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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

MONSTER MAKER

By

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19 December 2003

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I. INTRODUCTION

My artwork has always displayed qualities of the fantastic, quite simply, I like to make monsters. These take the form of distorted or transformed human figures, or familiar information that is juxtaposed and presented in an unfamiliar manner. For my thesis I explored the reasons, both personal and cultural, behind my creation of monsters. Within the body of work generated for this purpose, I intended to focus specifically in the areas of surface and texture, and how they related to the concept of “skin.”

I chose this theme for my thesis work because I felt that it would afford me the possibility to further investigate essential qualities related to all of my artwork and far beyond the field of sculpture. My artwork has always been figurative; representational even at its most abstract. Earlier in my graduate studies, I had come to recognize a duality in my work: pieces seemed to evoke responses of both humor and fear. I wanted to know the reasons why my work evoked these reactions. I began to ponder, “What do these works represent to my self and to others.” At the same time, I began to refine my use of color, which had always tended toward the saturated, “retina-searing palette”; I wanted to do “more with less”, I wanted the form of the objects to carry as much emotion as the surface. Lastly, I had created an increasing number of pieces that dealt with themes concerning my identity as an African-American, a topic that is rich and painful, yet inseparable from my self as an artist. I needed to investigate these themes further. It is with these preliminary concerns and observations that I began my thesis investigation. This paper is the

documentation of my thoughts, observations, processes and experiences of my thesis work, at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

One of my earliest art-making memories is of lying on the floor and drawing on a cutting board as I watched Saturday morning cartoons. This is important for several reasons. Primarily because it was during these times that I established the link with the television set, a medium that has come to influence my work as an adult. Science fiction and fantasy adventure series were some of my first contact with monsters. These beings existed in an alternate reality, they were “other-worldly”; researching these programs fueled my own imagination and encouraged me to create imaginary realms in the manner of artist such as Willliam Blake, Heironymous Bosch and J.R.R. Tolkien. Television is also where I saw my first rap music video-a profound experience for a young black male. From these experiences I gained both positive and negative impressions of American society, as well as a sheer love for the creative process of hip-hop. I speak now of the technique of sampling, in which disparate musical sounds- such as an alto saxophone and a cell phone ring tone- are digitally collaged into a sonic masterpiece. With this technique (analogous to my own process of sculptural assembly) I began experimenting with many of the sculptures for my thesis.

Television has influenced my art as much as the work of any other artists, and provided the source for my investigations. In the process of researching artists for my thesis development, I found myself to be most compelled by the development of artists personal lives. Rather than searching for artists who dealt with similar themes, materials, etc., I sought artists with similar backgrounds, history, and experiences.

This was a conscious, perhaps even selfish effort, but I wanted the development of my sculptural experimentation to occur spontaneously; as free as possible from the influences of any specific artist work that I had seen before.

Certain logic led me to study the lives of various African-American artists, my predecessors. I speak of men such as William Edmonson, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and Martin Puryear. Although these men all use different media for their expression: stone, paint, collage/ mix-media, and wood respectively, they have all achieved a certain level of success in a field that has been traditionally “exclusive”(some would say racist and chauvinist). The subject of their race is inseparable from their art, I believe, and through their skill they have been able to explore this theme. They have been able to invoke fear, pride, empathy and anger. Most importantly, they have all been able to express themselves with a high level of ability that is both a product of, yet irrespective of their skin color. I can only hope that my career will emulate the success of these individuals.

The time I spent experimenting with sculpture for my thesis can be split into three distinct periods. I began creating the first body of work, as I often do, by gathering materials and sketching. Here is a description of the materials explored throughout this process and their personal significance. I tested plywood to create hand like forms, to shape them I used laser-cutting technology in conjunction with experience from a previous employer. Next I explored Plaster gauze, along with paper; it became a skin that gave a visual unity to my structures. I found it both appropriate and ironic that materials traditionally used to heal and repair wounds were being used to create “monsters”. I experimented with handmade paper pulp as a

potential surface medium. Paper has a long history as an art material, and is flexible as well. In my approach, paper pulp was poured over foam molds to achieve carapace and shell-like structures. I was able to employ several types of industrial foam, a toxic material in terms of both exposure and manufacture, yet very versatile in its application. I was able to obtain, recycled, surplus insulation that had been poured in bulbous, globular forms (not unlike organs) Lastly, I explored the potential of Bamboo which reflects my love of many aspects of Asian culture: anime', kendo, Zen and calligraphy. It is a fundamentally light and strong material and became the basis for many of my sculptural armatures. Much like African American culture, Asian culture has been viewed at times as “monstrous” by American culture as a whole and I intended for the bamboo to echo this.

The sculptures of my first group of experiments are similar in that they are all abstract physical structures that possess human hands. I intended the physical structures as metaphors for the way human beings act, alone or towards others. For example, a piece entitled **Tree of Life**. A tree-like form spouts limbs that end in grasping appendages. In another, **Soul Cage**, grasping, claw-like arms form a lattice of bars that make cage walls. These two works are intended as visual metaphors for the way in which human beings both nurture and restrain each other, respectively. In this initial series of seven pieces there were both representational and non-representational elements, making the works both shocking and familiar. Originally, I had intended them to be displayed upon pedestals in the traditional manner for displaying Sculpture. However, upon development, it was evident that this artwork would be better experienced suspended from the ceiling, which was how it was

finally displayed. This format also emphasized the qualities of light and shadow, and gave the pieces a subtle, strange, animated quality.

II. MAIN BODY

A. MONSTERS

Monsters are not real. The Minotaur, the Dragon, the Devil, all of these examples exist in stories created by human beings. In many respects, these characters are created to represent phenomena that cause us confusion or fear as human beings. We have been conditioned, as Americans, to associate many notions of good and evil with the qualities of light and darkness; that which is bad is by nature “dark.”ⁱ We use expressions like “Black Friday” or “Black magic” or “Heart of Darkness” to denote bad, unpleasant things. As an African-American, which at one time meant, “colored”, at another time meant “black”, I have always regarded this way of thinking with skepticism. This may be reason for my personal affinity for monsters; i.e. dark characters (I was also born on the day before Halloween.)

In beginning the second body of work, I wanted to explore a single, larger than life statement, in contrast to the group of smaller experimentations that I had just completed. I was pleased with the manner in which these forms were able to capture and occupy the space around them via their vertical suspension; at times even encroaching upon the viewers during critique. I felt that with a single piece, built on a much larger scale, I would be able to further this sense of encroachment. In addition, I wanted to create a floor based “monster”; one that would be able to

support its own weight, standing in the same manner that human beings, and thus the audience, would stand.

B. DRAGONS

I have always had a love of dragons; I had two as favorite stuffed animals when I was younger. In western culture, the dragon is a thing to be feared and conquered, a relative of the primordial evil in the Garden of Eden: the serpent.ⁱⁱ By contrast, the dragon in Asian folklore is a creature to be worshipped and emulated, even occupying a place in the zodiac.ⁱⁱⁱ Dragons to me represent power, flight and magic; like myself, they may also fall victim to stereotyping: judged negatively based solely upon outwardly fearsome appearance, regardless of character.^{iv}

The aforementioned second body of sculpture experiments produced the largest sculpture I have built to date. The piece, entitled **Dragon Modules** is actually a triptych; being composed of three smaller, freestanding elements. These forms are intended to reference a head, body and tail; vertical “legs” support all three. The entire assemblage stands approximately 48” from the floor and measures 156”(13 feet) in length overall.

During this time, I was exploring casting paper pulp to create organic forms that I obtained from recycled insulation foam. This paper became the perfect “skin” for my dragon: rough and scaly in texture, with undulating ripples and curves created by the foam over which it was laid. I feel that paper is such an appropriate analogy

for skin: thin, yet infinitely resilient, available in such a wide variety of sizes and hues that are, elementally, all the same. Like my previous constructions, this creation became more metaphorical than literal in title and shape.

In addition to the dragon, this second body of work produced a suit of armor as well; a sculpture intended as a self-portrait. It was during this time, and through this exploration, that the concept of skin would figure greatly in my life. My skin, rather my skin color, has always been very apparent to me, growing up and as an adult, specifically as an artist. I think that I have developed my sense of humor, partly, as a means of diffusing difficult situations and thus protecting my own skin. Humor has also become a tool with which I can attack the same unpleasantness. Words are the tools of humor, like paper, words can cut. I began making an experimental life size armature: armor, that I would cover with paper; absurd yet strangely appropriate. I gave special attention to the area around the shoulders, emphasizing and enlarging the shoulder-plates to proportions almost wing-like. This was done in an effort to reference the proportions of fictional male characters such as superheroes, as well as actual models such as sports figures (such as football players). To complete the package an abstract “emblem” was placed in the center of the chest, it can be interpreted as team logo or heraldic coat of arms.

C. DREAMS AND HEROES

The suit of armor comprised half of a diptych that I entitled **Paper Hero**. The other half of this work was a large, crown-like structure that was suspended over the

armor, as if it were wearing it. I created the crown in response to a specific event in my life, one that was dependent on my skin color and presented the opportunity for a wealth of rewards, and new challenges. To its credit, R.I.T. recognized a need within the college for a more diverse faculty, simply put- they needed more teachers of color. Dependent upon completion of my thesis, I was offered a tenure-track position as a professor. While I was overjoyed at this prospect, these new stipulations added an urgency and complexity beyond the initial requirements necessary to complete my degree. For a time after, I first received this news; I suffered a creative block brought on by anxiety. I worked through that block to complete the crown, and thus the self-portrait, **Paper Hero**.

At the time I began the third and final body of work, I found it difficult to start new work. I had already completed over a dozen works of sculpture as well as bound two sketchbooks specifically for this project, plus created a large number of loose drawings and maquettes; inspiration was elusive. I found myself procrastinating by watching cartoons. I was sketching during one of these programs that I experienced a sort of epiphany. I came to realize that the monsters in my life represented my own fears: about life, about work, about not knowing what comes next and being judged on my appearance. I found that by addressing my fears, by giving them shape and even name, I could begin to address, and thus dispel them. The unknown is a lot less scary when you can put a face on it. And that is exactly what I needed to do to complete this last body of work.

Much like the first body of work, this last effort produced a series of related sculptures that I displayed in a floor-based installation entitled **Under the Bed**. This

body of work saw the return of the hand-like structures. All of this investigation was about nightmares, as well as shapes of familiar objects in the bedroom and the way these shapes seem to change in the dark. In this environment, I meant to reference not only my current bad dreams, but also the fear I felt as a child upon returning home from scary movies. There are two specific instances, after “Gremlins” and “Aliens” that I can recall actually sleeping under the bed so the monsters would not get me. How different my shoes and discarded toys looked from that vantage point; they scared me just as much as the special effects.

Consistent with the specific nature of my research, I did not display my work at the Bevier Gallery on the R.I.T. campus. It had become apparent to both myself and members of my thesis committee that the unique body of work I had generated would require a space above and beyond that provided by the Bevier. In an effort that was ultimately just as important as the creation of the work itself, I was able to obtain and renovate several thousand square feet of commercial space at a building, located in the heart of downtown Rochester.

D. INSTALLATION

When presenting artwork, especially sculpture, which is best viewed in the round; the environment can be crucial to the audience’s interpretation of the objects. Because of the size and scope of my work, I felt that a theatrical setting was needed to best display my efforts. I was able to control all the aspects of this production: the lighting, the background, even the “order of appearance” of each work. In addition,

by choosing an alternative site, I was also able to fulfill a personal goal of achieving my first solo show before the age of thirty.

The space was divided into three distinct areas. The **Dragon Modules**, as well as many of the hanging sculpture from my first experiments occupied the main area. These greeted the viewers as they entered the door. A single overhead light was used for each area; to dramatize the shadows as well enhance the various textures created by the strange material combinations. The diptych, **Paper Hero**, occupied a space adjacent to the main gallery. For this installation, a yellow party bulb was used, covering the entire piece with a golden hue. This golden color seemed to emphasize the themes of glory, wealth and success that were symbolized by the crown and suit of armor. In the rear of this space, in a dimly lit corner, was the installation **Under the Bed**; Cast in a red glow, akin to a “red-light district”—this was the most mysterious of the three areas. Due to the dim lighting, and because most of the sculptures were painted black, this area challenged viewers to search for and interpret details (as if they themselves were looking under the bed). It was this suggestion, the play of appearance versus reality that truly captured the spirit of the work.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have discovered much about myself as an artist at the culmination of this process. It is a hard thing to analyze and discuss one’s own artwork; I’m much happier making things than explaining them. To be quite honest, I’m not always sure why I do what I do; my attitude is best summed up by a quote

from one of my predecessors, the black artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, “ I don’t know how to describe my work because it’s not always the same thing. It’s like asking Miles, [Davis] well, how does your horn sound?”^v

Even with this difficulty, in reflecting upon my own work during this process, I have developed a greater understanding of some of the factors that motivate me in it’s creation. I was aware initially that the monster is a decidedly human construct, created out of fear to explain the unknown. What I have come to realize is that I as an artist, have an affinity for giving voice and form, for articulating my own personal fears in a manner that is both expressive and communicative. Moreover, I have come to realize that to be successful one must walk hand in hand with the unknown. To become a master, one must proceed with confidence down the path, which is hidden.

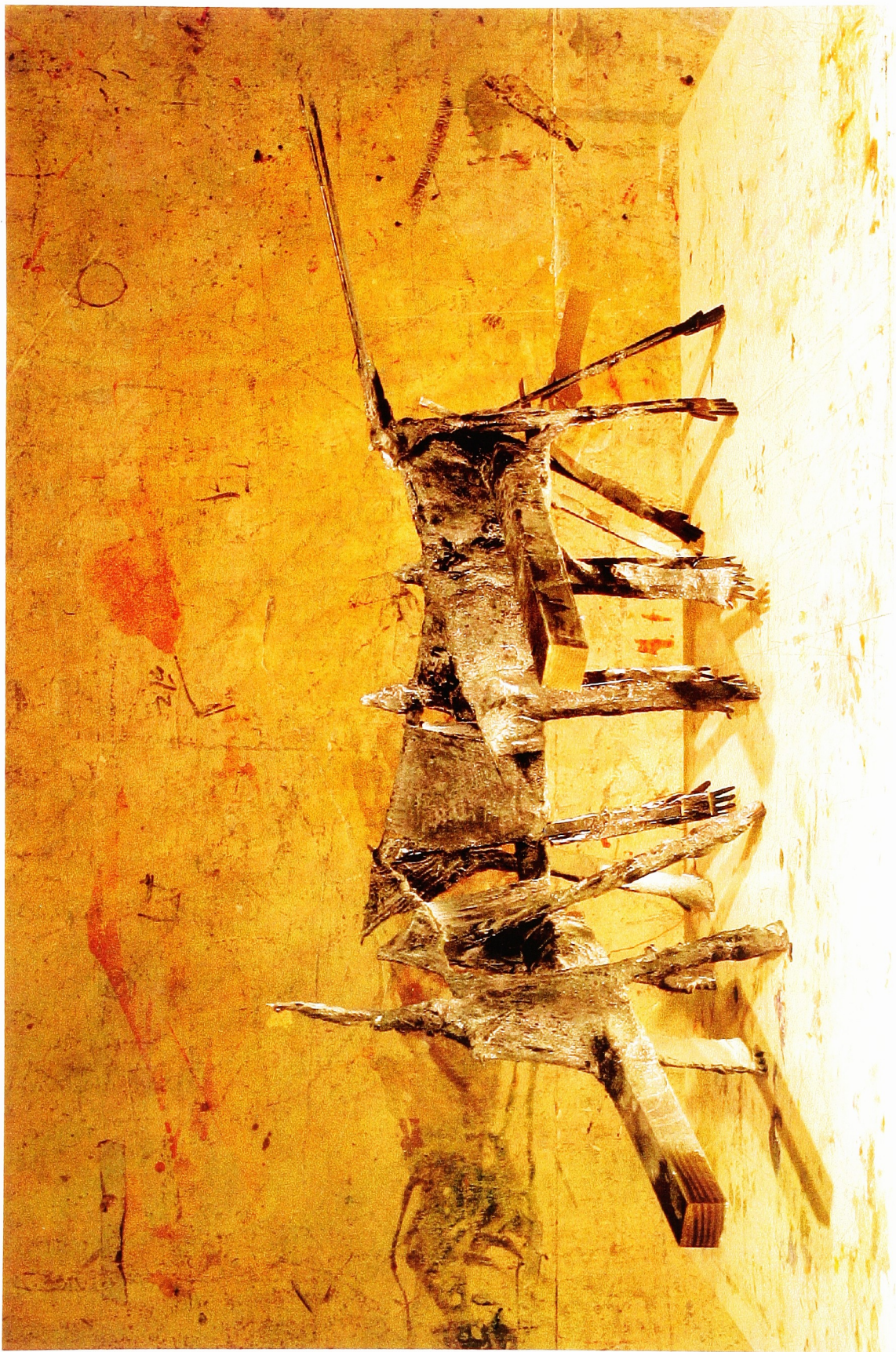
In the words of Langston Hughes,

“Let’s bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let’s sing it dance it, write it, paint it. Let’s do the impossible. Let’s create something transcendently material, mystically objective, earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.”^{vi}

IV. Body of Work

1. Tents of the Conquerors
Mixed media
36" x 6" x 10"
2. Wild Kingdom
Mixed media
Series of models, dimension variable, largest approx 24" tall
3. Untitled (Cloud)
Mixed media
36" long x 18" tall
4. Hand Warrior
Mixed media
14" tall
5. Untitled (Cloud II)
Mixed media
42" x 21.5" x 10"
6. Senki (War Spirit)
Mixed media
39" x 11" x 15"
7. Pick'n
Mixed media
40" tall x 15" wide
8. Paper Hero
Mixed media
Diptych *crown unavailable for photo shoot
Seated figure approx. dimensions of 6', 175 lb. male

9. Tree of Life
Diptych
Mixed media
30" tall x 11" wide
10. Soul Cage
Mixed media
16" x 9" x 9"
11. Cloud Emperor
Diptych
Mixed media
48" tall x 36" long x 24" wide
12. Shoo
Mixed media
15" tall x 17" long x 40" wide
13. Shoo2
Mixed media
13" tall x 20" long x 13" wide
14. Dragon Modules
Triptych
Mixed media
48" tall x 156" long x 36" wide

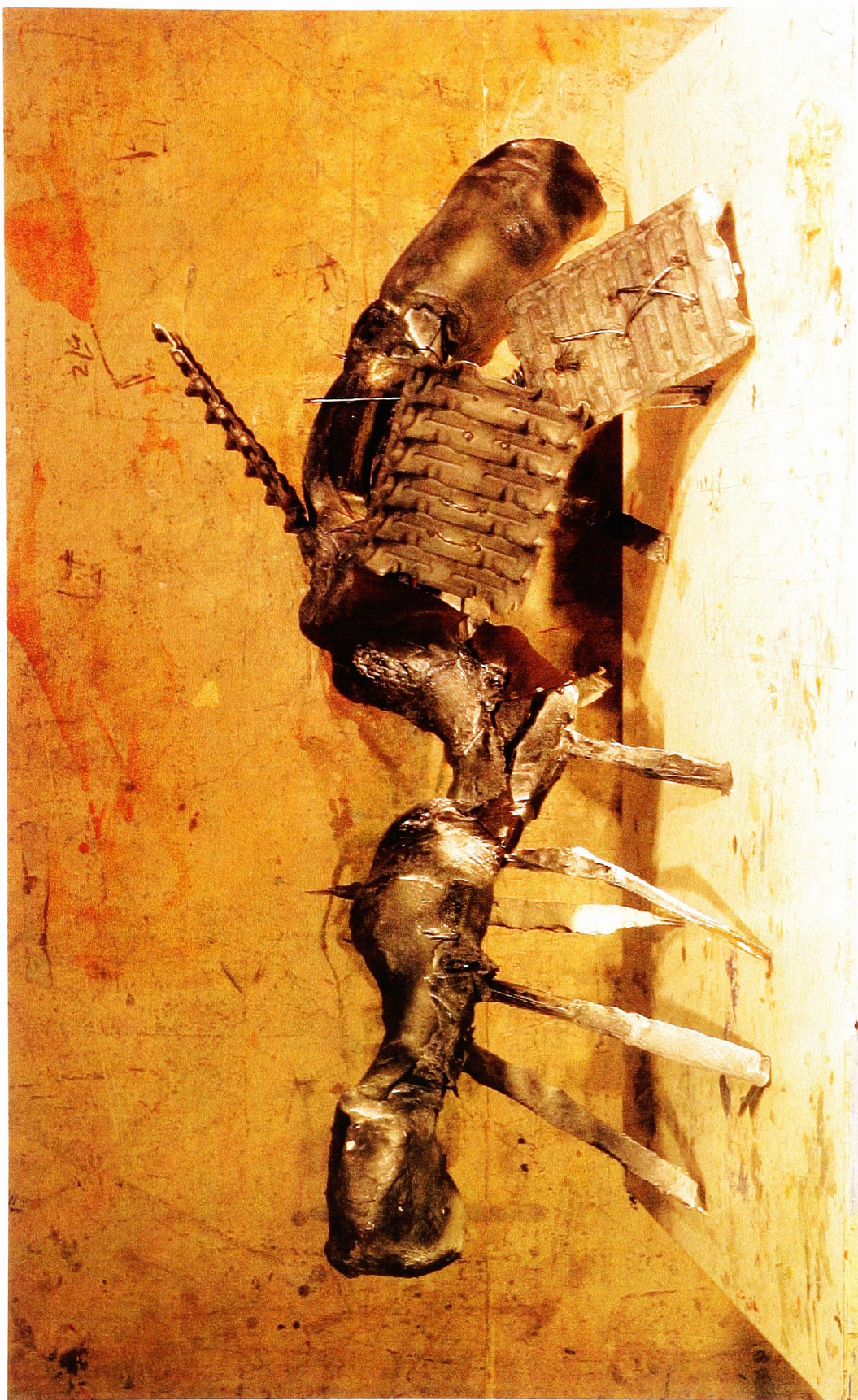








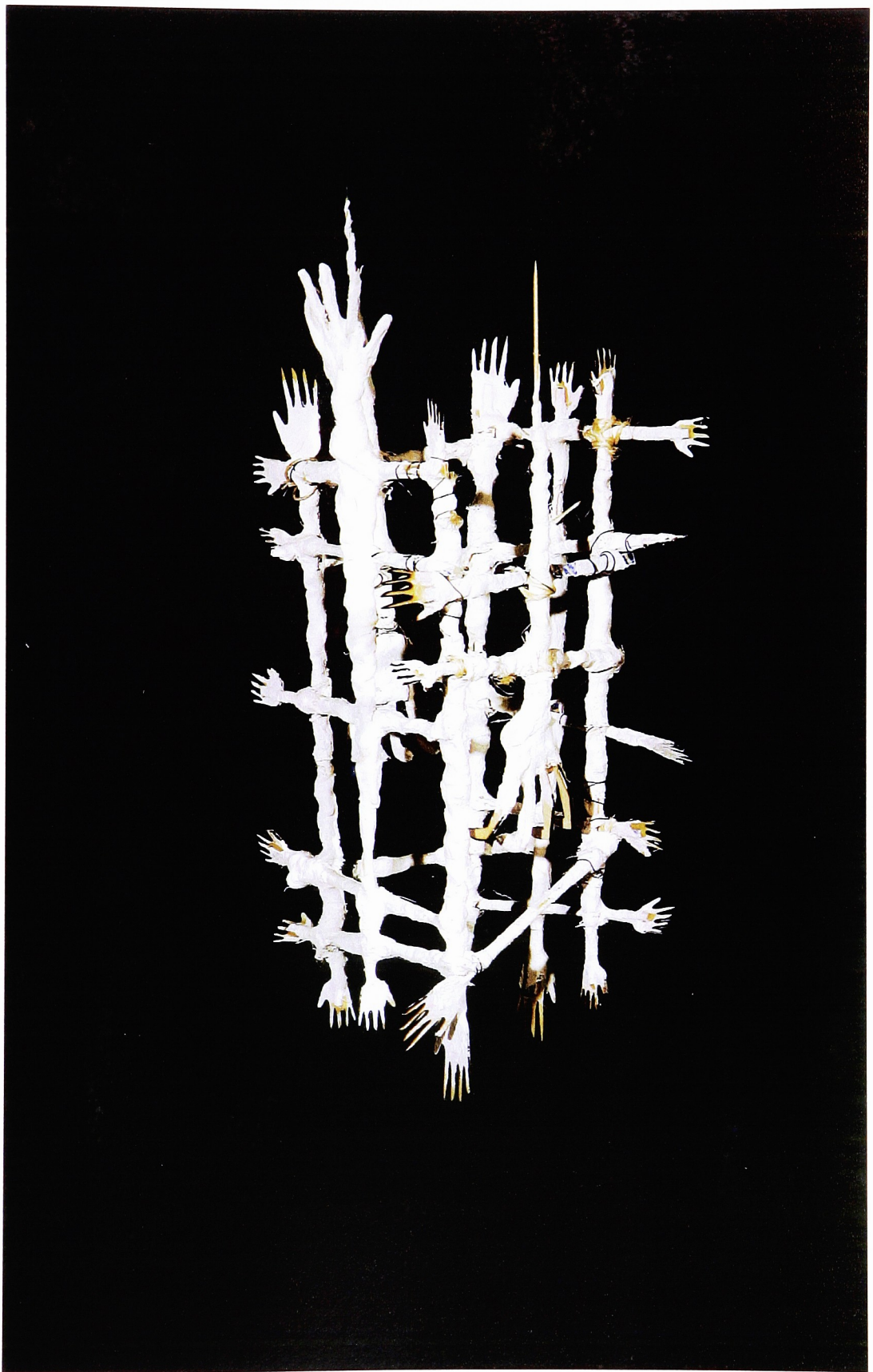








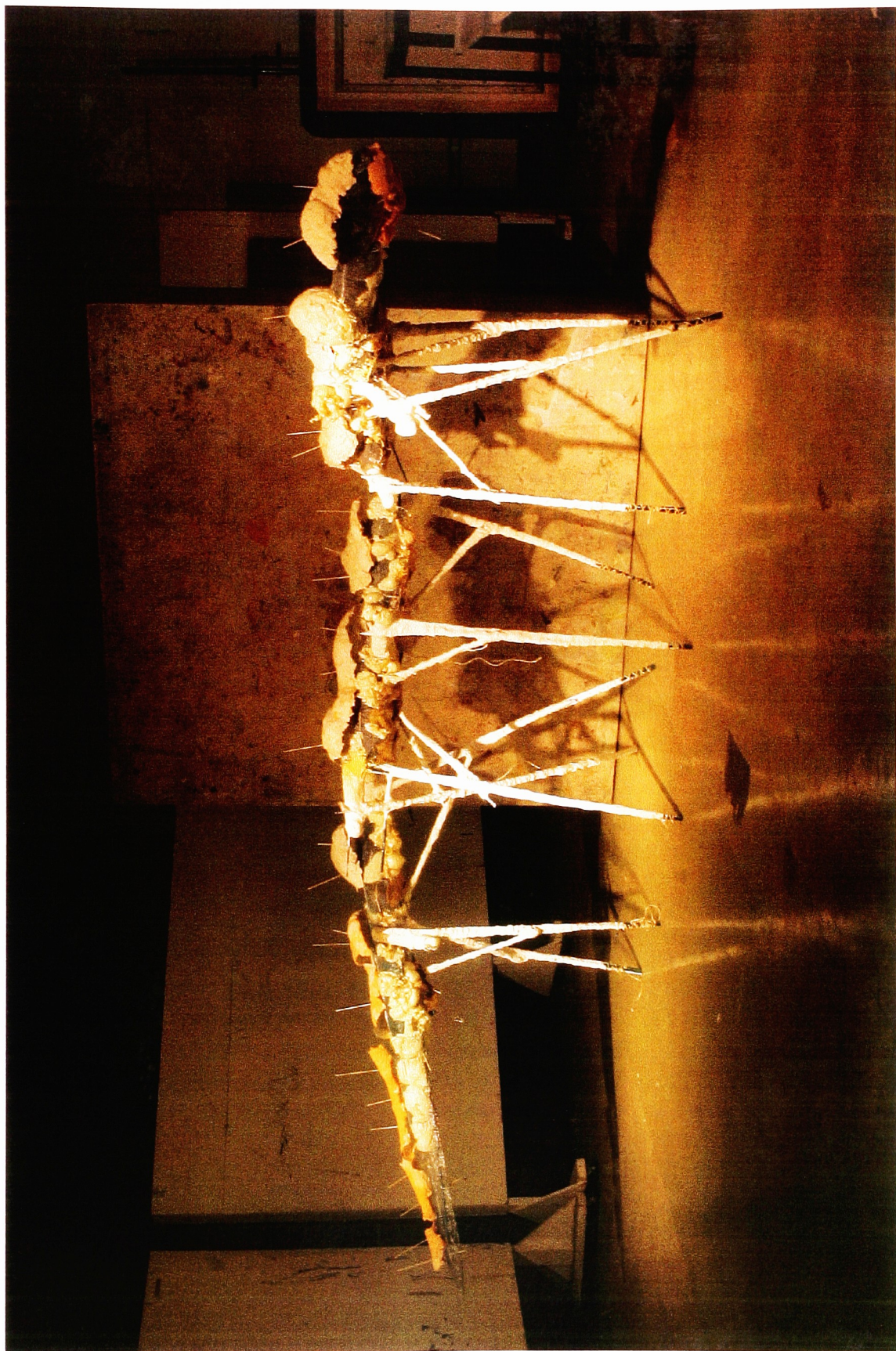












V. Endnotes

ⁱ *The New College Edition, American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin 1969

“**Black** (blak)-adj-abbr. Bl, blk. -3. Belonging to an ethnic group having dark skin, especially Negroid. 6. Evil, sinister, “black deeds” 7. Cheerless and depressing; gloomy”

ⁱⁱ *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, New York, N.Y., Abingdon Press 1962 pp.290-293

“**SERPENT**. A scaly, limbless elongated reptile of the genus Ophidia or Serpentes

5. **In mythology**. The familiar mythology of the ancient Near East with its primeval struggle between two opposing powers, has numerous echoes in the Old Testament where, of course, the struggle is between Yahweh and his antagonist. One of the terms for the latter is “the fleeing serpent.”

See Dragon; Rahab; Leviathan.

7. **In eschatology**. As early as Isa. 27:1 a mythological motif is used for an eschatological purpose: in this passage “ Leviathan the fleeing serpent “ stands for the lords enemies who “in that day” will be overthrown.-It remains for the Christian author of Revelation to identify “that ancient serpent” with the Devil or Satan (Rev. 12:9-15; 20-02). Thus the serpents of the primeval cosmic struggle, of the Garden of Eden, and the ancient fertility cult are united with all that the Jewish Satan had come to stand for, though this creature’s ultimate end is to be cast forever into the lake of fire and brimstone (20:10; cf. Matt. 25:41.)

DEVIL. A word which relates to several terms in the Old Testament.-The central understanding of the term is of one who destroys the relationship between god and men. *See also* Abaddon; Apollyon; Beelzebul; Belial; **Dragon**; Evil One; Lion; Lucifer; **Serpent**.

DRAGON. In several poetic passages of the Old Testament reference is made to a primordial combat between Yahweh and a draconic monster.”

ⁱⁱⁱ D Howard Smith *Chinese Religions, From 1000 B.C. to the Present Day, History of Religion Series*, San Francisco, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston 1968., pg 9

“The Dragon was early associated with storm and cloud, rain and fertility, rivers and marshes, and with awe-inspiring and kingly power.-That the dragon was significant for Shang dynasty religion is proved conclusively by the fact that in the *Chia Pien* list of oracle bone inscriptions, no less than forty-one characters are to be considered forms of lung, the dragon.”

Iiii. continued: J.C. Cooper, *An illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Signs and Symbols*, New York, N.Y., Thames and Hudson Inc., 1979 pp. 55-56

“Dragon A complex and universal symbol. Generally in the Orient, is a beneficent, celestial power, while in the Occident it becomes Cthonic, destructive and evil. The Dragon and the Serpent (q.v.) are usually interchangeable in symbolism; The struggle with the dragon symbolizes the difficulties to be overcome in gaining the treasures of inner knowledge. *Christian:* the power of evil, the Tempter, the Devil, the enemy of god: it also represents death and darkness. *Chinese:* The Dragon and the Serpent are not separated in Chinese symbolism. The dragon represents the highest spiritual power; the supernatural; infinity; the spirit of change; the divine power of change and transformation; the rhythms of Nature, the law of becoming; supernatural wisdom; strength. The dragon of the clouds is also thunder and fertilizing rain.”

^{iv} D Howard Smith *Chinese Religions, From 1000 B.C. to the Present Day, History of Religion Series*, San Francisco, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston 1968., pg 9

“A certain ambivalence is to be found in the concept of the dragon. On one hand he inspired awe and terror, but on the other hand he was worshipped as a beneficent king who sent down the fructifying rains.”

^v Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat*, New York, N.Y., Viking Penguin, 1998, pg 80
Tamra Davis and Becky Johnston video interview, 1983.

^{vi} Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat*, New York, N.Y., Viking Penguin, 1998, pg 405
Langston Hughes poem

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