



Victor Skipp





**Victor Skipp**

## Victor Skipp – A Fascination with Art and Life

Victor Skipp (1925–2010) was a historian, philosopher and passionate collector.<sup>1</sup> He created a remarkable collection of art, books and ethnographic objects in the house in Hopton that he shared with his wife Pat. For Skipp the connections between items in his collection and their special place at Hopton became a statement of his philosophy of life. He states:

“The more diverse the range of objects in terms of provenance the more the fundamental, all-embracing nature of the interrogatory idea is brought home. So the more it is appreciated.”<sup>2</sup>

The seemingly disparate juxtaposition of a Bob Law painting with an african mask or Turkoman Rug were all connected for Skipp. He celebrated the craftsmanship of his local finds in the same way as he appreciated Ivon Hitchens’ fluent paintings. He explored the representation of the human figure in both the African sculptures and objects he collected and in how he understood self-portraiture in Linda Karshan’s drawings.

Skipp regularly visited Kettle’s Yard. He was inspired by the exhibitions that he saw here, the artists he met, and by Jim Ede’s (Kettle’s Yard’s founder) fusion of art and found natural objects in a domestic environment. Skipp was always developing his collection, celebrating its diversity in the continual rehang of his house, which, along with its contents, he left to Kettle’s Yard on his death in December 2010. He states:

“In the last resort, the ‘right’ relationships often appear to be a matter of precise positioning, and/or of slight (and generally accidental) visual echoes and correspondences.”<sup>3</sup>

These connections were about systems, structures and ways of seeing and discovering the world, always searching for meaning between the ancient and modern. Skipp captured this thinking through his own unpublished writings on art and philosophy. They represent a unique compilation of quotations and personal insights, acting as a form of index for the collection.

Kettle's Yard's exhibition *A Lasting Legacy: The House and Collection of Victor Skipp* celebrated Skipp's collection and generosity, presenting a selection of work by the modern and contemporary artists whom he particularly supported, including Hitchens, Law, and Karshan. Some areas of Skipp's house were suggestively re-created to reflect his own juxtapositions of objects, and his inspiring mix of past, present, and world cultures. Books from Skipp's large collection of 20<sup>th</sup> century art, literature and poetry, and his own writings, were also displayed. Kettle's Yard was delighted to present a film made by Candida Richardson in 2010, which captured the inseparable relationship that existed between Skipp's life and the art, literature, and philosophy that surrounded him.

Andrew Nairne, Director

1  
Victor Skipp's published writings include *Out of the Ancient World* (1967), *Crisis and Development* (1978) and *A History of Greater Birmingham* (1980). Significant unpublished writings include *The Binary Business* (c.1985–87), *The Lost Inheritance* (c.1987), and *The Year of Mythical Thinking* (2007 and 2009)

2  
*The Binary Business* (c.1985–87)

3  
Ibid.





**“In the last resort, the ‘right’ relationships often appear to be a matter of precise positioning, and/or of slight (and generally accidental) visual echoes and correspondences.”**

Victor Skipp, *The Binary Business* (c.1985–87)















## A personal reflection

As a teenager from a conservative background, visiting Victor and Pat at their home in Birmingham was the start of a formative and enjoyable relationship. At the time when the norm was houses filled with the material bounty of the Cold War years, Clay Lane was different: it was brimming with a fascinating cocktail of paintings, sculptures and found objects. Here were people who did not accept the norm, and were infectiously enthusiastic about their art and the ideas it embodied. I had found a mentor who was to help me develop the latent, but unrealized, artistic dimension to my personality.

Later I came to understand something of Vic's [Victor Skipp] own development. Leaving the narrow confines of an austere Nonconformist family, he was exposed to a very different life serving with the Marines during ww2, and different again with post-war Cambridge. Small wonder he found it impossible to



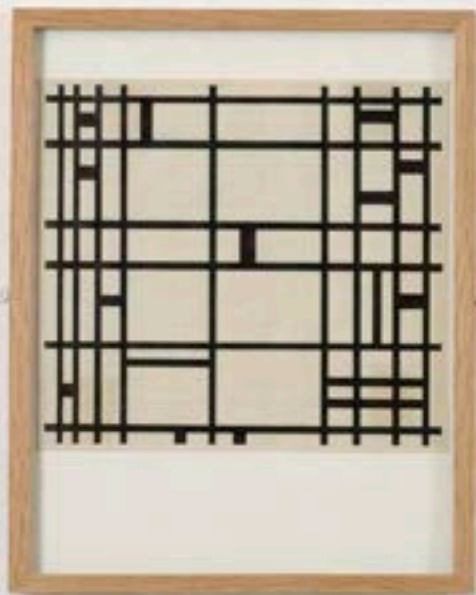
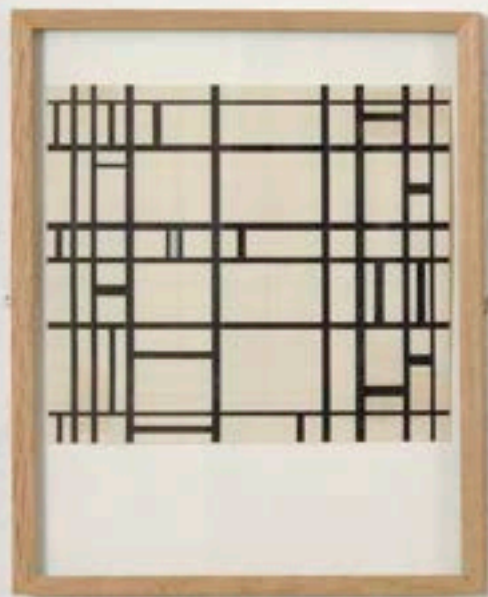
re-adopt the norms of his parents and left to build a different life in Birmingham and meet Pat, the love of his life.

The move to Hopton liberated him. There he was immersed in the countryside he loved, vaulted by huge East Anglian skies. There the song of the thrushes and nightingales he loved permeated. There in the timeless peace he was able to explore his passion for new ideas and beautiful things. At Hopton he could give full vent to his enthusiasms: to acquire, reflect, connect.

When his interest in nomadic carpets finally demanded he buy a Yurt, I was one of the party rapidly recruited to erect it in the garden of the Old Rectory. We spent a chaotic day, directed by Vic, erecting it in what he was certain was the correct juxtaposition to the house and garden. Passing light aircraft took note and saluted. We had achieved something; we all chose to ignore that nomadic women routinely do the same thing in a few minutes.

This epitomized Vic at his best, in his prime: exploring a new concept, sharing it with interested people, infectious in his enthusiasm and his insights. So it was with his history books, with his students and his colleagues, and those of his family who engaged with his ideas. We will remember him warmly, affectionately – and with a certain amount of awe.

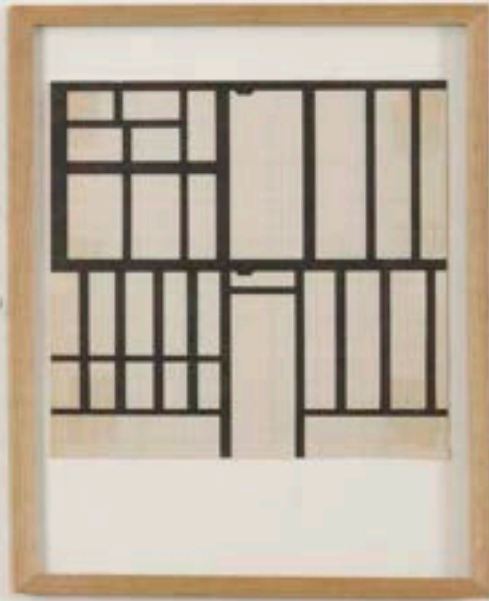
Nigel Holbrook





**“I made this drawing when it suddenly occurred to me that the whole of the timber-framed part of the house might well be regarded as a kind of Mondrian sculpture – or ‘found object’ – with the male-female harmony of his rectangular modules surrounding us on every side”.**

Victor Skipp, *The Binary Business* (c.1985–87)







**“Hitchens realised that – in terms of actual perceptual experience – space consists of things we do not see, or only half see, in a blurred, entirely out of focus mode of vision”.**

Victor Skipp, *The Lost Inheritance* (c.1987)



**“It sometimes feels that I must be one of the very last people in the world who hasn’t given up on Modernism: who is still utterly devoted to Modernism”.**

Victor Skipp, *The Year of Mythical Thinking* (2007 and 2009)







**“In forging ahead in such an until then largely unexplored direction in such an obsessive – even reckless – way, Law seems to have been virtually on his own, so far as Britain was concerned”.**

Victor Skipp writing on Bob Law's *Field Drawings* in *The Year of Mythical Thinking* (2007 and 2009)





ONE WHOLE . EACH ITS OWN WHOLE OF YET

ANOTHER WHOLE



800 LAV 1897



## Found Geometries: Signs of Men

In memory of Michael Harrison

The ‘found geometries’ of Victor Skipp can be likened to the ‘signs of men’ spotted by Aristippus in the fourth-century B.C. According to Vitruvius, and to Cicero, too, the philosopher Aristippus found himself ‘shipwrecked and cast in the Rhodian shore’. He despaired. He then happened to notice some geometrical forms scratched into the sand—triangles, perhaps, or circles, or straight lines suspended from points. He said to his companions, “We can hope for the best, for I see signs of men.”<sup>1</sup>

Victor Skipp saw these signs wherever he looked, and he looked everywhere: in tribal rugs; in primitive art; in the modernist art of Malevich, Mondrian, Kandinsky and beyond, Victor traced life’s patterns. Studying these patterns and making sense of them: this was his life’s research. But it was Modernism that absorbed him most, and most of all, his own version of it.

‘*I’m crazy about Modernism*’, he wrote to me in 2003, after his first encounter with my work at Kettle’s Yard. From that exhibition he immediately bought two drawings: a ‘grid-like’ form, and a ‘ladder’. This was the start of a relationship that was, in the words of Michael Harrison, a ‘personal and affirmative enquiry’<sup>2</sup> for us both.

Victor read my work as self-portraiture. It was in these terms that he wrote about it in *Linda Karshan. The Self Portrait at Sixty*, 2007. By then, Victor had acquired fourteen prints and drawings. He had another in mind, before he died, and knew EXACTLY where it would be placed.

For Victor, placement was all. It was precisely this placement that needed to be captured; through the placement of things, he connected his thought.

Despite his youthful appearance – enhanced by black shoe polish on his hair – Victor would not live forever. My forthcoming birthday provided the pretext for our ‘scheme’: Michael Harrison wrote the introduction; Douglas Atfield took photographs; Victor wrote an anniversary text; Graham Rees designed the book.

Looking through it now I am struck anew by Victor’s placement: that first ‘grid’ sits next to Beckett’s ‘texts for nothing’, texts written for me, I’ve often mused. My ‘ladders’ he put in the fireplaces where, for Victor, they became ‘Jacob’s ladders’, so that ‘the intellect’ could ‘climb up and down.’<sup>3</sup>

One ladder became a sacred guardian: after the death of his beloved wife, Pat, he placed her ashes under its ‘care’. She’d been, for Victor, his first ‘coup de foudre’. I was the second, or so he said, that my work, for him, was the second.

In it he found those ‘signs of men’, his geometries: grids, ladders, and most of all those ‘Orlos’, so-named by me after Alberti. According to Alberti, in his ‘Treatise on Painting’,<sup>4</sup> the ‘Orlo’ – the hem, or outline – was enough to describe the form, so long as the line be precise.

As a child or five or six, he recalled, he had drawn his first ‘Orlos’: a series of small, open squares. Newly re-discovered, he gave them pride of place at home, understanding them to be his self-portraits.

So when my ‘Orlos’ appeared in 2005, Victor was hooked: he immediately bought the first ‘Great Orlo’, as he called it. Thereafter he bought the first drawing with no corners and the first drawings with corners only. I tell this because it says so much about Victor; these last drawings he bought without having seen them! I described them to Victor on the phone. I believe they ‘matched’ the forms in his mind; that they captured his thought. He reflected, and called me back. The drawings had to be his.

He placed my ‘Orlos’ to the left of his squares. And to their right, seen against the backdrop of Hopton’s fields, were his prized field-drawings by Bob Law. Law, too, had been an obsession of Victor’s. Within his oeuvre, he esteemed these most of all.

Making connections and understanding them: this was the work of Victor Skipp. Like Baudelaire before him, so saw correspondences wherever he looked. And wherever Victor looked he FOUND GEOMETRY.

His books mattered, too, as did his writings; these were intrinsic to his world. After Victor’s death, Michael commissioned Candida Richardson to film ‘The Old Rectory’ and its collections, placed within Hopton’s open fields. This she did with sensitivity, and grace: with camera in hand, she climbed up Victor’s ladders, discovering, too, his name for his home.

Michael is no longer here to thank Canny, but I am: on behalf of Michael Harrison; on behalf of the University of Cambridge and Kettle’s Yard, it is my honour to thank Candida Richardson. For anyone interested in Modernism; in the ‘signs of men’; in a singular man of singular vision, ‘the Taj Mahal of Hopton’ shows, as does Kettle’s Yard itself, A WAY OF LIFE.

Linda Karshan

<sup>1</sup>  
David Berlinski, *The King of Infinite Space: Euclid and His Elements*, p.2.  
Basic Books, 2013.

<sup>2</sup>  
Michael Harrison, *Linda Karshan. The Self Portrait at Sixty*, 2007.

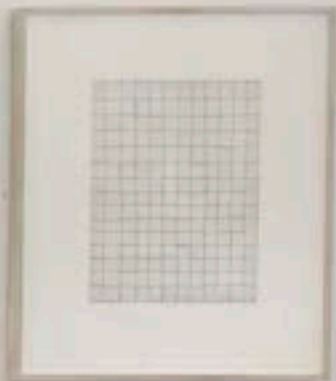
<sup>3</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>  
*De pictura* written in 1435 by italian architect and art theorist Leon Battista Alberti.



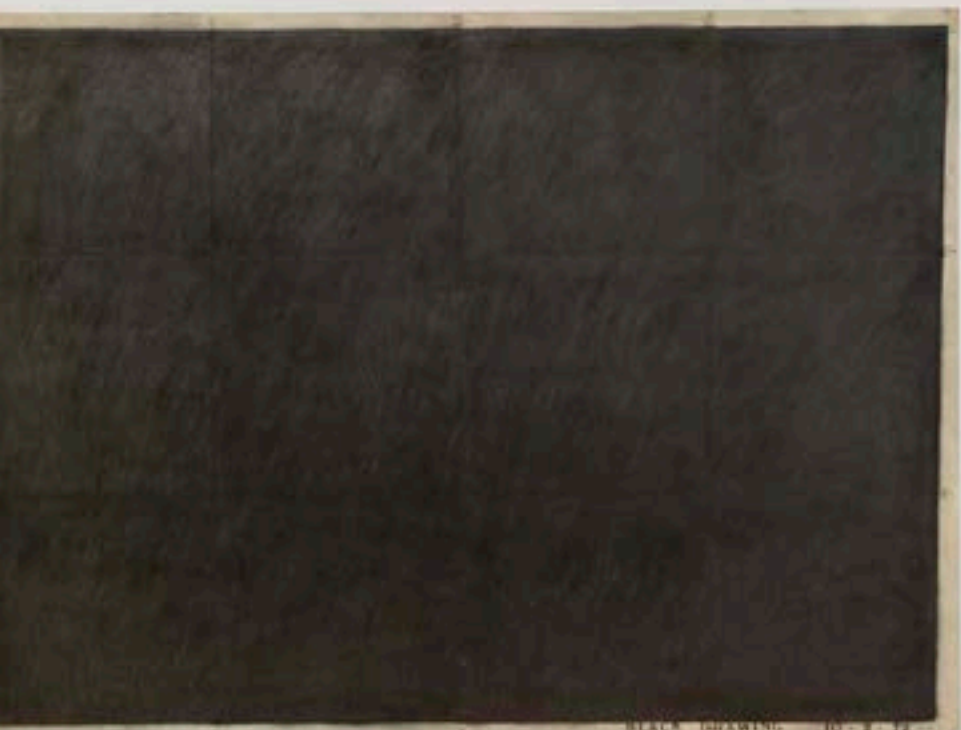
**“Like the ‘grid’ structures in Linda Karshan’s drawings, the serried rows of medallions or ‘guls’ with which the tribal womenfolk decorated their rugs and carpets are best thought of as continuing beneath the border and then running on endlessly in all directions”.**

Victor Skipp, *The Year of Mythical Thinking* (2007 and 2009)









BLACK DRAWING 10-2-12

## List of Works

P:3

Bob Law

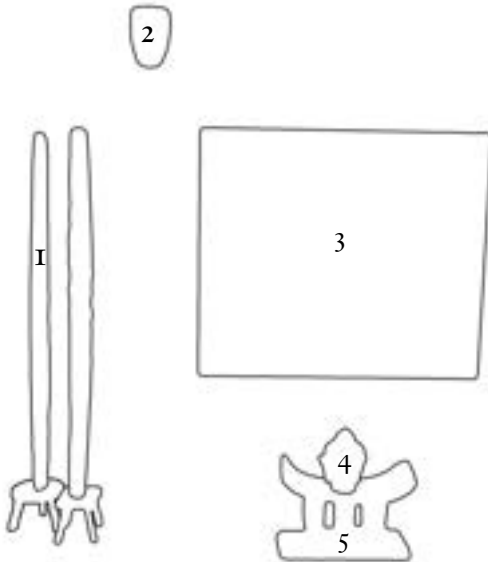
*Field Drawing 1.5.59*, 1959

Pencil on paper, 250 × 350 mm

© Bob Law Estate

P:4

Installation view of *A Lasting Legacy: The House and Collection of Victor Skipp*  
at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2013



1

Two neck or bow yokes, carved wood,  
probably Asian

2

Bete mask, Ivory Coast, carved wood

3

Bob Law (1934–2004), *The Last of The  
Black Donkeys*, 1992, acrylic on canvas

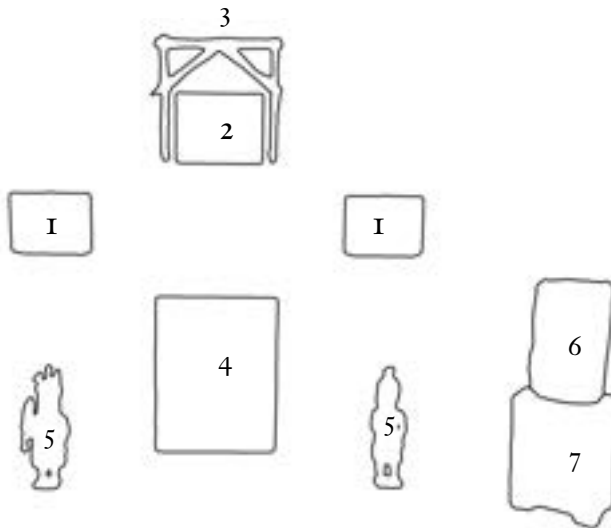
4

Head of a Buddha, bronze

5

Akhan chief's stool from Ghana,  
carved wood

p.5



1  
Unknown panels, possibly made by  
Victor Skipp, painted wood

2  
Bob Law (1934–2004), *One hundred  
holes within one hole, each its own whole  
of yet another whole*, 1987, incised lead

3  
Woven reed wall hanging

4  
Linda Karshan (born 1947),  
*IV 28.08.02*, 2002, pencil on paper

5  
Two Benin bronze figures

6  
Cork Beehive

7  
Painted chest

p.6

Part of the collection photographed in situ at Victor Skipp's house, Hopton, Suffolk. Photography: Paul Allitt © Kettle's Yard

p.7

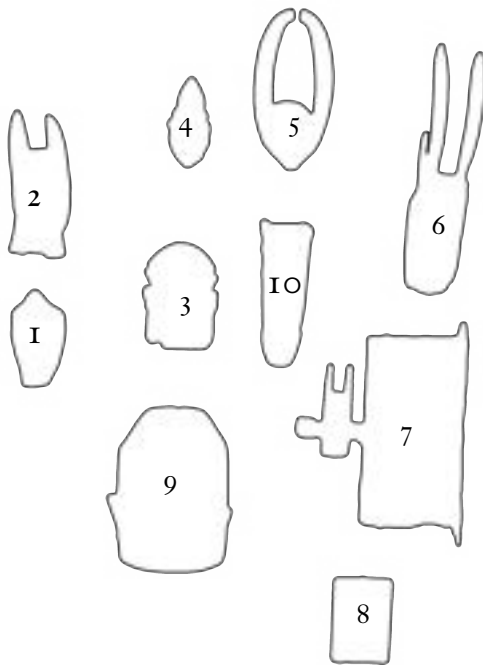
Yoruba helmet mask, Nigeria

p.8

Benin bronze figure

p.9

Installation view of *A Lasting Legacy: The House and Collection of Victor Skipp* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2013



1

Ibo mask, Nigeria

2

Mumuye buffalo mask, Nigeria

3

Yoruba helmet mask, Nigeria

4

Punu mask, Gabon

5

Chamba mask, from Cameroon or Nigeria

6

Dogon mask, Mali

7

Dogon granary door panel and lock, Mali

8

Painted wooden panel, by Victor Skipp

9

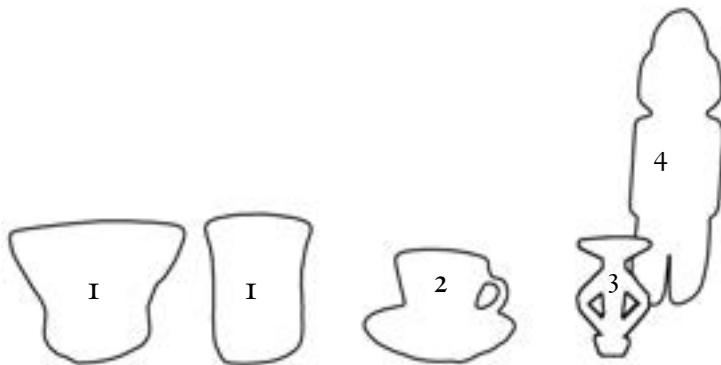
Yoruba female body mask, Nigeria

10

Kuba mask, Congo

pp.10-11

Installation view of *A Lasting Legacy: The House and Collection of Victor Skipp*  
at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2013



1  
Two Pre-Columbian pots, possibly  
c.700AD, painted porcelain

2  
Lucy Rie (1902-1995), *Cup and Saucer*,  
c.1950, ceramic

3  
Whistle from Burkina Faso

4  
Pre-Columbian green marble figure

p.13

Exterior view of Victor Skipp's house, Hopton, Suffolk

pp.14-15

Victor Skipp (1925-2010)

Three untitled drawings

undated, c.1971-1985

Pen on paper

© Victor Skipp Estate, Kettle's Yard

pp.16–17

Ivon Hitchens (1893–1979)

*Sussex Canal No. 2*

1972

Oil on canvas

559 × 1334 mm

© Jonathan Clark Fine Art, Representatives of the Artist's Estate

p.18

Francis Davison (1919–1984)

*Black Boats*

undated c.1952–60

Coloured paper

395 × 395 mm

© Francis Davison Estate

p.19

Ceri Richards (1903–1971)

*Claire de Lune 1*

1962

Oil on canvas

1270 × 1020 mm

© Estate of Ceri Richards. All rights reserved, DACS 2014

pp.20–21

Three scenes from a Hindu epic

Pahari, Bilaspur, late 17<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> century, possibly from a known series

c.1680

pp.22–23

Bob Law (1934–2004)

*100 holes within one bole, each its own whole of yet another whole*

1987

Incised lead with chalk

330 × 435 mm

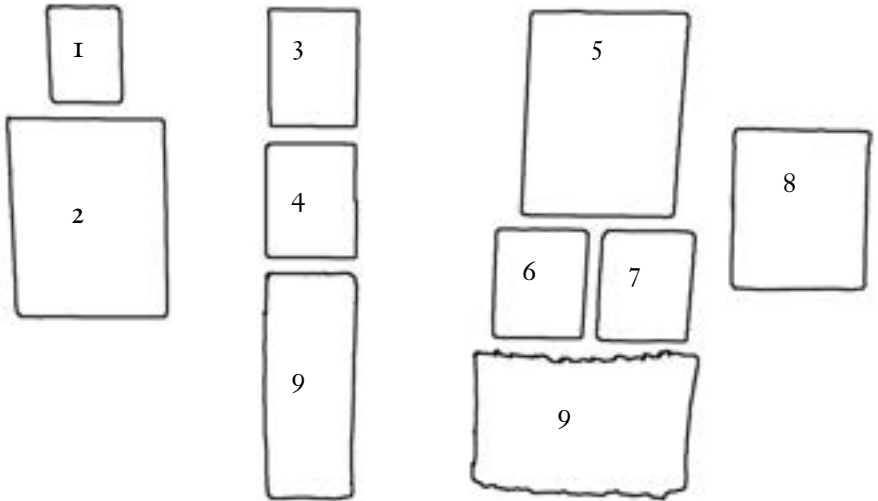
© Bob Law Estate

pp.24

Part of the collection photographed in situ at Victor Skipp's house, Hopton, Suffolk

pp.28–29

Installation view of *A Lasting Legacy: The House and Collection of Victor Skipp*  
at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2013. © Linda Karshan



Linda Karshan (born 1947)

1  
*Untitled*, pencil on paper

2  
*Untitled*, pencil on paper

3  
*Untitled 25/6/05*, 2005, print

4  
*Untitled 26/6/05 b*, 2006, print

5  
*O.T. II 15.07.05*, 2005, pencil  
on paper

6  
*Untitled 28/6/05 (2)*, 2005, print

7  
*Untitled 28/6/05 (5)*, 2005, print

8  
*N. E. 1*, 2002, print

9  
Two rugs with Turkoman pattern

pp.30-31

Installation view of *A Lasting Legacy: The House and Collection of Victor Skipp*  
at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2013

Bob Law

*Hole within a Whole on Crossed Wheels XC*

1984

Bronze

225 × 375 × 225 mm

Bob Law

*Two Balls with Obelisk*

1963-85

Bronze

150 × 250 × 85 mm

Bob Law

*Black Drawing 10.2.72*

1972

Graphite on paper

152 × 203 mm

all © Bob Law Estate

p.39

Linda Karshan

*N.E.1*

2002

Print

620 × 510 mm

© Linda Karshan

front cover:

Installation view of *A Lasting Legacy: The House and Collection of Victor Skipp*  
at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2013

back cover:

Victor Skipp at home, Hopton, Suffolk, 2006

All photography: Douglas Atfield unless otherwise stated.





Victor Skipp

*A Lasting Legacy:*

*The House and Collection of Victor Skipp*

16 November 2013–26 January 2014

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge

Published by Kettle's Yard

University of Cambridge

Curated by Dr Jennifer Powell, Senior Curator,  
with Guy Haywood, Assistant Curator

Designed by Herman Lelie

With special thanks to Nigel Holbrook, Barbara and Julian Harding, Dr Mark Elliott, Linda Karshan, Professor Jean-Michel Massing, Candida Richardson, Katherine Wood; and at Kettle's Yard to Tom Noblett and Marie-France Kittler.

Kettle's Yard

Castle Street

Cambridge CB3 0AQ

United Kingdom

+44(00)1223 748100

[www.kettlesyard.co.uk](http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk)

Director: Andrew Nairne

Chair: Anne Lonsdale

© Kettle's Yard and the authors

**KETTLE'S YARD**



UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND



hefce