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## Michael Ayrton

bronzes, paintings, collages, and drawings  
1962-1964

Grosvenor Gallery



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29 April - 30 May 1964

## Grosvenor Gallery

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Michael Ayrton

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To write about the work of Michael Ayrton is to plunge immediately into a morass of paradox. There is in his work an almost unique combination of cerebral and sensual elements so that, to a degree unusual outside the realm of abstraction, Ayrton's physical versatility and sensitivity are controlled by a restlessly seeking intellect. This has resulted, in Ayrton's work, in a series of paintings, drawings and sculptures which depend for their fullest appreciation upon a certain knowledge of classical mythology which at once renders his work unfashionable and suspect at a time when a work of art is supposed to communicate its total force without any outgoing effort by the spectator.

This is not to say that without knowing the background of myth and legend that surround and at the same time permeate his work that work becomes meaningless or inexplicable. It is rather that as more levels of meaning are added to the work so one's responses grow. In a painting like *Night Labrys* we see at first an abstraction composed largely of blues of great lustre; then when we come nearer we see that it is in fact a landscape, inspired by Cumae in Southern Italy, the 8th century B.C. Greek settlement that for eight years has cast its spell on Ayrton; a landscape that reveals its labyrinthine complexity both in the outlines of his painting and in the layer upon layer of paper of which the painting is composed. And then, distancing oneself again, one sees that the main outline of the picture is the shape of a double headed axe, the 'labrys' (from which the word labyrinth is possibly derived). Thus mythology and form are fused into a work of art and the scholasticism—even the antiquarianism—of which Ayrton has been accused in the past show themselves to be not adjuncts of an intellectual and hence inadequate art but the essential concomitants and the invaluable tools of his enormously fertile mind.

Visually, despite its relatively small size and scale, this particular painting is a work of considerable splendour and great sensual power with colours of glowing subtlety. This painting—or, more properly, paper collage—and the other recent landscapes of Crete and the Cycladic Islands, done in the same medium, show a new maturity in Ayrton's work as a painter. This is, in a sense, a second maturity because one tends to forget the excellence of some of his early paintings from the end of the nineteen-forties when he was one of the group containing Sutherland, Piper, Vaughan and Minton which dominated English painting at that time. But a few years ago he showed a group of paintings which were in a way the first run for those in the present exhibition. They were works of great technical ingenuity including paper collages and wax and bone reliefs and they somehow conveyed the impression that in the hardly achieved triumph over the possibly intractable materials one was left with technical mastery rather than compelling works of art. Now, in these new and utterly fresh paintings, the technical mastery has become taken for granted and one no longer asks oneself how he makes his effects but what those effects are.

It is one of the many paradoxes of his work that Ayrton can match complexity of medium with complexity of intention and produce clarity as in the paintings of Cumae and can simultaneously use starkly simple means for apparently simple subject matter and cause one to think deeply about his almost classically pure imagery. After his exhaustive treatment of the legend of Daedalus he has moved on to Cumae and to three other protagonists; the Minotaur, Talos and the Cumaean Sybil who plays a dual role with the Delphic Oracle. He has portrayed her in drawings, sculptures and paintings, notably in two large

paper collages called *Key Figure and Oracle* which are, in a sense, the summation of his relationship with Cumae and Delphi. There is something immensely expressive and haunting about these great looming, powerful and at the same time oddly tender figures superimposed upon that luminous background which Ayrton so skilfully weaves out of coloured papers which he has made redolent of the Aegean and Mediterranean light that has so affected him.

In this series he has successfully combined his twin obsessions with antiquity and the human figure to a remarkable degree. By doing this he has rationalized and justified his own journey through the labyrinth of the twentieth century and his own pursuit of a non-circular truth. In his own journeys to the sites where these legendary events took place he has sought what was once there and what remained. In the Cumaean paintings he has re-created the spirit of place and in these figure studies he has re-created those whose corporeal spirits haunted the place and now haunt Ayrton's mind to make of him a man who is himself, through his work, in one sense at least, timeless.

Just as Ayrton, and indeed also the spectator, could relate the drawings of Icarus under stress to those of the figures inspired by the astronauts so a similar identification takes place with the Sybil, Talos and the Minotaur. These are figures of our time as well as of antiquity. The bronze and useless figure of Talos, the guardian of Crete, the sentinel armless and equipped only with a rudimentary head does service for our equivalent figures who need not be named here—the sturdy, the magnificently exteriorized who are yet mindless and hollow. Ayrton's Talos is a peculiarly telling image of some of our upper echelons.

The Oracle, the Apollonian woman with her three legged stool and her gift of tongues is a figure who cannot understand what she speaks, being a sounding board for Apollo himself, responding to him entranced by the smoke of laurel leaves. She is a figure at once pathetic because helpless and awe-inspiring because divinely manipulated. She possesses all moods and she is all moods and so Ayrton portrays her. Without the intricately recorded musculature of his male figures, with their echoes of Michelangelo, she is feminine, pliant, vulnerable and of course volatile. But as with all of Ayrton's figures there is an urgency about her, something almost frenetic even in her stillness. Particularly in the bronzes he conveys at once the stylization of the figure with the tripod legs providing her legs too and also her possession as if he is not so much a figure to enlighten mankind but a figure to be herself enlightened in the sense of being disburdened.

This same desire to be disburdened is present far more strongly in the Minotaur, the man with a bull's head described by Ayrton in verse:

What is a man that I am not a man  
Sitting cramped pupate in this chrysalis?  
My tongue is gagged with cud and lolls round words  
To speak impeded of my legend death.  
My horns lack weapon purpose, cannot kill  
And cannot stab the curtain of the dark

This strange sense of struggle, humanly articulate and yet with the intellectual impotence of the animal comes over in several of Ayrton's finest drawings and in the lifesize bronze sculptures which show the Minotaur in his

attempts to slough off his hide, hooves and horns and become wholly human, shedding the beast to become sensate man. The rough texture of his body is surmounted by an increasingly sentient face and we can read into this whatever allegory we like, from the ritual slaughter of a Spanish Sunday to modern man trying to rid himself of the violence, both without and within, which will always menace and try to control us.

Again and again we see in Ayrton's work his supreme ability to portray the human body under stress; the arching, the distortion, the racked tension of a man trying to fly, of a bull trying to escape into humanity, of a woman with a voice she cannot control trying to speak. They are all creatures possessed and this is somehow important.

There is in every artist an element of diabolism and this element is largely present in Ayrton; which is unquestionably why he can portray so brilliantly not only the physical stress to which man can be submitted but also the nature of the possession which drives him willingly to undergo that stress.

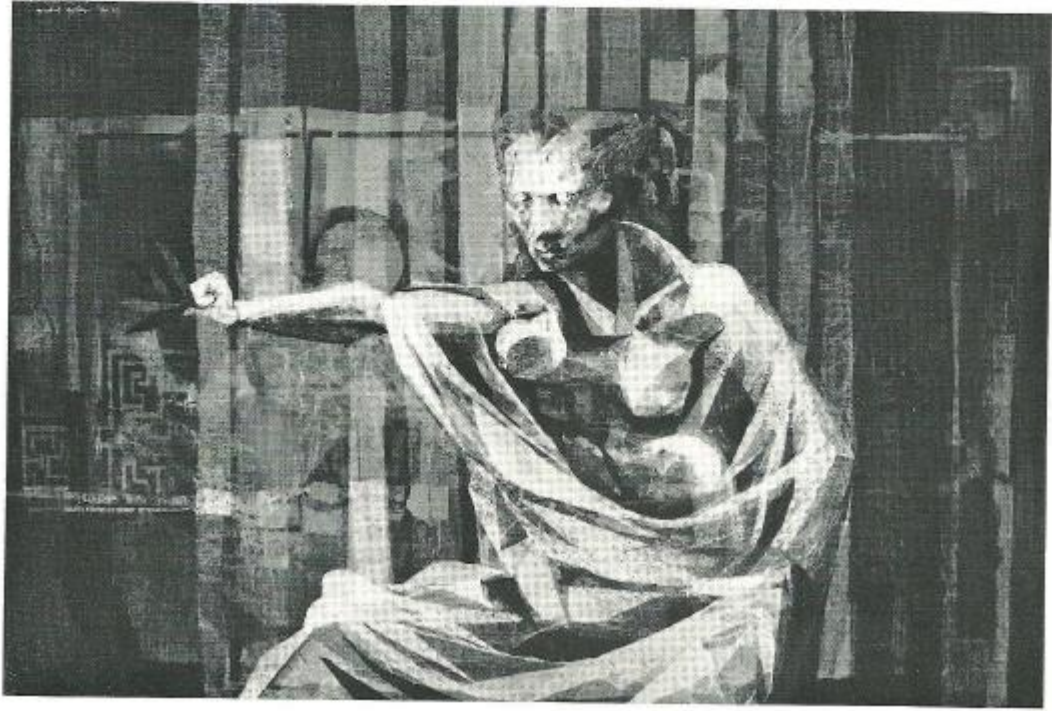
This is a concept at once ancient and modern, one which links as Michael Ayrton has tried to do, the worlds of antiquity and the twentieth century and it is a measure of Ayrton's strength as an artist that, starting with classical themes, he has created works which are wholly of our time and unquestionably and relevantly modern.

T.G.ROSENTHAL













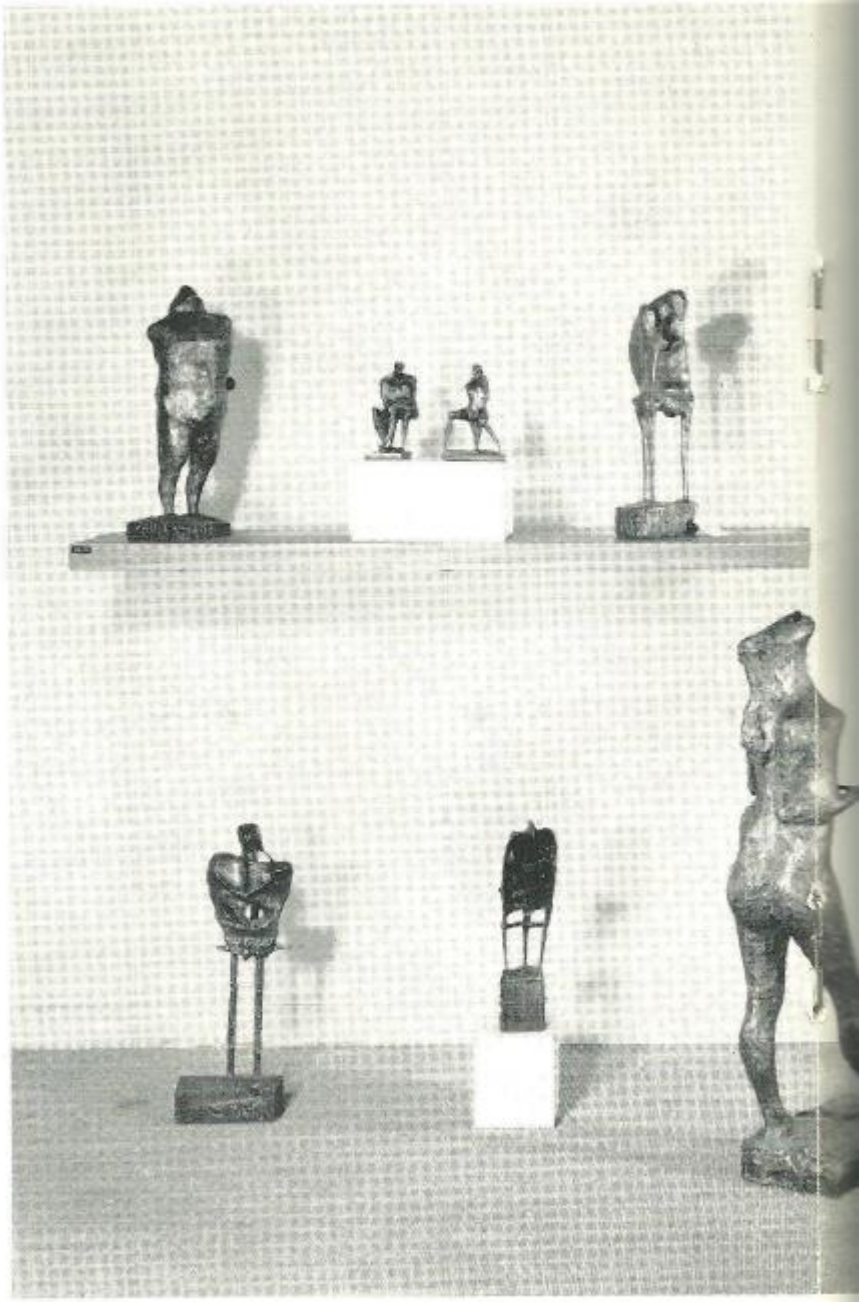
1 Minotaur



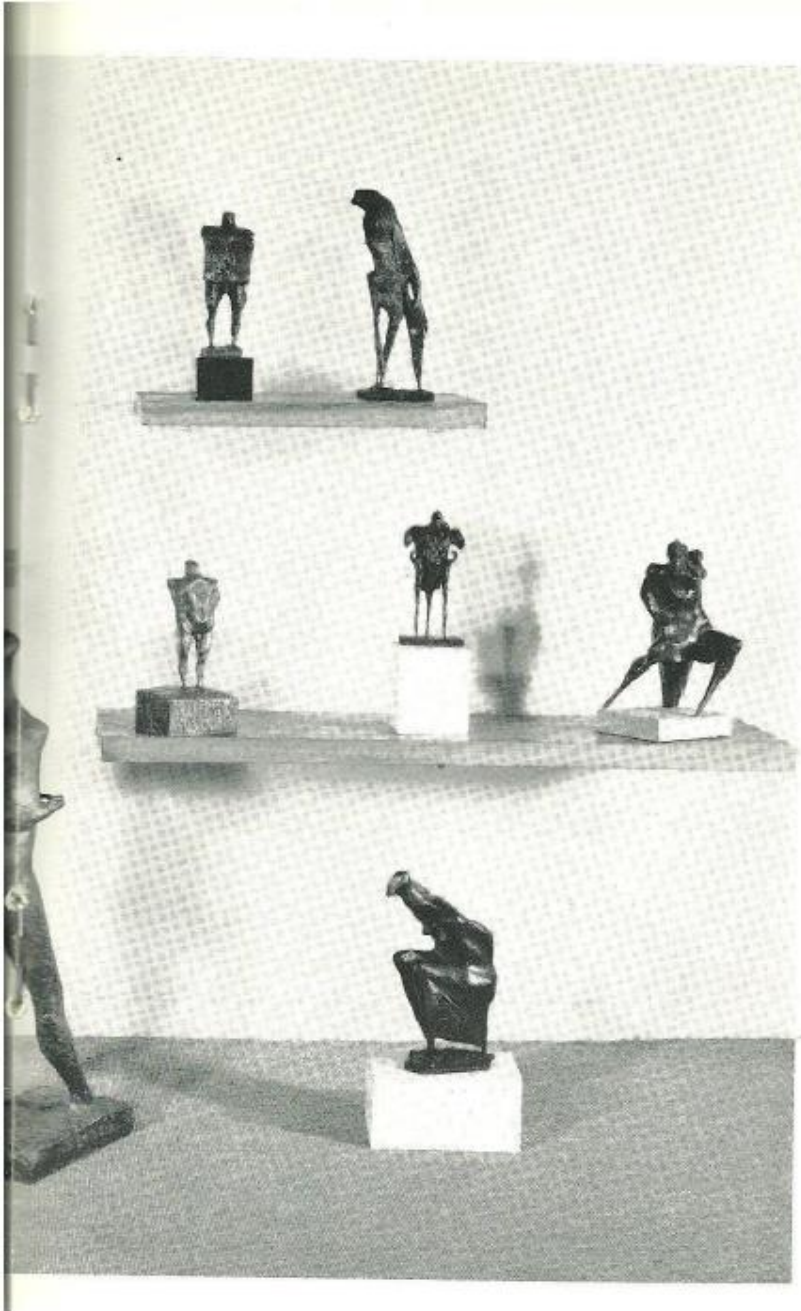












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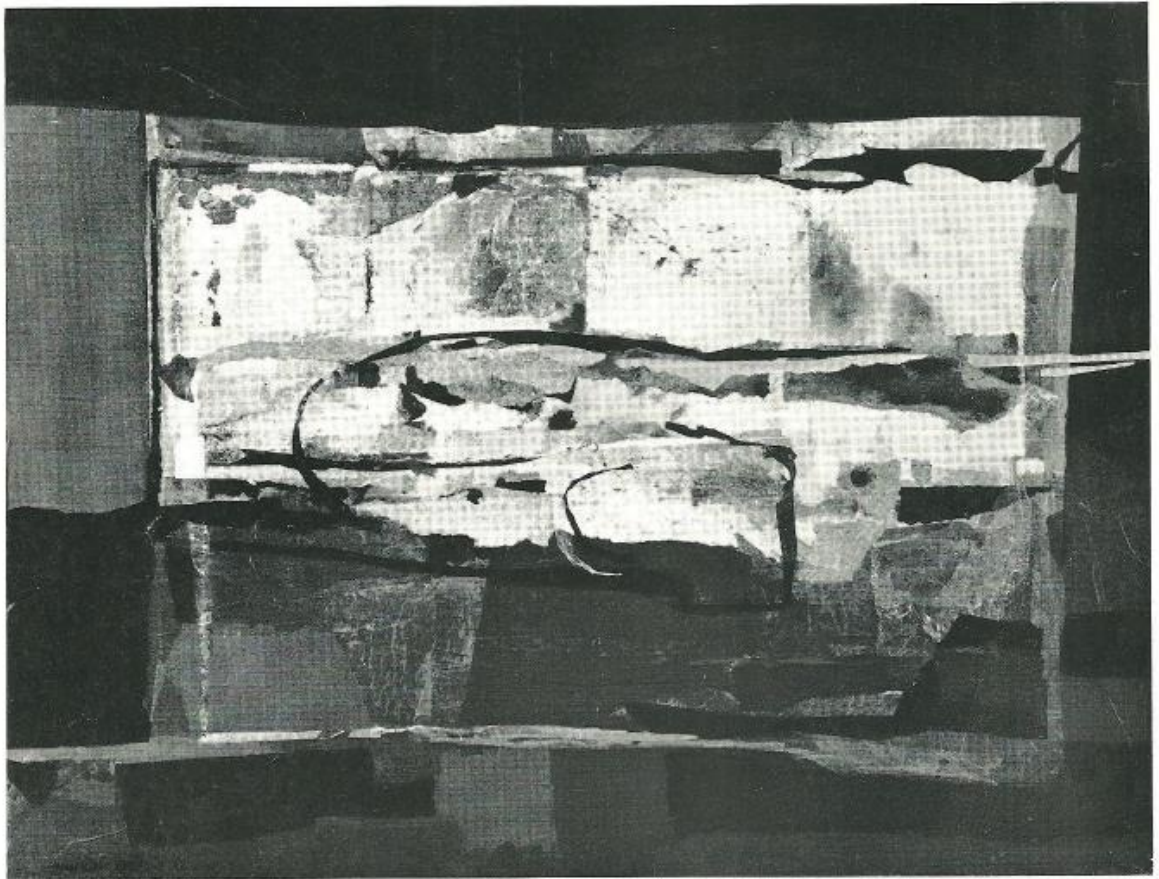
- 21 Fat Sentinel
- 15 & 16 Maquettes for Large Oracle I
- 11 Tripod Oracle
- 22 Maquette for Talos
- 12 Mantic Figure

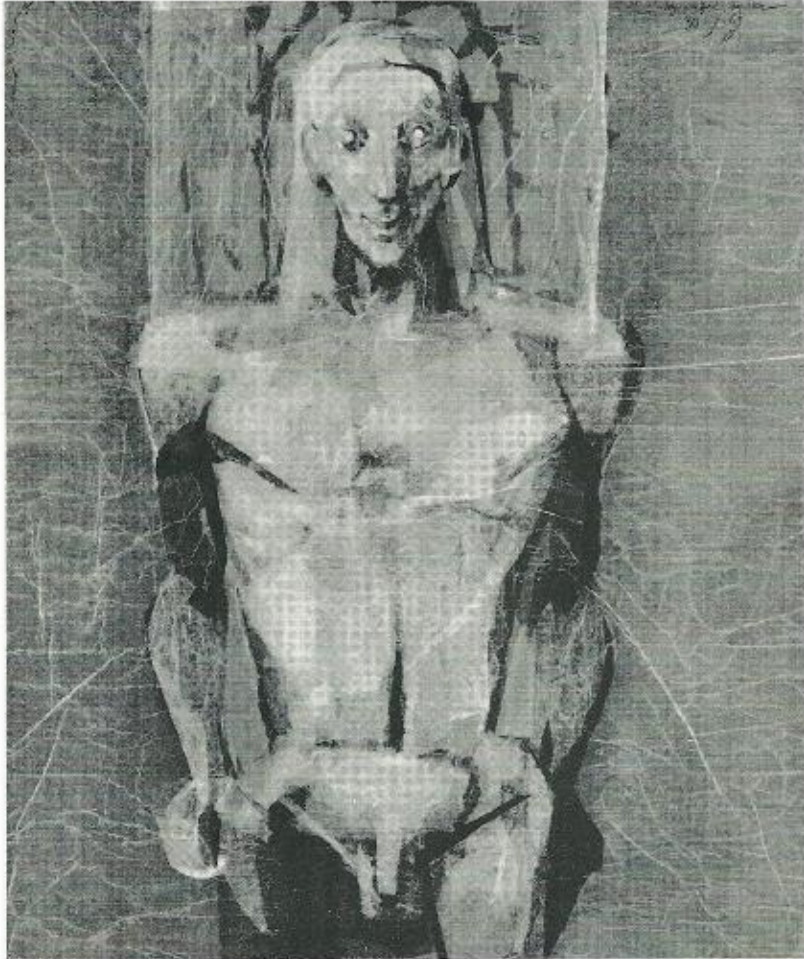
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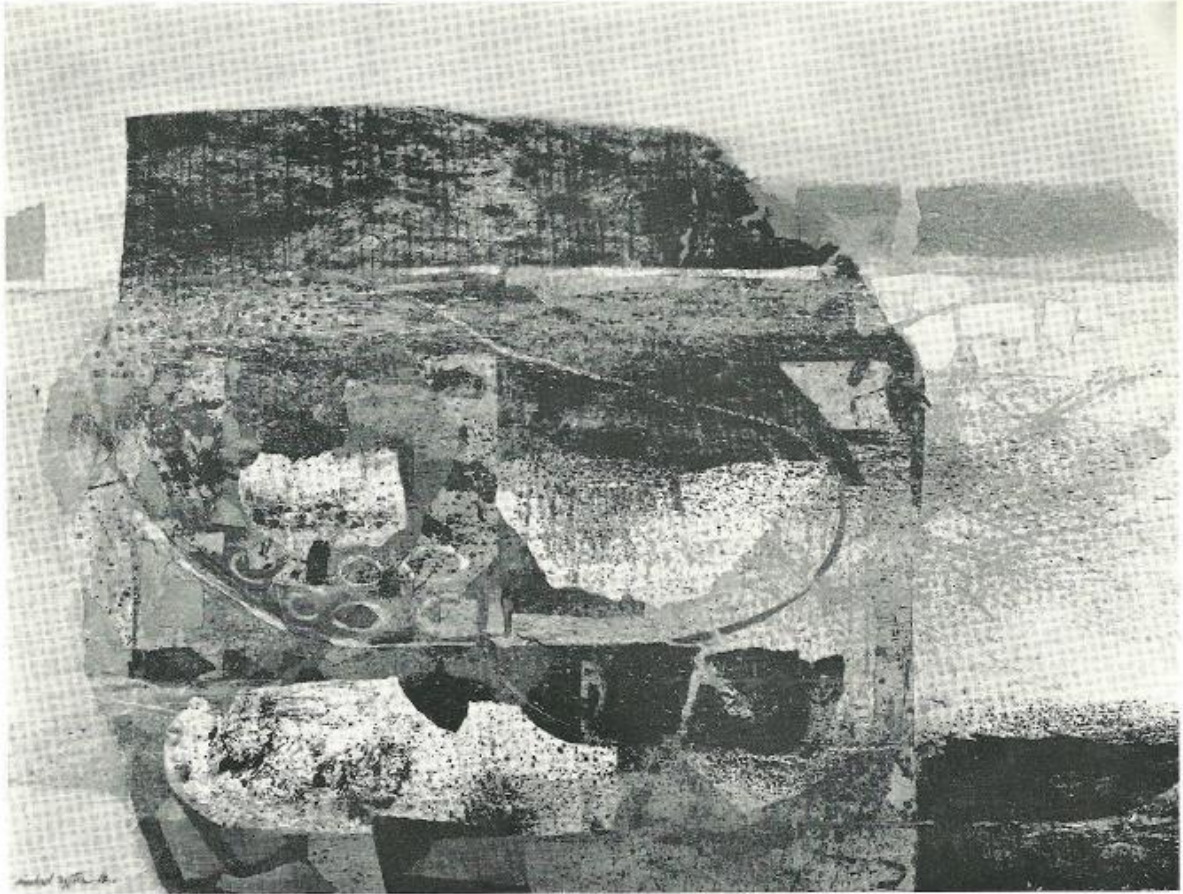
- 21 Small Sentinel
- 14 Siren
- 17 Pythia

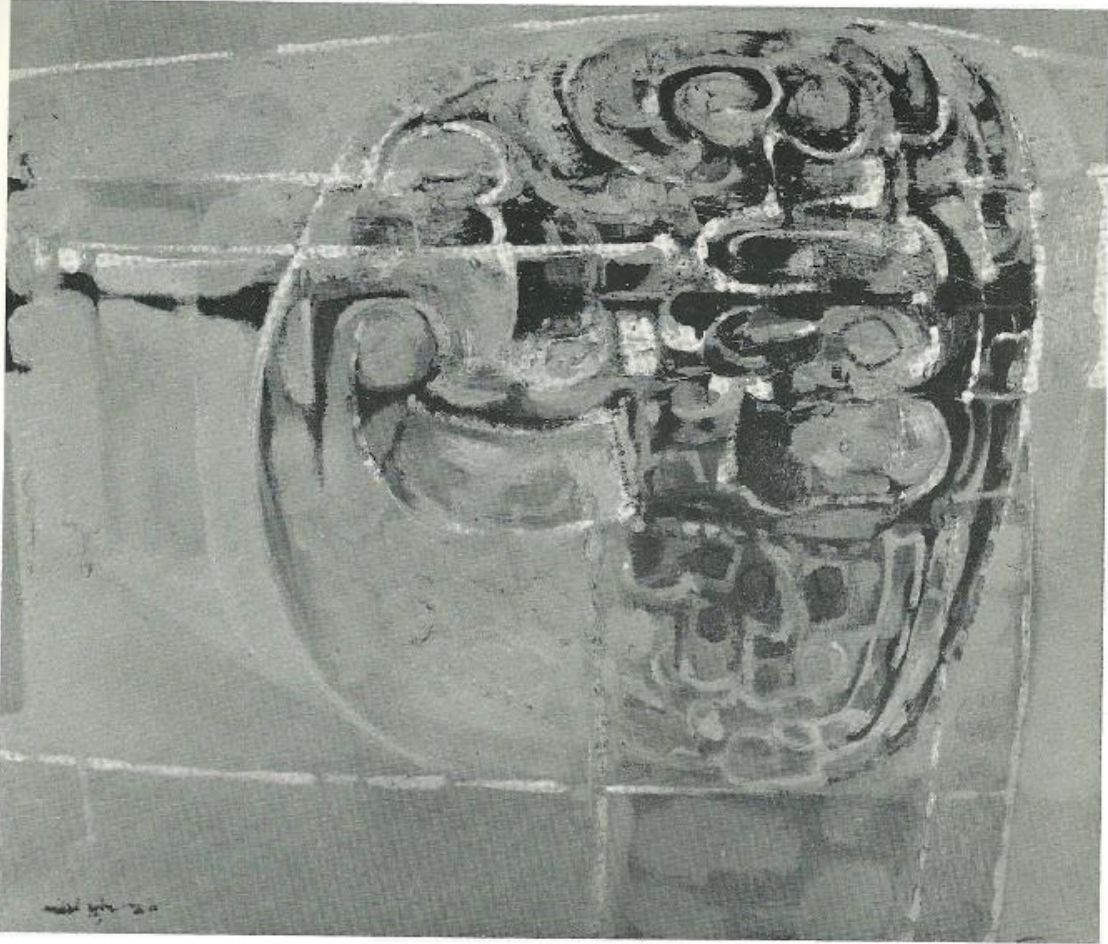
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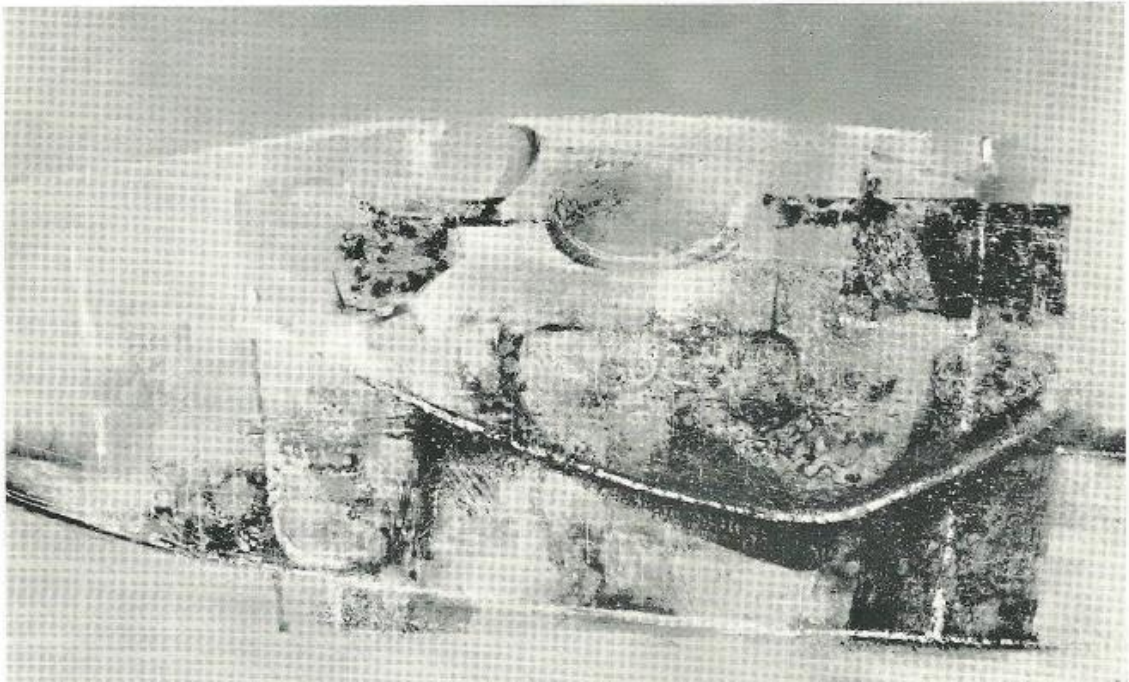
- 24 Sentinel Fetish
- 13 Ker
- 18 Figure with a Skein
- 10 Seated Tripod Figure

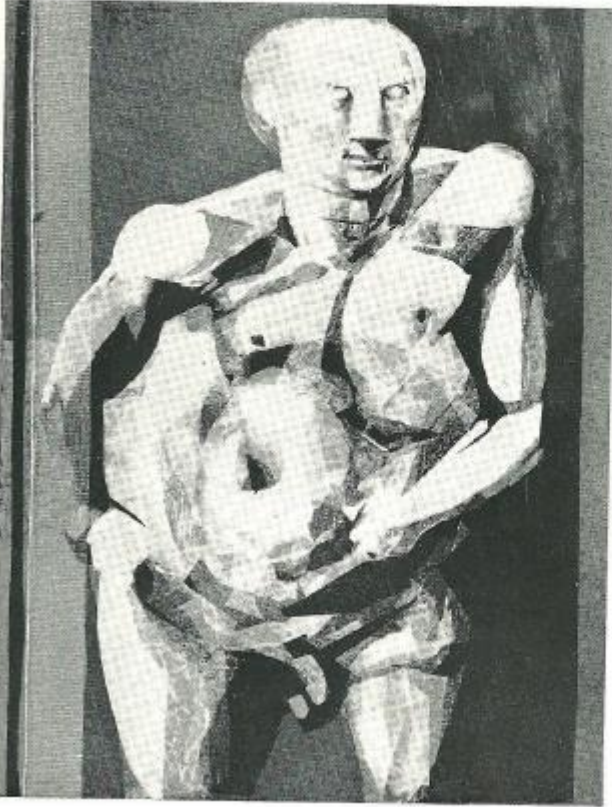


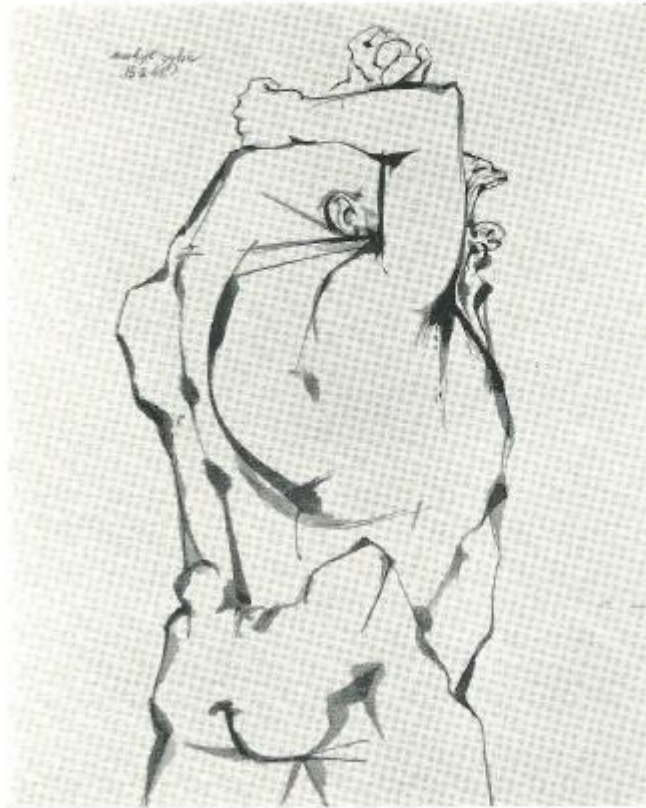




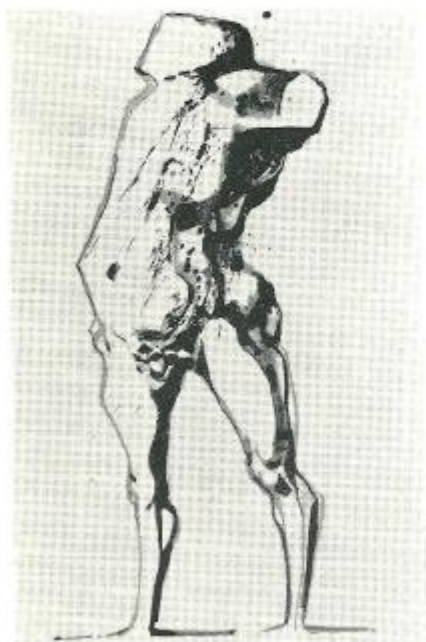


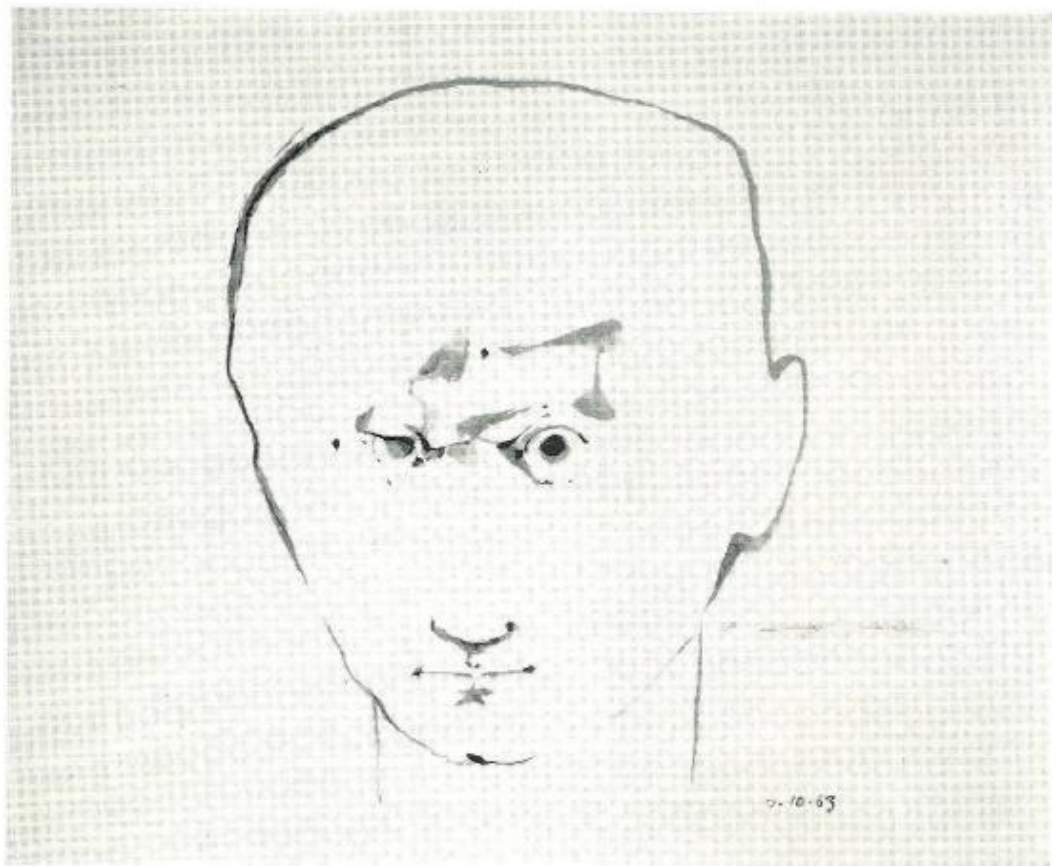




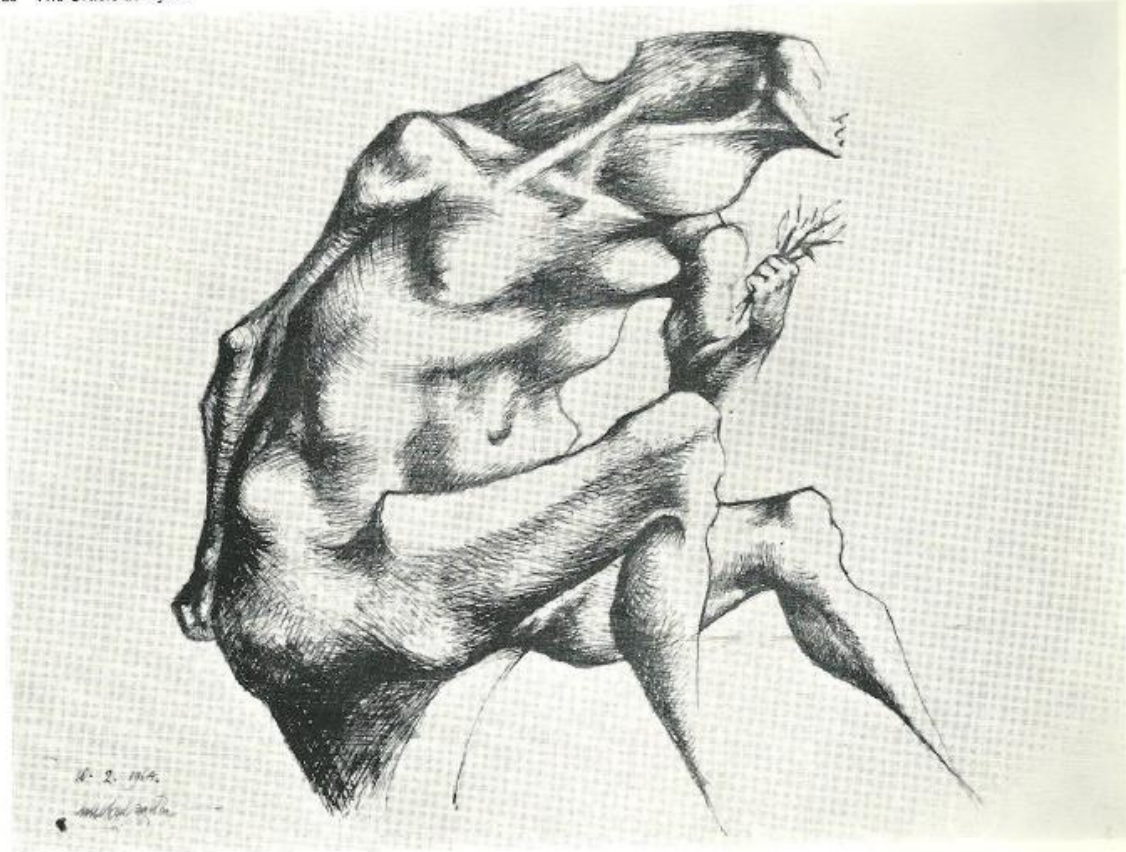














# next exhibition

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