

# REUBEN KADISH



**June 10 - August 1, 1992**

**University Art Gallery  
Staller Center for the Arts**

**State University of New York at Stony Brook**

## CURATOR'S NOTE

Without the dedicated, knowledgeable, and sensitive help of sculptor Jenny Lee and painter Hilda O'Connell, this exhibition would not have been possible, and I want to thank them. Herman Cherry, Reub's good friend, a poet of a painter, and a wonderful man, would have added to his statement, but couldn't, owing to failing health; he passed away earlier this year. To Dore Ashton, universally renowned and respected for her work on a generation of feisty artists that changed art in America and the world, I express my personal thanks for a deeply felt and moving appreciation of Reuben Kadish and his work.

Mel Pekarsky  
May, 1992



Spartacus, 1988  
Terra cotta, 24½ x 14 x 20"

Front Cover: Azteca, 1980  
Bronze, 59" high  
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Michael Harris

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to guest curator Mel Pekarsky, painter and Professor of Art at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, for curating this exhibition. Thanks are also due to Jenny Lee, Hilda O'Connell, and Douglas Still, Registrar, and the staff of Grace Borgenicht Gallery for their assistance with the organization of this exhibition.

I also want to thank Dore Ashton for contributing the insightful essay published in this catalogue. I am also grateful to Herman Cherry who gave us permission to reprint his essay on Reuben Kadish in our catalogue.

Special thanks are also extended to members of the Staller Center for the Arts staff: Heejung Kim and Amy Schichtel, Curatorial Assistants; Ann Bomberger, Brenda Hanegan, Julie Larson, Michael Parke, and Christina Ridenhour, Gallery Assistants; David Buckle, Jisook Kwon, and Roseann Stewart, 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 Reuben Kadish for sharing his work with the Stony Brook community.

*Rhonda Cooper*  
Director

*Photo credit: © 1992 Regina Cherry, NYC*

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Typesetting and Printing: TAM COMMUNICATIONS,  
Bohemia, NY

# REUBEN KADISH: Man of Substance

In one of Kadish's published statements, his intelligence and self-irony peer through an appropriate quotation: "words, words, words." He knows, and anyone who writes knows, that the distance between words and things can be very great, and sometimes unbridgeable. His own most profound needs are met not through words, but through tangible things which, all the same, have meaning. What one feels, confronted by Kadish's sculptures, is an intense search, born of myriad experiences in a long life; an existential understanding of the importance of *homo faber* — he who makes, who shapes.

I think of Kadish as a man of substance. Of substances. If we divest the word substance of its long history of philosophical conundrums, it remains indelibly substantial—wrought of matter and simply there, standing. (The Latin root of the word has the connotation of standing there. Quite unlike the words, words, words.) Aristotle thought of substance as any "distinct" thing, but he knew, and artists have always known, that substance is always coupled with shadow. Only a sculptor who is himself a distinct thing, standing, ever really understands with all his being what it is to fashion another distinct thing that stands, shadows and all, there. And that also embodies meaning, however mired in shadows.

Kadish's caveat about words of course diminishes the confidence of the writer who knows all too well what Kadish means. I approach his work, particularly the reliefs and heads of recent years, trepidantly. I do not want to describe his method, which is superb technically, or his choice of traditions, which is obvious. Rather, I want to try to talk about the substance of his work as if it were (and he says it is) the evidence of the whole of his experience in life; the tangibilia remaining after experience upon experience moulds the inner man. I, the witness, cannot be sure (can he, the artist?) just how these various and often overwhelmingly tragic experiences can have wound themselves into the huge terra cotta heads, diminishing all the spaces around them and proclaiming themselves sovereign reminders. Or, into the large sconces hardly containing their enthroned goddesses and mythic heroines. But there is a thread, certainly, leading back to the fresh and intense experiences of Kadish's early youth. Back, in fact, to the days when he and Philip Guston waxed indignant about the excesses in American life, such as the brutal activities of the Klan in Los Angeles when they were boys, and scenes of cops wading in among strikers to crack skulls and poke billy sticks into eyes. And then, there is Kadish's encounter with the fiery Mexican, Siqueiros, who was filled with certainty that only radical acts would ever set mankind right. Fervent and volatile, this

Mexican revolutionary thought that these two boys, Kadish and Guston, were America's great hope. He sent them to Mexico to make a gigantic mural in Michoacan, and Kadish most certainly registered forever the searing light and the great stone objects ancient people carved, and the thousands of sculptures fashioned in rich red clay, and even the three-penny prints with their harsh celebrations of the Day of Death; their skeletons and horses and dogs and cows and men all submitting to the forces of destiny with grinning masks; those mad calaveras of Posada. Even then, around twenty years old, Kadish knew that these reminders, so many of them monumental, were all too often of terrible things.

A few years later, word began to filter back to the United States about the activities of the Nazis, and Kadish's alert imagination was bestirred. He would, alas, have an opportunity during the Second World War to see for himself what human beings could do when the will to destroy took charge. He was not unaware, as his drawings of the period show, that wanton violence not only murders people, but also mangles the trees, beasts, and everything contributing to life that is not human. Finally, the issue of the Holocaust (of *all* holocausts, since one of Kadish's most profound wounds remains a vivid image of what hydrogen bombs really do)—such dreadful memories in one lifetime have surely burrowed into the man that fashions his response in substances and shapes that bear witness.

I have no idea why Kadish chose to respond to his deepest needs by going to earth again. That is, the famous decade in which the boy from the big city became an expert man of the land, growing provender for himself and his animals, and tending to the animals with a new awareness of their coexistence throughout the history of art with the image of man. For many years he worked only the land. But I am almost certain that in the mud of the farm, and even the mud of the pigsty, Kadish felt his potential. When he picked up the mud and began to fashion it, he was at home. As his friend, the wise and intelligent painter Herman Cherry, wrote: "Some of his large terra cottas look as if they had been dragged from the earth, bringing with them scriptural matter. Clods of earth cling like leeches to its life force." In any case, at a certain point in his life, Kadish felt a compelling force and answered with a prolific few decades of sculpture.

I don't think that a lifetime of worry and dismay about human destruction is all of Kadish's biographical story, and it would be ridiculous to assume that he is moored in tragedy. Like many other artists, he has known the great explosive joys of seeing the world through the eyes of artists of other times and other

places. Surely his familiarity with India, and its overwhelming sculptural presences, twining and inhabiting centuries of individual lives, and his immense knowledge of the great works of art of the world, have contributed incalculably to his own expertise. It is not accidental, I'm sure, that he chose to work in modes that human beings have nurtured for many centuries, using earth and metals drawn from the earth.

He says, "I'm absolutely archaic," but what does that mean? I have reason to believe that those who see themselves in the great prospects of history, or those who renew traditions, no matter how rebelliously, still have inexplicable powers. A week ago I went to see the very large retrospective of Giacometti's life's work in Paris—Giacometti who also used ancient materials and time-honored techniques of modelling and casting—and was struck by the throngs of silent, awe-struck people circulating slowly and pensively amongst Giacometti's phantoms. I remembered something Giacometti said: "Art interests me very much but truth interests me infinitely more." There is a kind of artist, a family of artists in history, whose hands seek to fashion truths in substances. Or perhaps, through substance that all too often yields to shadow. Shadows must be pushed back and something must be standing there, something in which the whole of a person's passion has been invested, again and again.

In these bulky heads of Kadish, these massive lumpings of matter, scored, scarified, patterned, gouged, there is much passion. Piling up clay often results in jejune masses whose centers are never sensed. The difference between Kadish's heads in terra cotta, and so many other heads exhibited, is that within the mass, so densely congealed, lies an animus. This is sensed. From the center outward, every molecule is at work, and on the final surface, sometimes as vast as a landscape, sometimes eruptive, discontinuous, the eye ferrets out the inner substance. A master modeler, Kadish is also a master finisher. That is to say, before he bakes his clay, he already imagines its color and texture, and with clay slip smooths and accents that which is form. When these heads are rendered in bronze, the saintly patience of the sculptor works the patina until every nuance, every, in fact, shadow, is of the whole from inside out.

Many of these heads are commemorations. (How, he asks himself, are we to fathom holocausts? His answer is always, one, and then another, and then another...) And in each case, Kadish endows the human visage with its salient characteristics. One work, the commemoration of the death of a friend, the painter Ernie Briggs, can speak for all in the sense that the eyes—one almost closed, and one shadowed but peering out on the world—say everything. There are dozens of inventions for the function of eyes in these

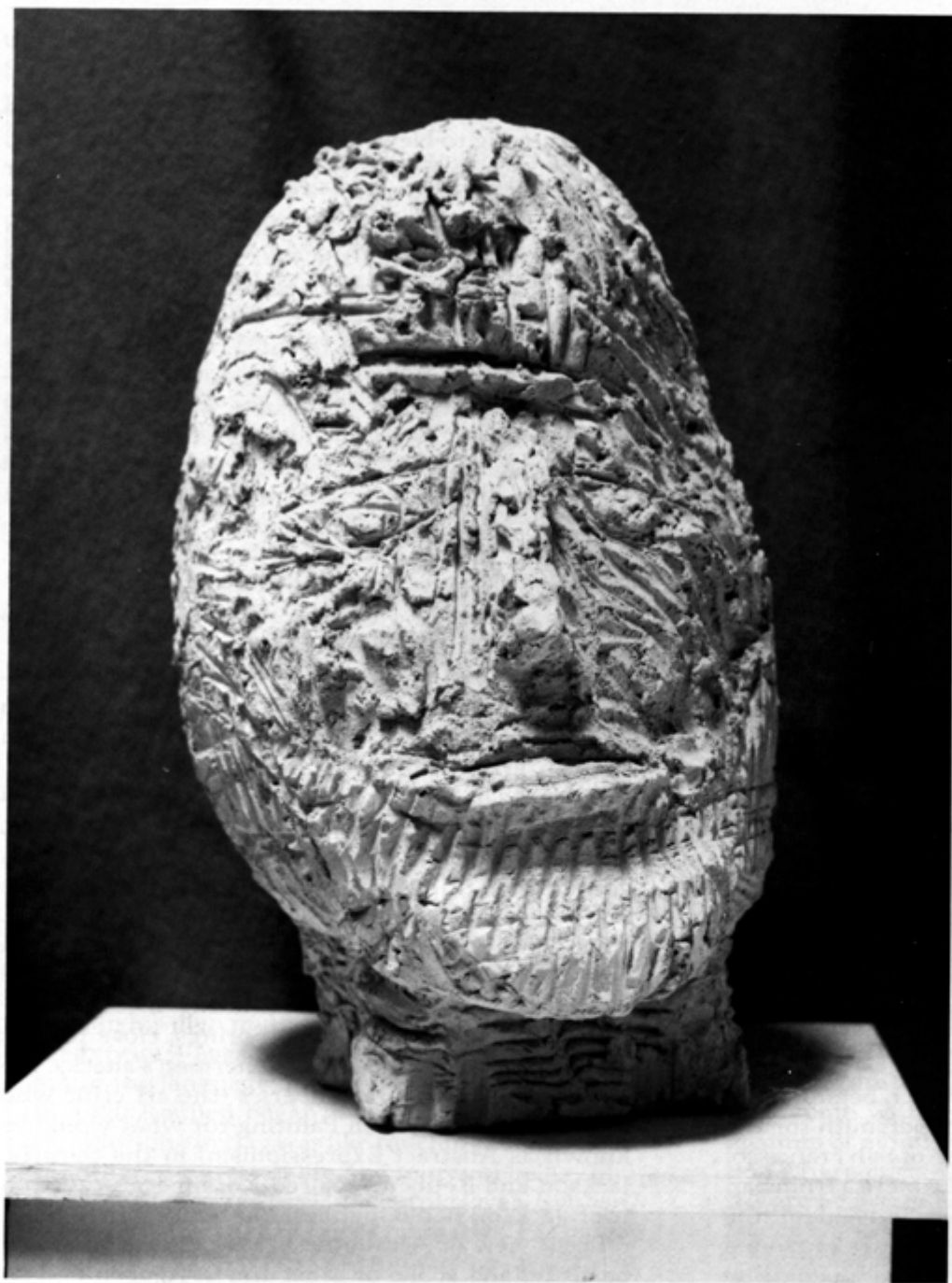
heads—slit eyes, protruding eyes, eyes sunk behind the bony cage—and I imagine the younger Kadish was attentive to Picasso's eye that so unerringly selected inventions from so-called primitives. But Kadish has his own story to tell, and it tells of the obdurate survival of he who thinks and suffers and shapes.

Part of his story has to do with his extended ruminations on the nature of myths, and particularly the myth of the earth mother. "Don't forget," he told me once, "I have worked with animals." In his cryptic way, Kadish tells of the continuity of man and beast and, above all, the mystery of procreation which he sees centered in woman. A long, interesting history unfolds in his numerous sculptures of earthy women. Often they are enthroned in a trough-like niche, a scone in which their light spreads, reaches into all the surround, animates everything within range, above all the supporting wall. All this fecundity, spilling into our space, is characterized through rounded volumes that are something like thighs or breasts or heads, but never explicit. India is there, as is pre-Columbian America. I suppose these must be called high reliefs, but their presence is so powerful that they seem to stand free among us. Not all Kadish's female figures are earth mothers. Some are tragic figures, deeply shadowed. He has often returned to eternal archetypes, such as poor Jocasta, to round out his story. There were Jocasas in Treblinka, we must not forget.

Although Kadish's matter is always earth, his memory includes stone. Once fired, a great standing figure such as *Azteca* takes on a stony permanence. The harsh, unyielding imagery of those ancient tribes has its counterparts today. Kadish's allusion is specific. This is a reference to an Aztec chieftain. But the hieratic frontality of those old times is broken. Kadish's authority figure stands in *contraposto*, a new history of our own civilization having displaced the old. There is something violent, almost uncontained in the muscular shaping of each plane and the restlessness of the surface of this figure recruited from memory that suggests modernity, disaffection, unease.

In all of Kadish's later works, we feel that thrust of a sculptural intelligence. It thrusts these shaped volumes into our space; reminds us that we are standing here, and that we, too, have presence. The energies emanating from the whole process—pulling, pounding, scoring, and shaping the clay, bringing it to permanence in the fire, altering and directing the way light will do its sculpturing part in patinas—are subsumed by the meaning of the massive object which is not renderable in words, words, words, but *stands there*.

Dore Ashton  
March, 1992



Memorial for Ernie Briggs, 1985  
Terra cotta, 19½" high

# Notes By Herman Cherry

Around 1932 or 1933, in Hollywood, California, Lorser Feitelson, a painter well-known for his knowledge of Renaissance art and a teacher of Reuben Kadish, then twenty years old, brought Reuben and Philip Guston to the Stanley Rose Bookshop, where I worked. I had just opened a modest art gallery on a balcony in the rear of the shop. As I myself was barely out of art school, I had been searching for young artists and had heard of Reuben and Philip as promising young painters. In 1930 Reuben had entered the Otis Art Institute, where he met Philip Guston. Both being political mavericks, they soon found themselves at odds with the county school. In about 1931, Reuben entered Los Angeles City College for a year to study anthropology and zoology. That interest would continue throughout his life.

Alfaro Siqueiros, the dynamic Mexican muralist who had come to L.A. in 1933 to teach at the Chouinard Art School, was to paint a controversial fresco in the Plaza Art Center in downtown L.A., thus attracting Reuben who became his assistant. In 1935, Siqueiros was to be instrumental in getting Kadish and Guston wall space in the University of Michoacan, Morelia, Mexico. An article in *Time Magazine* featured them as the most promising young painters in America.

After their exhibition at Stanley Rose Gallery, I saw Reuben and Philip infrequently. They had ended their collaboration, Philip to go to New York and greater success and Reuben to execute a mural commission for the W.P.A. on the subject of alchemy. The Depression was in full swing. War rumblings were heard in Europe.

With the slow demise of the Project, beginning in 1940 Reuben would work as a coppersmith for the Bethlehem Steel Yards on the docks of San Francisco. By 1936 Reuben had criss-crossed America from San Francisco to New York many times and had felt the rapid pulse and energy awakening in art as from a long sleep. The art world of America was opening its eyes. Young talents, Isamu Noguchi, Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, David Smith, and those not yet on the horizon, confirmed what he had already felt — New York was becoming the seedbed for a cultural revival. On one of his visits, Reuben had met the artist immigrants from Europe who were exerting an influence on the New York scene.

The few years of development under the sponsorship of the government began to bear fruit. The artists had found their own voice — an uninterrupted period of painting had consolidated their position as a force on the cultural map of the country. A small, discerning public had followed its wake, broadening the base for the artists to move in. The young, intense painters and sculptors were waiting in the wings, talking-talking-drinking-drinking and painting in a frenzy of newly-found discovery. The sense of inferiority vis-a-vis Europe was slowly beginning to fade. The stranglehold held by European artists

and Paris had been broken. Artists from far and wide were moving to New York as if drawn by a magnet, to weld an art community that would shift the center from Paris to New York.

Historical events had caught up with Reuben. In 1943, a message from the War Department asking Kadish to join the Army Artists Unit to document the ongoing theaters of war, however, delayed his move. He was assigned to India, Burma and other Eastern war zones, and his assignment had a shattering effect on his life. The conditions of depravity among human beings in what seemed a senseless war, the stalking death, the indignities of shattered bodies, the bombings and human debris — what could all this inhumanity mean? How could one express it? It was a message that fought to get out. Reuben's war drawings are some of the most powerful and agonized he made. It took a while for him to record them on paper. The flesh was too fresh.

The year 1945 was crucial for Reuben. The experiences of the war and the final decision to move to New York with the family came with the conviction that an artist should be in the eye of the storm. Besides, he had many friends who would open doors for him. Bill Hayter's Atelier 17, where he worked, moved from San Francisco to New York, and Reuben continued to print his work as well as printing Miro's and Pollock's etchings. Once settled in New York, Reuben and Jackson Pollock decided to look for a summer place. Since some of their friends had moved to East Hampton, within commuting distance, they went to look around. In the Springs, close to East Hampton, they found cheap fishermen's shacks. On one visit to Harold Rosenberg's (the art critic who coined the term Action Painting for what would be known as Abstract Expressionism) in the Springs, Jackson and Reuben repaired Rosenberg's caved-in roof. Jackson had bought an old house with a magnificent view of Accabonac harbor. It was quiet and beautiful and spoke of other times. Reuben had no such luck: with a family of five he needed larger space and went elsewhere to look.

After a time, Kadish found a place in Vernon, New Jersey, sixty miles from New York. It was dairy farm country, and he bought a dairy farm. He became a dairy farmer for ten years. Why a dairy farmer? I have not been able to get a reasonable answer from him that explains why he derailed his talent during these years, why he dropped completely out of the art world.

Had Reuben, after so many years as a painter, lost touch with himself and with the inner struggles that had given him so much joy and pain and so much fulfillment? What could take its place? It is my opinion that Reuben used the farm years to reconsider his position. His drawings and paintings had been based on late Renaissance form. His feeling for form was three-dimensional, and he had a natural affinity for materials. Reuben's factory work during the war

unknowingly may have contributed to it. David Smith always spoke of his factory work as a master welder in Schenectady making Sherman tanks during the war.

Dairy farming was back-breaking work, but in his spare time Reuben worked on some drawings. In other words, he kept his hand in. After five years he broke the mold and made his first terra cotta — a small nude. It would be five more years before he would give up farming permanently to devote himself fully to sculpture. The border had been crossed; the struggle was over, a new one to begin. It is a curious fact that I have noticed — that many sculptors start as painters. I will mention two of note: David Smith and Xavier Gonzales. It is rare to see a sculptor turn painter.

Reuben's experience in India had etched the mythic-religious-sensuous art into his consciousness. The earthbound quality of these art forms, their relationship to nature and to man, the earth mothers and bestiaries entwined with myths and his own sensuous nature combined to give his own art an authenticity difficult for a sophisticated man to achieve. As in other countries with a pre-historic past, animals share a great portion of myths and history. Reuben had mentioned animals to me in a special way, but I had not picked up on it. Now I did. He answered me flippantly, "I like the warmth of pigs," slyly looking at me (he had raised them for food), "furry animals," and he added that "horned toads had a special place in my youth." Flippant or not, they relate to his sculpture: animals remain a great source of imagery. There is an intertwining of animals and human beings. In his own myths, Reuben has built a sophisticated, primal art that transcends time, making it speak in the language of today.

In 1950 Reuben began making small clay sculptures. Working in clay was like touching earth. It was the mother, the giver of life, the source of being. The interim of silence had reawakened old loves. Reuben, a natural craftsman, had found his metier. His hands remind one of the series of hand studies by Picasso drawn in 1921, sensitive, clumsy, powerful. I have watched Reuben's seeing, thinking fingers probing for the right form — while sketching in clay, digging the archeology of the subconscious, the figure sprouting magically like a growing plant into a living image. It is his link with the immediacy of now and the milleniums past that collapses time.

Some of his large terra cottas look as if they had been dragged from the earth, bringing with them scriptural matter. Clods of earth cling like leeches to its life force. They become ornaments of raw beauty. The female figure assumes the "Da," metaphor of mankind, the pre-historic earth goddess. Kadish's experiences in India confirmed his philosophical and aesthetic tastes. The epic lushness of Indian art, the temples and monuments alive with snake pit writhings of its history and myths, the colorful frescoes

and sensuous sculpture struck his archaeological and creative chords — the female figure as a hedonistic concept of birth and rebirth. It is interesting to note that the title for one sculpture, *Queen of Darkness, Moloch II*, a sacrificial queen is also the name of an Australian spiny lizard. Architecture, animals, unidentifiable objects sometimes intrude on the figure or meld into forms. *Jocasta III, Queen of Thebes*, a Homeric character, joins both animal and human characteristics. *Indira, Earth Mother II*, fantasizes a series of sequential breasts bursting with voluptuous birth. Architecture abounds with humanoid elements.

In recent years, Reuben has been working on a series of oversized clay heads. Like all art of monumental force, they disturb and elevate, unveiling our fears and frailties. As in the Easter Island heads — their unseeing eyes forever seeking the horizon of endless seas — Reuben's geological, glacial tattooing designs the faces like those of Maorian tribesmen; the corrosive surface bubbles and erupts. What was a symbol becomes abstraction. They are our dreams. When economics allow, Reuben casts them in bronze, that durable material that will outlive their myths.

Kadish has been teaching for over thirty years, the last twenty or so at Cooper Union, where his vast knowledge and encouragement have created a whole generation of sculptors and painters.

Kadish's work in clay keeps him as close to the earth as he can get. His blunt capable fingers make the clay writhe with spontaneous life. Drawing was and is one of his first loves. Reuben never stopped drawing, not even during those desert years when his world had stopped. From his earliest Renaissance-like drawings while working on the murals, to his latest monotypes with their freedom of imagery and execution, he has developed a personal style that can only come with a mature, fermented vision. The medium of monotype itself demands a chancy execution where mistakes can be utilized, where possibilities are not programmed but accepted. The juices run free in a spontaneous gallop.

Until recently, Reuben and his wife, Barbara, plowed and worked a large garden of flowers and vegetables, which they canned for the winter and of which their friends became beneficiaries. He cannot keep his hands out of the earth. To this day, he still receives the yearbook from the Department of Agriculture.

Kadish's need and love of the earth are not unlike that of the Greek god Antaeus — son of Gaea, the earth mother — who became stronger each time he embraced the earth.

Herman Cherry, 1990  
New York City

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK



STALLER CENTER FOR THE ARTS

**art gallery**



Earth Mother, 1968-69  
Terra cotta, 47 x 20 x 24"

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