JULIUS TOBIAS

March 7 – April 16, 1992

University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
State University of New York at Stony Brook

INTRODUCTION

Julius Tobias has been the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, two National Endowment for the Arts grants, two awards from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and two grants from the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, among many others. He has received three grants in the past year. He is widely known in the art world. He has made works for the Storm King Art Center and for Artpark and has shown his work in galleries from New York to Tokyo. An influence since the sixties, any number of younger artists could trace their roots to his often aggressive or discomfiting ideas. (Sometimes, in my opinion, they've appropriated them.) He has sold one work in the last ten years.

He was well-known for his strong, often intimidating environmental pieces when he went back to figure painting, not giving a damn that the risk involved in this manifestation of the cycle of his work might be condemned as "selling out" by a generation of minimalists. Nor did he allow himself to be concerned with —bluntly—the unlikely market for paintings so large, concerned with such subject matter, and presented in such a remorseless way.

In quiet procession, within the space surrounded by the figurative works, are a handful of maquettes for the large-scale sculptures. Without them, I felt the show would be incomplete. They are wildly different in subject, medium, and intent, but they somehow go together, complement each other, and their spatial channeling is directly linked.

I want to thank Stony Brook's Staller Center for the Arts for letting me bring this commitment and risk to its Art Gallery, and I want to particularly thank April Kingsley for accepting the invitation to write again about an artist whose career she has followed for years.

—Mel Pekarsky, February, 1992

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to guest curator Mel Pekarsky, Professor of Art at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, for curating this exhibition. Thanks are also due to Ron Morosan, Director of B4A Gallery, New York, New York, for his assistance with the organization of this exhibition.

I also want to thank April Kingsley for contributing the insightful essay published in this catalogue.

On behalf of the artist, I wish to acknowledge The Richard A. Florsheim Art Fund for their support of this exhibition and Perry Tymeson and Matt Schley of Petersburg Press for their printmaking assistance.

Special thanks are also extended to members of the Staller Center for the Arts staff: Patrick Cable, Stephanie Cash, and Amy Schichtel, Curatorial Assistants; Nancy Alberto, Shannon Applegate, Linda Burns, Brenda Hanegan, and Young-Ae Shin, Gallery Assistants; Heejung Kim and Kim Yellin, Gallery Interns; Patrick Kelly, Liz Stein, and the Technical Crew, Staller Center for the Arts, for exhibition lighting; and Mary Balduf, Gallery Secretary.

Most of all, I wish to thank Julius Tobias for sharing his work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director

Front Cover: Portrait of My Left Eye, 1991
Photo-etching, 26 x 20"
Lent by the artist

Typesetting and Printing: TAM COMMUNICATIONS, Bohemia, NY

JULIUS TOBIAS: A BOULDER IN THE MAINSTREAM[1]

The history of art, and of the individual artists who create it, swings slowly like an enormous and weighty pendulum: the painter turned sculptor returns to painting; the Constructivist turned Expressionist becomes a Minimalist who later reverts to Expressionism; the artist who studies with a Socialist-Marxist becomes a maker of pure, "primary" sculptures, then suddenly, late in life, finds himself making socially-conscious art. All of these transformations have occurred in the career of Julius Tobias as he has circled and recircled through forty years of making art. Most of the work in this exhibition dates from the past decade, but it reflects a long lifetime of other artworks and other thoughts. Certain constants run through the drawings and prints, the paintings and the conceptual models: austerity and sincerity, a feeling for solid form but not for color, for insistent rhythms, forced separations, symmetry, and serried ranks.

Always in tune with the temper of his time but never locked in step with it, Tobias has consistently managed to maintain the unenviable position of being an outsider within his own art world. From sculptures that were closed environments too big for private ownership, he moved on to sculptures that barred your entrance, trapped you or controlled you. His idea now is to build sculptures so vast that they are on a scale of inches to yards, maybe even to miles, instead of inches to feet. Beginning to paint again, Tobias made pictures so dark they are barely viewable. Now the paintings are easy to see, but their subject matter—death—erects a different kind of barrier to your sight. Nothing from this artist is ever easy to take, and, for him, nothing is or ever was easy, either.

Julius Tobias was born in New York City seventy-six years ago. He suffered through the Great Depression as a school drop-out and spent the war years as a reluctant Air Force bombardier. (When forced by his commanding officer to explain why he refused to attend target recognition meetings, he gave such an eloquent description of the churches and children in baby carriages he knew would also be hit at each of those targets that he never heard another word of complaint about his absences.) After a crash landing he was interned in a Swiss prisoner-of-war camp where American prisoners were relatively well-treated. He was free to wander about the countryside as far as he could walk between meals. However, when he was forced to "escape," crossing the border was dangerous. He got to Lyon just after the Americans had arrived and was flown back to England. One thing he recalls about the experience which relates to the imagery of his recent work was being told that the Lyon aerodromes were filled with the bodies of hostages.

Like many other American servicemen whose art studies were interrupted by the war, Tobias chose to study in France; the Atelier Fernand Leger in Paris was his home-away-from-home between 1948 and 1952. Though Leger had been politically allied with Communism since its inception, his late forties paintings are the most blatantly worker-oriented of his entire career. Leger's Russian friend Mayakovsky said the following of him in 1923, but it was never more relevant to Leger's work than in his 1950 painting, *The Constructors*:

> He considers his work to be a trade comparable to the others. It is a pleasure to see the beauty of his industrial forms, his lack of fear when faced with the most brutal realism.[2]

Leger was obsessed with the idea of making paintings which the workers he was depicting could understand, and he even held the first exhibition of *The Constructors* in an automobile factory canteen. In part because of Leger, Tobias was deeply interested in Marxist Socialism around this time, and although his involvement with the ideology has diminished precipitously over the years since then, his concern that his art have social significance has intensified.

Thus did Julius Tobias start out as a painter in the humanistic, Constructivist mode of Leger, who saw the realities of urban existence—the neon signs and illusionistic billboards thrusting images into public spaces—as abstract pictorial elements to be manipulated at will. Once Tobias recovered from a spate of painting Abstract Expressionist-influenced "black" paintings on his return to New York in 1952, he moved gently back into painting neo-plastic configurations. Abstract, Leger- or Mondrian-like rectangles and bars moving in and out of space predominated, first in gray canvases, then, by the mid-

Figures Facing Away, 1988
Oil on canvas, 84 x 65"
Lent by the artist

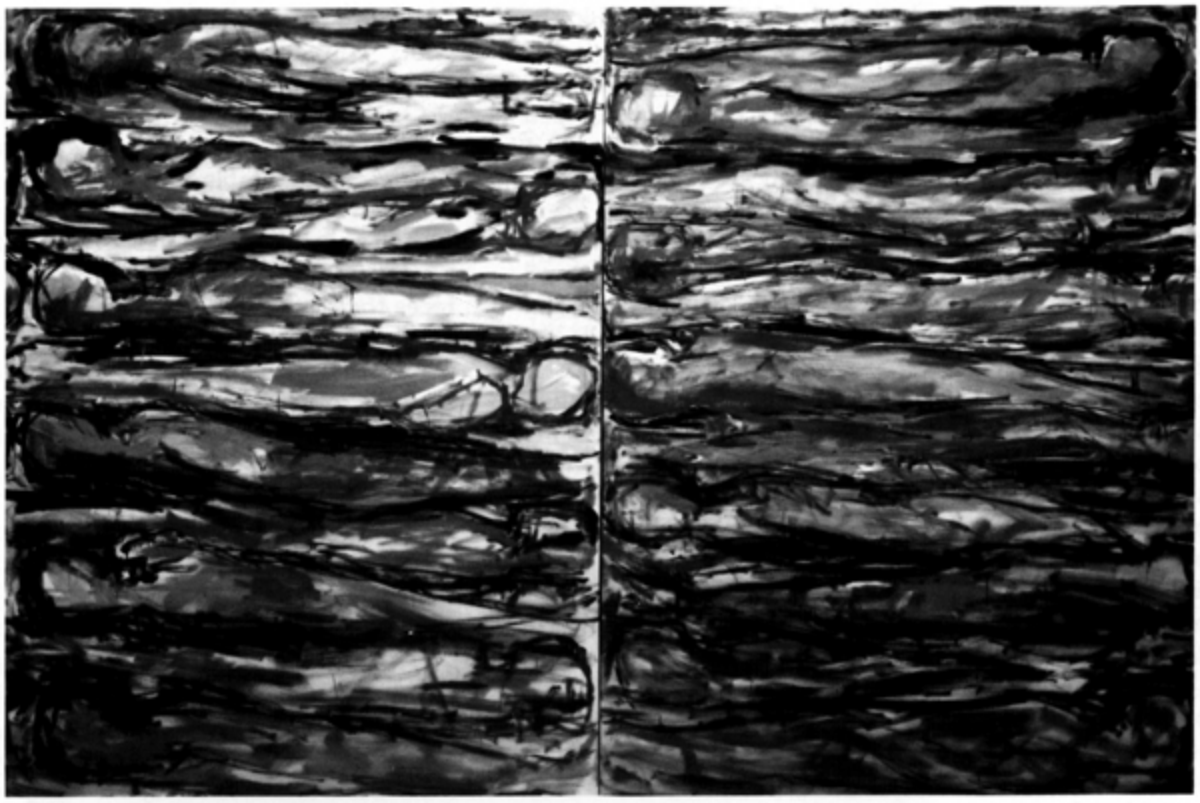
sixties, in white, wall-sized paintings. Suddenly between 1965 and 1966, the wall paintings became painted walls which he joined at the corners to make open-topped, open-fronted, room-like three-dimensional structures. He was literalizing, physicalizing, the illusions he had been painting. Now a *real* shadow created a dark gray rectangle, a *real* white surface created a plane of white light moving through space.

As one might expect, Tobias' new work was considered sculpture, though the artist still thought of himself as a painter. At the time, other creators of large physical objects, such as Salvatore Romano, Robert Grosvenor, and Ronald Bladen, were also more involved with painted surfaces and planar movements than they were with traditional sculptural concerns such as mass and density. In fact, their works tended to be literally hollow and their emphasis was always upon the "painterly" qualities—the light and shadows in particular. In the middle of the sixties so many painters-turned-sculptors were working in this overscale, hard-edged, elemental-environmental manner that Kynaston McShine was able to mount a huge exhibition at the Jewish Museum of this work which he termed Primary Structures. This 1966 exhibition simultaneously identified and created a movement in art, a movement which, in its larger, more inclusive sense, became known as Minimalism.[3]

The small steel models Tobias welded in 1981 which are included in the current exhibition are based on those white "room," "box" or "Interior Space" sculpture/paintings of 1965-68 (or on the plans for them, since not all were executed). One contained a singe rectangular beam thrusting out toward you from the back wall; in another the beam angled up from the rear of the "floor" toward you like a gun barrel. Three horizontal beams, low and far, mid-distance, and high and near, cross one box to bar one's access, while in another entrance is restricted by a single horizontal beam. More elaborate and ceremonial spaces—such as the one in which six diagonal elements in a row running down the center of the "floor" angle up to the top of a side wall—were apparently never executed full scale. Unfortunately, few of the room-boxes which were realized are still extant. In any event, they all had an innately elusive presence, a sort of now-you-see-it-now-you-don't quality despite their implacable physicality. Perhaps this reaction stemmed from the fact that all the action took place inside the boxes. Viewing them, one felt almost like a voyeur peeping into their interiors, looking for the whys and wherefores of their meaning, somewhat the way surgeons now use laser lights to scan out innards for the causes of our problems. Unlike most sculptors of the past, Tobias seemed unconcerned with the contours, surfaces, or massings of his pieces' outsides, which were simple, uninflected white walls. In contrast, his preoccupation with the insides seemed nearly perverse. The absolute frontality of the "white boxes" aligned them decidedly with painting, but, in another sense, one can view this work as an early manifestation of large-scale, environmental-conceptual art. Tobias certainly had a precocious understanding of the effect its physical, exhibition context had on a work of art. First the early paintings became walls which configured small "rooms" or cubicles to house the sculptural elements. Then, in the 1970s, the gallery walls became the containers for the physical objects he placed within them. Nineteen concrete slabs, propped up at various slight angles from the floor, took up the entire gallery space in 1971, and five low lines of poured concrete "curbstones" crossed and closed off another space in 1974. None of the small cement models for the large concrete "barrier" pieces that Tobias poured on site in his exhibition spaces during the seventies are included in this exhibition, but a few of the steel "maquettes" for futuristic, architectural-scale, versions of them are on view. Two thick walls, quarter-rounded at top and situated in parallel, provide a passageway that curves infinitely away above you as you make your way between them in your imagination. They can be easily envisioned on a vast scale, miles long.

Seen in the light of Tobias' socialist bent, his unorthodox use of the commercial exhibition spaces and art institutions as a part of his art work undermined their normal functions as elitist selling and showing places for *objets d'art*. Like the white boxes, they existed outside of the normal purview of the art market by being both site-specific and unpurchasably oversized. The problems created by trying to mix concrete in the gallery space for his 1971 exhibition at Max Hutchinson's gallery achieved one level of anti-artmarket negativity; a second level was reached with his "barrier" installations at 55 Mercer Street in the mid-seventies. "My abrasive attitude was at its apex at this time," he said a decade later[4]; and at the Alessandro Gallery in 1976 he used stainless steel to "divide the gallery space in such a way as to deny access to a portion of the gallery in which I had placed out-sized drawings." Again Tobais' art was functioning in a perverse manner, but in this case the viewer was on one side of a wall or barrier and therefore literally, though not necessarily willingly, *inside* the piece instead of peering into its interior. The denied-access pieces function similarly to the channeling constructions in that you are literally in or out of them, but the psychological effect of walking between the waist-high walls of the channels in *Runners*, 1976, or *Six Concrete Units*, 1978, is more powerful. The psychological fallout is like that of mazes and enforced line-ups such as those that occur in stockyards or took place in concentration camps. In fact, not long afterward in 1981, when he was working in wood, he created a piece at Artpark in Lewiston, New York, which was titled *Homage to the Cows of the Sioux Falls Stockyards* in deliberate dedication to the steers he once saw being brutally processed out west.[5] Clearly the piece had wider significance concerning life-damaging brutality in all of its modern forms.

Three major room-size installations executed in the years just prior to the artpark piece relate to it and to the "barriers" but are distinguished from them by a definite religiosity, a sense of the sacramental or ceremonial. Tobias' 1979 installation at the Zriny-Hayes Gallery in Chicago, in fact, had a configuration like that of church pews flanking a central aisle. One enters it between two



Stacking #1, 1988
Oil on canvas, 90 x 134"
Lent by the artist

low walls which rise on a diagonal to meet the first set of two-foot high horizontal walls, five of which then run twenty feet to the end of the forty-six-foot wide room in evenly spaced ranks on either side of the aisle. He also built two cruciform "channel" structures of plywood, one at the Myers Fine Arts Gallery in Plattsburgh, New York, which he painted silver, the other, at 55 Mercer Street, which he left in its natural state. The opening into one arm of the crossing channels is centered on the gallery entrance and the results are particularly dramatic when it opens into the long axis. Coming into the piece in the short arm creates a feeling more maze-like than controled and processional, but in both cases the emotion generated by these formal configurations is one of being within a sacred precinct.

The tenor of this work prepares us to some degree for the images of death and disaster to occupy him later in the eighties, if not for his shift away from abstraction. Only those soulful photo-etchings of his eyes that he used for some exhibition announcement cards during the seventies and eighties hinted at a possible rekindling of an interest in the human form. Even though a number of artists "returned to the figure" in the eighties when representational art made a comeback, Julius Tobias' post-1983 figure paintings should not be viewed as a smart marketing move of the kind commonly termed "selling out," "going with the flow," or "playing the game." There are a number of reasons why not. First, Tobias' paintings were in part forced into existence by circumstance: he began painting because he could only buy art materials, not tools, with a research grant he received from Kutztown State University in 1983. Sculpture was therefore out of the question for that period of time. Second, the images in his paintings came out of a septuagenarian's foreboding dreams stimulated by anxiety over his age and precarious health and by a potentially disastrous world situation. Also, to put it most gently, Tobias did not paint seductive, ingratiating paintings. His first works are so dark and finely nuanced they are barely visible. They were followed by paintings like *Figures Facing Away*, 1988, and the very spare, untitled, outline-figure on a white ground in which the figures face resolutely away from the viewer as though marching or being drawn irrevocably into a bleak future. They read as powerful nuclear-age images of humanity, though at least the figures are standing, i.e., alive. But then came the "Wall," "Pile," and "Stacking" paintings of dead bodies, the leavings of a violence-crazed culture that seems to have had little trouble avoiding responsibility for destruction en masse. From the machine gun to the nuclear bomb, the major twentieth century weapons of destruction do not permit the kind of personal, pin-point targeting that brings a moral weight to killing. (The Nazi death camps were yet another way of de-individualizing death.)

"What a century!" he found himself thinking. "Slaughter by the millions. Every time you open the paper you see more death and destruction." Unbearable memories, especially for a Jew, of the photographs taken in the process of liberating the concentration camps came flooding back. *Pile #1*, a 1989 charcoal drawing on canvas, clearly recalls those photographs because of the dangling limbs and the way the physiognomically and sexually

undifferentiated bodies are intertwined. The pallid bluish-white of *Pile #2*, the oil painting made from *Pile #1* in the same year, serves to have more coldness to the bodies and to remove the ameliorating touch of tradition provided by the use of charcoal lines in the earlier version.

Massed against the sky and filling most of the space, the bodies in *The Wall*, a more recent painting, seem partially disintegrated, their individualities as "things" even denied them. One can pick out head shapes and hair-like tangles, the lines of a torso or limb here and there, but the particulars within this ashen-gray pile are difficult to discern. A hint of a desolate burning plain and of distant fires behind the bodies adds to a future-less sense of devastation and waste. Even Beckett seems optimistic by comparison, as does Philip Guston with his stacks of gorgeously painted, inert limbs. Never a compromiser, Tobias allows no simple esthetic pleasures into his pictures, not of the feel of paint, nor of sensuous lines, of color, or even of compositional connections to past art. They are nevertheless, profoundly moving canvases.

But the "Stacking" paintings came first and they may be even more anguished than the others despite their studied calm. The personal knowledge that as a WWII bombardier he must have wrought a great deal of the very slaughter he now decries has surely added to the weight of this image-burden that he is laying down in paint. Recollections of the stacks of corpses in the aerodromes of France during the war probably also came to mind when he saw the tarmac arrangements of filled body-bags that appeared on television in the eighties. Newsprint images of the bloated bodies in Jonestown and of the fallen figures melting into the jungle terrain of Vietnam after years of exposure to the elements probably also made their impact. The fact that arranging the bodies in serried ranks links the imagery to Henry Moore's wartime drawings of figures snuggled together in rows as they slept in the London underground during the air raids is purely coincidental. Moore's drawings have a surreal, bizarre quality while Tobias' paintings make powerful statements in opposition to humankind's self-destructiveness. Tobias' parallel, symmetrical compositions—so unlike those of Moore—were also shared by his previous sculptures. The lack of hierarchy or of emotional stressing through composition in Tobias' paintings greatly enhances their frightening fusion of anonymity and devastation.

Stacking #1 seems closest to life in that the bodies, outlined in dried-red blood, are somewhat differentiated as to gender and are irregularly (naturally) disposed. The reds are buried under a covering of white and gray in *Stacking #2* and a clear channel runs between the bodies putting one in mind of the catacombs of the past and the cryogenic chambers of the future. In *Stacking #3* one is more aware of the rhythms of large to small, round to squared-off, long to short as your eye swings back and forth along the units, some of which are now barely recognizable as bodies. And in *Stacking #4* the figures seem chiseled out of stone; it is like a painting of a monument to death, to humanity's inhumanity. The "Stacking" paintings recall the words of Maurice Blanchot: "The calm, the burn of the holocaust, the annihilation of noon — the calm of disaster."

One additional constant can now be seen in Julius Tobias' work: a certain quiet sadness that affirms the timeless, lamentable lot of humankind. What one had previously seen in his eyes, both in life and in his photo-etched images of them in repeated rows, now appears to be the soul of his art—a no-compromise profundity that faces the facts of life-and-death—without blinking. The enormous sculptural complexes he envisions as vast ceremonial spaces for the meditative, contemplative activities of large numbers of people are likewise a humanist statement, though not of the same heart-rending intensity as the paintings.

Close to the end of the Cold War, Tobias found himself near where he began at the end of the hottest war of all, the one that ended in mass annihilations, both mechanical and atomic. At the end of World War II, few artists or writers could bear to take on the immensity of its implications in their art. Gertrude Stein, herself near death at the time, responded typically in the following quote:

> They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it... What is the use, if they are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing left there [is] nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about...So you see the atomic [bomb] is not at all interesting, not any more interesting than any other machine...Sure it will destroy a lot, but it's the living that are interesting not the way of killing them.[6]

Tobias' powerful visions of death express what, at an earlier time, Stein and Faulkner, Pollock and de Kooning, and all of the other great mid-century artists couldn't present in such a literal way. Perhaps it is possible now because we are beginning to see a glimmer of hope for a world at peace in the darkness, the grayness that's been around us for so long.

April Kingsley

1. The title is taken from Ron Morosan's conversation with Julius Tobias published in *Julius Tobias, Bits and Pieces, Was and Is* by the B4A Gallery in 1991: "Where ever in the future our efficient and ever so smart art industry takes art, it is going to have to go back and look at those stones in the main stream that don't get rolled along the bottom and simply hold their ground."

2. Jean Cassou and Jean Leymarie, *Fernand Leger, Drawings and Gouaches* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1972), p. 179.

3. Though he was one of the pioneer Minimalists, Tobias was not included in this exhibition.

4. He told this to interviewer Karen Hoover in 1983.

5. The look of the barnsiding used in the wedge-shaped elements comprising this piece is surprisingly similar to that of the "stacked-body" paintings which he began to paint a couple of years later.

6. Gertrude Stein, "Reflections on the Atomic Bomb," *Yale Poetry Review* 7, (1947), p 3-4.

JULIUS TOBIAS

Born 1915, New York, New York

EDUCATION

1949-1952 Atelier Fernand Leger, Paris, France

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1992 Artemisia Gallery, Chicago, IL
Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia, PA

1991 B4A Gallery, New York, NY

1980 55 Mercer Gallery, New York, NY
Myers Fine Arts Gallery, SUNY at Plattsburgh, Plattsburgh, NY

1979 Zriny-Hayes Gallery, Chicago, IL

1978 55 Mercer Gallery, New York, NY

1977 55 Mercer Gallery, New York, NY

1976 55 Mercer Gallery, New York, NY
Alessandra Gallery, New York, NY
University of Rochester, Rochester, NY

1972 Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York, NY

1971 Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York, NY

1970 Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York, NY

1969 Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH

1968 "10 Downtown," New York, NY

1962 Easthampton Gallery, New York, NY

1961 Bleecker Gallery, New York, NY

1959 Ester Stuttman Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1992 "Contemporary Wood Sculpture," The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY

1991 Jan Weiss Gallery, New York, NY

1990 Jan Weiss Gallery, New York, NY

1986 "Indoor-Outdoor Sculpture," El Bohio, New York, NY

1985 "Art Against Apartheid," Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

1984 "Recent Trends," Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, NY

1981 Art Park, Lewiston, NY
"Working Drawings," Hunter College, CUNY, New York, NY

1980 "V-S Art '80," Ericson Gallery, New York, NY

1977 "Tenth Street Days, The Co-ops of the 50's," New York, NY (traveling show)
"Magic Circle," Bronx County Museum, Bronx, NY
"Maquettes for Large Sculpture," Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York, NY
"Four Artists," Lehman College, CUNY, New York, NY
"Preliminaries," Sculpture, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI
"Sculptors' Drawings," Fine Arts Building, New York, NY

1976 "Collector's Choice," Clocktower, New York, NY
"Spare," Central Hall Gallery, Long Island, NY

1975 "Part III Collectors of the Seventies," Clocktower, New York, NY

1974 Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY
55 Mercer Gallery, New York, NY (two-person exhibition)

1973 "New York Artists on Tour," Sculptor 3, New York, NY

1972 New York Cultural Center, New York, NY
"Enviro-Vision," New York State Fair, Syracuse, NY

1971 Bard College, Annandale, NY
Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York, NY

1970 Parker Street 470, Boston, MA
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN

1968 Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, NY
"Sculpture Annual," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

1967 Park Place Gallery, New York, NY

1966 Rutgers University Students Center, Newark, NJ
Easthampton Gallery, New York, NY

1965 Easthampton Gallery, New York, NY

1964 Easthampton Gallery, New York, NY

1963 Windham College, Putney, VT
Easthampton Gallery, New York, NY

1962 Allan Stone Gallery, New York, NY
Easthampton Gallery, New York, NY
Staten Island Museum, Staten Island, NY
Bleecker Gallery, New York, NY

1961 DeAenlle Gallery, New York, NY

1960 "New England Exhibition," Silvermine Guild Art Center, New Canaan, CT

1959 Knoedler Gallery, New York, NY
Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan (traveling exhibition)
Brata Gallery, New York, NY

1958 Gallery Creuze, Paris, France
Brata Gallery, New York, NY
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA

1957 Brata Gallery, New York, NY
Art USA, New York Coliseum, New York, NY
Polari Gallery, Woodstock, NY
Camino Gallery, New York, NY

1946 Roko Gallery, New York, NY
Provincetown Art Association, Provincetown, MA

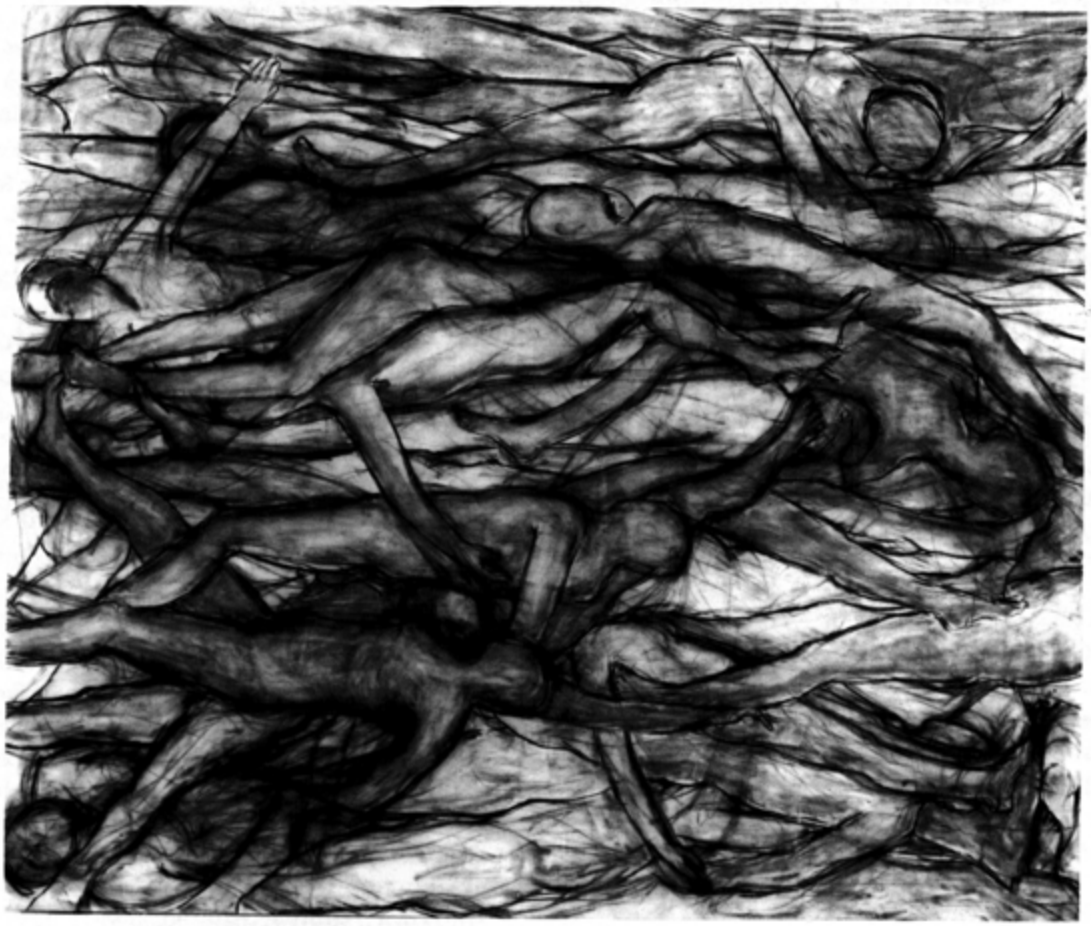
PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY; The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; Buffalo Fine Arts Gallery, Buffalo, NY; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, CA; UAB Visual Arts Gallery, Birmingham, AL; and Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

STALLER CENTER FOR THE ARTS

art gallery



Pile #1, 1989
Charcoal and white paint on canvas, 96 x 113"
Lent by the artist

STONY BROOK