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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CERAMIC SCULPTURE

by

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May 19, 1984

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Date: May 19, 1984

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THESIS PROPOSAL

I intend to create ceramic sculpture that will contrast and combine personal references (real or imagined) from natural and man-made environments. Within this context, I wish to explore the concepts of volume, structure, texture, and their mutual interactions. Another concern will be the use of color in order to enhance the sense of the object's construction, but also to point out the natural, random elements of ceramic processes.

INTRODUCTION

Except for a comparatively short time in Japan, my education in ceramics has been approached from a European viewpoint with emphasis on utilitarian ware. Technically, I had been trained to work with methods pertaining to mass-production. Aesthetically, my attention had focused on the principles of the Bauhaus movement with its central axiom of "form follows function." I had gained a broad, general base of knowledge, but I felt the need to further develop my interests and expand my perception of ceramic art.

In my present work I have relinquished utilitarianism in order to accommodate other concerns. Going through life, looking and feeling, there are experiences that remain in the peripheral area of one's consciousness. Other experiences come from within, wordless bits of sediment rising from subconsciousness. For me, these semi-conscious and subconscious experiences have been derived mainly from my interaction with nature and art.

I think of a wooded area by a lake where I often played as a child. I had been there dozens of times, but what I remember is only one particular bright spring day. The ice had broken on the lake; sunlight flashed in dazzling sparks on the cold water; the trees bowed in the wind under a blue sky; and the air was incredibly fresh and invigorating. A deep sense of joy and satisfaction accompanied these observations. As this example shows, we apparently "... accumulate a fund of memory-traces based on our sensory experience. These remain in our

minds charged, it seems with vestiges of the emotions which accompanied the original experience." (1:16).*

I have always wanted to see what kind of objects could be made by utilizing this realm of memory and sensation as a source of inspiration. I wish to convey an essence of place, time, and sentiment, as well as provide the viewer with a visual and spatial experience. From the outset I envisioned the work as drawing from certain references, exploring certain concepts, and deal with color in a specific way. These intentions have for the most part been followed through. However, the physical process of creating necessitates a synthesis of idea and the actual presence of material. At this junction change becomes inevitable. Additions and alterations have occurred during the process of development. Hopefully, these changes have served to strengthen and enrich the work.

*Numbers in parentheses refer to numbered references in the bibliography; those after the colon are page numbers.

CHAPTER I

REFERENCES

Corals

Everyone knows how one can look into the flames of a fire for hours. We feel an endless attraction to fire. So much of what it is to be human is related in one way or another to heat and flame. I look at water in the same way. It mesmerizes me.

The sea and things pertaining to the sea have a strong pull on my senses and thoughts. The sounds, the showers of light on the crest of a wave, and the smell of brine all blend to create a harmonious sensory rhythm. It is not the ocean itself with its endless expanse of water and sky that appeals to me, but rather the coastline, the temporary boundary that reflects the shifting balance between the land, the sea, and the air. It is a landscape in flux where the elements come together shaping and reshaping everything. There is a mixed sense of eternity and minute existence.

The coastal environment which I find richest in terms of sensory impressions is the coral reef. It is organic geology determined by the original topography of the rock on which the coral began. On shore is lush vegetation and white sandy beach. Just beneath the surface of the sea a vast intricate web of structural remnants and a plethora of living organisms offer some of nature's most amazing shapes and colors. In this aquatic world everything seems to be in motion. The coral polyps

make the rock come alive. Swirls of bright fish dart by, and the sun and sea create a shimmering play of light which obscures and transforms the scenery with ever changing patterns.

From a larger perspective, we see the multitude of reef creatures, the fish, sponges, mollusks, nematodes, sharks, birds, men as part of a single organism; like the cells of a coral polyp, move on their own, in response to the whole reef entity, and play individual, if redundant, roles. (2:26).

Monoliths

In the case of the coral reef, man is a small part of the whole, functioning in the natural integration of many different parts. What we often forget, is the fact that even when man is the dominant force in his environment, he is still only part of a larger, complex reality. Prehistoric man, however, had to incorporate his perception of self into the total environment.

The evolution, from a purely instinctive, unconscious being to Homo sapiens who tackles the world empirically, was a radical change. Man was forced to try to understand his reality, not just experience it. Myth and ritual were created to grasp and unify this understanding. Visual and verbal symbols came into being as supporting elements communicating the message. At the same time, these symbols became just as important as the myths or rituals themselves.

Man has from time immemorial put marks in his environment in the form of stone, and it is the early use of monoliths that has attracted my attention. These are single upright stones often of considerable size, either dressed or in their raw state. "...They represent, it would seem, a luxury that primitive people could ill afford." (3.96).

What prompted our ancestors to set up these stones cannot be defined with accuracy, but we do have a general idea of their function. Perhaps they also represent one of the earliest forms of self-expression. It should be pointed out that the term self-expression is not meant in its contemporary form, which is the expression of one's own personality, as through speech or art. It is here the expression of thought and idea shared by a group of people. Those who sculpted vague human images out of these stones, did not do so in order to bring forth any private point of view. They sought to communicate beliefs and knowledge which were part of their collective consciousness.

We know that even unhewn stones had a highly symbolic meaning for ancient and primitive societies. Rough, natural stones were often believed to be the dwelling places of spirits of gods, and were used in primitive cultures as tombstones, boundary stones, or objects of religious veneration. Their use may be regarded as a primal form of sculpture--a first attempt to invest the stone with more expressive power than chance and nature could give it. (4:232).

By placement alone the stone gained a significance of its own, and to enhance the quality of "spirit in the rock" the surface was often reworked. Acting upon their conscious and unconscious knowledge of the world, primitive man gave the stone the approximations of the human figure. What is interesting here is "... the primitive tendency to give merely a hint of a human figure, and to retain much of the stone's natural form." (4:234). As a result of this fusion between material and mind, these stones convey a sense of great power and meaning without revealing the enigma of their existence.

This sense of mystery is heightened when stones have been arranged in distinct sculptural/architectural patterns of which Stonehenge is perhaps the most well known example. We are intrigued by the seemingly

obvious yet illusive function of the arrangement. The mind is forced to perceive intuitively and understand without rationalizing.

Alberto Giacometti

In the work of Alberto Giacometti, one of this century's greatest sculptors, I find a continuation of ancient stone imagery. Although Giacometti was dealing with a more complex body of knowledge, he succeeded in combining sources from the familiar and the artistic concerns of his time with the past and the unknown.

Once the object has been constructed I have a tendency to rediscover, transformed and displaced images, impressions, realities which have moved me profoundly (often in my unconscious), forms to which I feel myself very close, although I may often be unable to identify. (5:144).

The statements he created convey this intense vision which is at once personal yet archaic in feeling.

Other aspects of Giacometti's work that I find of particular interest are his perception of space and movement.

Giacometti "... never considered the representation of space in and of itself a sculptural problem; he always thought of it in terms of a quality possessed by each individual figure, like an emanation or field of force surrounding it." (6:145). On movement he has said: "Despite all my efforts, it was impossible for me to endure a sculpture which gave the illusion of movement ... movement I only wanted if real and effective. Several objectives moving in relationships to one another." (7:n.p.).

These concepts are seen clearly in the works where figures move across a flat limited surface. (plate 1). Because of their movements, the figures seem to exist for each other, one advancing towards another. Yet at the same time, they stand alone, each in their own private world. The figures become a visual expression of the nature of human interaction.

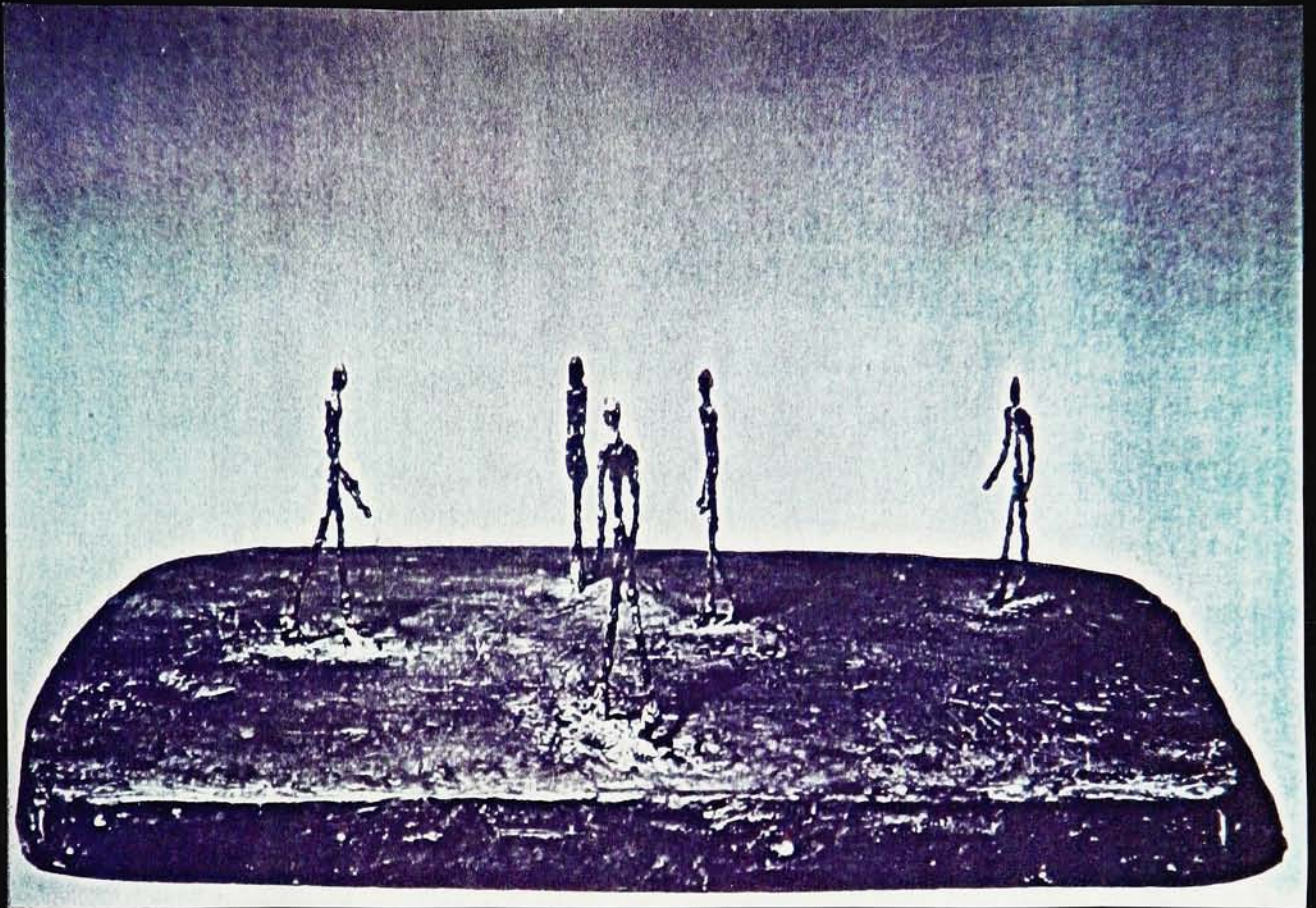


Plate 1

Alberto Giacometti

The City Square

CHAPTER II

BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

I wished in this body of work to deal directly with memory and ideas without subordinating them to a utilitarian purpose. In a utilitarian object I would only imply the notion of, for example, the sea through a subtle decoration or a slight modeling of the shape. Now, my concern was to press the material to its limits in order to project a powerful image of the sea on a visual as well as an emotional level. I was not interested in creating slick, literal presentations of my source material. I wanted to let the work grow from within itself, finding its own expression. I wished to adopt only as much technical skill as was necessary to get the work through the various stages of the ceramic process.

The work in this thesis grew not only from my ideas and external sources, but also out of experimentation with the clay itself. From these "tests" I culled what I considered formal considerations. These were: a concern for volume, a strong interest in structure, and an equally strong interest in texture.

I had been dealing with volume in several ways: first, in a straight forward fashion where a positive mass of curved clay determined the volume, and then in another piece where hollow tubes running through the form caused negative space to read as volume. (plates 2-5). At this point I was also attentive to the fact that the sheer mass of clay was

somehow important to the expression of the pieces, but this sensation of bulkiness and weight was still secondary to the more obvious use of volume.

By structure is meant the way in which the forms are built. Some work had been made by combining coiled shapes in or over a mold, others by combining slabs. I wanted the pieces to read as something consisting of parts.

The texture or surface quality was a dominant feature. Almost every surface was decorated with elaborate, undulating patterns to the point where it became difficult to discern the heavy ornamentation from the basic mass of the form.

It was the connection between structure and texture that brought about the idea to create work where volume, structure, and texture would function in a closely integrated fashion.

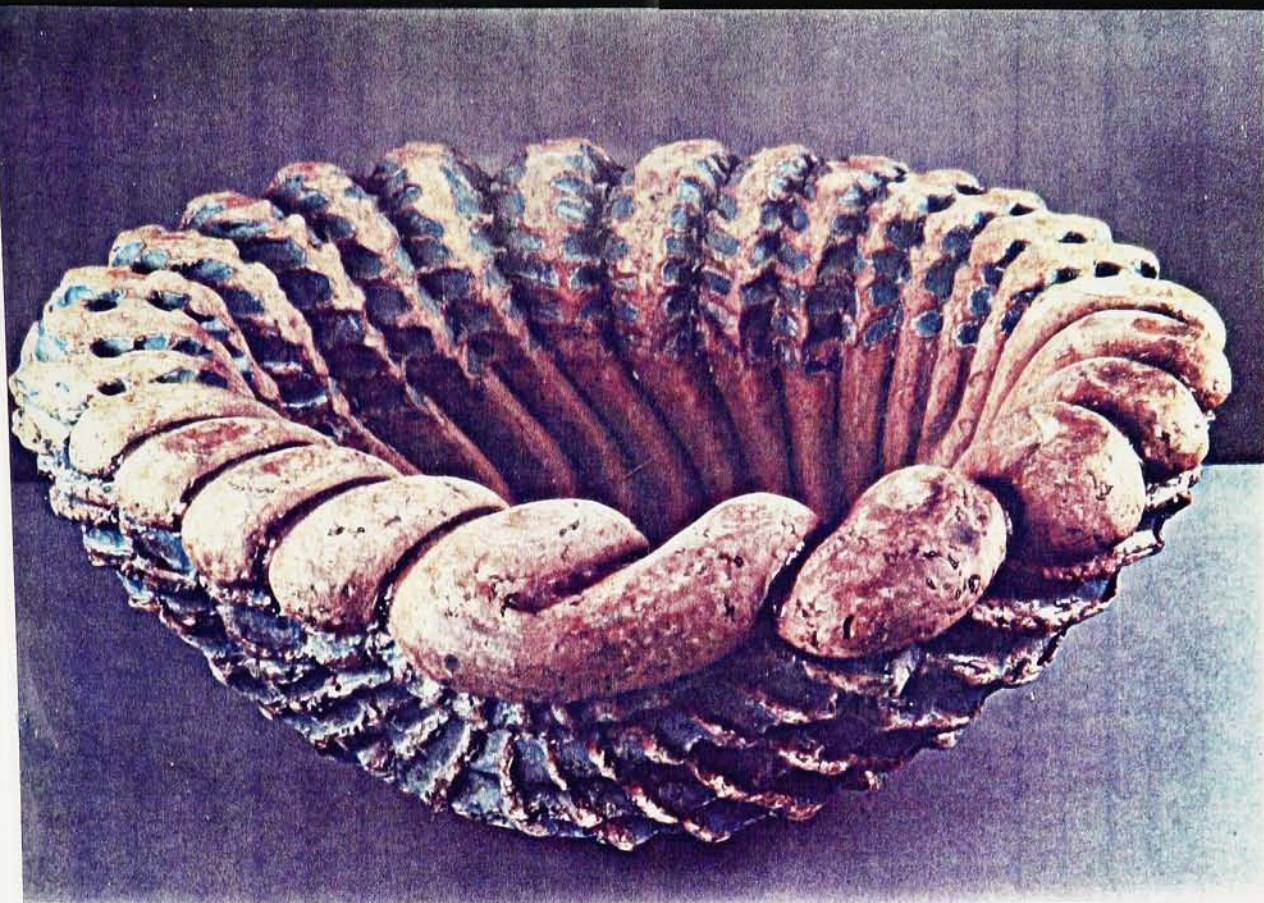


Plate 2

Shell Shape

Height 17" x Diameter 26"

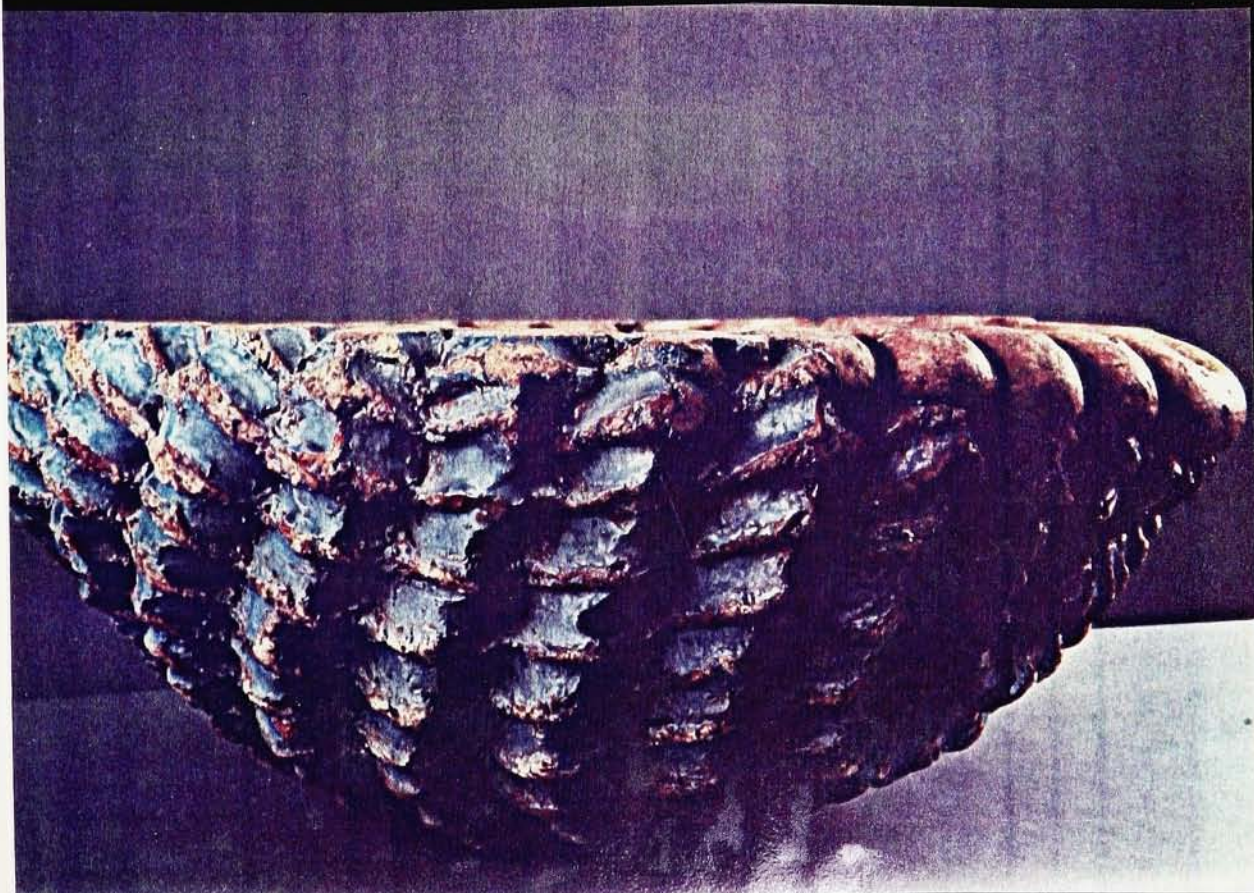


Plate 3

Shell Shape

Height 17" x Diameter 26"

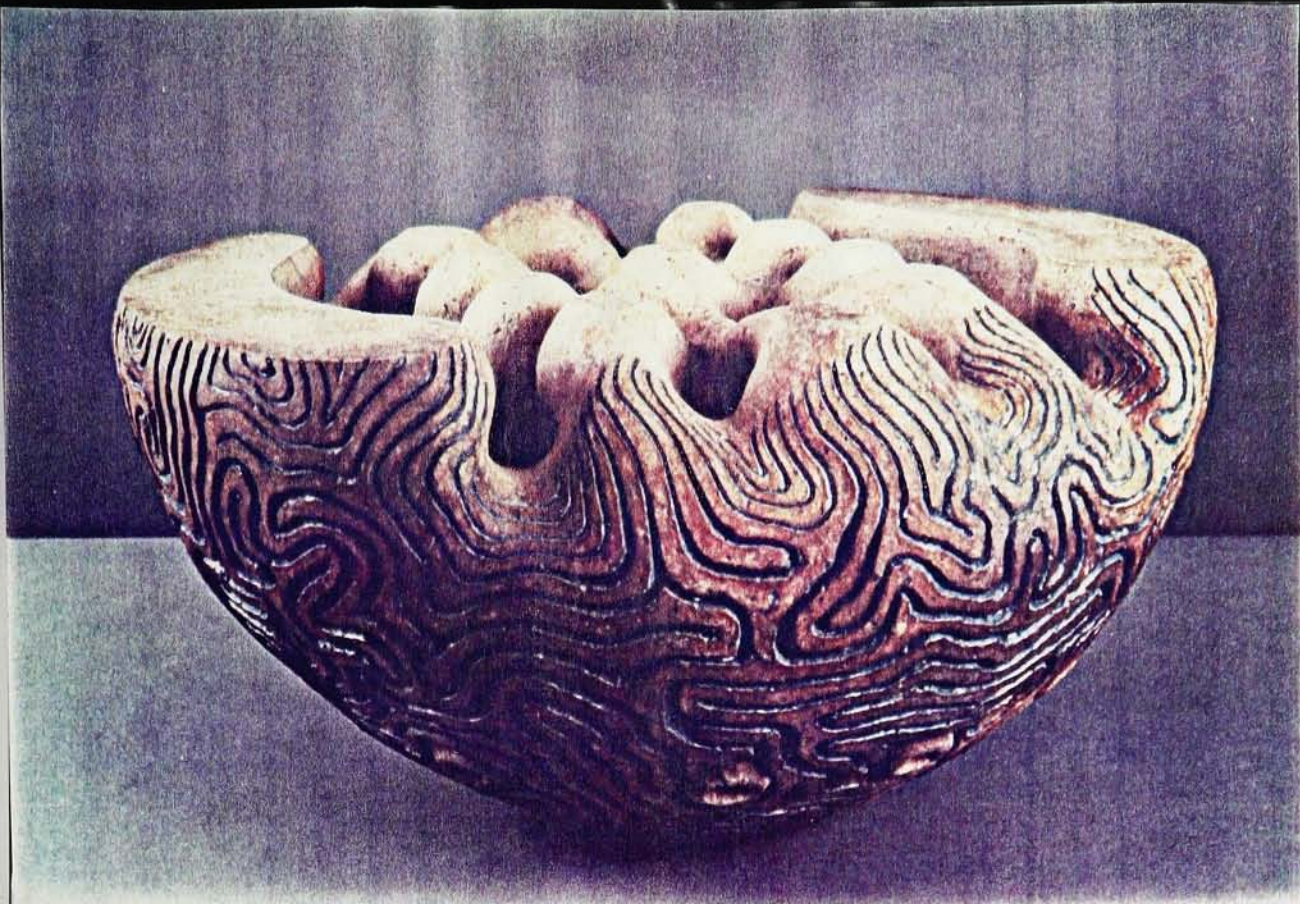


Plate 4

Sea Shape

Height 12" x Diameter 21"

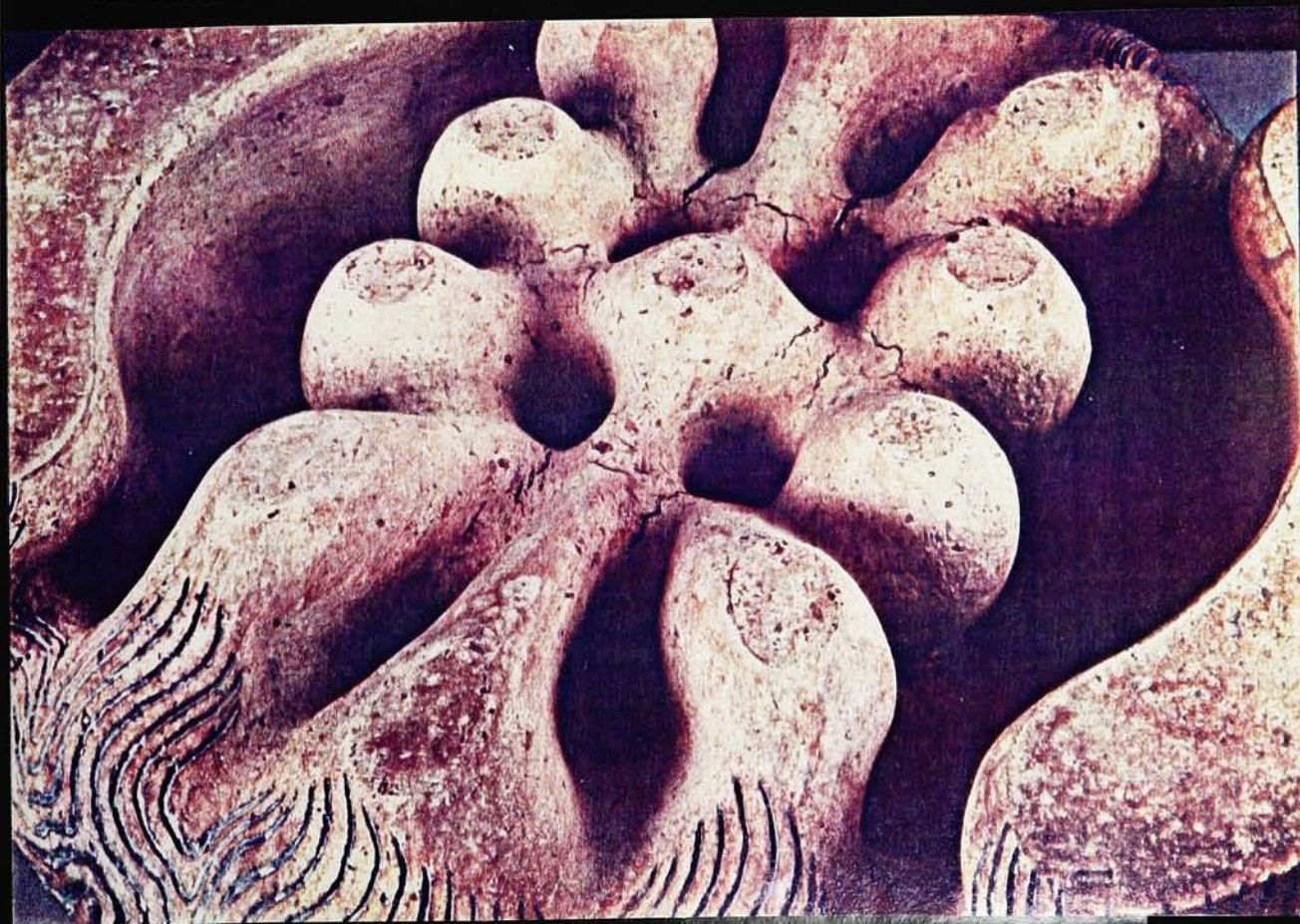


Plate 5

Sea Shape

Height 12" x Diameter 21"

CHAPTER III

THE WORK

My first experiments for the thesis were some small models drawing on impressions from natural sources. In these models I attempted to find a vehicle of expression for my basic considerations.

One piece is meant to show how a curved wall, while serving a structural purpose, also could speak of containment and act as a highly textured surface. (plates 6-7). A second piece demonstrates how an aggregation of small elements fuses into a structural entity. This unity of structure is significant as it shows a leaning towards mass rather than volume. The void is left only to indicate a lift of the mass. Furthermore, the structural units create a strong, ornamental surface quality. (plates 8-9). A third example shows an attempt to create a complex structural weave around a given amount of space. Formed with numerous layers of coils, small blocks, and a thin skin, the piece reads as structure/texture while the void within is more ambiguous, oscillating between volume and negative space. (plates 10-11).

A new development came from a small series of slab built shapes. The process of combining planes is spontaneous and fast. "Accidents", such as two slabs joined together to form a curved rather than straight line give the final shape a dynamic, gestural quality. Furthermore, the

flat surfaces lend themselves to embellishment. The planar surface's vertical thrust is cliff-like or architectural in feeling. The gestural quality alludes to the human figure. The connection between structural and textural concerns had been accomplished, but the question of whether the shapes should read as volumetric or solid forms was not resolved. (plate 12).

After a period of time I found myself making these slab-built shapes up to seven feet in height. On this scale it was difficult to maintain a spontaneous, flowing rhythm in the construction process. It was necessary to build the basic shapes horizontally with due consideration to internal support systems and then raise them to a vertical position. This procedure caused the shapes to be very stiff and box-like. To bring back the original intent of having the pieces be gestural, I started cutting into the shapes once they stood in a vertical position, thereby creating new planes, curves, and angles. Although this controlled, deductive method was not how I had planned to work, the results produced had the desired effects.

As the work grew in size, a shift from volumetric shapes to shapes with a strong sense of mass occurred. The idea of rock or a block of coral was no longer only present in a metaphorical sense; the pieces were as large as a section of cliff, or a block of coral. It is important to emphasize that the pieces did not become mere replicas of my source material. I used no direct references, but a collection of memories paired with ideas of formal construction. What went into the work were things I've seen while skin-diving, something I have felt while looking at a piece of sculpture or a building. Other elements were things that just felt right to include. I realized afterwards,

that in one piece I had included a reference from a chain-link fence. All these fragments of thought represented a collection of seemingly dissimilar elements. They were, however, connected in a metaphorical sense. The soft patterns and shapes of waves were echoed in the fluid lines of a chain-link fence. The fence in turn was worked into a gentle woven texture of clay. A New York skyscraper seemed to me a sheer, angular cliff, and this impression was translated directly into the planes and angles of the basic shapes I constructed.

The essential basis of art is the transformation of a material entity, which has an existence as something in its own right, not into one thing but into a complex of sensuous analogies, each of which is rendered symbolically, not by imitation. This seems to be a most useful criterion in all sorts of ways. It is an important help in exploring those borderline regions where ceramics and sculpture meet, especially in the mode of space as environment, where problems of attitude and appreciation can become acute. (1.;90).

Literally, my work consisted simply of objects made of earthenware clay. They were six feet tall structures covered with a porous texture and colored in various shades of blue, green, and grey. These staid qualities were, however, closely combined with visually and emotionally interrelated memories and ideas. In this way the work conveyed a larger meaning with more sensory and emotional information than any detailed copy of an object could provide. The pieces had evolved into sculptural entities which occupy much of the same physical space as does the viewer. This led me to the realization that scale is determined by the idea. The change in scale not only served in solving the question of volume versus mass but also brought about an integration of sources and concepts.

The work progressed and I found it important to intensify the surface quality.

We have a sensory reaction to actual texture ... this aspect is one of the strongest qualities that can and must be employed by the sculptor. For through the manipulation of this surface, the artist not only breathes life into a form but transmits these feelings and interpretations of surface to the viewer. (8;92).

First, I had used the flat surfaces of the slab constructions more or less as a wall, adding layers of slips to build up a texture. This kind of surface quality came across as a coating of stucco, more suited to express strong references to architecture than to raw stone or abundant growth. I did not mind hints of architectural references, but not to the extent that the work read as scale model houses.

The qualities of texture may appeal to sight as well as to our sense of touch if the texture scale is broad enough, especially when it is deliberately made. Tactile qualities can either be fortified by visual experience, or even inferred and experienced synaesthetically from sight alone. Texture, like shape, has its own symbolism, working on similar principles; and although the references of symbolism are, on the whole, general and vague, there are surface treatments which can have fairly obvious and direct symbolic references... (1;85).

Unlike the earlier stages of the work where texture grew straight out of the form, I now began to see the surface as a covering of the structure. The ornamentation builds up organically into an aggregation developing the shape. Like bark on a tree, the texture seems to be something radically different from the underlying form, yet still convincingly integrated with it. This sets up a deliberate tension in the relationship between the controlled order of surface pattern and the random order of the structures underneath.

The biggest change occurred with the introduction of glazes. From the outset the ideas had been to have only natural flashings of color induced by wood-firing, but the results were not consistent. As with the construction of the pieces, I had again come to a point where I felt that it was necessary to exert more control over a part of the ceramic process. The random effects of the flashings on the raw clay and slips did not give the kind of colors I wanted. The wood-firing made it possible to achieve a wide range of browns and deep reds, and on a cup these colors would perhaps remind the user of the soothing warmth of the beverage it contained. On my work, however, they read as something burnt, scorched, and violent. I wanted my colors to add a sensation of tranquility to the work, alluding to the characteristics of rock, water, and light. I developed a series of slip-glazes that could convey such elements and bind them to the shapes. The color range I could achieve was much more suited to the intent of the work. Subtle greys and greens for rock-like surfaces, turquoise, purples and pale blues for surfaces alluding to corals. The chalky, porous quality of these slip-glazes added depth to the work and invited the viewer to make a closer inspection. Color had become an integral part of the texture rather than an extra coating. It seemed to be absorbed and penetrating, giving life to the surface.

I have sought to instill some of the work with a sensation of movement. This stems in part from the mode of construction, the zig-zag, foot-like quality of the bases, and the slant of the pieces. These all give a gestural, moving quality. (plates 13-15). "Man is conscious of actual balance and gravity, but when they are placed in a strange context his senses must respond." (7:43). The size and shape of

the pieces, together with the shroud-like texture, creates the impression of frozen motion. The pieces seem to lean precariously forward, and the viewer experiences a bit of uneasiness, not enough to feel threatened, but enough to cause a slight sensation of vertigo.

In other pieces, I have been interested in creating objects which, although stone-like in their rigid structure, give an impression of growth. (plates 16-17). Here the texture becomes ambiguous. The layered surfaces seem organic, a protective covering, a kind of skin or shell. The flat hewn or worn planes, however, allude to stone. "Freshly broken rock suggests either the activity of man or the recent activity of nature. On the other hand, weathering indicates the ponderous and ancient origin of the earth and the incalculable passage of time." (9:108-111).

Singularly, the objects which incorporate gesture are statements offering a multitude of contradictory interpretations pertaining to place and sentiment. The viewer senses a unified expression, something quiet and subdued. He is, however, simultaneously confronted with the visual impression of seeing the work as fragments of separate realities. This creates a certain tension, a feeling of contradictory emotions, but also a sense of wonder and mystery. When arranged in a group the gestural pieces furthermore function in much the same way as Alberto Giacometti's groups of figures, although they do not specifically address the issue of human interaction. They energize the space around them, creating a sense of place, an illusionary environment.

The stone-like pieces also offer a sense of visual complexity, but they read more directly as monoliths. They are formal statements, rather solemn in character, which I imagine could be seen as relics of a

past culture, rocks used in a long forgotten ceremony. They could also be seen as some kind of natural oddity, a product of a rare geological event, but these or other interpretations do not stand out as separate entities. They are comparable to super-imposed mental images that complement and/or negate each other. With these pieces I wish to convey a silent sense of time, and here another juxtaposition of elements is present. By combining biological and geological references, there is at once a sensation of natural growth and decay, paired with a numbing feeling of eternity.

I have sought to create a body of work in which many ideas, emotions, and thoughts are bound together in a tangible form. It is my wish that the viewer will find himself interacting with the work, thereby adding to it his own interpretations and memories.

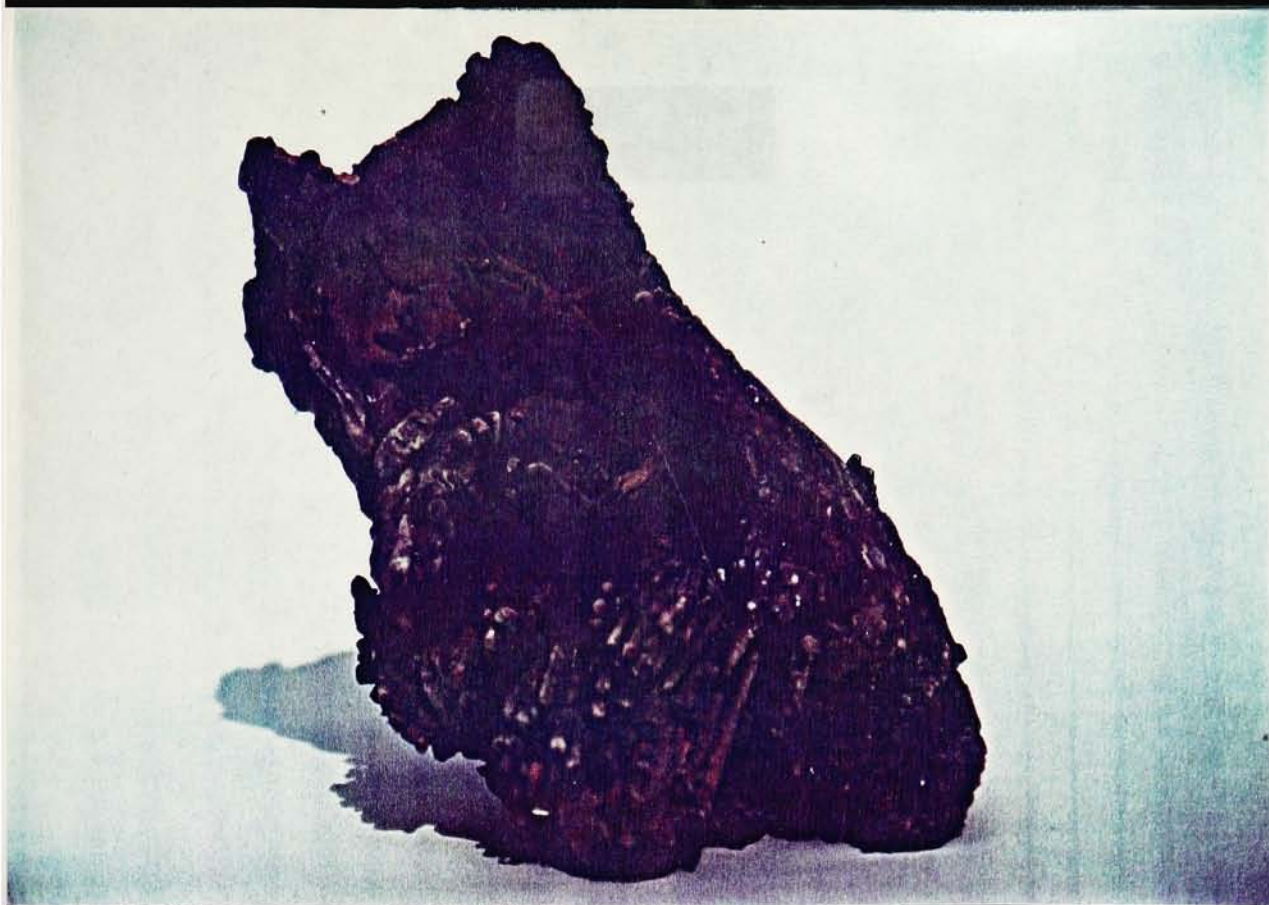


Plate 6

Curve

Height 11" x Diameter 9"



Plate 7

Curve

Height 11" x Diameter 9"

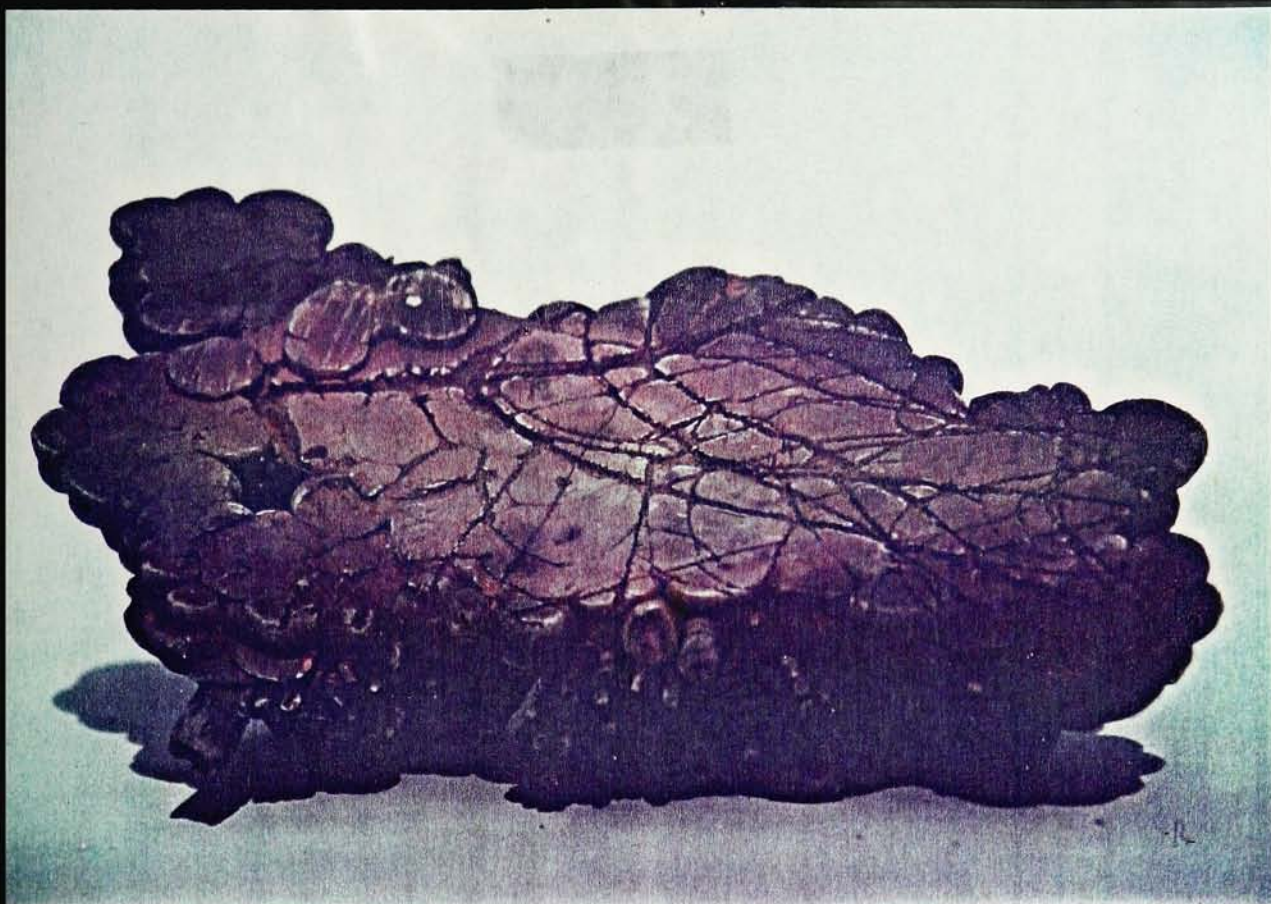


Plate 8

Island

Height 6" x Length 15" x Width 9"

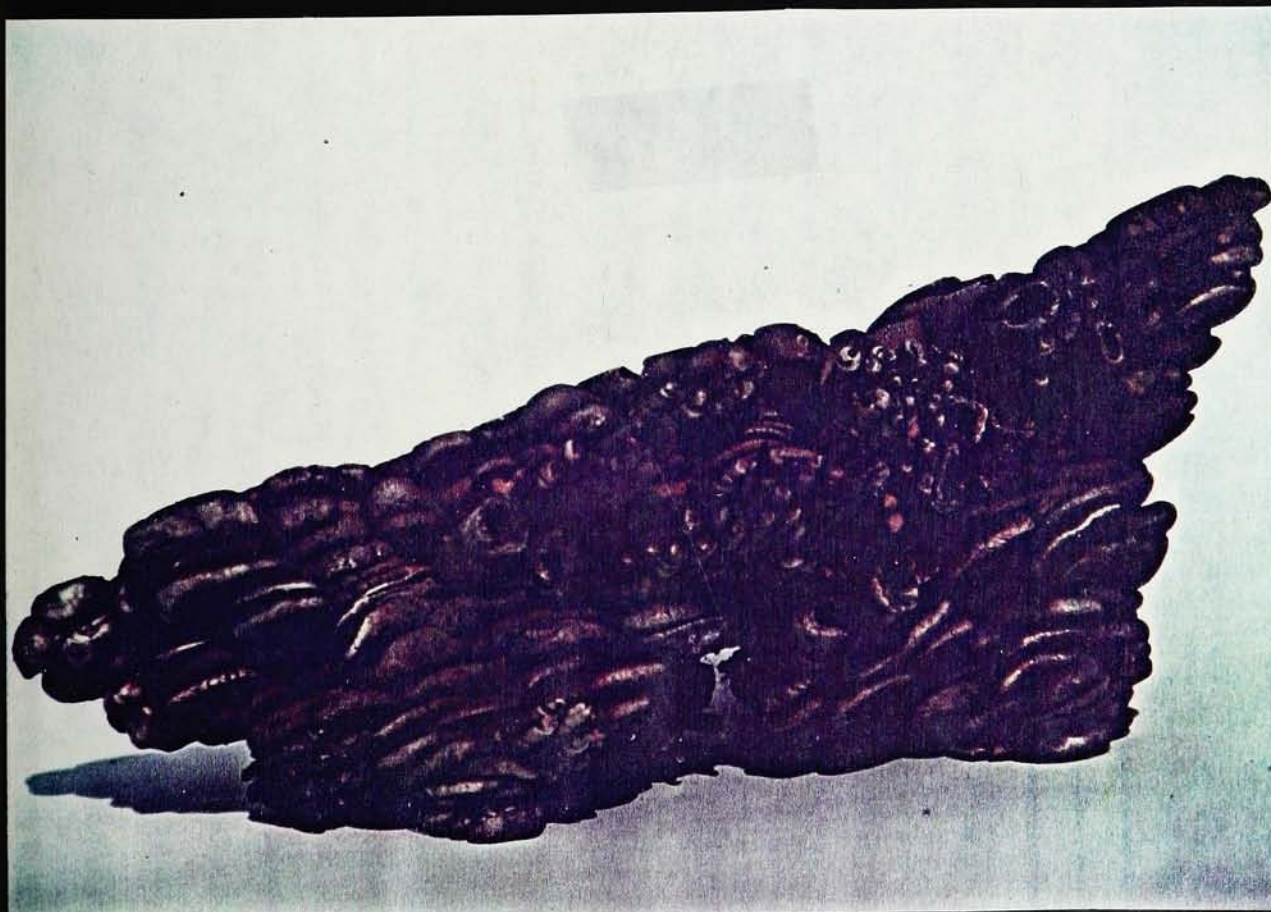


Plate 9

Island

Height 6" x Length 15" x Width 9"



Plate 10

Fragment

Height 23" x Length 22" x Width 12"



Plate 11

Fragment

Height 23" x Length 22" x Width 12"

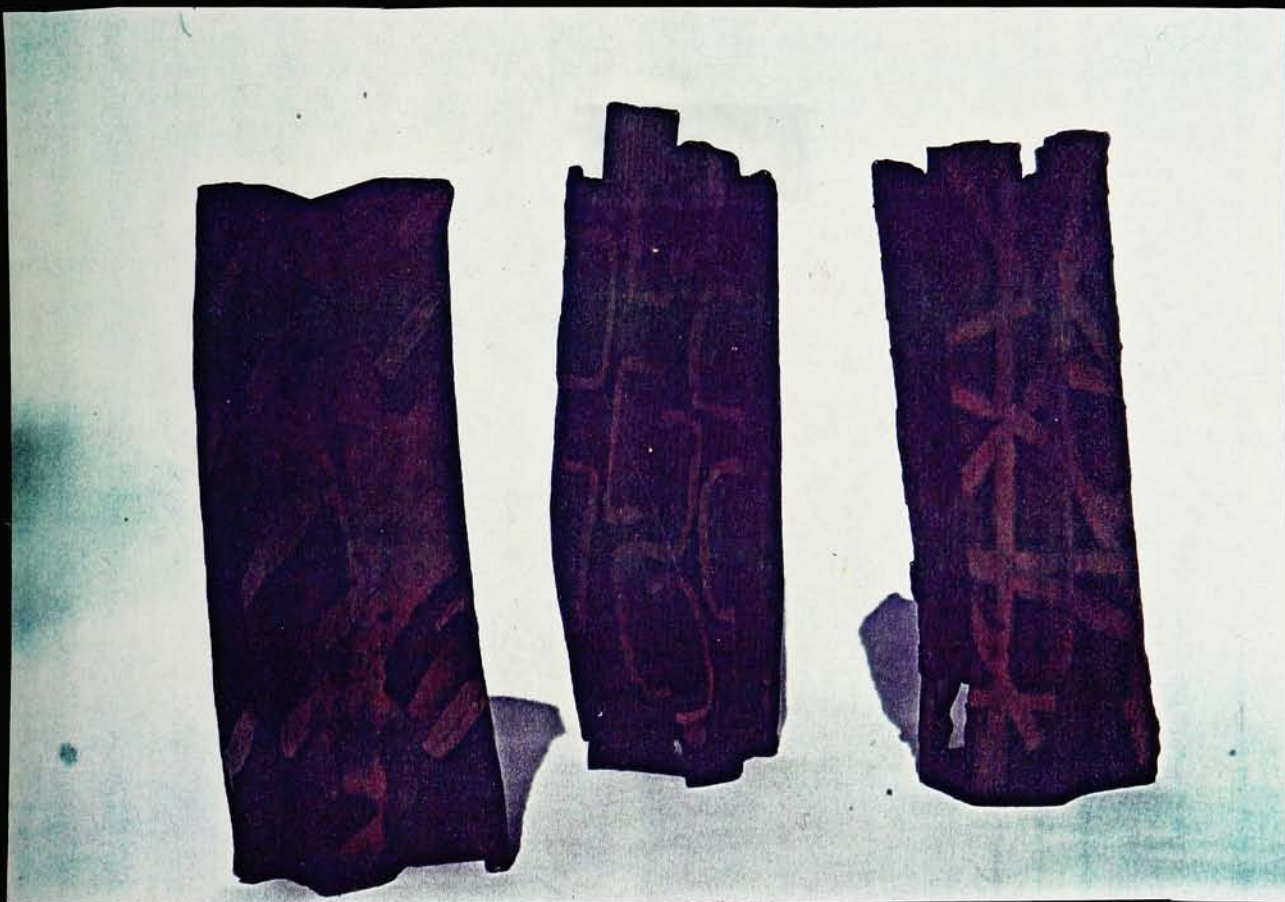


Plate 12

Towers

All approximately: Height 18" x Diameter 6"



Plate 13 Untitled Height 76" x length 20" x width 11"



Plate 14

Untitled

Height 72" x Length 17" x Width 10"



Plate 15

Untitled

Height 72" x Length 18" x Width 18"

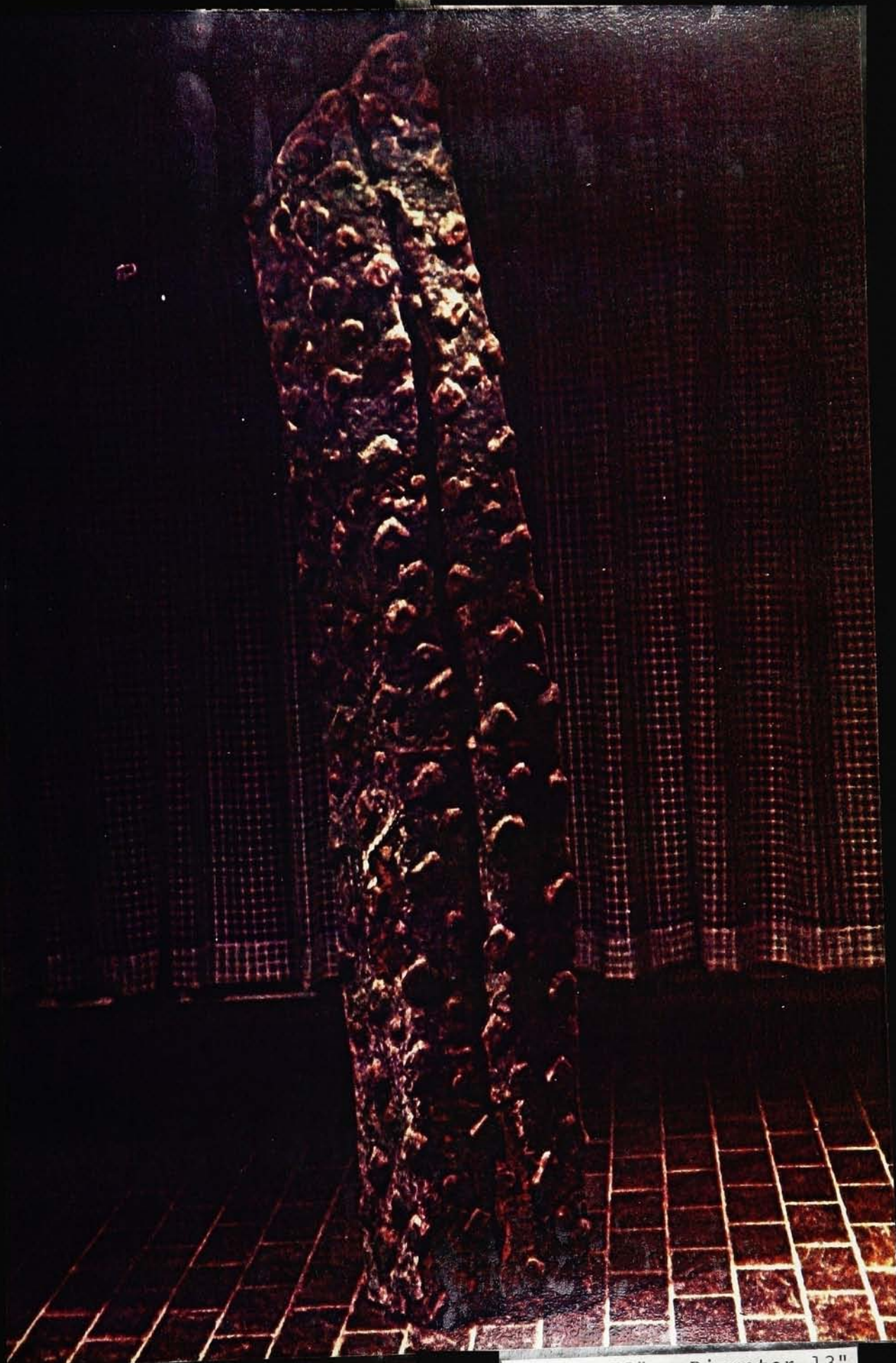


Plate 16

Untitled

Height 73" x Diameter 13"

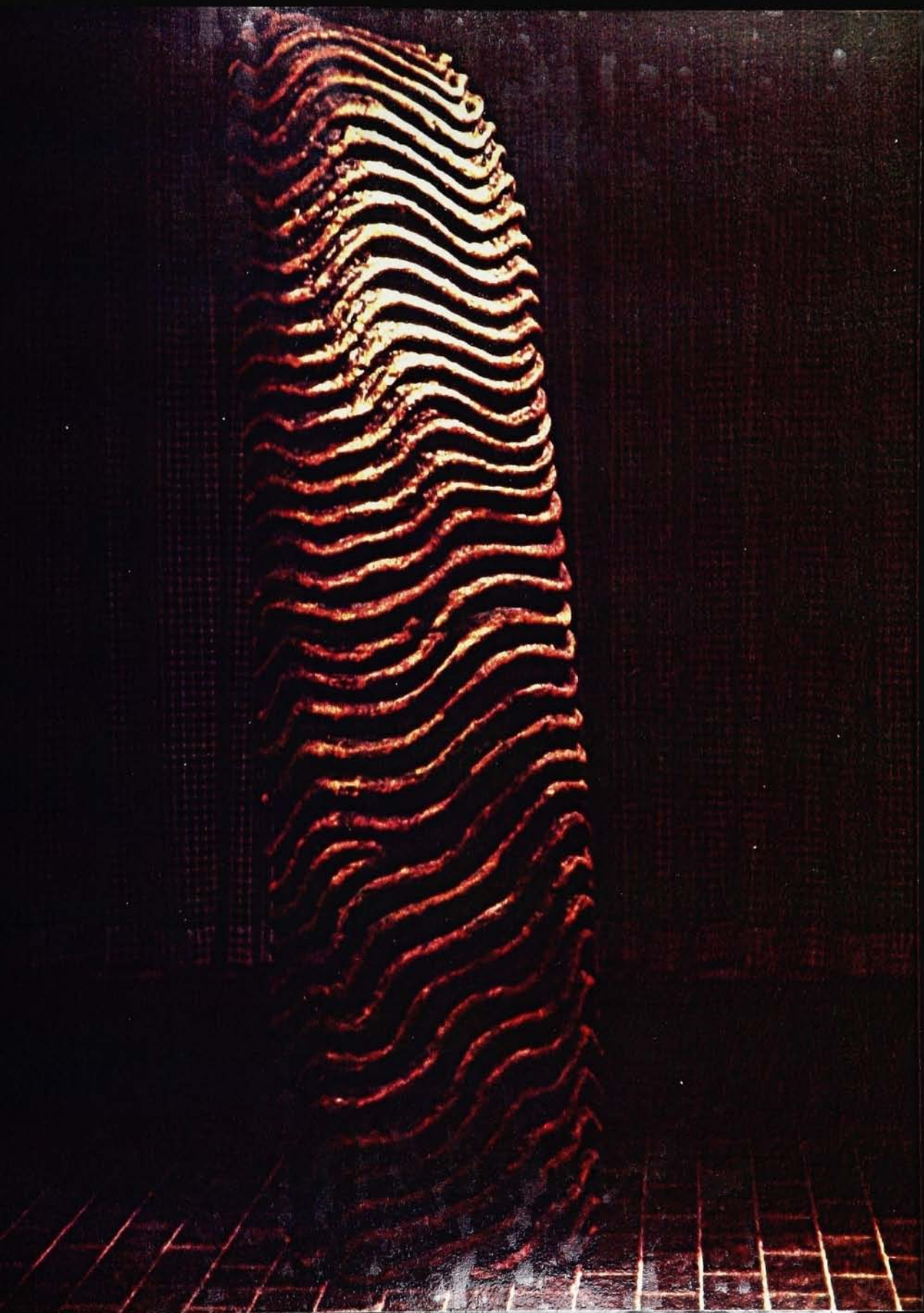


Plate 17

Untitled

Height 73" x Length 18" x Width 9"

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The process of creating this body of work has been a challenging and learning experience. For me, the ceramic materials and processes were new in fashion. This has allowed the development of a different sense of what it is to work creatively with my medium.

It has also been a humbling experience. One can see "...art as consisting of linked series of forms, which differ gradually from one another until the potentialities of the class have been used." (10:82). Viewing the work in this light, I find myself standing only at the beginning of what must be done.

After this effort of personal "trail-blazing," surprisingly enough I want to start working with the vessel again. I will want the pieces to function well in a utilitarian sense and incorporate elements of my most recent work. I have always found myself casting restlessly about for new ideas, styles, and techniques. Someday, a satisfying synthesis will emerge.

APPENDIX

EARTHENWARE SCULPTURE BODY*

Redart	120	grams
APG Missouri	30	grams
Tennessee Ballclay	20	grams
Talc	30	grams
Grog	50	grams
Sand	10	grams
Mullite	20	grams
Fibrous Wollastonite	2	grams
Barium Carbonate	1	grams
	<u>228</u>	grams total

add:

Fiber Glass	1	cup
Fine Sawdust	10-20	% by volume

SLIP-GLAZE BASE

Lithium Carbonate	26.0	grams
EPK	33.0	grams
Flint	59.0	grams
Bentonite	5.0	grams
Frit 3110	5.5	grams
	<u>128.5</u>	grams

For a good glaze-fit a thin application on bone-dry clay is recommended. If applied to leather-hard clay or applied too thickly on bone-dry clay, the glaze will have a tendency to flake off, due to its low coefficient of expansion. The glaze can be fired in an electric or gas kiln in either an oxidized or reduced atmosphere. The difference in kiln atmosphere does not seem to affect the colors.

*All formulas pertain to cone 03-04 firings.

add:

Light Turquoise	:	Cooper Carbonate	4 grams
Dark Turquoise	:	Red Copperoxide	4 grams
Grey	:	Iron Cromate	4 grams
Dark Purple	:	Manganese Carbonate	4 grams
Bright Lime Green	:	Leadbicromate	4 grams
Dark Lime Green	:	Potassiumbicromate	4 grams
Cream White	:	Cadmiumoxide	4 grams
Dark Blue	:	Cadmiumoxide	4 grams
		Potassiumbicromate	2 grams
		Copper Sulfate	2 grams

Various tones, shadings, and color-blends can be achieved by using an air-brush. The glaze should be passed through a 100 mesh screen for this purpose.

CRACK FILLER

Wood-glue	50	% by volume
Fine sawdust	25	% by volume
Medium sand	25	% by volume

This mixture is modeled into unwanted cracks and seams and allowed to dry. Its porous surface then serves as an excellent ground for touch-ups with oil-paints.

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