

Joe Brainard in 1961-63

by Ron Padgett

Because documentation has been lacking, relatively little has been written about two crucial years in Joe Brainard's life, 1961 and 1962—just after he moved at age 18 to New York City (December of 1960) and just before he moved to Boston (January of 1963). Joe did not keep a diary, nor did he write letters to his closest friends, who had come to New York about the same time as he. His letters—the few that survive—to his parents and aunt back in Tulsa consisted of perfunctory reassurances that he was all right. Recently, however, a group of his letters has surfaced, providing new and important details on this period.

The letters and postcards were addressed to Sue Schempf (1918–2009), a woman he met in Tulsa when he was still a high school student or a very recent graduate. Schempf, a decent Sunday painter, had signed on as a patron; that is, in the early 1960s she was sending him five dollars per month. The financial arrangement appears to have been vague: at several points Joe mentions owing her money and at others he gives the impression that she is due work in

exchange or that he is going to repay her. Regardless, the monthly arrival of five dollars was important to Joe.

The first piece of correspondence (postmarked December 15, 1960), addressed to Schempf and her husband, is a postcard announcement of Joe's modest solo exhibition at a place called The Gallery, in a small shopping center in Tulsa, to take place on December 17 and 18. The announcement is addressed in the hand of someone other than Joe, who was either in Dayton or New York City at the time. Over the course of the next year, Sue Schempf herself would open a frame shop, which would also be available for small shows.

At some point she bought one of his collages, a 1960 work that not only reflected the structure of the cover design he did for *The White Dove Review* a year or so before but also proved to be a harbinger of his collages to come 15 years later.

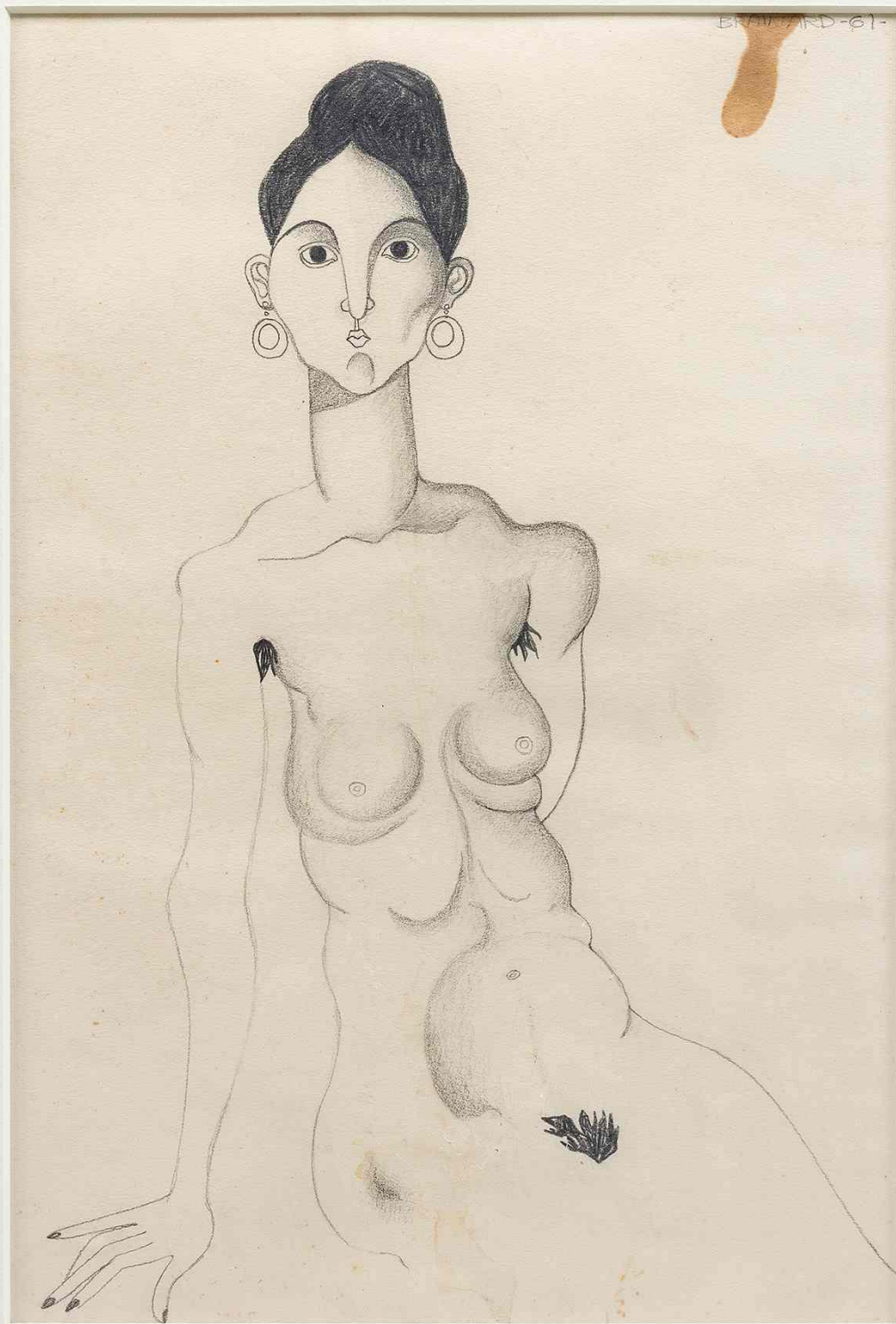
Joe had other patrons as well, among them Ella Rengers, whom he had befriended during his brief stay at the Dayton Art Institute in the autumn of 1960 (a few months before he moved to New York City), and Tulsans Faye and Dave Rich, about whom I know nothing. At one point Joe told Schempf that the total patronage was \$25 per month, which was enough to cover exactly half the rent of the ratty two-room storefront he was living in by January 21 of 1961, a place that had neither tub nor hot water. Joe set about making the grungy place habitable, battling the cockroaches, cleaning its big plate glass window, placing plants in the window, and adding a large white pull-down shade for privacy and at least a hint of spiffiness. Here, at 210 East 6th Street, his friend, the poet Ted Berrigan, soon arrived from Tulsa. They alternated sleeping on the single bed, Ted during the day and Joe at night.

On January 28 Joe mailed Schempf the first of what would become repeated reminders about his \$5 monthly installment. This one he signed "Joe Brainard, Maker of charts," "Needer of money," "Hater of snow," "Lover of money," "Liker of N.Y.," and "Wanter of money."

Meanwhile, he plunged into the extraordinary visual art treasures of the city—its museums, art galleries, and movie theaters. By February 14 he had begun attending a life drawing class twice a

week, an indication of his interest in what he called "a new direction: realism," a turnabout that came as a shock to him. One wonders, however, about how much realism was in what he described as an enormous collage he had just done on his wall.

By April he was back in Tulsa, where he joined local artist Nylajo Harvey and her husband Bob on a car trip to Mexico, where they stayed for several weeks, visiting Nylajo's expatriate artist friend John Nevin, who was living in Marfil, a ghost town near Guanajuato. Joe wrote to Schempf (on March 11, his 19th birthday): "Loving Mexico; my new work; & life in general. Also, me." One of the pieces he did on that trip was a Mexican-inflected nude drawing.



Pencil drawing, 1961, coll. E. G. Schempf, 12 x 8 inches

On May 12 he mailed Schempf an illustrated letter saying that he was back in Tulsa for two weeks, was having a quick show there of work from New York and Mexico, that once back in New York he would enroll in art school, and that she should remember to send him the usual five dollars. It seems odd that, being in Tulsa, he would not have met with her or even mentioned the possibility of a meeting.

He sent her another reminder in late June, as he urgently needed rent (\$24) and deposit money for a new apartment, this one a fifth-floor walkup at 93 First Avenue. With such a low rent, he felt he would be able to save money for art school. Until his letters to Schempf came to light, I did not remember Joe's wanting to go to art school back then. I also did not recall his having patrons other than Ellen Rengers. My impression was that he had made a more definite break with Tulsa and had rejected the traditional idea of going to art school.

By the third week of July he had moved and had resumed painting, studying art history, going to lectures (on what subjects we do not know) twice a week, and reading a lot (books such as R. G. Collingwood's *Principles of Art*). Of his own paintings, Joe mentioned their "mysterious feeling, almost expressing fear."

A month later he wrote Schempf that he had been doing mostly oil paintings, but the medium was proving too expensive, and that he wanted to attend the Art Students League to study under Robert Brackman. Because the school did not accept scholarship requests until the student had been enrolled for three months, he needed his patron money more than ever. His own work was getting stronger, but he felt "so anxious to develop" and he knew that "school will help so much."

In September he started class at the Art Students League, and in the first week made what he thought was serious progress. Brackman enthusiastically praised his drawings. Joe was working toward what he called "an intellectual personal form of realism." In characterizing contemporary art as "a form of chaos, a transformation period between Abstract Expressionism and God knows what," he might have been describing his own transformational period at the time.

In any case, New York was the right place for him to be: "Always something new and great to see and do. It's so stimulating; I don't see how I could ever live in Tulsa again. It's a big evil depressing city at times too; especially in my area. I never knew people could be so lost and the world so cruel. Every day I see two-year-old kids using words I don't even use. And bloody drunken bums lying in the street half nude. I can't walk two blocks any time of the day without beggars (lots

of 'em) grabbing your arm and pleading for ten cents or a cigarette. Also queers and dope addicts all over the place. It really isn't so dangerous, just damn depressing." But ultimately "I feel at home here; I can really be myself. I'm happy." That is, he feels free to be himself, though he hasn't quite figured out who that self is, namely that he is queer, though from his *I Remember* we learn that he had intimations of it as far back as high school.

Meanwhile his patrons grew casual about remembering to send their monthly installments, so he had sold his books, clothes, and blood, was eating little, and had to walk everywhere—to museums, galleries, and more than 50 blocks to school—and when his few friends left town to go home for Christmas, he was so lonely he drank six whiskey sours and spent all night and the next morning doing his first piece of writing, later titled "Self-Portrait on Christmas Night, Year 1961 Age 19 Almost 20; Homage to George," in which he described how he had broken away from the constraints of life back in Tulsa. He also talked about his attitude toward money, how he needed it to live but whose tyranny he hated.

A week later he told Schempf, "I know how valuable my time is and I plan to never ever get a job again." (As unrealistic as this desire sounds, it pretty much came true.) And though he had broken from Tulsa, he was still attached to it: "I want Tulsa to see what I'm doing."

I think he meant that he wanted *certain* people there to see his new work, for in other letters he showed little respect for the level of taste among Tulsa's art lovers, many of whom bought art mainly to decorate their homes.

At various points Joe tried, unsuccessfully, to clarify what he meant by the "realism" he was pursuing. In its most elementary form it's simply classically trained draftsmanship and figurative art, though with the figuration placed in an abstract setting or transformed by surprising colors, but by early January of 1962 he referred to using "pasted and painted labels . . . They denote truth, the way things are . . . I have found that so many great works of art are disturbing because they 'face up to things' in the way they really are." His defense of this form of realism was in response to Schempf's criticism of some of his new work. "I'm finding my work more beautiful every day because of its 'truth.' I find truth to be the highest, and perhaps the wildest, form of beauty. I hope you'll see this in my newest work . . . that it will demonstrate a *new* concept of beauty, and a *new* concept of form and composition which is highly original."

This is not the tentative voice of the Joe I knew in high school, who had been docile, self-effacing, and eager to please others. Approaching his twentieth birthday, he had now embraced the life he had chosen: "I'll probably [be] a kid all my life; which suits me. I

mean, I don't want to take on all the responsibilities of being 'mature' . . . I already feel I'm mature in the ways I want to be mature in; self-dependent, a purpose for living or a reason for not committing suicide, and faith in myself." Besides, he is chock-full of ideas about his work: "Didn't go to bed last night at all, and I'm dead tired, but too excited about the work I've been doing the past few weeks to really be sleepy."

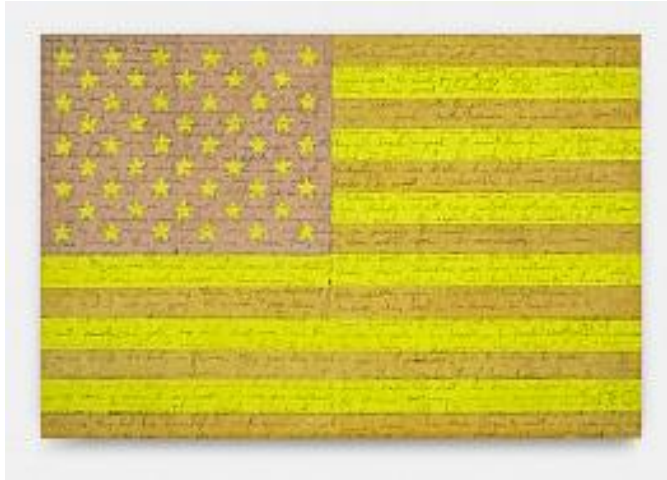
Later that month (March), his attachment to Tulsa resurfaced, when he was disappointed to learn that Philbrook, the local museum, had accepted only one of his pieces for their Oklahoma Annual show, rejecting the four others he had submitted. Nevertheless, he hoped "to make it home for a couple weeks this summer." *Home*.

At this point Schempf offered him a show in her frame shop, for which he planned on sending her about thirty pieces, mostly small ones. He hoped to be back in Tulsa in early June, but he wouldn't be able to stay more than two weeks, for he had "work to do and a thousand new ideas. I've never heard of an artist being overly creative, but this seems to be my problem. I have so many different ideas all at once, that I can't get them all done, nor really develop any one of them." In an artist who was so heavily visual and instinctive in his grasp of form—"though subject matter does exist in my work, form does dominate"—all his talk about ideas sounds unusual until we

consider that he is spending most of his time with no one to talk with except himself and that by this point he was occasionally using the Desoxyn (a pep pill) supplied by Berrigan, which also might explain his all-night painting sprees.

During this entire period Joe and Ted collaborated on a number of poem-pictures. When Schempf saw the ones that had words typed and scribbled on American flags, she was so offended that she cancelled Joe's exhibition at her frame shop, giving the work to artist Bob Bartholic for him to show at his gallery. Below are two collaborative flags from 1962, though I don't know if they were among the ones Schempf disliked so much.





Joe wrote to Schempf, defending his work: "I'm an artist and paint what I must. I am to be criticized for this? I adore America and these collages are my comment on it. My flags were done with love of spirit in mind. . . . I could never think of them as unpatriotic . . . Believe me, the American flag has a deep meaning to me too." He continues: "To call my collages trash is downright cruel. I have no intention of shocking the world. I only want to live in and with it, and to create from it. My intentions are of the finest, and I deserve to be admired for this . . . I can not be false in order to please." He concludes his letter feeling rueful that he and Schempf have such

different views, but he will not back down. He promises to repay her \$54 she's given him, as well as the \$11.50 she spent on shipping. Schempf's son recently told me that after this she never bought another painting from Joe—and it's likely she stopped sending the stipend—but that later in her life she regretted having been so narrow-minded.

Joe almost never dated his letters, but one of them, perhaps his final one to Schempf, mentions his attending a Swedish film festival at The Museum of Modern Art, a series that started on October 10, 1962, and ran for three months. The letter begins, "It sure was nice hearing from you. (I'm pretending you wrote me a letter.)" Then he goes on for a number of pages talking as usual about his life and work, as if there had never been a major rift with her. For example, "With oils, I've been doing still lifes, women, and self-portraits. Before that, working mostly with collages, I got deeply into pure abstraction. (For the first time in my life.) And per usual, many side tracks and branches." This moving back and forth between media and styles proved typical the rest of his artistic life.

By the end of 1962 Joe was feeling that for personal and artistic reasons he needed to make a radical change. His artistic direction had become unclear, and, though he never mentioned it, his sexual orientation remained unresolved. He decided to move to a city where

he knew no one and where he had neither lodging nor a job. On January 9, 1963, after giving or lending friends the few art works he hadn't sold or destroyed, and taking with him only one suitcase and a small amount of money, he caught the bus to Boston.

The approximately ten months he spent there were fraught with loneliness, poverty (to the point of begging and picking up used cigarette butts off the street), depression (sometimes expressed in a semi-delirium), and virtual starvation, though eventually he did manage to get part-time work with an advertising agency and at one point at a map company. During those ten months, he began making collages and small assemblages that led him to feel, as he put it in an excited letter to Berrigan, dated May 20, that he had "grown three inches," and in June in a letter to my wife Pat he called his new work "*the greatest things ever seen.*"

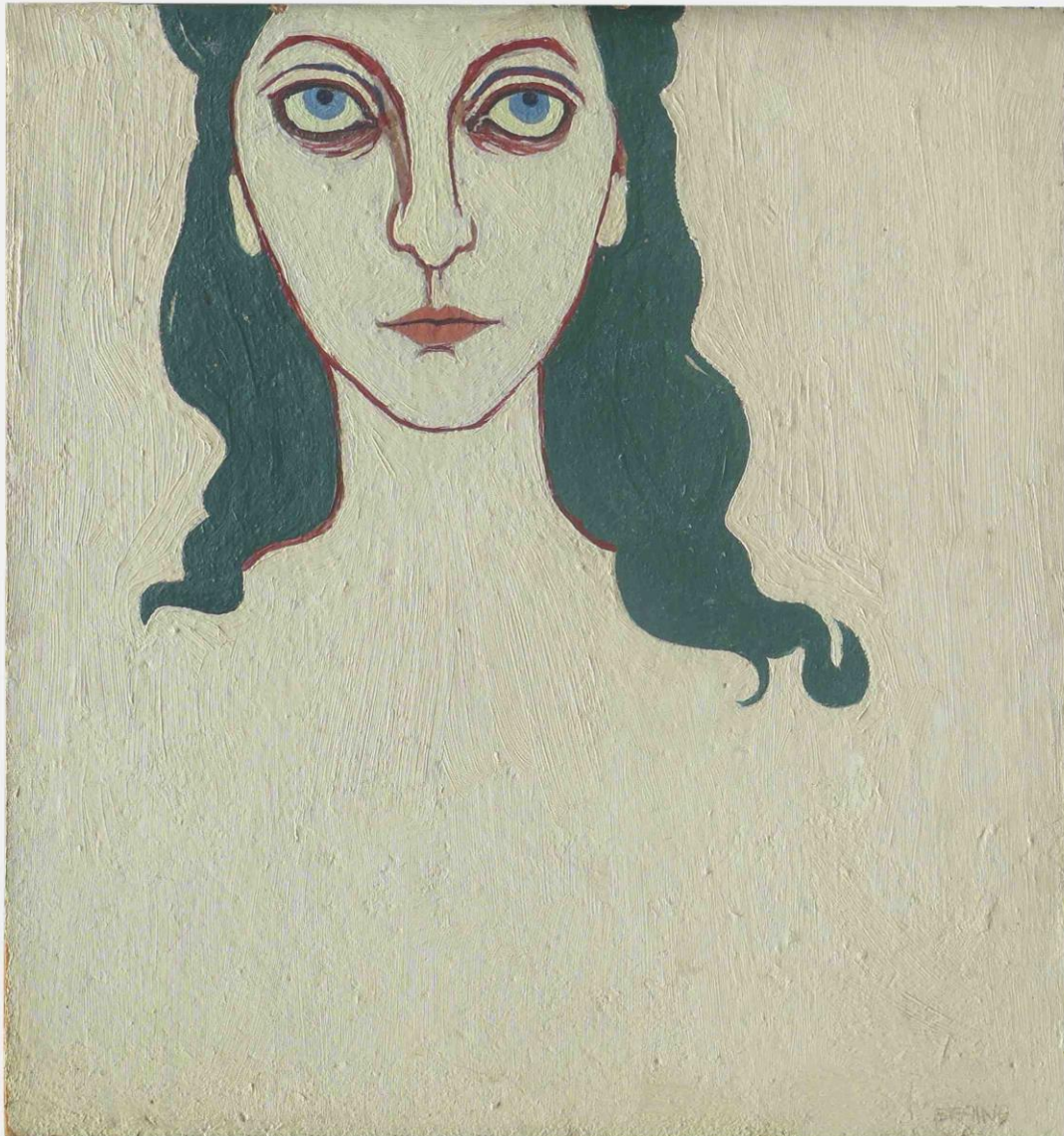
By then the pull of New York had reasserted itself, and he vowed to return as soon as he had saved enough money for an apartment there. It turned out that extra money remained scarce, but in October he came back anyway, staying with Pat and me in our one-bedroom apartment on West 88th Street, sleeping on the living room couch. We three got along very well, even though—or perhaps because—now there was something different about him, a confidence or determination, though entirely without swagger. He was also without

any privacy or work space, so the pieces he created on 88th Street were quite small.

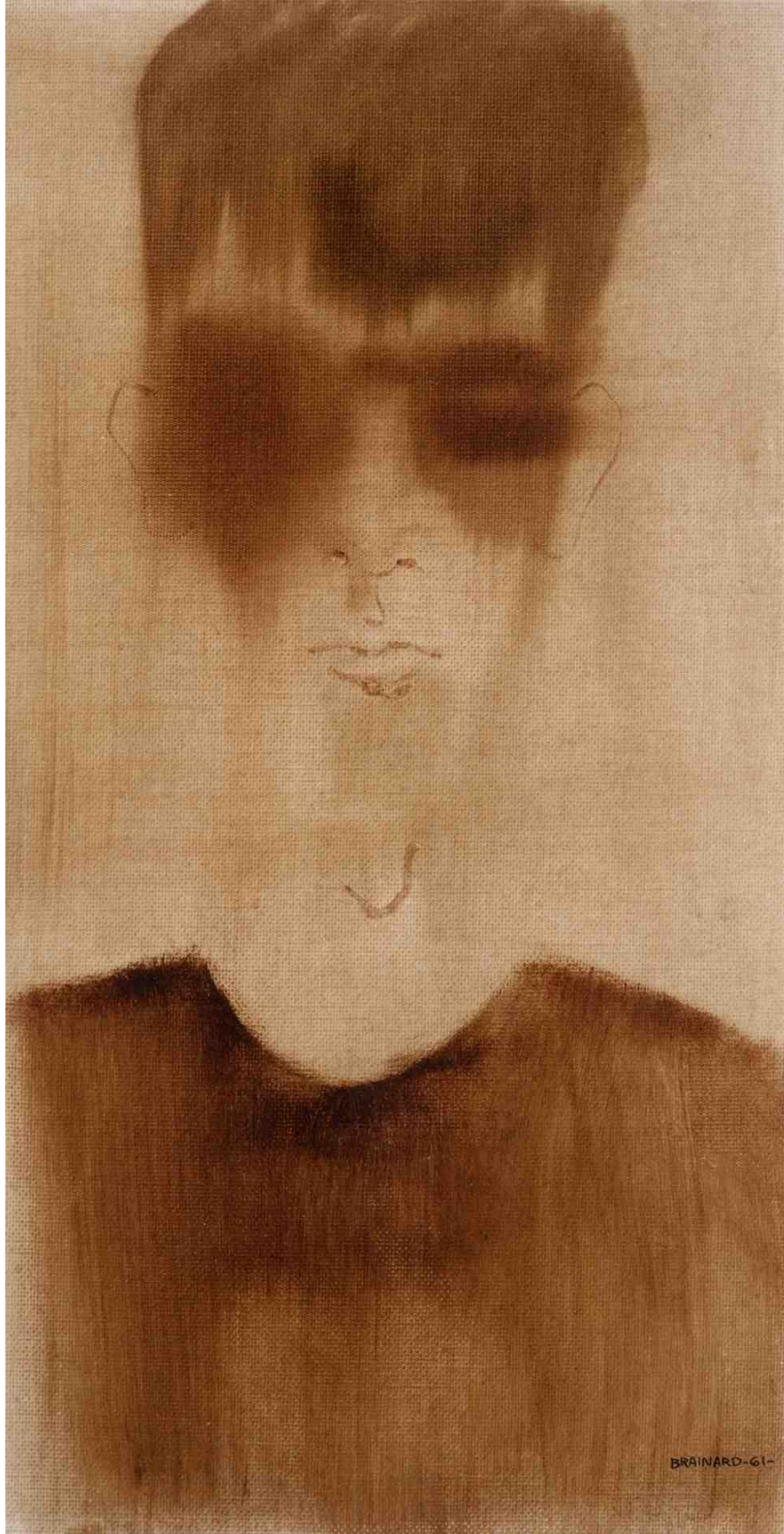
By late December, thanks to Ted, he began sharing an apartment on East 9th Street with the poet Tony Towle. There, with more space, Joe quickly created a startling number of assemblages, haunting, hallucinatory, and beautiful. One of them was built on a toy piano—it had only eight keys—painted baby blue, from which rose a gloved wrist holding an ice cream cone a snake was ascending, along with toy figurines of two Vikings, one of them climbing the wrist, which he gave (or sold for very little) to Frank O'Hara. The assemblages he created in 1964 went into his first solo exhibition in New York, at the Alan Gallery, in January of 1965. Subsequent exhibitions over the years also had coherent themes or media—small collages or drawings or oil paintings or cut-outs or what he called “gardens.” Years later he acknowledged that he never created a signature style, but that can be seen as something of a signature style in itself. In any case, by 1964 his work had taken on a new power. Joe had come into his own as an artist, but it would not have happened without the courage, persistence, and exploration of the few years previous.

Gallery

Below is a gallery of works from 1961-63, many of which have never been seen by the public. I took most of the photographs of them. E. G. Schemf, a professional photographer as well as Sue's son, rescued my amateur snapshots, correcting them via Photoshop. Also, he provided the photos of the three works from his own collection. Unless otherwise noted, all works in this gallery are from the collection of my wife and me.



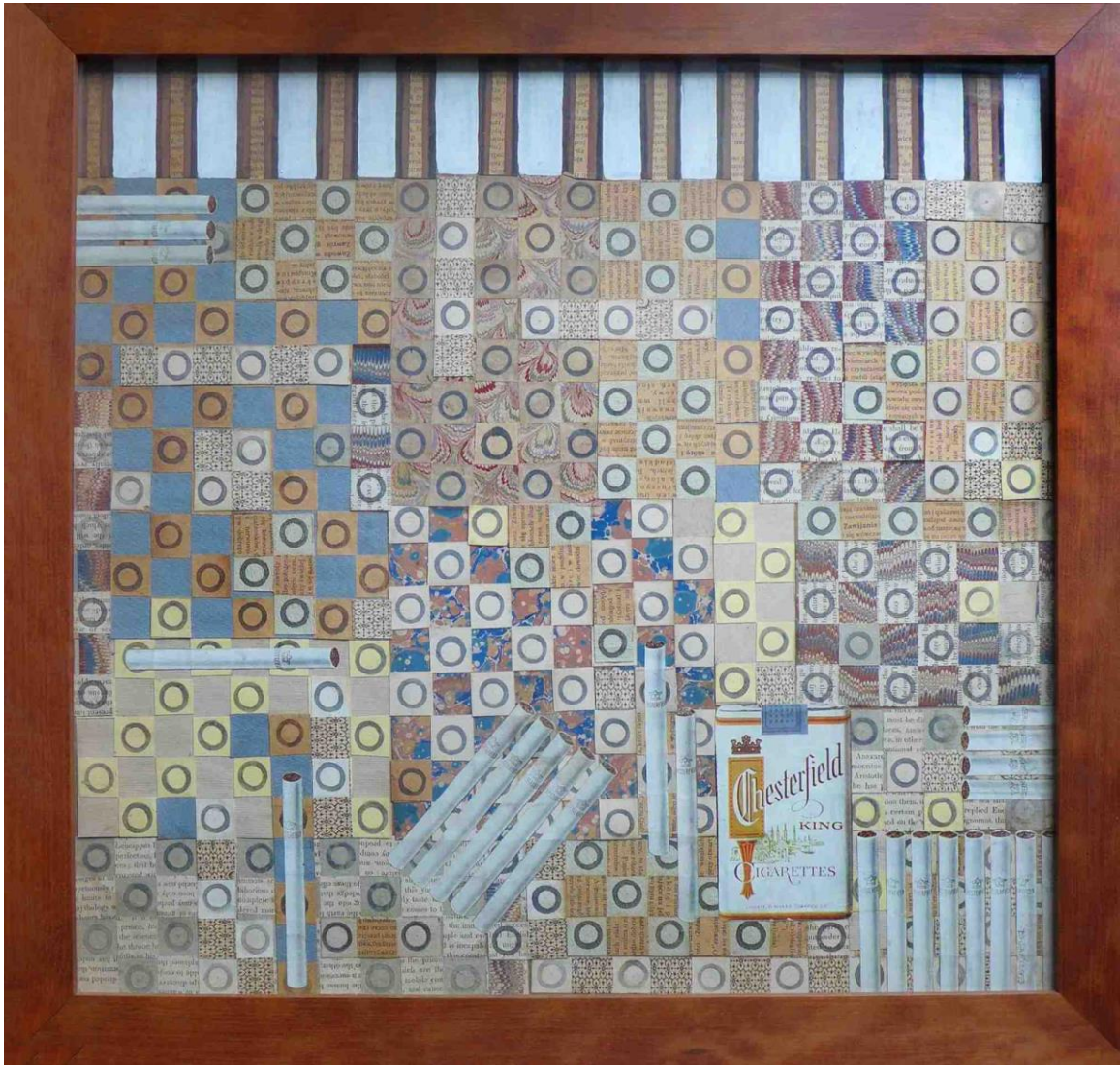
Untitled (*Pat*), June or July 1961, oil on pressboard, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ X 15 inches



Untitled self-portrait, 1961, oil on canvas,
16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches, coll. E.G. Schempf



Untitled drawing, 1962, 6 ½ X 11 ½ inches



Untitled (*Big Chesterfield*), 1962, collage, 22 X 23 inches



Untitled (*Fab inside Cuba*), 1962, mixed media collage, 21 ½ X 30 inches



Untitled (*Drengk*), 1962, mixed media collage

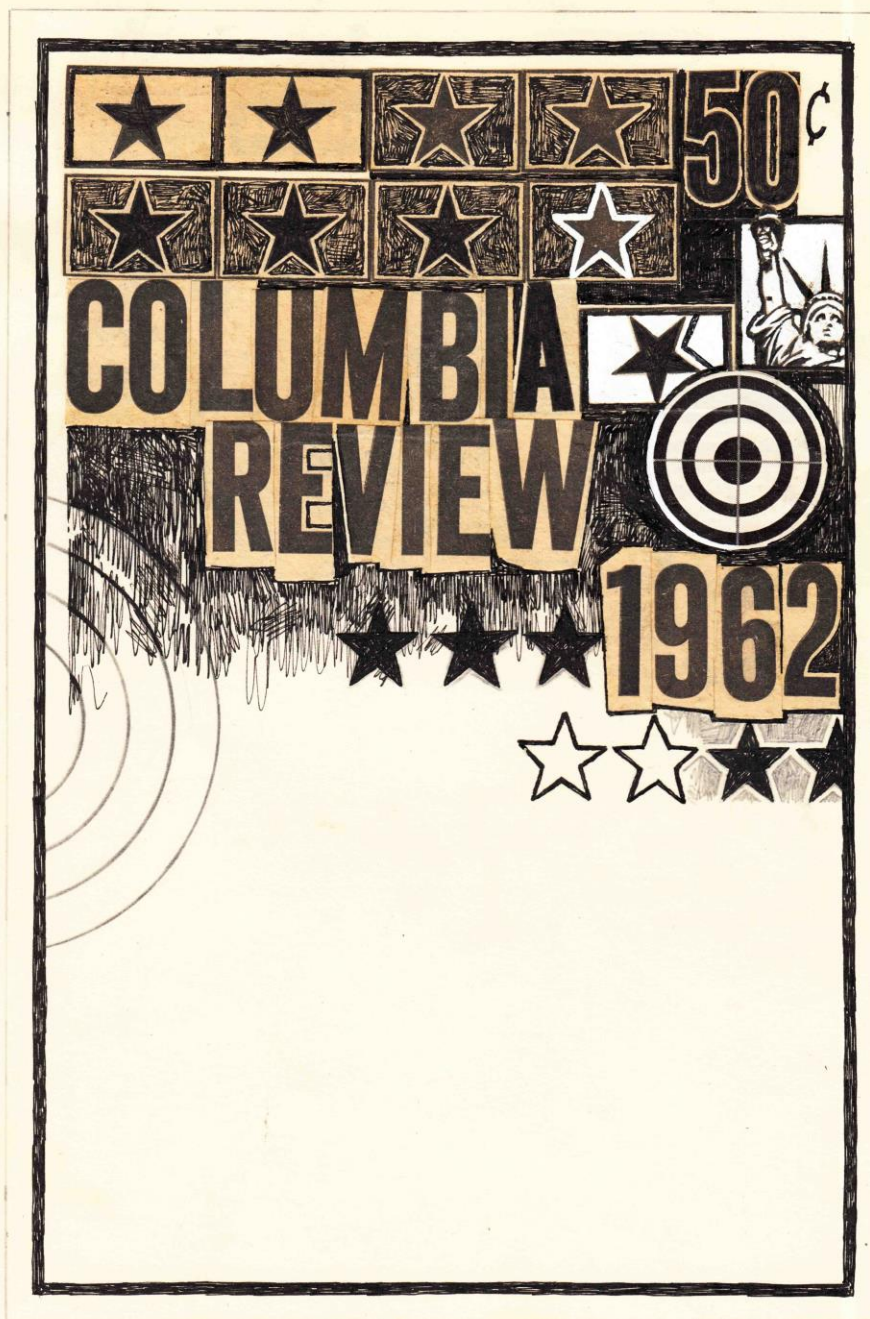


Untitled still life, oil on canvas, 1961 or '62,

38 1/8 X 44 1/4 inches, coll. unknown



Untitled (*Flag*), 1961 or 62, mixed media collage, 23 X 19 inches



Cover design, 1962, mixed media collage

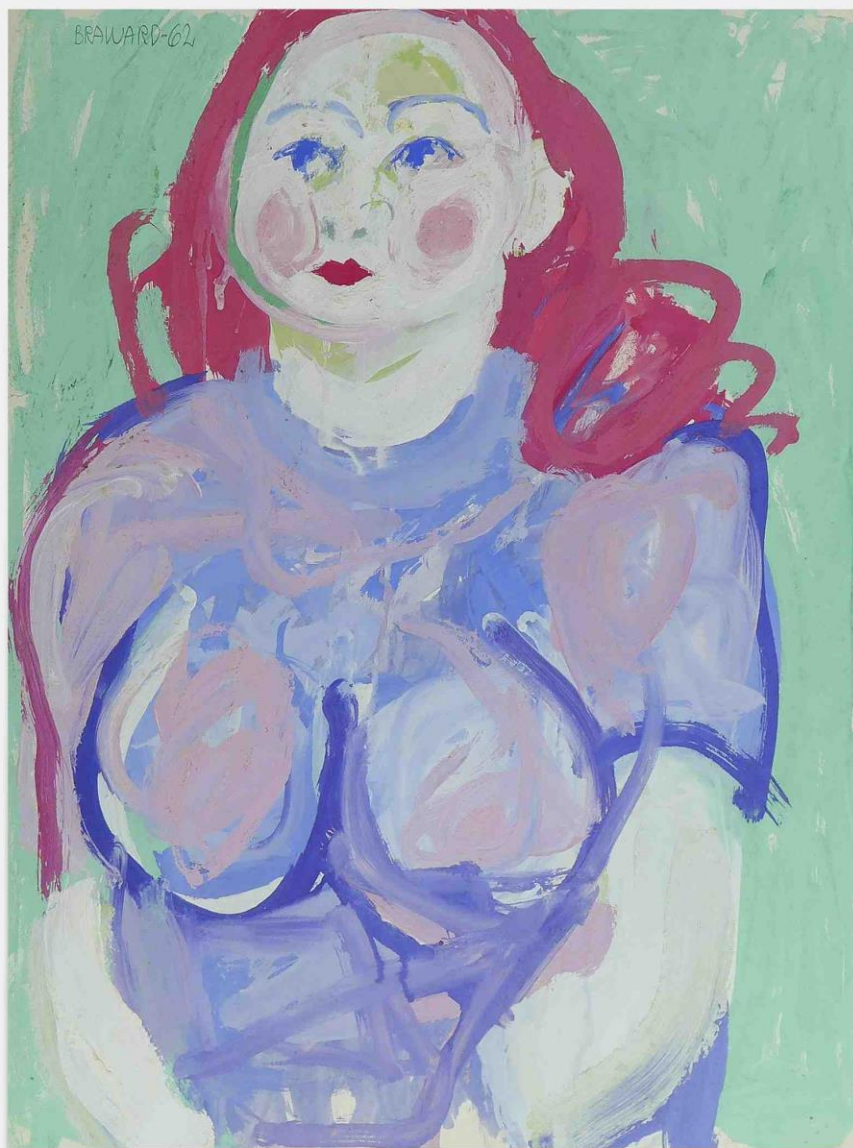


Untitled mixed media collage (Flag?), 1962,

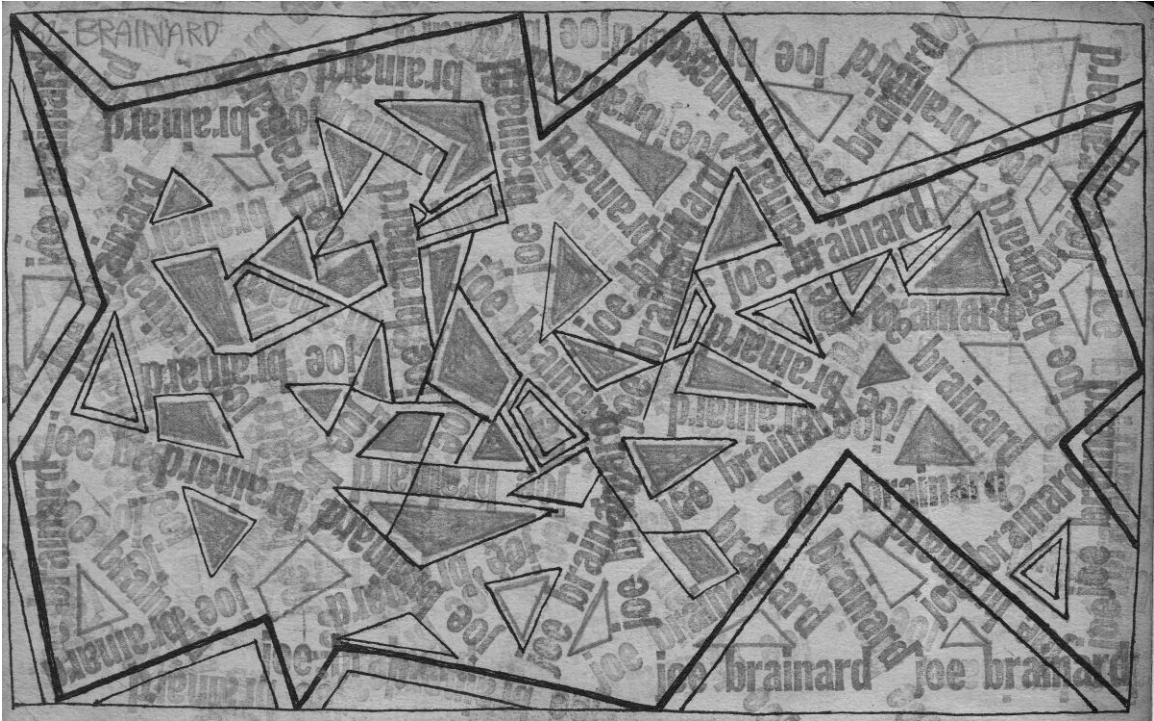
15 X 22 inches, coll. John Stanton



Untitled (*Pat*), 1962, gouache, 35 X 23 inches



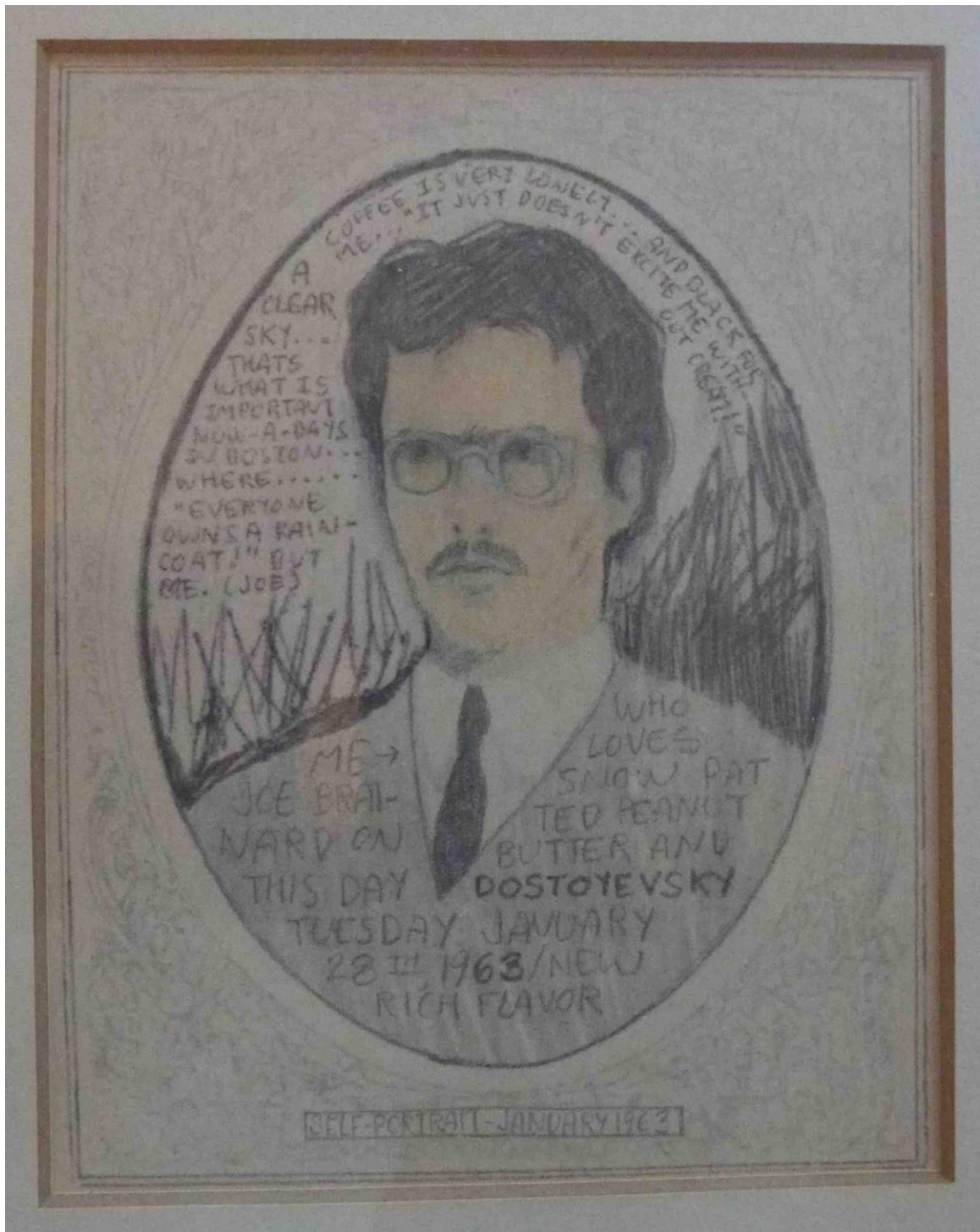
Untitled gouache, 1962, 23 X 17 ½ inches



Untitled, 1962, ink on paper



Untitled (*Chesterfield*), 1962, collage, 8 X 6¼ inches



Self-Portrait, 1963, graphite and colored pencil



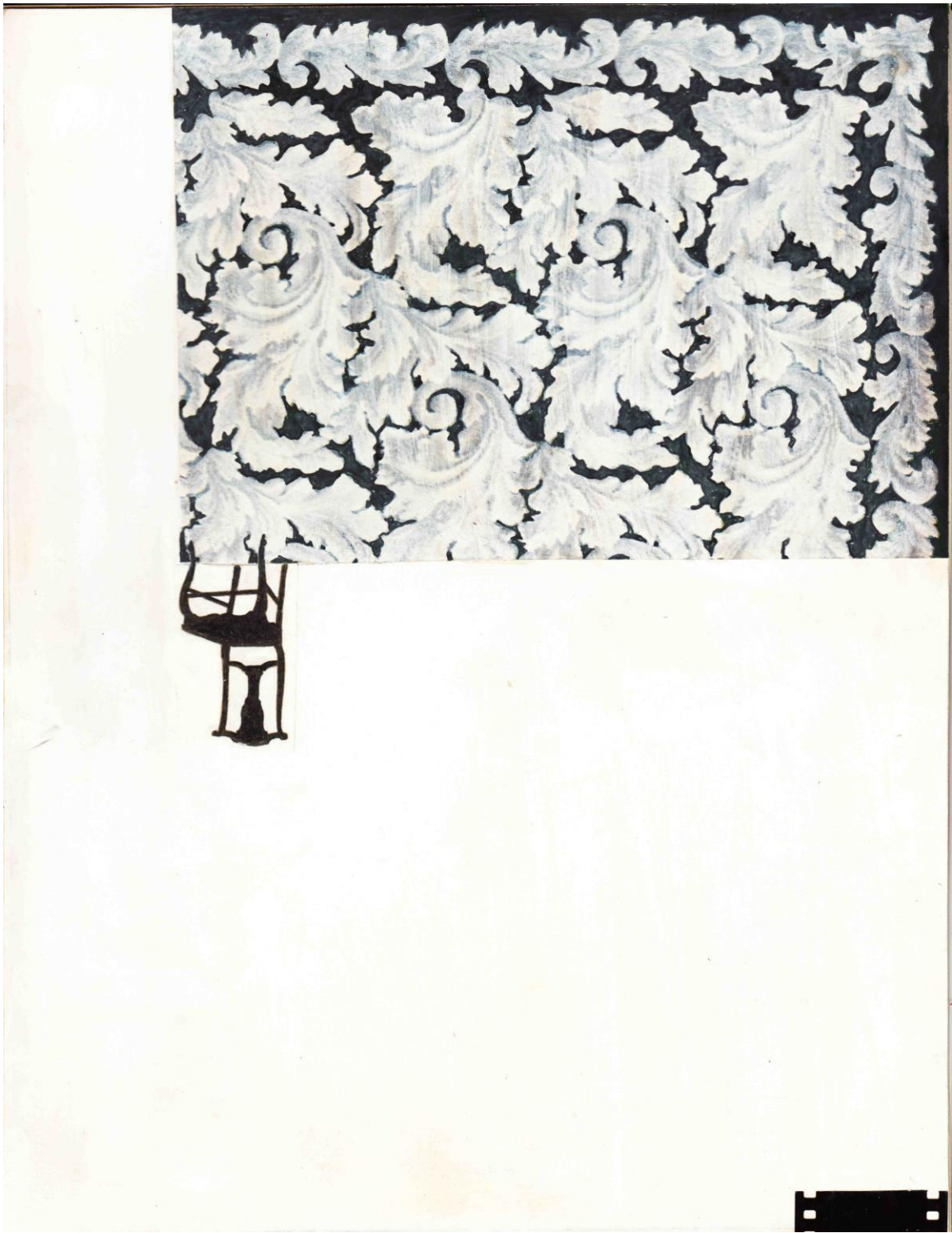
Untitled (*Blue Lady*), 1963, mixed media, 20 X 15 inches



Untitled (Save), 1962 or 63, gouache



Untitled assemblage (*Marilyn*), 1963, 29 X 14 ½ inches



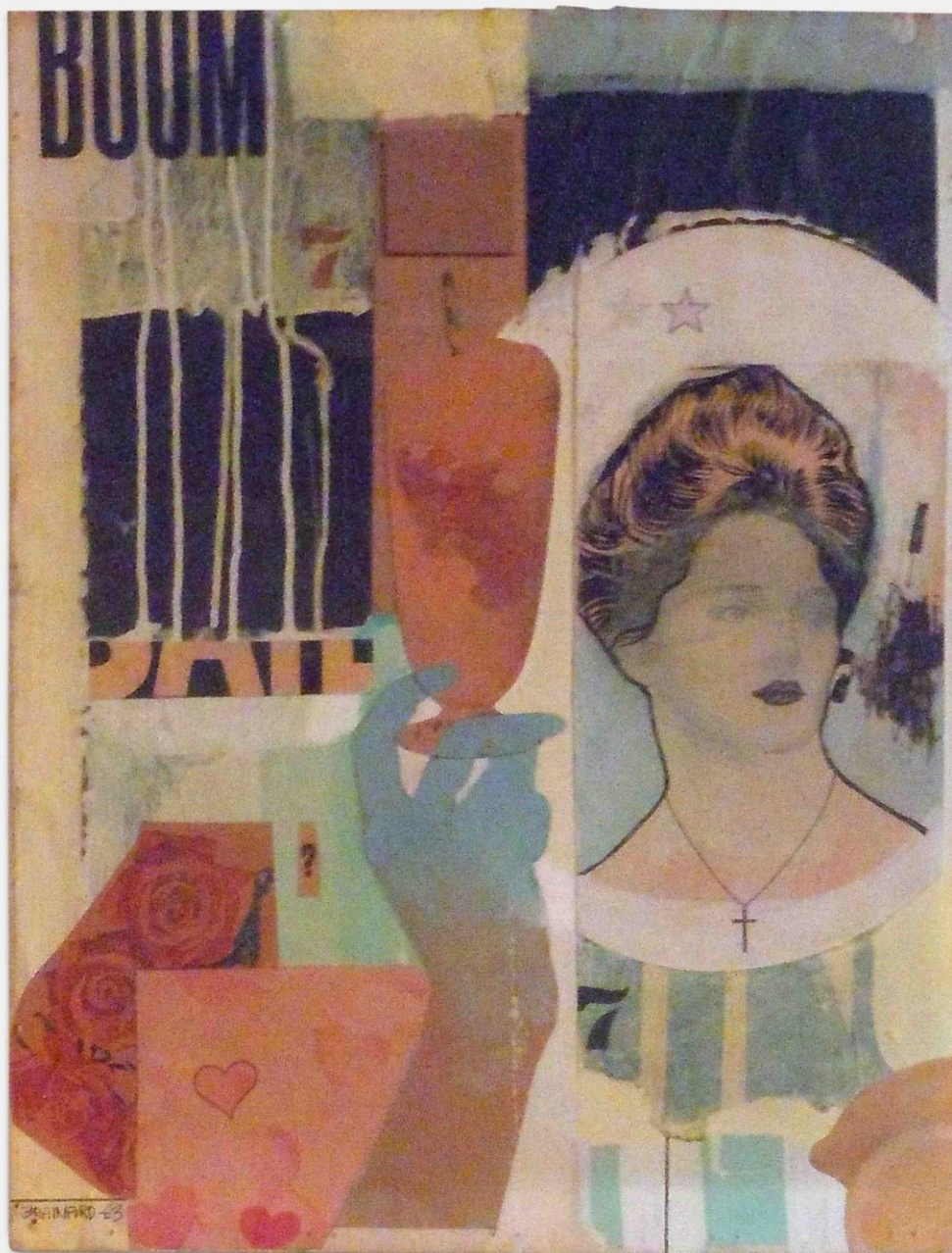
Untitled cover for *Some Bombs*, 1963, mixed media collage, 11 X 8 ½ inches



Untitled gouache for *Some Bombs*, 1963, 11 X 8 ½ inches



We Must Love One Another or Die, 1962 and 1963, mixed media
collaboration with Ted Berrigan, coll. Harvard University, 24 X 18 inches



Untitled mixed media collage, 1963, coll. Tony Towle, 20 X 15 inches



Black K, mixed media collage, 1963, 19 ½ X 14 ½ inches, coll. unknown

Acknowledgment

Huge thanks to E. G. Schempf, who generously provided information and copies of Joe's letters to Sue Schempf, and then applied his photographic wizardry to a number of the images reproduced here.

Thanks also to Siobhán Padgett, George Kaiser, Bill Bamberger, Bill Zavatsky, Bill Katz, and Wayne Padgett.

—*R. P.*

