

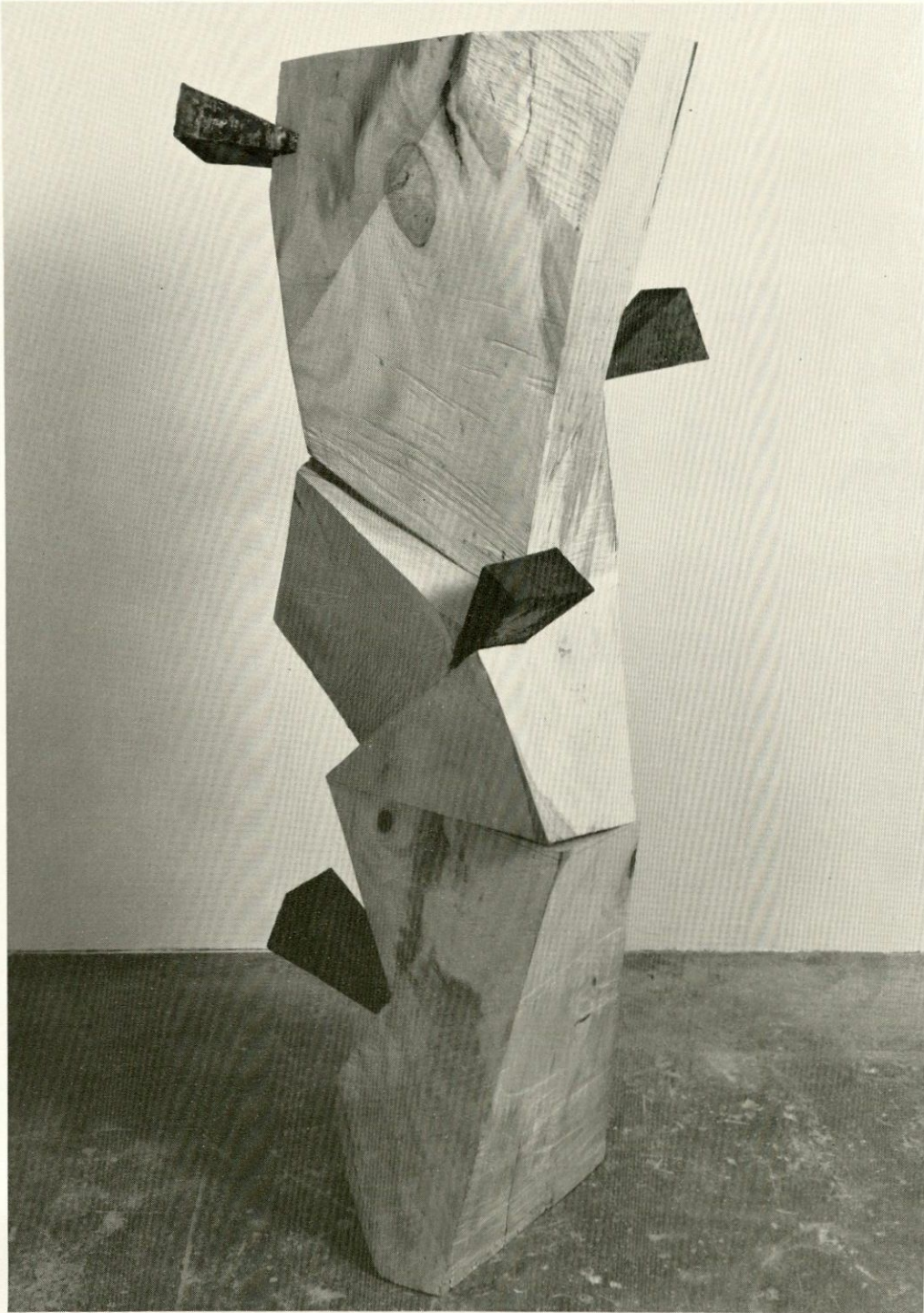
PETER
AMBROSE

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*The
Metaphorical
Figure*

Curated by Lynn Gamwell

OCTOBER 5-NOVEMBER 4, 1990
UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BINGHAMTON



FIRST DEATH

1990, cast iron and wood

54 x 22 x 22"

courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery

HUMAN BEINGS AND SCULPTURE both exist in a three-dimensional world, and thus the human body of the viewer is the implicit model for sculptural space. Peter Ambrose acknowledges this fundamental fact by giving his sculpture human scale. He also presents rich and varied surfaces to his viewers, for whom the sense of touch is essential to perception.¹

Ambrose infuses wood, metal, and glass with a subtle sense of the body, creating a tense balance between abstraction and figuration and between objectivity and subjectivity. His sculpture—a metaphorical projection of a figurative presence into alien, unhuman materials—presents modern man as fragmented and silent in a highly refined, abstract context.

Ambrose presents a very sophisticated but sobering image of the fragmented modern self in a series of life-size figures made from blocks of wood pierced with iron wedges: *Untitled* (1989), *First Death* (1990), and *Weight and Measure* (1990). Since iron wedges are used to split wood, they suggest the breaking up of the figure and bring to mind many recent discussions of “the falling apart of the self and of the world”² and T.W. Adorno’s remark that in modernism “art of the highest caliber pushes beyond totality towards a state of fragmentation.”³ These sculptures have a destructive overtone: split wood is used not for building, but for burning, leaving only ashes. The piercing wedges also give an ominous sense of being attacked from all sides. *First Death*, with its uncharacteristically emotive title for this cerebral artist, suggests this highly charged content. In the end, these extremely refined, abstract figures present us with an unromantic and stoical sculptural metaphor for the fragmented modern self.

In another haunting series, Ambrose creates torsos and heads that are less vulnerable to attack. The fragmented figures discussed above are all made of wood; the iron wedges threaten their dense unity from without. On the contrary, the torsos and heads—such as *Lead Head* (1983-84), *Torso* (1986), *Hero* (1987), and *Heart* (1988)—are made from impenetrable metal surfaces and give the impression of shields or masks. Here we encounter another powerful metaphor for the modern psyche: the silent, hidden self. These pieces are hollow; what’s inside? Our only answer is abstract blankness, with an occasional glimpse into a dark void.

For example, the shield-like *Torso*, covered with indecipherable marks, contains a small square hole through which we look into a black void. This sense of inscrutability—the suggestion that the subjective interior of this torso is unknowable—seems to link this modest black square with a distinguished modernist history of unintelligible voids, from Malevich to Minimalism. In this and other torsos, along with the blank-faced heads and portraits, we again see a powerful, abstract image of modern withdrawal and silence.

In his recent work, Ambrose has introduced cast glass into these dense, opaque figures. It is telling that he has thus far used glass only in representing heads: this luminous material, with its psychological overtones of lucidity, gives us the sense of a more active conscious presence, as in *Head to Hip* (1985), *Portrait* (1989), and *Untitled* (1989).

Because of its similar formal vocabulary, Cubism has often been discussed as the historical root of Ambrose's sculpture.⁴ This tie is perhaps strongest in Ambrose's drawings, where he moves freely back and forth from a more painterly to a more sculptural approach. Like most of the Cubist sculptors, Ambrose is also accomplished as a painter. In the four drawings for *Weight and Measure* (1990), he merges the foreground planes into the background, treating the whole as an illusory, pictorial space. However, the six studies for *Portrait* (1989) are depictions of three-dimensional sculpture on a flat background. Along with Cubism, another influence would appear to be the Constructivist work of Tatlin, which has formal affinities with Ambrose's transparent metal constructions such as *Young Man* (1987-88) and *Head to Foot* (1988). Despite its formal similarities with Cubism and Constructivism, Ambrose's figurative sculpture, in its content, is very much tied to the experience of urban men and women in the late twentieth century. Early modernists used geometric forms to express their faith in industrialized society and in spiritual wholeness; Ambrose's cubes and constructions, on the other hand, create figures of doubt and *fin-de-siècle* fragmentation.

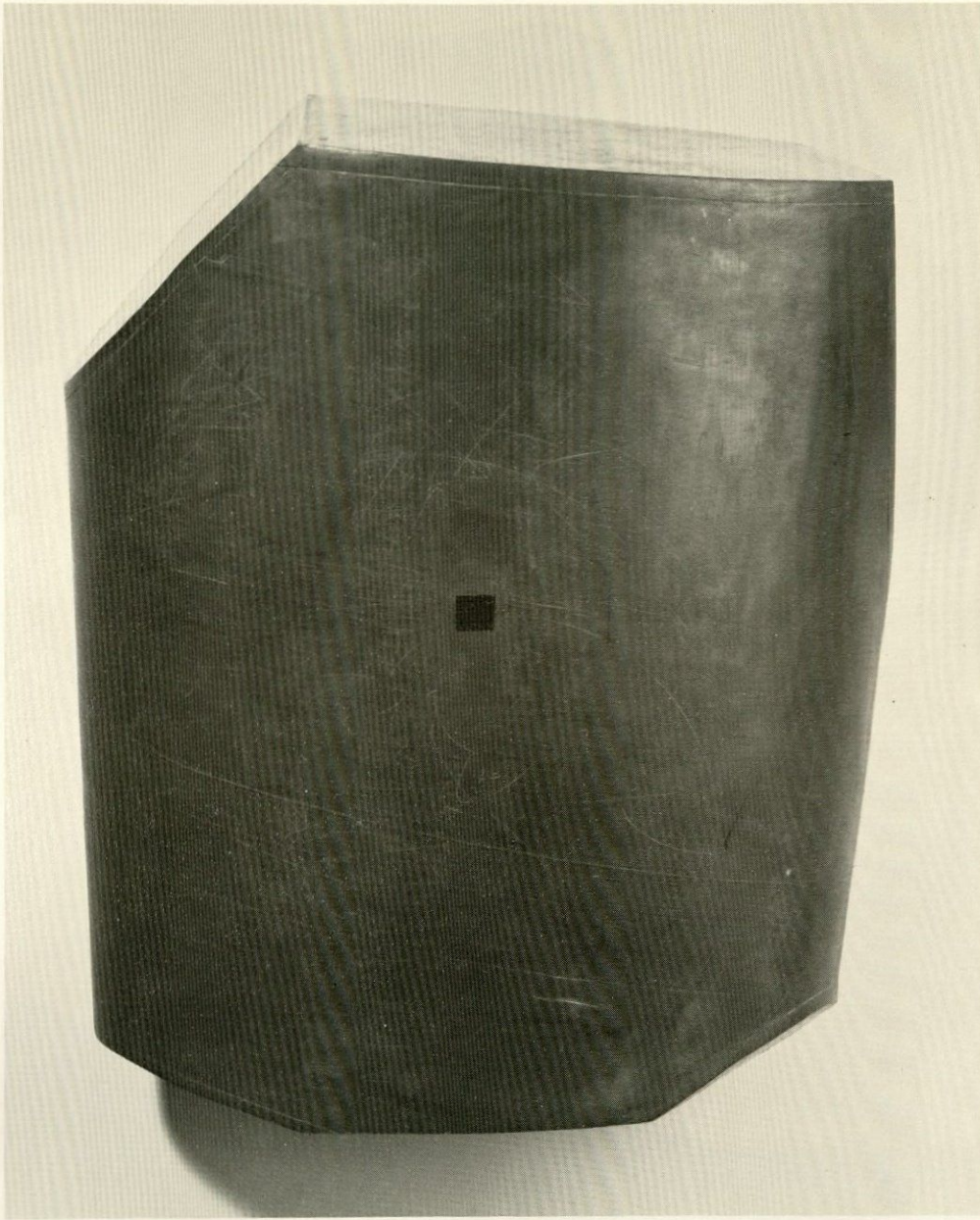
—Lynn Gamwell

¹On the essential bodily nature of all sculpture, see Donald Kuspit, "Material as Sculptural Metaphor," *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), pp.106-125.

²Such as by psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, *The Search for the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1978), p. 780.

³*Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 212.

⁴For example, in Walter Thompson, "Peter Ambrose," *Art in America*, September 1988, p. 185.



TORSO

1986, lead on wood

24 x 20 x 12"

collection of the artist



WEIGHT AND MEASURE

1990, cast iron and wood

72 x 30 x 30"

collection of Kaye, Scholer, Fierman, Hays, and Handler



UNTITLED (FEMALE)
1988, cast glass, iron, and wood
54 x 20 x 15"
collection of Judith Targan

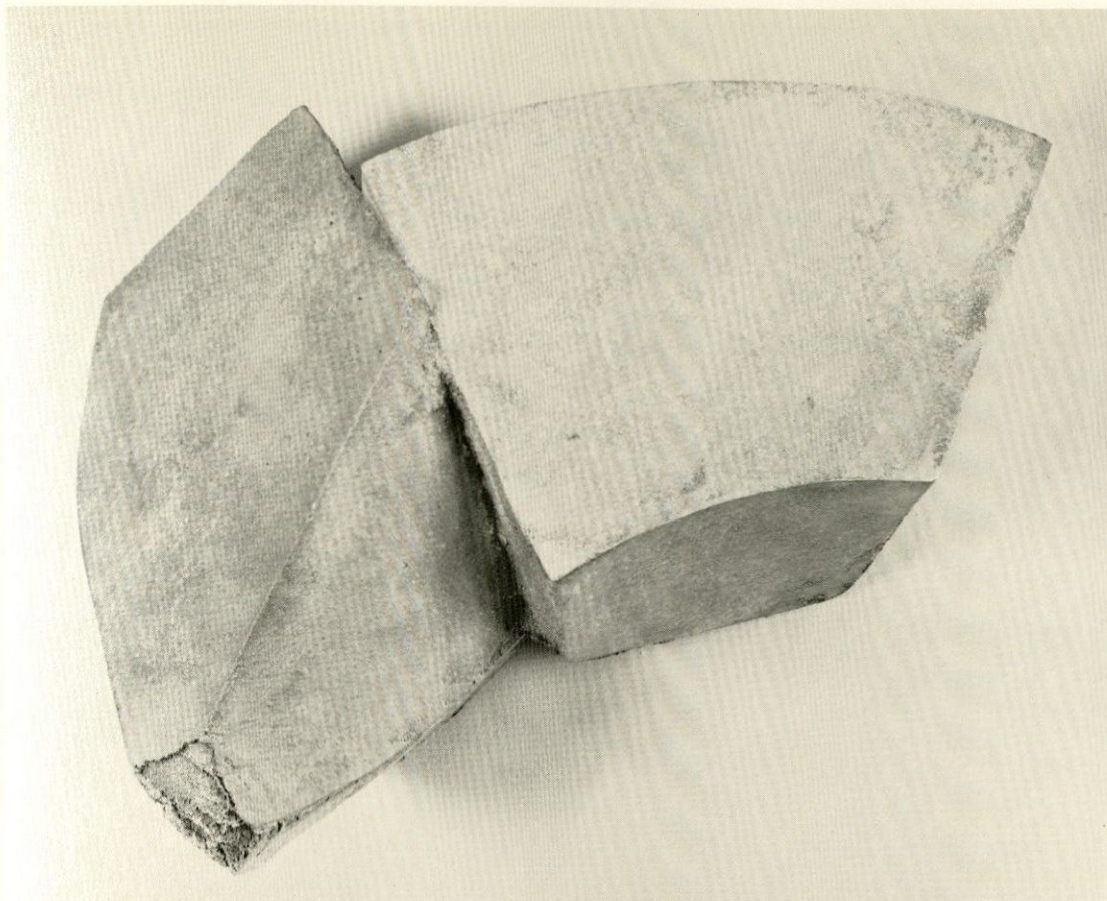


UNTITLED

1990, cast glass, wood, and steel

52 x 24 x 16"

collection of the Barish family La Jolla, Calif.



BREAST PLATE
1985, cast aluminum
15 x 17 x 6-1/2"
collection of the artist

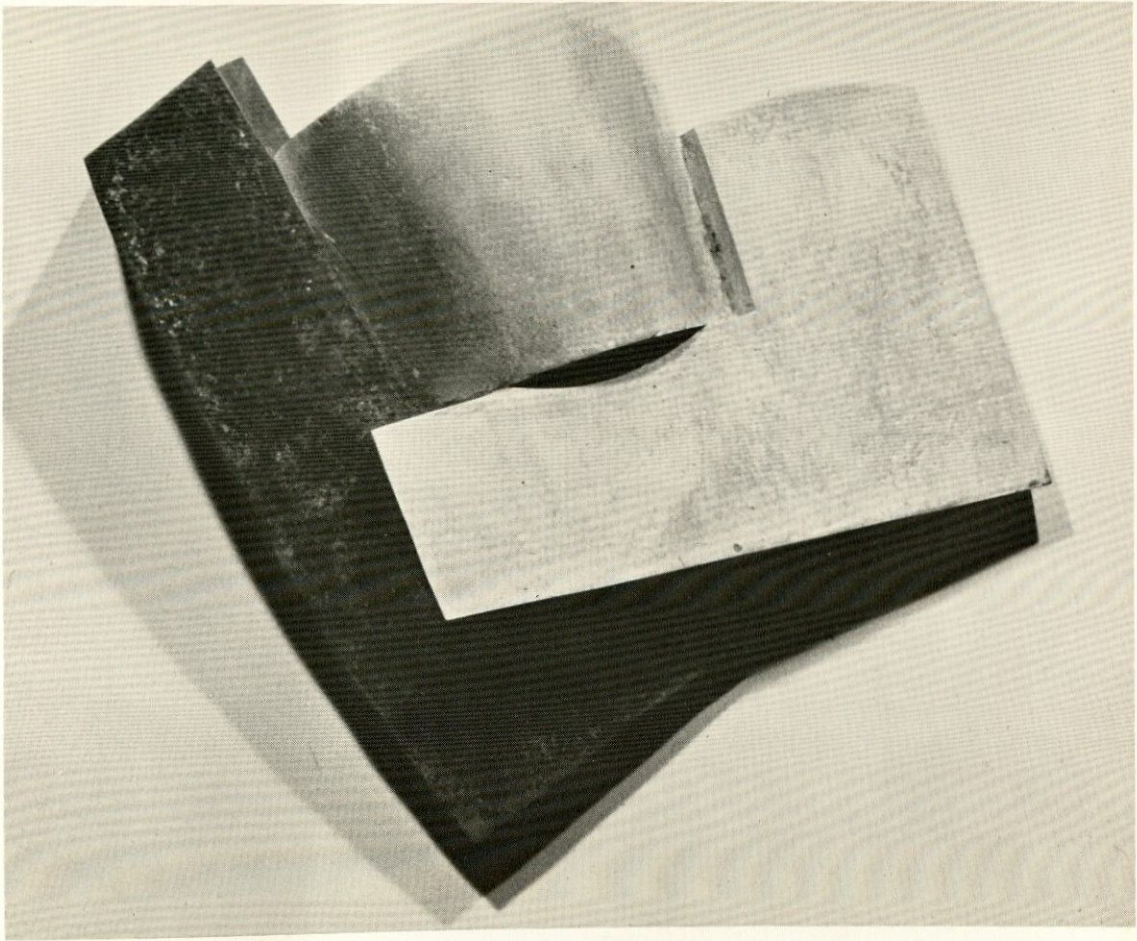


LEAD HEAD

1983-84, cast aluminum, lead, and wood

26 x 24 x 10"

collection of Maureen Missner and John Vennema

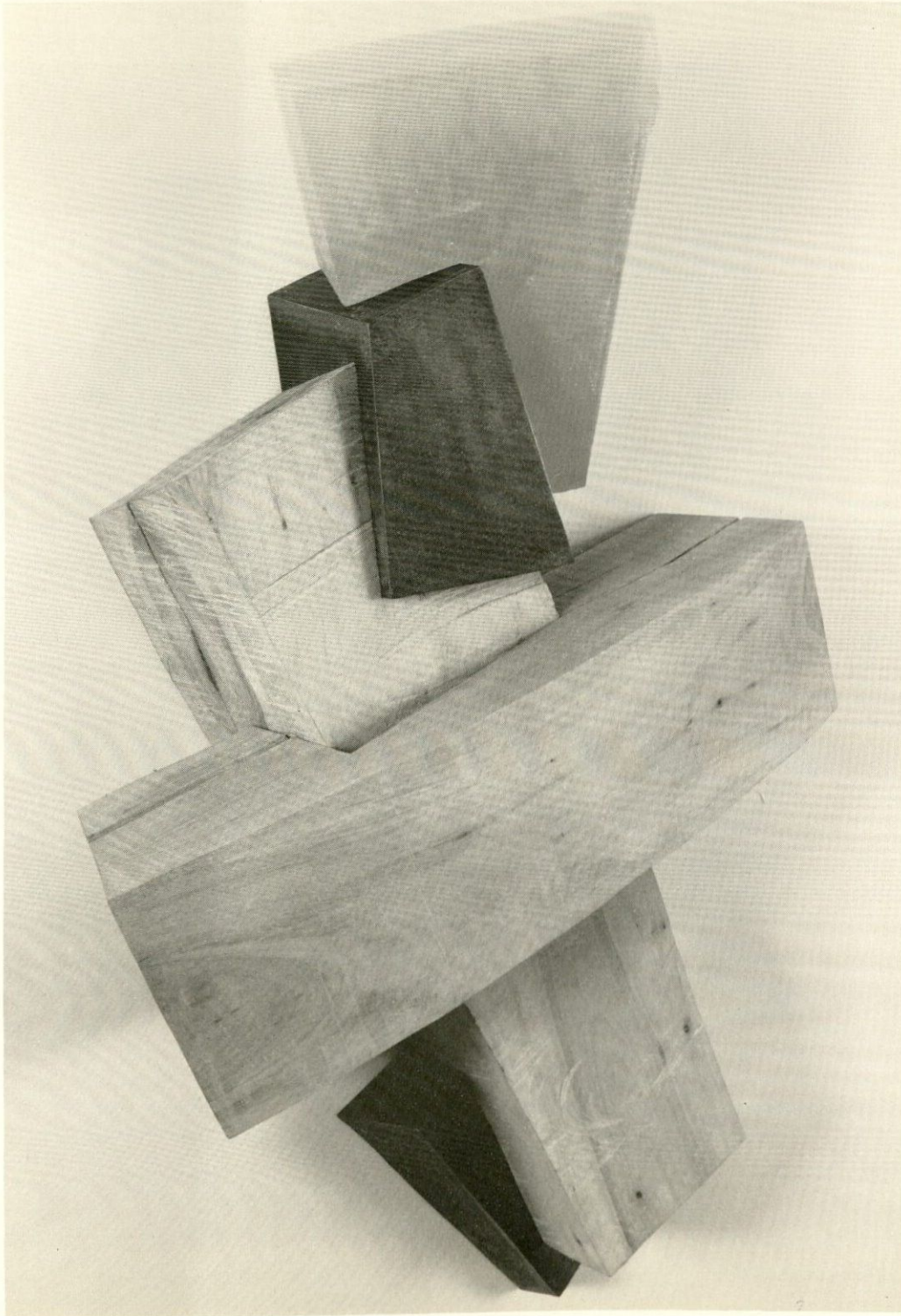


BOXER

1985, cast aluminum and lead

28 x 30 x 8"

collection of Alexander R. Oliver and Lorraine Presnick



UNTITLED (PORTRAIT)

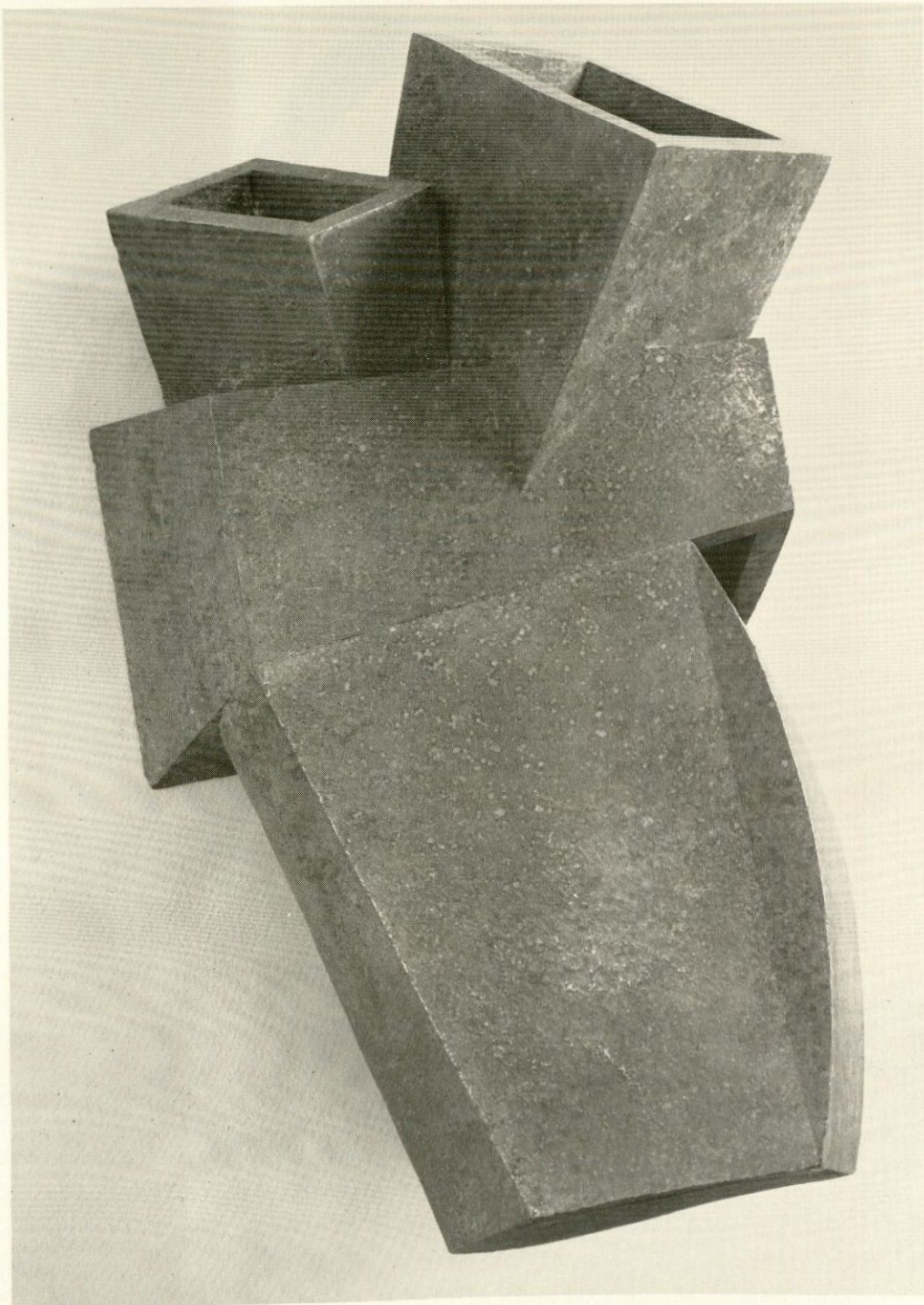
1989, cast glass, wood, and iron

30 x 24 x 12"

Norwest Corporation, Minneapolis



HERO
1987, cast iron
20 x 13 x 10"
courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery



HEART

1988, cast aluminum

20 x 12 x 10"

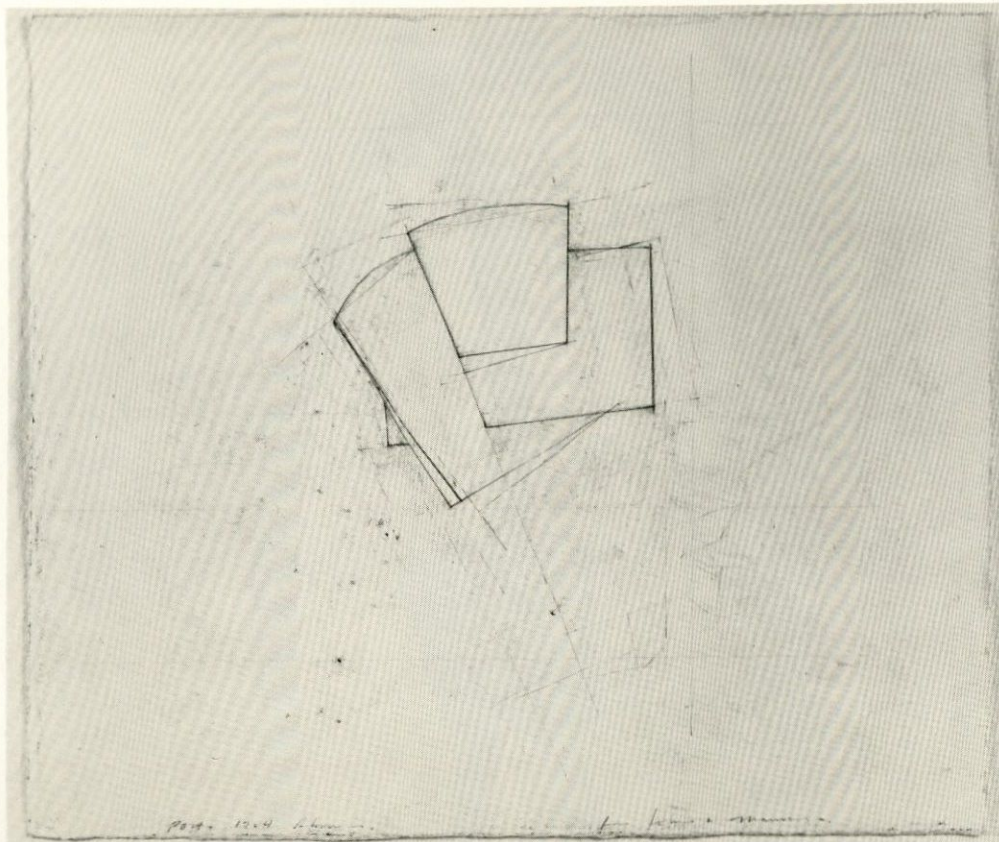
collection of Prof. Pieter and Mrs. Sander



HEAD TO FOOT
1988, cast iron and steel
46-1/2 x 34 x 10"
courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery



YOUNG MAN
1987-88, cast bronze and steel
53-1/2 x 23 x 10"
collection of the artist

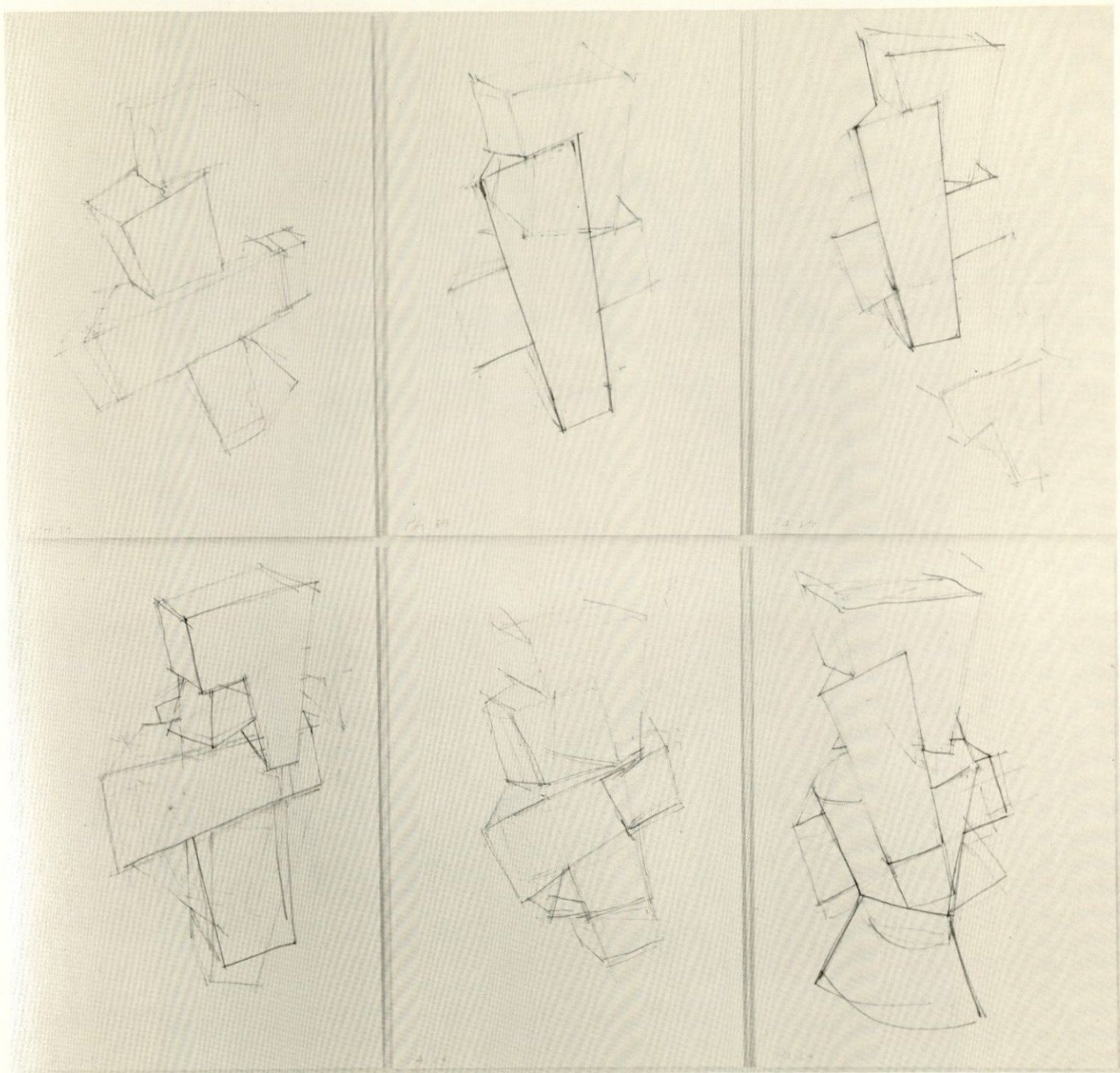


STUDY FOR LEAD HEAD

1985, pencil and charcoal on paper

18 x 24"

collection of Maureen Missner and John Vennema

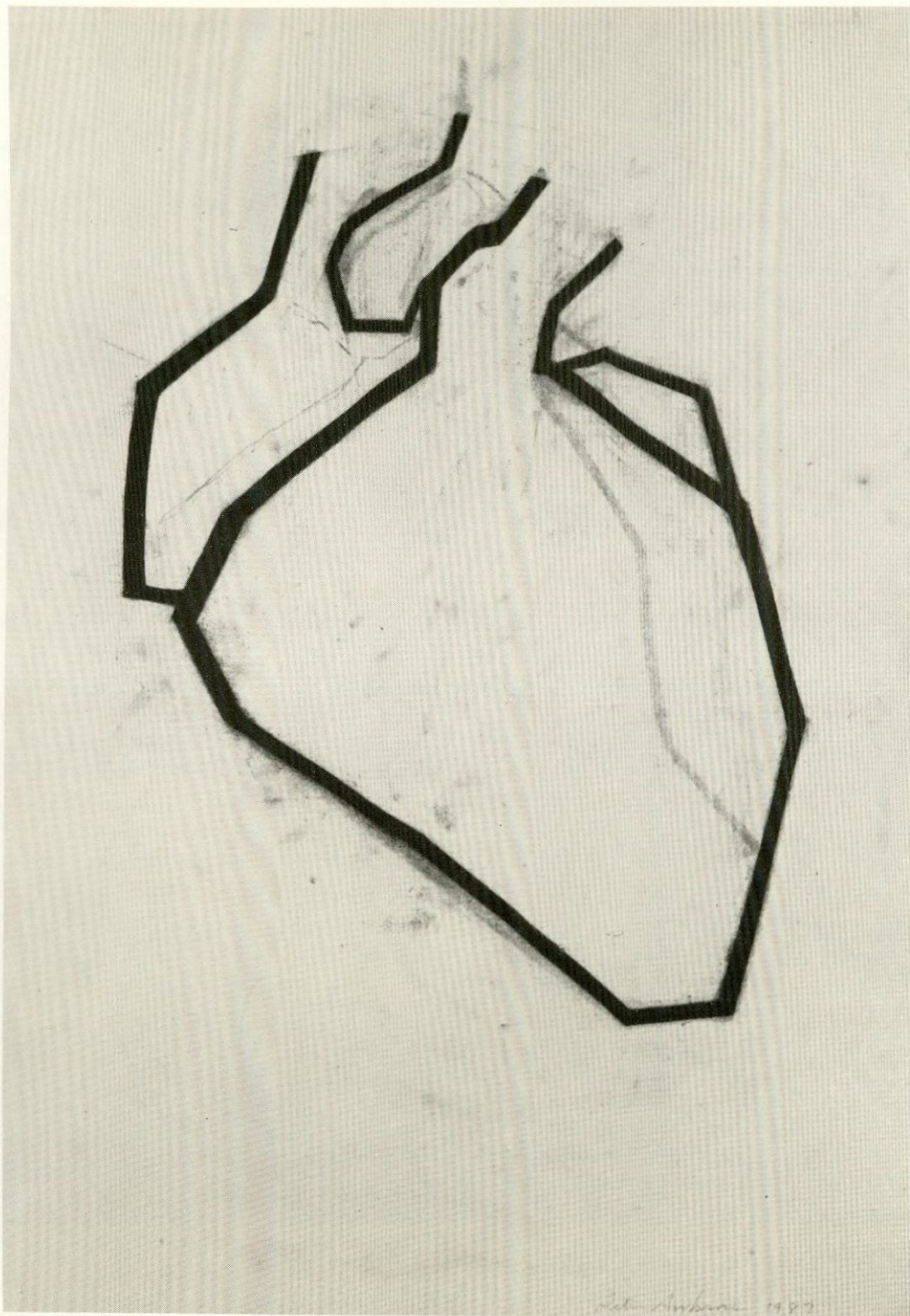


STUDIES FOR UNTITLED (PORTRAIT)

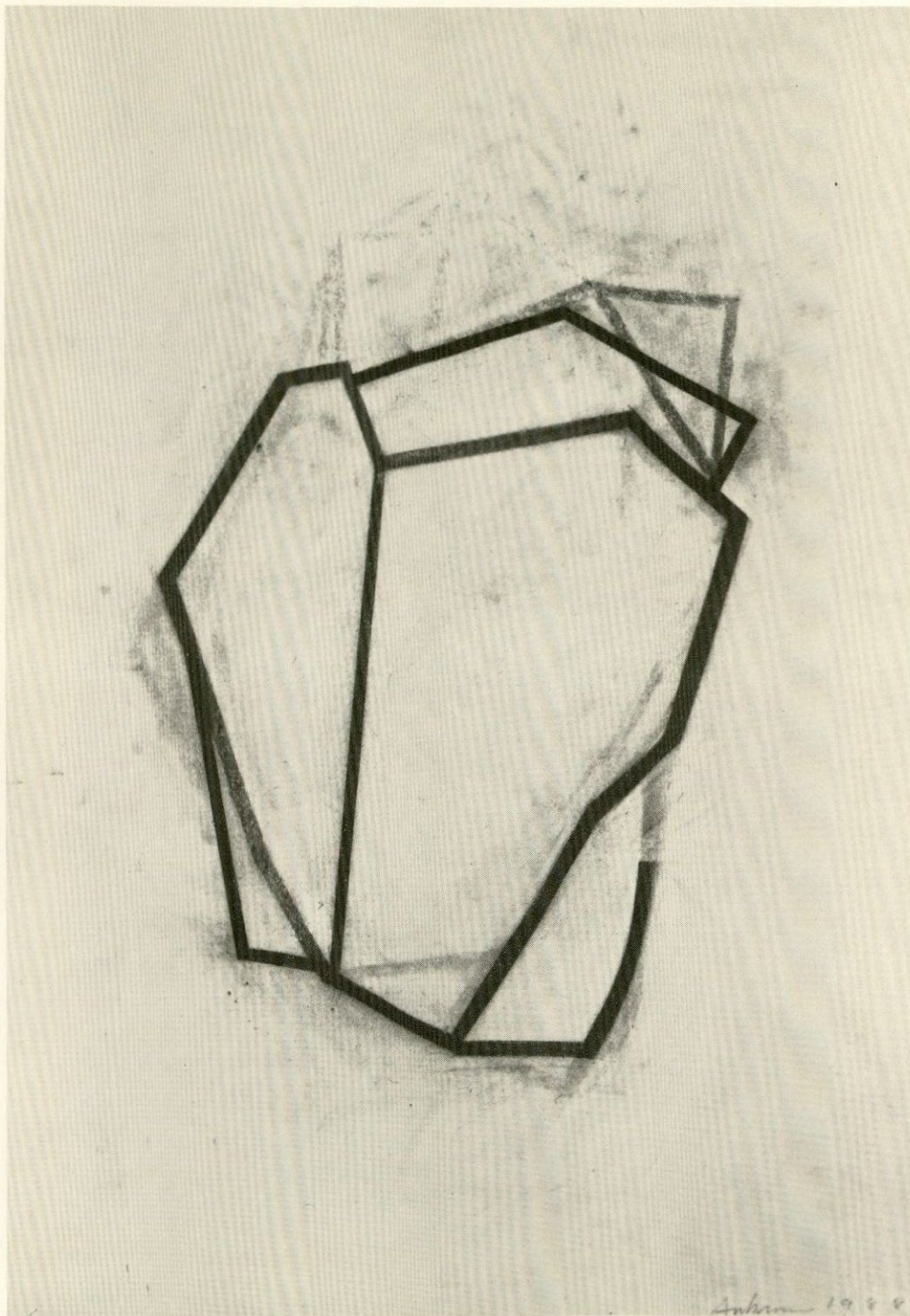
1989-90, graphite on paper

each 6 x 4"

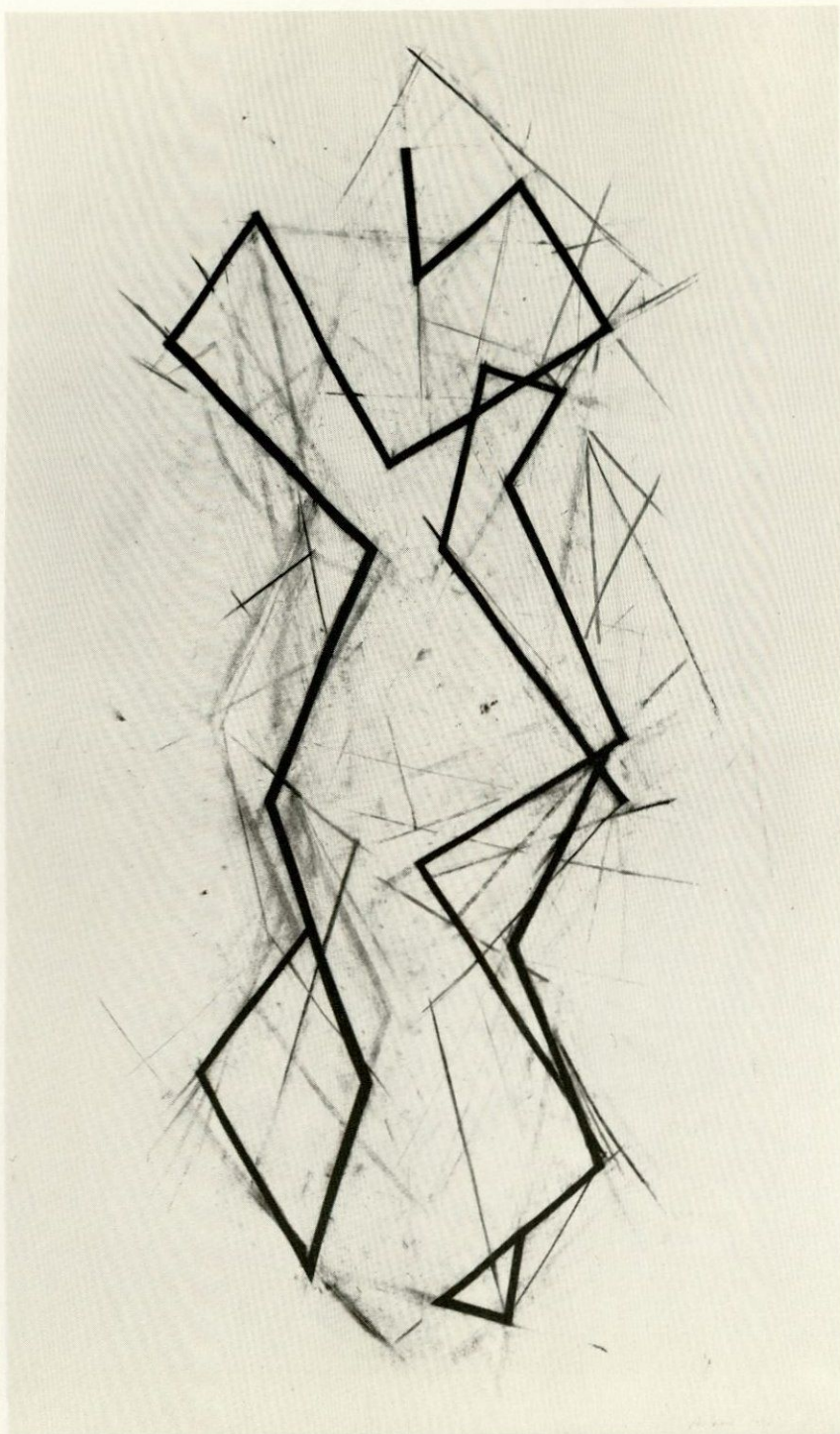
collections of Norwest Corporation, Minneapolis, Dr. and Mrs. Aaron Esman, Pamela Freund, and Rosa Esman Gallery



STUDY FOR HERO
1988, charcoal on paper
24-3/4 x 18-3/4"
courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery



STUDY FOR HERO
1988, charcoal on paper
24-3/4 x 18-3/4"
courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery

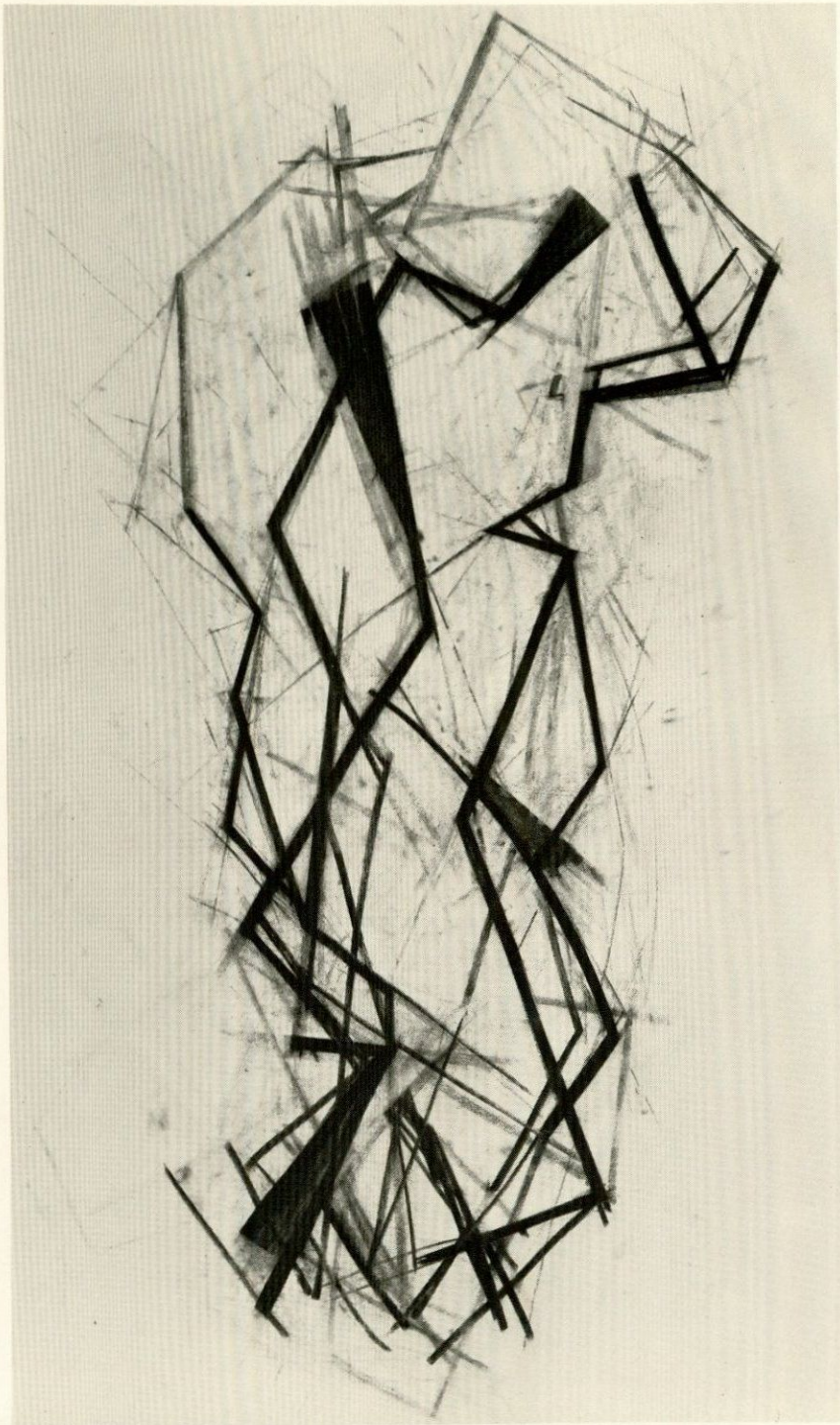


UNTITLED

1990, charcoal on paper,

42 x 29-3/4"

collection of Chris McGeachy

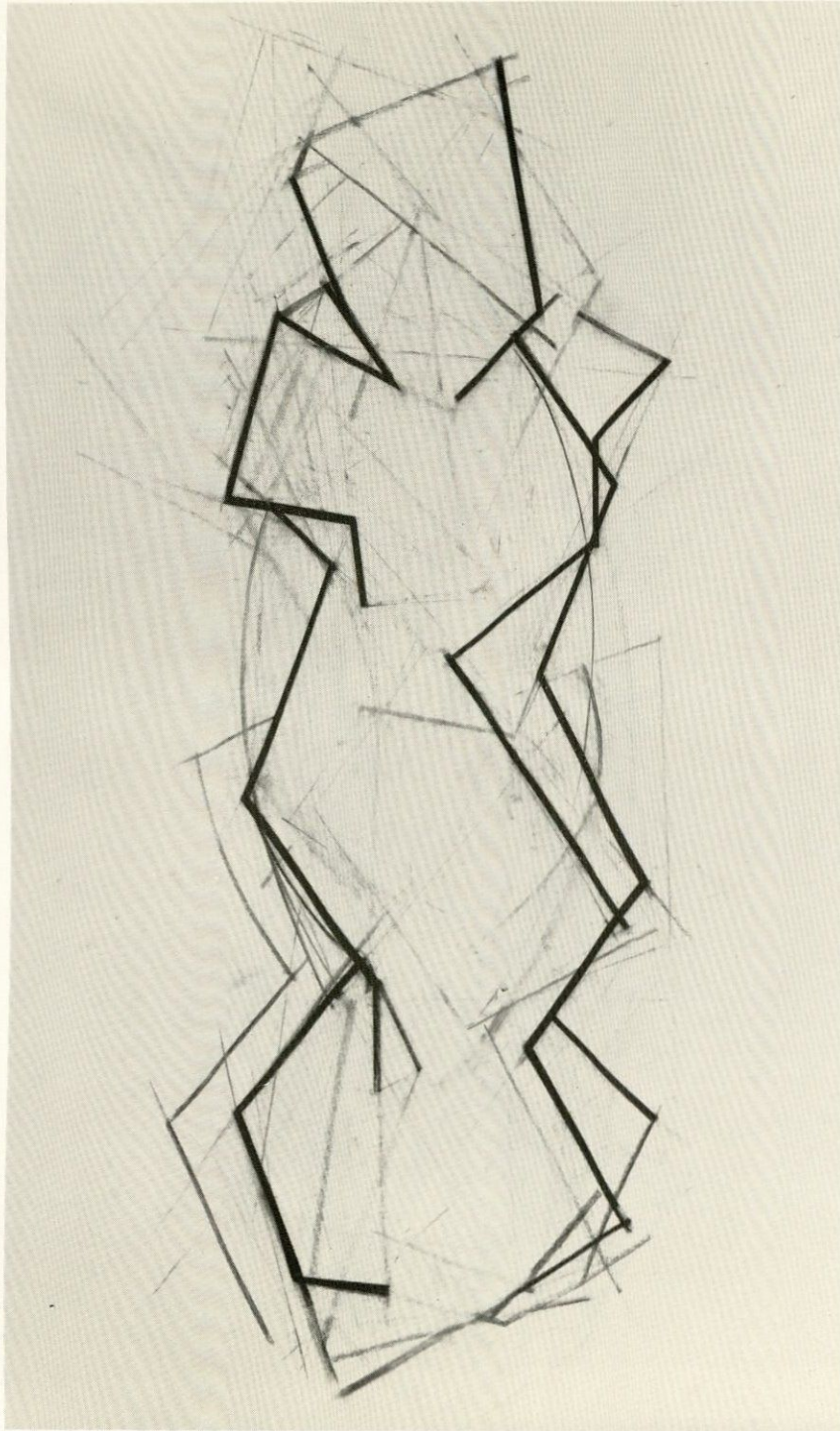


UNTITLED

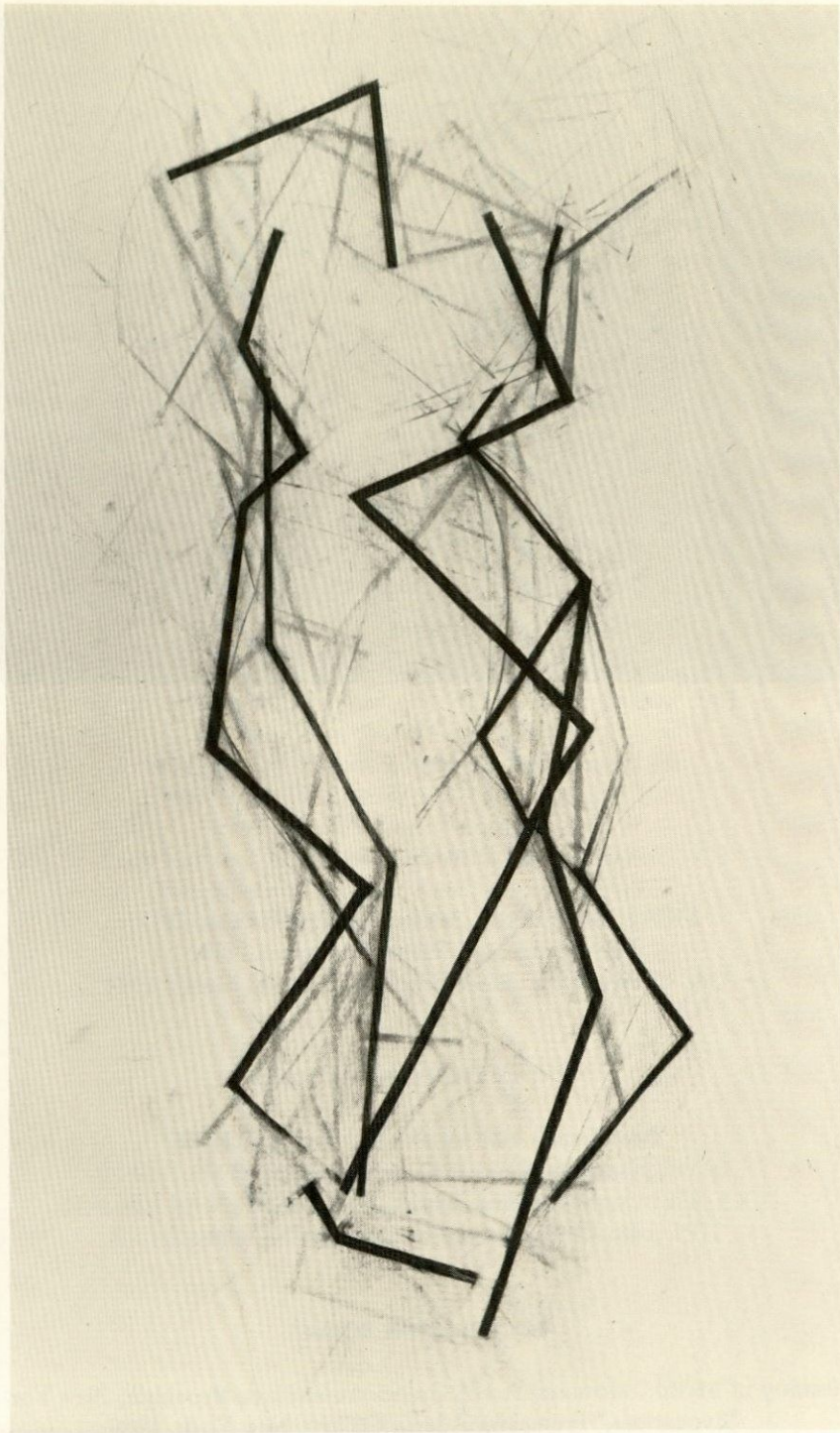
1990, charcoal on paper

42 x 29-3/4"

collection of Chris McGeachy



UNTITLED
1990, charcoal on paper,
42 x 29-3/4"
collection of Alex Ward



UNTITLED

1990, charcoal on paper

42 x 29-3/4"

courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery

PETER AMBROSE



Born in New York, 1953

EDUCATION

MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1977
BFA, Carnegie Mellon University, 1975
Yale University, Summer School of Art and Music, 1974

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

Rosa Esman Gallery, New York, 1988, 1990
Harm Bouckaert Gallery, New York, 1985
Balkin Fine Arts, Chicago, 1981
Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago, 1977, 1981

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

"The Meaning of Metal," Memorial Arch, Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York, 1989
"Evocations," Frumpkin/Adams Gallery, New York, 1989
"Body Fragments," Shea & Beker Gallery, New York, 1989
"Scale (Small)," Rosa Esman Gallery, New York, 1988

"The Right Foot Show," San Francisco Airport Commission, 1988
 "Material Transformations" and "Looking at New Work," Rosa Esman Gallery, New York, 1987
 "Peter Ambrose/Tim Linn," The Gallery in Tompkins Square,
 New York Public Library, 1986
 "Endangered Species: Art for Artists," Puck Building, New York, 1986
 Harm Bouckaert Gallery, New York, 1985
 Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago, 1984
 Harm Bouckaert Gallery, New York, 1984
 "Inside Spaces," General Electric Headquarters, Fairfield, CT
 (curated by the Museum of Modern Art), 1984
 "Work '4' the Revolution," Harm Bouckaert Gallery (curated by Edward Albee), 1983
 "Brooklyn Waterfront Artists," BACA/Brooklyn Museum, 1982
 "Exchanges," Henry Street Settlement, New York, 1979
 Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago, 1977
 Art Institute of Chicago, 1977
 Union League of Art, Chicago, 1977
 Carnegie Institute of American Art, Pittsburgh, 1975

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Walter Thompson, *Art in America*, September 1988
 Stephen Westfall, *Arts Magazine*, May and September 1983
 Ken Sofer, *Art News*, April 1983
 Bob Burleigh, *New Art Examiner*, November 1981
 Harold Hayden, *Chicago Sun Times*, October 1981
 Peter Frank, *Village Voice*, June 1979
 Lucy Lippard, *Exchanges 1*, Henry Street Settlement 1979
 Buzz Spector, *New Art Examiner*, Summer 1977
 Keith Morrison, *New Art Examiner*, May 1977
 Alan Artner, *Chicago Tribune*, June 1977
 Harold Hayden, *Chicago Sun Times*, June 1977

AWARDS

Pollock Krasner Foundation Fellowship, 1990
 New York Experimental Glass Workshop Grant, 1989-90
 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Grant, 1978, 1981
 E.L. Ryerson Fellowship, Art Institute of Chicago, 1977

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Butler Museum of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio
 Chemical Bank
 New Jersey Life
 Prudential Insurance Company

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Design: David Skyrca
Production: University Publications
Printing: Sullivan Lithography
