125 NEWBURY

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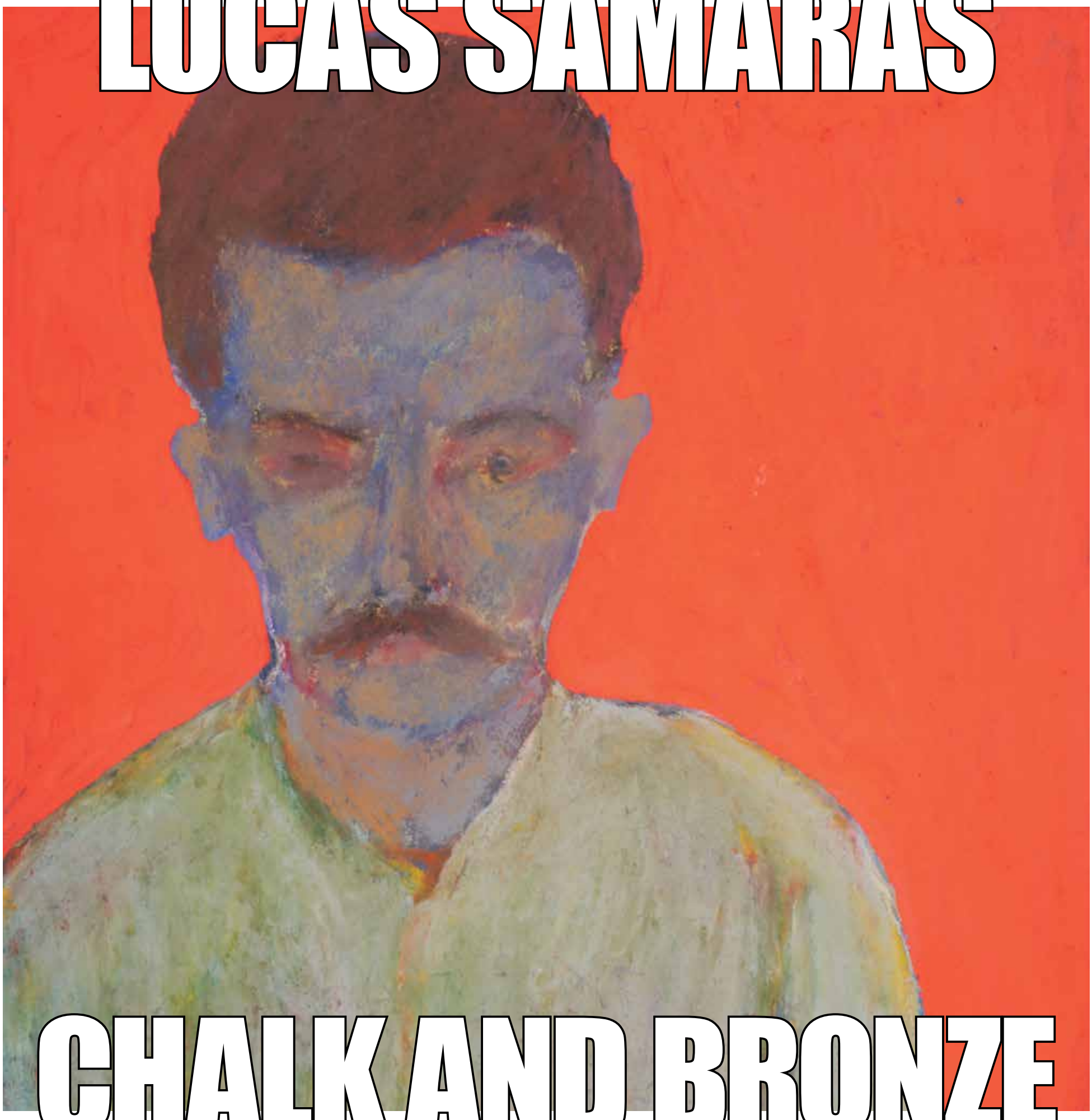
LUCAS SAMARAS



CHALK AND BRONZE

FREE PRESS

BETWEEN THREAT AND SEDUCTION

Arne Glimcher

From the moment I first encountered the work of Lucas Samaras at Dick Bellamy's Green Gallery in the early 1960s, I was captivated. The power of the work affected me somatically. It was a punch in the stomach. I soon met Samaras himself—this exotic, mutating, evolving creature, who would continue to surprise me for the next five decades. A sorcerer obsessed with the allure of danger, he produced imagery both seductive and repulsive, and never less than fascinating. From the beginning, I wanted to be as close to the work—and to him—as possible. He was magnetic.

Samaras was a radically inventive artist, always dancing on the highwire between threat and seduction. Love me and hate me, but never take me for granted—those were the demands he made of his audience. His first show at my gallery took place in 1966. Our friendship spanned fifty-five years and thirty exhibitions, and our visits were frequent. He worked every day until his death at the age of 87.

The pastels are the foundation of Samaras's work. It was in pastel that he invented not only his palette, but also the many versions of himself. When they were first shown by Bellamy, I thought immediately of Redon. But unlike the refinement of this nineteenth-century master, Samaras reveled in his own vulgarity.

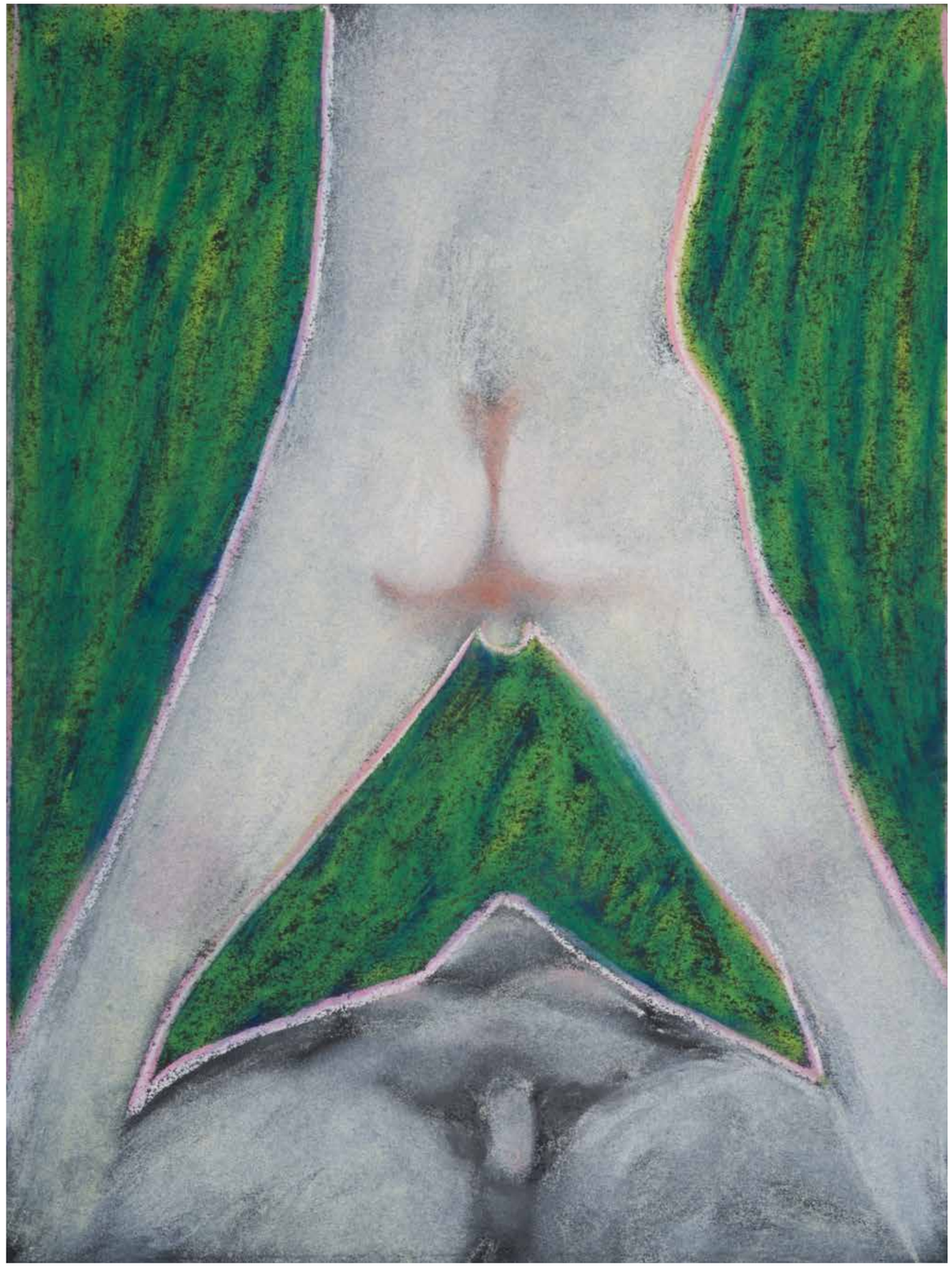
In his pastels, Samaras harnesses the abject body, transforming contorted depictions into exquisite delicacies. His sources are rooted in his own life and his own self. Coaxing high beauty from cheap materials, he spun flax into gold. Sometimes labeled a narcissist, his true religion was a kind of onanism. The pastels are testaments to the ongoing love affair between Samaras and himself.

Lucas is the first real postmodern artist, a chameleon continually changing direction. Surrealism remained a touchpoint throughout his career, though never in a doctrinaire way. As soon as he completed a body of work, he would shapeshift into the next chapter. This refusal of linear progression, the impossibility of conceiving of his career as a seamless whole, is fundamentally postmodern.

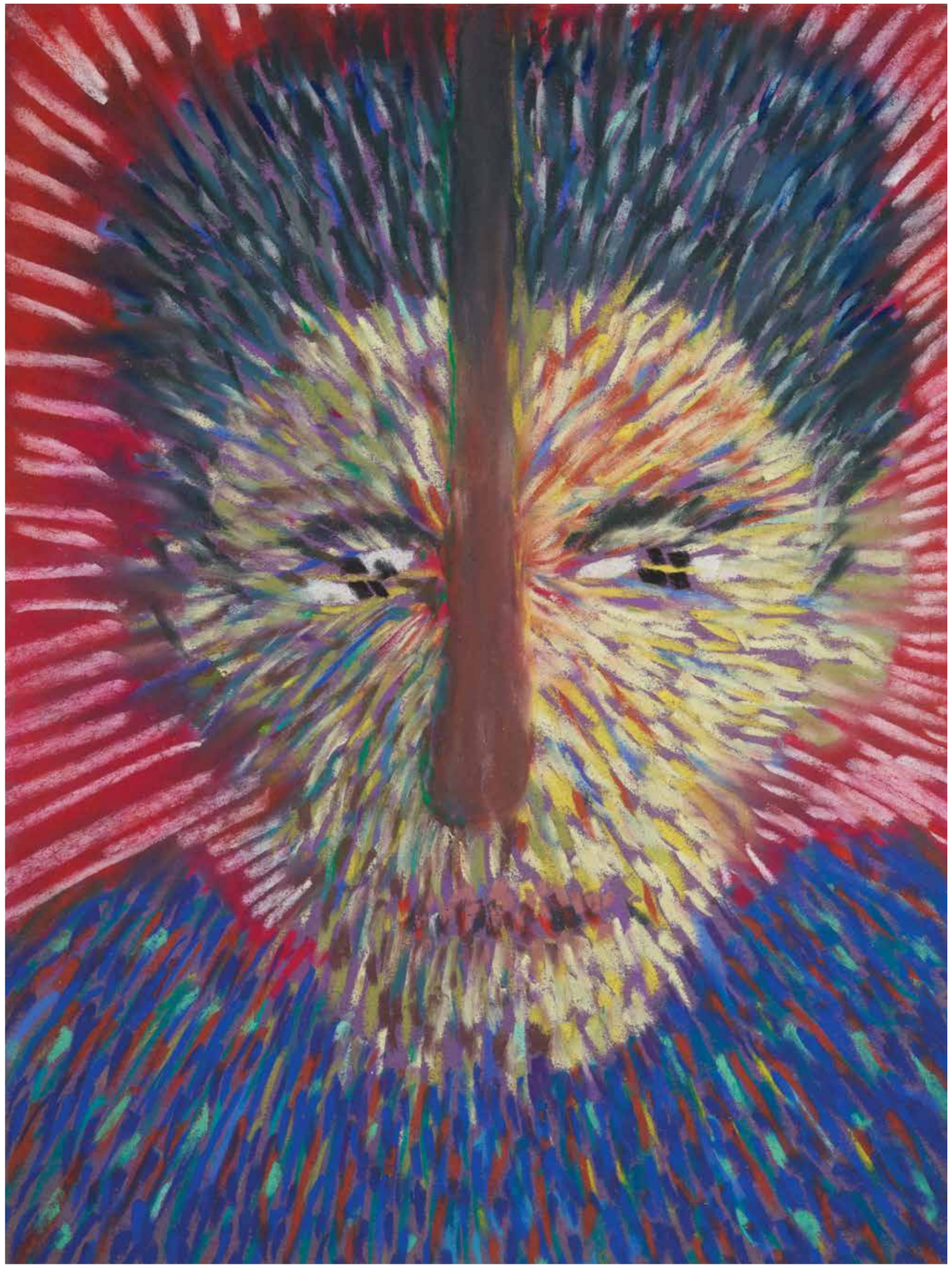
During the early 1980s, Lucas made a series of small figurative bronzes. I immediately saw their connection to the imagery of the pastels that had come before. In 1982, Pace presented *Pastels and Bronzes*, an exhibition that brought the two bodies of work into dialogue for the first time. This show at 125 Newbury comprises an entirely different set of never-before-seen pastels, mostly from the 1960s, which Samaras kept in his personal collection. This exhibition of Samaras's Samarases is dedicated to his memory.

Untitled, June 2, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

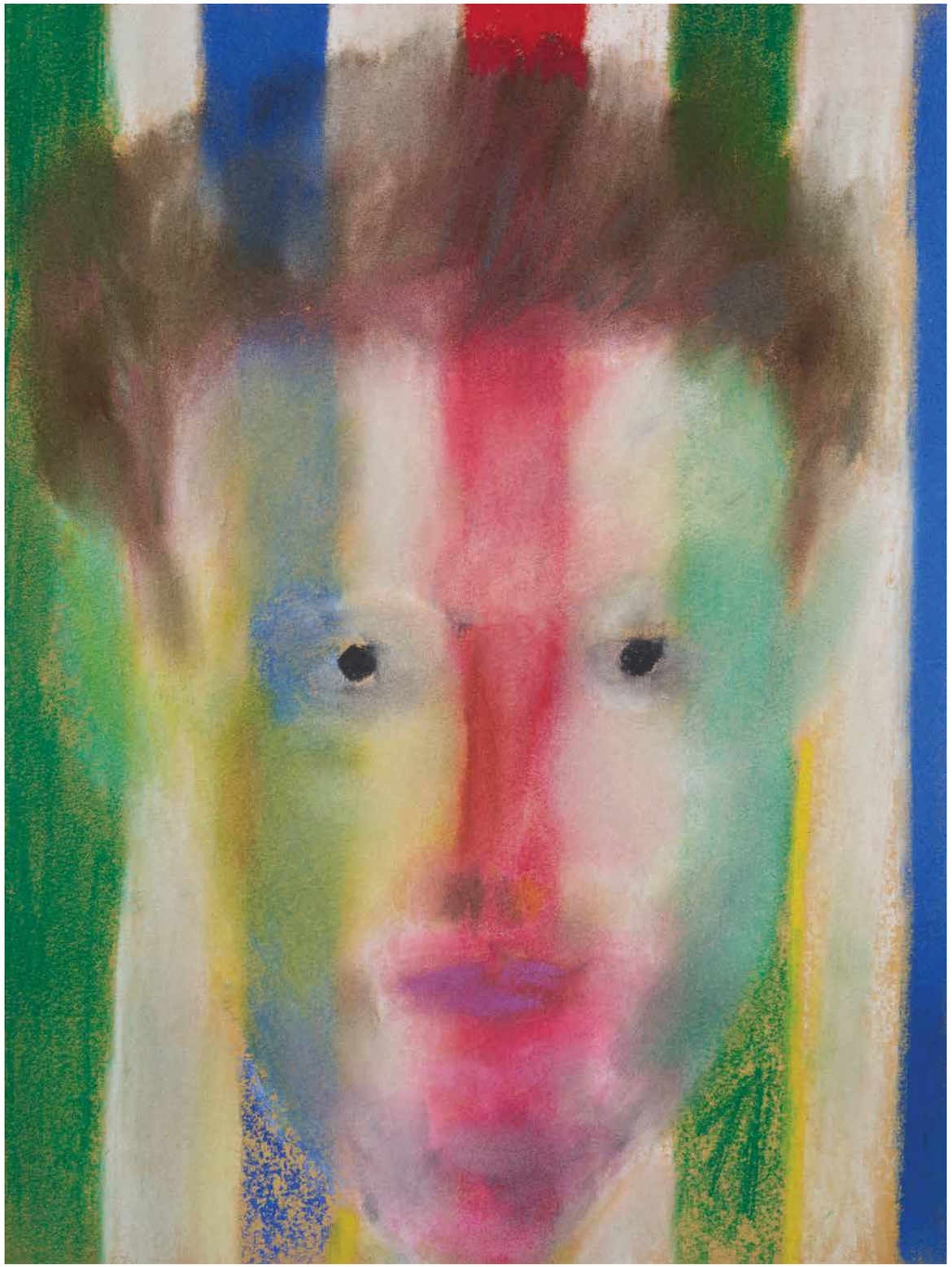
Untitled, October 25, 1958. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"



Untitled, August 5, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"

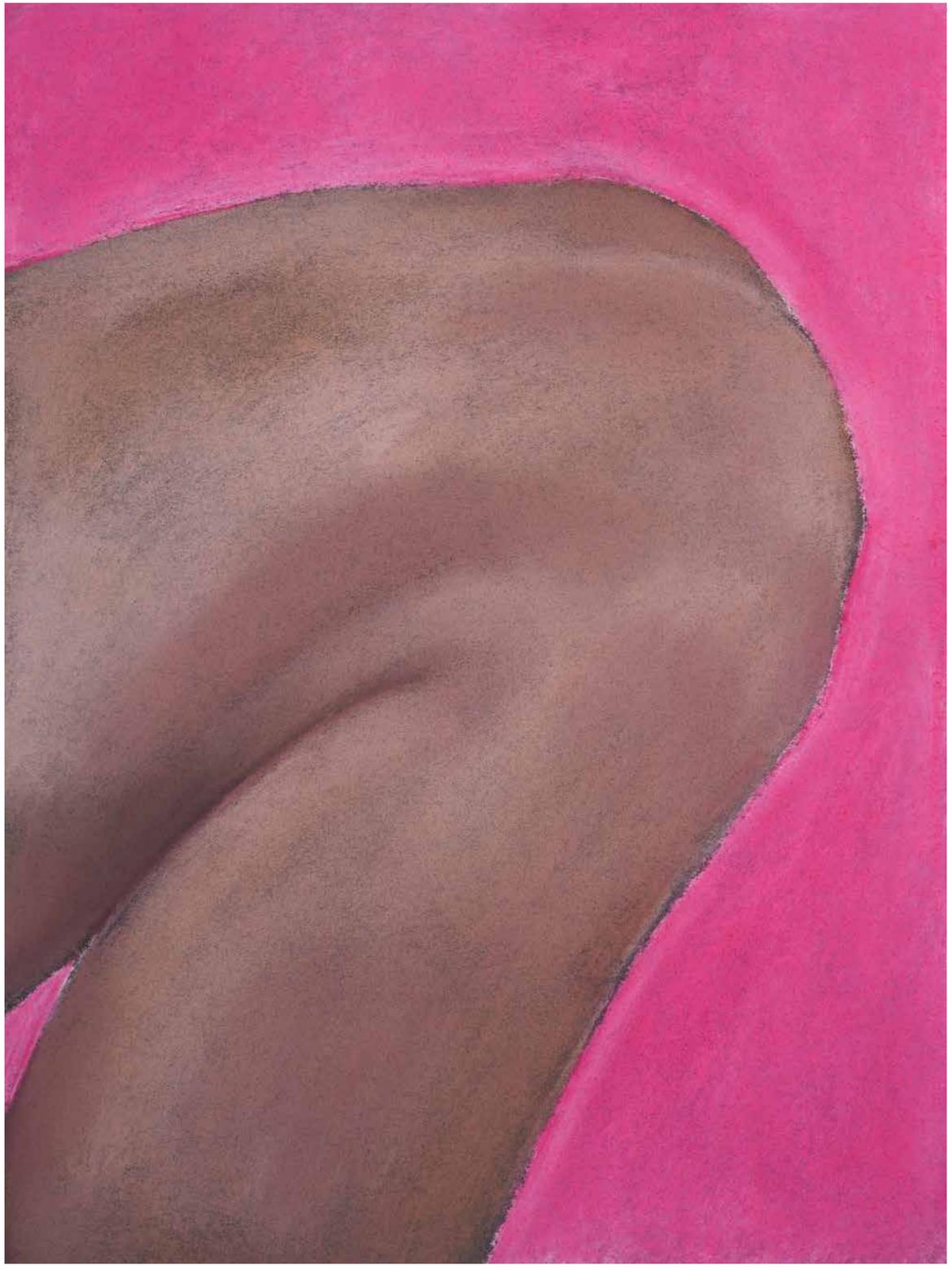


Untitled, July 25, 1961. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"



Untitled, July 11, 1961. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Untitled, July 21, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"



Untitled, 1965. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Large Abandon with Arc Arm, 1981. Silver plated bronze. 9½" × 10¼" × 7¼"

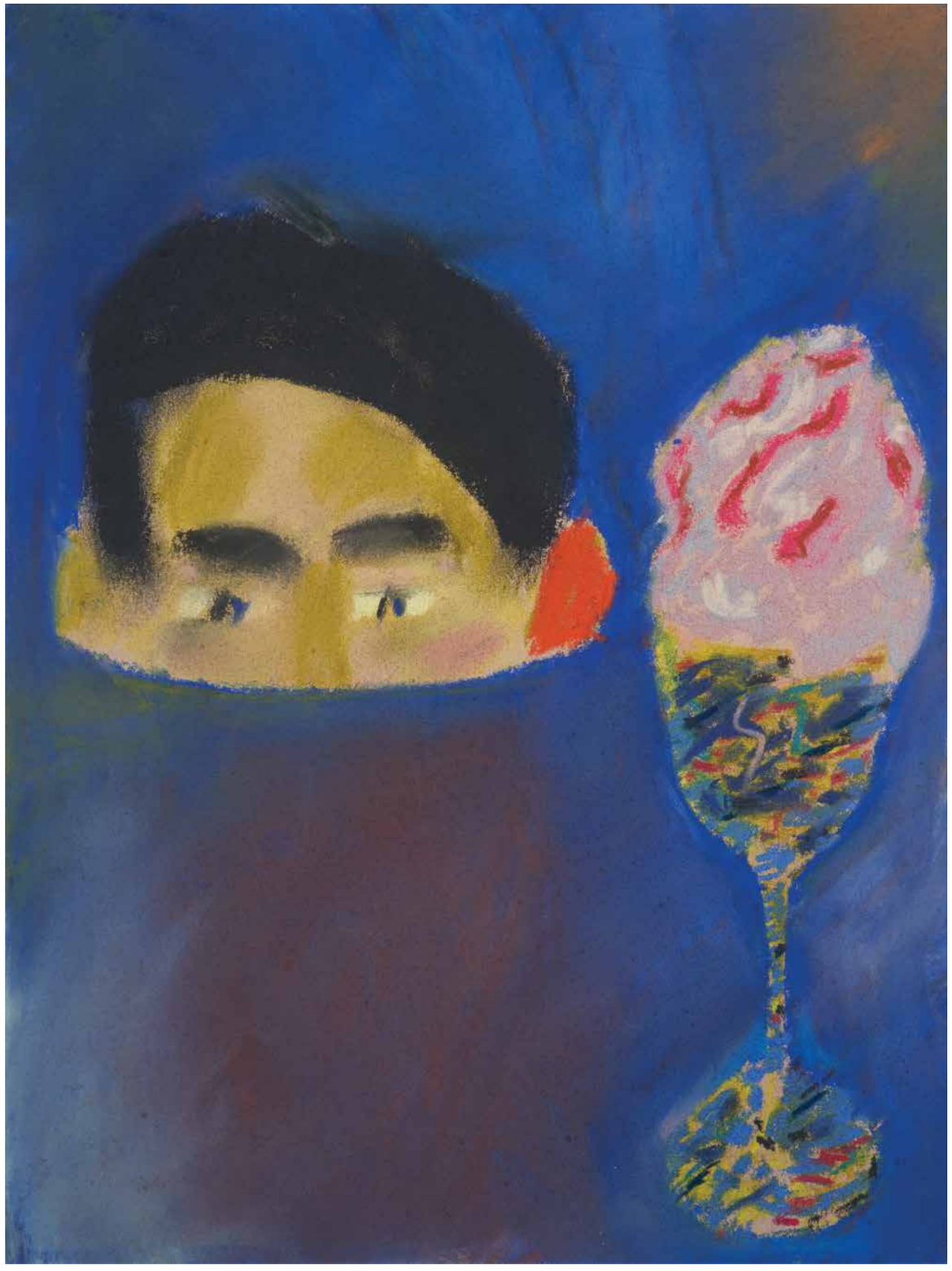
AUTOINTERVIEW

Lucas Samaras

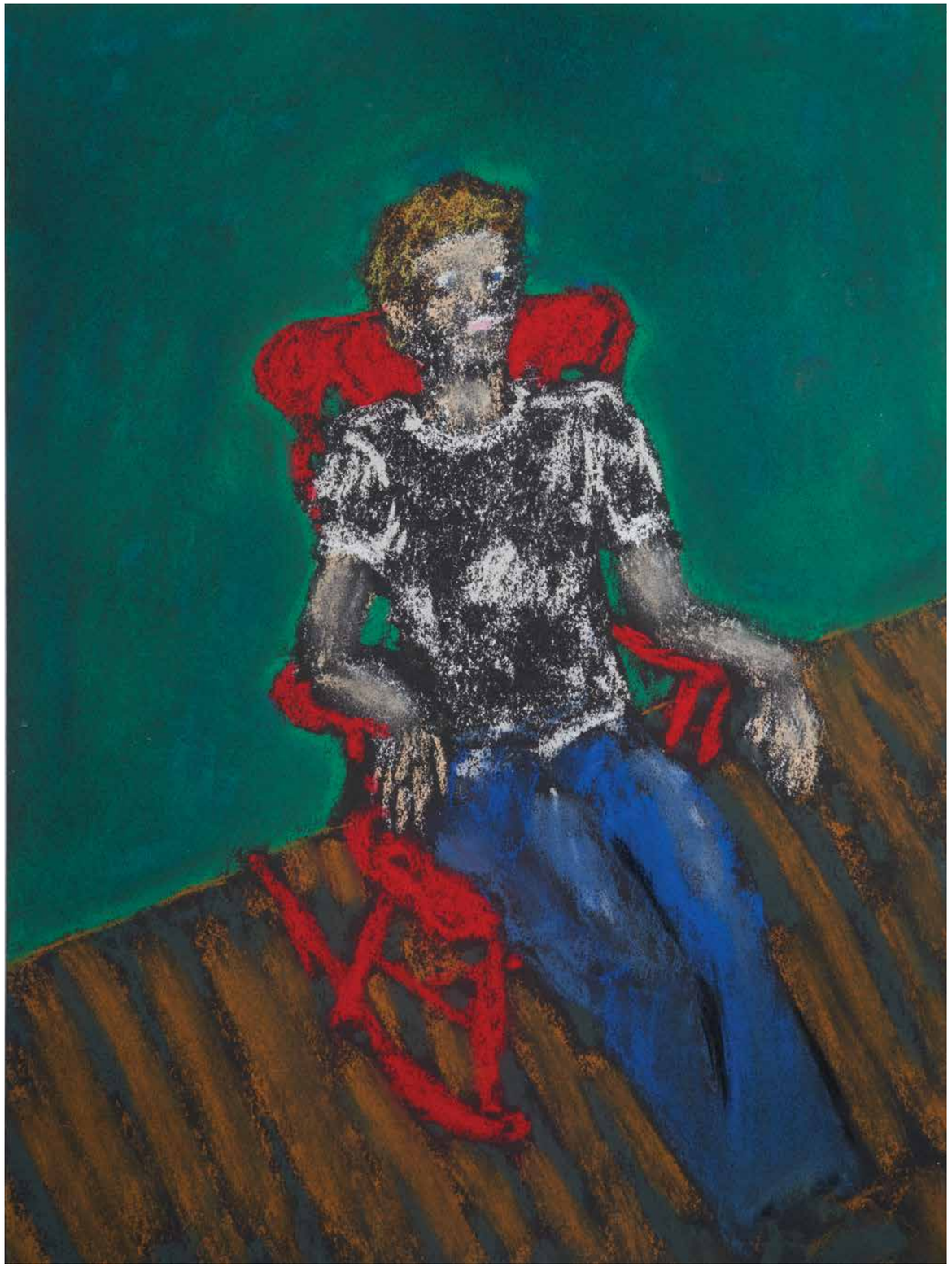
Originally published in *Samaras Album: Autointerview, Autobiography, Autopolaroid*
(New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art and Pace Editions Inc., 1971.)

AUTOINTERVIEW

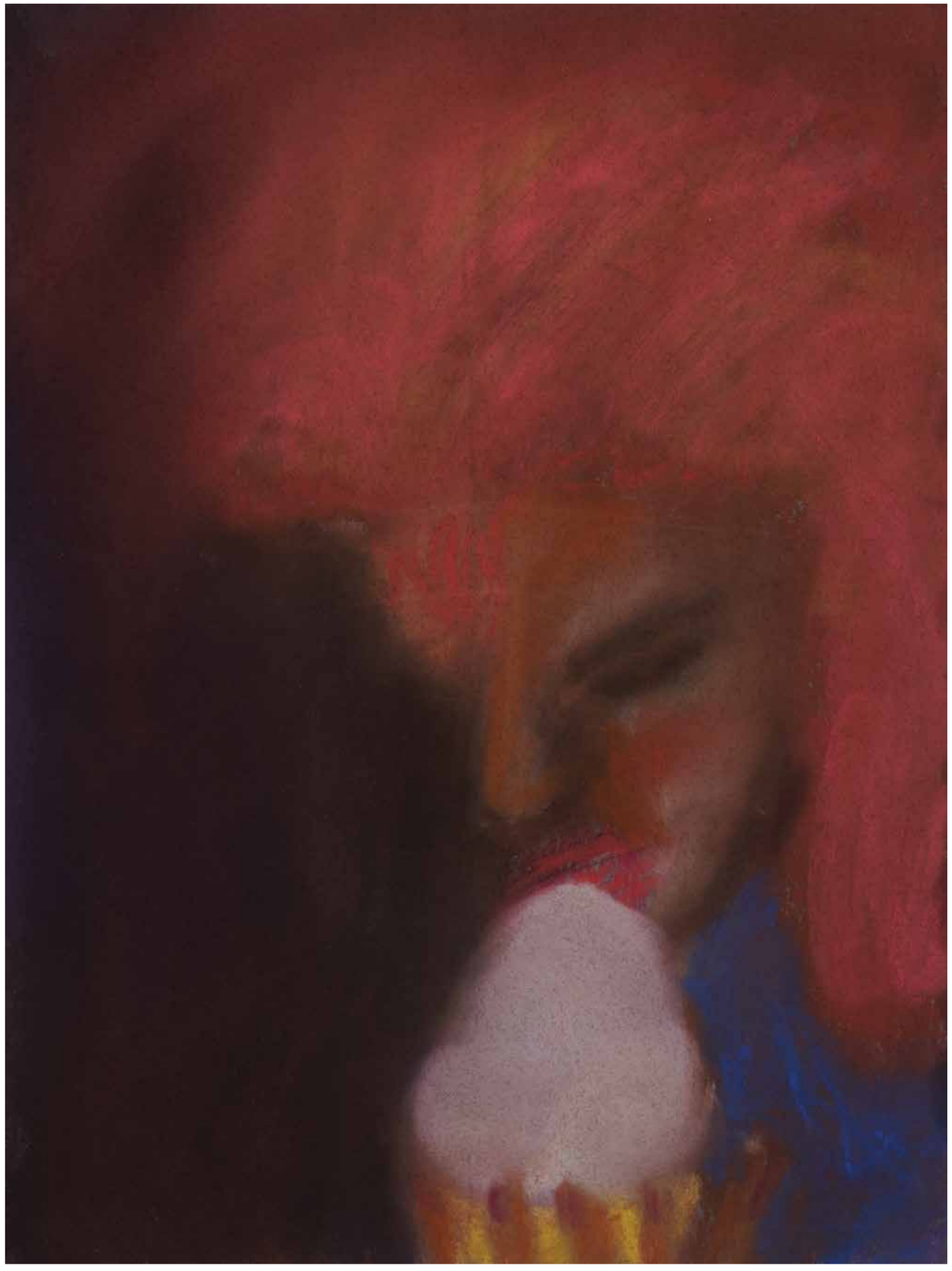
Where were you born?
In Macedonia.
Where is that?
In Greek and Byzantine history.
What does that mean?
I think it says enough.
Aren't you an American citizen?
Yes, since 1955.
How old are you?
I guess I'm thirty-five.
Don't you know for sure?
I'm sure about the number but not about the feel of each succeeding year.
How are you feeling?
When I'm making art I'm fine, otherwise not.
Don't you have a life outside art?
No.
How long have you been showing in New York?
For about eleven years.
Where?
At the Reuben Gallery in 1959 and 1960, at Green from 1961 to 1965 and at Pace since 1966.
What kind of work do you do?
That's like asking me how I want to be cooked. You could say I'm a sculptor.
Why are you afraid of words?
Because sometimes they are a different state of mind than what I'm doing.
What does your work remind people of?
My autobiographic obsessions.
Why?
They see my photograph inside my boxes or they see materials that they can't understand or they go into one of my mirror structures and they assume that my work must have meaning only for myself. I bring out the sociology in them.
Is your work autobiographic?
Autobiographic, anthropomorphic, practical, abstract, realistic, mental, real, imagist, fantasist — sure.
Why are you fascinated by your image?
Anything that anyone does is fascinating if you have the time. I am hooked on many things. You just happened to touch on this one.
Well?
My body is one of the materials I work with. I use myself and therefore I don't have to go through all the extraneous kinds of relationships like finding models and pretending artistic distance or finding workers or finding some symbol of geometry. I use myself also because it is still unorthodox to use one's self.
Is that narcissism?
Call it what you will, I get things done. The old notion of narcissism makes no provision for the audience.
Are you taking "know thyself" too seriously?
If I am, I am. My method and my subject matter help me to do what I do.
When did you decide that self-scrutiny was OK?
It wasn't a specific moment. Artists' self-portraits always fascinated me. I wanted to see the face that was responsible for the deed. Anyway, I was always inside-out rather than outside-in.
What does that mean?
Well, others talk about themselves when they talk about abstractions. I talk about others when I'm talking about myself. I like self-referrals. I like to be conscious of my senses. I have to be aware of me. That way I can know exactly what's mine and what's theirs.
Don't you share?
Sharing is messy unless you know what you share.
Had you done self-portraits before?
I did paintings of me in college both front and back using a mirror. I attempted making photographs about five years ago with someone else being the photographer, but I wasn't pleased with the results. I was self-conscious because the craft or art left something to be desired. I am not embarrassed by these polaroids because I am pleased with the technical side. It isn't only me that I'm looking at, it's a work. It is a positive withdrawal.
How did you ever stumble on the polaroid?
Martha Edelheit had taken some polaroids of me in 1968, and I liked the speed of the result. Also I wanted to show Kim Levin, who photographed the film we made of me called "Self," a year later, that I was as good or better a photographer than she. It was a way of getting back some of the dignity that slipped out of me while she was manipulating the movie camera.
Why did you take pictures of yourself with a wig?
Because I wanted to try that style, that behavior.
Do you want to be a woman?
No, I wanted the pretense.
But why that way?
I also wanted to pretend being a bird, a snake, a mountain — and evil — and maybe I'll do these things another time.
How was it, pretending womanness?
I think some came out as polite parodies of transvestites rather than portraits of women. In other words, portraits of transvestites as women on their day off, with messy hair. Or any combination of words like that. The hair was plastic hair left over from some works, and the theatrical makeup kit was from my acting-school days. Most of them have no makeup and the contortions are purely facial.
What other materials that you use in your work cropped up in the polaroids?
Aluminum foil, the anatomical chart (recalling my X-ray skull drawings), knives and forks, spots of paint, and of course colored wool. All the polaroids were taken where I live and work, and elements that I've worked with are all around.
How do you feel about this constant reuse of a thing?
I like it. Sometimes I use it as it is, other times I paint it, or paint from it, or photograph it, or I use things similar to it. It looks like a convoluted self-involved process, and sometimes it isn't.
Is it significant that you took the polaroids yourself?
I suppose so. I was my own Peeping Tom. Because of the absence of people I could do anything, and if it wasn't good I could destroy it without damaging myself in the presence of others. In that sense I was my own clay. I formulated myself, I mated with myself, and I gave birth to myself. And my real self was the product — the polaroids.
What is this, creative psychodrama?
If it is, why not?
I thought art was . . .
Think again.



Untitled, March 13, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

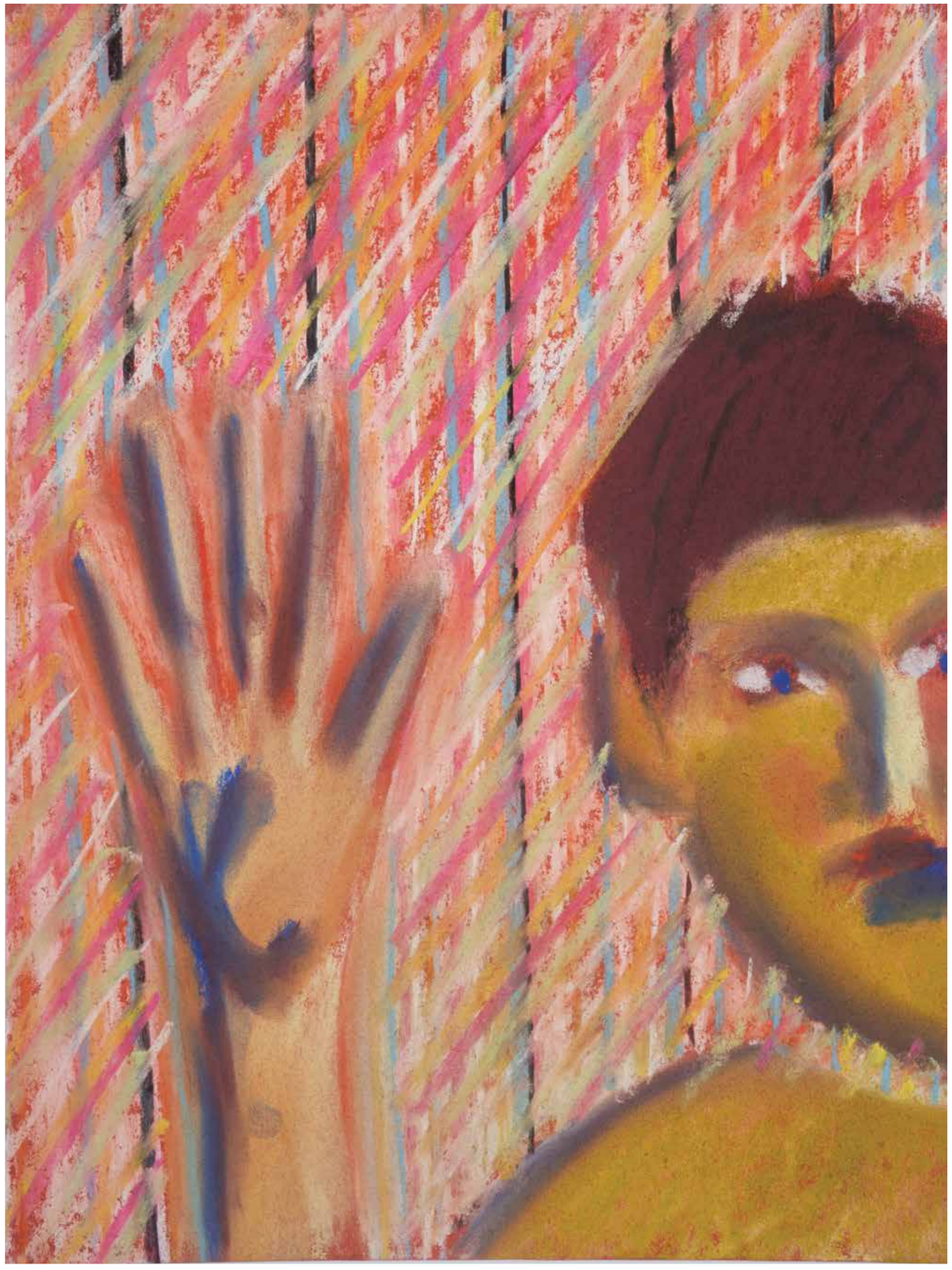


Untitled, August 1965. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"

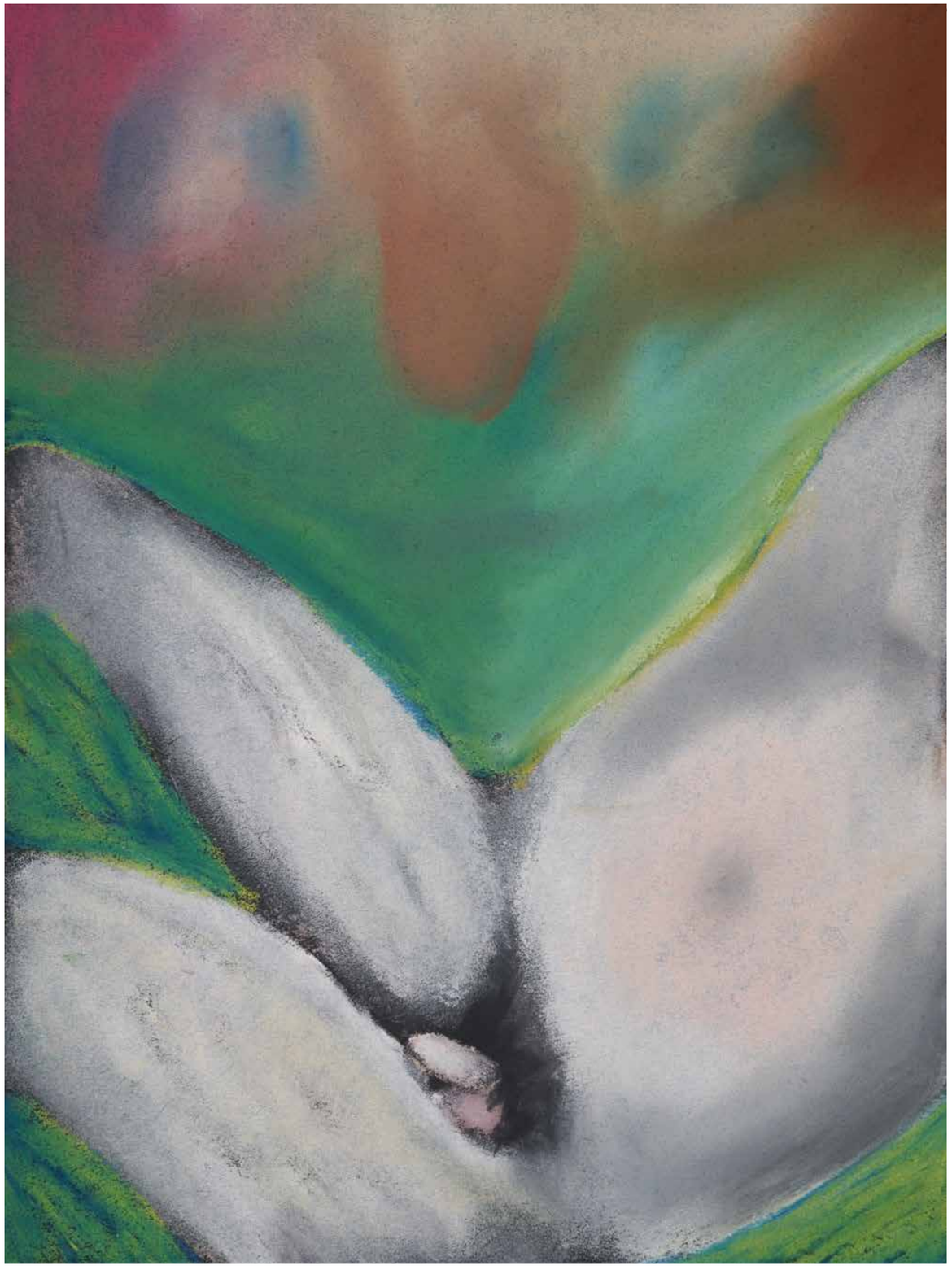


Untitled, June 7, 1960. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Untitled, July 18, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"



Untitled, May 30, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"



Untitled, July 19, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Untitled, June 3, 1965. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Untitled, August 1965. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"

Woman with Large Hand and Extra Head, 1981. Gold plated bronze. 11" × 10½" × 6½"

FUZZY STUFF

Isabelle Dervaux

Originally published in *Dreams in Dust: The Pastels of Lucas Samaras*
(The Morgan Library & Museum, 2016)

Fuzzy Stuff

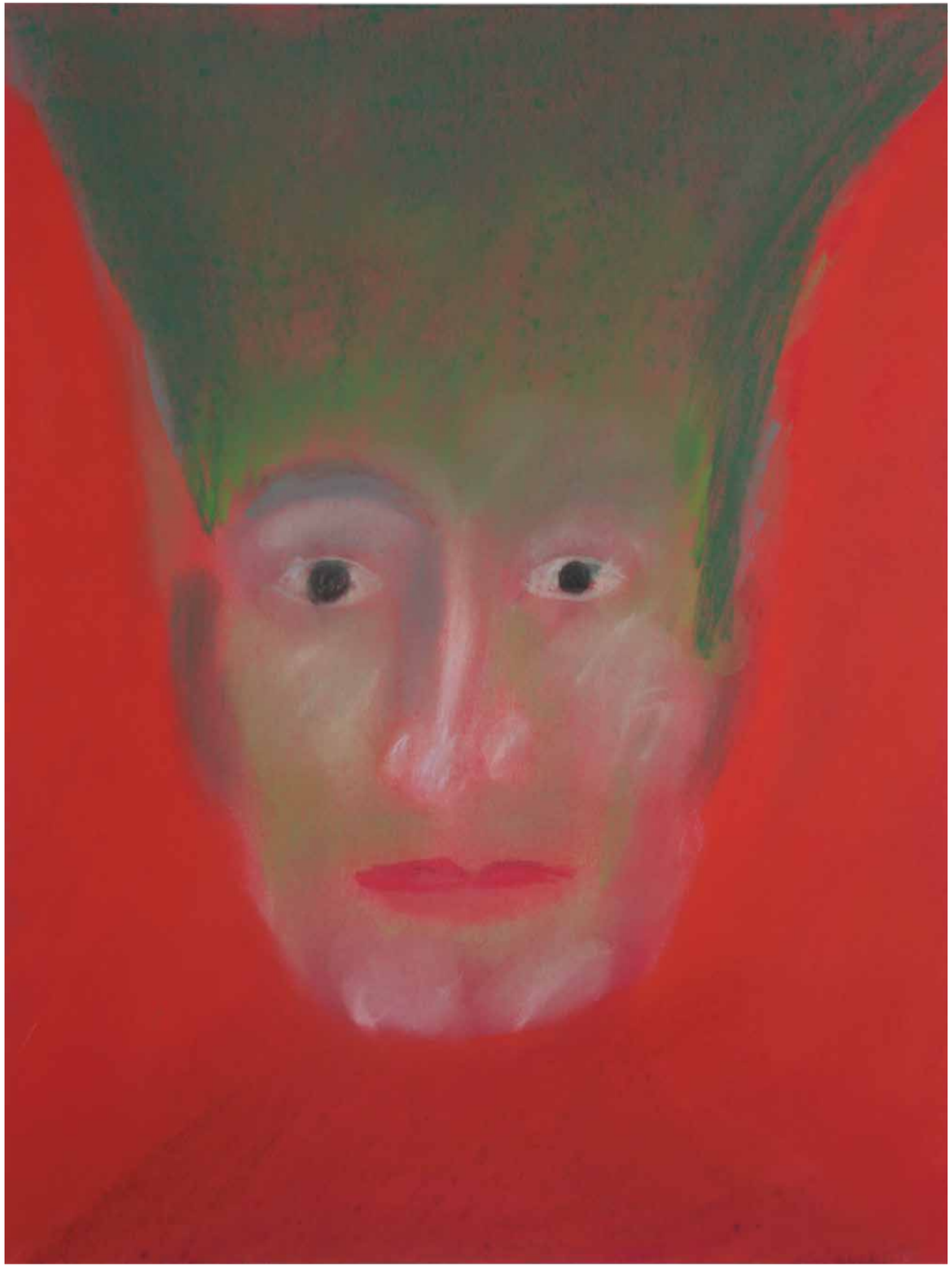
Isabelle Dervaux

All art is at once surface and symbol.
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

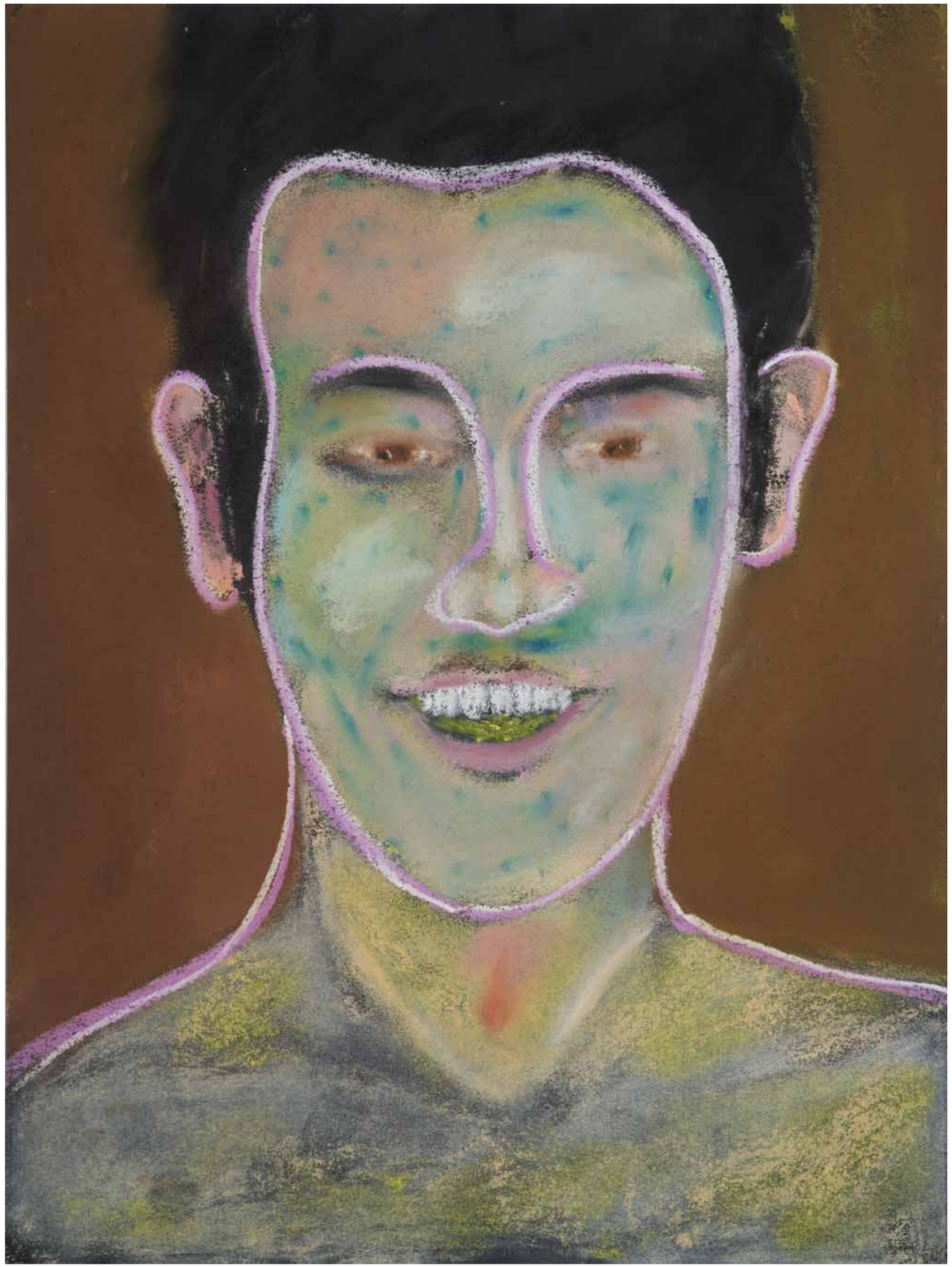
OSCAR WILDE
Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Pastel is not the first medium that comes to mind when thinking of Lucas Samaras, whose name more readily evokes pin-covered boxes and haunting photographs. Yet the numerous pastel drawings he created between 1957 and 1983 constitute an important facet of his work, along with his sculptures, installations, photographs, and paintings. Samaras has always emphasized the role his pastels played in his development and considers them to be his first mature works. "In college," he recalled, "I was making paintings, but I knew that wasn't the key for me. . . . With pastels it almost seemed like I leapfrogged into the guild. . . . I was doing something adult. . . . It was the pastels for me that were the magic."[1] With their traditional technique and multiple references to earlier artists, Samaras's pastels represent his closest connection to the art of the past. At the same time, they contain the germs of most of his subsequent work. Critics have described them as "a storehouse of ideas," "a kind of stylistic, iconological, and emotional laboratory."[2] With this double orientation—toward the past and the future—Samaras's pastels provide a symptomatic point of view from which to examine the work of this singular artist.

Samaras began drawing with pastels while in high school. He had come to the United States from Greece in 1948, at the age of eleven, not knowing the English language. "Art was the only thing I could do without speaking. . . . They just gave me paper and pastels and I drew."[3] He kept working in this medium during his years at Rutgers, from 1955 to 1959, at the same time that he was studying painting and experimenting with a range of unorthodox mediums, in the spirit of his teacher Allan Kaprow's dictum that "objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, . . ."[4] Antagonistic by nature, Samaras embraced pastel as an unfashionable medium—"neglected completely since Degas"[5]—and poles apart from the grand gesture of Abstract Expressionism, which dominated the New York art scene of the time. Samaras reacted especially to the machismo of Abstract Expressionist painters. "To become a man," he recalled, "you had to do womanizing and drinking and to use a certain kind of language. I couldn't do that, and I didn't want to do it. So pastel was a defense because it had a connection to intimacy. You didn't think of drunken people doing them."[6] Pastel was also removed from the Pop aesthetic that was emerging around 1960. "Pop Art had to do with sharpness and specific things. The fuzzy stuff, they weren't quite open to."[7] Samaras saw in this neglected medium a way to make his mark and resolved to "create something monumental out of something that other people think is ridiculous. . . . I was



Untitled, February 22, 1967. Pastel on paper. 11½" × 8¾"



Untitled, July 22, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"

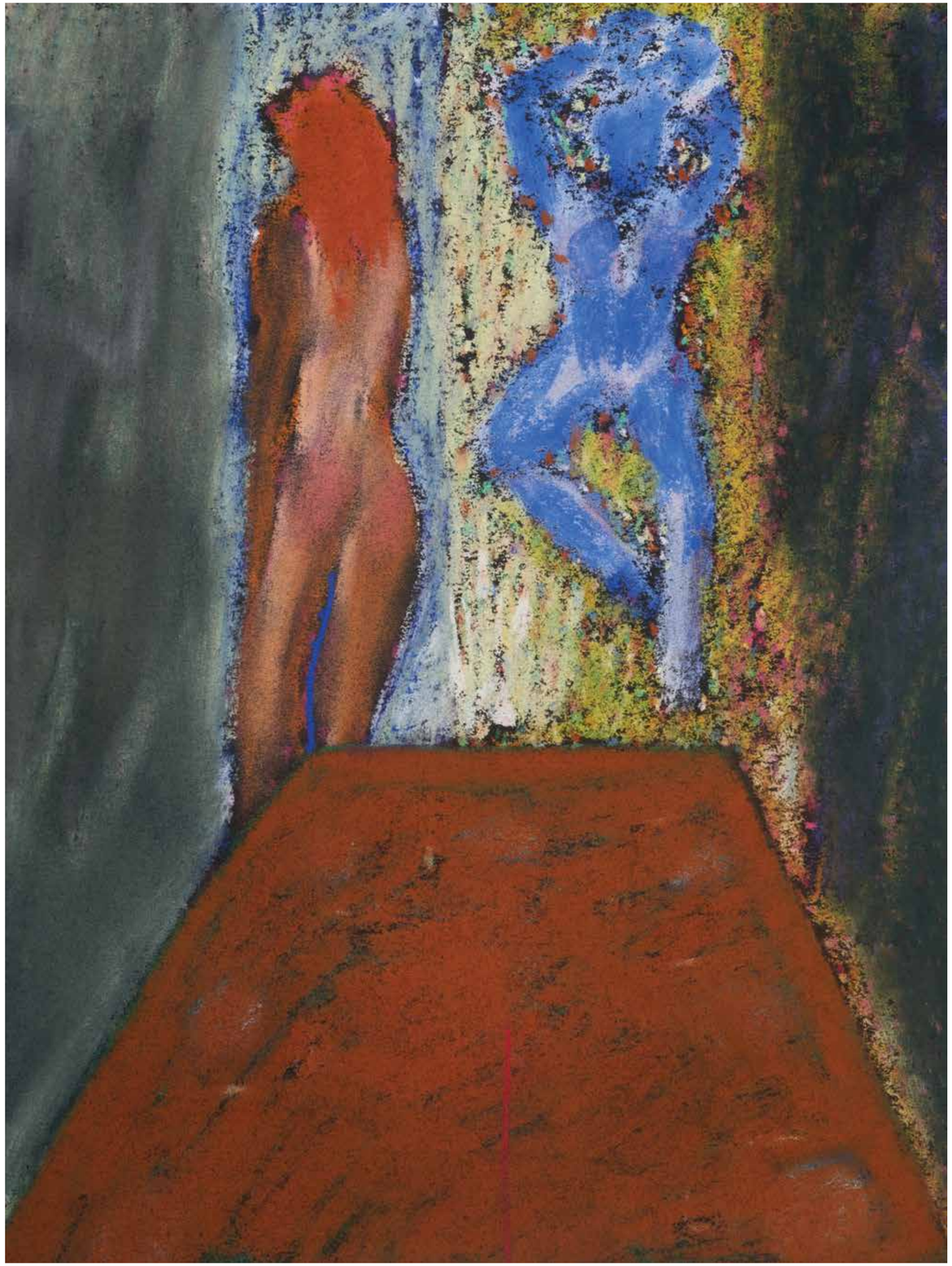
going to raise pastel to the prominence of big paintings."[8] Samaras's position recalls that of Edgar Degas, whose adoption of the pastel in the 1870s, when scenes of modern life became his main subject, has been linked to his perverse nature. At a time when pastel was associated with eighteenth-century aristocratic taste, Christopher Lloyd noted, Degas "probably derived a certain satisfaction from such a radical proposition, which pitted the rarefied elegance of life under the ancien régime against the harsh realities of nineteenth-century Paris."[9] It is indeed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century practice of the medium that one finds antecedents to Samaras's pastels—in the work of Degas, Odilon Redon, and Edouard Vuillard. It should be noted that Samaras's first intense phase of production of pastels in the late 1950s and early 1960s coincided with the years he was studying art history at Columbia University with Meyer Schapiro. Although he had enrolled in the graduate program with the idea of becoming an art historian, Samaras felt that he could never compete with Schapiro's phenomenal, encyclopedic knowledge and eventually dropped the program. It may be in his pastels, however, that the insights he gained from Schapiro's seminar on Impressionism are the most visible.

Samaras did not share Degas's interest in technical experimentation. Most of the time he used the pastel sticks as they were, without mixing them with other media. In the 1950s and 1960s, he relied on cheap colored construction paper as a support, partly out of necessity but also by choice: "I wanted something ordinary and then it's up to me to create the art, not the paper."[10] Pastel offered practical advantages over oil painting—no studio, no easel, no brushes, no drying time—that were important to Samaras, who was then living with his parents in New Jersey and worked in his small, cramped bedroom. The size and weight of the works mattered since he had to hand carry them to New York City by bus.[11] Finally he liked the quickness of execution—"Like making a soufflé, you have to do it quickly," he said.[12] Working on 9 x 12 inches sheets held on his lap (Fig. 1), he would make them in series, up to eight in a row, spending half an hour to an hour on each. "Then my mind and hands would have absorbed too much color, too much chalk, and I would stop."[13] His most active period of production of pastels was between 1958 and 1962, after which he sporadically returned to the medium—first in 1965; then in 1974, making over a hundred of them over a three-month stretch; and finally between 1981 and 1983, when, notably, he created about two hundred self-portraits.

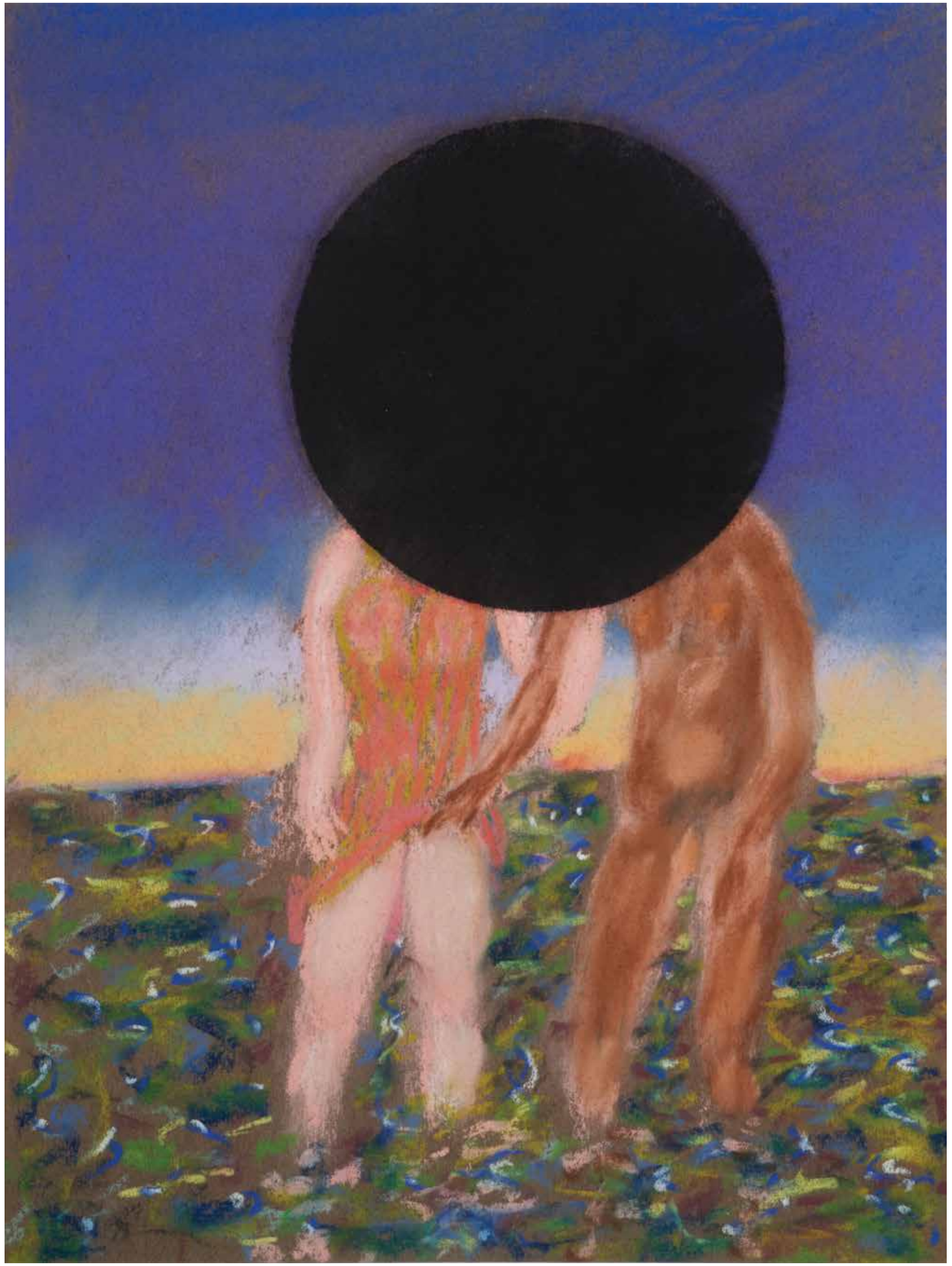
Chromatic Goose-Pimples

As was true of the late-nineteenth-century practitioners, Samaras was attracted to pastel for its bright colors and for the shimmering quality of its powdery substance. In his early pastels, his favorite combination was deep blue and red, a powerful chromatic juxtaposition with a rich art-historical tradition going back to French medieval art—Chartres stained glass windows and Limoges enamels (see Pls. 2–4). But his preferred palette soon became what Samaras called "cheap colors," combinations of green, purple, and light blue, or pink and orange. "It comes from my background," he explained. "These colors come from the five and ten. They also come from my mother's apartment. Let's say, my mother had lousy taste. But, it was wonderful, lousy taste. It was a lousy taste that I could then take and make into grand art."[14] Because pastels cannot be mixed, the richness of the palette depends on the size of the set the artist can afford. In the 1950s and early 60s, Samaras had at his disposal only a small box of pastels. His range of colors was limited. The same blues, reds, ochres, and greens reappeared throughout the works, applied at first in juxtaposed areas of solid colors. In the 1960s, the colors became more blended and nuanced, with greater prominence given to passages of gray to set off brighter hues (Pls. 8 and 15). Stripes added vibrancy to these "fields of organic daydreaming color"[15] (Pls. 13–14). In the 1970s and 1980s, Samaras was able to afford a larger assortment of pastels—as can be seen in a photograph of the artist at his worktable (page 24). His palette broadened, leading to the rich, dizzying patterns of the 1974 works. The black, smooth bristol paper Samaras adopted as a support that year heightened by contrast the luminosity of the colors to the detriment of the "almost fleshy intimacy"—in Peter Schjeldahl's words—that the soft tones of the construction paper imparted to the earlier ones.[16] Samaras described his quasi-physical reaction to the throbbing colors as "a sensation of chromatic goose-pimples."[17] In the pastels of the 1980s, he applied his high-keyed colors in multiple layers, creating a rich texture reminiscent of the dappled surface of Degas's late pastels.

Samaras's attraction to color resonated with other developments in American art of the time that were prompted by the influential teaching of two European-born artists, Josef Albers and Hans Hofmann. "The big man at the time, in the mid-fifties, was Josef Albers," recalled Samaras, who referred to Albers's Homage to the Square series in his own pictures of concentric squares (Pl. 10). Samaras, however, favored a looser, more painterly application, in contrast with Albers's clean edges and flat surface. "With me, it was like making a pizza," he said, "it was the organic quality."[18] His use of color had more affinities with Hofmann's theories, with which he was familiar through Kaprow, a former student of Hofmann's. In 1959, Kaprow arranged a small exhibition of paintings by Hofmann in the gallery of the Rutgers Art House. "It was terrific," Samaras recalled. "Hofmann was radical in the application of the paint. . . . I loved his vibrant colors. . . . I loved the way he used colors, these kinds of emerald greens on top of reddish colors. . . ."[19] Samaras's attitude was not that of a formalist but rather a sensualist. The way the texture of the pastel affected the perception of color was essential to his choice of the medium. The flickering effect of the powdery substance, the softness of the chalky surface contributed to his fascination with pastel, which appealed not only to sight but also to the sense of touch. It was color that wanted to be touched—"I must kiss it," he once declared.[20] Kim Levin noted the "quasi-erotic quality of surface-as-skin" in Samaras's work: "The eroticism of his work resides more in purely abstract surfaces and textures—not commonly understood as sexual at all. But the eye is an erogenous zone, an organ of sensory satisfaction. Looking equals touching: the surface of a work can be read as a substitute for skin."[21] Samaras stopped making pastels in 1963, when he found a way to



Untitled, April 18, 1963. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"



Untitled, June 11–August 4, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12⅛" × 9"

introduce color in his sculptures by using colored yarn—a material similar to pastel in its combination of brightness to the eye and softness to the touch (Fig. 2).

The color and texture of Samaras's geometric, abstract pastels set them apart from the hard-edged aesthetic of Minimalism that was emerging in the early 1960s. In a dialogue with his contemporaries, Samaras replied to the large scale, coolness, and industrial look of Minimalism with his small, warm and fuzzy handmade pictures—what he called his "home-made geometry."[22] Just as his boxes and chairs could be seen as parodies of Minimalist sculpture—they have been described as "Minimalist objects beset by nightmares, encrusted with desires, yearning for ecstasy"[23]—the irregular motifs and blurry surface of his pastels countered the sleekness of Frank Stella or Kenneth Noland's striped paintings. Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd himself noted the contrast. In a review of Samaras's 1961 exhibition at the Green Gallery, he wrote: "Samaras's work is messy and improbable, as well as exceptional, and should present a general threat to much current cleanly dullness."[24]

For Samaras, the shimmering effect of pastel—owing to the way the powdery substance catches the light from many directions—was as important as the vividness of its color. He had always associated color with radiance. He recalled how during his childhood, his relatives who were in the fur business would bring back shiny fabrics from their travels.

> *Color or "chroma" always meant treasure to me as a child. Many of my relatives used to go to different countries for trade. They would take furs there and bring back some kind of silk or satin, sometimes they came at night, on horses with bundles and valises, they would open a suitcase and out would come this wonderful little satin thing or glittering thing with gold and green and blue and perfume. I mean, that was a treasure! I was bedazzled.*[25]

To recapture this fairy-tale atmosphere, Samaras enhanced the jewel-like aspect of some of his early pastels with the addition of gold and silver metallic paint (Pls. 1 and 3). It is unclear to what extent he was consciously inspired by the gold and silver that decorated the Greek churches he frequented as a child—"If you had told me that the Byzantines had done it, I would have been stunned," he told Paul Cummings, recalling the first time he used silver. Yet in the same interview, he described the effect these childhood experiences had on him: "Seeing the priests with all the Byzantine costumes with jewels and strange iridescent robes . . . to me it was stupendous . . . I keep thinking of the ritual, the splendor."[26] Not only could Samaras have been reminded of this experience during his classes on early Christian art with Schapiro, but the year 1958 also saw the publication of Clement Greenberg's essay "Byzantine Parallels" in which he drew analogies between Byzantine and modernist art, notably comparing the use of color in late Impressionism and contemporary abstract American painting to "the vision of full color" in Byzantine painting and mosaic.[27] Samaras's pastels displayed the earliest manifestations of a decorative impulse that would remain constant throughout his career. Their flickering speckles of chalk anticipated the mirrors and tacks he put on his first boxes in 1960, which would become the hallmarks of his work.

Theater and Hallucinations

At the same time as he was enrolled in the art history program at Columbia, Samaras was taking classes at Stella Adler's acting studio and considering a career as an actor. "I was always interested in the theatre, even as a child," he said.[28] The formal, academic training he received in Adler's studio contrasted with the experimental atmosphere of the Happenings, the loosely structured performances organized in artists' lofts and galleries beginning in the late 1950s, in which Samaras was involved through his contact with Kaprow, a pioneer of the genre. Samaras participated in several of the earliest Happenings, created by Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, and Robert Whitman. It was the ability to "make yourself be somebody else" that attracted Samaras to the theater, whether traditional or experimental. He was particularly drawn to Whitman's Happenings for their oneiric nature. While Kaprow used people as they were, "with Whitman, you became a fantasy character, somebody from dream."[29] There was also more violence in Whitman's performances than any other Happenings at the time, a raw physicality and an intimation of danger that Samaras found thrilling and that resonated with his own temperament. Although he did not create any Happenings (he said he was not interested in controlling other people and using them to enact his "dream fantasies"), Samaras was writing stories that involved plotless and irrational narratives in the spirit of the Happenings. "It was in a sense doing Happenings, but they were only for myself," he said. "The stories were too complicated to materialize"[30]—a euphemism to describe the physical impossibility of enacting the fantasies around basic bodily functions that were the subjects of his stories. He did give visual form to some of them, however, in his pastels, the imagery of which relates to similar themes of private fantasies, violence, and eroticism. (See Pls. 5, 16, 18, 19, 21, 45, and 46.)

Samaras's involvement with the theater influenced the composition of his pastels, which often resemble stage sets. In *Untitled* (Fig. 5), for instance, the legs in the foreground appear to be on a proscenium, while the blue walls behind them recess diagonally toward a forest scene that looks like a backdrop. Spaces between the walls and the backdrop suggest the presence of lateral stage exits, while a path in the forest enhances the illusion of depth in the typical fashion of theatrical design. In many pastels, strong diagonals cutting the space create accelerated perspective, as in stage sets (Pls. 20 and 47). Enclosed rooms abound, in which small windows impart a stage-like atmosphere of confinement. In *Untitled* (Pl. 16), a red curtain above the figure provides another reference to the theater. Finally, the repetition of similar motifs from one image to another evokes the recycling of backdrops and props from one play to another. A typical example can be found in the forest scene mentioned above, which appears in three different works in this exhibition, each time in a different context. In *Untitled* (Fig. 4), it adorns the wallpaper of a bathroom in which a man is sitting on the toilet (a combination of forest mural and bathroom fixture that anticipates Robert Gober's 1990s installations). In *Untitled* (Fig. 3), the same forest has become the setting of a lynching scene, in which a naked, hanging body exhibits bleeding wounds reminiscent of a crucifixion. In the previously mentioned *Untitled* (Fig. 5) it is the backdrop of an erotic encounter. The three works were done around the same time—the first two on 7 July 1962 and the third a few days later. The comparison between them illuminates Samaras's process of working in series, zooming in and out or shifting his viewpoint from one image to another, like a film director who moves his camera or switches lenses to close in on a shot.

The staged character of Samaras's pastels, together with the profusion of busy patterns that heightens the sense of confinement of his enclosed spaces, are reminiscent of the domestic interiors of the late-nineteenth-century French Nabis Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard. One feature in particular, which is typical of Vuillard's paintings, recurs frequently in Samaras's works: the dissolving of figures into the background. A good example can be found in a painting by Vuillard in the Museum of Modern Art, *Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist* (1893; Fig. 6).[31] The woman on the left, whose body is awkwardly squeezed by the top edge of the canvas, appears to dissolve into the wall against which she is leaning as the pattern of her dress merges into the wallpaper. Samaras used the effect as early as 1958, for instance, in a still life in which the flowers in a vase mingle with the polka dots of the wall covering behind them (Fig. 7). He intensified the confusion through several means: the absence of stems, the proximity of color between the flowers and the dots, and the perspective that aligns the lip of the vase with the edge of the table. The latter device was frequently used by Matisse, who relied on this play with perspective to merge the flowers of a still life into the flowery pattern of a fabric or wallpaper behind them, thus enhancing the decorative aspect of a painting to the detriment of the illusion of reality. In Samaras's work, the confusion of flowers and dots is only one of several stratagems that render the image ambiguous. In the left section of the picture, the pink

color of the wall continues beyond the dark frame of the painting or window of the upper corner so that the two spaces merge. "I liked making scenes," Samaras explained, "but gradually the window into illusion became shallower and the space was the space of empty walls rather than of open fields."[33]

When applied to embracing couples, as in several pastels of 1974 (Pls. 29 and 33), the fusion of the figures into the background fosters an uneasy feeling, comparable to the psychological tensions that permeate the closed world of Vuillard's interiors in which the characters disappear into tapestry, cushions, and carpets. Samaras's flattened bodies camouflaged into the densely patterned wallpaper are difficult to tell apart, and the viewer remains uncertain as to whether the couples are embracing or struggling. Such images evoke the visions that one sees in shadows and patterned curtains when one is half asleep. In *Untitled* (Pl. 33), spiky hair adds a diabolical touch to the black figure, which seems to have flown in through the window on the gust of wind that lifts the curtain.

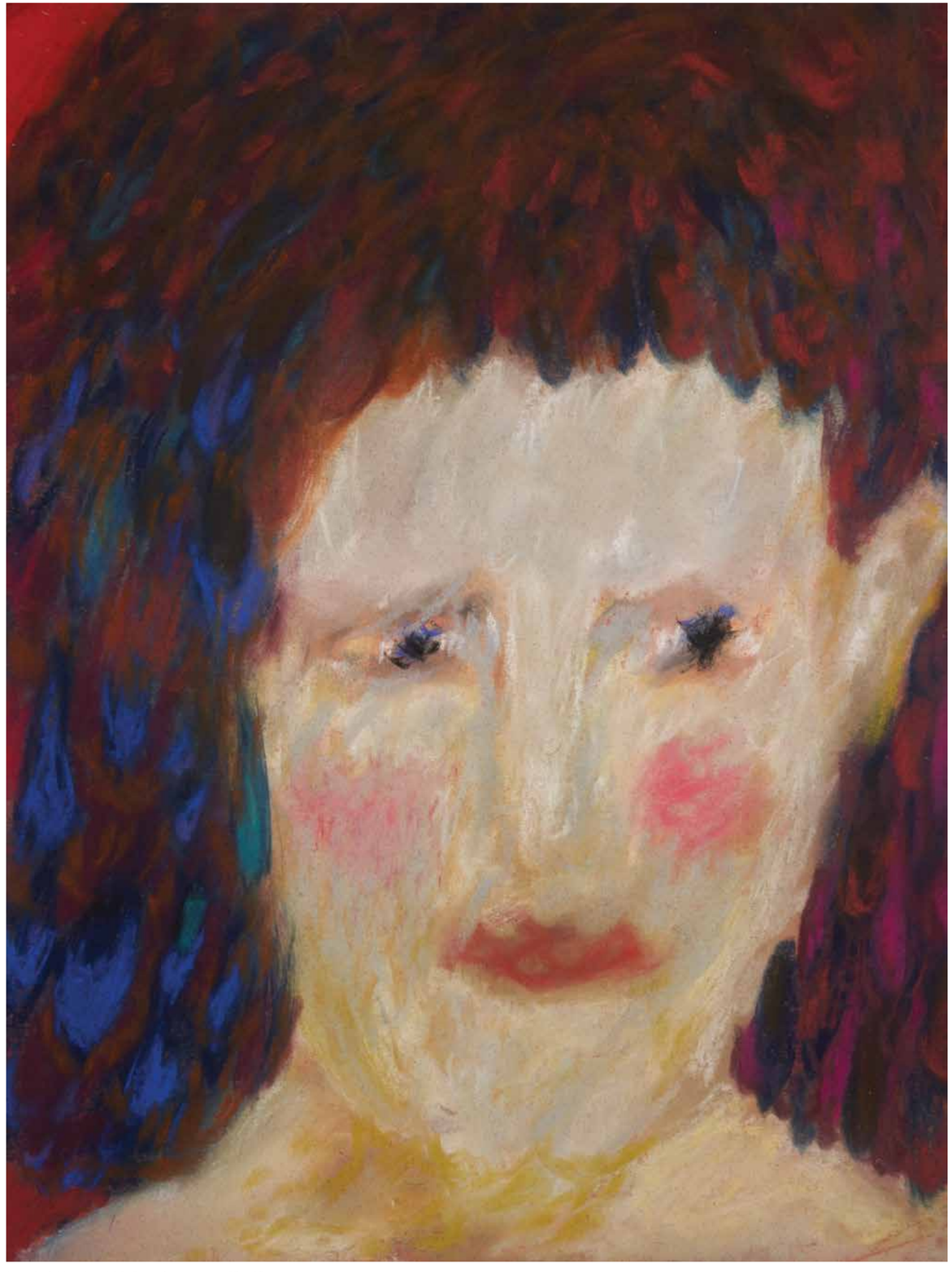
The dissolving of figures turns into hallucinations in Samaras's seascapes, in which close inspection reveals faces in the water. In *Untitled* (Pl. 31), a woman with red hair, blue eyes, and red lips can be seen among the waves at center right. In the left section of *Untitled* (Pl. 32), two blue eyes peer at the viewer from the surface of the water. In *Untitled* (Pl. 37), a mask-like face with blue eyes and orange lips is visible at the center of the picture. Barely noticeable at first, these human features emerging from the wave pattern give the images an eerie character. Like ghostly apparitions, the insistent blue eyes confront the viewer, who suddenly realizes that he is being observed. What seems to be a straightforward, peaceful seascape turns out to contain mysterious and disquieting visions. Samaras would return to the theme of the eye in a later group of pastels in which a single eye stares at the viewer (Pls. 41 and 44). Closely related to a series of self-portraits he was doing at the same time and reminiscent of Redon's hallucinatory drawings of disembodied eyeballs (Fig. 8), these floating eyes epitomize the hypnotic character of Samaras's imagery.

Intimate Bouquets

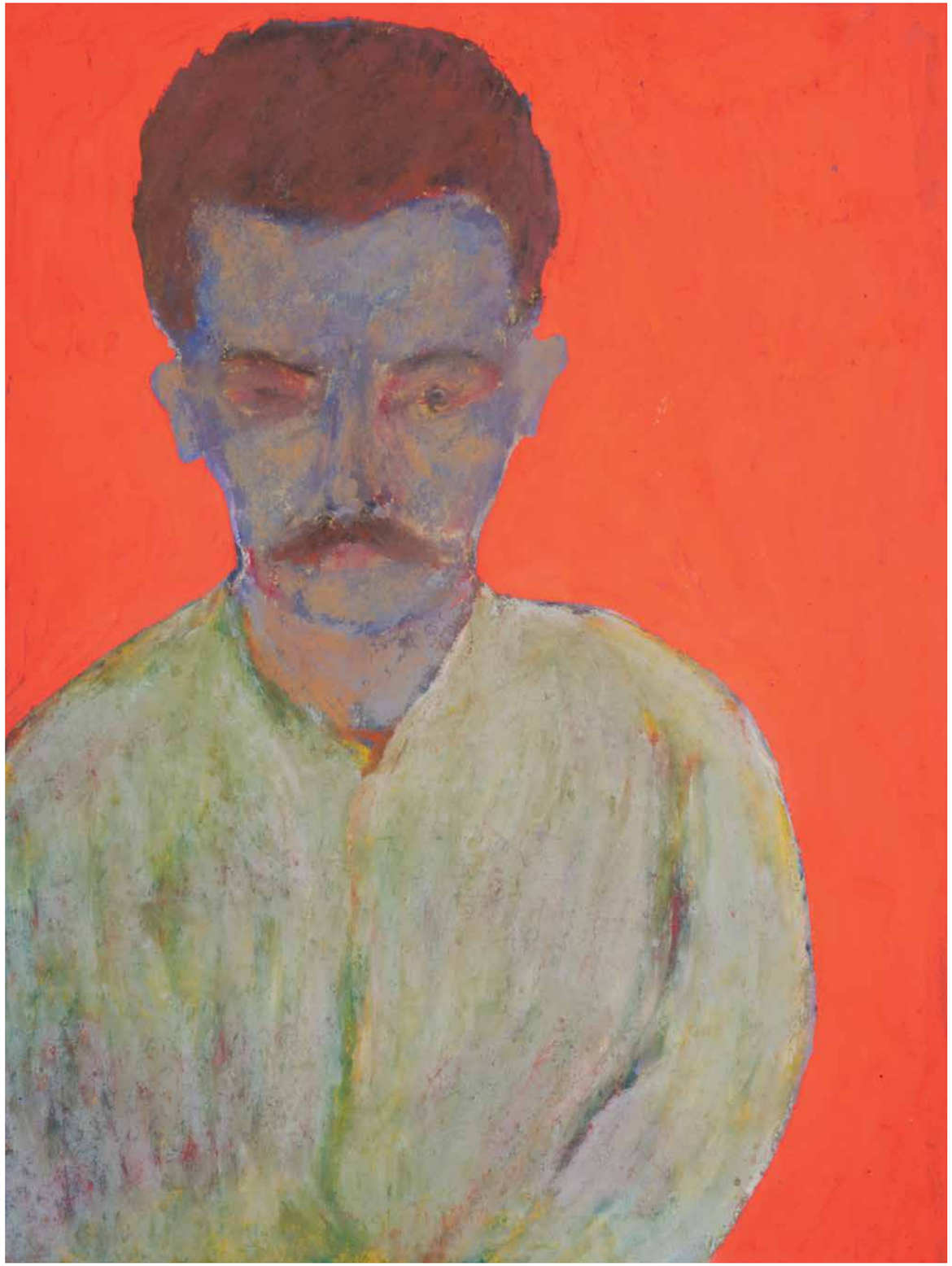
If pastel is an unexpected medium for an avant-garde artist in the 1960s, even more peculiar is Samaras's fondness for vases of flowers, which abound throughout his production. In the earliest pastels, the flowers, summarily sketched, are associated with geometric patterns, introducing an element of reality in works that would otherwise be abstract. Behind a vase of flowers, stripes and dots read as wallpaper or a curtain (Pl. 3). The flower compositions become more elaborate in the 1960s, in still lifes indebted to Matisse (Pls. 11–12), and especially in 1974, when vases are set at the edge of heavily patterned areas so that their foliage and bloom mingle with motifs of grassy fields or shimmering waves (Pls. 34–35).

Flowers are among the most self-referential subjects in art. Their arrangement of color for decorative purpose echoes the very work of the artist. As the subject gained currency in the nineteenth century, in tandem with the development of the genre of the still life, it lost most of the allegorical meaning that had been attached to it since the seventeenth century. Artists from Eugène Delacroix to Edouard Manet, Vincent van Gogh, and Odilon Redon found in it a vehicle to focus on purely aesthetic concerns. The subject lent itself to experimentation with color and paint handling. In an essay on Manet's flower paintings, James Rubin summed up the significance of flowers in the transformation that marked the beginning of modernism: "Still lifes, and flower paintings in particular . . . are emblematic of the shift in emphasis from a narrative to a visual poetics."[33] It is in Redon's radiant pastels of bouquets that one finds the main antecedent for Samaras's association of flowers and pastel. For Redon, pastel was the ideal medium for exploring color as the expression of sensation and emotion beyond naturalist representation. While the Surrealists had revered Redon's Symbolist images of dark and mysterious apparitions, by the middle of the century his flower pastels were somewhat neglected. It is ironic that it was a Surrealist, André Masson, who, in an article published in *Art News* in 1957, praised Redon's use of color. "He was one of the most astonishing colorists that ever lived. . . . He demonstrated the endless possibilities of lyrical chromatics; he invented *color as metamorphosis*. . . . Even his most reassuring bouquets suddenly will tear through their apparent repose, become astral vertigo, spurt and decline—a mystery."[34] The article, which was prompted by a major Redon exhibition in Paris, was illustrated with a flower pastel acquired at the time by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Fig. 9).[35]

Samaras was drawn to the subject of flowers from the beginning of his career. Among his early experiments are flowers in smoke on tinfoil and painted flowers on glass panels. A college friend recalled: "At that time, 1958, [Samaras] was painting flowers. . . . His room was full of cans, boxes, empty soda bottles to put flowers in. . . ."[36] One of the first



Untitled, May 31, 1960. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"



Untitled, n.d. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

paintings he exhibited was a large canvas of a flowerpot against a background of "circles that sort of echoed the flowers."[27] Kim Levin related Samaras's flowers to the target and bullet-hole imagery that was frequent in his early works, derived from his interest in shooting (he was on the rifle team at Rutgers) and to memories of his childhood in war-torn Greece, relayed through the target trademark of Looney Tunes and Jasper Johns's targets. "His vases of flowers had always been like targets—the flowers were the bullet holes, floating dots of color."[28] The comparison links the subject of flowers to the association of beauty and danger that is at the core of much of Samaras's art.

To be sure, Samaras's love of color explains his attraction to a subject that has traditionally lent itself to color exploration. But the vases of flowers bursting at the center of his pastels also had another meaning for him.

> *It's sort of a symbol for an explosion. An explosion or an emission. . . . It could be a volcano. It could also be something sexual. A flowerpot has a kind of phallic shape, most of the time, and then come these stems and specks, so it's a kind of emission or explosion. It's almost as though you're translating an ejaculation into a visual—the ecstasy becomes visual, instead of sexual.*[29]

The concept of visual ecstasy is magnified by the decorative exuberance of the 1974 pastels in which the flurry of patterns around the flowers reverberates and amplifies the explosion. Samaras's interpretation relates to the association of flowers and sexuality pervasive in Matisse's paintings of women and flowers, in which the vitality of the plants echoes the sensuality of the woman's body and symbolizes sexual drive. In Samaras's case, however, the flowers are emblematic of the latent autoerotism that permeates his work. They allude to a solitary experience. In the 1961 still lifes in the style of Matisse (Pls. 11–12), for instance, which include two vases, one full of flowers and the other empty, the latter stands at the lower right corner of the composition—the place where Matisse, who sat very close to his models, would often depict his own hand in the process of drawing. In Samaras's pastels, the tall, slender, phallic-shaped vase stands for the artist himself.

In the 1960s, Samaras kept his pastel drawings individually wrapped in wax paper and stored in a wooden box. They would be taken out of the box and unwrapped to be viewed, in an experience akin to the act of looking at forbidden pictures. The process turned the act of looking at the drawings into a form of voyeurism, in keeping with the private nature of the imagery. The sense of intimacy Samaras associated with making pastels was relayed through the individual viewing experience, bringing home the paradoxical nature of these works, at once seductive and troubling. Just as behind the shimmering surface of the water visions of submerged bodies disturb the calm of moonlit seascapes, all sorts of dreams, obsessions, and hallucinations lurk behind the alluring colors of Samaras's pastels, bringing to mind Baudelaire's comparison of Delacroix to "the crater of a volcano artistically hidden under a bouquet of flowers."[40]

Notes

1. Interview with the author, Margaret Holben Ellis, and Lindsey Tyne at the Morgan Library & Museum, 18 November 2013.

2. Kim Levin, *Lucas Samaras*, New York, 1975, p. 41; and Peter Schjeldahl, "Lucas Samaras: The Pastels," in *Samaras: Pastels*, exhibition catalogue, Denver Art Museum, 1981, p. 6.

3. Interview with Paul Cummings, 18 January 1968, Archives of American Art, transcript, p. 12.

4. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *Art News* 57, no. 6 (October 1958), p. 57.

5. Interview with Paul Cummings, p. 30.

6. Quoted in Schjeldahl, p. 13.

7. Interview, 18 November 2013.

8. Interview with Paul Cummings, pp. 31 and 54.

9. Christopher Lloyd, *Edgar Degas: Drawings and Pastels*, Los Angeles, 2014, p. 278.

10. Interview, 18 November 2013.

11. Interview with Paul Cummings, p. 50.

12. Quoted in Levin, p. 41.

13. Lucas Samaras, "On Pastels," in *Lucas Samaras*, exhibition catalogue, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1972, n.p.

14. "Barbara Rose Interviews Lucas Samaras" in *Samaras: Reconstructions*, Pace Gallery, New York, 1978, n.p.

15. *Samaras 1974*, exhibition brochure, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1975, n.p.

16. Schjeldahl, p. 16.

17. *Samaras 1974*.

18. Joan Marter, "Interview with Lucas Samaras," in *Off-Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957-1963*, exhibition catalogue, The Newark Museum, 1999, p. 141.

19. Marter, p. 139, and Alan Solomon, "An Interview with Lucas Samaras," *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (October 1966), p. 40.

20. *Samaras 1974*.

21. Kim Levin, "Eros, Samaras, and a Decade of Purity," in *Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art from the '70s and '80s*, New York, 1988, pp. 56–57.

22. Lucas Samaras, "On Line and Dot," in *Lucas Samaras* (Whitney 1972), n.p.

23. Levin, "Eros, Samaras . . . ," p. 52.

24. *Arts Magazine*, February 1962; repr. in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959-1975*, Nova Scotia and New York, 1975, p. 45.

25. "Barbara Rose Interviews Lucas Samaras."

26. Interview with Paul Cummings, pp. 33 and 7 (revised by the artist on 5 January 2016).

27. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston, 1961, p. 169.

28. Interview with Paul Cummings, p. 25.

29. Marter, p. 142.

30. Solomon, p. 42.

31. The painting entered the Museum of Modern Art in 1934; therefore, Samaras could have seen it there.

32. "On Line and Dot."

33. James H. Rubin, *Manet's Silence and the Poetics of Bouquets*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, p. 163.

34. André Masson, "Redon: Mystique with a Method," *Art News* 55, no. 9 (January 1957), p. 61.

35. The Museum of Modern Art acquired two floral pastels by Redon in the 1950s. See Jodi Hoptman, *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon*, exhibition catalogue, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2005, pp. 224–25.

36. Quoted in Levin, *Lucas Samaras*, p. 19.

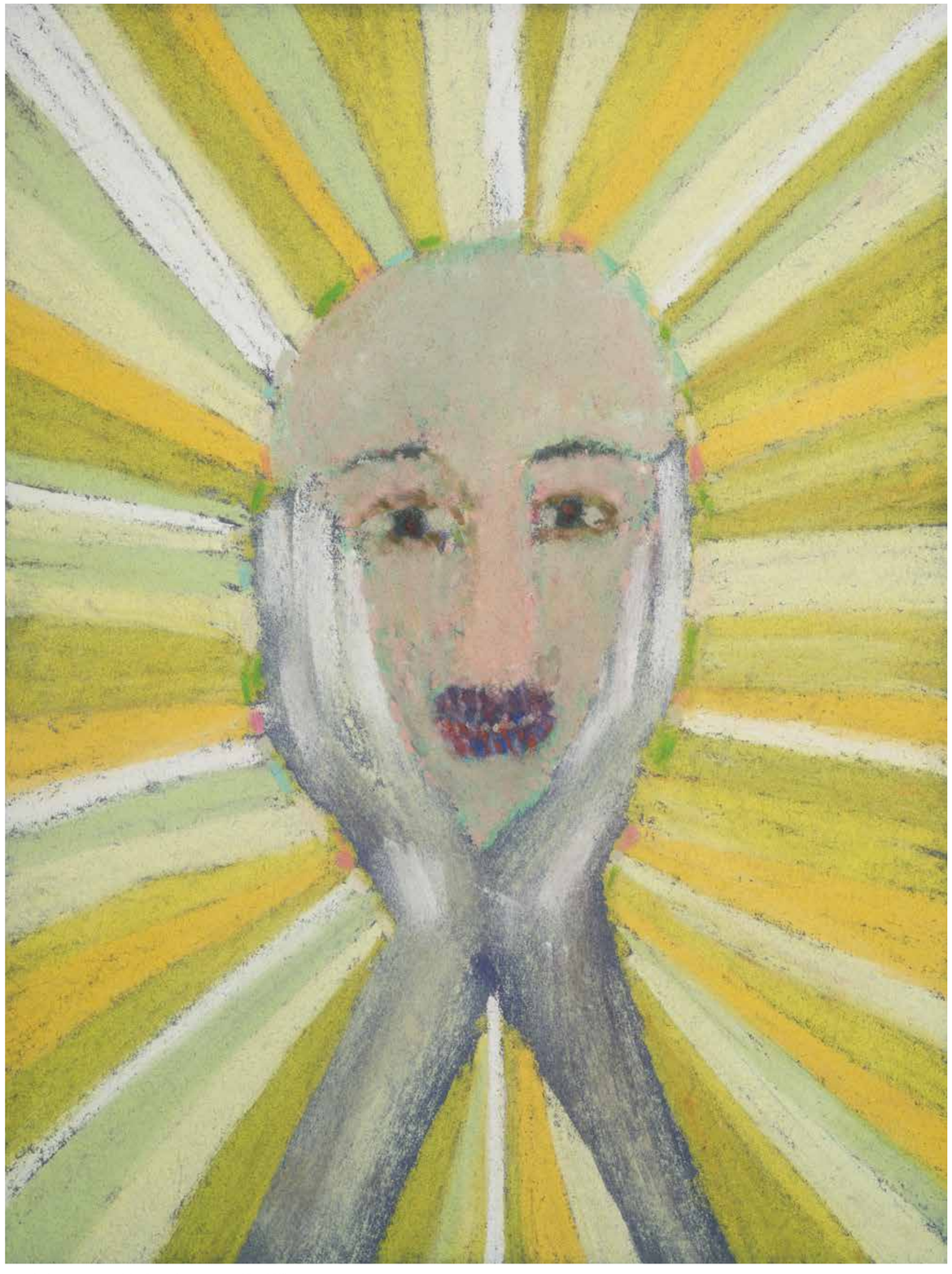
37. Interview with Paul Cummings, p. 48. The painting was shown at the Hansa Gallery in New York in 1958.

38. Levin, *Lucas Samaras*, p. 20.

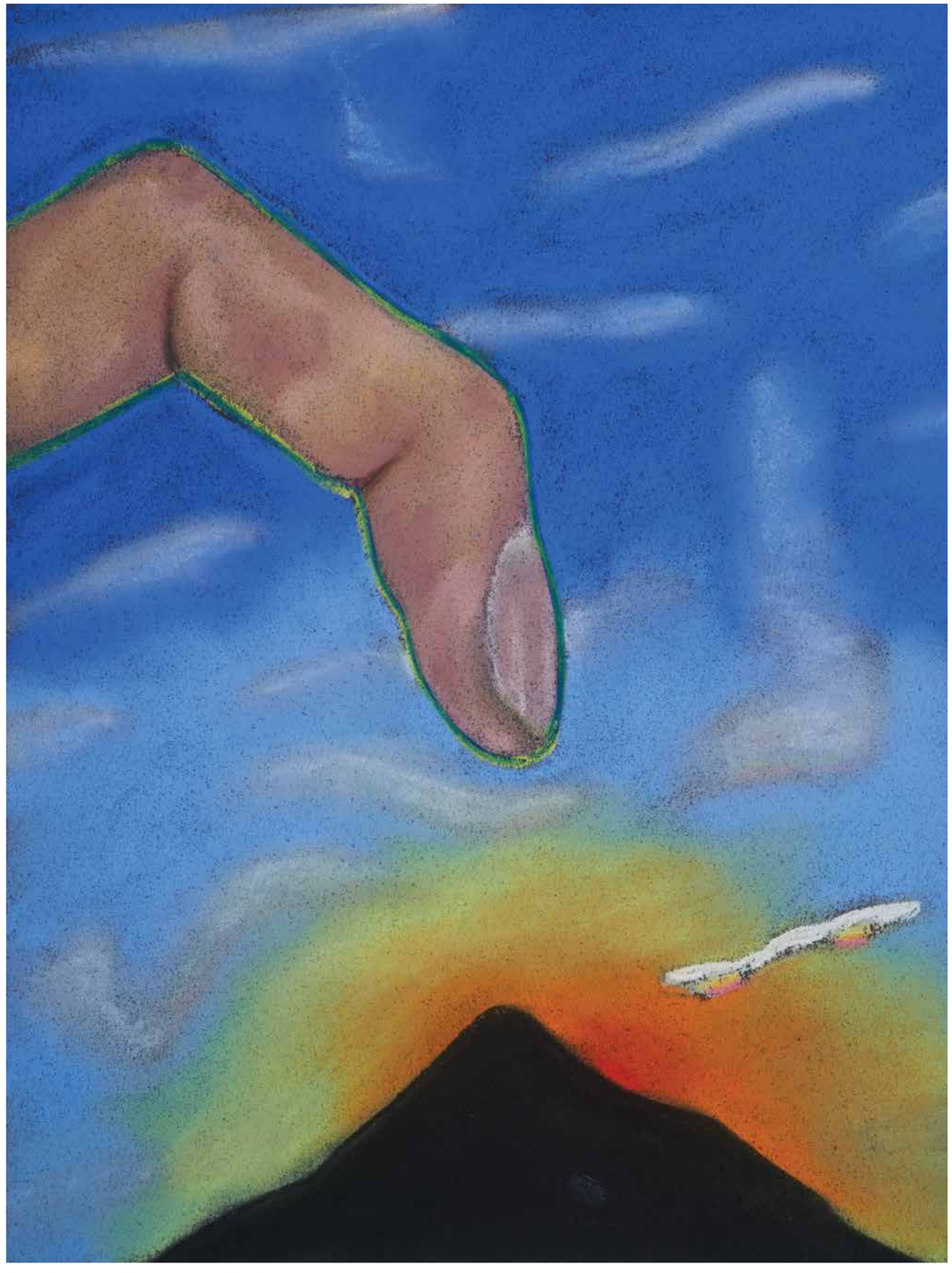
39. Marter, p. 141.

40. Charles Baudelaire, "The Life and Work of Delacroix," in Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, translated by P. E. Chavet, London, 1992, p. 376.

Reclining Curvaceous VI, 1981. Silver plated bronze. 6" x 16¼" x 8"



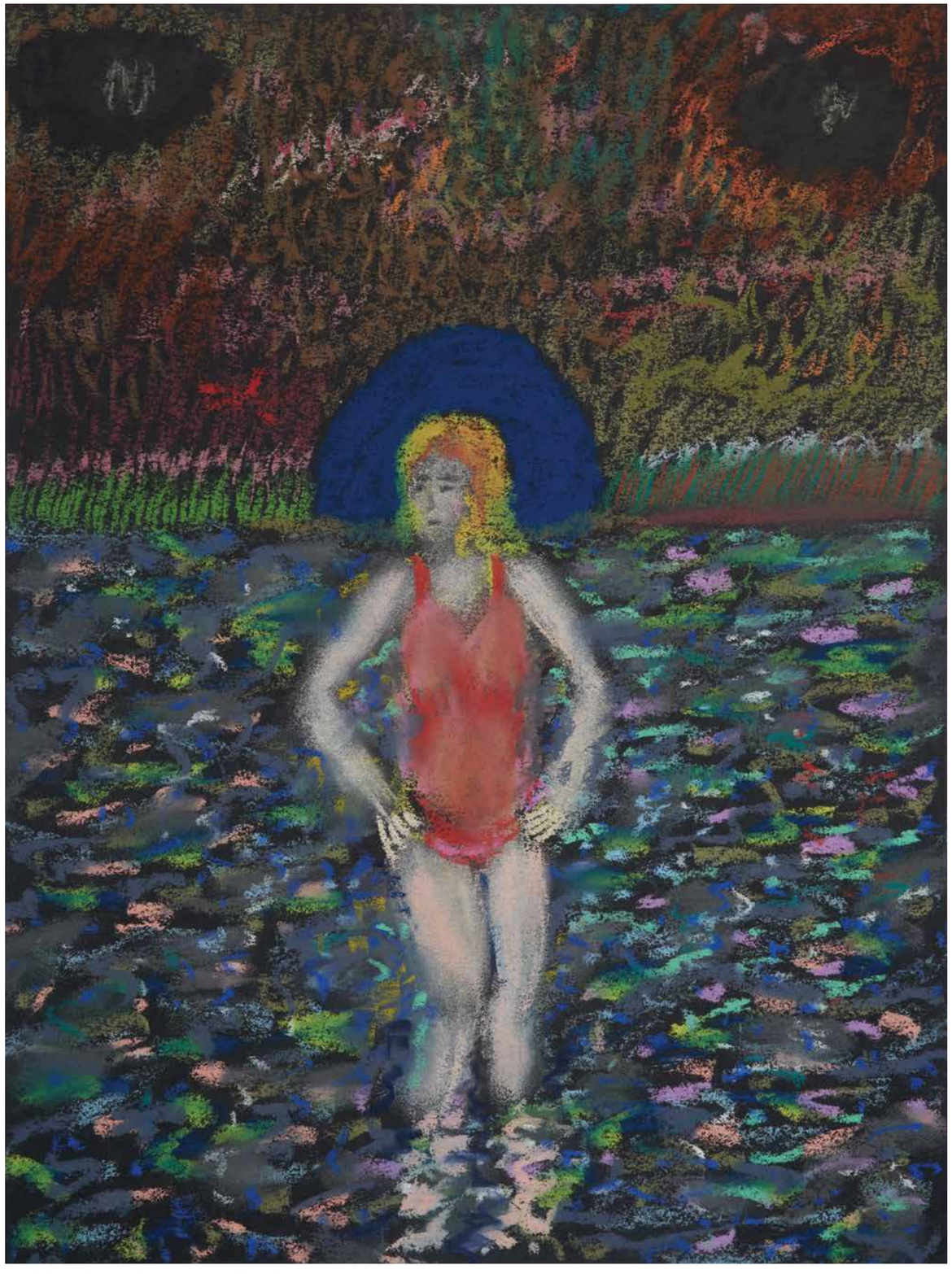
Untitled, August 14, 1961. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"



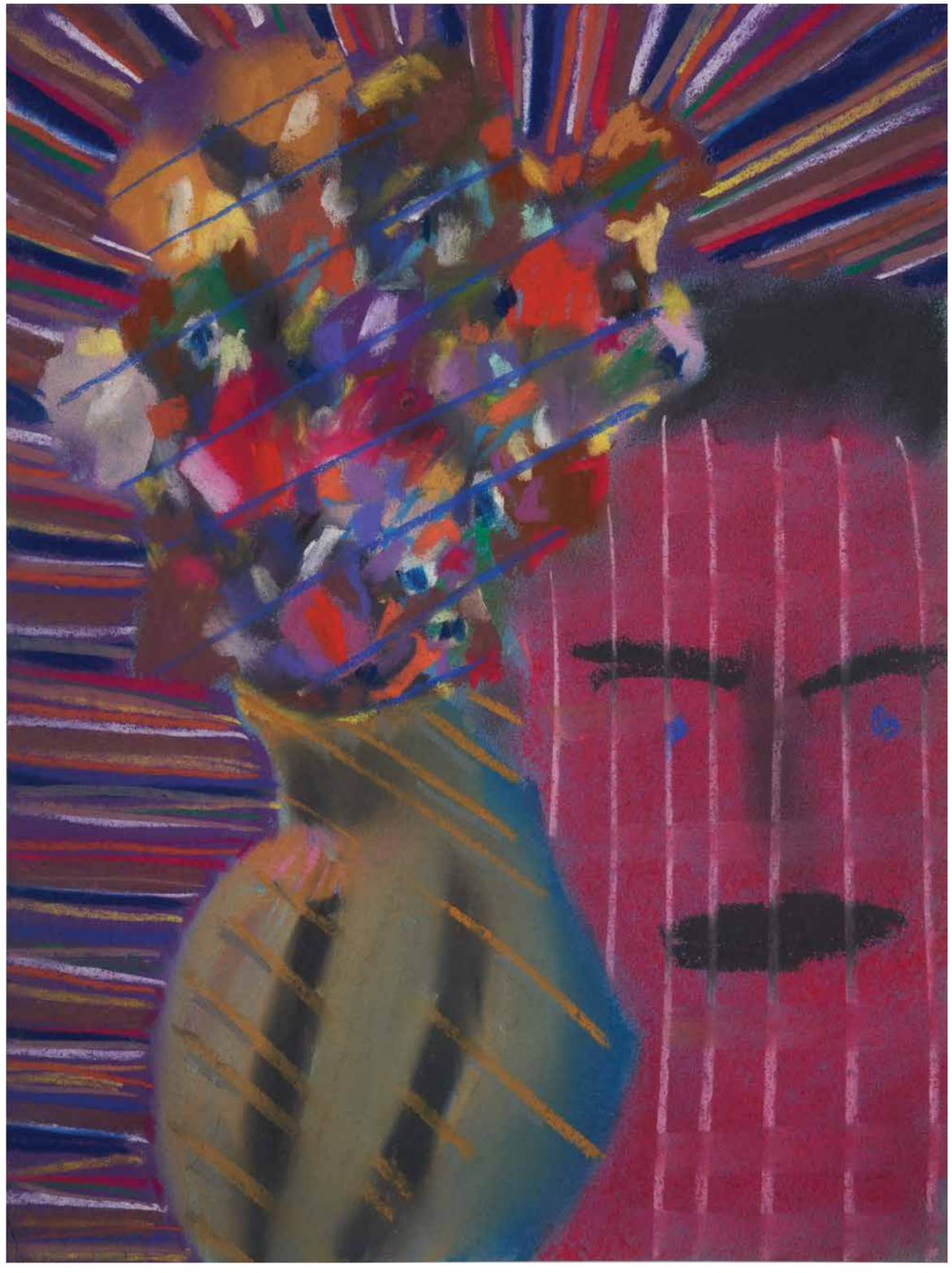
Untitled, June 3, 1965. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Untitled, July 14, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Untitled, May 7, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

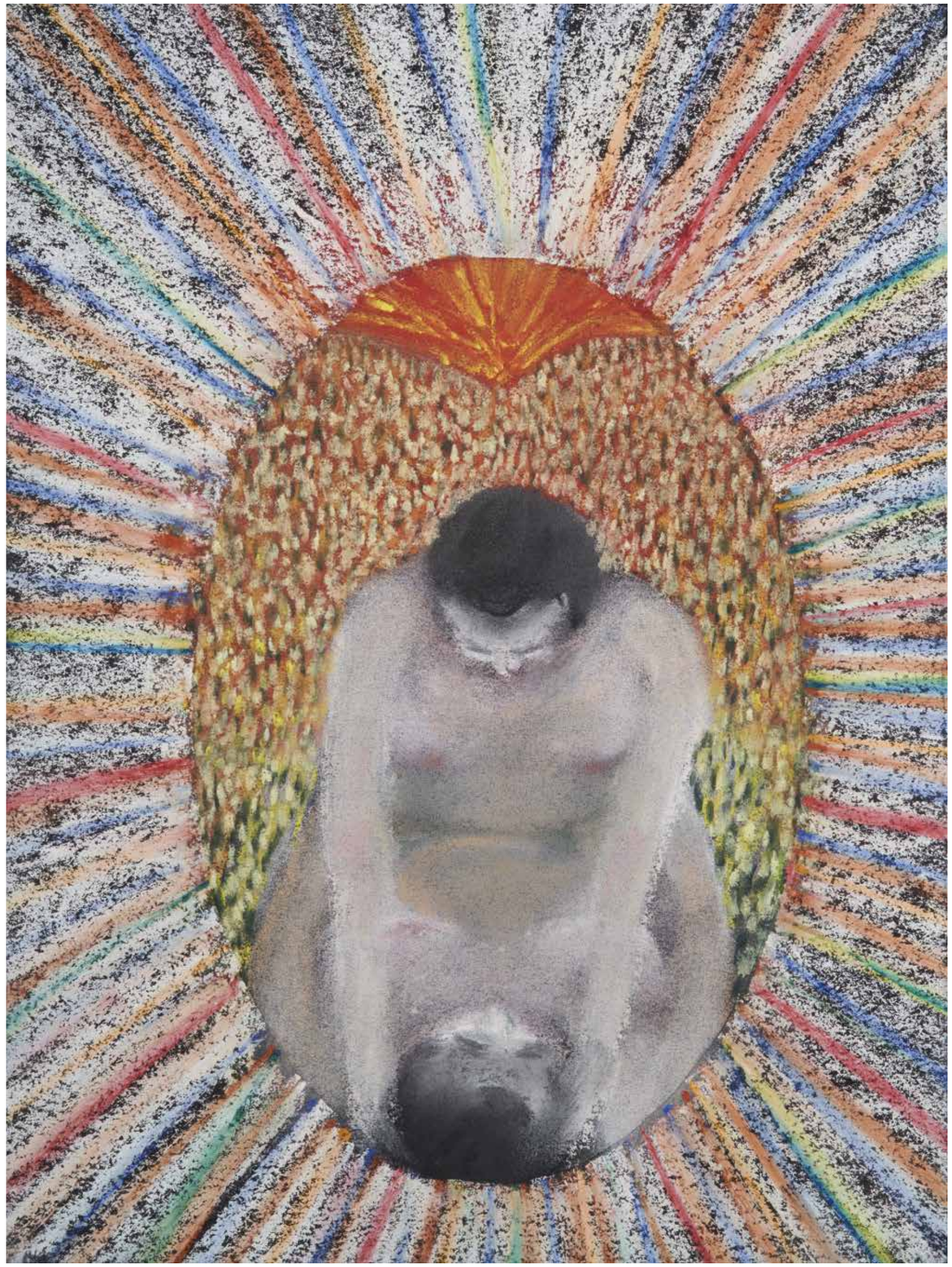


Untitled, June 22, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"



Untitled, July 16, 1961. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Untitled, August 7, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8¾"

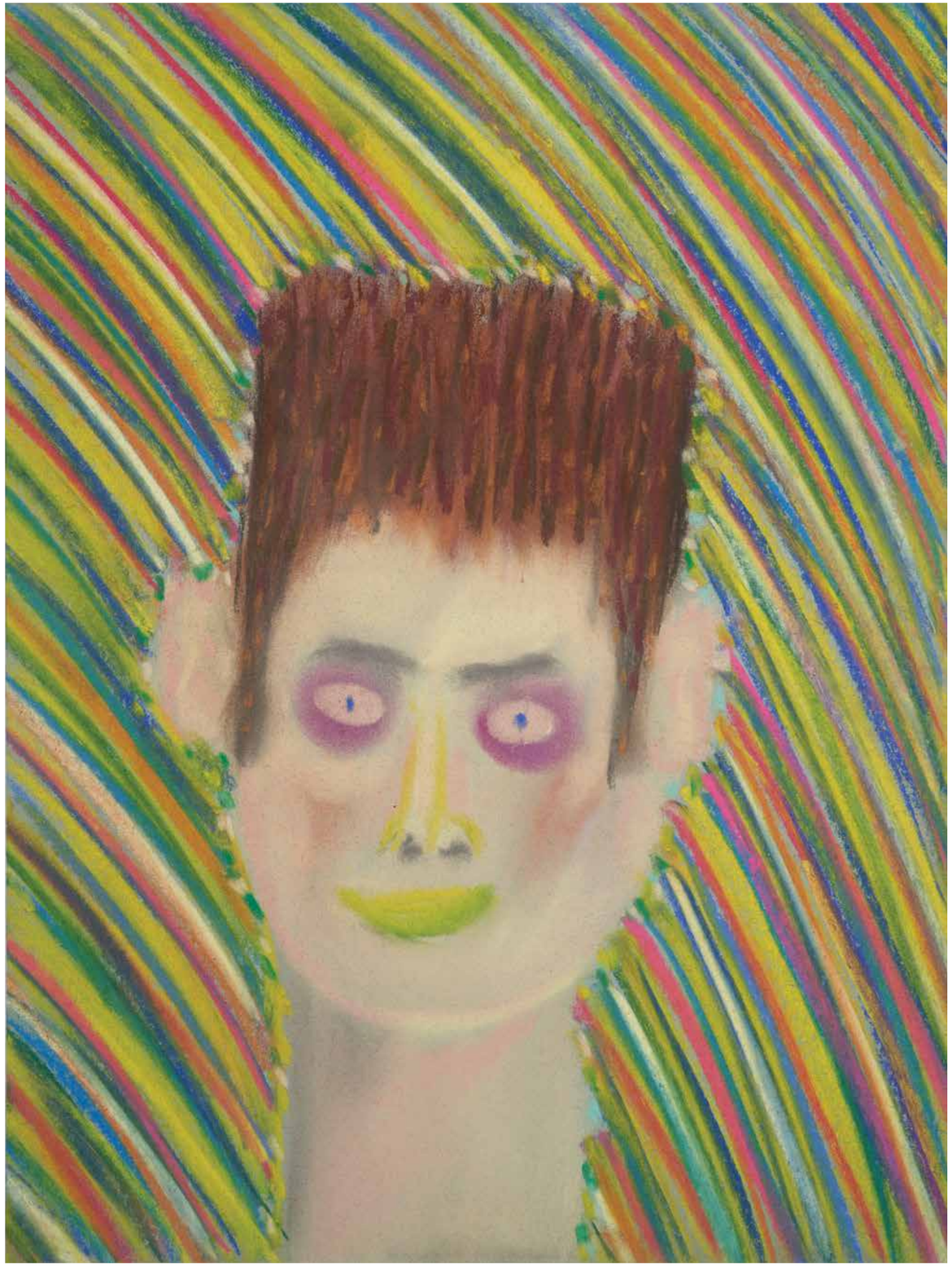


Untitled, August 5, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"

Reclining Curvaceous VIII, 1981. Gold plated bronze. 4" × 14" × 5½"

Woman with Head on Neck III, 1980. Patinated bronze. 13½" × 8¾" × 8½"

Originally published in *Flash Art*, no. 124 (October/November 1985)



Untitled, March 12, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"

Lucas Samaras

"There are two parts of you. One part says, gee, I'm wonderful, I'm kind and sweet. And the other says, I'm a monster, kill me, please."

Arnold Glimcher*

Arnold Glimcher: *Although your work is an aesthetic and psychological whole, it is chameleonlike. Unlike postwar American artists, you do not create a mark which is named, that is to say, immediately recognizable. Do you deliberately or consciously try to astonish with each new series?*

Lucas Samaras: Yes. I think I have a little spring in my brain that reacts once I do a number of works that, for me, seem to define an aesthetic experience. Once I've made a statement about something, this spring tightens or loosens or whatever; when I try to do the next one in the same series, I go defunct. In other words, I've developed a kind of an organism that doesn't allow me to stay too long at a given thing.

AG: *Is it a kind of perversity?*

LS: No, I think it's morality. It's a morality that says, okay, Samaras, you've done enough to express that part of your mind. If you do any more, you're just making it more banal. You're defeating the role of being an artist, you know.

AG: *What, then, is the role of being an artist?*

LS: An artist is somebody who has more power than ordinary people.

AG: *How so? You mean extra perceptual powers? Sees more, senses more?*

LS: Yes, there's the old saying of Diaghilev, he said "astonish me." It's that thing.

AG: *After you've made a group of works that were once considered shocking, and are, subsequently, accepted, are you angry at the acceptance? Is acceptance defeat for you? Do you try deliberately to be ahead of the public's perception of your work?*

LS: Well, they never really perceive it, and the art public is a small public anyway.

AG: *Is the anger fed by acceptance?*

LS: No.

AG: *Are there aspects of your work that you don't like? Is there a kind of thing you do in your work that you would prefer to avoid?*

LS: What do you mean?

AG: *I mean, is there some kind of mark you make, some kind of edge to the work, something in the work that makes you uncomfortable?*

LS: Okay. I think, usually, I'm in a state of not liking what I do. I exist in a state of anger. Let's say, at the inabilities that I have.

AG: *So how do you use those inabilities?*

LS: Well, that's where the magic comes in. I don't know exactly how it works. I just know I have to exist in this mucky period of banality. For weeks or months or whatever. And then, something happens, and all of a sudden I'm out of it.

AG: *How did that happen with the new portraits?*

LS: For months and months, I was kind of in this period of muckedness or whatever. And then, I began doing a couple

of the heads in the same format that you see now. And I liked them. And I showed them to a couple of people: you, Kim and John, and Philip. Essentially those four people. And you all didn't quite like them, you know. And I was furious at you for not liking them, because I kept liking them.

AG: *Did you make them for us?*

LS: No, but I wanted you to like them.

AG: *As a confirmation?*

LS: No, as a sharing of my joy at having come out of the period of banality. So, this kind of rejection that I got from all of you sort of became this new outside force saying, well, maybe you're still in a period of muck.

AG: *Did you think we might be right?*

LS: Well, I was hoping you weren't. Eventually, these things changed. They took another form. And then again, you, Kim and John, whatever, were sort of negative. But, the more I was doing it, the more I was becoming sure that this was it.

AG: *Do you think that our negative response to the work became catalytic?*

LS: Yes, it probably did. When I start something, and it takes a month or two months or three months to develop it, I realize what it is for me, I sort of bloom in it. But, before that, it's very hard work. And, I guess I've learned to work positively with negative criticism.

AG: *In a way, it's good for Kim or John or me to be negative at the first aspect of the work?*

LS: Yes, it is. Only this time I think I've been able to turn the tables around, and make portraits of you bastards.

AG: *Did the subject matter in these new works precede the formal creation of the work? Or did the formal creation suggest it?*

LS: As I said, I was making these heads. I think I might have made about forty or fifty heads. Paintings. And then, at a certain moment, it took about a month, I did a head and where, before, the heads were generalized heads, all of a sudden I turned the mouth in a certain way, and then it became a character. It became an individual, a creature, a type. It became a person.

AG: *Anyone you knew?*

LS: At that moment, it became the dealer. And then I made the next one. I said, of course, this is the art critic. And then another one, this is the collector.

AG: *Was this a kind of punishment for our initially negative responses to the work?*

LS: Judgment.

AG: *Because ours was an initial judgment, this was retribution?*

LS: I'm in a certain stage in middle age. I'm forty-eight, and, every ten years, you have to perceive yourself a little bit differently. You combine what your view of the art world is, together with where you fit in terms of living, dying, and so on. People around you die, or else there are anniversaries of deaths and things. Every once in a while, it's almost as if I take upon myself the position of being the judge and jury of whatever is going on around me.

AG: *Do you think that's the role of the artist? To be judgmental?*

LS: I don't know if it's the role of the artist. But it is mine. I judge myself all the time. I also judge other artists, and other people functioning in the art world.

AG: *How much hostility is in these works?*

LS: A lot. But besides that, it's also a matter of anger at approaching fifty and mortality and the faults of the world and this, that, and the other.

AG: *Why such an ugly portrayal of the art dealer? Is it hostility directed toward me?*

LS: It's not more ugly than the art critic.

AG: *I'm an art dealer. I find your portrayal very ugly. The surface of* The Dealers *isn't embellished like the surfaces of the other, later images. The surface is raw.*

LS: Well, I'll explain to you that these five black paintings, which are now the art dealers, started out as the art dealer, the art critic, the art collector, and so on. Then I decided no, they should all be the art dealers. And then the next batch I did I called the art critics. So, the process of formulating the title is also very creative and interesting.

AG: *Let's examine the art dealers. They're almost skeletal. They contain the least flesh of any of the images.*

LS: Well, you can interpret that whatever way you want. But the way I began it is that the art dealer is the most important one of all these types for me.

AG: *Why?*

LS: Because he is the access to the world. The art critic comes later. He is partly you. He's not just you. It could be you at certain moments that I hate you. And you know I hate you at certain moments, right? It is also other dealers that I've had, or that I know, that I hate from time to time.

AG: *Why?*

LS: Hate in the sense that you hate anybody to whom you're beholden. Without whom you could not exist. Without whom you could not survive. You could not have the reputation. You could not be an entity. You have that power of attacking them even.

AG: *Do you feel the art dealers are responsible for the reputations of artists?*

LS: Well, you are for my reputation.

AG: *But the artist is responsible for his reputation. You can give an art dealer work, but the work finally stands on its own. The work creates its own reputation.*

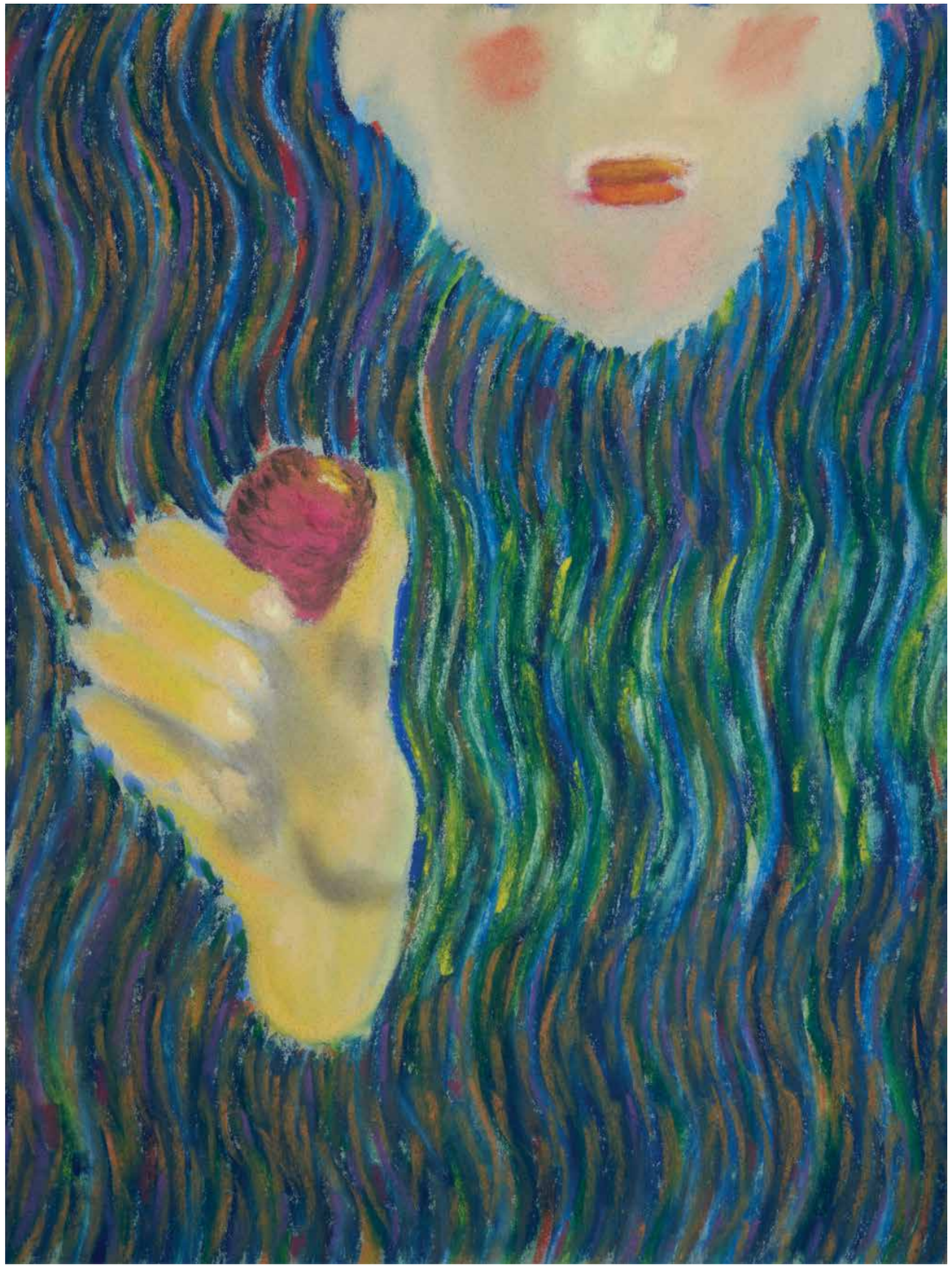
LS: True.

AG: *Is it a way of abdicating responsability for the work? If the work is not successful it's the dealer's fault, not your fault? I think these are portraits of you, self-portraits. And I think you are putting on these masks to attack the people around you for certain things that you have not fulfilled for yourself.*

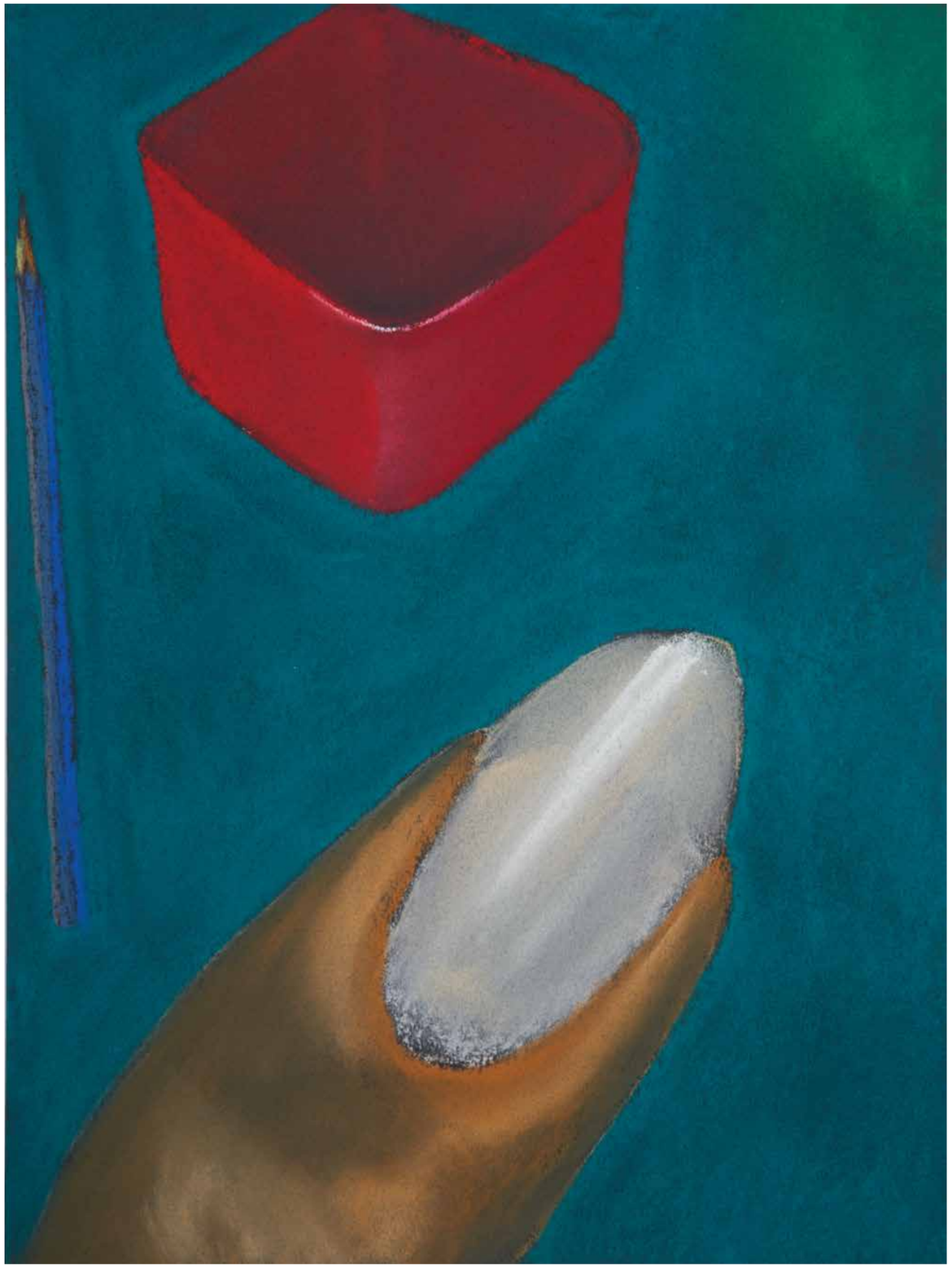
LS: Which is what?

AG: *You would like your reputation to*

Untitled, March 6, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"



Untitled, March 12, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12¼" × 9"



Untitled, August 1965. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"

be even greater than it is. You have critical acclaim, but you crave more. Every character in this scenario is you controlling your world.

LS: Yes. An aspect is mine. A lot of them even show the kind of facial structure that I have or which I used to have, like big ears and so on. However, when you see them you don't see me. You will probably see other people, but you will not see me.

AG: *I think they're masks. The person behind those empty eyeballs and behind the teeth is you.*

LS: Do you see Goya behind his portraits of the royalty?

AG: *Absolutely. He had to be them to feel them and know them.*

LS: All right, fine, fine.

AG: *You see, one of the most interesting things about this body of work is that it is the most physically conventional work you've ever made. You make art out of materials that are not suitable to artmaking. However, these are paintings on canvas. They're acrylic, but they might as well be oil. They're built up in impasto surfaces. But, they are among the most vicious paintings and objects you've ever made. You try to get everybody comfortable and seduced by paint on canvas in order to suck them in and clobber them over the head with this new theater.*

LS: That sounds good to me.

AG: *I was originally suspicious of them because they were conventional in their material. And then, suddenly, I realized that the psychological meaning of the paintings was much more complex than the painting itself.*

LS: Hmmm.

AG: *Do you agree with that?*

LS: Yes, I like that. You know, as part of my job, my breathing mechanism, I have to provoke myself. I guess even as a child I wanted to be an athlete, so whatever I do there's something athletic about it.

AG: *When did you want to be an athlete? You've never shown any athletic bent.*

LS: Every Greek boy and, I suppose, girl too, would like to be an athlete. Because Greeks invented the Olympic games.

AG: *Did you ever try to become an athlete?*

LS: My body was never strong enough.

AG: *Bodies are made strong enough. You have to exercise them and work them. Your body was presumably strong enough, you didn't perceive it as strong enough.*

LS: Well, perhaps I didn't perceive it. So, I think in art making there was something Olympic, some kind of challenge. After so many years of doing "the unconventional," a part of your mind says, now wait a minute, why couldn't you use paint? Why couldn't you use bronze or whatever. And do something. Just because so many people around you are comfortable with the fact that you have avoided these conventional sort of media, or conventional modalities, doesn't mean that you have to get rigor mortis. You don't have to be an avant-garde rigor mortisized individual. So, in that sense, anything is possible. There's absolutely no limits. You try to do it better. To show people how to do it, you know. You look around, you say, no, you bastards, you're not doing it right. This is how it should be done, you know. You have to live the right kind of life, to undergo the right kinds of torments and tortures and so on. The other thing is that I painted twenty years ago, and then, from time to time, I painted again, and I was always dissatisfied with whatever was coming out. So, I had this feeling of let me try it again. This stubbornness.

AG: *Is painting something special? Is the act of painting making real art?*

LS: Well, it's like that ancient tradition.

AG: *You've waited a very long time to come back to it, in your mature work.*

LS: Yes.

AG: *But you've made other paintings and you've always flirted with picture-making.*

LS: Oh, definitely yes, but, you know, there has to be also the right subject. I made paintings ten years ago, in '73.

AG: *They were terrible.*

LS: Well, I loved them. And Hilton Kramer and Dianne Vanderlip came during the summer, they were the retrospective for a couple of years from now, and I showed them to them. And they loved them. That inspired me again. It's like saying, yes, of course. I mean, you know, I'm delighted that you love that. Because my dealer, that schmuck, hated them ten years ago.

AG: *They played right into your lap.*

LS: I think they're very nice. But, beyond that, when I hit upon the idea of saying these new paintings are the art dealers, these are the art critics, it was like in the movie, *Frankenstein,* it's alive, it's alive. It became alive at that point.

AG: *But, because they liked the previous paintings, and you know your friends didn't, it became catalytic to making paintings again, simultaneously attacking the people around you that didn't respond to the previous series.*

LS: There are two parts of you. One part says, gee, I'm wonderful, I'm kind and sweet. And the other says, I'm a monster. You know, kill me, please.

AG: *Aren't you afraid of having attacked everyone in the art world, that they're going to attack you now?*

LS: Yes, but part of the greatest pleasure that I get as an artist is when I attack.

AG: *But that's not necessarily what art is about.*

LS: It may not be for other people. But, for me, it's a very essential ingredient.

AG: *One essential ingredient in all of your art is eroticism, sexual metaphor. It is all about the fine line between threat and seduction. Where is it in this work?*

LS: Where is sex in this work? I think probably in this work sex is in the paint.

AG: *In the portraits, I think the paint is ecstatic and almost ejaculative.*

LS: Well, you have to paint the monsters in ecstasy, you know.

AG: *I found the works initially difficult because of the conventional aspect of being paintings on canvas.*

LS: But they're portraits.

AG: *But these are anonymous portraits, the image is built in the way you put the flesh on the skull. The art dealers have very little flesh. The patrons have too much flesh.*

LS: Well, that's an interesting observation.

AG: *I think the further away from the cutting edge of your life, or the way things affect you, the more enhanced the creatures are. The closer to you, the more skeletal they are.*

LS: Really? What about the artist?

AG: *That's pretty close. I think they're quite skeletal. The critics are almost without form and colorless. And the dealers are also very ephemeral. There are hints of structure. The skeletal structure is there.*

LS: For me, it was time to redo the picture.

AG: *What do you mean?*

LS: We had the pop-art picture of ourselves, and then we had the new realist. I thought it's time to redo the portrait.

AG: *What is the essential pop-art portrait to you?*

LS: Clean surface and stylish mood.

AG: *Yours are masks. One could say your surface is moody, also.*

LS: Well, I don't see them as masks. The mask to me is only one small part of it.

AG: *But, as long as you have eyes without pupils and a nose without nostrils, it's like a pumpkin head. You could stick your nose there, you could stick your eyes through and fill in the portrait. That's why I think they're you. Putting me on and seeing what it's like to be me, putting on Kim Levin or Ingrid Sischy or playing with the danger of trying on the failed artist, feeling what it's like to be the patron. I think those orifices have been left open for you. You are all of the players, and it's a carnival and that's where it differs from a pop portrait. This is much more deeply psychological. This is much more involved with naming than with surface. This is about the ramifications of being and existence. Rather than the look of a specific time, it suggests a very confused moment, and condemnation and anger with the art world and its priorities. Are you angry with the art world right now? Do you hate the young artists who've come along and stolen the spotlight?*

LS: I don't hate them as much as I hate the older people who had more spotlight than I had. The world's full of injustices, and so on, but that's taken for granted. Years ago, you supposedly became an artist, the essential outsider, who condemned middle-class values or group values. But, more recently, the artist was in the midst of all these values. There was little condemnation.

AG: *Do you think the artist has become bourgeois and adopted the values of the middle classes?*

LS: The artist has been bourgeois for twenty years now.

AG: *How do you feel about that? You still live an artist's life. Do you think the artist is not living an artist's life any more? Or has the meaning of an artist's life changed?*

LS: Interesting question. Well, it comes to the area of the corruption of the artist. Supposedly, the artist is a little bit purer when he or she starts out. And then, with success, money and so on, there's a kind of corrosiveness that takes place. The talent sort of diminishes. The life becomes more confortable and so on.

AG: *I see the new work as a very deliberate indictment of the art world. I am not threatened by it, as I feel very secure in our relationship as well as in what I'm doing in my career. But, I find it particularly interesting that there's this attack on the people whom you love the most, whom you are most dependent upon, in a way see, in the superficial way it's stupid. It's too Freudian, too automatic. And the work is more complex than that. So, I've become more interested, and I'm digging under the surface to see, you know, what are the levels.*

LS: Well, even before I had this anger for you, let's say for a month previous, because you didn't like the heads. Which then allows me to do a portrait of you, okay? You and your type. And Kim, the art critic, and so on. There was this other thing which became one of the last series, the artist's friends. What a strange title. These people around the artist. In my personal life, there were people who were my friends for 20 and 30 years and then, all of a sudden, they weren't my friends anymore. What a strange phenomenon. The anger is total, it's a totality.

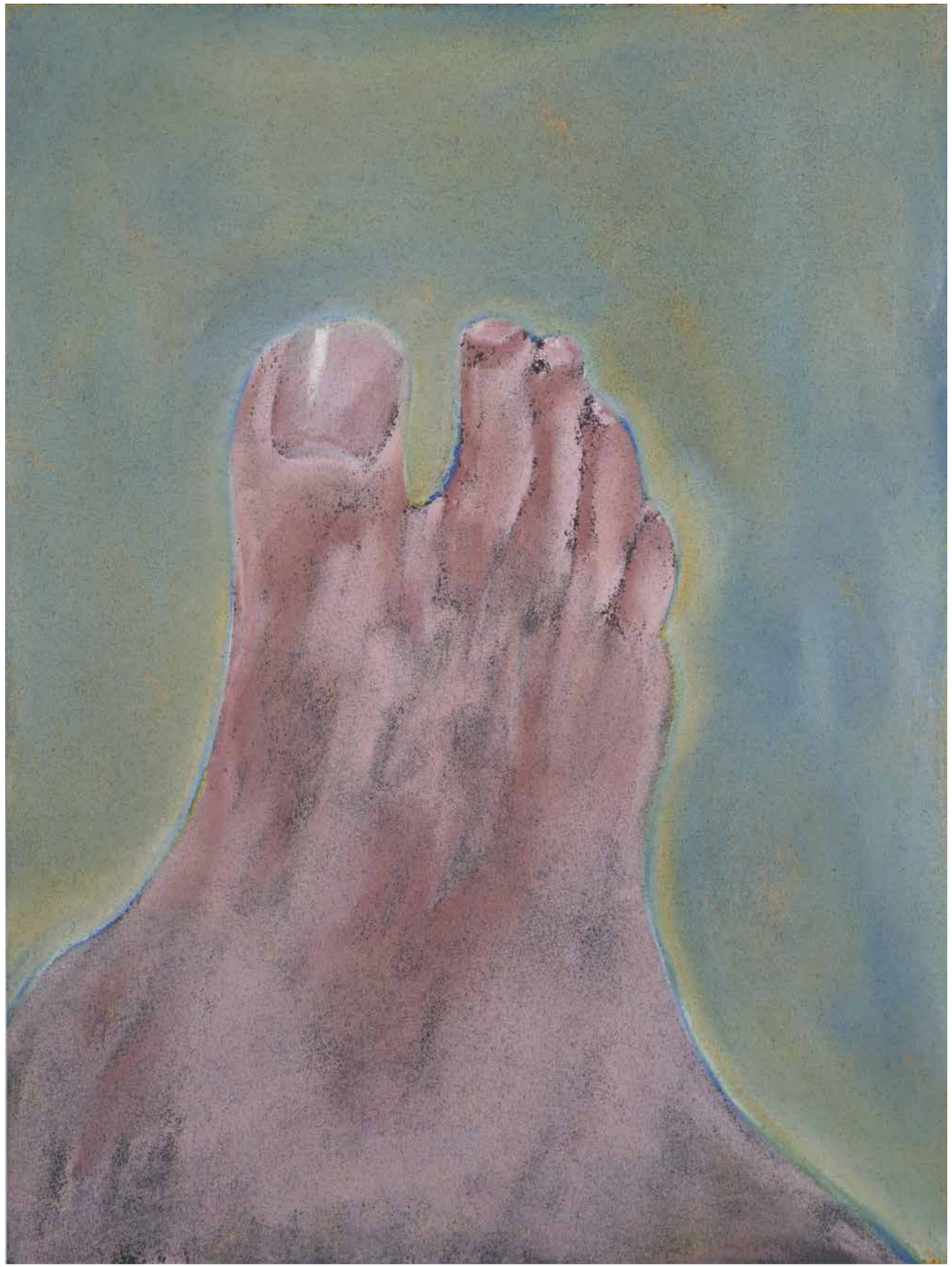
AG: *I see a parallel to these portraits and the Polaroid sittings. I think there's a relationship. I think you use us in an interesting way. In the sittings you used all of us in an erotic way. It was not a sexual occurrence for each of us to pose for you. But we were all giving you something by taking our clothes off. And, I think, in a way, you've done the same thing with these images, but you are testing us further. I believe that you were saying, you took your clothes off for me, now take your skin off.*

LS: Your psyche, yes.

AG: *That's an incredible demand that these works are making on the people involved. And the power of that demand is present in the image.*

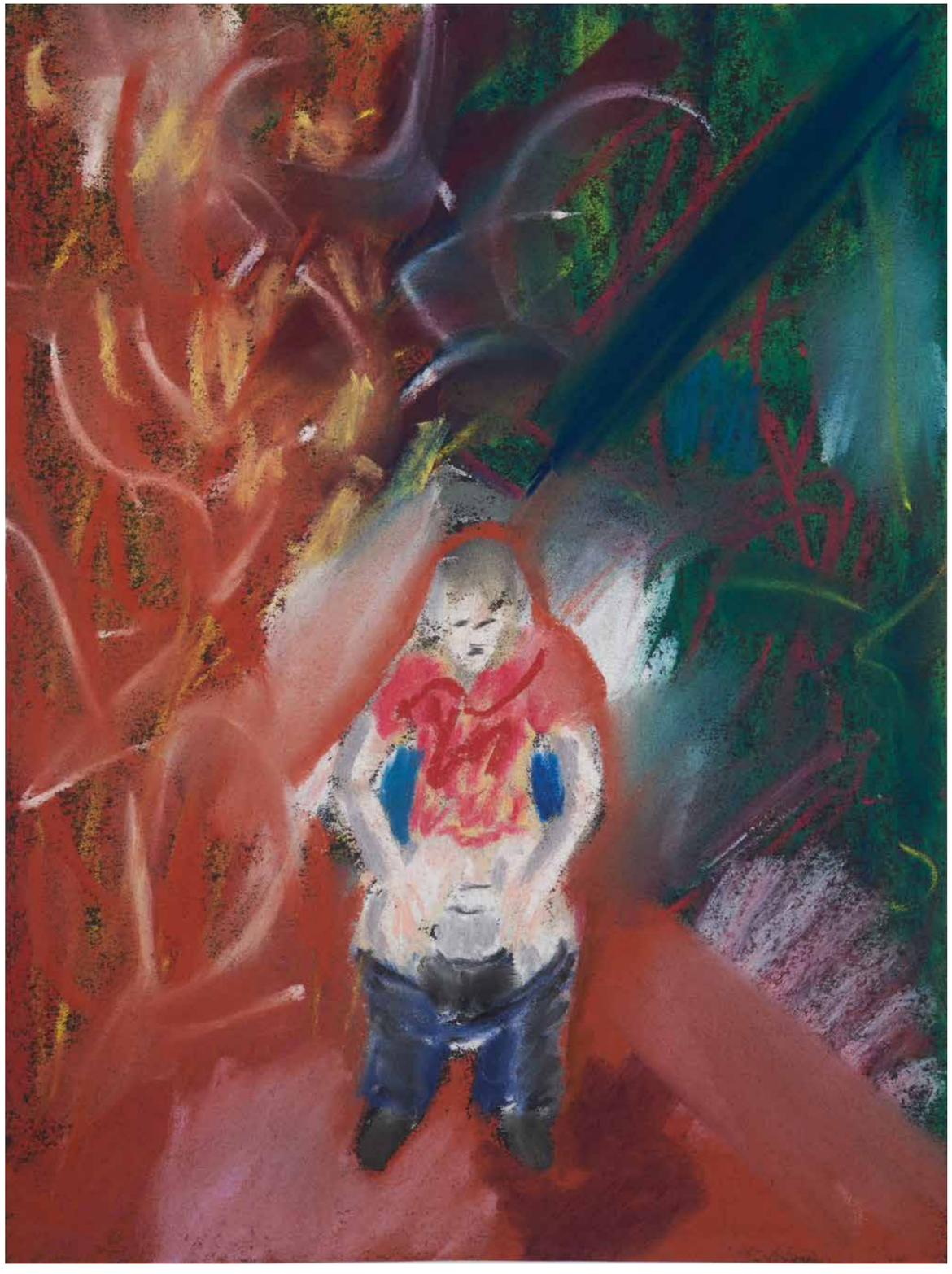
LS: God, why can't you have insights like that every day?

AG: *Well, we only need them once in a while.* ■

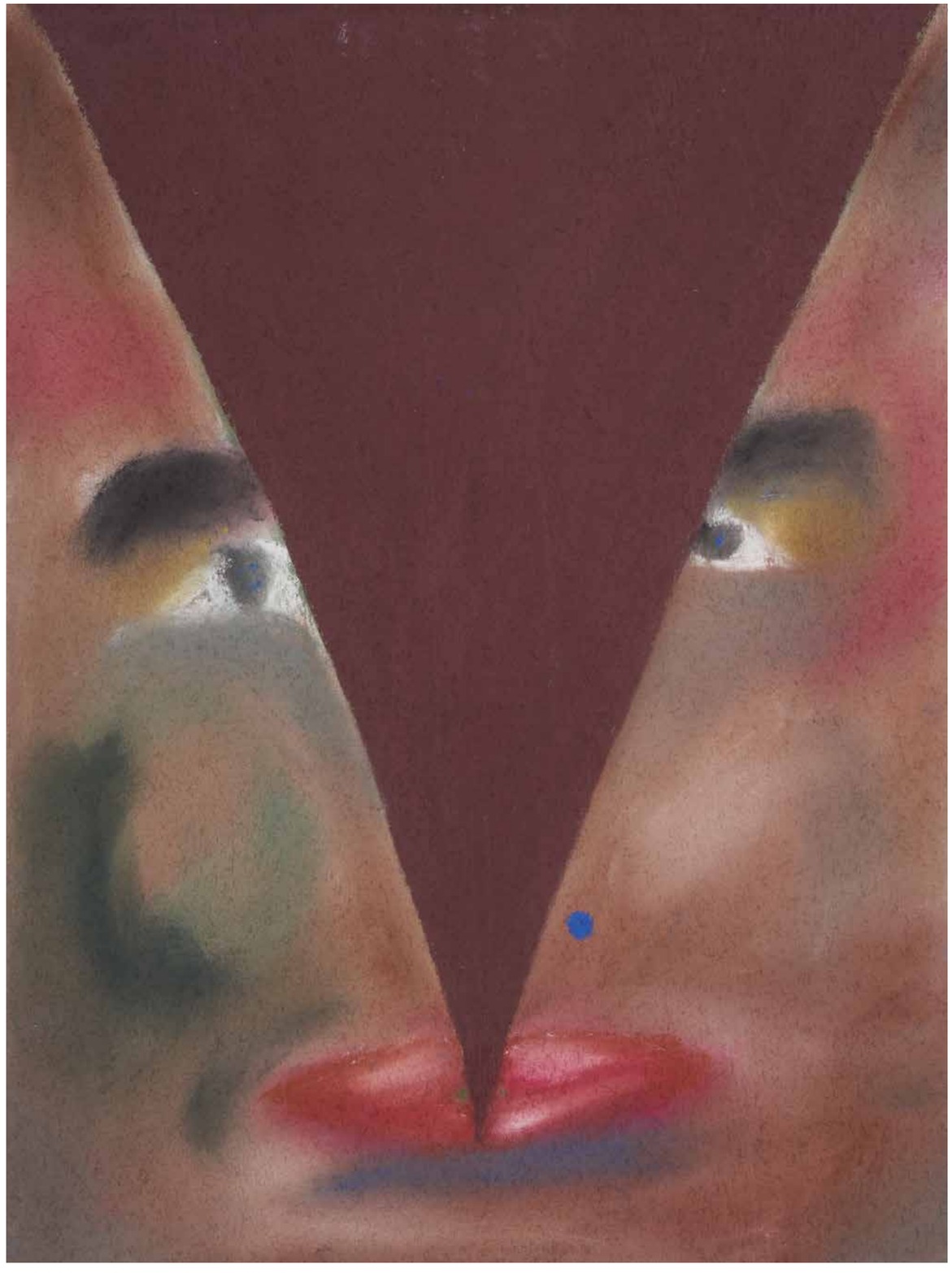


Untitled, 1965. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9”

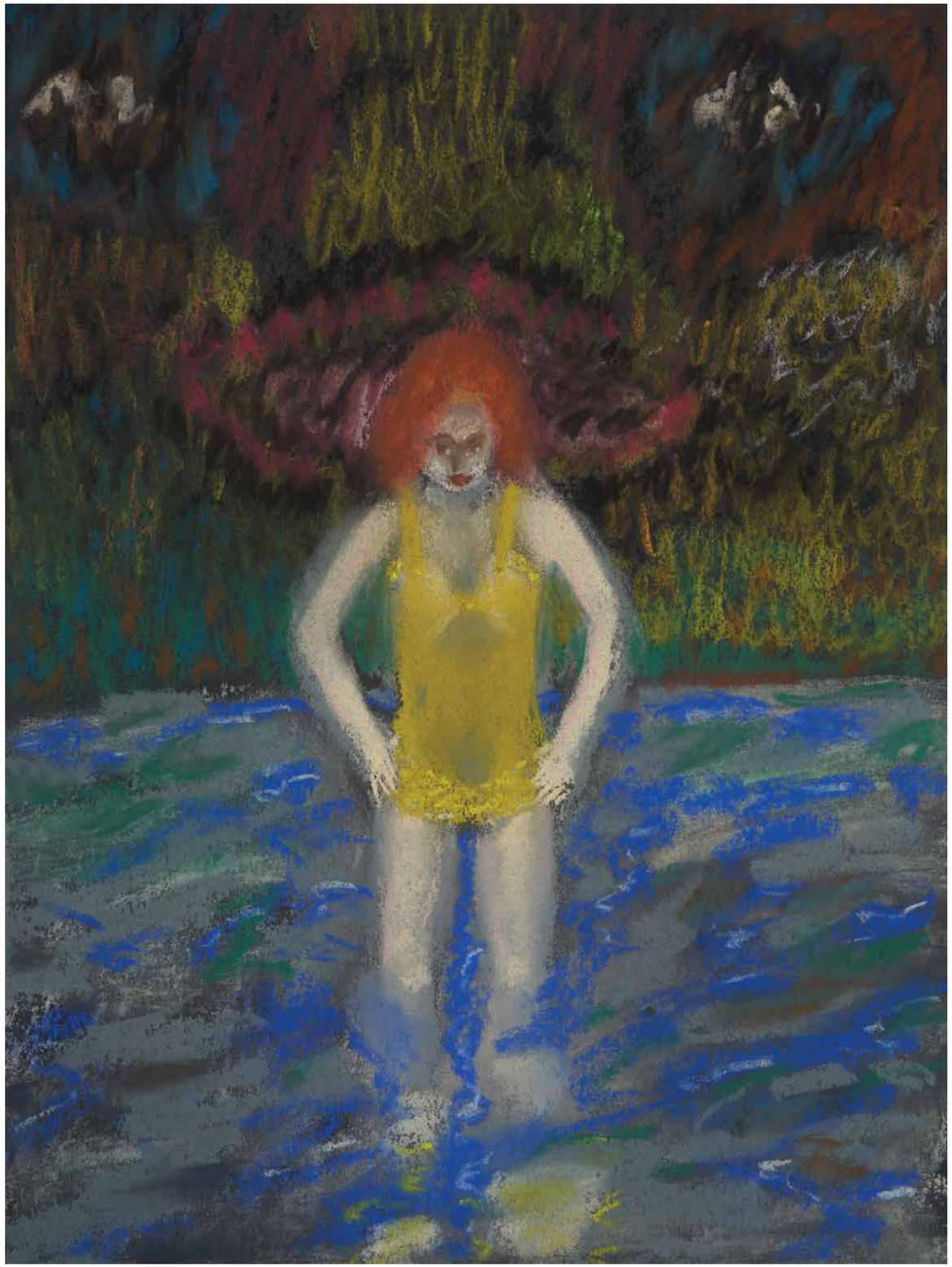
Untitled, July 20, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅛”



Untitled, July 6, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"



Untitled, February 17, 1961. Pastel on paper. 12" × 9"



Untitled, February 3, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12⅛" × 9”

Untitled, August 5, 1962. Pastel on paper. 12" × 8⅞"

Reclining Curvaceous VII, 1981. Silver plated bronze. 5¼" × 16" × 7¾"

ANOTHER AUTOINTERVIEW

Lucas Samaras

Originally published in *Samaras Album: Autointerview, Autobiography, Autopolaroid*
(The Whitney Museum of American Art and Pace Editions Inc., 1971)

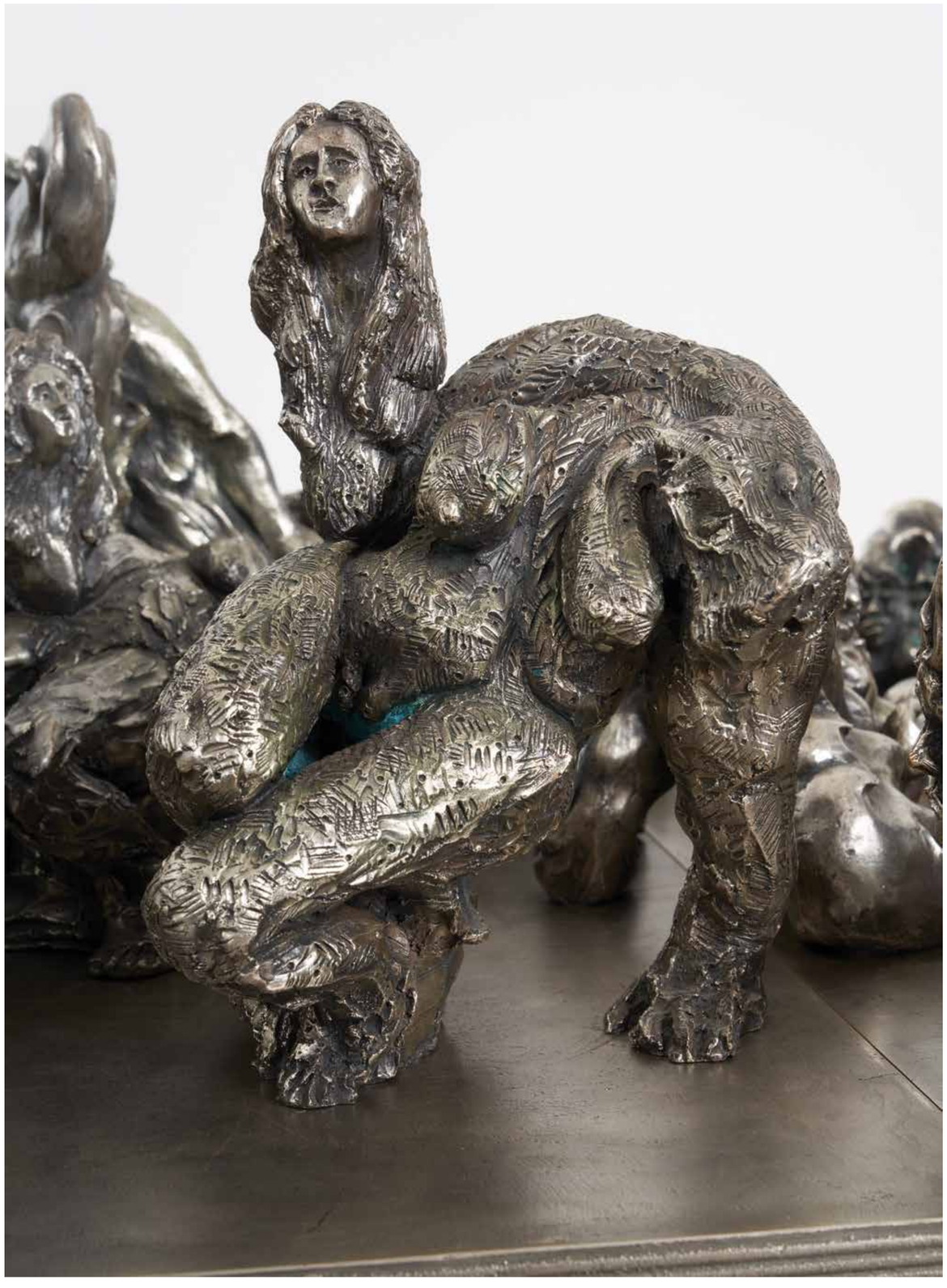
ANOTHER AUTOINTERVIEW

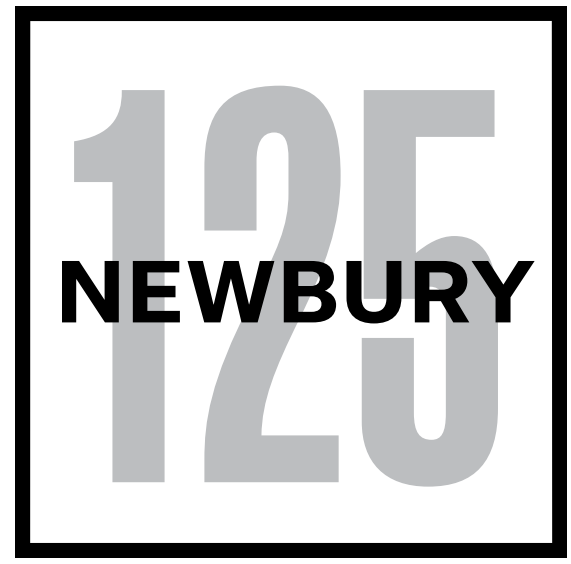
Why are you conducting this interview?
Because interview is a frequently abused form and self is a seemingly virginal patch of fertile content.
Why are you conducting this interview?
So that I can find out what's been declassified.
Why is that necessary?
It's a way to keep alert, a kind of sanitation.
Why are you conducting this interview?
So that I can protect myself.
From what?
From people's imagination.
How can you protect yourself with words?
Words ward off oblivion.
Why are you conducting this interview?
It's a way of releasing guilt.
Why are you conducting this interview?
I want to crystalize the daily situation of talking to myself.
Why are you conducting this interview?
In order to relax my mind from daily obsessions.
Why are you conducting this interview?
In order to formalize and isolate myself.
Why are you conducting this interview?
In order to enter the consciousness of others.
What are you?
A hunger.
What are you?
A smiling hunger.
What are you?
Inwardly I am an erotic sadness, outwardly I am a home-made process for unraveling meanings.
What are you?
I am an intermittent escapee from a more traditional behavior.
What makes you go away?
Desire for understanding.
What makes you come back?
Ancient uncontrollable signals.
What are you?
In the sense that I am an active irrational artist I am an early stage of a mutation. Also I am a beneficial impediment.
A what?
A slightly sadistic entertainer.
What are you?
An intense superstitious lover and hater of people.
What are you doing?
I am trying to synthesize love.
What are you doing?
Trying to evaluate and use what I've got.
How old are you?
Nineteen hundred and seventy-one.
Say it differently.
I am as old as the things I know.
How old are you?
I panic when I think of it.
Why?
It's a bowel-control anxiety.
How old are you?
Thirty-five.
How old is that?
Old enough to often get a stench of death.
What frightens you?
The separation between me and the things I see.
What frightens you?
The possibility for evil.
Are you a very moral person?
Outwardly yes. Inwardly I get glimpses of the cannibal, the selfish autocrat, the destroyer of things, the suicide.
What frightens you?
The needs of other people.
What is art?
The physical look of humanity.
Of what value is art?
It protects my adult existence.
How?
I can be pretty abnormal without having to isolatedly receive society's contempt or punishments. My separation is institutionalized.
Of what value is art?
It is a necessary component of being human.
Of what value is art?
It allows me to be revolutionary in a constitutional democracy.
Are you political?
Only in terms of art.
Why?
Regular society is out of my line.
Do you like society as it is now?
No, but neither do I like the weather.
Tell me a problem.
How can I get to accept, tolerate, live with and enjoy myself?
How do you cope with your body?
Carefully.
Is there something supernatural, undernatural or other about your body?
I sometimes control portions of it. I speak to it, telling it not to let me down. It's like another person. That's why when people make comments about my body I feel peculiar. They can't see my separation from it.
What do you fear about your body?
Its biology.
What do you fear about your mind?
Its passions.
What do you like about your body?
It takes me into the lives of other people.
What do you like about your mind?
Its conversation.
What's the most frequent question you ask yourself?
What am I going to do now.
Aren't you an artist?
Not always, there are unfortunate pauses, periods when I am anything but an artist.
When did you become an artist?
I set out to become one about twenty years ago, I was told that I was one about ten years ago, and now I am beginning to feel unembarassed by it.
What embarassment?
The proximity to the great men of the past.
What embarassment?
The jealousy of other people.
What embarassment?
The formal exposure of my psyche.
Is it very embarassing?
No. It used to be embarassing. Now there is some satisfaction in not being embarassed by it any more.
What are the first questions you ask others?
What do you want from me and what do you have that I may want.
Does it work?
No. I have to deduce their answer through their actions and it might take between a week and two years.
Do you like others?
Yes.
Why don't you live with others on a daily basis?
Because I haven't found a good servant-master.
How come other people manage?
It's a wonder to me.
What are you?
I am everything that everybody is only differently.
Isn't everybody like that?
Yes.
Tell me more.
The word artist says enough.
Are you an object maker?
I am a thing maker.
What's the difference?
A thing is less clear and more inclusive.
Do you like well made things?
Yes. Well made things including well made thoughts. I also like things that are not well made, but I like them less. Sometimes I like terrible things.
Are you accepted as an artist?
By some. Most of my work was done to prove to others including myself that I was an artist rather than because I was one. Or it was the opposite. One doesn't always know what one is.
Do you like to be called artist?
Sometimes I like it, sometimes I don't. I like antagonism and temporary anonimity.
If you were alone in the world would you be an artist?
I am alone in the world.
Are you alone in the world?
I am alone in a world full of nice and unnice people.
For whom are you making art?
For the adults in my past, for anyone who will look and wonder and let me live, and for the unnamables who will come in the future.
Why are you making art?
So that I can forget my separateness from everything else.
What are you running away from?
From people's evaluations.
Why are you sentimental?
Because I am unsatisfied.
What did one year of therapy do for you?
It was better than taking a course in psychology.
What is interesting about psychology?
The adults in my past talked about it with a mixture of respect and horror. They loved to tell me that if one read or thought too much or too long one became crazy. I was interested in this curious mind that could spoil under misuse.
Why didn't you become a psychologist?
The course I took in college was full of dull charts and statistics. I wasn't interested in math.
Are you nice to people?
No. I am accurate about my feelings.
Do you want to be wealthy?
Not any more.
Why?
Wealth is a profession.
Don't you want to have wealth?
I want just enough to live and do my work without feeling that I have to give something away out of guilt or generosity.
What's wrong with generosity?
It perpetuates a moneyed aristocracy.
Do you want your work to be preserved?

Either actually or photographically or descriptively.
What's the need for a tomb?
I want my spiritual and corporeal hunger to be remembered.
Why don't you keep your problems and your pleasures to yourself?
Because I'm universalizing them.
Isn't that a little pretentious?
No, it's a little fatherly.
Why is it easier to make art than to deal with people?
Making art is dealing with people on your own terms. The ideal way of using people is using them like clay, but that being out of the question, except for lunatics and leaders, art is a good alternative.
Why is art a profession?
Because it's hard work. Besides, all parts of awareness are categorized and professionalized.
Since when?
Ever since humanity.
Are you a professional artist?
Well, I find it weird being called professional. After I've done some art I'm pretty much where I started from even if I'm not. Art stops being what I made and it has to be something I haven't made. Tomorrow I may not be able to do art. There is no guarantee.
What has the acceptance of your work by others done to your character?
It has erased my ninety-five-pound weakling image.
Tell me a problem.
I have difficulty in understanding how the world began, if it did begin, how did I begin, if I did begin, and how does anything I do begin. I have a few minutes of intelligent perplexity whenever I bring up these enigmas and then I get drowsy and want to sleep in someone's protective amplitude.
Who is that someone?
A conglomerate of many people from my past, particularly those who knew more than I did.
What word describes your dealings with people?
In terms of feeling the word is eroticism, in terms of dealing the word is criticism.
How criticism?
I am question-oriented. I ask why to anything that is presented as fact. It puts people on the defensive and often they expose some privacies.
Why do you like to see their weapons?
It's a kind of knowledge, sniffing them out to see if they are like me or if they are different, how they are different from the people that they remind me of.
Are you superstitious?
In my conscious dealings I always leave a margin for the unexpected.
Are you an indoors person or an outdoors person?
Indoors. The outdoors is a luxury and a drug. Going out is like going on an expedition even if I'm going out to buy some bread.
Why do you dislike leaving your house?
Someone might call me.
Why do you dislike leaving your house?
I might get lost or lose all the people I've known.
Why do you like the indoors?
Because I'm domesticated.
What does that mean?
It's a contemplative situation.
Isn't contemplation possible outdoors?
There are too many distractions and dissatisfactions with the multiple presentations of beauty.
Why don't you drive?
I don't trust my killer instincts.
Do you kill the animals you eat?
I kill the containers in which the flesh of the animals is packed.
Do you have any animals?
Only those that come of their own suicidal accord like roaches, spiders, flies, moths and mosquitos.
Do you have any things that move in your apartment?
The TV, gas flame and water.
What is your reflection to you?
A disembodied relative.
Does your apartment tend to be sparse or cluttered?
Cluttered. I like to have within visual and physical grasp the tools and materials that I work with.
Do you live where you work?
Yes. There is a mixing of the two.
Have you considered yourself as a work?
I have been working on that.
Are you Christifying yourself?
Everything is traceable to everything else.
Why do you want a megaphone, why reach millions?
I don't want to reach millions but the equivalent of myself among those millions.
What for?
For continuity.

Chair with Four Figures, 1983. Cast bronze. 33" × 17½" × 19"

Sculpture Table, 1981. Silver-plated bronze. 41¾" × 51½" × 35¼"





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