

## ART

# The Challenge of the Figure

By PHYLLIS BRAFF

**A**T one time or another, every artist draws from the figure. Those who find the challenge absorbing are motivated by a desire to try their own interpretations of a classical theme and by a fascination with the variety of forms, postures, gestures and meanings that can be interwoven.

Since exhibitions of such drawings are increasingly rare, there is much to glean from the examples by 45 artists on view in "Drawings From the Figure" at the East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art.

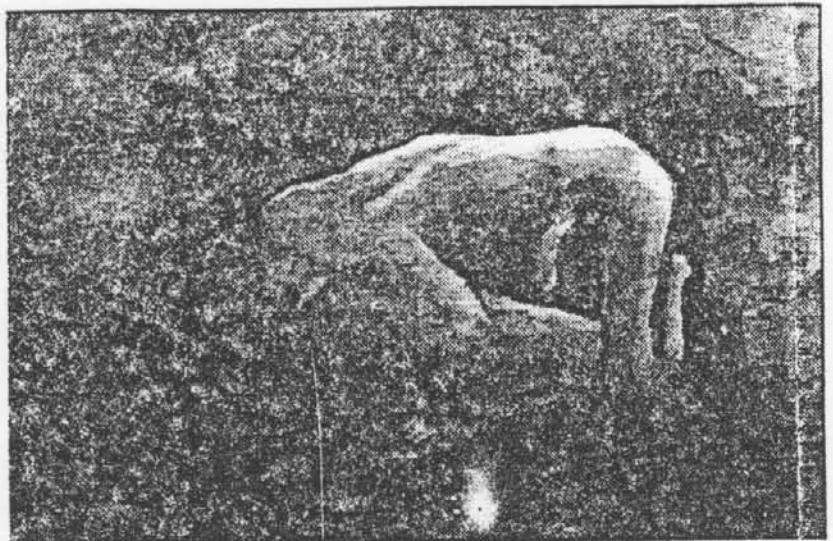
Most of the works are recent, but earlier pieces by Raphael Soyer (undated), Mark Rothko (1936), Gertrude Shibley (1953) and Ida Somkin (1958) add to the breadth of the show, which is through May 29.

Like most drawings, these sheets test and probe. (This accounts for the excitement of drawings and helps to explain the enthusiasm of collectors.)

Each artist seeks a specific goal, and the range of approaches provides considerable insight. This seems to be the show's real message.

Joan Semmel gives her oil-crayon study of a seated figure an emotional power through sharp black and white contrasts, through a forceful torso thrust placing exceptional weight on the foreground arm and through the body's sense of deep recession.

Elaine de Kooning's study of the painter Kaldis turns the figure into the central element in a fully conceived composition that makes



"Kneeling Figure," watercolor and pencil by Robert Valdes; "Kaldis #19," Elaine de Kooning charcoal drawing.

strong, effective use of diagonal and vertical background components.

Others, like Michael Landi 2d and Robert Valdes, compress the dynamic energy of a figure into a pulsating, single mass. Calvin Albert does this, too, but with an angled, visually dramatic pose. His fractured, nervous light adds an explosive quality that allows the flesh to seem to dissolve.

Others also achieve effects by incorporating the sensation of dissolving contours. This is part of the energy in Alex Russo's acrylic study and in Harriet Joffe's "Belly Dancer," a charcoal drawing that also emphasizes a swirling sweep of gestures.

But the main impression here is that of a fully worked sheet functioning as a satisfying abstract image built with the tensions and visual pushes and pulls that entice the eye.

The artists who carry the drawing into a full composition put us in touch with space as it interacts with the figure. This space is also usually an illusion that helps to involve the viewer more deeply.

Complex space contributes to the impact in Helen Meyerowitz's drawing of a standing female nude holding a mask to her face. A few vigorous horizontal strokes indicate background, while irregular borders