HAND PAPERMAKING

Volume 11 Number 1 *Summer 1996*

HAND PAPERMAKING

Volume 11 Number 1 *Summer 1996*

Contents

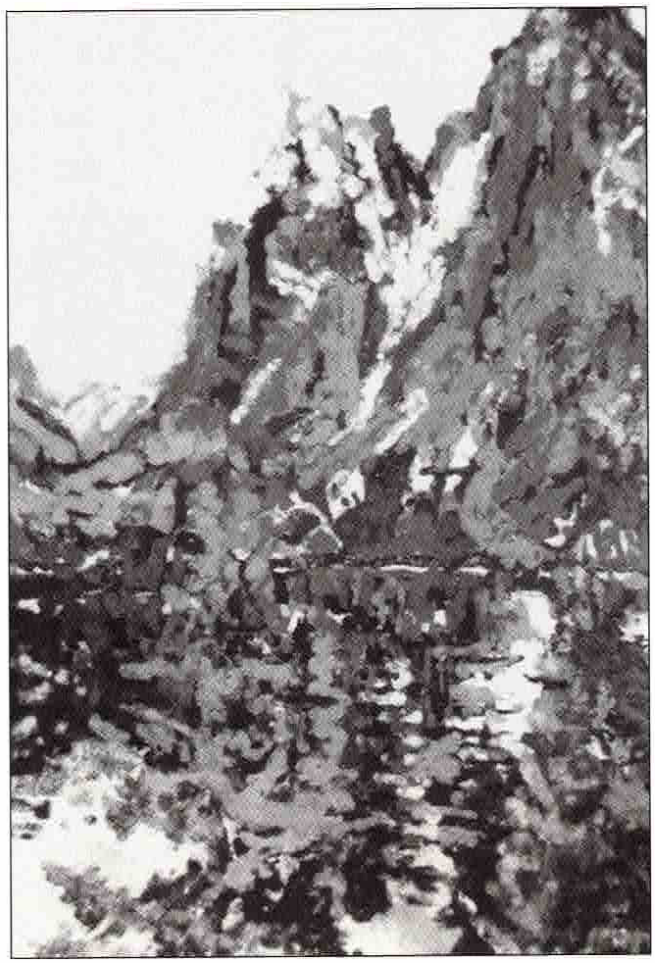
Hand Papermaking is a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing traditional and contemporary ideas in the art of hand papermaking through publications and other means.

Hand Papermaking (ISSN 0887-1418) is published semi-annually by Hand Papermaking, P.O. Box 77027, Washington, DC 20013-7027, USA. (800) 821-6604 or (301) 699-3143.

Subscriptions are $35.00 per year; $40.00 in Canada and Mexico; $45.00 outside of North America. Reduced rates are available for full-time students with valid identification and for extended subscriptions. Payment in US dollars is required. Visa/Mastercard accepted.

Hand Papermaking welcomes and will consider unsolicited manuscripts but cannot guarantee their return unless they are accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Initial inquiries are recommended. Write: Michael Durgin, Hand Papermaking, 8409 Flower Avenue, Takoma Park, MD 20912-6734, USA.

On the cover: Lynn Sures' *Lucy*, 1990, 43" x 75". Handmade Paper. This work explores themes in paleoanthropology. See interview starting on page 6. Photograph by Breger & Associates.



Jenny Lake *(detail), 1991, full size, 43" x 79". All photographs by the author, except as noted.*

An Interview with Lynn Sures

Michael Durgin: Let's start by talking about beginnings: your introduction to paper and your background before that.

Lynn Sures: I was painting for ten years before I started making paper, with a little bit of printmaking—etching—as a point of interest.

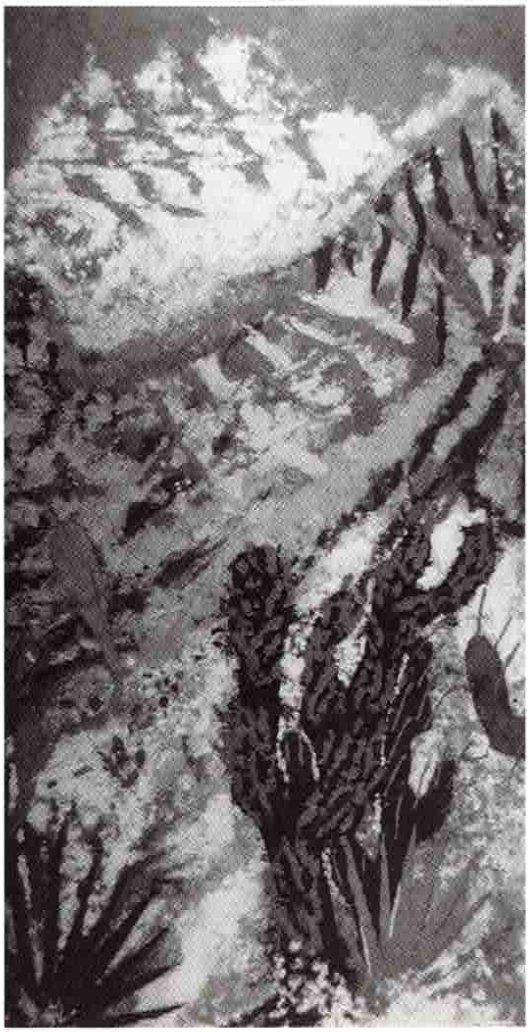
I was always very interested in landscapes. I did my graduate thesis on cloudscapes and waterfalls. Dramatic color is something that's been natural for me, also.

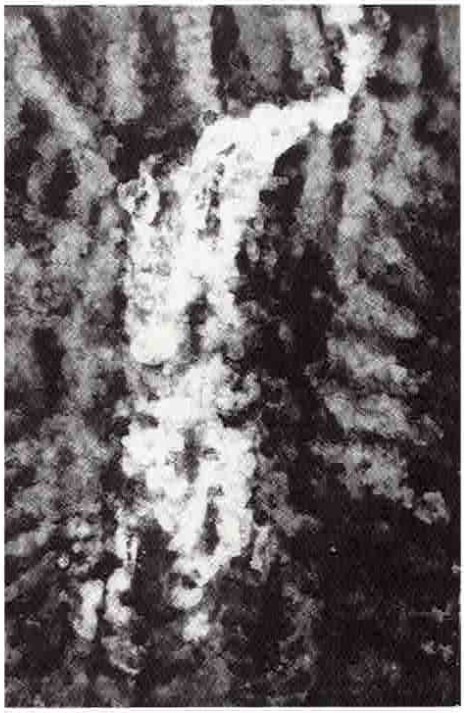
Paintings of remembered landscapes led to paintings of remembered construction site excavations. I'd stare at the site, then go home and paint my fuzzy recollection, which included feelings of strength and force and vastness. This led me to an interest in geological forces which have manipulated the landscape. Thinking about what secrets live in layers of the earth became a natural segue into paleoanthropology—early humans.

My introduction to papermaking happened when I was taking care of two very young children full-time, and teaching part-time around that. I was teaching an etching class for the Smithsonian Resident Associates, in Washington, D.C., in the same room where the Corcoran School of Art was renting space for a papermaking class. I had never heard of papermaking and only half noticed what the other class was doing. I spoke with Georgia Deal, the papermaking teacher, one day and she suggested I take the course the next semester.

I calculated very quickly that I would be able to do it, because both of my kids would be in school at that exact time. It was completely fated that I do this. So I took the class and was elated to be doing something new and different. As soon as the teacher demonstrated pigmenting pulp and that you could laminate colors and make images, I went "Oh my gosh; I can make paintings out of this." It just really lit a fire. I pretty much ignored everything else she said the whole rest of the semester because I was busy making my little paintings, and I never really learned how to cast or do any of the other things.

After that I didn't have any access to papermaking equipment for a good six months. Then I was hired by the Corcoran as a teacher and, therefore, had access to





Tower Falls, *1992, 23" x 35".*

Drink Deep, Back Again, *1987, 42" x 79".*

their new facility, on campus. I'd go in on Fridays and make paper from 9:00 until 2:00, and then dash home so I could be there when everybody got out of school. I did that for about six months, and then I was chosen as a finalist for an invitational show at the Baltimore Museum of Art, on the basis of landscapes I was doing in handmade paper. That gave me some money and encouragement to build my own studio, at home. Then I was able to make very large paintings in paper, which were then included in the show.

MD: This was about 1986?

LS: The introductory course was in the fall of 1985. About nine months later I was hired by the Corcoran. So, I consider 1986-1996 my ten years of papermaking.

The show in Baltimore was put up in early 1988. By that time I'd actually been making paper for a year-and-a-half; pretty much of a neophyte, but I'd been making art for ten years prior to that.

MD: Did your work with paper pretty much replace your work with traditional paints?

LS: That happened very quickly. First of all, having young children, I didn't have the time a full-time studio artist would have to do a lot of different things. Also, I was always teaching several courses as an adjunct; one here, one there, driving all around. I had to be pretty focused on what I was making. So, when I got interested in paper, it had to be pretty clearly just paper for some time. Lately, drawing has grown important to me again, but I also have older kids. Now I can draw if I want to and I can paint if I want to, so the other things are back in the picture, but paper is by far my primary medium. When I think about making art I always see it in my mind's eye in paper.

MD: So you ended up teaching at the Corcoran, but not papermaking.

LS: Not papermaking. I ended up teaching drawing part-time, then getting hired after a couple of years as a full-time teacher, in drawing and painting.

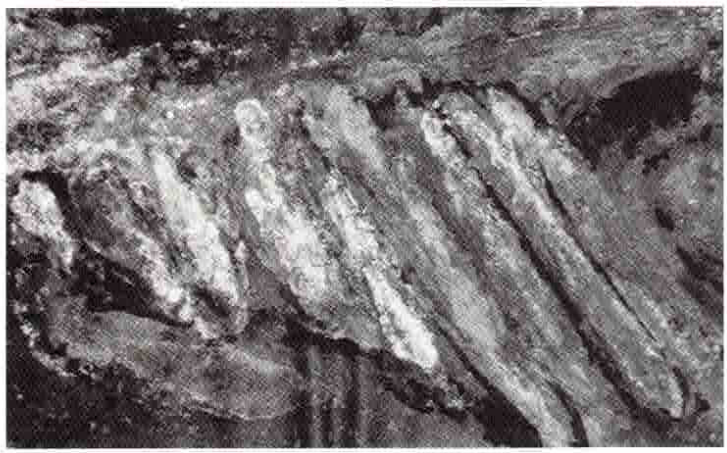
Although I've taught many workshops in papermaking now, this year I'll be teaching my first full-fledged papermaking course at the Corcoran. I'm very excited about that.

MD: Will this be an introductory course?

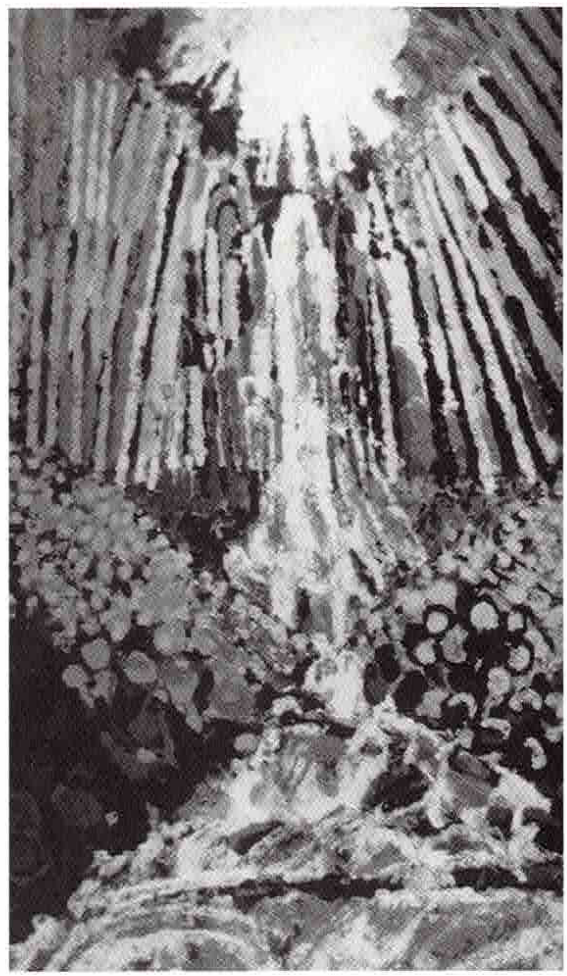
LS: It's going to be the only course. I'll have to see who my students are and what, if any, experience they have. It will include an introduction to sheet forming, with some painting and coloring techniques.

MD: What kinds of places have you taught papermaking before?

LS: I was able to talk the Smithsonian Residents Associates into starting a paper program, which lasted several years. I had many workshops there: both weekend and month-long, once-a-week kinds of schedules. I've also taught a few times at the Lee Art Center in Arlington, Virginia, and at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, in Tennessee.



Accretionary Prism, *1989, 43" x 26".*



Palisades Falls, *1991, 43" x 75"*

I really want to mention Arrowmont because they've been very encouraging. They discovered me at the Baltimore Museum of Art show and contacted me. Prior to that I had never even heard of that kind of summer arts and crafts retreat. This past spring, they invited people who had previously taught there to spend a week making a piece. It was supposed to be collaborative, so I called Donna Koretsky. Donna, with expertise in sculpture, and I, with color, put our skills together and created three very long totemic forms that have different treatments of painting on them. We learned a lot from each other. We were very excited about our sculptures, now on permanent exhibit at Arrowmont. It's a great honor.

MD: Do you enjoy teaching papermaking?

LS: Yes, it's fun. Also, I feel I do something a little different with paper and so I like it when I get the opportunity to explain that to somebody else. I know there have to be other painters out there, who either don't know about paper as a possibility or who haven't gotten over a lot of the really big stumbling blocks, which I, luckily, have been bull-headed enough to work my way past.

MD: Can you describe your transition from the traditional painting medium to painting with paper, and how you view working with paper as still "painting."

LS: The fluidity of paper is definitely the joining point. I like working with water color, with acrylic that has a lot of medium in it, and with oil paint that's thinned out and splashed around. I've always had a dynamic kind of painting style. As soon as I saw how messy paper was I was completely attracted to that aspect of it and I found that I could actually make what I wanted to make better with pulp than I could with paint. There's just something about the physical placement of the pulp that seems to come right out of me naturally. For me, using paint becomes more of a thinking process than using paper pulp. One aspect that hasn't been different, though, is the imagery.

It's been great to be out of that first situation where I had to complete a painting in paper in one day at the Corcoran and get it out of there before the next class showed up; to have pieces sitting in my studio and to be able to continue to go back to them, without having to close them up. That luxury of time is very important.

The thing about paper painting that works well for me while I am working on a piece is that I can do something then redo it, then redo it again, in many, many layers and with constant little adjustments. Artistically, I don't plan things out and execute them. I know what the image will represent, a certain specific landscape, for example, but I don't have a preconceived visualization of its appearance.

I almost look at my base sheet and think "Oh my. How am I going to do this?" and then my whole quest is to find out what it's going to look like at the end. And then, at the end, that's the answer. That doesn't last very long and then I have to make another painting. That's been very, very satisfying about paper. Also, I've learned over the years that you don't have to just cover something up. You can cover it up but leave evidence of what came before.

MD: You describe working with layers and not feeling the need to erase or cover up but letting some of the lower layers show through as you are building on them. I wonder whether you could talk about how that might tie in to some of your imagery, especially the anthropology and geology.

LS: Oh, that's so interesting: the evidence of what has come before. I'm so desperately curious about everything that has preceded us, that we can't really know about

La Ferrassie, *1993, 79" x 42".*

very definitively. The more difficult it is to know, the more I want to find out what we do know about it.

One of my series, of volcanoes, has several tall pieces in which I envision myself standing inside of a volcano as it was going to erupt and then as it started blowing up; with me in there watching the whole thing, as if I could. You could never really do that, but I can do it in my painting. It's the same with watching geological processes, which would take millions of years, and me pretending that it's an event that I can watch in my painting.

As far as the human anthropology, I feel so much that we're all a composite of everything that has preceded us: through both experience and genes. There are a zillion generations of genes that we all possess; I feel like that's our immortality. We pass our knowledge on down—and not even just as parent to child, but teacher to student, or any human interaction. It's our cumulative knowledge and understanding. And I'm so curious about the roots of it. Who were these beings that preceded us, that weren't really like us?

I've discovered things that are so amazing. There's not a straight line from proto-human to human. There were many of nature's little tests: some worked and some didn't. There were different branches of the tree of our presence; it's all very intriguing. The evidence fascinates me: the way that we're able to find out about our predecessors. You find a tooth and you analyze a structure in the tooth and you understand what the diet of that creature was.

So, I love what you just said about the layering tying into that. It does and I never thought about that before. I like being able to view the process of the painting and to not disguise the fact that at first I thought I should put a big green thing over there and then later I found out that I shouldn't. A lot of times I'm saying to the painting: "Well, should I try this?" And then the painting says back, "Yes. That's a good direction," or it says back, "No, no. Don't do that." I like seeing the artistic process: changes that were made, mistakes that were made, colors that were thought about. Also, I like that sense of unclarity, that nothing is really concrete, really known. It's something that's blue, that also has a little red in it, a little green in it, a little violet in it. And even the funky colors, with mica, gold, and bronze.

MD: So, there's a line between revealing and concealing what's beneath, in your technique as well as your imagery.

For the images which are inspired by paleoanthropology you do a lot of drawing studies at the National Museum of Natural History, in Washington. How has that fed your work and what has your interaction with the museum staff been like?

Lynn Sures painting at her modified vacuum table tank, in her studio. Photograph by Paul Elbo of Breger & Associates.

LS: Ideally, I would have fossil skull casts in my studio and would work the paper pieces directly from them. But drawing them helps me understand them, feel a familiarity with the individual that I couldn't get from just studying a photo. It takes me several hours to draw a skull and that includes good observation time.

The skulls I paint are recognizable to those in the field. Although they are abstracted, there are distinct physical characteristics which are retained. The brow, brain case, cheek structure, etcetera vary greatly from species to species.

The museum staff—Dr. Rick Potts, Director of Paleoanthropology, and his assistant, Jennifer Clark, a scientific illustrator—have been continuously supportive of my work. Jenny has always made a place available for me to draw and has been quick to assist with reference books and encouragement. Rick has helped me with technical information. He also advised me in choosing the most significant individuals to include in a recent six panel survey, from australopithecines to Cro-Magnon. He has indicated interest in seeing my work included in the planned Human Origins hall at the museum and he chose an etching I did on handmade paper as the frontispiece for his book, *Humanity's Descent: The Consequences of Ecological Instability*, to be published by Morrow in May of this year. They have also invited me to attend their ongoing, in-house paleoanthropological seminar series, from which I've learned an enormous amount.

This continuous enthusiasm for my work and encouragement by facilitation—I feel I could never have made my study as meaningful without their presence.

MD: A lot of your pieces are very large and I'd be interested to hear how, technically, you go about producing these works; what the steps are. The process of working them, but also the mechanics of forming, drying, and pressing them.

LS: I have to say that it's almost completely unrelated to the hand-dipped, simple, small sheet. I work with a box mould, immersed in water the whole time. I enjoy the different amounts of wetness that I work with. I notice that that affects my textures and my pulp distribution. It's very important to me in achieving the complex colors.

The base sheet is not a big deal with me. I can use almost any fiber and I'm halfway satisfied with it as the base sheet. But once I get into the painting, I've pretty much kept it either specifically cotton or flax. Their characteristics are so incredibly different. The cotton gives me a huge amount of control and I really learned to make a great deal of illusion with the cotton. The flax has been more in charge of me that I've been in charge of it, although I've learned so much about it now that I have a Hollander beater that I can fiddle with.

Panel Three, *1994, 43" x 79".*

MD: So, you're using a modified vacuum table, with high walls.

LS: Yes, the tank's four inch walls hold several inches of water and a heavy box mould which rests on the bottom. I have a deep deckle which I can latch onto the mould. I usually cover the mould with both a screen and a thin layer of Pellon and I fill it full with my base sheet, because I want the piece to be thick like cardboard at the end. I've noticed that the Pellon seems to retard the draining of the water when I have a lower water level, which allows the colors to disperse better.

I work the whole piece in numerous layers. It's incredibly rare that the first color that I put down is even visible at the end. This can go on for several weeks.

MD: When you begin a piece, making your base sheet and starting the painting, you usually have the water pretty low, until you've got the general shape of the image.

LS: For images that are more precise, like the skulls, I start with the water at the level of the sheet, but not at all above it.

MD: So it's kept wet, but not floating at all.

LS: Exactly.

MD: And then there's a point at which you typically raise the water and work at that more liquid state.

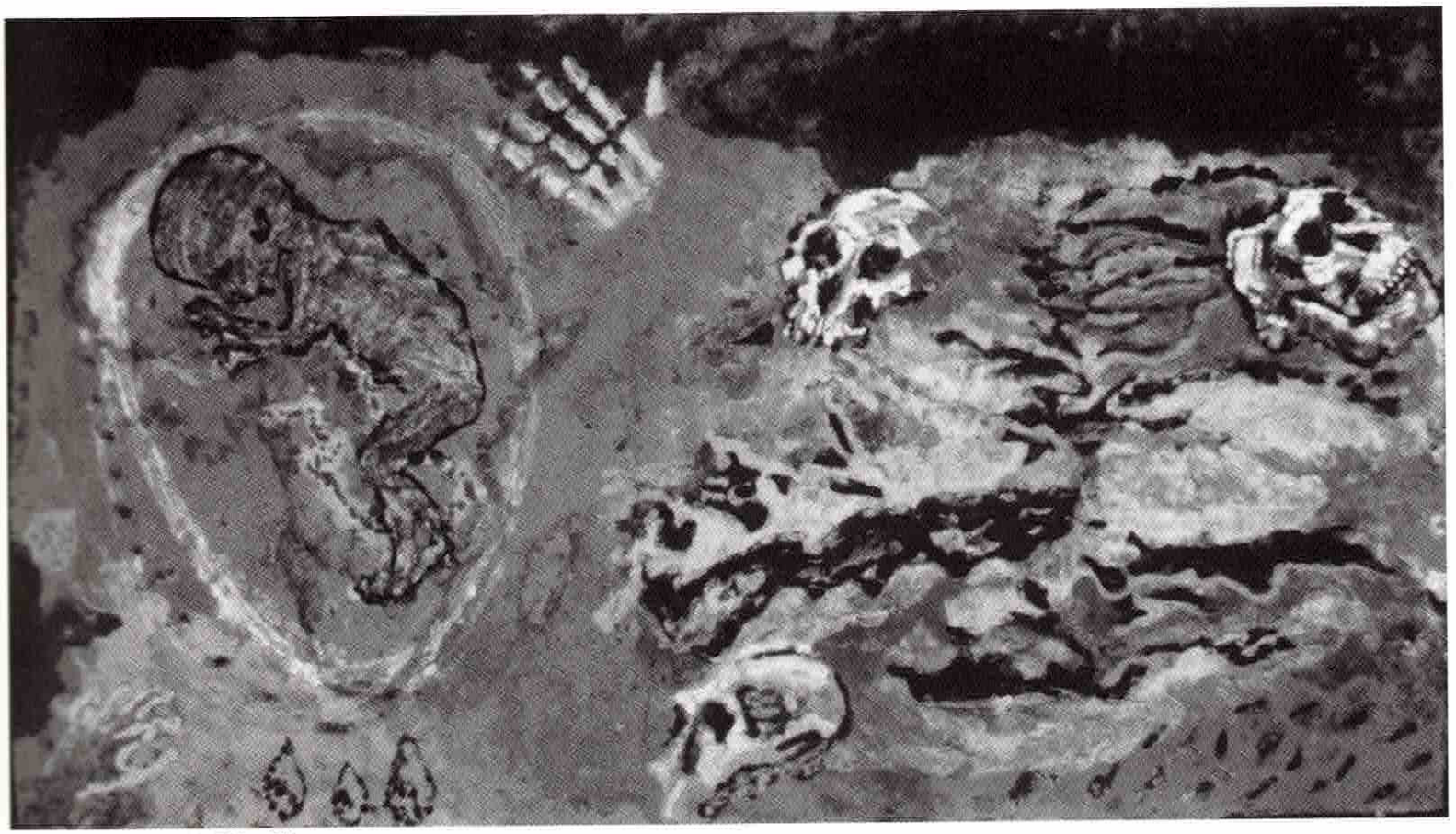
LS: Yes. Whenever I want to have a little less control and a little more even spreading and distribution of pulp I will liquify the pulp that I'm pouring, for one thing, and then also liquify the surface I'm working on. The landscape paintings all start out this way and stay liquid until near the end, when I want to introduce some definition.

I do not use formation aid, which I know most people who do pulp painting use. I like to use physical force to spread the fiber out instead of letting that graceful kind of distribution happen.

MD: Are you putting your hands into the image or just controlling how the pulp falls onto the piece.

LS: I'm just pouring through my fingers. I hold my gallon milk carton full of pulp in my right hand. My left hand is out over the image. I pour the pulp gently and sprinkle it from the carton, through my fingers, which are vibrating. They cause the little fiber droplets to rain

Etching on handmade paper, 5" x 5", 1994, to be used as frontispiece for Humanity's Descent.



Birth at Olduvai, *1990, 75" x 43".*

down on the surface. They're quite controlled, because my left hand is my paintbrush and it's telling everything where to fall.

MD: One other technique you use to finalize images is a squirt bottle, to give a little more edge.

LS: Yes. The variables are how finely beaten the pulp is and the water to fiber ratio. If it's very liquid and less beaten, you get a much looser line or not even a line. With very finely beaten fiber and not very much water, I can do something that's quite specific, especially if I use a template to create a sort of stencil edge.

When the image is done, I drain the tank. After I remove the deckle, I coax the pulp sheet out, either by inserting an aluminum sheet under the Pellon or by pulling apart my two-part detachable mold. The sheet of paper is then sitting on top of the Pellon on the floor of the drained tank. At that point I cover it with felt and pallet wrap, put the tubes of my vacuum system in place, and vacuum press it. That gets it really solid and, although not dry at all, it removes the standing water. The piece is very compacted at this point.

I air-dry the piece for two or three days until I notice that the edges are almost thinking about being dry. If I wait too long wrinkles develop, so I really have to keep an eye on it. Then I pick up the piece and move it to another surface so that I can reuse the tank. I usually put it on diffusion screen laying on the floor and then I cover it with more diffusion screen and air dry it until it seems that putting weight on top will not create an impression on the paper. At that point I put full jugs of water on top at very small intervals, and that does it.

MD: While you've developed many of these techniques and tools yourself, are there any notable people who have influenced your papermaking whom you'd like to mention?

LS: I have a great deal of gratitude to Elaine Koretsky, for her book on coloring pulp, and to Rick Hungerford, for his information about the fineness of the fiber as an important factor in getting saturated color. That information was hugely valuable to me and a great relief. Also, Helmut Becker's enthusiasm for flax certainly planted the seed for my interest in this fiber as a painting medium.

Any time a technical thing was solved for me by somebody else, it was always such a gift. Most of this, from designing my tank on down the line has been, "I wonder what's going to work."