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STEVEN BARBASH  
*The Limits of Control*

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November 12 to December 15, 1977  
UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY  
State University of New York at Binghamton



High on the mountain  
the beautiful colors are cold,  
Where flying white clouds  
cease to look white.

Tao-Chi (1641-ca. 1710)  
"On the Mountain Peak"  
from **Returning Home**



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## FOREWORD/THE LIMITS OF CONTROL

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The University Art Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition reflecting nearly twenty years of the graphic work of Steven Barbash. Tracing the stylistic and chronological progression of the artist through the fifty pieces selected for this show is not an easy task.

The technical working-out of natural imagery on the surfaces of Arches drawing paper, of zinc and copper plate, informs the work of Steven Barbash with a constant series of graphic statements. Conversations with the artist reinforce the sense one has of the important role words play. Prior to creation, he conceptualizes, anticipates and articulates problems of rendering the initial idea. Subsequent to completion of the work, he elaborates on the stylistic choices that he had to make, the variants, the technical solutions, the potential for reworking. Even titles of the individual pieces are contrived to reflect the commenting presence of the artist, still audible even when the work is framed and hanging in the gallery.

Barbash is insistent: he cannot refrain from modifying and expanding the work's dimension, arguing its possibilities and the difficulties of its production. The gestation period of each new work is long. He succeeds in integrating the diverse elements of pictorial space into what one might call a plurality of durations in which the viewer must literally close in on the object viewed in order to follow the disurbances, changes of tension and energy. The artist's memory of his farm, or of a nearby swimming hole, is not part of a past that ended somewhere in time but rather it has survived in him (in a large number of his prints and drawings) as the present that it once was. In the chain of signifiers, the series of memory prints and imprints which structure the temporality of Barbash's work, the past is contemporary with the present. It, along with the objects belonging to the past such as the turtle carapace, the cabinet of bird-forms, is preserved within the artist's own imposing presentness — itself already slipping away to become history. Although the viewer is not afforded the same possibility of temporal recuperation (the artist



re-presents, avoiding confrontation with his own mortality), he is granted the valuable time of seeing. And it is during that reflected viewing time demanded by all of Barbash's work, that one comes to terms with the long and arduous commitment the artist makes whenever he picks up a drawing instrument.

One senses that one can never get sufficiently close to the image to trace its generation, its point of origin. The intricacy of line and texture in the landscapes, in the flower prints, pulls the viewer into the dynamics of the drawing, forcing him to become part of Barbash's investigation. The commenting self-consciousness that characterizes verbal exchanges with the artist is missing from all but the Lady and Turtle series; there, one hears another voice speaking, tinged with a kind of sardonic humor, intrigued by discontinuity and arbitrariness. The unexpected juxtaposition of the nude and the tortoise, of the soft, vulnerable flesh against the elaborately detailed hieroglyphics of the hard shell, is one of the instances in Barbash's work where technical achievement serves to heighten another, more problematic, statement: it is this voice which admits to the ambiguity of position (that of the artist as organizer of visual space, that of the viewer attempting to examine the work and that of the compositional elements in relation to each other). The Lady and Turtle series, especially "Turtle Dance" which turns out to be a metacritical commentary, the mud turtle doubling and yet differing from its own reversed image, manages to establish an expectancy in the viewer which is not disappointed. Dissimilar images are divided by an implicit spatial barrier, the boundaries of which serve to define the edges of positive forms transcribed as well as the negative space created between them. Contours are

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marked off in the compositional dyad in such a way as to make transgression of those limits impossible. This holds true for Barbash's most recent print "Birds" wherein painstaking rendering of form and texture underscores the motion of going as far as one can go in a highly restricted area — up to the very edges of that particular graphic possibility. The artist himself remains separate, tensed between adequacy and excess, on edge and on the edge.

It is with time, perhaps more than any other single factor, that Barbash has struggled and succeeded in controlling through patiently developed techniques. And it is not only his own time which has been expanded but also that of the viewer who would penetrate the iconographic wall erected by Barbash and read the text beneath the surface, to see how it was made, to follow its convolutions and to ignore, finally, the passage of clock-time. The line, the first mark made on the blank paper or plate, claims for itself a space of inscription. Once registered by the eye of the viewer, the image continues to make its statement although Barbash has absented himself from the process. Having disappeared from his own text once it has been made "visible," Barbash also eliminates the need for the viewer to decipher any significant code. It is all there before us. The works, themselves now signifiers which combine and regroup, resist closure just as they resisted time. There is no previous and original meaning in Barbash's work — only the open-ended activity of distinguishing formal relationships within the syntax of pictorial space. Looking at Barbash's work reveals how things become what they are.

**Jill Grossvogel**  
**Administrative Assistant**  
**University Art Gallery**



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## CHANGES: THE NATURAL GROUPINGS OF STEVEN A. BARBASH

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1 Two aspects of Steven A. Barbash's life have had enormous impact on his fine art. First, although he was raised in various Jewish neighborhoods of New York City, where he specialized in pick-up basketball, he has always been awed by nature. In a recent interview, he emphasized: "I remember seeing how light plays on buildings in the city and I remember clearly how the sky was framed by apartment buildings when I lived in the Bronx." From an urban childhood, he moved to a rural adulthood. First he owned a farm (complete with copperhead snakes in the basement of his house) in central Pennsylvania for ten years and then he moved in 1970 to his present location in the middle of New York state. He loves to fish, to raise plants, to learn the natural history of his neighborhood. Still, he steps into the forest like a child. There's a spirit behind every flower and tree. His art shows a tough New York kid in a strange new wilderness.

The second influential element is more difficult to explain. As the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Barbash is imbued with the value of learning. An intellectual, knowledgeable about American history, western art since the Renaissance, and oriental art, he has taught a wide range of topics at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania and the State University of New York at Cortland. As a lecturer with intriguing ideas, marvelous Yiddish humor, and true compassion, Barbash stands apart from those college professors who hide behind their notes and contribute nothing more than ennui. How does this influence his art?

In his life, there has been a dialogue, or, perhaps better said, a tension between training and inspiration. In Barbash's best works, two different systems of thought seem to exist: (1) a Hudson-River-School-love of nature and (2) a Bauhaus preciseness. Indeed, while these two worlds seem disparate, Barbash combines them in what might be called a doctrine of change.

Change. In what sense is the word to be understood? In Barbash's large studio on Main Street in Cortland, there is an array of props: black and white photographs of the Pennsylvania



landscape, dry flowers, and his famous mud turtle. The subject-matter of virtually every print in this exhibition can be seen in real life in the studio. The iris, the daffodil, the mum exist. Drawn by a botanical illustrator, these would be pretty bits; but in Barbash's hands they become ambassadors of natural life. To his eye, nature is forever in flux, urging him on, humbling him before unending variety.

As far as Barbash can remember, this view of natural change has been his own. He did not learn it from someone else. His professional art training under Josef Albers at Yale, however, was a different matter. It was an intensely structural schooling that said very little about the growth and decay of natural forms, and focused almost entirely on elements of artistic speech: the physics, chemistry, and geometry of line and color. Barbash saw that the permutations of these formal elements promised an artistic life of ceaseless change.

The idea that an enormous variety of visual effects could be learned by the artist, and then that these tools could be applied to capture some of nature's changing appearance, has been Barbash's main concern. His goal has been to take a mum or a turtle or a woman or a bird or a landscape and to look at each from differing points of view — as both a child and a formal artist. How does our perception of a natural form change when we alter light, background, or color? And what changes when we bring two or more of these subjects into a single frame? Barbash, himself, says it best: "As I get older I am more and more aware that things are constantly changing. They come to fruition, they have instances of some kind of amazing life and they go into death. There are rebirths. This DYNAMISM OF CHANGE is the thing to deal with. My images stay static but they must deal with the implications of their past, the quality of that instant [when I draw them], and what they will become — and yet still be one picture implying all these changes."



From the Series

LOOKING UP FROM A SWIM, 1968, etching





From the Series IRIS, 1969, etching



II Many of the subjects that Barbash creates have been done for centuries. In the mature years of abstract expressionism, and all through op, pop, and minimal art, Barbash spent his time with flowers, landscapes, birds and other romantic subjects. For him, the test of artistic insight is to take one of these images and make it new: "to see new extraordinary possibilities in old subject matter," is the way he puts it. His novelty comes from this life-long dialogue. The tension of a modern artist, trained in the Albers tradition, dealing in natural forms, is very much in Barbash's mind: "When the imagination enters the physical world, the physical world has laws to make imagination work, to make it visible. The physical world directs my intellectual powers. My first images are made by an utterly non-intellectual process. Usually they are images which haunt me, that I want to just do. And flowers always have since I was a little kid."

Barbash sees flowers "as one of the great images of life and death and sexuality." He started drawing them in the early 1960s and worked hard "to get them out of the range of simply being pretty and to make them come to life again under my direction." He has drawn them in numerous fine-line styles; he has printed and painted them in various ways. His Chrysanthemum, for example, has been etched and printed on a plain background, then on an aquatint background, and finally on a ground of aquatint and cross-hatch. The process literally transformed the figure from a positive to a negative image. He began experimenting with this dramatic background in 1969 on the small Daffodil. He found that the cross-hatch over the aquatint gave a much darker and richer ground than cross-hatch alone. His latest florals employ this technique. They are heavy with ink, and instead of just looking like velvet they have, in

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Barbash's words, "a special kind of richness, a translucency, a dark ground that goes in and out." The set on exhibition is printed in black, but other groups are done in green and in blue. These have a gray effect, with less contrast between light and dark.

III Landscape is his oldest genre. Since boyhood, it has been a faithful love. Areas of land Barbash drew and painted while living in Pennsylvania are now under a huge, man-made reservoir. That change in the landscape affected him directly because it forced him to sell his farm. Repeatedly he refers to his Pennsylvania landscape images as proof of change.

The Pennsylvania landscape was not the picturesque, vista-laden brand of the White Mountains, but — as seen through Barbash's eyes — a brooding, womb-like series of enclosures, which residents call "hollers." Precipitous slopes create continually changing patterns of veils and shadows. One day, while swimming in the Juniata River he decided to capture these images in the series "Looking Up From A Swim."

Drawings were first. Etchings, which were made by applying aquatint and following it with line work, came second. A close look will show that the lines were applied in layers, or numerous states, numbering three to twenty. This required about four years of work. From the first picture, looking at the scene along the Juniata, each successive view got closer and closer to the subject matter. Relying heavily on photographs, he produced five pictures, four of which became prints.

IV At about the same time, he began the Lady and Turtle drawings, all of which are included in the exhibition. Ten or more years ago, Barbash found a dead turtle in the mountain region of central Pennsylvania. He hung it in a crabapple tree for several years, and when he left the area



to go to Cortland the turtle went with him.

While the turtle swung in the humors of the Pennsylvania seasons, Barbash was filling his notebooks with sketches. When he looks back on those years, he chuckles in self-deprecation. "I kept looking at this turtle, wondering what I was going to do with it. I started with my basic intellectual historical mind thinking about the turtle. Right? And I had all kinds of ideas. Well, the turtle is a very important symbolic form. It's a form of long life, a symbol for the north, a symbol for good luck; it plays many roles in western and eastern myths. Turtles' bones are said to have played a part in the origin of Chinese writing. All this stuff was coming to mind. I even thought of doing a kind of **View of Toledo** on the back of a turtle. Now all of that was great fun, and it's marvelous to talk about, but there's only one trouble: all these wonderful ideas were awful. They just didn't work visually. So I simply began drawing the turtle." At almost the same time (1970) he returned to the female nude. Then, as Barbash remembered: "One day, out of the blue, after drawing the two separately, I decided to bring them together. The first I did was pretty simple, but slowly a series developed. Not just a group of pictures, but a kind of event is what I sought. A continuous event where the hard crusty turtle was meeting this breath-sucking model. They had an interaction. They met. They turned away. Together the drawings sat on a dangerous edge, (I always like that dangerous edge), where the turtle was almost a caricature, but not; hopefully." Despite their differences, the lady and turtle seemed to pull closer together. They touched. She rode it. She wore it. Change. One minute the turtle is a vehicle of slow, reliable transportation, later the turtle is as small as a helmet. Change. It even flies.

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V Barbash has sure hands. He believes firmly in being able to draw rapidly and is a promoter of the timed sketch as an academic exercise. Before he begins his tightly controlled drawings, he warms up with quick, flash-like strokes. Working from photographs, from life, or from his own work, he exercises until it feels right. He taught himself to draw.

His earliest experience with sketching a nude rests vividly in his mind:

There was this famous lady at the Art Students League. The classes were filled with veterans from the Second World War, and I went down there to draw her. I sat in the room waiting for classes to begin. My reasons for being there were both erotic and artistic. We had little chairs which we straddled. I sat there sharpening my pencil, trying to be cool. I was the youngest person there. She came in wearing a chemise. She weighed about 180 lbs., a Rubens, mother-sex everything all together. She surveyed the room and saw this little kid sweating, and she just looked down and said, 'alright sonny, any time you're ready, I am.' This broke up the class, broke me up, destroyed one of the early great erections of my life.

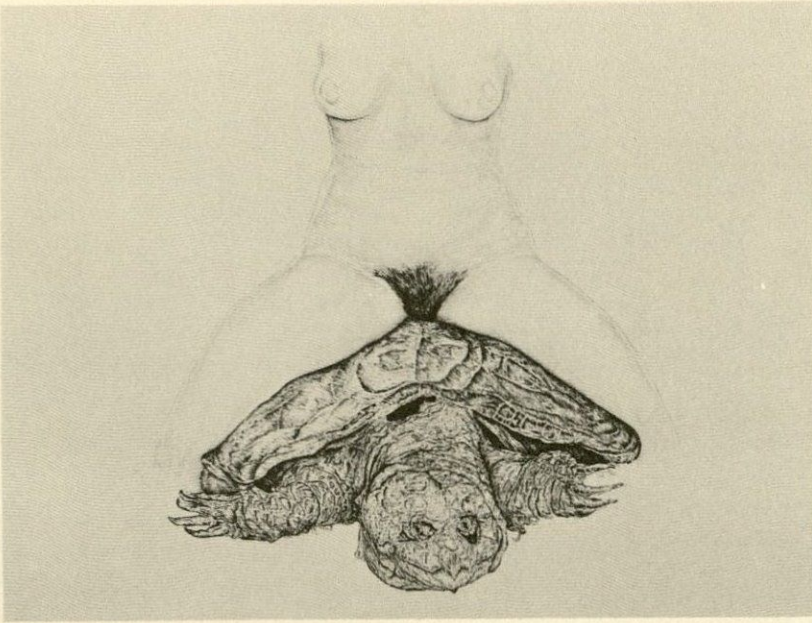
Barbash drew from live nudes for years. He did not then, nor does he now, draw a figure rapidly in outline. He begins with particular parts and the rest of the figure follows from that part.

One aspect of the Lady and Turtle group particularly fascinates Barbash. Never, in real life, did the model and the turtle touch. They met only on his drawing paper. In the pictures that show her riding, Barbash actually had a wooden saddle built for the model to mount. He then drew her form, minus the saddle, and in its place substituted the reptile. When knowing artists ask where he found such a large turtle, Barbash beams. Bringing the two together is his creation. That, to him, matters very much.

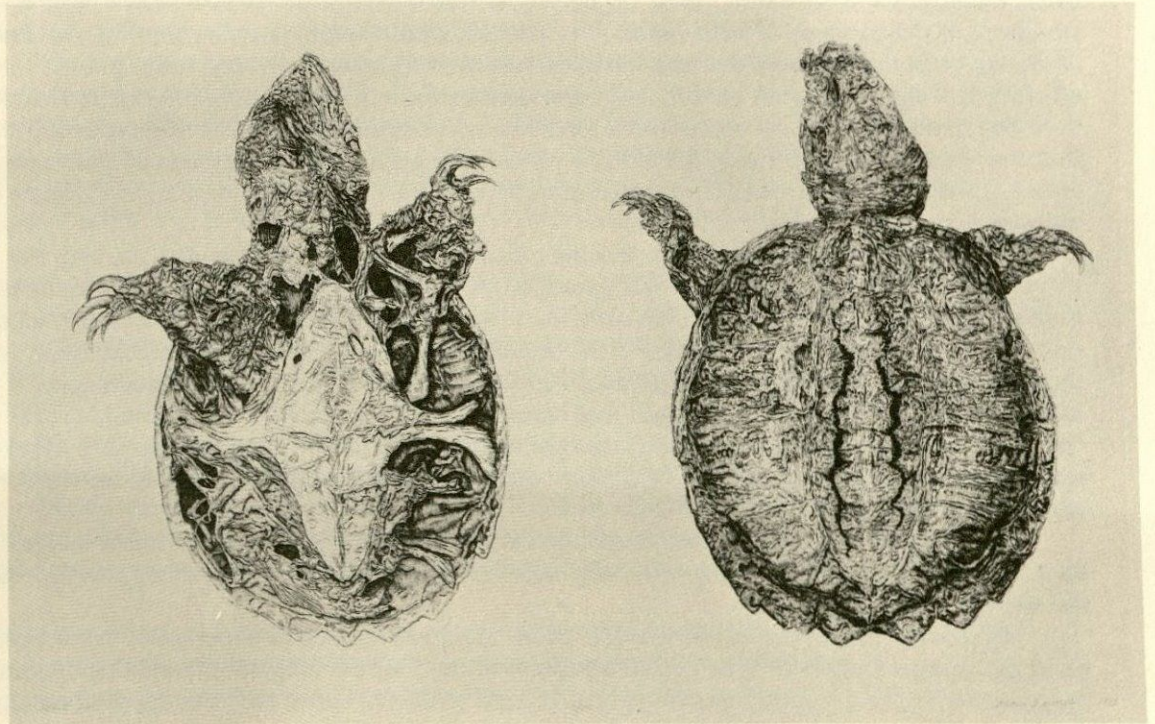
A portfolio of Lady and Turtle images is being etched. The goal is to bring a new quality to the prints which does not exist in the drawings; namely a greater consistency in the darkness of



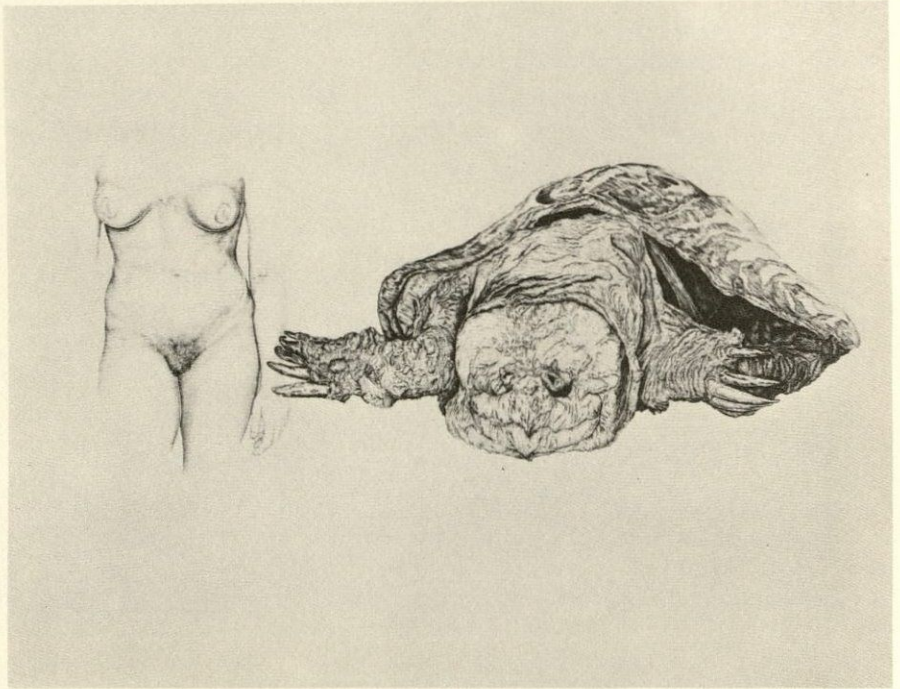
From the Series RIDING, 1975, etching



TURTLE DANCE, 1975, etching







every line and a surface that is "alive." To do this, he relies on optical mixture, much like the vibrations in the pictures of Josef Albers. The intensity of the black ink varies with the amount of white space permitted between fine-ink lines. This technique was common among line engravers of the nineteenth century, but even here Barbash makes a change. As opposed to the hard line of an engraver, his etched lines are much more feathery. In addition, the lines are so fine that they have to be made with the aid of a magnifying glass. The overall effect is what Barbash calls a "tonality," a shimmer and continual change that virtually forbid the eye to focus easily on any single point.

This worked well with the turtle, but the more he tried the technique with the lady the more impossible it seemed. "What was good for the turtle wasn't good for the female form," in Barbash's words: "The female wouldn't shimmer. So I developed the technique of applying dots one by one over the lines. This gave me the subtlest tonalities I ever got, more subtle even than those in the drawings." After printing various groups of ladies and turtles, Barbash began experimenting with the ink impression that came from the non-etched part of the plate, the "plate-tone." By working an eraser over the plate-tone areas of the print, he created a different feel. Thus, by using stipple instead of aquatint and erasers instead of "plate-tone" he has achieved, in his own words, "greater control."

This desire for control is a deliberate choice. Barbash himself admits that these things "may be a tremendous amount of labor for a very small difference, but that small difference for me is the key."

His passion for innovation is nowhere more apparent than in his latest work: coloring by hand the various Lady and Turtle prints. Barbash has done oil paintings of the unlikely couple, but they received mixed reaction and he himself is now unsure of them, but coloring prints is clearly pregnant with opportunity. The ink lines serve only as general guides. Sometimes he follows the





GROSBEAK, 1975, etching



FIRST SONG, 1973, etching

bounded contours, more often he does not. He explains: "Every time I take a Lady and Turtle print and start to color it, I discover that the psychological environment in the print changes depending on which colors I choose." The same image is colored differently with each fresh impression. Where will it take him? He muses: "Some day I'd like to have a wall of one print in six or seven impressions, each with a different color environment, a different feeling."

Barbash is pleased with the hand-colored etchings. His painting, drawing, and printmaking are coming together. And so are his various subjects. His latest notebooks show that the landscapes will soon be visited by the lady from the turtle series, and he is working up a latent interest in birds.

There were times, years ago, when Barbash did very small bird prints — prints that would be quick and "relatively painless." Working from real birds, he drew directly on the plate. The first was a birth announcement for his daughter Laura (1967), then an announcement for his godson (1973). Others followed. They exude confidence. Barbash did not then, nor does he now, seem to understand how good they are.

Today, the birds that were once small and "easy to do," have grown in size, number, and importance. His large bird etching (1977) was inspired by a nineteenth-century cabinet of thirteen stuffed specimens. Printed on a zinc plate measuring  $23\frac{1}{2}'' \times 31\frac{5}{8}''$ , the subject has many possibilities. One can see hand-colored birds, a dozen or more pictures of the same birds from various positions, and perhaps even birds meeting flowers, turtles, landscapes, and ladies.

VI In Barbash's work there is a microcosm of the problem perceived by modern American artists. Faced with the beauty of nature, one inspired soul after another raced into the wilderness. In short order, each found that formal training was indispensable, that nature did not translate directly into art. But too much training was also a problem. How was an artist to learn the trade



without losing a love of those wild images? The struggle between mannerism and inspiration lay at the core of American art. Barbash is only one in a long line of distinguished creators who often felt trapped: they were artists working against themselves. Indeed, in the tension between schooling and inspiration may be the heart of Barbash's creativity. Depicting changes in natural groupings is his way of expressing the dual forces of art and nature guiding his artistic life.

**Peter C. Marzio**  
**Smithsonian Institution**

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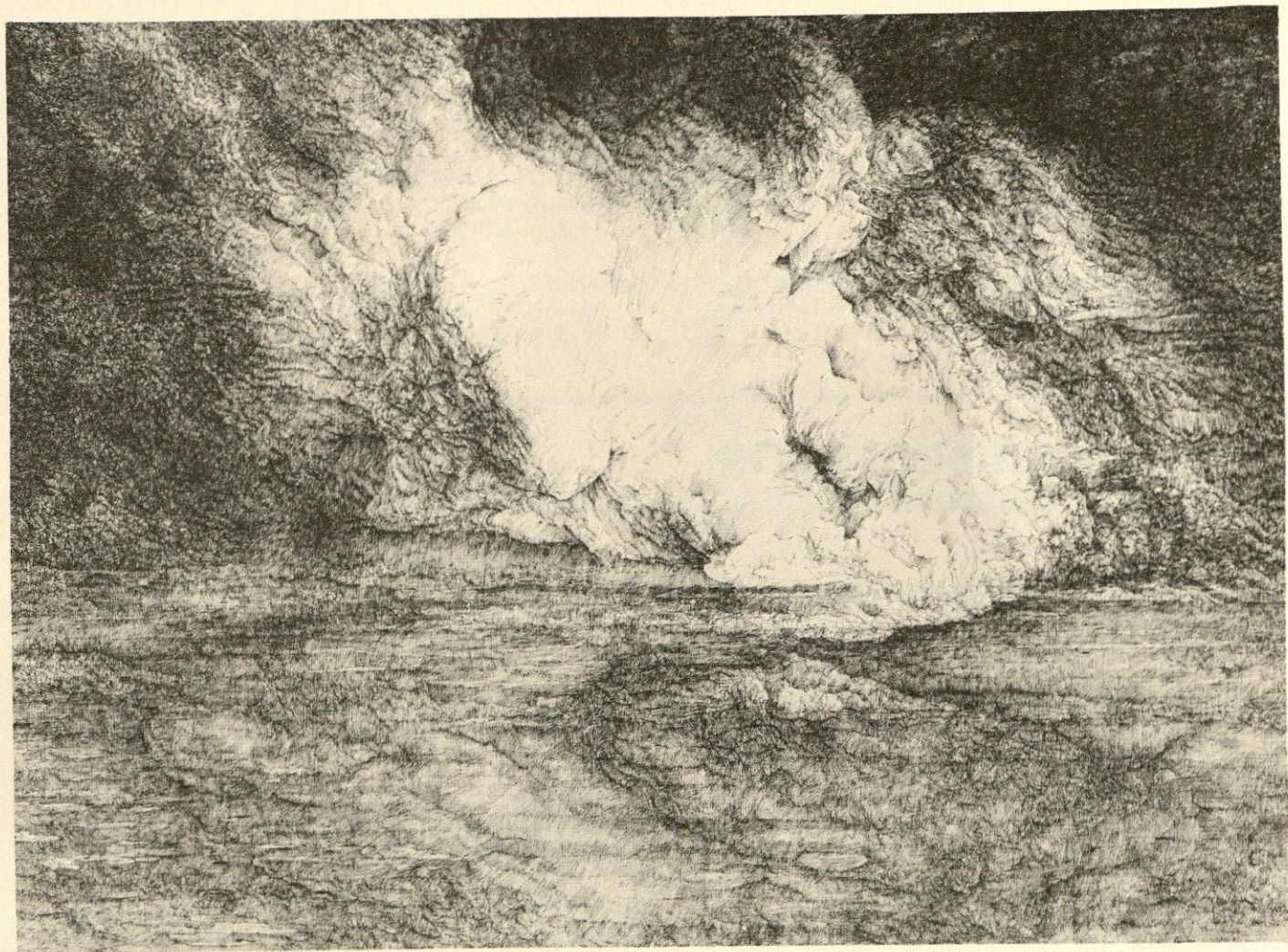
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### **Acknowledgements**

To Ken Lindsay for suggesting the exhibition; to Peter Marzio for his essay and for his assistance in choosing and hanging the show; to Jill Grossvogel for her introduction to the catalogue as well as her patience and support.

To my teachers Louis Schencker, Gabor Peterdi and Bernard Chaet.





GOODALE POND, 1976, pen and ink



- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. LANDFALLS<br>Etching, 1959<br>8 x 17                           | 12. HARRISBURG NARROWS<br>Pen & ink, 1968<br>13 x 18              |
| 2. TOWNS AGAINST THE HILLSIDE<br>Etching, 1959<br>11-1/2 x 17-1/2 | 13. LOOKING UP FROM A SWIM #3<br>Etching, 1969<br>21-3/4 x 27-3/4 |
| 3. FOREST<br>Etching, 1960<br>17-3/4 x 23-3/4                     | 14. LOOKING UP FROM A SWIM #4<br>Etching, 1969<br>21-3/4 x 27-3/4 |
| 4. FIVE STALKS #1<br>Pen & ink, 1962<br>35 x 40                   | 15. LOOKING UP FROM A SWIM #5<br>Etching, 1969<br>21-3/4 x 27-3/4 |
| 5. VIEW FROM THE BACK OF MY FARM #1<br>Pencil, 1964<br>14 x 20    | 16. IRIS #1<br>Etching, 1969<br>17-3/4 x 23-3/4                   |
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## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

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|---|--|
| 6. VIEW FROM THE BACK OF MY FARM #2<br>Liquitex on paper, 1964<br>14 x 20 | 17. IRIS #2<br>Etching, 1969<br>17-3/4 x 23-3/4  |
| 7. VIEW FROM PARADISE FURNACE<br>Etching, 1967<br>10-1/2 x 13-1/2         | 18. DAFFODIL<br>Etching, 1969<br>10-3/4 x 13-1/4 |
| 8. STORM OVER HESSTON<br>Etching, 1968<br>5 x 7                           | 19. THREAT<br>Etching, 1969<br>4-7/8 x 3-7/8     |
| 9. NIGHT STORM<br>Etching, 1968<br>5 x 7                                  | 20. MEETING #1<br>Pencil, 1970<br>19 x 26        |
| 10. CHRYSANTHEMUM<br>Etching, 1968<br>21-3/4 x 27-1/2                     | 21. MEETING #2<br>Pencil, 1970<br>19 x 26        |
| 11. LOOKING UP FROM A SWIM #2<br>Etching, 1968<br>21-3/4 x 27-3/4         | 22. RIDING #1<br>Pencil, 1970<br>19 x 26         |



23. RIDING #2  
Pencil, 1970  
19 x 26
24. TURTLE  
Pencil, 1971  
19 x 26
25. TURNING  
Pencil, 1971  
19 x 26
26. TURTLE TURNED UP  
Pencil, 1971  
19 x 26
27. LADY WITH A HAT  
Pencil, 1971  
19 x 26
28. MUSE RIDING  
Charcoal & watercolor, 1971  
19 x 26
29. TURTLE TURNED UP  
Etching, 1971  
21 x 17
30. HUMMINGBIRD  
Etching, 1972  
3 x 4-1/4
31. TURTLE  
Etching, 1973  
21 x 17
32. FIRST SONG  
Etching, 1973  
2 x 3-1/2
33. NUDE  
Pencil, 1975  
7-3/4 x 10
34. GROSBEAK  
Etching, 1975  
2 x 2
35. MUSE VISITING  
Oil, 1975  
21 x 30
36. FOREST MEMORY  
Etching, 1975  
17-3/4 x 23-3/4
37. MEETING #1  
Etching, 1975  
18 x 24
38. RIDING #1  
Etching, 1975  
18 x 24
39. RIDING #2  
Etching, 1975  
18 x 24
40. ARROGANT BIRD  
Etching, 1975  
2 x 2
41. TURTLE DANCE  
Etching, 1975  
21-1/2 x 34
42. CHRYSANTHEMUM #3 (Night Flower #2)  
Etching, 1976  
21-3/4 x 27-1/2
43. GOODALE POND  
Pen & ink, 1976  
18 x 25
44. MEMORY OF A MARYLAND EVENING  
Pen & ink, 1976  
20 x 28-1/2
45. A MUSE DISCOVERING THE GORGE OF THE GENESEE  
Pencil, 1977  
26 x 40
46. RIDING #2  
Hand-colored etching, 1977  
18 x 24
47. BIRDS  
Etching, 1977  
23-1/4 x 31-1/4



Born June 4, 1933, New York, N.Y. Currently teaching at SUNY-Cortland.

#### EDUCATION

Art Students League of New York (with Yasuo Kuniyoshi), Summer 1951.

Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson (with Louis Schanker, Stefan Hirsh), 1951-55 B.A.

School of Art and Architecture, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. (with Josef Albers, Bernard Chaet, Rico Lebrun, James Brooks; Assistant in Graphics to Gabor Peterdi, 1960), 1957-60, B.F.A., M.F.A.

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## STEVEN BARBASH

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#### ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

Barone Gallery, New York, 1961

Carl Siembab Gallery, Boston, 1967

William Penn Museum, Harrisburg, Pa., 1967

Marlin McCleaf Gallery, Philadelphia, 1969

Wilson College, Chambersburg, Pa., 1969

SUNY-Cortland, 1970

Wells College, Aurora, N.Y., 1973

LeMoyne College, Syracuse, N.Y., 1973

Gallery 121, Ithaca, N.Y., 1974

Zoller Gallery, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, 1975

The Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University, Hamilton, N.Y., 1976

#### COLLECTIONS

University of Connecticut, Storrs

Chancellor, State University of New York

Juniata College

Wells College

LeMoyne College

Wilson College

Dr. & Mrs. John Baker

Mr. & Mrs. Frank Tittleman

Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Me.

Pushkin Museum, Moscow, U.S.S.R.

Mermorial Art Gallery, Rochester, N.Y.

Marine Midland Bank, New York

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Museum of History & Technology, Smithsonian Inst., Washington, D.C.



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Cover: BIRDS, 1977, etching

