Untitled (Skull), 1981
When asked recently about the relationship between his paintings and his drawings, New York artist Jake Berthot explained that for him the act of drawing requires a discipline and focus different from that of painting. As he once said, "drawing is what the hand can grasp" and painting is "what the body faces" (Blakeston). He finds that ideas may come out of the drawings that he will then apply to his paintings; at times it is the other way around. In any case, the drawings are complete statements rather than studies for paintings. Eschewing a doctrinaire adherence to any art movement, Berthot's stylistic development has been personal and measured. Although his reductive, monochromatic grey and grey-green field paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s linked him with Minimalism, their painterly surfaces lent them a sensuality not usually associated with that style. (This could also be said of certain other so-called Minimalists such as Brice Marden.) Berthot's works, in fact, grew out of Mark Rothko's deeply emotional chromatic canvases. Berthot, however, does not share the heroic and epic aspiration of Abstract Expressionists like Rothko and Clyfford Still. He prefers instead to sound a more personal and poetic note.

Berthot's drawings of the period are characterized by a painted background of grey enamel into which the artist scratched with graphite, forming ambiguous but suggestive shapes. In the first examples of the series of human and goat skull drawings, the subject of the current exhibition, Berthot continued to draw into the soft grey enamel, sometimes highlighting with white enamel (nos. * through 4 are part of this group). Line, though present in the paintings, assumes a primary role in these drawings. Fluid lines form ovoid shapes, more or less skull-like, that are joined by written words or calligraphic marks that suggest writing. The script is a kind of private graffiti or "doodling," the meaning of which remains hidden.

Though related to the artist's contemporaneous nonobjective, vertical bar paintings, the drawings are more overtly romantic. By making a figurative element the subject of his drawings, Berthot was challenging "modernistic notions of what is or what is not acceptable." As Berthot developed the skull series, the image became increasingly literal (compare no. 4 with no. 15). In these late works, which make surprising use of ink, watercolor, graphite into what Berthot calls "doodling," the meaning of which remains hidden.

Perhaps the skull shape, depicted in varying degrees from abstraction to representation in the drawings, was the genesis of the oval shape that forms the central image of the paintings that have occupied Berthot since 1980. In these works, a luminous red and blue oval emerges from a rich impasto of ochre and gold oil paint. If Berthot's early dark paintings were "a dialectic between felt expression and concreteness of form," he allows that "gradually feeling began to predominate." The shimmering, abundant surfaces of the "ovals" are reminiscent of Claude Monet's late Waterlilies. The use of gold with deep reds and bright blues recall Medieval icons. Berthot once said "I am not interested in the new but in trying to make paintings that really "feel old" (Mt. Holyoke catalogue).

Although Berthot resists symbolic readings of the oval in his paintings, he acknowledges that the skull image brings with it a host of associations related to death and religion. Skulls are not the subject of Berthot's most recent works on paper. He says, however, that he intends to return to the motif from time to time. The skulls have become an anchoring device, a meditation for the artist.

Berthot was born in Niagara Falls, New York, in 1939. He moved to New York City, where he still resides, to study at the New School for Social Research, and Pratt Institute. He has taught at Cooper Union, New York, University of California, Berkeley (spring quarter, 1972), and currently teaches at Yale University. He was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1981.

Constance Lewallen

* Numbers refer to list of works in MATRIX (see below).

Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from a conversation with the artist on October 2, 1984.

Works in MATRIX:

1. Skull #3, 1977, enamel and graphite on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., NY.

2. Skull #4, 1977, enamel and graphite on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., NY.

3. Skull #5, 1977, enamel and graphite on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., NY.

4. Skull #7, 1977, enamel and graphite on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., NY.

5. Untitled, 1978, graphite and enamel on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Renee and David McKeever, CA.

6. Untitled (Skull), 1979, enamel, graphite and crayon on paper, 30" x 22". Lent by Renee and David McKeever, CA.

7. Untitled (Skull), 1979, white chalk, pastel and India ink wash on paper, 30" x 22". Lent by Thomas S. Schultz, N.D., Boston.

8. Untitled (Skull), 1979, white chalk, pastel and India ink wash on paper, 30" x 22". Lent by Thomas S. Schultz, N.D., Boston.
Selected group exhibitions:


Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Smith, Roberts. Artforum, May '75.

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