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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

TABLEWARE

by

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THESIS PROPOSAL

I intend to produce a series of tableware including cups and saucers, teapots, and other objects used in serving and drinking. Groups of asymmetrical tableware may be presented on geometric bases. The function of the base or tray will be to clarify and provide a focus for the objects. A wide palette of glazes and various firing techniques at cone five will be explored to produce a range of surface qualities and colors.

INTRODUCTION

The thesis proposal stated my intentions to produce tableware, cups, saucers, and teapots. What I exhibited as thesis work was a group of flower pots. I want to explain the reasons for the discrepancy between my written intentions and the work that I actually produced, by examining my experiments with tableware and the developments that followed.

My interest in tableware and functional objects can be traced, I think, to growing up in a religious and ethnocentric culture which rewarded hard work and tolerated material luxuries only if they could be used. Objects were appreciated more in terms of efficiency and function than for quality of craftsmanship or aesthetic interest. In our household, a high degree of importance was placed upon the preparation and presentation of the meal; the tableware was important and mealtimes were occasions not to be missed.

My appreciation for functional objects, in addition to their utility, extends to the purely physical satisfaction of touching a pot and responding to the surface my fingers are scanning. I can also be free to enjoy the visual and sensual memory associations that an object may draw up for me. These experiences and associations clearly reveal the powerful intimacy a functional object can provoke and make possible. Not only do these pieces function as objects with a personal, intimate status, but they also function as important elements

in the larger ritual of communal participation and celebration.

In promoting an atmosphere more conducive to communication and human warmth, an object loses its self-importance and acquires an identity which depends upon its relationship to everything else in that larger, specific environment. This seems an enormous mandate for an object, but I think that since on occasion it becomes a reality, it is not an unreasonable goal for the object maker.

PART I

Before beginning the work outlined in my thesis proposal, I willingly embarked on an experiment with clay slip which was intended to inject new life into my wheel throwing. My wheel work had become process dominated, and was characterized by asymmetrical forms seemingly devoid of an internal sense of structure. This sense of form was further emphasized by the use of intense, colored glazes. (Plates 1,2).

I needed to temporarily distance myself from this intensely personal approach. By working with white clay slip, I was forced to approach form as a constructed volume. I poured out the individual parts onto plaster bats, never cutting or trimming them, but peeling them off the bat to construct skeletal, grid-like units. These layers of grids became modules which could be stacked one on top of the other in many different ways. The modules were skeletal, dry, open, and revealed their interiors. Colored highlights were applied with a brush to certain areas by using a mixture of sulfates and water. The sulfates permeated the bisqued clay and after being fired to cone five, became a dry, integral part of the clay, further expressing a parched, thin-skinned framework. (Plates 3,4).

When confronted with this completely new way of working, I had to ask myself why I responded with these grid-like forms. I find it helpful to clarify and trace my organizational sense. Perhaps it has to do with the female sensibilities which permeated the

thought processes of the women around me as a child. For example, all of the women that I knew were quilt makers. I developed a respect for the way in which they approached their work. They collected fabrics, sorted them according to color and pattern, and they all made quilts of varying degrees of craftsmanship and quality. I was a participant in an activity which Howard S. Becker describes as one in which women "develope private sequences of problems and solutions within the framework of traditional quilt designs." (1:251).* Because their work was not considered art, these women were free of any preconceived constraints and did whatever they wanted to; they produced political, personal, abstract, and religious work which became objects of daily necessity and were a part of their life. (2:4).

The best quilt makers casually made sense of the seemingly endless varieties of ways to make allover patterns from basic modules or grids. Added to these possibilities for abstraction, were the endless ways in which colors, hues, and print patterns were incorporated into their arrangements.

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



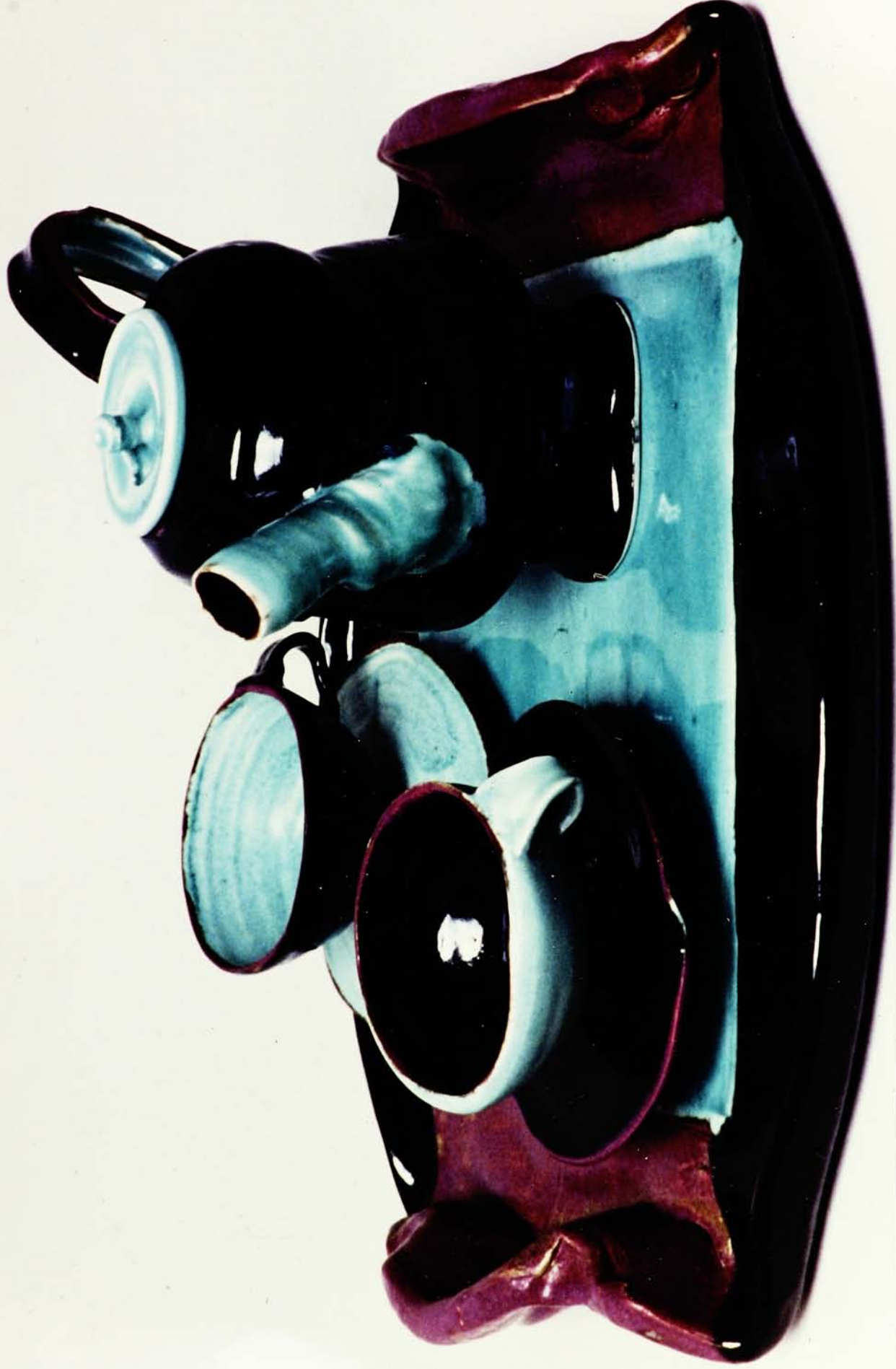


Plate 2
Page 6
7.5" h, 15" w, 11" d.





PART II

The experiment with the slip allowed me to question and determine why the use of color was so important to me. I came to recognize that my intuitive approach to using and experimenting with color was influenced from very early on by the quilt maker's sensibilities of juxtaposing both very dark colors, and unlikely combinations of pastels and prints. Also important for me was experiencing her freedom to choose whatever combinations she pleased, then watching her further arrange and rearrange the palette to her satisfaction. Sewing and patternmaking have afforded me a similar freedom to experiment and become more aware of color and texture. I also approached the use of glazes in this manner as a natural way to develop a personal sense of color for clay surface and form.

In looking back, certain painters have provided sources of influence regarding color. One of these is Milton Avery, an artist not easily labeled. I was attracted to the ideology of this independent thinker who continually pursued his own aesthetic interests despite prevailing stylistic winds. I found his ability to handle color spectacular. His use of delicate tonalities, chromatic subtleties, and sophisticated placement of planes of pale dry colors, has left a marked impression on me.

PART III

After a period of working with slip, skeletal units, structural grids, and dry muted color, these techniques and pieces became simply repetitive to me. I realized that this was the case because what really interested me was to return to wheel throwing, functional form, and the use of brighter color again.

I began with the teapots of my proposal. As a basis for starting, I decided to incorporate, as the teapot body, a covered jar form that I had worked on earlier and was interested in pursuing. I established a rhythm of working which lent itself well to the idea of the studio process as a continuum of experimentation. I worked in groups, each group consisting of six to eight pieces, and completely assembled the pieces of each group before starting the next.

In this way, ideas could be explored more cohesively and certain aspects of form and types of information could be reconsidered or elaborated on in the next group. This approach was carried over into glazing and firing as well.

My earlier thrown functional forms in porcelain depended heavily upon color. Working in the cone five range, I had developed a wide range of colors and textures. I used glazes in layers which depended on the white clay underneath for their luminosity and brilliance. The surface color did not hide the evidence of process, as in the throwing lines, but it did completely cover and conceal the clay body.

I did not want the raw clay body to be exposed because I felt it was too white, chalky, and unpleasant to the touch. So, by changing to an earthenware clay, I could expressly leave areas of clay unglazed and these areas could become important elements of the piece. By firing a typical cone 04 earthenware body to cone five, it acquired a patina with a softness and richness of surface and color that I liked very much.

This patina was an indication that the body was beginning to vitrify to the point of collapsing and melting. As long as I continued to use this clay body, I had many technical difficulties, including dunting and shivering.

Another difficulty stemmed from a desire for bright color. I quickly discovered that cone five glazes were nearly dissolved and devoured by the earthenware clay during firing. Iron from the body permeated the glazes, darkening them and making them very dry. Gases which formed from the high organic content in the body, bubbled through the glazes during firing, resulting in an uneven and pinholed surface when cool. To remedy this problem and arrive at the color palette, variety, and intensity possible at this range, I sprayed the areas that I wanted to glaze with a white slip. But this resulted in an incompatibility between the slip and the body as well as between the slip and the glazes. Solutions to these technical problems will be discussed in the appendix.

PART IV

The first series in earthenware clay consisted of eight teapots, each constructed of five separate parts; a thrown altered body, a thrown base, spout, and lid, and an extruded handle. When assembled, these reapots were an inventory of ideas; they expressed a miscellany, and emphasized the disparity of the parts. I did not glaze the handles, the feet, or the insides of these pieces; the remaining areas were glazed in one or two flat, opaque colors. In spite of the ambiguous qualities of the pieces, this first series provided the basis for a gradual and logical evolution. It was the beginning of my private sequence of problems and solutions taking place within the established parameters of utilitarian form.

In the second group of pieces, the teapot bodies were altered in a similar but bolder manner, the lids and the bases were more refined, and more attention was paid in joining the different parts and to details in general. The resulting forms were definitely more cohesive than those of the first group; nevertheless, they were bland and lacking in energy and movement. As in the first group, I did not glaze the handles, feet, or insides, using the different parts remaining as logical areas for color boundaries, matte and opaque.

I disregarded the bases and the lids altogether in the third group, as I could not justify their necessity or form in the second group. The body was thrown more forcefully with definite, spiraling

throwing lines met by an abrupt, smoothly ribbed horizontal shoulder. After the body was leather hard and trimmed, I relocated the base by throwing a cylinder onto the shoulder. Out of this neck, I stretched a spout instead of adding one separately thrown. A pulled, attached handle served as a link between the body and the neck; the negative space which it outlined, reinforced the curves of the spout and the body. In making the changes in this group of pieces, I essentially made pitchers instead of teapots. I did not return to a lidded form or a foot, but I continued with an evolution of the pitcher. (Plates 5,6).

During this time, I was very unhappy with my work in general. The forming at wet clay stages and the technical aspects presented a maze of difficulties. I was somewhat encouraged though, with the development which was occurring from one series of pieces to the next.

In the fourth group of pieces, I experimented mainly with the placement and form of the handle and a short, tiny spout on the shoulder and neck. The body of the pot became more delineated with each series. Meant to be unglazed, it had a rounded, soft bottom pushed in sharply on four sides with pronounced throwing lines spiraling up to the sharp edge which marked the beginning of the sloping shoulder. When leather hard, I threw a cylindrical neck onto the smoothly ribbed symmetrical shoulder. Very small spouts and handles were thrown separately. The handles, wide, with throwing lines, and sometimes undulating, were attached to span the top edge of the neck to the shoulder. On other pieces, they were attached horizontally, from opposite edges of the shoulder, sometimes altering the symmetry of the neck.

While still leather hard, the area meant to be unglazed, the body, was protected with plastic and the upper area was sprayed with white slip. Dry, matte glazes next to fluid, transparent color were applied in varying thicknesses to the bisque piece on the upper area. This loosely geometric application of contrasting colors and textures was banded by a very light, or very dark ground. (Plates 7,8).

The next series is marked by long, attenuated spouts, which originated inside the neck, altering its symmetry. From this point on I began to alter the shoulder area as well, while the clay was still very soft. The forms were beginning to increase noticeably in scale. As in the previous group, the shoulder and upper areas were sprayed with white slip and glazes were applied with a brush on a white ground. The ground was then sprayed with a fluid transparent. I used glazes which gave a wide variety of surface; fluid, dry, bright, intense, and saturated colors were placed next to each other. (Plate 9).

The pieces in the sixth series are watering pots. The spouts have become extremely long, and the pieces larger. The shoulder was noticeably altered and white slip was applied with my hand after spraying. (Plates 10,11).

At this point I was extremely interested in the ideas and analogies presenting themselves in these pieces. I began by emphasizing a definite upper and lower area. The lower area, of raw, dark brown clay, was characterized by a soft volume, the rounded indented bottom, suggesting an earthbound presence, the soil, latent growth, and internal activity. The area above was becoming

more complex and active on the surface. With both sprayed and applied white slip, and applied glazes, the upper area began alluding to an outcropping of vegetation and foliage. These pieces came to represent for me a complex of paradoxes reflecting my emotional make-up and the academic environment.

I wanted to continue with pieces which would emphasize these analogies. In the next series, instead of the long spouts, the pieces were given symmetrically placed handles and became flower pots. I applied thick slip to them in an uncontrolled manner. The glazes, applied randomly, were dark, somber, morose, suggesting the macabre. This approach seemed to weigh down and visually crush the soft, supporting base which was actually meant to buoy it up. (Plates 12,13).

I personally was not happy. I was not working to my capacity, but did not precisely understand why. I felt that academia was undermining my creative base, motivation, and independence of spirit. I recognized the false pressures and tensions that were created by the environment. My response was to produce work that was strongly emotive, clearly revealing the inflexible position I felt myself to be trapped in. I had to make a conscious, determined effort to pull from these pieces what I thought was most valid, and push ahead with a concertedly more positive approach.

The final groups of pieces were less horizontal in feeling. They still retained the unglazed lower area. The shoulder was smooth as before, but greatly altered from the inside as well as out, usually in a triangular manner. Certain areas were pushed out from the interior in forms recalling fruits, flowers, or buds. Handles were

thrown as concave or convex strips, twisted and attached to connect an undulating rim to the implied fruits, or a side to an edge. Sometimes additional pocket-like parts were thrown, attached, and incorporated as part of the pushed out fruit forms. After white slip was sprayed onto the entire upper area, thick heavy slip was applied to selected protruding areas. Sometimes the applied slip and protrusions dipped down onto the lower area making the line between glazed and unglazed areas less distinct. I also began to use sgraffito around the protrusions, stem handles, and lip rims. These incised lines emphasized the three-dimensionality of the pushed out areas, while the added energy and rhythm brought a cohesiveness to the form as a whole.

Color was applied to specific areas against a light transparent aqua or white background, or a black or dark red background. Copper green, purple, and pink were used against black or white grounds. When juxtaposed, these dense and opaque colors were suggestive of thick, tropical vegetation or of swampish, overripe colors. The handles suggested a vine-like reaching out, grasping and twisting. (Plates 14,15,16,17).



9" h, 7" w, 7" d

Plate 5
Page 17



8" h, 10.5" w, 8" d



7.5" h, 8" w, 6" d

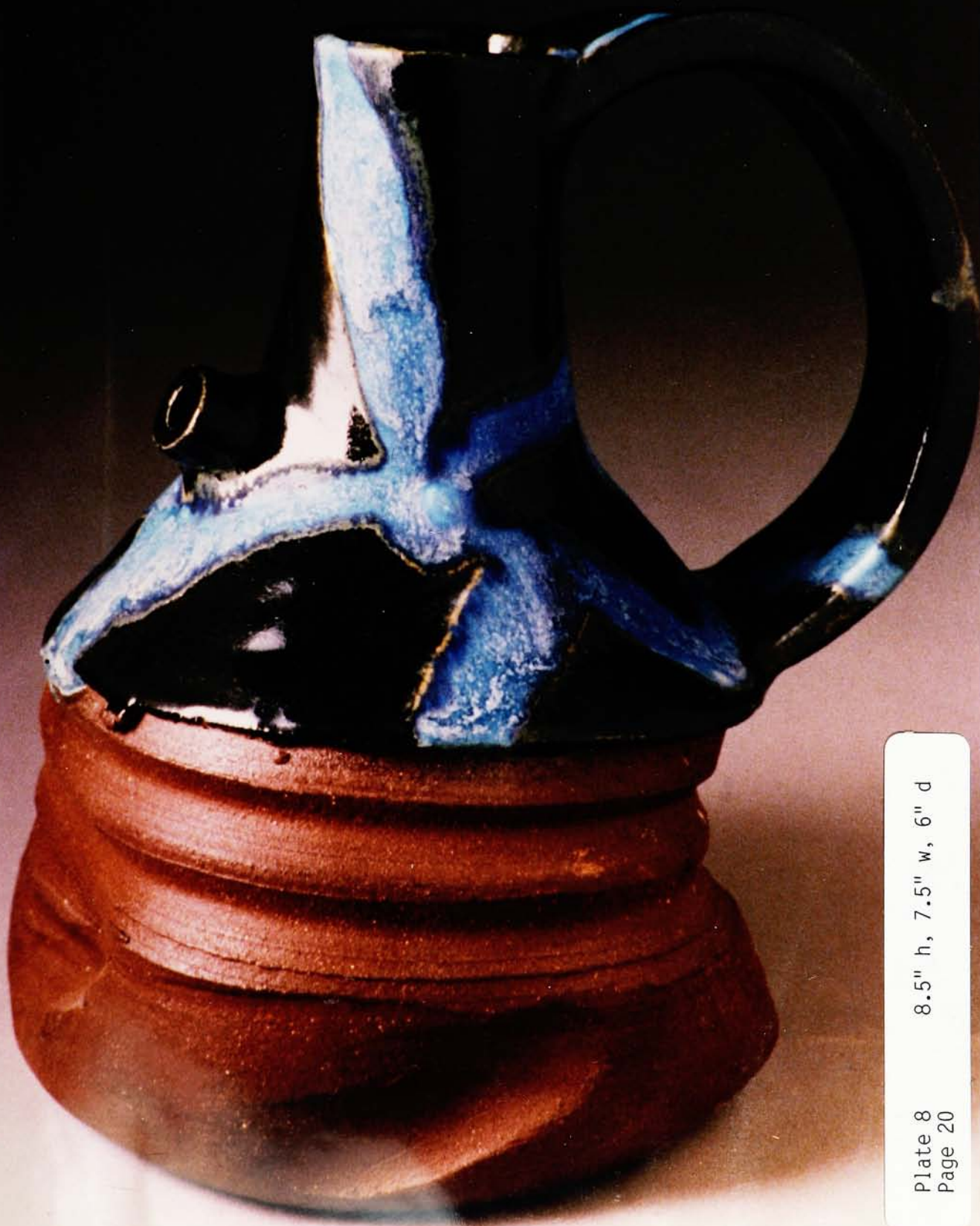
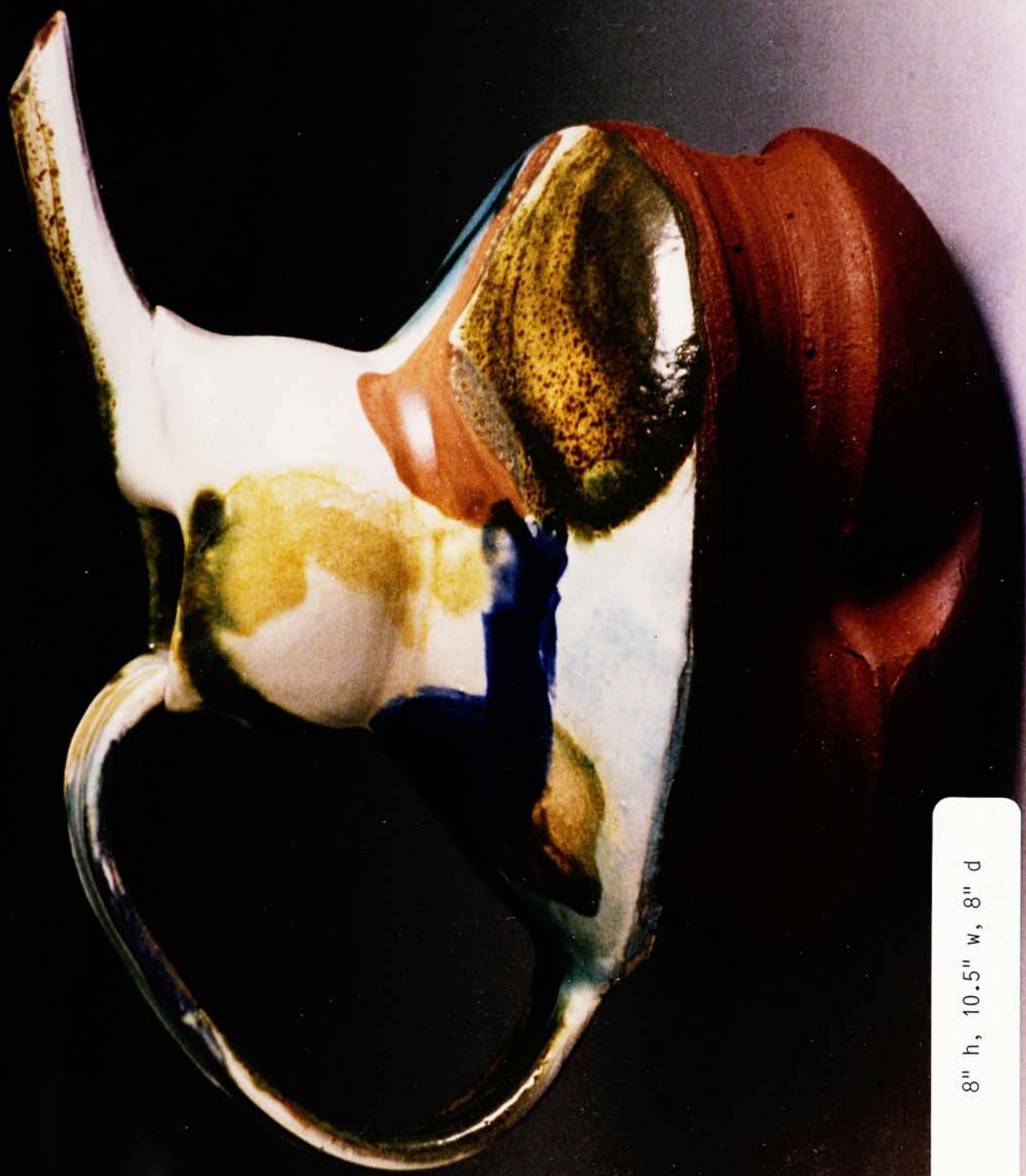


Plate 8
Page 20

8.5" h, 7.5" w, 6" d



8" h, 10.5" w, 8" d



13.5" h, 14" w, 8.5" d

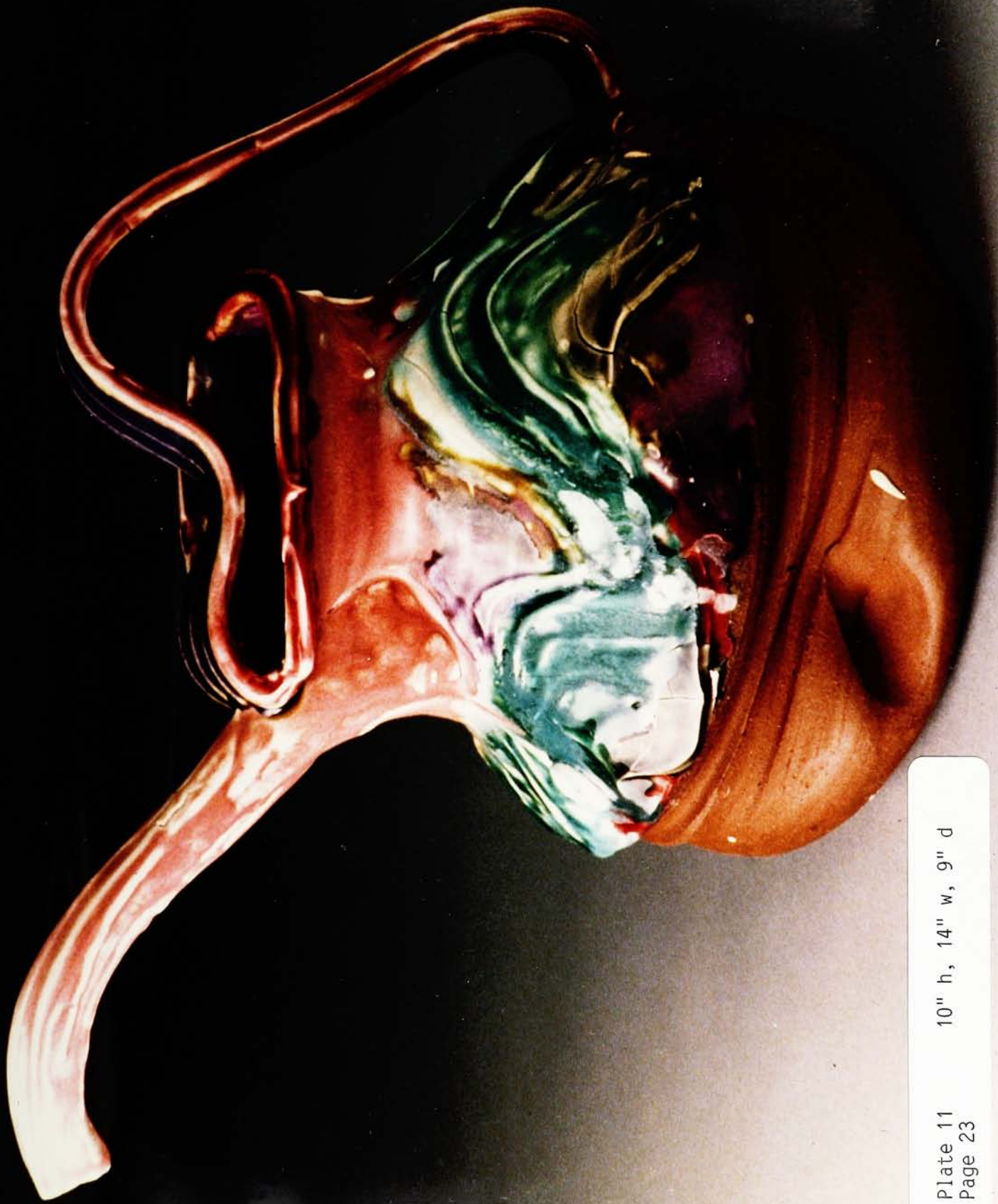


Plate 11
Page 23
10" h, 14" w, 9" d



Plate 12
Page 24

10" h, 13" w, 9.5" d



Plate 13
Page 25

8" h, 15" w, 10.5" d



Plate 14 14" h, 11.5" w, 10" d
Page 26



14.5" h, 13" w, 12" d



15" h, 11.5" w, 11.5" d



14" h, 13" w, 11" d

CONCLUSION

I feel that this process of exploration has brought about an increased awareness of the many facets of my inner framework as an artist. I felt a satisfaction in solving some persistent technical problems as well as reaching clearer formal solutions with this final group of pieces; they represent a complex evolution and interaction of meaning and emotion. As a meeting point for these paradoxes, these pieces are a source of information and a composite of solutions and research which will provide a wealth of inspiration for new work.

APPENDIX

CLAY BODY

The clay body which I started the first thrown series with was a low fire earthenware body.

EARTHENWARE THROWING BODY

Redart	96
Frit 3124	<u>4</u>
	100
Fine Grog	5-6%

When fired to cone five, this clay body proved to be far too vitreous, which resulted in excessive shrinkage and a porosity of .05%. I needed a more open throwing body with a 1.5-2.0% absorption which would have a very deep orange brown color at cone five. After a series of testing, I arrived at the following body which satisfied these requirements:

CONE FIVE THROWING BODY

Redart	55
Calvert	25
Hawthorne Fire Clay	10
Pyrax	<u>10</u>
	100
Bentonite	2
Fine Grog	2

SLIP

Initially, I had difficulty finding a slip that was compatible with the Cone Five Throwing Body, but after a long series of testing, I arrived at one that did not flake off in the bone dry state, or shiver off in the fired state.

SLIP cont.

This new slip was plastic in the wet state, and even when applied very thickly to the leather hard clay would adhere to and shrink with the body in the drying stages. When fired it was white in color, vitreous, and formed a tight bond to the body as well as to the surface layer of glaze.

CONE FIVE WHITE SLIP

Grolleg	25
Georgia Kaolin	5
OM4 Ball Clay	30
Custer Feldspar	20
Frit 3124	10
Flint	<u>10</u>
	100

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1. Howard S. Becker. Art Worlds. California: University of California Press, 1982.
2. Patricia Mainardi. Quilts, The Great American Art. San Pedro: Miles and Weir, Ltd., 1978