

Ibrahim El-Salahi:  
Pain Relief Drawings



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The Drawing Center

# Ibrahim El-Salahi: Pain Relief Drawings

Texts by

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# Introduction

Laura Hoptman

For more than sixty years, the Sudanese-born artist Ibrahim El-Salahi has been a prolific, innovative, and highly influential international voice in the contemporary art discourse, his body of paintings and drawings describing a unique response to the problem of transnational modernism and its relationship to postcolonial cultural development.

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Born in 1930 into a religious family in Omdurman, Sudan's largest city, El-Salahi learned to draw at a very young age, spurred by the Khalwa practice of writing Qur'anic verses on tablets of acacia wood, a support that students often embellished with indigenous African ornament. El-Salahi's father, a religious teacher, encouraged his son's talent as a draftsman as well as his diligence as a Qur'anic scholar. From an early age, artmaking—and drawing in particular—was, for El-Salahi, tied to spirituality and the practice of Sufism. Now in his early nineties, he still prays before beginning to paint or draw.

El-Salahi attended Gordon Memorial College in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, where, from 1949 to 1952, he received art instruction based on a Western curriculum. After graduation, he won a scholarship to the Slade School of Fine Art at University College, London. El-Salahi spent three years as a London art student imbibing the fundamentals of the state of modern art at the time, from Impressionism to Cubism and beyond, supplementing his studies with trips to museums like Tate and the National Gallery, where he was exposed firsthand to the European art historical canon. He also spent time in the British Library, studying illuminated Islamic manuscripts in particular, but when he returned to Khartoum in 1955, his oil paintings remained decidedly under the influence of European Post-Impressionism.

The first exhibitions of El-Salahi's work did not find an audience in the art community of Khartoum, a failure that made him determined to create an artistic language that would incorporate what he had learned both in Europe and in the unique cultural milieu of Sudan, a country with strong traditions emanating from Arabic, Islamic, and African visual culture as well as local decorative arts and crafts. Sudan had recently liberated itself from colonial rule, and when El-Salahi returned to artmaking after a period of study and travel within his country, he began to fashion a language that derived from all of these enormously rich sources and from the skills learned from a lifetime of reading and writing Qur'anic calligraphy. This ambitious and thoroughly contemporary quest to create a manner of artmaking that spoke to local, regional, and international communities has continued over more than half a century of producing paintings and drawings on three continents, and it has resulted in an oeuvre that defines the notion of hybridity in a global context.<sup>1</sup>

El-Salahi's goal has never been to create a language particular to contemporary Sudanese art. In fact, he is quoted by his friend, the Sudanese art historian Salah Hassan, as saying that "there is no such thing as Sudanese art."<sup>2</sup> His aim, according to Hassan, is to create an art that is simultaneously local and international, historically based, and deeply modern. He has achieved this objective by using the hybridity of Sudanese culture, which blends Arabic and Islamic, Nubian, Coptic, and Western influences, as his inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in the early 1960s, El-Salahi's paintings began to feature mask-like faces that referred to West African tribal art with which he had become familiar through books and magazines, and subsequently, a series of journeys to Nigeria, Uganda, Senegal, and other countries in the region. He juxtaposed these African motifs with stripes, spirals, stippled dots, and geometric forms inspired by indigenous Sudanese decorations painted on domestic adobe architecture, on objects like musical instruments, and woven into fabrics. As his style developed, he added shapes derived from letters of the Arabic alphabet to his compositions, followed by calligraphically-drawn words and phrases.

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1 El-Salahi traveled widely beginning in the 1950s, visiting countries that included Poland, Mexico, Brazil, and the United States, where he studied photography at Columbia University. In the 1960s, he traveled to many cities in Africa: exhibiting his work in Nigeria, teaching in Uganda, and participating in the World Festival of the Arts in Dakar, Senegal. In the 1970s, as a cultural diplomat representing Sudan, he lived in London and subsequently in Doha, Qatar.

El-Salahi has repeatedly emphasized that all his work starts with line, and this proved to be the uniting element between the abstract and the figurative, decorative pattern and narrative, word and image during the period when he was developing his mature artistic style. Above all, it is the calligraphic line that has dominated El-Salahi's work. Calligraphy is "something you can really rest against," he explained to an interviewer: "I took the calligraphy itself and took away the meaning from it...Then I had to break the forms of the letters themselves and try to see the bones of the letters...It then became the beginning of a new pictorial idiom."<sup>4</sup> As the art historian Iftikhar Dadi noted in an essay on El-Salahi and the calligraphic tradition, in the period between 1955 and 1975, many artists across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia were developing calligraphic languages in their work.<sup>5</sup> This trend was also evident among the painters of Khartoum. In the early 1960s, El-Salahi was one of a small but significant number of Sudanese artists blending abstraction and Islamic calligraphy in their work, and critics began to take notice, calling El-Salahi and his cohort the "Khartoum School" though none of the painters included worked closely with one another or agreed to use the rubric to describe their projects.

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From his mural-sized paintings to his tiniest sketches, all of El-Salahi's work can be seen through the lens of drawing. The artist has relied on an increasingly embellished and modified calligraphic language for his entire career, but this has not been at the expense of line in its purest, most abstract form. "In the end all images can be reduced to lines," the artist explained to Hassan.<sup>6</sup> In El-Salahi's works, line denotes shape, defines space, and creates pattern. Whether drawn in oil paint with a brush on a huge canvas or sketched with a fine-point pen on a paper scrap,

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2 Salah M. Hassan, "Ibrahim El-Salahi and the Making of African and Transnational Modernism," in *Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* (New York and London: Tate Publishing in association with the Museum for African Art, 2013), 18-19.

3 *Ibid.*, 19.

4 Ibrahim El-Salahi, quoted in Sarah Adams, "In My Garment There is Nothing But God: Recent Work by Ibrahim El Salahi," *African Arts* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 31.

5 Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective," in Hassan, *A Visionary Modernist*, 40-53. It is instructive to note that the postwar period in Europe and the United States also saw artists influenced by Asian and Islamic calligraphy, including Franz Kline, Mark Tobey, Hans Hartung, and others.

6 Ibrahim El-Salahi, quoted in Hassan, "Ibrahim El-Salahi," 24.

El-Salahi's lines can function compositionally, as structure, but also atmospherically, creating light and shade, objects and voids. As Hassan has observed, "El-Salahi does not subscribe to the traditional distinction between painting and drawing in the Western aesthetic tradition, which associates painting with color and shape, drawing with line."<sup>7</sup>

10 After a period in which El-Salahi worked for the Sudanese government and made little art, first in Khartoum and then in Doha, Qatar, he moved to London and subsequently Oxford, where he has lived and worked since 1998. Drawing has continued to be the focus of El-Salahi's production over the last several decades, and in the past five years he has created an extraordinary series of small works that he calls "pain relief drawings." El-Salahi started the series in 2016 when back pain reduced his mobility and caused him to rely on medication for relief. A diagnosis of Parkinson's disease further hampered his movement and added to his intake of prescription drugs. As he explained in an interview from 2019, "I am surrounded by packets of medicine, so I said, 'What a waste. Why don't I use them?' I started opening them and chopping them to size, and I started working on them. I had a number of pens with waterproof and fade-proof ink, which the material of those kinds of packages takes very nicely."<sup>8</sup> In the past half-decade, El-Salahi has produced hundreds of *Pain Relief* drawings, despite his advanced age and compromised physical ability. Throughout his career, El-Salahi has emphasized the connection that exists for him between making art and praying, as if the act of creation carries with it some spiritual power to comfort and maybe even to heal. Although El-Salahi has not spoken explicitly of the restorative powers of drawing as a practice, the sheer number of these small works indicate that their making has developed into a kind of ritual—maybe akin to El-Salahi's practice of praying five times per day.

The size of the *Pain Relief* drawings reflects the supports on which they have been drawn. But these works are also an example of a tenet of his drawing technique that dates back to 1975, an *annus horribilis* in the artist's life when he spent six months in a Khartoum prison for political crimes that were never enumerated to him. Writing implements and paper were not allowed in prison, but El-Salahi managed to tear small pieces from the wrappings

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7 Ibid.

8 Katy Donoghue, "Ibrahim El-Salahi: Art As a Spiritual Means of Meditation," *Whitewall Magazine*, May 13, 2019, unpaginated.

that contained food sent to the incarcerated by their concerned families. Drawing on them with a stub of smuggled pencil, he hid each fragment individually, never to retrieve them.<sup>9</sup> Because of the constraints of size and time in making these drawings, El-Salahi mastered a compositional technique in which he started from a tiny, central point-what he has described as a nucleus-and worked outward. In this most recent series, he uses a similar technique, derived from the one devised almost a half century ago. Recalling his prison drawings, El-Salahi has said that he considers each *Pain Relief* drawing to be in itself a kind of nucleus. "It's the origin; that's the main thing," he explains, referring to his new works.<sup>10</sup>

El-Salahi's artistic language, it is argued, was created during the heady postcolonial years of the 1950s through the 1970s, when there was a zeal among African cultural producers to create artistic languages that reflected regional and/or local histories, belief systems, and contemporary concerns. In retrospect, his work can be categorized as one of the many attempts by African artists to find "visual languages adequate to the aspirations of decolonization."<sup>11</sup> His paintings and drawings since the late 1990s, though, introduce a question and at the same time create an opportunity to examine a blinkered, Western-centric mode of looking. What happens when an artist like El-Salahi, whose blending of the languages of postwar modernism with Islamic calligraphic traditions and Sudanese folk imagery is exemplary of what Iftikhar Dadi calls "the aesthetics of decolonization,"<sup>12</sup> leaves his country of origin and returns to a European artistic milieu? El-Salahi himself answers this by suggesting that great works of art are, in the end, universal. In an interview given after his relocation to England, he stressed that a work of art must address Self first and also others in one's own society and those societies that have had an impact. Finally, he stated, one's work must address all of society.<sup>13</sup>

But perhaps, as the Black British cultural critic Stuart Hall suggested, questions that begin with the premise that there

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9 After his release and under house arrest, El-Salahi used the experience of making these lost works to create a series of modestly-sized drawings documenting his incarceration. He then bound the drawings into a single volume known as the "Prison Notebook," now part of the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

10 Donoghue, "Ibrahim El-Salahi: Art As a Spiritual Means of Meditation."

11 Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism," 43.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

is a relationship between one culture and an Other are no longer useful, and we should abandon the kind of thinking that posits a center and a periphery in favor of a model that envisions a group of “interesting centers which are both different from and related to one another.”<sup>14</sup> As Hall wrote, “The most exciting artists are those who live simultaneously in the [center] and in the periphery.”<sup>15</sup> As an “indigenous art that is also global and modern,”<sup>16</sup> at once local, national, and transnational, El-Salahi’s work has embodied Hall’s description since the artist’s first mature works in the late 1950s.<sup>17</sup> Now, in his ninth decade, he has created a significant new body of drawings that incorporates the richness of a hybrid visual vocabulary with world-ranging influences that converge into a unique and very contemporary kind of art. Like nuclei of the body of his work, El-Salahi’s Pain Relief drawings encapsulate a visionary, if not utopian, recipe for a universalist language of both cultural identity and cooperation that radiates from tiny pieces of paper into the world at large.

### Acknowledgments

An exhibition of this kind could not have happened without the help of Ibrahim El-Salahi, whose greatness as an artist is matched by his generosity of spirit. El-Salahi has been a role model for artists everywhere but especially for those from Sudan and other African nations. His patriotism as well as his bravery in his relocation to Europe in the face of political persecution at home is an inspiration. The Drawing Center thanks the artist for agreeing to exhibit his recent works with us. Our thanks also go to Katherine El-Salahi, who has been exceptionally helpful and welcoming during preparations for the exhibition, and to the France-based artist and writer Hassan Musa for his incisive and creative contribution to this catalog. I thank Dr. Salah Hassan for his long-term work on El-Salahi’s oeuvre—scholarship on which our research has been based—and also for agreeing to give a lecture about El-Salahi and his influence during the run of The Drawing Center’s exhibition. We are grateful to the Robert Lehman Foundation and Isabel Stainow Wilcox for their lead support for the exhibition. Enormous thanks are also due

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14 Stuart Hall, quoted in Hassan, “Ibrahim El-Salahi,” 12.

15 Ibid.

16 Hassan, “Ibrahim El-Salahi,” 19.

17 Ibid., 11.

to Toby Clarke at Vigo Gallery in London. Ably aided by Pia Austin-Little and Jess Wilkinson, Toby has represented El-Salahi for a number of years, and this show would not have been possible without his expertise and his generous support. In New York, we thank Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, Alissa Friedman, and Jennifer Grimyser, who, under the auspices of the gallery Salon 94 in New York, mounted a show of El-Salahi's Pain Relief drawings, inspiring us to do an exhibition ourselves. Artwork loans and financial support from Jeanne went a long way to make this presentation a special one. I would also like to thank our colleagues Hilde Lund, Director, and Tanja Thorjussen, Chairwoman, at Tegnerforbundet in Oslo, as well as Daniel Baumann, Director of Kunsthalle Zurich, for hosting this exhibition at their institutions.

At The Drawing Center, all of my colleagues have been helpful and involved in this exhibition, but I must single out for special mention Olga Valle-Tetkowski, Rebecca DiGiovanna, Kate Robinson, Isabella Kapur, and for their work on this catalog, Joanna Ahlberg and Peter Ahlberg.

It has been a career-changing thrill to have met Ibrahim El-Salahi, and it is an honor to showcase some of his most recent work at The Drawing Center. We are confident that this exhibition will inspire artists as well as American institutions who have yet to give this great African artistic voice the retrospective that his work richly deserves.





# The Good Use of Drawing

Hassan Musa

## I. The Chinese Calligrapher

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As a child, I was fond of making connect-the-dots puzzles. My elder brother used to bring *Assibyan* magazine home; he always started with the puzzle page and then passed me the magazine after rubbing out his pencil marks.<sup>1</sup> Making the puzzle on this palimpsest following his erased lines was less exciting, so I learned to make my own dot puzzles. I even made dot puzzles for my classmates. This early graphic experience made me conscious of drawing as an act of joining dots. The act of drawing, certainly in its primary and maybe in its final meaning, is based on the way we define the distance between two points. Dealing with drawing as a physical action enlarges the idea of drawing beyond the conventional representation of a visual reality.

During a trip to South China in 2012, I discovered the Chinese tradition of water calligraphy in Cui Hu Park in Kunming. I watched an elderly calligrapher dip a long brush into water and draw columns of Chinese ideograms on the gray marbled ground. A group of eager spectators silently watched the old man's dance. At the end of the performance, I asked the calligrapher about the meaning of the text he was writing. He said apologetically, "For me this is just a physical exercise" [FIG. 1]. I liked his answer because he brought writing to a material dimension where the movement of the body determines the quality of the graphic marks. I understood that he came to the park every morning to practice this strange sport of writing.

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1 *Assibyan* was a children's magazine founded in 1946 by the Bureau of Publications, Ministry of Education, Sudan.



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FIG 1 Water calligrapher in Cui Hu Park, Kunming, China, 2012.  
Photograph by Patricia Musa

I had first discovered Chinese calligraphy in my teens while I was copying Chinese watercolor landscapes published in *China Illustrated*, a one-piaster propaganda magazine available in the 1960s. That was during the Cold War, when propaganda publications arrived in Sudan from the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Egypt. *China Illustrated* was rich in all kinds of images: paintings of the Long March, the Chinese agricultural revolution with peasants on their tractors in beautiful landscapes, scenes of the Beijing Opera, and so on. I was intrigued by the vertical landscapes with several grounds. I used to copy these landscapes with their Chinese inscriptions in the margins. The calligraphy was, to me, a collection of abstract marks well integrated with the composition. This experience of working on inscriptions that I could not read enabled me, later, to ignore the conventional borders between writing and drawing.

I remember the day my brother Ibrahim brought a poetry book home. It was *Nar Al-Magazeeb* (The fire of the darvish), a collection of poems by Mohamed El-Mahdi Magzoub (1919-1982), but what fascinated me most were the twenty-eight ink illustrations that Ibrahim El-Salahi made to accompany Magzoub's poems.<sup>2</sup> El-Salahi and Magzoub were close friends and shared a passion for Sufi culture. I love Magzoub's poetry, but El-Salahi's illustrations were real visual marvels waiting for me each time I opened the book. His images monopolized my attention for weeks.

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2 Mohamed El-Mahdi Magzoub, *Nar Al-Magazeeb* (The fire of the darvish) (Khartoum: Ministry of Information and Social Affairs, 1969).

These illustrations were important to my understanding of calligraphy as drawing but also to my understanding of the art of illustration, because I learned that illustration is more interesting when it appears as a visually independent story, running parallel to the text. I recognized Arabic writing signs in El-Salahi's illustrations, but the fact that the artist was using a paintbrush instead of the traditional *qalam* (calligraphy reed pen) oriented my attention towards what Chinese calligraphers call "the art of the brush" [FIGS. 2-4]. In the Chinese tradition of calligraphy, "the art of brush" is the counterpart to "the art of ink." The union of brush and ink represents the union of Yin and Yang (Heaven/Earth, Dark/Light, etc.) from which the living comes into being.<sup>3</sup>

El-Salahi's illustrations in *The Fire of the Darvish* were exciting to me because I felt that he had deliberately ignored the scriptural dimension of the Arabic writing in order to reach the inner identity of writing as a gesture intended to materialize emotions. This attitude joins what Shitao, the great Chinese painter (1642-1707), called "the single brush stroke,"<sup>4</sup> but El-Salahi also approaches calligraphy with a methodology borrowed from the pioneers of European modernity. When he arrived at the Slade School of Art in 1954, the teachings of the Bauhaus were well established in European art education. Theoretical consideration of the Bauhaus masters' (Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian) visual language nourished El-Salahi's vision and inspired his new perspectives when he arrived back in Sudan.

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## II. The Organic Growth Engineer

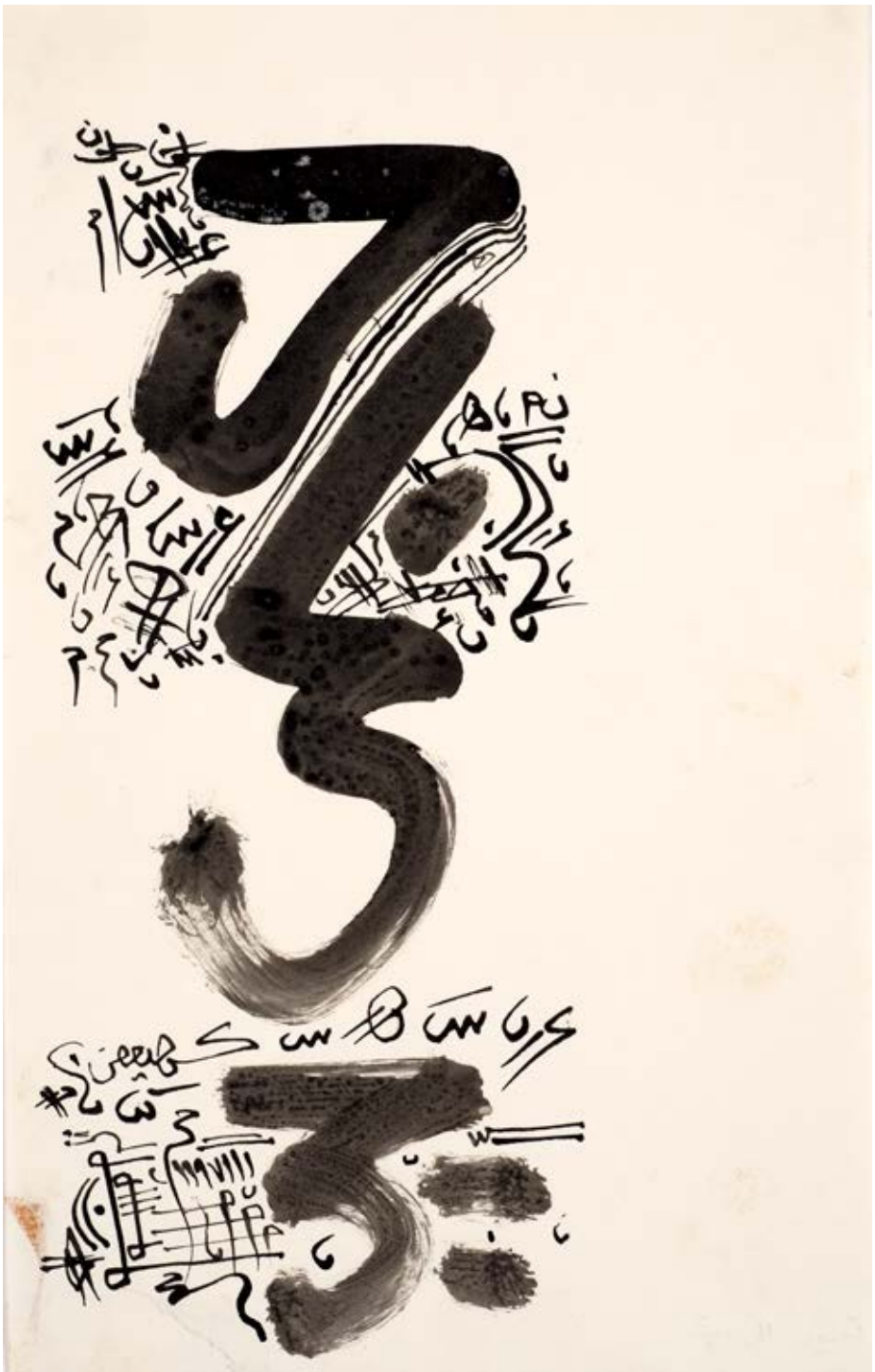
El-Salahi defines himself as a "picture maker" in the sense that he manipulates materials and tools to create visual concepts,<sup>5</sup> but I would define El-Salahi as a storyteller. We need stories to help us make sense of chaos, and in this sense, the best story El-Salahi ever invented was the one about Sudanese art. Sudanese art was/is a political necessity for the Sudanese middle class who, in 1956, inherited a country crippled by civil war. At that time the Sudanese political community needed new symbolic content on which a

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3 Pierre Ryckmans, *Les propos sur la peinture du moine Citrouille-Amère: Traduction et commentaire du traité de Shitao* (Paris: Hermann, 1984), 9.

4 Ryckmans, *Les propos sur la peinture*, 47.

5 "Global Vanguards: Ibrahim El-Salahi," videorecording, Tate, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/global-vanguards/sudan/v/el-salahi>.



FIGS. 2-4 Ibrahim El-Salahi, Illustrations for *Nar Al-Majazeeb* (The fire of the darvish), 1969, ink on paper

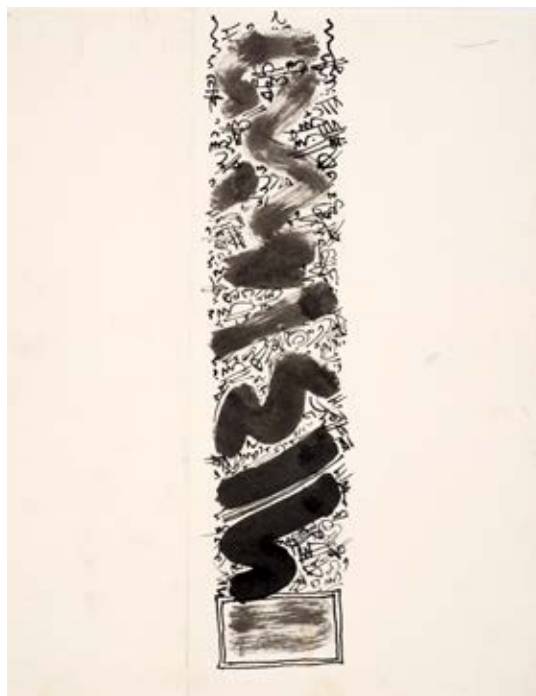
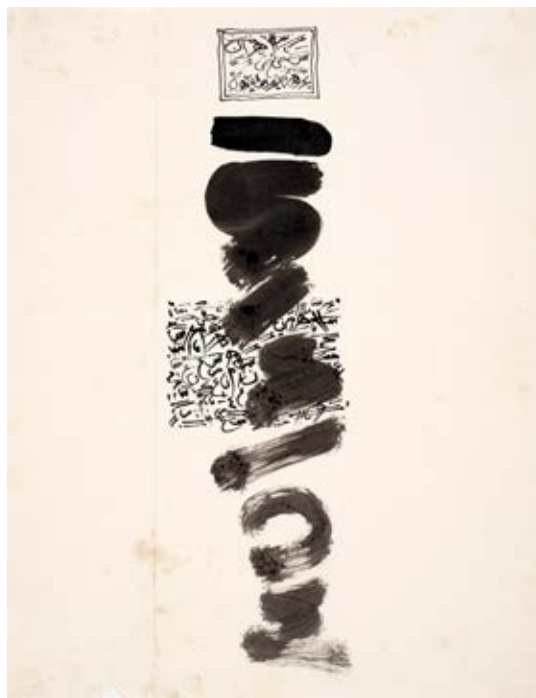




FIG. 5 Ibrahim El-Salahi, Page from *Prison Notebook*, 1976, ink on paper

national unity project could be constructed to address the realities of ethnic and cultural diversity in a politically fragmented country where more than a hundred languages are spoken.

The debates about the Sudanese cultural identity brought the concept of Sudanese art to the political scene. Progressive intellectuals posited the thesis of hybridity as an aesthetic framework to define the cultural identity of the Sudan. This optimistic utopian vision was quickly transformed into a political program.<sup>6</sup> El-Salahi was a key figure in the elaboration of the Khartoum School concept—essentially the aesthetic incarnation of the Sudanese cultural identity—and as such found himself in the center of a real *political organic growth* nourished by the expectations of the political authorities. I am reminded of one drawing from El-Salahi's *Prison Notebook*<sup>7</sup> in which he incorporated an indirect reference to Leon Battista Alberti's concept of the painting as an "open window."<sup>8</sup> El-Salahi explained, "This drawing is a kind of figure, and in its chest is a jail. I gave it a title, because I mix writing and drawing. It says 'each window has two faces.' The internal face: who you were and what you were doing and your intentions and hopes and aspirations. And the outer face: It comes from beyond. You have no control over it, but it has control over you" [FIG. 5].<sup>9</sup>

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The Khartoum School was an attempt to rationalize Sudanese art as the incarnation of the Afro-Arab miscegenation of Sudanese society. My truth about El-Salahi is that he is a Muslim man loyal to the Arab community of Northern Sudan. His efforts to express an African cultural dimension put him in the odd situation of someone looking through the window and seeing himself walking in the street. Being in two different places at the same time is possible only in the art sphere. Indeed this is how El-Salahi explained the presence of African masks in his images, despite the fact that the mask pattern is absent in art practice in Sudan. In a conversation with Ulli Beier, El-Salahi suggested he acted as an African *kujour* or shaman: "I thought I was being a medium of a spirit of some sort, something was working

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6 Hassan M. Musa, "The Party of Art, When the People Entered the Gallery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 1 (2010): 75.

7 Salah Hassan, ed., *Ibrahim El-Salahi: Prison Notebook* (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Foundation/New York: MoMA, 2018).

8 Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura* (1435; rept. Paris: Macula Dédale, 1992).

9 Ibrahim El-Salahi, in Hassan, *Ibrahim El-Salahi: Prison Notebook*, 14.

through me...So, answering your question about masks: I don't know if I was hit by a spirit from West Africa working through me, because I had never seen these masks before."<sup>10</sup> Who would believe such story? I certainly don't, but I love the unbelievable tales of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad the Sailor. The implausibility of those stories doesn't make Scheherazade a liar.

It is important to understand that by the mid-1970s, El-Salahi was established in Sudanese society at large as a national authority on issues of culture. He was well-known beyond artistic circles as the host of a popular TV show, and he held a series of high-ranking government positions. In 1969, when El-Salahi was the principal lecturer at the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum, he was appointed cultural attaché at the Sudan Embassy in London. Three years later, El-Salahi returned to Sudan, taking a position as the Director of Culture and then another as Undersecretary in the Ministry of Culture and Information. El-Salahi, the nationalist artist, was compelled to assume these roles out of patriotism, arguing, "If we don't work for our country, who else would do it?"<sup>11</sup>

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Unfortunately, the "country," under the military regime of General Nimeiry (1969-85), was impervious to the patriotic motivations of the artist. In 1975 El-Salahi was accused of complicity in a coup led by his cousin. He was arrested, beaten, and held in custody without trial for six months. In prison, El-Salahi took up drawing and developed an interesting concept that he calls the "endless organic growth painting." The idea emerged, according to El-Salahi, in Kober prison, where he was incarcerated with many other political detainees: "I made pencil drawings on those bits of paper that gave me the idea of the organic growth of a picture based on a central piece that worked as a nucleus. From there, and by adding other pieces to it, it grew sideways, upwards and downwards like a creeper plant. I made each piece work as a separate picture, the same as the relationship that exists between the individual human being and the human society at large. I drew, I drew and hid whatever I had drawn in the sand. When I was let out on March 16, 1976, I did not dig them up. I left them behind."<sup>12</sup>

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10 Ibrahim El-Salahi, in *Ibrahim El-Salahi: Conversations with Ulli Beier* (Bayreuth, Germany: Iwalewa Haus, 1983), 33.

11 Ibrahim El-Salahi, *Qabḍa min Turāb* (A fistful of earth) (Khartoum: Dal Cultural Forum & ICM, 2012), 61-79.

12 Ibrahim El-Salahi, in Salah Hassan, "Ibrahim El-Salahi's Prison Notebook: A Visual Memoir," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 1 (2010): 214.



Since the early 1970s, El-Salahi has returned several times to the concept of the “endless organic growth” of the painting.<sup>13</sup> In a 2015 interview, El-Salahi explained: “When I came out [of prison in 1976], I recalled the same idea of making...Each piece [of the work] has to be framed separately, because it’s an embryo of an idea that I’m not aware of completely. Then when it grows together it creates a whole.”<sup>14</sup> The concept of “endless organic growth painting” is a good allegory of the social relationship that exists between the individual and society. On the other hand, it questions the notion of the limit in art: Where and when does an artwork start and end? The drawings El-Salahi makes in the spirit of “endless organic growth” reveal an unexpected problem: The artist could be trapped in a unique image growing in all directions toward the infinitely distressing open range—a dark labyrinth with no map, a *hic sunt dracones* (place where dragons live). Finding the way out of the dragon’s labyrinth is a good challenge for artists if they manage to invent a map where the entry and the exit points are well defined. When the circular setting grows into a spherical setting, then the image is wrapped up in infinity; but while infinity is just an idea among other ideas, art exists in material form made with tools, objects, and physical gestures. El-Salahi seems to borrow Zeno’s paradoxical arrow for his spiritual meditation but he picks a real pen, a real brush, and real ink to make his concrete artistic project.

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Different versions of the origin of the “endless organic growth” concept have been put forward by different writers. Most of these versions obliterate the visual invention in the concept by overstating the trauma of imprisonment or the illness of the artist. It is not easy to resist the delicious fascination of the Christlike figure of an African Muslim artist suffering in jail and taking up the arms of poetry and painting against the tyranny: “With my own hands, I shall open the future’s curtains / With my own hands, I shall write my poems / With my own hands, I shall write the pronouncement for my last day / I shall illustrate the shape of words / With my own hands.”<sup>15</sup>

The trouble with this saintly portrayal of El-Salahi is that he consented to serve the tyranny of a military regime from 1971 to 1975, a period where many Sudanese artists and writers, among

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13 El-Salahi, *Qabḍa min Turāb*, 328.

14 Ibrahim El-Salahi, interviewed by Mark Rappolt, “Art in Context Africa: Part V: Ibrahim El-Salahi,” *Art Review*, April 2015.

15 Ibrahim El-Salahi, in Hassan, *Ibrahim El-Salahi: Prison Notebook*, 34.

opposers of the regime, suffered arbitrary incarceration and torture in General Nimeiry's prisons. I think El-Salahi's ambivalent attitude towards the Sudanese political situation in the 1970s was motivated by a combination of a civil servant's patriotic pragmatism, political naivety, and personal opportunism. Who would cast the first stone at him? The idea of handling such a monumental figure in contemporary art is perilous, even though I have spent many years contemplating El-Salahi's work. Ibrahim is my friend, my teacher, and my "wise enemy."<sup>16</sup> El-Salahi is among many great artists whose work shaped our perceptions and whose actions disappointed us. This is not something that can be evaluated in the religious binary terms of "good" and "bad." Great artists continue to inspire us despite their shortcomings. We need to know them in all their human complexity and can only then progress with this precious knowledge of a useful *claire-obscur* image.

### III. The Meditative Maker

Drawing was a private escape for El-Salahi when he was imprisoned, much as it had been during his years in bureaucratic jobs where the artist was confined behind a desk. That professional track could have been fatal for El-Salahi because painting needs time and space and a different organization of everyday priorities. But he was able to continue drawing. In his 2012 memoir, El-Salahi mentions assembling miniature drawings while he was working at the Sudan Embassy office in 1971: "I remember that my work was affected by the job in the office of the Cultural Attaché. I made few works on small size paper. I used to frame each work separately before assembling the pieces together to form a bigger range of vision."<sup>17</sup> When El-Salahi left Sudan in 1977, he settled in Doha, Qatar, as an adviser at the Ministry of Information, where he remained until 1998. For those three decades, he maintained his drawing practice on small-scale pieces of paper. For El-Salahi drawing and painting are merely art historical categories. What matters is the *making* itself, no matter what medium is employed.

With some of his most recent drawings, El-Salahi has once again discovered drawing as an escape. Indeed, El-Salahi found a means

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16 Hassan Musa, "El-Salahi, The Wise Enemy," in Salah M. Hassan, ed., *Ibrahim El-Salahi, A Visionary Modernist* (London: Tate Publishing in association with The Museum for African Art, 2013).

17 El-Salahi, *Qabḍa min Turāb*, 328.

of escape from his chronic pain in drawing: “In my bedroom I was surrounded by empty boxes of painkillers,” he explained, “Trying to ease my pain, I cut some packets into pieces. I found the quality of the paper wonderful, so I started drawing. When I work, I don’t feel pain at all.”<sup>18</sup> Drawing is a solitary practice. One needs to isolate from the outer world and concentrate on the making. This kind of solitude is enjoyable because it enables the maker to create and control a private visual environment. But when you suffer physical pain, you find yourself confined in a different kind of solitude. You are isolated in your pain. The fact that El-Salahi used the maker’s solitude to trump the physical pain solitude enlightens his “truth about drawing”: an absolute emergency and “a matter of life or death.” El-Salahi describes the state of metamorphosis from physical pain to the joy of creation as “mental thing,” explaining that, “Drawing for me is a kind of meditation.”

25

In a 1983 interview with Ulli Beier, El-Salahi reflected similarly on an exhibition of Tantra paintings he had seen many years prior: “I think it liberates you, it lets you meditate. I always meant to have painting as a platform for meditation... And that is what I found in the Mandalas, particularly with the designs where the lines open up: with an entrance to them. It takes you in and you feel very much at ease with yourself.”<sup>19</sup> In moments of liberation from his nationalistic burden, El-Salahi was able to return to mystical ideas according to which painting is an act of religion. But the nature of pain meditation doesn’t obliterate the corporal process of making the *Pain Relief Drawings*. When El-Salahi holds the painkiller packets, his fingers explore the nature of the support, which delivers iconographic information like the shape, the size, the texture, the color, and the braille inscriptions—each one of these elements proposes its own story as a starting point. Then the maker chooses one and the fingers do the rest: “Images enter my mind and flow through to my fingers...”<sup>20</sup>

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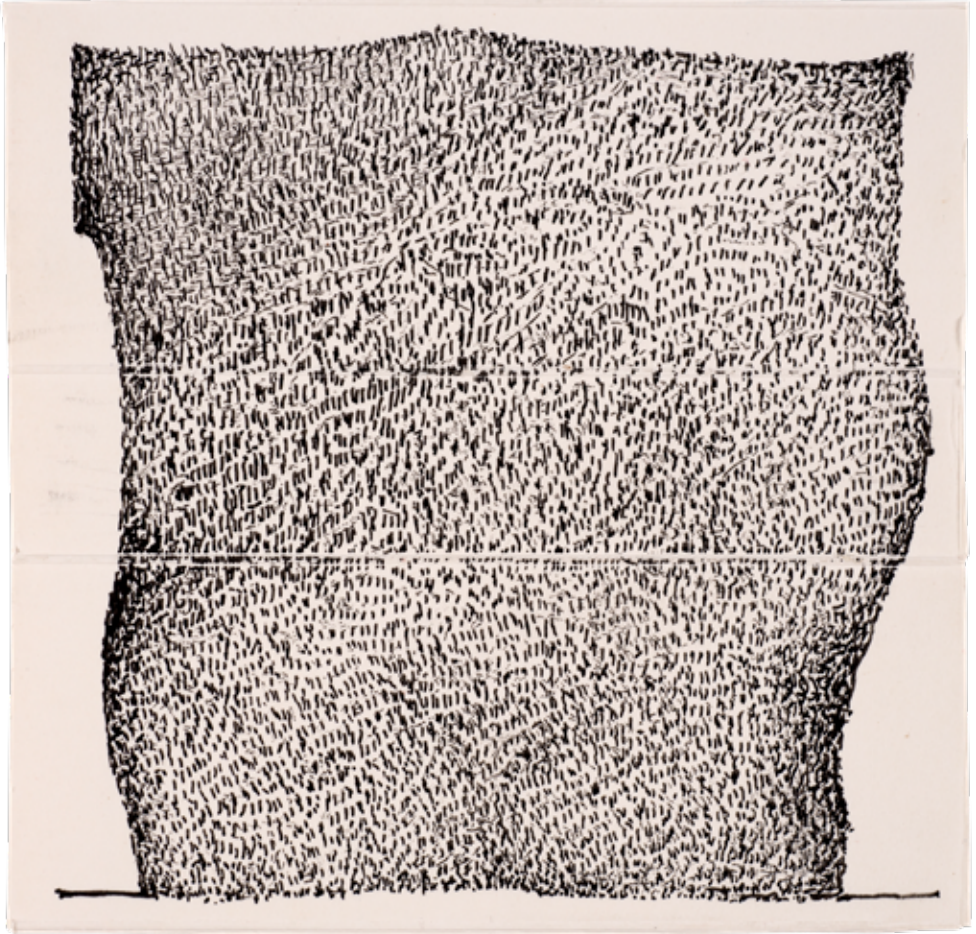
18 Ibrahim El-Salahi, interviewed by Anna McNay, “Artist Ibrahim El-Salahi: ‘When I work, I don’t feel pain at all,’” *Financial Times*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/df8bcc7a-da14-11e9-9c26-419d783e10e8>.

19 Ibrahim El-Salahi, in Norbert Aas, *Painting in Shades of Blackness* (Bayreuth, Germany: Boomerang Press, 1991), 38. The exhibition discussed was *Tantra* at Hayward Gallery (London, September 1971).

20 Ibrahim El-Salahi, interviewed by Anna McNay, “Ibrahim El-Salahi - interview: ‘Drawing for me is a kind of meditation,’” *Studio International*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/ibrahim-el-salahi-interview-drawing-for-me-is-a-kind-of-meditation>.



# Plates



PL. 1

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 2  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



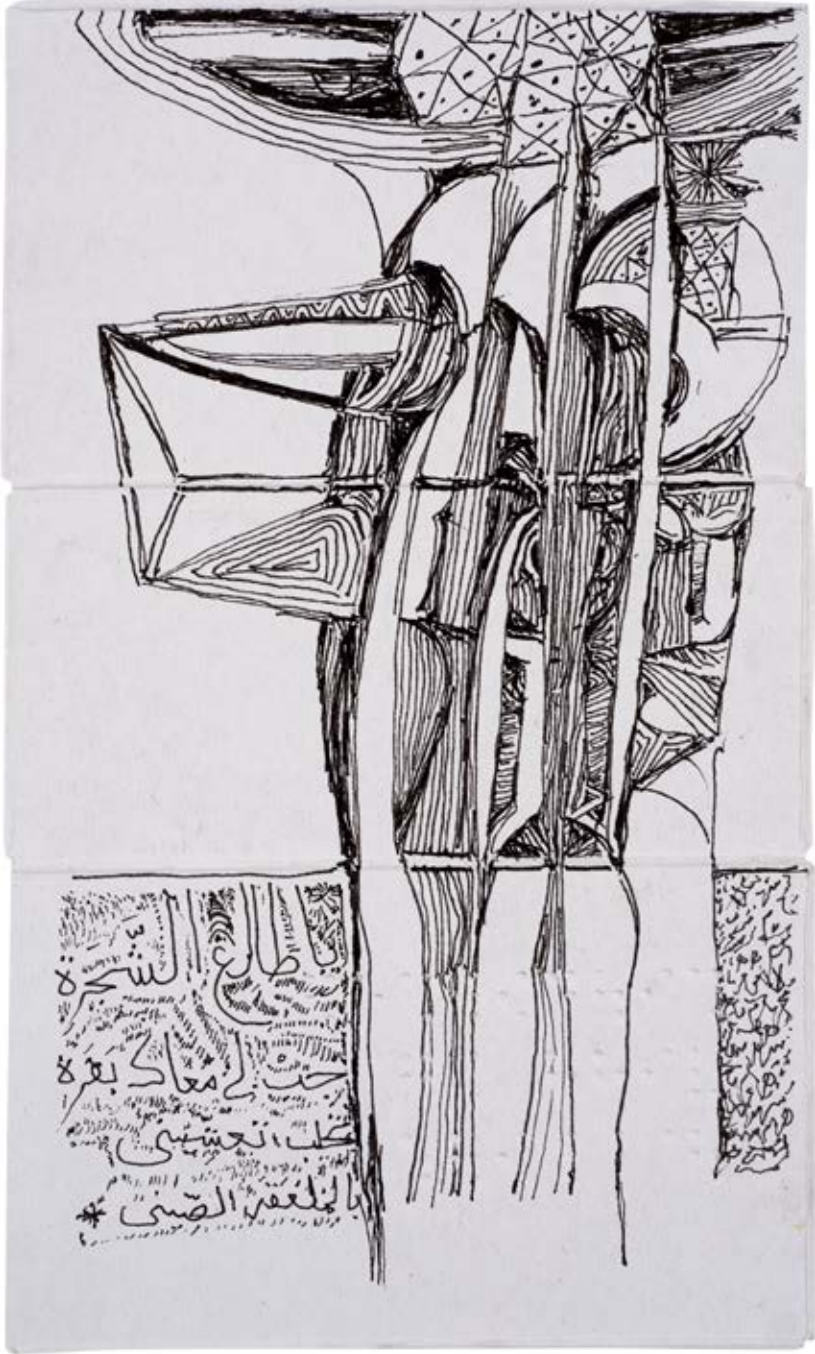
PL. 3  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*





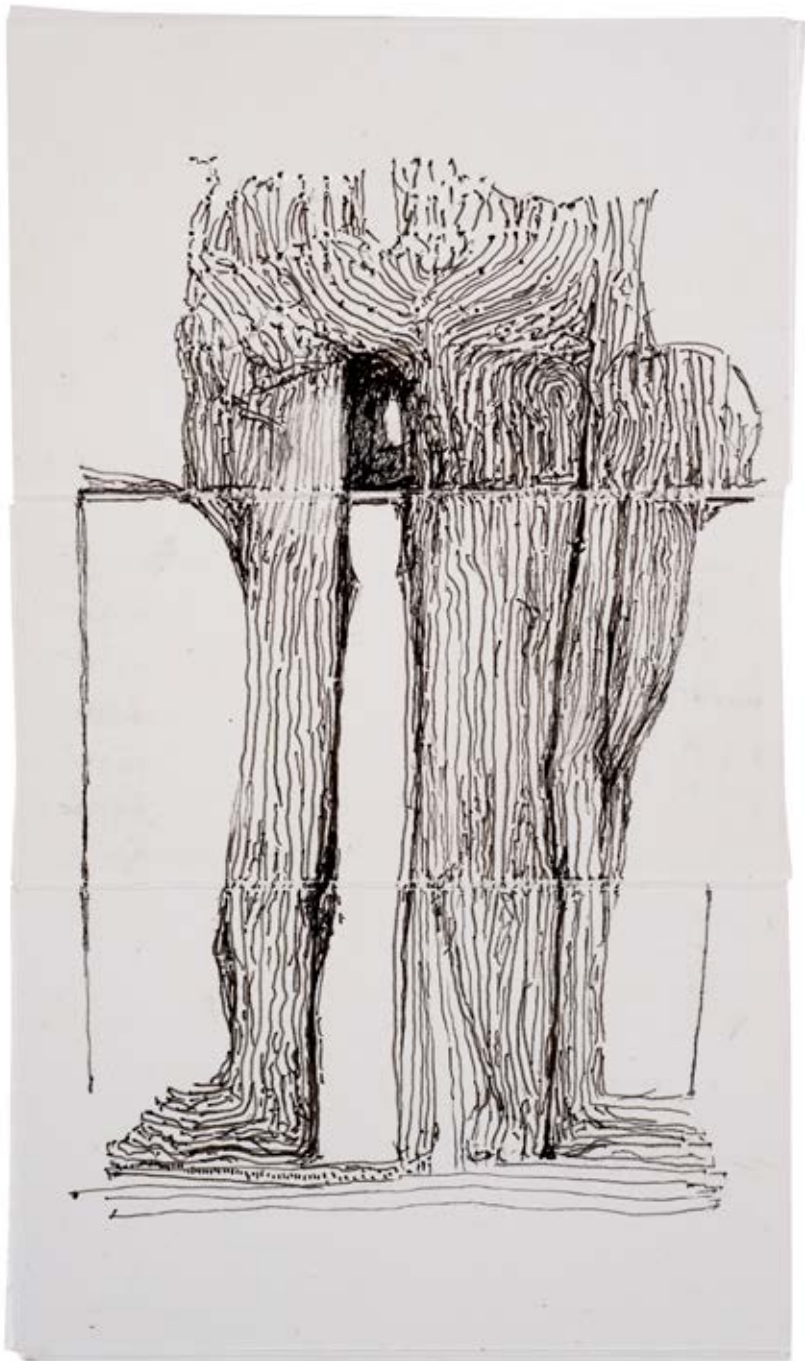


PL. 5  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

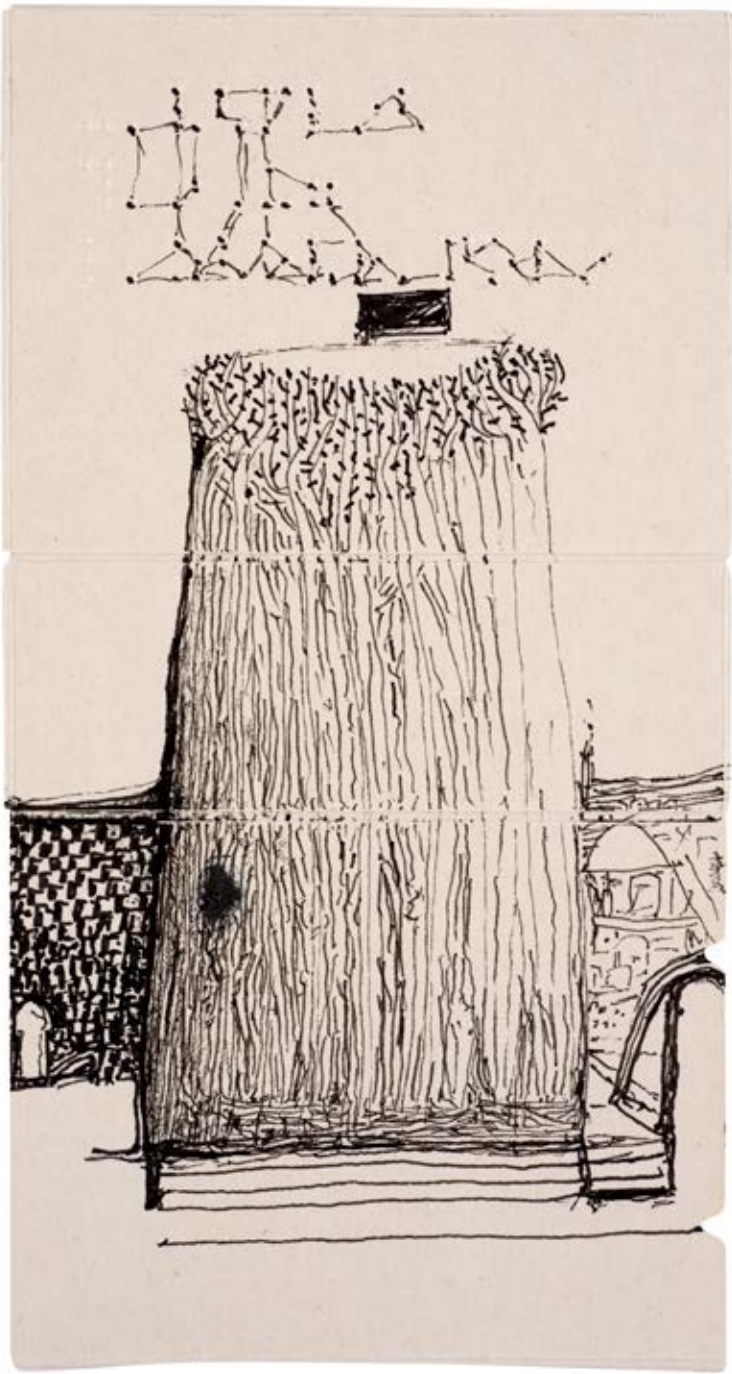


PL. 6

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



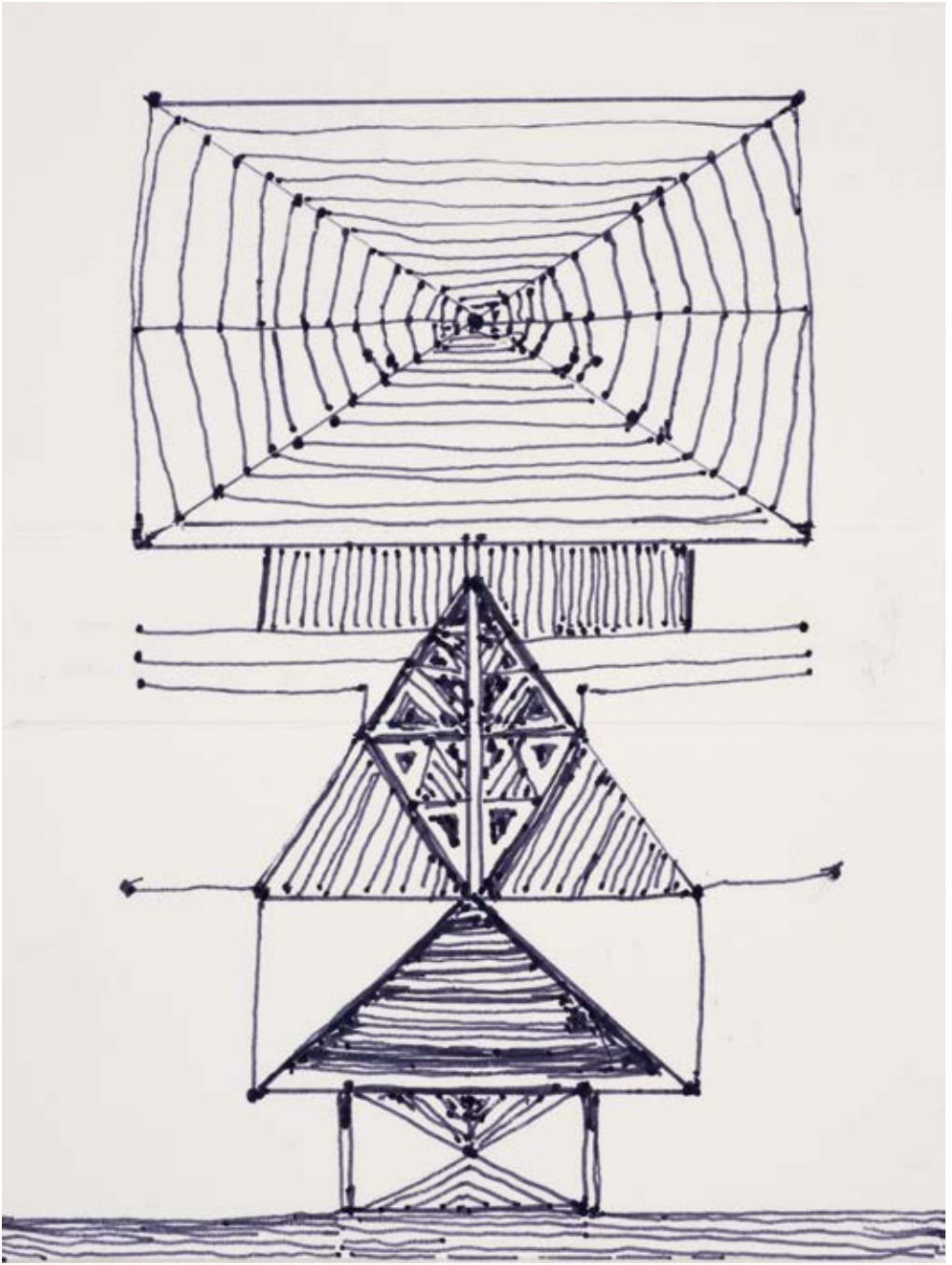
PL. 7  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



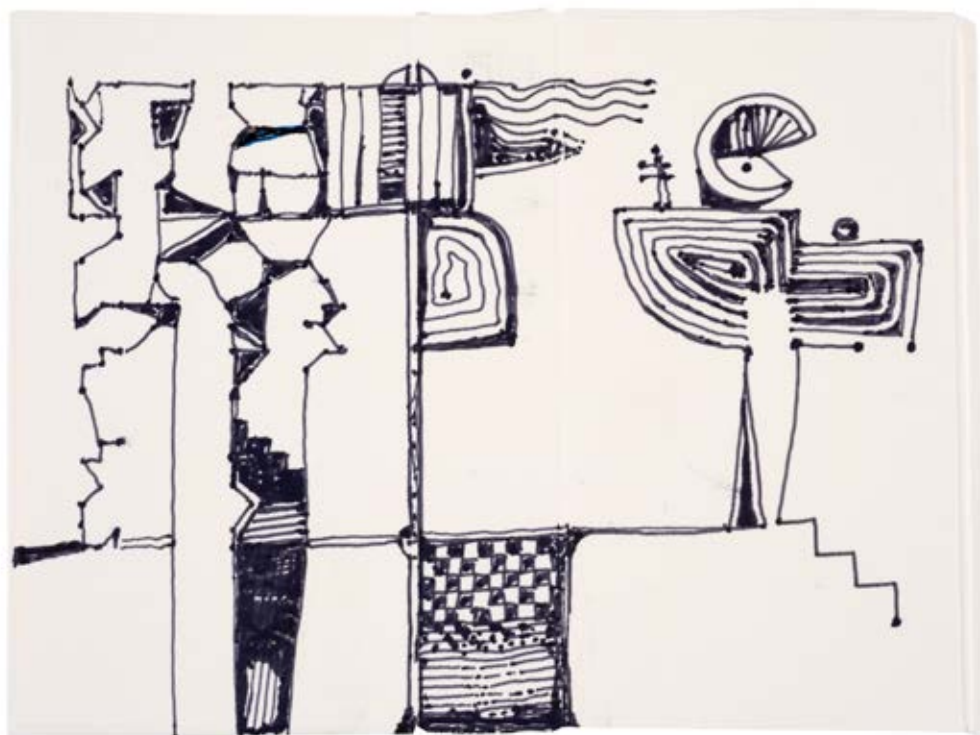
PL. 8  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 9  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

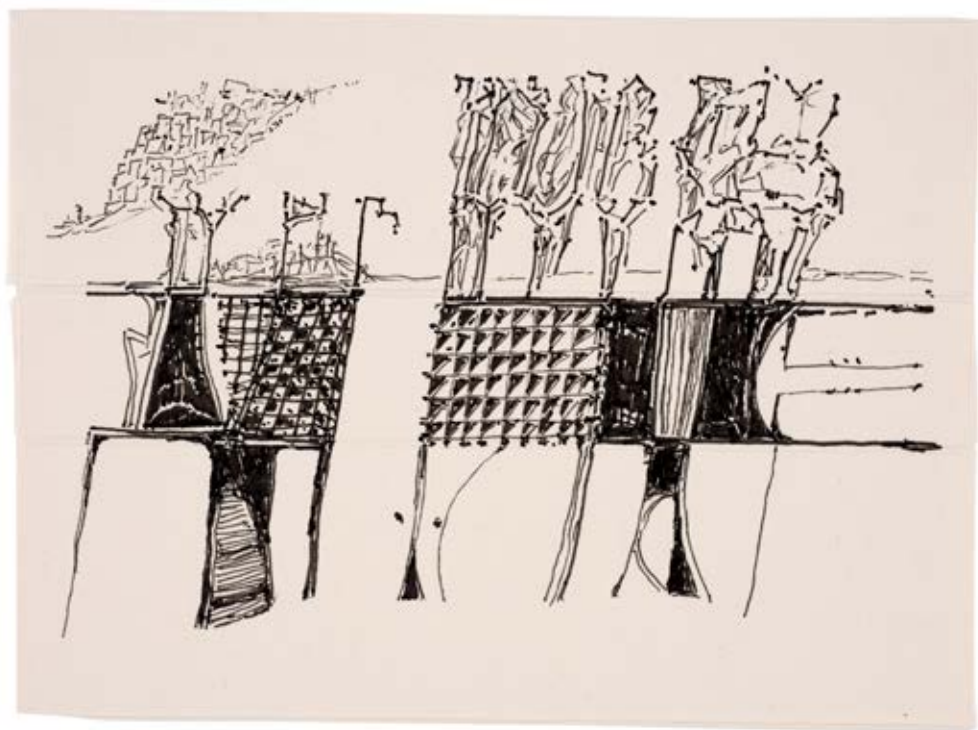


PL. 10  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

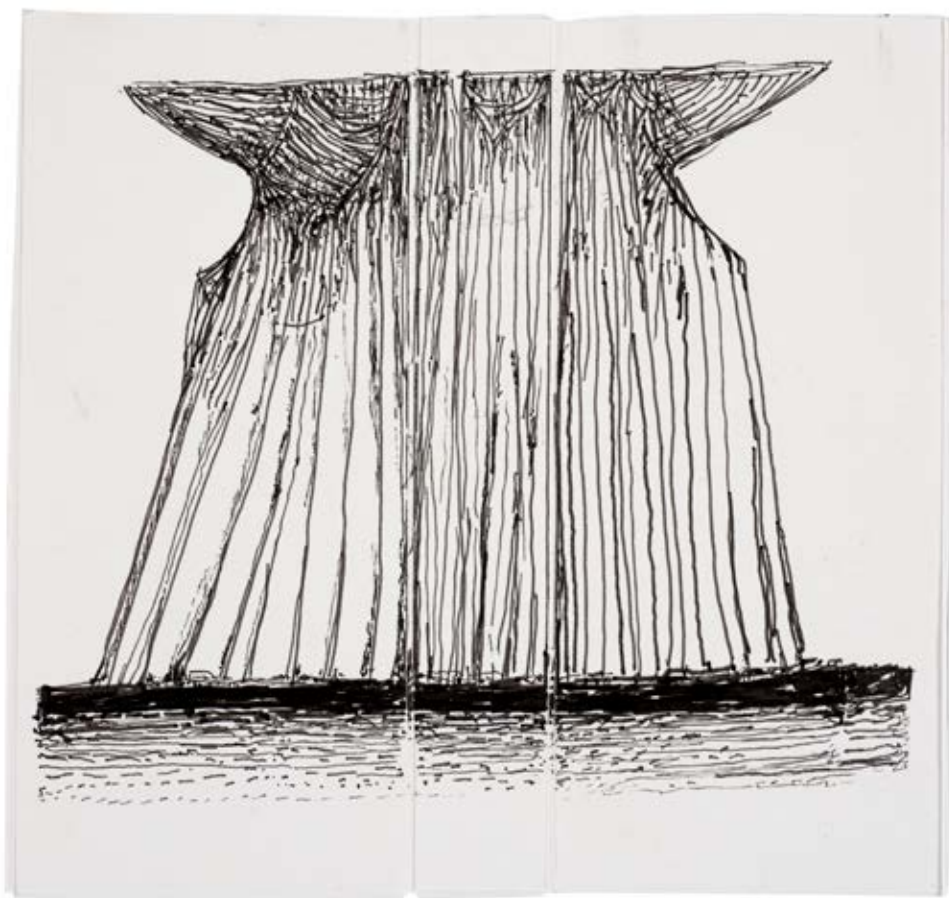


PL. 11  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

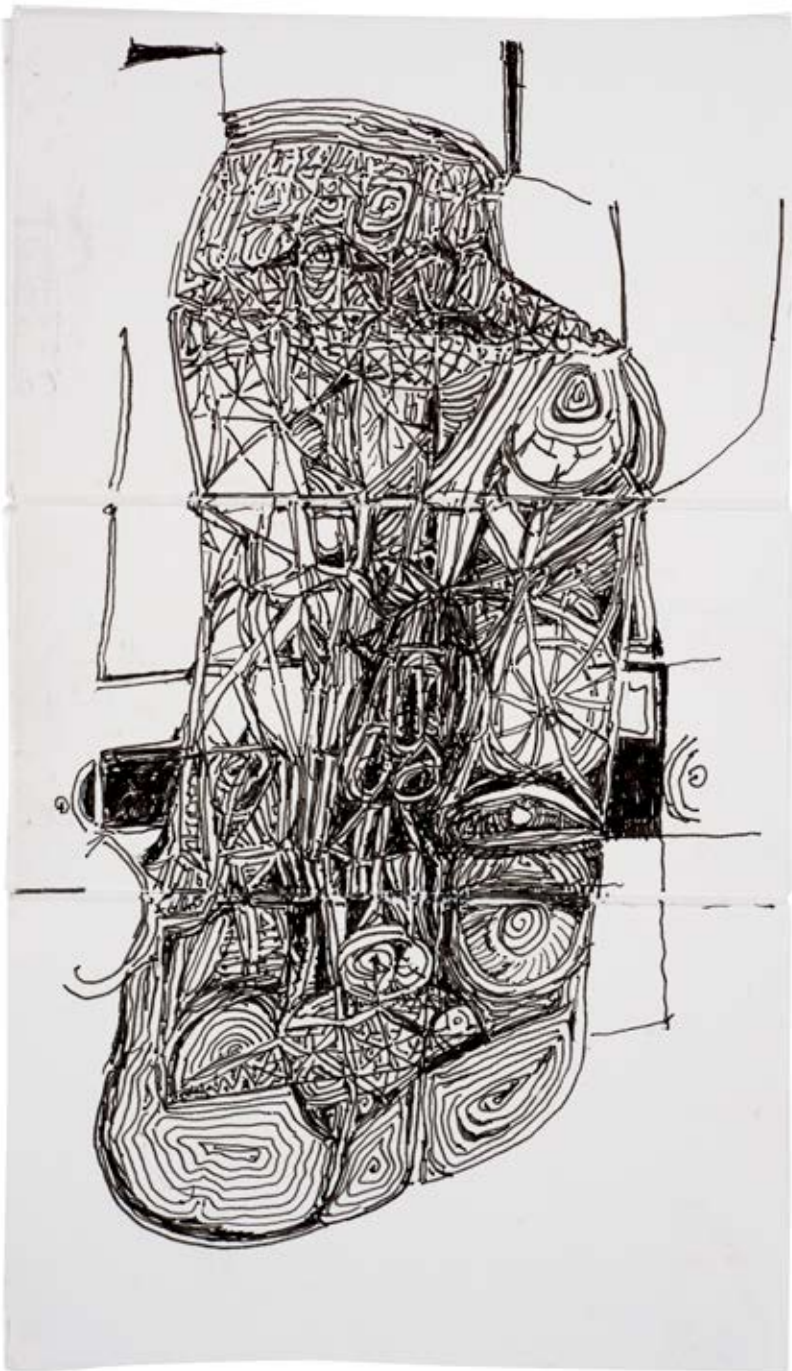




PL. 12  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

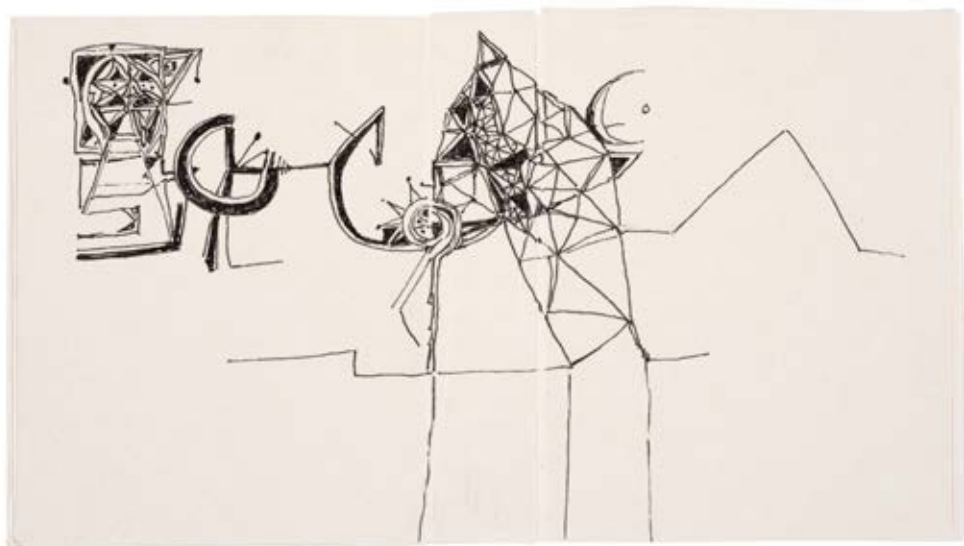


PL. 13  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 14

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



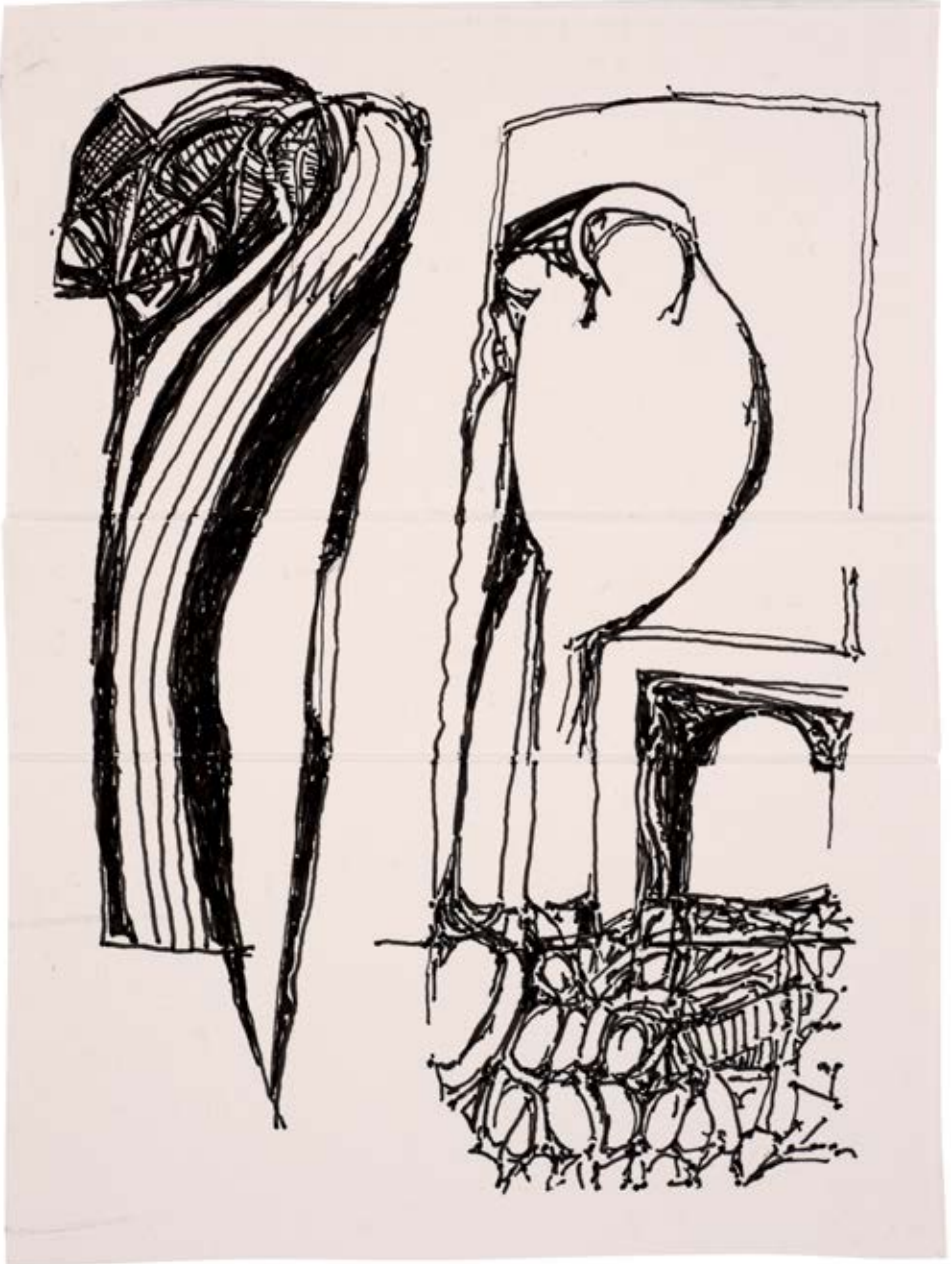
PL. 15  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 16  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

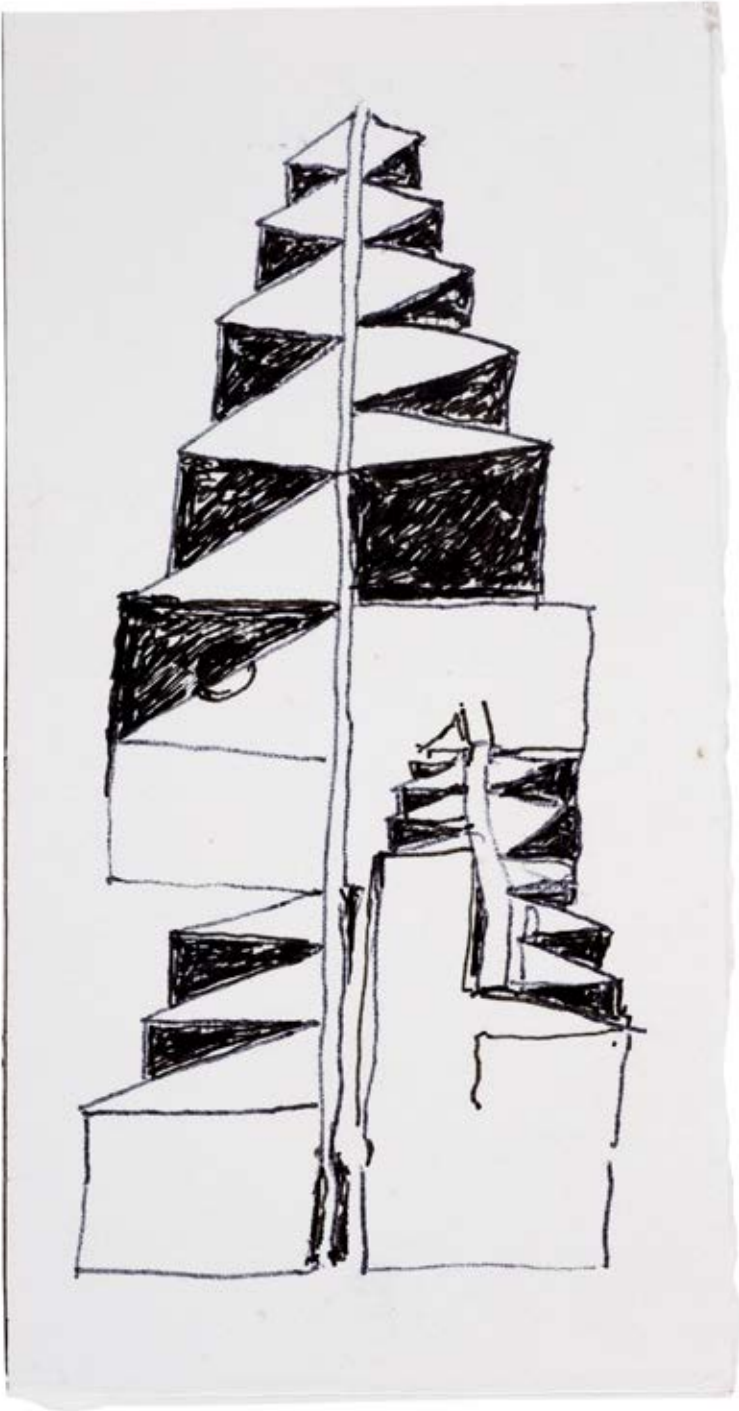


PL. 17  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 18

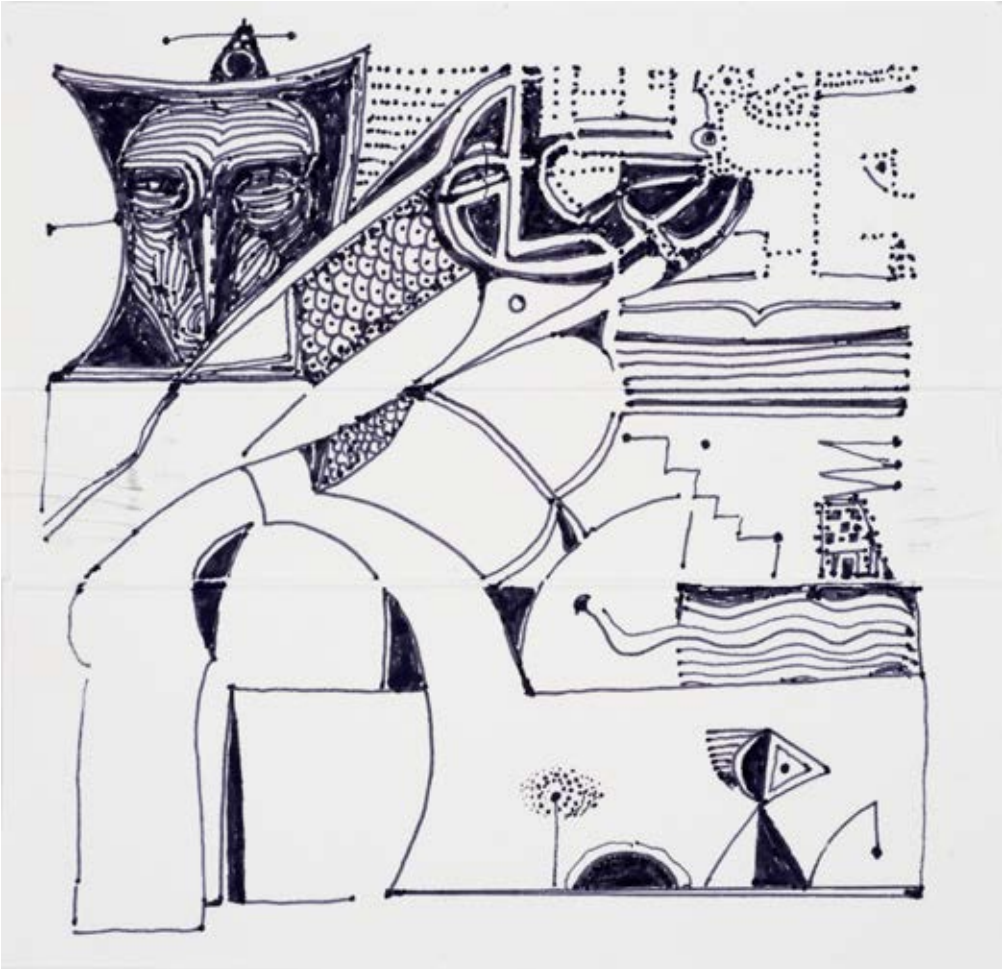
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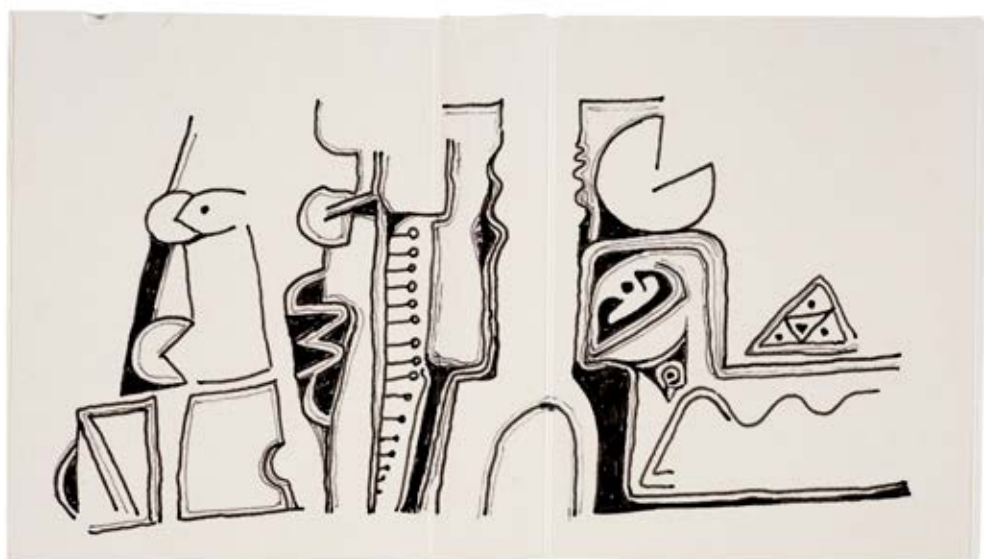
PL. 19

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



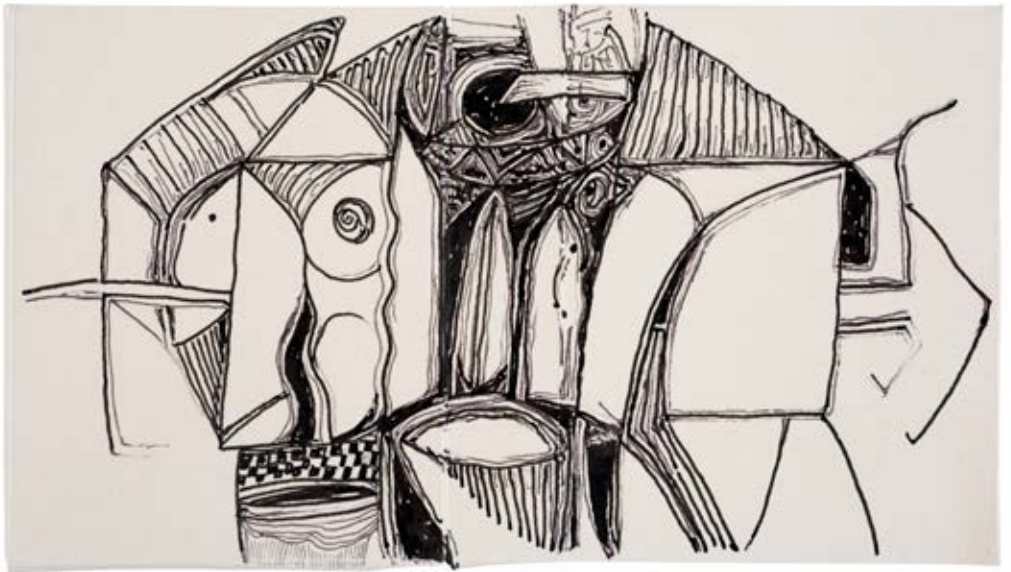


PL. 20  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 21

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



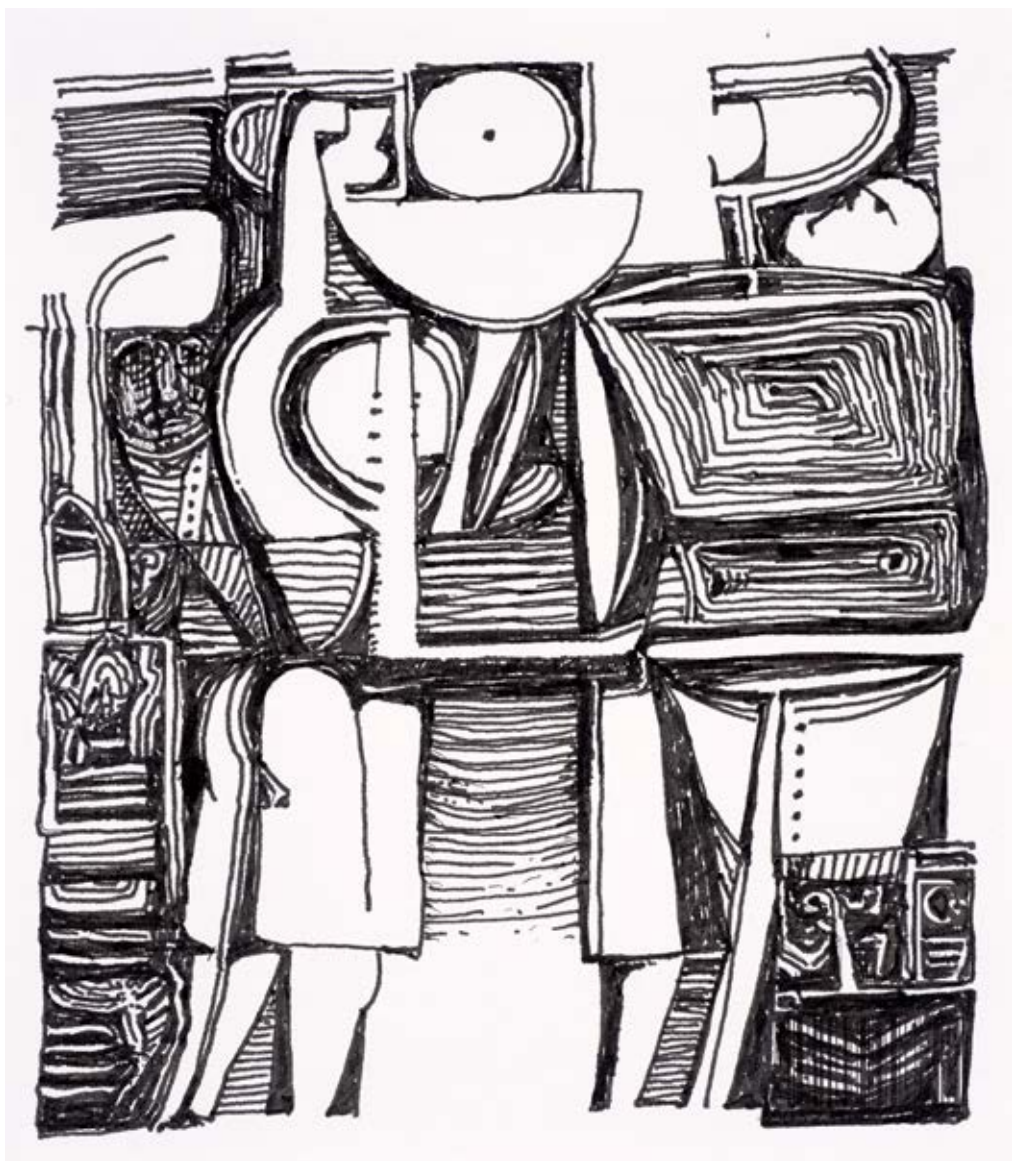
PL. 22  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 23

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*





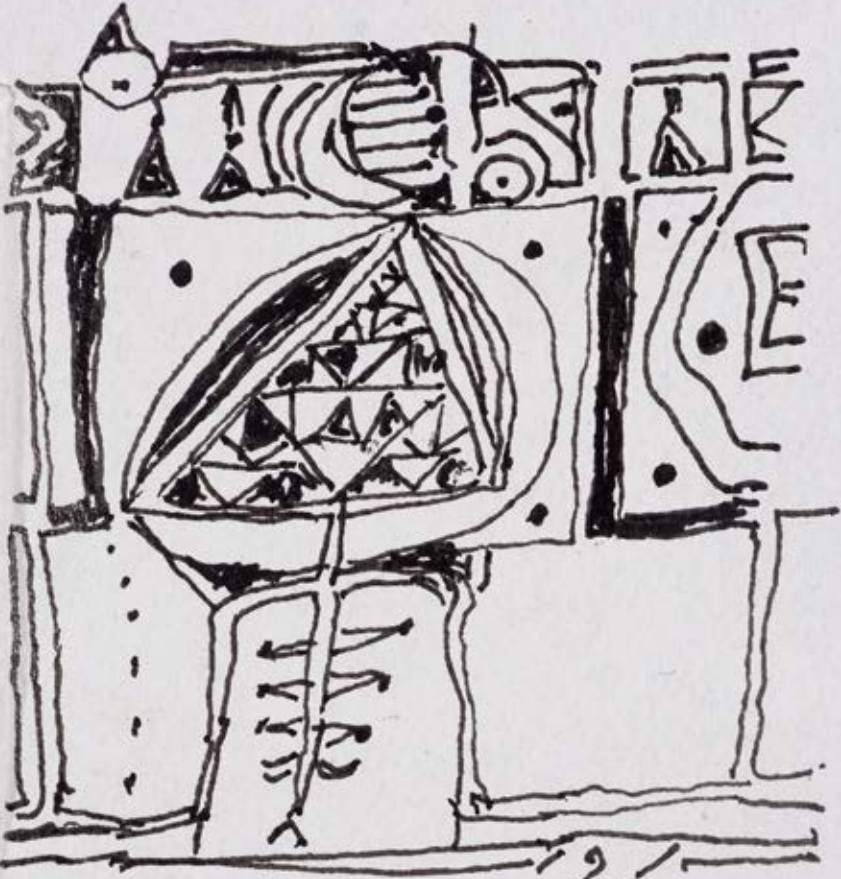
PL. 25

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 26

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



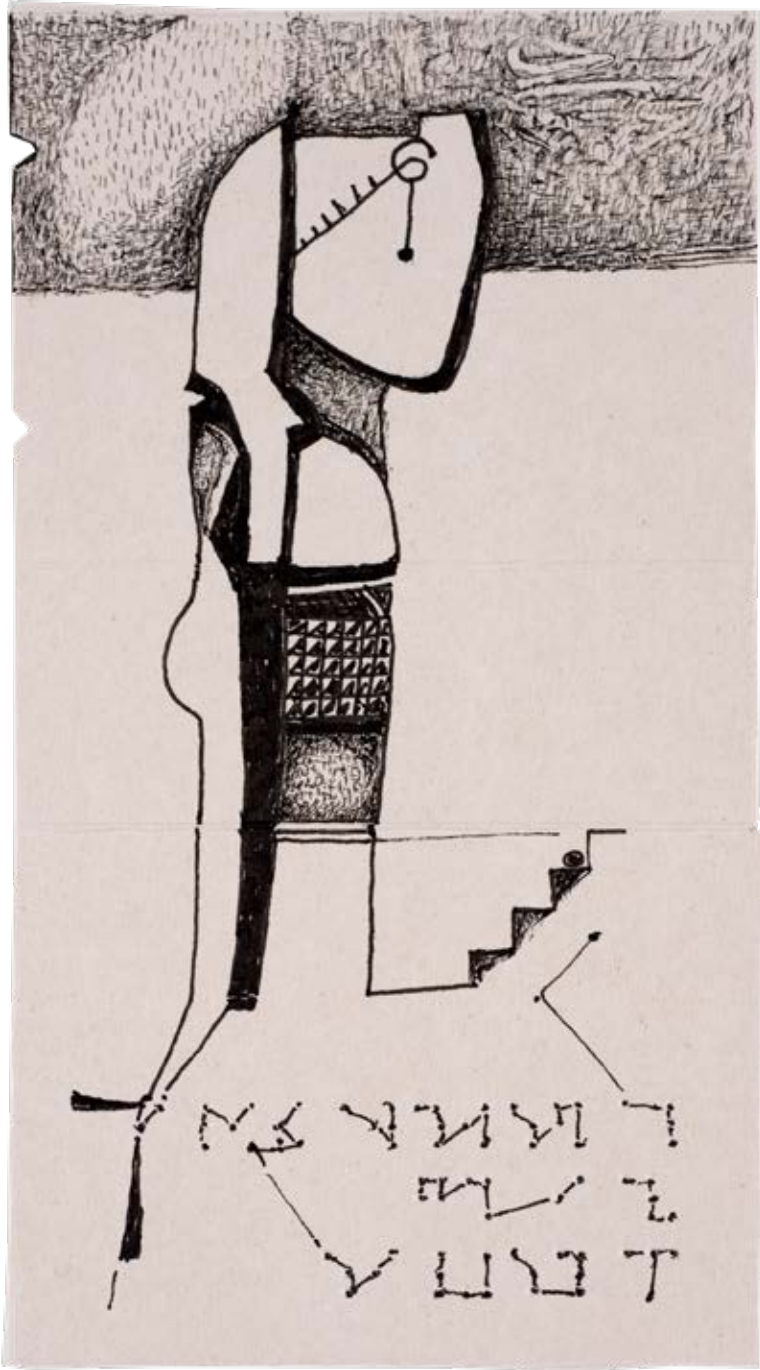
غَبُوشُ يَا غَبُوشُ  
كَلْبُ الْعَرَبِ أَبُ حَرْبُوشِ



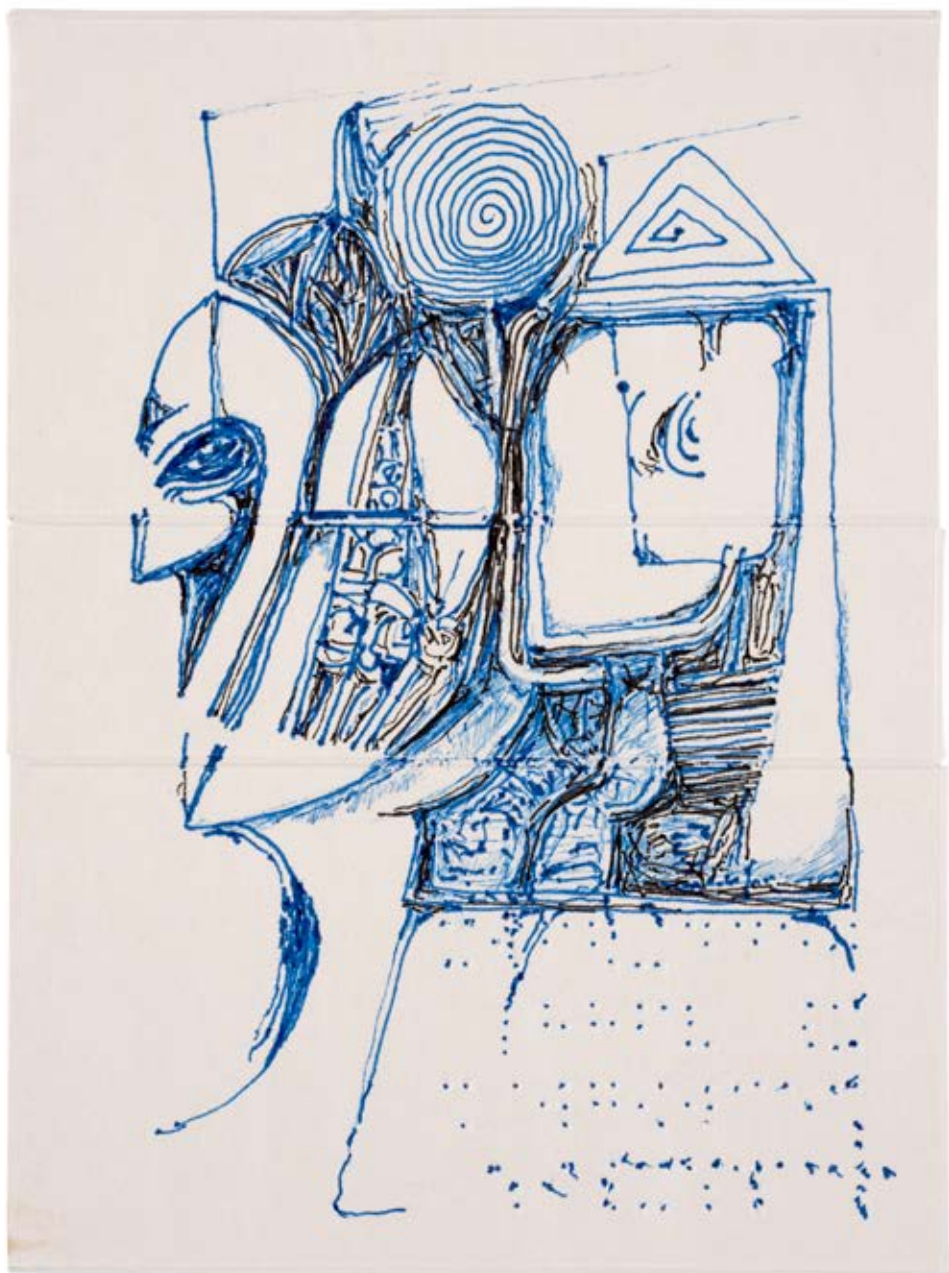




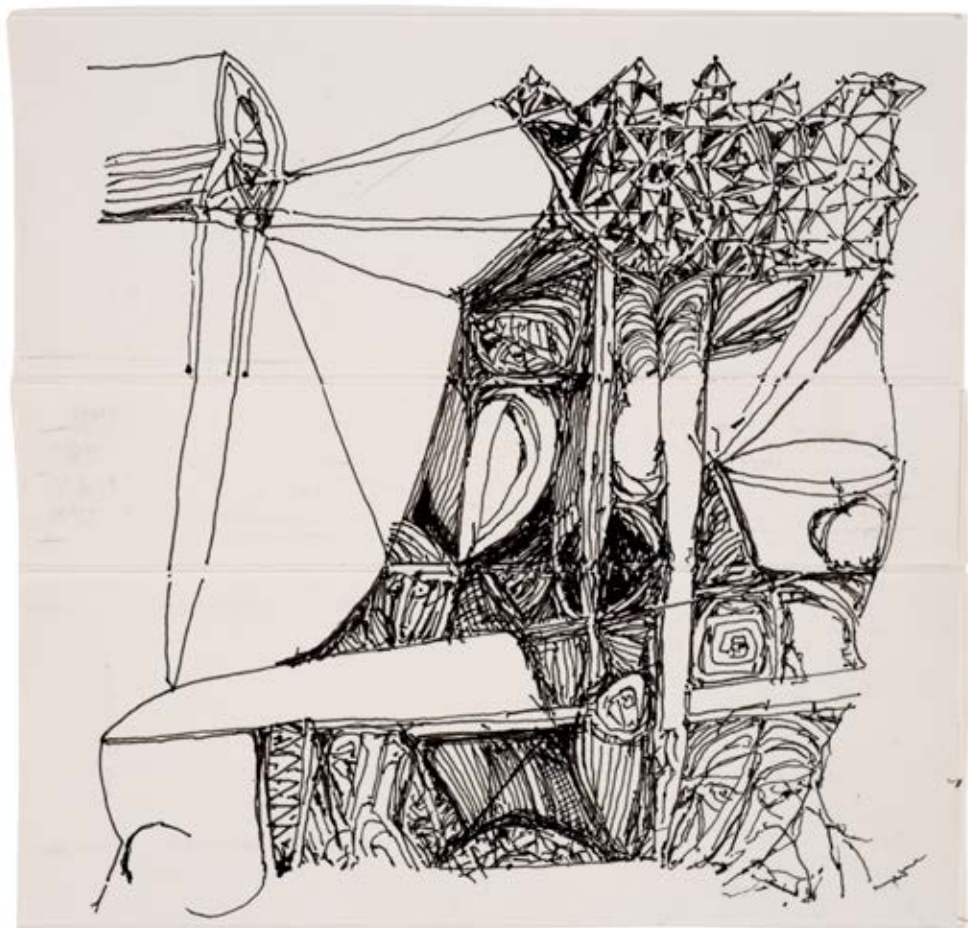
PL. 29  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



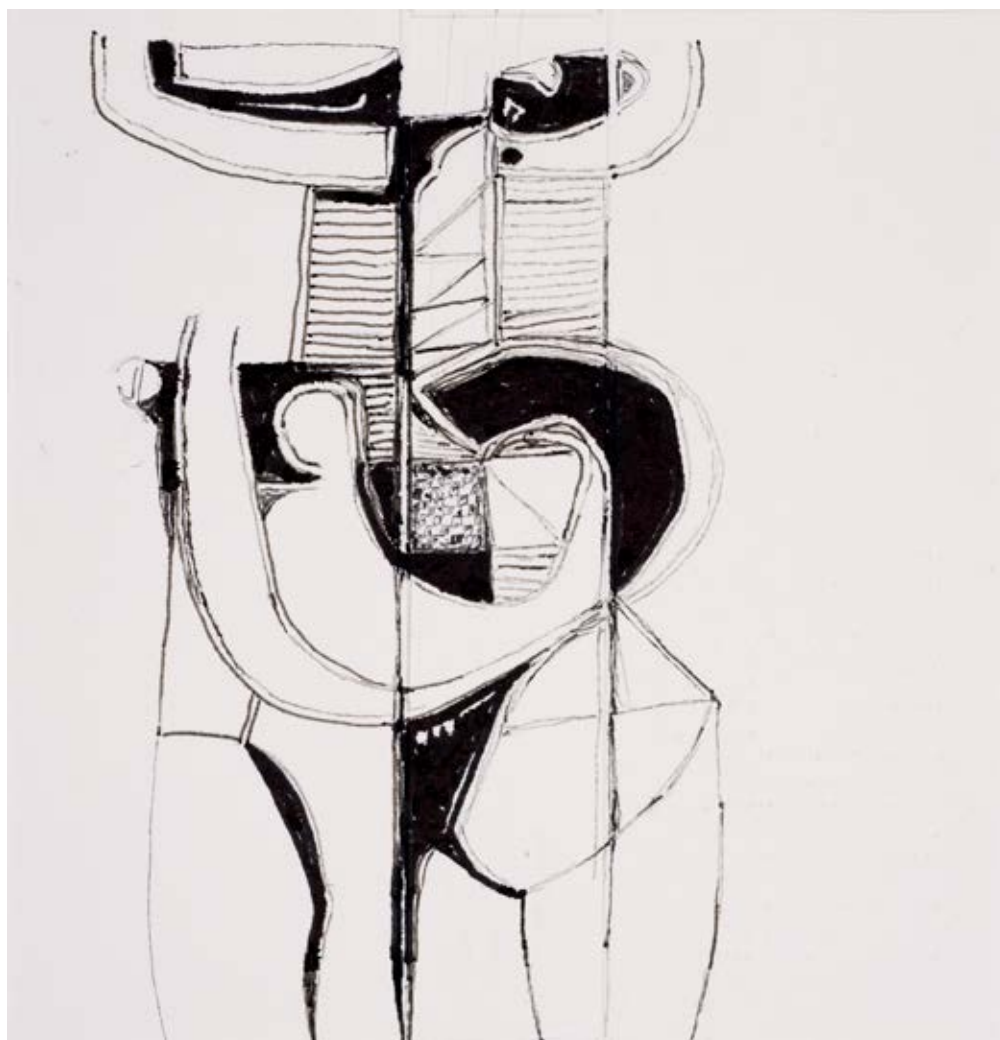
PL. 30  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 31  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

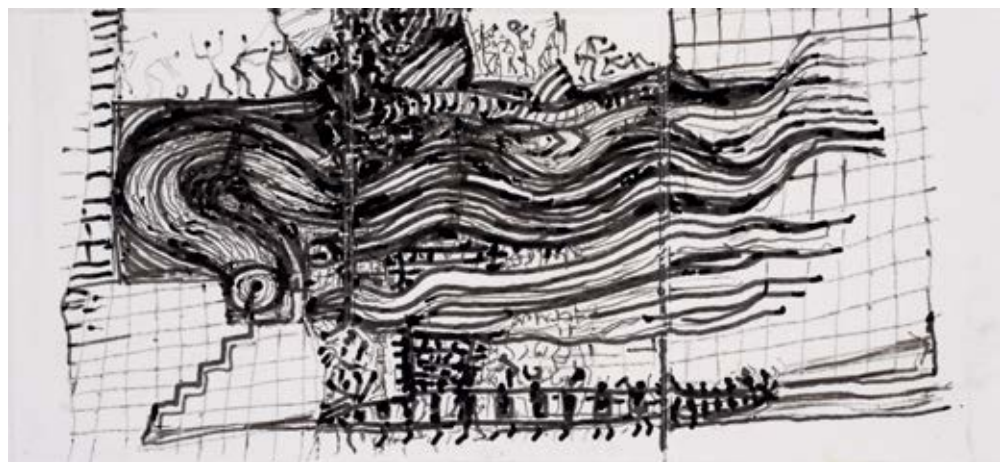


PL. 32  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



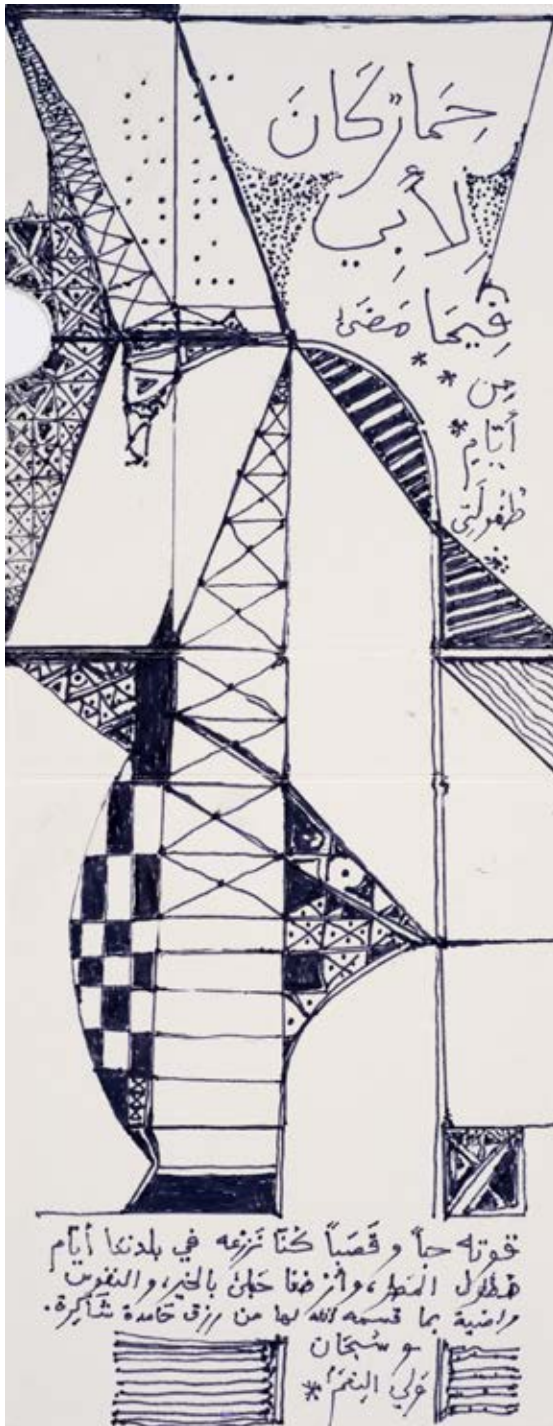
PL. 33

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 34

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

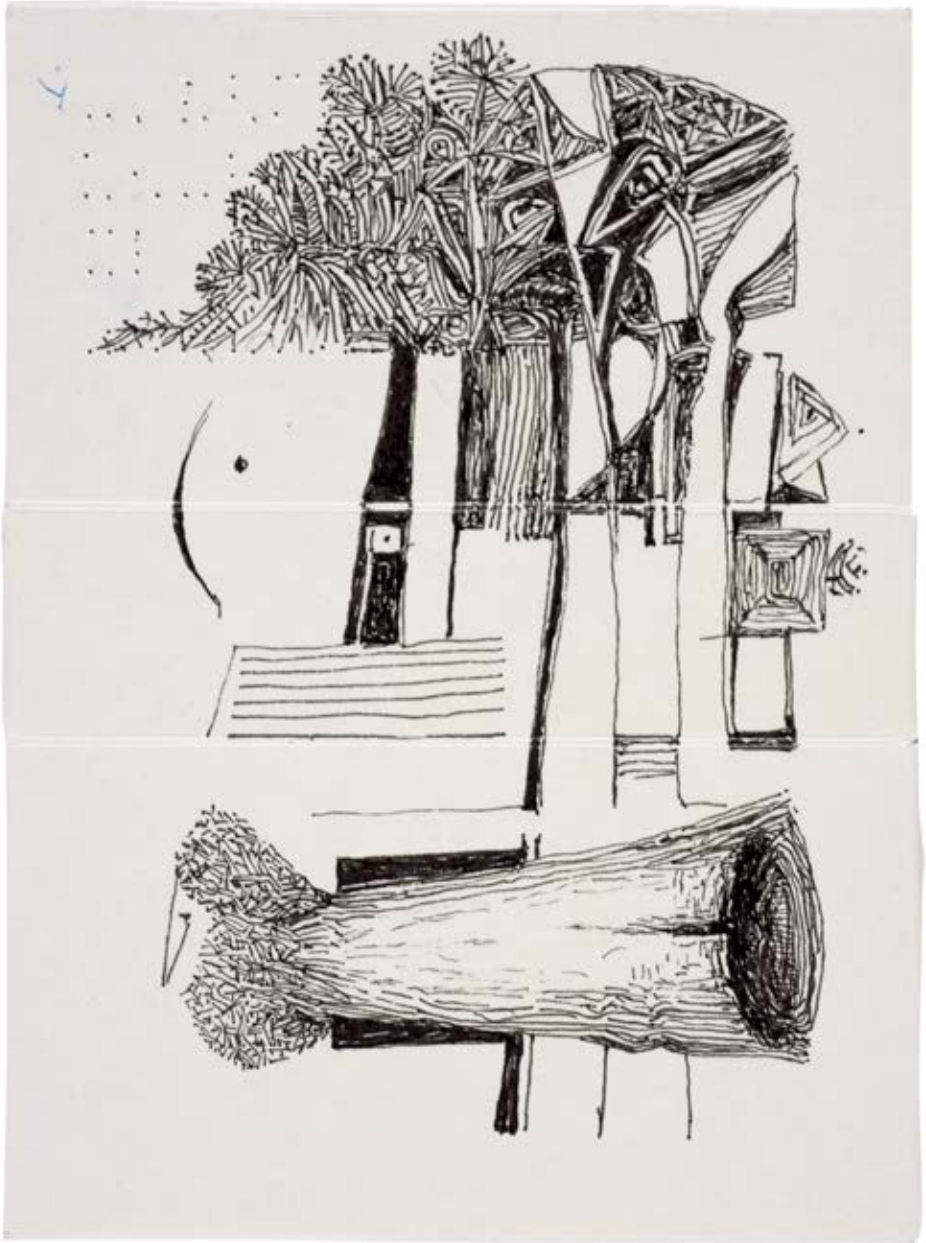


PL. 35  
Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18



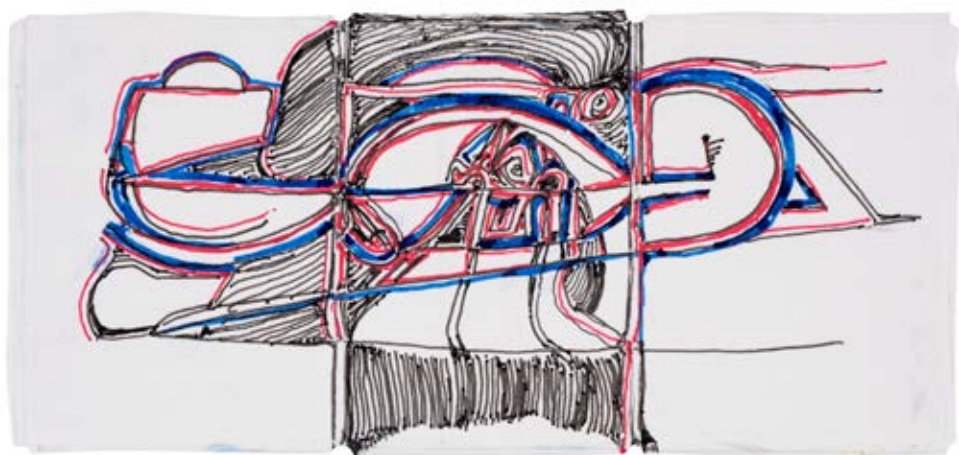


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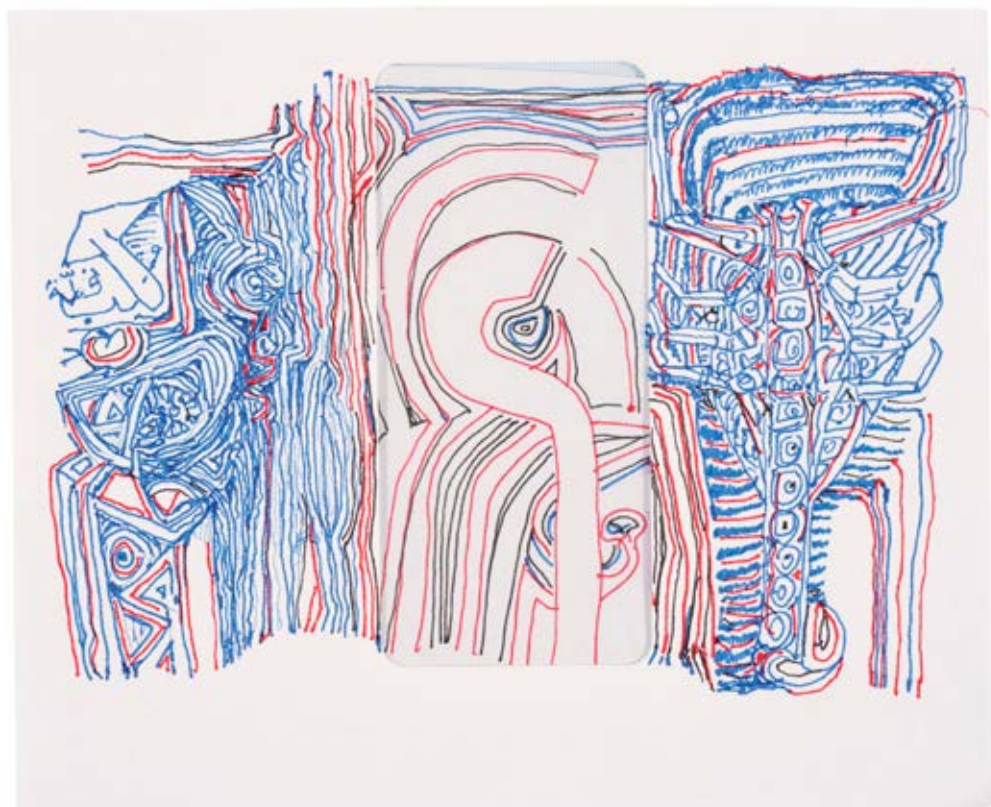
PL. 37

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



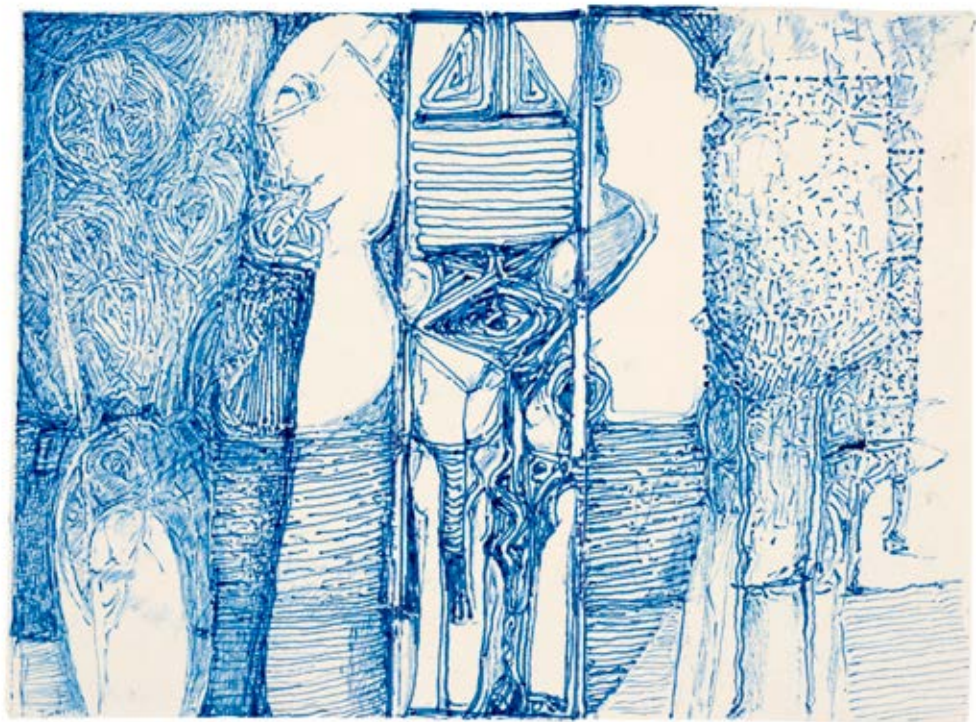
PL. 38

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 39

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 40  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 41  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 42  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18







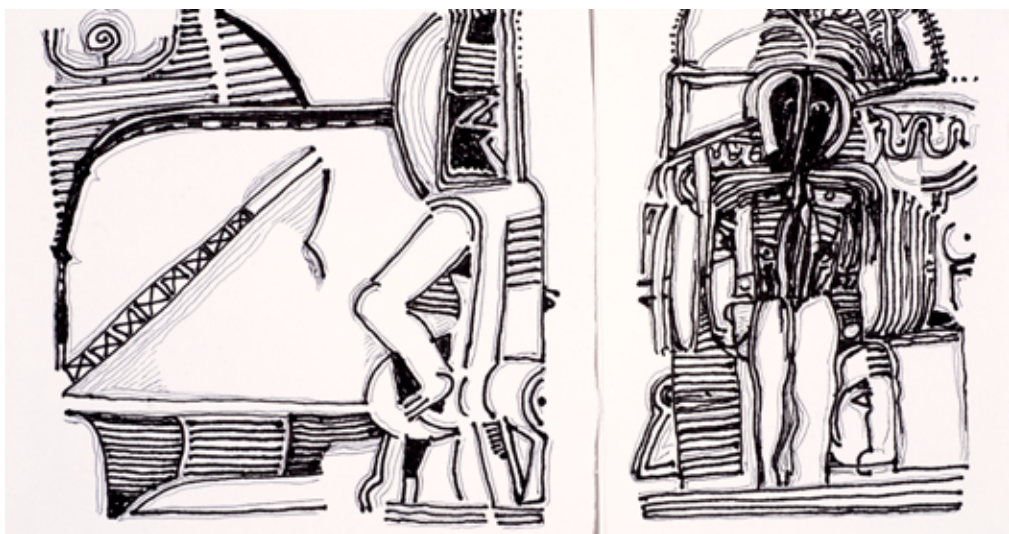
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*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 45

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



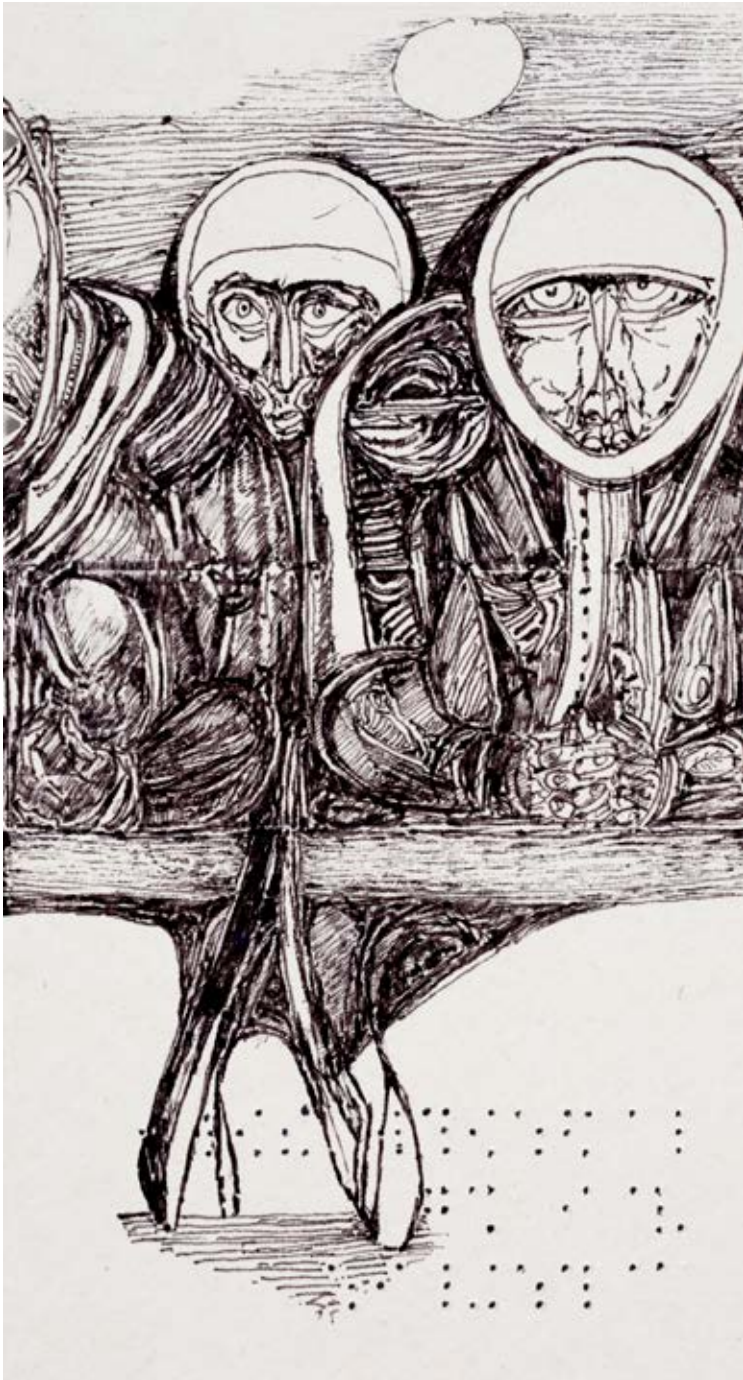
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*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



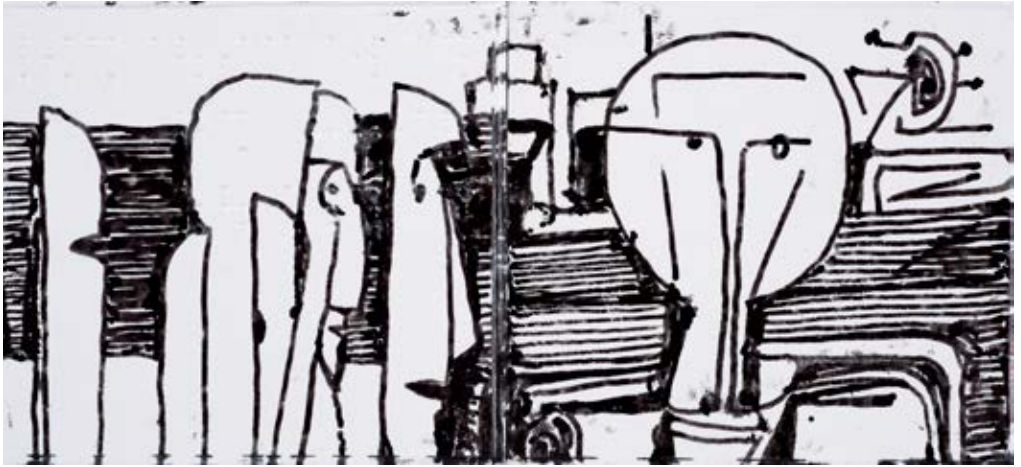
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*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 48  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



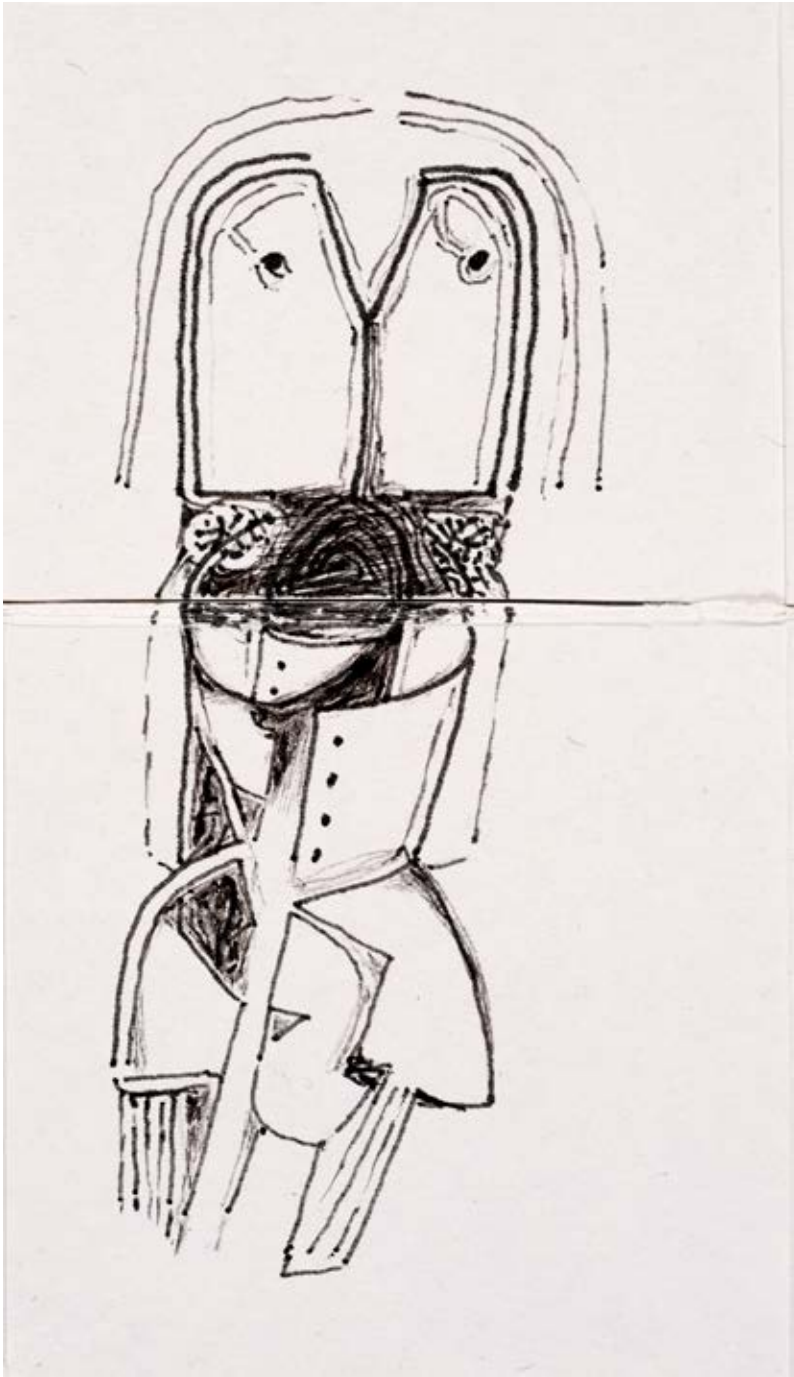


PL. 50  
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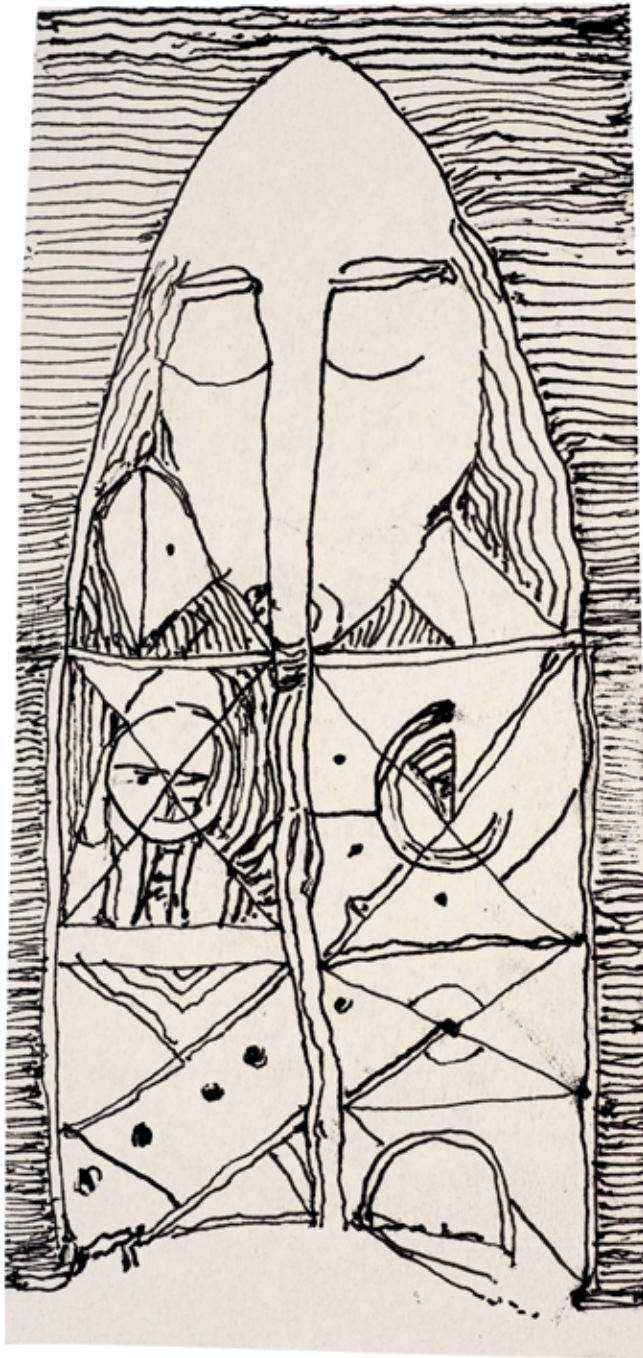
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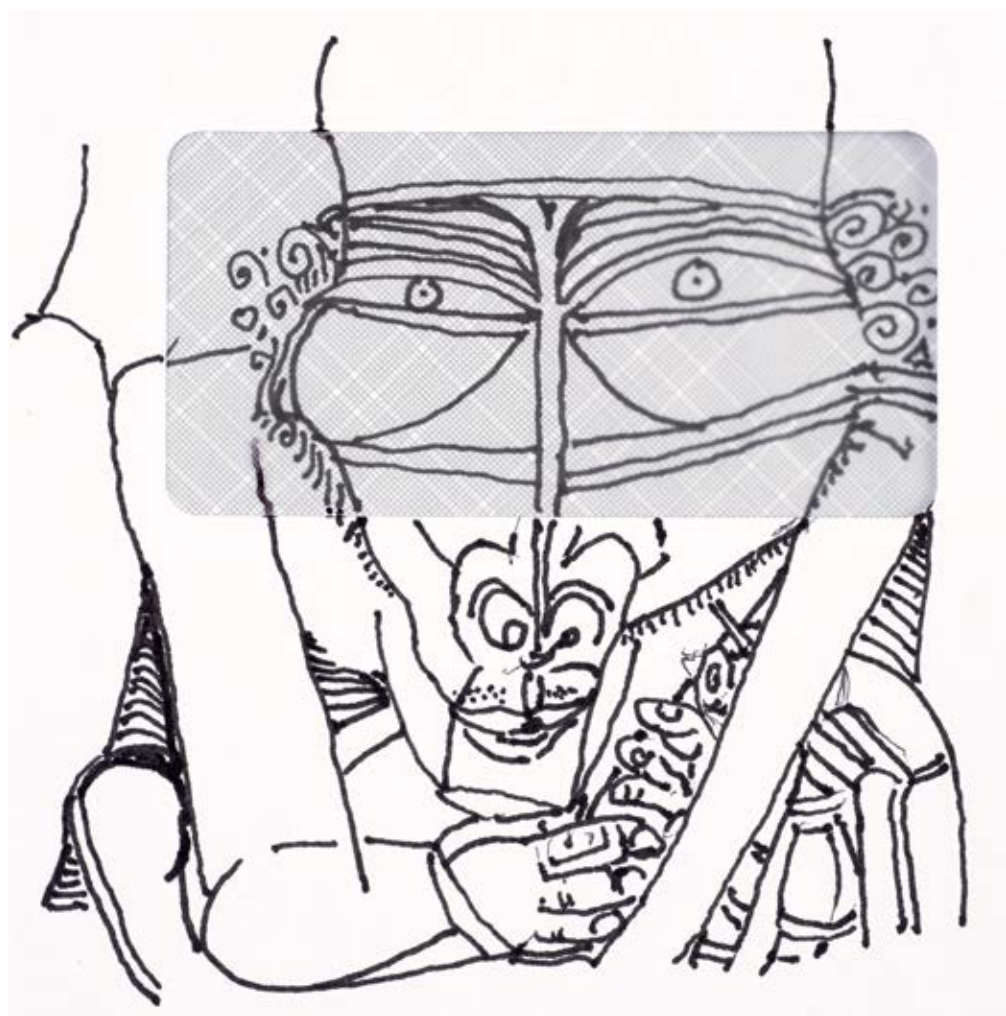
PL. 52

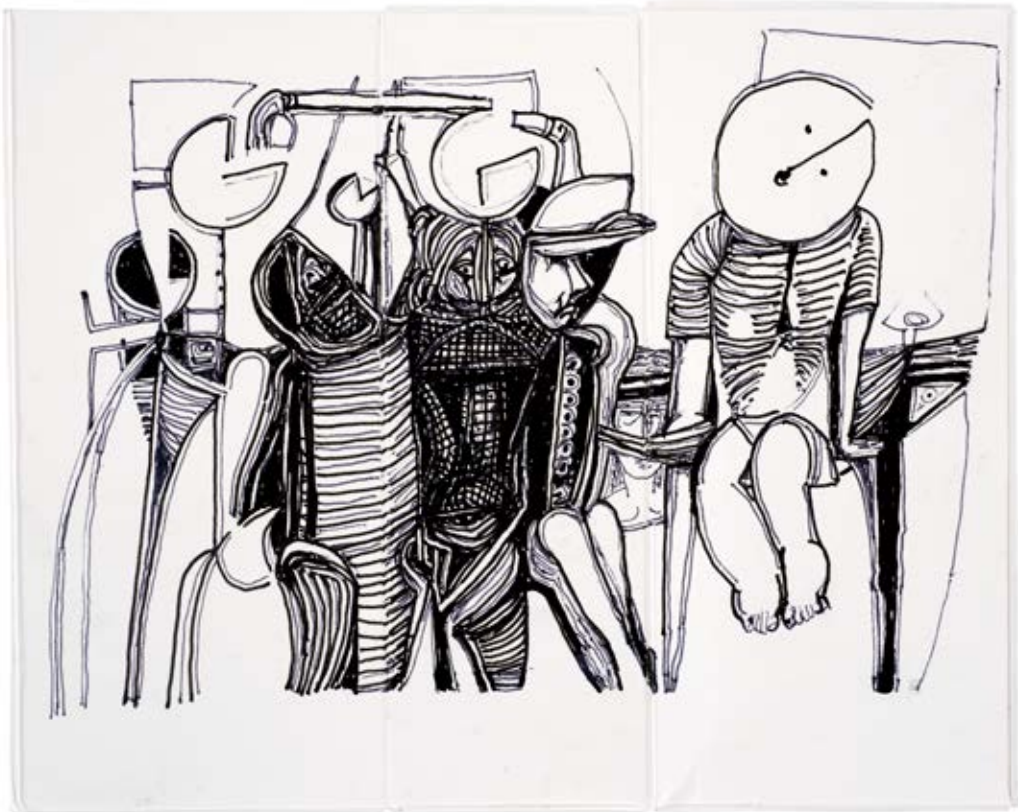
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PL. 53

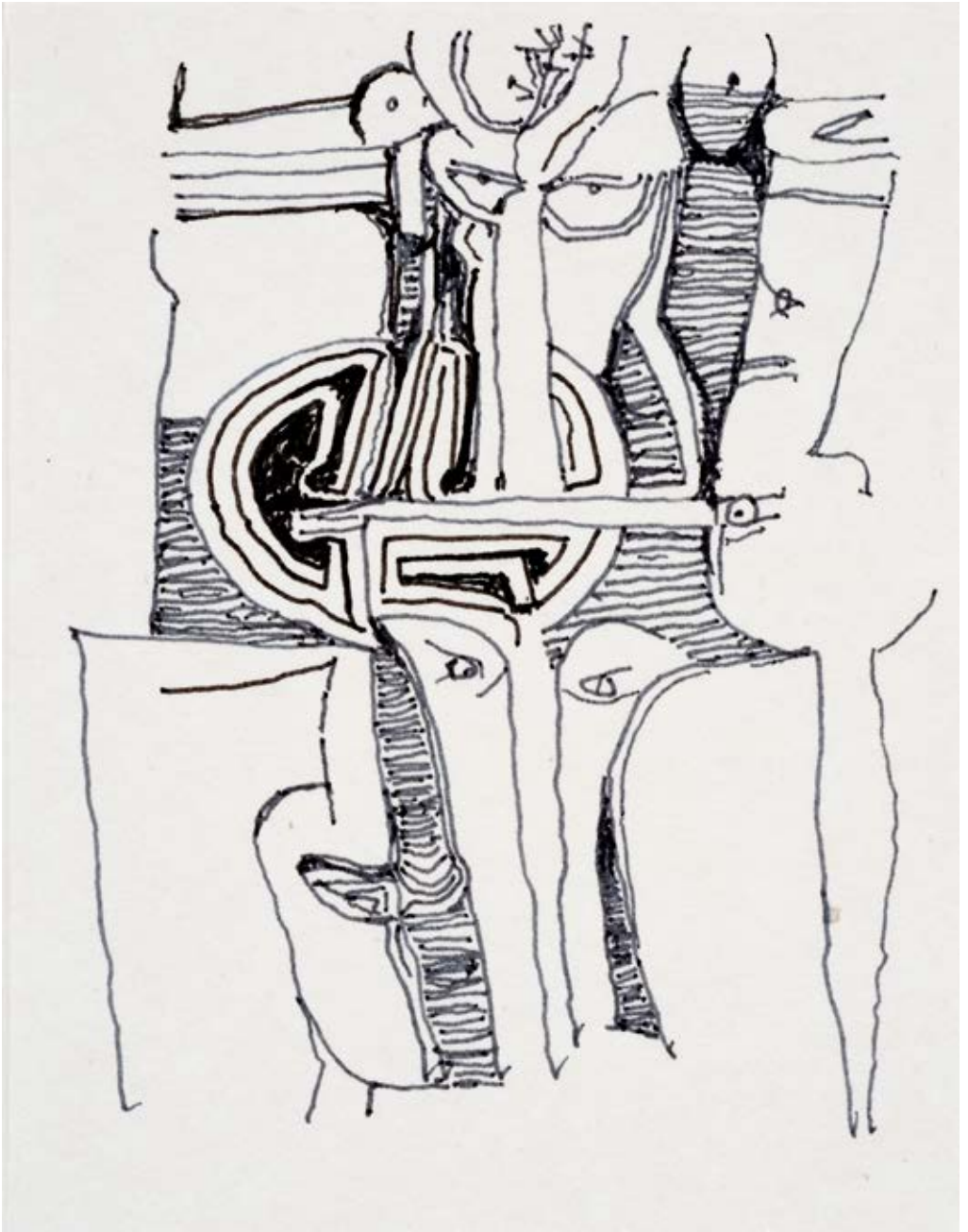
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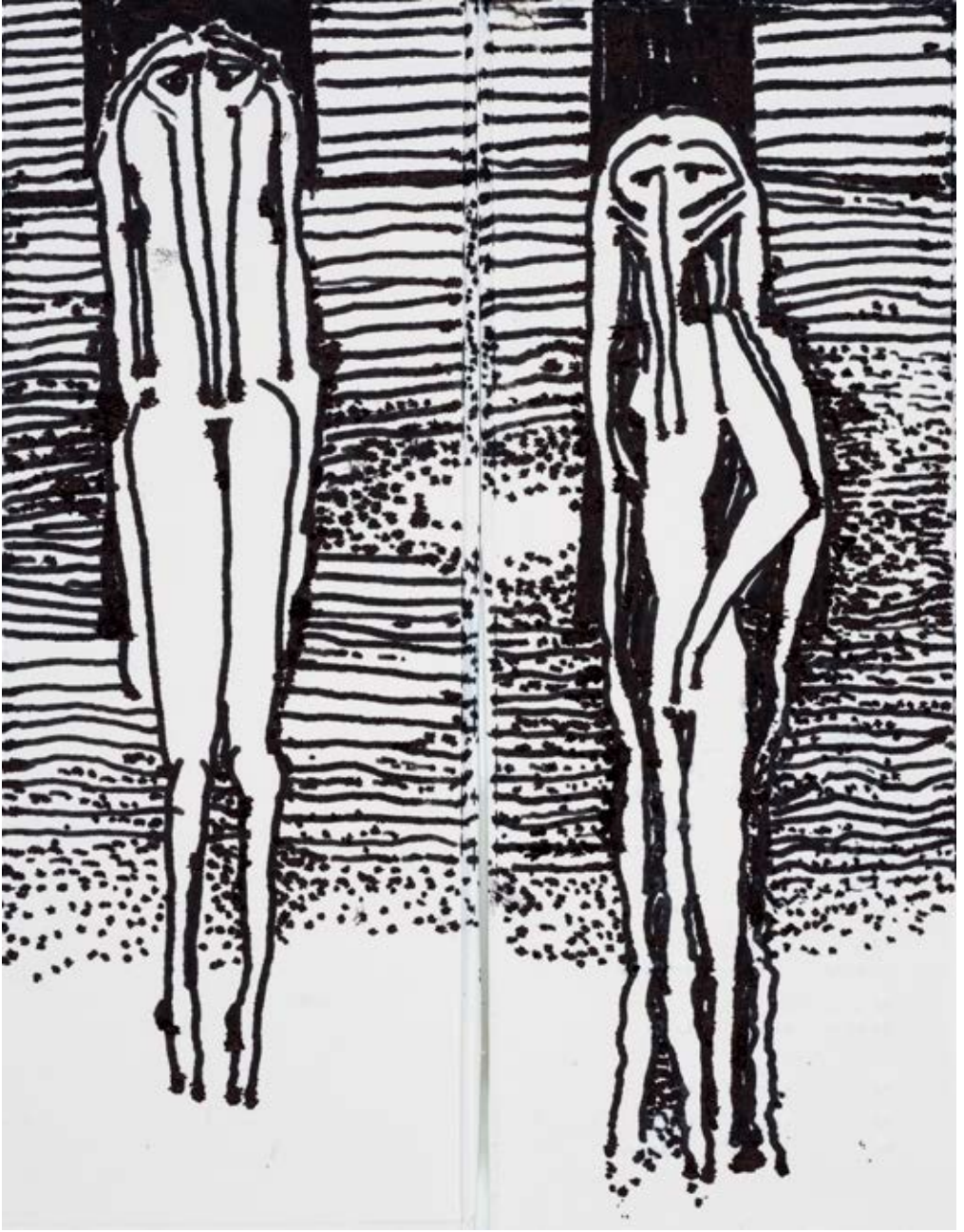
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*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



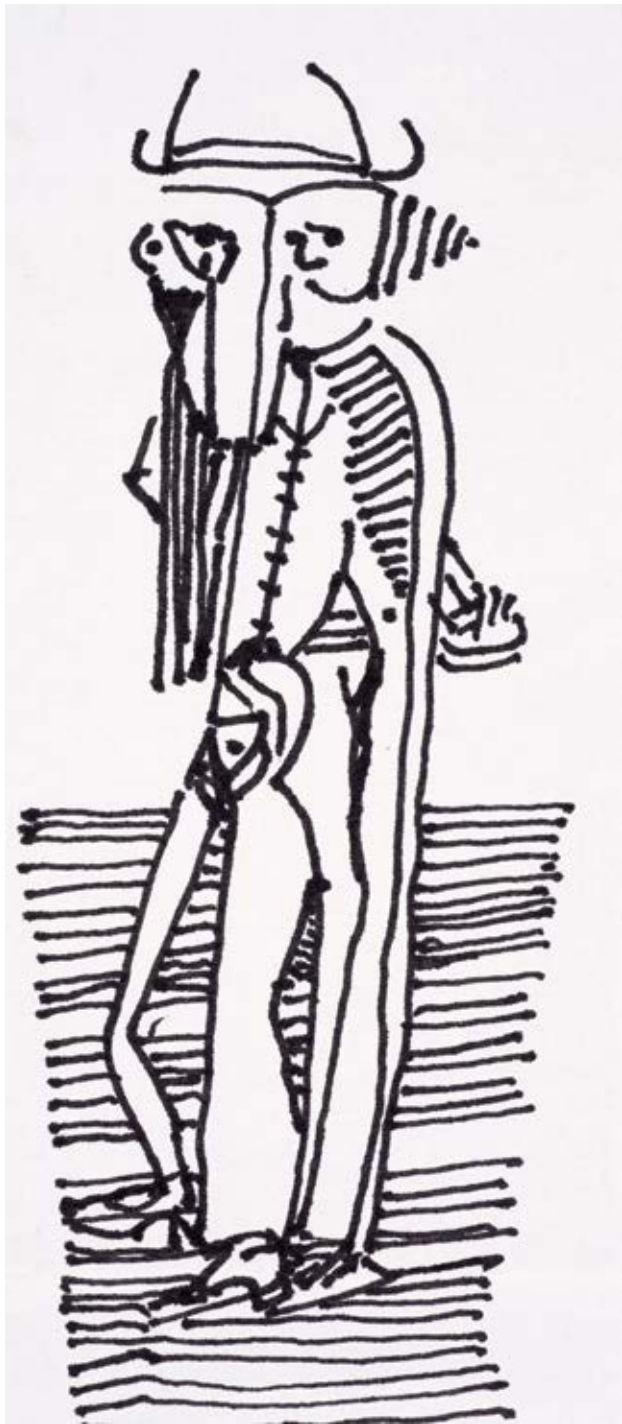
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*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



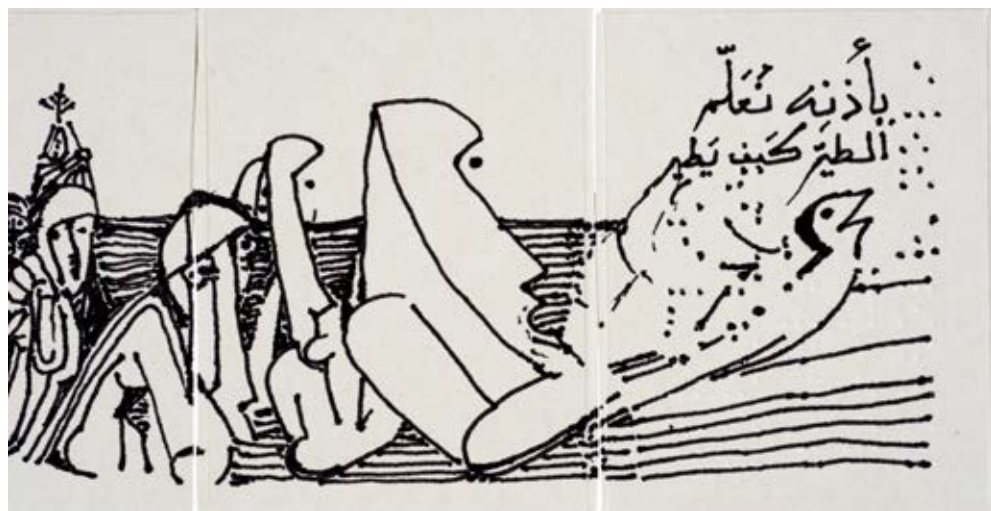
PL. 57

*Pain Relief Drawing; Adam and Eve, 2016-18*



PL. 58

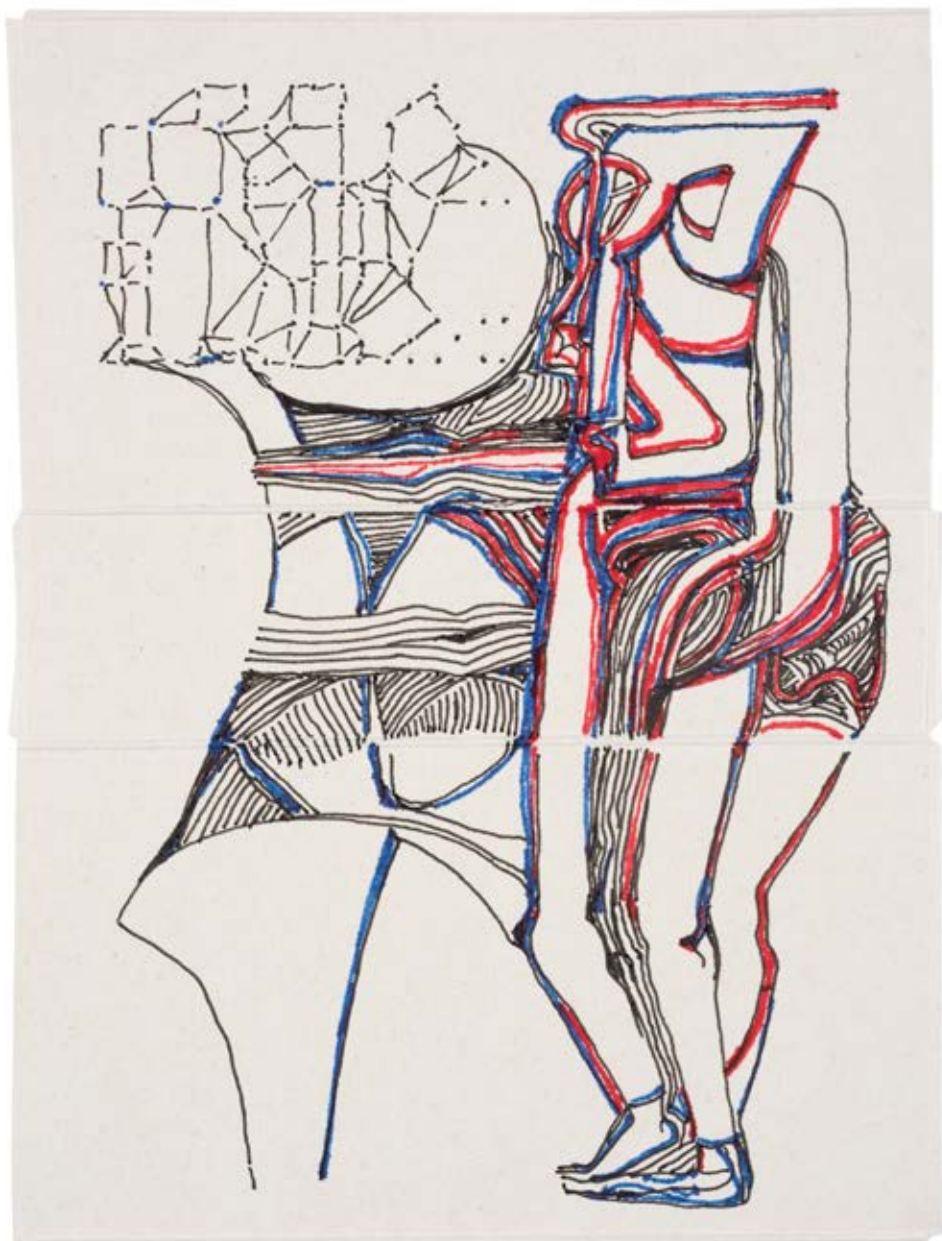
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18







PL. 60  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 61  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



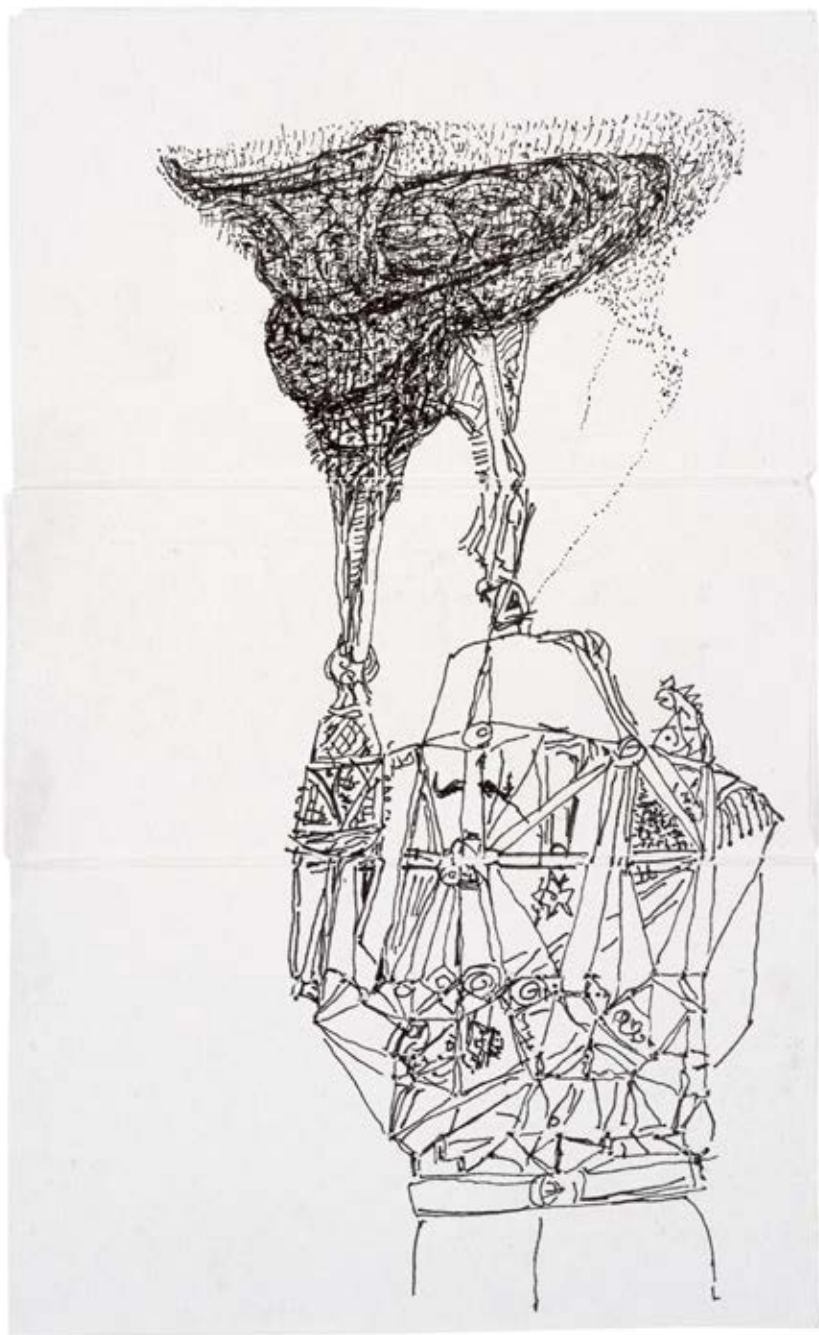
PL. 62

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



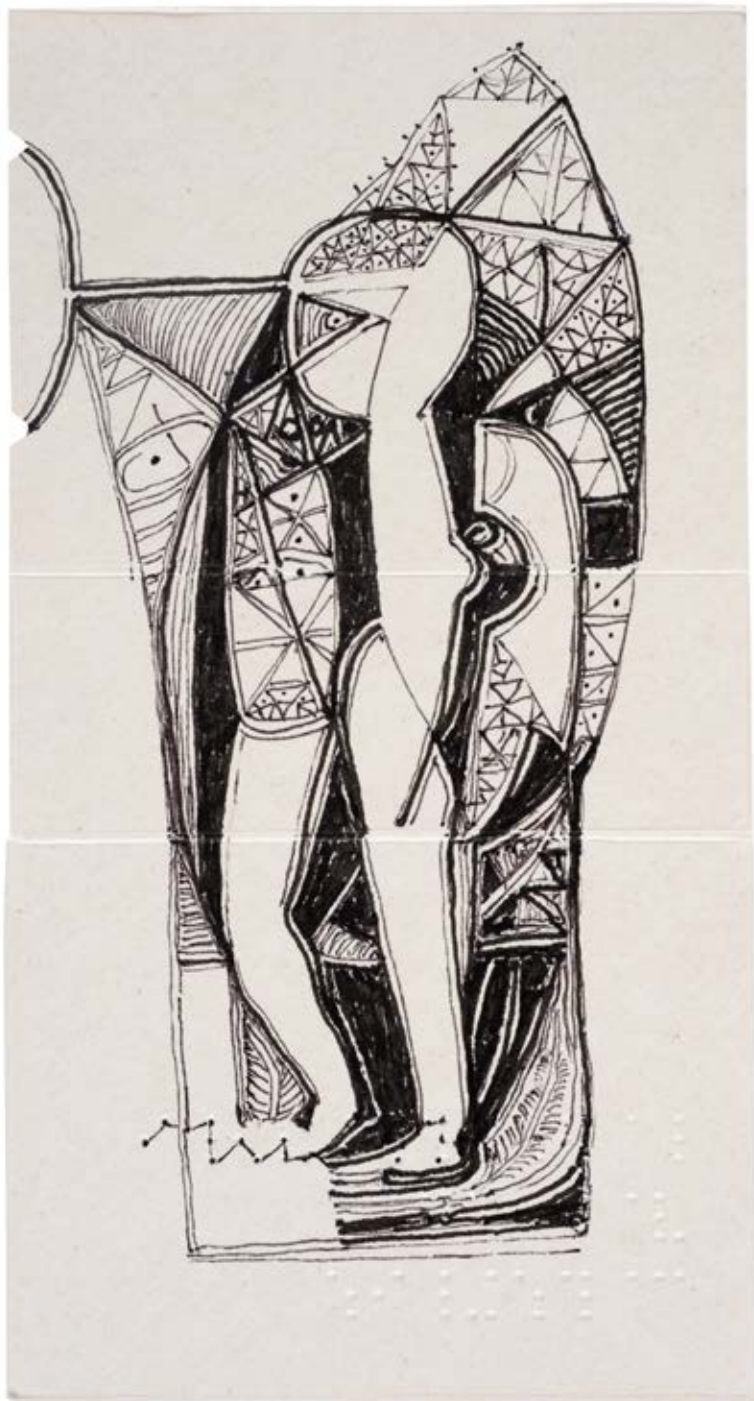
PL. 63

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

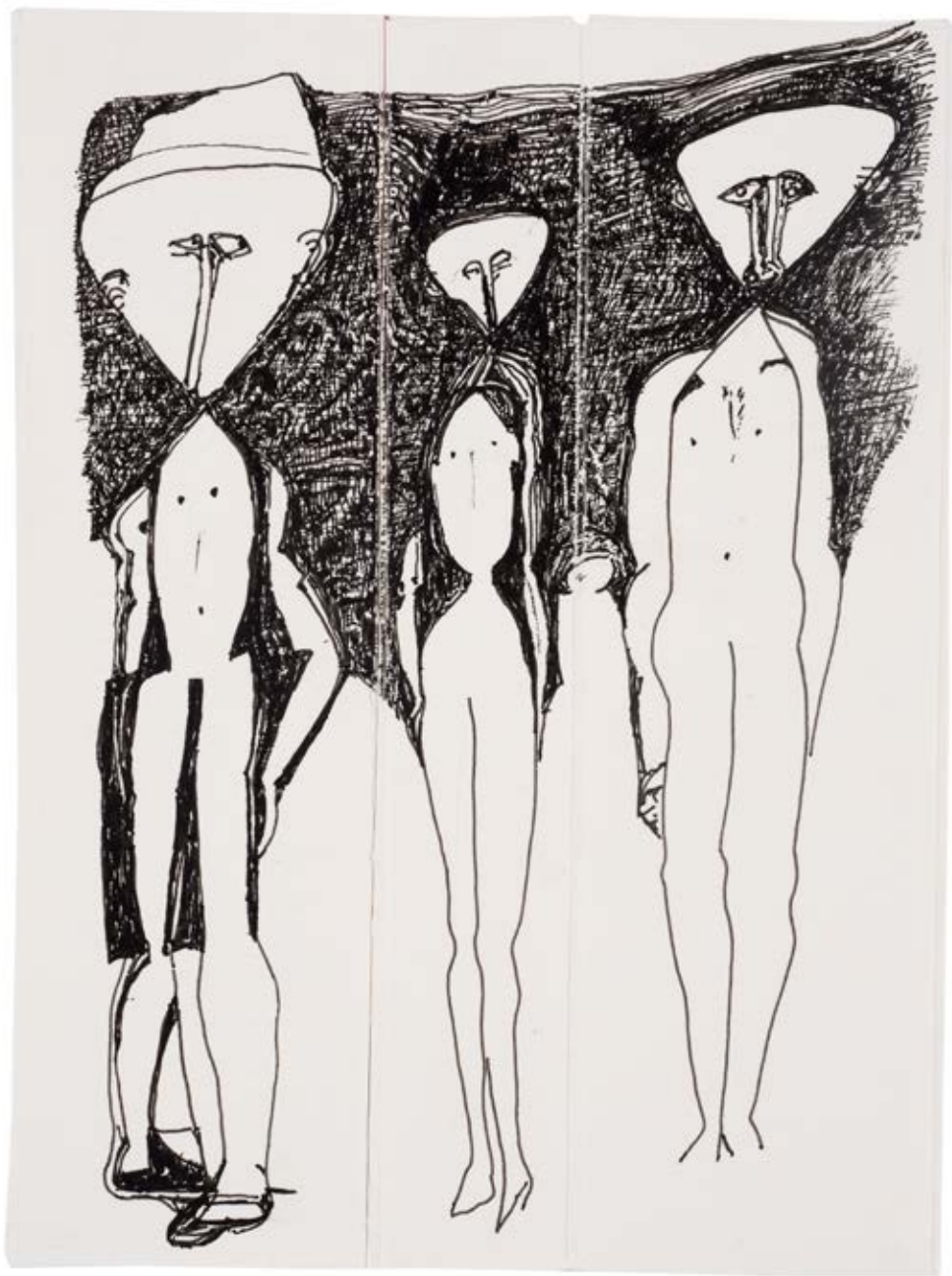


PL. 64

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 65  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 66

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 67

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*





PL. 68  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 69

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

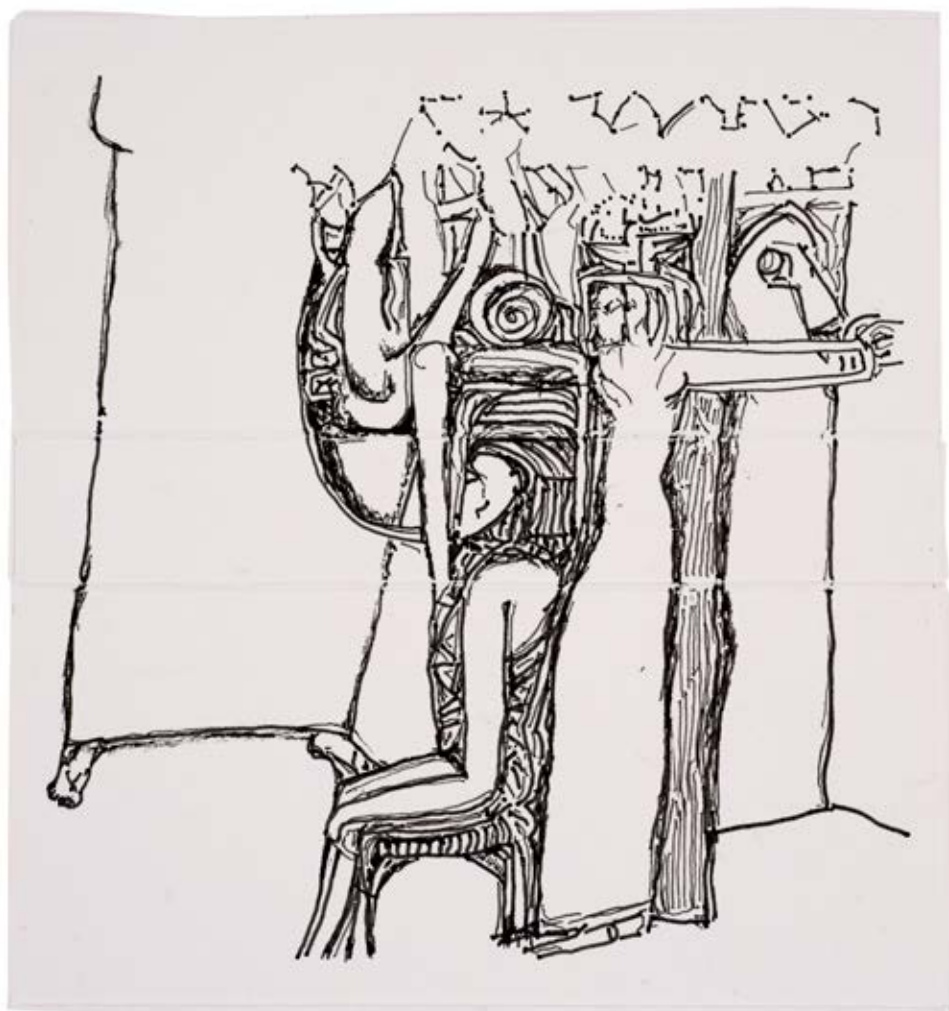


PL. 70

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 71  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

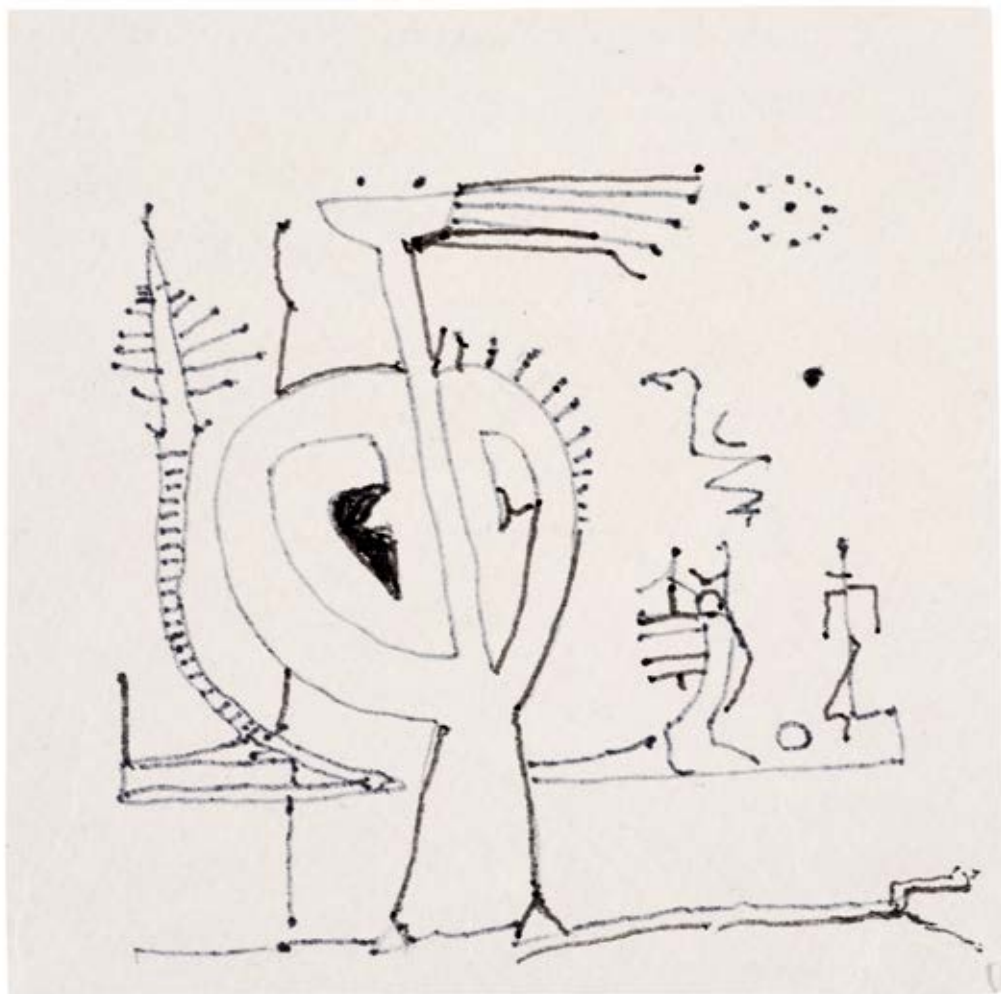


PL. 72  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



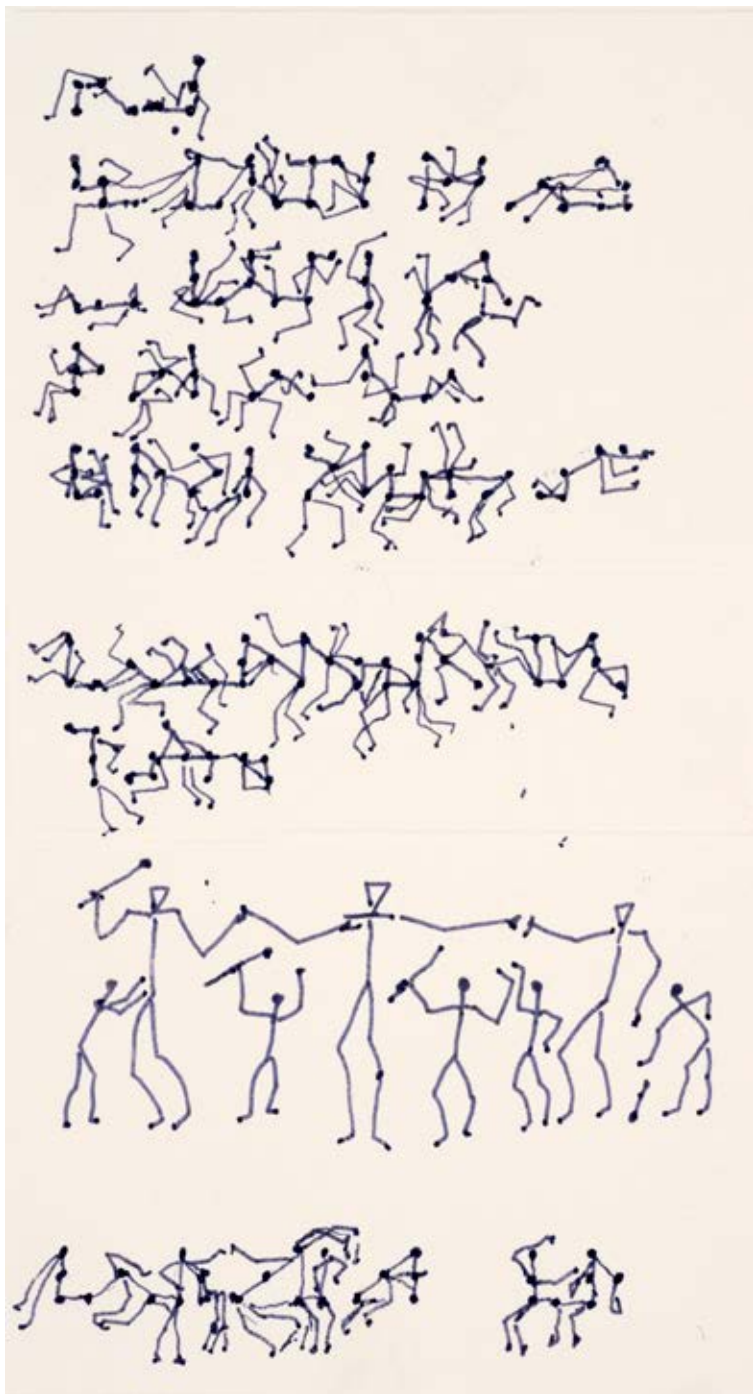
PL. 73

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 74

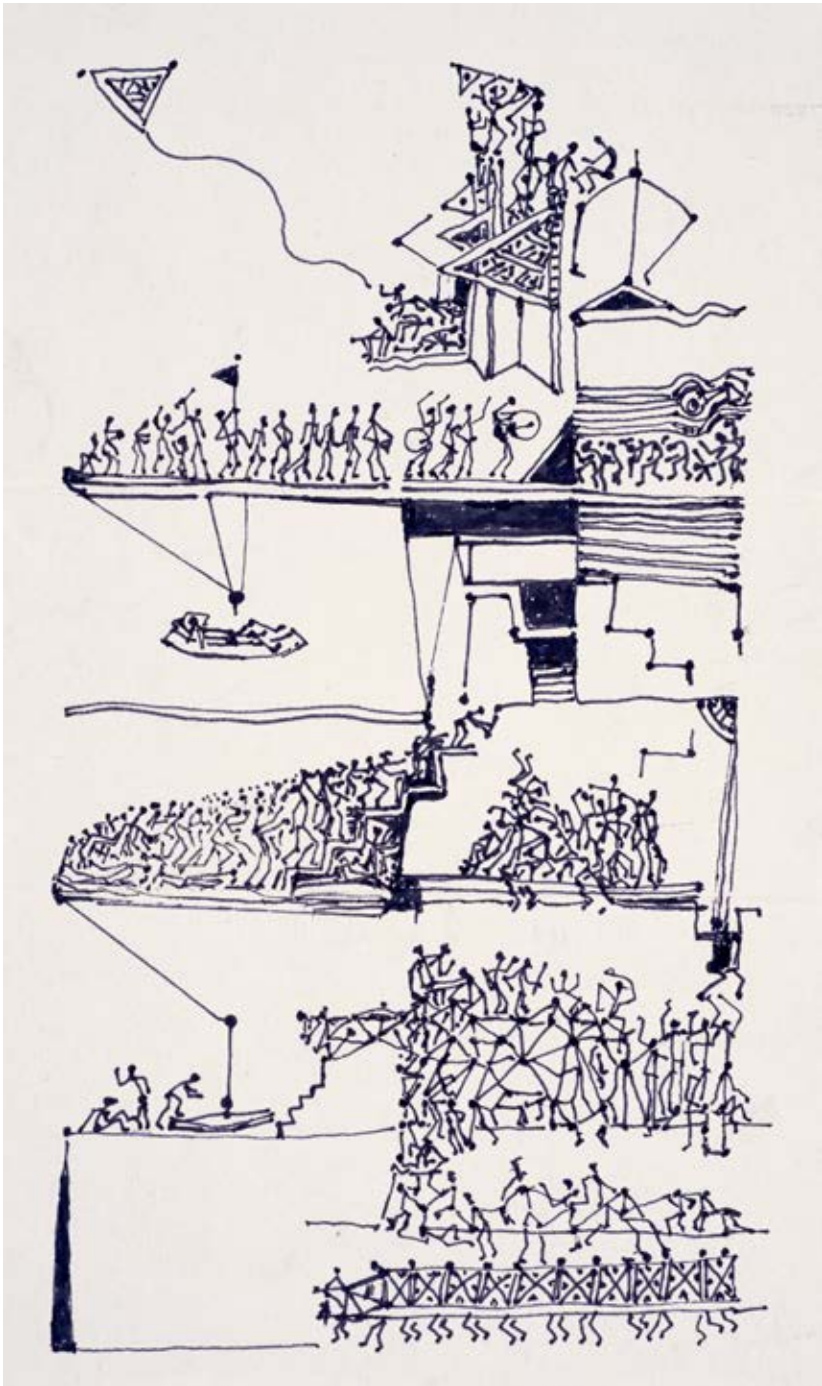
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 75

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



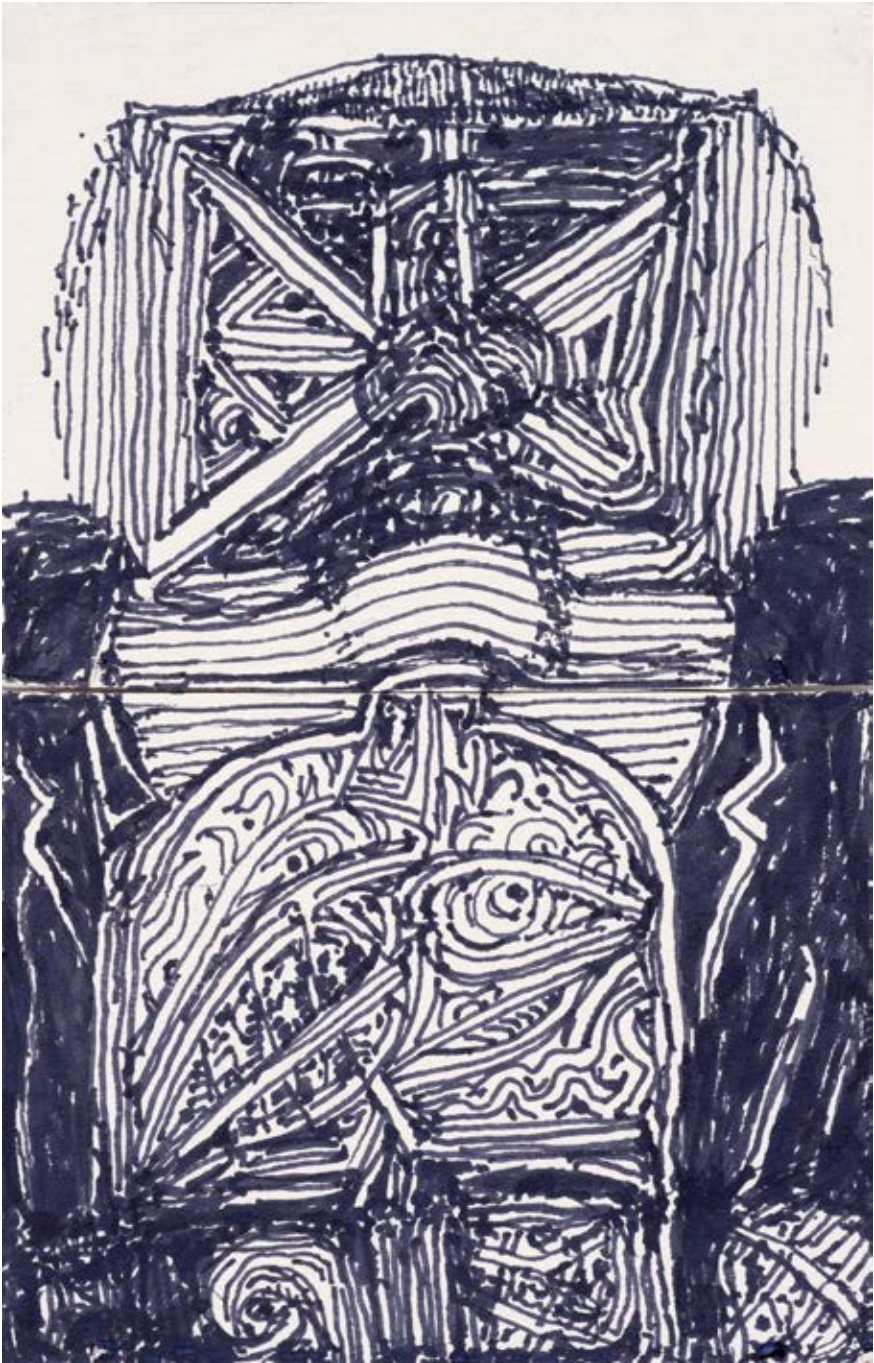


PL. 76

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

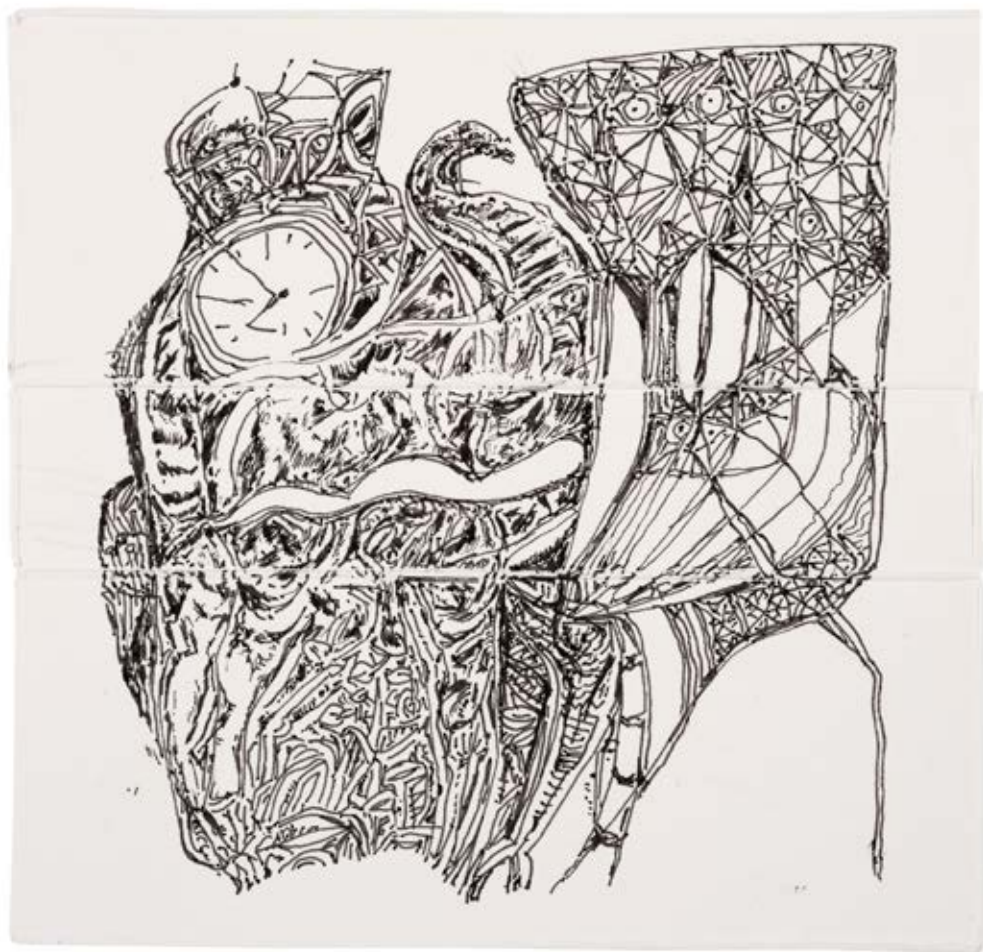


PL. 77  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



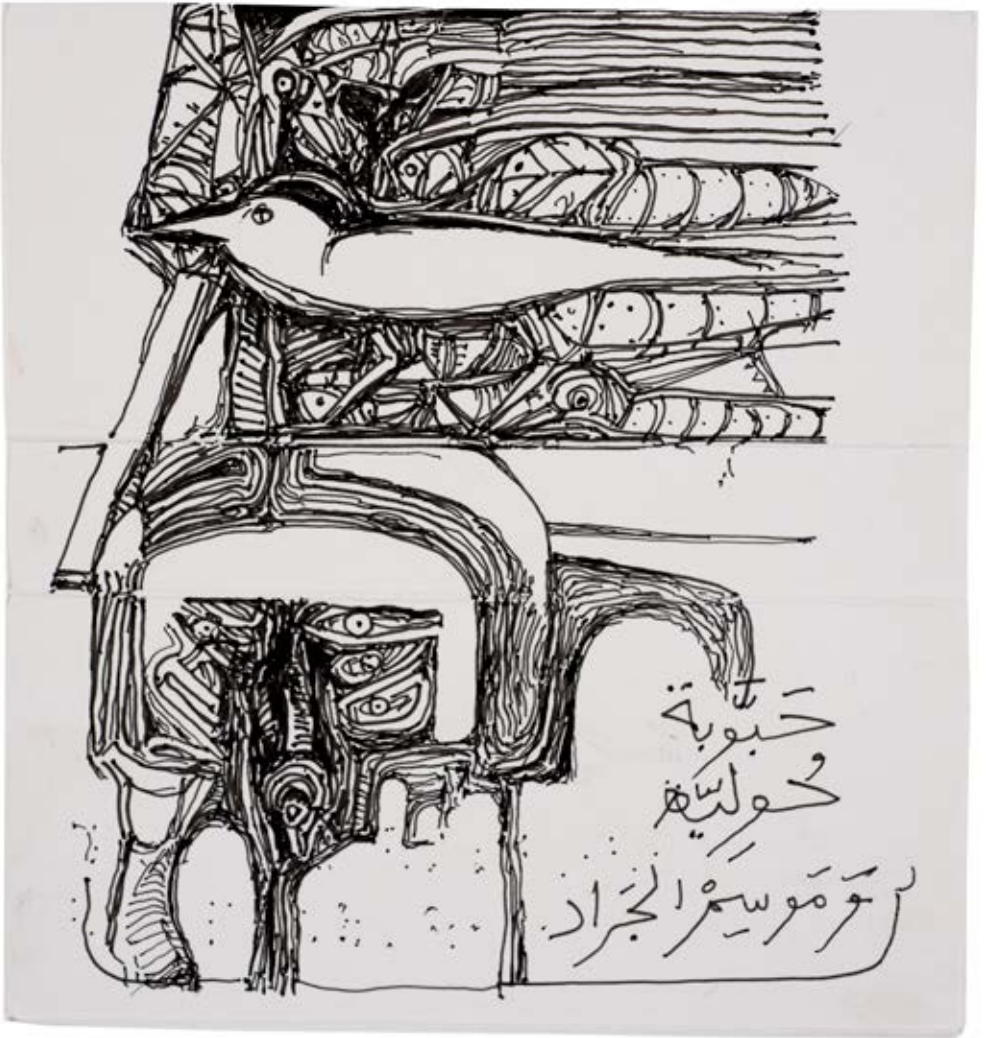
PL. 78

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

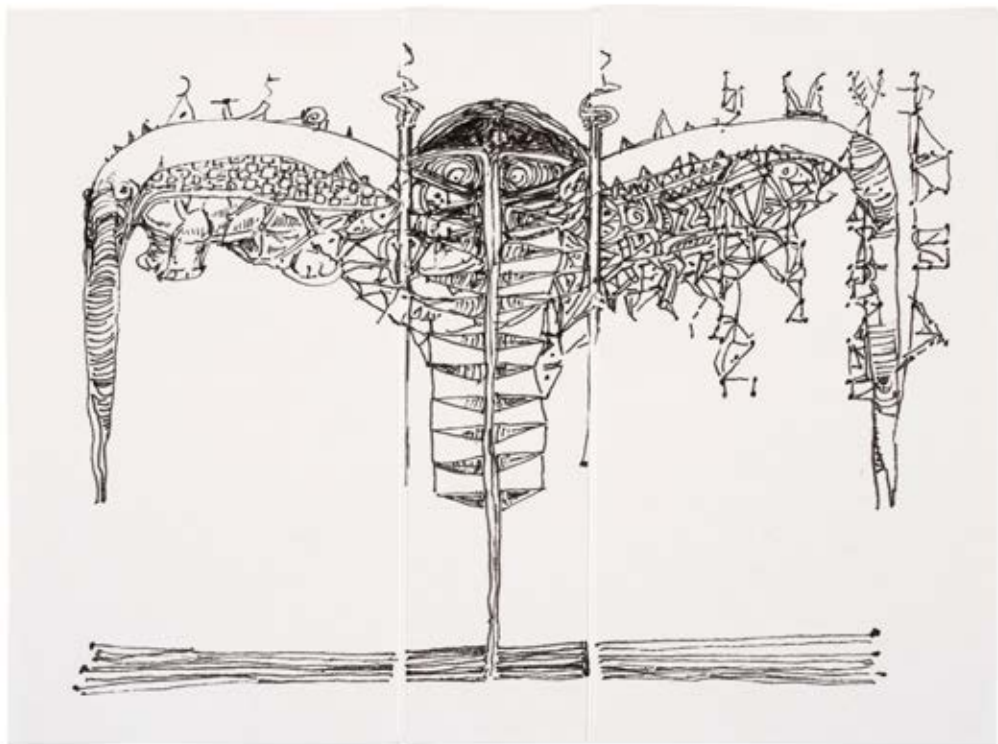


PL. 79

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

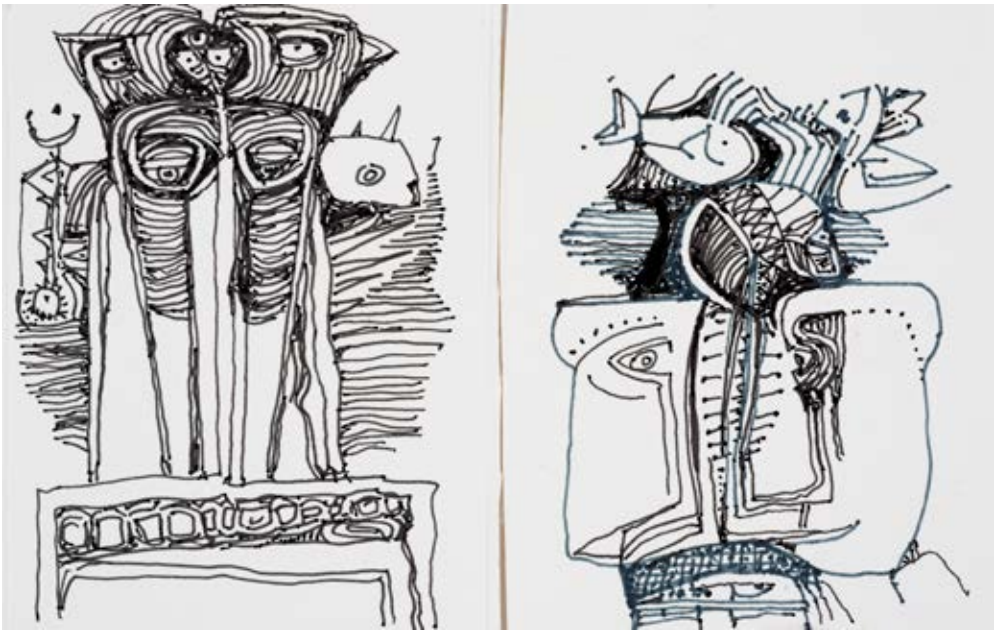


PL. 80  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 81

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*





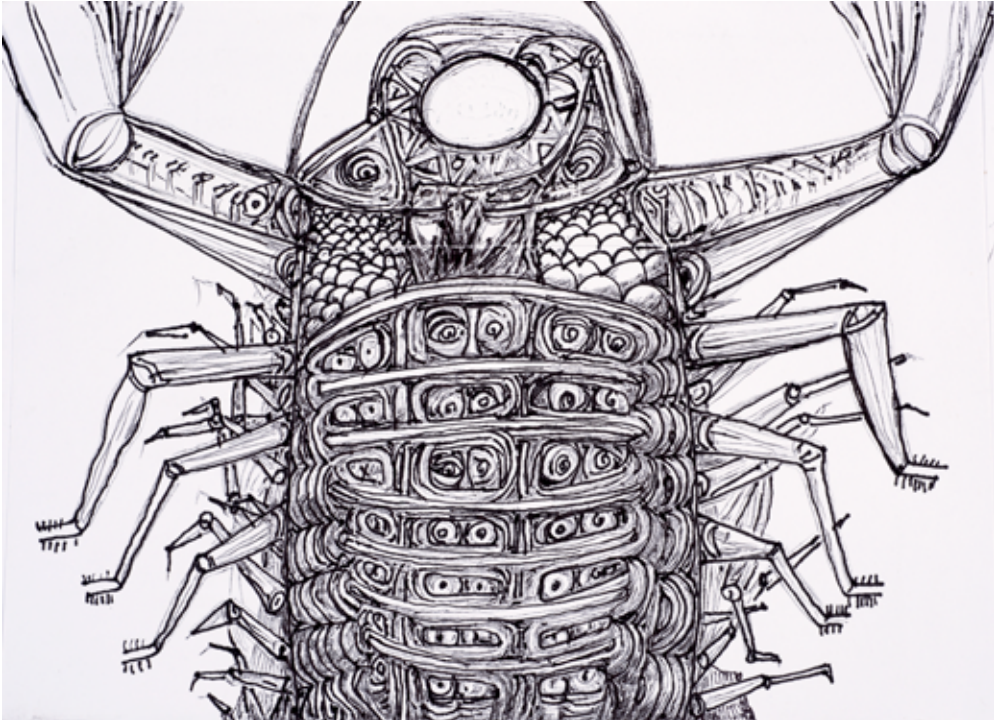
PL. 83  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



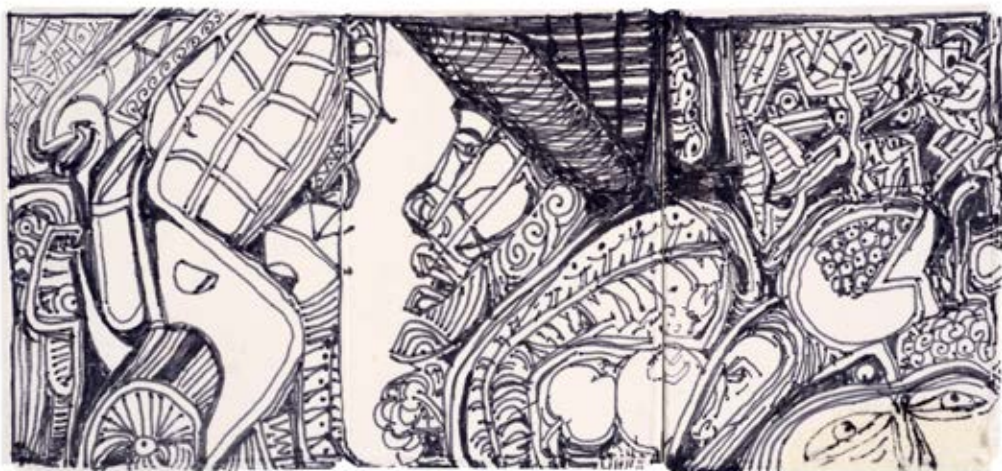


PL. 84

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 85  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 86

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 87

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

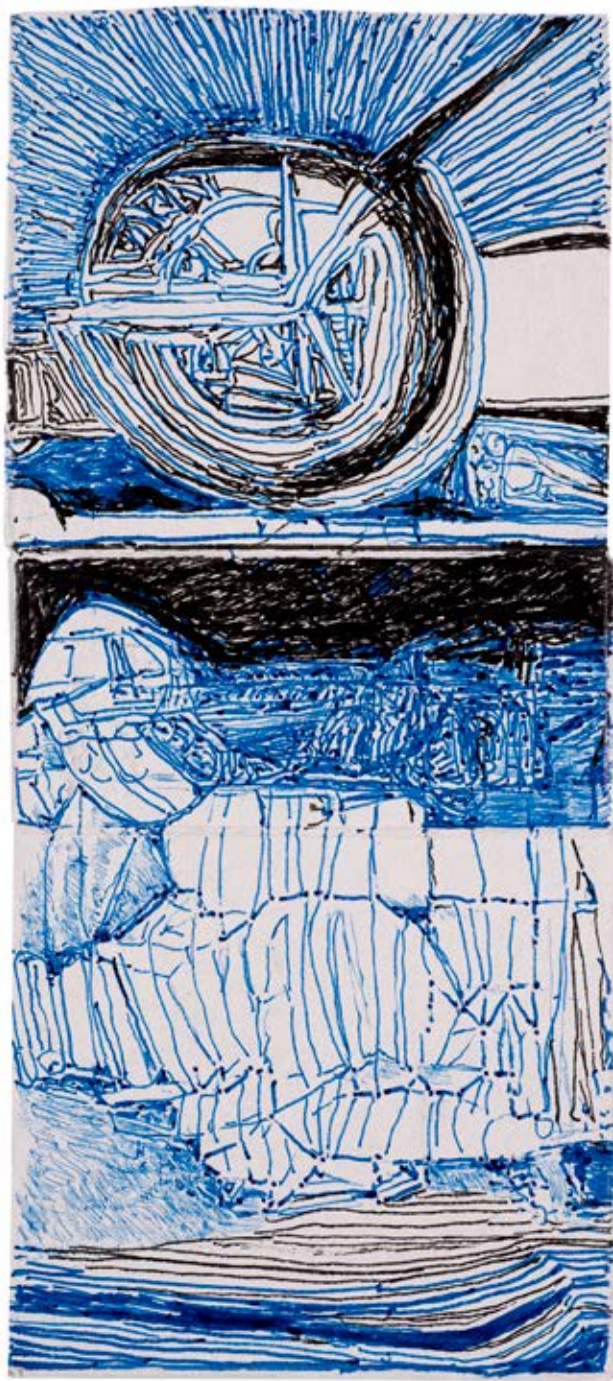


PL. 88

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 89  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 90  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



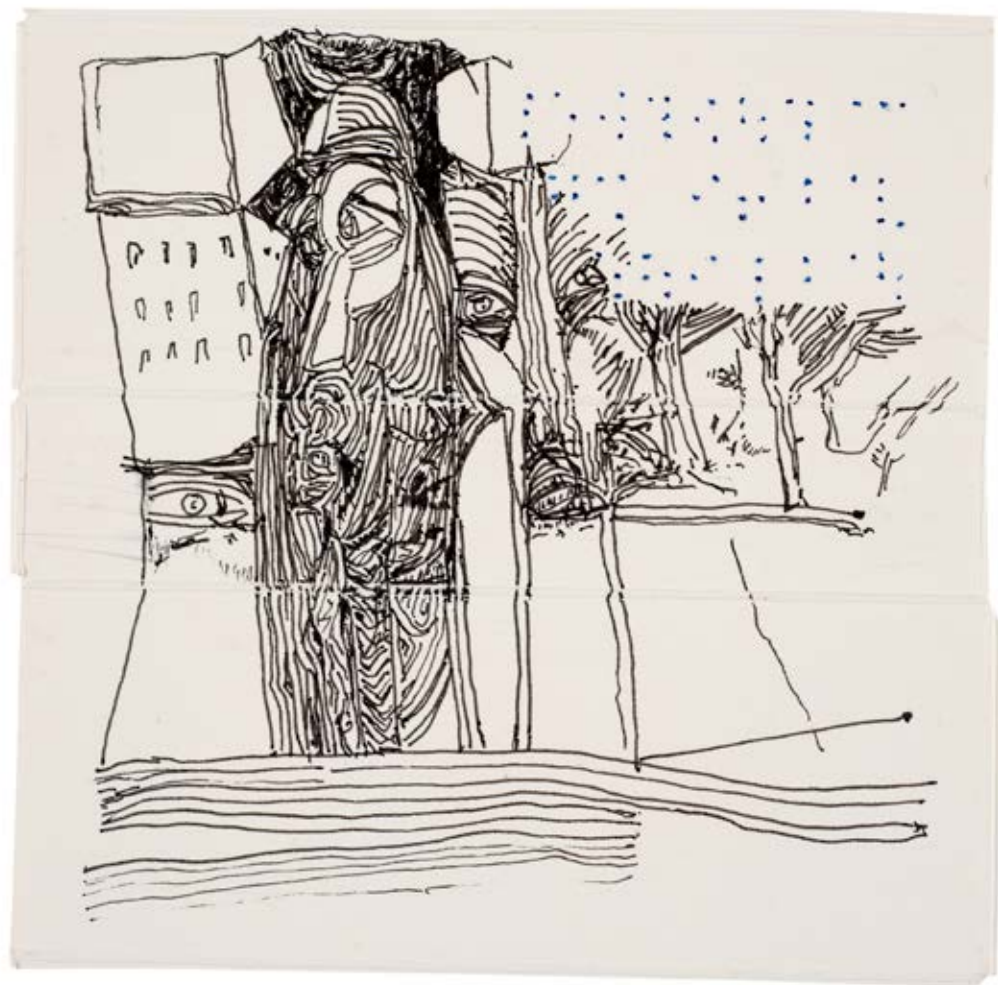
PL. 91  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*





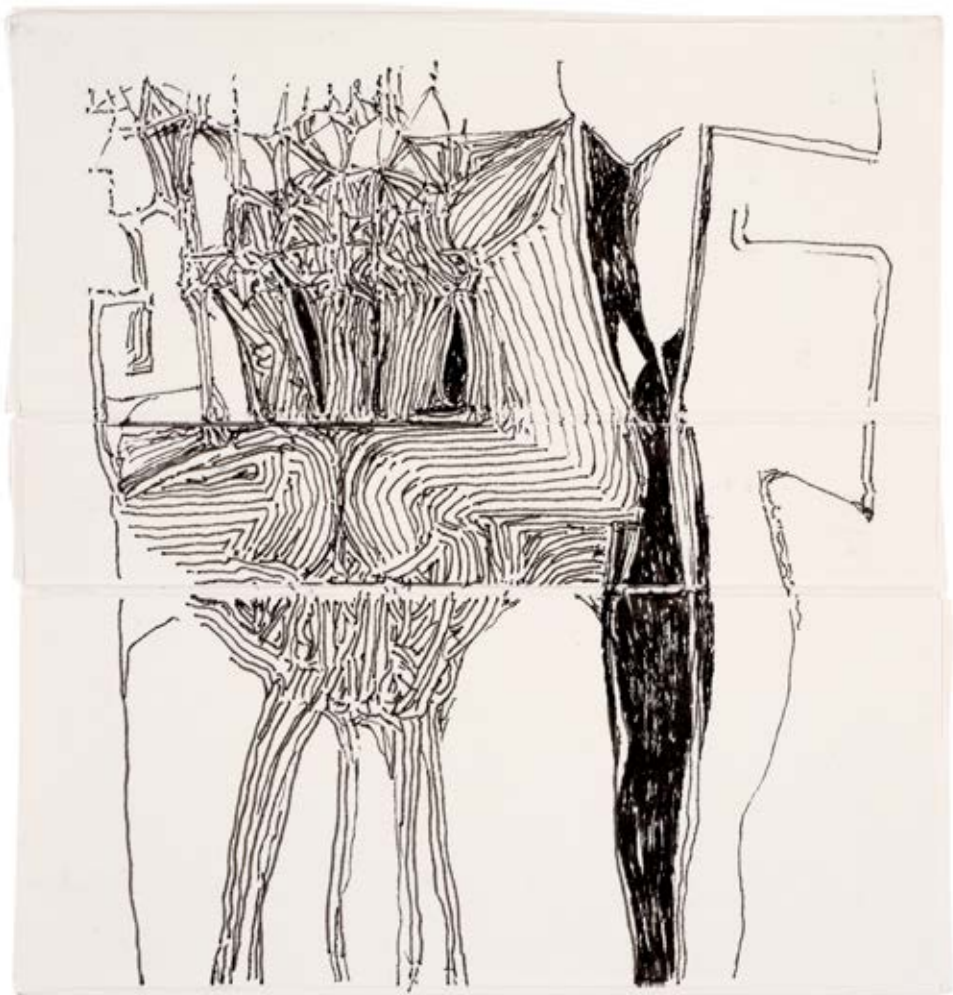
PL. 92

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 93

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



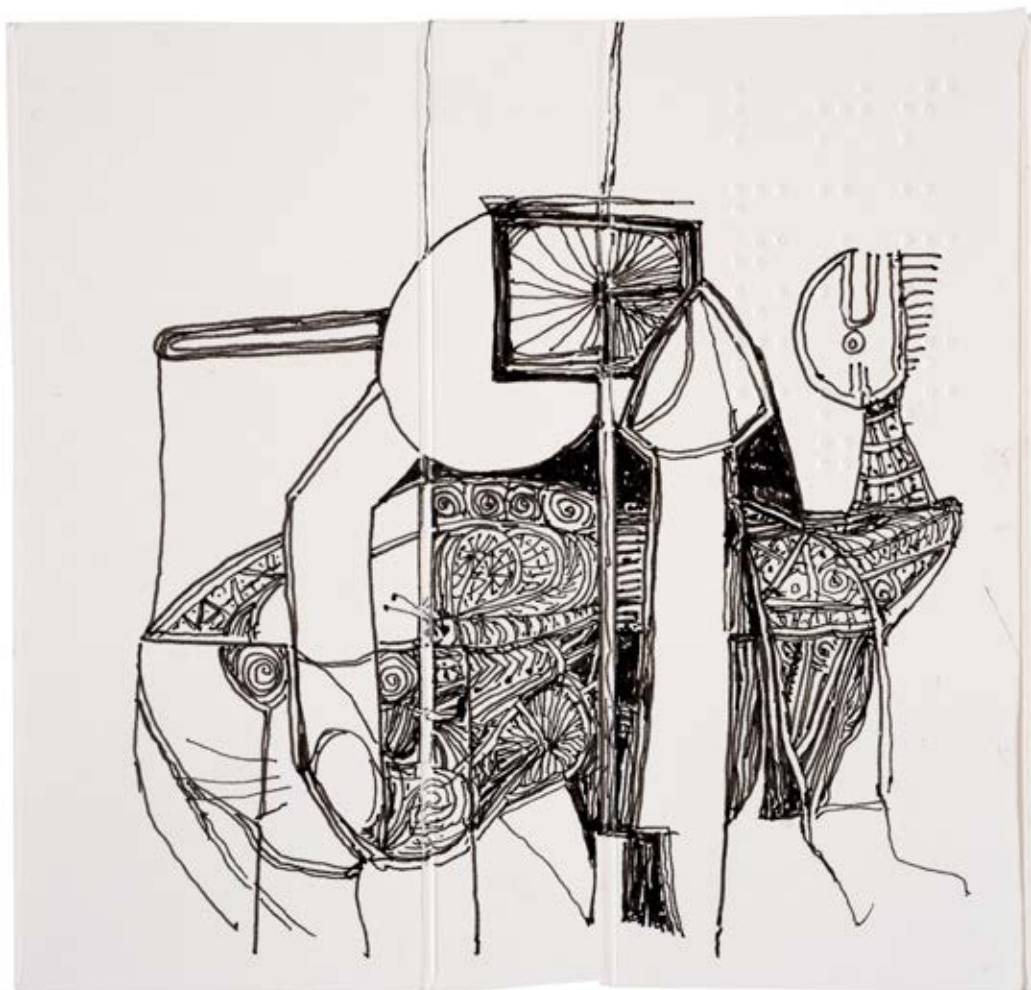
PL. 94

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 95

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

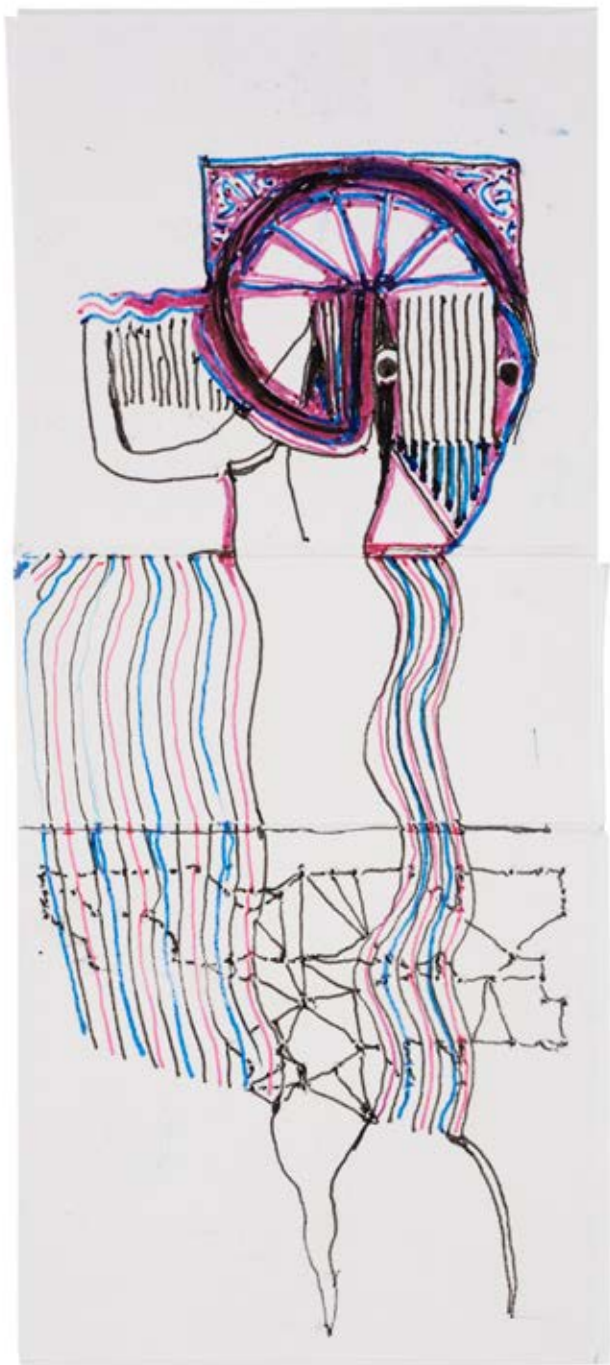


PL. 96

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 97  
Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18



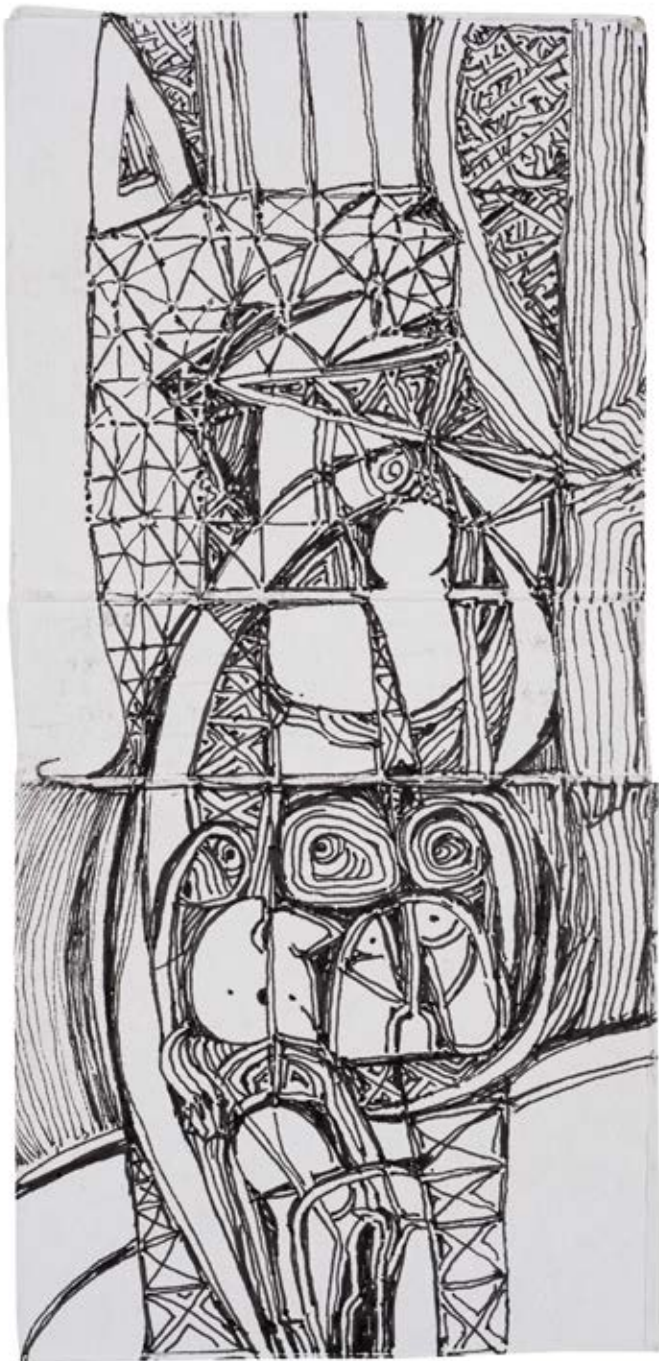
PL. 98

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

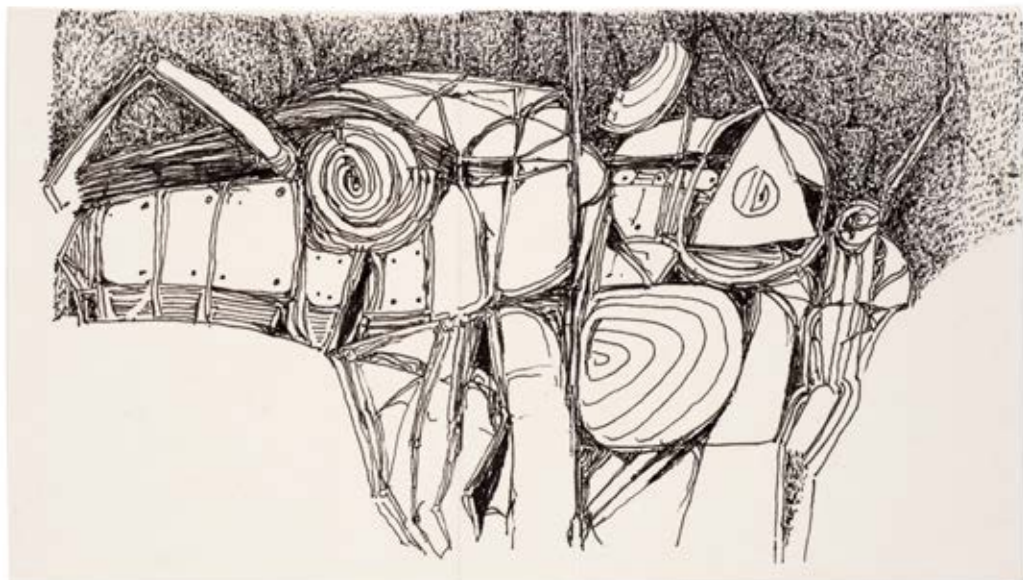


PL. 99  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18





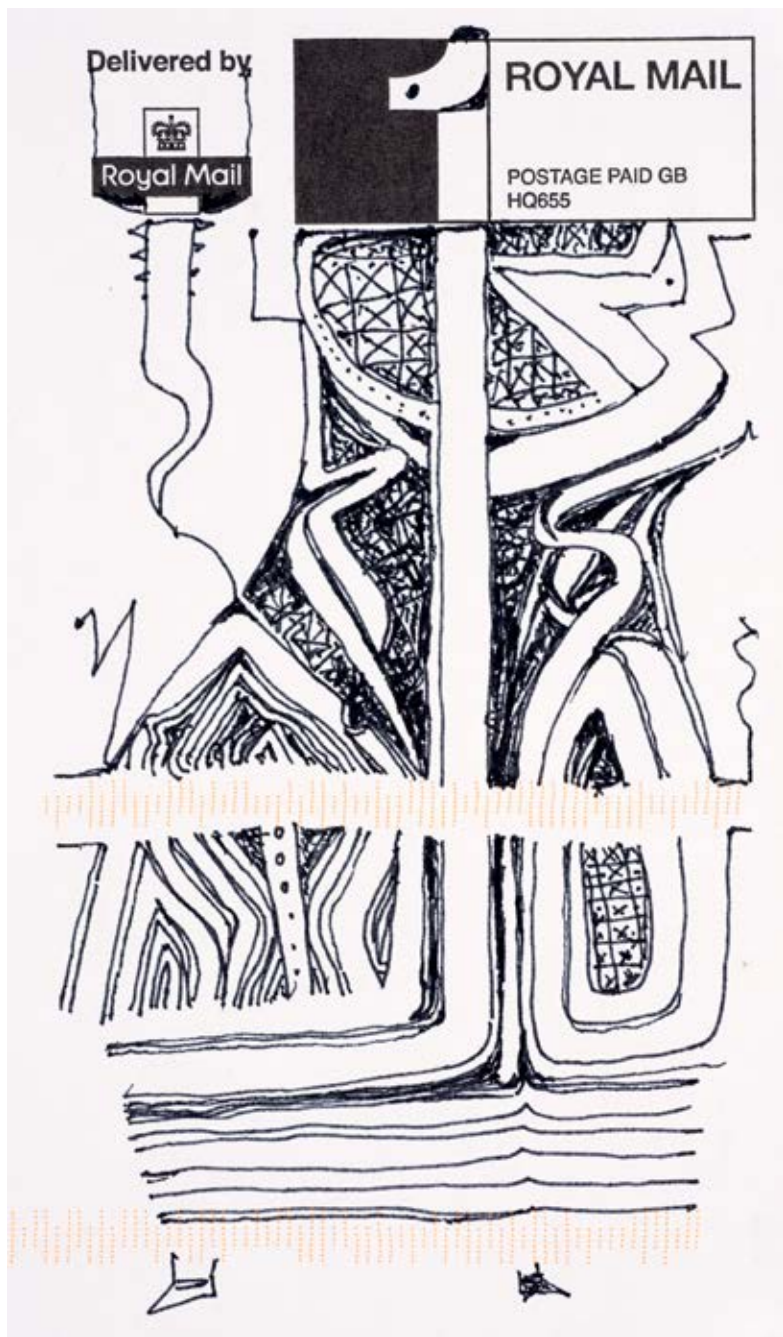
PL.100  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 101  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

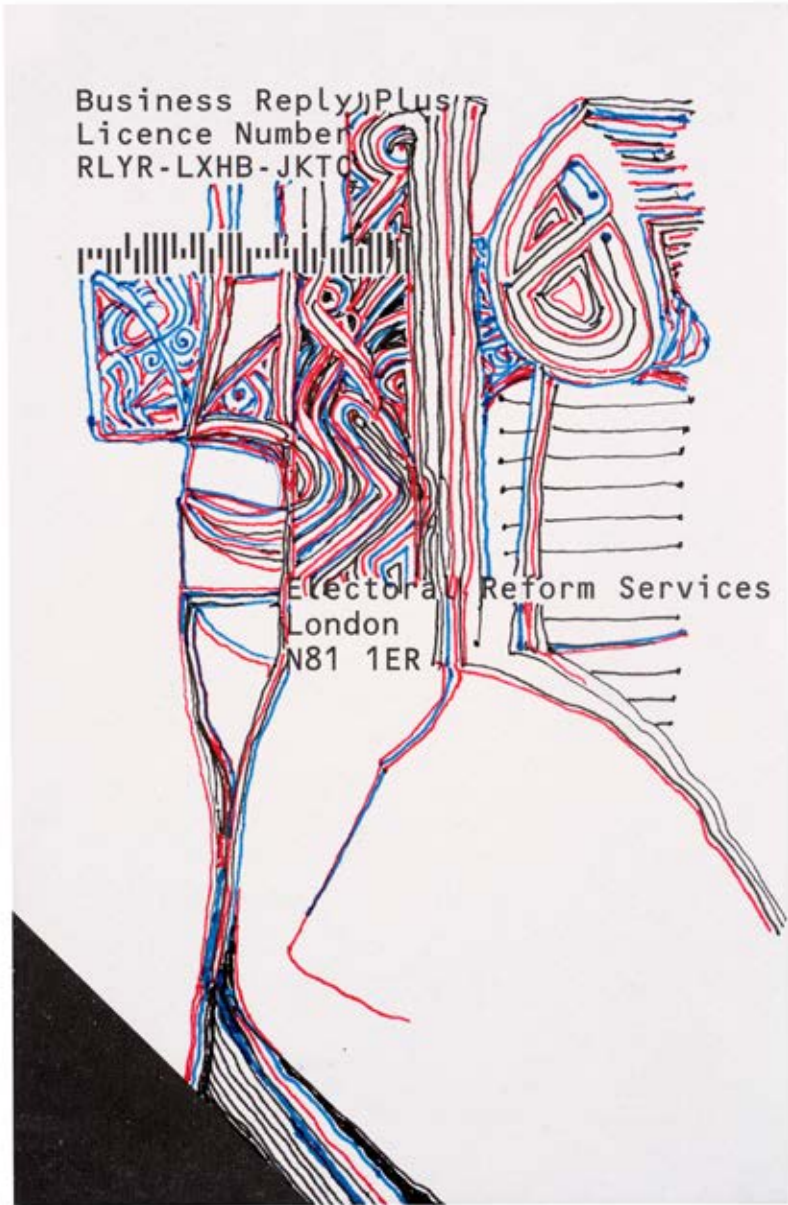


PL. 102  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 103

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



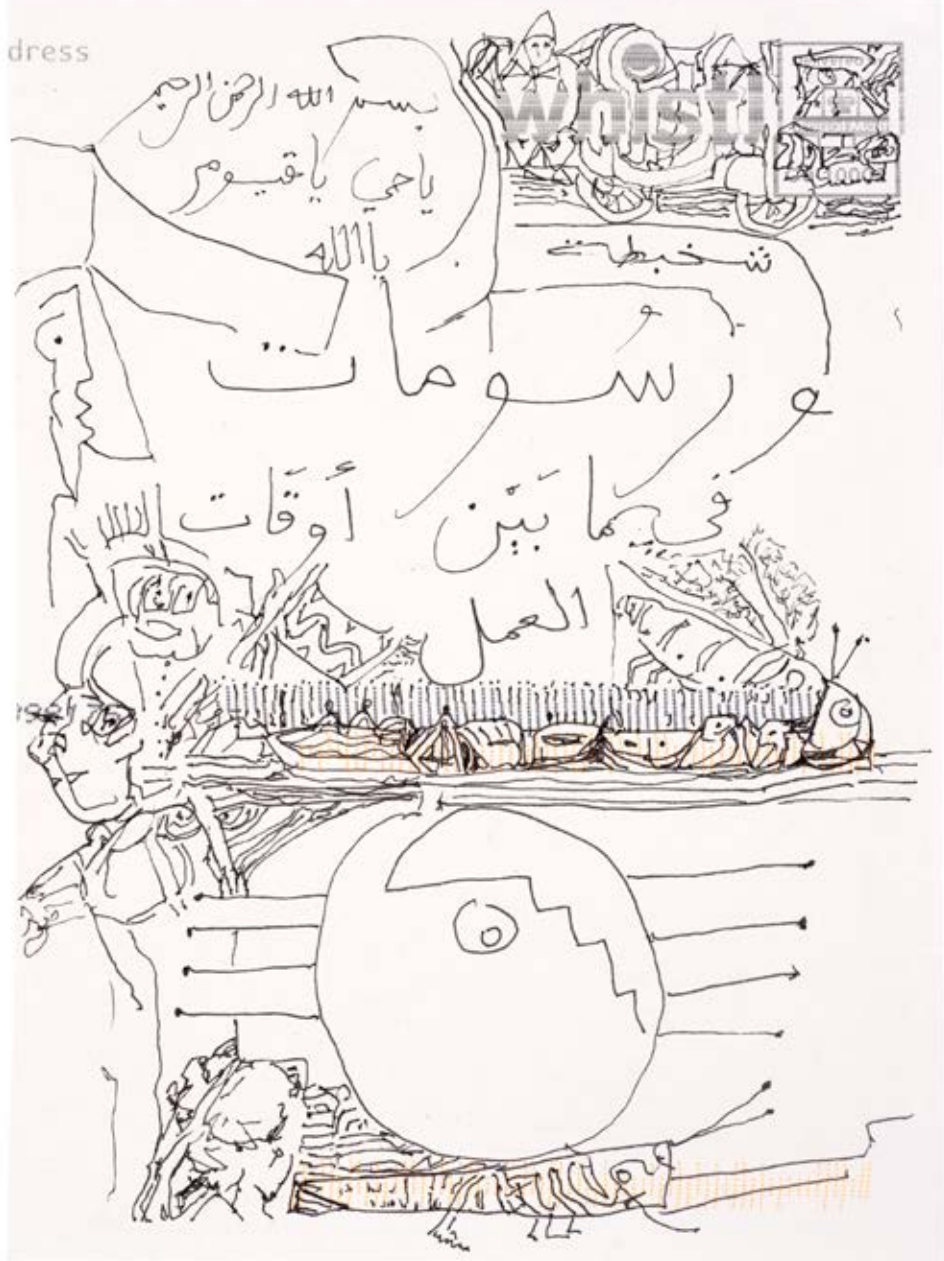
PL. 104  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 105

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*

dress



PL. 106

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



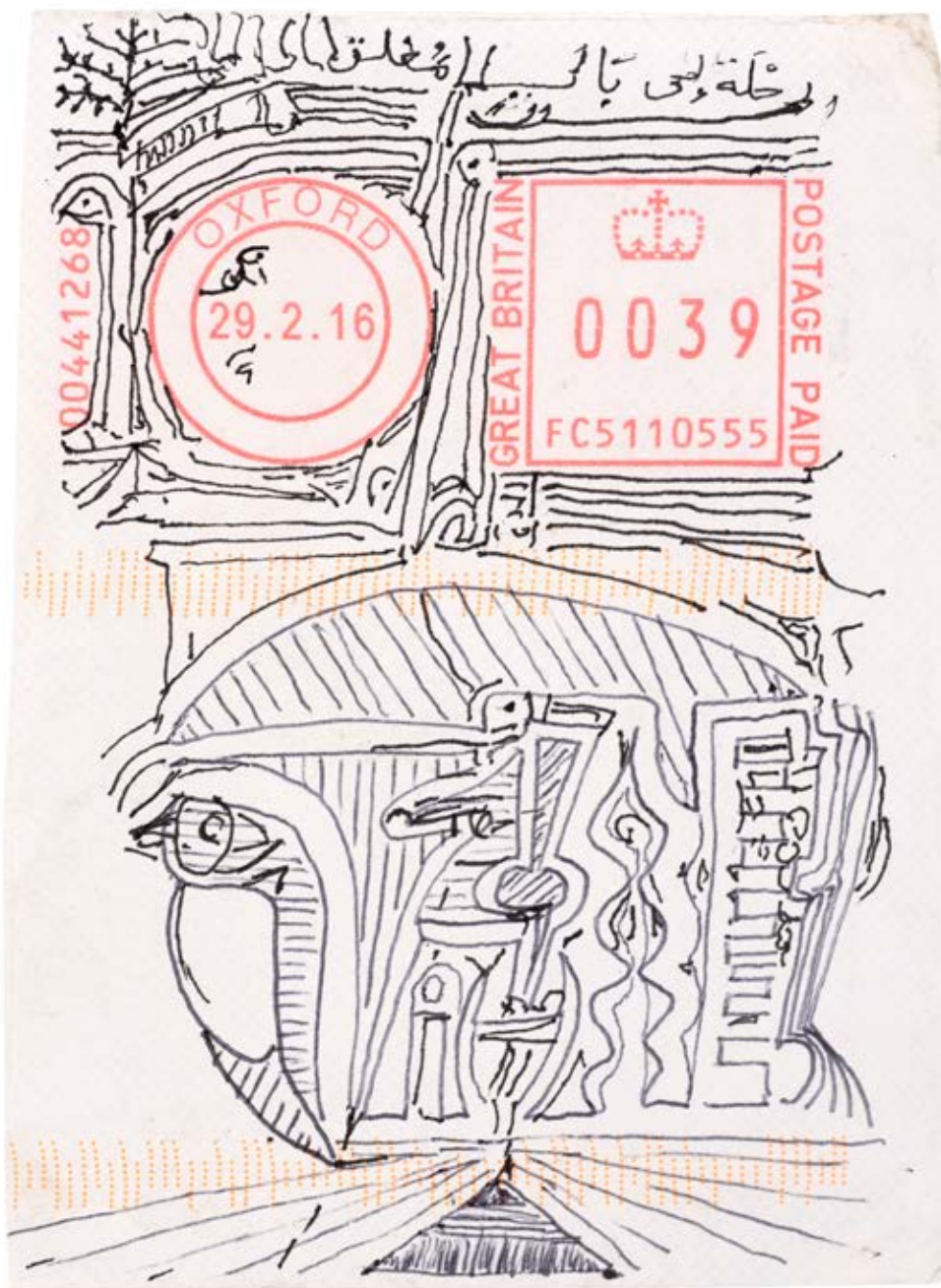
PL. 107

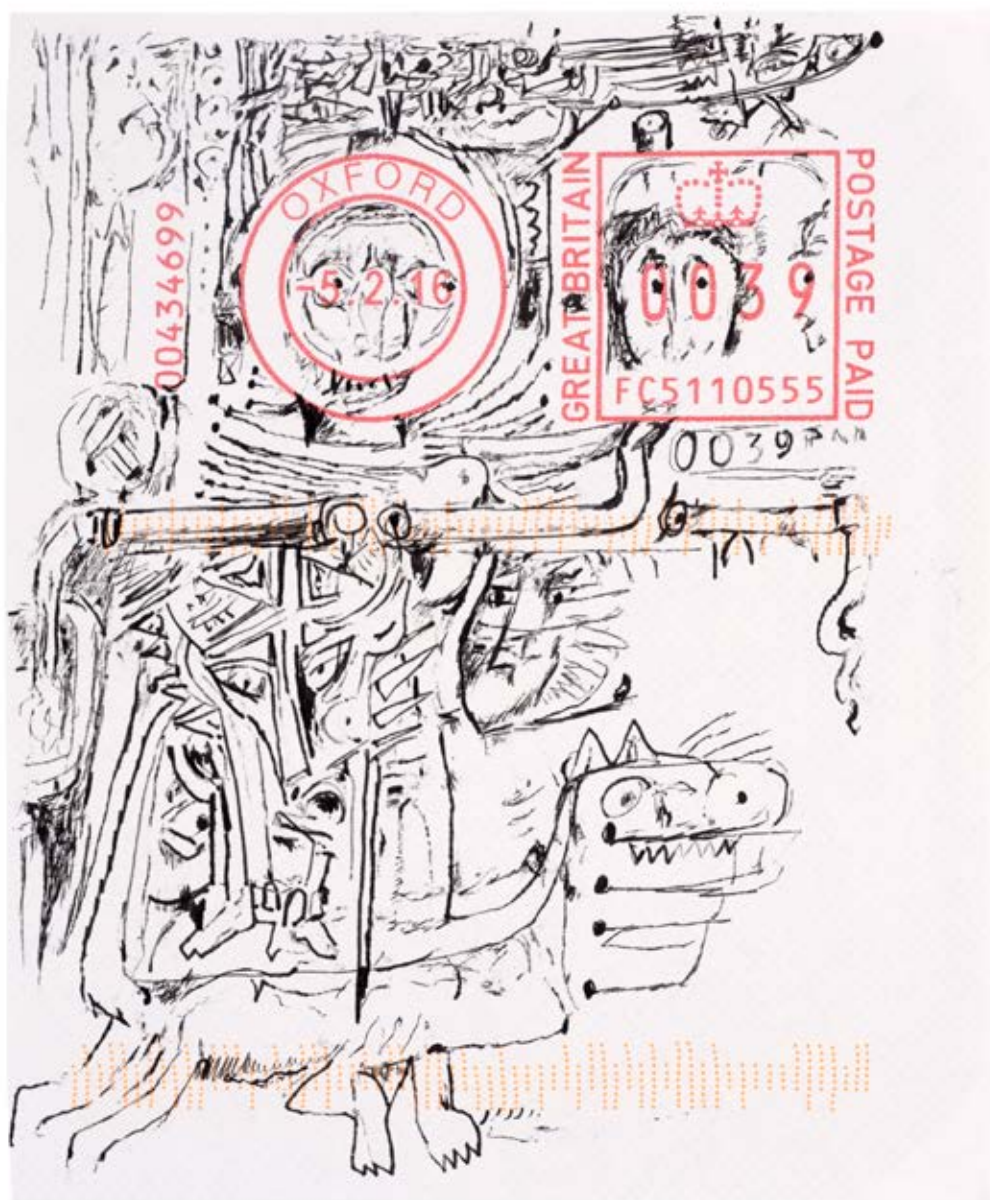
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



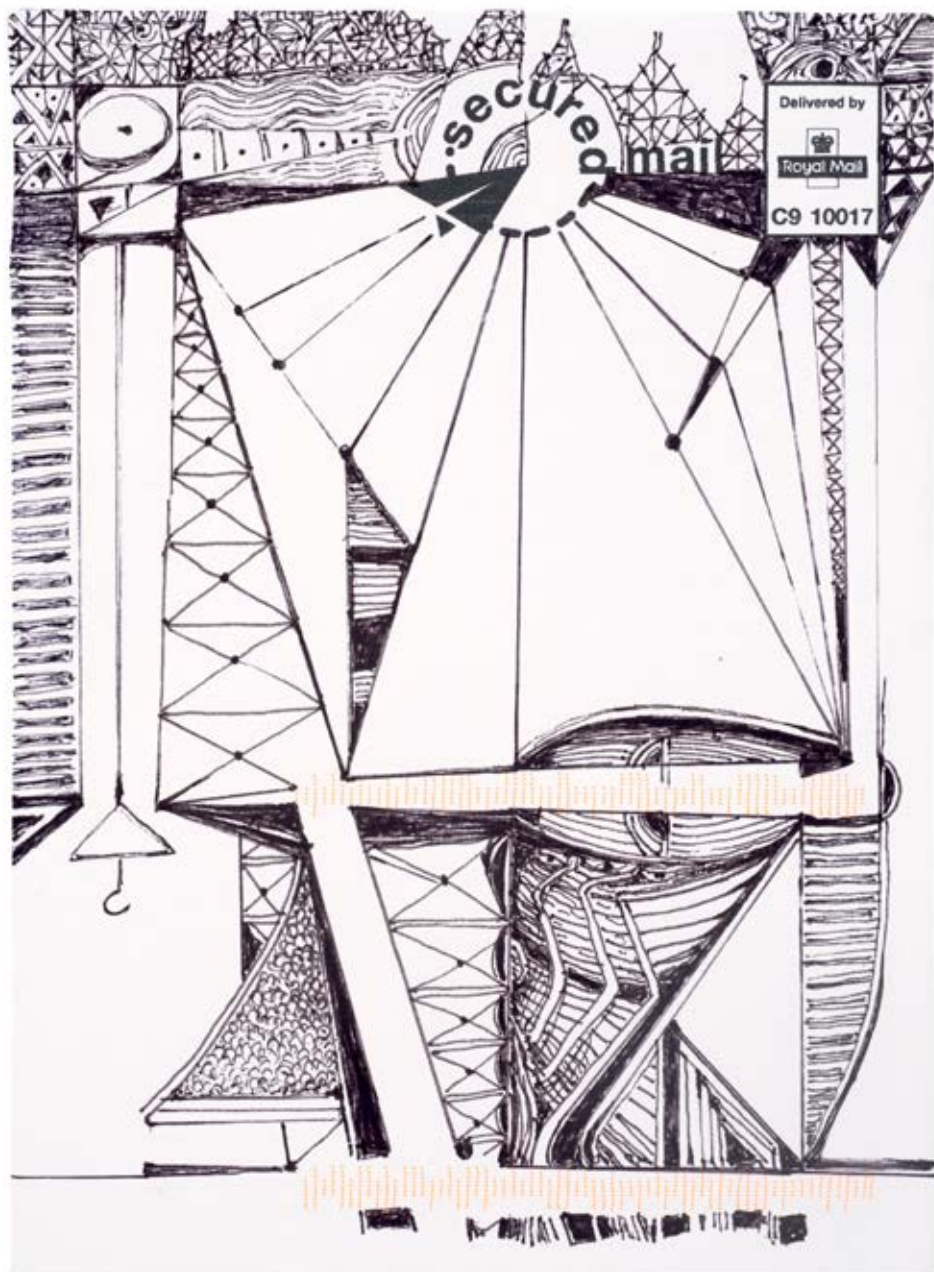


PL. 108  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



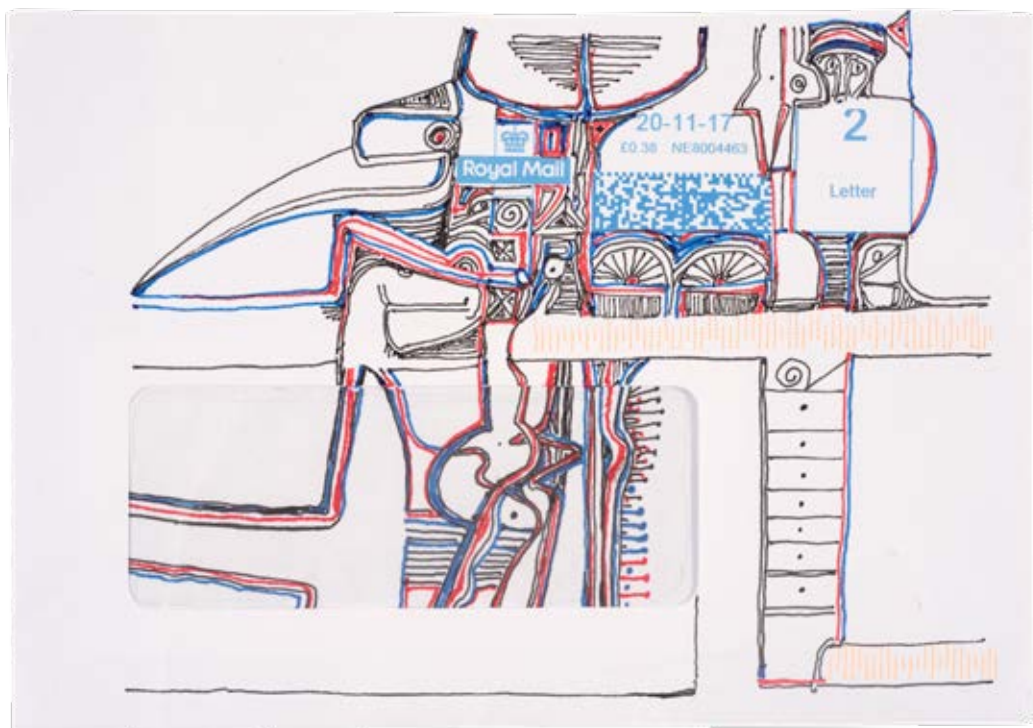


PL. 110  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



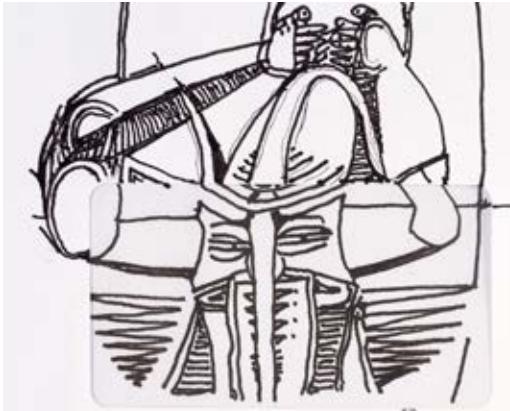
PL. 111  
*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*





PL. 113

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



Important - Labour Party ballot papers enclosed





PL. 115

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



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Royal Mail  
C9 10009

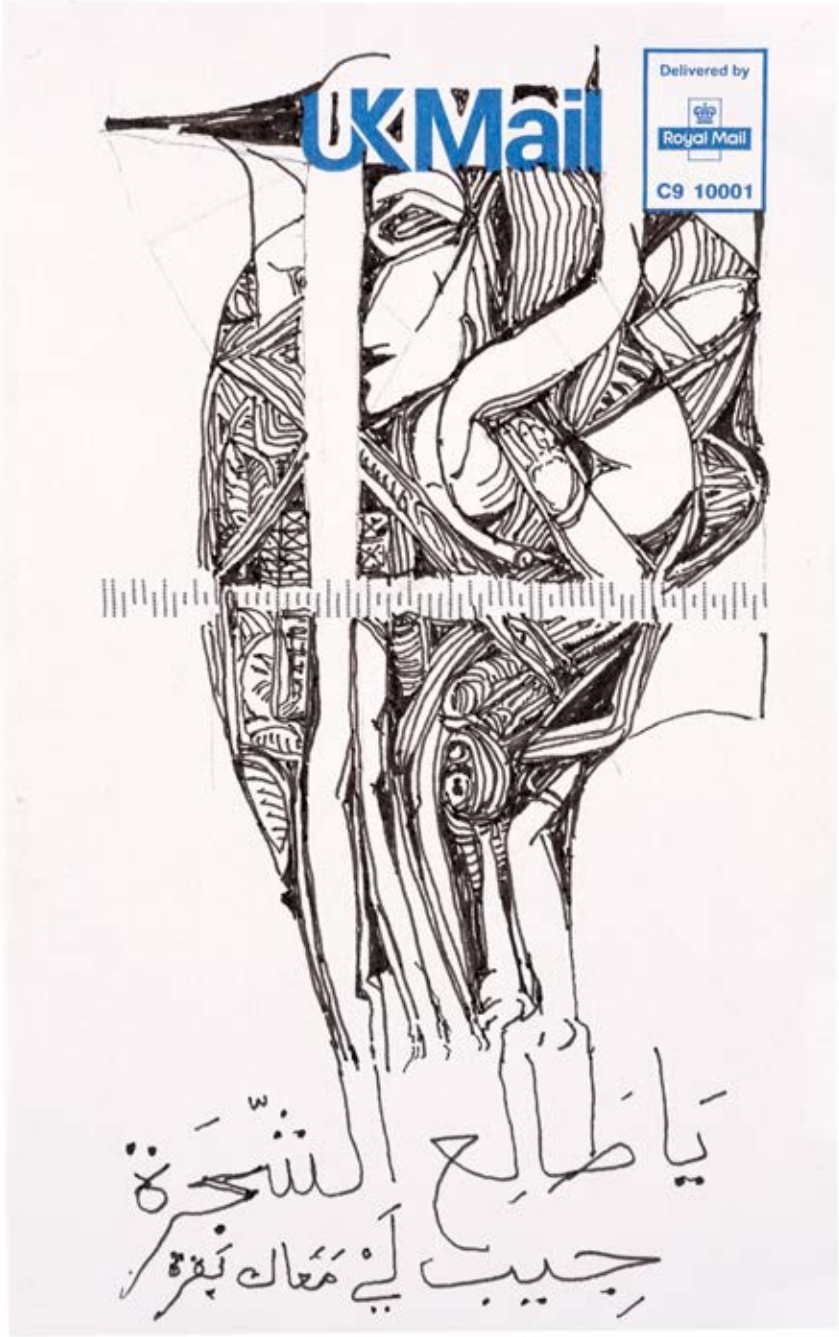


PL. 116  
Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18



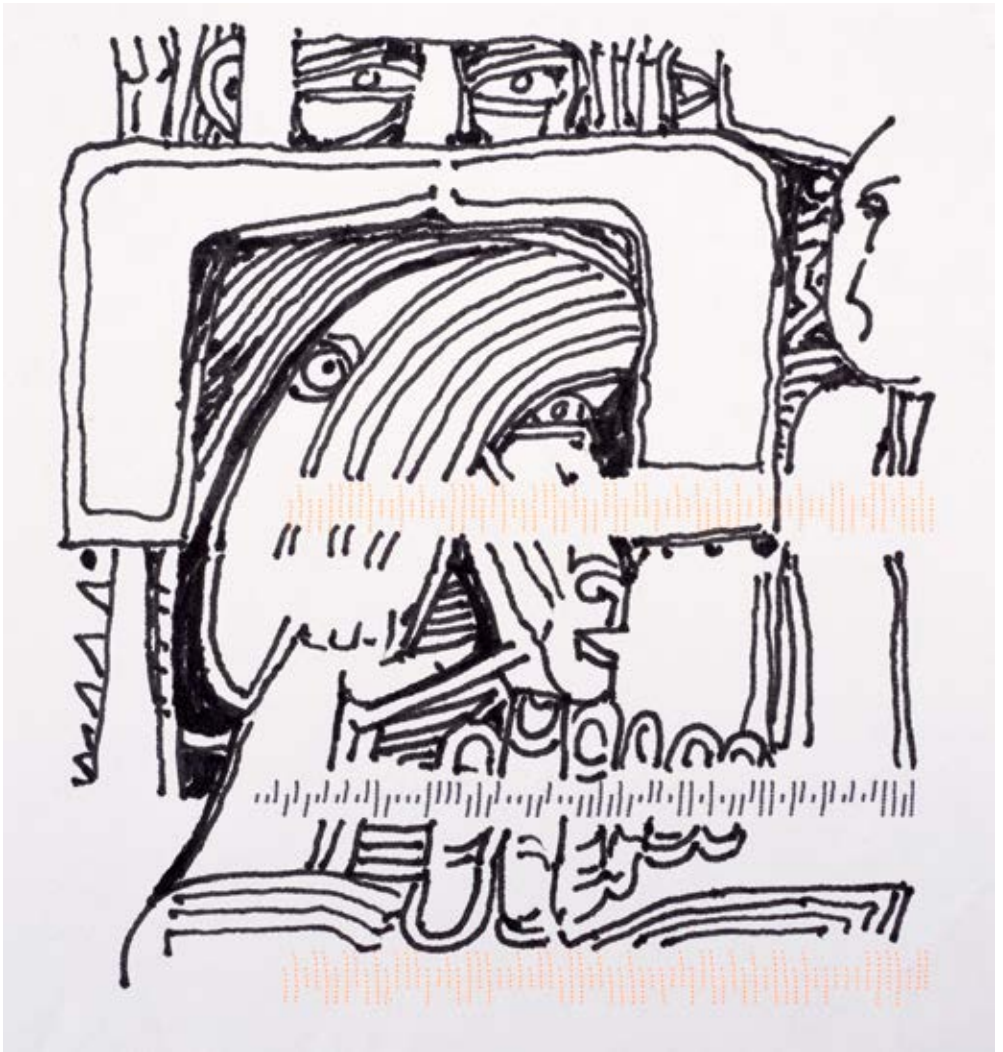
PL. 117

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 118

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 119

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 120

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18



PL. 121

*Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18*



PL. 122

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

## Works in the Exhibition

150

PL. 1

Pain Relief Drawing, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
4 7/8 x 4 7/8 inches (12.38 x 12.38 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn  
and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 2

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
7 1/2 x 4 1/4 inches (19 x 10.7 cm)

PL. 3

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
7 1/2 x 4 3/8 inches (19 x 11 cm)

PL. 4

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
7 x 4 1/8 inches (17.7 x 10.5 cm)

PL. 5

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
5 7/8 x 4 3/8 inches (15 x 11 cm)

PL. 6

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
6 3/4 x 4 inches (17 x 10 cm)

PL. 7

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
7 1/8 x 4 1/8 inches (18 x 10.5 cm)

PL.

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
7 1/8 x 4 inches (18 x 10 cm)

PL. 9

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
6 3/4 x 3 1/2 inches (17 x 9 cm)

PL. 10

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
5 1/8 x 3 7/8 inches (13 x 9.8 cm)

PL. 11

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
3 7/8 x 5 1/8 inches (9.8 x 13 cm)

PL. 12

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
4 1/2 x 6 1/4 inches (11.5 x 16 cm)

PL. 13

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
5 1/8 x 5 3/8 inches (13 x 13.8 cm)

PL. 14

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
7 x 4 1/8 inches (17.7 x 10.2 cm)

PL. 15

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine  
packet  
4 3/8 x 7 1/2 inches (11 x 19 cm)



- PL. 16**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 2 3/8 x 4 3/4 inches (6 x 12 cm)
- PL. 17**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 6 1/8 x 4 7/8 inches (15.5 x 12.5 cm)
- PL. 18**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 6 1/8 x 4 1/2 inches (15.5 x 11.5 cm)
- PL. 19**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 1/8 x 2 1/8 inches (10.5 x 5.5 cm)
- PL. 20**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 7/8 x 5 inches (12.4 x 12.7 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 21**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 5/8 x 7 1/2 inches (11.7 x 19 cm)
- PL. 22**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on medicine packets and envelopes  
 4 5/8 x 7 1/2 inches (11.7 x 19.1 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 23**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 1/4 x 7 1/2 inches (10.8 x 19.1 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 24**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 1/4 x 7 3/4 inches (10.8 x 19.69 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 25**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
 6 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches (15.9 x 14 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 26**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-188  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 3 7/8 x 4 3/8 inches (9.7 x 11.2 cm)
- PL. 27**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 2 3/8 x 1 7/8 inches (6 x 4.7 cm)
- PL. 28**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 5 1/8 x 2 3/8 inches (13 x 6 cm)
- PL. 29**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on medicine packets and envelopes  
 7 1/8 x 3 7/8 inches (18.1 x 9.8 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 30**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 7 1/8 x 3 3/4 inches (18.1 x 9.5 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 31**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 6 1/8 x 4 1/2 inches (15.7 x 11.5 cm)

PL. 32

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

4 3/4 x 4 7/8 inches (12 x 12.5 cm)

PL. 33

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

4 7/8 x 4 7/8 inches (12.5 x 12.3 cm)

PL. 34

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

2 3/8 x 5 3/8 inches (5.9 x 13.8 cm)

PL. 35

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

8 1/4 x 3 1/4 inches (20.8 x 8.4 cm)

PL. 36

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

9 7/8 x 2 5/8 inches (25.2 x 6.8 cm)

PL. 37

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

6 5/8 x 4 5/8 inches (16.7 x 11.6 cm)

PL. 38

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

2 3/8 x 5 1/8 inches (6 x 13 cm)

PL. 39

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on paper envelope

5 1/4 x 6 1/2 inches (13.3 x 16.5 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 40

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

4 1/2 x 6 1/4 inches (11.4 x 15.9 cm)

PL. 41

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

6 1/2 x 3 3/8 inches (16.5 x 8.6 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 42

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope

9 1/8 x 8 1/8 inches (23.2 x 20.6 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 43

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

5 7/8 x 2 3/4 inches (15 x 7 cm)

PL. 44

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope

6 3/8 x 4 3/8 inches (16.1 x 11 cm)

PL. 45

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

3 7/8 x 4 inches (9.7 x 10 cm)

PL. 46

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on medicine packets and envelopes

4 3/4 x 9 1/8 inches (12.1 x 23.2 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 47

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

5 1/2 x 5 1/8 inches (14 x 13 cm)

PL. 48

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

7 1/8 x 3 7/8 inches (18.1 x 9.8 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

**PL. 49**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
2 1/2 x 5 3/8 inches (6.3 x 13.7 cm)

**PL. 50**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
2 1/2 x 5 3/8 inches (6.3 x 13.8 cm)

**PL. 51**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
5 1/4 x 2 3/4 inches (13.2 x 7 cm)

**PL. 52**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
4 3/4 x 2 3/4 inches (12.2 x 7.1 cm)

**PL. 53**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
4 3/4 x 2 3/8 inches (12 x 6 cm)

**PL. 54**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
4 3/4 x 4 3/4 inches (12.1 x 12.1 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

**PL. 55**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
5 1/4 x 6 1/2 inches (13.3 x 16.5 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

**PL. 56**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
4 1/4 x 3 3/8 inches (10.8 x 8.6 cm)

**PL. 57**  
*Pain Relief Drawing; Adam and Eve*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
4 7/8 x 4 inches (12.5 x 10 cm)

**PL. 58**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
5 3/8 x 2 1/2 inches (13.6 x 6.2 cm)

**PL. 59**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
3 1/2 x 6 3/4 inches (8.8 x 17 cm)

**PL. 60**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and Ink on medicine packets  
3 5/8 x 2 3/8 inches (9.3 x 6 cm)

**PL. 61**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
6 1/8 x 4 1/2 inches (15.6 x 11.4 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

**PL. 62**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
7 1/8 x 3 1/2 inches (18.1 x 8.9 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

**PL. 63**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
5 7/8 x 3 1/8 inches (14.9 x 7.9 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

**PL. 64**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
6 1/4 x 4 inches (16 x 10 cm)

PL. 65

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

7 1/8 x 3 3/4 inches (18 x 9.6 cm)

PL. 66

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

6 1/4 x 4 5/8 inches (15.8 x 11.8 cm)

PL. 67

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

4 3/4 x 4 7/8 inches (12 x 12.5 cm)

PL. 68

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

4 1/2 x 4 5/8 inches (11.4 x 11.7 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 69

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

7 7/8 x 2 3/4 inches (20 x 7.1 cm)

PL. 70

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

7 1/8 x 4 inches (18.1 x 10.2 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 71

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

7 7/8 x 2 3/4 inches (20 x 7 cm)

PL. 72

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

5 1/2 x 5 1/4 inches (14 x 13.5 cm)

PL. 73

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

5 1/8 x 4 1/8 inches (13 x 10.5 cm)

PL. 74

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

2 3/4 x 2 7/8 inches (7 x 7.2 cm)

PL. 75

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

5 3/4 x 3 1/8 inches (14.5 x 8 cm)

PL. 76

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

6 5/8 x 4 1/4 inches (16.9 x 10.8 cm)

PL. 77

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

3 3/8 x 2 1/2 inches (8.5 x 6.4 cm)

PL. 78

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

3 7/8 x 2 3/8 inches (9.8 x 6 cm)

PL. 79

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on medicine packets and envelopes

4 3/4 x 4 3/4 inches (12.1 x 12.1 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 80

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet

5 3/8 x 5 1/8 inches (13.7 x 13 cm)

Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

- PL. 81**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 3/8 x 5 7/8 inches (11.1 x 14.9 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 82**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 3 3/8 x 5 1/8 inches (8.6 x 13 cm)
- PL. 83**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 7 7/8 x 3 1/8 inches (20 x 7.9 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 84**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 8 1/4 x 3 1/8 inches (21 x 8 cm)
- PL. 85**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on paper envelope  
 5 5/8 x 7 3/4 inches (14.3 x 19.7 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 86**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-188  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 2 3/8 x 5 1/8 inches (6 x 13 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 87**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 3/4 x 5 inches (12.1 x 12.7 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 88**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 7/8 x 4 3/4 inches (12.4 x 12.1 cm)  
 Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn
- PL. 89**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 5 x 2 1/4 inches (12.7 x 5.7 cm)
- PL. 90**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 6 1/8 x 2 3/4 inches (15.5 x 7 cm)
- PL. 91**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 5 1/8 x 2 3/4 inches (13 x 7 cm)
- PL. 92**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 inches (10.8 x 8.6 cm)
- PL. 93**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 7/8 x 4 7/8 inches (12.5 x 12.5 cm)
- PL. 94**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 7/8 x 4 1/2 inches (12.4 x 11.5 cm)
- PL. 95**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 5 x 4 3/4 inches (12.7 x 12.2 cm)
- PL. 96**  
*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18  
 Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
 4 1/2 x 4 3/4 inches (11.5 x 12.2 cm)

PL. 97

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
7 1/8 x 4 1/8 inches (18 x 10.5 cm)

PL. 98

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
6 1/8 x 2 5/8 inches (15.5 x 6.8 cm)

PL. 99

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
8 1/8 x 3 1/4 inches (20.5 x 8.4 cm)

PL. 100

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
5 3/4 x 2 3/4 inches (14.5 x 7 cm)

PL. 101

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
4 3/8 x 7 1/2 inches (11 x 19 cm)

PL. 102

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on the back of a medicine packet  
4 3/4 x 4 7/8 inches (12.1 x 12.5 cm)

PL. 103

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 3/8 x 3 3/4 inches (16.2 x 9.6 cm)

PL. 104

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on paper envelope  
6 1/8 x 4 1/8 inches (15.5 x 10.5 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 105

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
4 3/8 x 5 3/4 inches (11 x 14.7 cm)

PL. 106

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 1/4 x 4 3/8 inches (16 x 11.2 cm)

PL. 107

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches (16 x 14 cm)

PL. 108

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 1/4 x 3 7/8 inches (15.8 x 9.8 cm)

PL. 109

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
4 3/8 x 3 1/8 inches (11 x 8 cm)

PL. 110

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
4 3/8 x 3 1/2 inches (11 x 9 cm)

PL. 111

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 1/4 x 4 3/4 inches (16 x 12 cm)

PL. 112

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
4 3/8 x 3 3/4 inches (11.1 x 9.5 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 113

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
4 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches (11.4 x 16.5 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 114

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 3/8 x 9 1/2 inches (16.2 x 24.1 cm)  
Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn

PL. 115

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 3/8 x 4 inches (16.2 x 10 cm)

PL. 116

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 3/8 x 4 1/8 inches (16.2 x 10.6 cm)

PL. 117

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 3/8 x 3 5/8 inches (16.3 x 9.2 cm)

PL. 118

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 1/4 x 4 inches (16 x 10 cm)

PL. 119

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
4 3/4 x 4 5/8 inches (12.1 x 11.6 cm)

157

PL. 120

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
4 5/8 x 4 5/8 inches (11.8 x 11.6 cm)

PL. 121

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and Ink on a paper envelope  
6 1/4 x 5 1/8 inches (16 x 13 cm)

PL. 122

*Pain Relief Drawing*, 2016-18

Pen and ink on a paper envelope  
6 3/8 x 4 inches (16.2 x 10 cm)

Unless noted otherwise, all works are  
courtesy of the artist and Vigo Gallery.

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NY, 2022.

## Contributors

**Laura Hoptman** is Executive Director of The Drawing Center.

**Hassan Musa** Hassan Musa is an image maker, a writer, and an art teacher. He graduated from the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum, Sudan, in 1974 and received a PhD in art history in Montpellier, France, in 1990. His artwork is exhibited around the world. He has written critical texts for various publications including *Les Temps Modernes*, *Africultures*, *Critical interventions*, and *M@gm@*.



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Pain Relief Drawings*

Organized by Laura Hoptman

**The Drawing Center**

October 7, 2022-January 15, 2023

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documenting The Drawing Center's  
exhibitions and programs and  
providing a forum for the study  
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# Ibrahim El-Salahi: Pain Relief Drawings

To create a manner of artmaking that speaks to local, regional, and international communities defines the notion of hybridity in a global context. This has been the ambitious quest of Sudanese-born artist Ibrahim El-Salahi, from his first mature works to the new and astonishing group of drawings that are the subject of this publication.

Texts by  
Laura Hoptman  
Hassan Musa

El-Salahi's intricate pen-and-ink *Pain Relief Drawings* serve as a form of respite for the 92-year-old artist, who finds diversion from his chronic pain through his daily drawing practice. This volume features over a hundred of these small-scale works drafted on the backs of medicine packets, envelopes, and scraps of paper.

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