



SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

A SURVEY OF THE
CONCEPTUAL WORKS
1961-1973

ART BASEL MIAMI
DECEMBER 8-10 2023

DUANE THOMAS NEW YORK

NOTES ON THE HISTORICAL RELEVANCE OF SHIRLEY PETTIBONE CLOTH OBJECTS

Shirley Pettibone was born Shirley Young in Bakersfield, CA, in 1936, to a farming community that was bewildered by her ambition to become an artist. She obtained a teaching degree from Pasadena College. Once completed, she applied and entered The Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1961 to pursue her true vocation. This is where she met her soon-to-be husband, Richard Pettibone. The pair forged a companionship that is both apparent in their sharing of a studio and an apartment, but also in their fearless and joint interest in the most forward artistic trends of the time. It is rumored that a show of Joseph Cornell at The Pasadena Art Museum in 1960 may be responsible for an outpouring of neo-Dada works in the LA area at the time, a period now often referred to as “Assemblage,” or “Junk Art.” The institute was run at the time by students of Peter Voulkos, and ceramics was an important part of the curriculum. Both Shirley and Richard tried themselves at ceramics, and Shirley began experimenting with cloth that she stuffed with pillow fiber to create a piece “Untitled (Cloth Assemblage),” circa 1963, that resembles a womb and a fetus. The work made two years earlier than Eva Hesse’s first series of conceptual sculptures is highly innovative in its unabashedly feminine openness.

In a statement written in later years, she wrote: “I began creating original work around 1961. . . At the time, I felt it was impossible to do flat paintings anymore. Real objects reflected substance, but I was adding magic by painting them with additional imagery. An early series of collaged drawings with paint included parts of photographs of nude women. I regard these as a poetic, enigmatic celebration of Woman as a personal statement. At this time, I also began exploring the possibilities of using polyester resin as a stiffening agent for cloth in my three-dimensional paintings to convey strength. I did a series of rumpled images with ambiguous content, including flower and body parts. These pieces were both a celebration of the feminine and a protest against the conformity of the constrictive 1950s.”

Her partnership with Richard led to a dual exhibition at Cunningham Gallery in January 1962 where they presented ceramics and paintings. She obtained her first solo show in the Spring of 1963 at Aura Gallery in Pasadena. For this occasion, Shirley Pettibone presents a highly audacious series of wall sculptures made from recycled handbags. The feminine articles are transformed by the artist with rough materials in what seems to be organs (rib cages, vaginas, skin...). These works are reviewed in Artforum: “Three-dimensional organic forms fashioned from plastic and a variety of



Shirley Pettibone, in her studio circa 1963 with “Untitled (Cloth Assemblage)”

materials dominate the exhibition (...) The references to reproductive organs are, in some instances, nevertheless, too direct.” (Artforum, Spring 1963, review signed C.P.) It is to be noted that the review carefully avoids discussing the feminist position of the works, but the reviewer seems more impressed by her drawings that: “...painfully probe the unconscious mind while titillating the conscious.”

The reference to reproduction and particularly the bodies of women now seem, of course, in retrospect highly relevant to an artist who engaged in work that directly confronted the fate of women in America in the early ‘60s. It may be that unlike Eva Hesse, who obtained immediate recognition for her work, Pettibone may have come too early and maybe too strong for the sensibility of the time’s art intelligentsia.



An Artforum reproduction of a 1963 handbag piece presented at Aura Gallery

After graduating from Otis, both she and Richard establish their studio in Los Angeles and begin experimenting with silk-screen printing as early as 1964. An exhibition at the California State College at Los Angeles showcases her screen-printed works in 1966. The work is composed of multi-paneled paintings showcasing images of clouds and water. While the works garnered some attention, it is Richard's miniature renditions of Warhol, Jasper Johns, and others, all sized scrupulously after advertisements in Artforum, that truly takes off with an exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in 1965 and culminates with his solo show at Castelli Gallery in NY in 1968. At that point, Shirley dedicates herself to his burgeoning success and assists in the making of the miniature paintings. The couple moves to New York following the show at Castelli gallery and starts a new home and studio in Brooklyn. It is there as early as 1968 that Shirley renews with making work of her own. This time she experiments with painting, dripping diluted acrylics on thin muslin straight onto the floor.



A photograph of Shirley Pettibone's cloth objects at the Aldrich Museum in Lucy Lippard's "26 Contemporary Women Artists," 1971.

The resulting paintings are then sawn and turned onto themselves to form tubes that she fills with pillow stuffing. She may have referred to these objects as "Stained Batting" or later in a show of these works in LA as: "Cloth Objects." The pieces are both revolutionnary and highly synthetic in their approach to painting and sculpture. Neither truly one or the other, they articulate with a high degree of clarity the elements of the crafts, decomposes them and reorganizes them in an object. that feels highly familiar and yet definitely foreign.



A photograph of a Cloth Object in Pettibone's NY studio circa 1969.

In 1971 these works were included in the seminal exhibition curated by Lucy Lippard titled "26 Contemporary Women Artists" at the Aldrich museum. In 1969, Lucy Lippard, by her own admission, was "alarmed" at the state of inclusion of women in art exhibitions. She decided to tour studios in the tristate area with the ambition of showcasing the works of women artists: "I took on this show because I knew there were so many women whose work was as good or better than that currently being shown, but who, because of the prevailing discriminatory policies of most galleries and museums, can rarely get anyone to visit their studios or take them as seriously as their male counterparts." Over the course of several years, Lippard selected 26 women artists for her show at the Aldrich, including Mary Heilmann, Howardena Pindell, Adrian Piper, and Shirley Pettibone, amongst others.

If Lippard was not directly involved in the process of Pettibone in the manner of scholarly discussions, it is clear that the works of Shirley Pettibone fit within a number of major concepts that were central to Lippard's thinking. The concepts of "Soft Sculpture," "Eccentric Abstraction," and "Dematerialization" would all apply. At work, a kind of polemic opposition between "Hard" and



From Left to right, BRUCE NAUMAN, untitled 1965, latex and fiberglass / Richard Serra, To Lift, 1967, rubber, MOMA / Robert Morris, untitled (tangle), 1967, felt, MOMA

rectilinear plywood shapes and “Soft” fiberglass and cloth-made works that enabled a sensuous experience. Other exhibitions of the time flipped these ideas into different iterations and terms such as “Primary Structuralists” and the resulting show “Primary Structures Show.”

A piece by Bruce Nauman from 1965, “Untitled,” made of half hard, half soft materials, and other works by Richard Serra and Robert Morris in the years between 1965 and 1970, all showcased these preoccupations. This sudden focus on materials and their attributes in the conceptual art scene of the 60s may be attributed to several factors. The first, of course, is the introduction of polymers to mass consumers, including artists. It is a well-documented fact that Eva Hesse attended workshops in New York City that were extremely popular with artists, teaching them about the many uses of resins in the art process. For most, however, the question resided in parting ways with minimal orthodoxy, in particular to question the Christian features of minimalism (wood and crosses being the preferred material and symbol for Judd and Andre). Artists such as Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra were invested in finding ways to use these new materials to lift artistic expression out of its formal slumber. Thus, a political stance, a sense of irony or doom, or even a sense of humor could emerge from the work.

While Eva Hesse forged a path to stardom in the short years she was active, many women working in the conceptual vein were finding it difficult to show their work. Nonetheless, many persisted despite the bias, and an entire school of conceptual thinkers worked in the shadows. Gone was the idea of material for material, and structure for the sake of structure; a new generation of

women were making work that dealt with material in a political and unapologetic way while keeping with the structural rigors of ambitious conceptual projects: Mary Heilmann, Howardena Pindell, Dona Nelson, Mary Miss, Sylvia Mangold, Barbara Zucker and many others are only today getting the recognition they deserve.

Much can be said about the difference between female and male artists of the time, the most crucial of which is that men artists were being exhibited and sold their works, women did not. A famous video by Bruce Nauman titled “Violent Incident - Man Woman Segment,” made at a later date (1986), serves as indication that the trajectory of art history, and in particular conceptual art history in America, was entrenched in the inequalities that existed and still exist between the sexes. The late sixties announced the height of the Women’s Liberation movement, with the right to abortion, the contraceptive pill, and a widening acceptance of divorce.

The years between 1968 and 1970 seemed particularly important and prevalent in the making of works for both women artists worldwide and for Pettibone, who saw the political revolution taking place as an opportunity to make her most refined and mature work to date. The Cloth Objects were presented in three major venues in the course of three years: Ivan Karp’s first gallery “100 Acres,” Lucy Lippard’s seminal exhibition at the Aldrich, and a smaller yet notable presentation of the works at a newly opened artist space in Los Angeles, Orlando Gallery, in 1973.

The works (of which documentation exists for at least 30 pieces) can be divided into four categories: paintings, which are stained



From Left to right, HOWARDENA PINDELL, untitled 1968-70 / EVA HESSE, Untitled seven poles 1970, LOUISE BOURGEOIS, Fillette, 1968.

muslin pieces freely hung on the wall without stretchers; single-strand batts; multi-stranded batts; and multi-stranded batts that are hung in a rainbow pattern and/or coiled shapes. The exhibitions seemed to function as a repertory or index of the type of opportunities this invention provided. Laying the work as a single stuffed object projects a highly charged charisma that is both structurally primitive, ironically psychoanalytical, and, in the sense of a "Soft Sculpture," inviting and sensuous.

The muted references to Freudian psychoanalysis, and in particular his misogynistic point of views, could be inferred here in the notion of a primary object. However, Unlike Louise Bourgeois who gains some attention with her phallic sculpture "Fillette" in 1968, Pettibone may be more inclined to pursue her investigation as a formal experiment that may be more closely associated with the works of the women shown by Lucy Lippard in "26 Contemporary Women Artists."

In the presentation of the works where the strands become multiples, the pieces reveal their structural potential. Pettibone came to prominence as an artist of the conceptual art movement and sought to demonstrate that she too could produce an important project of deconstruction: deconstruction of painting and sculpture in this case that possessed all the rigor and synthetic beauty required of a great conceptual master.

During this period, the Cloth Objects could also take the form of a piece of fabric cut into one-inch strips that were then sewn back together, repaired to some extent. These pieces evoked flags and provide insight into the role that sewing may play in these works as a traditionally feminine craft whose function is to bring broken pieces together (quilting).

In the years following these groundbreaking innovations, Pettibone shifted her interest to realist painting. It may be that the deconstruction project which took much of her practice in the 1960s had found an ultimate expression and was over. One such "flag piece" presented in our exhibition is composed of 51 strands of stained fabric, with twenty lines of sewing running across, bringing the piece together as one, the work is both united and torn. The simplicity of the work and the depth of its symbolism is undoubtedly the work of a master.



Presentation of Shirley Pettibone's Cloth Objects at Ivan Karp's "100 Acres" 1972.

As soon as 1973, Pettibone became interested in Photorealism and began a series of works until her death that dealt with imagery imbued with a sense of loss and wonder. Like many, she made a shift from the conceptual art scene of the 60s to become a naturalist. Observant of trees, clouds, and bodies of water, she painstakingly depicted them with rigorous strokes. In an artist statement she wrote for an exhibition catalogue of these works: "I am a realist, but some of the symbolism of my early work still lies beneath the surface. I have never liked obvious statements but have chosen ambiguous symbolism and suggestion in order to give the viewer choices. My love and concern for nature and the environment are important elements in my art, and I hope my work conveys a life-affirming spirit to others."

RT.



Shirley Pettibone in her studio circa 1970

The image features four vertical fabric strips of varying colors and textures. From left to right: a light purple/white strip with a fine weave; a light green strip with a slightly coarser weave and some brown spots; a light blue strip with a medium weave and some darker blue staining; and a light orange/peach strip with a fine weave. The strips are set against a dark grey background.

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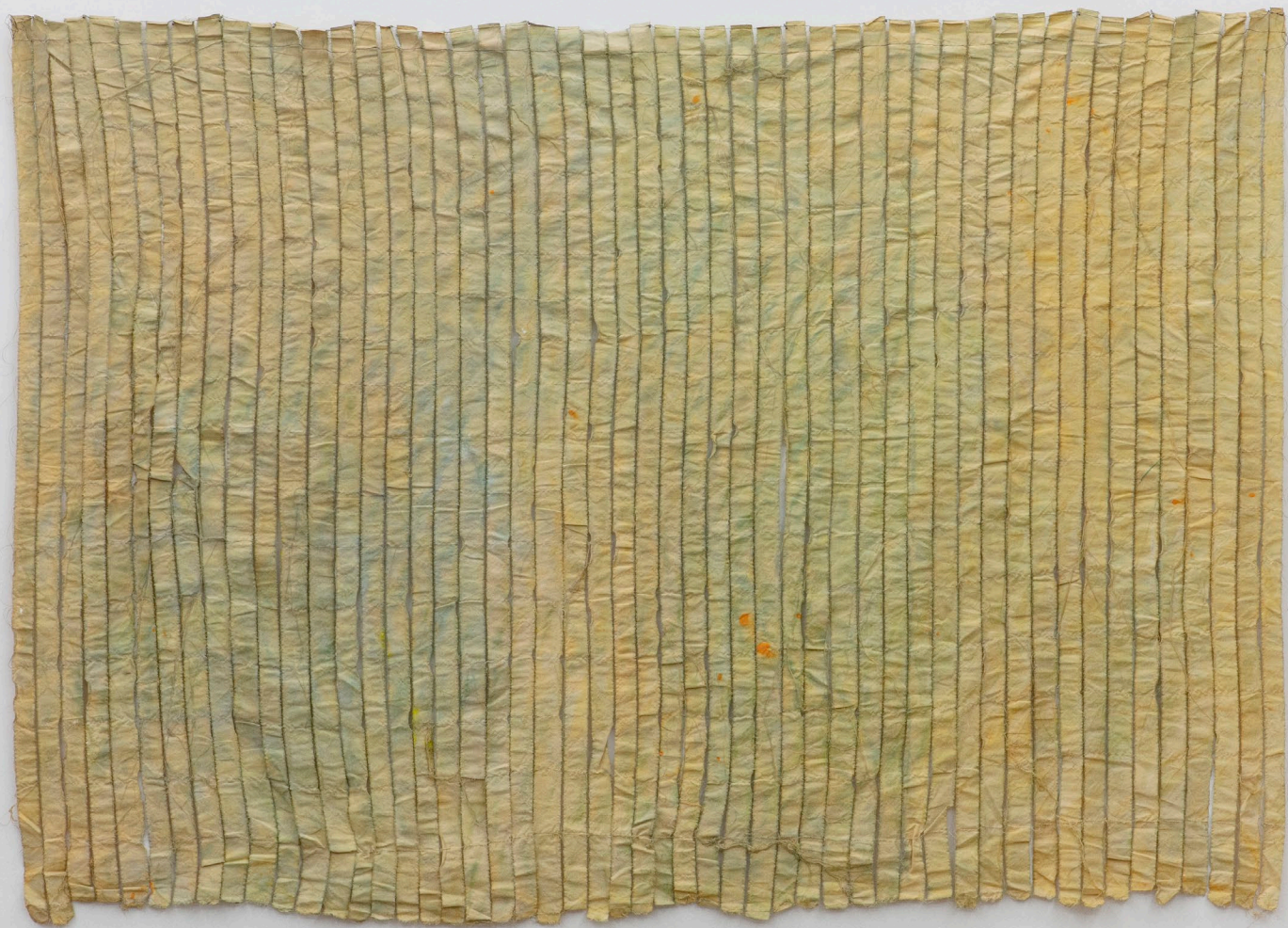




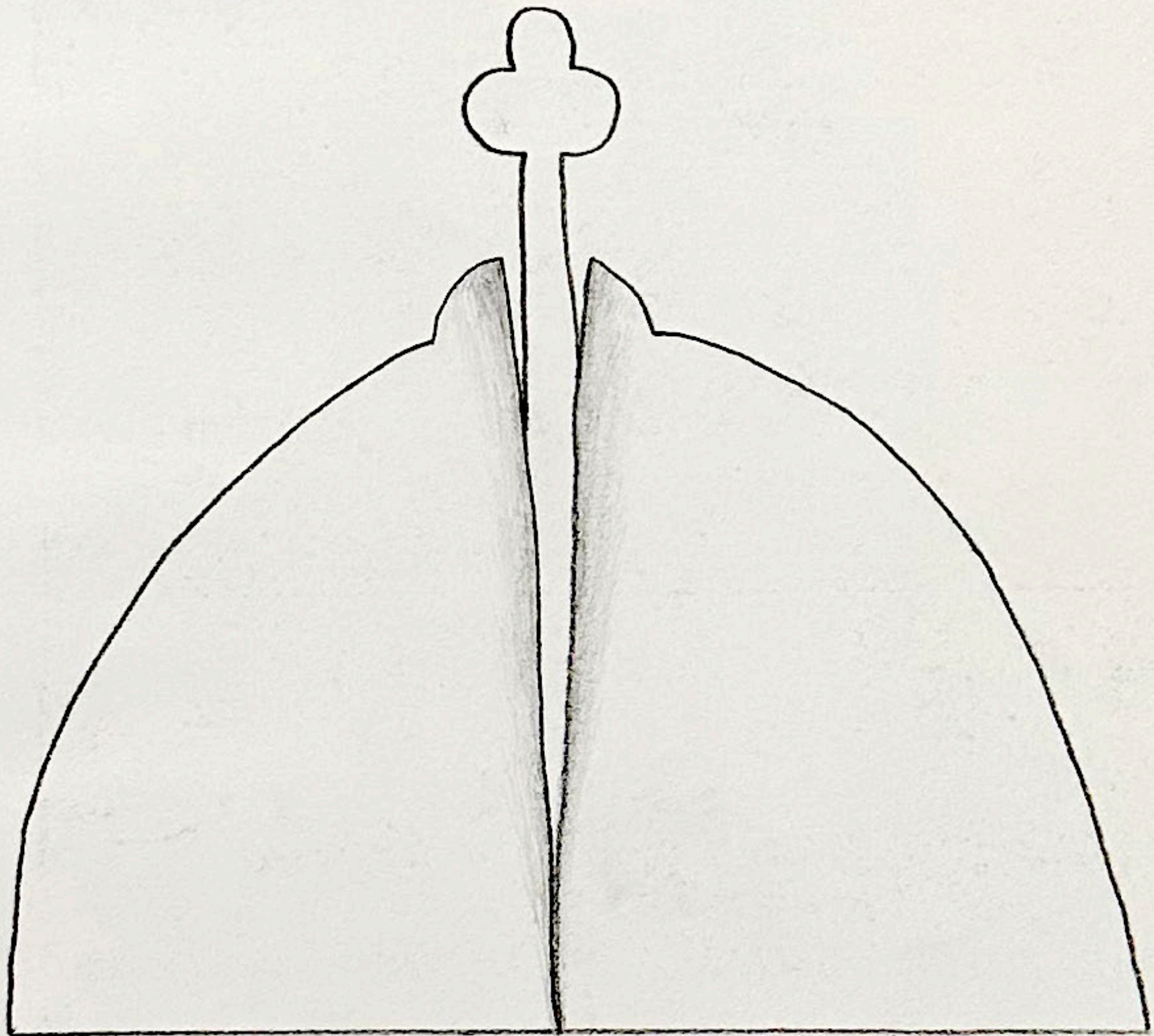




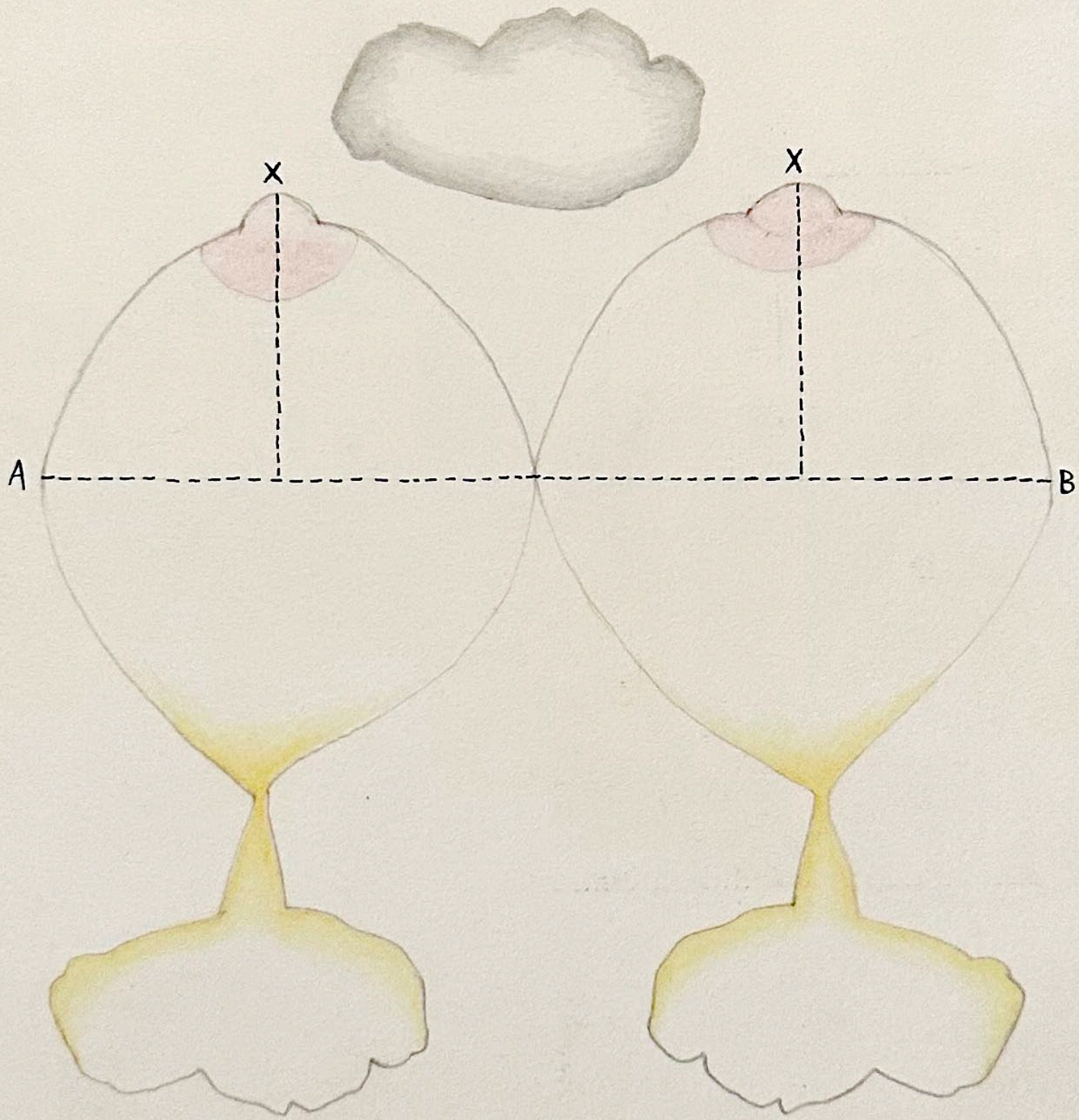




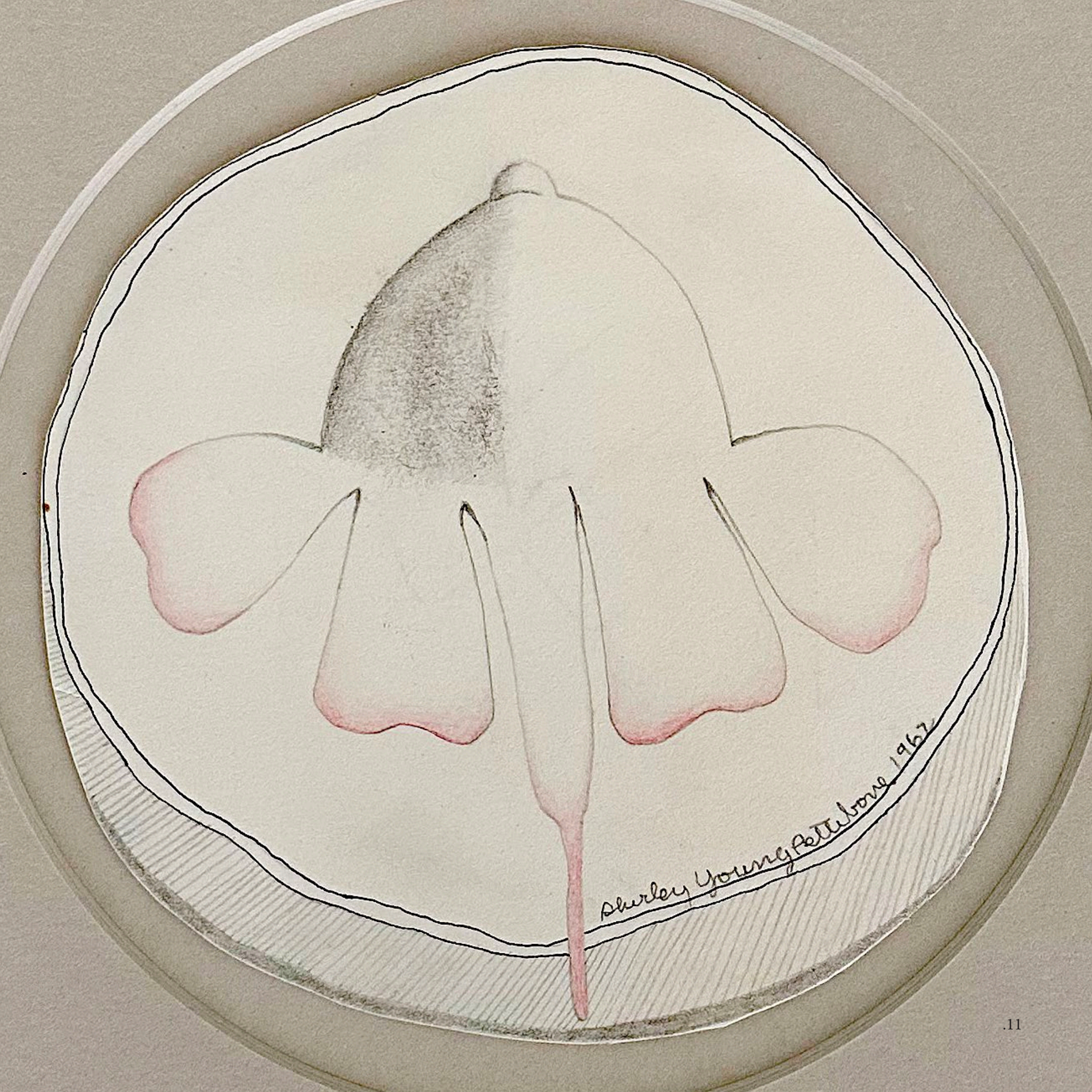




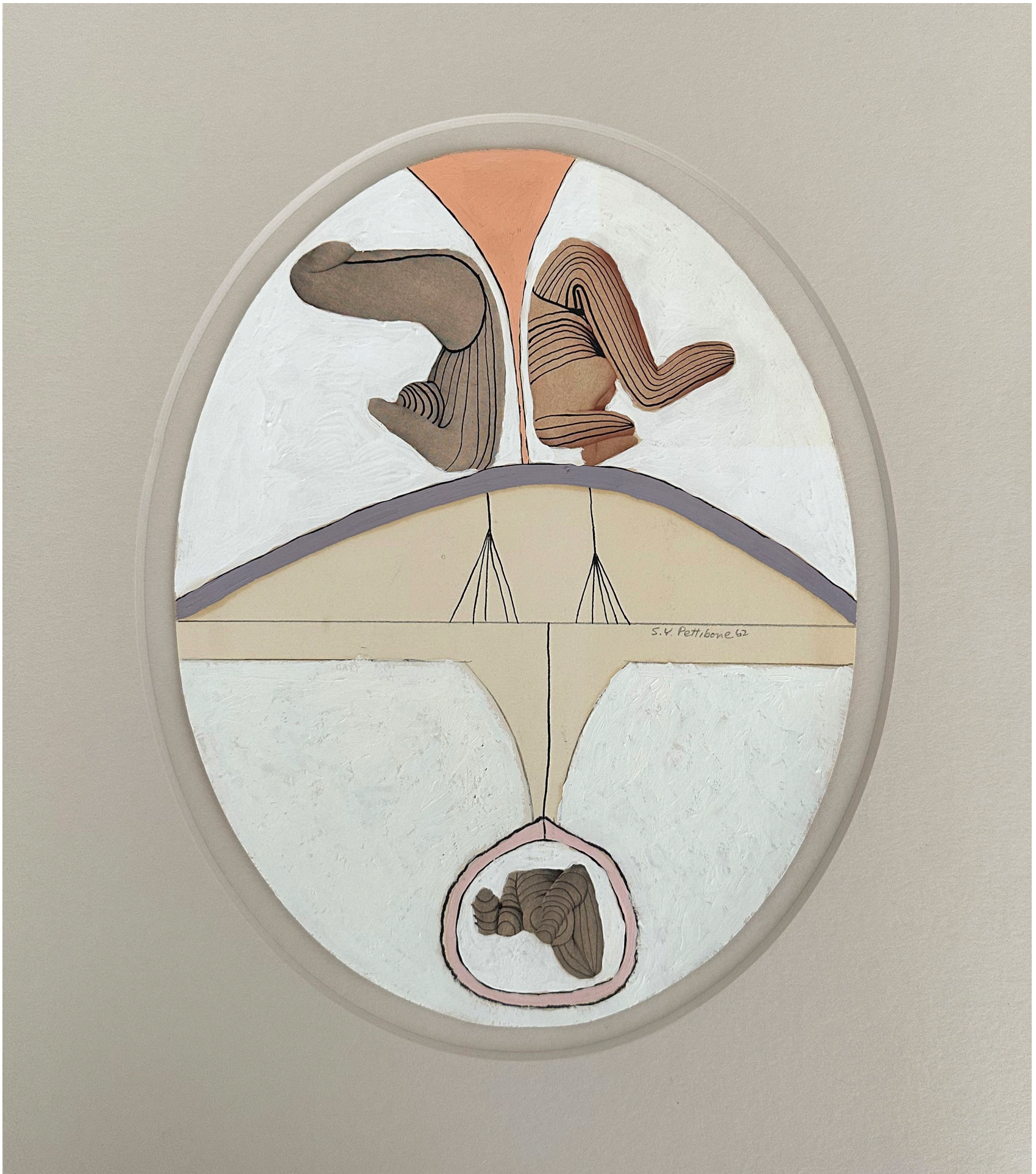
Shirley Young Pembroke 62

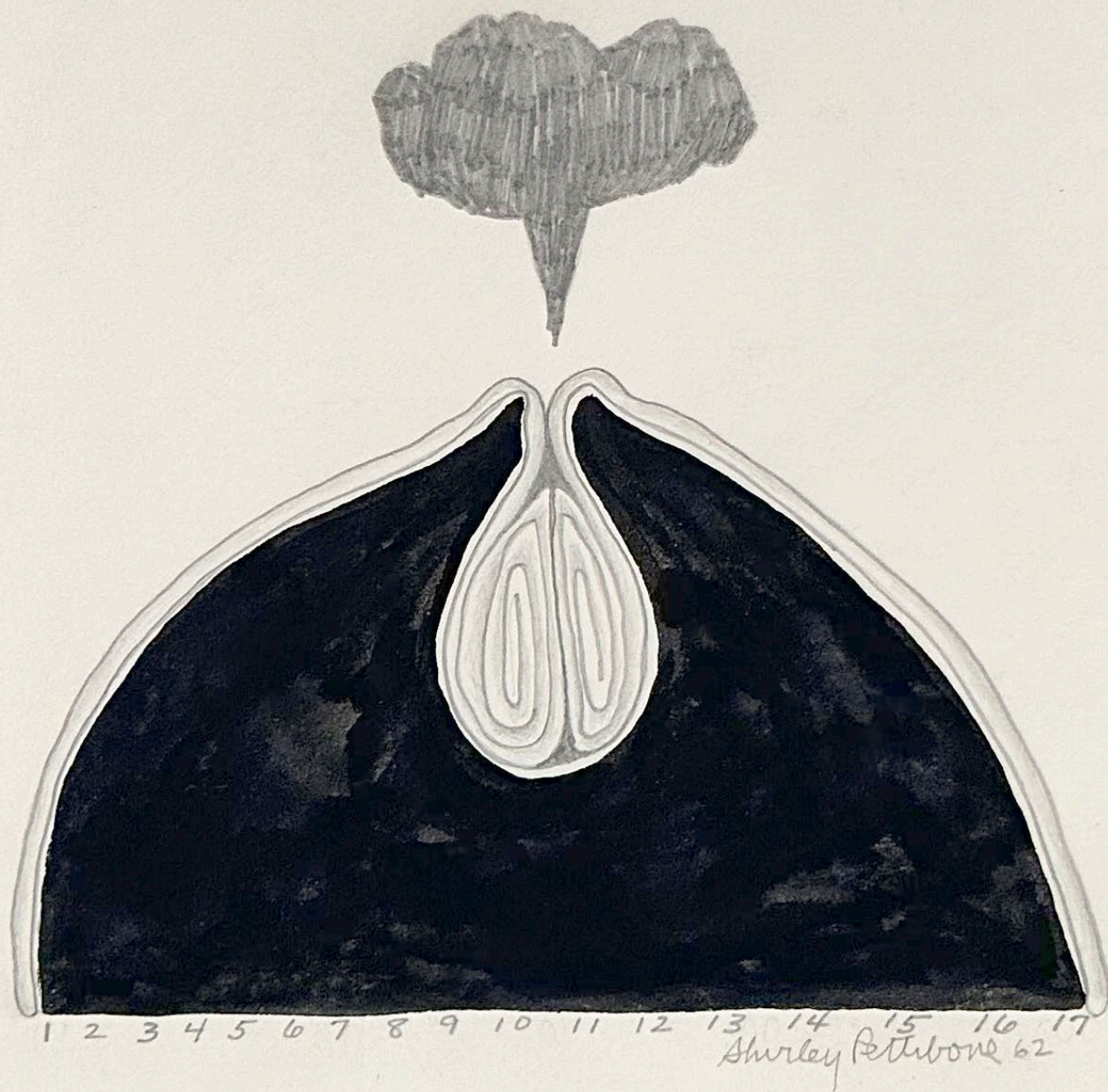


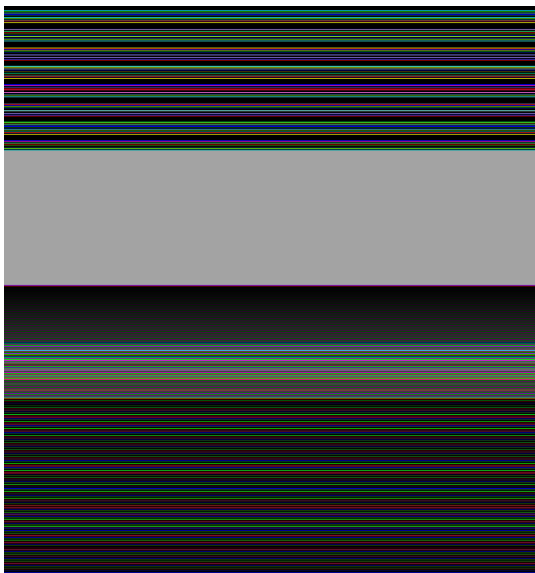
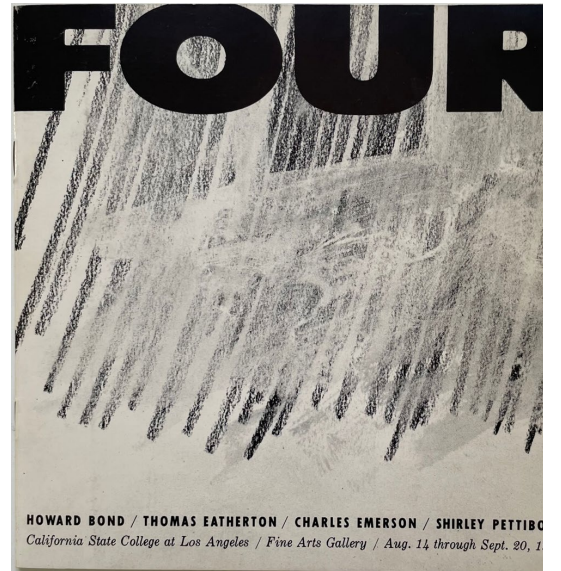
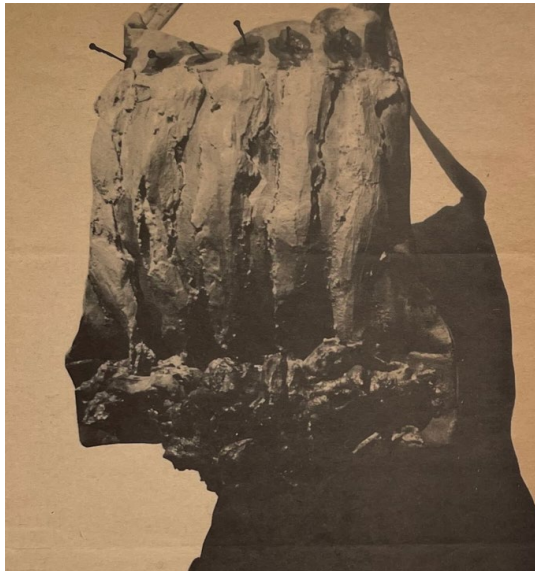
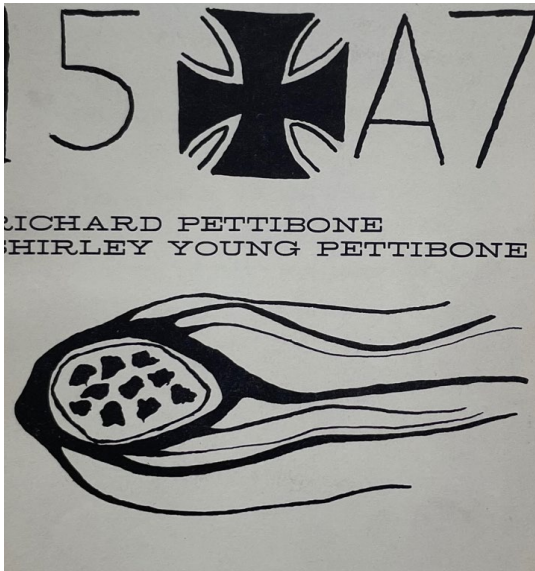
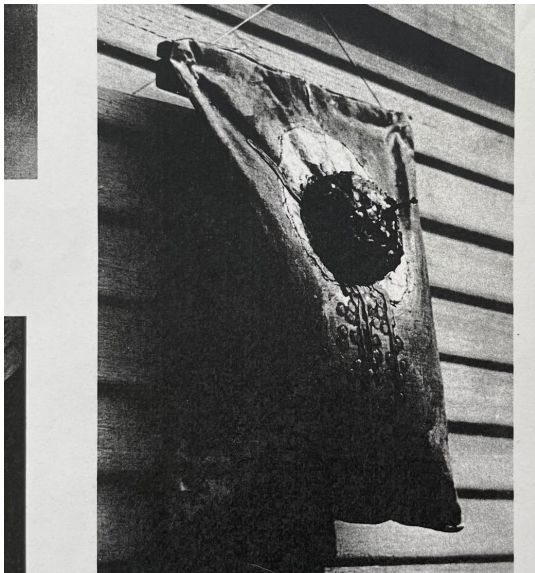
Shirley Pettibone 63



Shirley Young Pettibone 1962









CHECKLIST

01. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, Cloth Object. 1970.
signed and dated
cloth, fiber and paint
36 x 16 x 2 inches
Provenance: Gail Peachin collection, New York

02. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, Cloth Object. circa 1970
unsigned
cloth, fiber and paint
68 x 7 x 1 inches
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

03. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, Cloth Object. 1970
signed and dated
cloth, fiber and paint
73 x 16 x 2 inches
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

04. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, Cloth Object. 1970
signed and dated
cloth, fiber and paint
65 x 3 x 3 inches
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

05. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, Cloth Object. 1972
signed and dated
cloth, fiber and paint
83 x 4 x 4 inches
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

06. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, Cloth Object. circa 1970
unsigned
cloth, fiber and paint
26.5 x 2.5 x 3 inches
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

07. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, Cloth Object. 1969
signed and dated
cloth, fiber and paint
24 x 2.5 x 2.5 inches
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

08. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, Cloth Object. 1973
signed and dated "SP 73"
cloth, thread and paint
63 x 43 inches
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

09. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, drawing. 1962
signed and dated
ink on paper
5 x 5 inches (sheet)
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

10. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, drawing. 1963
signed and dated
6.5 x 7.5 inches (sheet)
SOLD
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

11. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, drawing. 1962
signed and dated
ink and pencil on paper
5.5 inches (sheet diameter)
Provenance: The estate of the artist, CA.

12. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, drawing. 1962
signed and dated
mixed media on paper
7.5 x 9.5 inches (sheet)
Provenance: The estate of the artist., CA.

13. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

Untitled, drawing. 1962
signed and dated
ink and graphite on paper
7.5 x 9 inches (sheet)
Provenance: The estate of the artist.

14. SHIRLEY PETTIBONE

"Presence," 1961
mixed media on canvas
signed "Shirley Young Pettibone" and dated on the back
21 x 16.5 x 1.75 inches
Provenance: The estate of the artist.
Exhibited: Cunningham Gallery, 1972

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