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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the College  
of Imaging Arts and Sciences in Candidacy for the  
degree of Master of Fine Arts

MOTHER AND CHILD

by

Gow Hwei, Chen

Date :Jun, 24, 1997

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Date 8-15-98

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## Introduction

Coming from Taiwan, Republic of China, a traditional and agricultural society, all of my perceptions of human relationships are influenced by this oriental conservative background.

As a Chinese in the United States, I am linked to a traditional Oriental background as well as to modern industrial American society. The traditional and agricultural atmosphere of Taiwan shaped my early perceptions of human relationships. My new experiences within the vastly different culture of the United States have led me to search for a deeper understanding of human relationships. Through my work in clay, I have looked for a new form of communication which crosses the boundaries of cultural experience.

I grew up in a loving family environment; within our household, my mother's influence was constant. Her career as an Opera singer gave depth to my musical understanding as well as

giving me an introduction to the arts. I studied violin from childhood and later graduated from the National Taiwan Education University with a Bachelor of Music degree. My mother's passion for floral design was another important influence. For twenty years, her flower design studio was the family business. I learned the art of floral design from her. Throughout my youth, I was her constant companion at the flower market, as well as at various lectures, conferences and exhibitions. Both of these things helped to stimulate my creativity and direct me into the arts.

It was again through my mother's influence that I tried ceramics. Following my military service, which ended in 1986, I was unexcited about the career as a high school music teacher for which my education had prepared me. I wanted instead to perform as a singer, a movie star, or an orchestral violinist. During the period that I sought a job doing one of these activities, my mother suggested that ceramics might be an interesting hobby. Following her suggestion, I went to a clay studio and learned several basic techniques. After I touched clay several times, I discovered its unique qualities:



plasticity, texture, color and form. Clay was attractive to me because its variety. With clay, I began to make a comparison to music. Clay allowed me to make whatever I wanted, but it could be touched and seen. I could put feeling and life into clay that becomes unnecessary to translate verbally, much like the feeling transferred by composers through music. For several months, I struggled between my lifelong attachment to music and my newly discovered interests in clay. In the end, I chose clay as my primary medium.

Despite the encouragement that I have received to try ceramics as a hobby, my parents were disappointed that I had decided to pursue it as a career. As they had already helped me attain a degree in music, they withdrew their financial support for this new direction. I was forced to leave my family and to support myself in this field. I then returned to teaching high school music.

Fortunately, I met a ceramist, Mrs. Margaret Shiu Tan, and became her studio assistant. For three years, I both assisted Margaret and started my own sculpture work, Margaret also



encouraged me to develop and continue in the field of ceramics art. A few months after leaving Margaret's studio I met Mr. Tang Kuo Luang, a traditional potter and sculptor. He encouraged me as much as Margaret had done earlier. At the time, Mr. Tang was starting a functional production ceramics studio. I had a chance to learn more about traditional Chinese pottery as well as several aspects of construction in clay. I received training as a professional potter, which included wheel throwing, traditional decoration, and reduction firing, as well as carving, designing, and glazing. I stayed with Mr. Tan for three years as a potter, but I did not give up my own sculpture work. I knew that I would continue beyond this stage of development.

When I was in the functional production ceramics studio in Taiwan, I realized that the decoration of oriental ware had a consistent characteristic in composition that involved nature and symmetry. On the other hand, Chinese sculpture is physical and requires that balance and stability be considered equally with symmetry. Traditional Chinese culture influences both functional

ware and sculptural ceramics in more subtle in color, pattern, and form. For example, figure 1 and 2 were made by a traditional Chinese artist Mr. Tang Kuo Luang. They are the best examples on the way symmetry in functional ware and sculpture have been influenced by Chinese culture.

I was trying to ask myself what contemporary ceramic art is in the late 20th century and trying to compare what is different between Eastern and Western ceramics today. By reading many books and magazines, such as Ceramics Monthly, Clay Today, and Ceramics Review, I looked for the right vocabulary for my work. Within Chinese ceramics, both form and color, are used in a conservative way. Solid, deeply toned colors are predominant and an emphasis is placed on balance and stability as a Chinese tradition. In contrast, the decorative patterns, the bright colors and the bold structures of Western ceramics were new and attractive to me.

For examples : (figure 3 & 4)

Dorothy Hafner's aesthetic and sense of color :

*“<sup>1</sup> She is interested in design issues involving pattern and color interrelationships that reveal a late twentieth century concern with ornamentation. Sleek forms and motif assemblages are additional factors of the postmodern synthesis ”.*

Phillip Maaberry enjoys color and pattern :

*“<sup>2</sup> His combination of form and tone are reflective of the stylistic freedom of the 1980s, freedom from the expected tonalities of the international style. This classifies him as a postmodern potter, who combines the images and cultures of the past with a rejection of modernist restricting and to create a new colorful, artistic synthesis”.*

Discovering Western ceramics had a strong impact on me; I was absorbing a new culture and a philosophical view of the world. For this reason, I decided to come to the United States to pursue a new experience in the field of ceramics art, and hope to gain more advanced and creative insight and art experience.

Footnotes : 1. Lynn, Martha Drexler, Clay Today : Contemporary Ceramists and their work (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Chronicle Books : San Francisco, 1990) pp. 79.

2. Lynn, Martha Drexler Clay Today : Contemporary ceramists and their work (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Chronicle Books San Francisco, 1990) pp.99.

Following my B.F.A. at Ohio University and before my move to R.I.T., a family tragedy occurred. My family was having financial problems and my parents separated. At the same time, my mother was diagnosed with Parkinson disease. I struggled for a long time with the ideas of either going back home or trying to continue my graduate study. I knew that if I went back home, I would never return for graduate school because I am the only son and would have to take care of the family business. It is up to me to re-build the honor of my family as the family career in the past. I also understand that my success as a great artist can build this. I had no financial support, but I firmly decided to finish graduate school.

## Personal Aesthetic

Traditional Chinese culture was an agricultural society which resulted in a conservative relationship between people, even today, the relationship between people is still influenced by that. By confronting this issue, I tried to re-examine myself. I was attempting to discover what the differences in human relationships are between Eastern and Western cultures.

In traditional Chinese society, the agricultural economy was based on bartering. This economy was also the only way to get in touch with one another. The relationship between people was limited. Today, the relationship between people has been changed through the influenced of a new pattern of industrial society. people have become estranged and lost an appreciation because of the egoistic social environment. The relationship between people become more realistic and pragmatic. The influences of the relationships between people from traditional Chinese culture still maintains a very deeply rooted influence over my life in the way I interpret people's relationship.



As an artist, how should I face the society of the world with two contradictory influences: traditional Chinese society and Post-Modern America ?

Being Chinese and having lived in the United States for several years, I am strongly linked to both cultures. I witness an interaction between both cultures, and the continued exploration of and search for the relationship between human beings has become more interesting and more important to me. In order to develop my philosophical view of the world, I observed the difference in human relationships between the two cultures. I discovered that this is the essence of my work. It is how I challenge myself and develop new ideas.

## Mother and Child

Idea :

My mother has been sick for the last nine years with Parkinson's disease. I am her only son, so I have felt it to be my obligation to stand by her side and to encourage her to be strong. But I have not fully accepted her illness and I still dream that she will get better some day. Since my father has left the family, I have had to take his place and be strong. As a result, my relationship with my mother has grown. I try and encourage her and surround her with love and warmth. I kiss her and tell her that I love her.

My mother is a traditional Eastern woman and she has spent her whole life taking care of her children and family, and so it was a family tragedy for us when my father left and my mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. The impact of this on me has been tremendous, and my artwork has become an emotional



expression of my relationship with my mother....the mother and child.

I spent three months last summer with my mother in the hospital. Her body was stiff and she could not move at all. I had to help her with everything because she could not move on her own. I stayed by her side day and night, helping her to eat, bathe, dress, get in and out of bed and doing anything to help her be more comfortable. This was all that I could do for her.

This experience made me very aware of the relationship between a mother and child. The bond is very strong, and I began to re-examine my own relationship to my mother. This became my central focus. Through the relationship between the two ceramic forms, I was showing the relationship between my mother and myself. I began to examine, through my own experience, the universal experience of a child honoring and protecting his mother.

## The Thought Process

During my first year at RIT, I made a transition from installation work, to unitized sculpture because I felt that my past work had been resolved. In my new environment I was looking for a new way to approach my ideas. The learning process was difficult, but I gained a new way to produce my own personal aesthetic. The relationship between the two forms had to be considered in terms of many elements. I considered the relationship between the subject, the surface, the geometric forms and their expression through organic shapes, the size, and the color. This challenged my old way of thinking and give birth to a new way for me.

I used linear elements to create negative spaces, which shows the relationship between forms as people are related to one another. I attempted to create work that transcends culture, creating my own language for illustrating the relationship between people.

## The Aesthetic

When thinking about my own aesthetic, I realize that I did not want to reproduce the oriental aesthetic in ceramics where symmetry is valued. I wanted instead, to bring my new understanding of American art to my own understanding of form and composition in ceramics. I am Chinese, and so I value my heritage and my culture. But by combining the two, I give birth to something new.

I began to punch and squash the forms into organic shapes that minimized the symmetry and equilibrium to break from the Chinese tradition of symmetry. I began to work in a lower firing temperature range where asymmetry does not pose as much of a problem. Because traditional Chinese ceramics is centered around high firing, their work must remain symmetrical in order to resist distortion in firing. But because I switched to forms that were asymmetrical, I decided to work in a firing range that was more conducive to that type of work. It was a break from tradition but for a reason. From each view of the piece there was something different.

Negative space is as important to me as form, and I believe that to understand form, one must understand space. And to understand space, is to understand form. One does not exist without the other. I was attempting to understand and reproduce the internal and external relationships that people take with their mother. I examined this through the use of both positive and negative space. But because of my Eastern background, I was more concerned with the space in between, than in the form which is abstract. However because one does not exist without the other, I must pay equal attention to the form, which is what people in Western culture value most.

## Historical Reference

Henry Moore said that “<sup>3</sup> one distorts the forms in order to create space” (Giulio, 1898, PP 76). Moore also said that “<sup>4</sup> Sculpture,

Footnotes : 3. Giulio Carlo Argan, Henry Moore (New York . 1898) pp.76

4. Philip James, Henry Moore on Sculpture (New York : 1966) pp58

for me, must have life in it, vitality” (Susan, 1988, pp 58). By creating a vitality and life within a form, one creates in a piece of sculpture, meaning. Moore said that ”<sup>5</sup> The great (the continual, everlasting) problem (for me) is to combine sculptural form (power) with human sensitivity and meaning...i.e. to try to keep primitive power with humanist content (Compton, PP 35)”

A major concern within my sculpture is to create negative space. However, I cannot understand negative space without equally understanding form.

Chinese culture is imbued with an indirect sort of spiritual vitality. In other words, an object perceived, then associated with a metaphorical meaning, has a higher sense of spiritual recognition than an object perceived as just an object in Chinese culture. This is when an object is imbued with life, for it takes on a significance beyond its physical appearance. Therefore, Henry Moore’s concept

Footnote 5. Susan Compton, Henry Moore (New York · 1988) pp.35



of “spiritual Vitality” which he said “has an indirect expression” was very understandable to me and fit with my cultural background.

By viewing many of Henry Moore’s sculptures, such as reclining (figure 5), two pieces carving : interlocking (figure 6), recumbent figure (figure 7), two pieces sculpture (figure 8), even animal form (figure 9 & 10), I started balancing and connecting different forms with one touching the other.

After my critique of winter quarter, 1996, I felt that I was unable to incorporate my Chinese background with American culture because I was born and raised in Chinese society not American society. From this perspective, I was separate from the culture. I realized that I must become a part of the culture and to impose myself and my ideas into my material, in a way that uses that material sympathetically but not passively. I found that the individual sense of freedom to be creative is much more supported in western culture, which is totally different from the way I learned. In Taiwan, the basic traditional techniques are taught, but individual

expression is not encouraged, tradition is. Therefore, I re-examined myself through western art ideas. I thought about forms, textures, a variety of materials, and structural ways to combine this with a sense of spiritual vitality.

I started to think about different forms which were based on linear elements. I thought about gesture in a linear way, because I am interested in the spaces in between and it is the line that provides a transition from form to form. It is the line that crosses the space. I began to think about the gesture of twisting, and bending because gesture is an obvious form of body language and the most obviously perceived. My work continued to become more organic and more unitized. This combination of linear elements and gestures as a symbolism and also presented a spiritual vitality in a more realistic features.



## Composition

The form's vitality, is drawn from the life of my mother and I. By breaking the figure up into several pieces, I increased the plastic potential of my aesthetic language. The composition of the two abstract forms, is effected strongly by the spaces between the pieces. The action of the piece comes from the point where the two pieces touch. It is an abstraction in form, of a child kissing his mother when she is ill. He is encouraging her to be strong.

In figure 11, mother and child 1, I utilized a curved shape to represent the internal and external form of my mother's sickly body, it contrasts her spoiled body with the love and warmth of her heart. The head is losing its alertness because of the illness. By not giving the head a recognizable face or expression, I avoided the typical characterization which viewers often take habitually. The linear, white piece represents myself as a child. The piece is soft looking but it has a strong character. The son touches his mother on her shoulder. It is an encouraging gesture. The whole piece is about a son encouraging and loving his sick mother.

Figure 12, mother and child 2, is an exceptional linear composition. I initially intended for the mother form to be free-standing by three points (the head, the shoulder, and the body.) By creating an arch with the mother form, I was able to create negative space underneath the form. The two forms, seen side by side, are similar because they are both arched forms. This established the family relationship between the forms and gave it an open air quality. The head's of the mother and child touch, creating an intimate and emotional dialogue between the two forms, which are side by side. The son instinctively cares for his mother and loves her.

Figure 13, mother and child 3, was the most forceful piece that I made because it has an extended range of emotional expressions and because of the detail in the gesture and form. It was a challenge to show the psychological relationship between the two forms. The mother's body is effected by her illness, Parkinson's disease. She is trying to stand up. The negative space underneath of her form, showed the action and the movement of standing up. It is difficult for her because her body is damaged and weak. It crosses cultural

boundaries because the figures have no faces. The theme of the pieces is of a son pushing and encouraging his mother and helping her to stand up. The touching point creates the impression of force, power, and support which is a characteristic of my relationship to my mother.

## Surface

The rough surface of the piece is a representation of how Parkinson disease has effected my mother's body. It is contrasted against the smooth surface which represents myself and how well I am protected and loved by my mother. Now she needs my help because she is very sick. (figure 11, 12, 13)

I used a series of warm colors to represent human nature and I contrasted the forms with different tones between the mother forms and child forms. All of my glaze colors seek to convey the feeling of the human nature and of a supportive relationship. I used

yellow white, cream white and yellow green on the child forms and dark orange, orange with black texture, and black on the mother forms.

In figure 11, the color orange symbolizes the mother's body and skin. The strong black texture was symbolic of her illness. I also utilized the running character of the dark green glaze to express my mother's spirit and mind which are still warm and alive, despite her illness. It represents my mother's love. The child form is yellow white, which represents love. The color looks as soft as the human body, but the brushed texture in the form represents the strength and character that it took for me to spend all my energy encouraging, protecting and loving my mother.

The color of the mother in Mother and Child 2, was dark orange to symbolize the energy and love that she has even with her illness. The dark orange tone represents human nature, the warm and rich love of a mother, especially my mother. The opaque white on the child form also represents love. The tone of the color has a warm

and comfortable feeling that represents the loving state of mind that I had when caring for my mother. My love comes from her. The surface of the glaze was smooth and soft looking which showed my body protecting her life.

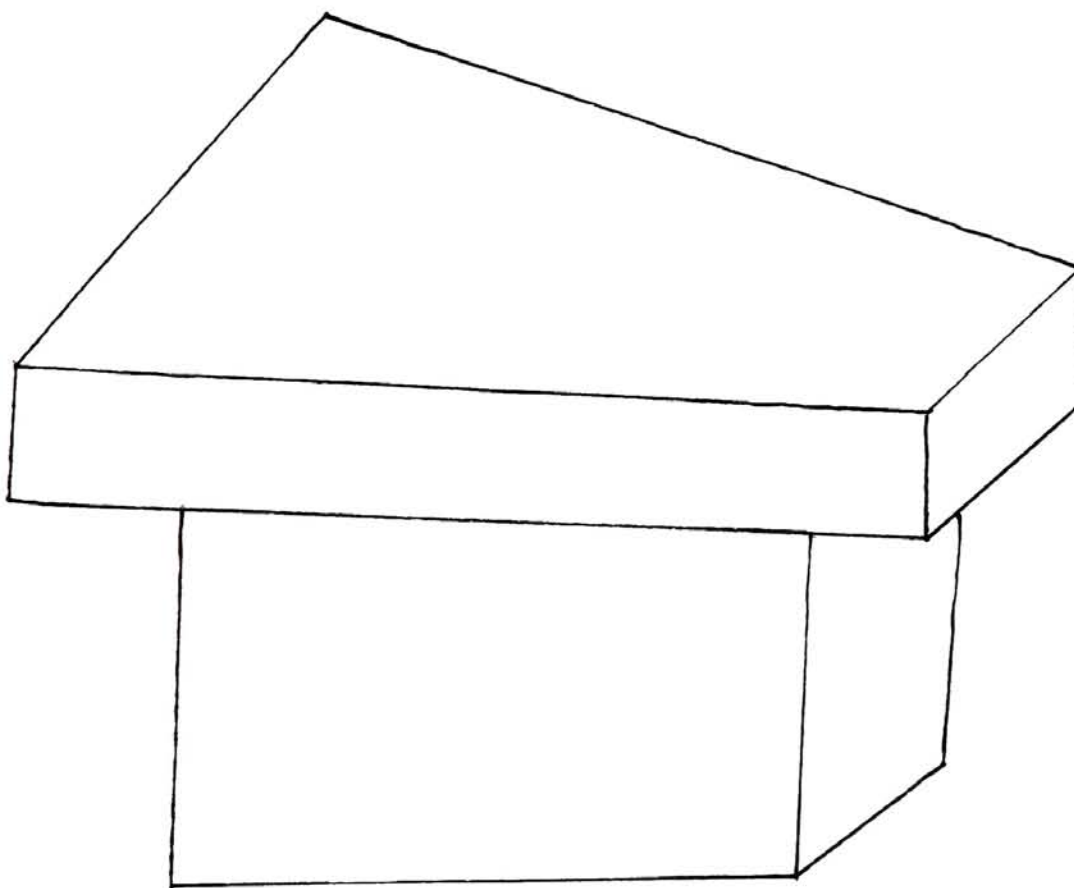
The surface of the mother form in figure 13 is black and very dry looking. It symbolizes the physical deformity that her illness has caused. The glaze is yellow cream colored, which represents the child's bare heart that is encouraging and pushing, powering and supporting, his mother to stand up again and to overcome the illness. The running looking surface of the glaze represents the sorrow of the child.

## Presentation

My sculpture is formed by two pieces connecting as a single unit. They are connected on one side only. Therefore, the sight lines of the piece on the pedestal must be presented in a particular way.



After I talked with professor Rick Hirsch, I used the shape of the pedestal as a table but the table top has many different angles in order to fit in with the organic shape properly. The shape of the table creates a separation between the work and the pedestal and it also keeps the work from appearing too heavy. The separation of the table top makes viewers feel that the work seems to be hanging in the open air. In addition, I also wanted to challenge the traditional pedestal form of a square block. As a result, the table shape of the pedestal makes the work more dynamic. The following diagram shows the pedestal :



## Conclusion

My Thesis, “ Mother and Child “, is an exploration of the emotional relationship between myself and my mother. Also, I believe the content of my sculpture to be an emotional connection between form and materials. The whole process was an attempt to reach for the best synthesis of contemporary communication and to find a link with mass audiences both in Eastern and Western cultures.

To develop my personal knowledge and philosophical view of the world through the expansion of my artistic vocabulary, I have come to the United States to explore a different culture, to learn another language, and deepen my education. These experiences led me to express and to develop myself in ways which differ from traditional Chinese culture. It has affected the way I communicate with people through my art work. This has been a very significant transition in my art world as well as a new experience in my life.



## Technical Reference

### Clay Bodies

Working with large scale sculpture and organic form, and in connecting two different clay bodies, I needed the appropriate clay bodies. These two clay bodies needed to be of suitable strength for large scale construction and the shrinkage of the two clay bodies must be almost the same.

The two clay bodies that I used were developed in my undergraduate work with professor Brad Sweiger at Ohio university. When I was in my first year at R.I.T, I did some tests for white clay bodies. I was trying to develop some different white stoneware clay bodies, but most of them were not white enough after reduction firing. Therefore, I re-tested the white clay body I used at Ohio university , which is still very white after reduction. In addition, I re-tested a red earthenware clay body. I added different

percentages of medium grog to reduce the shrinkage in the red clay body in order to get a similar shrinkage for both clay bodies.

The two clay body recipes are

White body		Red body	
Tile # 6	20	Red Art	100
OM4	20	Ocmulgee	60
Hawthorne			
fire clay	20	Talc	20
Custer	20	F.H.G.	30
Flint	20	OM4	20
		Mid Grog	45

The total shrinkage of the white clay body was 10.3 % when fired to cone 04 ( 1060 F ).

The total shrinkage of red clay body was 10 % when fired to cone 04 ( 1060 F ).

Both of clay bodies were tested in a reduction firing atmosphere.

During the firing, the temperature was 45 degrees under low pressure and a cloudy sky. During the reduction, I kept 10 cm soft flame with a blue light orange color after cone 08 was half way down. This situation I kept until reached temperature. The whole process I tested in the 4 ft outside kiln.

## B. Glaze

In regard to surface treatment; to achieve the quality of colors which can only be achieved in reduction firing, I had done glaze tests three times and discussed results with professor Rick Hirsch and professor Jeff Cole. As a result of these tests, I chose 4 glazes and 2 slips. These recipes are

Glazes :

### Dark Green

Mag carb	30
Kaolin	20
Lithium carb	60
Borax	30
Silica	60
Bentonite	10

### Opaque White

Frit 3124	72
Neph Sye	12
EPK	6
Flint	10

## Yellow White

Zircopax	8 5
Vanadium	1 2
Tin oxide	3
Cobalt oxide	2
Tin oxide	1

## Blue-Black

Gerstley Borate	6 4
Bone ash	1 6
Copper carb	4

## Slips

Orange slip  
( black on the surface )

Albany slip	5 0
Ball clay	5 0
Calgon	1 0

Orange slip

It was found and located at  
Hunterdon county, Ringoes,  
NJ

For the orange slip (black on the surface), it is very important to place the work in a certain way so that the slip can catch the flame properly and to become blackened on the rough surface. I put the orange slip work in the middle of the kiln. I placed the piece so that it was in the front with 45 degree angle to the plume path.

Reduction flame could be passed though the work in order to create the black color on the surface. (This experience was gained from tests)

## The Firing Process

Glazes	cone 04
Clay bodies	white stoneware, red earthenware
Temperature	cone 04 ( little higher )
Firing position	reduction
Weather	cold (around 30 degree), low pressure, cloudy sky, little windy

The firing was completely in oxidation until cone 08 was half way down. When cone 08 was half way down, the body reduction was started. I controlled the reduction by maintaining a soft flame with blue and light orange color. I kept the length of reduction flame around 10 cm in the top of the spyhole, and kept the length of the reduction flame around 1 cm in the bottom of the spyhole. In the beginning of the reduction, the atmosphere of reduction was clear and the color of the inside kiln was yellow and slightly orange. When cone 06 was half way down, the atmosphere of reduction was



turbid and unclear. The color of the inside of the kiln was bright orange. At that time, I kept a medium strong flame but still kept a 10 cm and a 1 cm reduction flame in the top and bottom spyholes respectively. When cone 04 was almost all the way down, I changed the atmosphere of reduction to oxidation for about 45 seconds, then, turned down the gas to 1 LB for both burners. 10 seconds later, I turned the gas off and closed the damper and both air regulators.

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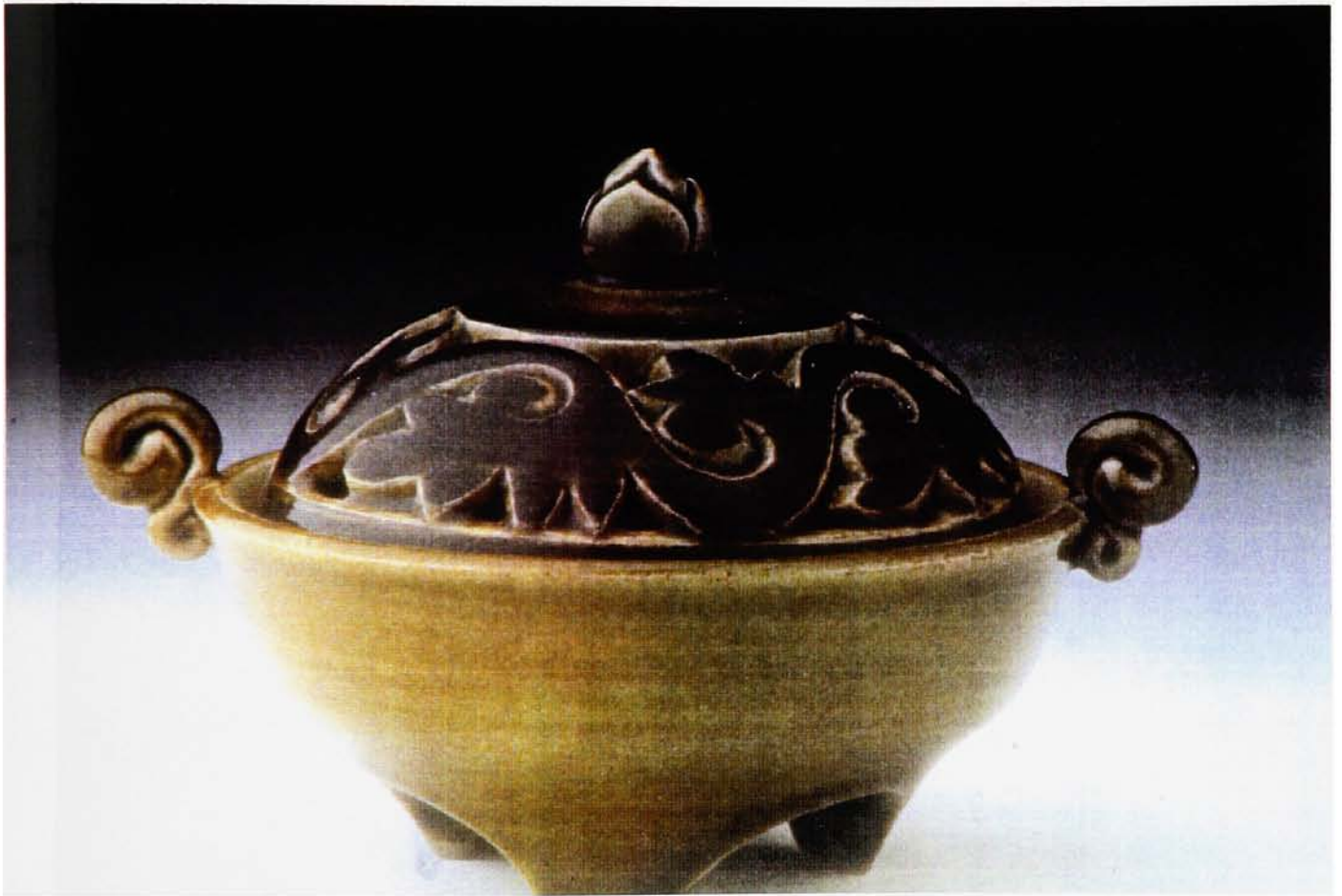


Figure 1

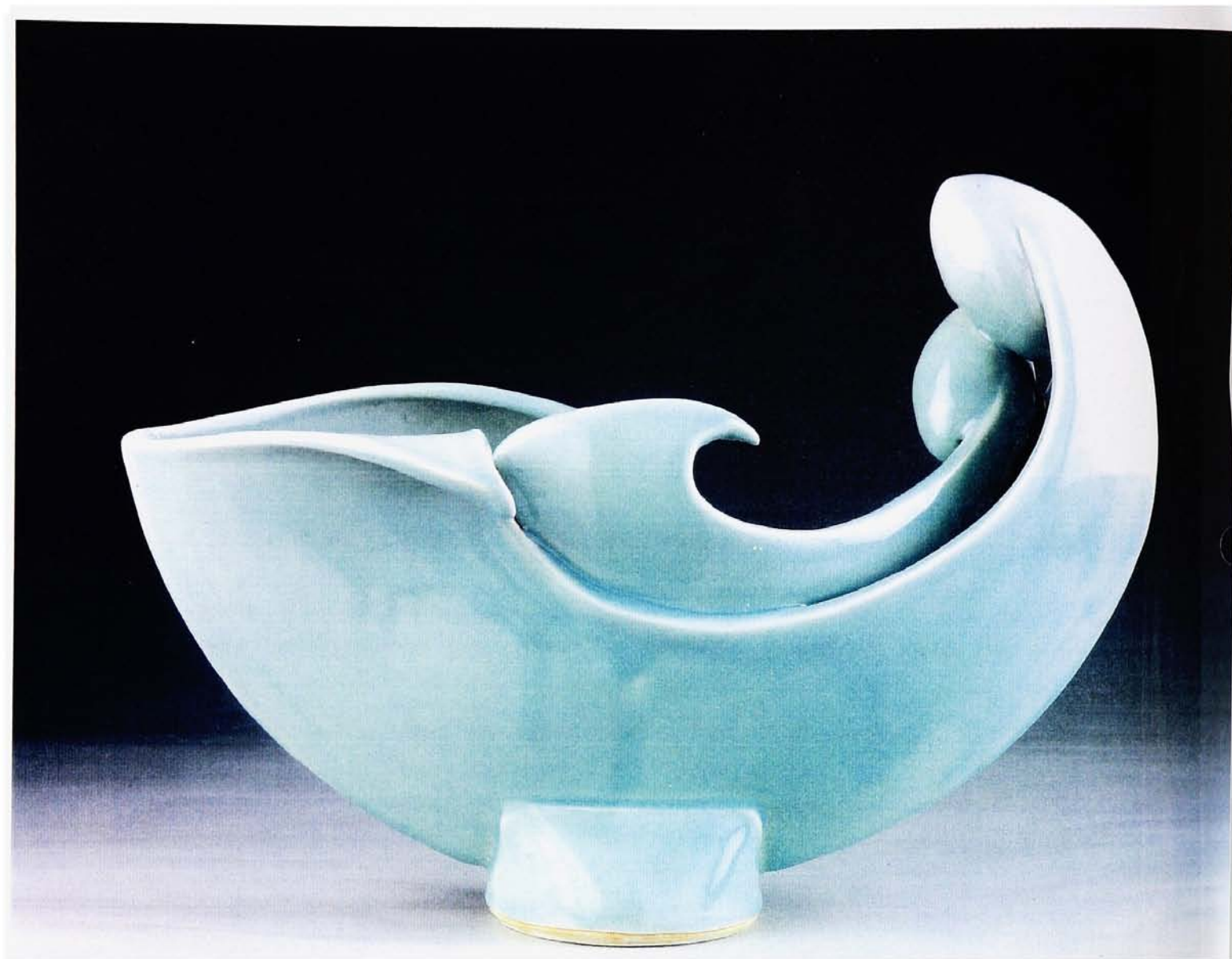


Figure 2





Figure 3



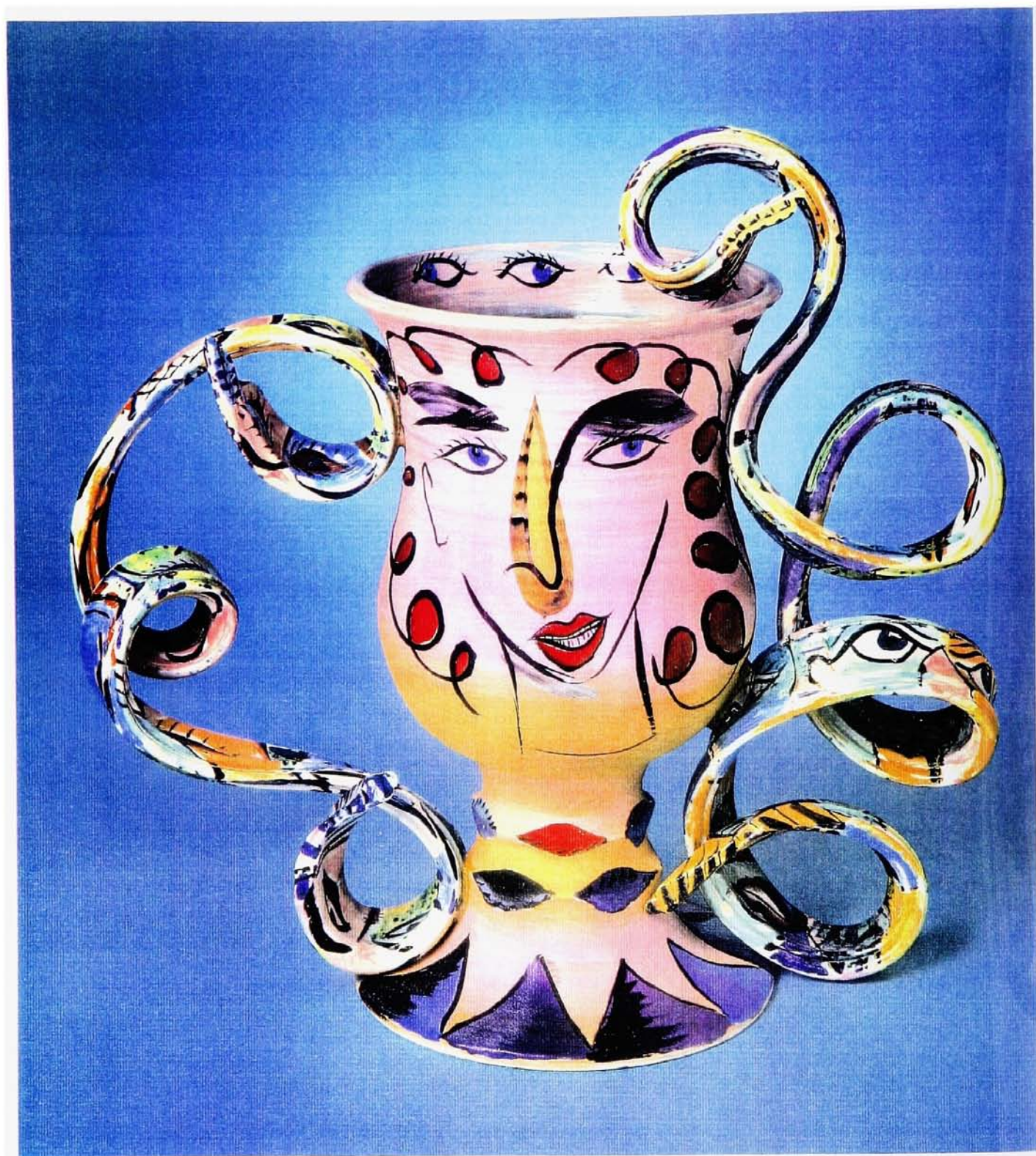


Figure 4



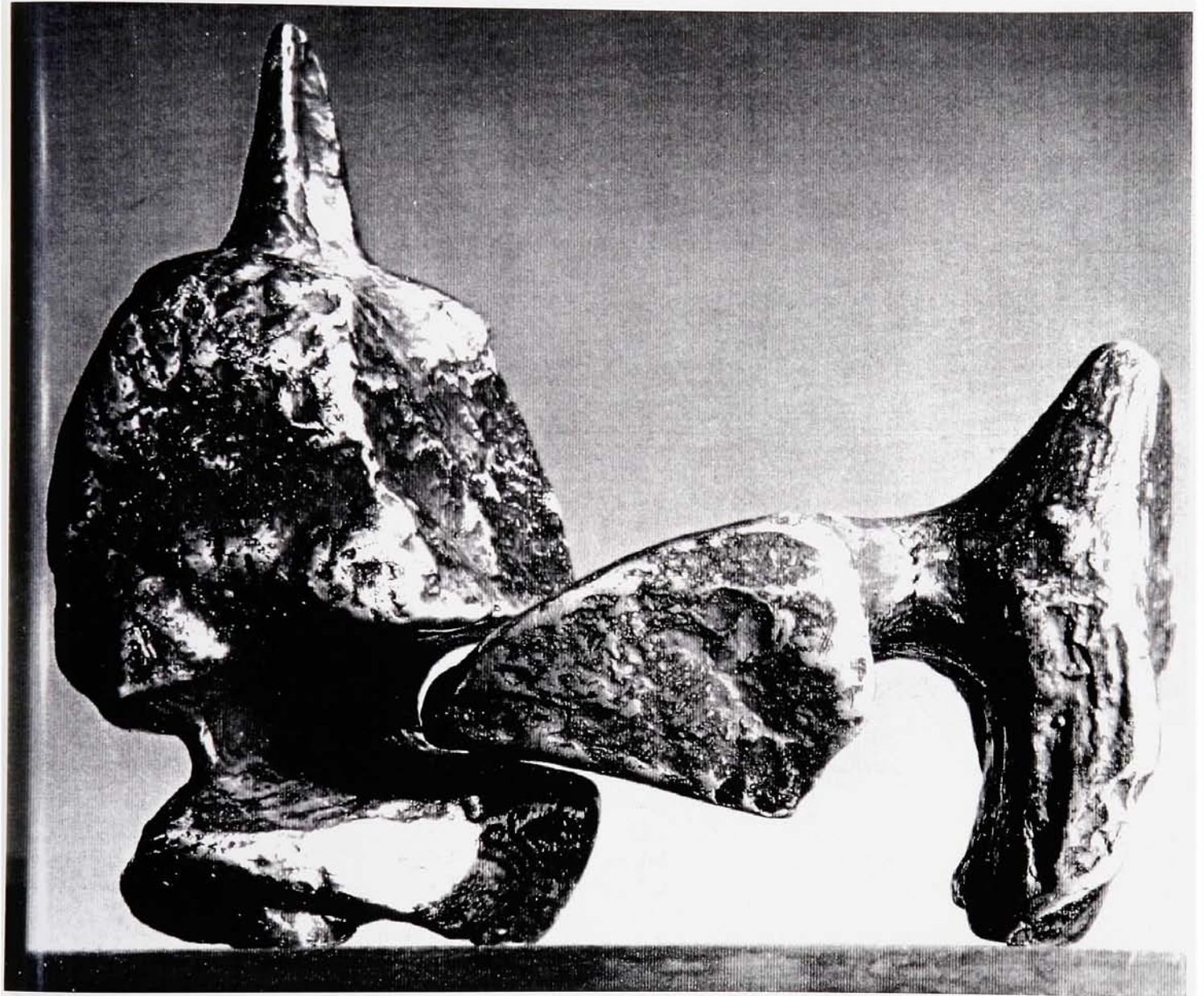


Figure 5



Figure 6





Figure 7



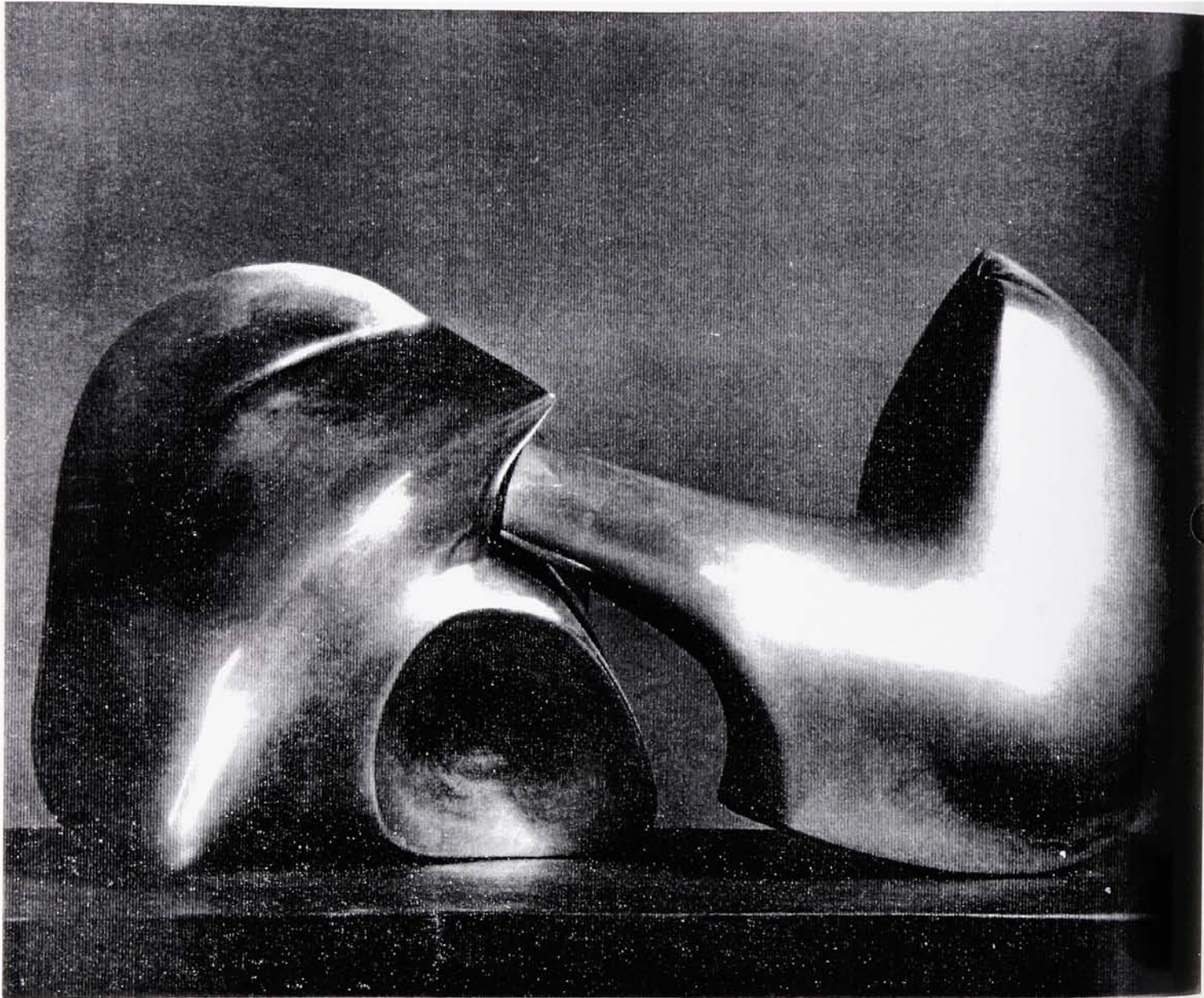


Figure 8

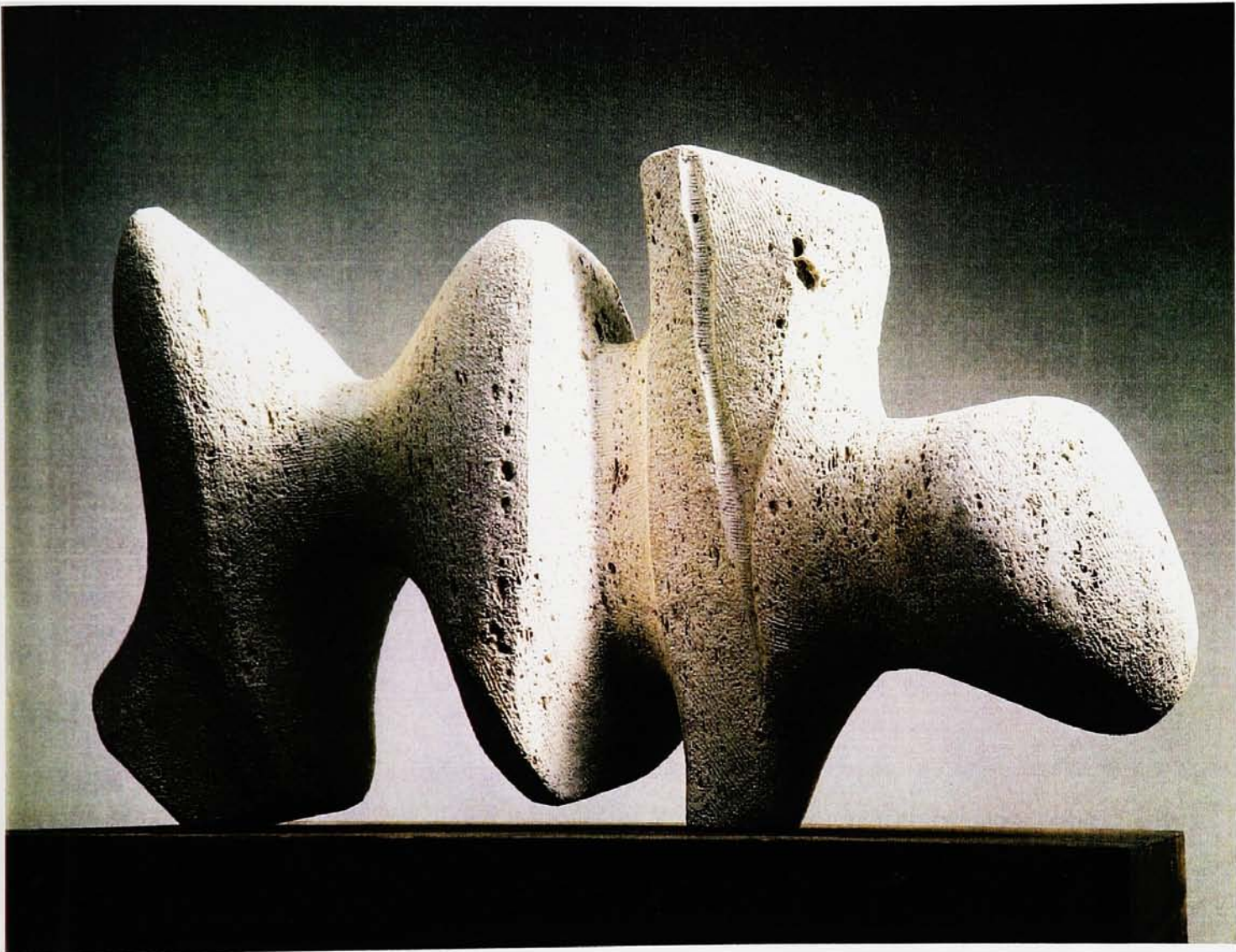


Figure 9





Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12





Figure 13