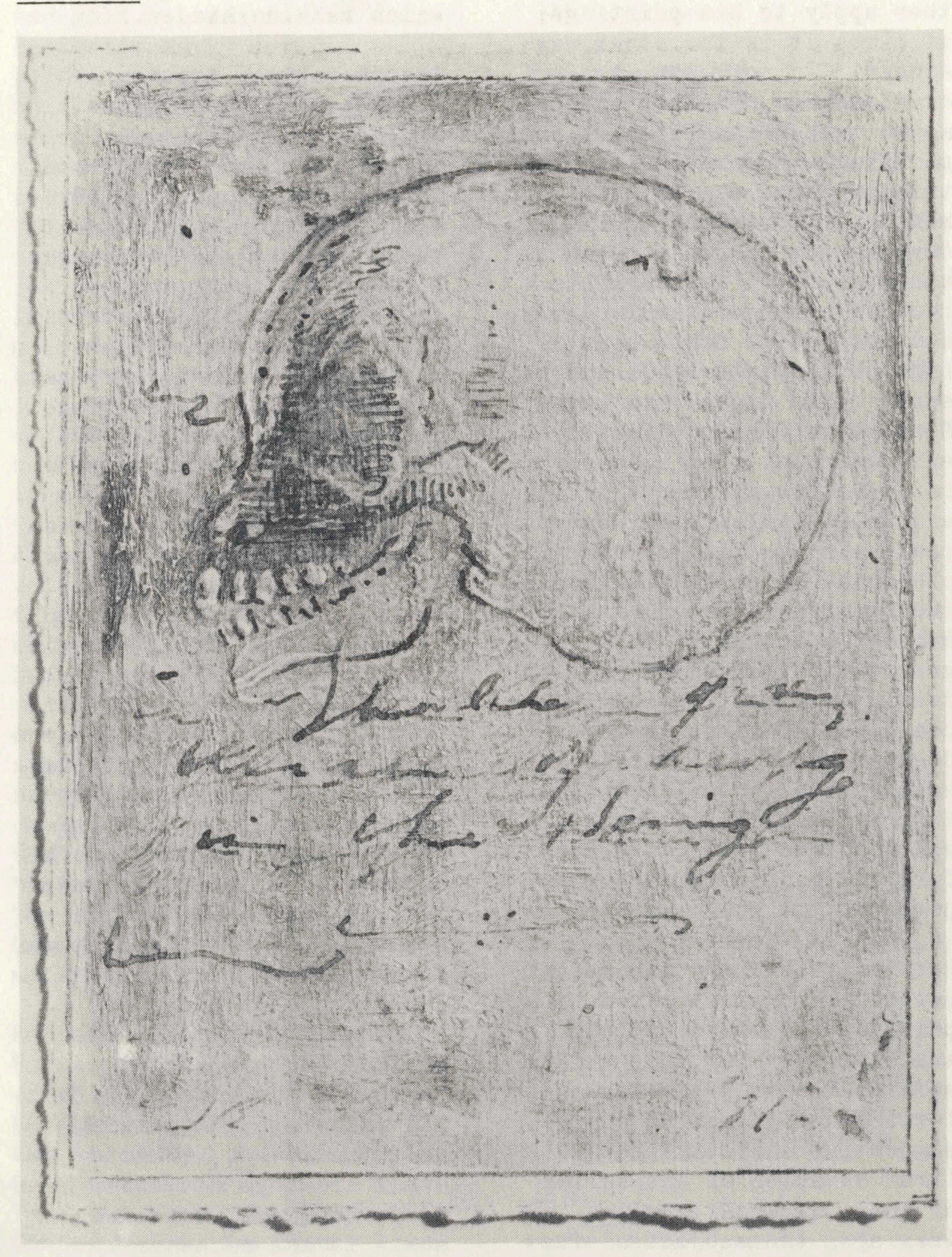
Untitled (Skull), 1981



When asked recently about the relationship between his paintings and his drawings, New York artist Jake Berthot explained that for him the act of drawing requires a discipline and focus different from that of painting. As he once said, drawing is "what the hand can grasp" and painting is "what the body faces" (Blakeston). He finds that ideas may come out of the drawings that he will then apply to his paintings; at times it is the other way around. In any case, the drawings are complete statements rather than studies for paintings. Eschewing a doctrinaire adherence to any art movement, Berthot's stylistic development has been personal and measured. Although his reductive, monochromatic grey and grey-green field paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s linked him with Minimalism, their painterly surfaces lent them a sensuosity not usually associated with that style. (The same could also be said of certain other so-called Minimalists such as Brice Marden.) Berthot's works, in fact, grew out of Mark Rothko's deeply emotional chromatic canvases. Berthot, however, does not share the heroic and epic aspiration of Abstract Expressionists like Rothko and Clyfford Still. He prefers instead to sound a more personal and poetic note.

Berthot's drawings of the period are characterized by a painted background of grey enamel into which the artist scratched with graphite, forming ambiguous but suggestive shapes. In the first examples of the series of human and goat skull drawings, the subject of the current exhibition, Berthot continued to draw into the soft grey enamel, sometimes

highlighting with white
enamel (nos. 1* through 4 are
part of this group). Line,
though present in the
paintings, assumes a primary
role in these drawings.
Fluid lines form ovoid
shapes, more or less skulllike, that are joined by
written words or calligraphic
marks that suggest writing.
The script is a kind of
private graffiti or
"doodling," the meaning of
which remains hidden.

Though related to the artist's contemporaneous nonobjective, vertical bar paintings, the drawings are more overtly romantic. By making a figurative element the subject of his drawings, Berthot was challenging "modernistic notions of what is or what is not acceptable." As Berthot developed the skull series, the image became increasingly literal (compare no. 4 with no. 13). In these later works, incising into wet enamel gave way to drawing with pen and ink, or chalk on ink wash backgrounds, to which gesso was sometimes added. The overall color of these works is black, grey or sepia with occasional pink or red crayon marks (no. 6). The juxtaposition of anatomical imagery and notation intentionally recalls notebook sketches by Leonardo da Vinci. Indeed, Berthot initiated the ink skull series after seeing an exhibition of Italian Renaissance drawings.

Berthot has gradually decreased the size of both his paintings and drawings over the years. (Some of the skull drawings are under 5" x 4".) He finds that large scale is not necessarily equivalent to monumental effect. Berthot's paintings and drawings have a powerful

presence despite their modest size.

Perhaps the skull shape,

depicted in varying degrees from abstraction to representation in the drawings, was the genesis of the oval shape that forms the central image of the paintings that have occupied Berthot since 1980. In these works, a luminous red and blue oval emerges from a rich impasto of ochre and gold oil paint. If Berthot's early dark paintings were "a dialectic between felt expression and concreteness of form," he allows that "gradually feeling began to predominate." The shimmering, encrusted surfaces of the "ovals" are reminiscent of Claude Monet's late Waterlilies. The use of gold with deep reds and bright blues recall Medieval icons. Berthot once said "I am not interested in the new but in trying to make paintings that refuse to grow old" (Mt. Holyoke catalogue). Although Berthot resists symbolic readings of the oval form in his paintings, he acknowledges that the skull image brings with it a host of associations related to death and religion. Skulls are not the subject of Berthot's most recent works on paper. He says, however, that he intends to return to the motif from time to time. The skulls have become an anchoring device, a meditation for the artist.

Berthot was born in Niagara
Falls, New York, in 1939. He
moved to New York City, where
he still resides, to study at
the New School for Social
Research, and Pratt
Institute. He has taught at
Cooper Union, New York,
University of Caliornia,
Berkeley (spring quarter,
1972), and currently teaches

at Yale University. He was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1981.

Constance Lewallen

* Numbers refer to list of works in MATRIX (see below).

Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from a conversation with the artist on October 2, 1984.

Works in MATRIX:

- 1. Skull #3, 1977, enamel and graphite on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., NY.
- 2. Skull #4, 1977, enamel and graphite on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., NY.
- 3. Skull #5, 1977, enamel and graphite on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., NY.
- 4. Skull #7, 1977, enamel and graphite on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., NY.
- 5. Untitled, 1978, graphite and enamel on paper, 30" x 22-1/2". Lent by Rena Bransten, San Francisco.
- 6. Untitled (Skull), 1979 enamel, graphite and crayon on paper, 30" x 22". Lent by Renee and David McKee, NY.
- 7. Untitled (Skull), 1979, white chalk, pastel and India ink wash on paper, 30" x 22". Lent by Thomas S. Schultz, M.D., Boston.
- 8. Untitled (Skull), 1979, white chalk, pastel and India ink wash on paper, 30" x 22". Lent by Thomas S. Schultz, M.D., Boston.

- 9. Untitled (Skull), 1980, pen and ink and ink wash on gessoed paper, 5-5/8" x 4-5/8". Lent by the artist.
- 10. Untitled (Skull), 1980, pen and sepia ink and ink wash on gessoed paper, 11-1/4" x 11-3/4". Lent by Lois Dickson, New York.
- 11. Untitled (Skull), 1980, pen and ink and ink wash on gessoed paper, 5-3/4" x 5-1/2". Lent by David McKee Gallery, New York.
- 12. Untitled (Goat Skull),
 1980, enamel and graphite on
 paper, 19-1/2" x 18". Lent
 by Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Saul,
 New York.
- 13. Untitled (Skull), 1981, pen and ink and ink wash with gesso highlights on gessoed paper, 4-5/8" x 3-5/8". Lent by The Edward R. Broida Trust, Los Angeles.
- 14. Goat Skull, 1981, pen and sepia ink and ink wash on gessoed paper, 12-3/8" x 21-1/4". Lent by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania.
- 15. Untitled (Skull), 1983, pen and ink and ink wash on gessoed paper, 5-1/4" x 3-3/4". Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

O.K. Harris, NY, '70, '72, '75; Michael Walls Gallery, S.F., '71, '72; Galerie de Gestlo, Hamburg, W. Germany, '73, '77; Daniel Weinberg Gallery, S.F., '75; David McKee Gallery, NY, '76, '78, '82, '83; Nina Nielsen Gallery, Boston, '79, '83.

Selected group exhibitions:

Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Annual, '69, '73, catalogues; University Art Museum, UC Berkeley, 8 New York Painters, '72, catalogue; Univ. of Utah, Salt Lake City, Drawings by New York Artists, '72, traveled, catalogue; U.S. Pavilion, Italy, Venice Biennale, '76, catalogue; Mt. Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, Silence and Slow Time, '78, catalogue; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, American Art: 1950 to the Present, '78, traveled, catalogue; The Museum of Modern Art, NY, New Works on Paper, '81, traveled, catalogue; The Museum of Modern Art, NY, An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture, '84, catalogue.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Ashton, Dore. "Jake Berthot Paints Quietness," Arts, Nov. '71.

Smith, Roberta.

Artforum, May '75.

Kasher, Steven. "Jake Berthot: Recent Work," Artforum, Sept. '78.

Masheck, Joseph.
"Pictures of Art," Artforum,
May '79.

Blakeston, Oswell. Arts Review (England), Apr. 27,

Yau, John. "A Return to the Basics: Jake Berthot's Recent Paintings," Arts,
March '84.

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.