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A Study of the Figure

William G. Lubitz

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A STUDY OF THE FIGURE

by

WILLIAM G. LUBITZ

Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of North Dakota, 1973

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

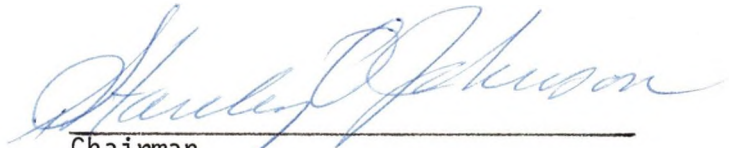
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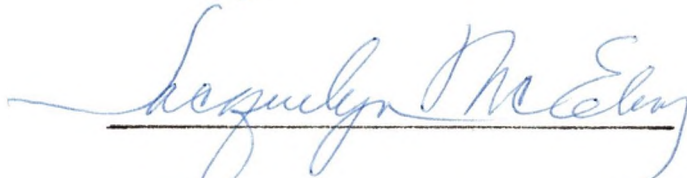
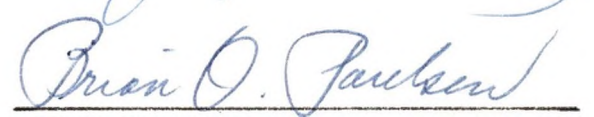
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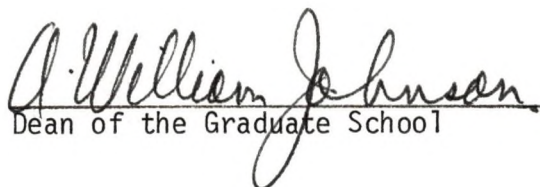
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A Study of the Figure

Department of Visual Arts

Master of Arts

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APRIL 23RD, 1980

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ABSTRACT

The problem I chose to work with was to render the figure in copperfoiled and leaded stained glass wall mounted or window hung panels. The solution I desired was primarily not academic. The plan was to unite separate facets of my previous work.

Using photographs and drawings from life as preliminary studies and problem solving devices, I then re-worked them into additional objects, i.e. free standing glass sculpture and intaglio prints. Consequently there are examples of the same subject in different media. It is from comparisons of these that I draw the bulk of my information for personal judgement, criticism and aesthetic evaluation.

The result of this effort is a cohesive exhibition of a creative effort coupled with a written document describing the processes of the critical decisions, trials and judgements during its preparation.

PREFACE

In undergraduate graphic work I had used the figure as subject matter in intaglio line compositions. Later, in my first year of graduate school, the figure again appeared in my work, but defined by the flat color areas of the serigraph. It was also at this time that I was introduced to the techniques of stained glass assembly. Now, four years later, I am combining the line of my early graphic work, the colored planes of the serigraph and the figure that has always interested me with a craft that not only is fully capable of combining these elements but, with the addition of intrinsic qualities of its own, elevates the total far higher than any of my previous efforts could have gone. It is not by accident that early craftsmen chose stained glass to color the atmosphere of structures designed to elevate the spirit.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly all of us in the Visual Arts have had a great number of influences that have combined to give us our "individual" viewpoint on our life and work. For some of us it is a duty to remain constant in our effort to continue looking at those few whose aesthetic principles we have chosen to claim as our own. Others of us choose rather to follow our instincts and emotions and strive less to consider their sources, that the outcome may at least feel more personal. Most of us realize it is foolish to deny influence, but also many of us feel we somehow can separate our styles from those of others before us and believe we are the inventor. I believe that we each are the product of our culture, the total of our experiences, and whether we consciously recognize them or not, they influence our every aesthetic thought.

The artists whose work I might recognize as having had an influence on me in a fairly broad sense are many. Partially in my attitude toward the subject, an almost familial closeness with the figure and primarily in my design of space, it is clear to me I have learned from first, the Japanese ukeyo-e in general, and in particular, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806). Second, I have learned much from the work of the French Intimists of the first decade of the Twentieth Century, Pierre Bonard and Edward Vuilliard. To a lesser degree, other artists such as Mary Cassat, Edgar Degas, Aristide Maillol and Henri Matisse also show influence.

What these people had in common, and what I wish to speak of is a degree of intimacy - a closeness between the subject and the viewer in terms of composition that becomes quite personal. They, the subject and the viewer, are alone together. The subject is most often at ease and unaware of the viewer and there is usually a privacy between them that is in no danger of being disturbed. This may imply a certain amount of voyeurism, but I prefer to ignore the negative connotations that word usually implies. To take it a step further, my wish would be that the viewer is a friend or family and knowing that, the subject wouldn't mind being seen.

The devices I use to encourage some of these responses are many: first there is scale, none of my pieces are large, they cannot be viewed at great distances by many people at once; second, cropping to eliminate a portion of the figure and closing out much of its environment also serves to bring the viewer closer. A third device is relaxing the subjects. My people are generally in comfortable positions doing activities common to most of us.

Certainly none of this is profound. It is not my desire, with a small panel of glass or a 5 x 7 print, to inundate the viewer with information. If with these objects I might solicit something empathetic, either between the viewer and the subject or between the viewer and my view of the subject, my overture is complete. My wish through my objects is only to make contact, a touch - perhaps to brush a soft emotion, not to expound or proselytize.

This document, on the other hand, may serve to offer whatever additional insight I might have to clarify certain of my personal

motivations and values. Now, months after the exhibition has closed, I am feeling the distance which may make it possible for me to take an objective look at my own work and the decisions that created it.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

These figurative panels are a visual documentation of one semester's effort in the investigative process of clarifying my understanding of the relationships involved between an image, its format and their viewer. It has become a study in the psychology of intimacy.

The graphic works here serve several functions: In addition to more rapidly visualizing the relationships involved in the panels, they serve also to record the auto(bio)graphic process of making marks. It is this process that tells us about the person holding the tools. For me those marks become a mirror, a means of re-assessment of self. For others, they may become a window. I don't mind if you take a closer look.

Wm. Lubitz

April 29, 1979

CHAPTER I: THE PHOTOGRAPHS

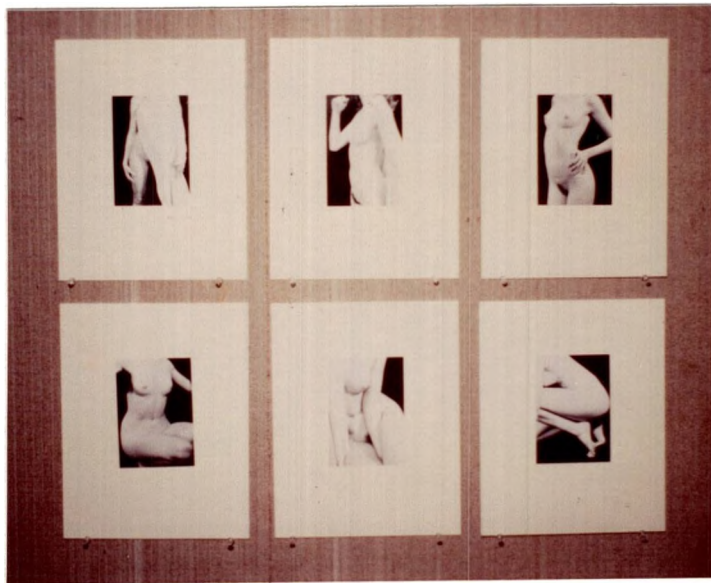
I have included this section to give the reader, as they did the viewer in the original exhibition, additional background information to help in understanding the development of the objects.

My intent was to isolate the figure from both its environment and the personality surrounding it. I am not particularly interested in portraiture. Expressive body parts tightly cropped and void of the superfluous details to which people attach idiosyncratic information tend to approach more abstract forms. What remains of the figure is somewhat more universal (Figs. 1 and 2).

In addition to using the photographs simply as photographs, these and the others taken during the same photo sessions were the sources of all the other work in the exhibition. Two of the photographs displayed appear also as glass panels, and one of them was the source for one of the aquatints. My purpose was to show the evolution of an image from its source through some of its various alternatives.



(Fig. 1) PHOTOGRAPHS
(a,b) 5 x 7 inches
(c,d,e)



(Fig. 2) PHOTOGRAPHS
(abc) 5 x 7 inches
(def)

CHAPTER II: THE PANELS

A friend of mine once observed that the subject in my work is virtually always a nude or semi-nude female. He seemed to have some difficulty with the fact that, especially in view of the subject, almost none of my work was oriented horizontally. My response to that is simply that I do not see my work as sexually oriented. I will admit there is certainly a degree of sensuality, of the physical that is the expression of humanness and a quality which I hope invites response. To embody this sensuality in my work is a goal I have had for years. I enjoy it when it happens for me, and I enjoy it in other peoples work as well.

I have attempted to encourage or emphasize this epicurian quality which might be a characteristic in the relaxed posture or pose of a semi-nude woman by slight exaggeration of certain tactile shapes or body parts, i.e. the flesh of a thigh or the weight of a breast. Also, attention could be focused by careful selection of glass with surface textures or color patterns which would emphasize the flow of fabric and the body under it. Another factor, having nothing at all to do with the subject matter, is the fact that the glass itself, with its liquid-like surface and depth, only encourages cutaneous perception both imagined and real. As a result, the impression of hardness and brittleness one might have when hearing described a panel made of pieces of glass which are held together by copper and solder and supported in an aluminum frame, is suprisingly easy to overcome.

The first of the panels, "FIGURE IN BLUE TUNIC" (Fig. 3), is



(Fig. 3) "FIGURE IN BLUE TUNIC"
20 x 24 inches

probably the most inconsistent of the eight. The figure itself, the treatment of the fabric and hair and their interplay with the milk glass used for the body I feel are well resolved. It was the remainder of the panel which needed further resolution, and it was this area that presented the most difficulty in future panels.

First of all, there is simply too much space around the figure. The entire figure is seen, it is suspended almost equidistant from the four sides of the frame. The architecture around the figure is much too divided, it has too many lines. In the effort to justify the necessary seams required to suspend the figure in the panel, the lines in the floor become dual purpose. First, a few breaks to the edges were a necessary part of assembly. By careful placement of those lines and by adding a few more, their necessity could be camouflaged in the aesthetics of the perspective lines of what became a fairly solid floor. The device used to make the floor perpendicular to the picture plane was also used to make a wall parallel to it, namely covering the area with parallel lines. Again, less than half the lines were necessary to fit the glass around the figure, but the additional lines gave them all a purpose. This was an effect that I felt was highly desirable.

With the second panel, "FIGURE WITH FUR JACKET" (Fig. 4), I began trying to solve some of the problems. First of all, the standing contraposto figure, cropped at the thighs, fills more of the format. The hand on the hip with the extended elbow also serves to cover background. We see less of the space in which the figure

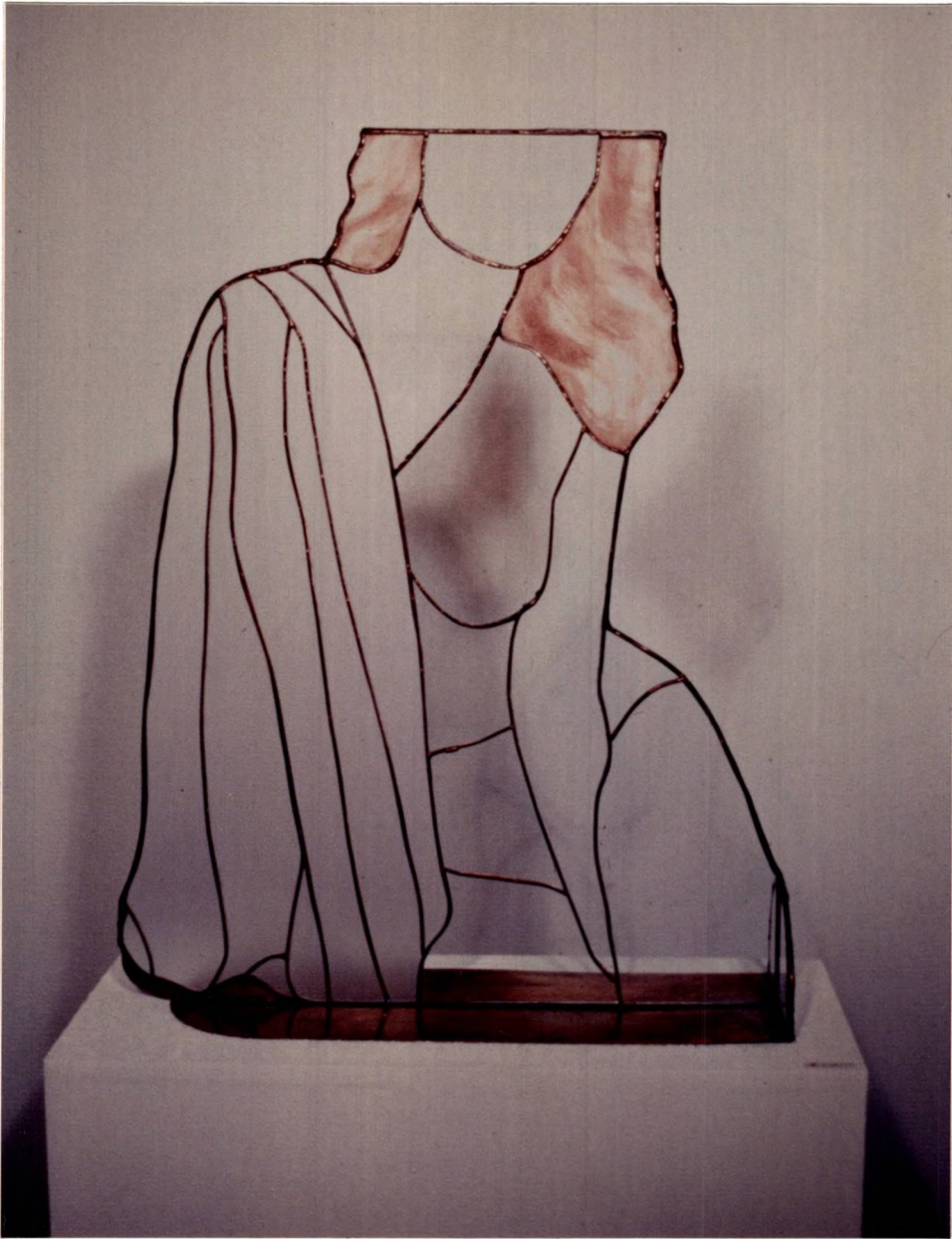


(Fig. 4) "FIGURE WITH FUR JACKET"
16 x 19 inches

resides, and the space around the figure has less depth. We are closer. The somewhat architectural mirrored arch serves to return eyes that may wander over the rest of the surface back to the figure. There are fewer unessential lines. Still, for me, there was considerable dissatisfaction in the necessity to break the space around the figure. I recall that my earliest critical response was "I am not doing this to render architecture!".

That brings us to the next panel, the first free standing piece, "FIGURE WITH RED HAIR" (Fig. 5).

Once the cartoon was drawn for this image (see the photograph Fig. 2e), I decided to crop the figure through the head to bring the viewer closer and to possibly simplify a background. However, two factors resulting from my dissatisfaction with elements of the previous panel soon became evident. First, rather than spending time and effort on a background that was, to me at best unsatisfying and at worst highly competitive with the subject, I decided to simply eliminate the background altogether. This decision, of course, brought its own new set of problems. They were problems that I thought might encourage more inventive solutions, solutions which could make the object more personal and I hoped more interesting. Also, as a direct response to the visual weight of the dark glasses chosen for the previous panel, combined with the decision to free the subject from the weight of a structured frame, my desire for the lightest of all possible glasses for the subject suggested that the answer might be simply clear window glass.



(Fig. 5) "FIGURE WITH RED HAIR"
22½ inches high

I liked that idea, because the result could be a line drawing more solid than any I had ever done, yet unfettered by a defined enclosed space or form. This was an appealing concept!

The first problem was the definition of texture. To differentiate figure from fabric, I chose to frost the area of glass intended to be fabric. Once that was done, it seemed necessary to define another texture for hair. Since clear glasses had been used for the other surfaces, I thought a lightly colored glass might be appropriate here. I felt a clear streaky glass with very little color would be ideal, it would minimize the possibility of giving too much importance to the hair, yet add character to the piece. While I am sure such a glass exists, having it at hand when I needed it was another matter. The final solution was to heavily etch clear window glass using a 'dry-brush' technique to apply the hydrofluoric etching paste. The stiff bristled brush created a pattern suggesting hair. After the piece had been assembled, the base attached and the solder coloring patina applied, the last stage was to rub a Venetian red oil-based pigment into the textured surface of the etched glass. The idea was that the pigment should adhere to the textured areas and wipe free from the smooth unetched surfaces - not unlike preparing an intaglio plate for printing. Since I used an oil-based pigment, colorfastness and adherence should be no problem.

At this point I might also mention the handling of another detail. When I finished the cartoon for this piece, I liked the almost perfectly balanced sections into which the body of the figure had been divided - with one exception: The two pieces now forming

the area from the neck to the breast were at that time one oversized piece. It seemed much too large an area for the others, but I had no justification for altering it. I had become adamant about not adding unnecessary lines. Then fortuitously, while handling (mis-handling) that piece before assembly, I broke it! The break happened to divide the piece nicely. It also appeared across an area that might be occupied by a piece of jewelry, like a chain or a chord that might be used to hold the 'cape' on one shoulder. Twisted strands of copper wire were soldered over the seam to more clearly encourage that definition. The result for me, is very satisfying.

The other major problem was to find some method of supporting this plate of assembled sections of glass in a free standing vertical position. The solution was a sheet of copper, since my choice of patinas on the soldered seams was already copper, cut with a semi-circle on the left side to balance the semi-circle of glass standing attached on the right side. This acted both as support for the piece, and as a visual cross section through the thigh of the figure. This perpendicular support, coupled with a 12 gage solid copper wire soldered to the entire perimeter of the panel, became the necessary device to hold the structure vertical. An additional benefit of the wire border which I intended to stiffen the somewhat flexible seams was that it also acted as a protector or buffer for the vulnerable edges of glass.

At the completion of this piece there were just two minor disturbances that remained somewhat of a problem for me. One of them was technical and the other was aesthetic. The technical difficulty

was in soldering the relatively heavy sheet-copper base to the foil wrapped glass at their intersection. Had I used the quantity of heat necessary for a smooth solder bead with both the glass and the copper absorbing massive amounts, all seven pieces of glass in contact with the base would have shattered. My approach was a painstaking touching and lifting of the iron back and forth across the seams while slowly adding solder. The result, after a sufficient build-up of solder, was a deliberate pattern of carefully spaced waves. The aesthetic difficulty was that the base appeared a little too heavy, a little too solid for the very light transparent object sitting on it.

The next piece, "KNEELING FIGURE" (Fig. 6), the result of the acquisition of some very rare and special types of glass from a friend, was simply a means of displaying two truly beautiful glasses. The background, a pale rose French "antique"* and the fabric, a clear German "ripple"* that fell in pleats from the hand loosely holding the ends together at the chest, were interfered with as little as possible by cropping the figure so the pieces of these special glasses would remain large. The glass chosen for the figure had to remain non-competitive, but still have some substance. The lightly frosted surface of non-glare picture glass seemed the perfect answer. I was not disappointed.

In the effort to detract as little as possible from the glasses, I chose to leave the soldered seams in their natural silvery color.

*Denotes term defined in glossary



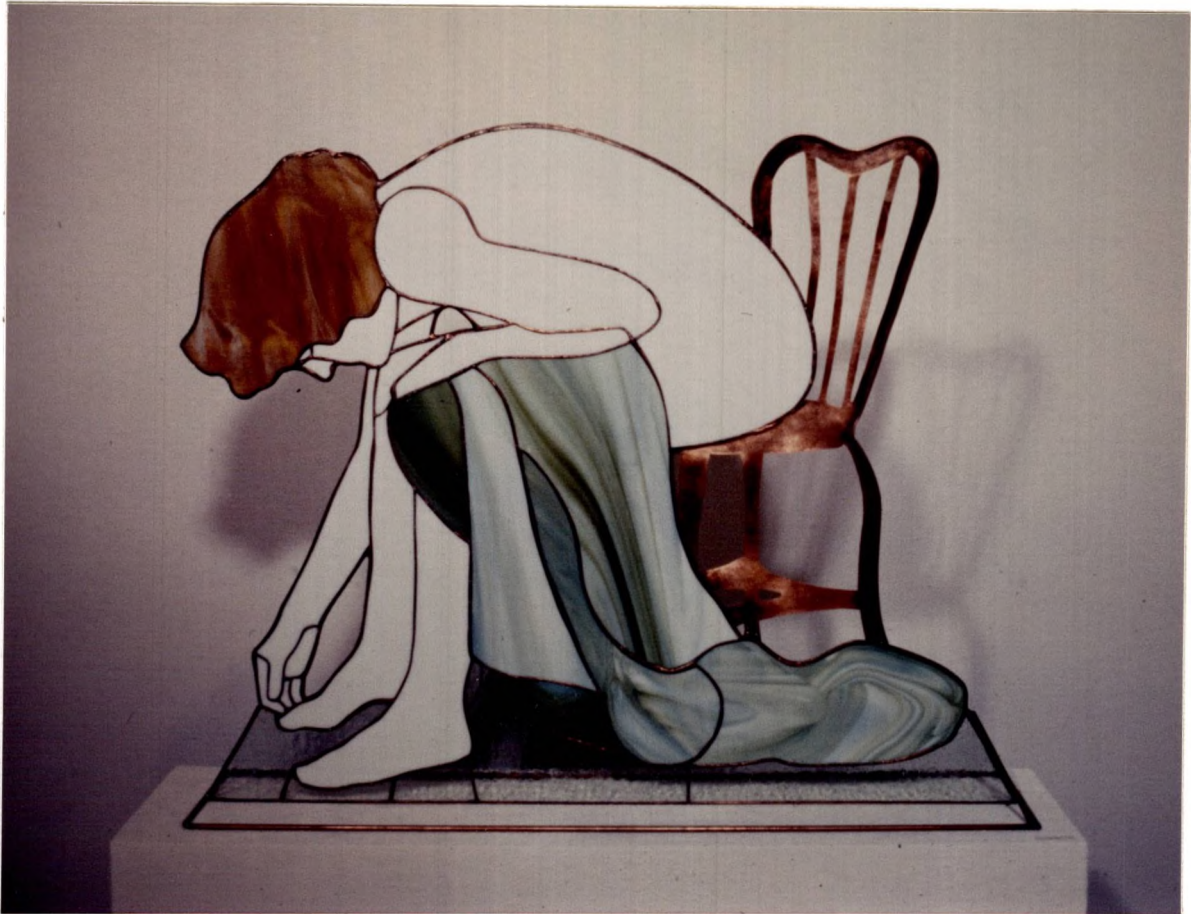
(Fig. 6) "KNEELING FIGURE"
18 x 18 inches

This, combined with the silver aluminum frame, seemed the perfect compliment to these delicate glasses.

After completing one free standing figure and stepping back from the concept to briefly indulge in the display of a pair of special imported glasses, I thought it was time again to see what could be done for another somewhat more sculptural object using the larger pieces of domestic glass I had available. The result was "SEATED FIGURE TOUCHING HER TOES" (Fig. 7).

This piece is very closely related to the first panel, "FIGURE IN BLUE TUNIC" (Fig. 3) in a number of ways. First, again we have the entire figure, no cropping. The compressed or condensed pose of the model helps create the intimacy with the viewer without the necessity of cropping. Second, as in Fig. 3, colored glasses suggest the textured surfaces of fabric and hair, the flat milk glass becomes skin and the casual pose suggests some intimate behavior occurring at or just after the bath. This conjurs in the mind of the viewer the references I spoke of earlier to the 18th. and 19th. Century Japanese woodcuts and the late 19th. and early 20th. Century European domestic scenes.

Some details worth mentioning, those probably not immediately apparent, I feel are further resolutions from "FIGURE WITH RED HAIR" (Fig. 5). Using work hardened (hammered) sheet copper for the chair gave the material a more important role in the image and added a solid yet somewhat lyrical dimension due to the design of the chair. The gentle fluid line is the most important element here. As in Fig. 5, this piece is supported by a wire reinforced perimeter and a triangulated



(Fig. 7) "SEATED FIGURE TOUCHING HER TOES"
23 inches high

support which is also on the right side. The base itself, however, unlike the one used for Fig. 5, is defined by a line as are the other elements in the image. It happens to be made of 6 gage copper-clad welding rod and I feel it is a more pleasant solution to the problem. In this case all the soldered seams have essentially the same smooth texture.

Another significant factor is that this is the only panel I have done with open spaces through it. Those through the chair are apparent, but there are also openings in the glass between the wrist and the ankle and at the underarm. These also have been reinforced with wire.

The next panel, "SEATED FIGURE TOUCHING HER TEMPLE" (Fig. 8), was an effort to return to the more conventional usage of stained glass in a framed panel. Again, it is the line drawing that is the prominent element here. The lightly colored transparent glasses, a pale peach "Flemish"; a gray "antique" and a clear "seedy" were chosen as a subordinate compliment to a submissive and somewhat introspective gesture by the model. This panel, more than any other, approaches the purity and simplicity that I so admire in the works of Maillol and Matisse.

The following panel, "SEATED FIGURE WITH A PURPLE TOWEL" (Fig. 9), was another effort at combining materials in order to solve problems. The figure is not closely cropped - just at the knees, the elbow and at the crown of the head. This action of stepping back from the figure allows for uncomplicated mechanics of space filling from the



(Fig. 8) "SEATED FIGURE TOUCHING HER TEMPLE"
15 x 22 inches



(Fig. 9) "SEATED FIGURE WITH A PURPLE TOWEL"
15 x 24 inches

figure to the frame on the right side, but leaves the left side with a more complex outline including a number of undercuts.

Undercuts present some difficulty if the desire is to have no lines running to the frame or across the field that are not defining something. The solution for this example was a single piece of sheet copper cut exactly to the outline and covered with a patina analogous to the surface treatments of both the antiqued solder and the darkly bronzed aluminum frame.

The main difficulty in this piece for me, is that there is no single focus. The individually important elements of the hands and the folds in the fabric are not well connected with each other and are too small a portion of the total surface area. This becomes for me an example of one of those insolubles where the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

In the last panel, "COUPLE" (Fig. 10), the addition of the second figure certainly made it easier to sustain a higher level of interest all across the panel. The additional pair of arms appearing from behind the primary figure - one to hold and one to touch, I think greatly increases the tactile identification for the viewer. It certainly does for me.

In recognition of the direction in which the color choices for the previous panels seemed to be headed, the glasses chosen for this panel were all essentially clear. I chose a softly mottled texture for the background, a glass called "Velvex", commercially used for bath and shower enclosures. The prominent female figure is done in the softly frosted non-glare picture glass and her hair is the glisten-



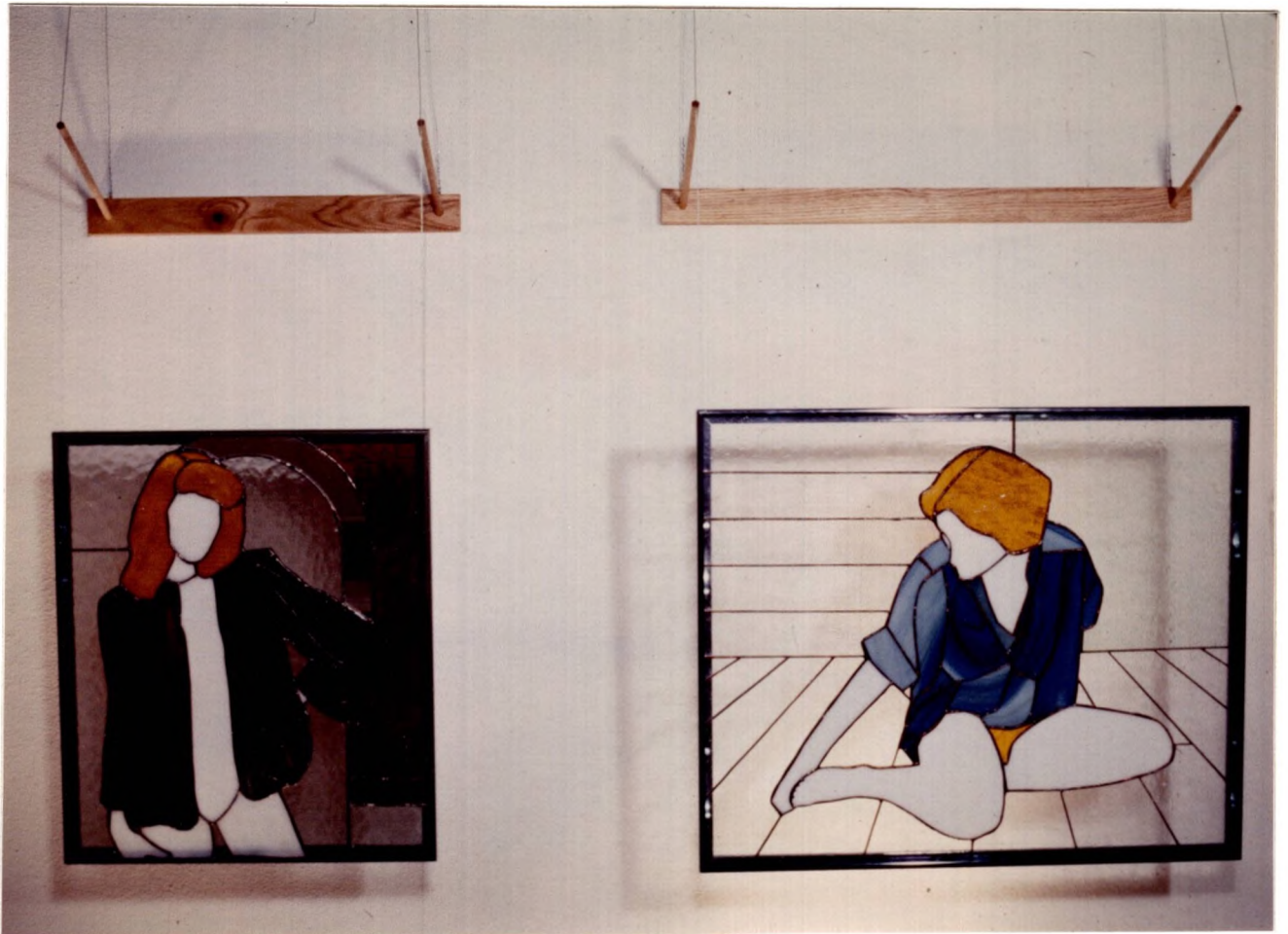
(Fig. 10) "COUPLE"
20 x 24 inches

ing "glue chip"* for contrast. Of the male figure in the background we see just two arms and a portion of his thigh. Here I used a more dense, heavily frosted commercial glass. Depending on the source or intensity of illumination, front lighting or back lighting, the two non-hued frosted glasses shift value considerably. One figure is always much darker than the other making it easier to tell which of the four arms belongs to which of the two figures. Also, because of this value shift, the figures seem to trade weight or visual significance. For me, that is an important element.

The effect that all of these nearly transparent uncolored glasses might elicit from the viewer is the recognition of feelings or qualities of lightness, possibly also of something slightly ethereal. Since it did not seem necessary to include any reference to their environment, these figures do appear to be floating.

Before passing on to the graphic work, I would like to describe briefly the method used to exhibit the panels that were not free standing or hung before a window.

A glass panel is generally at its best when it is transmitting rather than reflecting light. That is to say it should be backlighted. The problem is to get light behind two-dimensional pieces not designed to be seen from the rear. In other words, they could not be hung out in the room but neither could they be hung flat against the wall. The solution was to hang a bracket above the panel which would push the wires from which the panel hung away from the wall about a foot (Fig. 11). Then with a floor mounted spot light directed on the wall behind



(Fig. 11) PANEL DISPLAY DEVICES

each piece, the reflecting white wall becomes the source of illumination for the panels and we see the desired effect of the transmitted light and all the quality and character of the glass is revealed.

CHAPTER III: THE GRAPHIC WORK

Having expertise in diverse technical areas has been an admirable quality found in virtually all noteworthy artists and educators in the arts whose lives newer people on the scene might wish to emulate. In keeping with my longstanding goal of having a variety of skills to draw upon, I see the graphic work here as primarily an exercise in maintaining a certain amount of dexterity in areas that have long held my interest. While I know that periodically returning to practice old skills may not keep one at the forefront of any craft, it should at least help to maintain a level of proficiency in an area that may add depth and understanding to another process or image often related more than just superficially.

In general the intaglio process is not as well known for its ability to carry over the true nature or 'signature' character of the mark made by the stylus as is the lithograph. In an intaglio print the strength of the mark is made not by the hand, but by the acid. However the brush-drawn sugarlift does retain much of the autographic quality of mark making that I feel is so important.

An event which can happen in the studio where a quantity of production occurs is that the artist may not be totally aware of the relationships between the objects as they are being created. Often pieces are not displayed in the studio, but are stored for safe-keeping or space saving and what were important considerations on previous pieces are soon displaced by the total immersion of the artist into subsequent sets of problems with succeeding objects. It was not until all of the work prepared for this exhibition was placed

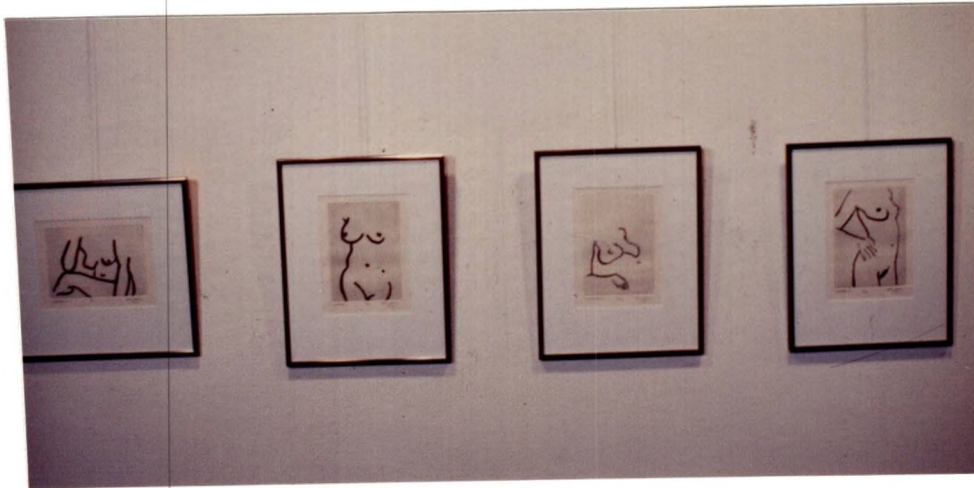
in the gallery and spaced around the room that a clear focus was realized.

Since the theme of this exhibition revolved around intimacy, the frontispiece I chose to display near the entrance was the self portrait sugarlift "LOOKING CLOSE" (Fig. 12). Tightly cropped at the forehead and chin, this life size portrait on a 5 x 7 inch plate does appear to be looking very closely indeed. With this rare example (in this exhibition) of facial expression, I hoped people might respond to the smile and consider themselves welcome to share whatever feelings I might be able to arouse. (See also the artist's statement on page 4).

Many of the nine sugarlifts offered here, primarily those in the first group (Fig. 13), have a subtle humor not found in the other objects. This element is one I wish not to ignore in my work, but because of the energy involved in the glass pieces, to add humor to them not only did not seem appropriate, it just was not possible for me. The degree of structure necessary to render these figures in glass just does not allow the freedom or spontaneity so important if one wishes to exercise a little wit. Working with the brush, however, does allow that freedom and the quick mark can become very expressive. The last plates (Fig. 14) are considerably more elaborate than the first and as a result, I feel they are much less effective having lost much of that whimsical element. As the poses became more complex, so did the detail. The last two plates, in particular, are a little overdone. I chose to include them, however, because they begin the transition into the drawings.



(Fig. 12) "LOOKING CLOSE"
sugarlift aquatint etching
5 x 7 inches



(Fig. 13) SUGARLIFT AQUATINT ETCHINGS
prints #2-5,
5 x 7 inches



(Fig. 14) SUGARLIFT AQUATINT ETCHINGS
prints #6-9,
5 x 7 inches

These pencil drawings (Figs. 15 and 16) are somewhat of a digression from the nearly totally linear aspect of this exhibition. There is considerable shading, modeling of the figure and development of form in all of them. The poses are more complex and the personality of the model is developed to a greater degree. They digress because with a simple rub of the finger the pencil line smudges, and it so easily defines contour. They digress because I cannot remember the last time I did a drawing that I could keep from rubbing.



(Fig. 15) DRAWINGS
untitled
9 x 12 inches



(Fig. 16) DRAWINGS
untitled (dancer)
9 x 12 inches

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

When I reflect over the processes of designing and executing these eight panels, nine prints and four drawings, it is clearly the linear element that I am most interested in working with, while the development of the subject seems to have focused on sharpening or heightening awareness of a tactile sensation in a human-to-human context. The glass pieces seem to follow this progression much more deliberately, even though the prints and drawings were done intermittently throughout the working period. Since the major concentration was in glass, it is not surprising that the clearer focus is found there. It would also be unfair to overlook the fact that if my primary interest is linear, and the stained glass process gives of necessity a very linear image, it is logically in the glass where one might expect a more harmonious association of process with object, object with attitude. However, because of the rapid development of image in the prints, I feel they do add an important breadth of sentiment. As I mentioned earlier, it is much easier to express a whim with the stroke of a bulbous watercolor brush than with the carefully plotted path of a line of solder. In our daily lives most of us enjoy a variety of experiences. Not all of them are equally important.

GLOSSARY

ANTIQUÉ GLASS Stained glass which is still hand-made in the same way it was in medieval times. It may also be known as muff or cylinder glass. Molten glass is gathered on a blowpipe and blown into a cylinder two to three feet long. The ends of the cylinder are cut off, a score is made down one side and it is placed in a hot kiln where it will open along the score to form a flat sheet of glass. Characteristics of antique glass include unusual clarity, uneven thickness, irregular surfaces and a variety of suspended bubbles or "seeds". Recently machine-made "antique" glasses have been developed so terms such as "full antique" or "true antique" are now being used to equate hand-made.

FLEMISH GLASS A surface texture, not a place of origin. It has the appearance of large blobs or lumps of glass evenly distributed over and partially melted into the surface of the sheet. Its thickness varies greatly.

GLUE CHIP A surface texture applied to clear glass having the appearance of frost-like patterns.

RIPPLE GLASS A broad term denoting an undulating surface texture in the glass. It may vary from nearly imperceptible ripples at regular intervals applied to the molten sheet by a machine with a ribbed roller to very large waves made by manually drawing a claw-like tool through the surface of the molten glass.

SEEDY GLASS Smooth surfaced clear (cathedral) glasses with small suspended bubbles called "seeds" created by adding bicarbonate of soda to the molten glass.