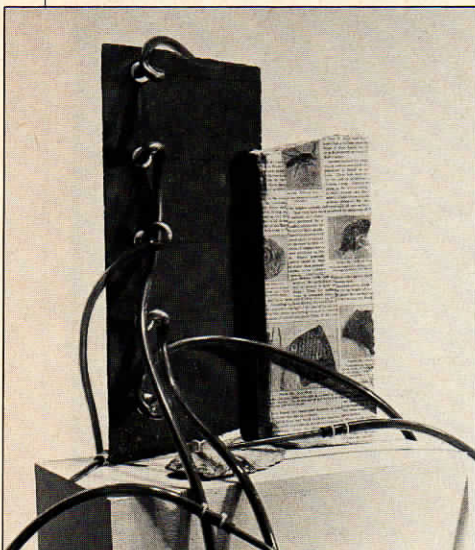


SYLVIA SNOWDEN

Brody's

SNOWDEN'S acrylics on canvas, hard-board and paper are titled with people's names, but they are not portraits in the usual sense. There is no attempt to capture and reveal a sitter's character. Instead, Snowden gives us expressive, energy-charged, often disturbing figures that share a power-packed anonymity despite their names. The poses (crouched, splayed, reaching out), the skeletal shadows and masses of chests and head, the cartoon quality of the sitters' attitudes do not easily resolve into individ-



*How information reaches the mind is the subject of Ronald Leax's **Why Study Science**, 1985, mixed media.*

Indiana and proximity to autochthonous limestone and fossils.

The key to Leax's new approach, however, is his change of emphasis from the phenomenological to the metaphysical. Many of the earlier pieces used the grid as an arbitrary ordering device imposed by the mind on phenomena. It was employed as part of a retrieval/collation methodology by which specimens from the field were collected and then presented in conjunction with text in a matrix that served as a table of interpretation. Other pieces used limited ecosystems—light, water and nutrients to stimulate plant growth in *Yam House*, for example—the results being uncertain at the time of execution.

The system of order in the new sculptures is intuitive, the use of material more measured. *Why Study Science* (1985) is constructed of an Indiana limestone block wrapped in pages from a geology textbook standing next to a black slate slab. Plastic tubes emanate from the slab and are capped by metal pointers, one of which points to a piece of fossilized rock. Taken together, the elements illustrate a circuit by which data is brought to the mind (the *tabula rasa*) by means of the senses (there are five tubes), to be merged with the body of discourse that constitutes knowledge.

Where the previous works present raw data, the new ones offer information that has been interpreted. This change is a repudiation of pure empiricism as a foundation for art. Interestingly, this results in an object that is more obviously for esthetic contemplation but that remains, in the final analysis, clearly antiformal. —V.A.C.

Gloucester

SOLILOQUY IN DOGTOWN Cape Ann Historical Association

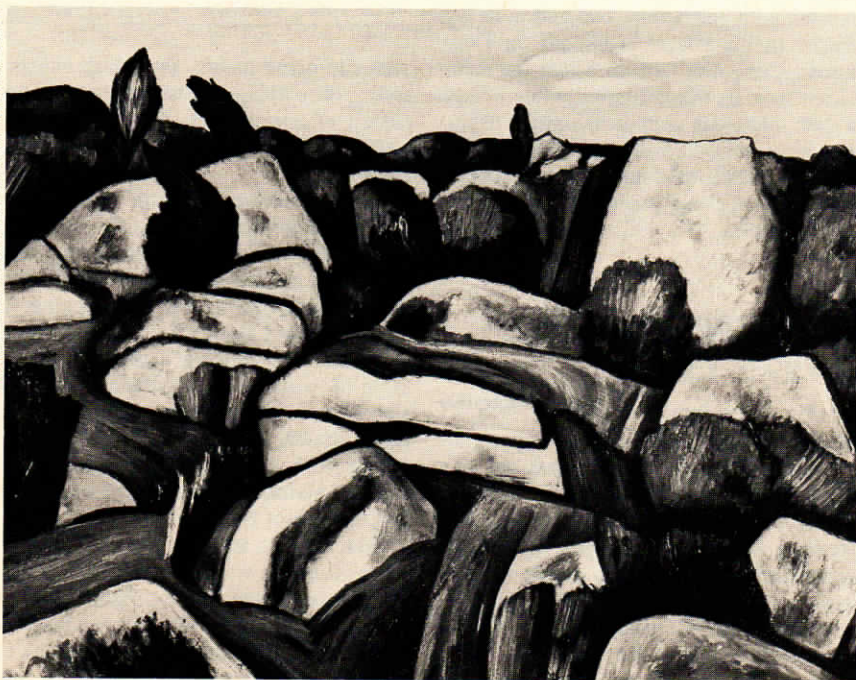
“TERMINAL glacial moraine” is the more or less accurate scientific term for what anyone who has walked in eastern New England knows as hilly, boulder-strewn terrain—often embellished by blueberry bushes, stone fences and the odd seagull. It was such terrain—a short distance from the sea but lacking a view of it—that helped Marsden Hartley drop down to earth near native soil after a period of physical and artistic drifting. The place was Dogtown, an overgrown farm settlement—not formally inhabited since the mid-19th century—located slightly inland from Gloucester, on Cape Ann in Massachusetts. The area's only remnants of homes were (and are) cellar holes in a landscape dominated by immense rocks.

This small, well-researched exhibition, curated by Martha Oaks, focused on Hartley's Dogtown paintings and poetry. Relevant examples of the latter were printed on the walls near the paintings and drawings, and there were even blueberry bushes on hand to lend atmosphere. Viewed so near the actual site that inspired these paintings and the by no means insubstantial poetry—much of which was published during Hartley's lifetime and is slated for future publication—the exhibition was a true

find. The association also owns a number of Fitz Hugh Lane's sublime views of the Gloucester harbor in the 19th century, and a more effective illustration of some basic differences in the landscape art of the 19th and 20th centuries can hardly be imagined than that provided by these two artists.

Hartley, a native of Maine, made visits to the area in 1920, 1931 and 1934. The first visit, though it yielded no work, left a lasting impression. The artist would later write, “I wanted to go back to New England again. . . . I had remembered the rocks and the name Dogtown—that's a great name—and no one in all the years of Gloucester painting celebrity had ever done anything about Dogtown.”

By 1920 Hartley had abandoned his earlier emblematic abstraction, having been inspired to paint the New Mexico landscape; and in the late 1920s he spent time studying and emulating Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire series—on location. His return in 1931, at age 54, to relatively prosaic New England must have felt like a homecoming. His chosen site was the more prosaic for being rocky Dogtown instead of the picturesque harbor and shoreline depicted by most Gloucester and nearby Rockport painters. Hartley, the world traveler and sophisticate, experienced communion with the elements in this plain landscape. When, in a letter of 1931, he proclaimed “Dogtown is mine,” he meant it presumably in the sense that Aix had been Cézanne's and Arles, van Gogh's. Intel-



*Marsden Hartley's **Rock Doxology**, 1931, oil on board. With its simple flat horizon line, the field of boulders looks as if it could go on forever.*



COURTESY BIRDY'S GALLERY

Sylvia Snowden, *Ethyl Moyd*, acrylic on hardboard. Snowden's "portraits" are anonymous despite their titles.

dium. Now she demonstrates the emotional and ironic levels that can be achieved when that skill is applied to the complexities of the human condition. These exuberantly menacing figures stay in the mind with a force that is both genuine and fresh.

—Lee Fleming

ual character readings, as with conventional portraiture. Instead, Snowden aims for the edge of the cliff that overlooks the cliché, positioning her subjects just this side of the banal in color combinations and gestures. They never fall into the abyss, but gain, in the uneasy balance, a powerful presence. Snowden makes us aware that there is a person behind the "personality" she is de-personalizing. She illuminates the barriers that prevent our seeing a person as individual rather than as part of a group.

The banana hands of her men and women wave, clutch and threaten; the paint flows, roils and bubbles across the surfaces, resolving into figures only at a distance. At close range, we see only gradations, hills and valleys of plastic color, stroke turning back on stroke. The whites, reds and browns that dominated from afar disappear. The stances of her figures, their ages and places in life, are equally evanescent. Sometimes these people look like shambling, helpless flabby-breasted women. Other times they are furious priestesses, unleashing vitriol in the greens, blues and ochers that create their forms.

Annie Williams and *Ronnie Hill* convey a sense of the body as continent. In *Annie Williams*, the elephantine legs of the woman breach the raw canvas ground like the land defines the ocean; in the latter work, the look of a map where "figure" meets "ground" is even more pronounced. And if the extension of the body can be metaphoric, so can the body's truncation: *Red Steve*, a long, horizontal work, uses the confines of the picture plane to cut off two of three figures at neck and lower leg. The third and shortest figure loses his leg at the knee. *Red* takes on a meaning other than color, seeming to be a shorthand for skin and bone cut, spirit flayed.

In her earlier paintings, Snowden revealed that she knows how to use her me-