at states of Rembrandt prints proves that enormous changes are possible. Additionally, his sense of the dark, moody landscape influences my related world view (fig. 20).



I am also influenced by the prints of Jim Dine, who uses a similarly free and exploratory approach to the medium or media. He uses whatever tools are available in an experimental manner, and his prints are subsequently loose, fresh, and rich with textures and markings (fig. 21).

I look to Richard Diebenkorn as my main influence in regard to abstraction and formal concerns. In his still life and figurative series, he explores the abstract arrangement of shapes while simultaneously depicting fairly realistic subject matter (fig. 22). He weds his interest in texture and surface to an illusion of three-dimensional space.

Alice Aycock's work from the 1970s is a significant if unlikely influence on my work. I have included a reproduction of one of her works which demands explanation (fig. 23). Aycock creates environmental sculpture, mostly interior spaces, including tunnels and towers. Her work evokes feelings of entrapment, claustrophobia, fear, or at the very least discomfort. I am influenced by this emotional and visceral response in the viewer or participant. I am also influenced by her use of personal memory. She taps the reservoir of her own experience to create structures with resonance for others. When writing about or describing the sources of her work, Aycock lists her grandparent's basement or a shed where she had a certain experience. I similarly hope to use my personal memories and experience as the source for my work.

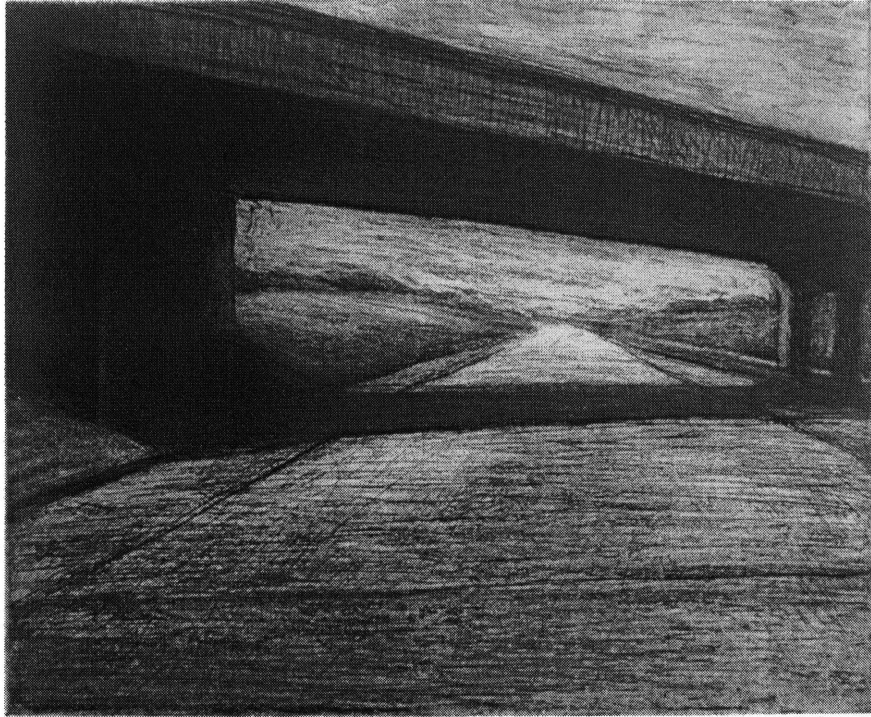


Fig. 1, Karin Stack, Bridge, Route 88, 1995, etching, 10 x 12".

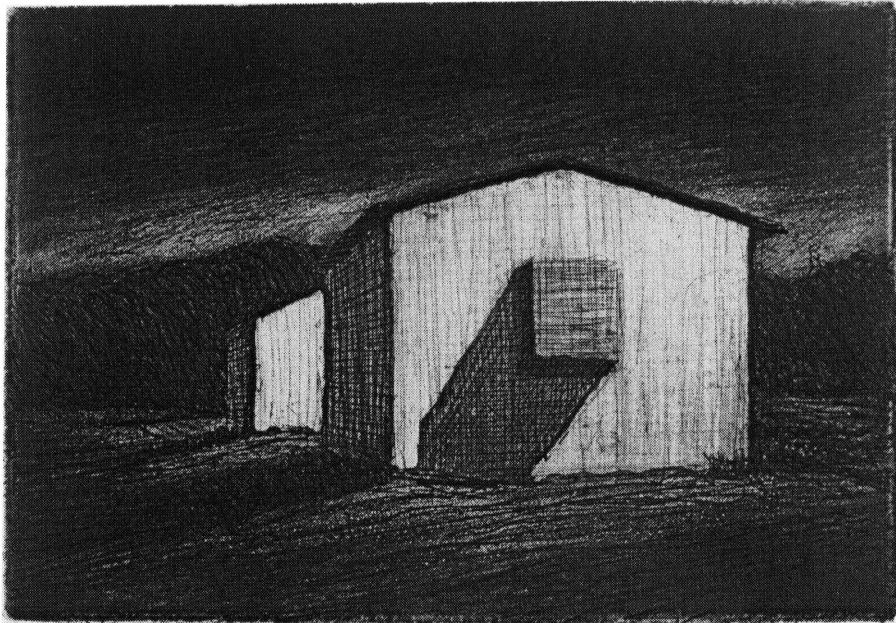


Fig. 2, Karin Stack, Sheds, 1995, etching, 3 x 4-1/2".

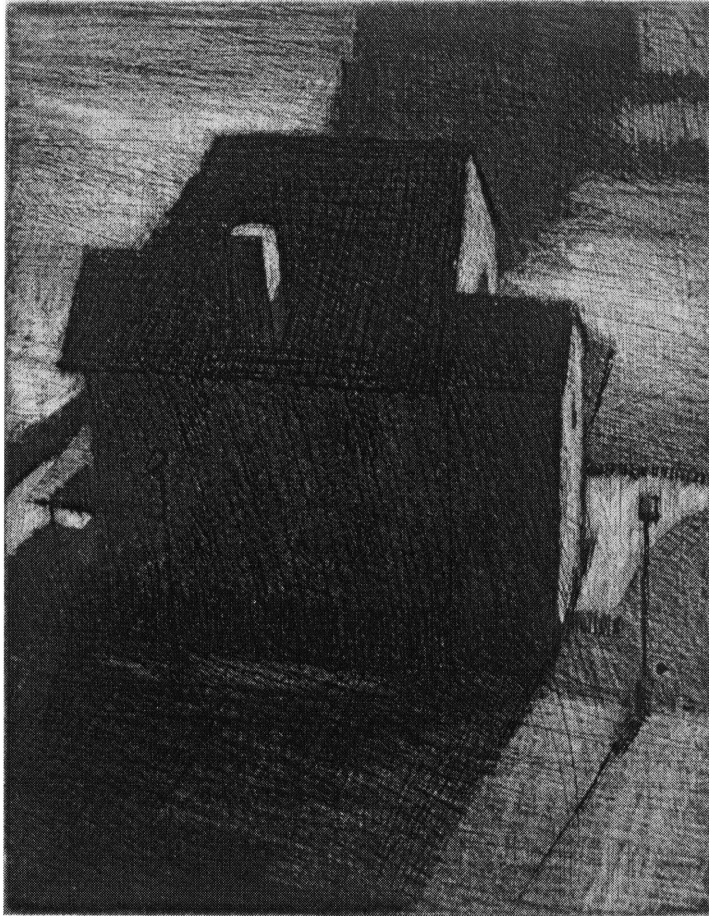


Fig. 3, Karin Stack, House from Above, 1996, etching, 7-3/4 x 6".

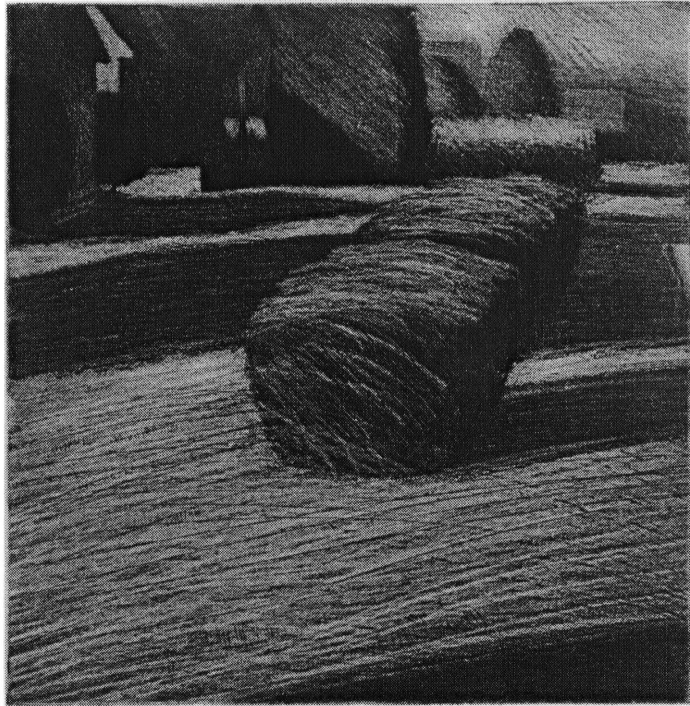


Fig. 4, Karin Stack, Wolff Road Park, 1996, etching, 10 x 10".

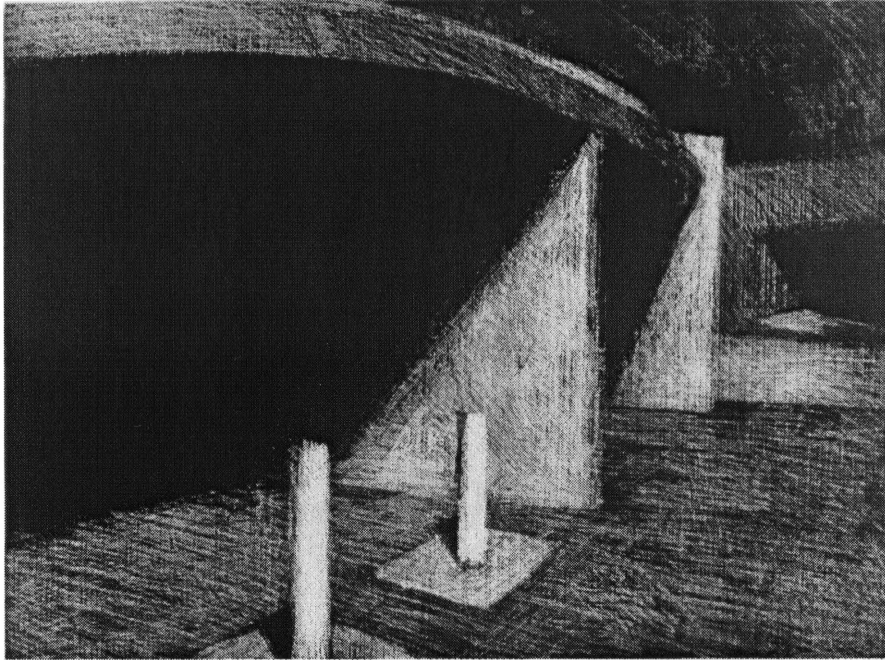


Fig. 5, Karin Stack, Bridge with Bollards, 1996, etching, 18 x 24”.

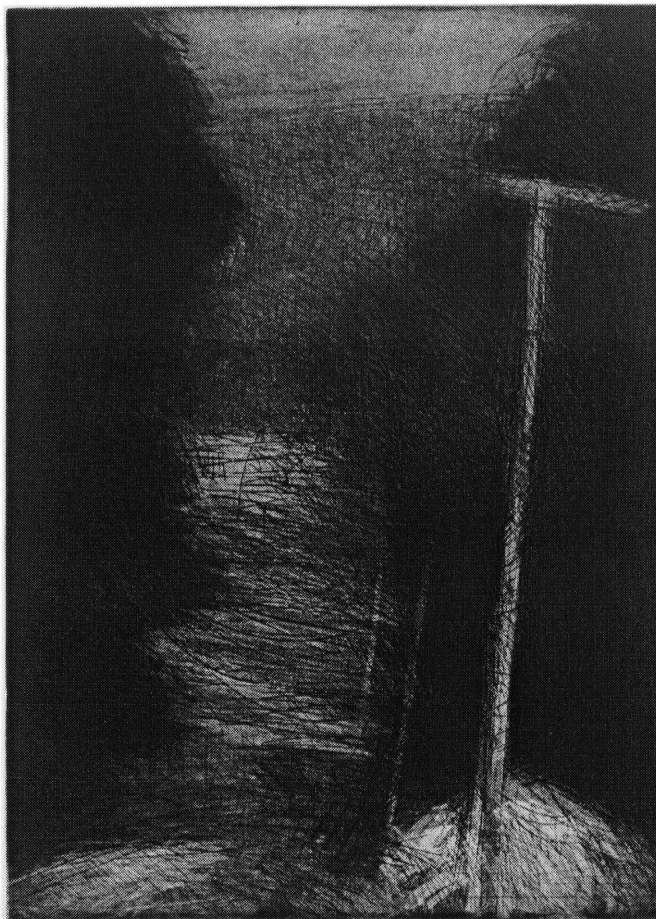


Fig. 6, Karin Stack, Telephone Pole, 1996, etching, 24 x 17".

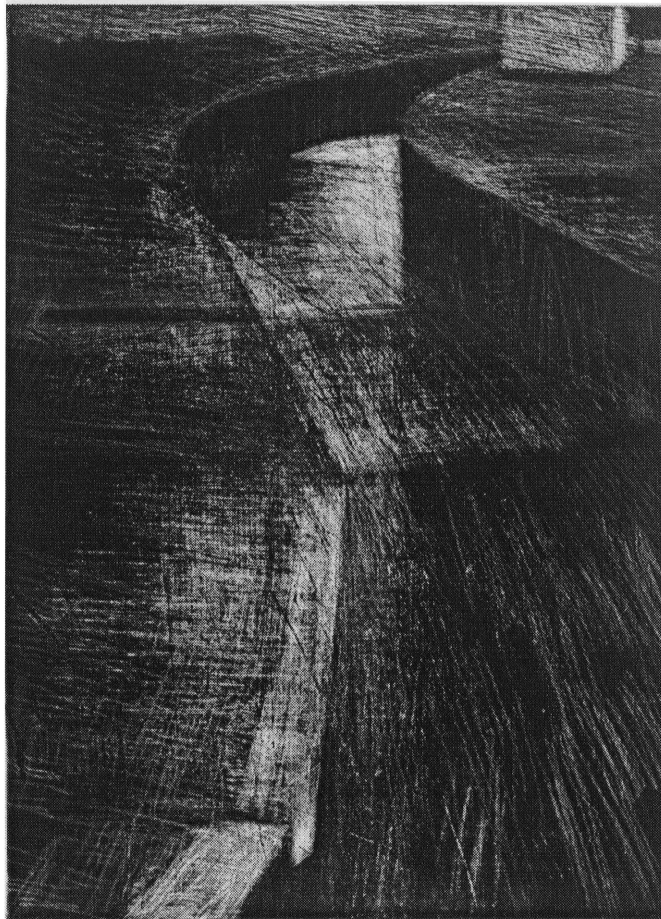


Fig. 7, Karin Stack, Waterway, 1996, etching, 20-1/2 x 28".





Fig. 8, Karin Stack, Lake Road, 1998, etching, 11-1/2 x 9".

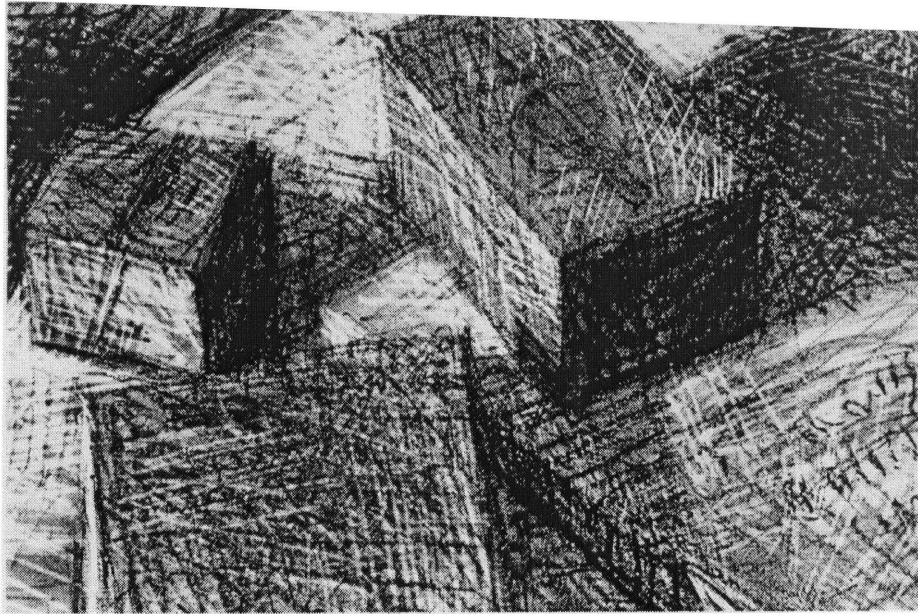


Fig. 9, Karin Stack, Red Boxes, 1996, lithograph, 8-1/2 x 12-1/2".



Fig. 10, Karin Stack, Coffee Cup, 1997, lithograph, 21 x 15-1/2".

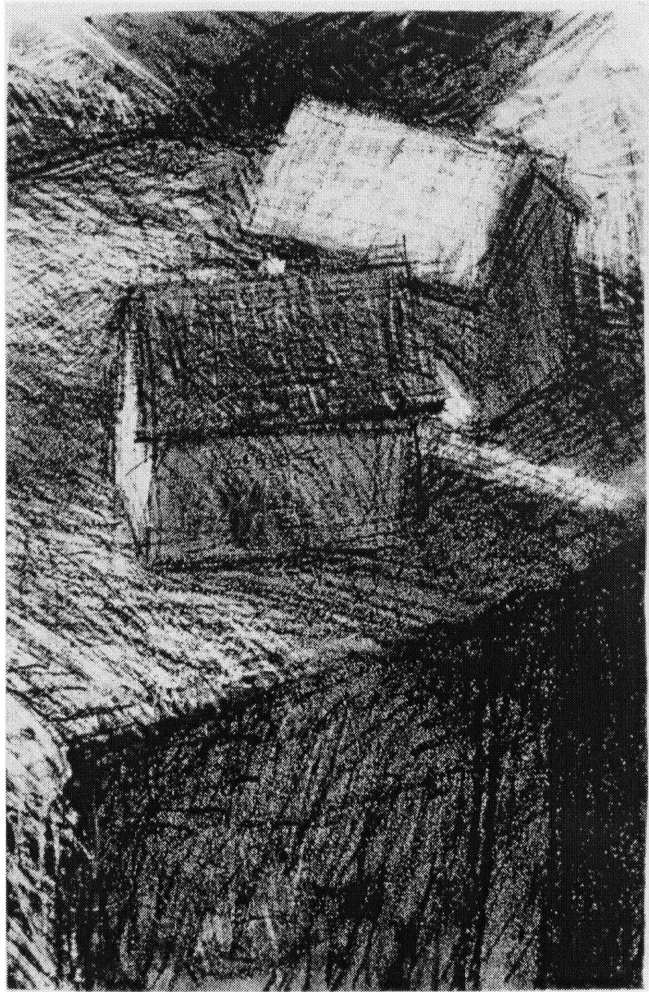


Fig. 11, Karin Stack, Houses on Cliff, 1997, lithograph, 12 x 7-3/4".

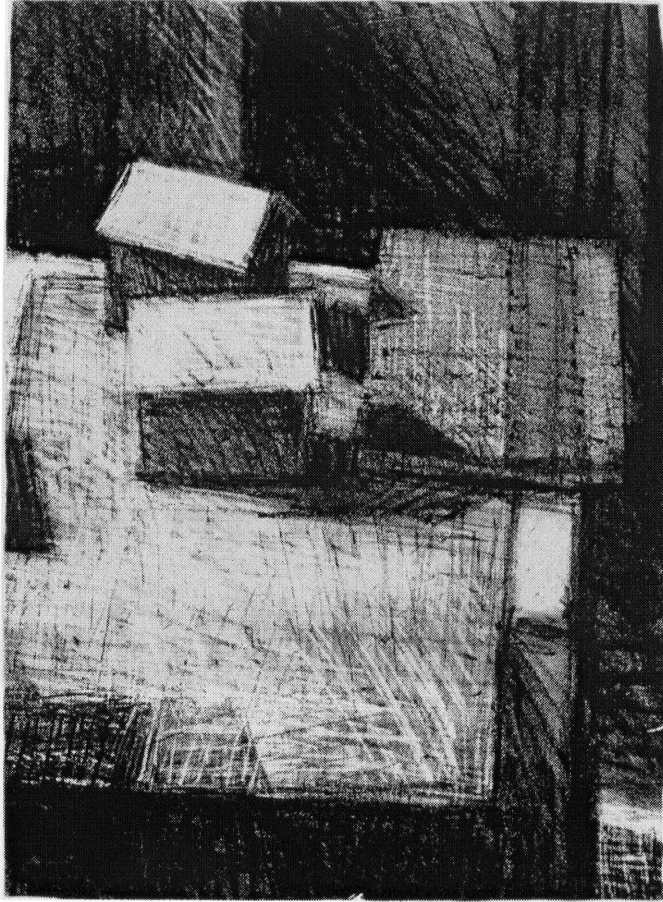


Fig. 12, Karin Stack, Right Angle, 1997, lithograph, 14-1/2 x 11".

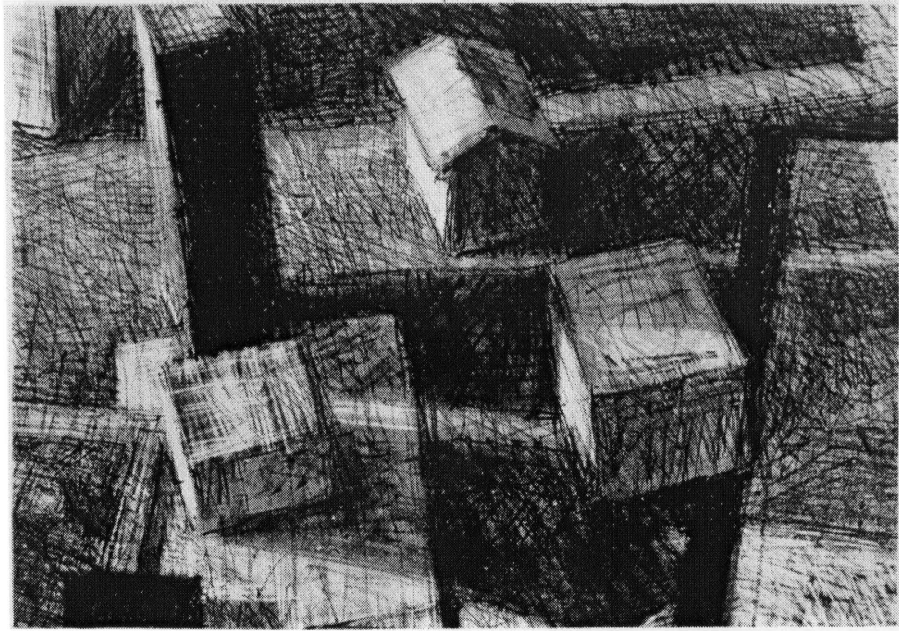


Fig. 13, Karin Stack, Black Tower, 1997, lithograph, 15 x 21-1/2"

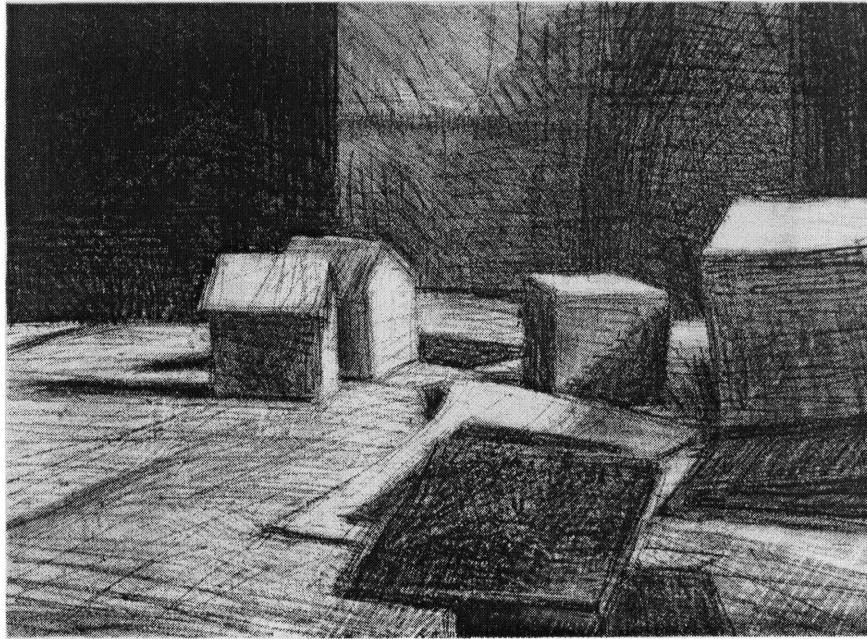


Fig. 14, Karin Stack, Zig Zag, 1998, lithograph, 15 x 20".

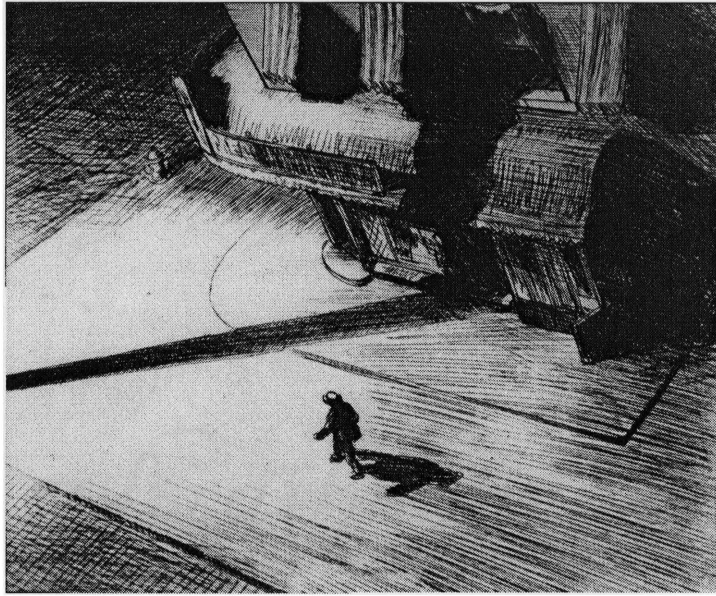


Fig. 15, Edward Hopper, Night Shadows, 1921, etching.



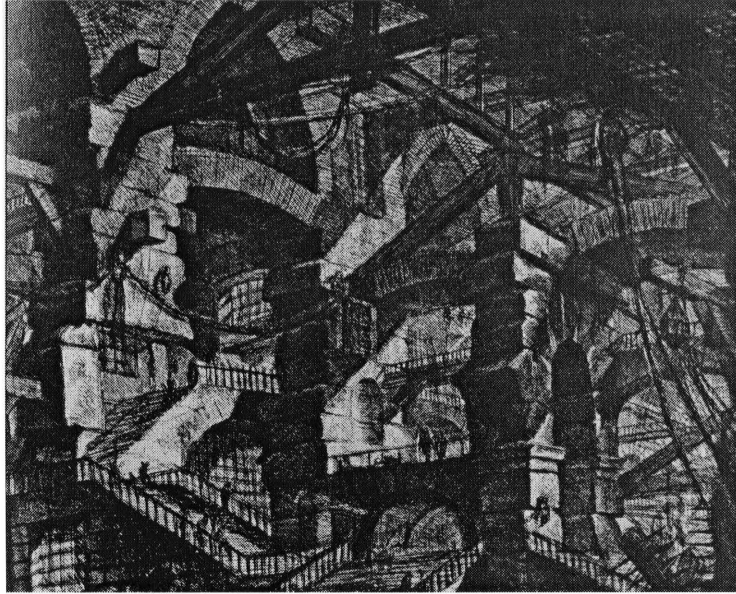


Fig. 16, G. Piranesi, Carceri XIV, circa 1750, etching.

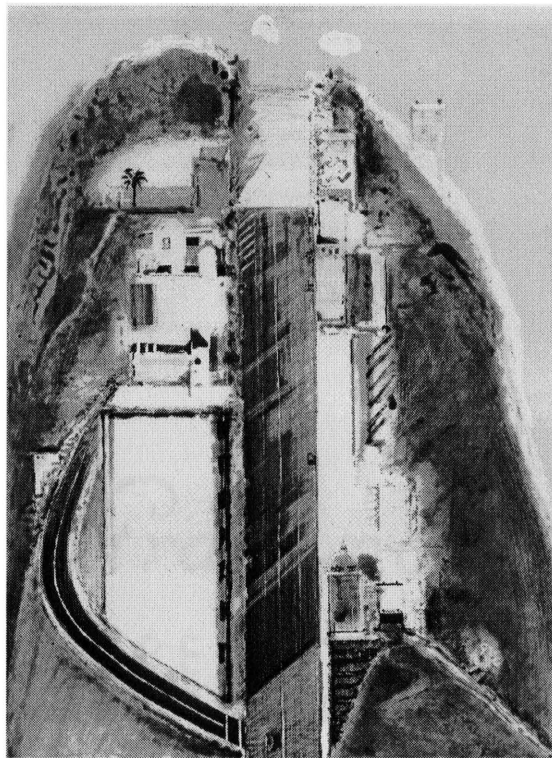


Fig. 17, Wayne Thiebaud, Steep Street, 1991, color spitbite aquatint and drypoint.

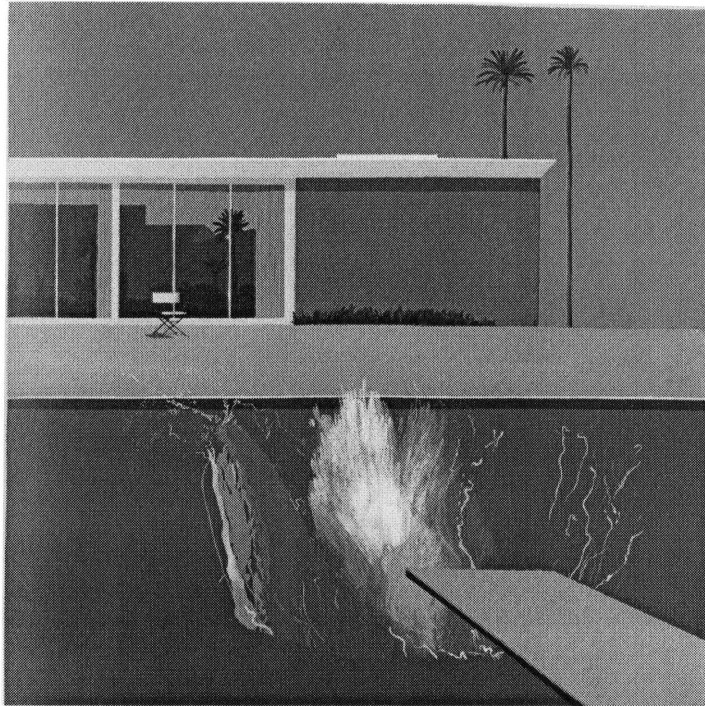


Fig. 18, David Hockney, A Bigger Splash, 1967, acrylic on canvas.



Fig. 19, April Gornik, Divided Light, 1988, oil on canvas.

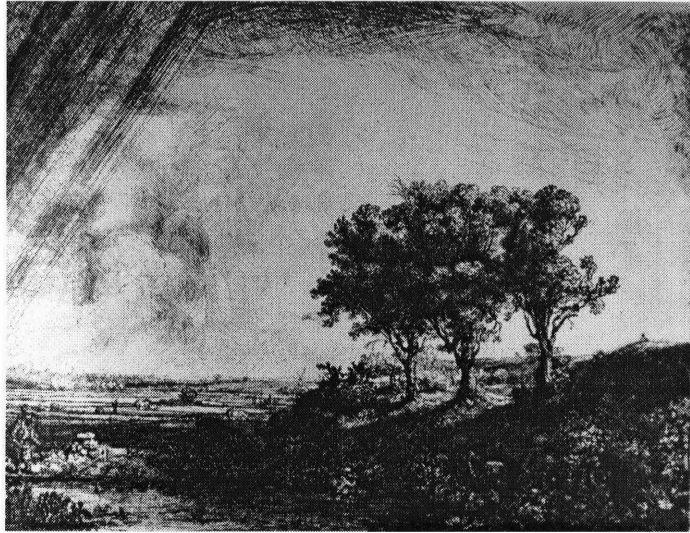


Fig. 20, Rembrandt van Rijn, Three Trees, 1643, etching.



Fig. 21, Jim Dine, The Brown Coat, 1977, etching with soft ground, aquatint, drypoint, and electric tools from two plates.

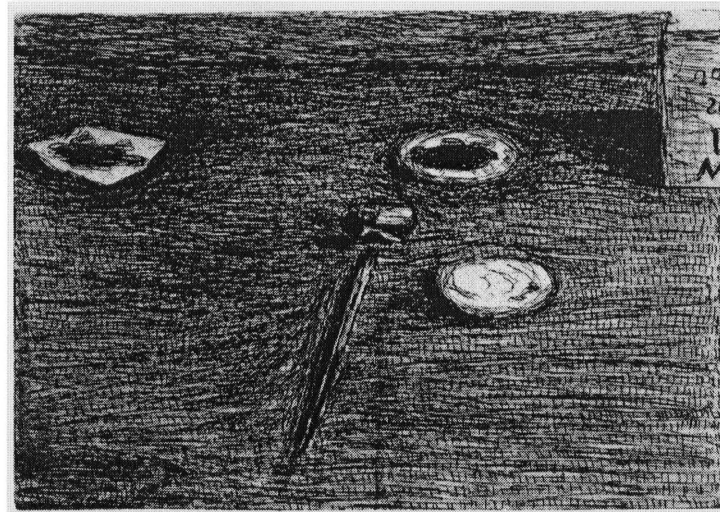


Fig. 22, Richard Diebenkorn, Composition with Pencil and Letters in Reverse, 1965, etching.

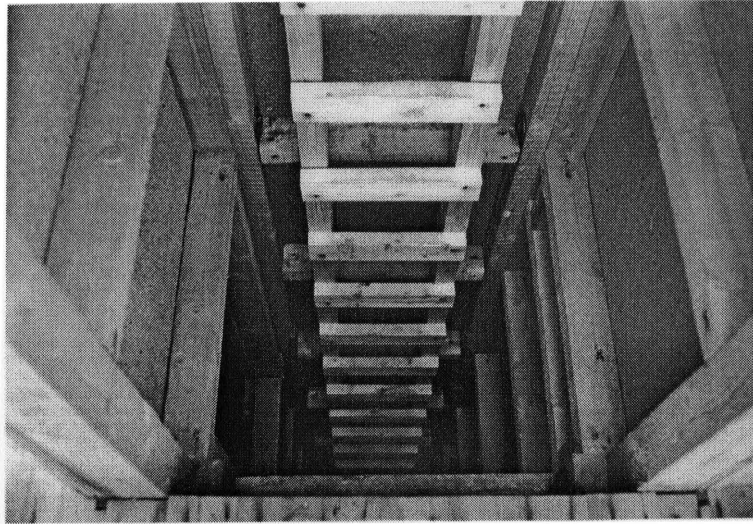


Fig. 23, Alice Aycock, Project Entitled “Beginnings of a Complex....”  
1977, installation for Dokumenta, Kassel, Germany, wood and concrete.