

Colorado State University

SURREALISM IN CHICAGO

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ii
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURREAL IMAGE	2
III. SURREALISM IN CHICAGO	8
IV. THE CHICAGO IMAGISTS	14

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Rene Magritte, <u>Collective Invention</u> , 1935.....	19
2. Salvadore Dali, <u>The Temptation of St. Anthony</u> , 1946.....	20
3. Andre Masson, <u>The Metamorphosis of Gradvita</u> , 1939.....	21
4. Max Ernst, <u>Europe After the Rain</u> (detail), 1937.....	22
5. Yves Tanguy, <u>The Sun in its Shrine</u> (detail), 1937.....	23
6. Max Ernst, <u>The Robing of the Bride</u> , 1939.....	24
7. Max Ernst, <u>Oedipus Rex</u> , 1921.....	25
8. Giorgio de Chirico, <u>The Evil Genius of a King</u> , 1915.....	26
9. Rene Magritte, <u>Carte Blanche</u> , 1965.....	27
10. Rene Magritte, <u>Personal Values</u> , n.d.....	28
11. Giorgio de Chirico, <u>The Uncertainty of the Poet</u> , 1913.....	29
12. Rene Magritte, <u>On the Threshold of Liberty</u> , 1929.....	30
13. Max Ernst, <u>The Joy of Living</u> , 1936.....	31
14. Salvadore Dali, <u>The Great Masturbator</u> , 1929	32
15. Rene Magritte, <u>The Ready Made Bouquet</u> , 1957.....	33
16. Joan Miro, <u>The Harlequin's Carnival</u> , 1925.....	34
17. Joan Miro, <u>The Potato</u> , 1928	35
18. Salvadore Dali, <u>Soft Construction with Boiled Beans; Premonition of Civil War</u> , 1936.....	36
19. Hans Bellmer, <u>Peppermint Tower in Honor of Greedy Little Girls</u> , 1942.....	37

Figure	Page
20. Rene Magritte, <u>The Use of Speech</u> , 1928.....	38
21. Rene Magritte, <u>Evening Falls</u> , 1964.....	39
22. Henri Rousseau, <u>The Dream</u> , 1910.....	40
23. Joseph E. Yoakum, <u>The Great Mtn. Range Near Canberra Austria</u> , 1964	41
24. Cosmo Campoli, <u>Bird Protecting New Born</u> , 1970.....	41
25. Joseph Goto, <u>Emanak</u> , n.d.	41
26. George Cohen, <u>Limbus</u> , 1958.....	42
27. Ray Fink, <u>Triptych</u> , n.d.	42
28. Leon Golub, <u>The Siamese Sphinx</u> , 1954	43
29. June Leaf, <u>Ascension of Pig Lady</u> (detail), 1969.....	43
30. H.C. Westermann, <u>The Evil New War God</u> , 1958.....	43
31. Seymour Rosofsky, <u>Man with a Pacifier (I Will)</u> , 1970.....	44
32. June Leaf, <u>Woman with Hoop, Woman Theatre, Man with Top Hat, Fat Lady</u> , and wall pieces from <u>Buster Brown</u> series, 1968	44
33. H.C. Westerman, <u>Imitation Knotty Pine</u> , 1966.....	45
34. H.C. Westerman, <u>Angry Young Machine</u> , 1960.....	45
35. Leon Golub, <u>Hamlet</u> , n.d.	45
36. Seymour Rosofsky, <u>The Doctors</u> , 1967	46
37. Robert Barnes, <u>James Joyce</u> , 1958	47
38. Irving Petlin, <u>Rubbings From the Calcium Garden... Rachel</u> , 1969	47
39. Richard Hunt, <u>Large Hybrid</u> , 1973	48

Figure	Page
40. Ted Halkin, <u>Untitled colored pencil drawing</u> , 1968	48
41. Jim Nutt, <u>Toot Toot Woo Woo</u> , 1970.....	49
42. Gladys Nilsson, <u>Teeteebares</u> , 1971	49
43. Karl Wirsum, <u>Screamin' Jay Hawkins</u> , program cover for the Hyde Park Art Center, 1968	50
44. Ed Paschke, <u>Dominant Nurse</u> , 1977.....	50
45. Art Green, <u>Saturated Fat</u> , 1971.....	51
46. Roger Brown, <u>Grand Spaulding Dodge</u> , 1975.....	51
47. Christina Ramberg, <u>Hereditary Uncertainty</u> , 1977.....	52
48. Jim Nutt, <u>Miss Sue Port</u> , 1968.....	52
49. Jim Nutt, <u>Look and Look</u> , 1978.....	53
50. Jim Nutt, <u>Zzzit</u> , 1970.....	53
51. Jim Nutt, <u>Please! - This is Important</u> , 1977.....	53
52. Jim Nutt, <u>Hold it Right There!</u> , 1975.....	54

I

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will attempt to describe Surrealism in terms of identifiable traits. Having outlined potential carriers of Surrealism as an influence within the Chicago environment, I will establish the existence of these traits in Chicago "Imagist" painting since 1945.¹ Encompassing three generations of Imagists I will particularly focus on one of the painters of the third generation, Jim Nutt. Nutt, more than any of the other Imagists, most fully incorporated the Surrealist traits, yet developed the most idiosyncratic variation of Imagist painting.

¹This term was coined by area critic Franz Schulze in Fantastic Images: Chicago Art Since 1945 (Chicago: Follett, 1972).

II

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURREAL IMAGE

Since the First Surrealist Manifesto was published in Paris in 1924, elements of Surrealist doctrine have filtered down through the American avante-garde of poetry and painting. When Andre Breton, the director of French Surrealism, fled from Paris to New York at the beginning of the Second World War he carried with him the voice of Surrealism. (Some American poets had already become familiar with his Surrealist writings in the original French.) Within an already European oriented avante-garde, Surrealist writings slowly began appearing in American publications. (Transition and View were two Surrealist oriented American magazines initiated in the '30's.) These documents along with the wartime refuge of many other Parisian Surrealists helped to plant the seeds of the surreal image in America.

As revealed by Breton, the surreal image is by design elusive and obscure. In the first Manifesto he quotes from his precursor in the surreal image, Pierre Reverdy:

The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is both distant and true, the stronger the image will be -- the greater its emotional power and poetic reality (from Nord-Sud, March, 1918).²

²Andre Breton, Manifestos of Surrealism, trans. by Helen R. Lane and Richard Seaver, Ann Arbor Paperbacks (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), p.20.

Breton maintained that this incongruous juxtaposition could only occur within the domain of the unconscious. Inversely the image resulting from such a juxtaposition possessed the power to "spark" a fragmentary awareness of the absolute reality of being which involves the faculties of both the rational and the oneiric.

It is as it were, from the fortuitous juxtaposition of the two terms that a particular light has sprung, the light of the image, to which we are infinitely sensitive.³

As in a dream, this surreal image was presented with a startling directness, not as a simile or metaphor but as a factual occurrence, as real as the tangible phenomena of the exterior world. (fig. 1)

Whether written or painted the numerous manifestations of the surreal image reveal particular characteristics. Most comprehensive among these are the quality of a dream state and the cult of the child. As Reverdy's juxtaposition of distant realities is commonplace in the dream, it is from the vantage point of the dream state that surreality is envisioned. In this aspect Surrealism parallels the Freudian position that the total consciousness of the psyche is experienced most readily through a marriage of the unconsciousness and waking states via the dream. (Breton had been trained in Freudian principles as a medical student and served a psychiatric internship in the French army from 1915 - 1918.) This

³Ibid., p. 37.

dream state can be inclusive of self induced hallucinations. Many of the French Surrealists experienced visions of surreality when under the physical influences of extreme fatigue, hunger, drugs (ether and opium) and/or alcohol. Alfred Jarry, for example, made it his personal mission to live out his life suspended in the surreal state. (He died of consumption at age 34.) In his novel Les Jours et Les Nuits, Jarry described the "true hallucination" as a sustained waking dream in which there is "neither day nor night (in spite of the title...)" and in which "life is continuous".⁴ In the first Manifesto Breton referred to this continuous quality in dreams.⁵ Like Freud he held that we should give attention to the events in our dreams to the same degree that we do events in our waking experience. Yet Breton went further to suggest a complete integration of the dream and the waking state:

I believe in the future resolution of these two states dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak.⁶

This dream quality has been described in surrealist painting by any or all of the following characteristics:

⁴Roger Shattuck, The Banquet Years (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), p. 200.

⁵Breton, Manifestos of Surrealism, p.11.

⁶Ibid., p. 14.

- a) Hallucinatory transformations and distortions of form, Dali's The Temptation of St. Anthony (fig. 2) and Masson's The Metamorphosis of Gradvita (fig. 3)
- b) The presence of inanimate matter that has become charged with life, Ernst's Europe After the Rain (fig. 4) and Tanguy's The Sun in its Shrine (fig. 5)
- c) Fantastic and ambiguous narrative content, Ernst's The Robing of the Bride (fig. 6) and Oedipus Rex (fig. 7)
- d) Incongruous or contradictory perspective devices, Chirico's The Evil Genius of the King (fig. 8) and Magritte's Cart Blanche (fig. 9)
- e) Familiar forms placed in an improbable setting, Magritte's Personal Values (fig.10) and Chirico's The Uncertainty of the Poet (fig. 11)
- f) Super-clarity of vision and hyper-articulation of the image, Magritte's On the Threshold of Liberty (fig. 12) and Ernst's The Joy of Living (fig. 13)
- g) Latent eroticism, Dali's The Great Masturbator (fig. 14) and Magritte's The Ready Made Bouquet (fig. 15)

Breton proclaimed in the first manifesto, "the mind which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part

of its childhood.⁷ He held childhood closest to "real life", where everything conspires to bring about the effective risk-free possession of oneself."⁸ This adoration and reliving of the child consciousness became an essential part of the surrealist revolt. It provided a method to the proposed "complete-non-conformism" of the Surrealist position.⁹ For the Surrealists, Jarry's play of 1890, Ubu Roi,¹⁰ set an ideal model in the cult of the child, from its scatological opening one-liner "Shit!" through blasphemies, slapstick humor, nonsense word games and extemporaneous moral code. We find these same characteristics as they developed in Surrealist painting three decades later in the playful forms of Miro's The Harlequin's Carnival (fig. 16) and The Potato (fig. 17), the aggression and violence of Dali's Soft Construction with Boiled Beans; Premonition of Civil War (fig. 18), the scatology of Bellmer's Peppermint Tower in Honor of Greedy Little Girls (fig. 19) and the word play and trompe l'oeil magic of Magritte's The Use of Speech (fig. 20) and Evening Falls (fig. 21).

⁷Ibid., p. 39.

⁸Ibid., p. 40.

⁹Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁰Alfred Jarry, Ubu Roi, (New York: New Directions, 1961).

A secondary Surrealist characteristic which obliquely corresponds to the cult of the child is the adaptation of primitive or naive forms. The later poems of Tristan Tzara (post 1918), which are critically considered Surrealist rather than Dadaist, emulate the chant-like rhythms of primitive Maori poetry ("Bonita", "Saltimbanques").¹¹ Breton devoted ten of the sixty-eight segments in his collection of essays, Surrealism and Painting, to the discussion and expose' of "autodidactic" and primitive art forms. Within "Autodidacts Called Natives" he credits Henri Rousseau with the "burgeoning of an entirely new branch of a marvelous tree" -- that of the variegated heritage of primitive vision, "ranging through the whole field of works by Giotto, the Masters of Avignon, Uccello, Fouquet, Bosch, and Grunewald."¹² It was specifically Rousseau's The Dream of 1910 which the French Surrealists accredited as the first Surrealist painting (fig. 22). This adaptation of primitivism in Surrealist painting can be seen in light of certain dream characteristics which have previously been described, particularly that of contradictory perspective devices and hyper-articulation of the image.

¹¹Michael Benedikt, The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1974), p.82.

¹²Andre Breton, Surrealism and Painting, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), p. 291.

III

SURREALISM IN CHICAGO

Although the New York avante-garde has drifted far from its pervading Surrealist influence of the '30's and '40's toward a sensibility steeped in formal abstraction, still variations of the surreal image, with its juxtaposition of distant realities, can be found in localized pockets of American art. One such pocket has flourished for three generations as the so-called Chicago Imagist group.

If cities are artworks, Chicago is certainly Surrealist. Described both as "The City of the Big Contradictions"¹³ and the "husky, brawling, City of the Big Shoulders"¹⁴, Chicago embodies many of the characteristics which distinguish the work in its many and extensive collections of Surrealist art. Its glistening lake-front towers stand glorious against the wind as monuments to rationality and prosperity in their Meisian simplicity, but with their backs turned to the "mouse-grey, low-slung outback that stretches endlessly to the western horizon".¹⁵ Judith Goldman describes it as

¹³M.W. Newman, "City Portrait: Chicago-Introduction: Contradictions are the Key", Portfolio Magazine, April-May, 1979, p. 111.

¹⁴Carl Sandburg, "Chicago", The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), P. 3.

¹⁵Franze Schulze, "City Portrait: Chicago - The Art Scene: Vigorous if Divided, Chicago Takes on its Own Identity", Portfolio Magazine, April-May, 1979, p. 117.

"the place where the dream and reality meet: a cosmopolitan island in the prairie; a worker's town where the big money has been hard-earned in unglamorous, gritty industries, in farm equipment, scrap metal and automotive parts, in meatpacking and beauty supplies".¹⁶ Chicago as "the Nation's Freight Handler"¹⁷ even has its great art museum straddling a railroad yard.

As the traditional and conservative Parisian middle class had served as a springboard for the French Surrealist revolt, so has the rigid and practical-minded Daley regime, with its devotion to tough, matter-of-fact material reality, spawned Surrealist responses among artists in Chicago. There is a history of artist migrations from Chicago to either coast, where conditions have been more encouraging to artists. John Chamberlain, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Indiana, William Wiley, Leon Golub, Robert Natkin, June Leaf, Steven Urry, Irving Petlin, Robert Barnes, H.C. Westermann, Art Green, Jim Nutt, and Gladys Nilsson have all left Chicago. (Nutt and Nilsson have since returned.) Yet after leaving the Chicago environment, the Surrealist characteristics have most often persisted in the work of these artists.

¹⁶Judith Goldman, "Collecting in Chicago: 'Love Affairs with Art'," Art News, February, 1979, p. 47.

¹⁷Carl Sandburg, "Chicago".

Usually the existence of Surrealist characteristics in American art is historically tied to the presence of a significant collection of French Surrealism or to the actual presence of one of the personalities of the original Surrealist group. Both of these historical ties exist in Chicago.

One of Surrealism's biggest fans in Chicago is lawyer Joseph Randall Shapiro. Besides owning a large collection of significant Surrealist art, which includes Magritte's Chant d'Amour, Delvaux's Sirenes, and Man Ray's Portrait of the Marquis de Sade, he has been instrumental in the spread of interest in Surrealism among other Chicago collectors. In 1967, under Shapiro's encouragement, a number of local collectors established the Museum of Contemporary Art which subsequently called attention to and surveyed the history of Surrealist influenced Chicago painting. Other significant Surrealism collectors in Chicago are the Edwin A. Bergmans, the Morton J. Neumans, the Leonard Horwiches, lawyer Barnet Hodes, and photographer Arnold Crane. The Bergmans claim that it was Shapiro who originally swung them towards Surrealism. They had been buying German Expressionism from Allan Frumkin. Their collection includes works by Picabia, Ernst, Gorky, Wilfredo Lam, Man Ray, and Joseph Cornell, most of which were acquired by direct contacts with the artists. On a trip to Cuba they met Wilfredo Lam who later introduced them

to Max Ernst and Man Ray. They also befriended Joseph Cornell and as a result have one of the largest collections of Cornell boxes. Judith Goldman compares the Chicago house of Mr. and Mrs. Morton Neuman to Peggy Guggenheim's palazzo in Venice. The dining room is hung with Miros, a bedroom with Dubuffets, and the den is "jammed" with early Surrealism. Among Barnet Hodes' Surrealist collection is at least one work by each of the signers of the first Surrealist Manifesto. He also owns much Belgian and Latin American Surrealist painting. Among these is Magritte's Ready Made Bouquet (fig. 15). Within Arnold Crane's historically thorough collection of photography (reportedly the world's largest)¹⁸ are the Surrealists experiments with photo-montage and collage, monotypes by technique. His also includes a vast collection of Man Ray's pioneering experiments with contact printing (rayograms) and solarization.

It is noteworthy that many Chicago art collectors were first introduced to Surrealism by Allan Frumkin. It was his gallery that showed Matta, Cornell, Victor Brauner and other Surrealists in the early '50's, when Surrealism was still readily available on the art market. He was also the first to pick up on the Surrealism/Expressionism influenced young Chicago artists who are now seen as the first generation of Imagists: Golub, Leaf, Barnes, Westermann, and

¹⁸Goldman, "Collecting in Chicago: 'Love Affairs with Art'," p. 46.

Joseph Goto.¹⁹

It was through his connection with Frumkin that eventually led to Roberto Matta's teaching appointment at the School of the Art Institute in 1955. Although Matta was Chilean and not French, he traveled widely and in 1938 spent time living and working in Paris. It was then that he met Breton and was officially received as a member of the Surrealist movement. As a painter Matta's concerns had always been Surrealist oriented. And as Franz Schulze points out in his survey of postwar Chicago art, it was Matta's Surrealist orientation, rather than his command of abstract form, that made a more lasting impression on the young Chicago artists.²⁰

The most recent development as a unifying factor of Surrealist tendencies among Chicago artists was the 1966 founding of the Hyde Park Art Center on the South Side. The HPAC was actually a run-down neighborhood storefront which offered non-accredited art classes and staged regular exhibitions of local artists. The founding director was local Surrealist sculptor Don Baum whose own work usually took the form of slicked-up assemblages of doll parts and other assorted found items. Baum found most of his exhibitors among students and recent alumni of the School of the Art Institute. The group associated

¹⁹Franz Schulze, "Art News in Chicago", Art News, November, 1971, p. 53.

²⁰Ibid., p. 50.

with the HPAC eventually evolved into the third generation of Imagists. Mixed in with the exhibitions of the Art Institute crowd were exhibitions of a few elderly "autodidacts". With their awkward perspectives and crude gestures, Joseph E. Yoakum (fig. 23), Pauline Simon, and Aldo Piacenza were three of these who were especially influential to the younger, schooled Imagists. With Bretonian flair the younger artists revered these names more than any others in 20th-century art.²¹

²¹Ibid., p. 55.

IV

THE CHICAGO IMAGISTS

Among the characteristics that lead to a consideration of a cohesive Chicago style is the common attitude of indifference, if not antagonism, toward the notion of art dogma. If Chicago artists of the '40's and '50's were stylistically and formally influenced by European traditions, these were traditions based on revolt and an expressive freedom of the individual. As New York art sought to refine 20th-century revolutions of style (cubism, constructivism), Chicago artists sought to adopt the revolutionary spirit itself. These artists had grown up during the war years and had known violence and devastation. Some had served in the armed forces and witnessed first hand the disgust that fueled the absurdist vision of the Dada and Surrealist European artists of the '20's. This apocalyptic vision underscored the imagery and narrative tone of these postwar Chicago artists. Like the Surrealists they turned inwardly, feeding off of personal desires, fantasies, and childhood memories. Often these introspective visions were projected with a cruelty and destructiveness that warranted this group the label of "the Monster Roster". The Roster included Cosmo Campoli, Joseph Goto, George Cohen, Ray Fink, Leon Golub, June Leaf, H.C. Westermann, and Seymour Rosofsky (figs. 24 - 31). As is true of most of the

Chicago Imagists, they had all been students at the School of the Art Institute.²² Campoli, Goto, Fink, and Westermann were primarily sculptors whereas the others were painters.

The work of the Monster Roster introduced Surrealist characteristics in Chicago art that would remain consistent throughout the next generations of Imagism. Generally their work called on elements of the human psyche as subject matter: Desires and fantasies, fears and phobias, and ambiguous anxieties and neuroses. The cult of the child seems present in both the burlesque images of Leaf's scenarios and in the visual puns and ingenious fantasies behind Westermann's objects (figs. 32 - 34). The dream often becomes a nightmare in the Monsters' sensibility. The mythical figures in Golub's and Rosofsky's paintings seem to be trapped by their own inadequacies (figs. 28, 31, 35, & 36).

By 1960 much of the Monster Roster had scattered to the coasts and a second generation had begun to emerge. These were artists who had worked with Matta at the School of the Art Institute in the mid-'50's. Their work was less shocking than the Monsters' and relied more heavily on the imaginative forms of late European Surrealism (Arp, Tanguy, Matta, Gorky). The best of them included Robert Barnes, Irving Petlin, Richard Hunt, and Ted Halkin (figs.

²²Ibid., p.49.

37 - 40).²³

The third generation of Imagists, as previously mentioned, surfaced around the Hyde Park Art Center in 1966-67. These artists first exhibited at the Center in small groups, with names like rock-n-roll bands: The Hairy Who, The Non-Plussed Some, The False Image. Often these shows had thematic titles - "Marriage Chicago Style", "The Artful Codgers", "Chicago Antigua". Their clubbiness is somewhat reminiscent of the Breton Paris-based group (minus the solemnity), which alternately initiated and expelled artists and poets according to the prevailing attitudes. The Hairy Who consisted of Jim Nutt, his wife Gladys Nilsson, Karl Wirsum, Suellen Rocca, Art Green and James Falconer; The Non-Plussed Some were Ed Flood, Ed Paschke, Sarah Canright, Richard Wetzel and Don Baum; The False Image -- Roger Brown Phil Hanson, Christina Ramberg, and Eleanor Dube (figs. 41 - 47).²⁴ The group as a whole first received official recognition as a viable movement in a 1969 exhibition at the young Museum of Contemporary Art. The show was titled "Don Baum Says Chicago Needs Famous Artists" and it subsequently inspired a new wave of enthusiasm over an indigenous and truly original Chicago style.²⁵

²³Peter Schjeldahl, "Letter from Chicago", *Art in America*, July-August, 1976, p.55.

²⁴Ibid.

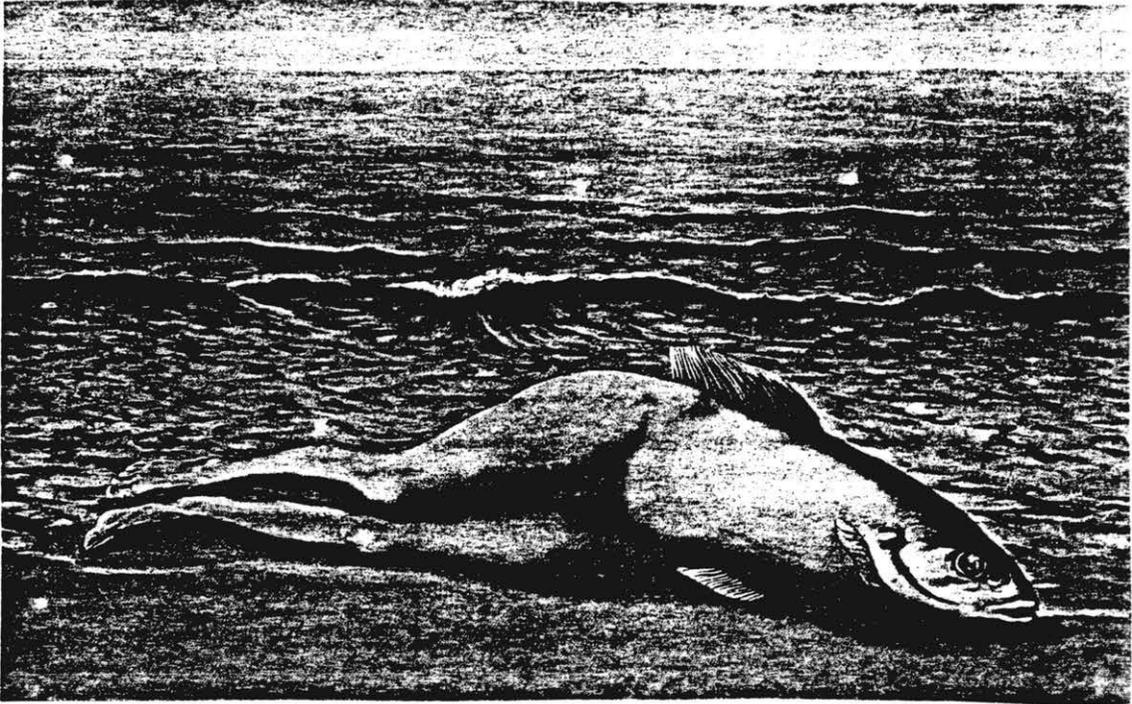
²⁵Ibid.

This new style carried over the Surrealist traits of the previous Imagists with special emphasis on the child cult. It incorporated a graphic visual quality that rendered a scatological and burlesque content with the detached grittiness of a South Side streetwalker. Visual elements allude to vernacular sources: movie posters, comic books, hobbyist catalogues, pin-ball machines, muscle magazines, and tattoos.

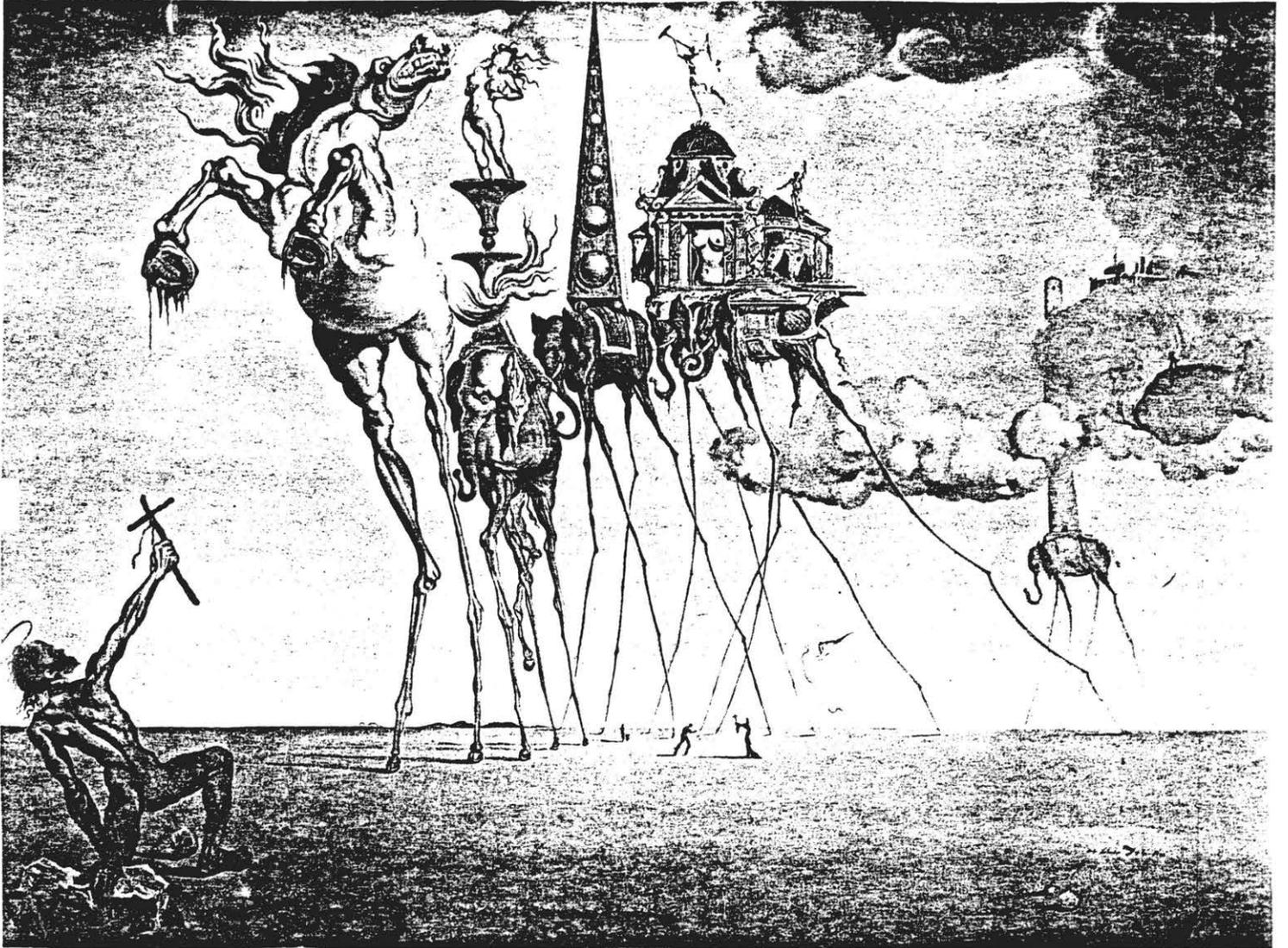
The major standout in this new style has been Jim Nutt. He incorporated the Surrealist traits most fully and, ironically, developed the most idiosyncratic variation. His images present us with all sorts of violent and aggressive activities, often involving sexual assaults, mutilations, and scatological activities. But these are presented through a child consciousness that combines giddy humor and playfulness with these ghastly visions and allows us to see with a certain objectivity and innocence, removed from aesthetic and moral criteria (His draughtsmanship resembles that of porno-comics.) (figs. 48 & 49). He also engages in a childlike word play, either with misspellings in his titles - I'm da Vicious Roomer (I Usta Date Her) (1969), or by combining pictures with words directly on the painted surface a la Magritte, as in Zzzit (1970) (fig). Nutt's images are technically rendered with a compulsive meticulousness reminiscent of Magritte and of the methods of autodidactic painters. His paintings usually incorporate elaborate illusionistic framing

devices which create the theatrical effect of a stage set within which figures act out ambiguous narratives. The figures are grossly exaggerated and metamorphosised as if in a hallucination or dream. Within these dramas, figures are juxtaposed with incongruous scale variations, distorting the perspective and effecting an otherworldly sensation - Breton's "light of the image, to which we are infinitely sensitive".²⁶ (Please! - This is Important, fig. 51)

²⁶Breton, Manifestos of Surrealism, p. 37.



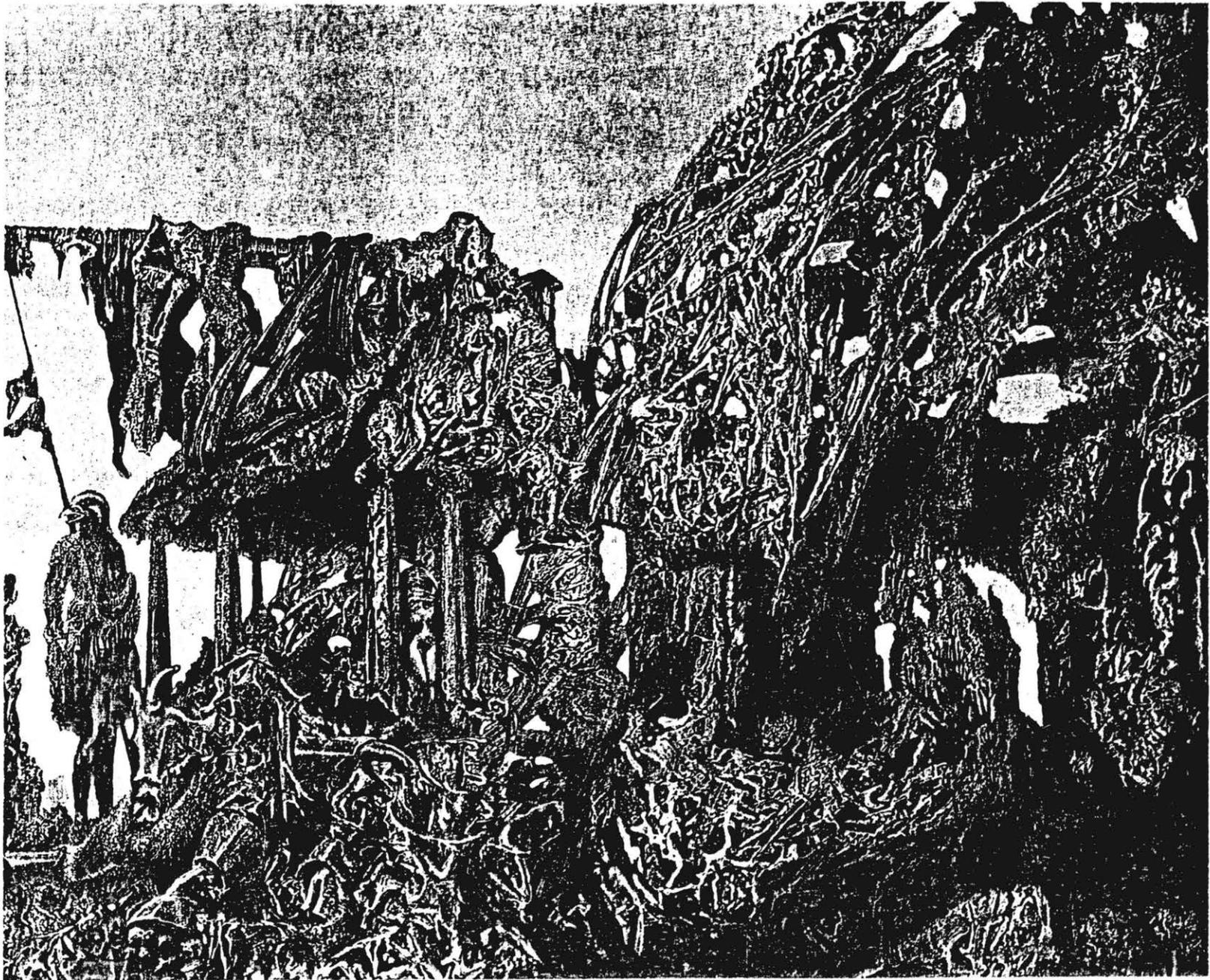
1. Rene Magritte, Collective Invention, 1935



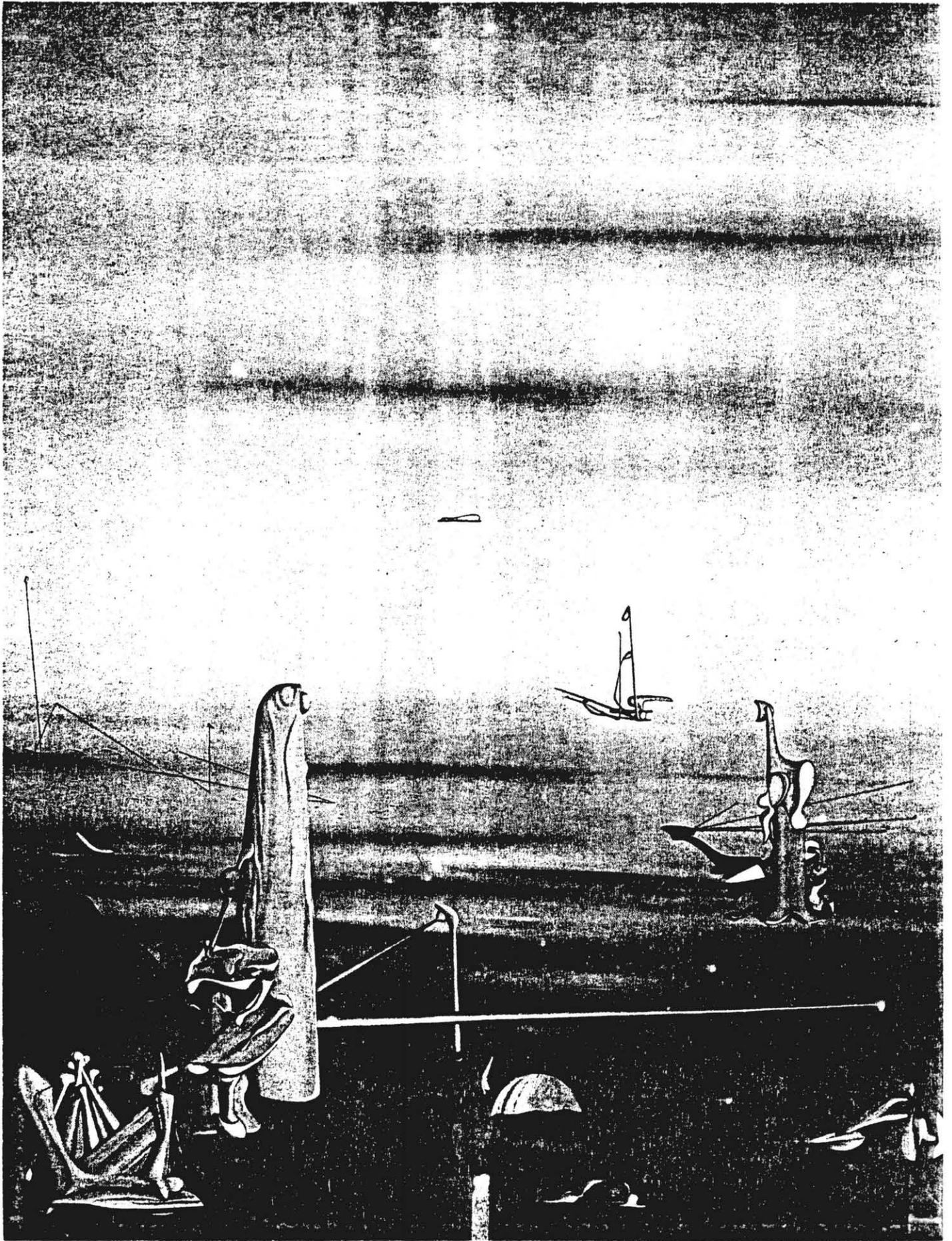
2. Salvadore Dali, The Temptation of St. Anthony, 1946



3. Andre Masson, The Metamorphosis of Gradvita, 1939



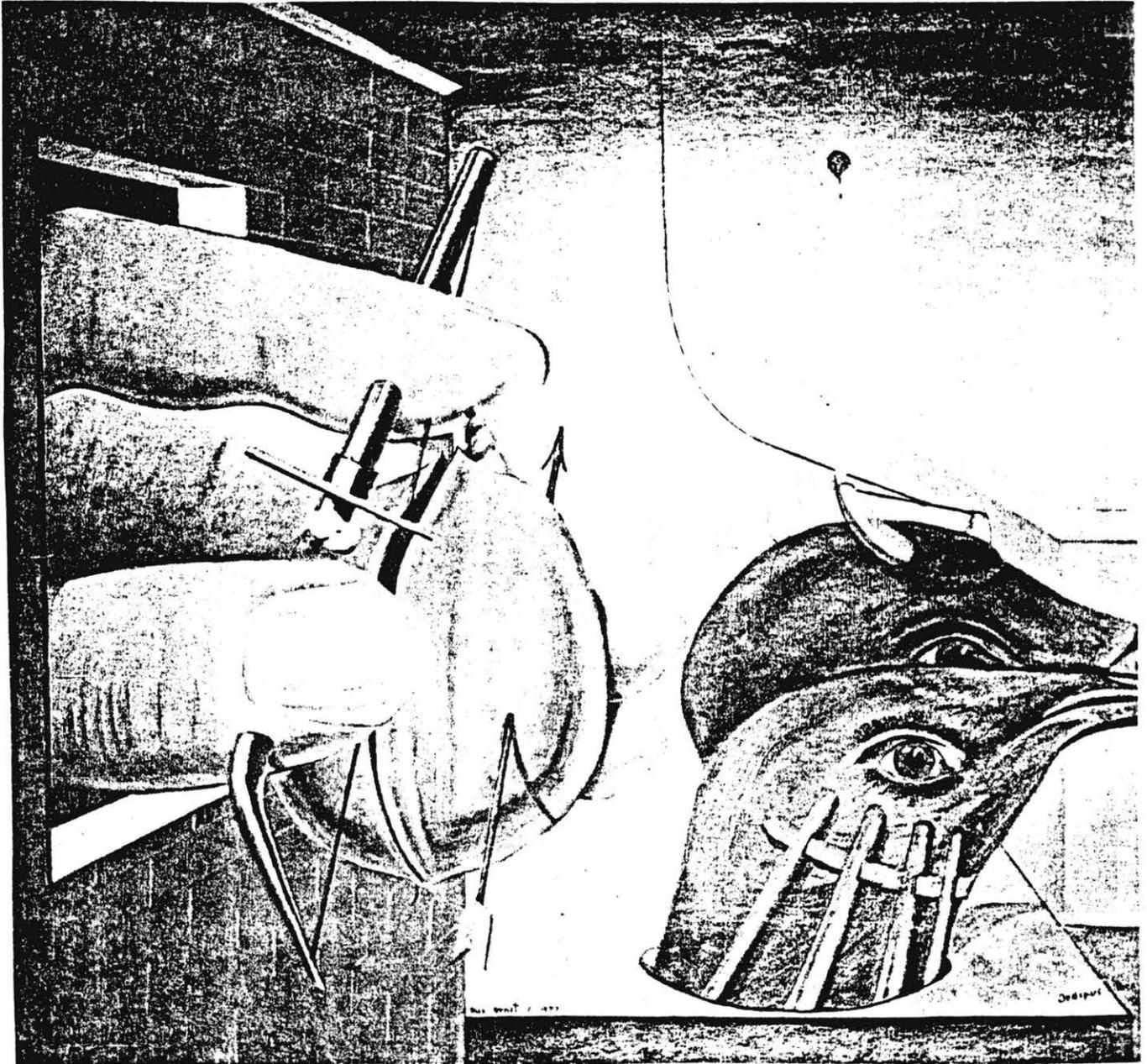
4. Max Ernst, Europe After the Rain (detail), 1937



5. Yves Tanguy, The Sun in its Shrine (detail), 1937



6. Max Ernst, The Robbing of the Bride, 1939



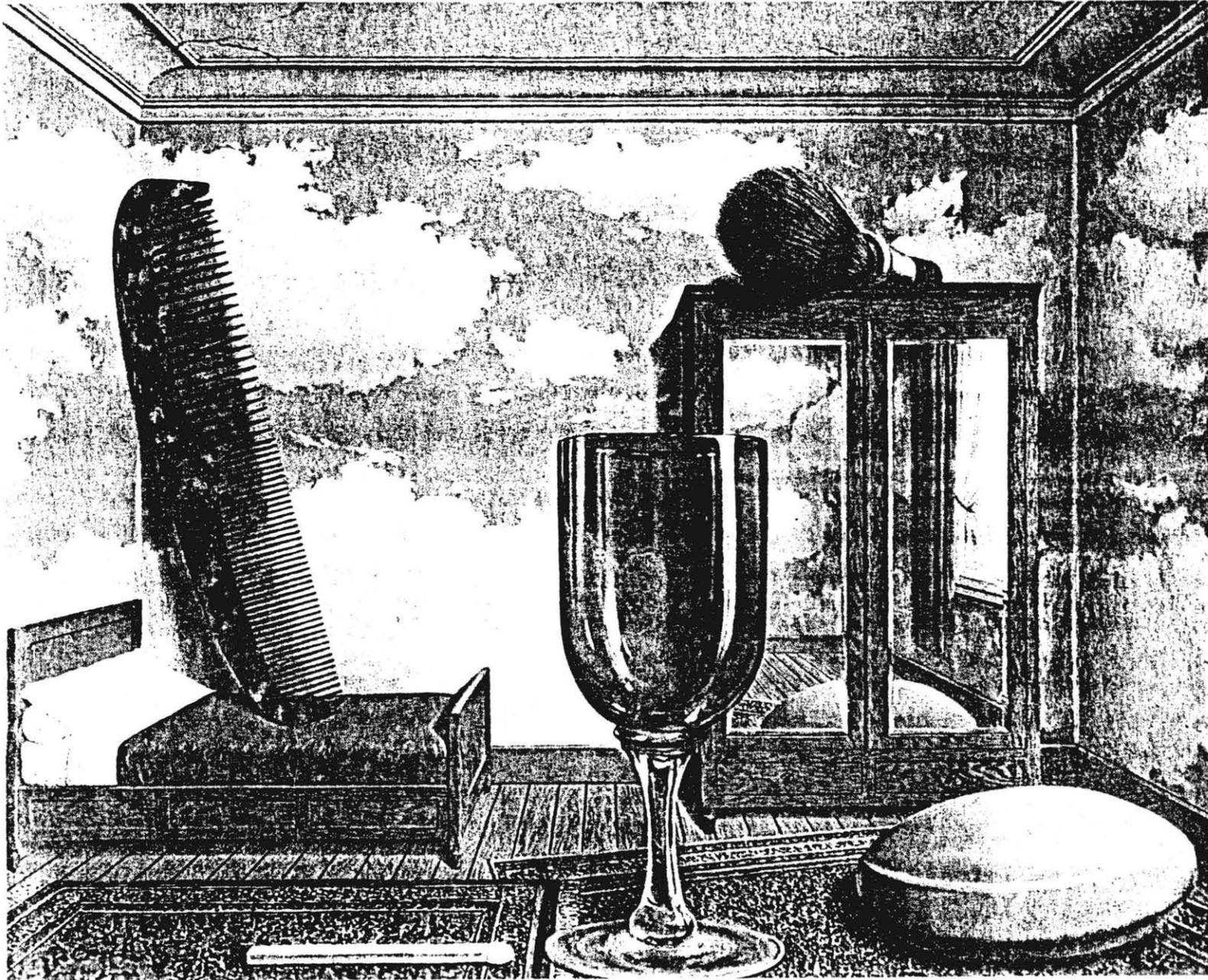
7. Max Ernst, Oedipus Rex, 1921



8. Giorgio de Chirico, The Evil Genius of a King, 1915



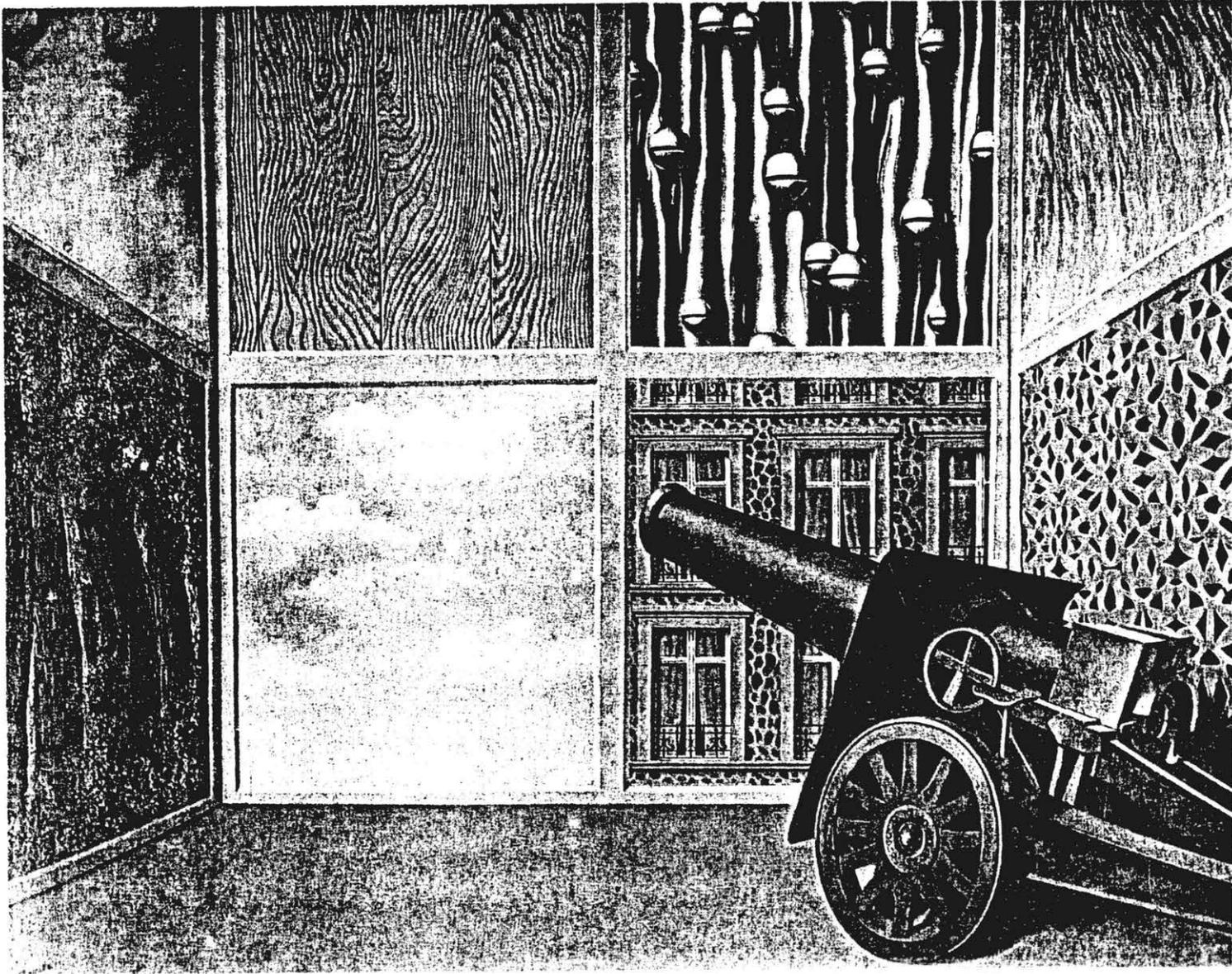
9. Rene Magritte, Carte Blanche, 1965



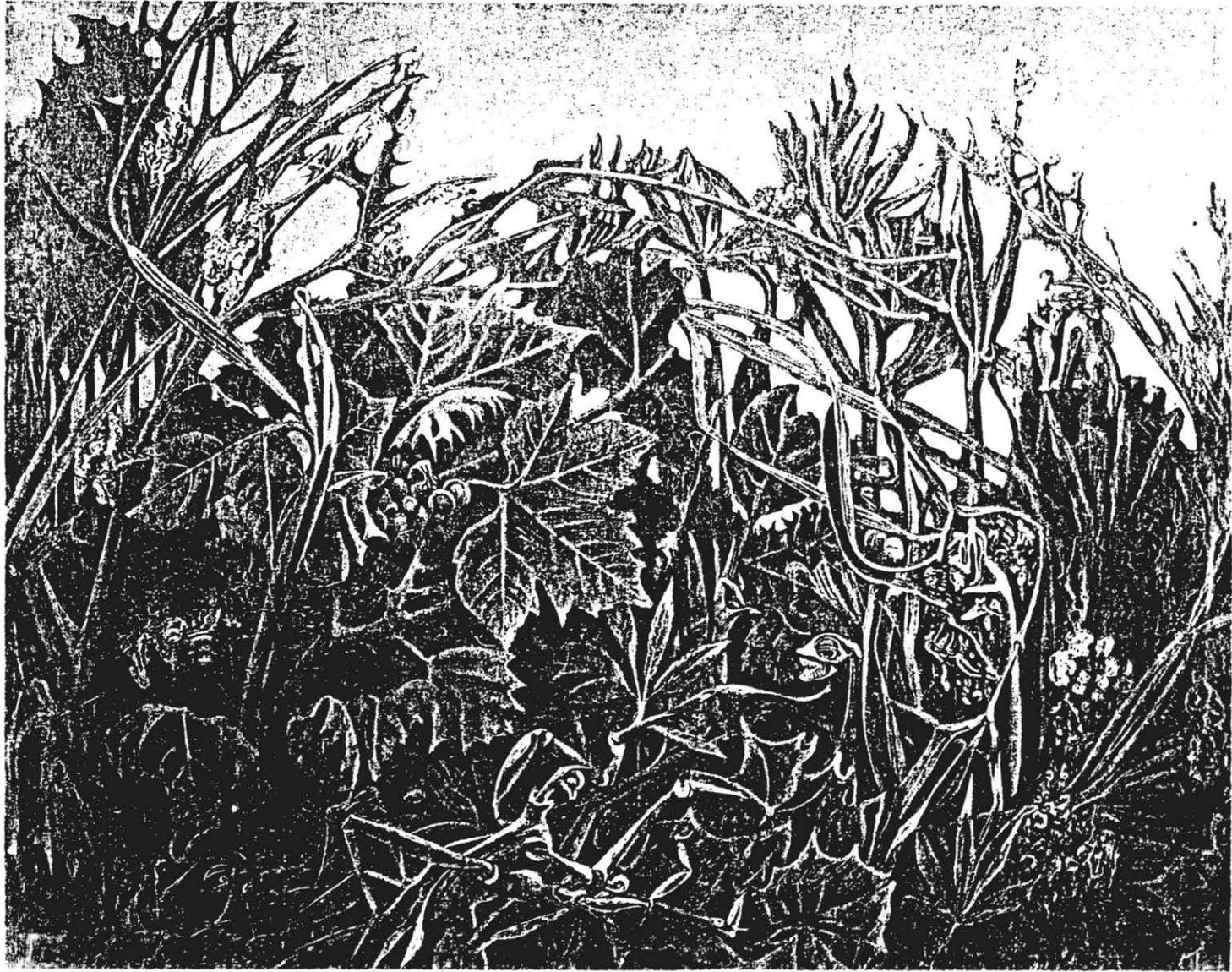
10. René Magritte, Personal Values, n.d



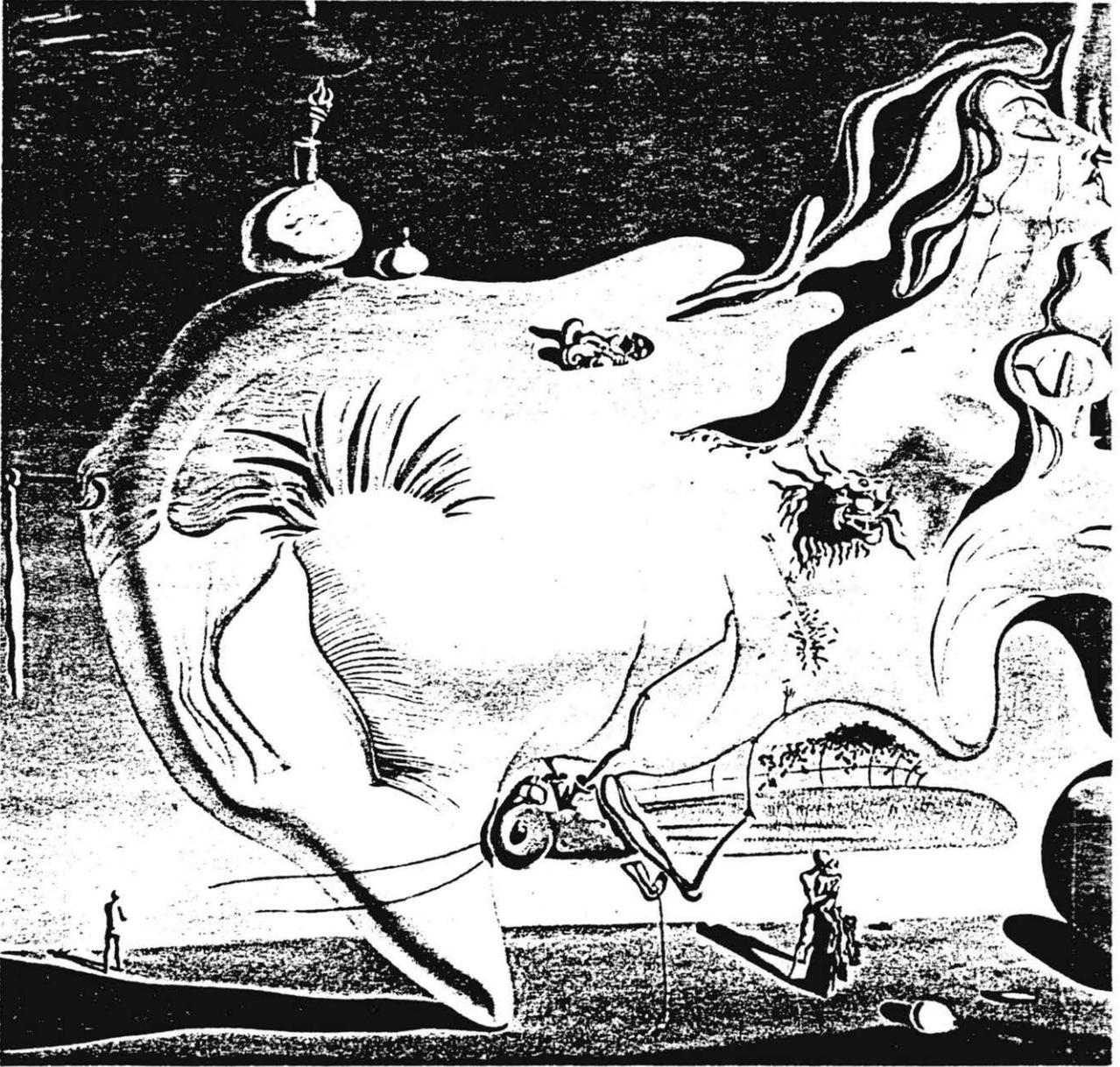
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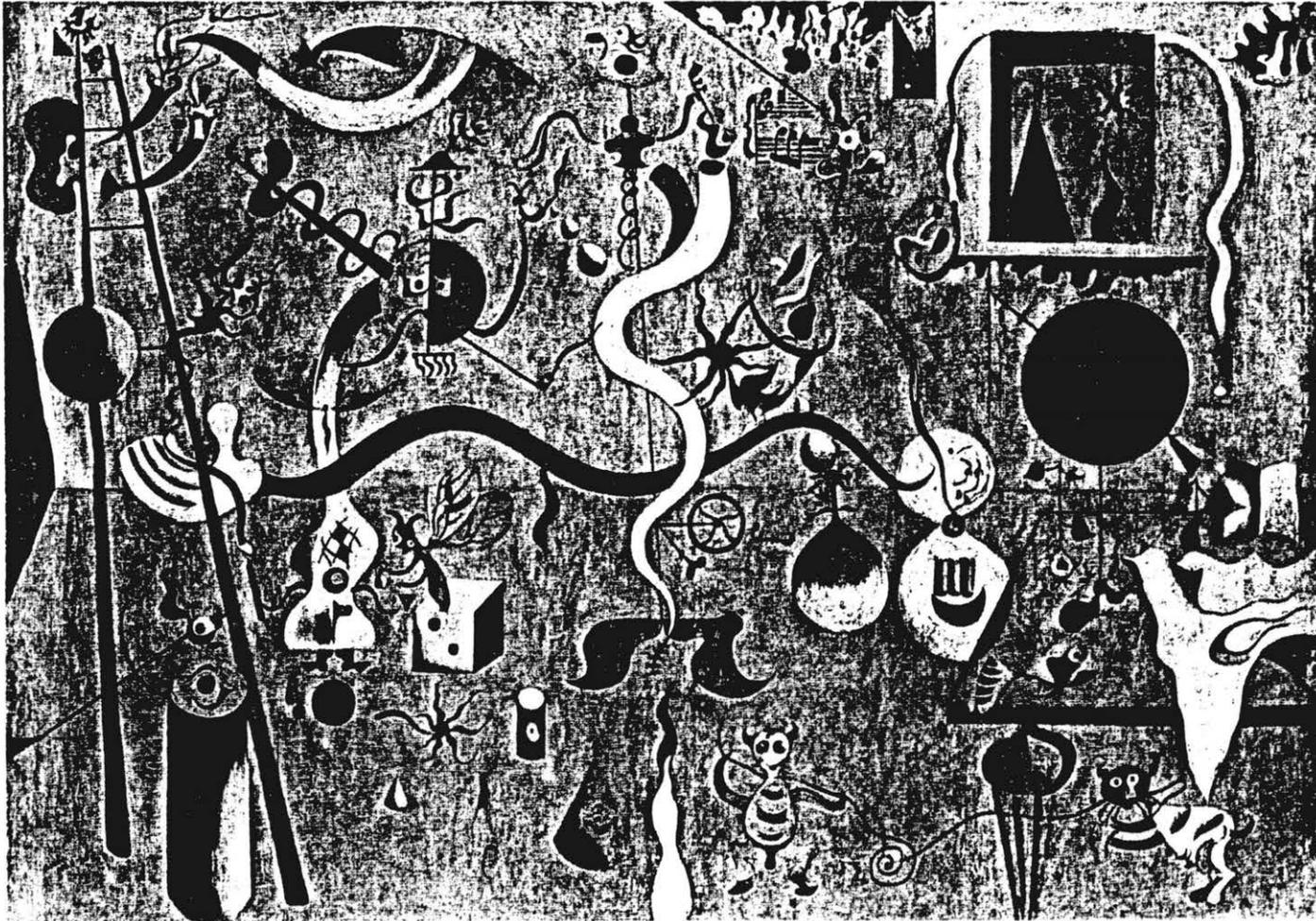
13. Max Ernst, The Joy of Living, 1936



14. Salvadore Dali, The Great Masturbator, 1929



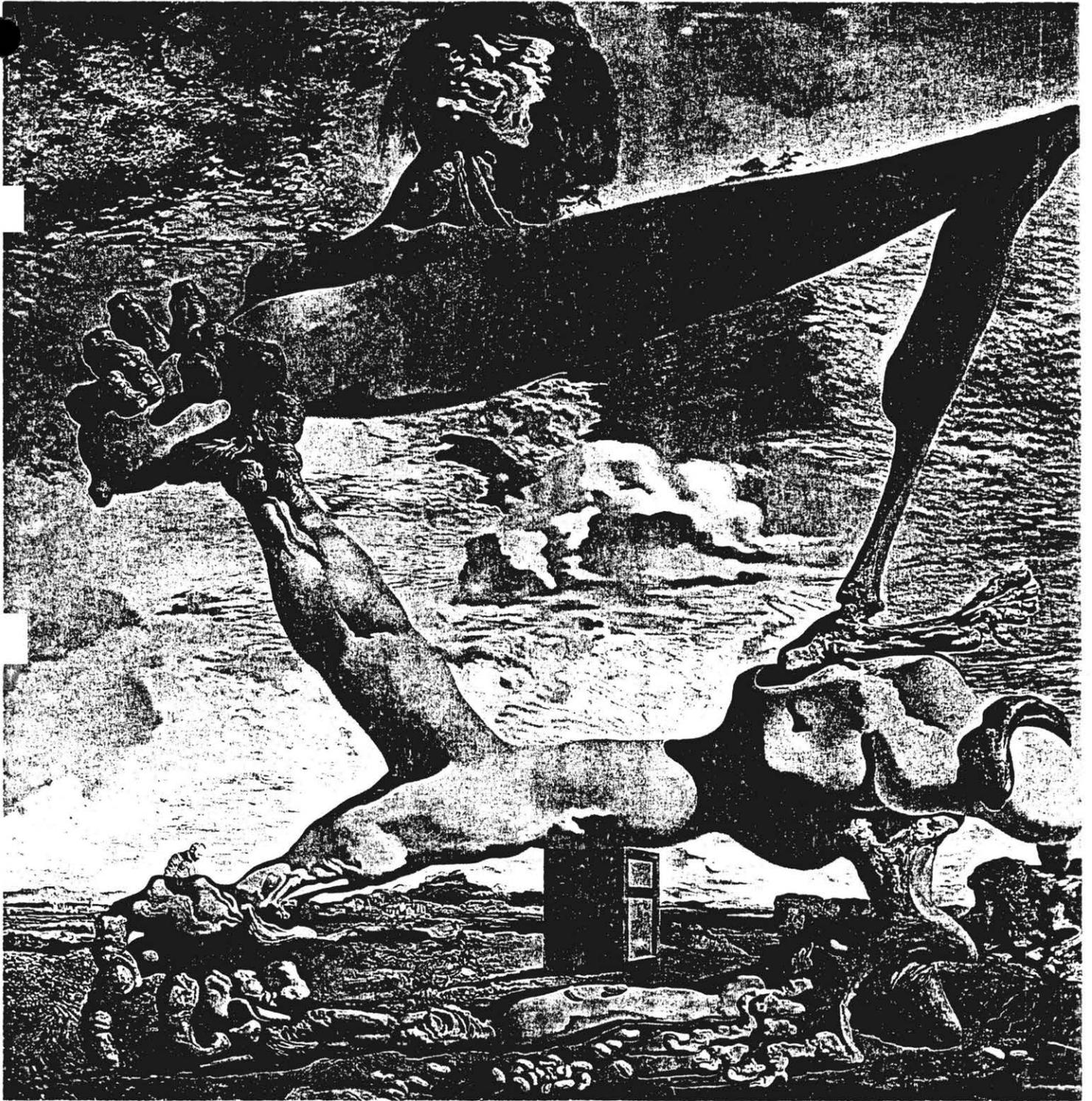
15. Rene Magritte, The Ready Made Bouquet, 1957



16. Joan Miro, The Harlequin's Carnival, 1925



17. Joan Miro, The Potato, 1928



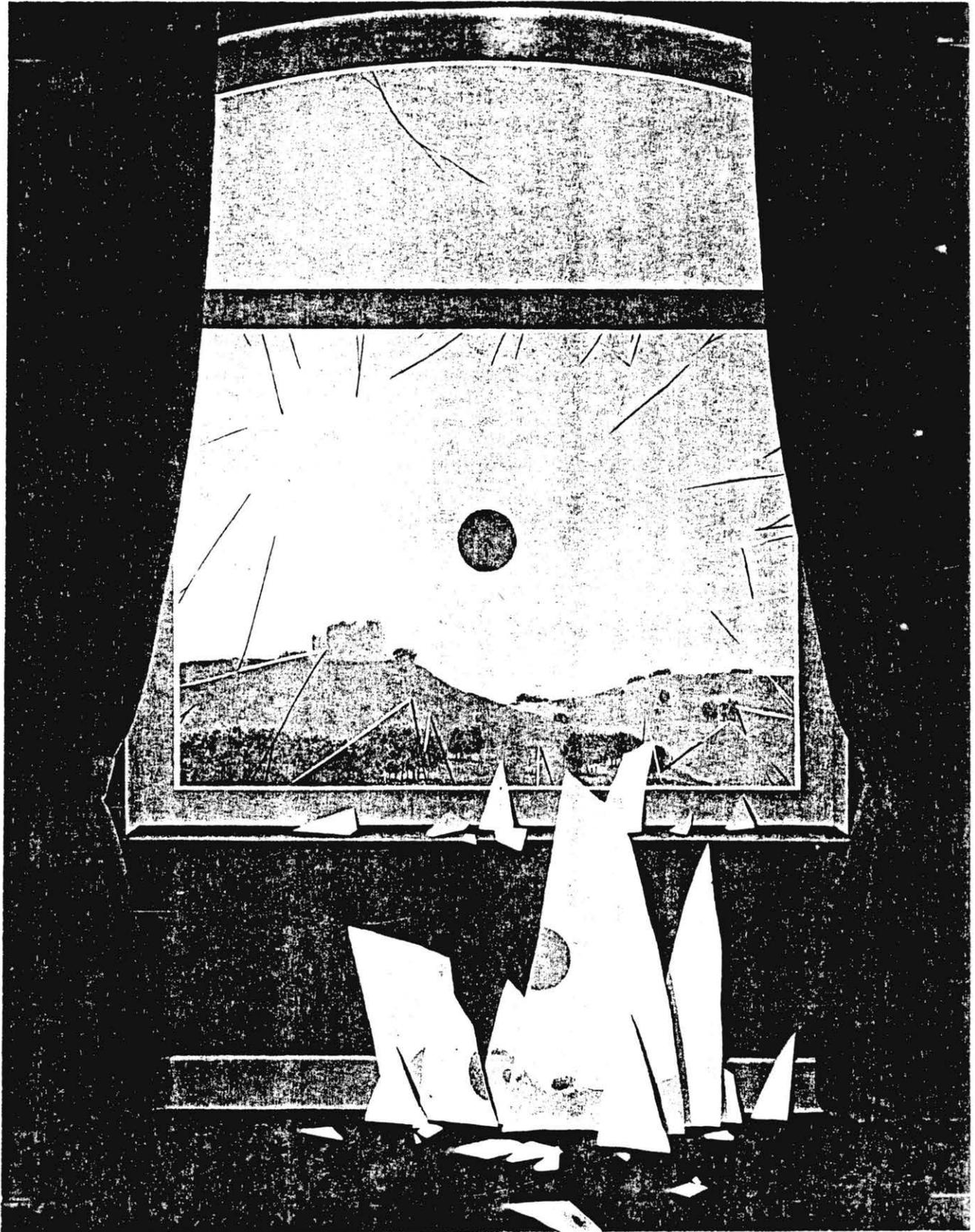
18. Salvadore Dali, Soft Construction with Boiled Beans;
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19. Hans Bellmer, Peppermint Tower in Honor of Greedy Little Girls, 1942



20. René Magritte. The Use of Speech, 1928

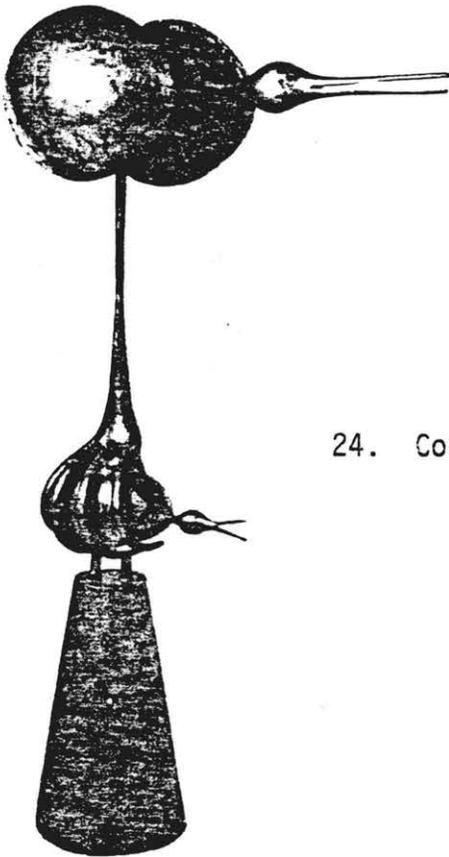
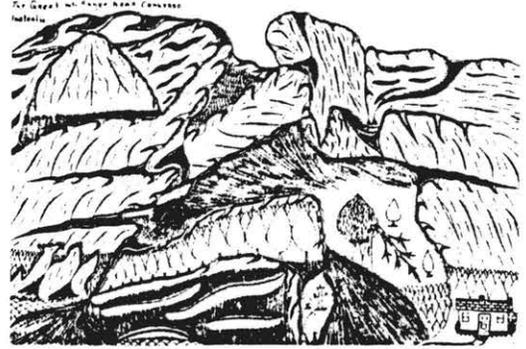


21. Rene Magritte, Evening Falls, 1964

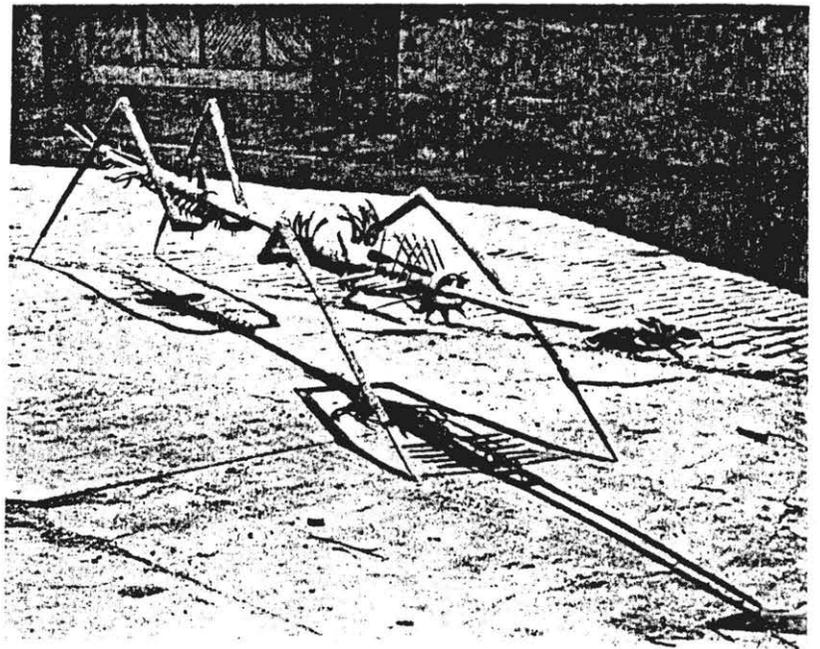


22. Henri Rousseau, The Dream, 1910

23. Joseph E. Yoakum, The Great Mtn. Range Near Canberra
Austria, 1964

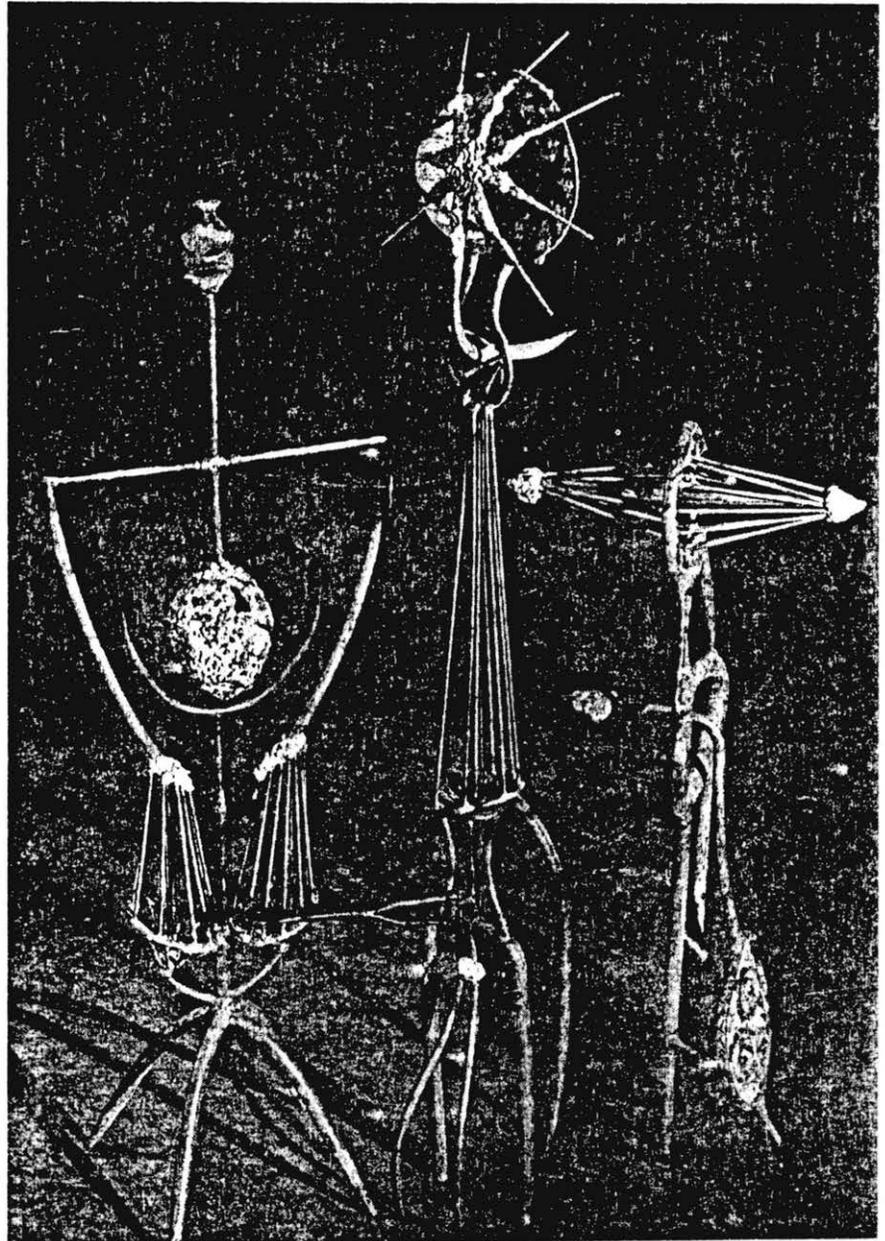


24. Cosmo Campoli, Bird Protecting New Born, 1970

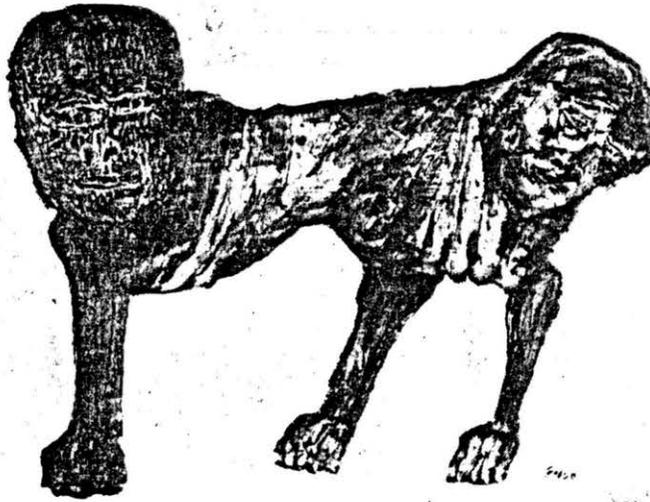


25. Joseph Goto, Emanak, n.d.

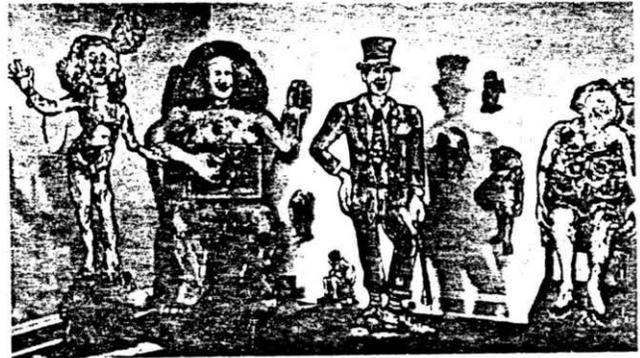
26. George Cohen, Limbus, 1958



27. Ray Fink, Triptych, n.d.



28. Leon Golub, The Siamese Sphinx, 1954



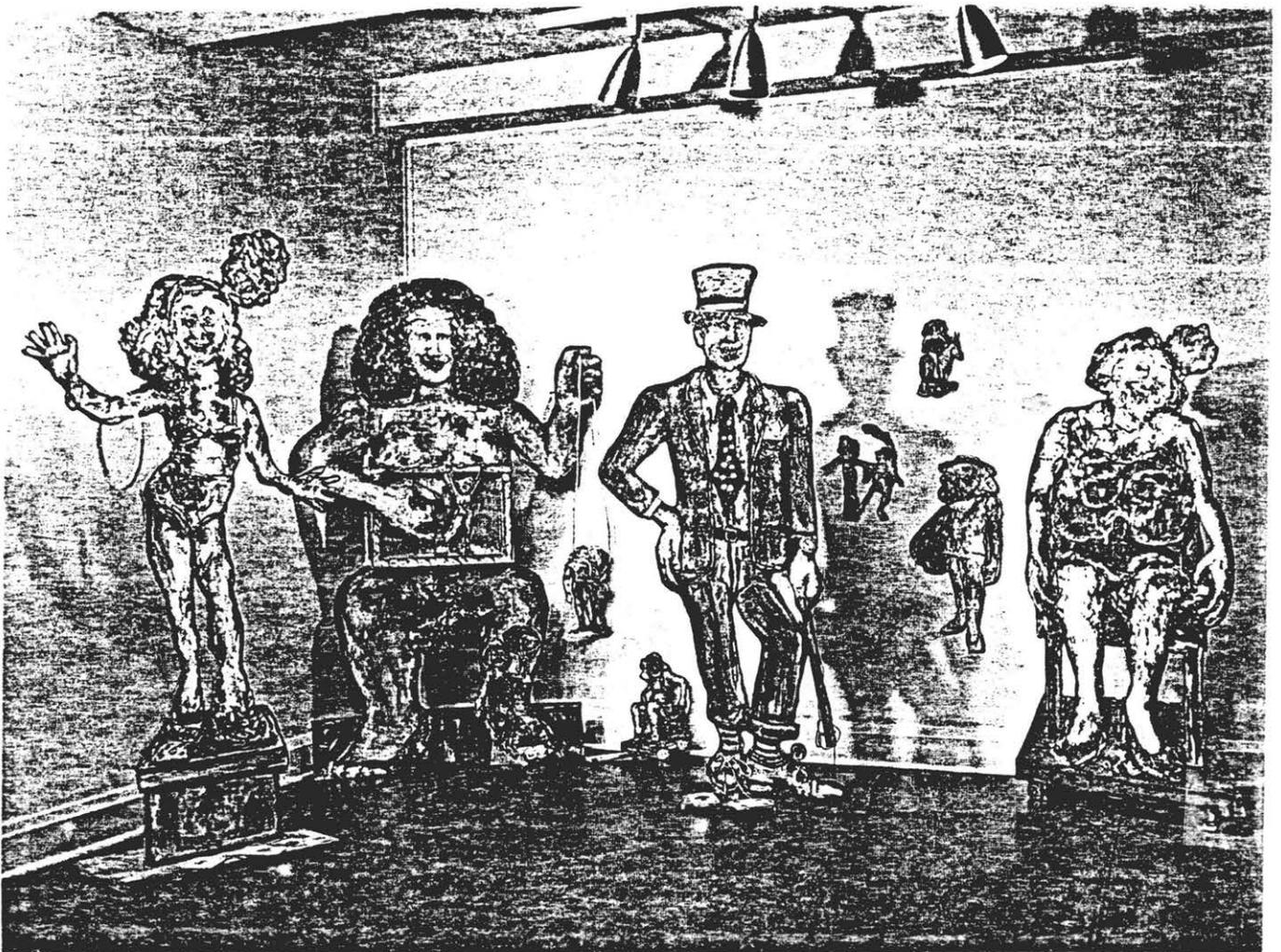
29. June Leaf, Ascension of Pig Lady (detail), 1969



30. H.C. Westermann, The Evil New War God, 1958

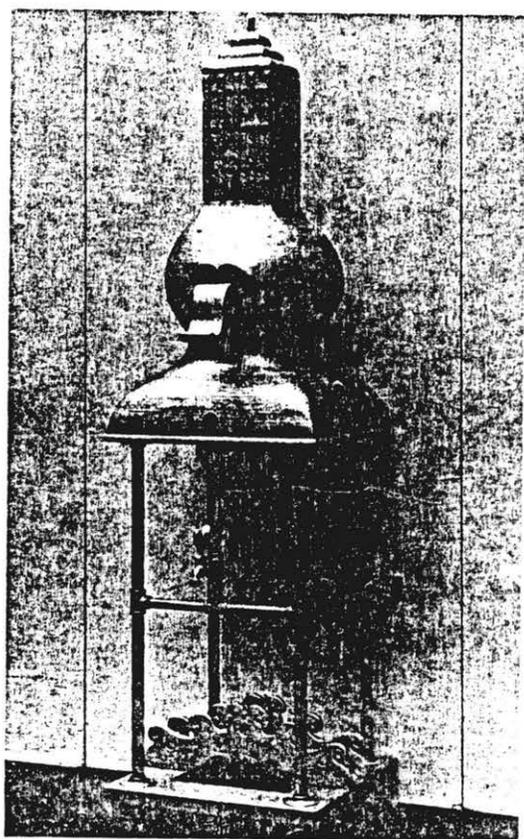
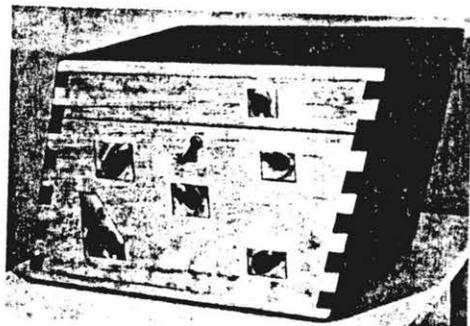


31. Seymour Rosofsky, Man with a Pacifier (I Will), 1970



32. June Leaf, Woman with Hoop, Woman Theatre, Man with Top Hat, Fat Lady, and wall pieces from Buster Brown series, 1968

33. H.C. Westerman, Imitation Knotty Pine, 1966



34. H.C. Westerman, Angry Young Machine, 1960

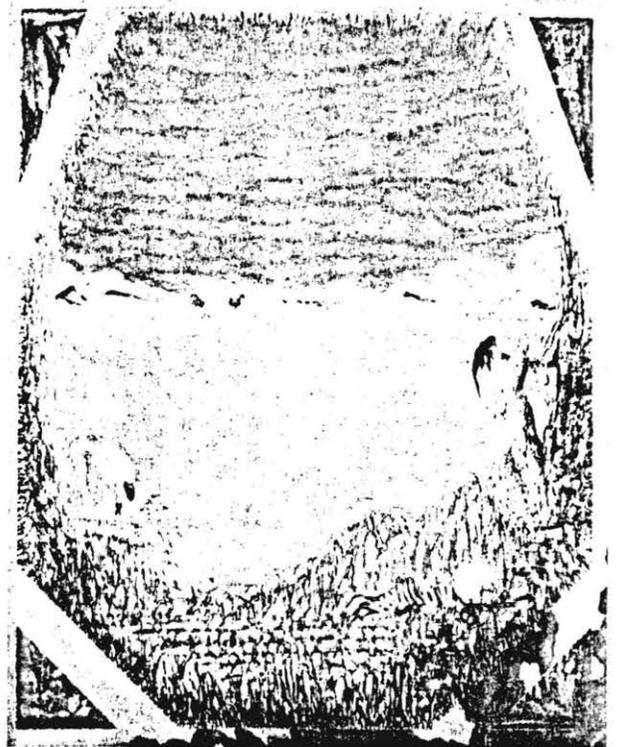
35. Leon Golub, Hamlet, n.d.



36. Seymour Rosofsky, The Doctors, 1967



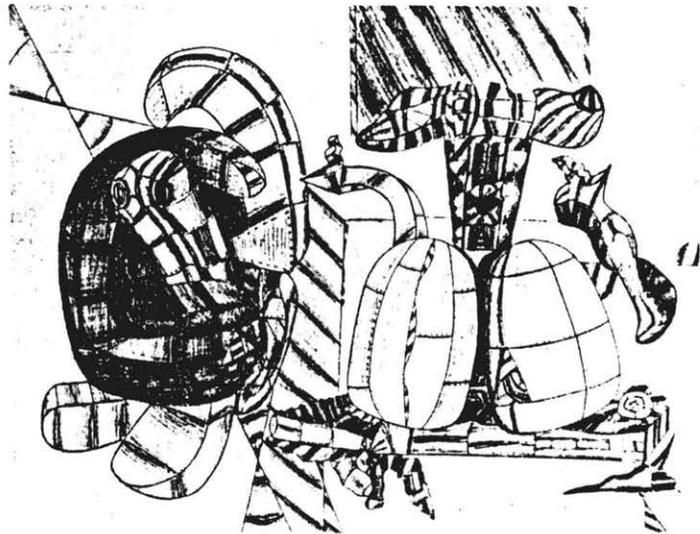
37. Robert Barnes, James Joyce, 1958



38. Irving Petlin, Rubbings From the Calcium Garden... Rachel, 1969



39. Richard Hunt, Large Hybrid, 1973



40. Ted Halkin, Untitled colored pencil drawing, 1968



41. Jim Nutt, Toot Toot Woo Woo, 1970



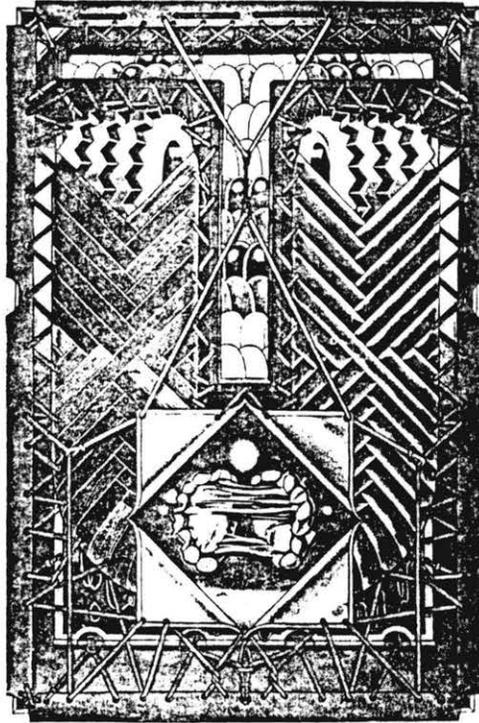
42. Gladys Nilsson, Teetebares, 1971



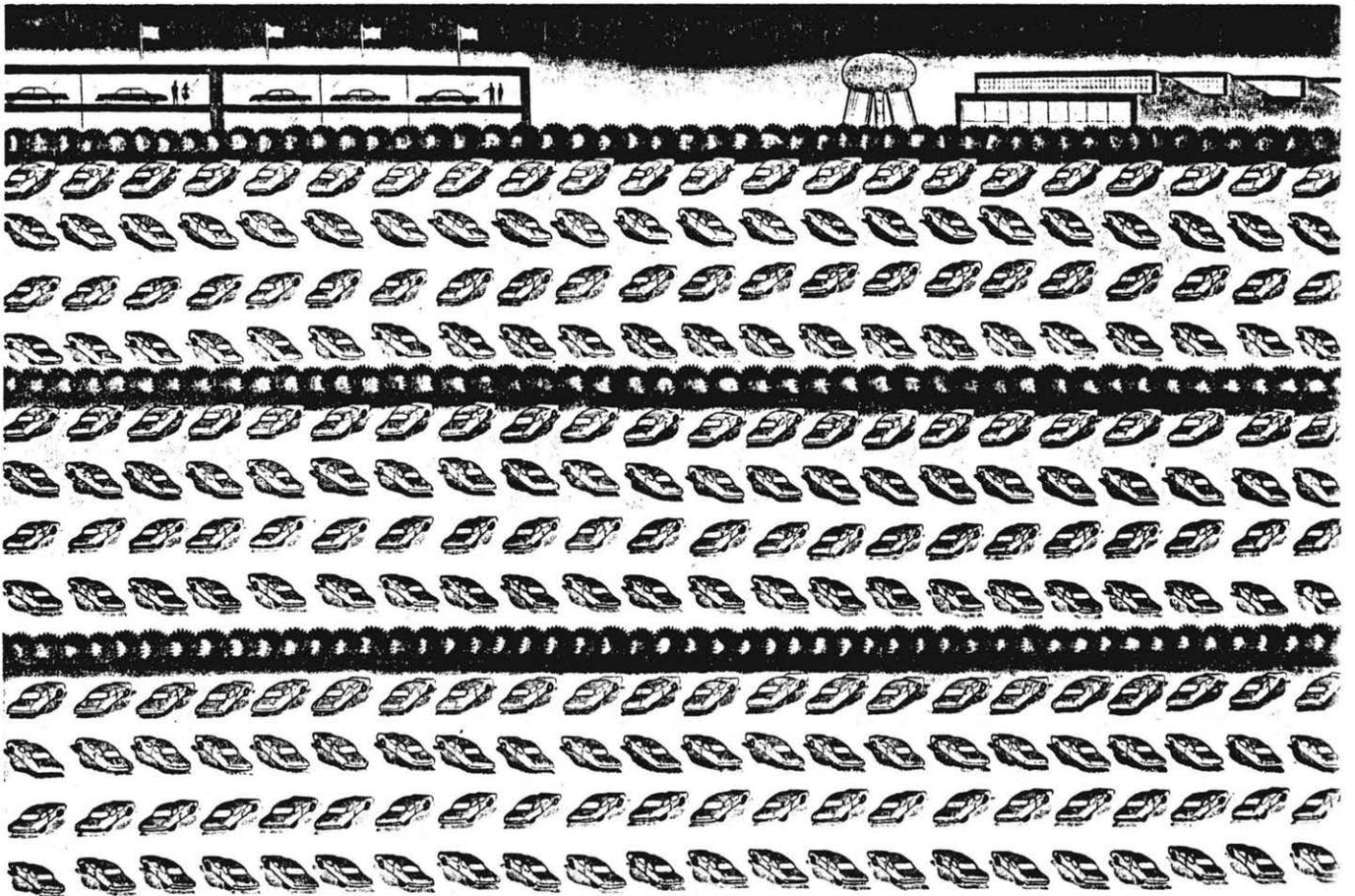
43. Karl Wirsum, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, program cover for the Hyde Park Art Center, 1968



44. Ed Paschke, Dominant Nurse, 1977



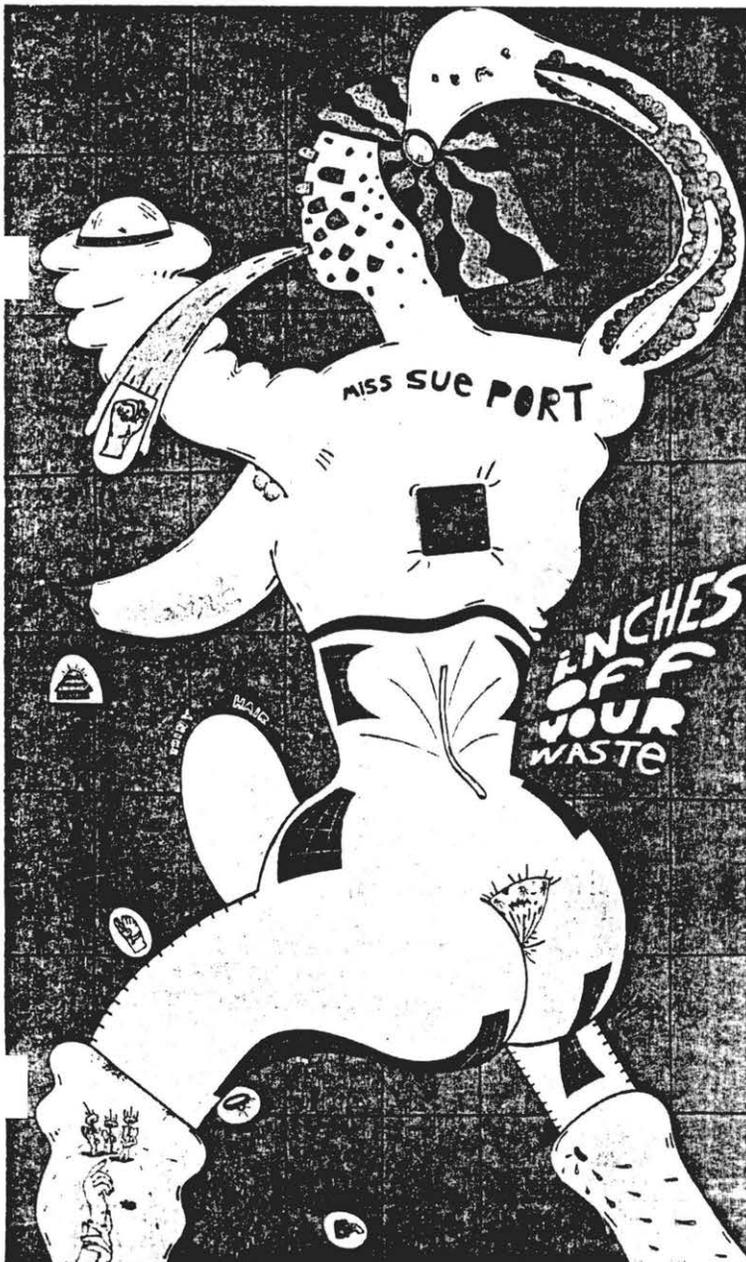
45. Art Green, Saturated Fat, 1971



46. Roger Brown, Grand Spaulding Dodge, 1975

47. Christina Ramberg,

Hereditary Uncertainty, 1977



48. Jim Nutt, Miss Sue Port, 1968

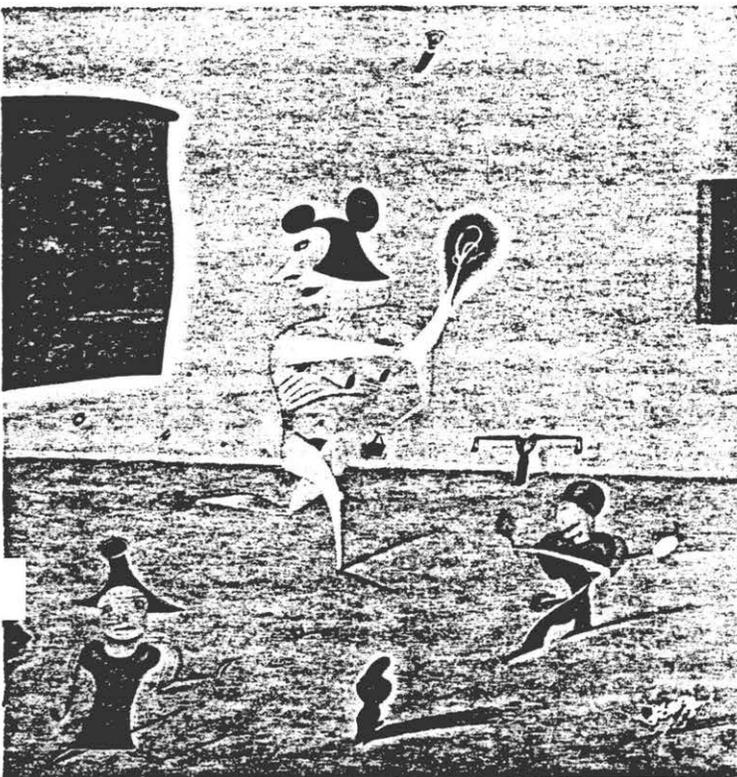


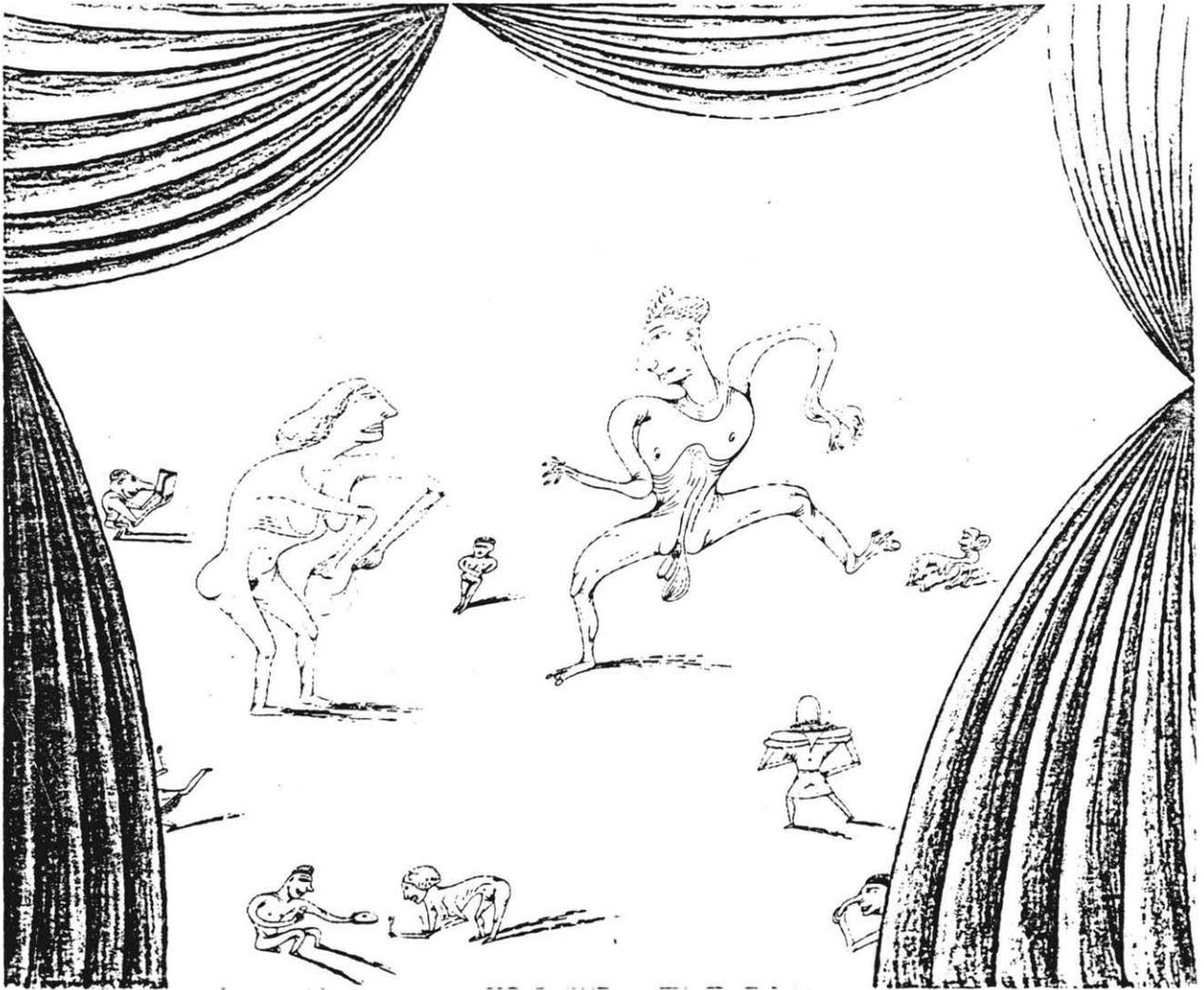
49. Jim Nutt, Look and Look, 1978

50. Jim Nutt, Zzzit, 1970



51. Jim Nutt, Please! - This is Important,
1977





52. Jim Nutt, Hold it Right There!, 1975