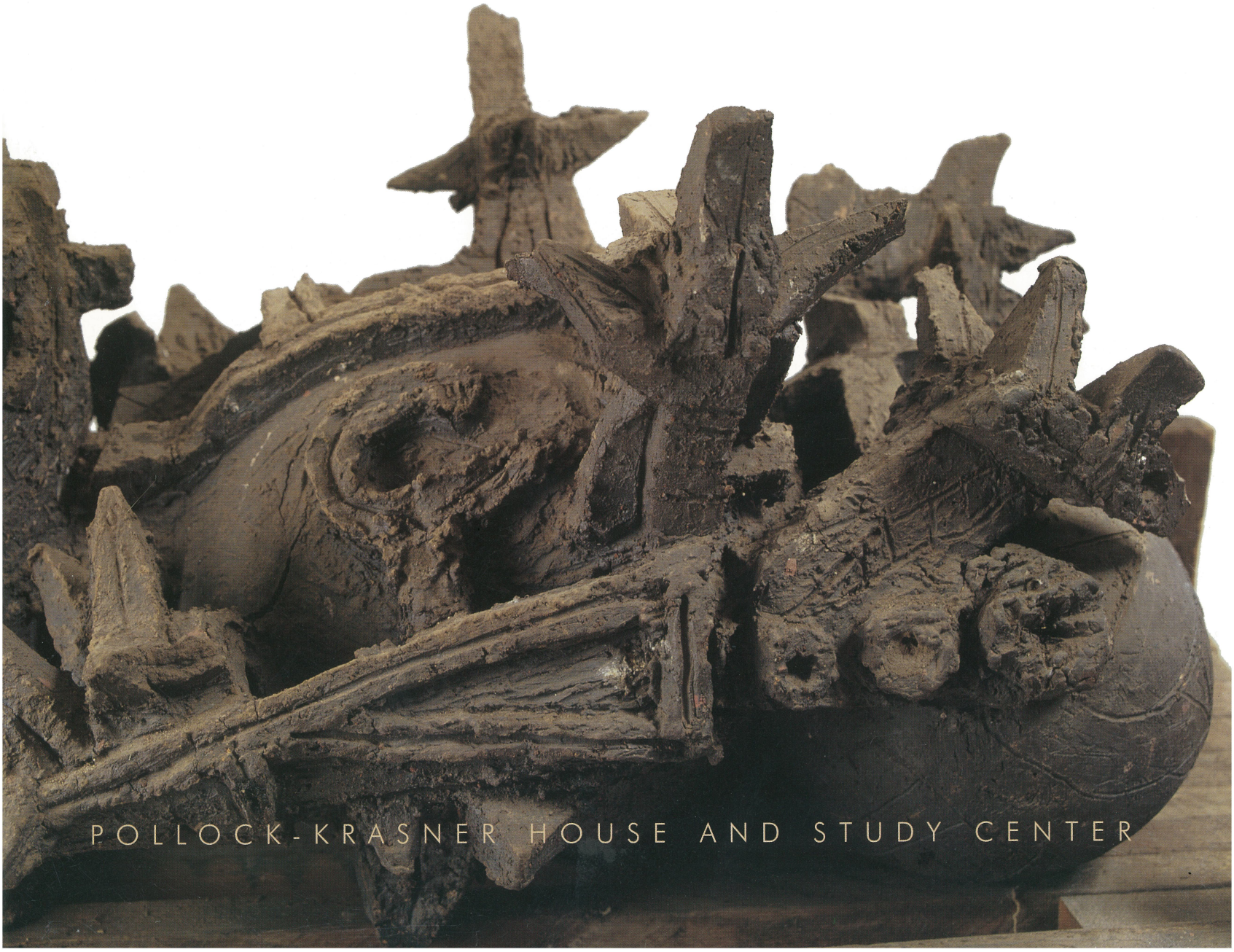
REUBEN KADISH

METAMORPHOSIS



POLLOCK-KRASNER HOUSE AND STUDY CENTER

5 August – 31 October 2004

Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center
830 Fireplace Road
East Hampton, New York
www.pkhouse.org

The exhibition and catalogue are
made possible by a grant from
the Judith Rothschild Foundation

Photographs of the artworks by Regina Cherry

On the front cover: *Gregor,* 1965. Terra cotta, 14 x 33 x 16 inches. (Detail)
On the back cover: Untitled, mid 1940s. Oil and sand on canvas, 22 x 18 inches.

REUBEN KADISH

METAMORPHOSIS



Reuben Kadish (right) in his 9th Street studio, listening to Herman Cherry read his essay for the catalogue of Kadish's 1990 retrospective exhibition at the New Jersey State Museum. Photograph © Regina Cherry

INTRODUCTION

Reuben Kadish plays a key role as Jackson Pollock's friend and confidante in Ed Harris' motion picture, *Pollock,* but the film does not examine the depth or significance of their relationship. As art students in the early 1930s, both were outsiders whose interest in creativity and spirituality set them apart from most of their peers. When they met in 1931 Pollock was on a visit home, having already left Los Angeles to study in New York City. Kadish would also crisscross the country several times to visit New York and eventually relocate there.

During that first summer of their friendship, he and Jackson frequented the Museum of the Southwest and the ethnographic exhibits at the Los Angeles County Museum, ignoring the contemporary art on display. As he later told Pollock's biographers, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, "we knew where the real vigor was, where the energy was." They were also deeply interested in the work of the Mexican muralists. In the small, tight-knit avant-garde of their formative years, the value of their mutual support and encouragement should not be underestimated, especially in light of Pollock's self-doubt and insecurity.

The two artists shared an aesthetic outlook based on formal boldness, technical experimentation, strong emotional content and subjective expression. Both came to maturity at a time of worldwide social and political upheaval, as well as artistic innovation, and this zeitgeist is reflected in their work. But more importantly, both found ways to synthesize their influences to create truly original and meaningful art in the face of widespread skepticism, frequent misunderstanding and occasional hostility.

After serving in the Army Artists Unit during World War II, Kadish returned to the United States and moved to New York City, where he and Pollock renewed their friendship. He worked as an assistant to the printmaker Stanley William Hayter, whose workshop, Atelier 17, was located at 41 East 8th Street, across the street from the apartment Pollock and his lover, Lee Krasner, were sharing. Kadish taught Pollock to make engravings, and Hayter encouraged him to experiment with novel approaches to printmaking. Posthumous impressions of some of those 1944-45 prints are on display in the Pollock-Krasner House.

In the summer of 1945, Kadish and his family had the use of a beach cottage on Louse Point, at the mouth of Accabonac Harbor, in the East Hampton hamlet of Springs. Knowing that Pollock and Krasner were too broke to afford their usual summer rental in Provincetown, he invited them to share the Louse Point cottage. As Kadish once remarked to me, if it had not been for that coincidence, there would be no Pollock-Krasner House today. It was the couple's introduction to the area, which so appealed to them that they decided to leave New York City and move permanently to Springs, where Pollock perfected the pouring technique that made him famous.

I am sincerely grateful to Regina Cherry, who suggested this exhibition and contributed in vital ways to its realization. (It was Regina's husband, the painter Herman Cherry, who gave Kadish his first solo exhibition at the Stanley Rose Bookshop Gallery, which Cherry ran in the early 1930s.) She now serves on the board of the Reuben Kadish Art Foundation, which has provided the works for the exhibition. The foundation's chairman, Judd Tully, went out of his way to facilitate all aspects of the exhibition and catalogue, for which he has written a sensitive appreciation of Kadish and his work. I also want to thank Rhonda Cooper, director of the University Art Gallery at Stony Brook University, and Mel Pekarsky, a member of the Art Department faculty and of the Reuben Kadish Art Foundation board, for their help and advice.

Neither the exhibition nor the catalogue would have been possible without a generous grant from the Judith Rothschild Foundation, which also supported our 2002 exhibition of paintings on paper by the late Herman Cherry. It is fitting that the work of both Cherry and Kadish—lifelong friends whose significant contributions to 20th century American art are less well known than they should be—is receiving recognition under the foundation's auspices.

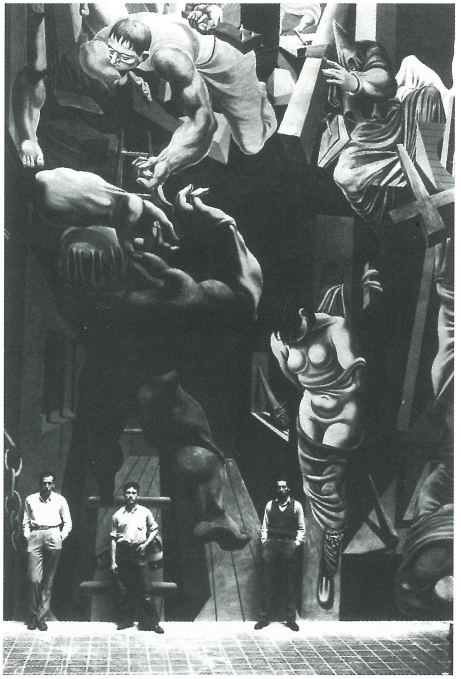
Helen A. Harrison, Director
Pollock-Krasner House and
Study Center

REUBEN KADISH: METAMORPHOSIS

There are numerous instances of 20th century American painters, such as Willem de Kooning and Barnett Newman, who took up sculpture at some point in their careers. Conversely, sculptors such as Alexander Calder and David Smith experimented with painting. But there aren't many painters who radically transformed themselves into sculptors and resolutely soldiered on in that demanding, three-dimensional field. Reuben Kadish (1913-1992) is a stellar example.

According to family lore, Kadish was a precocious draughtsman. By the time he was in his early 20's he and his mural painting partner, Philip Guston (then known as Philip Goldstein), were hailed in *Time* magazine by their mentor, the famed Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, as "the most promising painters in either the U.S. or Mexico."

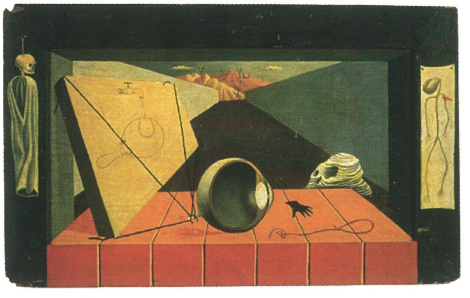
Kadish had met the charismatic Siqueiros in 1932 in Los Angeles and volunteered as his assistant on mural projects—or, as Kadish described his role in an oral history interview with the Archives of American Art, a "go boy for this, go boy for that." In 1934 he, Guston and Sande Pollock (Jackson Pollock's older brother) painted their own mural at the Workers' Community Center, signing it, in emulation of the revolutionary Mexican mural collective, as "The Syndicate of Painters." By this time Siqueiros was back in Mexico, and Kadish sent him photographs of the mural. Siqueiros was impressed and excitedly invited the young artists down to Mexico, telling them he had work for them. Sande Pollock didn't make the trip, but Kadish and Guston were commissioned to paint a mural in Morelia.



Left to right: Philip Goldstein, Reuben Kadish and the poet Jules Lansger in front of the mural, *Struggle Against War and Fascism,* University of Michoacan, Morelia, 1935

The Morelia mural of 1934-35, provocatively titled *Struggle Against War and Fascism* (or *La Inquisicion,* as it was known in Mexico), was quickly followed by *Physical Growth of Man,* another mural collaboration with Guston, at the City of Hope sanatorium in Duarte, outside Los Angeles, in 1935-36. That ended Guston and Kadish's remarkable collaborations, but Kadish went on to execute a solo mural, *A Dissertation on Alchemy,* at the San Francisco State College Science Hall, in 1936-37. Like the Duarte mural, it was commissioned under the aegis of the government-sponsored Federal Art Project, part of the Works Progress Administration.

During World War II Kadish worked as a steelworker in shipbuilding before being recruited in 1943 to document the war effort as an official Army Artist. It was an elite unit comprising some of the best-known American artists of the time. Kadish was just 30 years old. He requested posting to the European Theatre but was sent instead to India and Burma, where he encountered little battlefield action but found an abundance of abject civilian suffering, hunger, dislocation and misery. The Post-Surrealist influences he had hungrily imbibed in Southern California, in part under the tutelage of painter Lorser Feitelson—whose influence can be readily seen in Kadish's paintings of the 1930's such as *Lamentation,* as well as



Lamentation, 1935. Oil on panel, 16 x 25 inches. Private collection

some aspects of the Morelia mural—were jettisoned and replaced by a razor-sharp documentary style, seething with emotional energy and social concern.

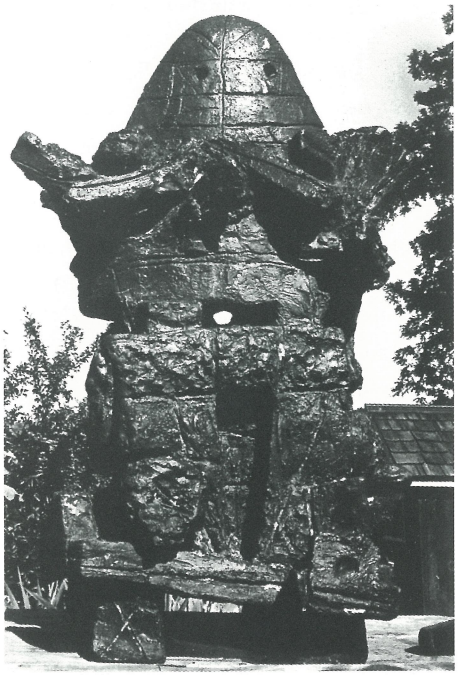
The brutal images he drew of emaciated figures and skeletal corpses occupying devastated and scarred streets—two of which are in the current exhibition—kindled the expressionist flame that Kadish kept burning throughout his long career. His experiences in the storied Army Artists Unit and intense travels to the ravaged streets of Calcutta and other downtrodden places had a profound impact on his later work, planting the seeds for his transformation into a sculptor. For, although never confirmed in so many words during his lifetime, it seems that Kadish also took home the mythological richness of India—powerful images of the exotic architecture and carved stone figurative sculpture of ancient cultures that would so transform his artistic vision.

That process slowly developed after the war, when Kadish spent a few years in New York City, where he painted the small group of untitled paintings from the mid-1940's that make up part of this exhibition. They represent some of the last examples of his two-dimensional work on canvas. The churning surfaces, some rough with the mix of sand and oil paint, are also densely crosshatched with marks resembling hieroglyphic symbols in blazing hues.

In 1948 Kadish settled with his young family at a rundown dairy farm in then-rural Vernon, New Jersey, sixty winding miles from Manhattan. It was a time of fierce and painful struggle: Kadish, the new farmer and family man trying to make a living; and Kadish the artist fighting to find his way in paint, far from the bubbling tumult and excitement of Manhattan and the burgeoning New York School. "I could have been living in Kansas," he ruefully recalled in a 1992 interview for the Archives of American Art. "It was really one of the major mistakes of my life."

Stories of a devastating studio fire at the farm that destroyed many of the paintings created after the War couldn't be confirmed by Kadish's oldest son, Dan, who still lives there; he believes it was more of an emotional conflagration, in which the artist deliberately destroyed his own work. In a recent telephone interview, Dan Kadish also recalled that, as a teenager in the early 1950's, he spent long hours with his younger brother Ken in the backwoods of the farm helping their father dig trenches in the rich earth and fill them up with field stone and concrete. Apparently the structures they created had no utilitarian purpose. Dan Kadish believes that these earthworks were his father's earliest sculptures, now buried and unmarked as some still undiscovered archeological wonder.

Though isolated for a critical period from his New York peers, Kadish began to develop his own sculptural vocabulary, first in the medium of clay and carving directly into the pliable material with the sharpened point of a rib from a pig he had slaughtered for the family table. He eventually turned to bronze casting and his growing progeny of expressionist figures, such as *Double-Jack* (1958) *Queen of Darkness* and *Wandering Oedipus* (both from 1959), represent some of his first mature works in sculpture. His series of larger-scale earth mothers and other potent fertility goddesses, such as Demeter and Indira, would not appear until the latter part of the 1960's, further confirming the immense impact of his India experience.



Double-Jack, 1958. Bronze, 30 x 16 x 16 inches.
Reuben Kadish Art Foundation



Indira (Earth Mother II), ca. 1968-69.
Bronze, 41 x 20 x 10 inches.
Reuben Kadish Art Foundation



Gregor, 1965. Terra cotta, 14 x 33 x 16 inches.

That decades-long distillation of influences melded with Kadish's experience as a farmer intimately involved with seasonal cycles of life and death, growth and decay.

It is interesting to consider his 1965 terra cotta, *Gregor,* named after the central character in Franz Kafka's story, "The Metamorphosis," as a metaphor of Kadish's own transformation from painter to sculptor. Cradled in a crudely fashioned wooden bed, its stubby legs anchored by flimsy wires, Gregor contemplates his bizarre fate. The stocky, terra cotta sections of the reclining figure/bug, with its upturned legs and pincer-like fingers, creates a ferocious presence. The scored lines that tattoo Gregor's armored body, as if a kind of tribal marking, further invest this creature with a quirky authenticity. The figure, simultaneously playful and disturbing, rattles and challenges the viewer with the title's literary reference. (The first line in Kafka's tale reads: "Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams and found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.")

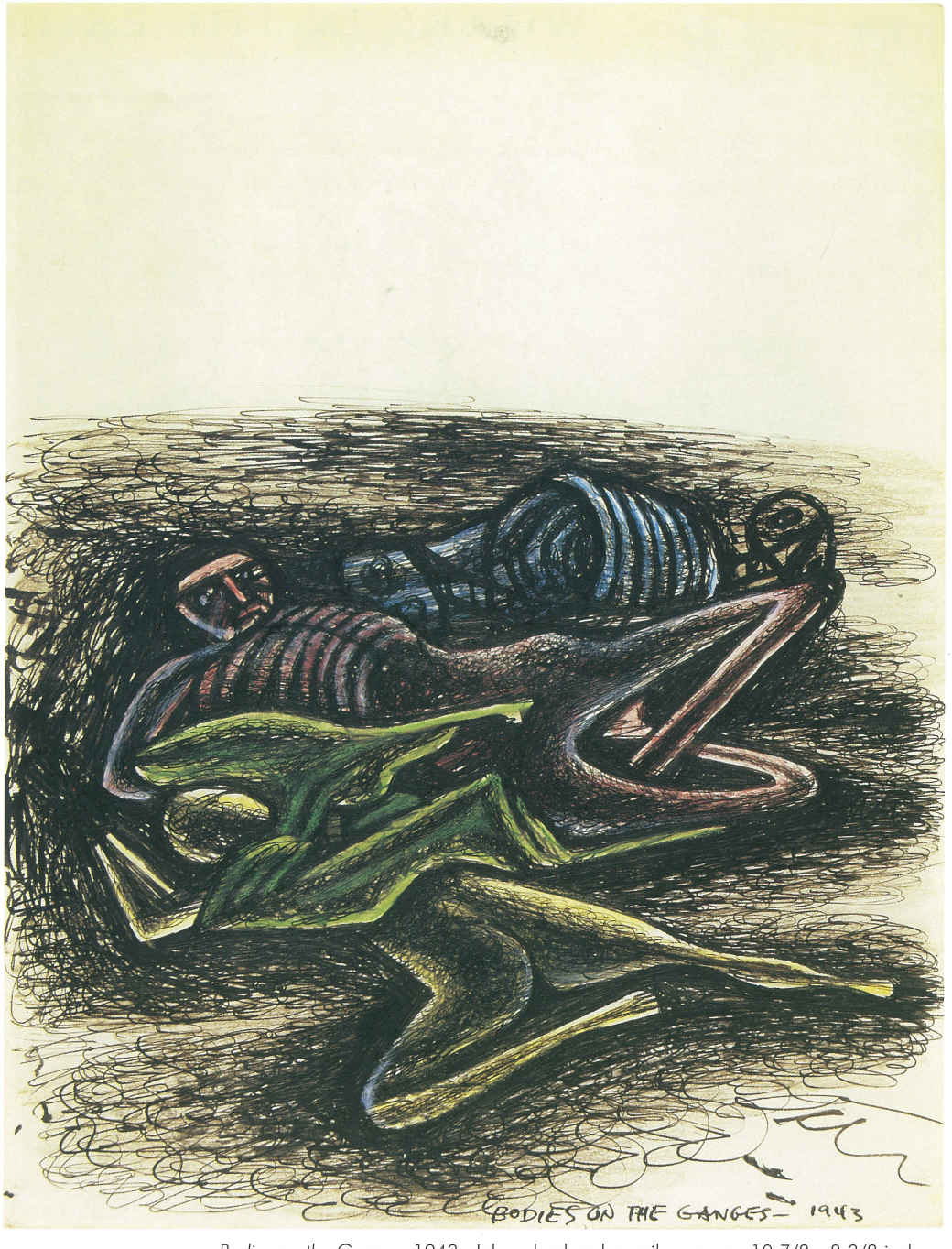
Though Kadish underwent a decidedly different kind of transformation, his long journey also achieved extraordinary and surprising results.

Judd Tully
New York City
June 2004

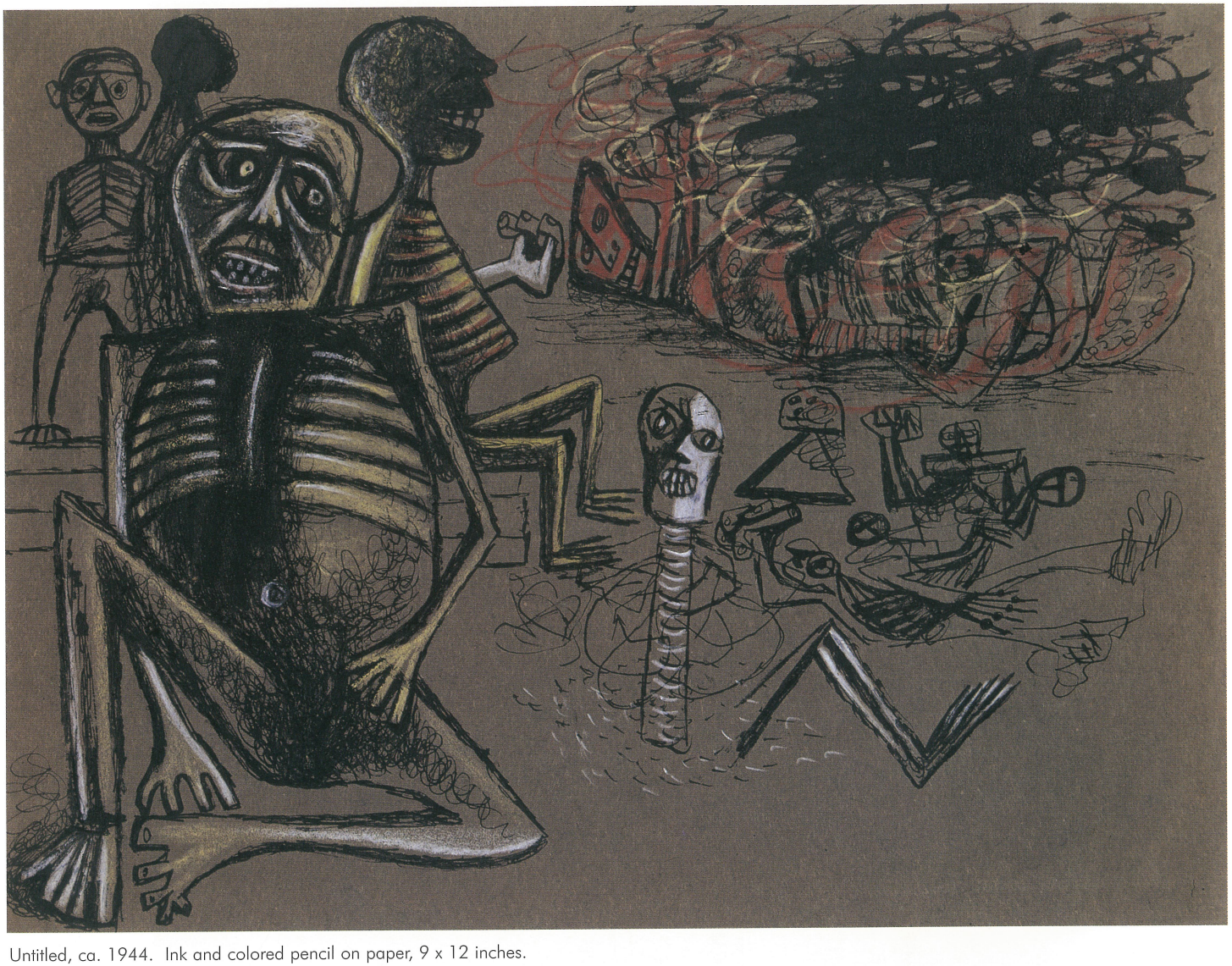
WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Unless otherwise noted, all works have been lent by the Reuben Kadish Art Foundation.

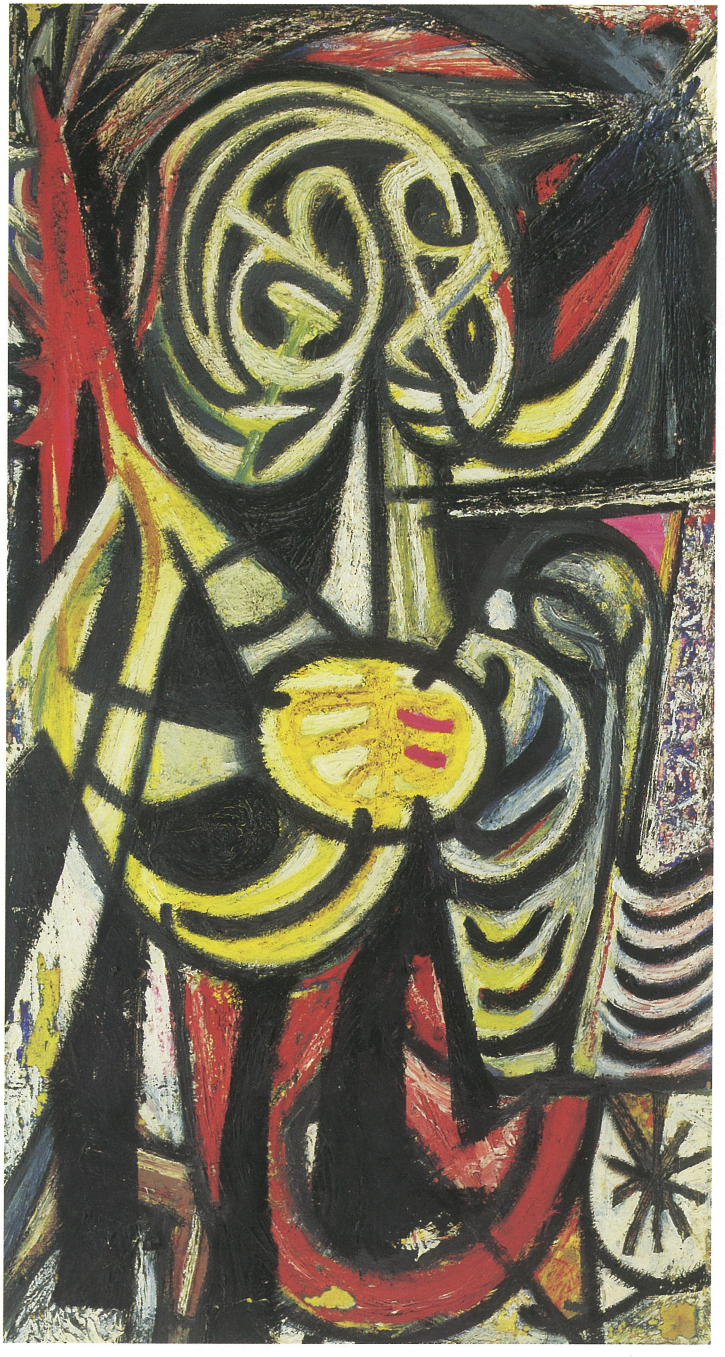
1. *Bodies on the Ganges,* 1943. Ink and colored pencil on paper, 10 7/8 x 8 3/8 inches.
2. Untitled, ca. 1944. Ink and colored pencil on paper, 9 x 12 inches.
3. Untitled, ca. 1945. Oil on canvas, 40 x 21 inches.
4. Untitled, mid 1940s. Oil and sand on canvas, 22 x 18 inches.
5. Untitled, ca. 1947. Oil on canvas, 44 x 27 inches.
6. *Head,* 1962. Terra cotta, 16 x 16 x 14 inches.
7. *Gregor,* 1965. Terra cotta, 14 x 33 x 16 inches.
8. *Seer I,* ca. 1965. Bronze on wood base, 18 x 10 x 8 inches.
9. Untitled (seated woman), ca. 1970. Bronze, 20 x 11 x 10 inches.
10. *Cocoon III,* 1977. Terra cotta, 10 x 16 x 8 inches.
11. Untitled, ca. 1984-85. Monotype, 22 x 29 1/2 inches.
12. Untitled, ca. 1984-85. Monotype, 29 1/2 x 23 inches.
13. Untitled, ca. 1984-85. Monotype, 30 x 22 inches.
14. Untitled (to Vincent), ca. 1987. Color monotype, 22 x 30 inches.
15. Untitled, ca. 1989. Ink on paper, 9 1/4 x 12 1/8 inches. Private collection



Bodies on the Ganges, 1943. Ink and colored pencil on paper, 10 7/8 x 8 3/8 inches.



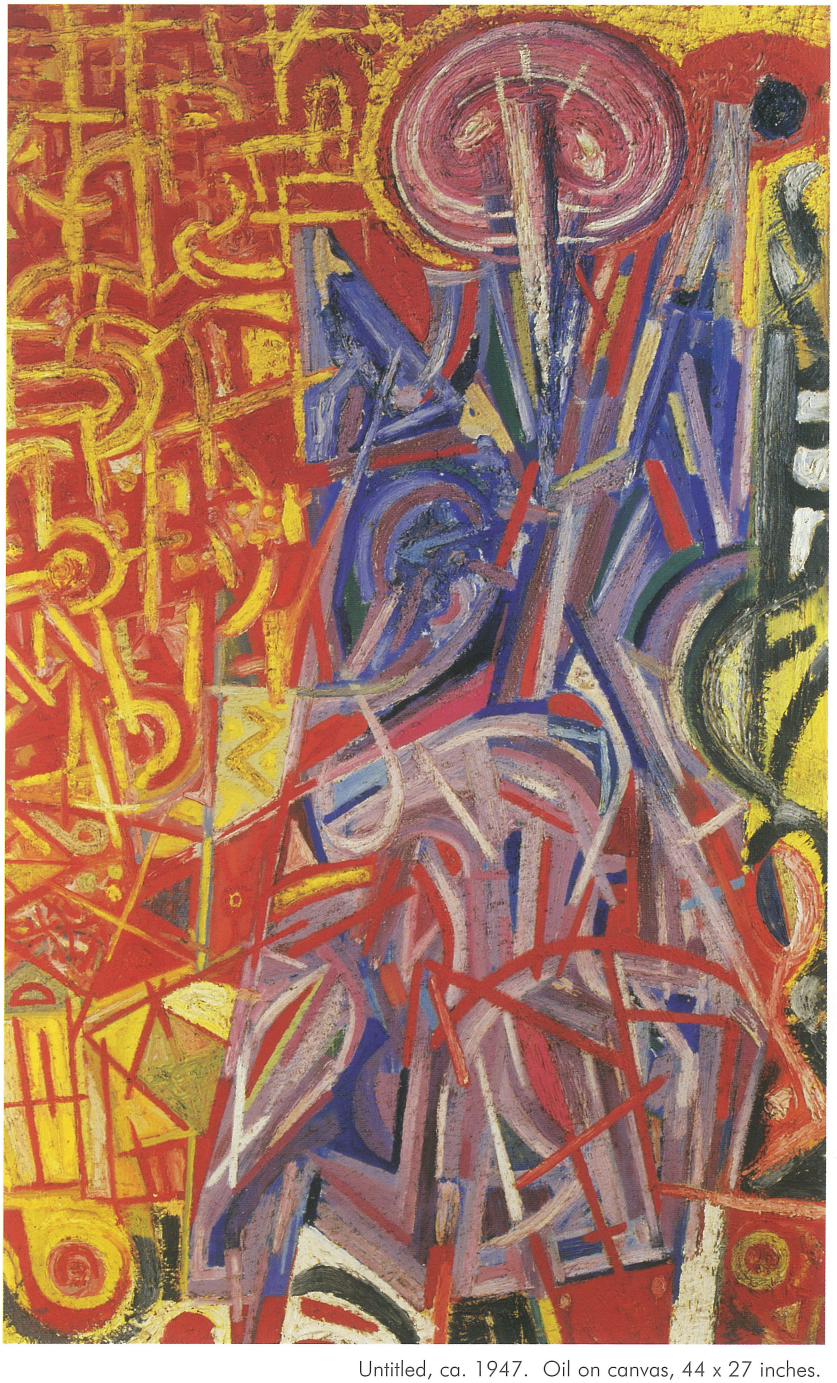
Untitled, ca. 1944. Ink and colored pencil on paper, 9 x 12 inches.



Untitled, ca. 1945. Oil on canvas, 40 x 21 inches.



Untitled, mid 1940s. Oil and sand on canvas, 22 x 18 inches.



Untitled, ca. 1947. Oil on canvas, 44 x 27 inches.



Head, 1962. Terra cotta, 16 x 16 x 14 inches.



Gregor, 1965. Terra cotta, 14 x 33 x 16 inches.



Seer I, ca. 1965. Bronze on wood base, 18 x 10 x 8 inches.



Untitled (seated woman), ca. 1970. Bronze, 20 x 11 x 10 inches.



Cocoon III, 1977. Terra cotta, 10 x 16 x 8 inches.



Untitled, ca. 1984-85. Monotype, 29 1/2 x 22 inches.



Untitled, ca. 1984-85. Monotype, 29 1/2 x 23 inches.



Untitled, ca. 1984-85. Monotype, 30 x 22 inches.



Untitled (to Vincent), ca. 1987. Color monotype, 22 x 30 inches.



Untitled, ca. 1989. Ink on paper, 9 1/4 x 12 1/8 inches.
Private collection

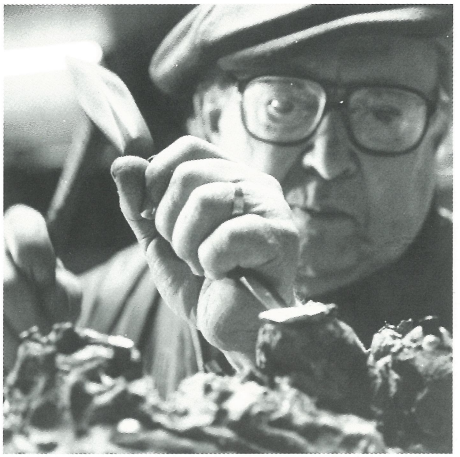
A BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Reuben Kadish was born on 29 January 1913 in Chicago. When he was nine, he and his family moved to California, where he was first exposed to Eastern philosophies and beliefs, an interest that remained with him throughout his life.

Kadish began his art studies in 1927 with Lorser Feitelson, one of the California post-Surrealists, whose Renaissance-derived style and mystical subject matter influenced his early work. He also studied at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles (1930)—where he met Philip Goldstein (later Guston)—the Stickney School of Art in Pasadena (1931), and Los Angeles City College (1932). In the summer of 1931, he met Sanford Pollock (later McCoy) and began a close friendship with Sande's younger brother, Jackson.

Kadish assisted David Alfaro Siqueiros on his Los Angeles mural, *Tropical America,* in 1932, then went with Goldstein to Mexico at Siqueiros' behest to paint a fresco at the University of Michoacan in Morelia (1934-35). On returning to the United States, Kadish and Goldstein painted a mural in the City of Hope National Medical Center and Beckman Research Institute in Duarte, California (1935-36). Kadish then painted a mural at San Francisco State College for the WPA Federal Art Project (1935-37) and became the head of the project's San Francisco mural division. His first solo exhibition was held in 1937 at the Stanley Rose Bookshop Gallery in Hollywood. The following year he married Helen Barbara Weeks, and the couple had two sons: Daniel Morris, born in 1939; and Philip Kennan, born in 1940.

Following his discharge from the United States Army in 1944, Kadish moved to Long Island City, New York, and resumed his career as a painter. He also worked as a studio assistant to the printmaker Stanley William Hayter. His third son, Julian Leonard, was born in 1946. Two years later Kadish and his family



moved to a dairy farm in Vernon, New Jersey. He did not remain active in the New York art world, and he ceased to paint, although he continued to make drawings. He also attended the Brooklyn Museum School of Art in 1950, when he began making small sculpture in clay.

Kadish re-entered the art world as a sculptor in the late 1950s, in a group show at the Stable Gallery in New York (1958). In 1961 he had a solo exhibition—his first since 1937—at the Poindexter Gallery. That year his work was included in "Recent Painting and Sculpture," a traveling exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and he was among the artists included in the Art Institute of Chicago's 65th American Exhibition in 1962. He began a 30-year teaching career at The Cooper Union in the early 1960s, exhibited periodically at the Graham Gallery, the Grace Borgenicht Gallery and the G. W. Einstein Gallery in Manhattan, and maintained a studio on East 9th Street.

Kadish's work has been the subject of three retrospective surveys: at Artists Choice Museum, New York (1986); the New Jersey State Museum, Trenton (1990); and the University Art Gallery, Stony Brook University (1992). It has also been included in numerous group exhibitions, notably the Fifth Biennial in São Paolo, Brazil (1959); the Riverside Museum, New York (1962); the Newark Museum (1968); "The Brutal Figure: Visceral Images," at Rutgers University, Newark (1986); "Ancient Inspirations," a traveling exhibition (1988-89); and "Made in New York: Encounters with Contemporary Sculpture," at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania (1989). It is in numerous museum collections, including those of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Harvard University, the Worcester Art Museum and Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton.

Reuben Kadish died in New York City on 20 September 1992.





Reuben Kadish at work in his 9th Street studio, 1985.
Photograph © Regina Cherry

Designed and Printed by Searles Graphics, Inc.
Yaphank, New York

© 2004 The Stony Brook Foundation, Inc.

STONY BROOK
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

