

Joseph Piccillo's Game Structures

BY DIANE COCHRANE

LOOKING AT JOSEPH PICCILLO'S latest series of drawings is an extraordinary experience. Some people find them bewildering, others maddening, but most viewers agree they are forcefully compelling. And that's what Piccillo is striving for in these strange works he calls *Game Structures*. The concept behind them goes like this: The drawings are meant to confront the viewer with a number of signs and symbols, without overall literary content—"just a lot of information"—and force him to react to the imagery. How the viewer responds is unimportant; the viewer can get whatever he wants out of the picture, arrive at his own conclusions about its meaning. What is important is that something has been communicated. "If 100 pictures are exhibited in a museum, I want the viewer to stop and look at mine and get something out of it, not pass it by", says Piccillo, a soft-spoken, self-effacing man in his middle thirties, who is compelling in his own quiet way.

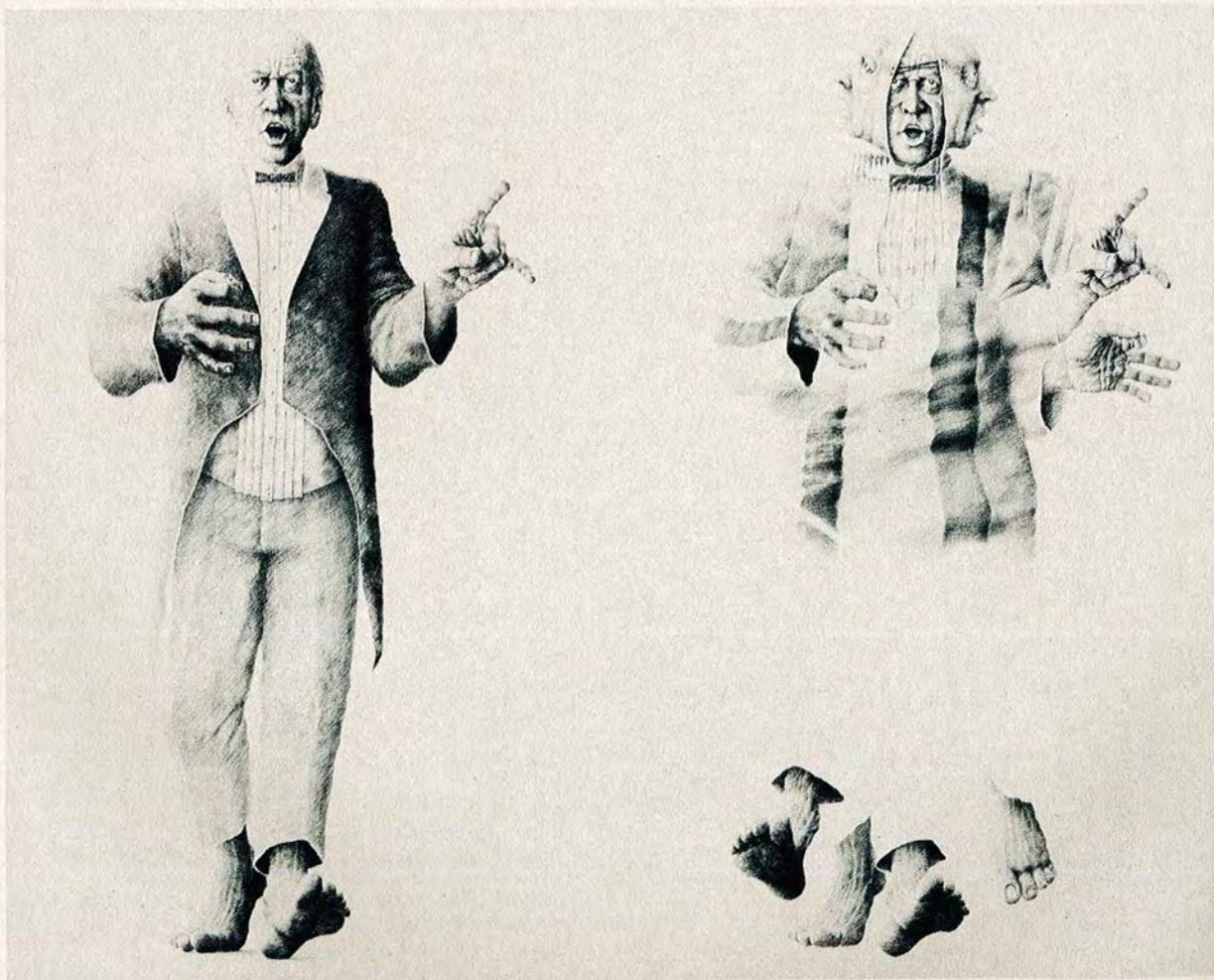
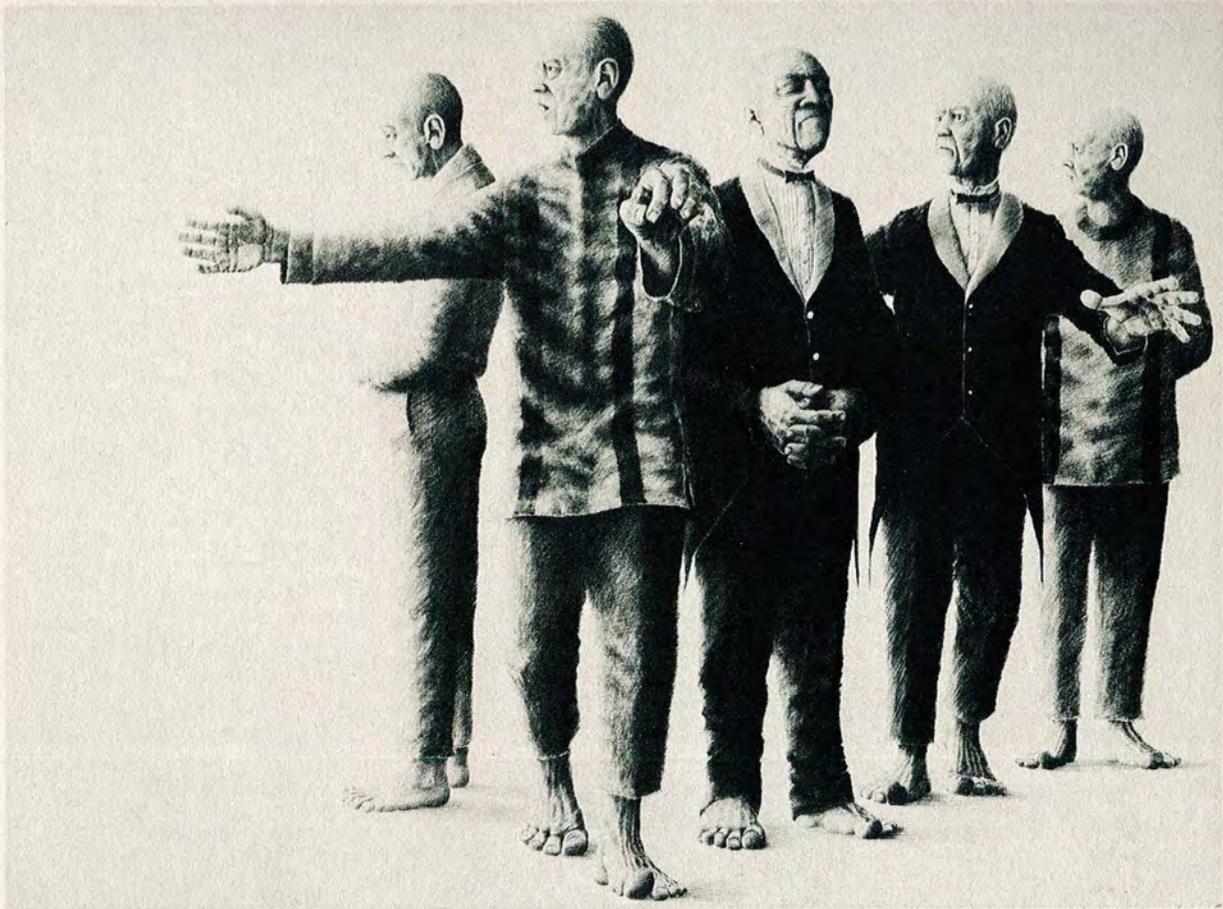
How are *Game Structures* structured to elicit this reaction on the part of the viewer? "Each element, or image, in the drawing is a single thing so that if it were possible to lift them off the paper, they could be placed anywhere. The viewer could then make his own picture because all the images have equal importance, like hieroglyphics on a tablet."

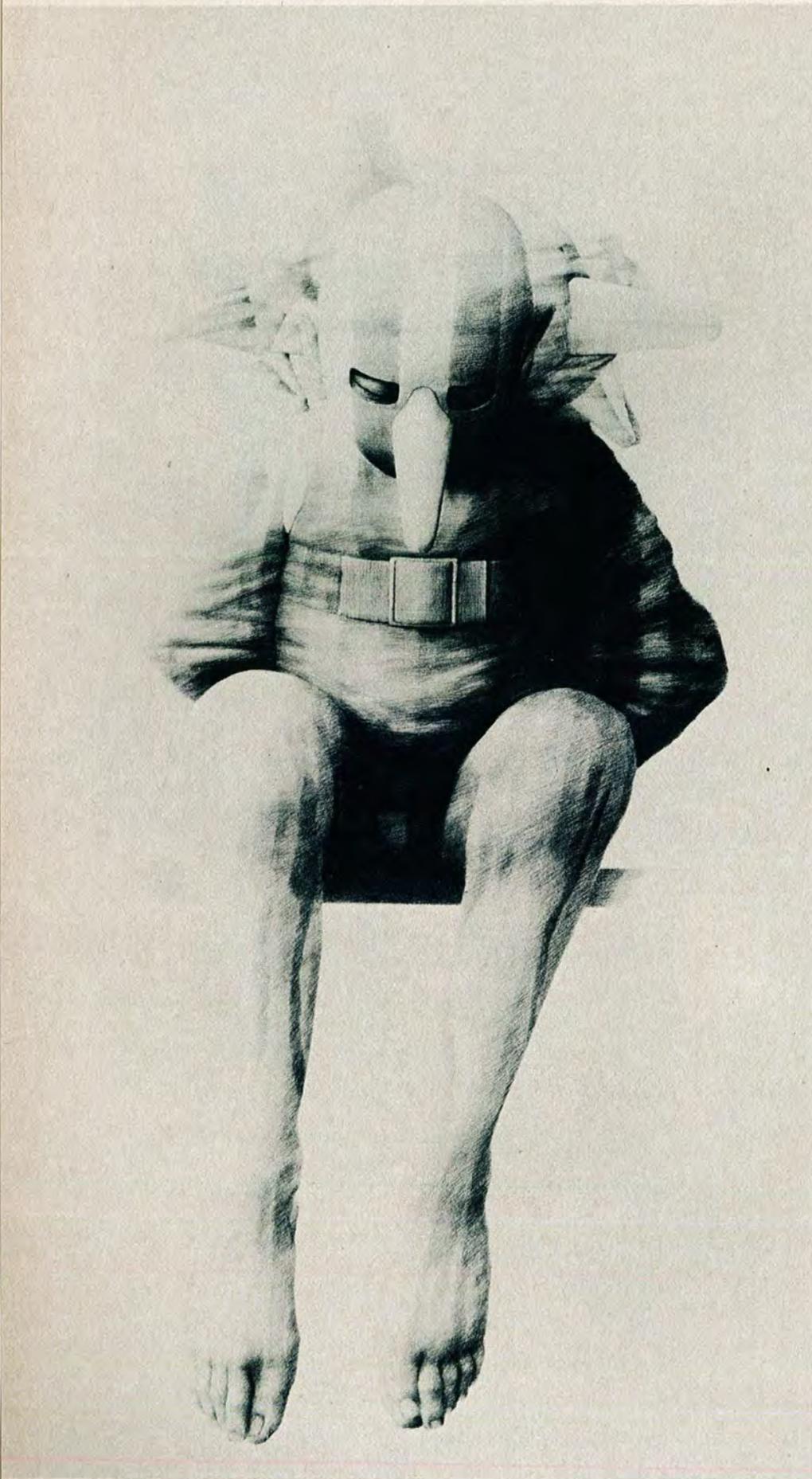
And like incised tablets, the drawings are flat. There is no focal point, no traditional foreground, middle ground, or background in these pictures. But that doesn't prevent Piccillo from playing with space. "I try to fool the eye by cutting into space with different techniques such as the ball that bounces back and forth in *Game Structure Series III, No. VI*, or the seemingly separate pieces of paper in the charcoal drawing shown here.

All these games and tricks sound rather whimsical, and this is certainly Piccillo's intention. They act as a counterpoint to the stark, horrific quality that characterizes his work and add a touch of comic relief. On another level, whimsy juxtaposed with, or superimposed on, other images can become ironical, even sinister. Take, for example, the innocuous targets in *Game Structure Series III, No. VI*. When they are placed over



Above: *Drummer No. XI*, 1967, charcoal, 29 x 16. Careful modeling belies the absence of background and clenched expression. Top right: *Policy Makers Series II, No. II*, 1967, charcoal, 30 x 42. Placing his figures near each other Piccillo creates the illusion of a relationship that disappears as you look closer. Bottom right: *Drawing*, 1967, charcoal, 30 x 42. The action is repeated by both figures. Yet one wonders just what these actions imply. The artist is unconcerned with a literal statement. Piccillo presents information or impulses, but not a plot. Private collection. Courtesy Krasner Gallery.





Drawing, 1972, charcoal, 40 x 23. Piccillo uses impersonal satire to express his outrage against the forces that cause alienation and anxiety. Private collection. Courtesy Krasner Gallery.

the different figures, the viewer's response (depending on the viewer, of course) could change from amusement to sneering approval and finally to dread.

Social outrage is Piccillo's concern; outrage against the inhuman forces that cause alienation and anxiety in general and those who, through the misuse of power, encourage the growth of these forces in particular. "I am very much affected by the political scene. I can't just read and remain calm. I must express myself somehow. But good art cannot be editorial." So he resorts to an impersonal satire. Almost never does he refer to a specific person or event, the one exception being *Game Structure Series III, No. VI*, and this illusion would remain obscure to most viewers. At the time he was working on the series, the FBI was harassing columnist Jack Anderson's aide Les Whitman because of his connection with Indians who took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs Building in Washington. Piccillo began to associate the shooting gallery with the victimized reporter, but unless the viewer knew the workings of the artist's mind, this literary symbol would be meaningless.

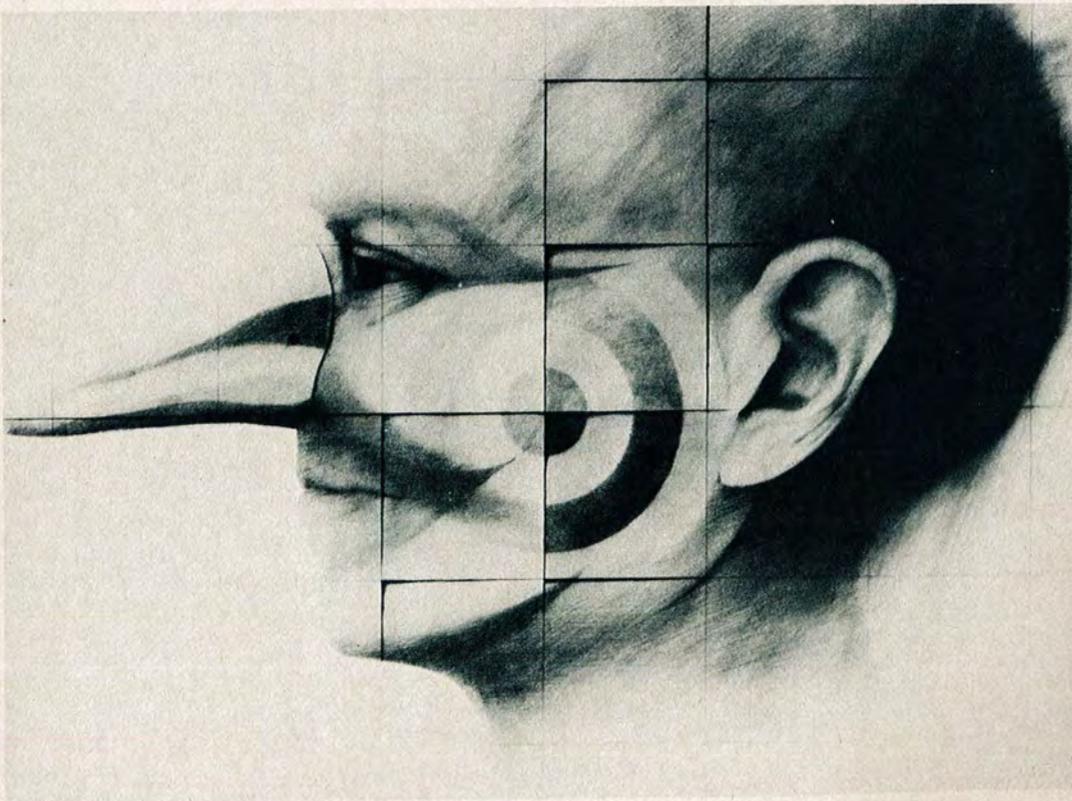
Piccillo strives to evoke a feeling, rather than apply a specific meaning. Like the British painter Francis Bacon, who was an early influence, Piccillo sees the horror in man's inhumanity and tries to express it visually. Nowhere is this more effectively achieved than in the *Game Structure* series. Figures have been placed on canvas so that they are near one another in space but unconnected in any other way. They are close in proximity, but the gulf between them as communicating human beings is enormous, possibly unbridgeable. Alienation prevails here, the same alienation that allows by-standers, for example, to passively watch their fellowman be mugged or murdered without even bothering to call the police.

And with alienation comes dehumanization. Just look at the figures in the studies for the *Game Structure* series. They are strapped-in, bound-up jacks-in-the-box, wearing masks so no one knows who, if anyone, is inside their heads. A pretty frightening scene, and a devastating comment on contemporary life.

These symbols are fairly obvious. Others are less so. What, for example, is the meaning of the images in *Game Structure IV*? That's for you to figure out. Traditionally, says Piccillo, paintings are read like books—the plot is there for all to understand. "But my work is more McLuhanesque. I give the viewer lots of information or impulses. Some people will recognize and respond to them; others won't. For example, if somehow I worked into a picture an illusion to, say, Rolling Stone's Mick Jagger, it will mean something to the person who knows who he is and nothing to the person who is

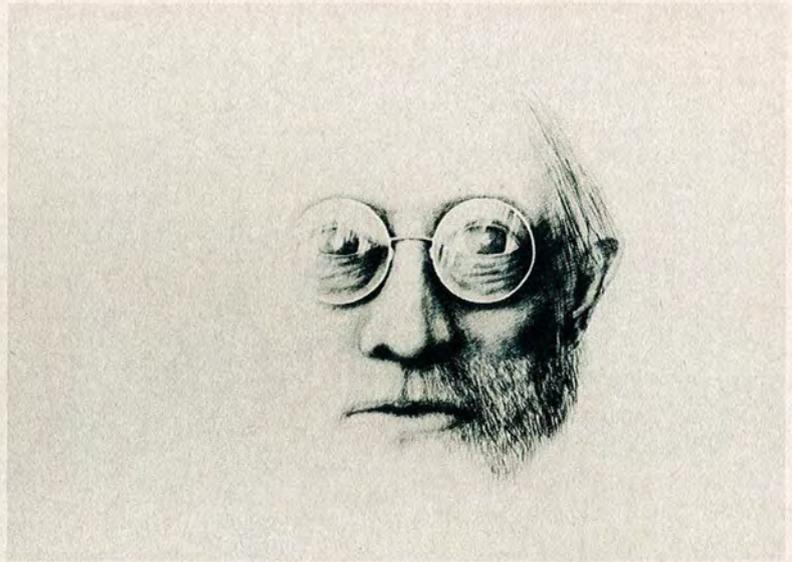


Above: Game Structure Series III, No. VI, 1973, pencil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 90. Each element is of equal importance, leaving the viewer free to reach his own conclusions about meaning. Private collection. Courtesy Krasner Gallery.



Left: Drawing, 1973, charcoal, 30 x 40. The artist cuts into space by creating an illusion of separate pieces of paper. Private collection. Courtesy Krasner Gallery.

“The viewer can make his own picture, because all the images have equal importance, like hieroglyphics on a tablet.”



Top: Drawing, 1972, charcoal, 30 x 40. The circular glasses and enclosed flat eye shapes lend an uneasy contrast to this otherwise subtly rendered drawing. Above: Game Structure No. IV, 1972, pencil on canvas, 72 x 72. Collection Oscar Krasner. Piccillo feels his work is McLuhanesque.

unfamiliar with him." Then, thinking he sounds pretentious, Piccillo laughs and says that's as precious as he will get in explaining his work.

Whether or not all the illusions are recognizable, a lot of people like Piccillo's work. Not all, of course; even within families, husbands and wives can't agree, says the artist. "One will relate to a picture and buy it, and the other will hate it." Siding with those who think positively about him are a number of museums such as the Brooklyn Museum, the Corcoran Gallery, the Baltimore Museum of Fine Arts, the Richmond Museum, and the Albrecht Museum in St. Joseph, Missouri. Others favoring Piccillo are the American Academy of Arts and Letters who awarded him a Childe Hassam purchase prize, the New York State Council of the Arts, and the New York State University, both of whom gave him grants in aid, and a number of galleries who have put on one-man shows for him.

Another reason for Piccillo's popularity is his superb skill as a draftsman. But drawing as a medium has not always come first and its importance may fade somewhat in the future, although not completely, because he truly loves to draw. Like many students back in the 50s and early 60s when he studied art at the

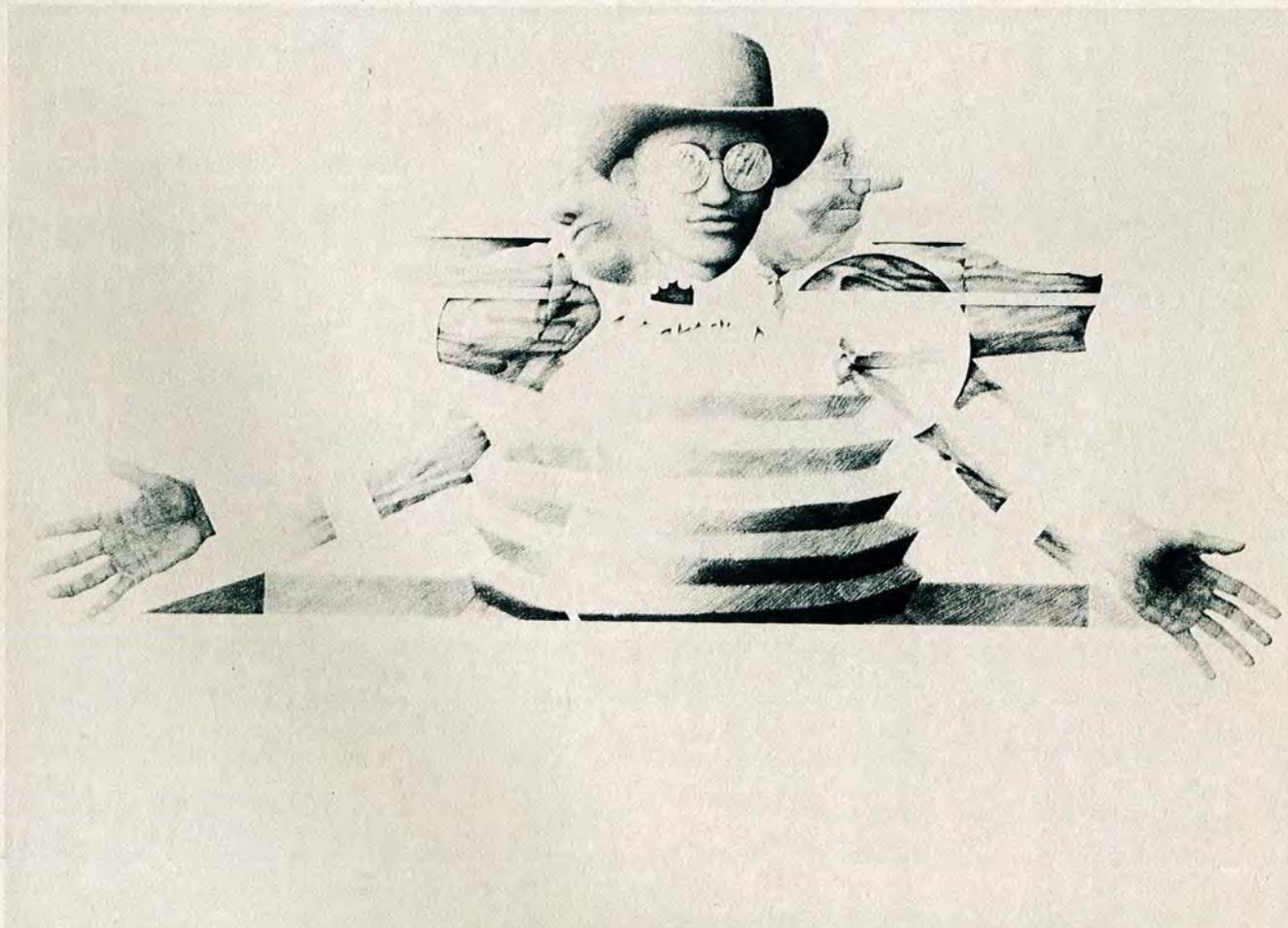
State University College at Buffalo, Piccillo was an abstract expressionist ("I still feel that I am an abstractionist"). Boredom set in after a while, and he switched to collages which he called "cityscapes." At first these were just large numbers and letters pasted on canvas; later he began to add figures. The culmination of these researches was a series of collages called *The Policy Makers*. "Collage" is perhaps not quite the right word. Instead of using bits and pieces of newspapers or posters, he pasted on wrinkled or cut-up drawings done by him to look like real photographs. The figures in these collages resemble those seen here in the studies for the series. "Study" is also an inaccurate description. The drawings are not meant as rough sketches, but as final products that are exhibited and sold as major works.

From collages Piccillo turned to oils. Working with traditional foregrounds and backgrounds he still emphasized his eerie images, but in a different and ultimately unsatisfactory way. "First I would paint the figure in, then I'd scrape it out until it was just barely visible and glaze over it. But I really wasn't interested in painting a pretty picture with fussy glazes, or even in the physical aspect of painting; my only concern was to present an image." Finally it occurred to

him that if he pursued the image further and eliminated the scraping and glazing, the effect would be more natural and quite similar, in fact, to his previous collages. At this point he began to draw exclusively, for this approach made his imagery more accessible; and painting became unnecessary.

Now Piccillo is contemplating the future. At the time of this writing he has just about finished *Game Structures* and he's been thinking about his next series. He likes to work in series because he enjoys exploring a theme. "There won't be much difference between the first two drawings but there will be between say number one and number five." He can't predict, however, how many will be in his new series, or even much about it. "I don't want my work to be well thought out in advance because it will lose spontaneity." All he can say is that the drawings will be more colorful, more massive and more abstract. Watercolors have already started to appear in some of the *Games* series, and he plans to expand their use. How much bigger his pictures will grow is another question. The studies are already large, mostly 30 x 40, and the pencil drawings on canvas are enormous: *Game Structure Series III, No. VI* is 6 x 7½ feet. The abstract quality

Continued on page 69



Study, 1972, charcoal, 30 x 40. Collection Albrecht Museum, St. Joseph, Mo. The artist's careful rendering of superimposed images evokes curiosity, humor, then dread.

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cially liked "Sandy" and felt she would be perfect for the newly dedicated sculpture garden on campus. A fund drive began to purchase the sculpture, and it was arranged that the piece could remain on loan for the rest of the school year. Alumni and faculty also made contributions, a grant was received from the Cooper Foundation, and additional monies received from the Sheldon Art Gallery and collected from the community by a board member of the Nebraska Art Association. Finally, in February of 1972 the student's efforts were realized, and Sandy had a permanent home in the garden.

PICCILLO (from page 43)

refers not to the figures, but their placement on canvas; Piccillo expects to compartmentalize them even further than he has in the present series.

But how about the images themselves? They will be very urban and perhaps more whimsical than the past. A recent trip to New York with its elaborate window displays and myriad neon signs provided him with some new images which may or may not wind up on canvas. Other ideas might come from newspapers and magazines. News photographs, for example, might spark an image and serve as a composite model because he doesn't want any figure to be identified as the man who lives upstairs or next door. But there's little to fear on that score.

Piccillo's figures are singularly inhuman in a very human way. Their faces are mottled and fleshy; their eyes, when not shut tight in fear or pain, stare blindly ahead; their hands and feet are beautifully articulated, but oversized, larger in some cases than their heads and certainly their brains. But they are nobody we know personally, or admit to know. They are symbols, illusions, rather than particular people.

Once he has an image in mind, he sketches it loosely with lead pencil on paper. "I used to use Rives etching paper (as I did in the *Policy Makers*) because of its nice absorbent quality. Now I use two-ply bristle board with a hard, smooth surface which allows me to build up darks quickly and erase more easily." If he likes the placement of the image he makes sure the lines are light and then starts in with a carbon pencil ("I use an enormous number of pencils and exhaust at least one sharpener a month"), working from top to bottom and right to left to prevent smudging. As another protective measure he puts a piece of paper between his hand and the paper. If he plans to work on a large canvas, he will transfer the drawing directly, again to avoid smudging. He uses compressed charcoal for certain intensities, such as very dark darks, and vine charcoal for other effects. Recently, he has begun to

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