

S T I T C H

C R E I G H T O N M I C H A E L

S T I T C H

Works by Creighton Michael 1976-2000

FEBRUARY 2 - MARCH 16, 2001

FREEDMAN GALLERY

Albright College
Center for the Arts
Reading, Pennsylvania

Curated by Christopher Youngs



On the reverse:

Innuenedo (800), 2000
60 x 60 inches
oil on canvas

Freedman Gallery, Albright College
13th and Bern Streets
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Gallery Hours:
Tuesday: 12 - 8 p.m.
Wednesday - Friday: 12 - 6 p.m.
Saturday - Sunday: 12 - 4 p.m.

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CREIGHTON MICHAEL: STITCH

BY CHRISTOPHER YOUNGS

A stitch alternately reveals and conceals its existence. It is a thread both lying on the surface and dwelling beneath. For a quarter of a century, much of Creighton Michael's work has both literally and metaphorically employed the stitch. Like the stitch itself, these works surface with a common language but varied deliveries. This collection reads like an anthology of short stories, episodes, with differing narrative voices. What links the sequences together is a mark—the stitch as a part of a larger pattern, weaving together art and life over a period of time.

In 1974, Creighton Michael suffered a serious automobile accident. He has spoken of this event as having had a profound effect on his life and his art. At first there was probably only darkness, pitch black. Then, a beautiful aura of light, as if life itself was filtered through eyelids, veins and vessels. The darkness gradually evaporated into pools of flickering pinks and reds. The blackness was slowly displaced with an awakening, a recreation of the pulse, the flow of life. His eyes were seeing, sensing: a hand, a needle, a thread, a pulling of scalp tissue together. Then, his eyes closed, again, turning inside, cloaked, like a spy, deciphering an abundantly complex mystery, a terrible beauty.

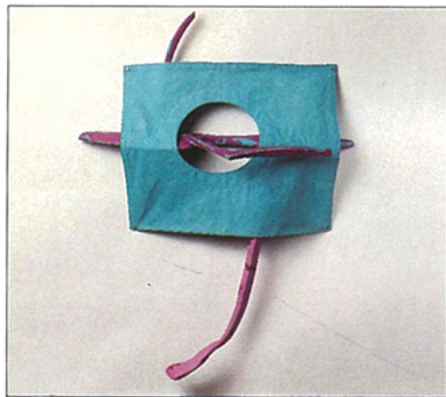
The stitch lies visibly on the surface, but the stitch also has another life, hidden below the skin. There is an invisible underbelly to these works, concealed by the artist's gestation, yet ironically revealed by tracing his processes over time—by stitching together layers of thought and interstices in time to create a consolidation of sorts. These artworks are not overly complicated on an intellectual basis. Their thoughtlines are more intuitive than theoretical. They are more about creating memories than about forcing issues—the difference between tracing the flight of a butterfly and categorizing a specimen.

For Creighton Michael, the stitch became a universal element that transcended traditional distinctions about sculpture, drawing, and painting. The varying mediums become unified, without dimensional confines. The *Melmoth* drawings from 1976 introduced a series of incremental markings that address the paper surface in a sculptural mode. The small marks are conceived in much the same way a sculptor might chisel away at a block of marble or wood. They are not like etchings; they are about creating form—not merely two-dimensional considerations. As with his later drawings, the image developed fairly organically without a totally preconceived notion; and, there is a flux back and forth from figuration to abstraction.

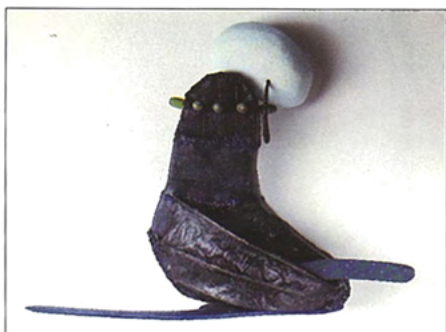
The process of considering art may be a disconcerting blend of beauty and disorientation, such as the artist regaining consciousness on an operating table. Reading back through these artworks chronologically is like tracing a process of awakening. The earliest works in this exhibition, *Orgma Fem* and *Orgma II* from 1976, are themselves like going through layers of materials with the mind tracing, reconstructing, a sense of the overall pattern of a material and spiritual existence. What appears to be obvious in one part is questioned by the imposition of a transparent overlay and becomes instead a transitory belief. The marking of stitches



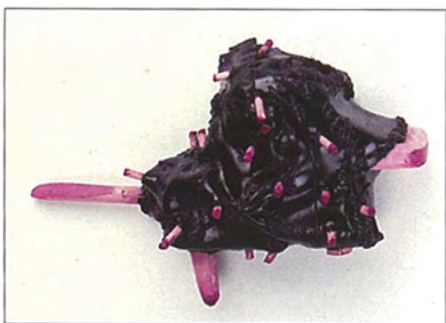
ORGMA II, 1976



MONKEY TAILS (4), 1980



PUNCH, 1981



TCHATCHAKE, 1980

emerges and submerges. From this point forward, Creighton Michael's work reflects a fascination with concealment, the almost invisible underpinnings of the stitch.

This exploration into the realm of the hidden aspects of reality is not unlike the forays of Lee Bontecou and Yves Tanguy from the real into the surreal world. Creighton has spoken of these two artists as important influences. Bontecou's constructions echo a sense of primitive power and mystery and Tanguy's drawings and canvases transcribe another reality, the unreal world. In this sense, a work of art could address another level of existence, both by creating its own world as a perceptual end, and by immersing the artist in the process of that world evolving.

This concept of the process of creativity as an all-encompassing episode of work is central to Creighton Michael. As he says: "The work comes out of doing."¹ From the early simple stitched surfaces to the later complex incremental markings, seeing is also doing, imaginatively retracing, following a series of acts over a span of time. Creighton speaks of his notion of making the image process driven—that his initial intents are often obscure. There are months of looking and calculating another world; however, much of his sense of art is learned vicariously imparted by coincidental experience and a process of play.² Michael constructs a dialogue within himself that is gradually transferred to the material world, replicating experiences, and may be perceived as a sort of Zen revelation.

The *Monkey Tails* from 1980 and 1981 recall an ongoing interest in overlays, and play, in concealing underlying structures while exposing the majority of the "storyline." Somewhat ironically, harkening back to his accident, the *Monkey Tails* are constructed from surgical drapes—more hidden references. Like a surrealist monkey flirting in a tree, they are an absurd play of light, color, structure and space. Yet, even in these simple early forms, we are drawn behind, beneath the surface of an overlying material, imagining an invisible inner space. From the outset, these objects are not merely static images: they are perverse provocateurs, propagandizing the hidden merits of another existence.

Other works also created in 1981 are the miniature "floating worlds" or dream worlds of *Punch* and *Tchatchake*. In this case, stitching and piercing of an underlying structure are evident. Unlike the *Monkey Tails*, they are more self-contained, creating their own sculptural space more so than exploring out into space. They are nature's tent caterpillars rather than monkeys. This act of turning back into a sense of inner space becomes evident with the evolution of works in 1982 such as *Ovel (2)*. In this work, the lyrical sculptural elements are stripped bare. Instead, the flow of the stitch takes on an internalized dialogue alternating between lyrical and bestial. Although it is simplified, the exterior surface is hardly refined. It is crudely constructed of strips of rubber sewn together over an armature, suggesting an African tribal shield or mask—the creation of concealment. It is as if a sculptural object has taken on an ironic presence, the stitched surface actually hiding the substance of the work, stripping its identity—as if a glove has been turned inside out and displayed as a surreal object.

In his activity, there have been frequent connections between drawing and sculpture. Beyond the constructivist concept of drawing in space, Creighton simply considers sculpture as drawing. The stitches on works, such as *Ovel (2)*, convey a linear sense of drawing and the armatures themselves are of a linear nature. A parallel body of sculpture from 1985 to 1995 stripped away the stitched surfaces to reveal the linear constructs. As sculpture was considered drawings, sequences of linear markings propelled drawing into a sculptural state. The nature of the stitch is that it is simultaneously addressing interior and exterior space. Its topology is never simply on the surface. In this regard, two-dimensional works inevitably delve into three-dimension space; and, drawing and painting may assume a sculptural aura.

An interest in recycling abandoned artifacts began flirting with another constructivist notion, "the culture of materials". But Michael's components were hardly precious. The materials employed in works of this era include old inner tubes and the nylon "skins" of umbrellas found littering New York City after a rainstorm. Both are discarded elements, the tube's form having contained nothing but air and having been hidden under a tire, and the latter having provided shelter—until being literally blown inside out. These materials are from surfaces that held forms together, that gave shape and meaning to an object. Now, lacking identity, they are torn ruptured surfaces whose only connecting link is the mending stitch.

It is at this stage that Michael's work really begins to court mystery. The objects assume an almost ritual aura, suggesting that, in addition to inner space, there is also another level of invisibility at work. Jonathon Swift, in his *Miscellanies* in 1726 said that: "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible." Perception then becomes much more than what meets the eye. It is a play of implications on intuitions—partial hints of a greater whole.

A work such as *Widow (6)* in 1982 consists of incredibly light substructures covered with nylon umbrella "skins" and multiple layers of translucent medium. Their apparent mass contradicts their lyrical shape. They are floating off the wall, and they assume a transitory presence, apparently escaping the confines of gravity. *Traveler (6)* from 1984 presents an even more dynamic contradiction, with the metal layers on the outer most limits of the work creating a quandary of balance and mass. The surfaces of these works almost resemble a metallic patina, with as many as ten layers of charcoal, graphite, paint and metal filings.

A studied evaluation yields some understanding of how fragile and ethereal the true nature of these objects is. They may appear to have sprung with gossamer wings from the cocoon-like enclosures of works such as *Ovel (2)*. But, what is their true nature—their being? Rather than being sculptures occupying space, they are gestures into space. It is this temporal perception of these artworks that lends them an aura of both a ritualistic guise and a life beyond the visible. They are not similar to a display of frozen artifacts. They are closer to reflecting the activity of the tribal dance itself than to acting as the physical souvenirs of an event.



OVEL (2), 1982



WIDOW (6), 1982

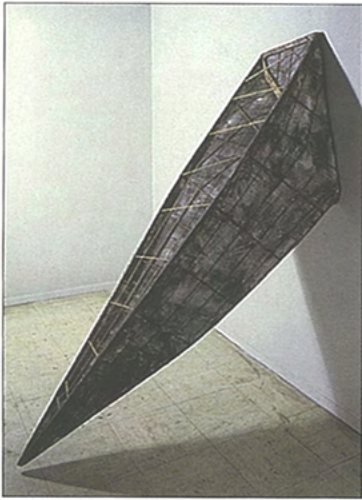


TRAVELER (6), 1984



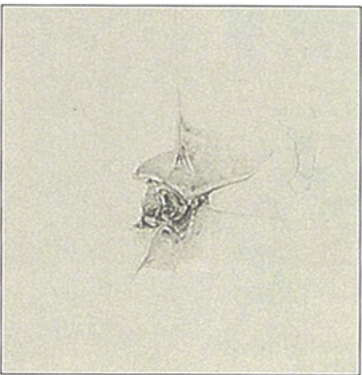
STUDY FOR SPIRIT OF SAINT LOUIS PART 2, 1985

The 1985 installation of seven small works *Study for the Spirit of Saint Louis Part 2* created a linear text of an amalgamation of the individual components encapsulated in Creighton Michael's thinking. It is a small anthology, from lyrical, to self-contained, to gravity defying. It is also, by its very title, about travelling into difficult and challenging territories—flying solo into the dead of the night. It is no accident that these works begin to take on structural devices akin to model airplanes such as in *Blind Horn (4)*. In a sense, the gestural aspect of these works was like taking off on a voyage into space. In *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery recounts an imagined dialogue: "What is that object? This not an object. It flies. It is an airplane." These sculptures are not objects. Their more abstract function brings meaning to the figure of their being: They are elevated to become art.



BLIND HORN (4), 1985

The year 1987 marks a time when Michael traveled to Europe where he was impressed by the aged architectural walls which suggested a combination of sculptural form, drawing, painting, and time. This same observation was to later influence his *Haiku* series. In the interim, with this sense of a coalescence of mediums, there was a transition with drawings growing out of sculptural concerns—from drawing in space to sculpting in two-dimensions. The works on paper that evolved at this time were small and intricate, such as *Shell*. Although on paper, they delved into form to become forms themselves. Not merely to represent form, but to travel into the realm of three-dimensional space. Their intimate incremental markings again recall the stitch; and, their subtle complexities suggest an enormous expanse of time inherent in their making. The creation of *Memoir* spans from 1987 to 1990.



PUPA, 1987
(DETAIL)

Creighton's works are simultaneously studies of the exterior surface of art and the internal psychological constructs of the artist. Upon first investigation, they are at once elegant and enticing, whereas, upon closer examination, they often exude a fundamental crudeness. It is as if we are entering a sophisticated carnival of delights, only to be side tracked into a sideshow of carney tents—as Aphrodite gradually assumes a freakish form.

A small drawing, such as *Pupa*, traces an inward journey to an infinitesimally tiny world. The fleeting existence of figurative references flicker across vaporous layers. These drawings are subtle tracings of mind trips into inner space. What may appear to be meticulous tracks on a surface lead the eye through a perceptual adventure—akin to travelling through a nebula. Abstract elements take on figurative identities and

an apparent microscopic view becomes a glimpse of an infinite universe. The microcosms evolve into an epic scale. In *Memoir*, as our imagination enters the space, surreal worlds emerge of Bosch-like images. Yet, our mind poses the question: Are these glimpses of another existence real or imagined? This juxtaposition of the object and its spirit echoes Cennini's fascination with eliciting unseen things hidden in the shadow of natural ones.

Creighton Michael has an interest in religious philosophies, but his works are not religiously inspired. Rather, they elicit a spirit world. The very act of the artist immersed for days over a piece of paper suggest a trance-like state of process becoming obsession—being seduced by a creative ritual. Accordingly, these works, and the paintings that were to evolve, demand a dedicated response—a commitment of time. Otherwise they are just arbitrary marks, not studied renderings. Another dichotomy in Creighton's work is his fascination with automatism, the art of the accident. This interest coupled with a sense of the American tradition of Transcendentalism and organicism witnessed in the philosophies of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman led him to reflect in nature as a vessel of inspiration.

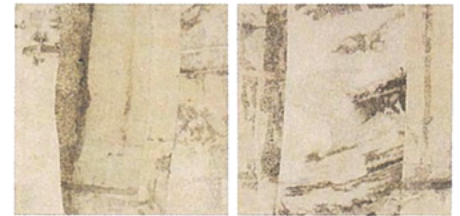
Michael's own background from a Southern religious upbringing filtered with the rural folklore of his native Tennessee would appear to be a blend of the strictures of minimalism with the coincidental flow of pantheism—sort of like Donald Judd trying to read the future in a tea leaf. Nevertheless, out of these contrasting perceptions, a new way of looking at things evolved. It could be compared to Robert Smithson's voyage from his early minimal structures to the remarkable *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson had an interest in aerial perspective—in mentally taking flight. Michael's drawings of small microcosms eventually led to reflecting on the surfaces of ponds, the layers of algae and the edge where water and land meet, into the more monumental scale of the sky and the earth. At the same time, these later works are not literal depictions of natural phenomenon. Rather, nature becomes a point of departure for a fantasy world to take flight. The result is imaginative interpretations of the natural and cultural landscape in relationship to where we are.

By 1995, Creighton Michael had reduced his visual vocabulary to the basic unit of the mark. In that same year, the stitch resurfaced in his *Dust* paintings that introduced color into the realm of drawing—again, blurring distinctions between various mediums. In his *Haiku* series of paintings, Michael edited his vocabulary in a relatively minimalist vein. As a result of his interest in stitches in time, he had become intrigued with ancient European walls, an underlying structure overlaid with the wear and tear of time—the stains of history. The evolution of the *Haiku* series begins with an organic and fundamentally accidental process. Sections of raw canvas soaked in water are placed outside on old stretcher crates so that they will take on natural rust stains and molds. The process of the development of this work suggests an unusual blending of nature and culture—unusual in that the fabrication yields a meditative aura rather than a clashing of opposites. The *Haiku* "paintings" assume the sort of translucency associated with some of the earlier constructions, but here it is less structured, more like an Eva Hesse combination of the intended integrated with the arbitrary.

This continuation of an interest in the exploration of the accidental is a fascination with the surrealist belief that the accident is a product of subconscious desire coupled with the agency of memory. In 1998, a



DUST (897), 1997



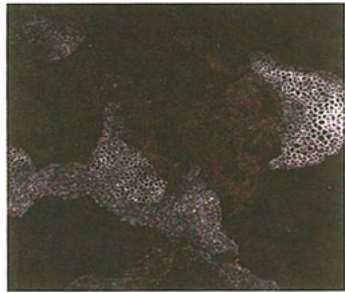
HAIKU (897), 1997



RHAPSODY (1498), 1998



NOTATION (498), 1998



VESTIGE (299), 1999



INNUENEDO (800), 2000

series of large drawings, such as *Rhapsody* (1498) and paintings such as *Notation* (498), present a sort of aerial perspective of a perceived landscape. Here there is a play between the apparently accidental incremental markings (the stitches) and the creation of textual patterns—order out of chaos, or the chaos of disorder:

The larger episodes of work are broken down into smaller stitches woven into an overall text. The markings are stitches of varying degrees, pulling the composition together and pushing it apart—like the action of a magnetic field on iron filings. The perceived landscape alternates between a confused state and a structured environment, but, it is never static. There is a compositional equivalency between many of these works and musical improvisation. They employ time, notations, rests, silences, and establish larger patterns from a myriad of movements. Form is born from the momentum of the markings.

Just as Creighton Michael's earlier pieces challenged the viewer to assume peculiar angles of view, these "aerial views" and "microscopic views" actually imply the act of looking down into or onto something. It is as if the earlier vehicles of art have become the vessels of art. The *Vestige* series in 1999 expands on the *Rhapsody* and *Notation* series by introducing more color in an apparently ever-expanding field—an expanse of vast magnitude into the cosmos. Then, a work like *Mesh* suddenly places us back at the edge of a pond, deciphering the translucent layers of algae, silt, water, and sand. It can also fluctuate into a glimpse of a microscopic world. These works are all the same human scale (sixty inches square), although even a basic perception of their size becomes elusive. At the edge of the pond, on the edge of consciousness, beneath the eyelids, there is also a cardiovascular pulsation of cells, internalizing an experience reminiscent of the operating table. The stitch fluctuates back and forth from the most intimate inner space to the vastness of the cosmos. It is this fluctuation itself that is the invisible component: the weightlessness that is also the substance.

In the *Innuendo* series from 2000, color continues to become a more dominant albeit subtle force. These works are built up from a series of semi-transparent undercoats that then serve as a cloud-like base for the textual markings of black and maroon colors. The earlier works juxtaposed stitches with varying lengths, widths and directions playing out a complex choreography. There is a shift here: an additional level of dialogue created between the tonal variations. The result is an increasing dance of depth—another level of confusion drawing us into an infinite world. It becomes like trying to decipher a text at twilight—a disquieting cycling from here and now, to what had been and back again. The unseen forces of nature, will and memory become manifest in our reconstructed state in a seamless stitch.

In these twenty years of work, the stitch has progressed from an early primitive state into a sophisticated yet simple beauty—a journey from modest beginnings to sublime heights. Viewed collectively, these works are not merely about our seeing. They are about our process of being.

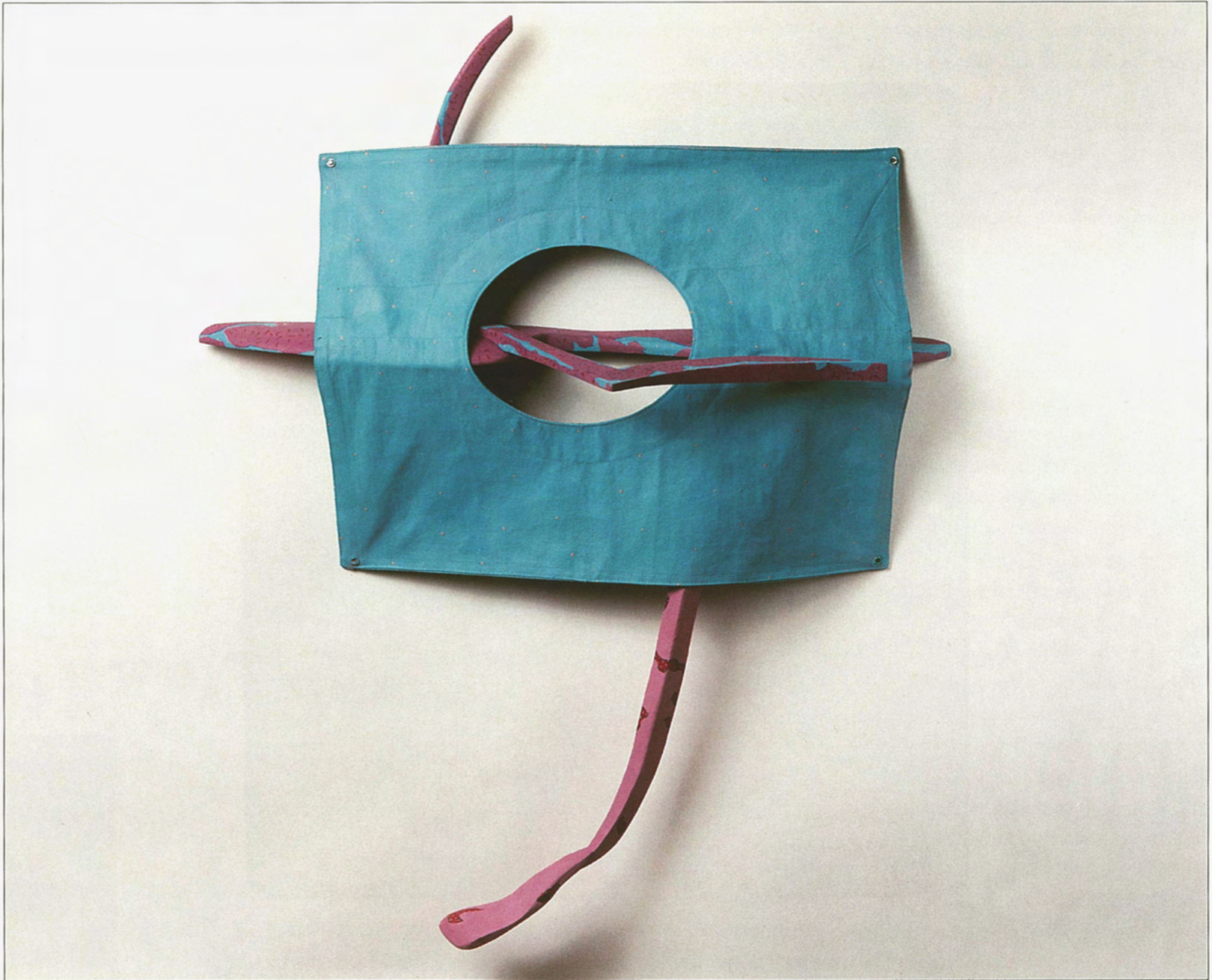
¹ Christopher Youngs, notes from a conversation with the artist, December 2000.

² Ibid.



ORGM A II

1976, 15 x 12 inches, silkscreen, hose, dog hair

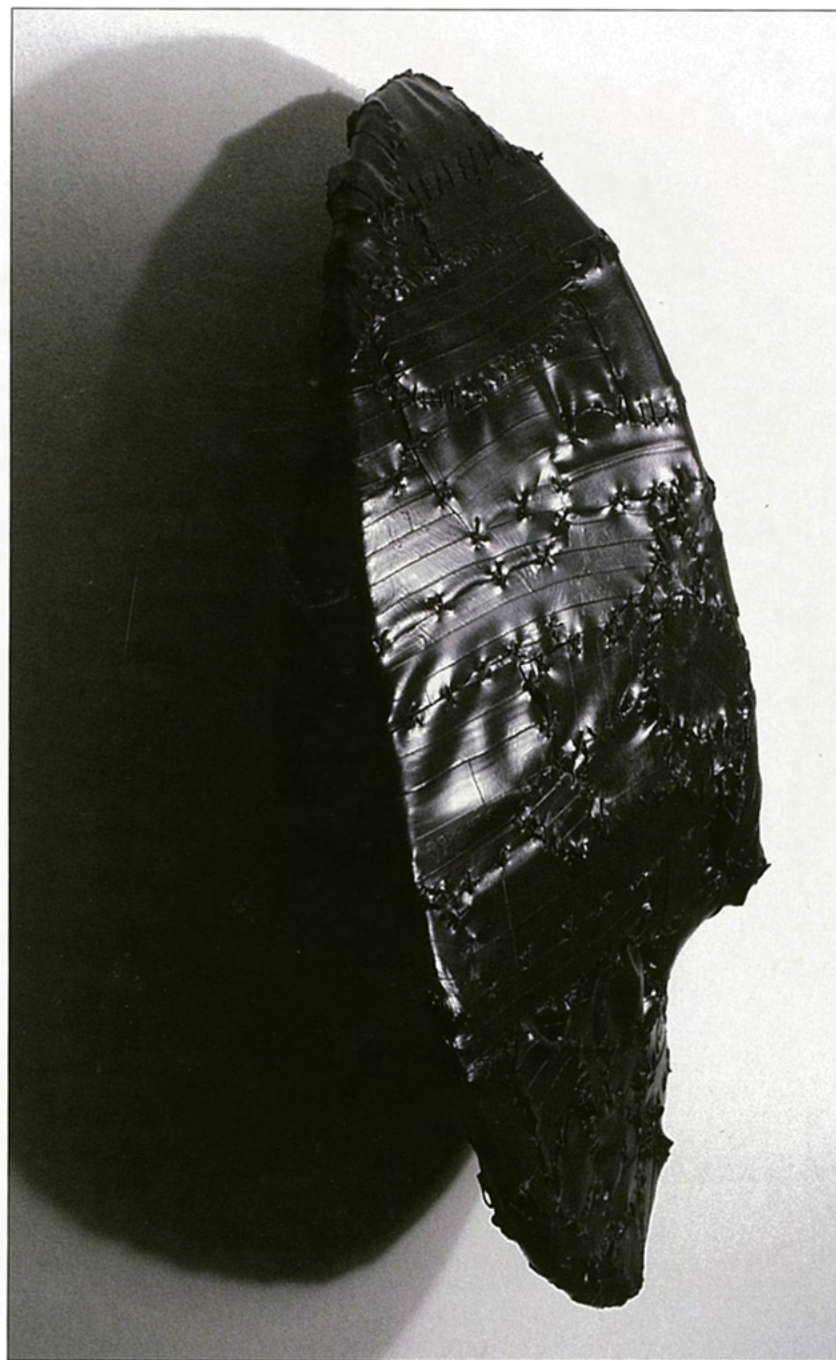


MONKEY TAILS (4)
1980, 36 x 23 x 3 inches, cloth, wood



PUNCH

1981, 11 x 13 x 4 inches, mixed media



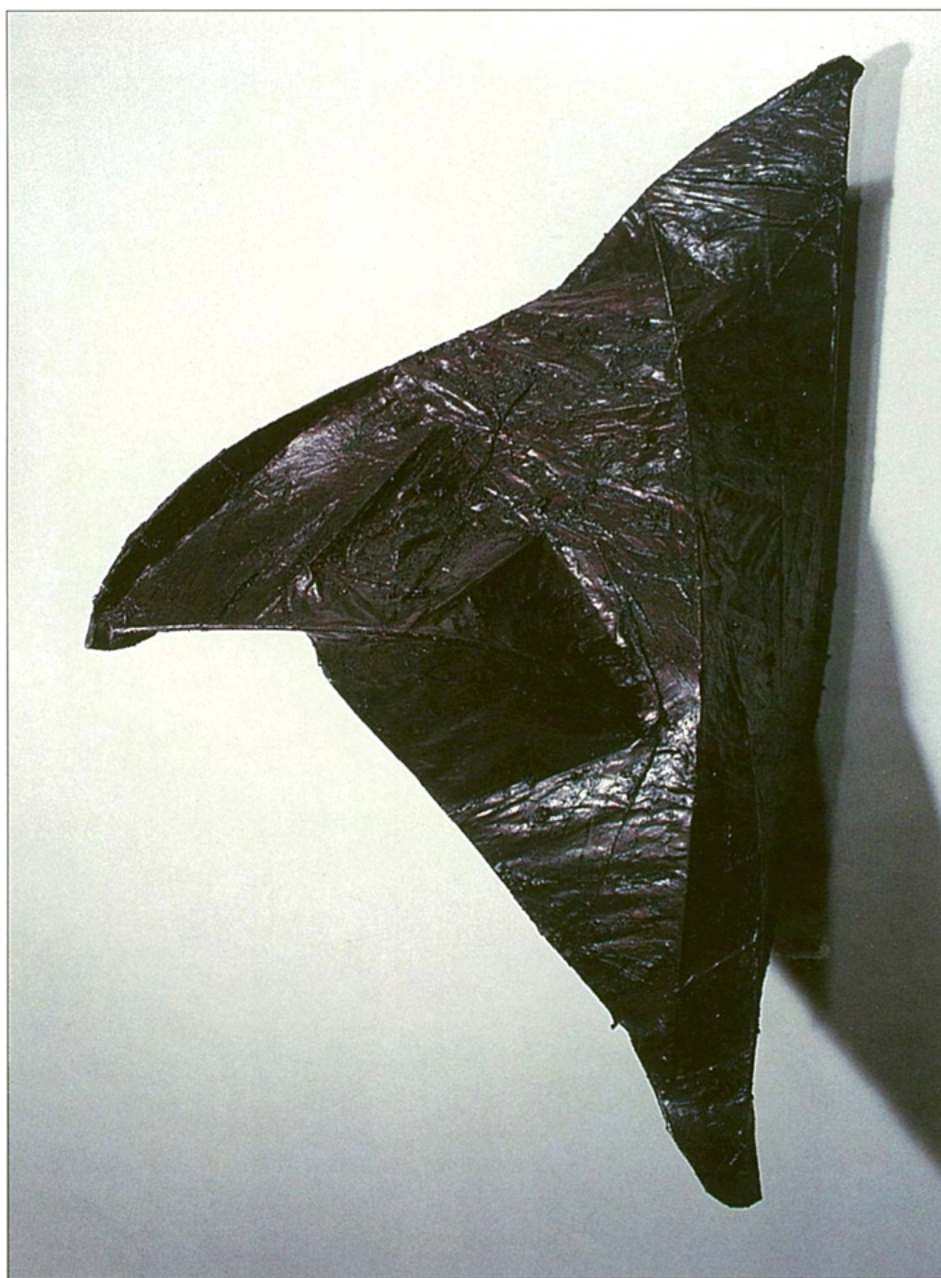
OVEL (2)

1982, 30 x 18 x 9.5 inches, rubber, wood, acrylic



TRAVELER (6)

1984, 32 x 5 x 42 inches, wood, sawdust, metals



ORLACH AS A JACKAL
1984, 42 x 30 x 22 inches, nylon, wood, charcoal

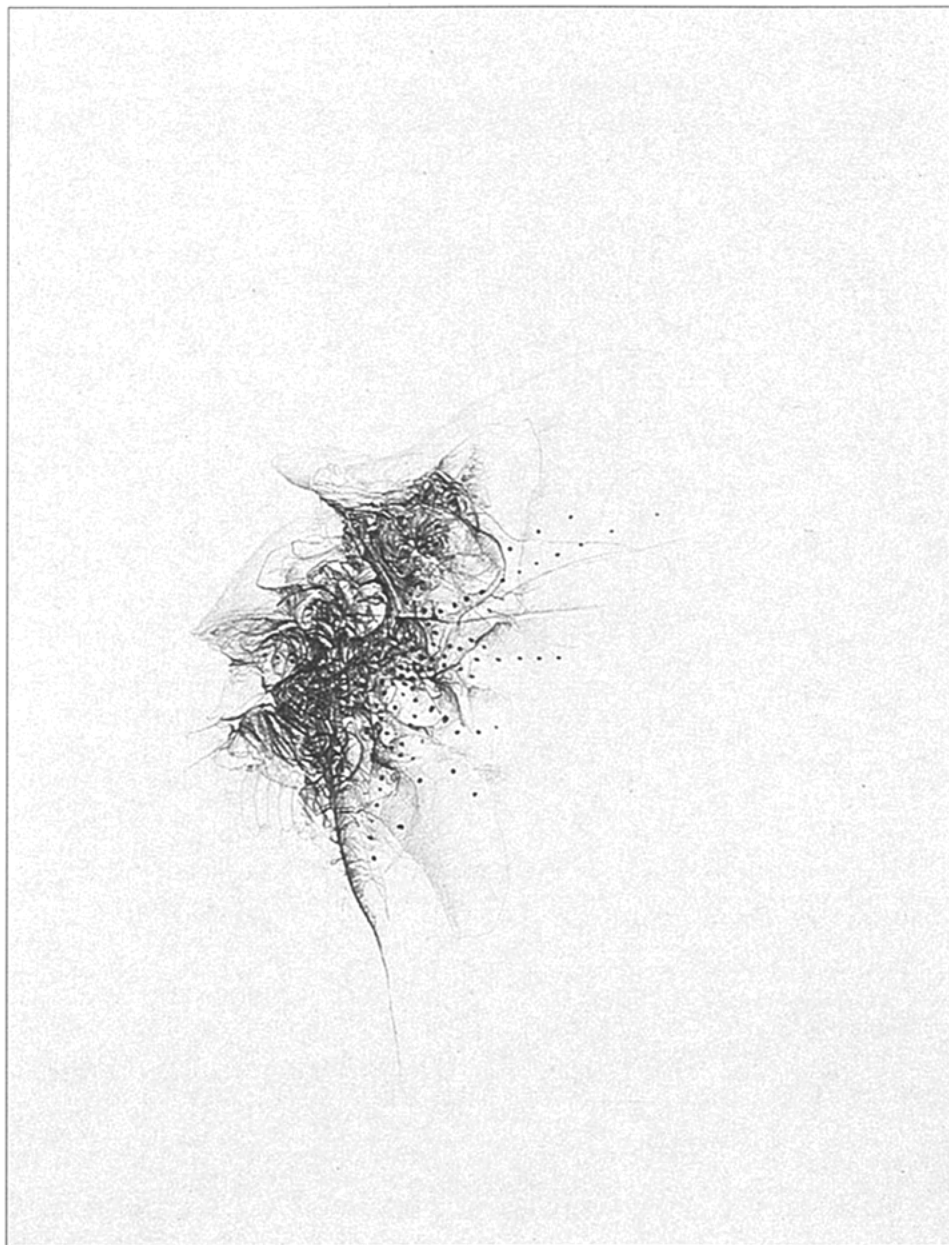


DUST (897)
1997, 45 x 90 inches, oil on canvas



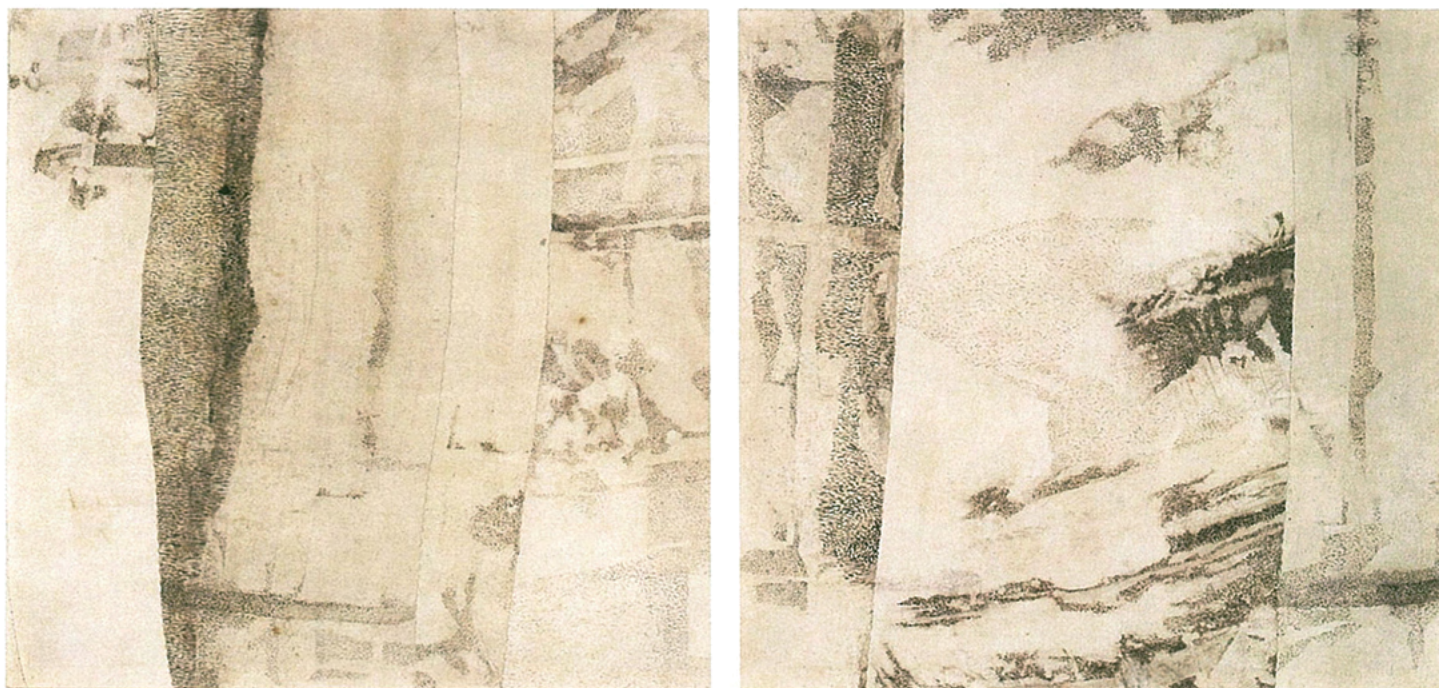
MEMOIR

1987-90, 12 x 9 inches, pencil on paper



S H E L L

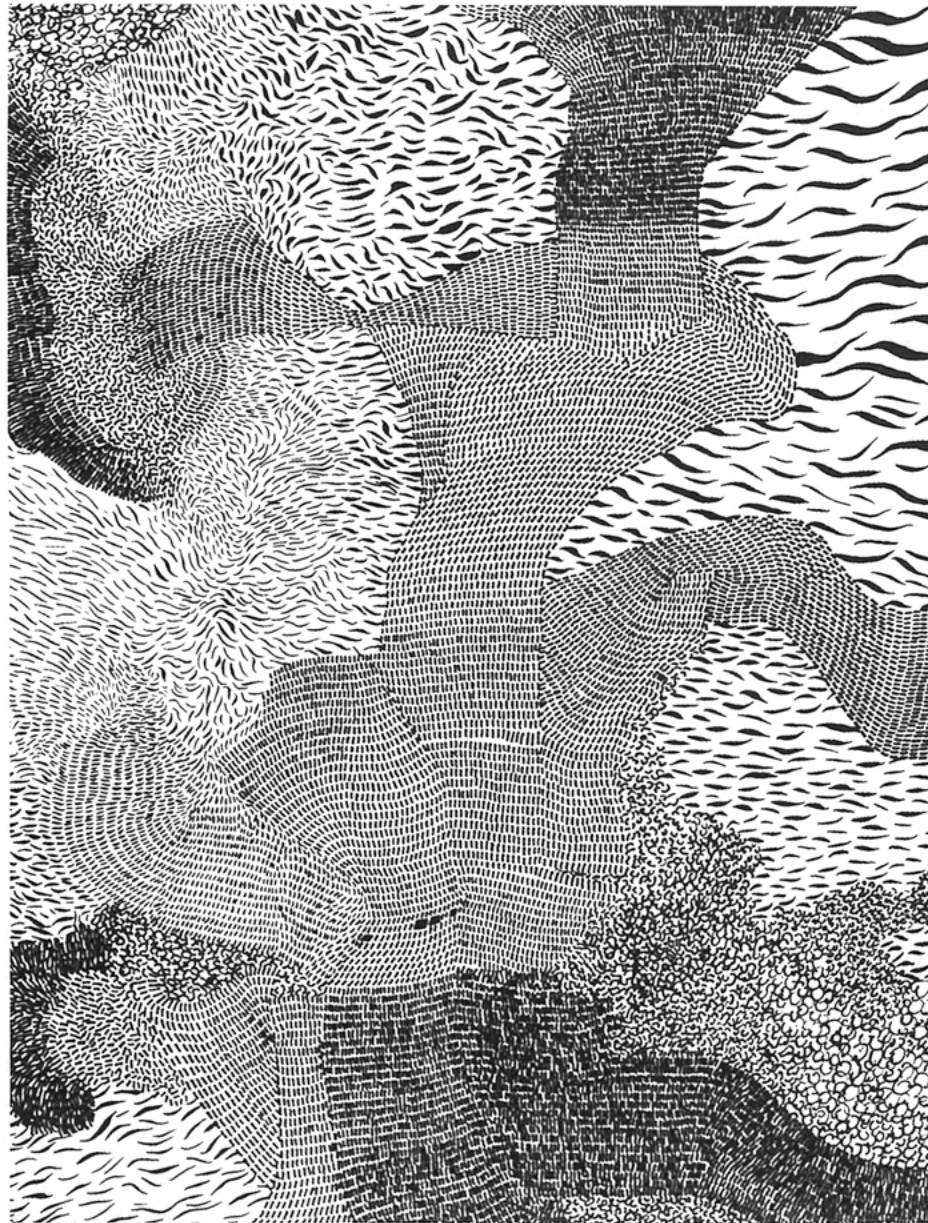
1987, 14 x 11 inches, pencil on paper



HAIKU (897)
1997, 45 x 90 inches, moldstain, oil



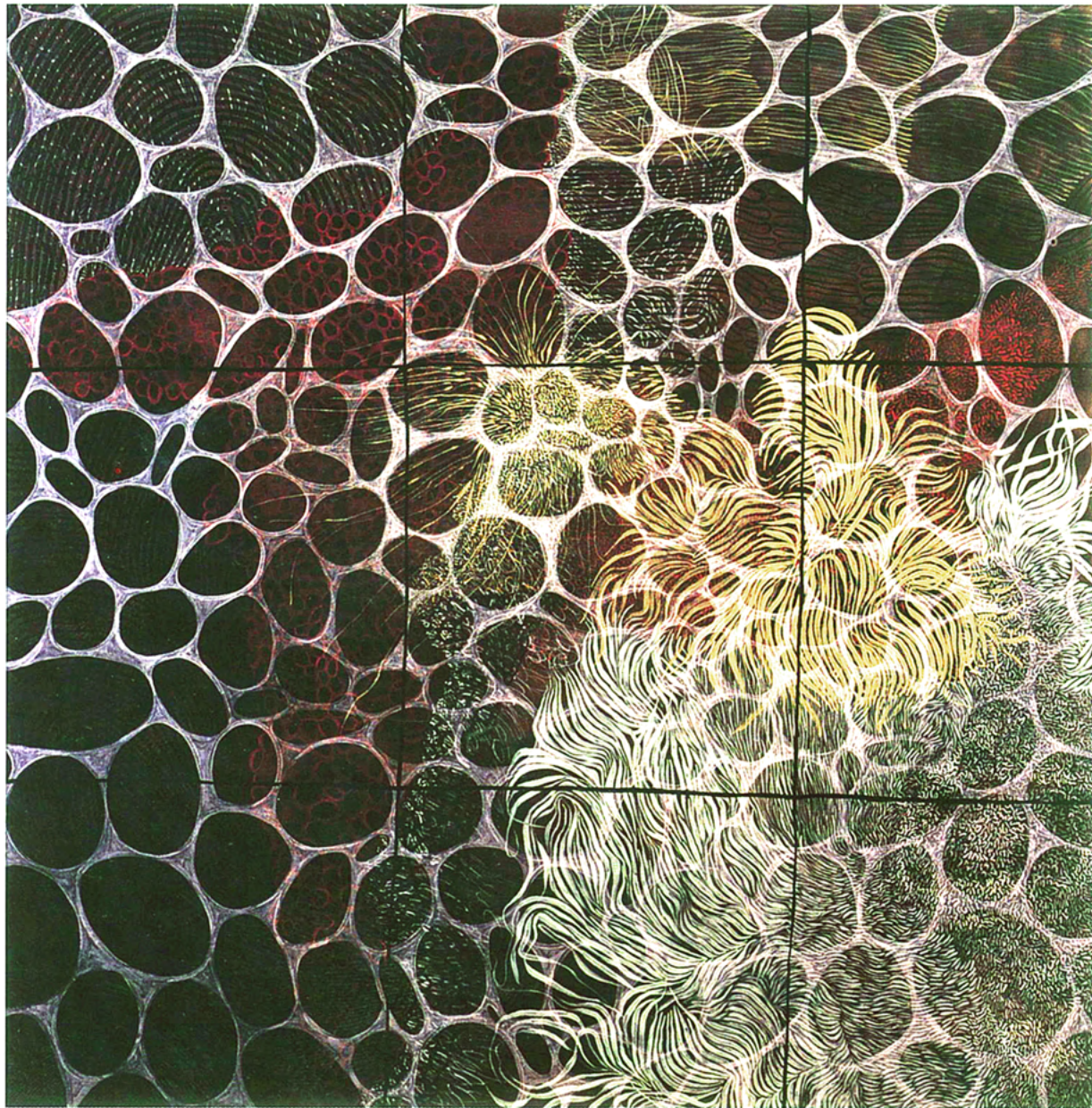
NOTATION (498)
1998, 60 x 60 inches, oil on canvas



R H A P S O D Y (1 4 9 8)

1998, 40 x 30 inches, ink on paper

Collection: The Honorable David Klein and Ellen Endick-Klein



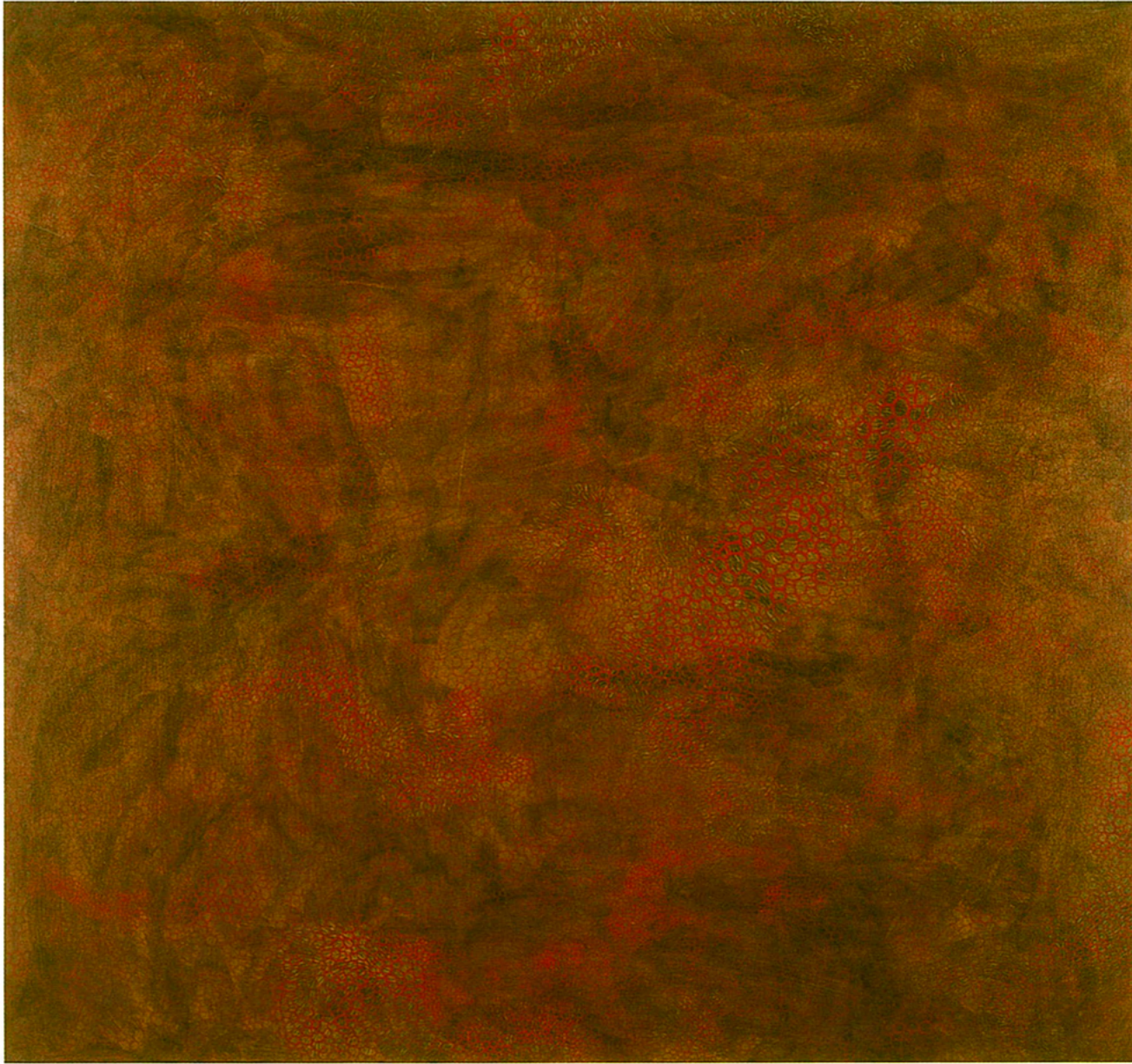
MESH (999)

1999, 60 x 60 inches, oil on canvas



VESTIGE (299)

1999, 60 x 60 inches, oil on canvas



INNUENEDO (800)
2000, 60 x 60 inches, oil on canvas

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Creighton Michael for sharing his work and his ideas with our audience. I am personally grateful for the time that Creighton spent discussing his work and for his input on the essay. His additional assistance with loans from collections and other logistical arrangements was invaluable. I also want to thank Creighton's wife, Leslie, and their son, Balin, for their hospitality and entertainment during my research visits to their home. Leslie was also extremely helpful with organizational assistance and text revisions.

I first became aware of Creighton's work at an exhibition in Denver in 1992. Over the past decade, our paths had coincidentally crossed a couple of times, and a potential project was in the making. Nina Freedman also quietly encouraged our present collaboration. We are both grateful to her for her intuitive sense of a good match of an artist and a curator. We want to express our appreciation to the lenders of artworks for the exhibition: the Pfizer Collection and the Honorable David Klein and Ellen Endick-Klein. It is not always easy to part with works from your walls; so, we do not take their generosity for granted.

The installation was executed with the assistance of the artist, our chief preparator, Nancy Sarangoulis, and her assistant, Daniel Schlenker. Martha Barnes, events coordinator for the Albright College Center for the Arts, helped prepare the publication and programming. Suzanne Calvaresi, the curator of educational programs and her assistant, Kara Messinger, designed workshops and tours for school children. Lisa Korecky, the secretary for the Center for the Arts provided support services, and our designers, Niemczyk-Hoffmann Group, helped realize this catalogue. We are grateful for all of these critical contributors.

This project is supported in part by a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. This funding source is complemented by the private contributions of various individuals, in particular, the Jandon Foundation for their generous assistance with the production of this catalogue, the Silverweed Foundation, the Freedman Endowment Fund, and our membership group, the Friends of the Freedman Gallery. Without the generosity of this broad support base, we would not have been able to realize this project.

-Christopher Youngs, director

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Creighton Michael has had numerous solo exhibitions at public institutions including: the Queens Museum of Art, the Elmhurst Art Museum, the Katonah Museum, the High Museum, the San Antonio Art Center, Marshall University, Haverford College, Vanderbilt University, and, most recently, the Neuberger Museum of Art and the Freedman Gallery. He has also been featured in one-person exhibitions in private galleries across the United States: in New York City at Craig Cornelius, David Beitzel, Ruth Siegel, LedisFlam, Littlejohn Contemporary and Kim Foster; Nina Freudenheim in Buffalo; Pence in Santa Monica; Hanes in San Francisco; Robischon in Denver; and Reynolds in Richmond, Virginia. He has also shown at Gallerie Trois Points in Montreal. He is represented in many public and private collections including: American Express, AT&T, Brown University, the Brooklyn Museum, the High Museum, the Neuberger Museum, New York University, Pfizer, Inc., Prudential, Vanderbilt University and the Weatherspoon Art Gallery. Creighton earned a BFA from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville; a MFA from Washington University in St. Louis; and a MA in Art History from Vanderbilt University. He lives in Mount Kisco, New York, where he has just built a new studio. He also continues to maintain a studio in New York City.

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