

The image is a black and white etching, likely by M.C. Escher, depicting a symmetrical interior space. The central focus is a staircase with three steps leading up to a platform. On the platform, two dark, vertical, textured figures stand side-by-side, facing away from the viewer. The walls and ceiling are rendered with dense, intricate cross-hatched and radial line patterns, creating a complex, textured environment. The floor is also detailed with similar patterns. The overall composition is highly symmetrical, with a vertical axis of reflection. The style is characteristic of Escher's etched woodcut work, showing fine lines and deep shadows.

First Etching
1969 - 1973

Acknowledgements

Thanks, Peter, Bill, and Mary.

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Artwork by Hugh Merrill

Designed and Edited by Kathryn Day

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Hugh Merrill Bio 2022

Hugh Merrill is an artist, educator, writer and community activist. In 1985 he had a one-person exhibition at the Nelson Atkins Museum, and his work is collected in over 50 museums including the New York Museum of Modern Art, Kansas City Kemper Museum, Cranbrook Art Museum, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and the Poland National Museum of Poznan. He is a long-time professor at the Kansas City Art Institute. In 1996, he collaborated with French artist Christian Boltanski on the city-wide community arts project Our City/Ourselves: Portrait of Community at the Kemper Museum. Hugh was the president of the Southern Graphics Council International from 1992 to 1994. He developed Chameleon Arts and Youth Development as a resource for disenfranchised youth communities which provided over 1 million dollars for community arts and youth development programming during its 25 years. Merrill was selected as one of 42 international artists for Richard Noyce's book *Printmaking at the Edge* published in 2006. Hugh has been awarded multiple grants including 2 NEA grants, Melon Foundation, Yaddo Fellowship, and the 2007 Distinguished Education Award from the Southern Graphics Council International. The Nelson Atkins Museum invited Hugh to curate *Print Lovers at 30: Celebrating Three Decades of Giving* in 2008. In September of 2010, his retrospective *Divergent Consistencies* was exhibited by the Leedy Voulkos Art Center.

Hugh Merrill is the author of:

Divergent Consistencies: 40 years of studio and community artwork

Shared Visions: Thoughts and Experiences in Social Arts Practice

Preaching to the Choir: thoughts on contemporary printmaking

Learning Journal: Teaching in Foundation

Nomadic, published by 39 West Press in 2016

Dog, published by Stubborn Mule press in 2018

Whiteout: Journey of Privilege, published by Spartan press in 2019

Making and Collaboration, published by Chameleon Press

Hugh Merrill: Etchings 1969-1973 First Etching

I arrived in Baltimore to attend the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in 1969. I had \$100.00 in my pocket and a white canvas sea bag filled with my belongings. Got off the bus at the Greyhound terminal and headed out into a blazing hot late August afternoon. I was headed to the Marlborough apartment building on Eutaw Place. I stepped off the curb, tripped, fell face first onto Howard Street and was fortunate not to have been a traffic fatality in my first few minutes in the city.

Built at the intersection of Eutaw Place & Wilson Street in 1907, the 11-story Marlborough building was the first to have electricity and was for a time the tallest building in the city. Many well to do folks lived there, including the sisters Etta and Claribel Cone. The Cone sisters found wealth through their family's successful textile business ventures and gathered a celebrated collection of modern art in their Baltimore apartments.

They had met both Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse while visiting friends Gertrude and Leo Stein in Paris. For decades, the Cone sisters collected Picasso, Matisse, Degas, Cezanne and the "rest." They invited Henri Matisse to come to America and he stayed with them at the Marlborough, overlooking Eutaw Place. Their collection included 114 works by Picasso and hundreds of pieces by Matisse. Upon Etta Cone's death in 1949, the year I was born, the collection was donated to the Baltimore Museum of Art and is on view in the museum's Cone Wing. I visited the collection on many occasions. Over time, I developed a deep friendship with the paintings--many that had once hung in the building I was now living in.

When I arrived at the Marlborough, the building was a tenement and Eutaw Place was a ghetto, a poor and tough place where you took your life in your hands when you decided to walk after dark. Artist and film maker John Waters was living in the Marlborough Apartments then. As was Harris Glenn Milstead, better known as Devine from the Trash Trilogy, Water's films Pink Flamingos, Female Trouble and Desperate Living. The parties were memorable, weird, wonderful, and continuous. Visiting artists and poets invited to MICA from New York often wandered in: it would not surprise anyone to see Alan Ginsberg, John Cage, or Larry Rivers pass through the doors. They were just part of the community of weirdos, poets and artists hanging out.

MICA was a wondrous magic community where there was little structure and

a great deal of interaction between faculty, artists, poets and students. While I loved the Marlborough, the city of Baltimore and the school, things did not start well. I quickly flunked out after the first semester. Why? let's leave it at Immaturity.

I then headed home to Alexandria Virginia and went to work for Senator John Sparkman of Alabama at the Capital in Washington DC. It was a patronage job for the nephew (me) of important Alabama politicians. I hated the job and reapplied quickly for fall of 1970, got in, and went back. Three years later I was accepted into the Printmaking Department of Yale School of Art and Architecture to get my master's degree.

How did I become a printmaker? When I arrived at MICA, painting was still dominant in the arts. For me, at 19 years old, painting seemed rigid and rule oriented: whether it was figurative, action-painting, the muscularity of slinging paint, or Minimalism, with its reduction of the surface to a flat color. It all seemed constricted and pretentious.

Printmaking was viewed as a secondary art form based in craft. Craft at the time was about as ugly a word as you could use in describing a work of art. When you went into the print studio you entered a freer space. One without modernist constraints. The printmaker, then, and perhaps now, was always in a battle with negative forces that belittled and depreciated the art and artists. This provided a wonderful freedom for the printmaker to follow their own voice. I loved making etchings, with its freedom of expression it provided. It was as if a metaphorical door opened for me in the printmaking studio on the third floor of MICA's Italian marble main building. What I discovered in the first 5 years of being in Baltimore, at Mica, living at the Marlborough, and drinking in the Mount Royal Tavern has stayed with me in my studio for over 55 years.

Thoughts on my studio narrative.

To date, I have created well over 500 printed images, etchings, relief prints, digital works, as well as a full body of drawings, paintings and installations. I achieved technical virtuosity in generating highly crafted etchings but also learned to push against virtuosity and make works that celebrate the physicality of the acid attacking the metal etching plate.

Image making is the working through of pictorial possibilities that show themselves to the "artist" (me) during the time spent in studio. Making the work,

is a dialogue of give and take with the materials, a breaking down of rigidity and quick solutions. The activity of making directs the artist's eye to discover pictorial solutions that are in concert with their (my) concerns, memory, and concepts. Over time the importance of geometry and architectural linear forms contrasted with organic natural forms and passages of drawing became the underlying forces to energize my etchings.

At Yale, I worked with Gabor Peterdi, a brilliant (print) artist and mentor who understood the excesses of craft for its own sake. Peterdi taught generations of print artists that the etching process and the materials have a strong voice in the production and even the meaning of the work. He often spoke of vitality as a form of beauty. I was already on this road and enjoyed his brilliance and support.

It should also be noted that the history of printmaking ranging from Durer to Goya, Romare Bearden and Elizabet Catlitt, consistently dealt with social, political and psychological content. I was deeply interested in social change and was part of the civil rights, gay, women's and anti-war movements. In addition, I was deeply depressed, going undiagnosed for decades to come, had the scars of an ugly upbringing and dysfunctional family, as well as an array of learning disorders. All this energy, personal and political, needed to be part of my work and became part of the journey toward my artistic vision. The door to being a painter was closing as the door to making prints opened broadly. Making etchings for me was a way to dive deeply into my own being.

These forces, circumstances and realities were not apparent to me as an artist in his early 20s: they were not concepts, but lived experiences that led to images coming out of my zinc etching plates. Slowly, through developing my studio narrative, working daily, my experiences at MICA, Yale and beyond, step by step this journey has led to my vision. What I have accomplished was not thought up, but lived and achieved over time, making and tearing it all up and remaking it again. So, it is for me.

Hugh Merrill

The story of my First Etching

Artistic breakthroughs come from many places. Ways of channeling creative energy arise from a myriad of influences, which vary for every person. Many times, it can be difficult for an artist to determine which way to go to develop an idea. Some ideas seem to emerge completely on their own, almost as if artists were following something outside themselves. Ideas can take on a life of their own. For artists working and discovering their creative paths, others' work and methods can be instrumental in developing a personal methodology, especially in the media of printmaking, which can seem prohibitively technical.



A drawn line will always be simpler to make and understand than an etched line, simply because there is no time delay between the making of the mark and seeing, experiencing the mark. Drawing is a direct process, so nothing is hidden or mysterious. In print, the technical barrier between drawing the line and then etching the metal then printing the plate slows the process of drawing to a crawl. I found this indirect and slow process was for me not detrimental, but a rich positive creative process. (Hugh Merrill)

From Discussions with Jenette Powers

“It almost killed me,” Merrill has been known to comment about his Lucky Dragon suite, which was first exhibited at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1985. The series started as a personal response to a Japanese maritime disaster. A nuclear-bomb test destroyed a fishing vessel, setting off a firestorm of publicity and rage that resulted in a \$2 million payoff from the United States to the Japanese government (1). This test was conducted by the United States in 1954 and was specifically designed to provide maximum lethal fallout. At the time, Merrill had been working on atmospheric and structural concepts and imagery, which dovetailed well with the sad fate of the Japanese fisherman.

Merrill produced a new etching daily over several months, resulting in 70 separate pieces. In the process, he weakened the zinc plate until it had no structural integrity and could no longer be printed. Here, Merrill talks a little bit about how he got started drawing and etching and comments on the beginnings of his methods of self-discovery and the role of chance and history that he began exploring as a youth and continues to do so today.

- Nettie Powers



First Etching

The Story and Consequences of my First Etching

I was learning to draw in 1968. At that time, we had 12 hours of drawing with a model each week at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland, where I was a student. Each night in my apartment, I would copy the work of Max Beckmann, James Ensor, George Grosz, and others. I was drawing abstractly on large sheets of brown paper using a variety of mediums, including paint and charcoal. Photographs and collage materials from newspapers and magazines were then pasted onto the images.

I had found an old cardboard box in the closet of my apartment in the Marlborough building which was filled with black-and-white porn magazines and several years' worth of Disabled American Veteran magazines. All this showed up in the drawings.

The Marlborough had been one of America's most posh apartment buildings back in its day. It housed the Cone sisters, who spent much time in Paris at the movable feast, where they bought Matisse's, Picasso's, and Degas's works for a song. Their collection would later form the core of the Baltimore Museum of Arts' collection. By 1968, this once-wealthy area was dirt poor. The beautiful, old brownstones lining Eutaw Street had been broken up into small apartments for the diaspora of southern African Americans moving to the north.

The Marlborough had lost much of its grace but had rooms that testified to past wealth. Apartment had bathtubs that a 6-foot man could float in, marble countertops with brass fixtures—all the good stuff. The building was now falling apart and had been taken over by students and artists hanging around MICA. The residents included John Waters and his starlet Divine, who, at the time, were making the now infamous film *Pink Flamingos*. Artists, students, poets, and eccentrics came and went in our own version of the movable feast, but there was a lot more pot in our neighborhood in 1968 than there was in Paris.

In my sophomore year, I took an etching class taught by Peter Hooven. He spent most of the class drinking beer at the bar just down the street. The class started at 9:00 in the morning. If I needed to talk to my teacher, I had to walk down to the Mt. Royal Tavern, which was always worth the walk, because I ended up in an interesting conversation, he bought me a couple of beers in the process.

I began to be drawn toward etching and found that, in printmaking, there was no

solid, contemporary current. In painting, students were told what contemporary art was and how to make it. At the time, painting stripes or knockoffs of abstract expressionism made up most of the student's palettes.

Print was more obscure and mystical in both history and process. I started by tracing an image from one of the porn magazines I found in the closet onto the plate and then added geometric divisions with a ruler. Like most young artists, I was focused on control. Twelve years in the American public school system had taught me about control and to know the answers to the questions long before they were asked.

Thinking, feeling and creative vision were not part of the high school curriculum. Just knowing the answer does not mean that it is creative or interesting. Vision and creativity are more than correct answers and come about more slowly through acquired knowledge, life experience, time, and experiential interaction. Knowledge grows from contact, participation, and reaction. It is a dialogue. When I began making drawings and etchings, I was automatically driven toward control, trying to think up the meaning of the work and then illustrate it. Think it up first, and then make it, rather than becoming a part of it from beginning to end.

The print process is a guardian against control for the beginning student, throwing in the artist's way frustration, evil misdirection, and a tornado of chancy operations. How many drops of acid do I use for this litho? How long do I leave the plate in the acid for etching and so on?

Let me step back. In the beginning, the etchings I made were drawings on zinc plates, which were etched a single time and printed, oddly coming out in reverse. There was little reason these first etchings should not have simply remained drawings. Yet there was something that drew me to stay with what I saw as an outdated process.

The day came when my zinc etching plate with the tracing of two nudes from a magazine, coupled with a good deal of cross-hatching in the background, was put in the acid for a 20-minute etch. I left the print room and went to the Mt. Royal Tavern. I returned after several beers, a game of pool and much good conversation. The plate had been in a new 6 to 1 acid solution for three hours to my eyes, it was ruined. I left the plate on a table, angry but unable yet to toss it and headed back to the bar.

In the morning, Hooven came into class prior to going out for a drink. When the class gathered, he held the plate up in front of everyone. It was so deeply etched it was a relief sculpture. Hooven said, “Thank, God, this is an etching!” He asked who did it, and when I raised my hand, he looked unsure and understood it was a mistake, not a defining creative risk.

I took the compliment with acceptance. I needed it, and Hooven asked me to print the plate. I re-filed the edges before printing as they had transformed from perfectly rounded, straight, mirror-finished lines to what could have been the topography of a riverbank. I did my best to repair the damage and then inked the plate and began wiping it with a tarlatan. The ink clung to the deep areas with a richness I had never seen before. The cross-hatched areas that had been etched away held a fine, thin skin of ink and were surrounded by a dark, ink halo. The delicate drawing of the figures’ faces had etched together to produce a mask, foreground, and background, complicating the reading of the space. I began to feel that I might have something, and when I had completed wiping the plate, I placed it on the press bed.

Hooven, had blotted a piece of Arches Buff paper and positioned it. I turned the crank on the press and felt the pressure increase as the plate went under the roller. Hooven pulled the felts back, slung them over the roller, and carefully lifted the paper from the plate. He smiled and said, “Now that’s an etching,” and flipped the print onto a table for all to see. I was awestruck; the drawing was greatly improved by the etching process. The simple act of allowing the acid to do the work had changed everything. The attack by the acid had taken a rather trite image and turned it into something much more profound and mystical.

The space described in the print was not easily determined. The richness of the lines was dynamic, and the ink achieved a physicality in the black areas I had no idea existed. The straightforward content the nudes possessed was interrupted and placed in a new light, questioning the male gaze, and giving power to the nude, feminine figures. I was on my way but not quite sure if the work was mine or just a lucky accident.

It would take years to digest all that went into making this “first etching”. At first, it seemed easy to just etch the hell out of the plate, but that was not the lesson. The lesson was to allow chance into the process, to move as an artist from control to openness, to new opportunities, content, and possibilities. Not preconceived solutions.

This recognition was not only skill based and technical but also based in meaning and content. New images that seemed to come from beyond my intellect led me to new interpretations and social investigations of my subconscious imaginings.

Later, while at the Maryland Institute, I would meet John Cage and Allen Ginsberg. Only God knows why they would take an interest in my work, but they did. Cage's concern for leaving space for chance in the studio narrative and creative process had an immense impact on my work as a printmaker. I had been writing poetry in 1970, as well as making prints and large, mixed-media drawings.

Emmanuel Navarrete, Cage and Ginsberg came up to my apartment on Baltimore Street near MICA to look at my work. They liked the direction of the prints and drawings, so I got cocky and handed Ginsberg my sketchbook, which I turned to a page of my poetry. He read the poem, gently closed the sketchbook, looked me in the eye, and said one word: "Paint." Navarrete and Cage broke out laughing, and so did I.

I guess I knew the poetry was trite stuff, and the advice given was concise and good humored. Then Cage got serious and posed this idea for writing or creativity in general. He told me to select four areas I knew a lot about: family, my erotic life, the Civil War, and high school. He took a piece of paper off my desk and drew two circles and divided each into quadrants. In the quadrants of one circle, he wrote 1 minute, 5 minutes, 8 minutes, and 30 seconds. He wrote the subject areas in the second circle: Civil War, erotic life and so on. He then took dice from his pocket and rolled a single die on the subject and the other on the time circle. He told me to write without thinking about the selected subject for the amount of time the dice directed and to continue the process 10 times. I was to take that text, created by both knowledge and chance work from it, discovering new ideas and relations based on the chance operation of the dice. Over the next several weeks, I played with the process, making a series of writings. This process and writing in general did not open up for me, but I learned a more important lesson and have applied it to my prints and drawings ever since.

Several years later, in graduate school, William Bailey and Al Held, two very different types of artists, both talked about creating a dialogue with the image. Their sense of dialogue seemed to mirror Cage's idea of opening the creative process to the operations of chance. The artist provides input and then looks at and lives with the image in the studio, allowing new connections to form.

The image is concrete, and thoughts are illusive and nonmaterial. The gap between what we think and what we make is the area of dialogue. Artists no longer work from a theory, concept, or fantasy/mental imaging of what has to be done. They look at what already is and make decisions based on the material reality of the physical work. This always leads to ideas different than the original conceptual inspiration.

Peter Milton, Evan Summers, and many other extraordinary print artists apply their images to the plate by drawing. The etching process, with its incised lines and plate tone, provides the image with a richness and physicality difficult to achieve in drawing alone. For me, the drawing is the first step to enter the plate. My images lie under the plate's pristine, mirrored surface, not on it. Images lie inside the plate and have to be carved out of the metal surface.

I often attempted to draw with the precision of Albrecht Dürer, Milton, or Summers, but for me, the etching needle cutting through the ground was always the first layer, which would eventually be etched, sanded, and scraped away to leave only archeological remnants of the first drawing efforts. The images were built up by combining aquatint, soft ground, line etching, engraving, and, most importantly, scraping and grinding the surface away, transforming it into trace memories of previous incarnations. The burnisher, scraper and disc sander I used for grinding the metal surface were as integral to the image as the etching needle.

For eight years, from 1968 to 1976, I created abstract landscape images using this process. When the image reached its final stage, I would then pull small editions of 10 or so prints. Eventually, I began to recognize that each image had more life through sequence and variation. I found that the plate had multiple conclusions and multiple complex narratives. I had always been drawn to Rembrandt's multiple states of the Crucifixion and other plates. I began to produce sequential etching monotypes, pulling one, two, or three prints from each state, rather than an edition. At times, I would create as many as 70 unique prints from a single zinc plate, as I did with the Lucky Dragon suite (1986) and the Tower Series (2012) made at Guanlan Printmaking Base in Shenzhen, China.

Now even though I do not make etchings anymore my drawings with digital printing are informed by the sequential process of creating etching monotypes and the memory of adding and forcefully subtracting from the surfaces I was working on. There is something today when I will go to my studio that was essential which started with the first etching, it amazes me.

List of Prints 1969 to 1973

1. Baltimore Walker 1969 Etching 4x6
2. Back to the VA Hospital 1969 Etching 3x9
3. First Etching: Girls 1970 Etching 9x12
4. Aniconic Portrait 1970 Etching 5x5
5. Lover 1972 Etching 12x12
6. I Can't Depend on Growing Old 1971 Etching 18x24
7. Ambo 1971 Etching 10x10
8. Exedra 1972 Etching 4x6
9. Bears House 1972 Etching 10x10
10. Bears Release 1972 Etching 12x12
11. Sky Tower 1972 Etching 8x8
12. Inside Out 1972 Etching 9x10
13. Hortus Conclusus 1972 Etching 9x12
14. Interior Wall 1972 Etching 9x9
15. Wall III 1972 Etching 9x9
16. Milton's World 1972 Etching 18x24
17. Western Garden I 1972 Etching 18x24

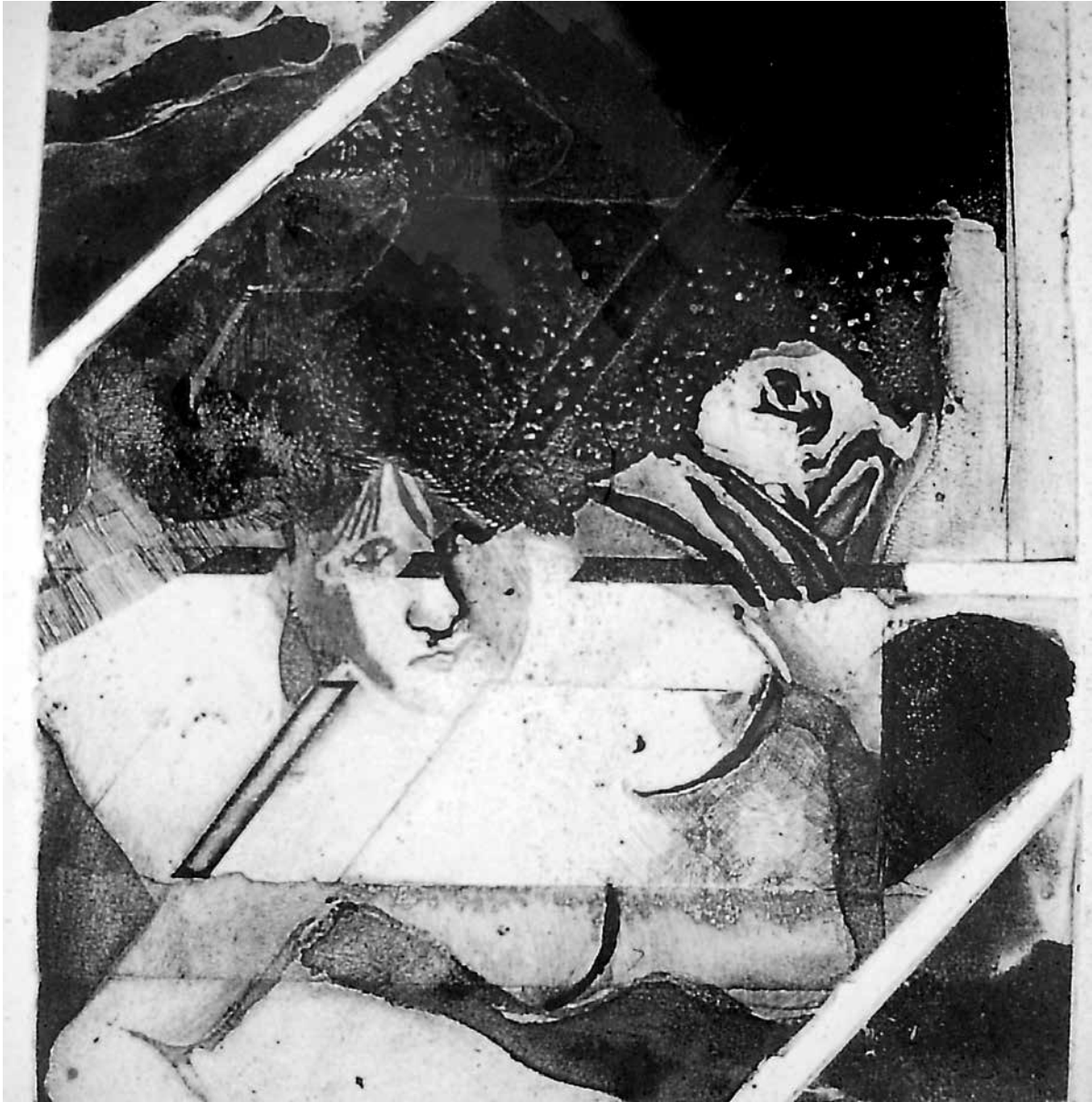
The image is a symmetrical, high-contrast etching. It depicts a staircase with a central vertical axis. At the top and bottom of the staircase, there are two dark, vertical, textured shapes that resemble figures or pillars. The walls on either side of the staircase are filled with dense, cross-hatched lines, creating a dark, textured background. The overall composition is balanced and symmetrical, with the central text 'First Etching' overlaid on the middle section of the image.

First Etching

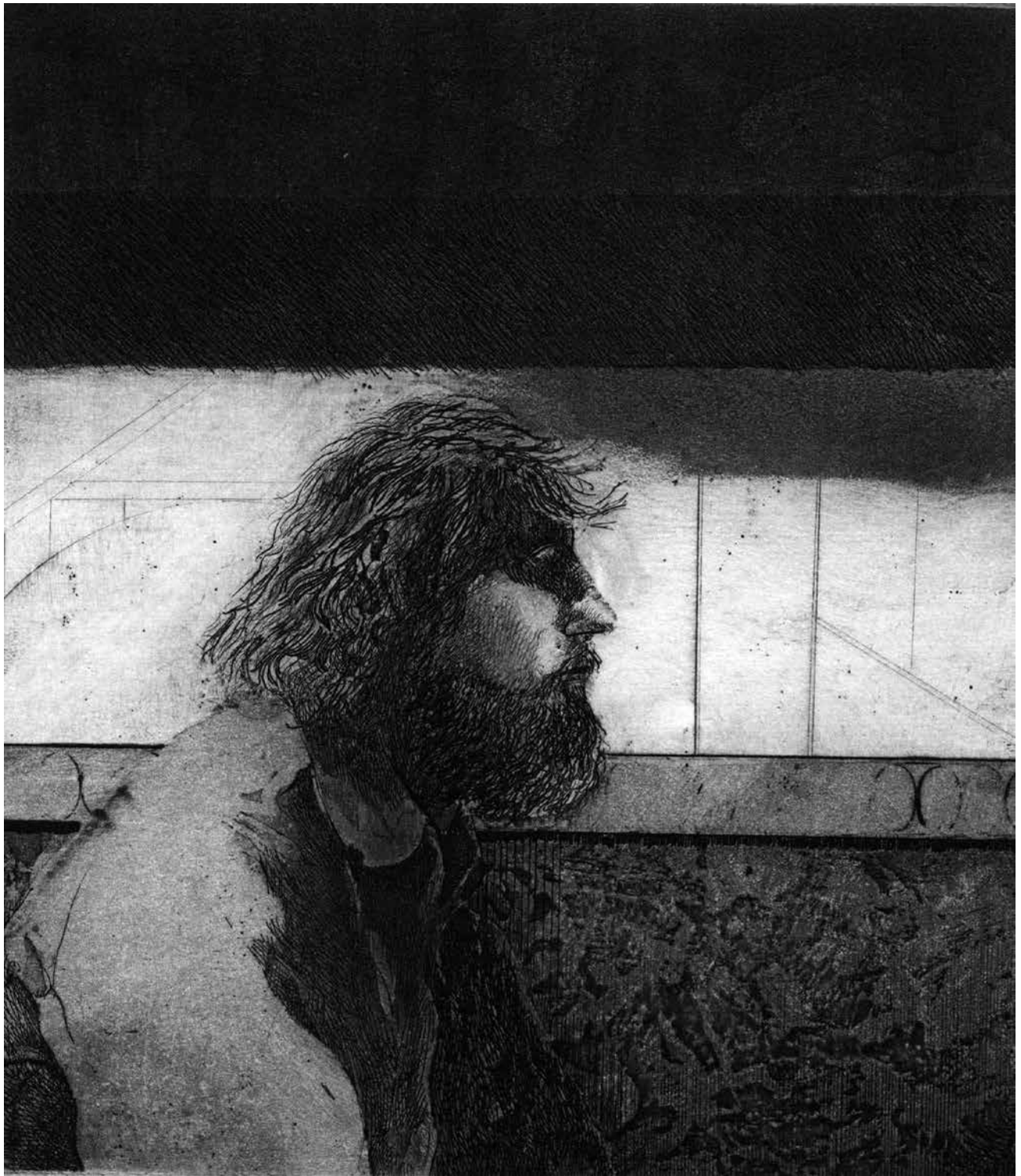


Baltimore Walker 1969 Etching 4x6





First Etching (Girls) 1970 Etching 9x12



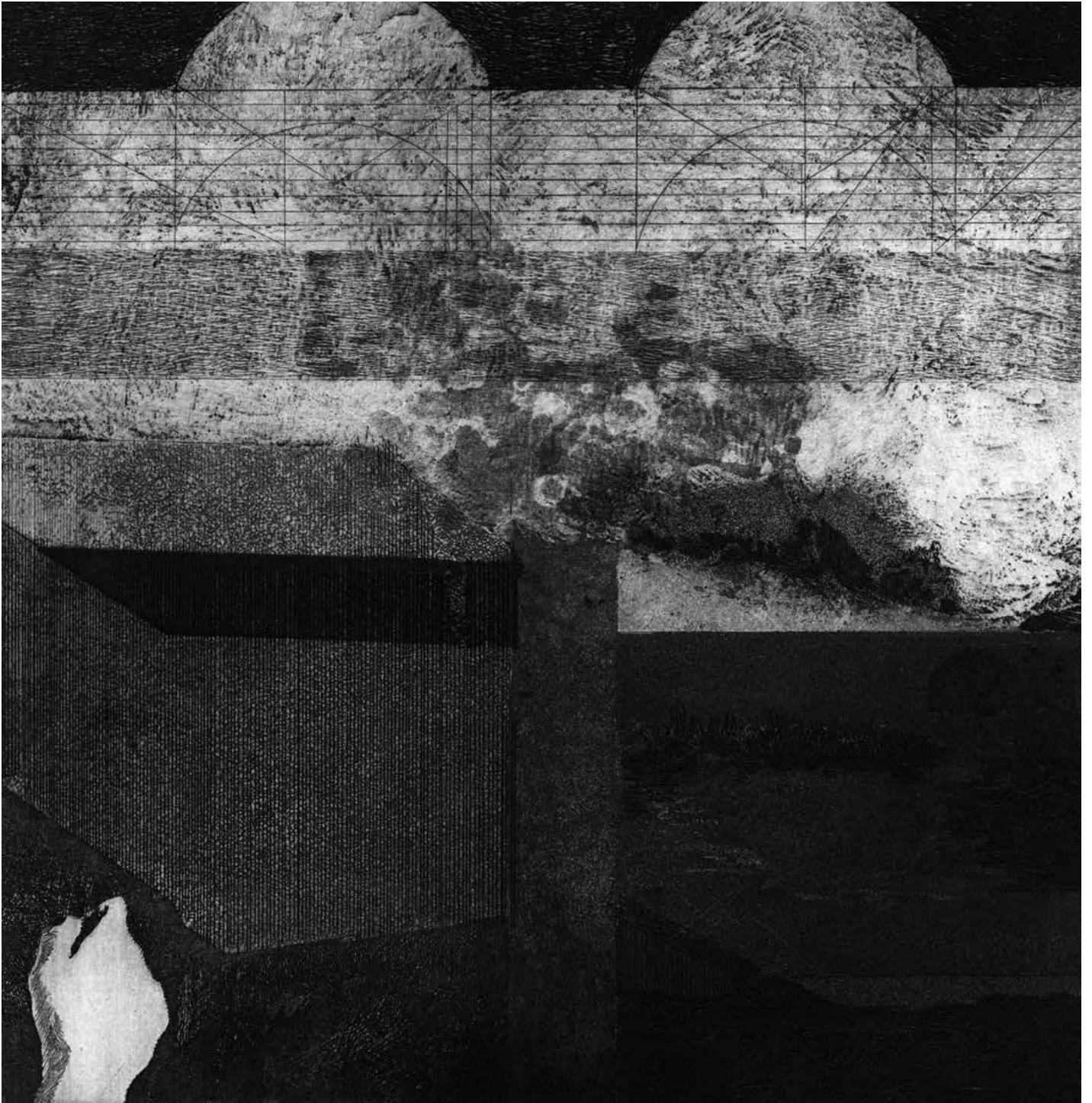
Aniconic Portrait 1970 Etching 5x5



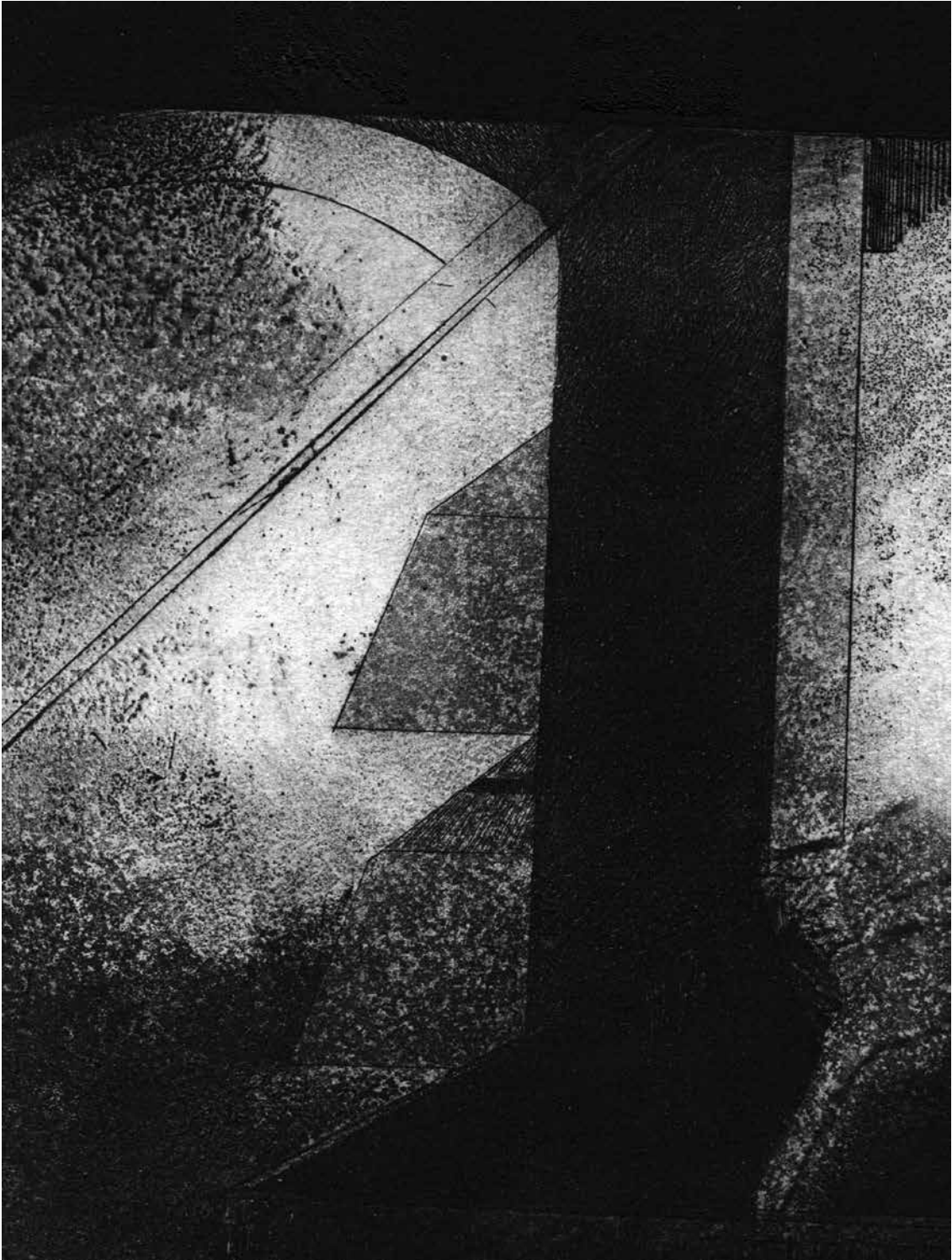
Lover 1972 Etching 12x12



I Can't Depend on Growing Old 1971 Etching 18x24



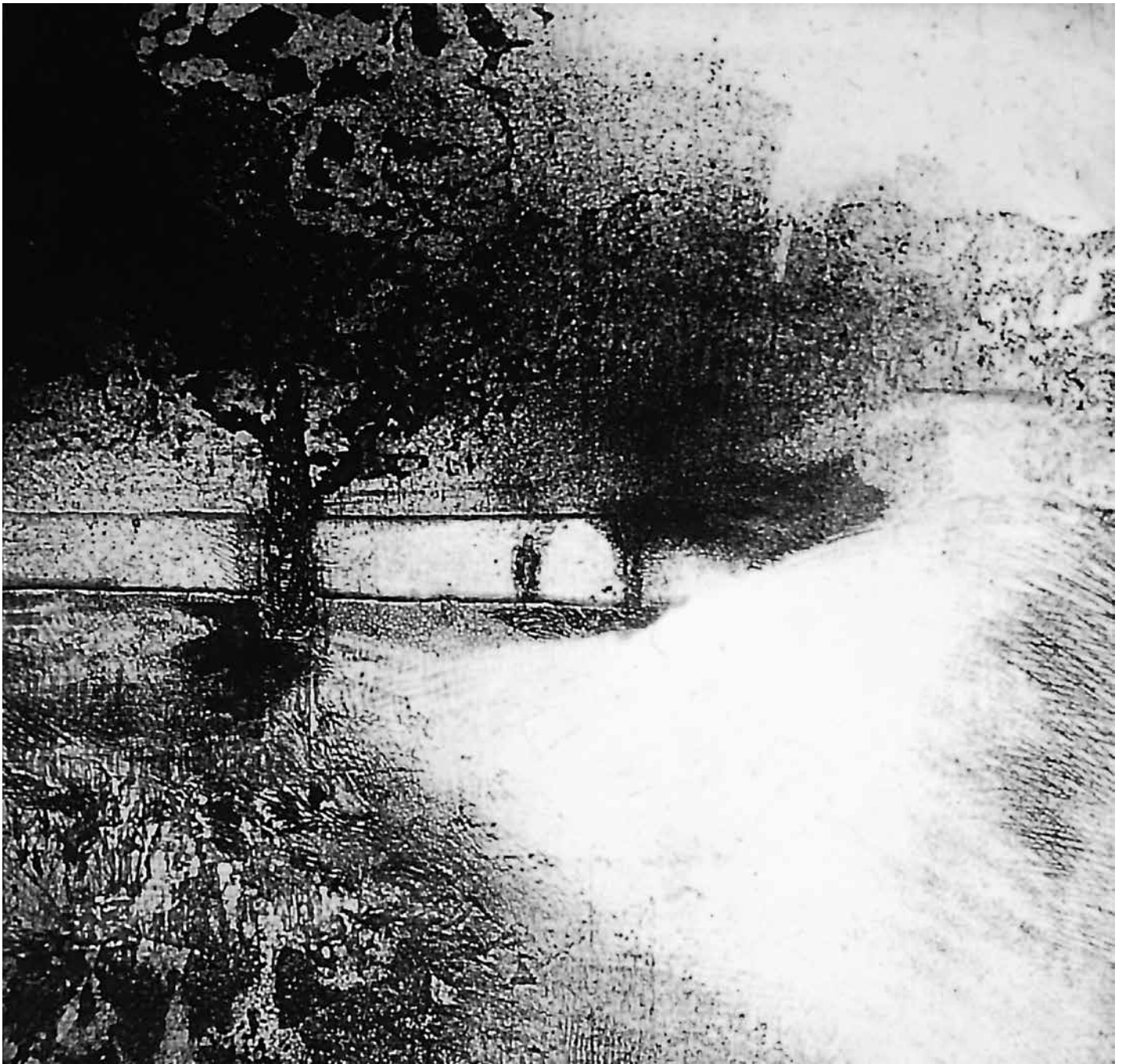
Ambo 1972 Etching 12x12

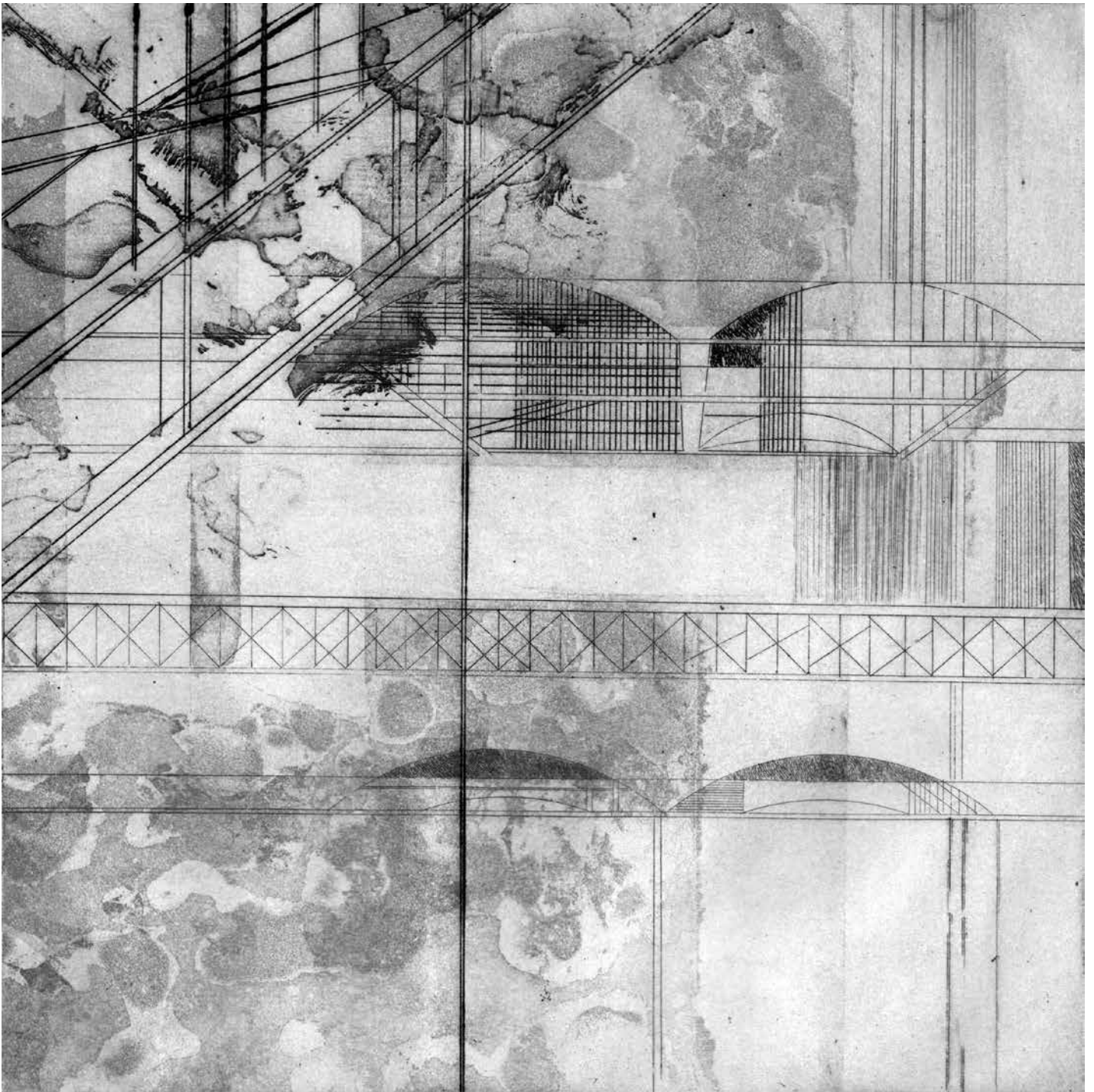


Exedra 1972 Etching 4x6

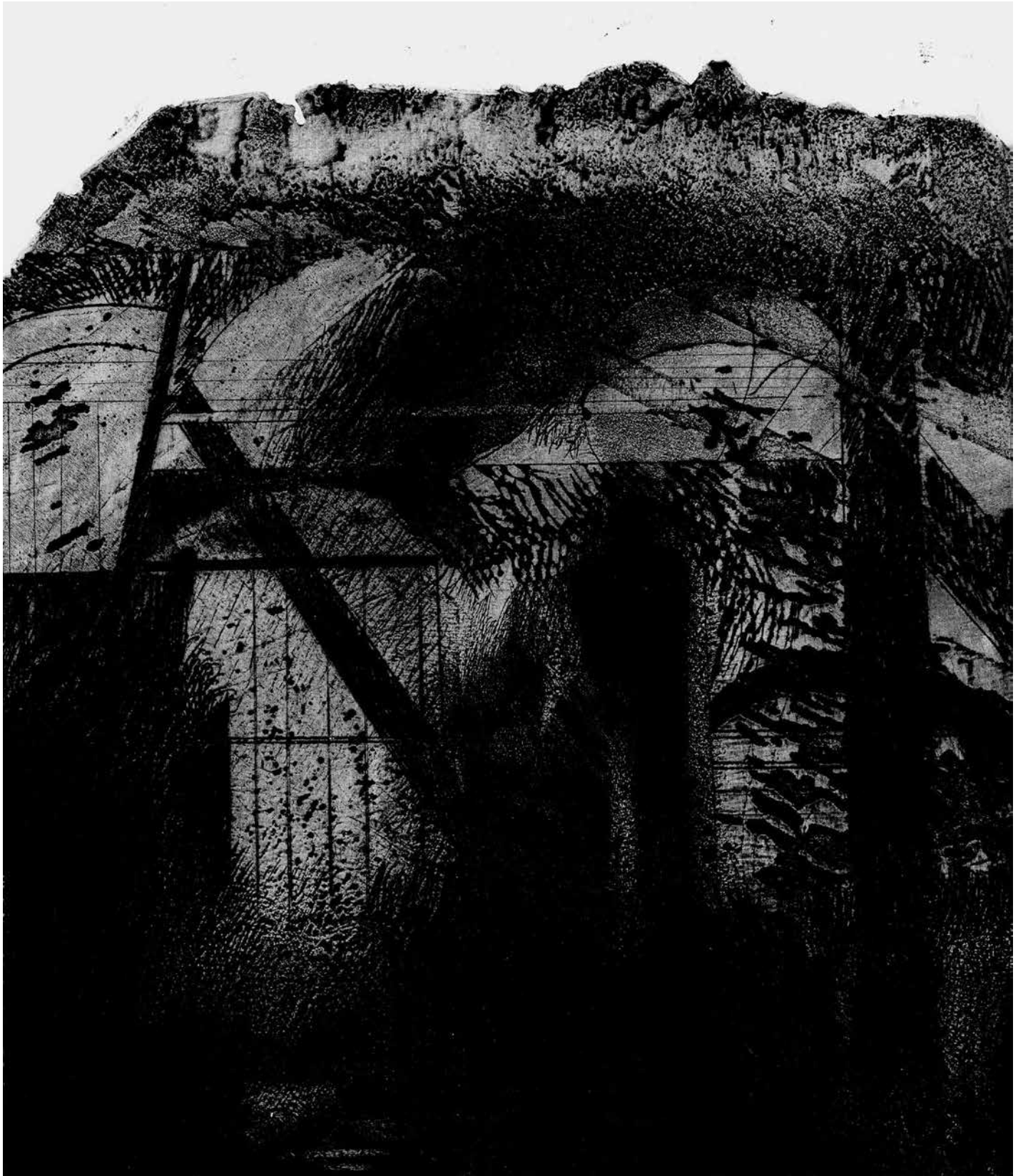


Bears House 1972 Etching 10x10

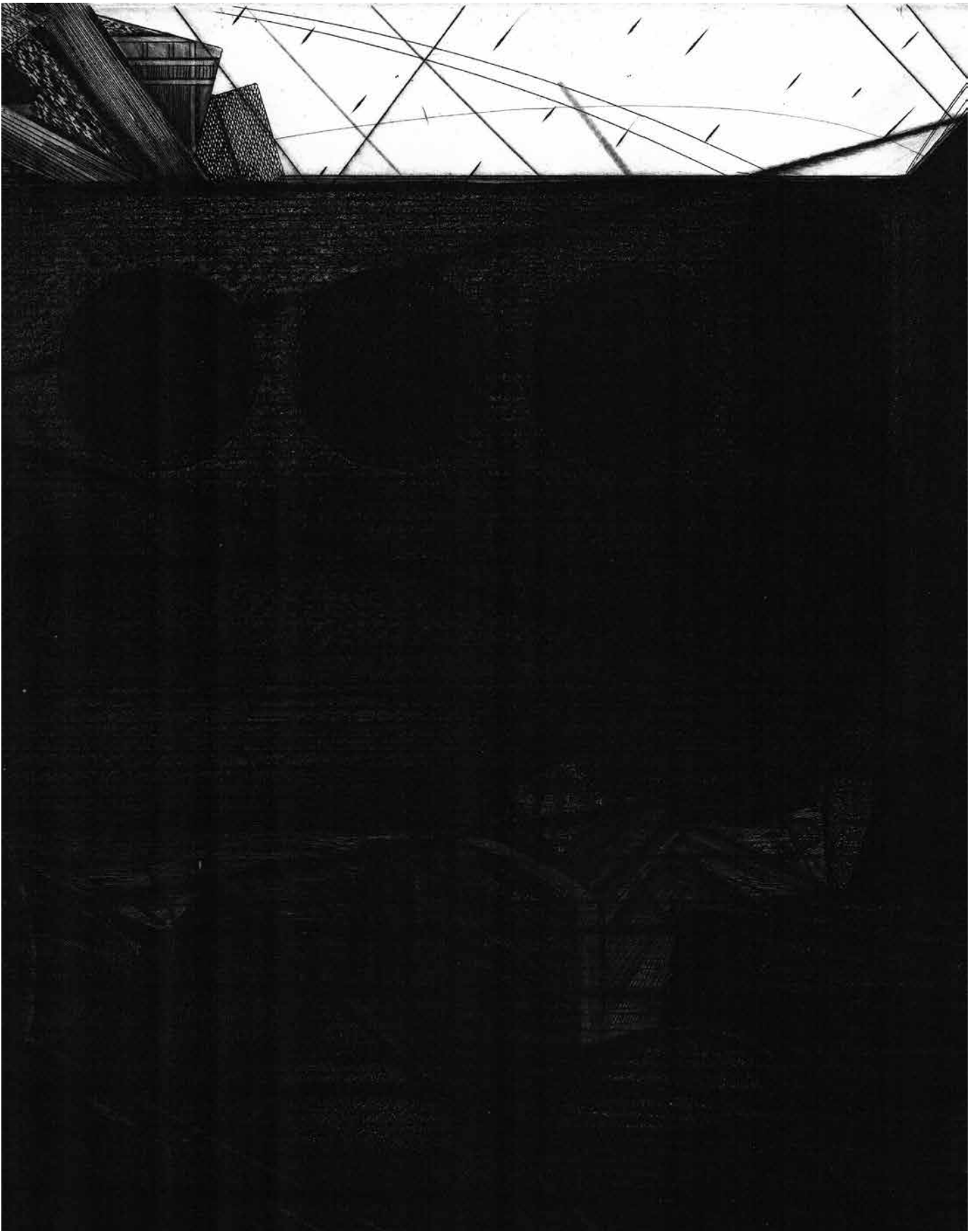




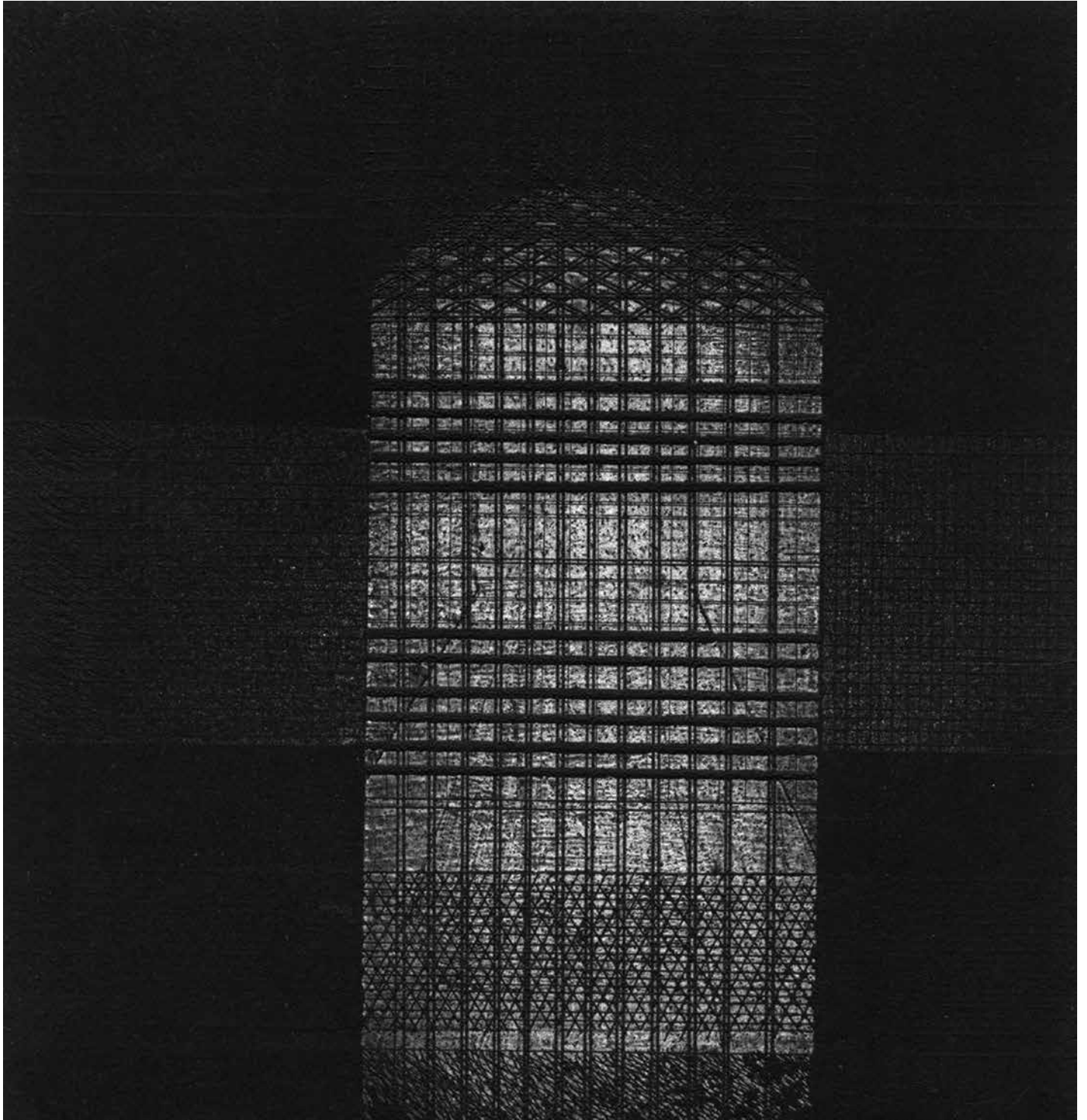
Sky Tower 1972 Etching 8x8



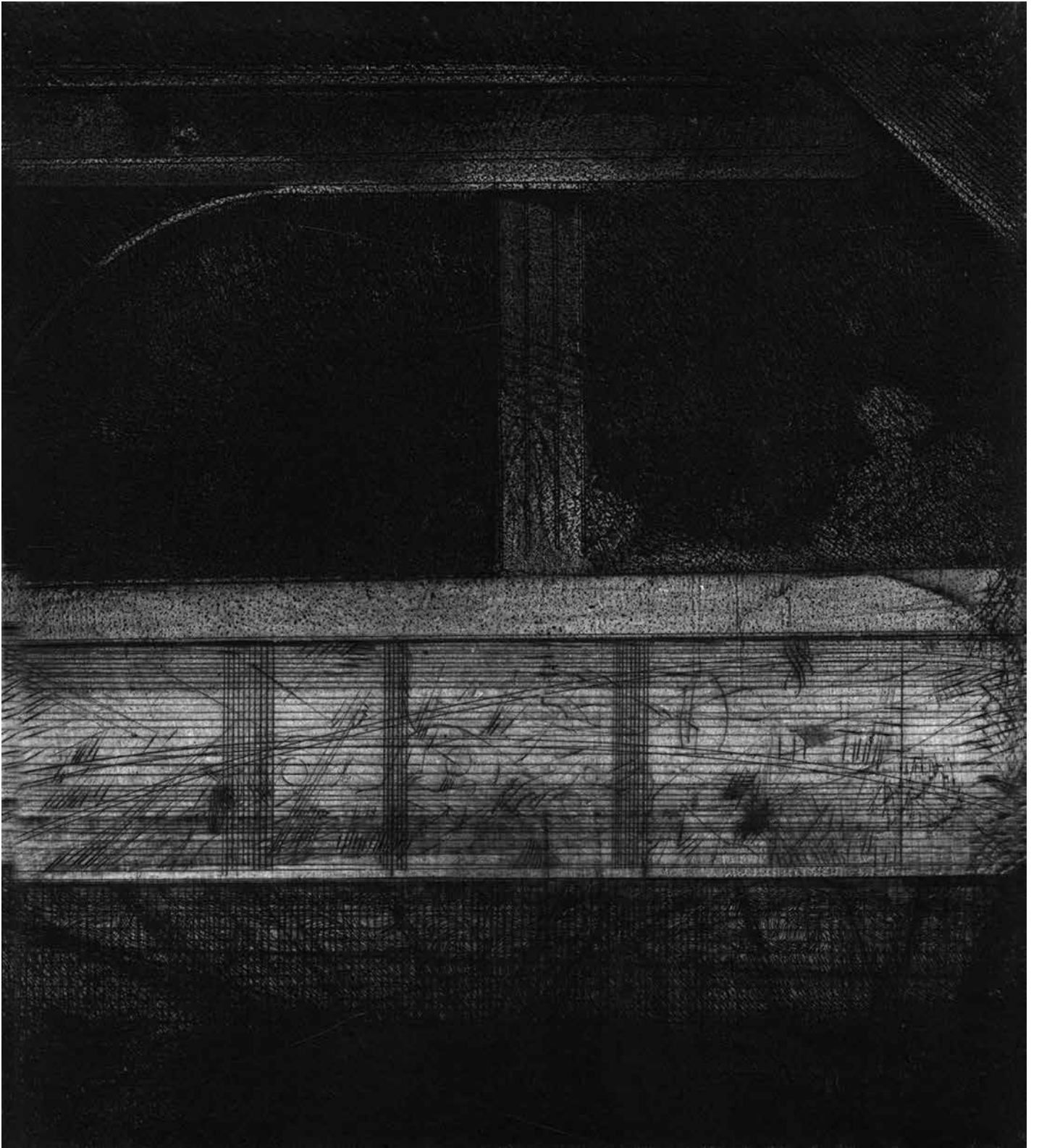
Inside Out 1972 Etching 9x10



Hortus Conclusus 1972 Etching 9x12



Interior Wall 1972 Etching 9x9



Wall III 1972 Etching 9x9



Milton's World 1972 Etching 18x24



Western Garden I 1972 Etching 18x24

