



# Aubrey Schwartz

## A Retrospective

September 5 — October 10, 1997

Binghamton University Art Museum  
State University of New York

## ON MONOTYPE

**T**o appreciate the diversity of experience, its singularity, and to express that inclusiveness requires more than mimetic representation or artistic artifice.

While I feel a responsibility to the facts of the object, to render is not sufficient. For the concrete to become alive and speculative requires a meaningful selectivity or distortion. This is easier said than done since both are separate deities and hateful of one another.

To hold this paradox in place suits the workings of the monotype. Its fluidity of execution enables one to move and change directions effortlessly, allowing all deities equal time. Its elusive forms of additive and subtractive reflect the spontaneity and precariousness of existence. The monotype is always hovering on the edge of disaster—accident is part of its nature, but that path of frustration is also open to an imaginative newness.

Aubrey Schwartz



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## AN APPRECIATION

**T**here is a progression in this exhibition that the casual viewer might not observe. The progression moves from the early, strong drawings (always and most significantly for Schwartz the preliminary stage of all artistic invention), to the more complex and less forgiving medium of the etchings (where mistaken lines cannot be erased with a lump of India rubber), then to the even more demanding and temperamental monotypes (where the extraordinary freedom afforded by the medium brings concomitant risks—the work “always hovering on the edge of disaster,” as the artist puts it so acutely), and finally (though perhaps not finally) to the most demanding of all mediums, the life-sized sculptures of the last few years. In each phase the artist allows himself greater freedom—but only after he feels he has earned it, by mastering whatever challenges he has set for himself; and in each phase a new freedom is achieved.

The work possesses always the clear outline of a great draughtsman; but, as a secondary and more important feature, it possesses a particular vision or empathy that is distinctively the artist's own—the thing that makes these powerful conceptions an Aubrey Schwartz. Technically, this is often achieved through the most imperceptible distortion; spiritually, we can't say how it is achieved, except to allude to Schwartz's ability to penetrate to the real heart of the thing he wishes to convey. This is particularly true of his portraits (though also of his nature studies). There is in Schwartz's anatomical studies and portraits a psychological accuracy that is the accuracy of the dream. I mean the way dreams suggest the range and depth of another's character more penetratingly than any conscious perception. His portraits of Count Cenci, Rembrandt, Brahms, van Gogh, Kafka, Munch, Poulenc, Joyce, Olson reach closer to the heart of these individuals than any photograph; capturing salient qualities of each that are suggestive of the whole creator, both life and work together. His portraits are biographies; autobiographies done by the artists themselves (in a sense). In them we are as far removed from the photographic image as we can get (and still retain an image). What Schwartz achieves is something at once more deep and less obviously psychological than the photographic image can provide—because not captured in a single instant of time (a single sitting).



The lives of these geniuses (the shapers and definers of the modern spirit, in effect), their psychological and artistic beings, are scrutinized anew. Light is shed upon them.

In these works there is a tension achieved between tangibility and ephemerality, certainty and indefiniteness, thought and reverie. It holds the viewer to the bite of life that only flashing eyes and white teeth and facial features can do, yet lets us shake loose concentration at will in abstraction. It gives us not representation but representation as idea, something recalled or conjured forth; it gives us the beginning of representation and design, that acute moment wherein we witness the birth of something through the eyes and by implication through consciousness as well.

This artist reprises much that is fine (or not quite finished) within the recent European past; he takes up where modernism, one strain of modernism, leaves off; where art decides to veer away from the representational and become speculative, cerebral, abstract. What this show should do for any discerning art lover is reveal a major artist in all his myriad phases and maturations; each reaching further into difficulty than the last; and each setting greater and greater benchmarks for itself—and ourselves, the art-interested, art-loving public. Each phase (drawings, etchings, monotypes, sculptures), as indeed each piece, reflects back upon the others; reprises, redefines and reassesses the others. The viewer, even the viewer who thinks he or she knows our century, is taken on a wonderful, eye-opening voyage. To speak of this as an education or transformation is insufficient; edification and that highest of aesthetic-spiritual satisfactions must be included as well. In any case the experience is moving and memorable. I suspect for all those who see this show it will also be a permanent experience. Schwartz's images will have entered our consciousness for all time. For those of us who thought all such discovery lay behind us in our lives (never to be repeated in this age) such discovery is a welcome, unexpected reward indeed.

Matthew Corrigan

Division of Humanities

York University, Toronto



**A**ubrey Schwartz has been in the top ranks of American printmakers for many years. His reputation was established and has been maintained on the basis of the steady production of etchings that combine technical elegance and, for the most part, ordinary everyday subject matter. In addition to individual prints, he has regularly executed series of prints or livres-de-luxe on such themes as birds of prey; mothers and children; midgets and dwarfs; moths and butterflies; wildflowers; cats; infants; Edvard Munch; and even appropriately his own version of that classic print subject, bestiary, as well as a series of monotypes of *Homage to Claude Lorrain*.

For some years now, Aubrey Schwartz has been breaking new ground both in printmaking and in his sculpture. This exhibition has significant examples of his work in both those fields as well as a generous representation of the etchings on which his national reputation rests, and of his drawings, which remain for him as for Ingres, "the probity of art."

His most important innovation in printmaking is taking monotype, and making it an art form of suavity and grace.

Similarly in his sculpture, he has taken ancient methods and materials, combined them in new ways and produced an art that is always compelling, often haunting in its effects.

It is a mark of his seriousness with monotypes that he has done a great many portraits of friends and colleagues, but also of writers, composers and fellow artists of the past. One portrait in the exhibition is neither a friend nor a colleague, nor a writer, an artist or a composer. It is the actual historical figure of Count Cenci, who in his own lifetime became a legendary figure of pure evil. In the monotype portrait of the count, the figure rises before us like a monument. The richness of the dress is amply suggested by the wipe of the Tarleton rag to articulate the lace at throat and wrist. The white line against the black sets off a bandolier of honors and office and above it all looms the chill-white face, nose like the edge of an axe, eyes steady, mouth grim, the whole a kind of permanent sneer. We understand that the incestuous scheme grew out of pure pride, the chief of the deadly sins, not out of lust, perhaps the least of the seven. The presentation of the subject's inner soul in this and the other portraits are quite remarkable.

Schwartz's innovations in sculpture are no less startling, although less likely to be widely adopted by other artists. They were motivated by the return of sculpture to first place in a



kind of revolving triad Schwartz has followed loosely for many years and finds refreshing in the literal sense for his art and his mind. What he does is to take turns operating primarily as a printmaker, then as a sculptor, then as a draftsman.

In Schwartz's phrase, the works are "bas-reliefs freed from their background plane." The sculptures are finished with encaustic paint, which is what gave Egyptian mummy cases their seemingly eternal life and their rich, sensuous glow. The painted sculpture thus produced goes back to classical Greek sculpture, all of which was painted before time stripped the paint off. The bas-reliefs include animals, a number of standing figures—some Japanese women (a homage to Utamuro)—and full-length nudes. The nudes especially have a gently luminous quality, readily explainable by the encaustic paint, except it seems more than that. The Japanese figures faintly suggest the ghost in Noh drama. They all seem to hover, which is always disconcerting in sculpture; therefore, compelling. You feel you are in the presence of a presence, which you can't quite place in your mental catalogue of art and experience.

Those full-figure nudes and the portraits in monotype close the circle, cap the structure, of the art of Aubrey Schwartz. They complete the range of its interest through the animate world we are members of. He has done and surely will do more studies of the vegetable world, like the lovely loosestrife and other fauna in this exhibition.

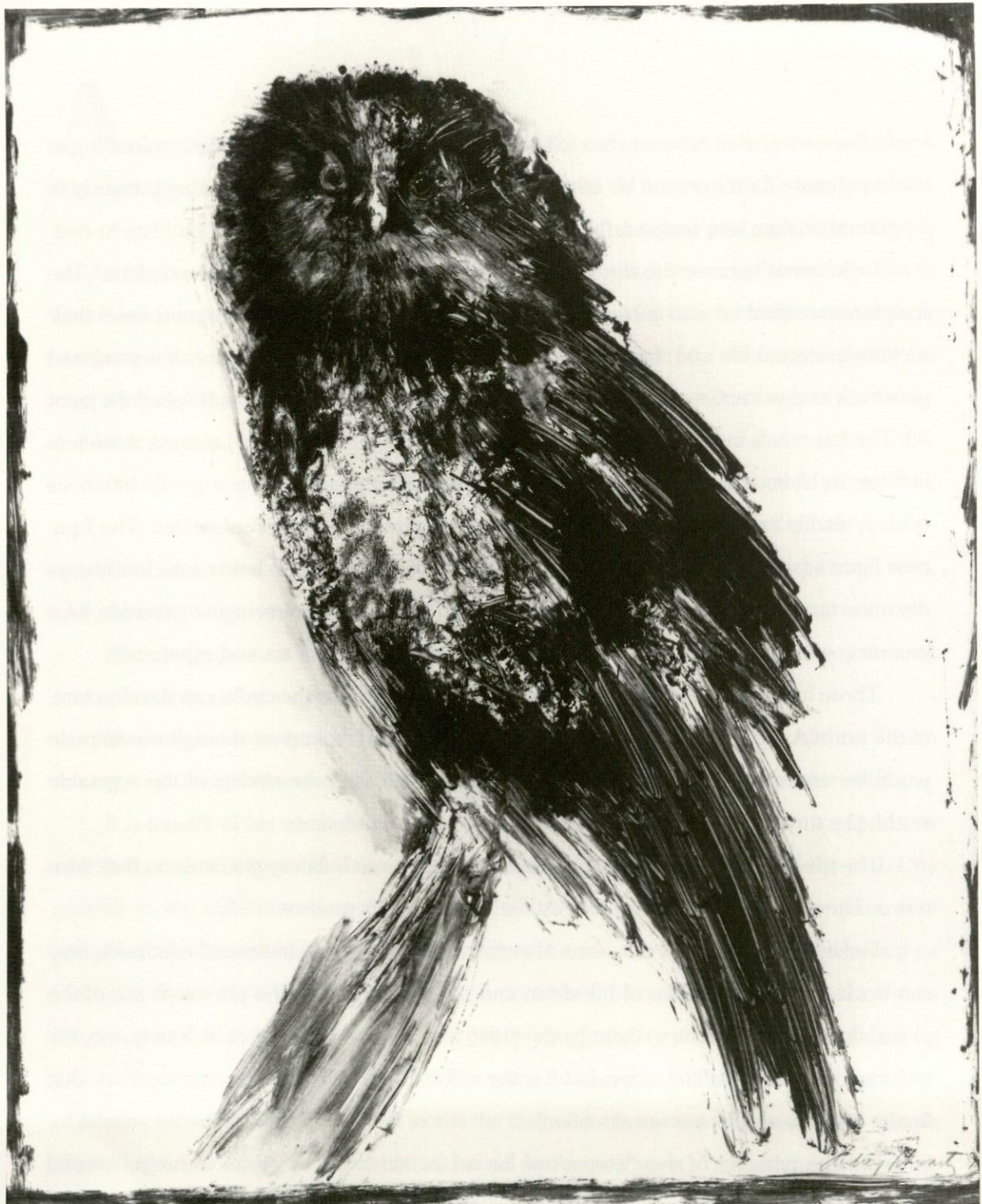
The special virtue of his art is that it accepts all these ambulatory creatures on their own terms. They exist, therefore, they are justified in and for themselves.

Finally, it is not Schwartz's assets of technique, however ingenious and admirable they can be; it is rather the union of his vision and material. Certainly the art comes out of the materials and what is done to them by the artist; it could not otherwise exist. Surely, too, the techniques are a part of the vision, but it is the vision, the mind and the matter together, that finally compels and repays our attention.

But the paradox of the "lessons" of his art is that these exquisite etchings, forceful monotypes and beautiful sculpture, like those animals and birds, first of all exist in and for themselves and should so be enjoyed.

Frank Getlein





*Owl*  
monotype  
21 1/2" x 17 3/4"





*Homage to Utamuro II*  
encaustic and plaster  
59" x 18"



*Homage to Utamuro I*  
encaustic and plaster  
60" x 23"





*Portrait of Count Cenci*

(for John Sherry)

monotype

24" x 21"





*Dwarf*  
29 1/2" x 21"  
drawing



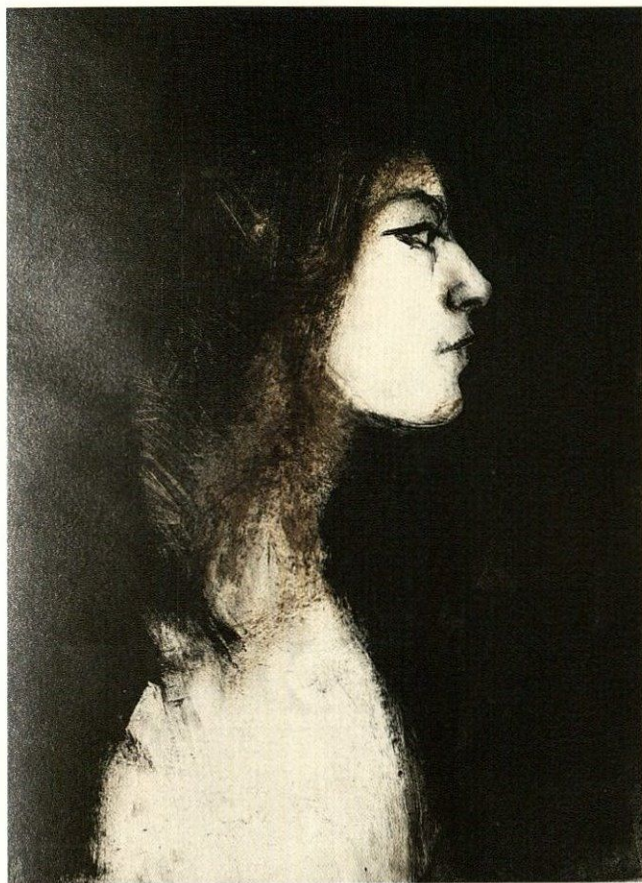


*Portrait of Milton Kessler*

monotype

30" x 22"



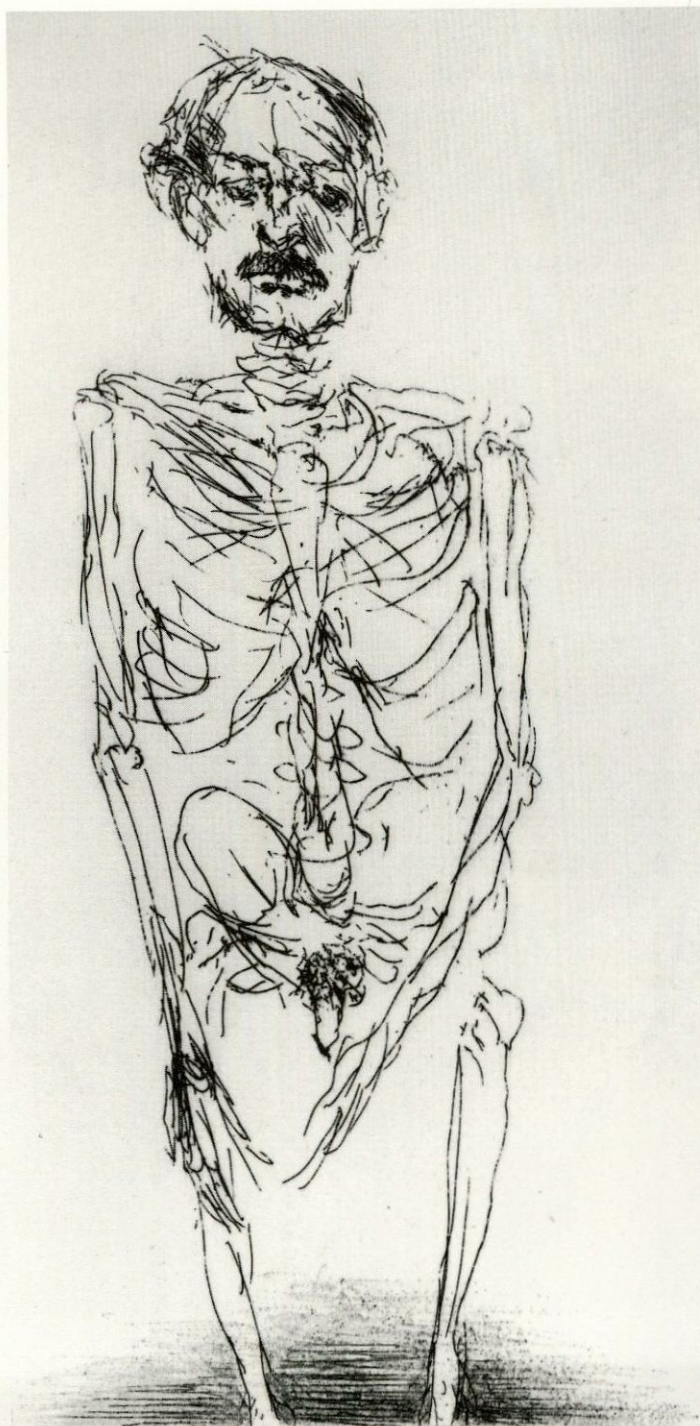


*Portrait of Teresa*  
monotype  
23 1/2" x 17"



*Purple Loosestrife*  
monotype w/pastel  
23" x 19"





*To Edvard Munch*

etching

for the poems of Don Coles entitled *To Edvard Munch*

6" x 3"





*Francois Poulenc*

monotype

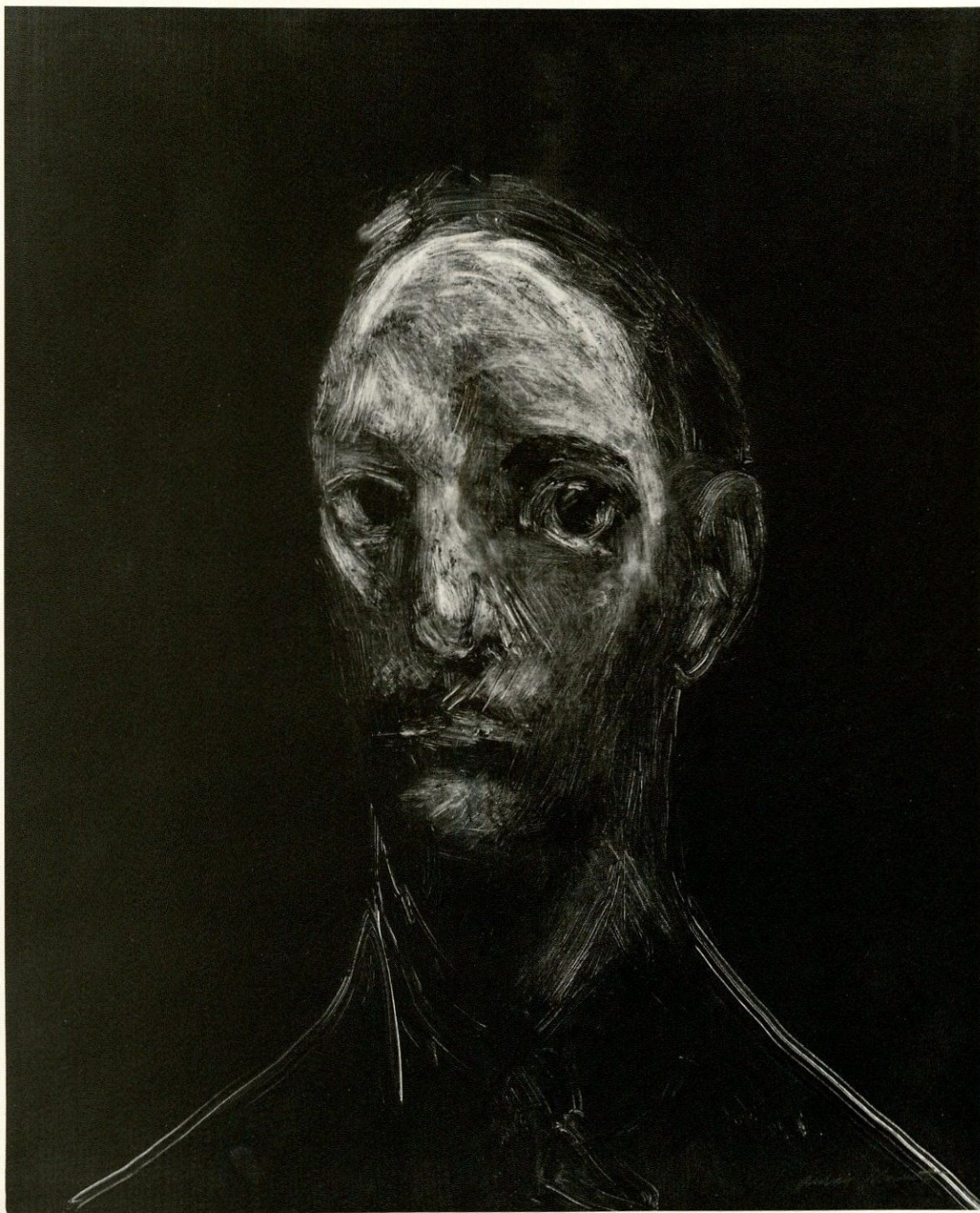
14 1/2" x 12 1/2"





*Monkey*  
encaustic and plaster  
22" x 11"





*Portrait of Joe Crivy*

monotype

21 1/2" x 17 1/2"





*Bruno Schulz*  
monotype  
23" x 18"





*Streetman*

etching

(from limited edition portfolio in progress)

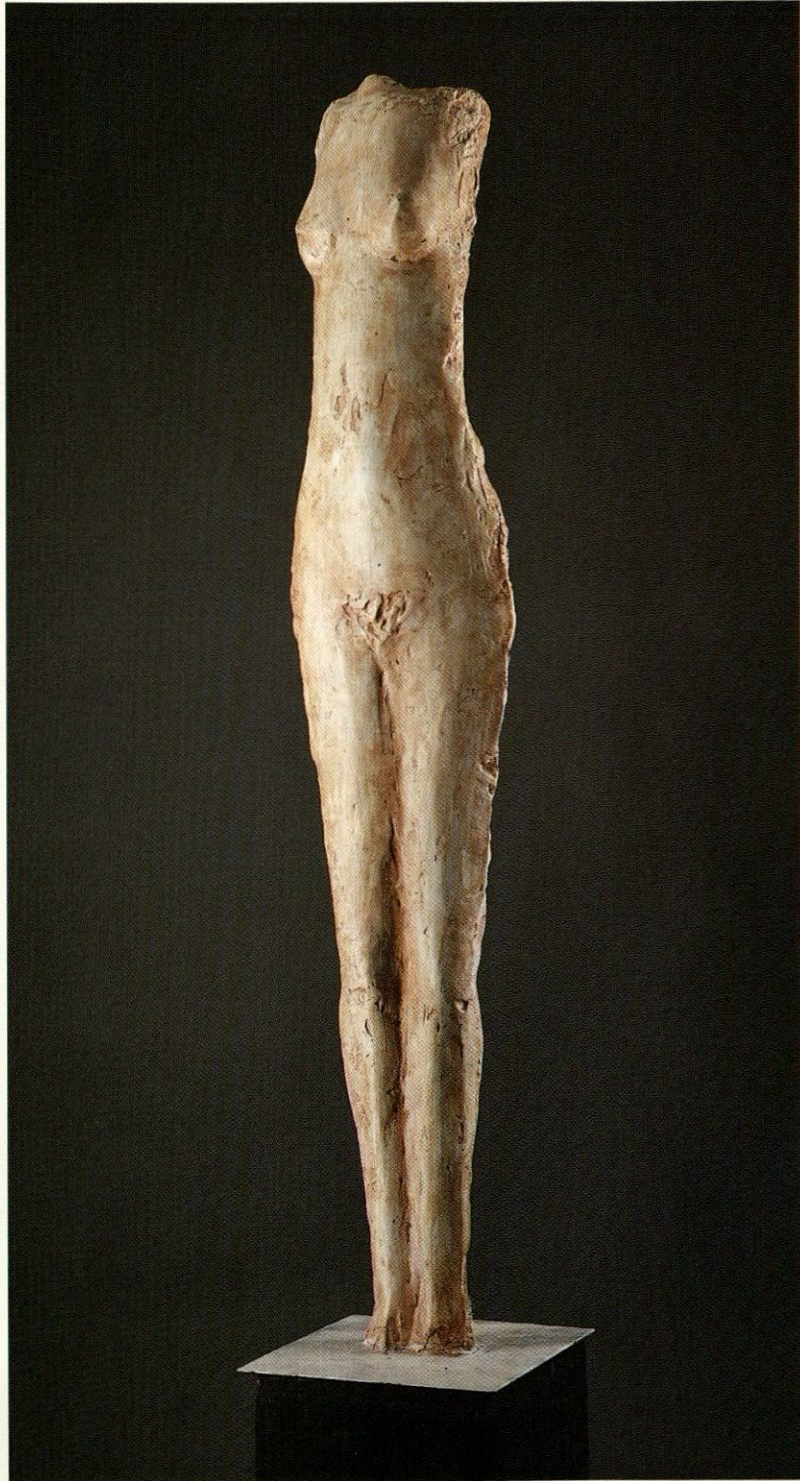
6 1/2" x 4 1/2"





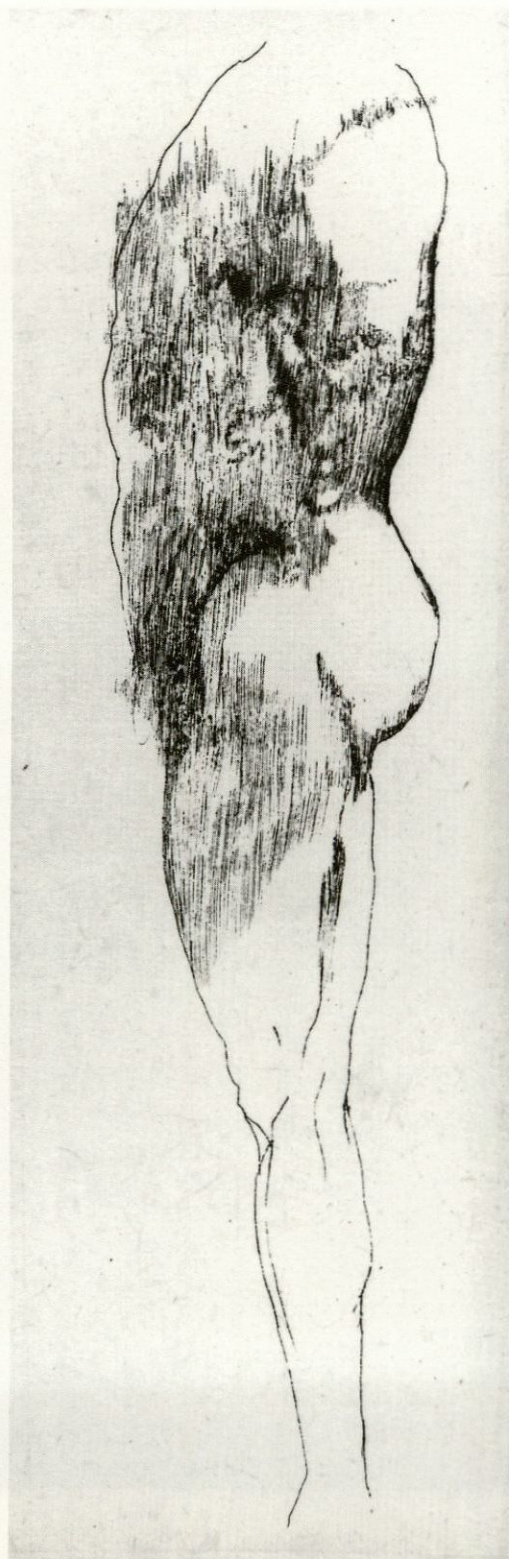
*Susan*  
monotype  
21 1/2" x 13 1/4"





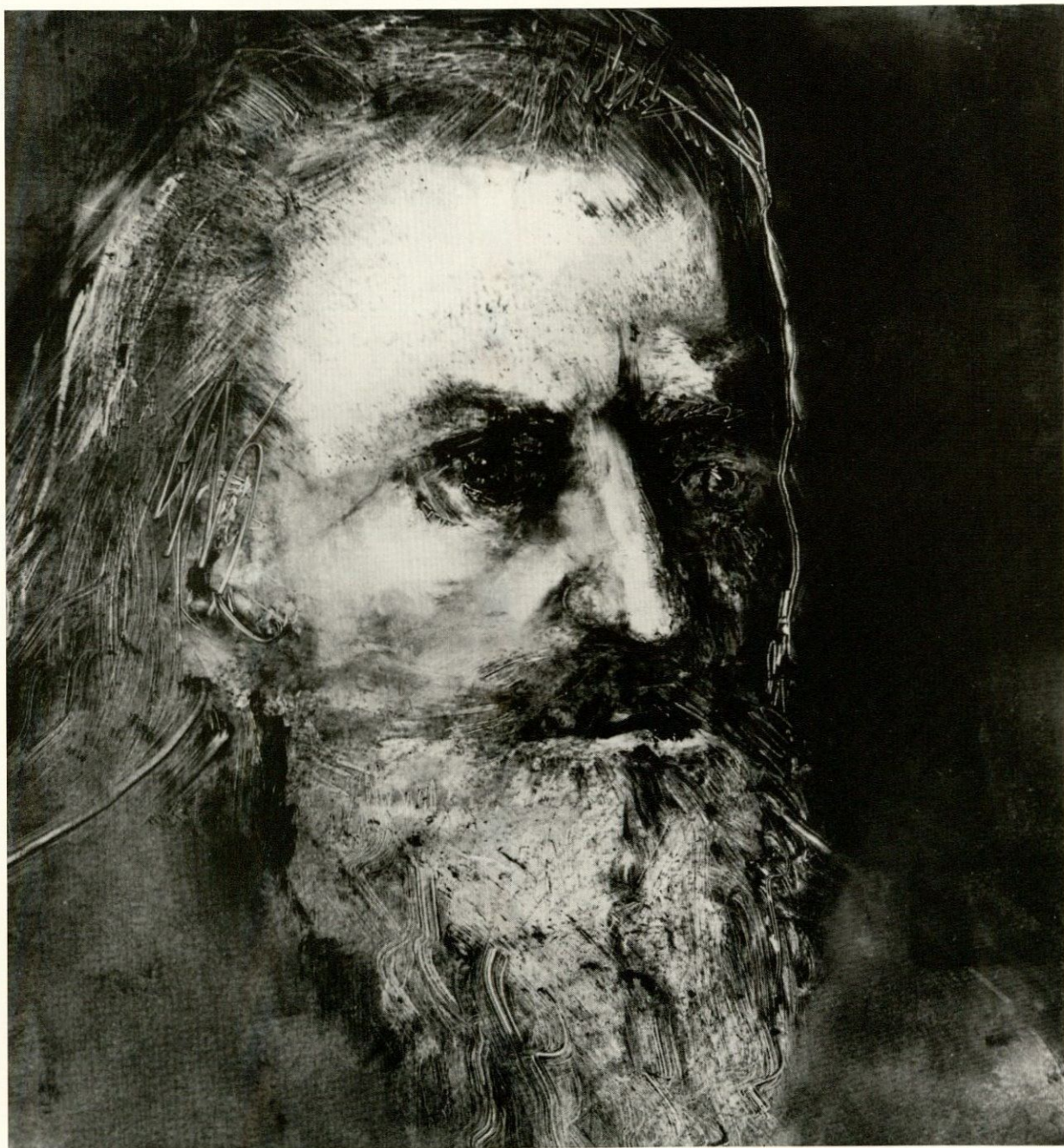
*Nude*  
encaustic and plaster  
58" x 11"





*Fragment*  
etching  
12  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 4"





*Johannes Brahms*

monotype

10 1/4" x 9 1/2"





*Amy*  
encaustic and plaster  
18 1/2" x 8 1/2"





*Ape*  
encaustic and plaster  
12" x 9"



*Rat*  
encaustic and plaster  
18" x 24"





*Count Cenci*  
monotype  
29 1/2" x 24"





*Rat*  
crayon  
22" x 29"





*Nili*  
encaustic and plaster  
22" x 10 1/2"





*Newborn*  
monotype  
19" x 12 1/2"





*Portrait of Bertha*

monotype

17" x 13 1/2"





*Claude Lorrain*  
monotype  
(from suite of monotypes *Homage to Claude Lorrain*)  
12 1/2" x 8 1/2"





5/25

A3

*Cats*  
etching  
(from portfolio edition of 25)  
3 1/2" x 3"





*Cats*  
etching  
(from portfolio edition of 25)  
2 1/4" x 4 1/2"





*Infant*  
 etching  
 (from limited edition of 20)  
 4 1/2" x 3"



*Infant*  
 etching  
 (from livre deluxe edition of 20)  
 4 3/4" x 3"





*Infant*

pencil

(drawing for portfolio  
of etchings *Newborn*)

5" x 4"



*Infant*

pencil

(drawing for portfolio  
of etchings *Newborn*)

5" x 4"



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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—*Aubrey Schwartz*

## CREDITS

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Cover: *Kafka*, monotype, 21" x 16"





*State University of New York*

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