

“The painter who draws merely by practice and by eye, without any reason, is like a mirror which copies every thing placed in front of it without being conscious of their existence.” — LEONARDO DA VINCI

A line of thought

BRONWYN MAHONEY AND CHRISTINE CLARK

The works of Maria Prystupa are the product of a lifetime of looking, thinking and moving. Hers has been a practice in the truest sense, with the doing of the thing more important than the product. This doesn't mean she eschews the works made: rather it means that there has been no place in these works where she has “stuck”. The pieces from childhood, through her migration, parenting, ageing, all share one line, that of an artist moving through the world and interpreting it to better understand it for herself.

This does not imply that an artists' oeuvre is an illustration of their life. But threads may run through, thoughts may be developed, examined, put aside, elucidated, left and returned to. Maria has consistently explored what it means to be human. How humans are in the world, how they see and how they relate to each other. For her, the line is a tool — painted lines, drawn lines and the lines (and underlines) in the books she has loved, devoured, re-read, shared and discussed all her life. The line has been carried by her, and carried her.

It has been a tool of freedom, moving from medium to medium: acrylic swathes of the vertical and horizontal meditations, full of depth and surprising colours in *Reflections* from the mid-eighties, to the watercolours and collage lines of *Nearly There?* from twenty years later share a strong horizon and the line, the lines.

Life drawing: Body XII c. 1978
Ink on paper
33 x 36.5 cm



Life drawing: Body VI c. 1978
Charcoal on paper
54 x 34.5 cm





Portrait of a Man at Table c. 1967
Pencil on paper
8.5 x 8 cm

Earlier than both of these are the figures, many of which are sketches she made during or as exercises for Merv Moriarty's classes, around 1978. Moriarty was a singular figure in Brisbane, indeed Australian, art circles: in 1971 he gained his pilot's license so that he could travel to remote parts of Queensland to give art classes as part of his Flying Arts School (initially known as EastAus Art School). Maria spent a lot of time at Moriarty's studio, though she was never a student. She was there for access to the life model, to draw and so to think about the body. Of these sketches, *Life drawing: Body VI* stands out, for the flow of its lines and the sense of imminent movement.

The body has been the subject of many of Maria's works. When first looking at the images of all her works, we made divisions, groupings that made them easier for us to approach. But these divisions were imperfect, the categorisations porous, and in many ways the very opposite of the kind of post-Enlightenment adventures Maria has been going on all her life. The body, though, hers and others, has been constant in all this.

The series of portraits as a whole hint at the depth of regard and thoughtfulness for Paul Klee; a lifelong love for Maria and parallels can be drawn with the type of psychological work he created with portraiture and similar pieces painted by Maria — they are childlike, haptic, but they represent both the thought of the artist — the expression of the line, the movement of the pencil — and that of the subject.

She has been particularly drawn to Klee's global outlook, encompassing other art forms and scientific thought. For Maria this has included the work of Rudolf Steiner and the study of quantum physics. Maria's interest could be seen as eclectic — science, art, ecology, biology, physics (this is, evidently, a non-exhaustive list) — but they point to a desire to encompass, to understand the whole of ourselves as humans, the whole of where we are and what we do — to take perspective on ourselves.

The Turkey Feeder (detail) 2004
Watercolour on paper
23 x 21.5 cm

What it means to be human is of course a very human endeavour ... is it those marks found in caves, the traces and fragments held in white-gloved hands and museum cases, that are perhaps the reason we are, to make. And perhaps that somewhere that reason has been co-opted by forces (religion, the Catholic Church, politicians, capitalism, communism, -ism, -ism) to hold it in check. Maria is a part of those thinkers — many of whom also came from the Europe of the early twentieth century, that have moved to tie back together the elements that Enlightenment thought rent asunder — to put science back with art, the body back with thought, to move away from the strict divisions of the Academy and realize our lives as part of a system, our bodies as another system — that our existence is part of a series of systems and is itself a series of the same.

Being in nature is an integral part of such systems, and gardens are another aspect of a system. Planting things, working in the garden were essential to Maria as long as she could. Her interest in healthy foods, long before there was such a section in chain supermarkets, was a natural extension of this. Gardens and the study of nature feature repeatedly in Maria's work, inspired at varying times by explorations, among other things, in form, juxtapositions of colours and the explicable linking to the human condition. One of the earliest works in the book, *Tante's Garten*, from around 1933, plays with strong painterly contrasts of colour. *The Loquat* (c. 1967) and garden studies, such as *Bird of Paradise* (c. 1967) are rendered with the simplicity of flowing lines, while later garden works from the early 2000s, including the Garden Nymph series, *Hello* and *Turkey Feeder*, appear enchanted, imbued with the magical and the personal, often capturing the bond between humans and the other living beings that share the world.

The planting of roots extended beyond the garden. She and Peter made family of their friends and that family warmth is the true beginning of the home they made. Home is integral to Maria's practice. In the house she and her husband built, her work space moved from the dining-room table (where things





Cityscape 1969
Synthetic polymer paint on board
62 x 89.5 cm

had to be constantly moved), to the sunroom, where she eventually moved too, once her arthritis meant she could no longer walk up the stairs to her bedroom. Home for her is a place full of art and discussion of art, with pictures on the wall, her own and the work of others.

As noted in the foreword, *They Came in Ships* is a symbol of the home that welcomes and nurtures. *Boat People* hangs in the same room: the study shows the intricacies of the lines, the swirls that are memory and the lines are at once anguished and hopeful, and of course sadly always more poignant as people continue to take any means possible to move themselves and their families to places, situations that appear to offer safety and potential for a better life.

There is nothing in Maria's work, or in herself, that yearns for the old country. A migrant who came to Australia following the devastation of the Second World War, one of the most striking things about Maria is her complete absence of "the old country", a better place ... she carried her better place within her, seeing the world with her boundless curiosity. Austria was of course part of this place, and her love of her native country is evident in her very early, very romantic *Festung Hohensalzburg* painted in 1936 when she was just fourteen. It was part of the Europe she carried with her, and combined with her European training, her lack of distance to artists like Paul Klee, but tempered to her own unique vision.

The Brisbane Maria and Peter settled in was considered by many as a big country town. Hats and gloves for the ladies, tea on the table when their husband got home from work. There had long been a strong, though very small (and wont to lose members to the south or overseas) art community, but the injection of the European diaspora from the 1950s onward permanently changed the city.

The different architecture of both public and private buildings was one of the most visible changes, many of which involved either Maria's husband Peter, or people they knew well, including other émigrés, such as Karl and Gertrude



Leaf study: Line Pattern c. 2006
Leaves and synthetic polymer
paint on paper
20.5 x 24.5 cm

Langer. Maria’s interest in architecture, an integral part of her readings and research, is demonstrated in *Cityscape* (1969). This painting’s three-dimensionality and strong sense of movement draws the viewer into the imagined city.

While architecture and design has been as much part of her world and reality as it was for Peter, she maintained her reserve and many aspects of her sense of self remained in isolation — there was little opportunity to share private (and in that era certainly unfashionable) philosophical thoughts and memories.

Maria’s work represents a rich way of viewing the world, one that has only become richer — more colourful, more lush, more filled — with age. In her works from the 1980s, landscapes are no longer distant, being observed; now we are “in” them, and they are teeming with life, human, animal, vegetal, merging together, no hard lines, but a sense of flow, of curves and merging (*Sand Dunes North Stradbroke Island*), while her collages of the early millennium (*Leaf Study: Line Pattern* for example) are experiments in working with nature to develop new forms. They are extensions of ideas she was examining in the 1960s (*Loquat*). The collages were also a matter of necessity: with her arthritis worsening, she needed to find a medium that didn’t demand hours holding a pencil or brush.

For Maria everything in the world is “imbued with life”; she has always been looking, but unlike so many of us, not for a better place where we once were but a place not yet visited, perhaps not even imagined. Thinking a thought, reading a philosophy, it is often difficult to go further, to follow it, to allow our minds to explore. To allow ourselves to be uncomfortable: we hit a wall, stop. Maria has continuously forced ways around, over, through these walls, re-reading, re-visiting, re-thinking. Her need has been to make connections and to draw together, like stitches, her disparate, though always human, concerns.



Sand Dunes, North Stradbroke Island c. 1957
Watercolour on paper
21 x 26 cm



POSTSCRIPT

The early days of a friendship are a lot like the early days of falling in love: spending time, learning about the other person's family, past, etc. In the early days of my friendship with Miriam and Christine, part of this learning took place at the Hotel Diana Korean bathhouse in Woolloongabba. This was where I first met Maria: I remember her back. Then in her early seventies, her arthritis not-quite-fully debilitating, the four of us sat in the water and talked. The skin on her back was perfect, no wrinkle, just flecks left by time and the sun.

And when I try and recall things about Maria, it is this image and her hands that I think of. Maria's skin is so delicate and the thought of its softness hurts my heart — especially as I sit here writing this in the Europe she left so long ago while she readies herself, with her open mind and curiosity, to go on to the next voyage, which will make crossing the equator seem a doddle. And we won't know where she will be. I think of her hands, of the bends and folds that the bones have set themselves in, and of the anger that other people, other artists would have felt at hands that could no longer hold a brush. But the best thing, so far, that Maria has taught me is acceptance. — BRONWYN MAHONEY

Life drawing: Two Figures in Blue Chairs c. 1976
Charcoal and chalk pastel on paper
35 x 38.5 cm



Life drawing: Portrait c. 1983
Charcoal on paper
20.5 x 27.5 cm

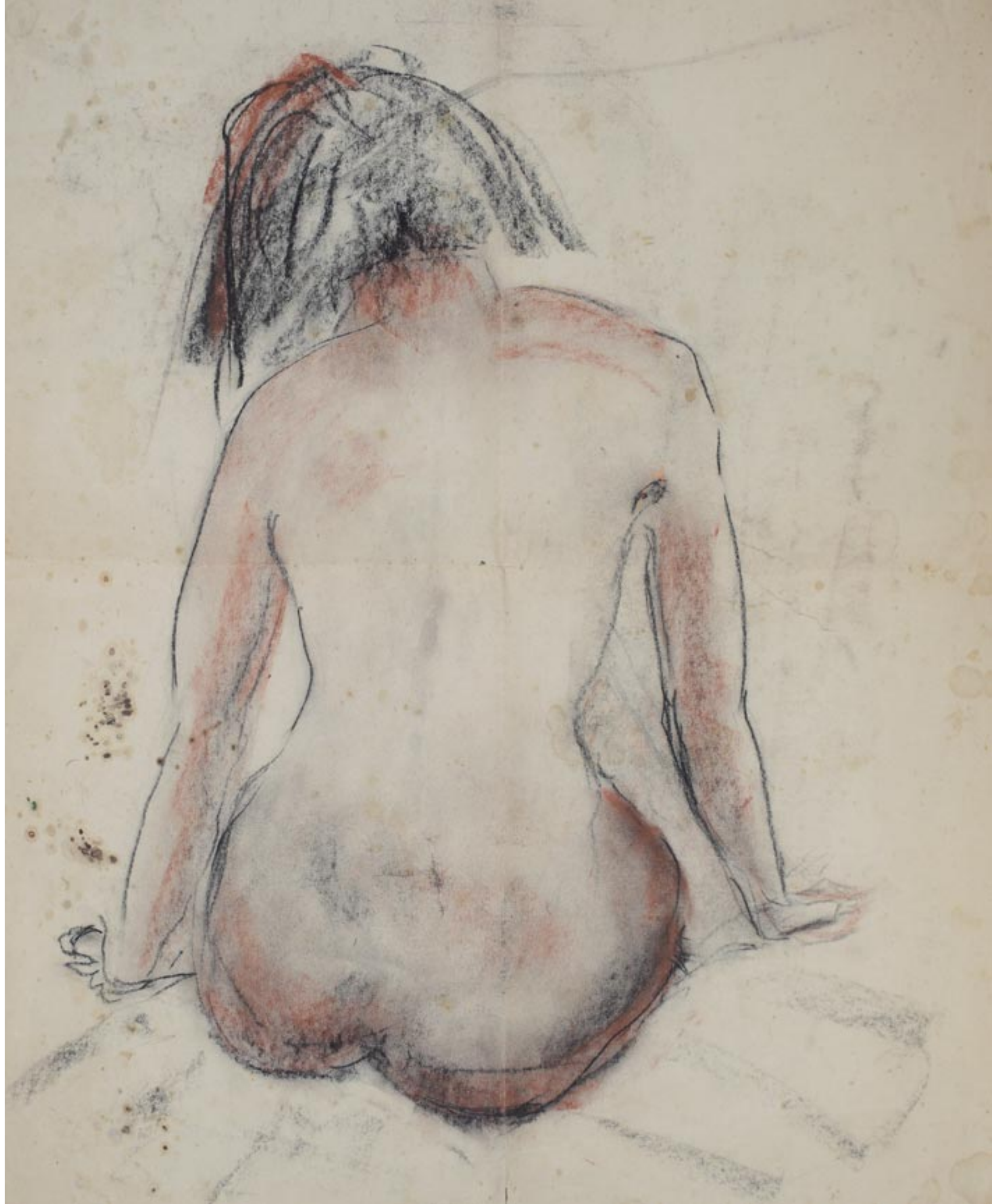
Life drawing: Body XIII c. 1978
Charcoal and chalk pastel
43 x 35.5 cm

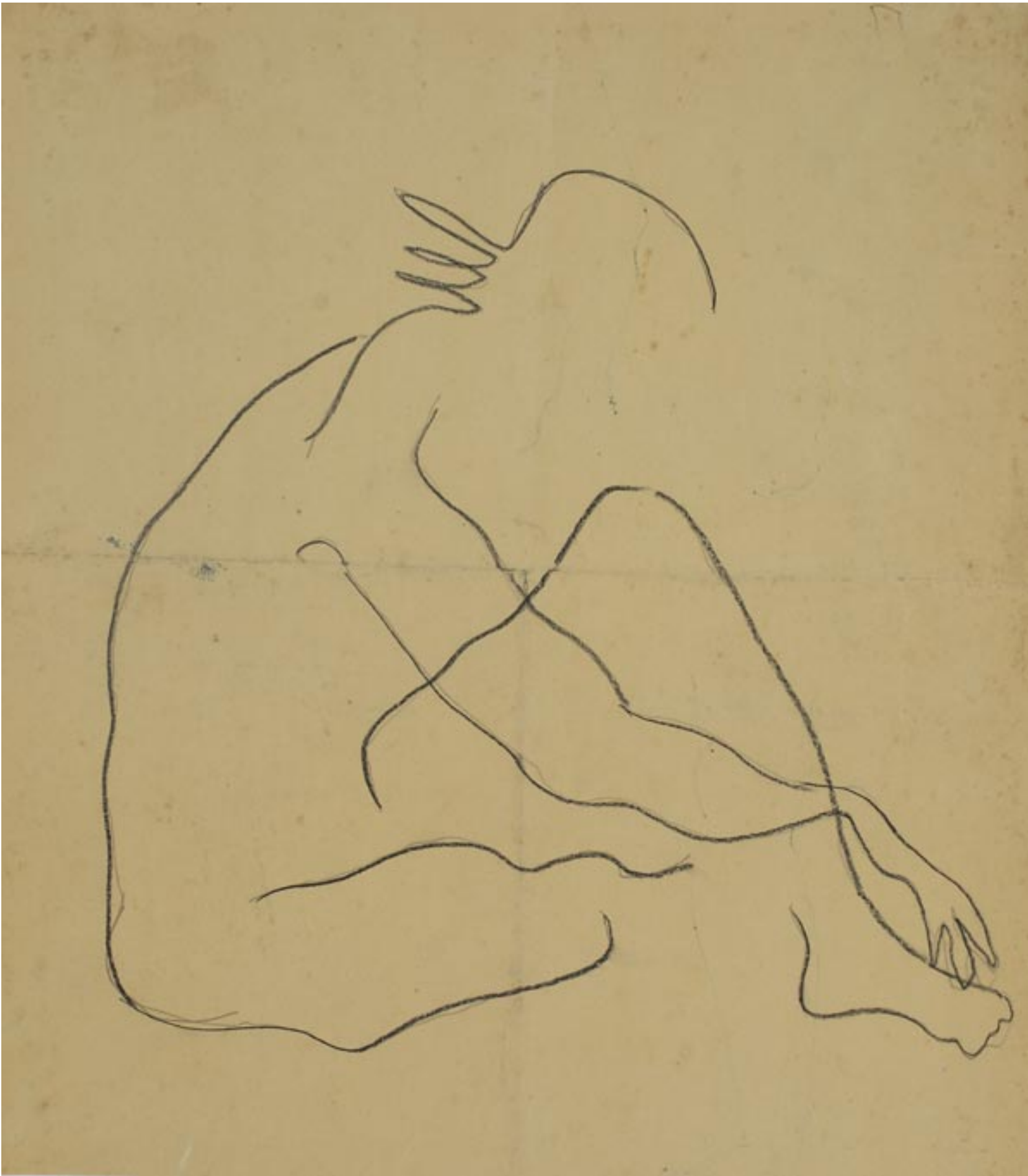




Life drawing: Body IX c. 1978
Charcoal on paper
38 x 49 cm

Life drawing: Seated Nude (detail) c. 1976
Chalk pastel and charcoal on paper
58 cm x 30 cm





Life drawing: Body X c. 1978
Pencil on paper
42.5 x 3 cm

Life drawing: Body XI c. 1978
Ink on paper
35.5 x 22 cm







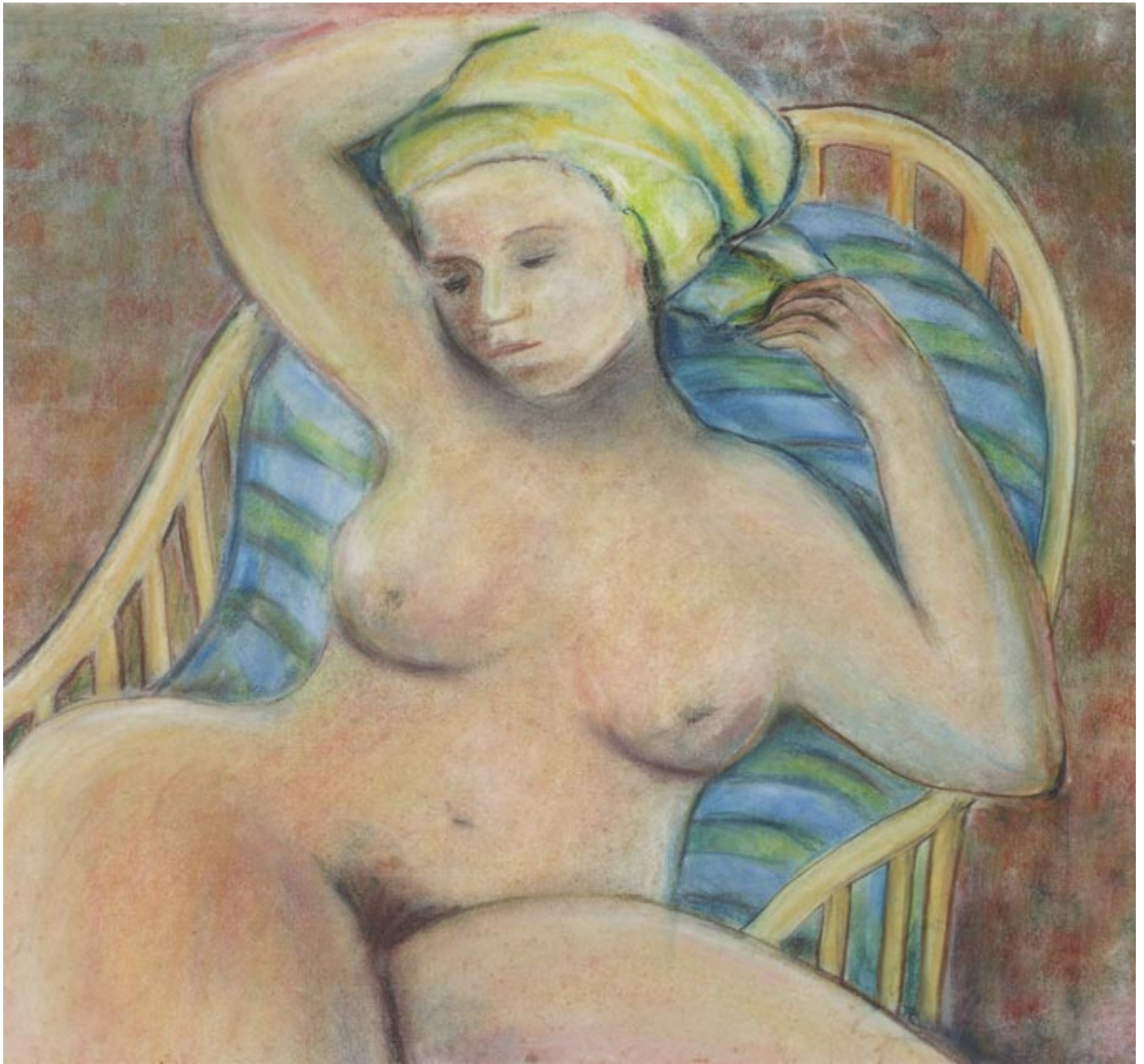
Portrait of a Girl with Long Hair c. 1979
Charcoal on paper
24 x 21.5 cm

Life drawing: Girl with Curly Hair c. 1978
Charcoal on paper
23.5 x 22 cm



Frank and Thelma c. 1985
Chalk pastel on paper
21 x 21.5 cm

Nude with Yellow Headscarf c. 1986
Chalk pastel on paper
38 x 42 cm





Portrait sketch: Man Smoking c. 1968
Pencil on paper
12 x 7 cm



Portrait sketch: Woman Smoking c. 1968
Pencil on paper
10 x 9 cm



The Game c. 1975
Charcoal on paper
16 x 21 cm



The Queue c. 1983
Pencil and charcoal on paper
16 x 21 cm



Gumnuts c. 1958
Pencil on paper
19 x 22.5 cm

Hand c. 1979
Ink on paper
19.5 x 15 cm