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### A ruin aesthetic

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A RUIN AESTHETIC

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL FOR THE AMERICAN CRAFTSMEN

DEPARTMENT OF METALCRAFT AND JEWELRY

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

BY

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ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

MARCH 1982

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## A Ruin Aesthetic: A Definition

Ruins fascinate me. Destroyed temples, eroded cities, fallen bridges, and abandoned buildings left for demolition appeal to me and absorb my attention. I find myself drawn to sites of decay, documenting them through photography and pillaging them for materials and visual information. But I am far from alone in my appreciation of ruins; it is an appeal that is ancient and widespread. Saying this, however, does not explain the hold that ruins have over so many people.

What is the ruin aesthetic? Ruins are unique in the realm of damaged art because they maintain an aesthetic unity. Even though the original intent of the builder may be lost and the structure itself is lying in fragments, the ruin still has the ability to make a complete or satisfying statement. Yet it is hard to consider ruins as genuine works of art. Many of the structures, before they acquired their ruined state, were not fine architecture. Furthermore, ruins are formed by both art (man) and nature and, thus, exist somewhere between these two forces.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, ruins possess an aesthetic appeal, one that is unique and emotionally intricate.

Man strives for order, seeking to understand and apply its systems. Nature's appearance is chaos and disorder as

it moves toward entropy. Order versus disorder: A ruin is dynamic evidence of this struggle. When viewing ruins we are made conscious of the organizing power of the human spirit in conflict with the continual onslaught of nature. The worn facade of a temple impresses on us that the same forces which shape mountains and rivers also shape man's creations.<sup>2</sup> Like any struggle, the conflict between the human system of ordering its environment and nature's disorganization (actually a different ordering process) has an intense drama and appeal. Even though we realize that our material creations ultimately fight a loosing battle, we don't despair in the face of ruins. Instead, a mystical satisfaction emerges from the knowledge that our pursuit of material immortality is futile. Despite attempts at directing and controlling it, nature slowly triumphs over man's endeavors. Ruins are representative of this triumph and benefit from the strange appeal that the destruction of things human has.<sup>3</sup>

The irrevocable flow of time that erases our life's work is symbolized by the ruin and gives the ruin aesthetic its greatest meaning. Time, like the wind, cannot be seen; but its effects can be. In something as vast as a mountain, the natural order is difficult for us to comprehend and separate from the disorder. Understanding the forces and flow of time is beyond our grasp in anything as complex and unfamiliar as a mountain. A building, however, is man-made and on a human scale. We identify man's order in the structure

and recognize when disorder, or time's weathering, has taken its toll. It is in man-made things that we are more likely to understand and grasp the concept of time. That is why ruins so effectively impress on us life's transience.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, not every one of our creations is destroyed by the inevitabilities of time and nature. We do it to ourselves, as well. The destruction of wars, the renewal of our cities, and a whole variety of changes and upheavals result in ruins that give just as much pleasure as ancient temples do. It seems paradoxical, but people delight in destruction as much as in creation.<sup>5</sup> This morbid pleasure in decay is often explained by Freudian theory. Our two strongest drives are to create and to destroy, and satisfying these drives gives us great pleasure. Since people do not give free rein to their destructive impulses, gratification must be vicarious. Ruins, which "strike a responsive nerve in our destruction-seeking souls",<sup>6</sup> provide us with the needed perverse fulfillment.

Another aspect in assessing why a crumbling building holds our attention is the impact of history.<sup>7</sup> A ruin has a human story, whether it be grand or small. Once the structure had purpose: it was built with a plan, served a function, and was active with people. Now the building is abandoned and without function. The stark contrast between what was and what is intensifies our awareness of the ruin's story. Through the silence and the rot, we search

for clues that unveil the past. If the past was glorious, then the ruin stands as a symbol and reminder of that greatness; we honor its survival as a means to preserve our appreciation with what is lost.

Another pleasure that ruins possess is their intrinsic uncertainty.<sup>8</sup> It is impossible for us to perceive the original intent and vision of the architect who planned the building because the structure lies in fragments. We can never be sure how the scattered pieces fit as a whole. The architectural past, like the historical one, is a mystery. But our imagination, stimulated by the incompleteness, seeks to reassemble the ruin, making us architects in the recreation of that structure. The building holds beauty for us, not only because of what it once was, but also because of what we imagine it to be.

Regardless of whether we successfully reconstruct the fragmented edifice in our imagination or not, the architectural remains still offer a great deal of satisfaction even as they lay scattered about. With facades and ornamentation stripped away, the engineering becomes more apparent and able to be appreciated. Material is revealed. Where there was once refinement in the construction elements, now the stone, steel, and wood appear unembellished and subject to decay; the contrast makes evident a material strength that was unsuspected before. Nature and the other destructive elements have created a new object that interacts with its environment in ways the original builders would not have



foreseen. Indeed, some ruins make such a strong statement of material, form, and space that it is hard to consider them as anything except abstract sculptures with their own aesthetics.<sup>9</sup>

"A ruin exists in a state of continual transition caused by natural deterioration, specific catastrophes, or other circumstances."<sup>10</sup> Equally part of a ruin's "continual transition" is the individual's reaction to it. A person's response to a ruin reflects not just the ruin's objective appearance but also the individual's emotional, cultural, and intellectual attitudes. Dissecting the ruin aesthetic - is the appeal an architectural one, a melancholy fascination for the mysteries of time, or an intense fulfillment gained from destruction - is a subjective process. Each of us approaches a ruin with our own set of experiences and attitudes that ultimately determines what the ruin aesthetic is and what the broken fragments mean. "Changing from country to country, from century to century, sometimes from generation to generation, the image of the ruin is always ambivalent and open to manifold interpretations."<sup>11</sup>

## A Ruin Aesthetic: A Historical Perspective

The fascination with ruins is ancient, and traces of its artistic expression are found in some of the earliest recorded histories and tales. Early Hebrew and biblical poets often celebrated the fall of the proud and mighty. Righteous destruction became the object of poetic expression and frequently was symbolized by images of ruined cities. Indeed, the imagery of these ancient poems is remarkably similar to the Romantic poetry two thousand years later, which glorified gloomy ruins. Yet, in these ancient examples of the ruin aesthetic, it is hard to separate the aesthetic pleasures of a ruin from the vindictive ones: most of the ruins described were devastated by war, not time, and the poets were on the side of the victorious.<sup>12</sup>

Early visual examples of the ruin aesthetic are found among Roman remains, which themselves supplied so much of the impetus for the rebirth of the ruin as an important aesthetic statement. Excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum have uncovered wall paintings depicting pastoral scenes with partially fallen temples and with broken columns. Such subjects were apparently a common decorative motif. The Romans, great lovers and plunderers of ancient cultures, also appreciated ancient ruins for their pleasing appeal.<sup>13</sup>

The artistic impact of ruins is not new, but the

strength of its influence has varied. It would seem that the Middle Ages, a period characterized (sometimes erroneously) by upheavals and warfare, would have been a time when the symbolic use of ruins would flourish. Afterall, this was an age when Christianity stressed destruction and the Judgement Day, when waves of disorder in the form of barbarians and disease swept across Europe, and when the massive Roman architecture fell to ruin through disease and pillage. But ruins are found rarely in Medieval Art.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps an explanation for this is that in times of stress, people seek solace in calmer attitudes and reassuring imagery rather than in the exciting but uneasy thoughts of disorder, as symbolized by the ruin.

It was not until the early Renaissance in Italy that conscious awareness of ruins re-emerged. Just as any Renaissance development has complex explanations, the reasons for the renewed concern for ruins are many but will only be outlined briefly here. The growing interest in classical studies played the largest role in the rebirth of the ruin aesthetic. Ancient Greece and Rome emerged from their pagan dishonor and were revered instead. This change in perception affected attitudes toward the architecture, literature, and sculpture of the ancients; Roman ruins were no longer subjected to indifference but became objects of intense study.<sup>15</sup> Added to this renewal was the greater number of travelers who journeyed to Italy and saw for the first time the architectural remains of antiquity. Their

fresh and incredulous view of the fallen temples resulted in even more attention to the ruins, both in Italy and beyond.<sup>16</sup>

It is not surprising then that, as ruins proceeded from being inconvenient debris to objects worthy of archeological and architectural study, they next became objects of artistic interest and began appearing in paintings. First, ruins were used as settings for religious subjects. A tumbled down Greek structure in a painting of the nativity symbolized not only Christ's humble birth<sup>17</sup> but also that the new order--Christianity--was born amid the ruins of the classical world.<sup>18</sup> Later as perspective skills improved, ruins became more dominant in paintings because they offered challenging opportunities for artists to demonstrate their proficiency in suggesting three dimensions. Another factor in the growth of the ruin aesthetic was the development of landscape painting--as landscape painting evolved from background illustration into its own genre, so did the ruin emerge as more than just one of many props used in religious compositions.<sup>19</sup>

Over the century and a half that followed their first appearance in religious paintings, ruins gradually were recognized as a subject worthy of an artist's scrutiny.<sup>20</sup> One artist whose work gives evidence of such a preoccupation is Monsu Desiderio, a painter of ruins that have a startlingly fantastic quality unseen before. Unlike artists before him, Desiderio (active 1615-1631) did not paint ruins merely to

display his perspective skills or his ability to manipulate light and shadow. His paintings demonstrate more than just an architectural interest in columns, arches and reliefs. Instead, Desiderio's ruins establish a shocking, macabre mood and reflect an intense fascination for death and destruction. His ruins have a hypnotic quality: despite the premonition that his structures and settings are possessed and intend to do harm if one enters their world, one feels unable to resist their beckoning. Characters occupy his bewildering compositions, but their story is unimportant in comparison to Desiderio's creation of a strange and "elegant nightmare of decay."<sup>21</sup> With Desiderio's work, it is clear that one of the major symbolic aspects of the ruin aesthetic--the pleasures found in the destruction of things human--clearly has been established.

It was Salvator Rosa (1615-1673), however, who was responsible for making ruins an aesthetic obsession among artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>22</sup> Like Desiderio, Rosa's landscapes have human inhabitants of historical or biblical importance who are secondary to the dominating concern of his paintings. Rosa's overriding concept was the immense and enduring power of nature, which was as harsh as it was glorious. He painted the fierce wildness of nature as it had not been painted before, stressing its implied threat to man, yet promoting its fierce and majestic beauty. Indeed, people are hardly safe under a Rosa sky--storms seem to be building just out of sight, and the

characters are unaware of their impending danger. "This is a landscape not to walk about in delight but to get out of."<sup>23</sup>

Ruins have a crucial role in Rosa compositions, but it is a role totally different from Desiderio's ruins that dance with death. Just as Rosa creates gnarled trees that, stripped of bark and branches, possess a harsh grace which only the ravages of nature can instill, Rosa paints structures that stand in a similar state of jagged grace. These decaying structures, with their fallen turrets and crumbling plaster, enlarge Rosa's view of nature. Not only is nature untamed, but it is also locked in a fierce struggle with man; nature intends to destroy what man creates. Rosa's ruins are symbolic not of death but of the enduring power of natural forces. His savage view of nature as reflected in the ruin later would have a profound influence on English art and landscape.<sup>24</sup>

By the mid-seventeenth century, the work of Rosa makes it clear that ruins had emerged as a major component in landscape painting and had, in the process, exchanged most of their religious connotations for more somber ones. Yet, not all artists painted ruins for their melancholy appeal; many painters enjoyed ruins for their scenic value. Foremost among these artists was Claude Gellée, called Lorrain, (1600-1682), a painter of classical landscapes. In Claude's work, nature is not a violent force devouring man's accomplishments; instead, nature is lush and inviting, filled

with warmth and tranquility. The ancient temples which grace his landscapes are enhanced by nature, not threatened by it. The harsh edges and broken masonry of the classical columns have been gently eroded by the natural aging process that affects all things. His vistas are infused with a gentle glow, created by the finest gradations of light, color and atmosphere.<sup>25</sup> In this way, Claude creates a "satisfying"<sup>26</sup> and relaxing landscapes in which ruins, caught in the warmth of his palette, are an integral part of their subtle harmony and appeal.

Continuing in an approach to ruins more reminiscent of Claude's charm than Rosa's savagery is the painter Giovanni Pannini (1691-1765). Like Claude, Pannini's ruins were usually controlled architectural renderings of specific ancient temples; but here the similarity ends. For Pannini, the ruin aesthetic was a commercial aesthetic. He painted Roman monuments not as part of an enchanting vista but rather as mementos. During Pannini's time, tourists abounded in Rome, and like all travelers, they wanted to return home with images of their trip. For their benefit Pannini painted.<sup>27</sup> His Roman arches and monuments are impressive, grand, and aloof. But one's emotions are not touched by thoughts of lost grandeur, the inescapable flow of time, or the war between man and nature. Nor is one's intellect challenged by Pannini's design or symbolic use of classical imagery. Instead, his paintings are jammed with as many architectural remains as can fill a canvas in order to make his sale.

Nonetheless, Pannini's work promoted the ruin aesthetic. He made no attempt to name his paintings after the obscure human inhabitants that landscape and other related types of paintings were still expected to have. His work was titled very simply after the particular ruins. Tourists, captivated by what they saw in Rome, returned to Northern Europe and England with Pannini's paintings, which glorified the Roman antiquities, and spread the cult of the ruin.<sup>28</sup>

Frequently working for a similar audience was Giovanni Battista Piranesi, (1720-1778), a graphic artist. Whereas Pannini's paintings recounted what one saw in Rome, Piranesi's etchings and engravings shock one into remembering what was felt. Or more accurately what Piranesi felt in Rome.

Piranesi was born in Venice. His father was a stone mason, his uncle a civil engineer. Undoubtedly, Piranesi's childhood was filled with talk of engineering and construction, especially since the dominating project of his youth was the mammoth reconstruction of the seawalls in Venice. He must have seen firsthand the planning, labors and raw materials that go into projects "that dwarf the men who make them."<sup>29</sup> Because of these experiences, Piranesi as a man in Rome was able to "imagine how the huge ruined halls and aqueducts must have looked when they were being assembled on their foundations, what tackle and scaffolding must have served to raise their arches so durably aloft."<sup>30</sup> This understanding enriched his work.

The Rome that Piranesi settled in in 1745 and was to



draw for the rest of his life was a city of contrasts that jostled one another. In many ways Rome was a beautiful city in which the vast new buildings of papal Rome gave it a feeling of stability and proud wealth. These palaces, however, were juxtaposed against crumbling buildings, left from antiquity but still inhabited. More startling were the ruins that were beyond practical restoration, magnificent, complex structures left to decay.<sup>31</sup> The imperial columns of ancient Rome had become posts for laundry lines; the Roman Forum was a cow pasture.<sup>32</sup> In this city of opposites, of permanence and change, one could not help but be aware of the "uncomfortable feeling of devouring time."<sup>33</sup> Piranesi himself explained the effect that this jumbled city had on him:

When I saw in Rome how most of the remains of ancient buildings lay scattered through gardens and ploughed fields where they dwindled day by day, either weathering away, or being quarried into fragments for new buildings, I resolved to preserve them by means of engraving. I have, therefore, drawn these ruins with all possible exquisiteness.<sup>34</sup>

More than that, Piranesi expressed his fascination for these ruins with an exuberance unseen before.

Piranesi investigated the ruins like a scientist performing an autopsy on a building. He examined not just style but technique. His early experience in Venice, as well as his later training as an architect, served him well. He drilled to the core of the masonry and dug under the foundations; he stripped, sectioned, and sawed until he established the structure in all its layers and functions.<sup>35</sup>

Then Piranesi drew the ruins with the understanding of an engineer and the insight of an artist. For thirty years he drew the ancient Roman architecture with relentless accuracy and oppressive power. He never stopped finding the ruins terrifying in their significance.

Although Piranesi depicted churches and temples for the tourist trade, he felt that ancient Rome showed its true magnificence in its civil structures and functional constructions on which great societies depend. Thus, his emotions were fully engaged when Piranesi was drawing the ruins of sewers, aqueducts, roads, and other engineering feats.<sup>36</sup> Nature's presence is heavy in his work, and the ruins tire under the weight of encroaching plants. Piranesi's ruins have been damaged more than those drawn by other artists. He uses light and shadow not to emphasize the strength of what remains but to show off the wounds of time. Unlike Pannini's almost antiseptic ruins, Piranesi revels in the incompleteness and rubble. Even the people found in Piranesi's engravings are decayed. Crippled, begging, or dying, these creatures are as much evidence of the cruelty of time and nature as are the ruins that surround them. The very insignificance of these pitiful people serves to heighten the titanic grandeur of the structures and the drama of their subsequent decline.<sup>37</sup>

Nearly as famous as Piranesi in his evocation of the ruins was the French painter Hubert Robert (1733-1808). By the late eighteenth century, ruins had achieved such

acceptance that it was possible for an artist like Robert to devote himself to the subject without being obliged to produce the equivalent of postcards for the wealthy. He made little attempt to achieve archeological accuracy since he was more interested in the unique aesthetic qualities of decay.<sup>38</sup> His ruins, while retaining much of their original stately elegance, seem to possess a sorrow over their lost grandeur. Unlike Pannini's dry compositions, Robert's are infused with the mournful reflections that had become so much a part of the ruin aesthetic.

Yet, Robert handled the pervasive gloom more gently than Piranesi did. Piranesi, whose fascination with decay bordered on the perverse, filled his drawings with violent architectural thrusts and counterthrusts and accentuated the agitated surface with deep shadow and harsh sunlight. Robert, however, used shadow and atmosphere to soften, rather than highlight, the scars of his temples, arches and bridges. The ragged intrusions of nature have a mellowing effect in Robert's paintings and envelop the ruins with a sensuality not found in Piranesi's work. Robert's ruins retain the mass and solemnity that also characterized Piranesi's ruins, yet without the penetrating foreboding. Nonetheless, Robert's pursuit of the ruin aesthetic was as intense and sincere as Piranesi's. So preoccupied was Robert with the slow erosions of time that his most turbulent paintings were fantasy ruins of Versailles and the Louvre, complete with twisting vines, gnarled and dead trees,

broken arches, and scattered sculptures. The ruin aesthetic was for Robert the fate that awaits all of man's creations.<sup>39</sup>

By the late eighteenth century, the ruin motif had achieved such popularity as to break out of the confines of art. No longer were the elite who could afford travels to Rome the only people to enjoy the special beauty of ruins. By this time, ruins had become a common decorative style in the applied arts: picturesque ancient columns commonly embellished porcelain, wallpaper, and fabric.<sup>40</sup> Ruins became a fashion hysteria that was encouraged not only by the popularity of the previously mentioned artist but also by the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Begun in the 1740's, these excavations and the discoveries that resulted from them had a powerful impact on the thought and fashion of the eighteenth century and did much to increase the popularity of the ruin.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the potential trivialization of the ruin aesthetic by its overuse on household items, it remained an inspiring force in painting. This was true both for the Classic and Romantic painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Much has been written about the differences between the Classicists and the Romantics; however, Kenneth Clarke defined these opposing forces succintly. The Romantics are those artists who "have appealed to our emotions by analogies, buried memories, or the sensuous use of color,"<sup>42</sup> while the Classicists "have satisfied our need

for order and permanence by creating structures or compositions that seem complete in themselves."<sup>43</sup> The two intentions had coexisted in European painting during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but by the mid-eighteenth century the movements were deeply divided in their product and their theory. The gap between the Classicists who strove for "noble simplicity and calm grandeur"<sup>44</sup> and the Romantics whose intent was to excite the emotions and rebel against conformity widened dramatically in the late 1700's and early 1800's.<sup>45</sup>

Artists of both persuasions made pilgrimages to Rome. To the Classicists, the Roman ruins were symbols of grandeur and virtue, attributes that the artists tried to capture in their work. The ancient structures represented a mathematically and aesthetically satisfying order that fulfilled both the compositional and theoretical requirements of Classic painting. But the Romantics haunted Rome for different reasons.

"To the Romantic eye, the ruins of the ancient world were not reminders of Reason. They were reminders of man's mortality. Choked by vines and grasses among the crumbling stones, the broken monuments of antiquity evoked lost battles, dead loves, mysteries. They were settings for melancholy revery, for trysts, for episodes of sweetness or violence. For the Romantic, even the classical world was fodder for emotional yearnings."<sup>40</sup>

The Romantics pursued a new ideal of beauty and composition. They broke from Classical aesthetic constraints and sought drama and an appeal to the senses. Ruins

possessed an intrinsic uncertainty based on the shock of what is versus what had been, making them an effective tool to disturb and set one's emotions on edge.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, ruins epitomized one of the Romantics favorite themes: the struggle between man and nature.<sup>48</sup> Man was sensitive and civilized; nature was unruly and untamed. What man had created, nature could destroy. This destruction, once regarded as undesirable and disgusting, was viewed by Romantics as impressive and admirable.

Ruins, once mere evidence of nature's inconvenient habit of destroying man's handiwork, now became eloquent symbols of the struggle between unspoiled beauty and the eroding hand of time. Struggle implied drama and drama itself was a theme that deserved cultivating. Ruins could be, it was discovered, more eloquent than neat perfection.<sup>49</sup>

Although the Romantic movement is considered generally to have reached its peak during the early and middle nineteenth century, its origins were evident much earlier.<sup>50</sup> In particular, Piranesi was a forerunner of the Romantic movement with his intensely disturbing and involved engravings. Even though he preceded them by many years, Piranesi was never surpassed by the Romantics in his expression of the ruin aesthetic.

He captured the struggle between man and nature, the foreboding presence of time, the oppressive stillness, and the unconscious satisfaction in destruction that was the ruin aesthetic to the Romantics. So evocative were his drawings of Roman monuments that many people, inspired by his work, were disappointed by the real ruins and "only saw

a jumble of Masonry."<sup>51</sup> And Piranesi created his romantic vision without the typical Romantic tools of color, sunset and immense vistas.<sup>52</sup>

In Great Britain the cult of the ruin took a unique turn. The English, like most Europeans, had embraced the classical world with a renewed interest. Perhaps the great ancient empires had an added fascination for the English who were themselves building an empire.<sup>53</sup> They exhibited the typical scholarly curiosity in the remnants of antiquity and returned from Rome with the appropriate paintings and engravings.<sup>54</sup>

But these English were primed to have an additional sentimental response to ruins as well. In the early eighteenth century, English poets began exploring the melancholy potential of ruins and filled their poems with glorious states of decay. Their visions were composed of ruins, moonlight, creeping ivy, hooting owls, and anything else that symbolized man's losing battle with nature and time. The poetry was very sensationalist; it seemed as if every poem had to establish a bewitching mood more powerful than the previous one.<sup>55</sup> What was unusual in the poets' ruin aesthetic was that the ruins were not Roman; they were Gothic.

Up until the mid 1700's, when ruins were discussed and painted what was meant almost exclusively was the remains of classical antiquity. The reasons for this are clear. Roman and Greek ruins were the kind that

surrounded the Southern Europeans who played the primary role in the rebirth of the fascination with decay. Also significant was that these ruins symbolized an age of reason, order and knowledge, while Gothic or Medieval architecture was slandered because it was a remnant of a barbarous and uncouth age that had subverted the glory that came before it.

However, Northern Europeans and the English, in particular, saw beauty in the ruined Gothic abbeys and churches.<sup>56</sup> (Of course, Medieval ruins surrounded them in far greater numbers.) The Romantics in their rebellion against the Classicists further revered these ruins and saw in Gothic churches evidence of deeply held beliefs and feelings. This was an architecture based on faith and meant to appeal to the emotions of all. For the Romantic poets and painters, the eerie Medieval ruins, which had been inspired by sincere religious yearnings, were thought to be more effective at provoking the proper emotional response than the Roman ruins, which were based on aloof reason.<sup>57</sup>

Even though the northern European Romantic painters tried to revive the ruin aesthetic by focussing on Gothic ruins, the ruin aesthetic had, nonetheless, reached its pinnacle years earlier, as demonstrated by the works of Piranesi and Robert. Still, some painters captured the aura of Gothic ruins with subtlety and grace. One such artist was J.M.W. Turner who, like many painters of his day, supported himself early in his career with renderings of



of Medieval abbeys.<sup>58</sup> Yet, the overall flow of the ruin aesthetic was one that became more symbolic of hopeless despair. Just as poems became more sensationalist with each poet trying to elicit a blacker mood than the previous one, so with painters of ruins. In place of melancholy reflections about inevitable decay came a harsher image of fruitless life and greedy death. The ruin became a symbol for grotesque disintegration.<sup>59</sup>

As it played out its phenomenal popularity, the ruin aesthetic took an eccentric turn in a curious fad that had its most enthusiastic following in England--the artificial ruin. The first mention of a sham ruin in England was in 1746,<sup>60</sup> but there is evidence that artificial ruins existed in other countries before then. In the early sixteenth century, for example, Vasari, the Italian painter and gossip, describes an artificial ruin in a friend's garden so casually that one can only assume that such structures were quite common in Italy.<sup>61</sup> Yet it was in England that sham ruins flourished.

The reasons for this curiosity are many. Ruins became such a popular decorative motif on household furnishings that the step to artificially constructed ruins seemed a natural progression rather than an aberration.<sup>62</sup> Artificial ruins had more than mere decorative potential, however; they possessed emotional potential as well. The Romantic poets and painters had produced among the wealthy an affection for crumbling Gothic arches in moonlit landscapes. Yet, most estate owners

were not fortunate enough to possess an authentic ruin. Not wanting to be denied the pleasures of contemplation among decaying towers, the deprived landowners were forced to construct their own.

Another reason for the popularity of artificial ruins lay in the English relation to their bit of nature, their garden. To understand the English garden, one must be acquainted with its antithesis, the French park. The French gardens were formally structured and followed established rules of order just as building did. Since French parks were part of an entire architectural conception, they were as geometrically formed as the architecture itself. To the French, the only difference between a park and a building was material (tree versus stone), reflecting the French belief that man could and should control nature and give it order.

The English, however, rebelled against the French formal garden--they believed that gardens should follow a natural order, not an imposed one. The works of man and the works of nature should harmonize in the garden, man should not try to subordinate nature.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the English view of nature was the Romantic view. Part of nature's beauty and impact was its strength and savagery. What better way to symbolize this than with a ruin in the landscape.

In their pursuit of the natural garden, the English were inspired also by the landscape painters of the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The paintings of Rosa and Claude, in their different ways, represented an unstructured approach to nature that the English wanted to emulate. Since ruins were an integral component of these artists' paintings and their view of nature, ruins belonged in English gardens as well, even if they had to be specially constructed.

Originally sham ruins were Roman recreations. Later as the Gothic revival took hold, ruins based on Medieval themes became acceptable. However, the shift from classical to Gothic did not occur without great philosophical discussions.<sup>64</sup>

The first sham ruins were built solidly from the best materials, but only the wealthiest people could afford this. More often, ruins were constructed from less enduring elements such as plaster and were Gothic facades for functioning barns or sheds.<sup>65</sup> Even the most mundane "ruin" had to meet Romantic criteria for mood and atmosphere. Guidelines were published, describing the proper placement of the ruin in the landscape and the appropriate style.<sup>66</sup> Builders, trying to keep up with the trend, kept on hand sets of designs to meet the demand for Gothic ruins.<sup>67</sup>

Such a fashion was not permanent: it defeated itself with its own excesses and absurdities. Yet, it lasted through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>68</sup> Today, this peculiar fad is viewed as mildly humorous and dishonest. Kenneth Clarke writes:

We might be stirred by the sudden prospect of ruins, but once we knew them to be artificial our pleasure would evaporate. We are incapable of isolating the sensation and enjoying a dramatic effect without the influence of truth, and there has come to be something shocking in the discovery that a seeming castle is only a disguised cowshed. It is a sham, it is telling a lie.<sup>69</sup>

The ruin aesthetic rapidly declined as an artistic motif through the remaining years of the nineteenth century. It had been played out, and other movements took its place.<sup>70</sup> As an encompassing influence in art, it seems lost to the twentieth century, at least in its traditional form. But ruins have never lost their effect on individuals. Even though television has converted the shocking images of destruction and demolition into the everyday, dinner-time, news event, ruins both modern and ancient remain an oddly absorbing sight. The ruin aesthetic continues as a powerful personal influence.

## A Ruin Aesthetic: A Personal Experience

In my own work and life, I cannot help but be aware of the ruin aesthetic. Its existence most certainly is traceable to the two years I spent with my family in Amman, Jordan. Although I was only eleven at the beginning of my stay, the startling environment of the Middle East had and continues to have a profound influence on me.

Jordan, at the east end of the Mediterranean Sea, is part of what is commonly called the "cradle of civilization." It is one of the most archeologically rich locations in the world, containing a vast cross section of cultural remains from the many civilizations that overlapped and merged there for thousands of years. These remains, having withstood the forces of time and man, are partially intact today and support a substantial archeological community.

Jordan was a perfect setting for entertaining me with, and educating me about the ancient cultures. I was enthralled by the architectural remnants of Amman and was eager to get involved in the archeology programs. I took part in many archeological digs in and around Amman and particularly enjoyed journeys to remote sites.

For example, I participated in digs at the ancient city of Jerico (plates 4 and 5). At Jerico the remains of past civilizations are concentrated because each succeeding city

and culture stacked itself upon the previous one. Repeated for thousands of years, this process results in a tell or what appears to be a lone mound protruding from the natural contours of the desert. Excavating a site such as Jerico is difficult; the evidence of a particular civilization is scattered and tossed with the remains of other civilizations. Digging at Jerico and sites like it definitely produced in me an appreciation for minutiae.

Other remains were more remote than Jerico, and we depended on Jordanian army guides to lead our jeep caravans through the roadless desert to these locations. The isolated ruins of Jerash (plate 6) and Castle Al Tuba (plate 3) are like this and are entirely different from those of Jerico. Unlike tells, these sites are representative of only one culture and a briefer period of time. Moreover, Jerash and Castle Al Tuba are architectural ruins, and their magnificent remains, being the sole structures in a vast hostile space, make a startling impression. Here one is free to concentrate on the grace of the ruins, the weathering of material, and the silent history that the sites possess.

Unique among the ruins that I saw was Petre, a city carved into sandstone. The journey to Petre is treacherous, and concludes on foot through rising cliffs. But the reward is worth the strain. Upon entering Petre, one is immediately astonished by the Dair shrine (plate 8), a one hundred fifty foot temple cut from the side of a mountain. In this solid rock city, one is astounded by its scale and finds

reflections of man's reaction to the enormity of nature.

For sheer immensity, no ruins are more impressive than the massive structures of Egypt. The formidable presence of the pyramids and other ancient temples at Giza (plate 7) and Abu Simbel (plates 9 and 10) have amazed people for thousands of years. The stately aura, incredible mass, and simplicity of form - the characteristics of ancient Egyptian architecture - were qualities not lost to me.

For the most part, these various archeological sites, from Jerico to Abu Simbel, were united by a common feature: the ancient remains are isolated from contemporary civilization. Unlike Rome or Athens where ancient ruins share the same space with modern cities, most of the ruins I experienced were virtually unmarred by modern society. The fact that these remains were so remote gives one not only a clearer appreciation and understanding of a particular civilization but also an awareness of the relationship between the structures and the space and time that surrounds them.

It should not be surprising, then, that these two years of intensive exposure to architectural ruins should have so strongly affected me and made an impact on my work. Rose Macaulay describes many of the sites that I saw in terms which I felt intuitively while I was there. She describes the ruins of Egypt as "possibly the most impressive assortment of ruins anywhere,"<sup>71</sup> which in their age and extent stagger the imagination. Certainly the Egyptian ruins present the greatest challenge to time and mortality

that any of man's creations ever have. Their enduring monumentality have remained awesome; yet the ever present effects of nature and time are evident, gently eroding man's work.

Macaulay discusses Jerash, "one of the most beautiful columned ruins anywhere,"<sup>72</sup> describing it as a "brightly colored butterfly of a Hellenistic town."<sup>73</sup> Once a center of luxury, culture, and commerce, the sheer beauty of Jerash "breathes like a memory about its ruins."<sup>74</sup> Even though it suffered through crusaders, Arabs, and earthquakes, Jerash is not desolate in its stark landscape; it remains lovely despite its ruined state.

In her description of Petre, Maculay uses such terms as "strange,"<sup>75</sup> "lovely,"<sup>76</sup> "elegant,"<sup>77</sup> "improbable glamour,"<sup>78</sup> and the "great carved opal glowing in the desert."<sup>79</sup> Petre, unknown to westerners for hundreds of years, is enhanced by the arduous journey across inhospitable land. When one suddenly comes upon this ancient city, the impact is enormous and permanent. Carved from rose-red stone in the midst of a mountain wilderness, Petre is a "sumptuous ornament"<sup>80</sup> surrounded by "savage environs."<sup>81</sup>

Living in Amman, a city of contrasts, made an impact on me as well. Like the Rome of Piranesi, Amman is paradoxical. It is a modern city, but its Roman ruins are so assertive that they cannot be diminished by Amman's activity and bustle.

Not everyone who visits the Middle East comes away



with an awareness of the ruin as an aesthetic symbol or tool. And certainly, I wasn't conscious of that at the time. But I am sure of it now and know that it is a force in my sculpture. The interaction of man and nature over time and the evidence that each leaves behind are common elements in much of my work. I look forward to returning someday to what I believe is the source of those concerns.

## A Ruin Aesthetic: A Material Influence

The photographic essay makes apparent both the similarities that I see between ancient ruins, contemporary ruins and construction sites, and the influence that these ancient and modern sites have had on my work. It visually defines my interpretation of the ruin aesthetic.

Each of the sites documented in the photographic essay gives evidence of process and change; each has the mark of man. The ruins represent a destructive or breaking down process, while the construction sites are a building process. Both kinds of sites project the dynamics of their ephemeral state, making one aware of time. Both have a sense of formal order; yet, they are in a state of disarray. Both reveal the raw quality of their materials.

But the construction site is fundamentally different. It is a building process--thus, a symbol of progress and prosperity, a symbol of the future--as opposed to a ruin with its melancholy. A photograph, however, freezes time, pulling the different sites together. For that instant, time lacks progression--its reference--and the ruins and construction sites are united in a compositional, material, and conceptual way. This freezing of time makes one see the construction sites as futuristic, skeletal ruins in which the contemporary materials and processes have been reexposed

to the elements.

My sculpture is a simplification of the visual information obtained from these varied ruins, focussing on the compositional and material presence of the sites. The diagonal, the process, and the effects of nature are components in my work that can be traced to the ruins.

I have chosen marble and steel to convey my concepts of the ruin aesthetic for several reasons. Marble is a classical material used throughout history as a medium in both architecture and sculpture. It is a symbol of wealth and elegance. The use of steel for structural support in architecture is a comparatively new concept and revolutionized architecture, beginning in the nineteenth century. Steel's ability to perform as a weight-bearing material in compression and tension is what made the skyscraper and expansion bridge possible. Similar to its modern architectural history, steel's aesthetic history is a recent development, and its use has had an equally revolutionary effect on sculpture.

Marble and steel interested me in a material sense as well because they are different, nearly opposites, construction materials. Marble is a naturally found form of limestone, its granular structure makes it inappropriate as a tension support structure, although it performs well under compression. Steel, on the other hand, is a man-made alloy whose strength and malleability are well-known.

A ruin is dynamic evidence of the struggle between man

and nature, revealing the raw evidence of both, with entropy enduring. The ruin is a direct comparison of man and nature. Responding to these feelings and trying to make a sculptural statement in a contemporary context, I began working with steel. I chose lengths of industrial, cross-section elements because I felt that they were a direct extension of our society, steel beams being a primary building material. Through the use of fire and simple, direct force, I compressed, pierced, and transformed portions of these elements into flowing, organic shapes. (Plates 28-31)

Just as ruins tell their own story through process, these sculptures also are a form of documentation and present evidence of a physical work experience. Remnants of the fire - the fire scale and soot - are left on the worked steel. Yet, some of the original stock is left unaltered to give context to the portion in its altered (or worked) state. The steel, used primarily as a support mechanism, takes the form of a diagonal. (Plates 28, 32, 38) I introduced the diagonal into my work because it has a strong association with chaos and randomness, characteristics which are indiginous to a ruin.

I selected marble for my sculptures because, like steel, it has a historical aesthetic importance, but one that ranges over a much greater span of time. Marble is a natural material whereas steel is not. (Steel formation occurs in the visible furnaces of man.) Thus, symbolically, steel and marble are opposites. But, in my sculpture, the

the marble and steel work in structural harmony to form complex support systems. (Plate 38) Other times, the steel dominates the marble, dramatizing the rocks' shattered fragments (Plates 32-35). When completed, these sculptures are left to weather. The steel richens into beautiful shades of reds and browns and colors its marble companion with iron oxide washes.

In short my work is a romance with steel and marble. While stressing the integrity of material, I attempt to combine the sensibilities of man and the laws of nature. Seeing ruins as abstract, spiritual art, I interpret this vision through industrial form and remnant.

## A Ruin Aesthetic: A Photographic Essay

All life shares an identical function, that of progressive composition and decomposition. Creation and dissolution is in the nature of being. Disintegration is as essential an aspect of nature as aggregation of regrowth.

The collocations of mass and energy are always breaking up, however slowly, however imperceptibly in a continual process of change.<sup>82</sup>



Plate 1



Plate 2



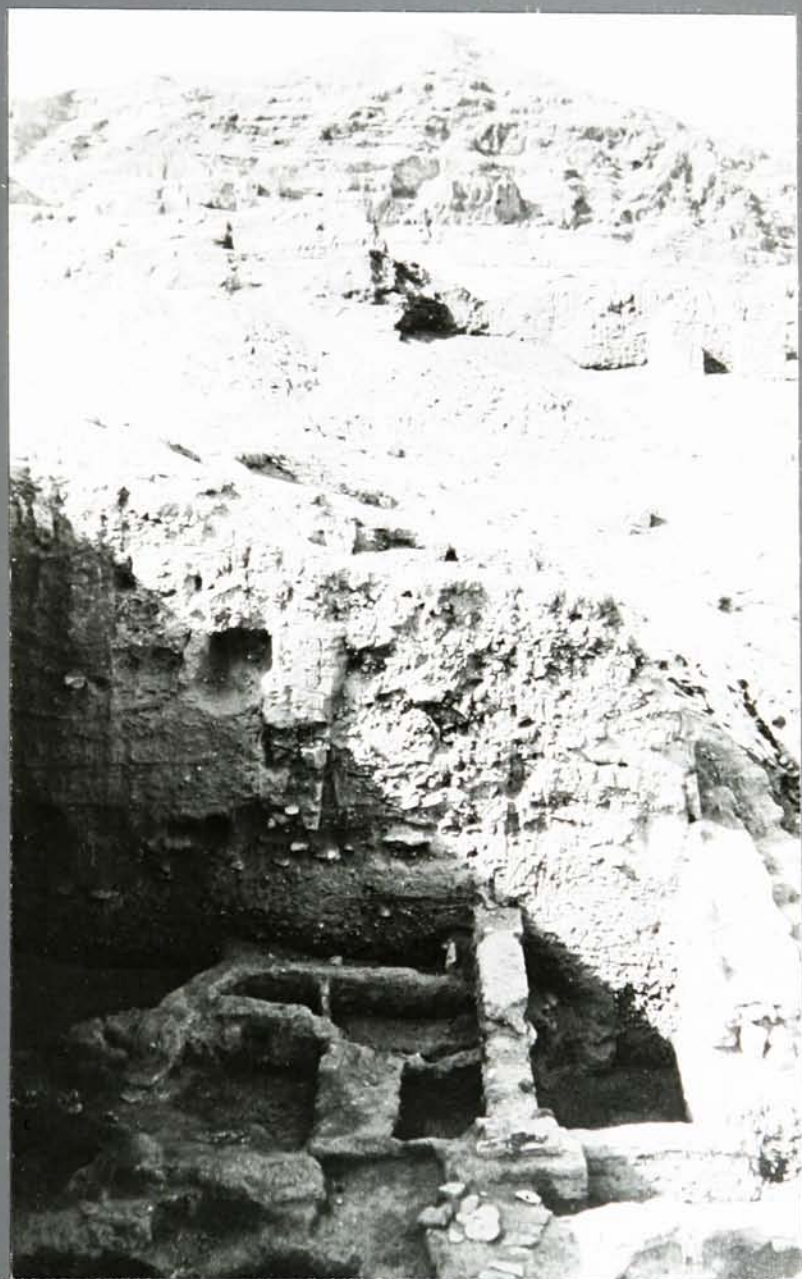


Plate 3



Plate 4



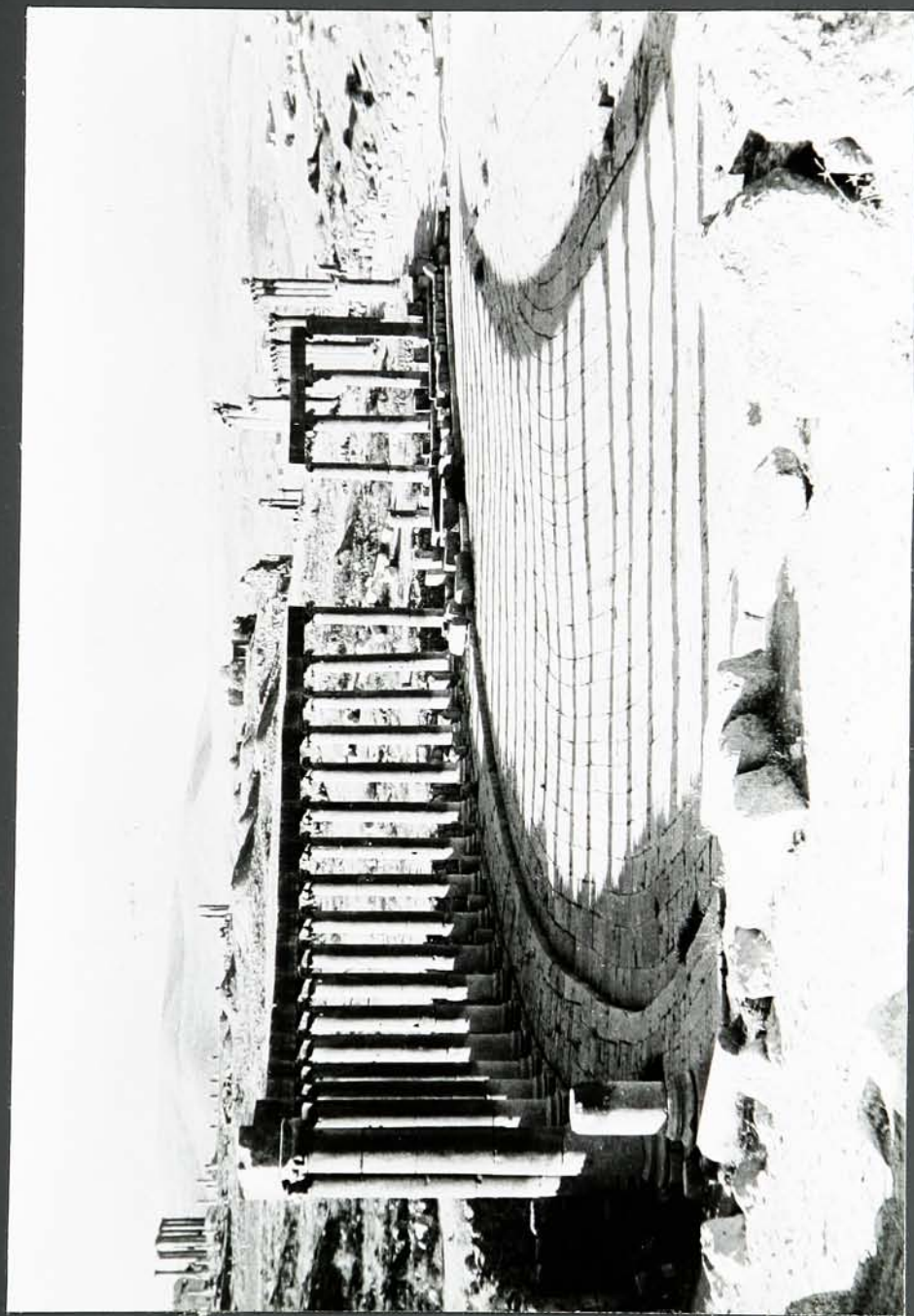


Plate 5



Plate 6

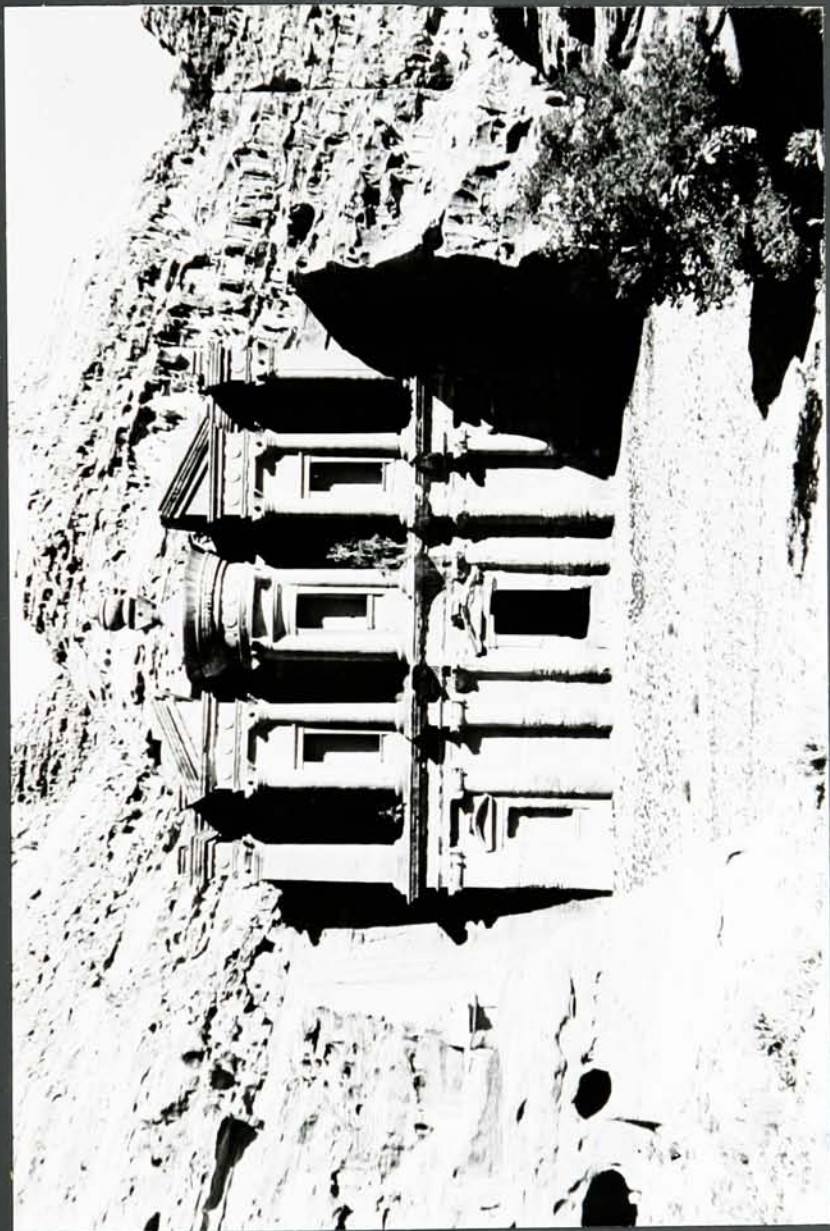


Plate 7



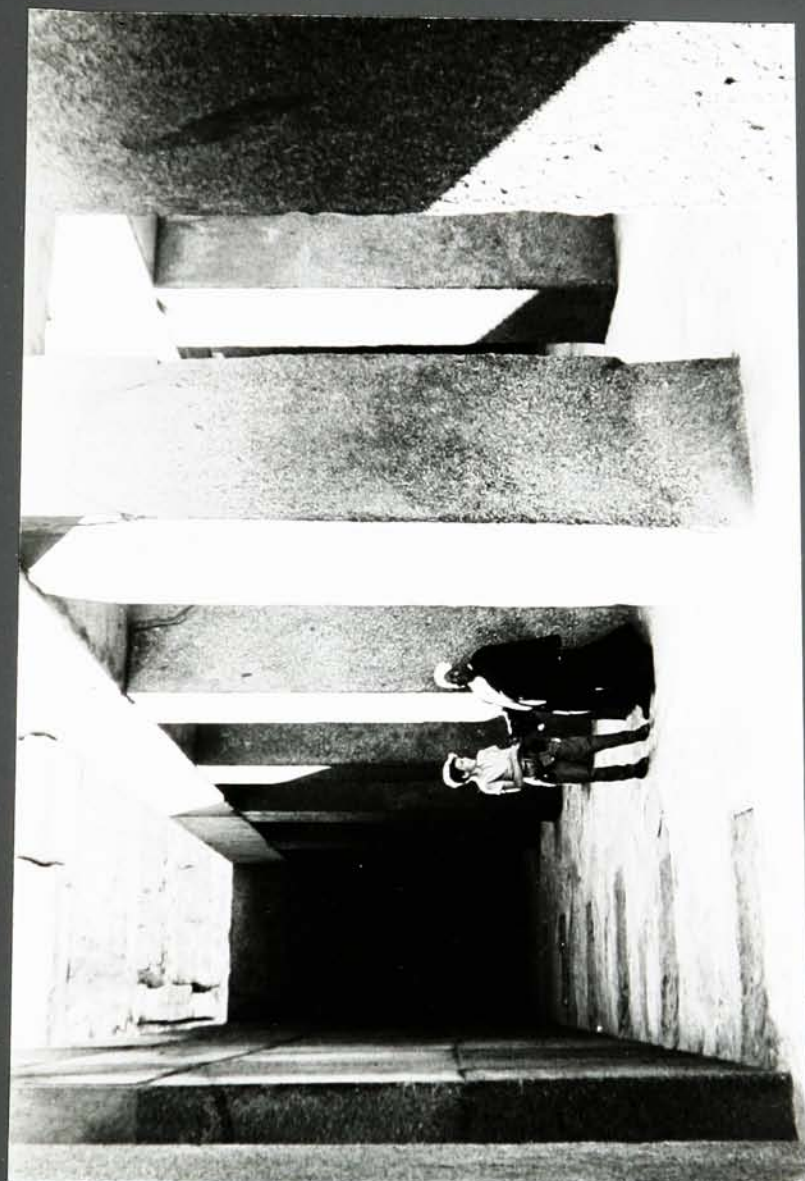


Plate 8

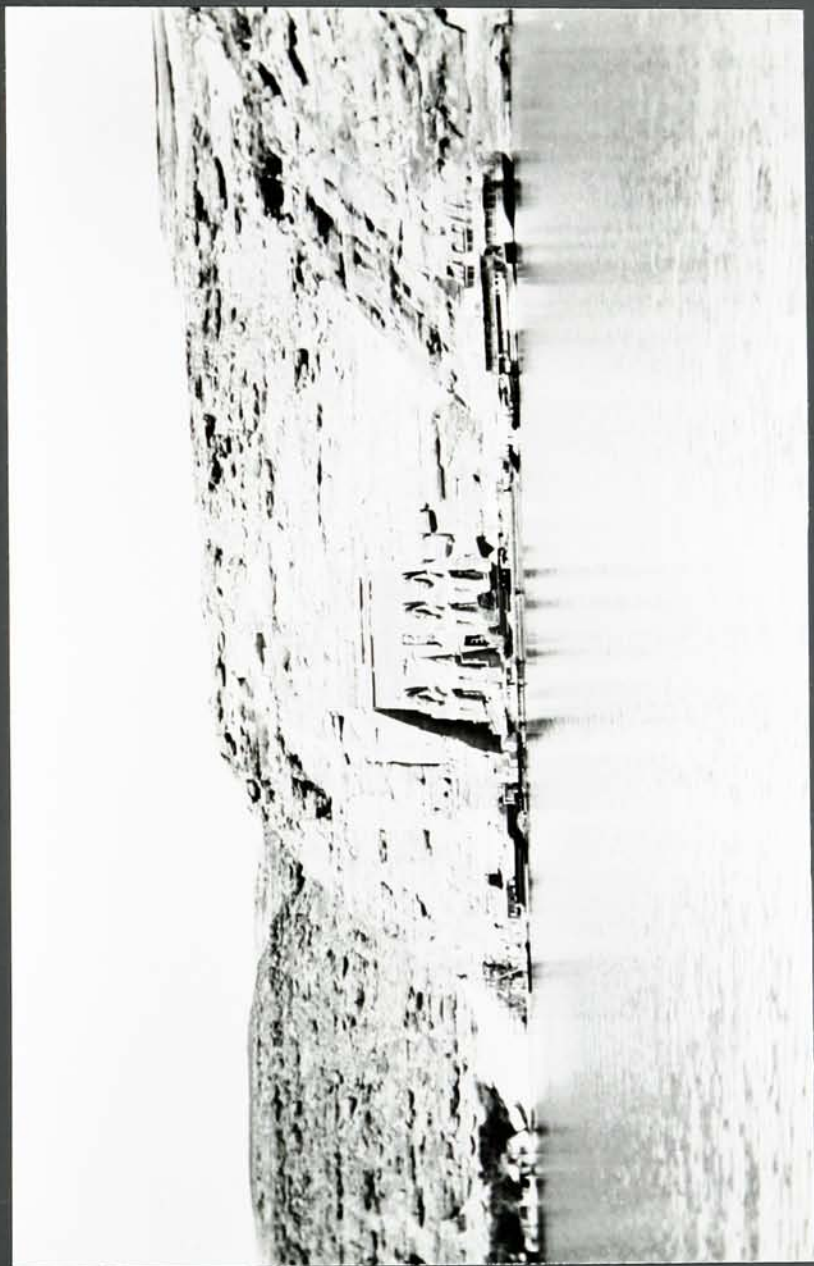


Plate 9

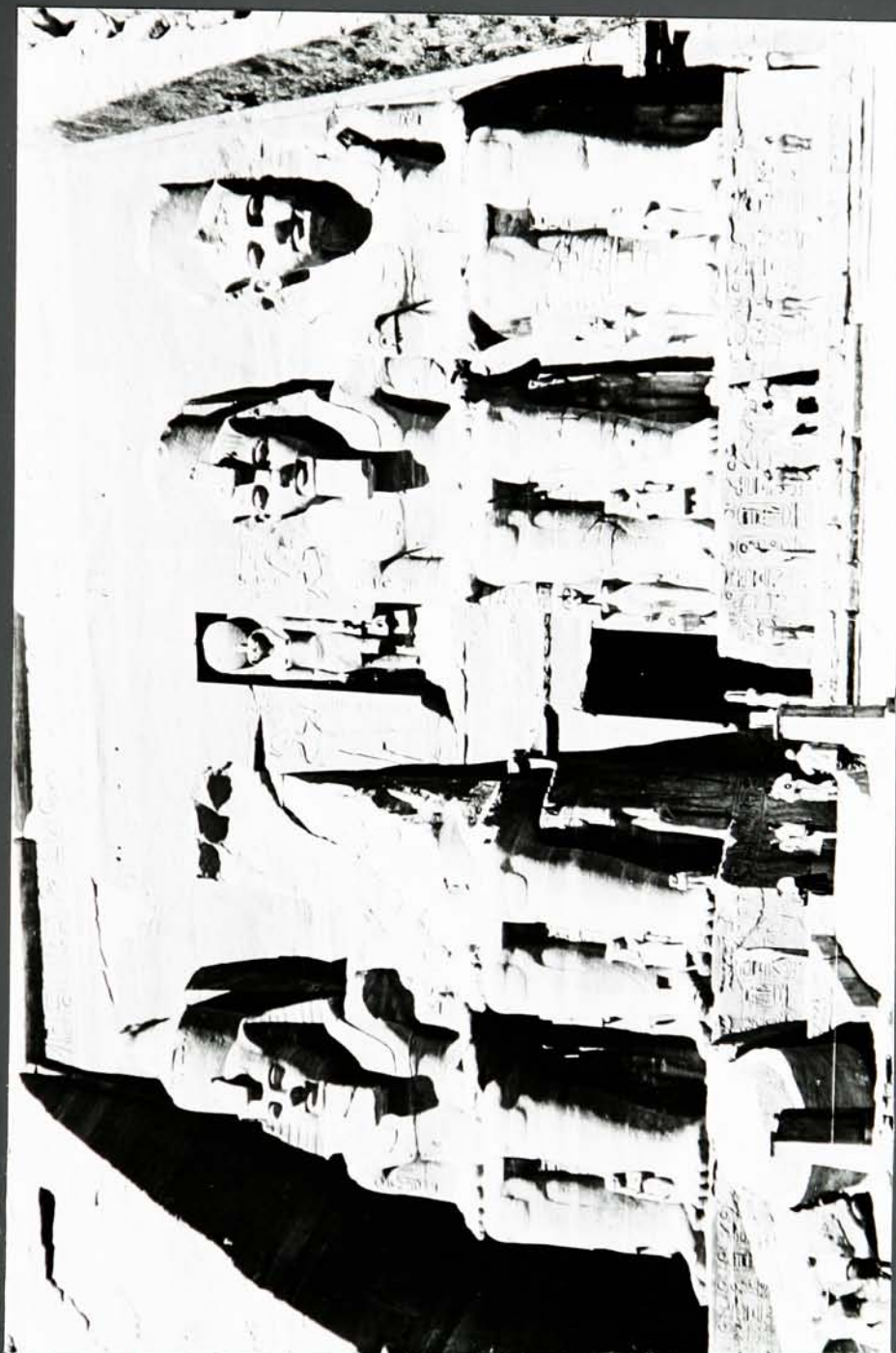


Plate 10



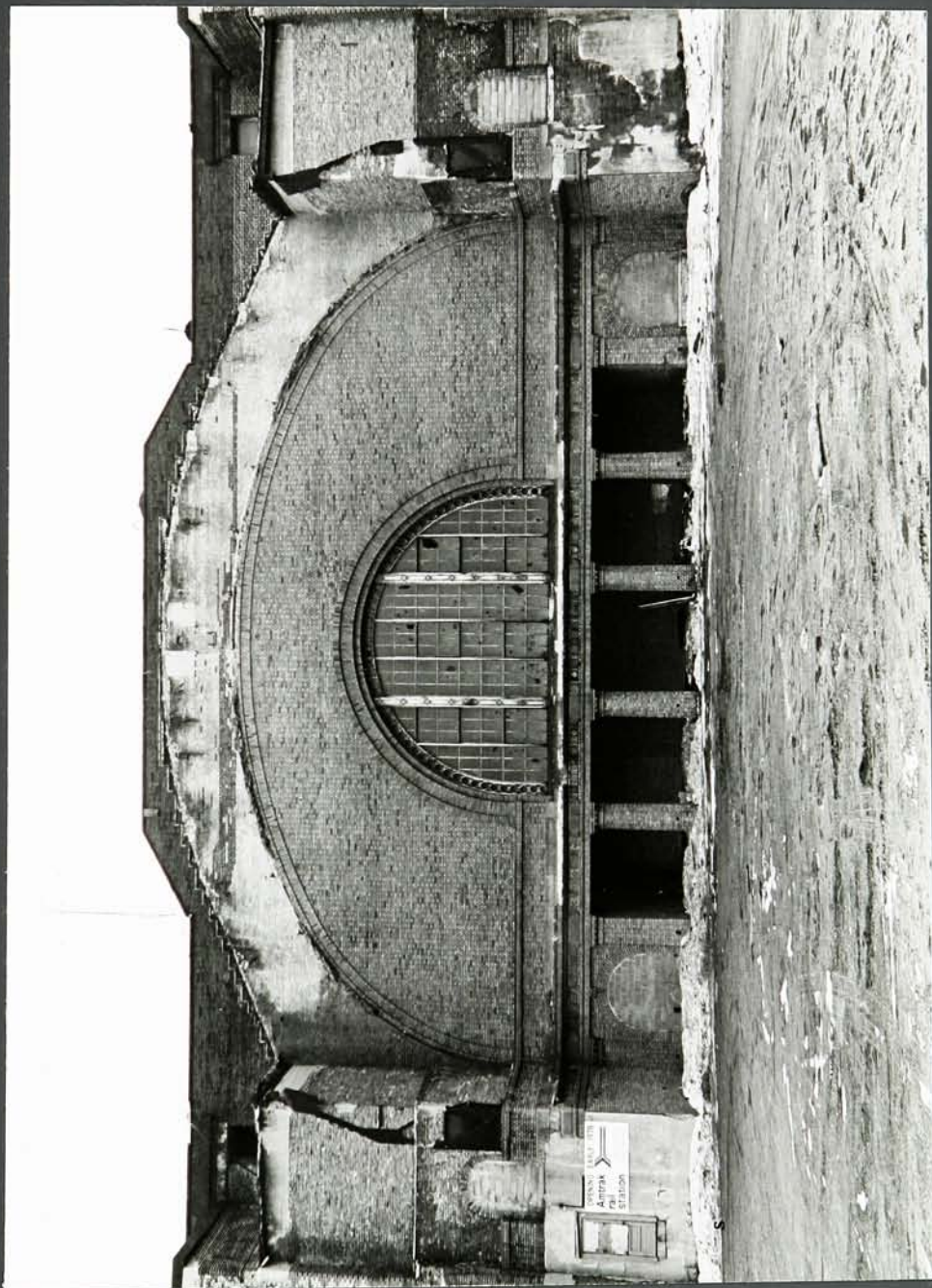


Plate 11



Plate 12





Plate 13



Plate 14





Plate 15



Plate 16





Plate 17



Plate 18





Plate 19



Plate 20



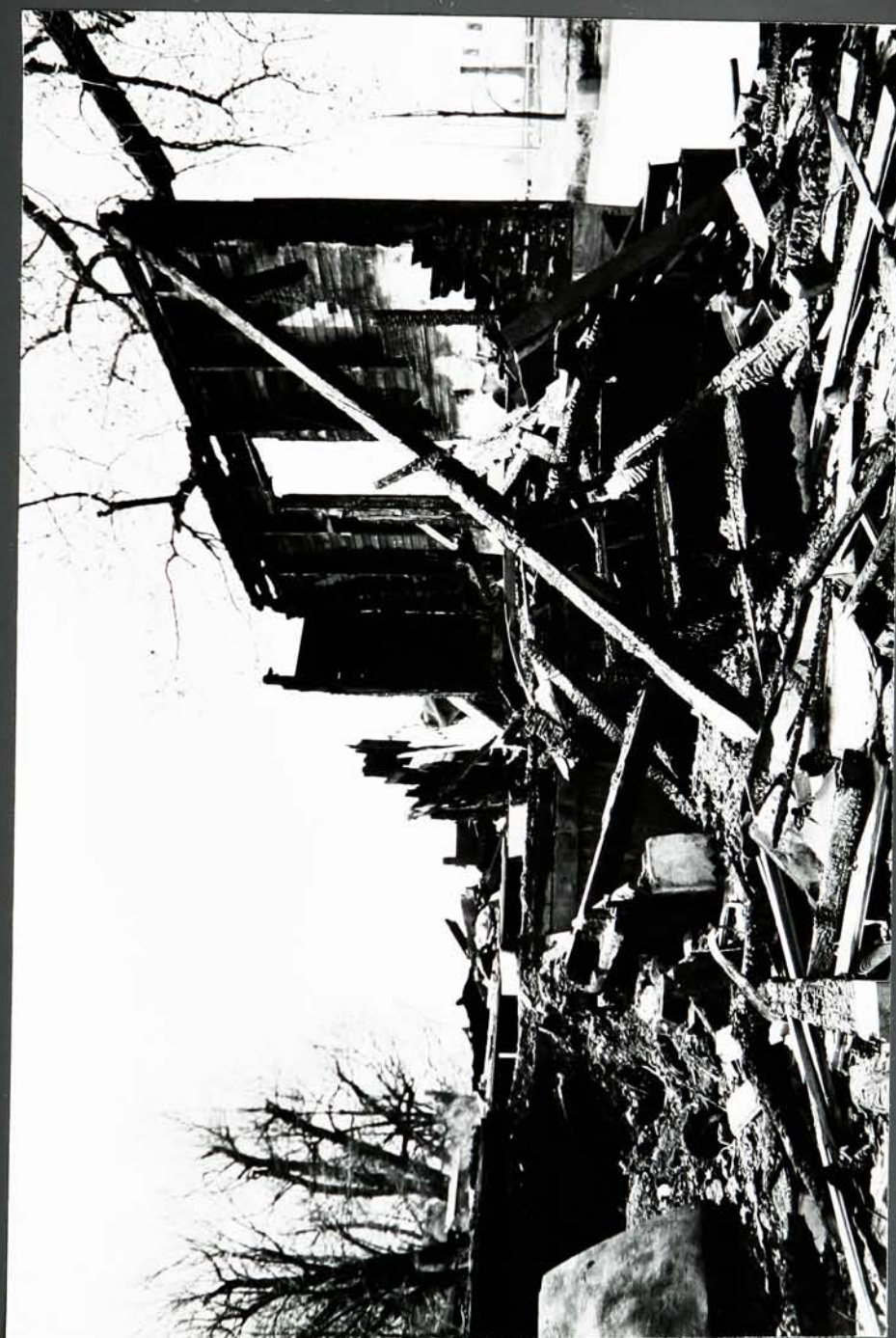


Plate 21



Plate 22

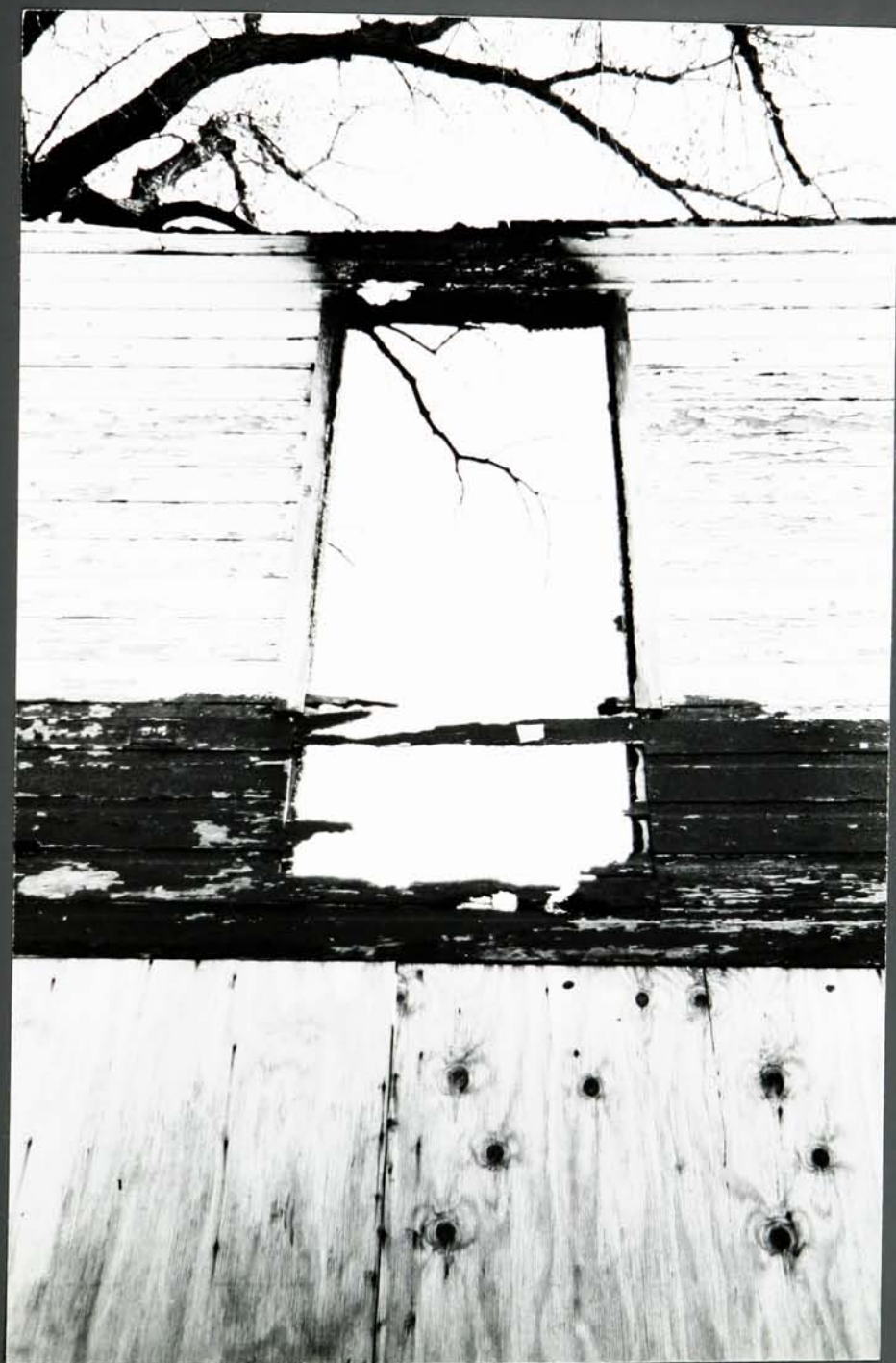


Plate 23





Plate 24

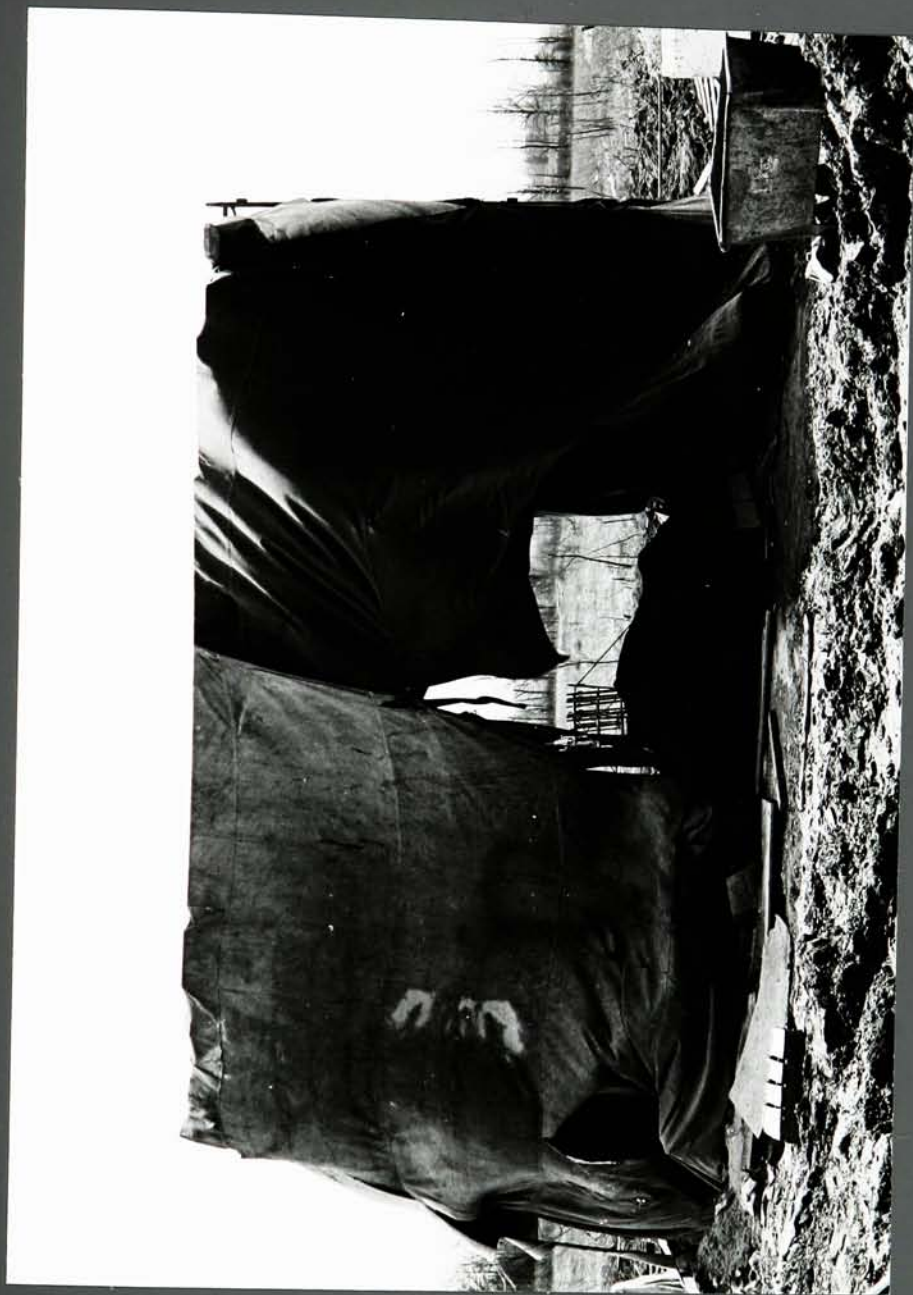


Plate 25



Plate 26



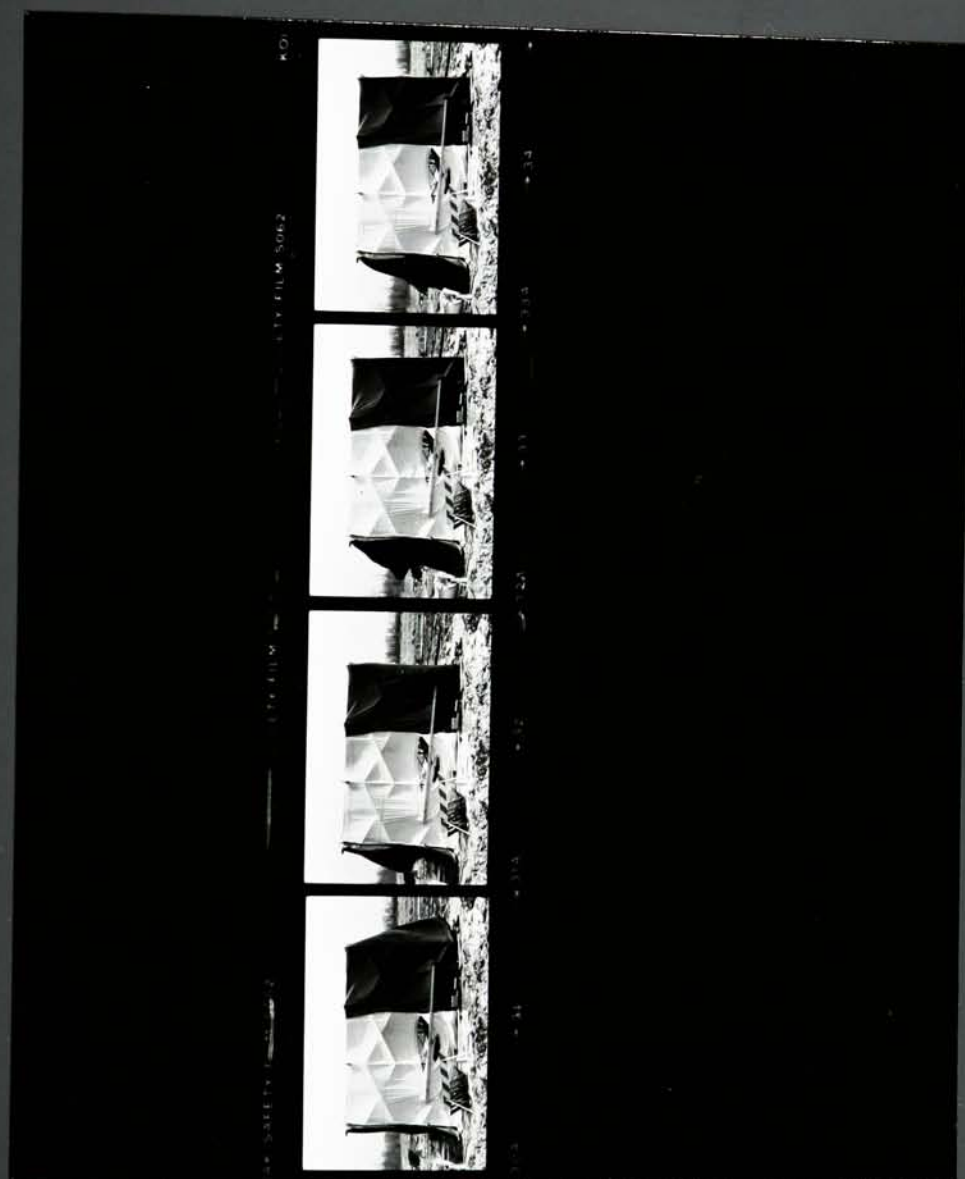


Plate 27

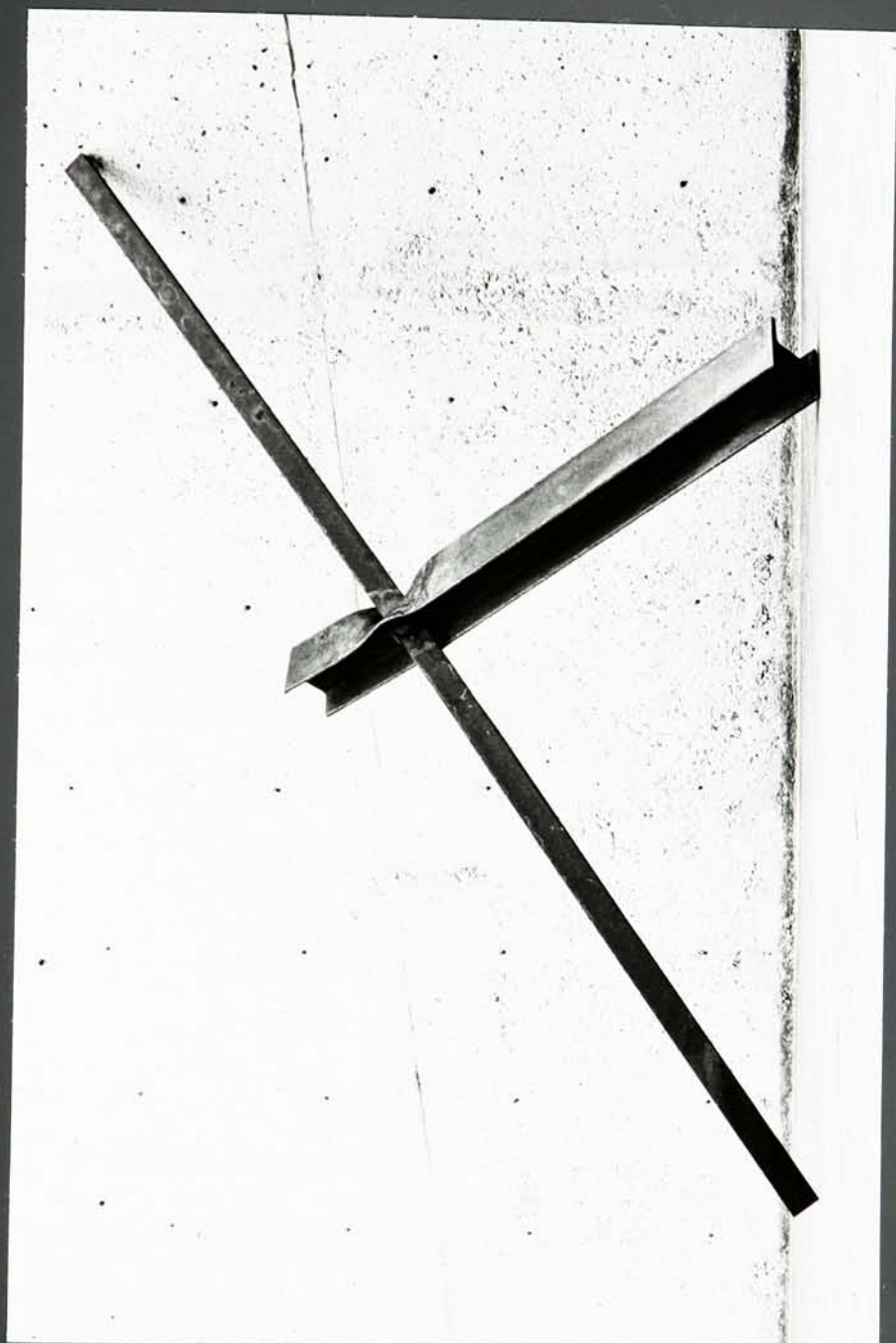


Plate 28

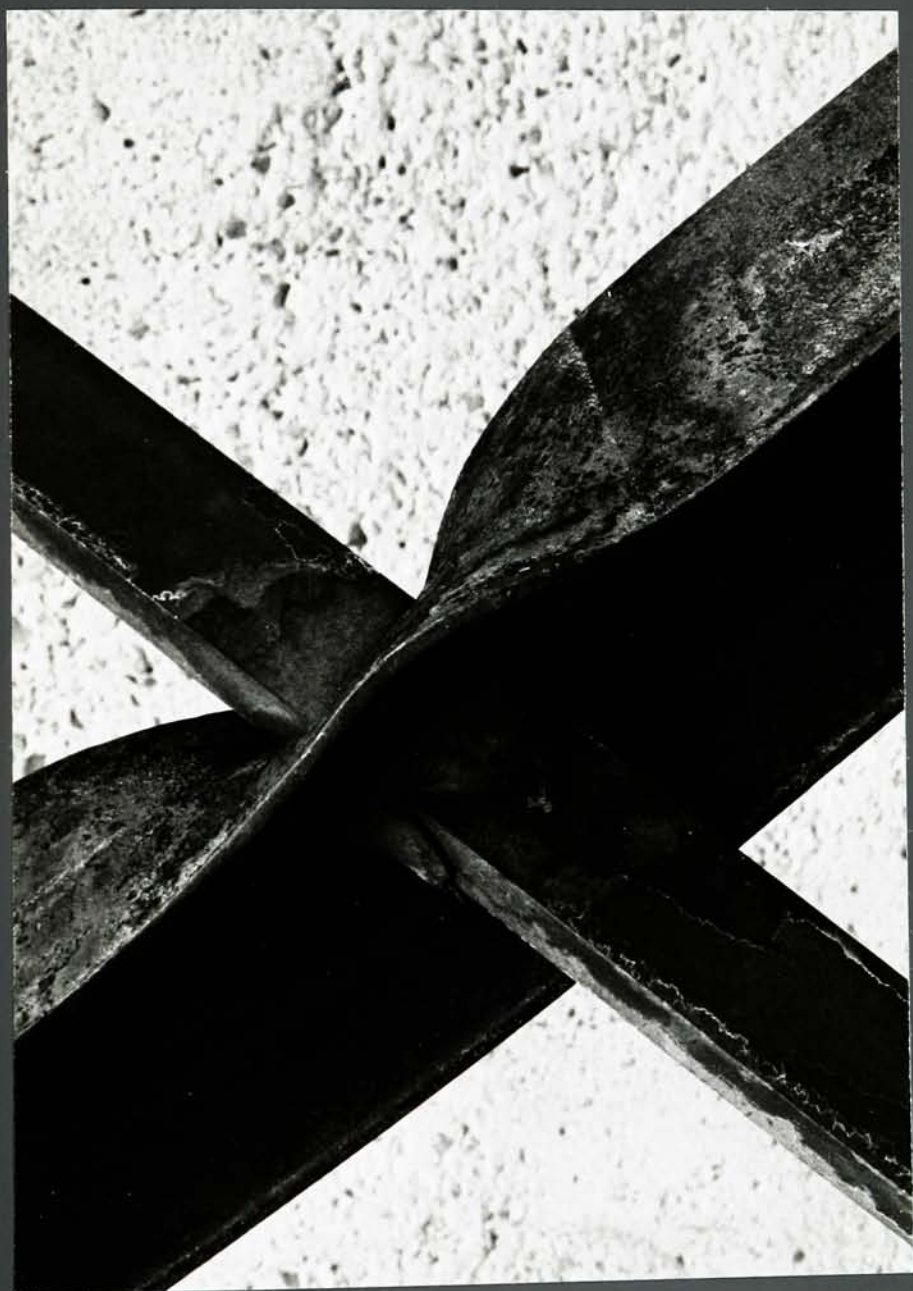


Plate 29

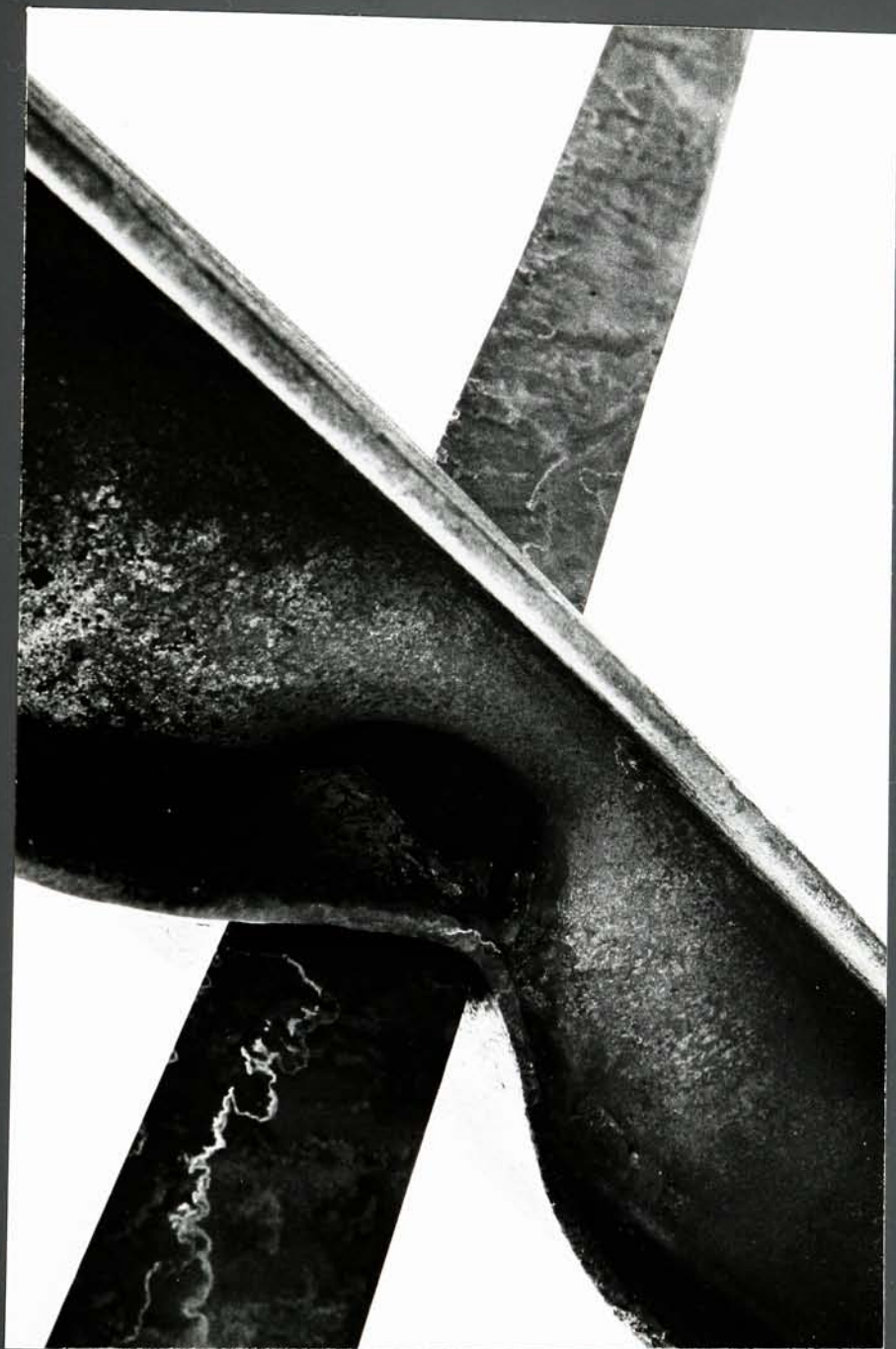


Plate 30



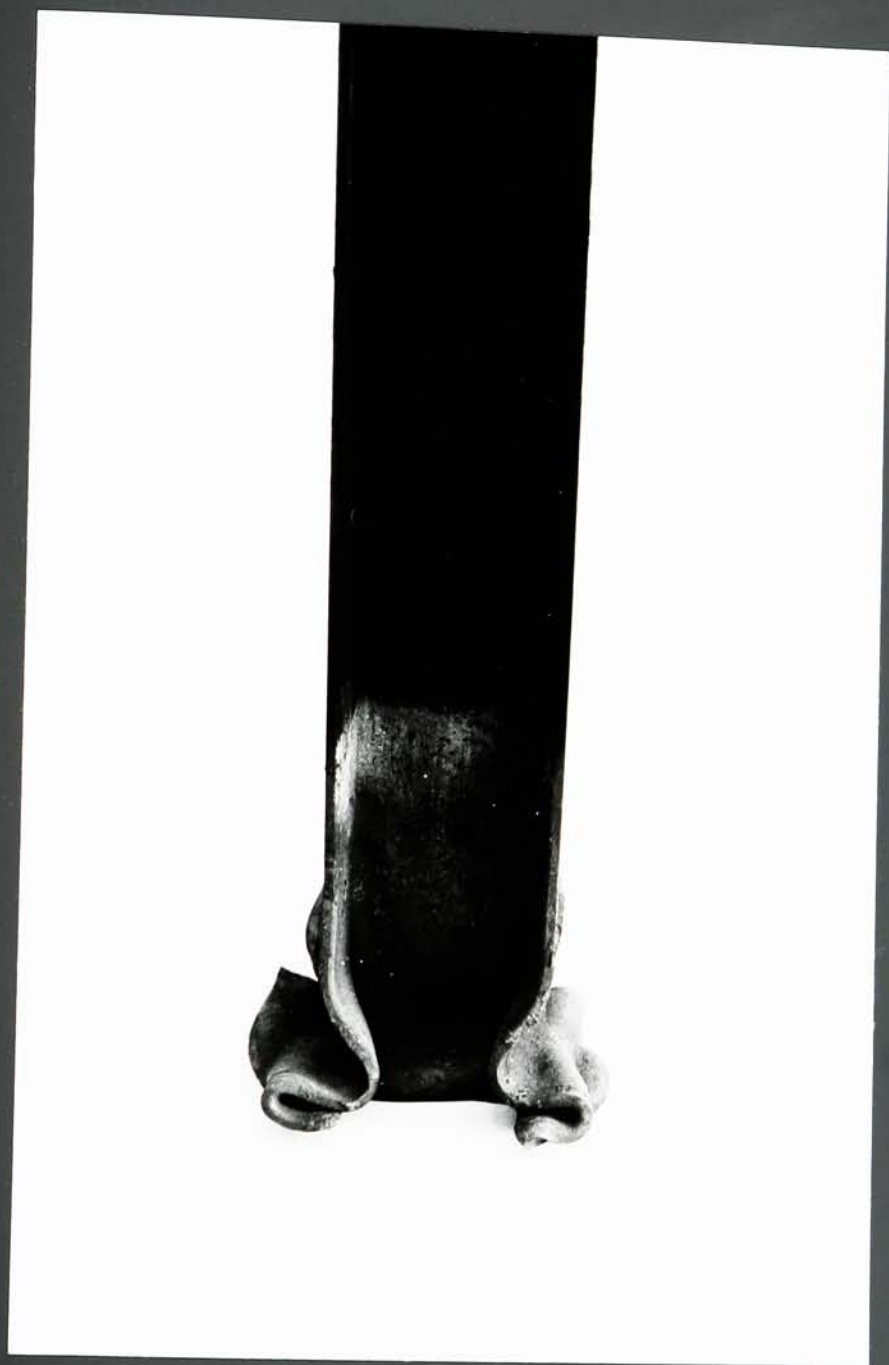


Plate 31

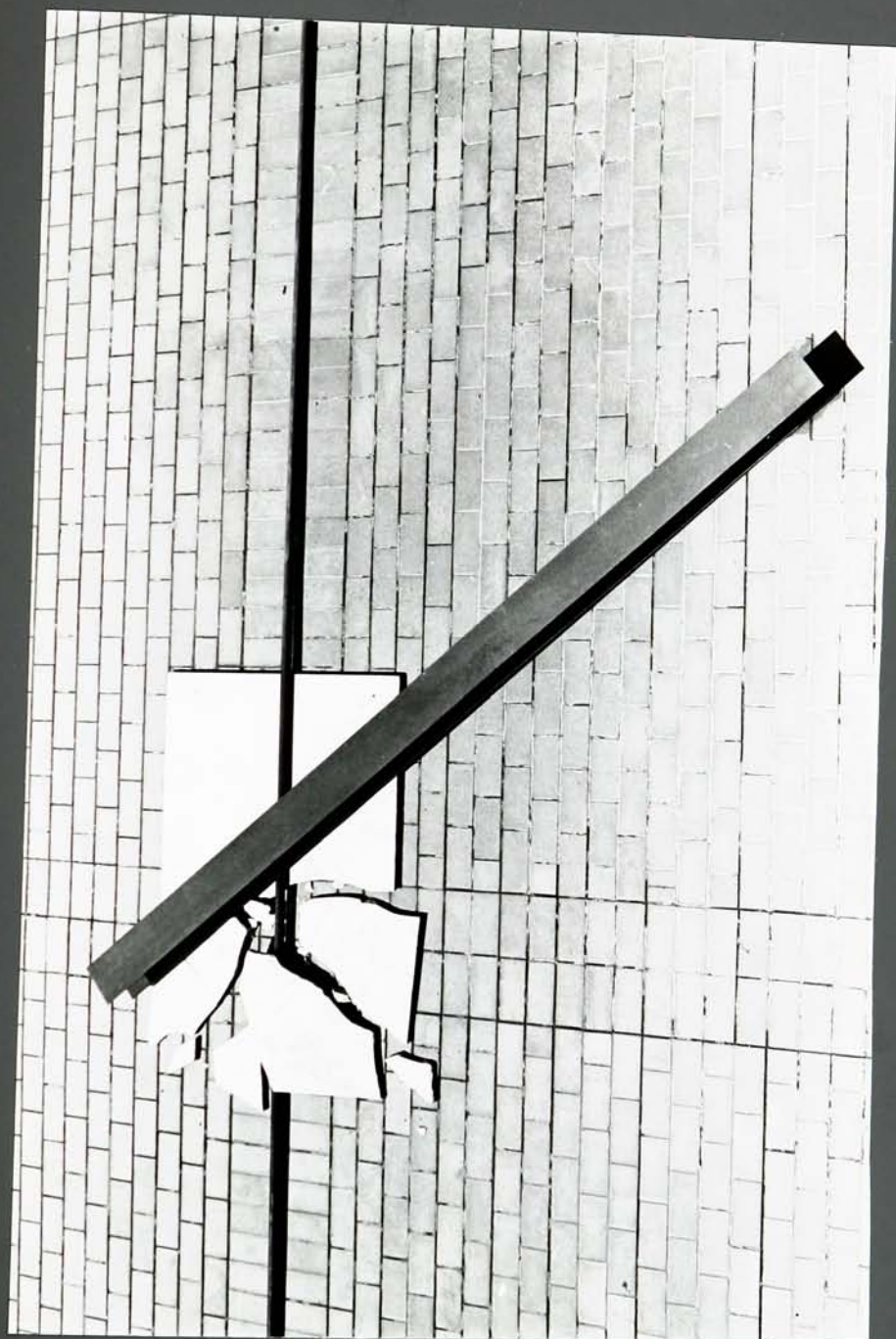


Plate 32

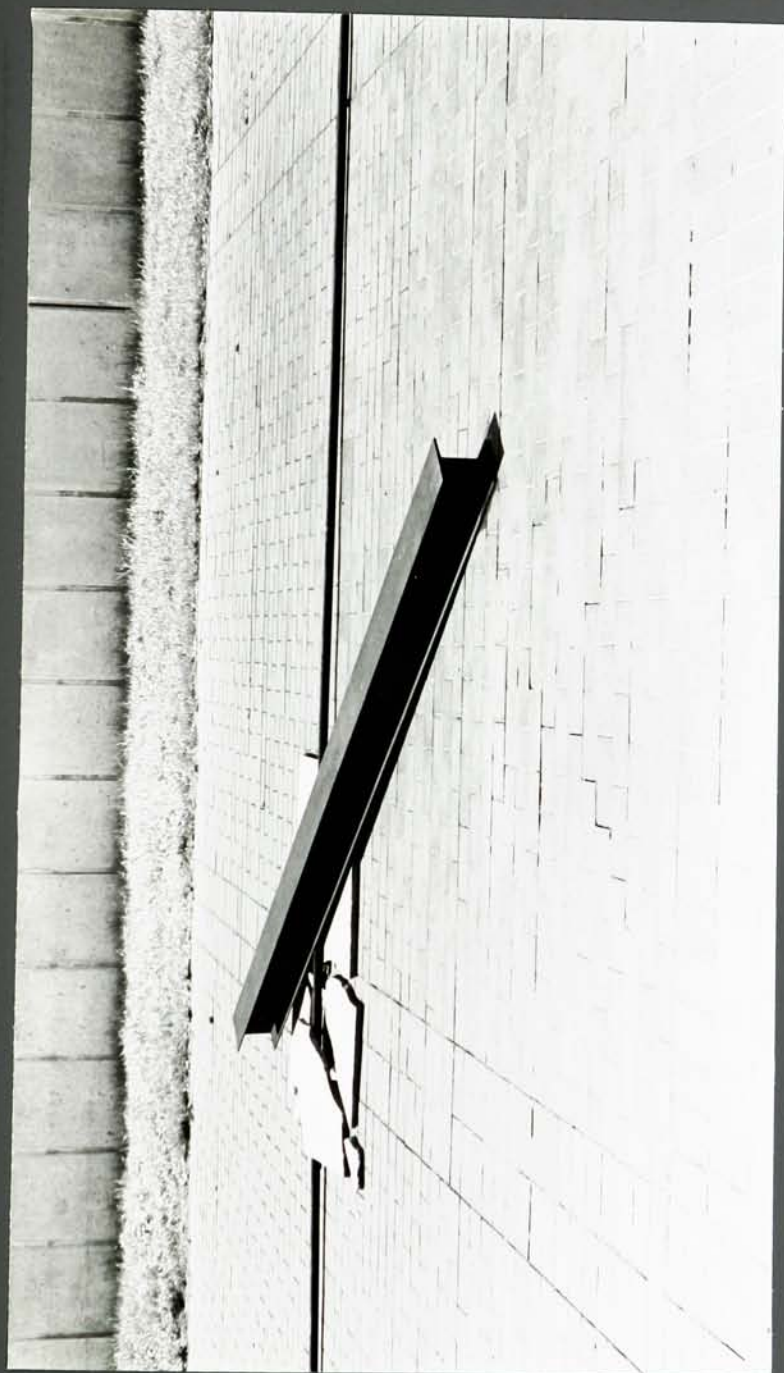


Plate 33

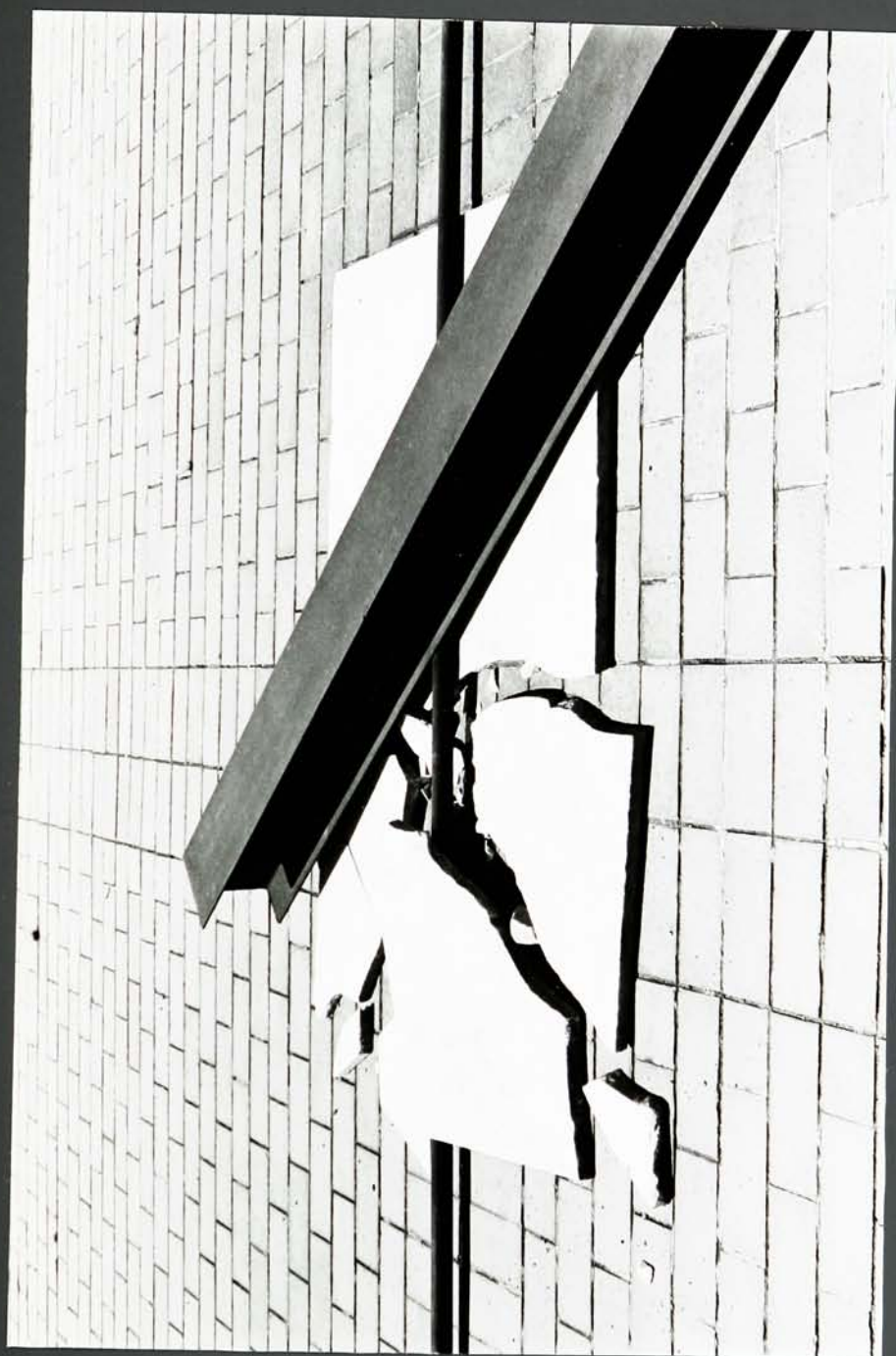


Plate 34





Plate 35

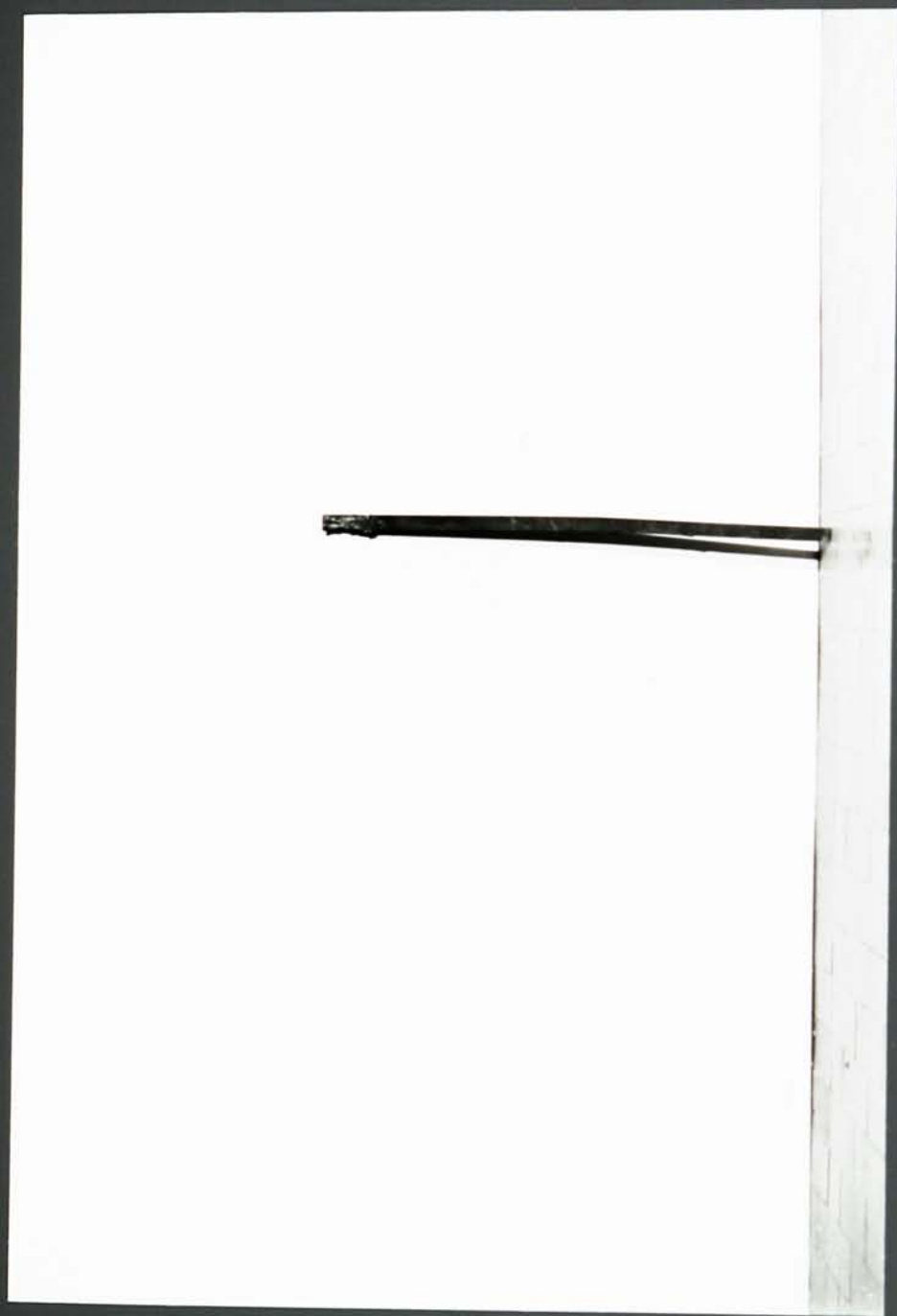


Plate 36

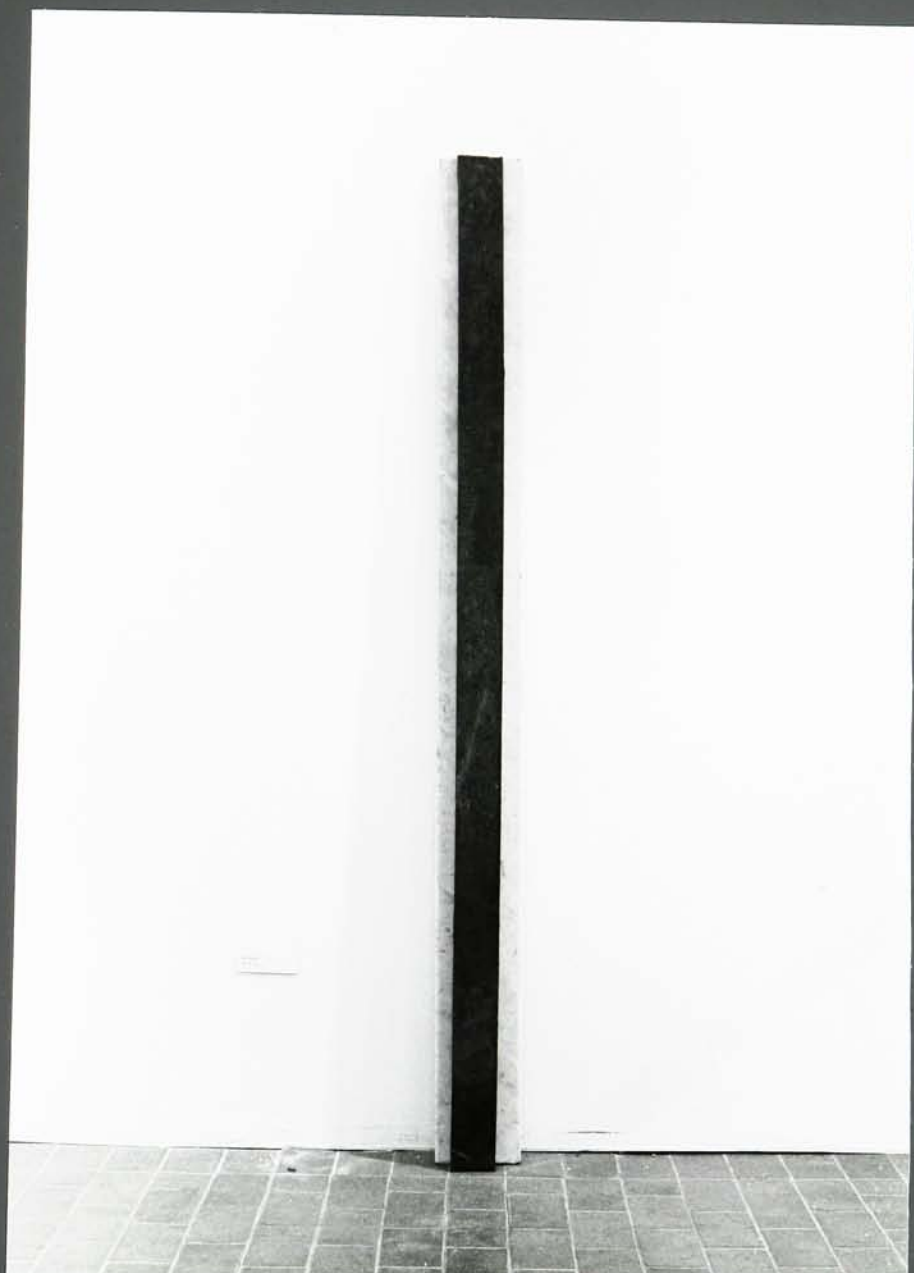


Plate 37



Plate 38

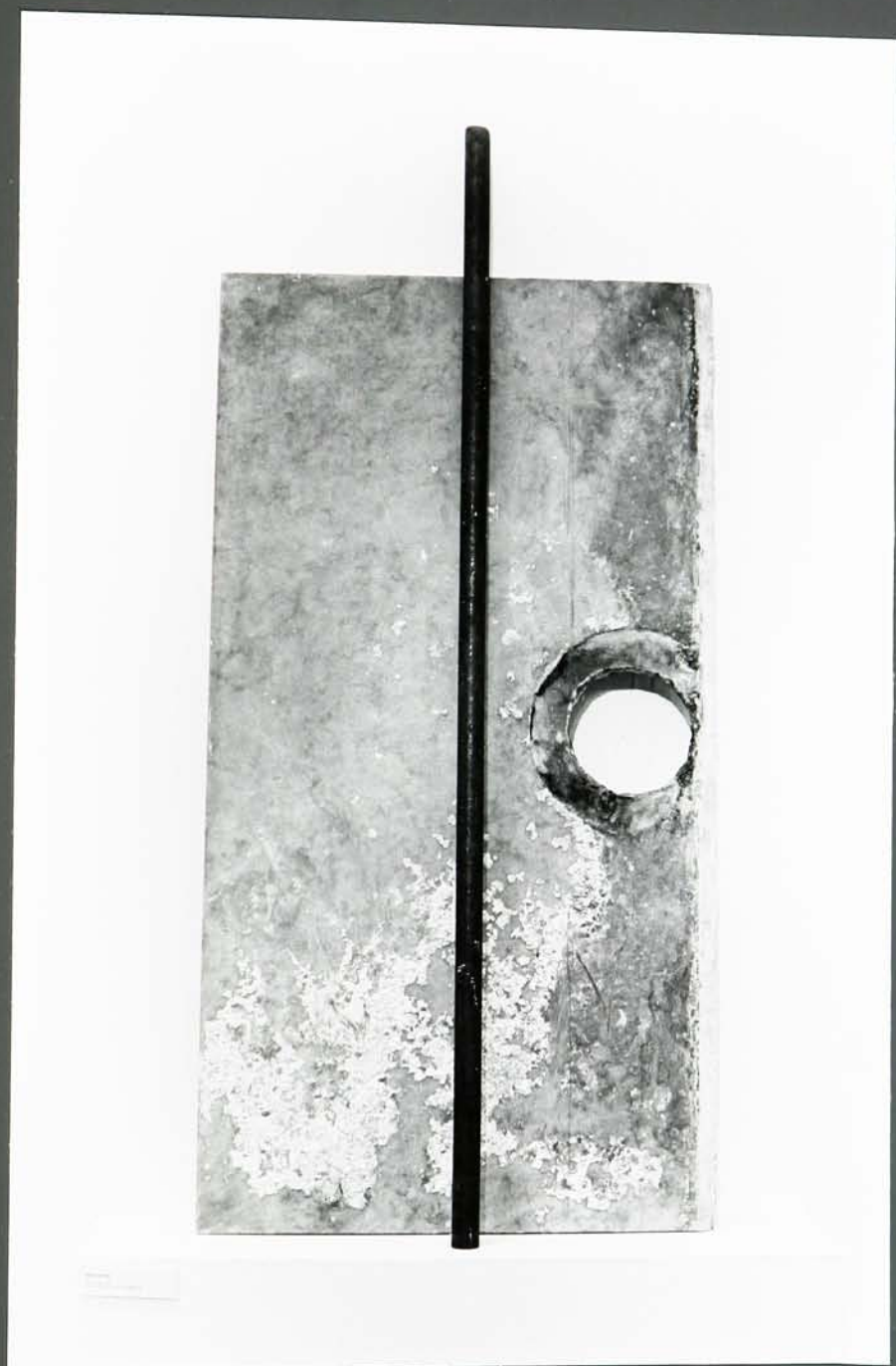


Plate 39



## A LIST OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PLATES

## PLATE #

- 1 Wadi Araba, Jordan. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 2 Wadi Rum, Jordan. C.F. Ruppert, 1962.
- 3 Castle Al Tuba, Jordan. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 4 Jerico, Jordan. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 5 Jerico, Jordan. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 6 Jerash, Jordan. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 7 Giza, Egypt. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 8 Temple Dair, Petra, Jordan. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 9 Abu Simbel, Egypt. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 10 Abu Symbel, Egypt. C.F. Ruppert, 1963.
- 11 Cut Away. Penn. Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 12 Loading Dock. Penn Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 13 Doorway. Penn. Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 14 Wall and Pipes. Penn. Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 15 Wall. Penn Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 16 Column. Penn. Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 17 Wall and Board. Penn. Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 18 Wall and Sink. Penn. Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 19 Ceiling. Penn. Central Station, Rochester, NY, 1977.

## Plate #

- 20      Burnt House Site, Henrieta, NY, 1977.
- 21      Burnt House Site, Henrieta, NY, 1977.
- 22      Burnt House Site, Henrieta, NY, 1977.
- 23      Back Door. Burnt House Site, Henrieta, NY, 1977.
- 24      Construction Site. R.I.T. Camps, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 25      Construction Site. R.I.T. Camps, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 26      Construction Site, R.I.T. Camps, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 27      Progresion. Construction Site, R.I.T. Camps, Rochester, NY, 1977.
- 28      Pierced Steel, 1976. Steel.
- 29      Detail, Pierced Steel, 1976. Steel.
- 30      Detail, Pierced Steel, 1976. Steel.
- 31      Compressed "I" Beam, 1976. Steel.
- 32      Site 1, 1977. Marble and Steel.
- 33      Site 1, 1977. Marble and Steel.
- 34      Detail, Site 1. 1977. Marble and Steel.
- 35      Detail, Site 1. 1977. Marble and Seeel.
- 36      Found, 1977. Steel.
- 37      Wall Assemblage, 1977. Marble and Steel.
- 38      Corner Assemblage, 1977. Marble and Steel.
- 39      Artifact, 1977. Marble and Steel.

NOTE: Unless otherwise stated, the photography is by John Ruppert.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Paul Zucker, Fascination of Decay. (Ridgewood, NJ: The Gregg Press, 1968), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Zucker, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Rose Macaulay, Pleasure of Ruins. (New York: Walker and Co., 1953), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Laurence Goldstein, Ruins and Empire: The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature. (University of Pittsburg Press, 1977), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Goldstein, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>Macaulay, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup>Zucker, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Kroeber and William Walling, ed. Images of Romanticism. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 152.

<sup>9</sup>Zucker, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup>Zucker, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>Zucker, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup>Macaulay, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>Macaulay, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup>Macaulay, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup>Zucker, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup>Macaulay, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup>Zucker, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup>John Walker, The National Gallery of Art. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), p. 94.

<sup>19</sup>Zucker, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup>Zucker, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup>Macaulay, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup>Macaulay, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup>Macaulay, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup>Zucker, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup>Zucker, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup>Walker, p. 310.

<sup>27</sup>Zucker, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup>Zucker, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup>A. Hyatt Mayor, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup>Mayor, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup>Kenneth Clark, The Romantic Rebellion: Romantic vs. Classic Art. (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 50.

<sup>32</sup>Mayor, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup>Clark, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup>Mayor, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup>Mayor, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup>Clark, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup>Eric Newton, The Romantic Rebellion. (New York: St. Martins Press, 1963), p. 106.

<sup>38</sup>Zucker, p. 149.

<sup>39</sup>Zucker, p. 155.

<sup>40</sup>Zucker, p. 102.

<sup>41</sup>Clark, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup>Clark, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup>Clark, p. 20.

<sup>44</sup>Clark, p. 19.

<sup>45</sup>Clark, p. 21.

- <sup>46</sup>John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 31.
- <sup>47</sup>Kroeber, p. 13.
- <sup>48</sup>Newton, p. 106.
- <sup>49</sup>Newton, p. 105.
- <sup>50</sup>Kroeber, p. 13.
- <sup>51</sup>Mayor, p. 17.
- <sup>52</sup>Newton, p. 106.
- <sup>53</sup>Goldstein, p. 4.
- <sup>54</sup>Macaulay, p. 18.
- <sup>55</sup>Kenneth Clark,, The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Art. 2nd. ed. (Rome and London: John Butler and Tanner, Ltd., 1962), p. 28.
- <sup>56</sup>Zucker, p. 161.
- <sup>57</sup>Zucker, p. 162.
- <sup>58</sup>Diana Hirsh, The World of Turner. (New York: Time-Life Books, 1969), p. 43.
- <sup>59</sup>Zucker, p. 159.
- <sup>60</sup>Clark, The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Art., p. 48.
- <sup>61</sup>Macaulay, p. 16.
- <sup>62</sup>Macaulay, p. 20.
- <sup>63</sup>Zucker, p. 195.
- <sup>64</sup>Clark, The Gothic Revival, p. 48.
- <sup>65</sup>Clark, The Gothic Revival, p. 48.
- <sup>66</sup>Macaulay, p. 24.
- <sup>67</sup>Canaday, p. 248.
- <sup>68</sup>Macaulay, p. 32.
- <sup>69</sup>Clark, The Gothic Revival, p. 57.



<sup>70</sup> Zucker, p. 210.

<sup>71</sup> Macaulay, p. 245.

<sup>72</sup> Macaulay, p. 243.

<sup>73</sup> Macaulay, p. 243.

<sup>74</sup> Macaulay, p. 243.

<sup>75</sup> Macaulay, p. 84.

<sup>76</sup> Macaulay, p. 84.

<sup>77</sup> Macaulay, p. 85.

<sup>78</sup> Macaulay, p. 87.

<sup>79</sup> Macaulay, p. 88.

<sup>80</sup> Macaulay, p. 89.

<sup>81</sup> Macaulay, p. 90.

<sup>90</sup> Philip Rawson, Yoga Art. (England: Thomas and Hudson, 1975), p. 109.

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