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"Fritz Bultman Studio"
photograph by
Joel Meyerowitz

IN MEMORIAM: AN "IRASCIBLE"

BY B.H. FRIEDMAN

Fritz Bultman (April 4, 1919-July 20, 1985) was one of the most complex men I have known — at once, generous and acquisitive, calm and temperamental, snobbish and democratic, loyal and vindictive, religious and heretical, slow-spoken and quick-witted. The contradictions in the man existed also in his work which, during any period of his career, could be both brilliant and somber in color, both figurative and abstract in style. He was not an easy artist for critics or dealers or collectors to handle. He did not present them with a simple recognizable trademark. Though they could see the consistency within given categories of his work — paintings, drawings, collages, and sculpture — the stylistic connections between categories, the recurring shapes in different media, were more difficult to see.

I knew Fritz during the last twenty-five or more years of his short life — not so short in comparison with the lives of some of the first-generation Abstract Expressionists to whom he was close, such as Pollock, Kline, and the polymath Weldon Kees, but very short in comparison with several masters of the previous generation, including Matisse and Hofmann, whom I think he most revered. Though Fritz and I may have been introduced to each other earlier, I really met him, met him head-on, in the late Fifties, at the Riverside Drive apartment of Judy and Ben Heller (then still in the jersey business before becoming an art dealer). I was dancing on a glass Mies coffee table and Fritz came over, it seemed, to save my life. In his Southern drawl, he explained, perhaps too graphically, what might happen if the glass broke. As I listened to the short, chubby man below me gesticulating and becoming shrill, I could almost see my amputated legs floating in a pool of blood. I could almost hear the siren of the ambulance arriving just a little too late. I got off the table and talked with Fritz for a long time. We talked about his family's funeral home in New Orleans and my family's real estate business in New York; about his rather tyrannical father and my own; about his leaving home to study art in Munich, in Chicago (the New Bauhaus), in New York and Provincetown with Hofmann; and about my entering the family business while writing nights and weekends. We agreed that there was no single path leading to creative satisfaction and that one might have to make as many detours and corrections along the way as in one's work itself.

Long after midnight I introduced Fritz to my wife Abby, and he told us how much we would like his wife Jeanne. A drink or two later, I asked if it was too late to call her. Wouldn't Jeanne like to join us for a nightcap? He wasn't sure. I persisted. Finally, he gave me their number. I called and awakened Jeanne. What did I mean by

calling at this hour?...A nightcap?... Was I out of my mind?...Where's Fritz?...I put him on, and I could hear her voice rising at the other end of the line. Fritz tried to explain. Every truncated sentence began with my name. I had had this silly idea...I had been drinking...I had been dancing earlier on a glass table...Her voice continued to rise. She thought he'd better come home. By the time he got off the phone he was furious at me. How could I call Jeanne at one in the morning? How could I awaken her? How...? My explanation was simple: he had given me the number. No, he hadn't given it to me, I had wormed it out of him. He never wanted to see me again — or Abby either.

However, inevitably in the small art world of those years, we saw each other again and again — the first few times, without Jeanne, then with her, at an opening or a party following one. Fritz introduced us cautiously. He didn't have to be concerned. He was right the first time, the night at the Hellers' — Abby and I liked Jeanne. She was calmer than Fritz and more forgiving. We felt immediately that she was a soothing influence in his life and in his art.

There were other contrasts: Jeanne was tall and slim, with a long neck and a strong narrow face; Fritz, besides being comparatively short and pudgy, was almost neckless, round-faced, and soft-featured. We didn't know, couldn't know at first, the extent to which she held his life together, his and that of their sons and, later, that of their grandchildren. Fritz loved to select the clothes Jeanne wore and the art and antiques that furnished their homes on Miller Hill Road in Provincetown and on 95th Street in New York. Jeanne took care of the children, the cooking, the housekeeping, and Fritz — Fritz, most of all. She protected him from his own gregariousness, saw to it that he had the time he needed for his work and for the vast amount of art viewing and serious reading that fed into it. Gradually it became apparent that, in a sense, they always worked together. It was appropriate that Fritz's last, most major work (1981-85) — a stained-glass mural for Kalamazoo College, 12 feet by 47 feet, for which he did the designs in collage, and Jeanne (aided by a few students) did the execution in glass and leading — was a literal collaboration, though Jeanne said of it, with typical self-effacement, "I do not feel that I am an artist in the true sense of creating an original work of art, and I asked that I not be listed as an artist."

I think back to the first exhibitions of Fritz Bultman's work that I saw at the Stable Gallery in 1958 and at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1959 — comparatively dark paintings mostly, in which natural shapes (that were to be echoed again and again in later work) began tentatively to appear and to become increasingly clearer and more refined in exhibitions of paintings, collages, and drawings in the early Sixties at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery through the early Seventies at Martha Jackson (again). During roughly the same period, 1963-75, I visited Fritz's studios quite frequently (particularly the one in Provincetown, designed by Tony Smith in 1945) and

there watched the development of a large body of sculpture, fabricated typically in plaster over wiremesh armatures. These works grew slowly and organically and were based often on forms from nature — bones, plants, horns, shells — that, through manipulation of shape and scale, achieved a monumental and often mythic presence.

It was always a surprise to visit the Provincetown studio, which resembled a large, geometric, proto-Minimalist Smith sculpture, and to find inside it Fritz's seething world of tension between the Classical and Baroque — the same world that existed in his homes full of furniture and accessories made of horn, whale vertebrae, bent-wood, carved and layered "tramp art" cigar boxes, and even bent bayonets. It was a surprise, also, to see the first major exhibition of Bultman's sculptures, cast in bronze, at the by then (early 1976) two Martha Jackson Galleries. At the end of my brother Sanford's catalogue introduction to this dual exhibition, after dealing with specific pieces — e.g., *Catch I, II, and III* and *Good News I and II* — he summarizes Bultman's accomplishments:

And what of the artist? To bring his work to fruition on earth, he too, like Persephone, must spend a goodly portion of his time toiling in the Underworld. To come up with a "catch" such as Bultman's, he must, moreover, endure a struggle with the earthly, striving for years to master not only his materials but himself. In the process he often falters, fails, suffers defeat, and is even torn asunder — somewhat in the image of the hero destined to become the mutilated god. Increasingly he looks to his work for the possibility of epiphany. Only by relinquishing the personal, "dying to the self," does the artist become at last the messenger of his muse, the work itself his glad tidings.

From the sculptures on, during the last twenty or so years of his life, Bultman did his best work and, during the last ten years, his most joyous. He was a "late bloomer" in every sense. His eyes opened more and more widely to color. His shapes themselves opened wider and wider. He saw more ambitiously and was able in the best of his work, particularly the splendid and spirited collages of the last decade, to encompass what he had learned not only from Matisse and Hoffmann but from daring books that moved across large canvases. I remember particularly his enthusiasm for Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* and, more recently, for David S. Landes' *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* — a sea and time, vast challenging themes for any artist. Fritz presented both of these books to me, almost like calling cards, cards of identity, crypto-credentials. However, he could be at least as enthusiastic about the sometimes more modest works of authors he knew well: in the Forties, Tennessee Williams and Weldon Kees; later, Donald Windham, Sandy Campbell, Norman Mailer, Rudolph Wurlitzer, Michael Stephens (whose *Paragraphs* were accompanied by fifteen

fine Bultman drawings), Anka Muhlstein, Keith Althaus, Roger Skillings, my brother, myself... Again and again over the years, he went out and bought copies of books by such friends and gave them to others, painters as well as writers, who he thought might not otherwise have seen them.

He did something else even rarer among artists — he helped us with our own work. In my case, he was always encouraging but, more specifically, he gave me information and leads for my *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible*, for an article on Weldon Kees, and for two articles that appeared in *Arts Magazine*, "A Reasoned Catalogue is Almost a Life" (March, 1979; about the Pollock catalogue raisonnee) and "The Irascibles: A Split Second in Art History" (September, 1978; about the most famous photograph of the Abstract Expressionists — taken by Nina Leen for *Life*, which published it January 15, 1951). It still seems ironic to me that Bultman, along with Hofmann and Kees, was away for this photograph. Though all three signed "The Irascibles" letter protesting the Metropolitan Museum's neglect of advanced American Art, their absence from the photo itself contributed to their omission from the official, institutional Abstract-Expressionist "list."

Fritz was also generous and committed to visual artists. He studied with Hofmann as early as 1938. He was equally early in his appreciation of John Graham, Joseph Cornell, Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock, the Cavallons, Myron Stout, and others. In his teaching at Pratt Institute, Hunter College, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Tulane University, Tougaloo College, and elsewhere, he gave enormously of himself to students. And at the Long Point Gallery in Provincetown (of which, in 1976, he was a founding member), he fought as hard for the youngest artist on their roster, Rick Klauber, as for one of the oldest, Robert Motherwell. And there, also, he befriended Varujan Boghosian and helped to find objects for his colleague's assemblages.

The lists could go on — lists of writers, artists, institutions; lists of specific generousities; lists of battles as worthy as that against the Metropolitan Museum; lists of squabbles as silly as his with me when we first met. . . . However, such lists would add only details, a few bumps and bulges, to the shape of a career, a reputation, that remains too modest. I would rather conclude by emphasizing the culmination of Bultman's body of work. After one more show at Martha Jackson (in 1977), little was shown except at the Long Point Gallery — little, particularly, of the superb late collages, made of hand-painted paper, "built up" almost like his sculpture, and revised, in process, like his drawings. These collages should be more widely seen, preferably within the context of Bultman's work in other media. Only then will a wider public understand its loss, and only then will it be able to cherish the memory of a significant artist who received too little attention, especially during the courageous later years when, despite almost constant illness, he produced his happiest, most accepting and affirmative work.

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Fritz Bultman's work reflected how he felt about life. Like a religion, Fritz and Jeanne believed in each other, in their production and what touched them as a team. Fritz the individual insisting on teamwork with his wife and with his models. Teaming humor with anything. Quick to laugh, his laughter infectious. Precocious wild child, encyclopedia mind, willing to let others be wild — a respecter of wild oats sowing, "But sow 'em well! Spread the salt but spread the salt evenly." Insist and insist. Get up cool but get to work. Work the garden, think, read. Work the work, think talk. Swim Herring Cove long lengths side

stroke so as to watch the shore. Fritz and Jeanne, melodic psychic call and answers. Statement and restatement. Announcement and elaboration. Teamwork. The South and the Midwest, living in the North. The tall woman, the short man, the oneness consistency, openness allowing others to feel part of the family. Kalamazoo! — where the luminous internal light, the positive color of the collages was majestically ensconced. Jeanne, the talented quick learning hard working only-one-who-could-do-it-right crafts-woman learning stained glass to translate the collages into this transcendent medium. The sculpture flow-

ed into the paintings and the paintings into the collages and the collages into the drawings — the nudes with the waves, the waves with the texture, the texture with the light — into the colored glass.

Summer '74 I was in the Bultman's cottage. I'd see Fritz every morning coming down the hill from his house. Pink oxford shirt, khakis. He'd check out their organic garden. He watched it grow with patience. He'd stop and say hello. Then into his studio. There was never with Fritz mere talk. He was executing step by step all the time. Countless motions. Each part of the art. His demeanor silently insisted he

was special. Everybody from all walks of life immediately sensed Fritz knew exactly who he was and that, if they wanted, Fritz would give them all the time in the world to find out too. Fritz would insist on it.

Rick Klauber

The Collages of Fritz Bultman

By Budd Hopkins

Vincent Van Gogh, marvelous though he was, in many ways spoiled things for other artists. Unlike that great, driven and ultimately mad painter, most of us in real life are easily distinguishable from the paintings and sculptures we make, and most of us, if truth be told, lead relatively uneventful lives. I've often thought of the absurdity of a Hollywood film on the life of, say, Henri Matisse. Matisse sleeping, Matisse waking up and painting, Matisse having coffee and talking to his wife, Matisse going to bed that night. Few trips to foreign shores, few dramas — in fact few memorable incidents — only many great works of art. If Kirk Douglas in steel-rimmed spectacles and a neat little beard were to play Matisse, the script would provide a paucity of opportunities to gnash those famous movie star teeth.

I bring this up, first of all, because Fritz Bultman in his late collages is something of an American Matisse. Those very large, clear, radiant works of his provide an instant joyfulness and the kind of emotional precision that Matisse would have instantly understood. I cannot write about Fritz's work, however, without remembering his as a man, as a friend, and as an extremely complex artist whose person was very different from his product. In conversation Fritz was given to long pauses, halts and near stammers as he sought a particular phrase, a necessary psychological shading. His thought could be as convoluted, inward, and even as dark as his collages were clear, precise and joyful. In a way it's as if these abstract works embody all the assurance and simplicity and sunlight that Fritz's personal style seemed to avoid. Robert Lifton once remarked to me that despite Freud and all the psychological theorizing that's gone down over the years, plain old depression remains the central problem. He meant this ironically, of course, but the truth is there. In an age of terrorism, nuclear accidents, "surgical" bombing raids that kill children and all the other horrors we read about daily, depression is almost a natural condition of life.

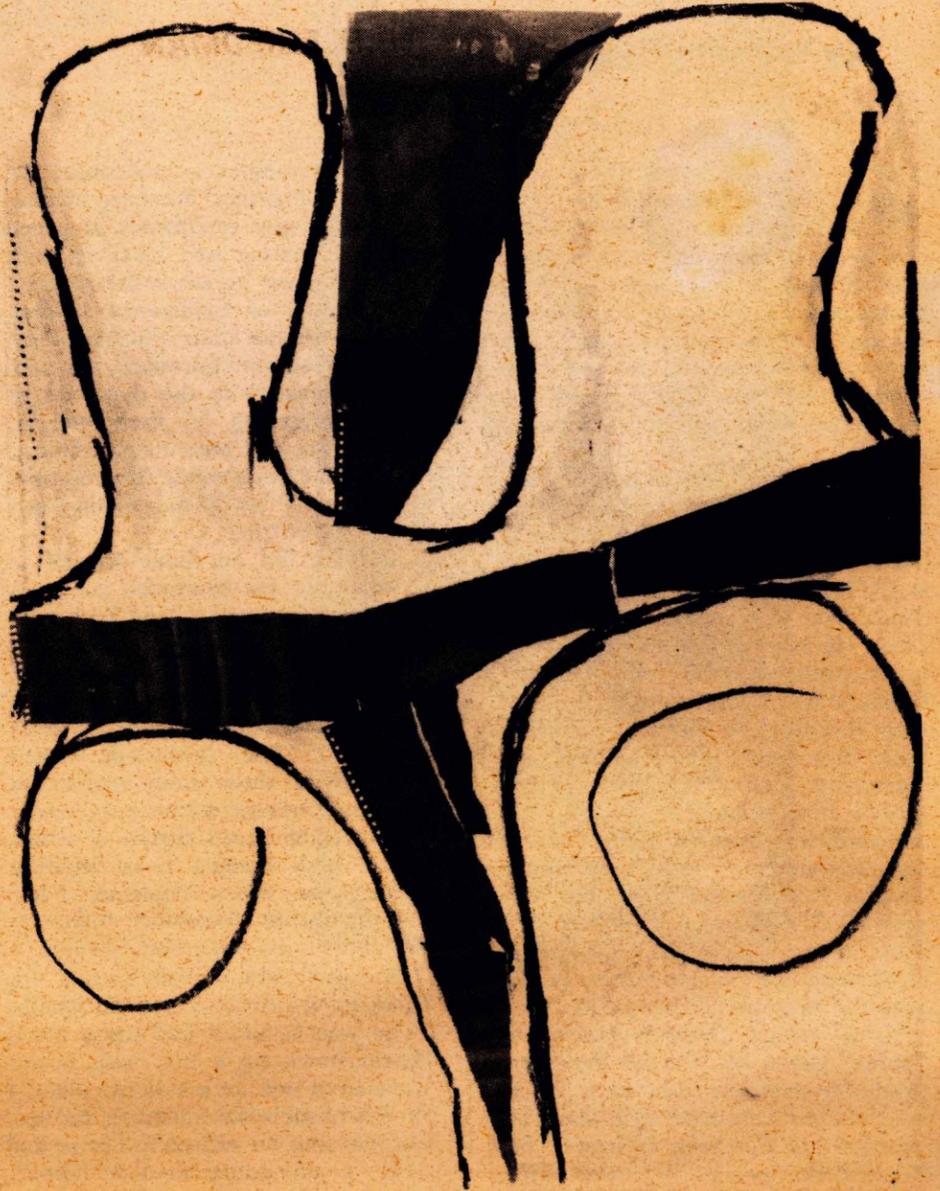
Fritz Bultman's collages provided — for himself as well as for all the rest of us — a radiant island in this depressing sea. They suggest that even now one can still be clear and assured in one's decisions, that we are not necessarily doomed to choose always amongst a mass of flawed possibilities. In fact, the pleasure of *definiteness* is one of the most valued gifts his work can bestow upon us. Fritz's generosity also includes the simple idea of beauty and the emotions it inspires. Earlier, beauty per se lost some of its appeal during the abstract expressionist years, when angst and authenticity were more often talked about. Artists for whom physical beauty was a more deliberate goal — people like Bonnard, for example — were often given less attention than they warranted. Fritz was an unashamed lover of color, of the light that painted paper can magically embody. Pure, simple,

straightforward beauty is more centrally important in his collages than in any of his other works — his sculptures, his drawings or his paintings, where other factors mitigate that element.

Though we may think of many disparate artists as colorists, in actual fact not that many painters over the last few centuries have stressed color as an autonomous glory in its own right, all apart from its more business-like functions in an artwork. In his collages Fritz Bultman gives us color — pure, fresh, clean, radiant color — as an end in itself, as a simple source of visual energy. In this he follows both his beloved teacher, Hans Hofmann, and Henri Matisse, the spiritual father of Fritz's late collages. In the hands of another kind of artist, someone like Mark Rothko, for example, pure color can be made to operate very differently. Rothko's method was to combine hues in such a way as to suggest inward — even tragic — emotional states. Despite the presence of saturated, "beautiful" colors, a Rothko can have the paradoxical effect of *draining* energy from the room in which it hangs. Fritz in this respect is Hofmann's true descendant, since his collages, like Hofmann's paintings, almost always function as power sources, as places to go for a necessary emotional recharge. His color cleans the eyes and invigorates the spirit.

Jeanne Bultman's translation of some of her husband's collages into stained glass attests to the primacy of pure, emotive color in his scale of values. In these works, where translucent glass replaces opaque paper, one discovers an even more intense and refined world of color and light. And since Fritz began with a stack of papers he had already painted before undertaking the process of cutting and shaping, the physical processes of the two media are not totally dissimilar. Bultman covered his strong rag paper with unmixed gouache color, stressing the primaries, black and a few rich earth hues. The earth colors — sienna and ochre appear most frequently — perform the function of grounding his images, connecting them with the soil. But in the last few years, as his health deteriorated, Fritz depended more and more often on a range of ethereal blues and whites, a higher, lighter, less physical spectrum than before. An interesting precedent comes to mind when one considers Henri Matisse, whose worldly, coloristic, carefully measured style turned out to be ideally suited for the design of a Roman Catholic chapel in Vence. Towards the end of his life, Fritz Bultman, too, was able to infuse his worldly style with new spiritual resonance — despite the fact that the changes in his work are very subtle indeed. It is as if his preoccupation with principles of organic growth, his interest in the sea and the beauty of the human form all sprang from the same spiritual source.

Fritz's world of abstract, organic forms was steeped in nature. He loved certain curves, a particular melodic edge that can equally define a wave, a breast or an antelope's horn. Yet these characteristic Bultman curves also approach the kind of regularity that belongs almost as much to geometry — to arcs of a circle superimposed and then reversed in lazy essences. They do not ever seem merely eccentric, or "naturalistic" in the manner of Arshile Gorky's family of organic edges. When Mondrian next visits the Heavenly Museum he



"The Lap"

Fritz Bultman

might surprise Fritz by recognizing him as something of a kindred soul... or, at least, a distant cousin. Fritz's reverence for clarity, for precise, pure color, for superficially simple, logical compositions which upon study appear surprisingly complex — all these elements would seem very familiar to that great and subtle Dutchman.

I first saw Fritz's collages en masse at his 1974 exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery, and the experience was a powerful, memorable one. He titled his show *Collages: Between Painting and Sculpture*, a name which provides a very important insight into his thinking. Fritz was, of course, a superlative sculptor, describing a visit to Edward Hopper's Truro studio. He found the old man seated in front of his easel, staring disconsolately at four joined stretcher bars sans canvas, a rectangle every bit as challenging for him, with his architectural acuity, as it would have been had the linen already been stapled in place. As lucky — or inspired — artists often do, Fritz Bultman hit on the perfect personal solution to the problem of fixed limits. He simply went to a large wall in his studio and began pinning pre-painted colored papers to it, enlarging the composition as he went along. If an initial curve seemed too short, he made it longer. Often a structure he originally conceived of as being vertical in orientation changed direction and widened. His only constraints were the wall, the problem of an eventual frame, and his own sensibility. There was no original set of limits, not even the idea that the composition must of necessity have a rectangular outer silhouette:

If a thick, lazy curve is a central Bultman unit in these collages, there is another element that is nearly as ubiquitous: it is a small, slightly irregular colored square, or series of squares. These small geometrical shapes are often glued onto the larger curving forms at precise intervals like confetti fastened to boomerangs. Though it may sound contradictory, these little squares provide both a sense of regularity and order — and a new, smaller-scale decorativeness. In fact, it's possible to look at these collages as if they were beautifully-designed machines that hum and sing only during Mardi-Gras.

In his more transitional collages — works of the sixties and early seventies — Fritz made extensive use of torn edges and irregular surfaces, thereby lessening the distance between collage and his own earlier paintings. It is a familiar process. In the nineteen-forties, for example, Robert Motherwell began making collages which intermixed painted areas with torn paper in a complex dialogue that only gradually clarified its terms. If we begin as painters we think in that medium and can easily regard collage as something to "mix" with painting; or even, if we are really condescending, as a way of working that's glib and easy. I remember Steve Pace's remarking once, tongue-in-cheek, that he'd never seen a bad collage. I had my tongue in the same place when I countered that that might be true, but I'd never seen a *good* woodcut. Collage in the hands of a master — one things immediately of Braque and

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Budd Hopkins is a painter, collagist, and sculptor, who exhibited with Fritz Bultman at the Long Point Gallery in Provincetown.

Bultman

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Matisse, Bultman and Motherwell — is an arena in which large esthetic choices can be made quickly, clearly and decisively. The exact placement of a shape can assume the same importance that the choice of adjectives has in Haiku. Over the years Fritz Bultman's collages developed away from a complex and imitative painterliness and towards a greater sense of simplification and distilled power. Clear shapes and pure colors stand up clearly for themselves. Typical later works like *The Red Wave* and *The Beach* have, as it were, fewer moving parts. There is an increased sense of compressed energy in these collages that fully comports with Fritz's position as an early and important figure in the abstract expressionist movement. His works are forthright and ebullient in a way that occasionally reminds one of certain paintings by his friend Franz Kline.

The only artists in history who really have had to *name* their works the way we name our children are abstract artists. Representational artists can, if

they wish, just describe the subject — *Cape End Light* or *Reclining Nude*. The titles abstract painters choose can be clues to sensibility, and even to the artist's values. Franz Kline's use of Wagnerian names like *Siegfried* or *Wotan*, for example, or Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist* or *Autumn Rhythm* are cases in point. Fritz Bultman loved the Cape. He loved the sea and swam almost daily, rain or shine. He was born in New Orleans, and beneath the surface of his work lies that city's mixed aura of French order and American jazz, of carnival nights and Catholic ritual. He gave his collages names like *The Blue Wave*, *The Gulf Stream*, *Celebration*, *Midsummer*, and, inevitably, *Mardi-Gras*. Many of his collages, in their heavy curves and intense color, also suggest blossoming, opening, even sexual forms that are simultaneously energetic and oddly languid. Despite the impact of Bultman's blunt, hard-edged shapes, one soon discovers their surprising emotional ambiguity. A very complex mind lay behind these apparently simplified images, as I have pointed out. Fritz was a true intellectual, a widely read man whose interests were varied and eccentric. A book on the spiral as a principle of nature might be taken up after a

history of Africa, a collection of essays by Adrian Stokes or a work on the theory of costume. Whenever my wife and I visited the Bultman's we were always curious to know what new book he had discovered what odd topic he was currently pursuing. Yet Fritz's intellectual activities do not fully explain the man. He drew almost daily from the nude, and the drawings clearly reveal his appreciation of female sensuality. Fritz's excitement at discovering a new writer or historian was matched by his pleasure at having found a wonderful new model. And that particular pleasure, with its subtle sexual overtones, is also present in the waving, curving shapes of the large abstract collages.

Apart from his moods of depression and despair — moods inevitably produced by chronic poor health — nearly every aspect of Fritz's complex temperament somehow fused with the others to fuel the collages of his last decade. They rank, I believe, among the greatest works of the era. They are beautiful, magisterial, and now, in retrospect, strangely spiritual. It is a profoundly depressing thought to know that we will not see Fritz again, but it is equally sad to know that the last of these great works is in the world, and there will be no more.