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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

A QUESTION OF REALITY

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PHILOSOPHY

A question of reality is simply that, a question. Intrinsic to the question is the notion reality is ultimately hidden from any finite exploration. Philosophy, religion and science each have their own ways to grasp and formulate its nature, but in most cases they succeed in fragmentizing it. Those who do offer absolute solutions usually incorporate a 'blind faith,' while others who inquire realize the possibility there is more than meets the eye, and that includes the inner eye. The human imagination, reinforced by this searching eye will look for things that are beyond the limits of the known, particularly by those who bypass 'blind faith' and regard reality as elusive, subtle, latent and mysterious. It is this mystery that gives life its meaning. For without it, all questions would have readily available answers, complete explanations and predictable results. Fortunately the answer sheets are blowing around just out of our reach.

If reality is so difficult to comprehend, then probably the best that can be done is to pay attention to the fragments of truth it does reveal. Amongst those fragments are those which are meaningless, mixed in to confuse and

misdirect one's course; and that course can be compared to ascending a giant staircase. On each tread are fragments of information, containing a mixture of fact and illusion, myth and symbol. Each is a necessary part of humanity. When each is analyzed, one must not propose outright acceptance or rejection, but limit one's judgment--can one ever be sure? Those bits of information engage and tempt one's curiosity as to the step in front of you. Once climbed, another step again fills the horizon above and additional clues are offered. The climbing continues as does the cycle. For every truth revealed dozens more remain in shadow and for each truth dozens more questions will arise, including the absoluteness or relativeness of those collected truths.

The fragments which are illusory. Are they really necessary? "These vital lies provide a screen against despair and the awesome horror of a meaningless life and death, but they also prevent us from facing the truth squarely."¹ And what about those thoughts that can never be proved? Carl Jung states, "It is that they are known to be useful. Man positively needs general ideas and convictions that will give a meaning to his life and enable him to find a place for himself in the universe."² Are projections of

¹Roger S. Jones, Physics as Metaphor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), p. 175.

²Carl Gustav Jung, Man and His Symbols (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1964), p. 76).

reality largely formed in response to the human condition and the fear of death? Should reality constructs be dualistic or integral, i.e. in terms of mind-body, matter-spirit, man-nature and heaven-earth? Ancient man saw nature and self, reality and fancy, as radically interpenetrative and coalescent. Likewise medieval astrologers followed the tenet of 'as above, so below'--not referring to different places but interacting, dependent and unified with one another. There cannot be one without the other. Eastern philosophies work on much the same accord, while Western concepts tend to be more dualistic and individuated. Science, with its rational, logical and factual practices, neglects much of what mysticism has to offer. In physics, quantum theories are now taking into account aspects of mystic thought as viable views of the nature and structure of the universe.

Each provides an enlightenment. Should we believe in one or the other? Can one and should one entertain the notion of Eastern and Western, black and white, here and there, atheist and believer, quantum theories and mysticism simultaneously? Does each by itself hold a sufficient contribution or will greater insight be gained into the metaphysical riddles by creating an alloy of differing thoughts? Shall we listen to the voices of the Hindu gurus of the Upanishads?--"Neti, neti"--"not quite that, not quite that."

"Reality, a projection of consciousness, must also evolve and is a timely expression of the state of the human mind and spirit."³ As reality evolves and changes so should the creative act be a process and reflection of the evolution. Creation should speak to/about the multifacets of reality, addressing its questions, challenging its ambiguities, pursuing its truths and deceptions and entertaining the contradictions and the illogical. For it is only an inappreciable mind that limits creativity and the boundaries of understanding.

The artist will call upon the past, present and future, personal and shared experiences, subconscious and the collective unconscious, the intuitive and the concrete. "Thus creativity is perpetual birth, leading to unity" ...⁴ "one must work towards that which one does not know, whether this is called invention or finding or searching, it must be a projection beyond the given state of art".⁵ Towards a point whereby new forms, images and sensations are manifested. The goal not being to educate, motivate or dominate, but to induce and sensitize the intellect into contemplation, in a perfect equilibrium with the senses.

³Jones, Physics as Metaphor, p. 171.

⁴Marc Olivier, Psychology of the House, trans. Jessie Wood (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1977), p. 78.

⁵Ellen H. Johnson, ed., American Artists on Art From 1940-1980 (New York: Harper and Row, Pub., 1982), David Smith, p. 39.

One must work with clarity and disinterest when confronting the mystery and paradox of reality.

Magritte stated, "One cannot speak about mystery, one must be seized by it."⁶ One of the goals of art should be to embody this mystery of reality. Paul Klee, in his writings, adds, "The visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are many more other latent realities ..."⁷ His was a search of said mystery. There is an interchangeability between the words, mystery and reality, particularly when thinking about space, time, matter, life and death. Mystery exists in all from the most banal of objects to the most complex of spaces. The answers to the ultimate reality could lie within one, both or neither.

⁶Laura Rosenstock, "DeChirico's Influence on the Surrealists," in DeChirico, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), p. 118.

⁷Robert Hughes, Shock of the New (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1980), p. 304.

SYMBOLISM AND METAPHOR

In works represented in this thesis, symbols and metaphors are directed towards a question of reality. They have a wider 'unconscious' aspect that cannot be pinpointed and goes beyond the obvious. "The best symbolic imagery is not a conscious effort. A symbol should not be inserted into a work of art; it should enter into it unconsciously."⁸ They speak to others on an inner level as an effective vehicle for perceiving and understanding various aspects of life.

Space and Time

"In my pictures," Miro once said, "There are tiny forms in vast spaces. Empty space, empty horizons, empty plains, everything that is stripped has always impressed me."⁹

To explain and explore space-time in terms of relativity and/or quantum theories a more complete analysis is required. Therefore, it will be more conducive to take a more poetic approach to ideas and metaphors of space and time.

⁸Olivier, Psychology of the House, p. 30.

⁹Hughes, Shock of the New, p. 235.

In order to exist, one must exist in space and time. They are the forms on which life depends; to exist in space means to stand out from, to be aware of our existence is to experience space and time. The two-dimensional surface becomes insufficient to adequately deal with actual space-time interests. Actual space-time relationships between viewer and object require the individual be directed to move through space-time in order to experience the piece. One viewpoint is insufficient. One must observe the object from many positions in order to 'see' it.

Time and space entertain the ideas of simultaneity. The memories of times and spaces past affecting times and spaces of the present and future. Past, present and future overlap and intermingle. A child snuggled in the space created by the body sandwiched between the bed and its coverings, being awakened by the steady hum of a vacuum cleaner and feeling a warmth and safety in this space; as if in the womb or returning to the womb and listening to the hum of internal body rhythms. A space of solitude, a private space to return to, a space to return to that is creative "an intimate place to his own size, a place which is like a deep sigh in the face of the plenitude of the universe, a place where he can breathe, a micro climate in the vast expanse of the universe, a space propitious for the revelation of his inner self in his contemplation of the outer world. Such a 'magic place' reduces the universe to intimate proportions, while allowing one to enter into its

vastness."¹⁰ These spaces to be returned to and re-experienced as memories or actualities, often enlivening the spirit to find and explore new spaces. The evoking of intimate spatial feelings, letting times and spaces flow back and forth to allow one to be in two places at the same time and to be in one space at simultaneously different times.

Time creates change. Changes in space. Changes in the life process; its rhythms reflected by the natural processes of creation-birth and destruction-death. Things remain in constant flux either from outside forces or from forces within, be they natural or man-made.

Burning an object and violently altering its physical appearance address aspects of decay and death. The vicarious, unpredictable world outside the control of man and an object which hints at a certain control of those natural forces is an attempt to gain some leverage in the struggle with the natural process of decay and death. Amidst that turmoil on the exterior of the form is a calm, often concealed space somewhere in the interior, introduced quietly by natural or artificial light. It is a place to regroup, to rediscover and to recreate. Both spaces existing simultaneously but each marking a different point in the process of time, each representing a fragment of space-time.

¹⁰Olivier, Psychology of the House, p. 131.

The fragments indicate a part to whole relationship. This relationship and its metaphor can be viewed in basically two ways. The first relationship draws the analogy of a broken ceramic vessel, whereby one fragment does not represent the whole and it would be difficult to complete the rest of the object without prior knowledge of the remaining pieces. The second relationship would be likened to a hologram, which is a photographic type plate that projects, by way of a laser, a three dimensional image. The fascinating occurs when the original hologram is broken: any fragment can be used to project the entire original image. So in effect, the part represents the whole. The fragmented object has the ability to recall that which is absent, particularly the unknown, the mystery of the unexplored; yet it may also act as a hologram.

The formation of the fragmented objects is done as irrationally as possible; that is, chance, no preconceptions, no preplanning or capacity to predict the actual formal results of forces exerted or applied to the work. "If the formation of the image is done irrationally, it seems to come onto the nervous system much more strongly than if you knew how you could do it ... if the making is more instinctive, the image is more immediate."¹¹ Breaking

¹¹David Sylvester, interviews, Francis Bacon (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1975), p. 104.

and fracturing wood randomly allows the accidental to occur. One does not know at what point the piece begins or when and where it will finish, particularly when starting with a found article common in nature and appearance. An object already having had a chance process inflicted upon it, perhaps. The more common and disinteresting the thing, the more likely it is to be made uncommon, as opposed to an uncommon object in which the process will be hard fought to outdo the original 'preciousness.'

Architecture

"Architecture has no presence but exists as the realization of a spirit. A work of architecture is made as an offering reflecting the nature of that spirit"¹²

The intermingling of allusions to architectural elements such as doors, windows, openings, passages, and walls, the intermingling of different spatial and temporal periods is in many respects derived from surreal and metaphysical concerns with a different level of reality. A reality representing the junction of the inner and outer worlds, the subconscious and the conscious.

Each architectural element has its own symbolic and metaphoric, illusory and allusory connotations. However, they overlap in meaning as well. Doors and walls stand at

¹²Louis Kahn et al., On the Future of Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1970), p. 25.

once as barriers and at once as transformations in space-time. "Walls speak a very ambiguous language. In fact a magical language. They are there to protect us and to shut us in; they form a whole and a whole between them. It means resistance and protection, prison cell and coziness, anxiety and relaxation--in short tomb and womb."¹³ They are the keeper of life, of knowledge and of secrets. They stand, a silent partner, waiting for human intervention and interaction. They listen and are listened to; the voices and sounds beyond, the messages contained; waiting to be profaned so as to reveal the sacred.

The doors, windows and other openings provide the link between the outer and inner worlds. The sanctity of the inner world is a microcosmic space of contemplation, a space to safely view the outer world, the macrocosm, where man and the universe take their toll. Doors remain closed or open, tempting one to explore beyond the confines of their present space. In Japanese, the word for door also means 'obscure' and 'mysterious' and in primitive societies the door or 'entrance' of the shelter was in the form of a vulva, as if entering the womb; the guardian aspect of the Great Mother or a cave of Mother Earth.

If windows, doors and openings are thought of in terms of passageways, they invoke the idea of a journey. A

¹³Vilem Flusser, "Walls," Main Currents, Mr-Apr 1974, p. 136.

physical effort must be made in order to experience a spiritual enrichment. Consider ascending hundreds of stairs and multiple platforms of an ancient Assyrian ziggurat, walking back into the dark regions of an Egyptian hypostyle hallway, climbing down a ladder, through a hole in the roof, into the ceremonial space of a Hopi Indian kiva, the divine trek to Mecca, or the more modern analogy of driving the car to church; all requiring a physical effort of some sort directed at that particular place or space.

The viewer of the objects in this thesis is asked to make a physical effort in order to more fully experience the object; not intending that it should be a 'religious' or even 'spiritual' experience, but reaching, perhaps, more of an understanding of the relationship between the physical and what can be experienced from the effort. The inner spaces are not obvious in some cases. They are usually marked by openings that have been torn into the wood, with splintered, jagged edges remaining; as if a struggle took place. Once clear of the initial impact on the nervous system, these openings might provide the curious with an invitation to explore further and ... "if one becomes absorbed in passing through the tiny openings, entering the pieces and exploring the dark interiors, one can be caught up in a limitless trip in time and space, a sort of confrontation, if you will, with infinity. The experience of disorientation occurs when we engage in the play between the

concrete reassuring exteriors and in the floating mystery of the inner space."¹⁴

There are no protrusions or objects or disruptions of the interior spaces, which are sufficient unto themselves; just silence and light. Silence to suggest a sense of unlimited space and light for its illuminating qualities and mental and spiritual import. Often, one silent space is brightened by a light emanating from an adjacent area, just out of view--a temptation to explore further? A similar solitary experience occurs when wandering through a large building during darkness. Dimly lit, seemingly endless networks of crisscrossing corridors, spilling what little light onto the darkness of another, enticing one to travel its path; open doors with beckoning light shapes projected across wooden floors. The walk, the silence and the light blend for a contemplative expression.

"Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man."¹⁵ Motionless objects will engage man in the play of size and scale. Size is an objective

¹⁴Marilyn Pappas, "The Temples of William Wyman," American Craft, Feb/Mar 1980, p. 24.

¹⁵Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria-Jolas (New York: Orion Press, Inc., 1964), p. 184.

perceptual analysis, wherein one's senses give the information concerning the object, and it is processed in a logically real manner, allowing one to function in the spatial environment. Scale, however, requires more of a subjective approach. It is dependent on objective size experience but the inner level allows the perceptions to play, to imagine, to miniaturize, to make immense, to transcend logic. When one refuses to release scale from size, one is left with an object that appears to be certain ... scale operates by uncertainty."¹⁶ The playground of immensity and miniaturization enable us to experience what is large in what is small and vice versa. It is where macrocosm and microcosm correlate, where new images, perceptions and realities arise.

¹⁶Johnson, American Artists on Art From 1940 to 1980, Robert Smithson, p. 172.

EPILOGUE

How people live in time and space in relation to their architecture depends upon religion, philosophy, economics, social structure and technology. Their spirit bears its fruits in the form of architecture. Primitive man's architecture reflected a spiritual connection with nature, which is evident in the materials he uses, the scale of the buildings and the symbolic use of architectural elements, integral to the primitives' daily life. Objects and the placement of those objects in architectural spaces became a context for meaningful spiritual events. If the tribe had to relocate, rituals were commenced so the journey would be safe and the new land rich in game and fertile. Civilized man with his large cities, symbolized by their skyscrapers and sprawling network of streets and highways, focuses his attention on himself; the power of man and his technology. His architectural forms tend to project his dominance or control of nature. He seems to have a view of separateness and aloofness from nature. His structures appear to reflect a loss of effective symbol making, i.e. one working with nature.

The works in this thesis have attempted to combine materials and ideas of a civilized, technical culture with a

primitive cultural aesthetic, especially in forms with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic allusions. This combined aesthetic seeks an appreciation of both cultures and that the differences and inter-relatedness of the two can create new questions. Are the two forms really that far apart or are they really closer in meaning and content? Will primitive concepts, forms, spaces always be a part of man and his spirit or will he lose touch with his ancestors, or primal roots? What if an artist is so confused by his society that he reflects other cultures in his work? Perhaps the indication is that "... time warps and does not extend indefinitely."¹⁷

The use of primitive and architectural allusions, and spatial metaphors are but one step in an artists' explanation of the unexplainable. As time experiences, as consciousness evolves, so will the visions of the artist, searching for truths to the question of reality.

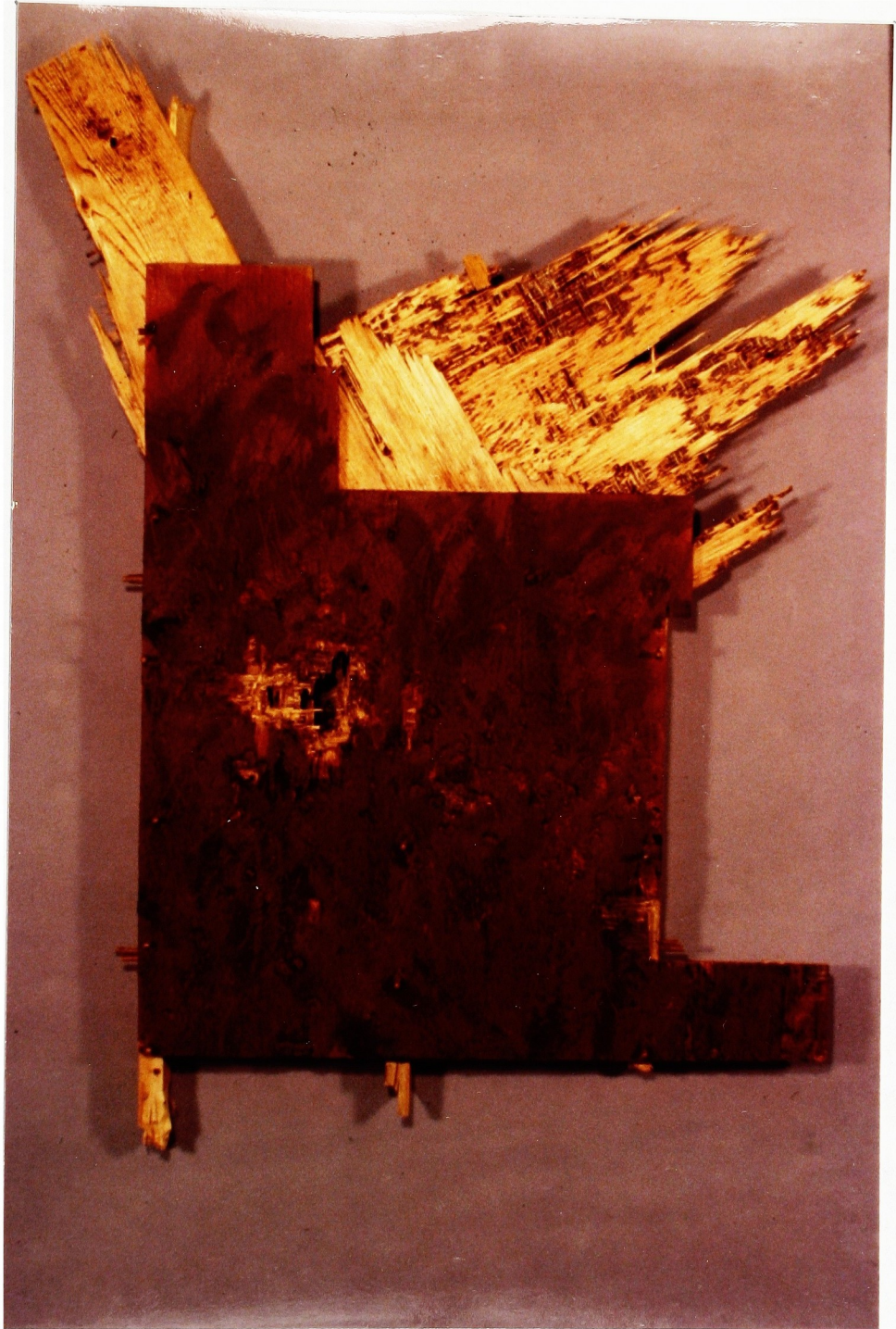
¹⁷Lucy Lippard, Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Pre-History (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 130.



1. "Neither Life Nor Death," acrylic on wood, tar paper, 79"×48"×10", 1984.



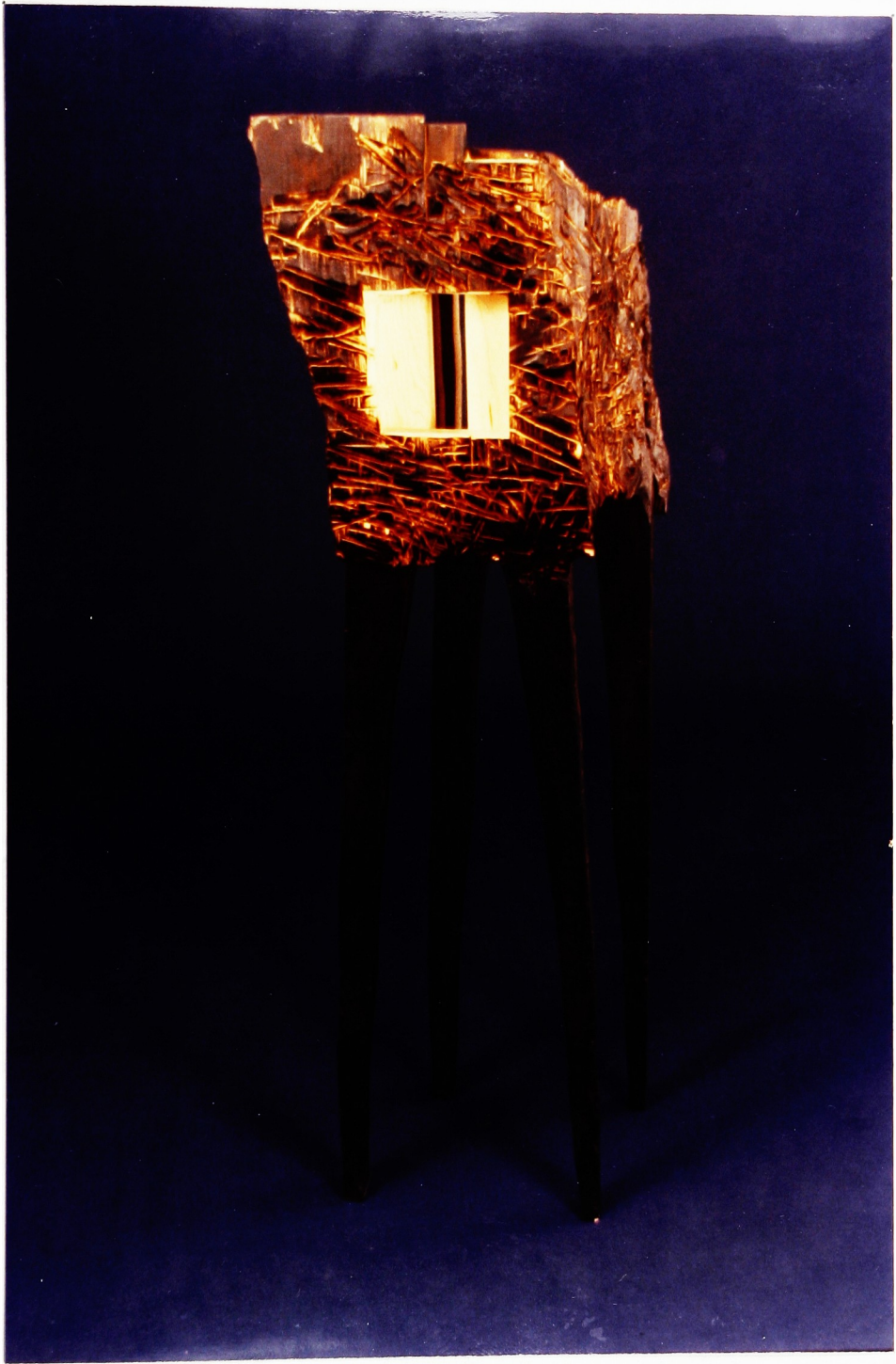
2. "Fragment," oil on wood, styrafoam, 48"×34"×7", 1984.



3. "... Voices ... messages," acrylic and sand on wood construction, 69"x54"x6½", 1984.



4. "The Polemics of Space," oil, paper, staples on wood, gold leaf frame and electrics, 91"x58"x4", 1985.



5. "Untitled," maple, 47"×17"×12", 1984.



6. "Icon to the Wall of Light," acrylic and sand on wood construction; electrics, 72"x31"x5 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", 1985.



7. "Untitled," acrylic on wood construction, electrics, 84"x48"x36", 1985.

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