

# DRAWING

Vol. VII, No. 2

The International Review published by The Drawing Society

July–August 1985

## Forum: de Staël's "Martiques"

Nicholas Fox Weber

*I need to feel the presence of life in front of me, and to seize it whole, just as it penetrates through my eyes and skin.*

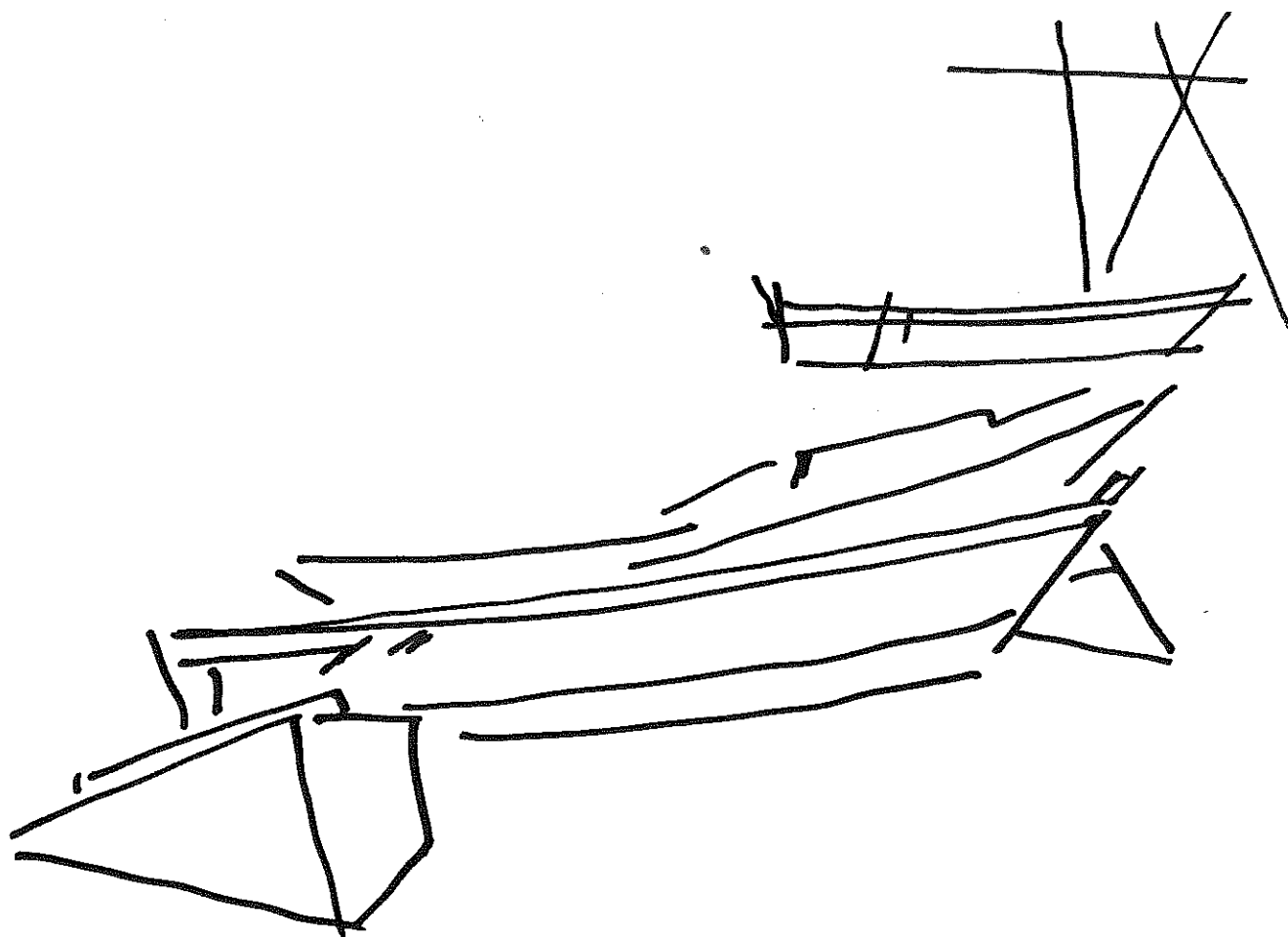
*I must think of the impersonal and the universal.*

Nicholas de Staël

Like most of de Staël's late work, *Martiques*, drawn in 1954, one year before his death, is part of his all-consuming attempt to bridge the gap between what he saw and what he committed to paper or canvas. Studio objects, buildings in Paris, Mediterranean coastal villages—his everyday reality was his subject. He struggled to be faithful to its appearance, and in the heavily impastoed paintings, as in the spare linear drawings, he succeeded.

*Martiques*, named for a Provençal fishing port, captures the look of boats in all their buoyancy and solidity. It is clear what sits in front of what. The angles and spaces are legible. The blank paper becomes sea and sky in relatively proper degrees of recession. And de Staël achieved the desired universality: far removed from the seashore scenes of Monet and Boudin, with their trappings of an era, these boats are familiar to most anyone who has looked at a calm harbor.

The opening quotations—from two of the many letters that document de Staël's total immersion in the process of making art—are plainly keys to elements of his aspiration. They are significant, however, not just for their content but also for their tone. The "I need" and "I must" are unintended revelations that point to de Staël's most essential trait—his constant, unrelenting vehemence. His ardor comes through as clearly in the weight of his decisive pen strokes as in the sculptural manipulations of his palette knife and the bold expanses of vibrant color in his larger works. We feel his emotional engagement both in the meticulous organization of the surface and in the deliberate positioning of figures and open spaces. The placement and commitment of each line bespeak a focus



Nicolas de Staël, *Martiques* (1954), pen and ink,  $13 \times 15\frac{1}{16}$  in. (33.0  $\times$  40.5 cm.). Private collection.

that seems absolute and inevitable. Weighty choices have been made.

Risks have been taken as well. For all his control, the rational attempts to achieve that "presence of life" and "the impersonal," de Staël allowed himself to become possessed by both the subject and the process of drawing, to succumb to the fervor of "must" and "need." His abandon permitted him to burst out with abstract phrasing like that in the crossed lines at the upper right of *Martiques* without relinquishing any of his sureness of technique or the facts of the scene. The serious and the spontaneous combine with one another. A mixture of repose and feverish excitement is established by the shifts in rhythm from genial sweeps to sharp staccatos.

The same blend of the rational and the sensual marks a 1954 painting of a similar view in *Martiques* that is in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzer-

land. Dinghies and sailboats are distinctly in place against an unmodulated sea of piercing orange that covers more than half the surface of the painting. The aspect of de Staël that was entertainer and inventor, that transformed as well as realized his subject, is what ultimately gives his work its singular impact.

*Martiques* invokes its subject matter; it is also an art object that is, in the best sense, elegant and refined. The drawing is a paean to the themes of black and white, line and void. What describes reality is as beautiful as reality itself. If de Staël has long been a controversial figure—his representation in most American museums, excepting the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Phillips Collection, is scant—for some of us his work holds the power to transfix as well as the mystery that the visible world itself had for the artist.