

## Karen Wilkin

### MEDRIE MACPHEE: WORKS ON PAPER

Over the many years I have been following Medrie MacPhee's work, I have watched her imagery become steadily more abstract and metaphorical, yet, at the same time, it appears to be more about being human and more about distilled lived experience—not literally, but by implication. Her recent works on paper, many of them made in response to the enforced limitations of life during COVID-19 and the political upheavals of 2020, are solemn, tense conversations among non-specific elements that are at once autonomous, mutable, and vaguely anthropomorphic. Her large, dramatically confrontational paintings, made during the same fraught period, could be described very much the same way, although at first acquaintance they can be read as non-allusive, uncompromising abstractions constructed with generous shapes. We soon become engaged by nuances of surface and texture—gritty passages of paint thickened with pumice, delicate edges, subtle pleating—and, if we pay attention, realize that the entire richly inflected expanse has been constructed by collaging. Paint challenges, contradicts, and sometimes even destroys the character of the applied material. We begin to focus on linear elements and rhythmic repetitions—a row of narrow, regularly spaced, short rectangles or what seems to be the memory of stitching—and then recognize a piece of waistband or a flattened collar.

MacPhee, we discover, builds her works with deconstructed clothing from 99-cent stores, collaging with fabric and sometimes incorporating buttons, zippers, and other fragments of actuality, transubstantiating them by their new context. It's a testimony to the power of her paintings that we never fixate on the previous lives of these allusions to

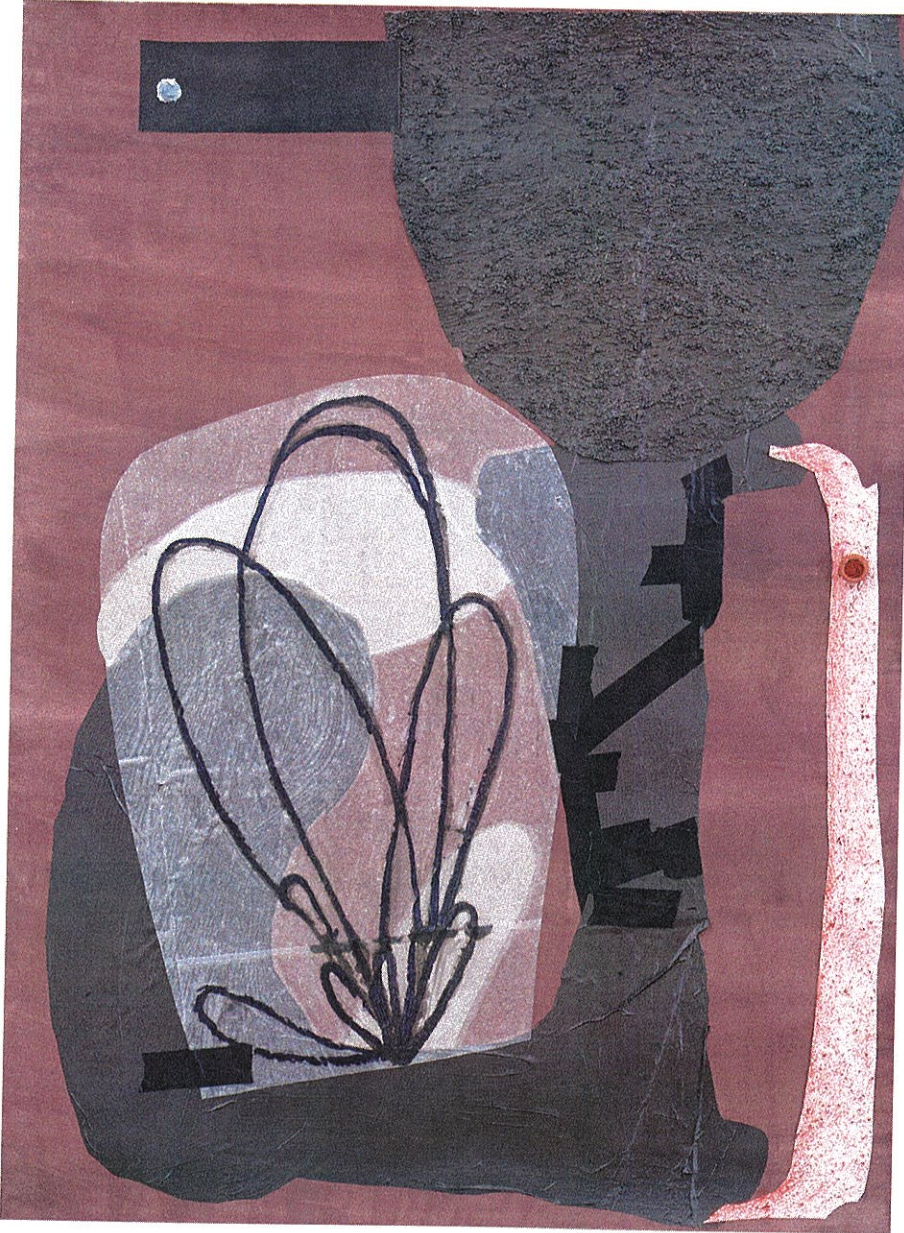
the quotidian, but continue to read them as drawing and punctuation that enliven the canvas. The origins of these snippets of the real world and their intimate connection to the human body are subsumed by the new invented worlds of the paintings they inhabit, yet, on some perhaps subliminal level, we remain faintly aware of the former identity of shirts and trousers, before the artist dissected and reassembled their parts. It's as if a benign ghost haunted MacPhee's recent work.

Her works on paper share this collaging aspect, with more isolated, personable shapes engaged in inchoate dramas. Like her paintings, her paperworks deploy a vocabulary of suave curves and expressive drawing, played against the edges of the support, and elicit maximum expression from different textures, varied paint applications, unpredictable patterns, and encounters between line and expanse. The zones of texture are even more aggressive in her works on paper, contrasting strongly with the neutral expanse that surrounds them and helping to turn floating, often soft-edged shapes into self-sufficient personages, so dense that they can seem physically distinct from the surface. These robust individuals dominate MacPhee's recent paperworks, discrete presences that enter into dialogues with fragile, insistent lines and smooth forms that are sometimes punctuated with small, scattered incidents. The shift in scales between the dense, blunt, heavily textured shapes and the delicate lines and spatterings of little rectangles animates the frontal, resonant images.

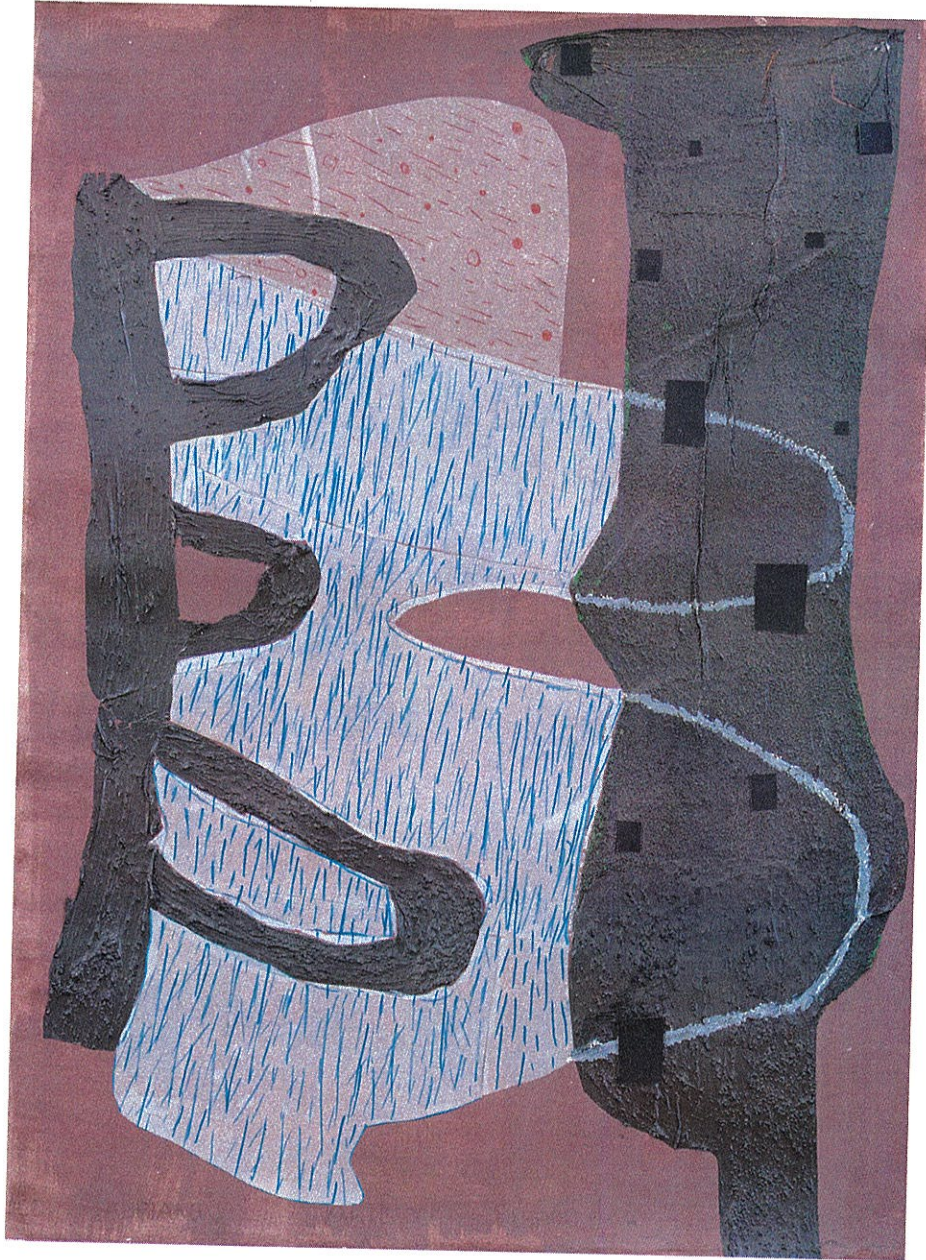
The swelling, agile characters that populate MacPhee's recent works on paper can seem both comic and intensely serious, more or less at the same time, which intensifies our sense of their having been provoked by the events of our difficult, sometimes improbable present. MacPhee's brooding, antic abstract works on paper become potent, intimate metaphors for the stresses of the past year.



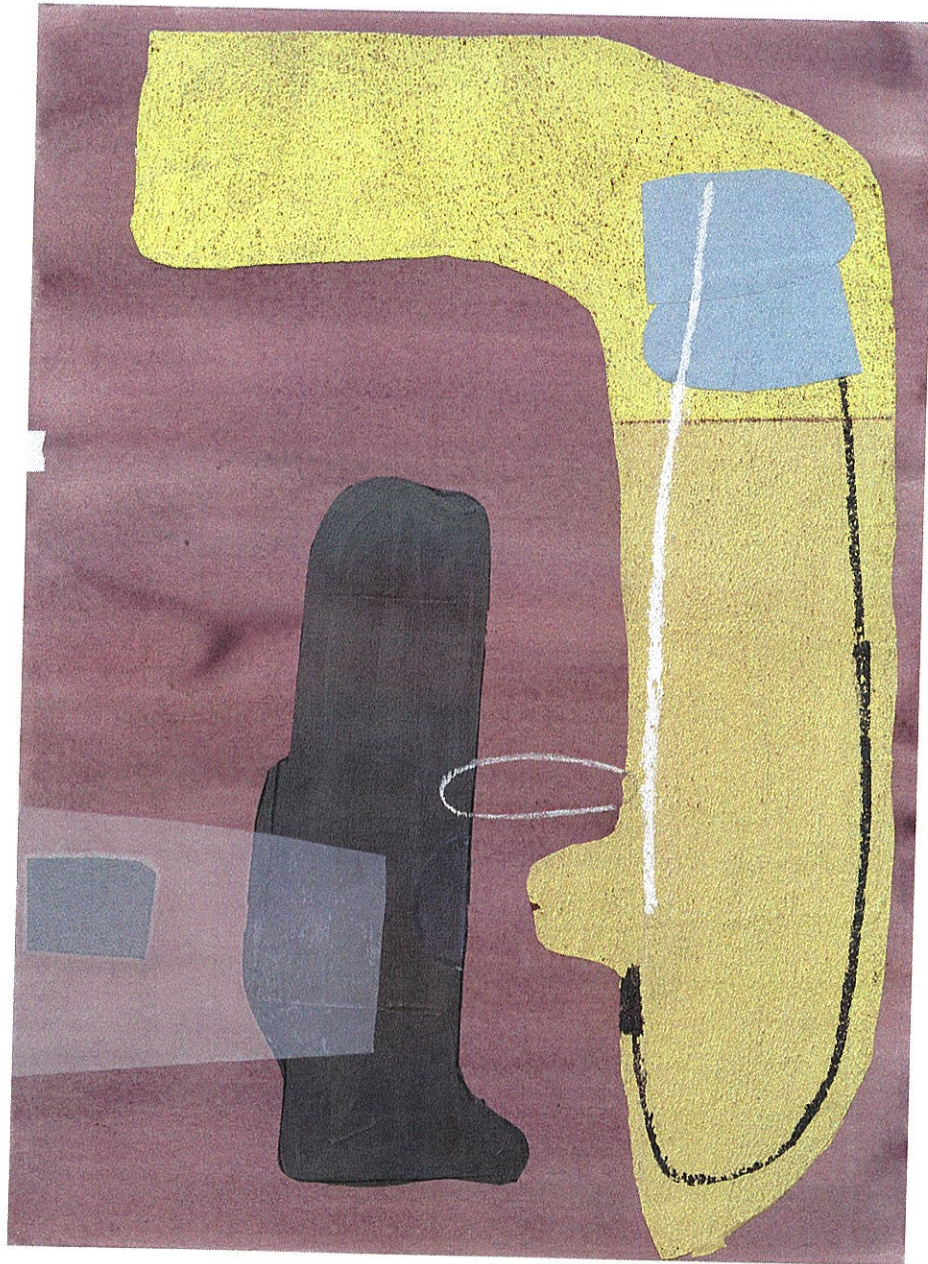
*Hello Darkness* (2020), mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches. © Medrie MacPhee.



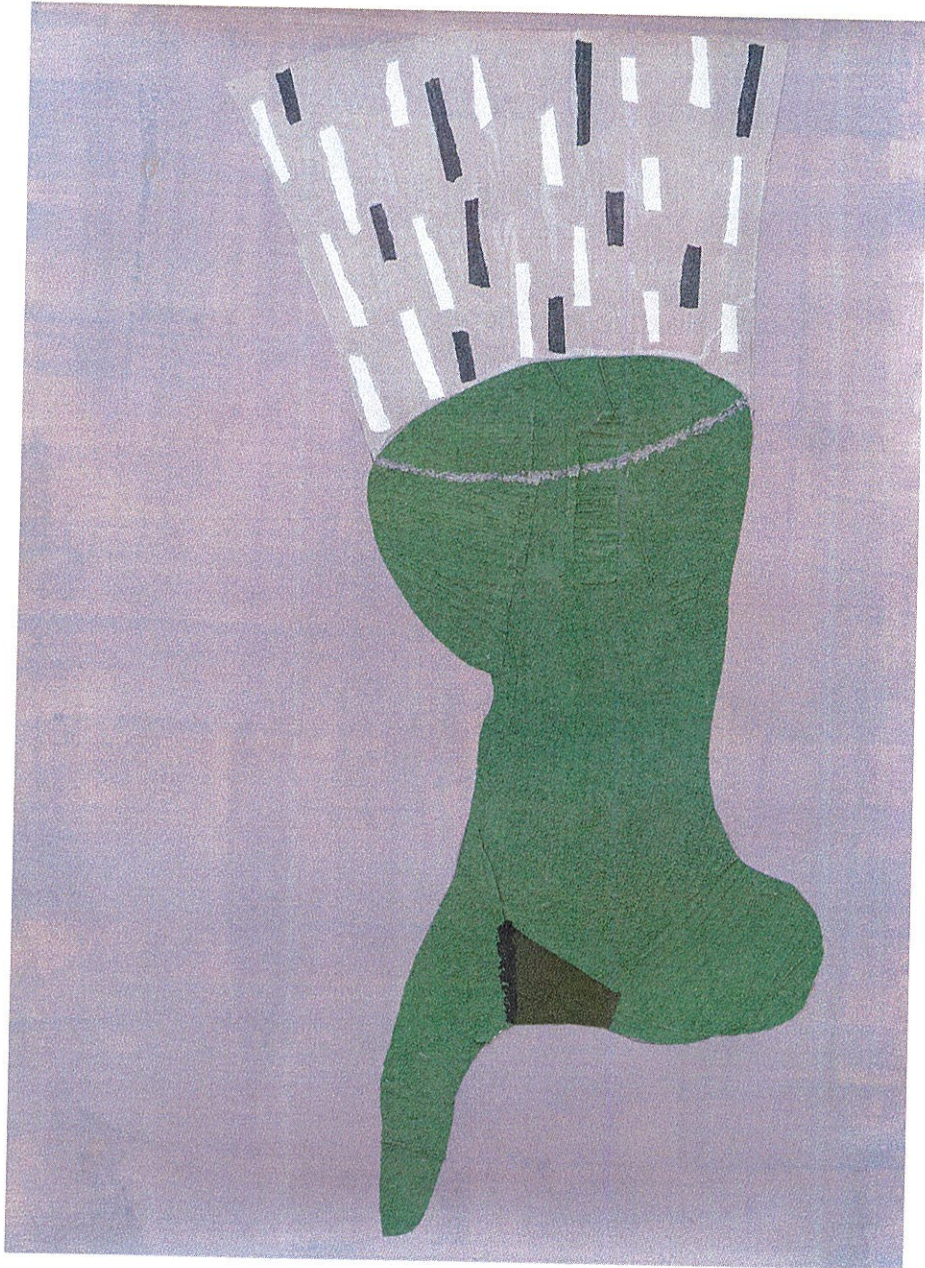
*That's Your Lookout* (2020), mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches. © Medrie MacPhee.



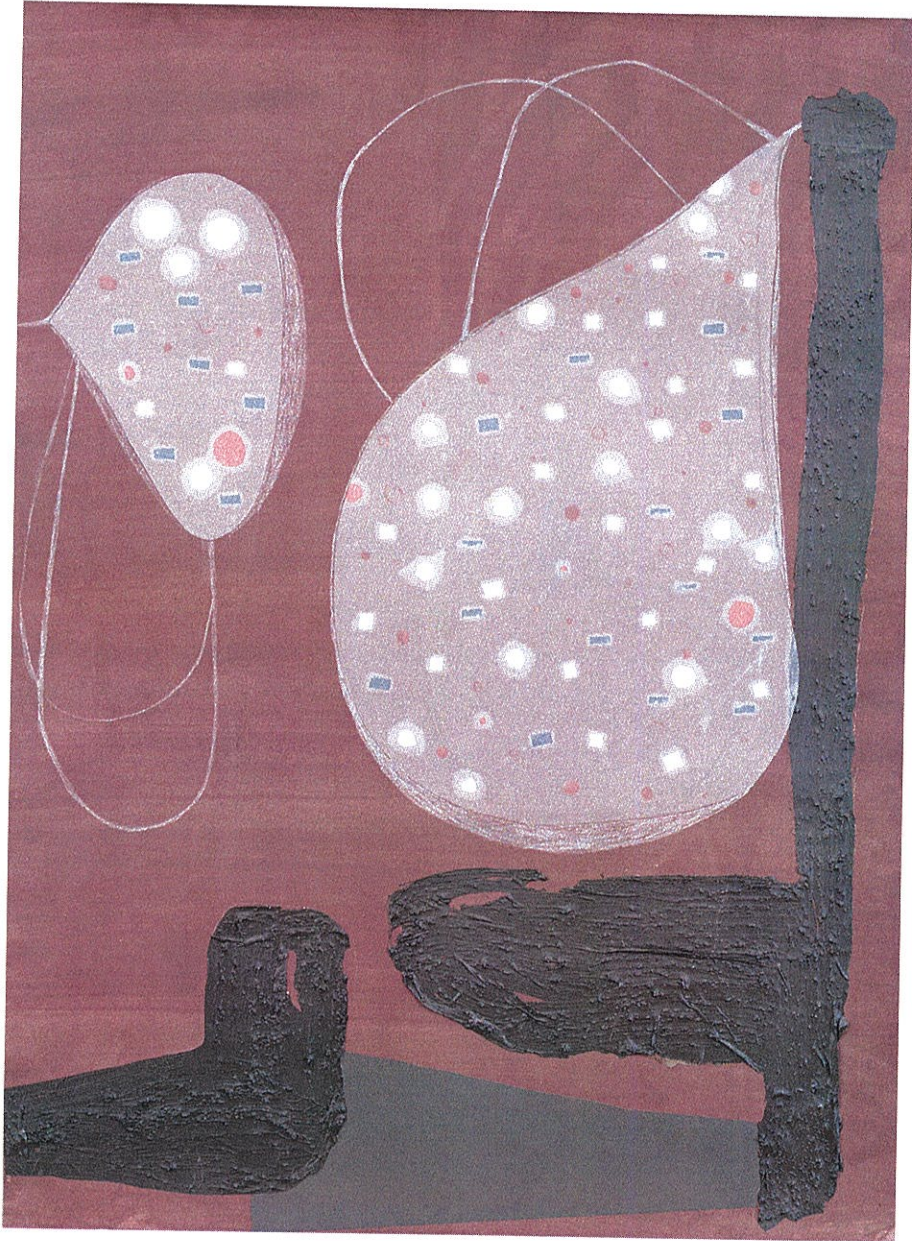
*Up the Hill* (2020), mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches. © Medrie MacPhee.



*A Change in Identities* (2019), mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches. © Medrie MacPhee.

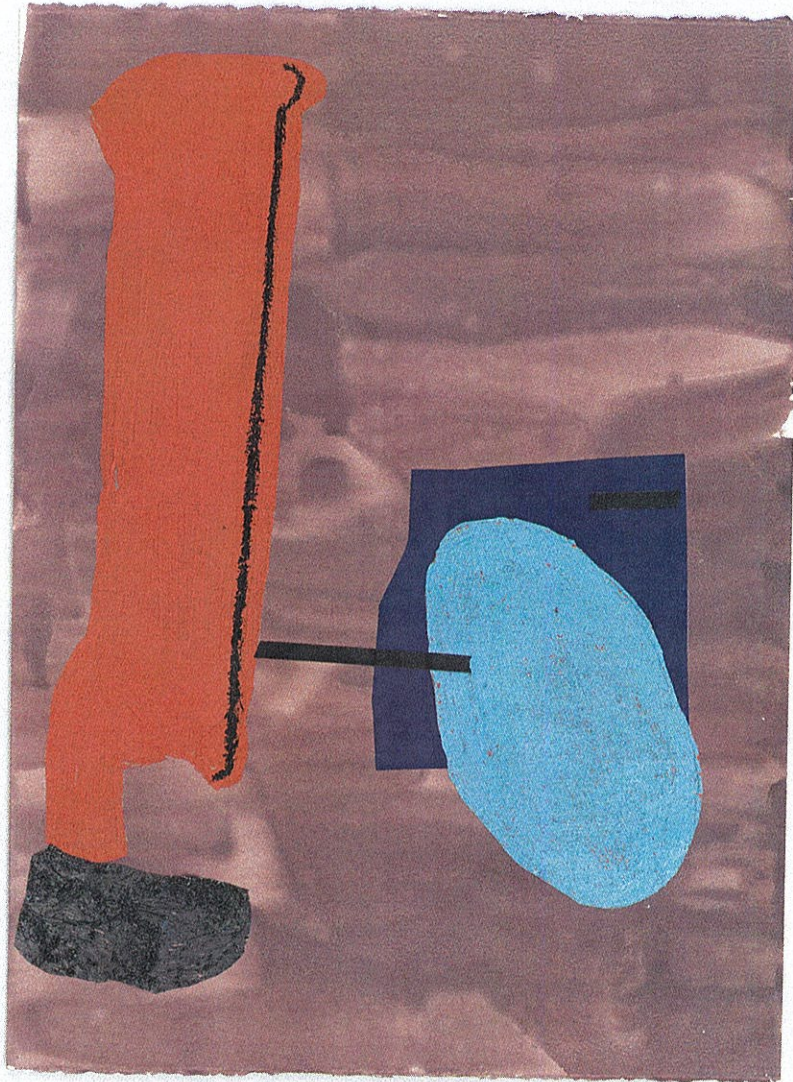


*Green as Grass* (2018), mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches. © Medrie MacPhee.

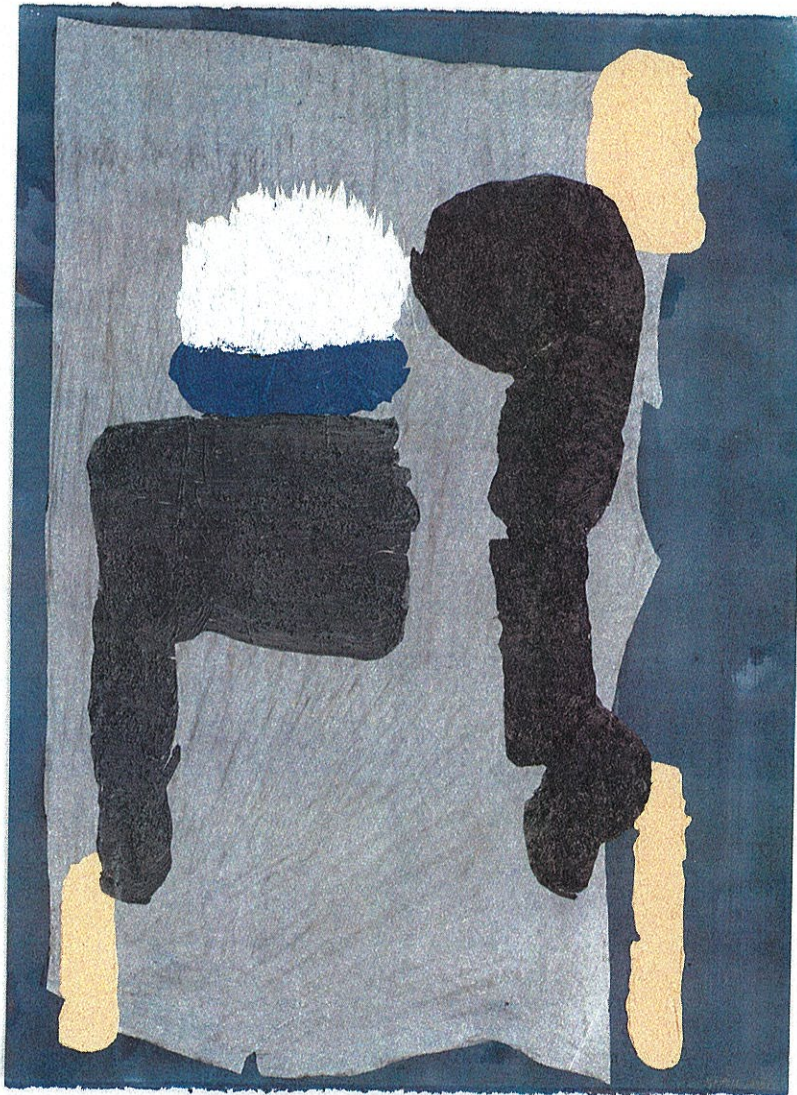


*Suspended* (2020), mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches. © Medrie MacPhee.





*Disagreement* (2020), mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches. © Medrie MacPhee.



*Confab* (2020), mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches. © Medrie MacPhee.