



PHILIP PAVIA:

SCULPTURE AND DRAWINGS

"...the point of marble sculpture is the block--as Michelangelo teaches. Pavia has never strayed far from it. It is his reference to nature, his point of contact with reality. Pavia assembles his stones in ways that connect both their raw states and their most sophisticated manifestation....But in Pavia's work of the mid 1960s, these nuances are elbowed aside by the artist's muscular, even perverse scattering and jumbling of blocks. There is a will to shambles. The act of lifting and tilting, countered by the evident heavy pull of gravity, by the weighty mass of stone units, establishes the drama. It is a strong willful kick at the limits of art. For all its intellectual, Romantic, 1950s accent, it shares in the up-front, single impact imagery of the 1960s".

— **Thomas B. Hess**, December 1973

Philip Pavia in his studio at 810 Broadway, New York, 1973, Photograph by Renate Ponsold



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MAY 5 - JULY 30, 2016

Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center
830 Springs-Fireplace Road, East Hampton, New York



Philip Pavia: Sculpture and Drawings

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Natalie Pavia



1. *Untitled*, late 50s, graphite & watercolor, 14 1/4" x 10 3/4" in.

FOREWORD

Early in my tenure at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, I interviewed Philip Pavia for the Study Center's oral history project, part of an array of resources for the study of modern American art. The collections focus on the New York School and the internationally renowned artists' community of eastern Long Island, which includes Pavia and his wife, the painter Natalie Edgar, and their son, the sculptor Paul Pavia. We spoke at the Pavia studio on Squaw Road in Springs, and Philip was extremely generous with his recollections of the two art worlds—New York City and the Hamptons—of which he was such a vital member.

Pavia first met Jackson Pollock at the Art Students League in the early 1930s, and they stayed in touch throughout Pollock's life. During the Great Depression, both men worked on the New York WPA Federal Art Project and socialized at the various gatherings that led in 1948 to the formation of The Club. After meeting informally in sculptor Ibram Lassaw's studio, a group of artists decided to rent space at 39 East 8th Street, and Pavia advanced the required "key money." From then on, he was the guiding force behind The Club, organizing a series of lectures and panel discussions where the issues that defined the New York School in the 1950s were debated. In 1956 he resigned from The Club to concentrate on creating a tangible adjunct to those debates, *It is. Magazine for Abstract Art*. He edited and published five issues of *It is.* from 1958-1960, and a sixth issue devoted to sculpture in 1965—all the while participating in a succession of group shows and mounting solo exhibitions of his own work.

In 1967, when the Museum of Modern Art held its first full Pollock retrospective, Pavia wrote movingly of his late friend's contribution, not only to contemporary art but to future generations through "his unique invention of a way toward a full experience" of art-making. Similarly, I see Pavia's approach to three-dimensional form as both a deeply personal process and a more broadly applicable philosophy of creativity, one that is subjective without being esoteric. One that respects the nature of materials while transforming them. One that defines art-making not as an activity, but as an encounter. The results of such an approach are evident in this exhibition.

I am extremely grateful to Natalie Edgar Pavia for lending the drawings and sculptures from the Pavia Trust, and for an essay that sheds light on the thinking behind the drawings; to Phyllis Braff, whose long familiarity with the artist and his work informs an essay that illuminates the sculptures; and to Paul Pavia for his beautiful design of the catalog, which is supported by funds from the Pollock-Krasner Endowment Fund.

Helen A. Harrison
Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Director



Studio on 10th Street, New York, 1962. Photograph by Natalie Pavia

A photograph of a sculpture studio. In the foreground, a large, white, abstract sculpture is mounted on a circular turntable. The sculpture has a bulbous base and a long, thin, vertical neck. In the background, a wooden workbench is cluttered with various items, including a stack of papers, a box, and some tools. A window is visible behind the workbench, letting in light. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the white sculpture being the brightest element.

SCULPTURE

RECONSIDERING PAVIA

Philip Pavia (1911-2005) was passionate in his belief that sculpture could produce breakthrough visual dynamics that might parallel the achievements made by the avant-garde painters of his generation. He probed just about every area to be investigated and every area to be pushed.¹ It is possible, for example, to trace the evolution of complex, activated space through Pavia; to trace transitory, impermanent surfaces through Pavia; and to trace developments with structural, yet ephemeral light through Pavia. While writers commenting on his mid-century exhibitions recognized his contributions to new directions that involved material and volume,² these points, too, deserve further recognition today.

A number of circumstances played a role in Pavia's career. He came from a Connecticut family well-versed in the practices of stone work, and went on to art studies in New York, and in Europe. There he absorbed the dynamic cultural philosophies of the 1930s and participated in the intellectual climate prevailing in Paris. After returning to the United States in 1937, he became an energetic presence in the New York art world, using his lively, penetrating mind to further the reigning debate about form, color, light and material. He was widely regarded as perceptive and dedicated.

The breadth of Pavia's theories and insights contributes to the interest in his career. As a founder of The Club, as its panel organizer from 1950 to 1955, and as founding editor of the magazine *It is*, he shaped dialogues covering a wide range of subjects pertinent to the concerns of the mid-century avant-garde and took a major role in expanding the language that has become associated with understanding the era. Some of The Club's panels during his tenure were: *Mythology and Creative Art*, *The Purist Idea*, *Abstract Expressionism*, *Action Painting*, *The Image in Poetry and Painting*, and *Nature and Abstract Art*. His colleagues and participants in The Club endeavors included many names that now have a strong historical place in American art, such as Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt and Philip Guston.

Benefiting now from a degree of historical distance, it is possible to understand Pavia's experiments with space more fully. His thoughts were broad: he could be concerned with how surrounding space interacted with fluctuating surfaces; with the way his large multi-unit scatter pieces impacted upon their surroundings; and with the way the gestural thrust of a walking figure might activate space. In conversation, he regularly spoke of space as transparent, space as transitory, and space as a real yet also intangible idea. Championing his New York avant-garde colleagues in *It is* in 1958, he wrote of the vitality, power and vigor of the new American abstract space -- an "indirect space."³



Philip Pavia and Lily Pond, 1965-1966, Photograph by John McMahon

Pavia's pioneering ground-oriented sculpture, *Lily Pond*, recalls aspects of the general cultural buzz at mid-century. Contemporary artists had been giving considerable attention to Claude Monet's late-life studies of his water lily pond at Giverny, noting especially the expansion of the visual potential of scale, the dissolving of form into generalized multiple abstract units, and the lengthy time engagement that became synthesized in a single work. Especially significant, too, was the artist's vantage point, looking downward from the bridge constructed across the pond. The radical steps with perception seemed to be precedents for interests of the new American generation.

Fanfare and an enthusiastic press accompanied the Museum of Modern Art's acquisition of an 18-1/2 foot Monet water lily painting in 1955. After its tragic destruction in a 1958 fire, the museum immediately arranged to acquire the 42-foot wide triptych, *Water Lilies*, from the Monet estate. It was installed in late 1959 and served as the anchor, a few months later, for the water garden section of "Claude Monet: Seasons and Moments," the museum's vast survey organized by William C. Seitz. The fourteen other water garden examples were major international loans.

The Pavia *Lily Pond*, initially presented at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1966, was the first in his series of large, ground-based configurations of richly toned marble units. Its title prompted the critic Katherine Kuh to comment, "Not surprisingly, one of Pavia's favorite artists is Monet."⁴ Along with other new Pavia marble abstractions, *Lily Pond* was exhibited the following year in the artist's solo show at the Gallery of Modern Art in Washington, D.C., which traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Art and the University of Iowa Art Museum. One of the largest of the multi-part, ground-based works, *East Pediment, Sun-up*, was then on view for a year at the Guggenheim Museum's courtyard in New York.

These presentations called attention to Pavia's exploration of new ways to use the expressive possibilities of material, light and tonality. His focus on complex faceted contours and tipping, seemingly unstable abstract shapes led to continuously fluctuating units of vibrant light. By organizing these light-producing planes, he created and controlled some aspects of the interweaving and optical action and left other parts of the visual impact to the variables constantly generated by the observer and by the ambient environmental conditions.

Pavia's investigations fit perfectly with the dynamics of the New York avant-garde at mid-century. Like others, he was finding new ways to suggest motion and make it part of content and context. There are bronze abstractions, for example, primarily from the 1950s, which recall the gestural thrusts of Franz Kline. Commenting on the kind of action Pavia was presenting in his marble pieces, Thomas B. Hess called it "scattering,"⁵ and that concept has stayed with pieces like *Lily Pond* as a descriptive designation.

Like others, too, Pavia was finding ways to intensify the expressiveness of surfaces. Markings on his marble, terracotta, and bronze pieces emphasize tangibility and malleability, suggesting the intuitiveness, immediacy and directness of the personal hand.

It is also interesting to consider Pavia as one of the mid-century avant-garde artists who re-examined the idea of figuration, motivated by the challenge of treating humanistic traditions with new approaches. He thought about interior actions contained within descriptive volumes. This suggests that broad readings are possible, particularly for his heads, which range from the simplified plasters of the 1930s to the monumental bronzes of the 1970s to subsequent series of imaginary portraits, and finally to the large terracotta heads from 2002 - 2005. The work is complex, but provides additional insight into a career that explored many directions, including installation and public art, while also offering a wealth of intellectual investigations as part of its rich legacy.

Phyllis Braff
New York, 2008
Revised 2015

¹ References to Philip Pavia's ideas are based on the author's interviews with the artist, 1984- 2004

² See, for example, Thomas B. Hess, brochure essay for Kootz Gallery exhibition, April 18 - May 6, 1961. Vivien Raynor, *Arts*, September, 1961, p.37. Katherine Kuh, *Saturday Review*, June 25, 1966, pp. 39-40.

³ Philip Pavia, "A Manifesto-in-progress; The Second Space: The American Sense of Space on Space." *It Is*, No. 2, 1958, pp. 4-6.

⁴ Kuh, op. cit., p. 39.

⁵ Release distributed by the School of Visual Arts for the exhibition *Some Things They Never Told You about the 1940s, '50s and '60s*. Thomas B. Hess, guest curator; SVA Gallery, New York, November 8 - December 10, 1973.





2. *Lily Pond*, 1965, marble, 112 inches diameter
Promised gift to the Hirshhorn Museum and
Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC



Detail of Lily Pond

View of Lily Pond from above

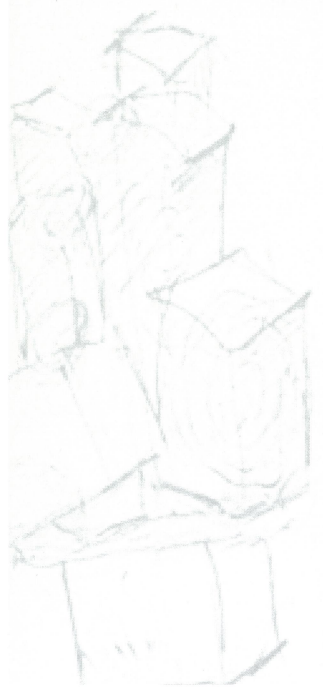




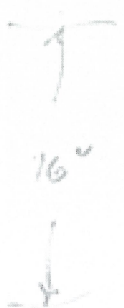
3. *No Mood for a Walk #2*, 1995, marble, 18 in. high

4. *Wine and Bread #2*, 1995, marble, 11 in. high





Square
Moulding





DRAWINGS
1960s

BUTTERFLY THOUGHTS

Pavia's drawings are light sketches, drawn free hand without instruments, by somebody who could think with a pencil. Rectangles, arcs, cubes, slabs and wedges are drawn with a fluid line into groupings that suggest the presence of distant perspectives. Some are expanded into watercolors. And some have interesting labels such as *Double Egg* and *Egg Shadow*. He referred to the drawings as butterfly thoughts or thought-forms coming from his "stream of consciousness." This was not the dream world of Freud and Jung. What he meant by that phrase he explains in his writings:

"When I am alone in my studio, flying debris crosses my mind and floods my imagination. Not matured ideas or a program as to what's important. A different movement with an under-layer of something uncontrollable, hurries over my mind, persistently and non-stopping. Its steady stream ignites deep recesses of my past memories and frivolously sweeps up momentary visual objects lying around the studio....This unique movement within us contains our whole life..."

"...William James studied the structure of the consciousness and invented the brilliant phrase 'stream of consciousness' to describe thought-forms and the flow that propels them. Gertrude Stein, Bernard Berenson, and other art thinkers were his pupils at Harvard and they spread the American way into the novels and plays of James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway....In America some writers called it the interior monologue....The more I think what's in the make-up in our stream of consciousness...I conclude it was also a gold mine to the visual artists."

Pavia usually carried pre-cut message slips and pens and pencils in his pocket to catch the succession thought-forms passing through his mind in small drawings, some of which are in this exhibition. They often depict a scattering of blocks with the precise proportions of a Greek temple now falling apart, but still with elegant, clear planes rendered in fine outlines that emerge from or sink into the paper, depending on the pressure of the hand, like images reflected in passing water.

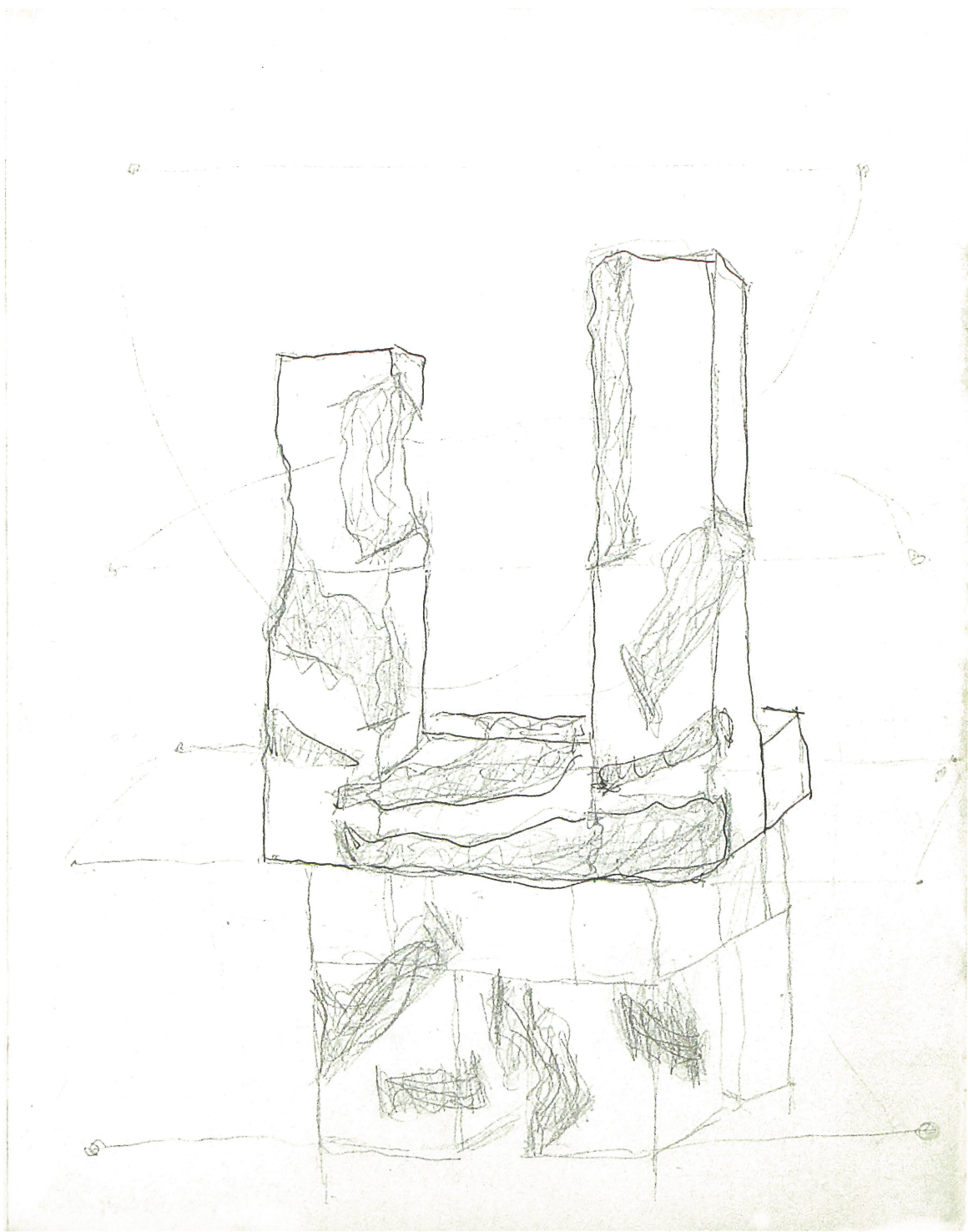
Among the drawings, there are no specific studies for *Lily Pond* or any other sculpture. There are similarities in format and other family resemblances, but when it came to the actual sculpture, Pavia heaved the blocks and carved the hollows in *Lily Pond* with spontaneous decision-making coming from his stream of consciousness, not from studies. The correspondences between drawing and sculpture are a simple matter of both coming from the same personality.

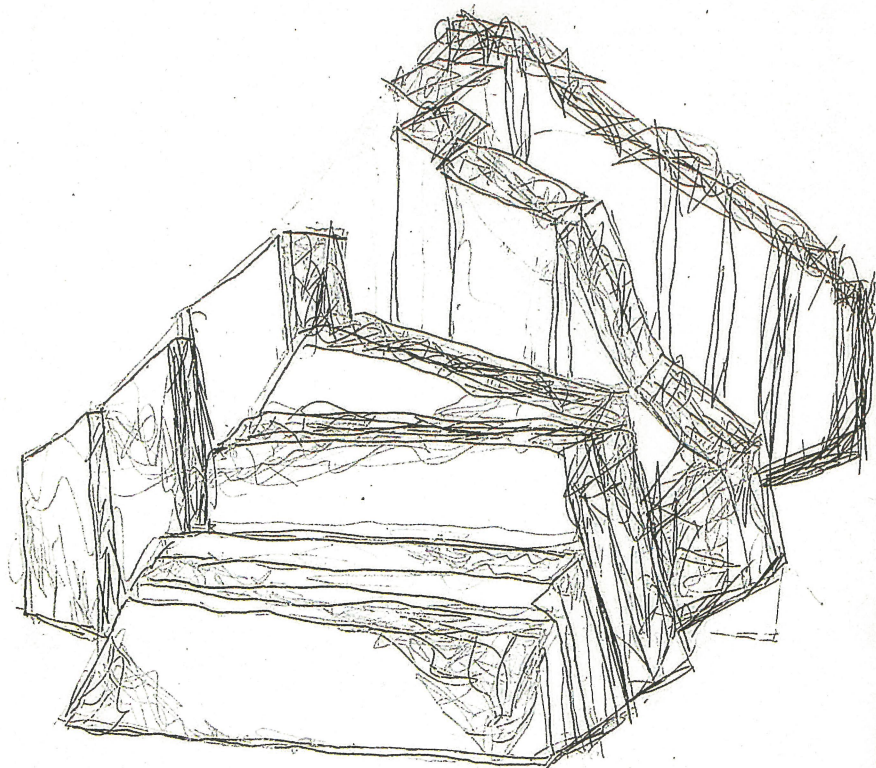
Natalie Edgar Pavia



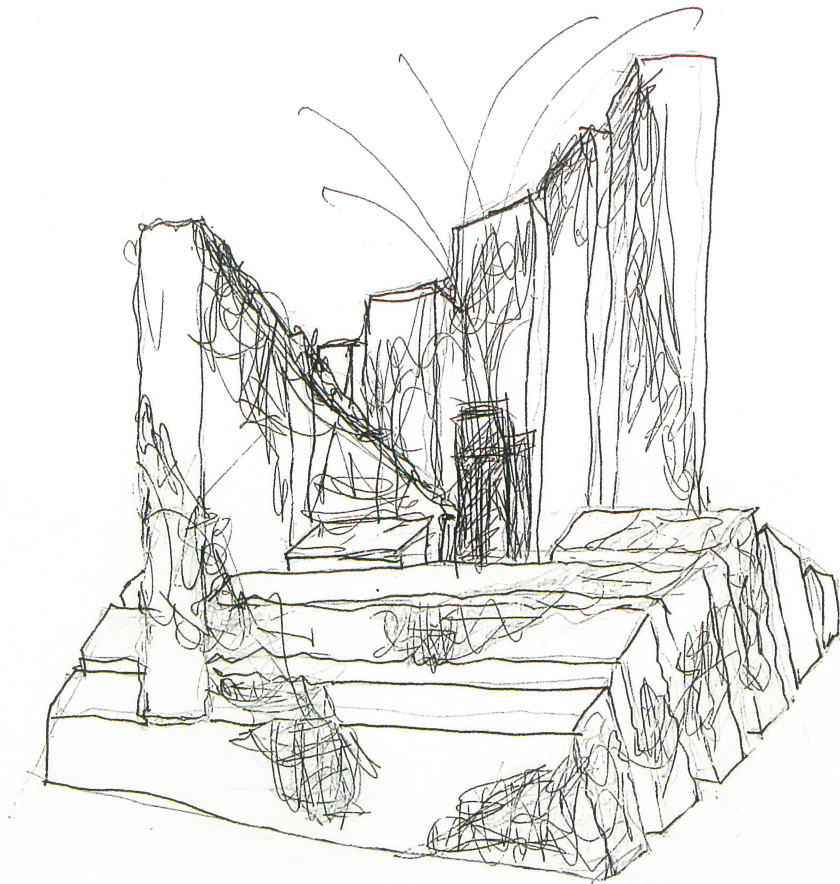
5. *Untitled*, 60s, ink, graphite & brown chalk, 11 ½ x 9

6. *Untitled*, 1960s
ink & graphite
11 ³/₈ x 8 ⁷/₈ in.





7. *Untitled*, 1960s
ink & graphite
11½ x 9 in.

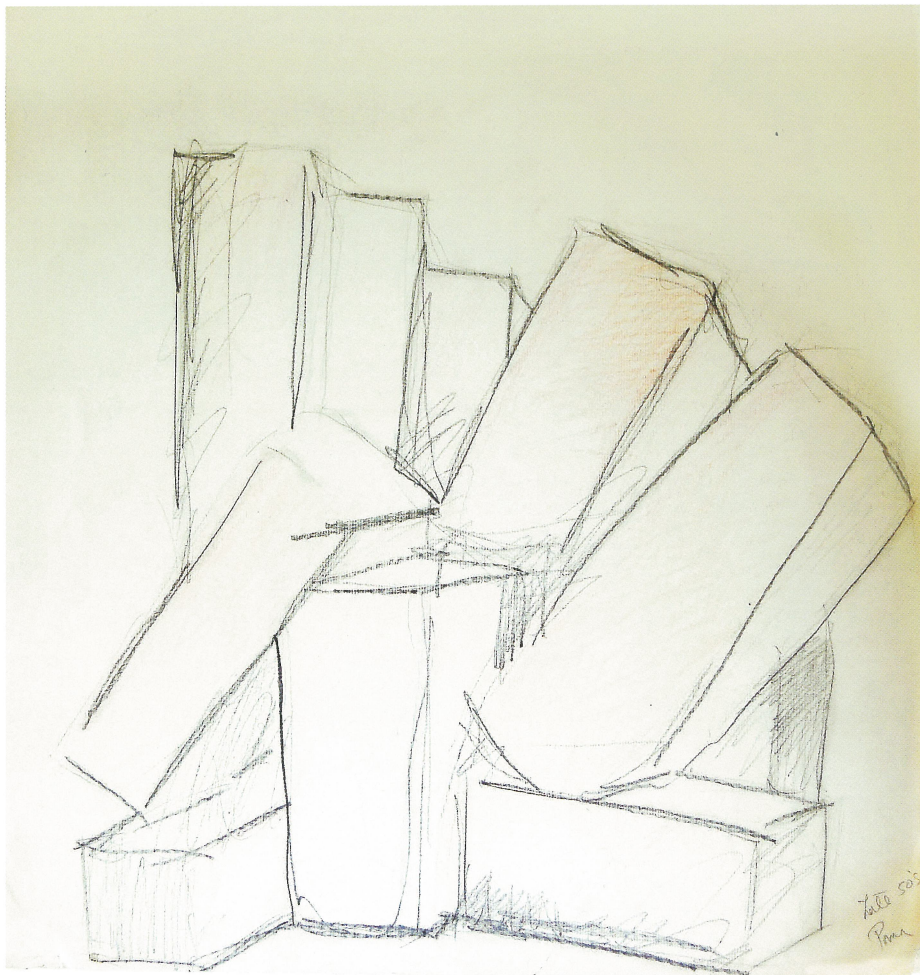


8. *Untitled*, 1960s
ink & graphite
11 3/8 x 9 in.

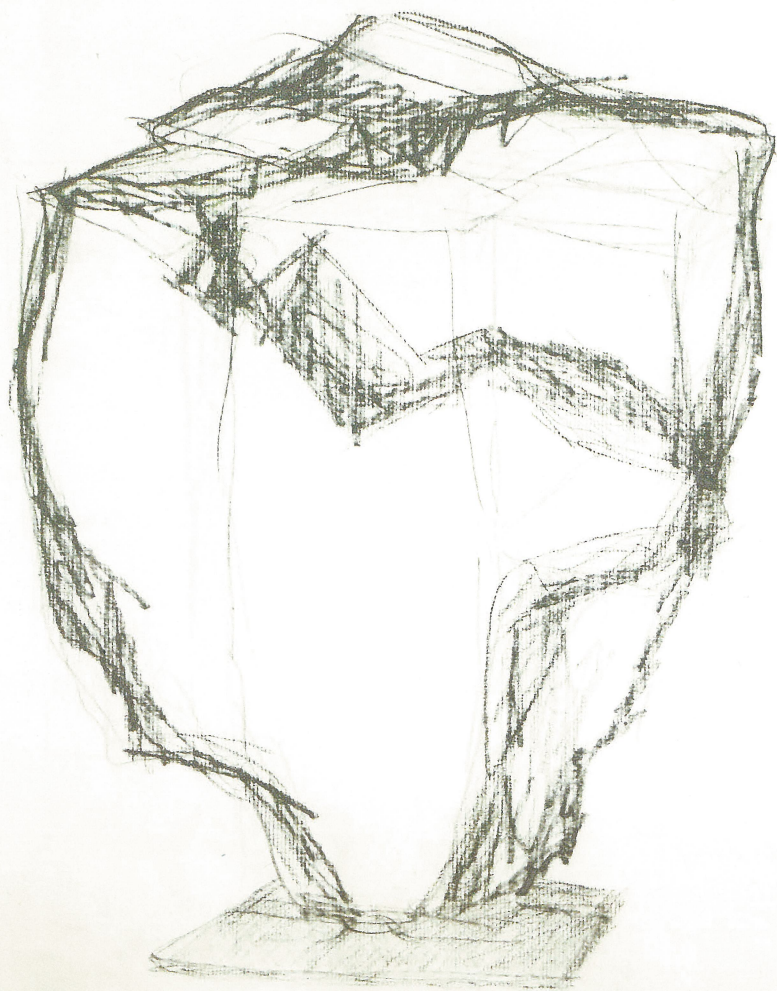
9. *Untitled*, 1960s
graphite & watercolor
13 x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



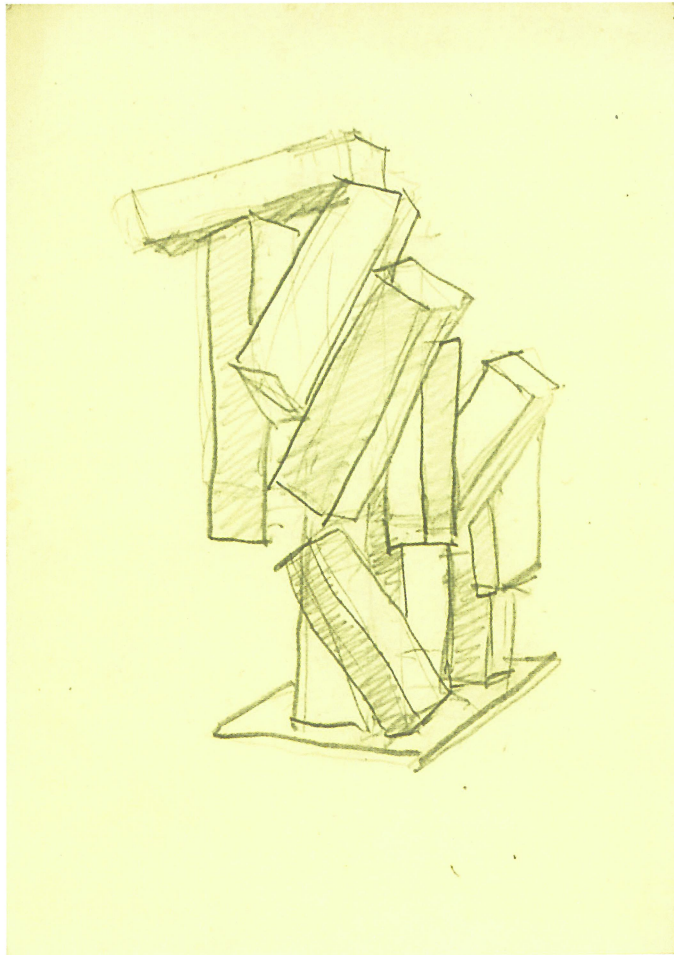
11. *Untitled*, 1960s
graphite & colored pencil
19 x 18 in.



10. *Untitled*, 1960s
graphite & colored pencil
19 x 18 in.

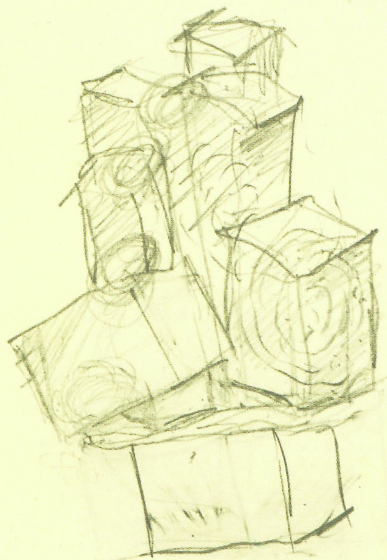


Middle 50s
Paris

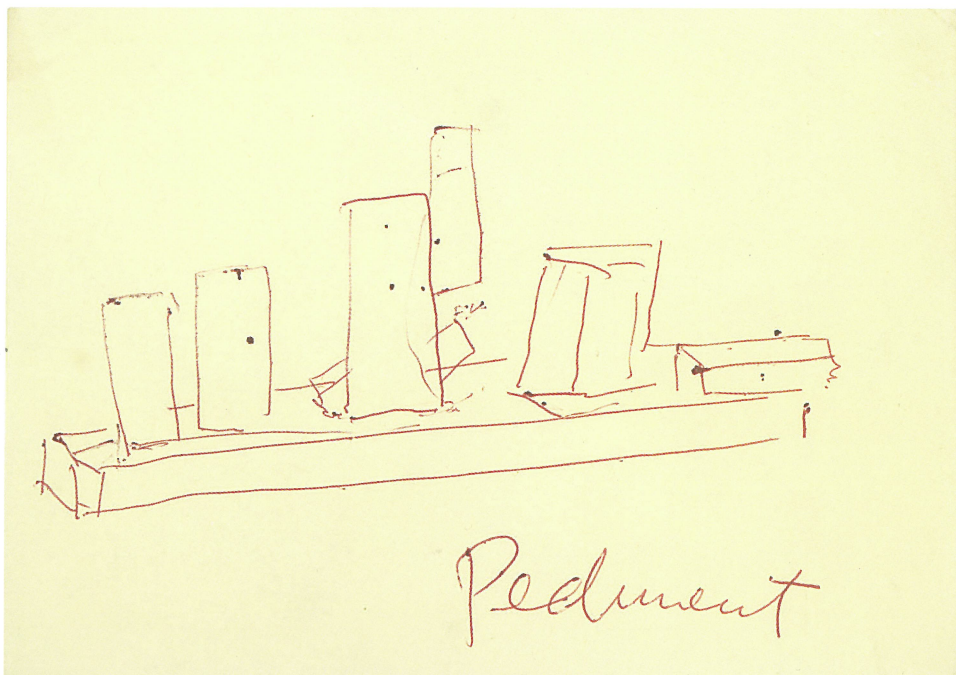


12.A *Untitled*, 1960s
graphite on yellow paper
5 x 3 ½ in.

12.B Squarish Monolith, 1960s
graphite on yellow paper
3 1/2 x 5 in.



Squarish
Monolith



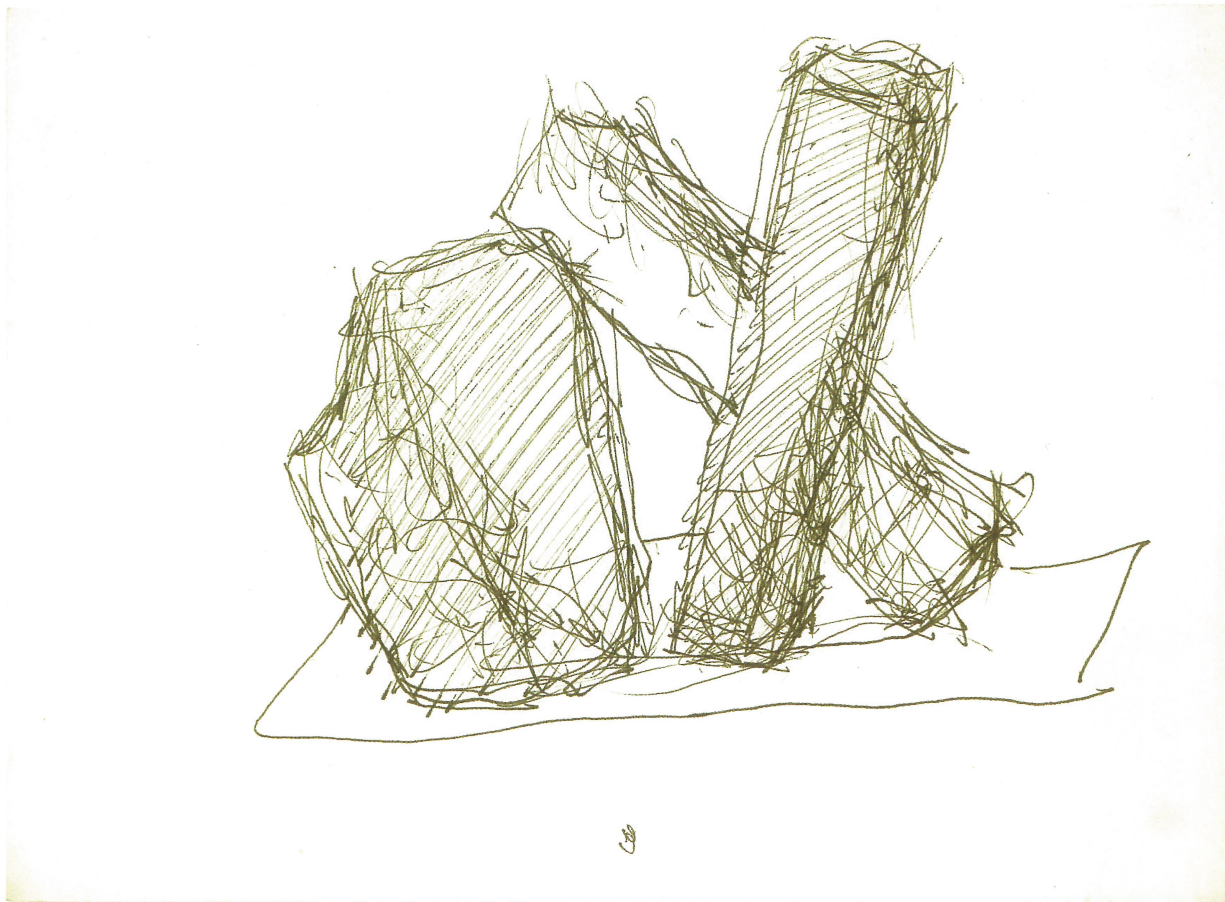
12.C Pediment, 1960s
graphite on yellow paper
3 1/2 x 5 in.

Pediment

13. *Untitled*, 1960s
ink & watercolor
11 ½ x 9 in.



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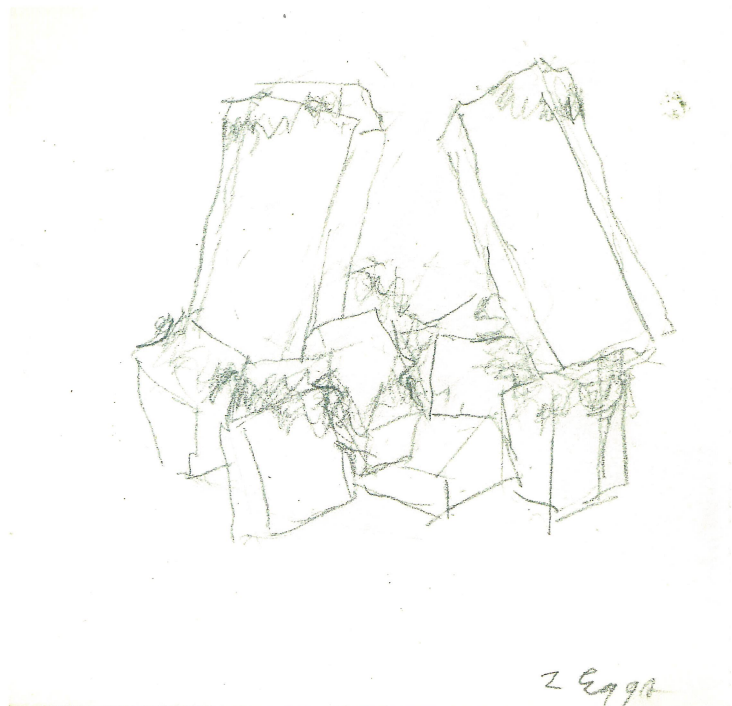
14.A *Untitled*, 1960s
ink on paper
4 ¼ x 5 ¾ in.



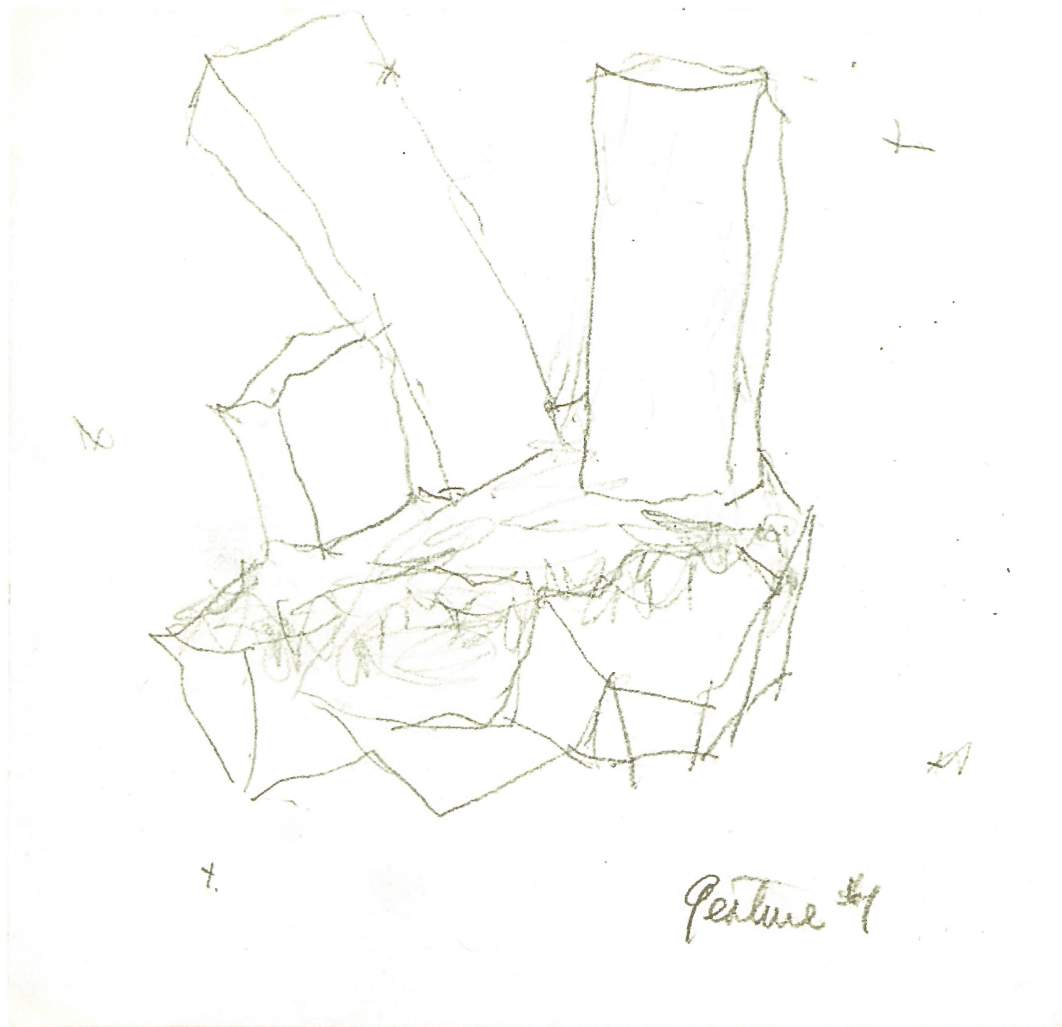
14.B *Untitled*, 1960s
ink on paper
4 1/4 x 5 3/4 in.



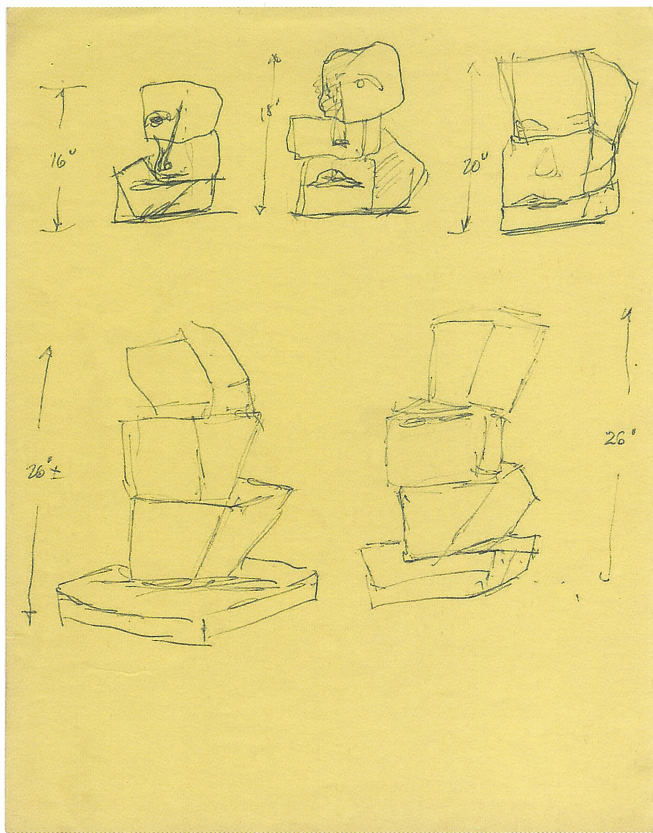
15.A Egg Shadows, 1960s
graphite
4 $\frac{3}{8}$ X 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



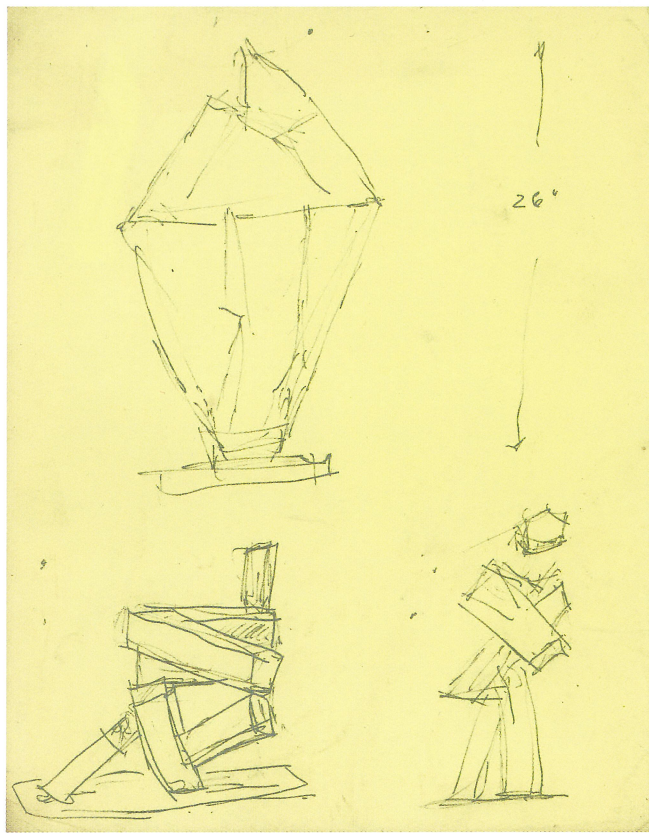
15.B Two Eggs, 1960s
graphite
4 $\frac{3}{8}$ X 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



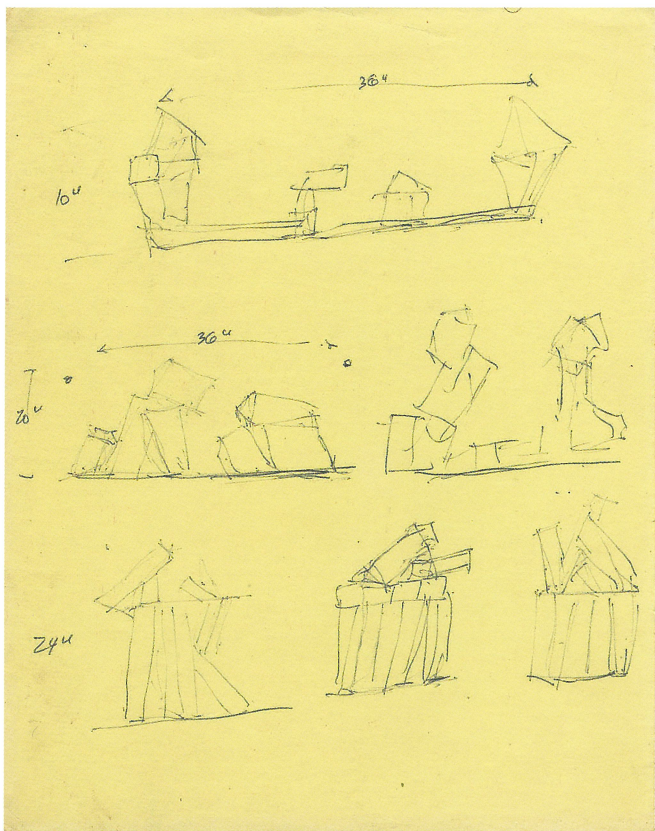
15.C Gesture #1, 1960s
graphite
4 3/8 x 4 1/2 in.



16.A *Untitled*, 1960s
ink & yellow paper
9 x 7 in.

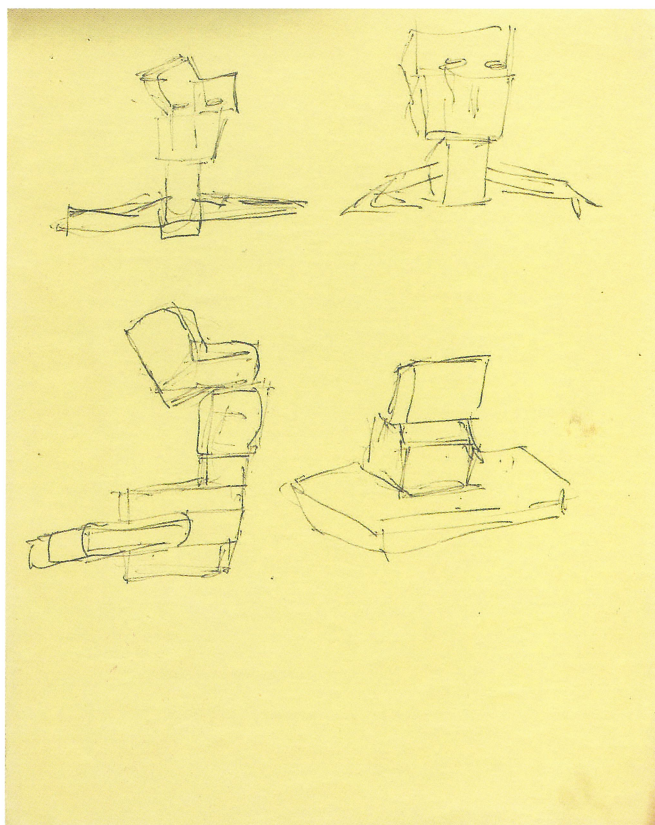


16.B *Untitled*, 1960s
ink & yellow paper
9 x 7 in.



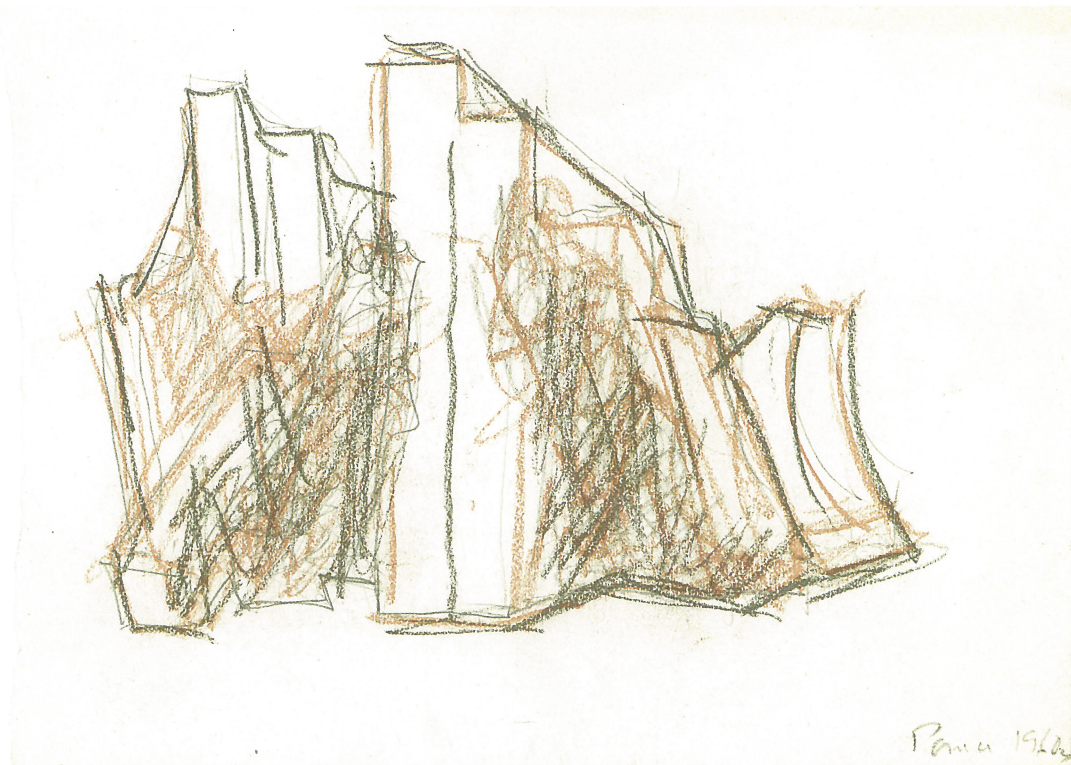
16.C *Untitled*, 1960s
ink & yellow paper
9 x 7 in.

16.D *Untitled*, 1960s
ink & yellow paper
9 x 7 in.



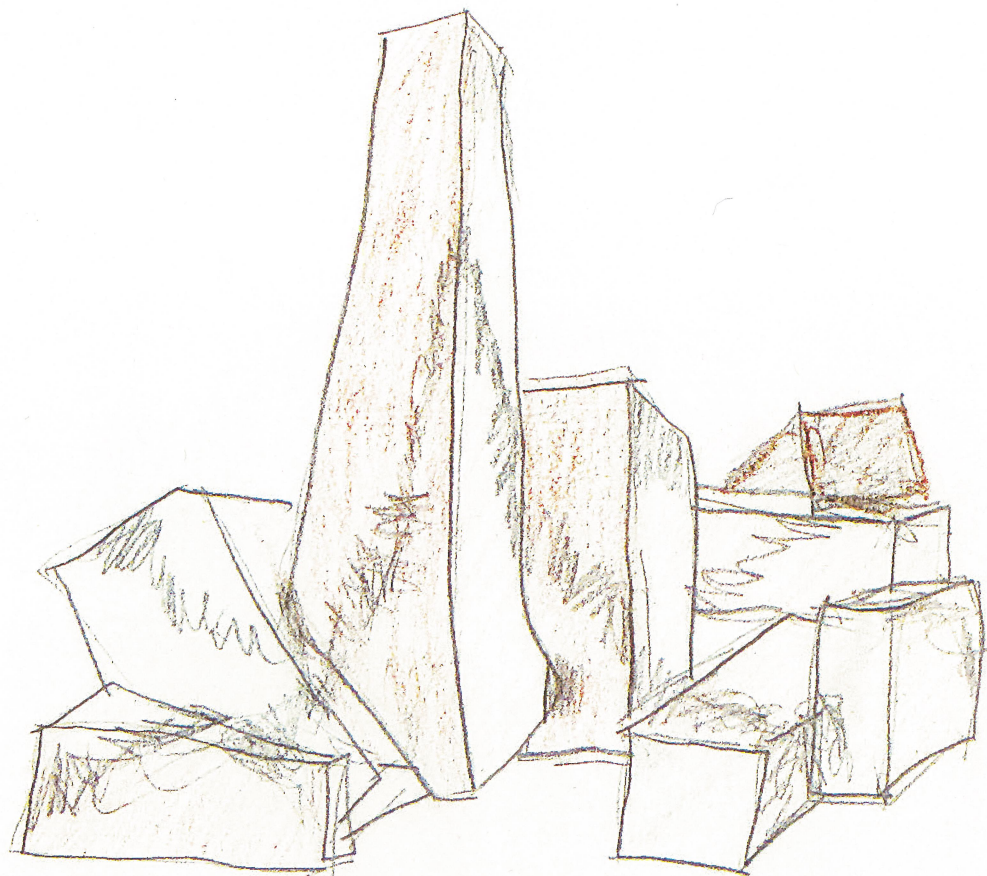


17.A *Untitled*, 1960s
brown & black chalk
8 ¼ x 5 ⅞ in.



17.B *Untitled*, 1960s
brown & black chalk
8 ¼ x 5 ⅞ in.

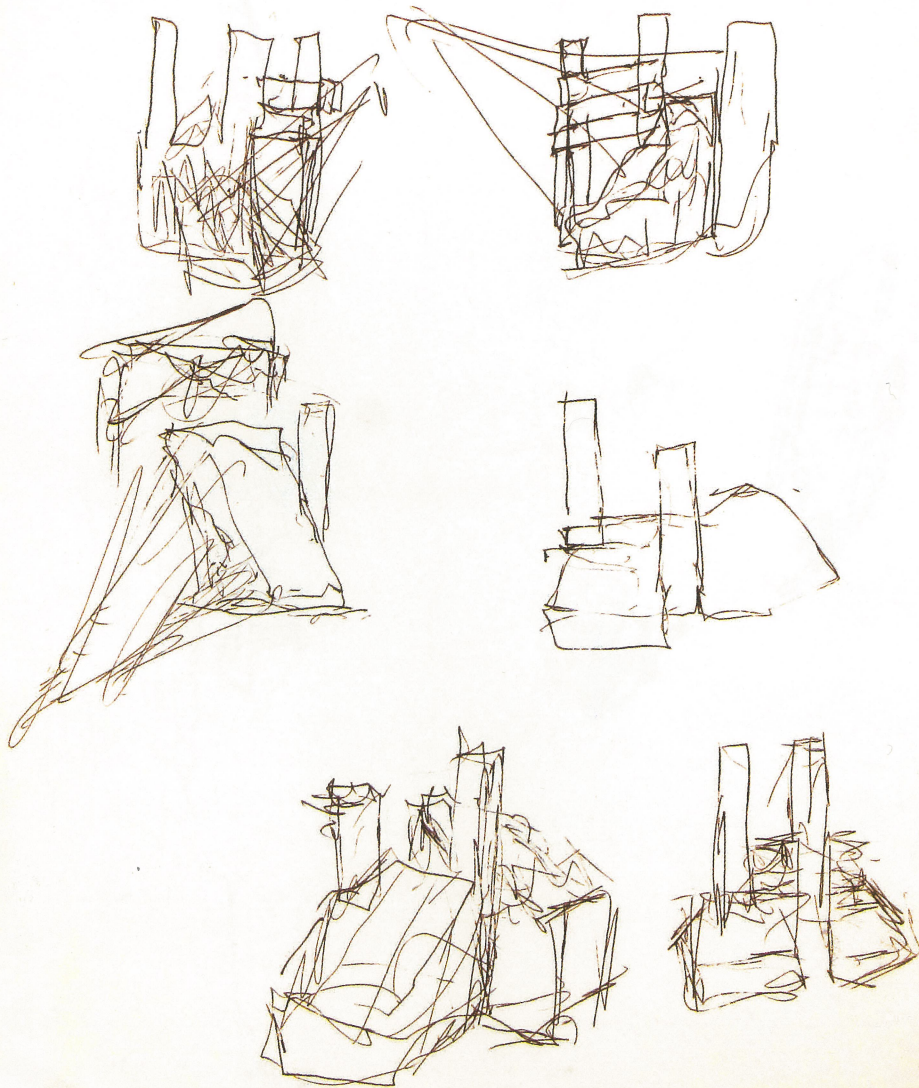
18. *Untitled*, 1960s
graphite & colored pencil
9 3/8 x 8 3/8 in.



19. *Untitled*, 1960s
blue ink & graphite
11 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.



↑



20. *Untitled*, 1960s
blue ink & graphite
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 in.



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