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DEGLI STUDI
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J. dubuffet

October 25 - November 26, 1960

DIPARTIMENTO DI STORIA E CRITICA DELLE ARTI
UNIVERSITA' DEGLI STUDI DI VENEZIA

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WORLD HOUSE GALLERIES

987 madison avenue, new york 21

j. dubuffet

UNIVERSITA' DEGLI STUDI DI VENEZIA
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Dr. 01179

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ANTICULTURAL POSITIONS

I think, not only in the arts, but also in many other fields, an important change is taking place, now, in our time, in the frame of mind of many persons.

It seems to me that certain values, which had been considered for a long time as very certain and beyond discussion, begin now to appear doubtful, and even quite false, to many persons. And that, on the other hand, other values, which were neglected, or held in contempt, or even quite unknown, begin to appear of great worth.

I have the impression that a complete liquidation of all the ways of thinking, whose sum constituted what has been called humanism and has been fundamental for our culture since the Renaissance, is now taking place, or, at least, going to take place soon.

I think the increasing knowledge of the thinking of so called primitive peoples, during the past fifty years, has contributed a great deal to this change, and especially the acquaintance with works of art made by those peoples, which have much surprised and interested the occidental public.

It seems to me that especially many persons begin to ask themselves if the Occident has not many very important things to learn from these savages. May be, in many cases, their solutions and their ways of doing, which first appeared to us very rough, are more clever than ours. It may be ours are the rough ones. It may be refinement, cerebrations, depth of mind, are on their side, and not on ours.

Personally, I believe very much in values of savagery; I mean: instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness.

Now I don't mean to say that the Occident lacks these savage values. On the contrary! But I think that the values held up by our culture don't correspond to the real frame of mind of the Occident. I think that the culture of the Occident is a coat which does not fit him; which, in any case, doesn't fit him any more. I think this culture is very much like a dead language, without anything in common with the language spoken in the street. This culture drifts further and further from daily life. It is confined to certain small and dead circles, as a culture of mandarins. It no longer has real and living roots.

For myself, I aim for an art which would be in immediate connection with daily life, an art which would start from this daily life, and which would be a very direct and very sincere expression of our real life and our real moods.

I am going to enumerate several points, concerning the occidental culture, with which I don't agree.

1

One of the principal characteristics of Western culture is the belief that the nature of man is very different from the nature of other beings of the world. Custom has it that man cannot be identified, or compared in the least, with elements such as winds, trees, rivers—except humorously, and for poetic rhetorical figures.

The Western man has, at last, a great contempt for trees and rivers, and hates to be like them.

On the contrary, the so called primitive man loves and admires trees and rivers, and has a great pleasure to be like them. He believes in a real similitude between man and trees and rivers. He has a very strong sense of continuity of all things, and especially between man and the rest of the world. Those primitive societies have surely much more respect than Western man for every being of the world; they have a feeling that the man is not the owner of the beings, but only one of them among the others.

2

My second point of disagreement with occidental culture is the following one. Western man believes that the things he thinks exist outside exactly in the same way he thinks of them. He is convinced that the shape of the world is the same shape as his reason. He believes very strongly the basis of his reason is well founded, and especially the basis of his logic.

But the primitive man has rather an idea of weakness of reason and logic, and believes rather in other ways of getting knowledge of things. That is why he has so much esteem and so much admiration for the states of mind which we call madness. I must declare I have a great interest for madness; and I am convinced art has much to do with madness.

3

Now, third point. I want to talk about the great respect occidental culture has for elaborated ideas. I don't regard elaborated ideas as the best part of human function. I think ideas are rather a weakened rung in the ladder of mental process: something like a landing where the mental processes become impoverished, like an outside crust caused by cooling.

Ideas are like steam condensed into water by touching the level of reason and logic. I don't think the greatest value of mental function is to be found at this landing of ideas; and it is not at this landing that it interests me. I aim rather to capture the thought at a point of its development prior to this landing of elaborated ideas. The whole art, the whole literature and the whole philosophy of the Occident, rest on the landing of elaborated ideas. But my own art, and my own philosophy, lean entirely on stages more underground. I try always to catch the mental process at the deeper point of its roots, where, I am sure, the sap is much richer.

4

Now, fourth. Occidental culture is very fond of analysis, and I have no taste for analysis, and no confidence in it. One thinks everything can be known by way of

dismantling it or dissecting it into all its parts, and studying separately each of these parts.

My own feeling is quite different. I am more disposed, on the contrary, to always recompose things. As soon as an object has been cut only into two parts, I have the impression it is lost for my study, I am further removed from this object instead of being nearer to it.

I have a very strong feeling that the sum of the parts does not equal the whole. My inclination leads me, when I want to see something really well, to regard it with its surroundings, whole. If I want to know this pencil on the table, I don't look straight on the pencil, I look on the middle of the room, trying to include in my glance as many objects as possible.

If there is a tree in the country, I don't bring it into my laboratory to look at it under my microscope, because I think the wind which blows through its leaves is absolutely necessary for the knowledge of the tree and cannot be separated from it. Also the birds which are in the branches, and even the song of these birds. My turn of mind is to join always more things surrounding the tree, and further, always more of the things which surround the things which surround the tree.

I have been a long time on this point, because I think this turn of mind is an important factor of the aspect of my art.

5

The fifth point, now, is that our culture is based on an enormous confidence in the language—and especially the written language; and belief in its ability to translate and elaborate thought. That appears to me a misapprehension. I have the impression, language is a rough, very rough stenography, a system of algebraic signs very rudimentary, which impairs thought instead of helping it. Speech is more concrete, animated by the sound of the voice, intonations, a cough, and even making a face and mimicry, and it seems to me more effective. Written language seems to me a bad instrument. As an instrument of expression, it seems to deliver only a dead remnant of thought, more or less as clinkers from the fire. As an instrument of elaboration, it seems to overload thought and falsify it.

I believe (and here I am in accord with the so called primitive civilizations) that painting is more concrete than the written word, and is a much more rich instrument than it for the the expression and elaboration of thought.

I have just said, what interests me, in thought, is not the instant of transformation into formal ideas, but the moments preceding that.

My paintings can be regarded as a tentative language fitting for these areas of thought.

6

I come to my sixth and last point, and I intend now to speak of the notion of beauty adopted by occidental culture.

I want to begin by telling you how my own conception differs from the usual one.

The latter believes that there are beautiful objects and ugly objects, beautiful persons and ugly persons, beautiful places and ugly places, and so forth.

Not I. I believe beauty is nowhere. I consider this notion of beauty as completely false. I refuse absolutely to assent to this idea that there are ugly persons and ugly objects. This idea is for me stifling and revolting.

I think the Greeks are the ones, first, to purport that certain objects are more beautiful than others.

The so called savage nations don't believe in that at all. They don't understand when you speak to them of beauty.

This is the reason one calls them savage. The Western man gives the name of savage to one who doesn't understand that beautiful things and ugly things exist, and who doesn't care for that at all.

What is strange is that, for centuries and centuries, and still now more than ever, the men of the Occident dispute which are the beautiful things and which are the ugly ones. All are certain that beauty exists without doubt, but one cannot find two who agree about the objects which are endowed. And from one century to the next, it changes. Occidental culture declares beautiful, in each century, what it declared ugly in the preceding one.

The rationalization of that is that beauty exists surely, but it is hidden from view for many persons. To perceive beauty requires a certain special sense, and most people have not this sense.

One believes also it is possible to develop this sense, by doing exercises, and even to make it appear in persons who are not gifted with this sense. There are schools for that.

The teacher, in these schools, states to his pupils that there is, without doubt, a beauty of things, but he has to add that people dispute which things are endowed with that, and have so far never succeeded in establishing it firmly. He invites his pupils to examine the question in their turn, and so, from generation to generation, the dispute continues.

This idea of beauty is however one of the things our culture prizes most, and it is customary to consider this belief in beauty, and the respect for this beauty, as the ultimate justification of Western civilization, and the principle of civilization itself is involved with this notion of beauty.

I find this idea of beauty a meager and not very ingenious invention, and especially not very encouraging for man. It is distressing to think about people deprived of beauty because they have not a straight nose, or are too corpulent, or too old. I find even this idea that the world we live in is made up of ninety percent ugly things and ugly places, while things and places endowed with beauty are very rare and very difficult to meet, I must say, I find this idea not very exciting. It seems to me that the Western man will not suffer a great loss if he loses this idea. On the contrary, if he becomes aware that the world is able to become for any man a way of fascination and illumination, he will have made a good catch. I think such an idea will enrich life more than the Greek idea of beauty.

And now what happens with art? Art has been considered, since the Greeks, to have as its goal the creation of beautiful lines and beautiful color harmonies. If one abolishes this notion, what becomes of art?

I am going to tell you. Art, then, returns to its real function, much more significant than creating shapes and colors agreeable for a so called pleasure of the eyes.

I don't find this function, assembling colors in pleasing arrangements, very noble. If painting was only that, I should not lose one hour of my time in this activity. Art addresses itself to the mind, and not to the eyes. It has always been considered in this way by primitive peoples, and they are right. Art is a language, instrument of knowledge, instrument of expression.

I think, this enthusiasm about the written language, which I mentioned before, has been the reason our culture started to regard painting as a rough, rudimentary, and even contemptible language, good only for illiterate people. From that, culture invented as a rationalization for art, this myth of plastic beauty, is in my opinion an imposture.

I just said, and I repeat now, painting is, in my opinion, a language more rich than that of words. So it is quite useless to look for rationalizations in art.

Painting is a language much more immediate, and, at the same time, much more charged with meaning. Painting operates through signs which are not abstract and incorporeal like words. The signs of painting are much closer to the objects themselves. Further, painting manipulates materials which are themselves living substances. That is why painting allows one to go much further than words do, in approaching things and conjuring them.

Painting can also, and it is very remarkable, conjure things more or less, as wanted. I mean: with more or less presence. That is to say: at different stages between being and not being.

At last, painting can conjure things not isolated, but linked to all that surrounds them: a great many things simultaneously.

On the other hand, painting is a very much more immediate language, and much more direct, than the language of words: much closer to the cry, or to the dance. That is why painting is a way of expression of our inner voices much more effective than that of words.

I just said, painting allows, one to express, much better than words, the various stages of thought, including the deeper levels, the underground stages of mental processes.

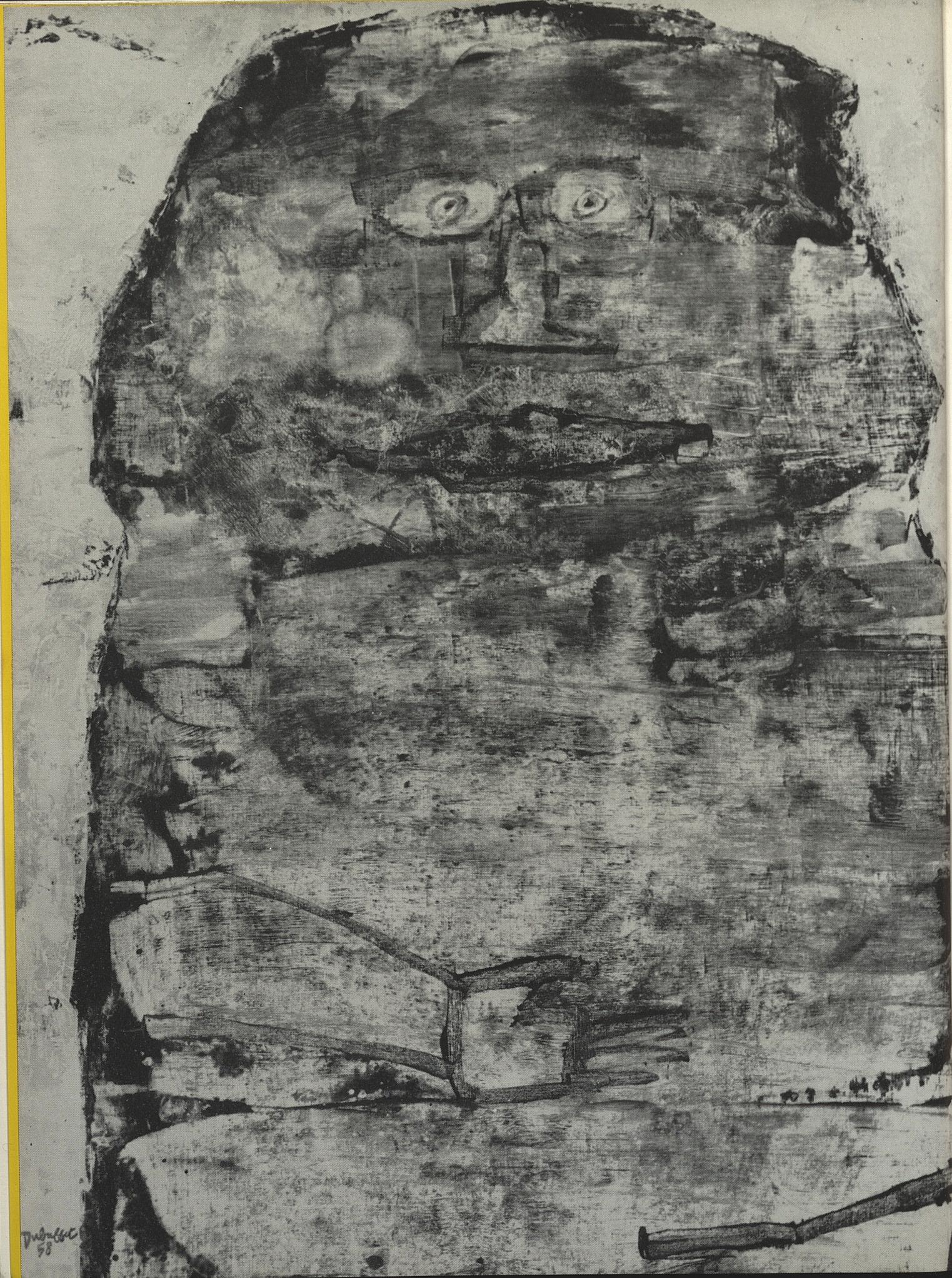
Painting has a double advantage over language of words. First, painting conjures objects with greater strength, and comes much closer to them. Second, painting opens, to the inner dance of the painter's mind, a larger door to the outside. These two qualities of painting make it an extraordinary instrument of thought, or, if you will, an extraordinary instrument of clairvoyance, and also an extraordinary instrument to exteriorize this clairvoyance, and to permit us to comprehend it ourselves along with the painter.

Painting now, using these two powerful means, can illuminate the world with wonderful discoveries, can endow man with new myths and new mystics, and reveal, in infinite number, unsuspected aspects of things, and new values not yet perceived. Here is, I think, for artists, a much more worthy job than creating assemblages of shapes and colors pleasing for the eyes.

J e a n D u b u f f e t

The foregoing was presented at a lecture given by Jean Dubuffet in December 1951 at the Arts Club of Chicago.







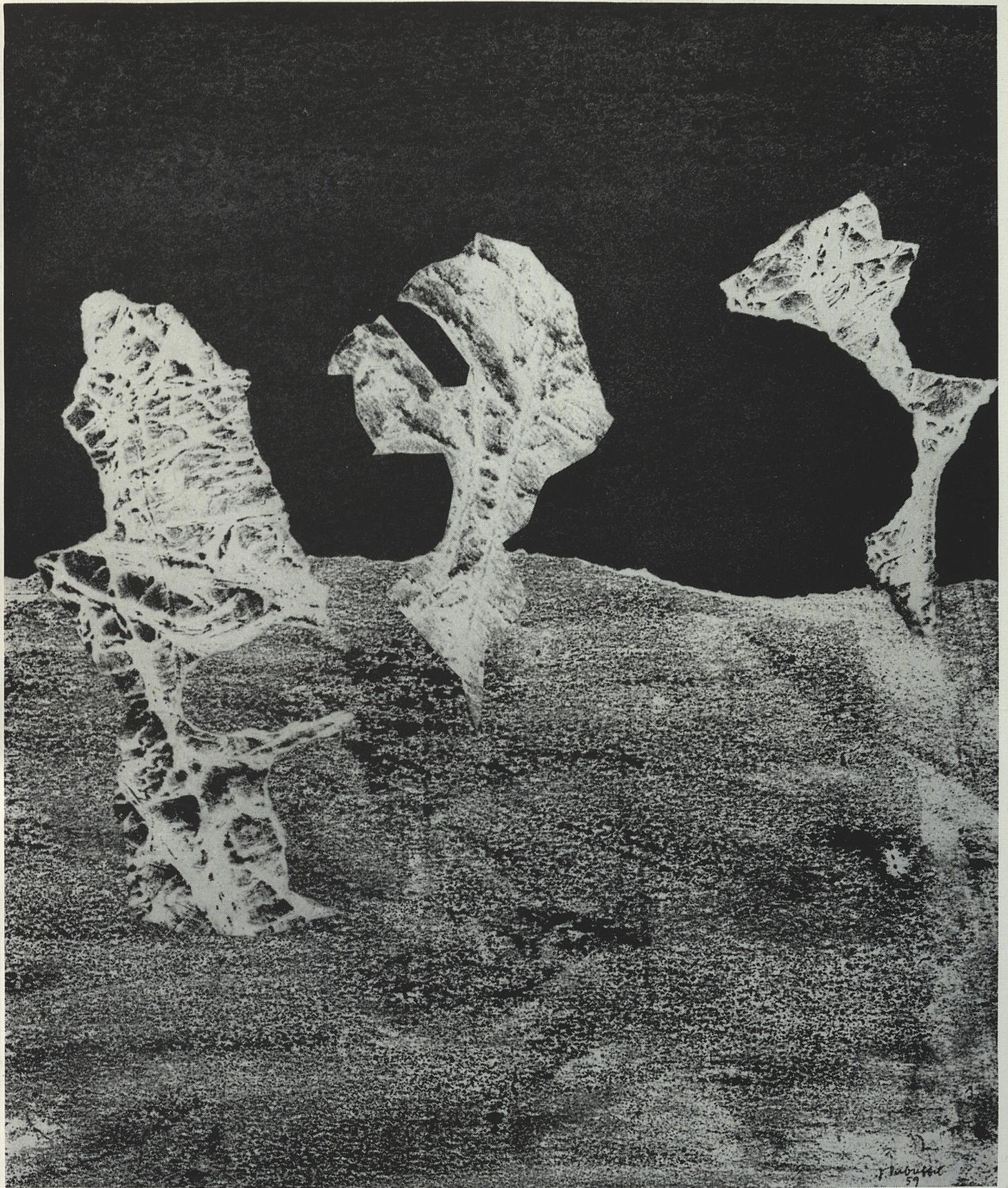
above: 1 **Personnage au bicorne** november 1943

opposite: 33 **Le coquin prospère** avril 1958

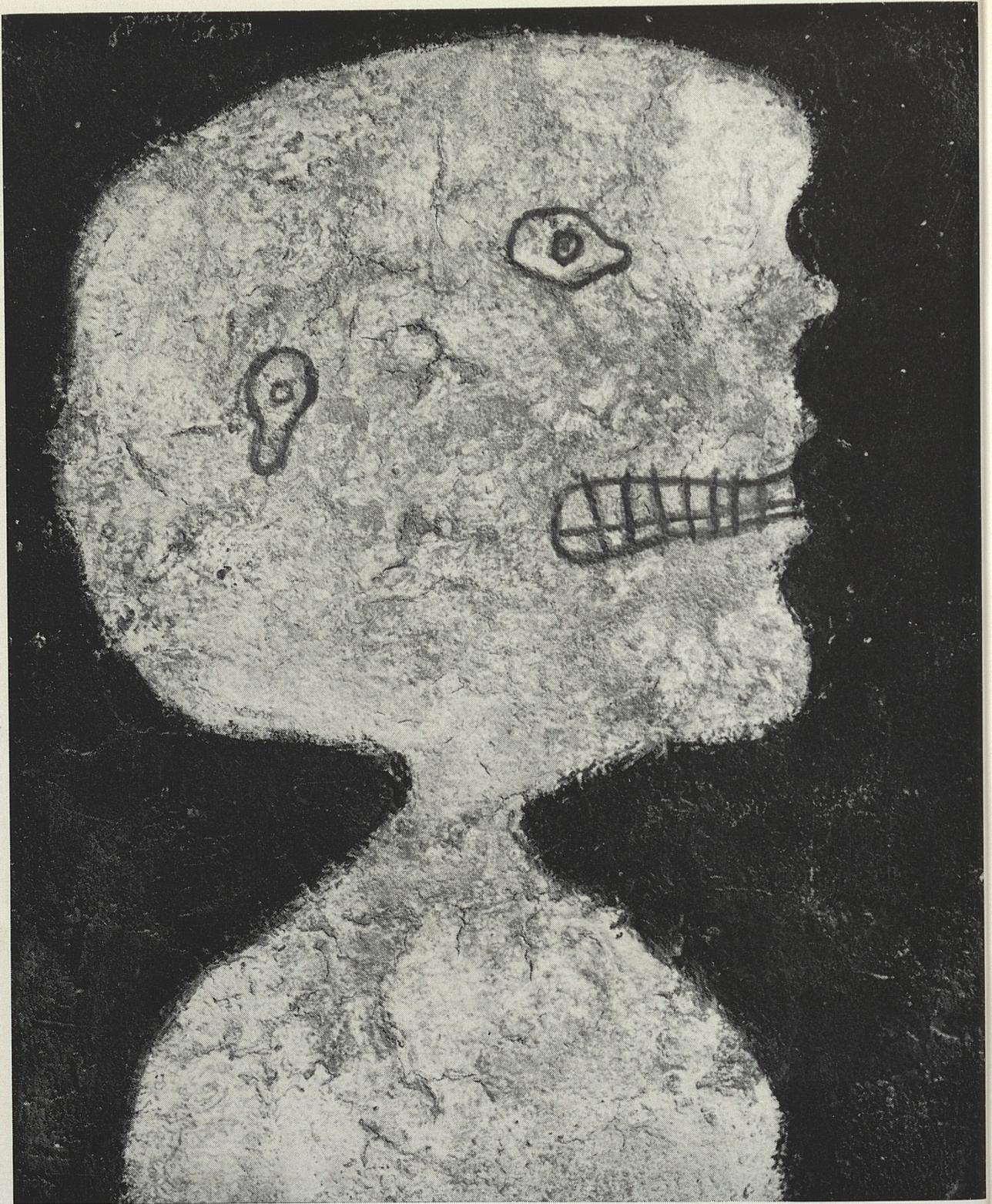


above: 27 **Table nue** 1957

opposite: 38 **Lande aux trois arbres** may 1959



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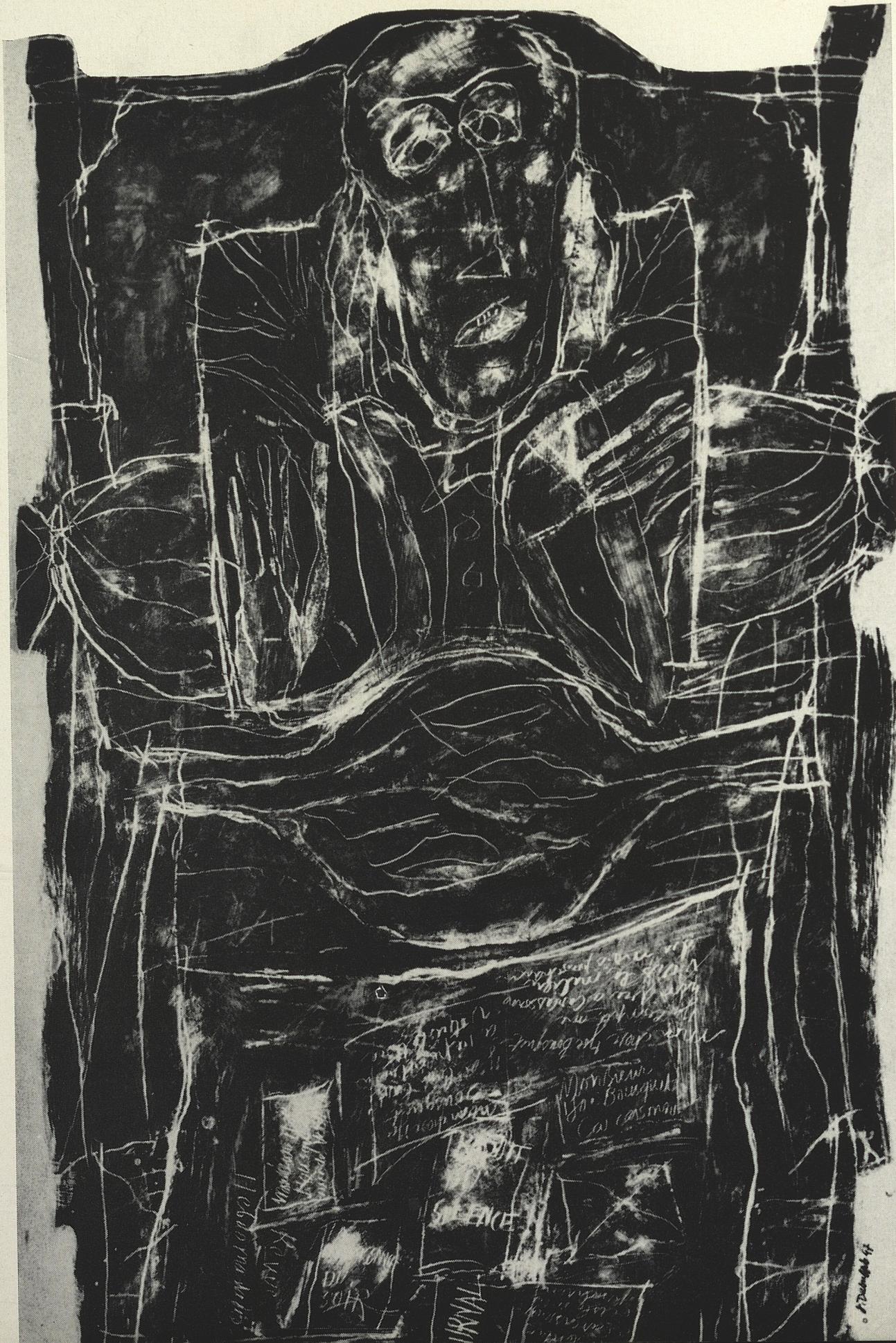
3 Black Beauty 1945



24 Urgence july 1957



20 Site aux errances september 1955

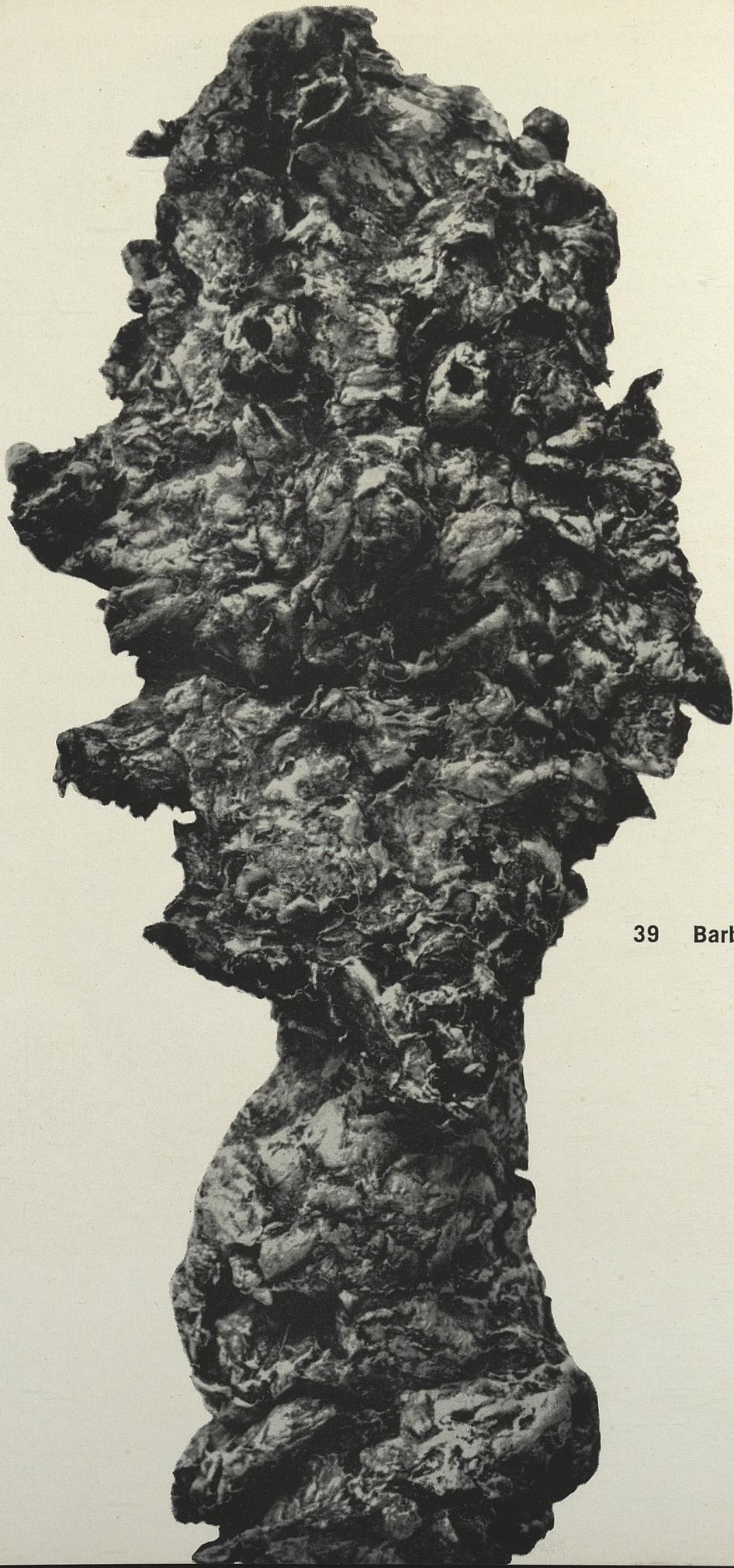


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Casson et Bousquet

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J. Dubuffet
oct. 58



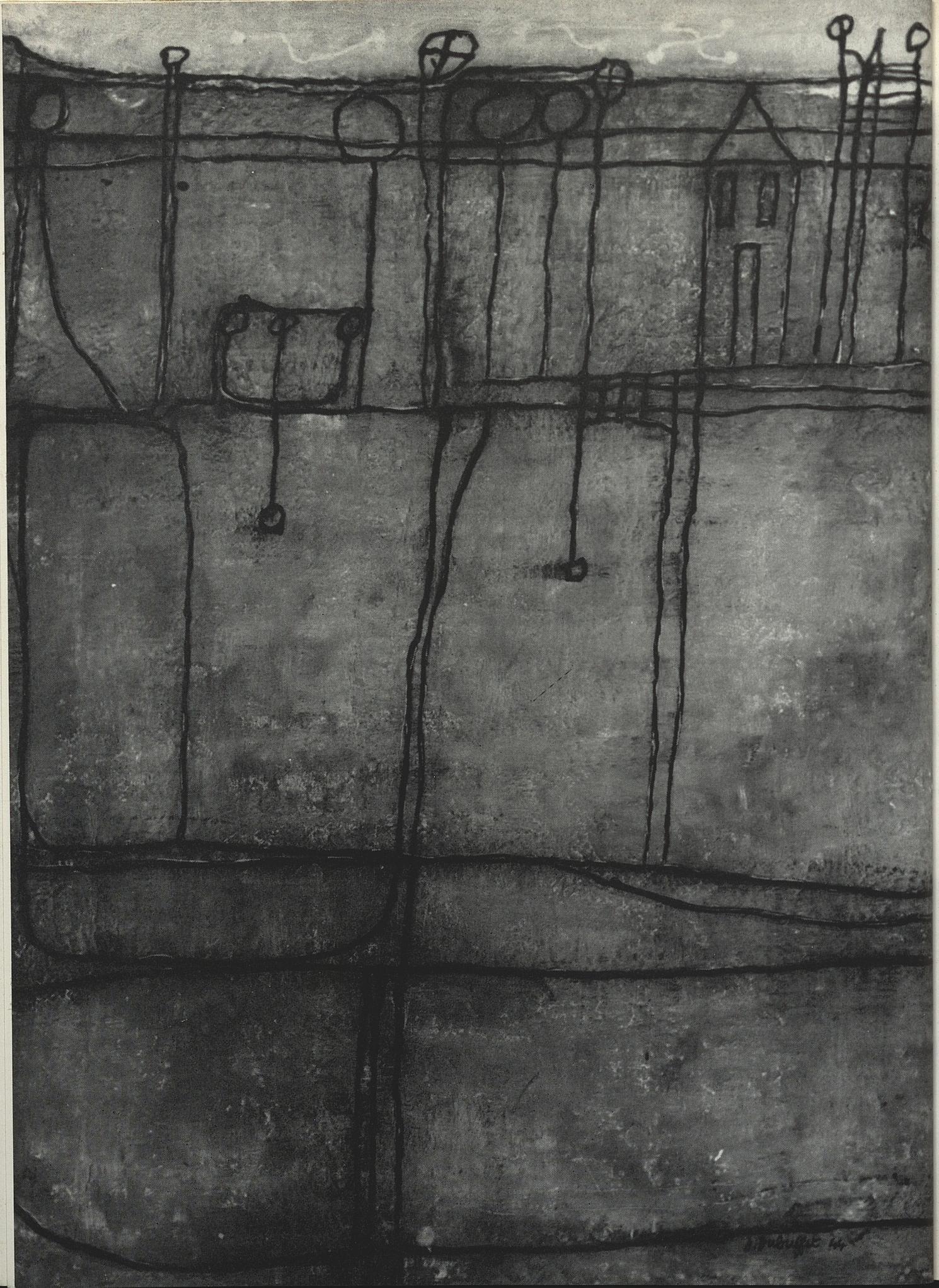
39 Barbe au menton november 19

ember 19

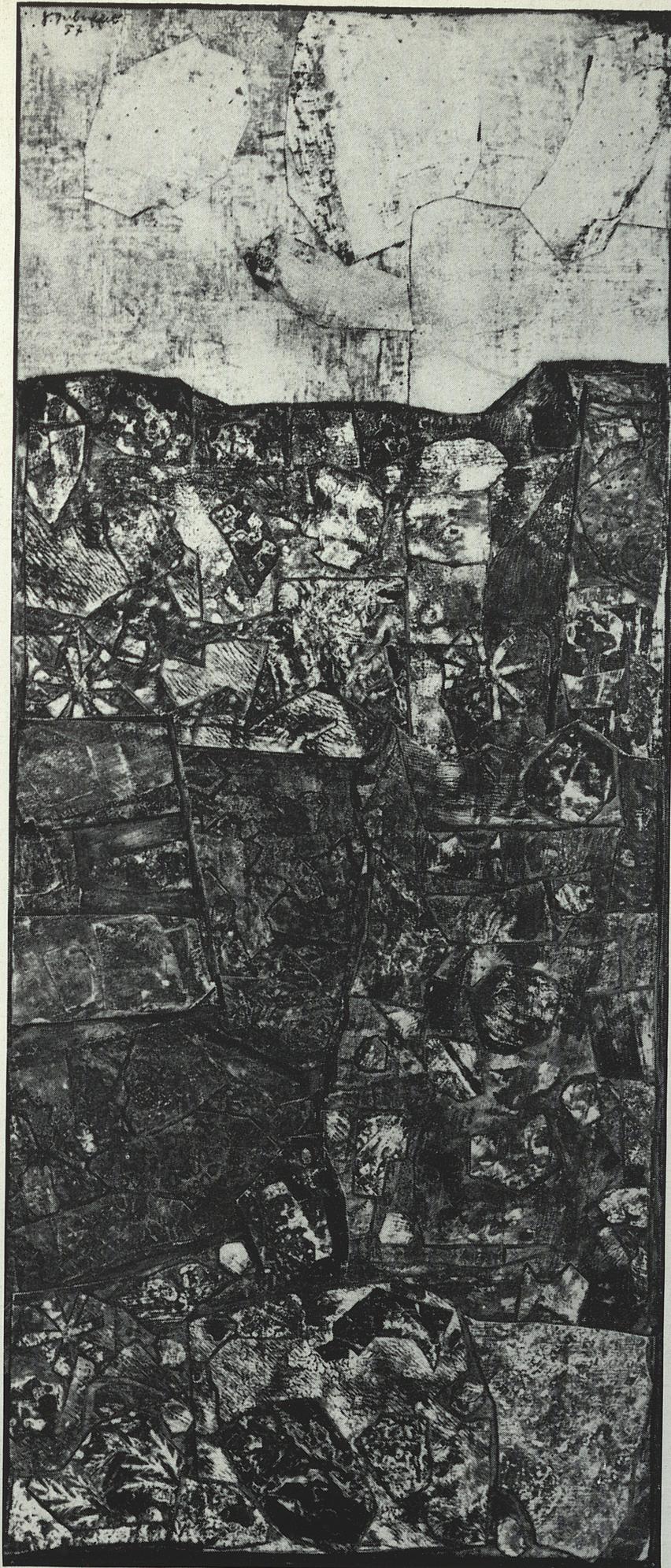


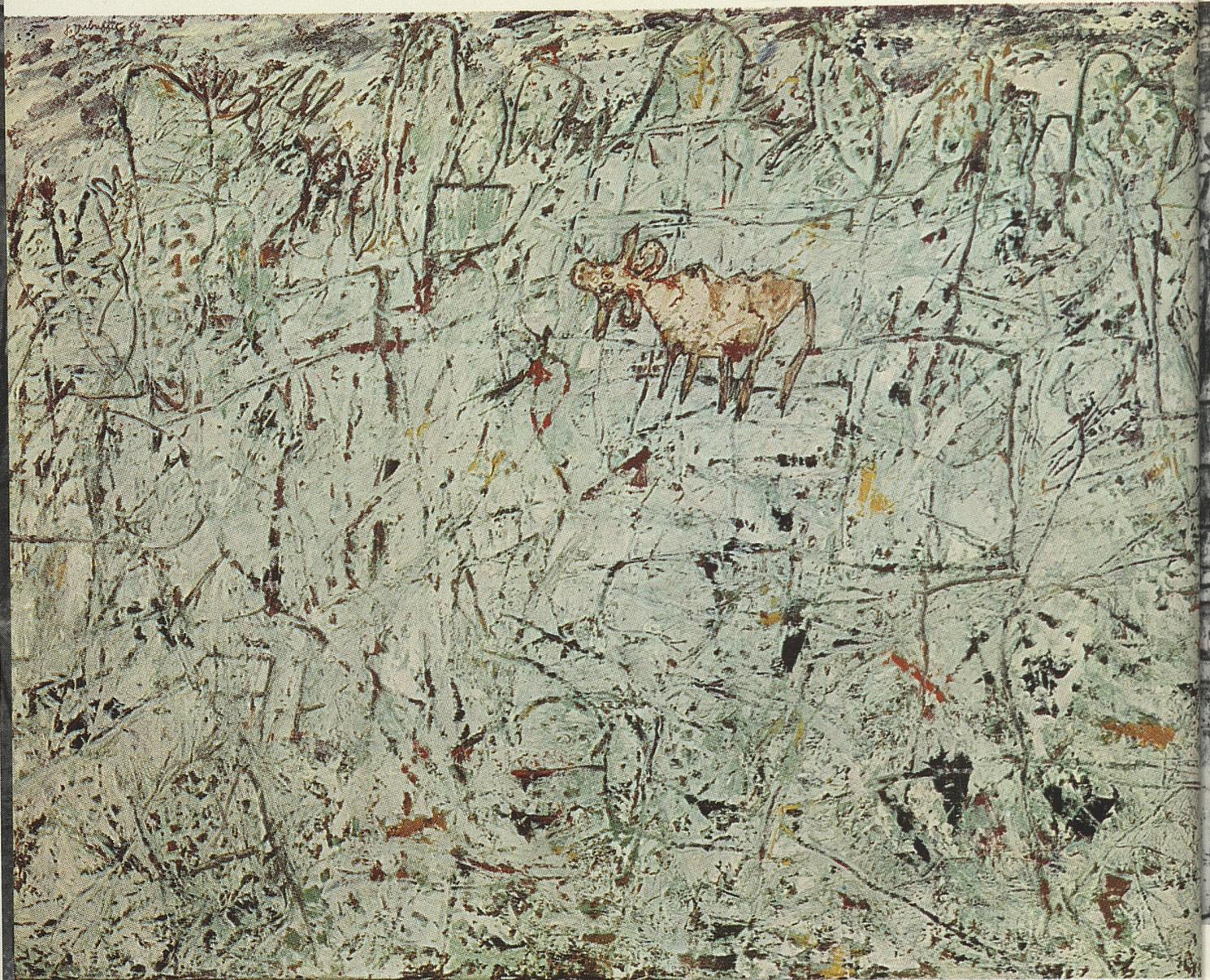


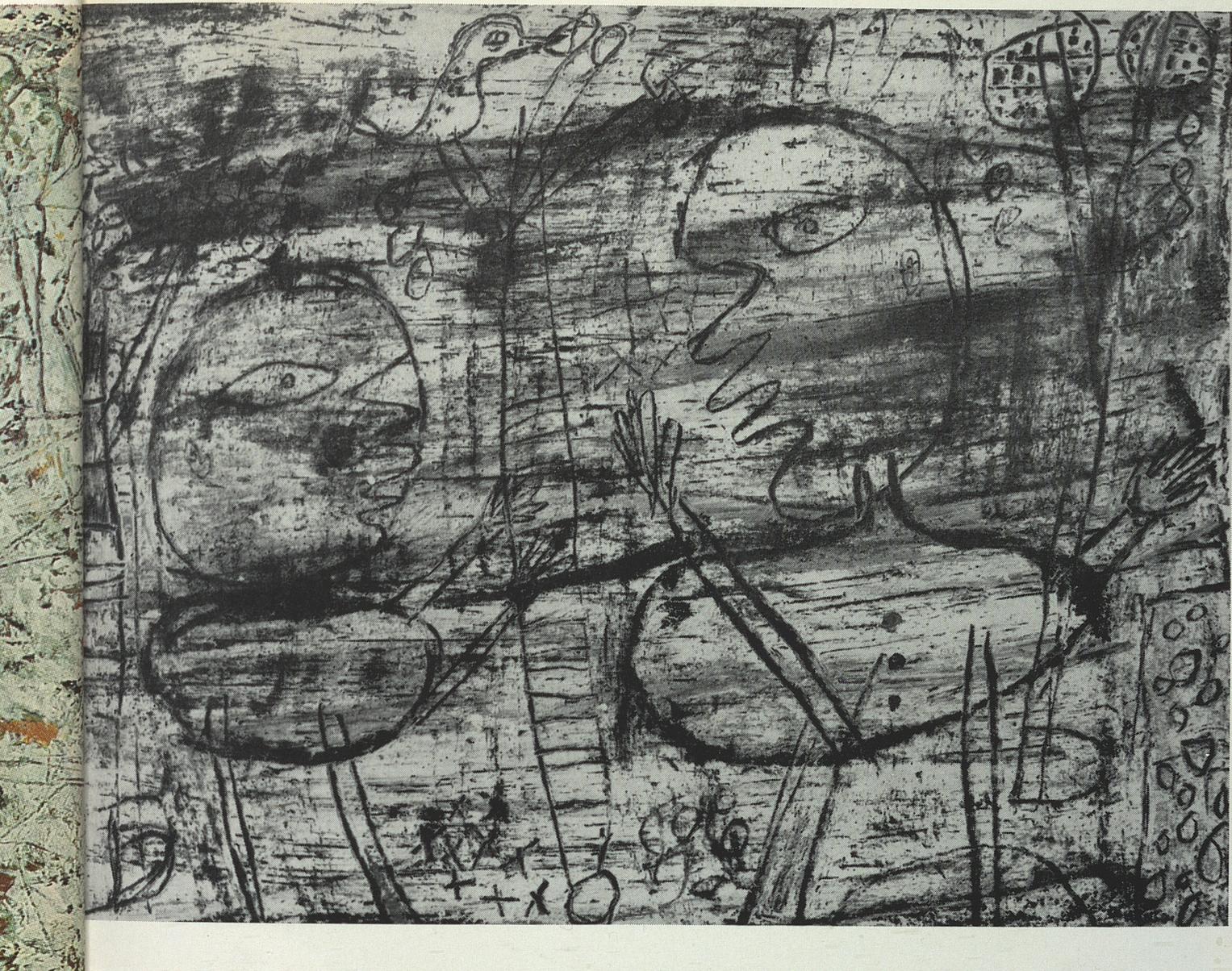




Paysage au jardin 1944







1954

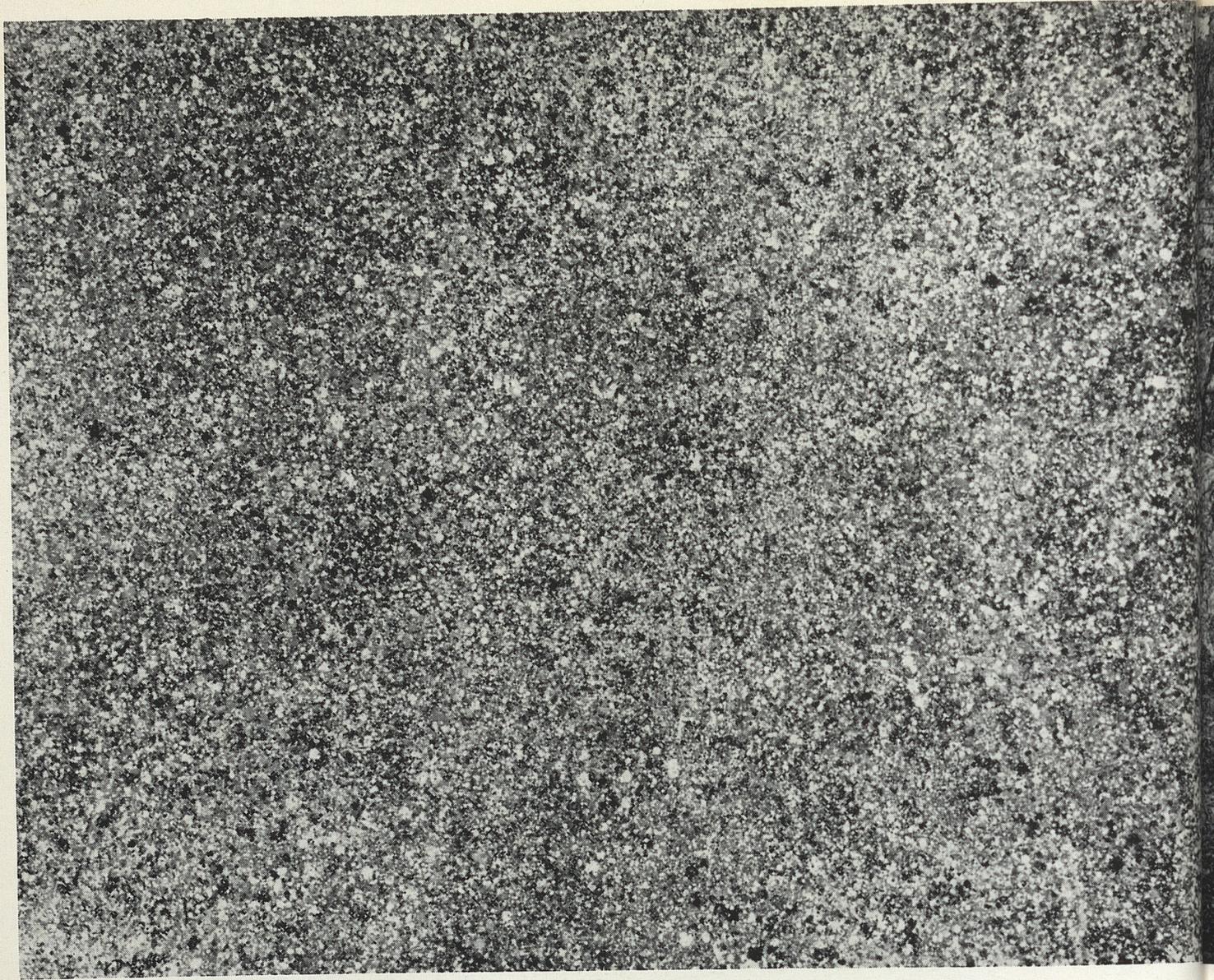
11 Dialogue aux oiseaux 1949

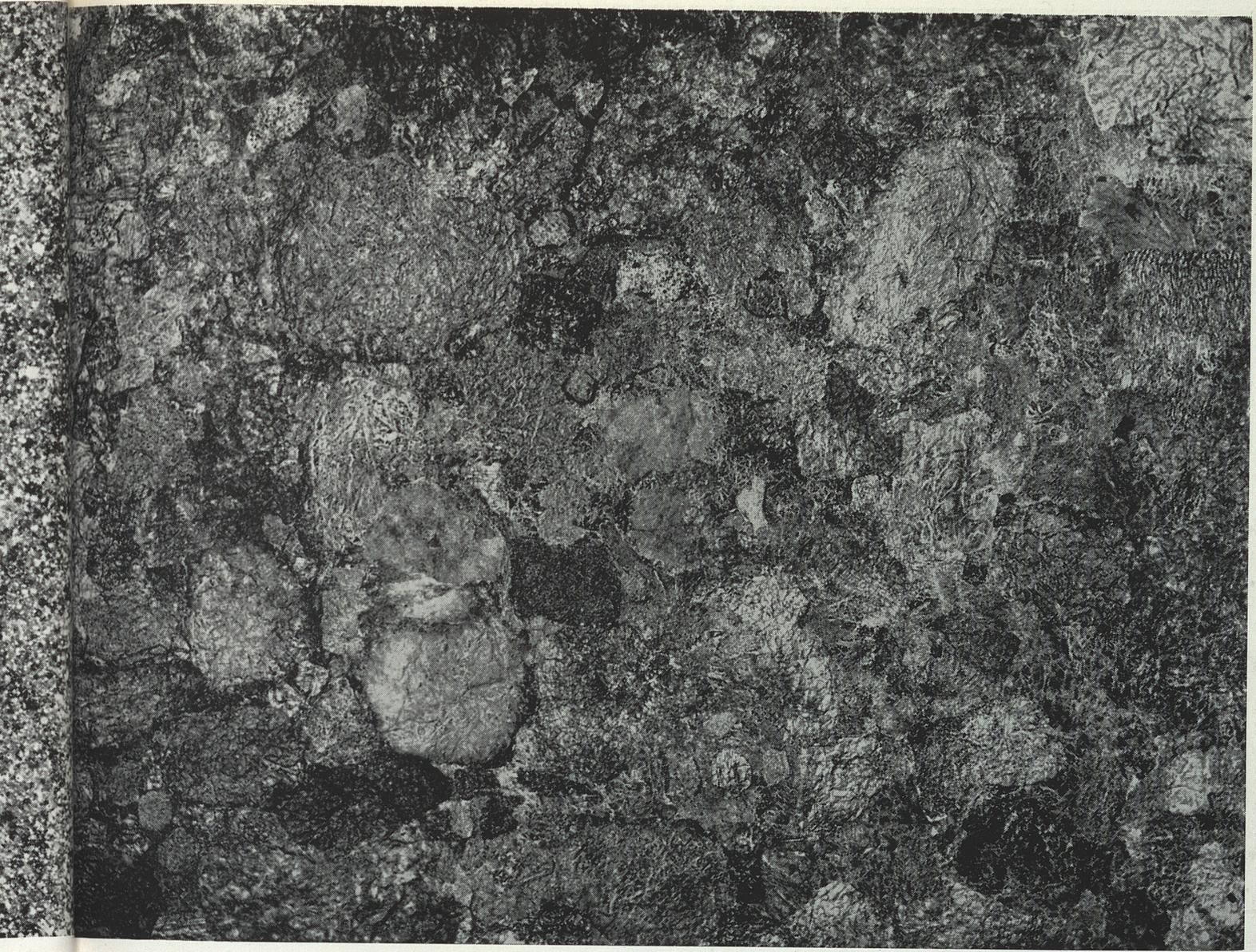


above: 8 La fécondation des palmiers (El Goléa) janvier/april 1948

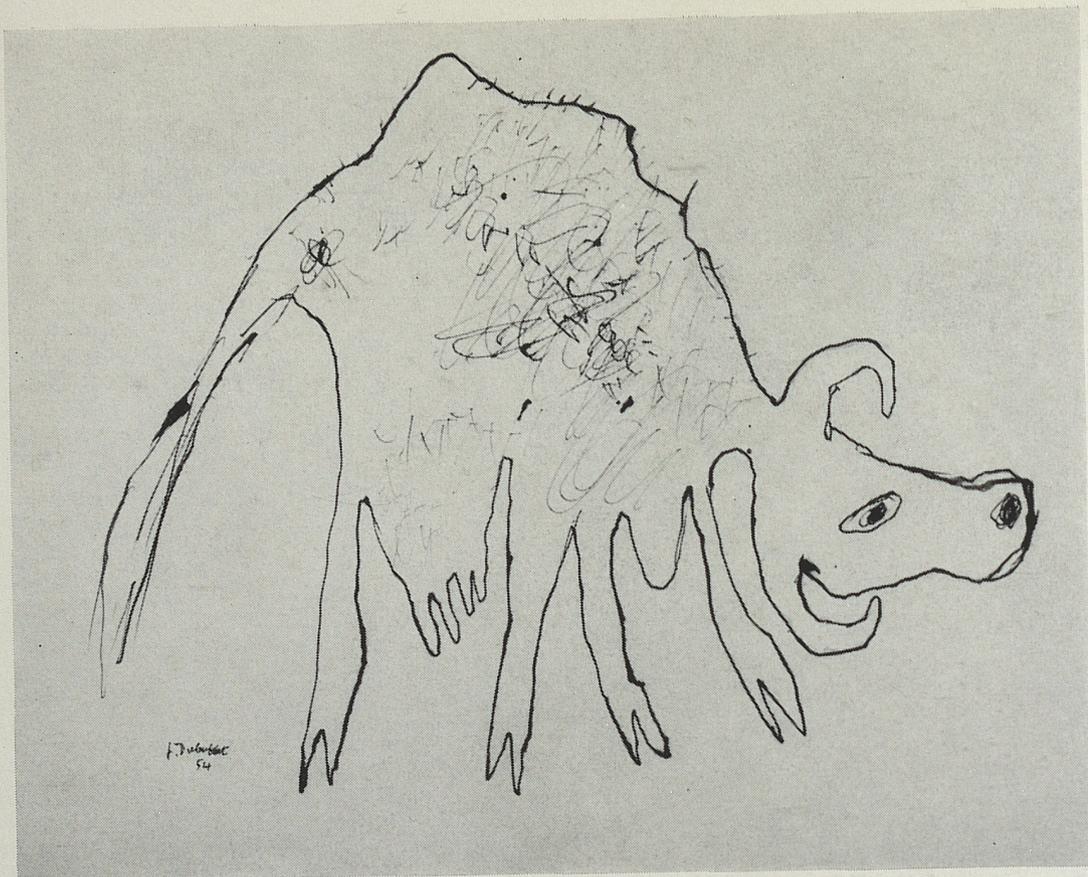
below: 9 Arabe au palmier (El Goléa) janvier/april 1948



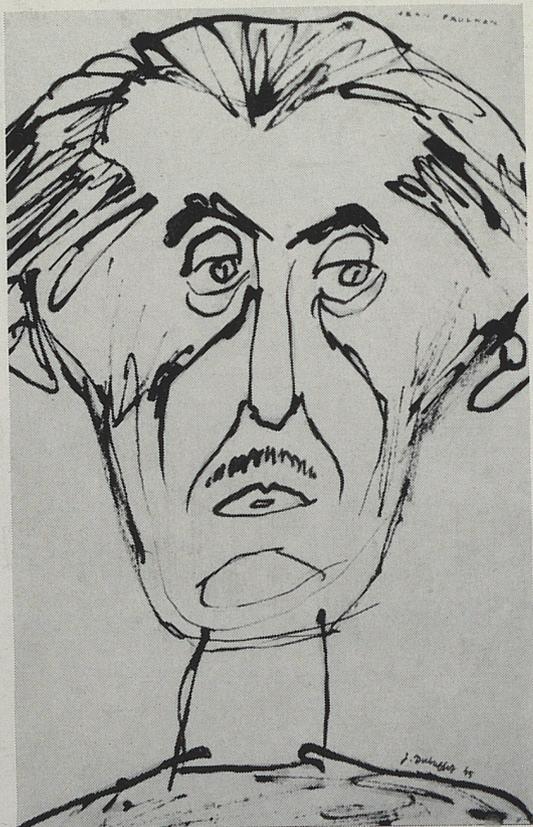




18 Vache 1954



4 Portrait de Jean Paulhan 1945



22 Jardin touffu 1955



1954





Catalogue

- 1 Personnage du désert (Nouveaux
oil on canvas
- 2 Paysage au jardin - 1944
oil on canvas - 32 x 24 1/2
- 3 Black Beauty - 1945
oil on canvas - 25 1/2 x 21 1/4
- 4 Portrait de Jean Paganon - 1945
ink on paper - 21 x 15 1/2
- 5 Portrait of the Sculptor at Work - 1945
oil on canvas - 100 x 120
- 6 Gisement des os d'un éléphant - January 1948
oil on paper - 21 x 15 1/2
- 7 Gisement d'os humains au désert (L'Anatolien) - January 1948
oil on paper - 21 x 15 1/2
- 8 La fondation des palmeraies au Golea - January/april 1948
oil on paper - 17 1/2 x 16 1/2
- 9 Gisement d'os humains (Le Golea) - January/april 1948
oil on paper - 15 1/2 x 21 1/4
- 10 Gisement des palmeraies (Le Golea) - January/april 1948
oil on paper - 21 1/2 x 16 1/2
- 11 Gisement des os d'éléphant (Paysages goliardes) - 1948
oil on paper - 35 x 46
- 12 Portrait d'Antoine Arnaud - March 1950
oil on board - 25 1/2 x 21 1/4
- 13 L'homme au font ramage - October 1950
oil on masonite - 25 1/2 x 21 1/4
- 14 Paysage Saharien - 1952
oil on canvas - 18 x 21 1/4
- 15 Tête abandonnée (New York) - January 1952
oil on masonite - 28 3/4 x 19 1/4



Catalogue

- 1 **Personnage au bicorne** november 1943
oil on canvas 28¼ x 23
- 2 **Paysage au jardin** 1944
oil on canvas 32 x 25¾
- 3 **Black Beauty** 1945
oil on canvas 29 x 23¾
- 4 **Portrait de Jean Paulhan** 1945
ink on paper 9¾ x 6¼
- 5 **Portrait de Joë Bousquet au lit** 1947
gouache, oil, ink on board 19¾ x 12¾
- 6 **Chameau dans les dunes (Tamanrasset)** january 1948
crayon on paper 9¼ x 12⅝
- 7 **Arabe et palmiers sous le soleil (Tamanrasset)** january 1948
crayon on paper 9⅜ x 12½
- 8 **La fécondation des palmiers (El Goléa)** january/april 1948
gouache on paper 17¼ x 18⅞
- 9 **Arabe au palmier (El Goléa)** january/april 1948
gouache on paper 17¼ x 21½
- 10 **Palmiers aux bédouins (El Goléa)** january/april 1948
gouache on paper 21¾ x 16½
- 11 **Dialogue aux oiseaux (Paysages grotesques)** 1949
oil on canvas 35 x 46
- 12 **Portrait d'Antonin Artaud** march 1950
oil on board 25½ x 21¼
- 13 **L'homme au teint ramagé** october 1950
oil on masonite 25¾ x 21⅜
- 14 **Paysage Saharien** 1952
oil on canvas 18 x 21½
- 15 **Tête abondante (New York)** january 1952
oil on masonite 23¾ x 19¾

- 16 **Le Majordome** december 1954
oil on canvas 51¼ x 35
- 17 **Paysage d'été avec vache** december 1954
oil on canvas 35 x 45½
- 18 **Vache** 1954
ink on paper 12⅝ x 16½
- 19 **Chien** 1954
oil and gouache on canvas 12¾ x 16¼
- 20 **Site aux errances** (related to Personnages monolithes) september 1955
oil on canvas 32 x 39½
- 21 **Pied du mur au sol mouillé** 1955
ink on paper (assemblage) 43½ x 24½
- 22 **Jardin touffu** 1955
ink on paper 12½ x 9¼
- 23 **L'homme au foulard** october 1956
ink on paper (assemblage) 24½ x 25½
- 24 **Urgence** (Lieux cursifs) july 1957
oil on canvas 31½ x 39
- 25 **Aires et cheminements** (Lieux cursif) april 1957
oil on canvas 32 x 39¼
- 26 **Le langage du sol** (Sols nus) october 1957
oil on canvas 44½ x 57½
- 27 **Table nue** 1957
oil on canvas 38¼ x 51¼
- 28 **Paysage éclectique** april 1957
oil on canvas (assemblage) 45 x 19
- 29 **Tête barbue** december 1957
oil on paper and canvas (assemblage) 29¾ x 22½
- 30 **Personnage dans un paysage peu distinct** may 1957
gouache and collage on paper board 10½ x 14¾

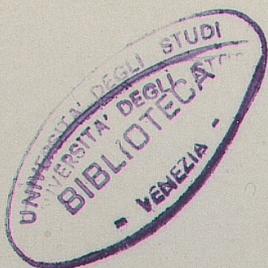
- 1955
- 31 **L'agression (Paysage avec 3 personnages)** may 1957
gouache on paper 12½ x 15
- 32 **Paysage aux Colias** may 1957
gouache and butterfly wings 14⅞ x 9
- 33 **Le coquin prospère** april 1958
oil on canvas 36¼ x 29
- 34 **Texturologie XXVI (radieuse)** march 1958
oil on canvas 44½ x 57
- 35 **Texturologie XLII (Pullulation)** may 1958
oil on canvas 35 x 45½
- 36 **Texturologie LXXIII (aux salissures)** october 1958
oil on canvas 35 x 46
- 37 **Sans cérémonie** october 1958
ink and collage on paper 26½ x 17¾
- 38 **Lande aux trois arbres** may 1959
ink on paper (assemblage) 22¼ x 19
- 39 **Barbe au menton** november 1959
papier-mâché sculpture 13⅜ h.
- 40 **Tête barbue** december 1959
driftwood sculpture 11½ h.
- L'âme des sous-sol (Matériologies)** december 1959
aluminum foil, oil, collage on masonite 58⅞ x 76¾

All dimensions are in inches

Height precedes width

cover: catalogue no. 41 L'âme des sous-sol december 1959 (detail)

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design: Stella Y

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