

Charcoal With a Charge

By **STEPHEN MAINE**

One of the fascinations of portraiture is that it inevitably discloses more about the artist than it does about the subject. As surely as any other genre, but with considerably more irony, the portrait is a mirror of its creator's obsessions, fantasies, and predilections. In "Head of a Girl," his second solo show at McKenzie Fine Art, James Nelson expands on this idea. In 15 charcoal drawings on handmade Japanese paper, he imagines his subjects as consisting almost entirely of roiling mounds of tightly curled hair, ar-

HEAD OF A GIRL

McKenzie Fine Art

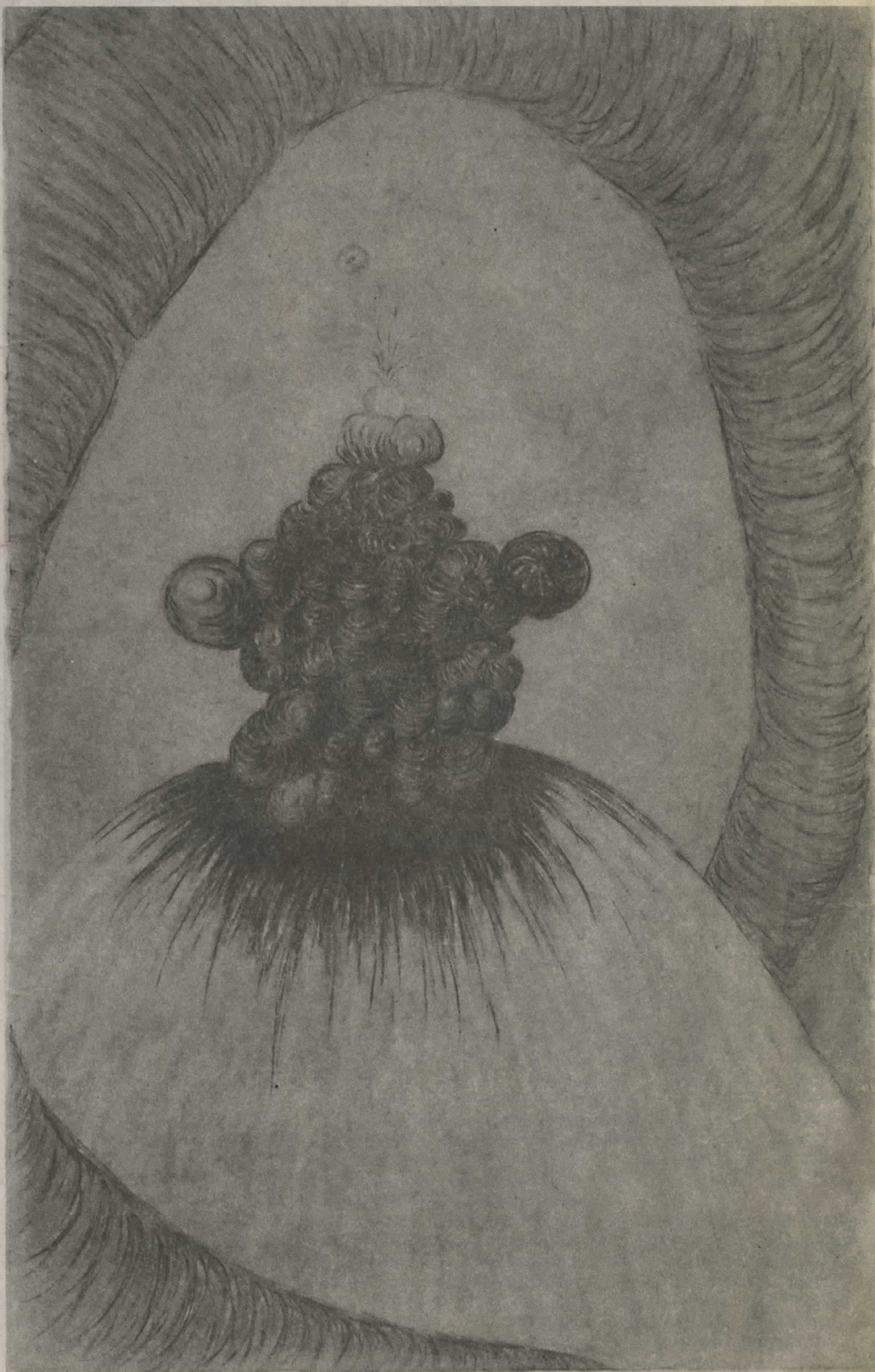
ranged in irregular bulges and subsuming all other attributes in swirling, lumpy coils. The effect is to give an unsettling erotic charge to the unremitting tactility of this artist's technique.

Such tension is unmistakable in "Blue Head with Hole" (2007), one of three drawings done on pale blue paper. Wraithlike, a rocco hairdo emerges from the bottom of the frame, surmounted by a smaller cluster that flaunts a tight, round orifice. The exhibition's press release quotes a state-

Nelson's work possesses the visionary tang of Symbolism, and recalls Surrealism's irrational synecdoches.

ment in which Mr. Nelson cites the Rapunzel fairy tale, and in "China Head" (2007), he reimagines the poor girl trapped not in a tower in the woods, but somewhere along the Great Wall. Ornamentation runs amok. Her grotesquely elaborate tresses contrast visually and conceptually with the blocky crenellations of the ancient fortification.

In the six-and-a-half-foot tall "White Well," a cascading coiffure morphs into a knotted ropelike column, suggesting rescue or escape from the yawning maw below. According to the artist, the motif was derived from a drawing by Odilon Redon, "The Well," done around 1880 and now in MoMA's collection. In that work, the disembodied and prematurely wizened head of a boy is framed by a ring of heavy stones. Mr. Nel-



James Nelson, "Glint" (2007).

son's work is much less literal, but it does possess the visionary tang of Symbolism, and recalls Surrealism's irrational synecdoches.

Though art-historically erudite, these glimpses into Mr. Nelson's

imaginative life are far from pastiche. They comprise a compelling and highly personal body of work, lodged in the gap between abstraction and figuration, archetypal imagery and private reverie, the

artist's subject and the artist as subject.

Until October 6 (511 W. 25th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-989-5467).

MCKENZIE FINE ART