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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SWIMMING WITH THE FISHES

FISH AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL SYMBOL

by

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April 22, 2004

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Alan Singer and Bob Heischman for their superb teaching, kindness, and understanding. You both have a sense of humor, which helped me through the last two years. You guys are the best. One could not ask for more. You kept me at RIT when I was ready to leave; you valued my work. Thank you to Carlos Caballero Perez for “getting” the fish, seeing the value of my topic, and for the caring you give so freely. Len Urso, thank you for giving me your opinion and help when I was desperate; for access to everyone and everything in metals. Thank you to Tom Lightfoot who, five years ago, told me to first do an undergrad degree and, then, come to RIT. Who took time out of his busy schedule to advise me, be a friend, and talk. To Donalee Peden Wesley, my exceptional undergraduate teacher who encouraged me, constantly made me laugh, and taught me “environment” and “structure”. To Matthew Friday for his skills as a teacher, who figured out what to do with an older, weird, student, and was able to draw out the best in me.

Thank you: Denise and Sol, Diane and Don, and Jamie who have encouraged me, come to shows, and offered me friendship and opinion. Thank you to my friends Alan, Kay, and Eileen from Wayne Central, for being there after I quit teaching, who bought me lunch, flowers and show a continued interest. To my RIT artists--Eddie, Paula, Robin, Bill, Ju-Yi, So-Young--you are the best, so talented and fun. To Peggy, who has the eye for art and didn't know it, thank you for your friendship, caring, and tea. To Cheryl for caring and allowing me to do a portrait—you have changed me. To Jessica for the emails and tolerance of my insanity. To Linda and Margie for their friendship and kindness and laughter. Eric, thank you for the beer, proofreading, conversation and *Gould's Book of Fish*. Thank you all for your friendship, advice, and criticism during times of craziness and sanity.

Finally, the best for last, thanks to Bob, my husband, friend, without whom none of this would have been possible. You constantly amaze me. You told me to “quit the job and go to art school”. Thank you for a studio of my own. For the love and for the opinions. For the printer! You supported my efforts during the good art and bad. You helped me value myself and my work.

I thank you all. You are part of my thesis, my life, and I am ever grateful.

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Original Thesis Statement

The purpose of this thesis is to explore transformation through traditional painting and drawing methods and incorporation of sculptural objects onto a two-dimensional plane.

Transformation occurs as a being progresses from birth to death to whatever lies after. All that remains is the physical essence, the shell or husk, of former self. Even as repulsive as decay may be, it is compelling and contains within itself the elements of regeneration. Death may not be merely painful and traumatic but a path to rebirth.

Fish are symbols of birth and regeneration. Dead fish with their leathery shells, vacant eyes, and gaping mouths are husks which represent unspoken basic urges; unspoken content. This thesis will explore transformation through dead fish in an attempt to capture the unspeakable.

During library and internet research, I discovered vast cultural references to fish symbolism. Fish are prominent transformational symbols in numerous religions and cultures. I will explore this symbolism in Chinese, Olmec, and Northwest Coast Native American cultures. Also, I will examine the work of Nancy Graves, Hyman Bloom and Rona Pondick in order to connect our art visually and conceptually.

Discussion of Basic Premises

Fish as a transformational symbol will be explored in the context of Chinese, Olmec, and Northwest Coast Native American, through the work of Nancy Graves, Hyman Bloom, and Rona Pondick, and through my thesis work with dead fish. Physical, psychological, and emotional transformation occurs as a being moves from birth to death to beyond. Dead fish are not merely a metaphor for us, but are the subject of my work. In their dried, leathery husks and through their hollow eyes, I see a retained essence. There is beauty and tragedy in the passing of the fish. As a fish decomposes, it returns to the earth to be nourishment for another life form in this endless food chain.

Humans belong to this food chain, and avoidance of mortality is a focus in our culture. In a youth-obsessed society, scientifically advanced enough to clone, haunted by wrinkles and aging, fish become a metaphor for us. We fear our mortality; yet this fear is unspoken as the gaping mouths of the dead fish are incapable of speech. Although, in my opinion, dead fish are not morbid, for, even if we do not pass into a heaven, we continue as a bit of universal dust.

Fascination with dead fish has little to do with my own aging; I have been interested in decomposition for years. In part, my dead fish represent coping with the reality that my entire family has passed. Even more significant, the dead fish relate to my attachment to nature and my, perhaps over-developed, sensitivity to the environment. I

reside on fifty-three acres of woods. Daily, trees, fungus, and animals pass into dust. I watch a tree grow where I planted a favorite dead cat. In an effort to express my thoughts without explaining, in an effort to cope and find comfort, to answer my own questions and perhaps illicit a dialog, I have composed my dead fish.

Examining fish in the art of three cultures and the work of three artists connects my work with that of others. For years, I have been drawn to Chinese, Pre-Columbian (Olmec), and Northwest Coast Native American art. These cultures have strong fish symbolism exploring issues of transformation and regeneration. The three artists, Nancy Graves, Hyman Bloom, and Rona Pondick, conceptually and/or technically caught my imagination and influenced my art.

Integration of the representational with the abstract pervades my work. Abstract renderings of rocks and shape resemble body parts. Through the processes used during my thesis, I captured abstract ideas—decomposition, transformation, death—through a mixture of representational and abstract art. With color and texture, I am trying to convey a feeling, not merely the look, of death. (Figures 1-8)

Cultural Section

Introduction

I have been drawn to the art of the Chinese, Olmec, and Northwest Coast Native American for many years. These cultures utilize fish as symbols of rebirth and regeneration, not surprising since fish live in the cleansing element of water. These cultures have a long history, and their art is primitive only in the sense of being old or prehistoric. A strong mythical base exists, which is of personal interest. Since my dead fish are so visceral, I wanted cultures with a more animistic and elemental view of the world and alignment with nature. The Chinese, Olmec, and Northwest Coast Native Americans are related; all are descended from the people who came across the Land Bridge in ancient times. Their art illustrates similarities and differences which I found intriguing.

Because fish are indispensable and exist in an element, water, the Olmec, Chinese, Northwest Coast Indians, and I are asking the same questions. How are we linked with fish? How are we linked to our environment? The mythology is powerful and often focuses on transformation. It tells us, sometimes quite literally, we are the fish.

Chinese

Representations of fish date from the Neolithic to the present day. *Yu*, the fish, was an animal totem worshipped in the Neolithic for good harvests which coincided with a totemic/animistic religion. The legendary basis for this symbol is tied to the mythical emperor Yu who was in charge of flood control. Yu's "success in flood control made him a great leader of the Chinese tribes and legend has it that he founded the mythological Hsia Dynasty (2205-1766 B.C. E.) China's first in history" (Fish) .

Yu's name means fish; the word and character are homonyms for plenty, abundance, and surplus. The fish was abstracted on ceramic bowls. (Figure 9) Neolithic Yangsho pottery "reflects the close relations between humans and aquatic animals" (Taipei Journal 1) .

Consciousness of fish was deeply rooted in the common people and symbols of fish were important in worshipping for good harvests, dispelling evil and praying for happiness and love. After Buddhism was introduced into China in the sixth century A.D. Buddhist cultural influences resulted in the division of fish and dragon culture and generated all kinds of related myths (Fish).

Although the initial fish consciousness may have been in common people, it included a spiritual/mythical element that continues throughout Chinese history. Yu, being in charge of flood control, would account for good harvests and an abundance of fish. Fish symbols were prayers and as such transformational. Included in my work with fish is indeed the prayer that others recognize the connection.

Movement from the totemic meaning of fish to a more philosophical meaning occurred during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 C. E.) altering the artistic presentation of the fish. As ceramic techniques were refined, so were the fish. (Figure 10) Fish designs

occur in relief and in three-dimensional work in jade and wood. (Figures 11) During the M'ing (1366-1644 C.E.) and C'hing (1644-1911 C. E.) dynasties, representations of fish became more delicate and further refined. (Figures 12)

Chinese painting has a set of constructs and “aquatic topics are by-products of the bird-and-flower paintings”. (tawiiwan.gov) Carp are the fish most often represented in Chinese art. (Figure 13) The character *yu* 魚 comes from the character for carp 鯉. Frequently the carp is seen leaping out of the water. (Figure 14) The leaping carp is a symbol of taking *Han Lin*, a Master's Degree in Fine Arts. Leaping carp also represent a scholar “passing exams with distinction and becoming an official” (Jenyns 249). They are symbols of marital bliss. During Chinese New Year celebrations, the saying *nien nien you yu* is a wish for abundance in the coming year. Paper fish cutouts are hung in households to bring good fortune.

Wild koi were domesticated during the T'ang dynasty. “The breeding of ornamental goldfish, which began in the Song dynasty during the reign of Huizong (1101-25 C.E.), was by the 16th century a popular domestic pastime, and hence provided a reasonably widespread motif” (Rawson 241). Koi are seen in many paintings, sculptures, ceramics, and lacquer. (Figures 15) Koi, are still kept as pets in China.

Fish, reptiles, and amphibians were not distinguished as species, and the dragon was created from a combination of fish, lizard, and snake. Seen as a benevolent creature by the Chinese, the dragon is the controller of rain, and fertility without whom all would perish. (Figure 16) In legend, the carp becomes a dragon as it ascends the *Huang* (Yellow) River. I find the transformation of the carp to dragon, from the physical fish to an imaginary beast, appealing.

Legendary attributes are applied because of the fish's environment and significance. Despite cultural advancement, the dragon is a primary symbol in Chinese contemporary life, and the Chinese maintain this ancient symbol. Recently in Taipei an exhibit of Chinese art was held at the National Museum of History featuring primitive to contemporary art with fish. (Figures 17) An elegance and fluidity exists in Chinese art; especially in this exhibit of fish. I appreciate that in contemporary society an ancient symbol remains. Viewing my thesis work in a Chinese context, if *yu* means plenty--luck in a wish for the New Year, food, wealth--then, my dead fish express a contrary aspect taking away abundance; replacing it with an essentialness; the dearth of prosperity in death.

Olmec

Pre-Mayan, pre-Columbian, Olmec society flourished in Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala from 1200 to 330 B.C.E. (Figure 18) Olmec derives from the Aztec word *olman* meaning “rubber country” for rubber trees were plentiful in these tropical, Gulf of Mexico lowlands. The written language of the Olmec is pictographic, and reconstruction of their society is from archeological remains of architecture, sculpture, ceramics, and everyday tools. As always with ongoing anthropological studies, controversy continues regarding interpretation of Olmec symbolism and the relative importance of various icons including fish, werejaguars, and stone heads.

“Olmec iconography includes humanized animals and humans disguised as animals, which may indicate that Olmec consciousness anticipated an identity with other living beings” (Gay 43). Opinions differ regarding the meaning of fish iconography dependant, I believe, upon the focus of the researcher. The Olmec belief system was centered on a World Tree shown in much of their artwork. The World Tree is the link between the natural and spiritual realms. On Stela 5 (Figure 19), the fish is pictured “moving upward to retrieve from the tree of life” (Norman 19). The fish move downward carrying sea or earthly elements to the celestial. In addition, the placement of fish on scroll panels is not merely decorative, but indicates the region that fish occupy. (Figure 20)

In Veracruz, Mexico, November 1986, workers discovered a stela underwater bearing over 400 glyphs in an unknown script and a beautiful shark relief carving. Called La Mojarra Stela 1 (Figure 21) because of its location, the form and language reflected that of the Olmec. The stela is dated mid-second century C.E. La Mojarra Stela 1 shows

a ruler, standing with a weapon; his headdress a maize plant transformed or depicted as a shark (Figure 22). A knife blade symbol designates the shark fin and baby sharks swim down an umbilical rope. Three pairs of blood circlets drop from the notochord and seven additional pairs from the base, totaling 20—the number of days in a Mesoamerican “divinatory month” (Stross 13). The umbilical cord represents “the crucial blood link between maize, fish, and the human to whose head these elements are attached for display” (Stross 13). Fish on headdresses indicate a connection to the spirit realm.

Brian Stross, a preeminent anthropologist, states that, to the Olmec, fish were transformed into humans during a great flood and are, therefore, human ancestors. A Mayan (post-Olmec) myth exists of the “Hero Twins” who had their bones ground and thrown into the river where they became channel catfish before reappearing as young men. There existed an intrinsic link between humans and fish in mythology, which I preserve in my thesis work. The transformation existent in the “Hero Twins” corresponds to my belief that we are unified cosmic dust and transforming constantly.

Maize and fish were essential foods, per Stross, and occupied a religious symbolic place because of their importance in this subsistence culture. Fish occur as stylized sculptures (Figure 23) and on utilitarian vessels (Figure 24). Indigenous cultures in contemporary Mexico say fish are the maize deity’s familiar. Small sharks, called *cazon* (root word to hunt) are part of the people’s diet and are said to be a delicacy similar to maize ears. Homophony of maize and fish—*koke* (fish) *kok* (maize); *maak* (to fish) *mook* (maize)—continues in indigenous languages. The association between essential food items and religion not only indicates reliance upon a deity but an understanding of the fragility

of subsistence. I attempt to capture this interdependence artistically by manipulating and transforming materials and abstracting rocks to human body parts in the paintings.

The Olmec revered fish and acknowledged their importance to the environment. Evidenced in Olmec art is a spiritual link between the health of the people and the health of the fish which transcended subsistence. It is not merely eating the fish; it is becoming part of the fish. This 'becoming' is the concern in my art of dead fish. Fish continue intrinsic and metaphoric importance. Contemporary Mexican culture involves fish symbolism on masks (Figures 25), people paint on fish skin, and stuff fish skin with food. Fish symbolism continues to be a part of contemporary life.

Northwest Coast Native American

Northwest Coast Native American artistic tradition centers on a flattened abstraction of three-dimensional form called formline. Northwest Coast tribes skillfully use formline in weaving, carving, sculpture, and painting. These Native people, located from Northern Oregon to British Columbia (Figure 26), include: Haida, Salish, Kwawaka'wakw, Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Nootka tribes. Although stylistic differences exist, the use of formline is consistent as a basic structure even today. The artwork is flattened, without structural variation, predominantly red and black, but including blues and yellows in the weaving of Chilkat blankets (Figure 27). Northwest Coast Indians are skilled metal smiths, painters, and carvers (Figure 28) whose artwork runs the gamut from stylized realism to total abstraction (Figures 29).

Formline is extremely complex in Northwest Coast art. Extensive research and study is required to consistently and accurately identify the animals in pictographs. "It seems that the greater the masterpiece in Northwest Coast art, the less we can say about its meaning" (McLennan 133). Artwork in this oral culture has multiple meanings and interpretations dependent upon the status of the individual or upon memory. "Stylized representations of species function as ways of seeing the social order and the spirit world" (McLennan 108). Ambiguity and complexity protected the belief system from violation by white settlers who were unable to accurately interpret or render an image.

Mythical references and meaning in art are further complicated by an oral tradition and matrilineal clan structure. "Based as we are in a tradition of writing and

reading to record and obtain information, it is difficult to appreciate the amount of information that might be extracted from a painted composition within an oral tradition (McLennan 189). An image is a method of visual thought insuring a common-knowledge pattern essential for any culture. Images were especially vital for Northwest Coast Native Americans as only one fourth of the population remained after 100 years of contact with white settlers. During the Jessup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1902), anthropologist, Franz Boas, believing the Northwest Coast Indians would be destroyed, relegated prominent artist Charles Edenshaw to producing stylistically historical art.

Northwest Coast Native culture and art survived. Haida artist Robert Davidson suggests transformation of images

reveal multiple realities and point-of-view. The culture was always evolving with the times. If there's no creature that seems right for a purpose, then you invent a creature. That's one of the great joys of the art form. In fact, there are new creatures emerging in my flat designs. They have no name yet, but they are emerging" (101 McLennan).

Fish, essential for subsistence, evolved as an intricate part of the belief system. Northwest Coast people believe all creatures were once people, who transformed into animals when they interacted with humans. The great sea monster, Gona Kudata, half animal, half fish, controls all wealth. Bentwood containers frequently represent this myth. (Figure 30)

Salmon continue to be the primary food fish and major source of wealth. Before spawning, male salmon have a hooked nose similar to a human nose. This suggested a metamorphosis from salmon to human. Salmon are, also, people of the Underworld. The Tsimshian believe the salmon people lived in five different villages in the sea. In the spring, salmon people change into salmon and journey up the Skeina River alerting all

the salmon people to follow. Tribes believed copper comes from salmon, and a salmon may transform itself into copper. (Figures 31)

Orca and Grey whales were hunted and legends grew up around them. A wounded whale would return (at some time) and capsize the fisherman's canoe. Whales would then carry the fisherman to the Whale Village and transform him into a whale. Haida believe whales swimming in front of a village are ancestors attempting to communicate. Prolific in the art of the Northwest Coast, whales are clearly defined by a "round snouted head with large mouth and man teeth, a blow hole, a dorsal fin, a pectoral fin and a tail with symmetrical flukes" (Stewart 42). (Figure 32)

The red snapper is a colorful pink fish usually painted red and identified by its spines. (Figure 33) In a myth, a man went looking for his wife who had been abducted by killer whales. He lifted the edge of the sea, like a blanket, and went under. Coming across some pale fish and wanting to please them, he painted them red.

On utilitarian and ceremonial regalia Dogfish or sharks are depicted. The labret, a lip ornament, is sometimes shown with dogfish designs. A dogfish labret indicates the dogfish was a woman "in remembrance of the woman carried off by a dogfish who became one of its kind" (Stewart 74). Dogfish/sharks are identified by domed heads, sharp teeth, down turned mouth and gill slits on each side of the mouth. Two small, round nostrils, gill slits on the forehead, vertical pupils and prominent fins, sharp spines and asymmetrical tail flukes may also be shown. (Figure 34)

Halibut are odd fish beginning life swimming vertically, changing to horizontal as they mature. The eye migrates to the upper side, and the fish becomes oval with a spreading out tail. (Figure 35) They transform into bottom feeders. The Nimpkish tribe

of the Kwawaka'wakw believes the halibut was stranded at the mouth of the Nimpkish River during a flood and threw off its skin to become the first man. The Tlingit credit the halibut with giving Queen Charlotte Islands its bifurcated form when a woman, disgusted with the halibut, disposed of the fish. The halibut continued to grow until it smashed the island in two.

Not often represented in Northwest Coast design, bullheads are readily identified by spines and activity. (Figure 36) Tsimshian myth states that the bullhead acquired its large upper body when the raven grabbed it from the river. The fish escaped, but the raven was hungry, made another grab, and squeezed the bullhead so tightly that its "innards squished into its upper body and its eyes bulged" (Stewart 79). The fish again escaped but retained its new shape.

Mythology acknowledges the significance of fish in the belief system and culture of the Northwest Coast Native Americans. The complexity of the art and myth belies the word primitive. Luckily, Franz Boas was wrong and the Northwest Coast Native Americans survived. Their art flourishes today. Artists of the past left a beautiful legacy continuing in contemporary art, including some phenomenal fish influencing my attempt to capture vitality and in appreciation of finely abstracted work. The myths of the people stimulate my own ideas and creativity.

Conclusion to Cultural Section

Chinese, Olmec, Northwest Coast Native American people and their descendents continue to create fabulous art using fish as a symbol of transformation. These cultures have a vital, elemental vision I find most attractive. It is the rebirth of culture and of self to be like the fish.

The Olmec, Chinese, and Northwest Coast people effectively integrate abstraction with representation which is my goal. The iconography of the cultures, in pre-literate eras, is applicable in a visual context as the people interpreted meaning without reference to text. Art is dynamic, not static, and need not be littered with explanatory text.

Primitive cultures, if one can refer to them that way, knew if the fish died, so did they. Some contemporary cultures continue this belief, but not ours. Our spiritually unsettled culture is unsuited for such investigation. Many contentedly avoid questions of mortality and the linkage between people and other beings in the environment. Yet, the connection was obvious in subsistence cultures. I do not advocate a morose obsession with death or decomposition. To the contrary, I feel the fish maintain their essence in passing as will we. I believe respecting and caring for creatures and the environment is a spiritual acknowledgement of the intrinsic link between us all, not merely a wise political decision. The Chinese, Olmec, and Northwest Coast Native Americans knew all needed to be cleansed in the primordial sea, transformed like the fish.

Introduction to Artists' Section

Nancy Graves, Hyman Bloom, and Rona Pondick are three artists who have influenced my work. A multitude of artists and artwork influence what we as artists do. It was virtually impossible to narrow the field. How does one look at any art without an impact? How does one even know the depth of an influence? Avoiding the temptation to include the fifteen or twenty artists who captivate me, a constantly changing list, I have chosen these three. They are excellent artists and hold a special place in my soul. They articulate a vision, are involved in a process, or embrace thoughts similar to my own. Through their words and their art, I have become more articulate in my own vision and realize I am part of a community of artists.

Nancy Graves

Born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts on December 23, 1940, Nancy Graves spent her childhood in New England where her father was employed at the Berkshire Museum of Art and Natural History. The Museum has an excellent collection of art and artifacts. Graves stated her background led to “an affinity with organic form” (Padon 38). While our backgrounds are dissimilar, I spent most of my childhood outdoors where I developed a love of nature and affinity for organic forms. My grandfather was an avid hunter and naturalist who taught me love and respect for the environment.

Nancy Graves initial success occurred in 1969 with a Whitney show of *Camels*, life sized, wood, steel, burlap, wax, animal hide and oil camels. (Figure 37) They “play between abstraction and representational imagery” (Padon 10). Graves succeeded in integrating the elements of abstraction and representation, and I continue to grapple with this issue my own art. *Camels* is not realistic, yet achieves a true sense of camelness capturing an essence not merely taxidermic or fluid line abstractions. In *Family Tree* and *Sacrifice*, I wanted to capture the essence of dead fish through the use of mediums of wax and oil. While the abject element of dead fish could be displayed by merely hanging dead fish from the ceiling, I felt the use of material and color gave *Family Tree* more “fishness”, as Graves felt her *Camels* had more “camelness”.

Creating in the 1960’s era of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, Graves’ work stands out as freshness in a rather conceptually restricted era. “I wanted to develop a base from which my work could continue for the next 20-30 years and not do something that was fashionable” (Padon 36). Graves was not an artist to be pigeonholed, producing sculpture, paintings, prints, and drawings. Early in her artistic life, she went

from painting to sculpture; doing one thing at a time. Later, she painted sculptures, adhered objects to paintings, shaped canvases with sculptural elements attached. Most of her work was vividly painted. (Figure 38) Initially, I saw Graves' work as an undergraduate at a time when I was told, frequently and sternly, I needed to choose a field. In order to be successful, I needed to specialize in painting or sculpture, in oils or acrylics.

While Graves had a consistent conceptual base, her focus, style, and medium varied. She was a painter, sculptor, printmaker; she cast, welded, and painted sculptures. This is very encouraging. She did this because "it's something I'm not supposed to do" (Padon 39). I appreciate her desire, curiosity, and rebellion in pursuing variety. At times this has been very difficult for me. Graves was willing to explore and dissolve boundaries. Nancy Graves is proof one does not need to do one thing for the rest of their artistic life.

Another area of commonality between us is the use of varied material and technique. Graves spoke of a desire to "make art out of the shards of art" (Padon 11) as if picking up the pieces of something and carrying it forward into a new realm. In my paintings *Who Wants to Live Forever*, *Gravity of Love*, and *Universal Justice*, I use netted turkey bags to simulate scales. I use the discarded to create something beautiful, or at least interesting.

Graves was so obsessed with process it was difficult to locate references to content. The 1960's was an era focused on process; conceptual art had not yet come into vogue. "My work came out of the 60's where process was a focal point; it has always been a consideration and the "how" of the making of the piece remains evident in its final

form” (Yager 31). She left gating, wire, rope attached to her work as history of the process. (Figure 39)

Conceptually, Nancy Graves’ ideas differ from mine. She posed different elements creating a “reverberation of meaning in different cultures” (Yager 31). Layering diverse objects caused a clash of cultures. Through the use of varied historical and social objects, she allowed the audience to determine meaning. She believed her work was “closer to poetry than prose” (Yager 33). Therefore, we see no narrative but rather a dialog. Both Nancy Graves and I desire a dialog; neither of us desire to dictate to the audience. I hope to emulate the sense of mystery in Graves’ work. Nancy Graves died at age 54, my age, in October, the month I am writing this section of my thesis. This is poignant as I am beginning my artistic journey, and she has passed.

Hyman Bloom

Born in Latvia in 1913, Bloom immigrated to this country with his orthodox Jewish parents in 1920. Boston in the 1920's was a place of contradiction for immigrant Bloom. He was faced with the strangeness and detachment of the City, and his family life was disquieting. Bloom's father was distant and demoralized, in part because of his inability to learn English. His mother loved the amenities of the States; she missed the closeness of her village. There was constant conflict among family members, and Bloom was frequently sent to live with an aunt and uncle. That household, too, was chaotic. Bloom began to feel that all women in his life were "troubled, loud, hysterical, and extreme in their emotions" (Thompson 17). He became detached. However, not all was negative. Bloom's older brother and mother encouraged his artistic talent.

While not drawing too great a parallel, Hyman Bloom's self reliance and distance due to constant conflict mimics my own. In part, the psychological reasons for some of my art lay in childhood trauma—a chaotic family, violent father, psychiatrically ill sister. I am certainly not the only person with such experiences, but my experience led me to nature; also to a sense of human isolation. Art gives me a great sense of serenity and an avenue of expression, even when the art itself is not going well.

Hyman Bloom is a kindred spirit conceptually and his work relates to mine in a spiritual way. We consider similar questions of mortality. Bloom became attracted to Asian Indian music and Eastern religion. He was fascinated by Buddhist monks who observe decay in graveyards. This came as a surprise. I have an attraction to agoras in India who live in the charnel houses and consume gifts to the dead. My spiritual focus is

Eastern religion, and I love the music. Bloom believes in predestination, and a vision led to his interest in the “mutable world” (Thompson 8). The vision solidified a conceptual base that “ran against the grain of society, which expended vast amounts of time and energy denying exactly this reality” (Thompson 8). A focus on the mutable world is a major philosophical correspondence between Bloom and my thesis.

Harold K. Zimmerman, one of Bloom’s first teachers, taught at the West End Community Center in New York City. The first day of class, Zimmerman told students his philosophy was that “art making was a discipline which engages equally body and soul” (Thompson 8). Bloom’s belief in predestination saw Zimmerman as a teacher who appeared as a reason, not randomly in his life. “It is his conviction that teachers, mentors, and friends have appeared as if by appointment, and that within each fateful encounter was a spiritual or material contribution essential to his development as an artist” (Thompson 11). I too hold this belief and have found people entering my life when needed. Art teachers have been my gifts.

Bloom participated in séances, believes in the astral plane. (Figure 40) He and I make use of our dreams in our art. His ideas come from the interior, as do mine. Zimmerman advocated drawing from memory not from a model. When I began studying art at the Memorial Art Gallery in 1996, a teacher said there were two kinds of artists: inside/out (taking ideas from within self to create art) and outside/in (taking a visible object/subject to art). I am an inside/out artist, and much of my art comes from dreams, memory, and thought. A painting is developed in my mind, described in writing in my sketchbook, long before it is begun on canvas.

Fascinated with the body, Bloom read medieval biology texts and attended autopsies to sketch. “The inside of the body is a fascinating place. The outside is always being tended and primped, but whatever is outside, originates inside” (Thompson 35). Bloom’s corpses examine the issue of mortality rather directly. There is a great depth of feeling in Bloom’s corpses; they are not trite but spiritual representations. When the corpse series was first presented, it was shocking. *Female Corpse* (Figure 41) was placed in a backroom. During a 1945 Stuart Gallery exhibit of the autopsy paintings, critic Dorothy Adlow expressed her reaction: “Bloom has carried the macabre beyond the boundary of artistic discrimination. Two portraits *Corpse of an Elderly Female* and *Corpse of an Elderly Male*, (Figure 42) “obtrude an element of shock and repulsion...” (Thompson 39). Bloom’s response to the attitude was: “It’s true they get most of the reactions, but then I think they’re the most essential pictures. The attitude of the superficial observer towards them is vulgar in the extreme...” (Thompson 40). Not all criticism was negative. Joe Gibbs of *Art Digest* wrote:

The *Corpse of an Elderly Woman* is surrounded by white grave clothes placed on stygian black [is] a dynamic piece of design and symbolism. After a moment of repugnance, one becomes aware that within one artist’s seemingly absorption on death and decay is contained the resurrection – the relative unimportance of fugitive flesh as opposed to the indestructibility of spirit” (Thompson 41).

I never considered my work abject, nor did Bloom. In contrast to such work as Damien Hurst, Joel Peter Witkin, and Matthew Barney, Hyman Bloom is tame.

Bloom walked along the sea on Cape Cod and found fish skeletons washed ashore; I walk along Lake Ontario finding the fish. Bloom drew his fish in pen and ink, charcoal, and gouache. Bloom’s fish are skeletal and disturbing. (Figure 43) “...Bloom

painted death as a process in which the shell of life is discarded at the beginning of a new spiritual existence—the metamorphosis he had understood in his vision as integral to the nature of being” (Thompson 36). Spiritual existence and metamorphosis are integral to my work with the dead fish. Metamorphosis is the same, whether fish or human, none of us escape. Bloom’s fish are metaphysical and maintain a conceptual base comparable to my own: “inhabiting a metaphysical sea in which beginnings and endings form an indissoluble continuum...”(Drawings). The fish exist in an “other-worldly sea in which creatures – neither alive nor dead – swirl in never-ending pursuit and escape, always about to devour or be devoured” (Thompson 53). While I do not find my fish static, they are definitely dead; inanimate. Bloom’s fish have altered my thoughts and allowed me to consider a more active dead fish, in a painting now in process. I discovered the fish in *Art in America*, April 2003, just as I was completing my thesis work. I was thrilled to know someone considered dead fish a worthy subject, and that our conceptual base coincided.

Comments regarding my dead fish surface frequently. People question who would buy it? Why I do it? What is my fascination with something so disgusting? The questions are of mortality and decomposition and are worth examining. Bloom examined the transformation between life and death. “Almost unimaginable...he offers death and beauty as morally neutral and inextricably linked” (Thompson 9).

By preference, I believe, Hyman Bloom was antisocial. “My focus was on art. I had nothing else, not family, not home...I tried to stay out of everything not directly related to what I was doing” (Thompson 29). I understand the intense desire of a singular focus is perhaps unhealthy, but frequently I do not want to go to my job. I want to do my

art. In my opinion, an enormous level of intensity is necessary to become skilled and successful. "For me, painting and thought are the same thing... They are an attempt to cope with one's destiny and become master of it" (Duncan 127). Synchronicity between Hyman Bloom and I does not end with our fishy subjects. We are traveling a similar spiritual path seeking answers to perhaps the unanswerable questions. Bloom--alive, 91 years old, living in New Hampshire--traveled this path all his life. My work is beginning. Hopefully my searching will continue as long as his.

Rona Pondick

Rona Pondick was born in 1952 in Brooklyn, NY making us approximately the same age and therefore, sharing a similar history. While Pondick has not created fish (yet), I believe we maintain a common conceptual base and passion for using traditional and ephemeral materials in unusual ways. Conceptually, we pursue issues of transformation.

From the beginning, my work has been about a metamorphosis. It brings me back to Franz Kafka and the idea of transformation, something in flux. If you go back to my scatological pieces, the breast pieces, the shoe pieces, the teeth pieces, all were about a metamorphosis: things mutating. And I don't mean mutating in a scientific way. Each piece was about an evolution (Zjipp 138).

Pondick cites her mother and Kafka as major influences in her art. Kafka is, also, an influence on my art. I have read *Metamorphosis* many times, and created a sculpture entitled *Kafka's Dream* in tribute to the issue of literal transformation.

Rona Pondick's work is always disturbing. Issues of consumption and appetite resound, especially in the head and teeth pieces. (Figure 44) Critics assert strong Freudian elements to her art, and, while acknowledging this interpretation, Pondick appears virtually unconscious of this in her creative process.

I have read books on certain subjects to convince myself that I wasn't nuts. I didn't sit down and read theory and then try to depict it in any way. My sculpture has led me to this reading not the other way around. I read theory to confirm myself and to help me understand some of my own impulses and drives" (80 Zjipp).

This comment made me laugh; it relates to my own work. People think you are perhaps crazy when you make dead fish, and critical and psychological theory have always been others' justification for work, not mine.

What keeps Pondick's work fresh, and I hope this occurs in my art, is spontaneity. Rather than being didactic, her work asks questions; is open to many interpretations. "Though Pondick may bait you or tempt you to play Freud, her works lie on the floor not on a couch" (Seward 80). Allowing the muse to take possession and not over-thinking, and then, permitting others their own interpretation is precisely my desire. I internally knew the reason for my dead fish. Initially, however, there was only attraction. Rather than psychoanalyze, I made fish, and maintained creative magic. A somewhat suspicious character, I believe if I talk too much about an idea or particular piece, the magic disappears. Pondick maintains magic in her work.

The early sculptures of Rona Pondick are some of the most viscerally attractive and repulsive due to image, use of material, and color. (Figure 45) She created hundreds of lump-like forms resembling heads with teeth.

I think we all have desires that are not socially acceptable. I did, at one point, have an obsession where I'd be talking with someone, become angry, and would want to bite them. That's how the teeth came into my pieces. But it's not socially acceptable to walk over to someone I don't like and take a chomp" (Zaya 72).

No wonder critics psychoanalyze her. In the head/teeth pieces, I perceive an inability to speak. All mouth and teeth, they merely chatter as a conglomerate. My dead fish convey speechlessness through their gaping mouths full of unexpressed content; "swimming with the fishes"; the silence of their death. It appears Pondick and I are trying to find our voice in the voiceless.

A variety of materials were used in creating the head/teeth series, such as dirt, wax, and polyurethane. For example, *Little Bathers* (Figure 46) has hundreds of Maalox-

pink heads of polyester resin, with off-yellow teeth, scattered on the floor. “It was around 1990. Someone took me to see a show of Renoir’s *Bathers* and I hated it. There’s this use of pink and it’s supposed to be seductive and sensual and it put my teeth on edge...I thought. “I’m going to do a piece that captures this” and that’s where *Little Bathers* came from” (Zaya 58). When I first saw *Little Bathers*, I thought it was ghastly. The sickening pink strongly conveyed this repulsion; it has become one of my favorite pieces. I want my audience to be curious and uneasy, like Pondick.

Rona Pondick’s latest work is metaphorical and legendary. Another attraction we share is animal human hybrids. They have a long presence in art and mythology. “You can go into more transgressive, more emotional, more “off” subjects with an animal than you can a human, so I combined them” (Zaya 122). *Monkeys, Dog, and Marmot* (Figures 47, 48) are hybrids in a transitional state. This is very disconcerting. “Discomfort is implied by physical combinations” (Koplos 118); the arms are at wrong angles and are too large for the bodies.

Cast stainless steel, yellow stainless steel, and silicone rubber are used in her latest sculptures. Stainless is a jarring, inanimate material used to create an unsatisfactory blend of animal and human. The human portions are textured, finely detailed; the animal portion smooth creating a sense of discomfort or partial mutation. The textural variance graphically contrasts. The human parts, usually head and arms, are Pondick’s own. This unsatisfactory blend evokes the question is the creature in the process of transforming? Who is winning this transformational struggle--animal or human? Questions of genetic manipulation and cloning are consistently raised regarding Rona Pondick’s recent work. “Her sculptures seem to embody the philosophical

associations of the worked monster as in “monstrum” an omen or a dire warning. Her work directly addresses fears of genetic creation and manipulation and embodies technology as a subject as well as a process” (Fifield 75).

Rona Pondick is fearless in her use of technology, extensively employed in *Monkeys*:

Casting my head was so unpleasant. I decided to make all the sculptural changes on my original by hand to avoid having to recast. To prepare the head for scanning, I took one of my casts, sanded off my hair, reshaped the head into an egg-like shape with no neck. This cast became the model from which we scanned. The level of detail I wanted made this very difficult. Each time we would scan the head the computer would crash. In the end we needed three-quarters of a million dots or cloud points to create my head. The file was so big the computer was always crashing. What was supposed to take a week took six months. Then we had problems producing my head three dimensionally. It took another six months, but it was really worth it” (Zaya 122).

I relate to the technical problems, and admire her determination. What appears so seamless and painless was not. It is good to be reminded that even successful artists struggle. Sometimes I believe it is only my lack of experience or skill causing difficulties.

Rona Pondick’s art differs from mine, yet, I believe we are examining issues of transformation and linkage with animals. Our approach to art is similar--both of us begin to work and discover greater meaning as we go. We both hold a fascination with material and are innovative in our approaches to it. I find her work extremely well crafted; another facet I greatly admire. Her work is exceptionally fresh and innovative; I have not seen work similar to hers.

Conclusion – Artists' Section

Living in the pluralism of contemporary art allows a dual focus of concept and process. Nancy Graves' era of abstract expressionism focused primarily on process, and sculpture is very process oriented. Like Graves, I am lured by process and caught in the art of making. Graves work, however, was well crafted and did not conceptually conform to abstract expressionism. She essentially collaged sculpture.

In my opinion, conceptual art frequently lacks craft. It appears to be quite thrown together. Rona Pondick demonstrates solid concept and craft. Her ideas are not obscured by poor craftsmanship even when using ephemeral material. This is a consistent goal for my artwork. Pondick tackles personal issues and has an excellent sense of humor. She is an inspiration.

Hyman Bloom's work resides in my heart, influential because of the sense of transcendence and spirituality. His entire life focused on art; he painted what he desired; what he had to, not what others thought he should paint. At this time, I feel little pressure from teachers to paint or sculpt subjects not to my liking, but it took me a long time to validate my ideas, method of expression, and numerous questions about the fish.

Technical Process Section

Technical challenges in my thesis work were significant, and these three artists were also presented with challenges I discuss in the context of my own artwork. Initially, I wish to present the overall technical aspect of my thesis:

The cast wax fish in *Family Tree* (Figure 1, 2) were particularly difficult. The process began by gathering dead fish from the shores of Lake Ontario and allowing them to dry. Various mold materials were tried, including direct plaster casting, which was a disaster as the fish was impossible to remove, and the dry fish reconstituted into an awfully smelly mess. Latex molds were considered, but latex is too flexible and requires hours of heat and drying time. Rubber, specifically Brush-on 40, captured the detail and made sturdy molds. The first coat of liquid rubber was applied thinly onto one side of the dead fish, followed by seven thicker layers until the rubber was an inch thick. The rubber was allowed to set, the fish was turned over, and the process repeated. The wax casting process was complicated for if the molds were not tightly sealed, hot liquid beeswax would spill out. In the end, six molds of six different fish were made, and my mold-making skills improved greatly.

Material was a major consideration in *Family Tree*. While more expensive than microcrystalline or paraffin, beeswax is considerably more luxurious and smells wonderful. It is not as toxic as microcrystalline, or as flammable as paraffin. Complications occurred when attempting to preserve delicate wax tails while removing the cast fish from the molds. The broken tails can be melted and reattached, but some detail is lost and must be replaced either by carving or painting.

The most persistent problem was the suspension system in the mouths of the wax fish. Hooks screwed directly into the wax broke or worked their way out, causing the fish to crash to the floor. Hooks in glue-filled holes drilled into the wax worked relatively well. Heated hooks, forced into the wax, also held. Fishing swivels allowed the fish to rotate. Crashing fish posed a particular problem in the Bevier venue because the heat in the gallery softened the wax. Since *Family Tree* is an installation of decaying fish, I felt the crashing acceptable even if nerve wrecking.

I believe the problem can be solved for future installations by casting a piece of 1" gauze directly into the wax fish and attaching only the fishing swivels. This will put less stress on the wax. Also, the gauze is organic looking and will allow easy hook attachment.

Integration of sculptural elements onto canvas is a persistent interest of mine. Therefore, painted metal, attached to canvas and presented as an integrated work was another goal in my thesis work. *Dissipation* (Figure 3) began with rabbit-skin glue on canvas covered masonite. Fourteen gauge copper pieces were hand sawed and scale texture rolled on. These pieces were then screwed through the masonite into 1"x2" strips secured to the back of the board to handle the weight of the metal. The entire canvas and portions of the copper was spontaneously coated with beeswax, over which was applied encaustic, coated with quinacridone (transparent) oils. *Dissipation* has a bloody, visceral feel with fractured fish parts floating in an abject sea of wax and oils. The painting was well planned but spontaneously painted, which I enjoyed because of the directness and speed of completion. I plan on developing this process in future work.

Sacrifice (Figure 4) was hung from 24” rusted rebar 12” in front of *Dissipation* to achieve continuity with the fragmented metal in the painting. The painting appeared to be the sculpture exploded, conceptually reinforcing the idea of decomposition. *Sacrifice* began very experimentally with a one-piece hammered 14-gauge copper body and head. The metal was frequently annealed and hammered for volume. It had to be planished unevenly to maintain a deflated, rough look and yet be worked. The tears in the skin were hand sawed, annealed, and shaped. The head of the dead fish was formed by hammering, the eye drilled and sawed. The scales and gills on the head are made of copper foil, gel in nylon netting, and real gill bone. The tail was one piece; rolled with nylon netting from fruit bags to achieve scales, then welded to the body.

Texture over the body and tail was created by applying nylon netting from turkey bags into extra-heavy matte medium and tar gel, letting it almost dry, before removing the netting. Extremely realistic scales were created in this fashion. Quinacridone, interference, and iridescent oils were applied over the gels and in the body interior. These particular oils were chosen for transparency and reflection not available in acrylics or enamels. One drawback was that the oils took a long time to dry. The fish was then partially varnished to enhance the structural effects.

The spine was initially to be welded copper, but the affect was not adequately realistic. After much discussion, I decided to place a real spine for critique. The response was so positive, I gelled the pieces in, which integrated nicely with the gill bones.

Sacrifice was challenging. Never had I hammered such a large, heavy piece; I had no idea if the gels or oils would work (or dry) on metal. It is one of my favorite

pieces; it was intuitive, physical and combined my obsession with process and the Zen of painting.

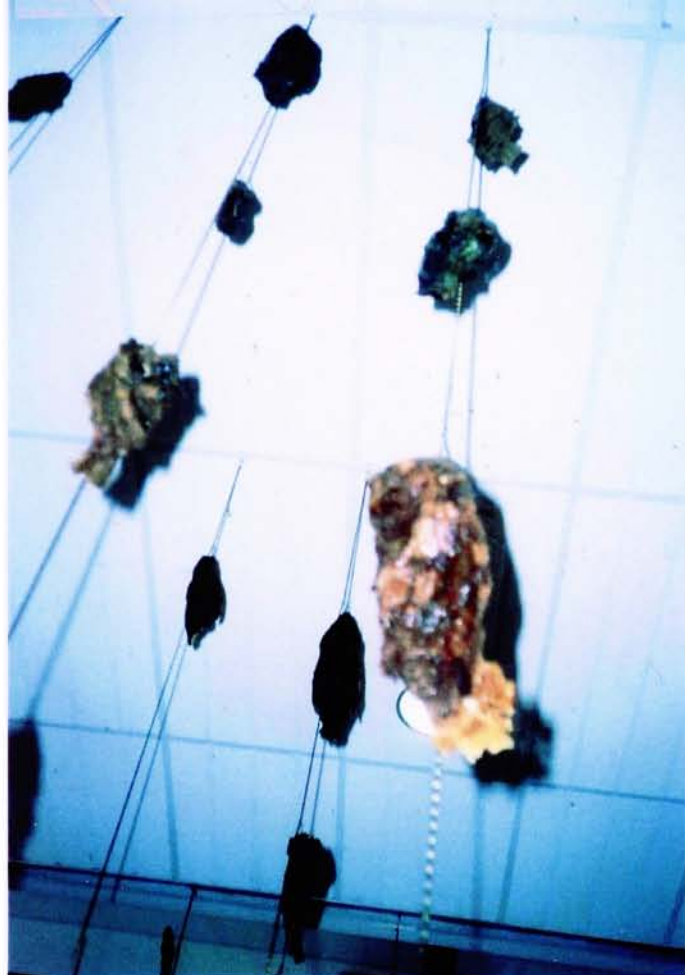
The other four paintings, *Gravity of Love*, *Who Wants to Live Forever*, *Universal Justice*, and *Altered States*, (Figures 5, 6, 7, 8) were painted traditionally but incorporated an unusual mix of media, such as oleopasto, gels, and nylon netting. The thick impasto added texture and depth as well as the feel of decomposition. *Altered States* was painted with liquid rubber washed with oils and turpentine. Texture was a major consideration to give 'life' to the dead fish. *Universal Justice* is the only acrylic painting. It incorporates nylon net, clear tar gel, matte gel, and enamel paint (for the drips). The paper is torn and pieced together using liquid rubber. The feeling of fragmentation is strong in this piece, and, although I appreciate the painting, I am not entirely satisfied. I contemplate tearing off the bowl area on the bottom. Because of its torn appearance, this painting may be difficult to show.

Conclusion

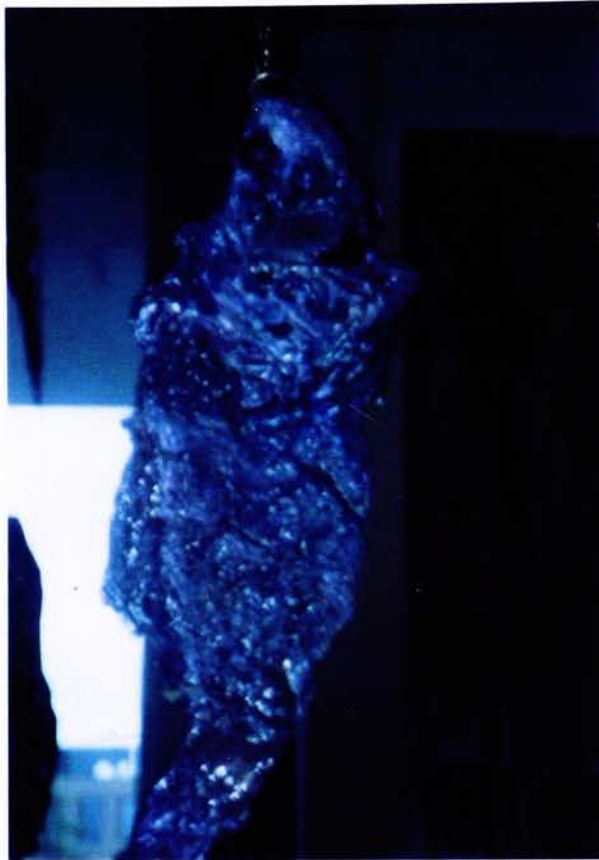
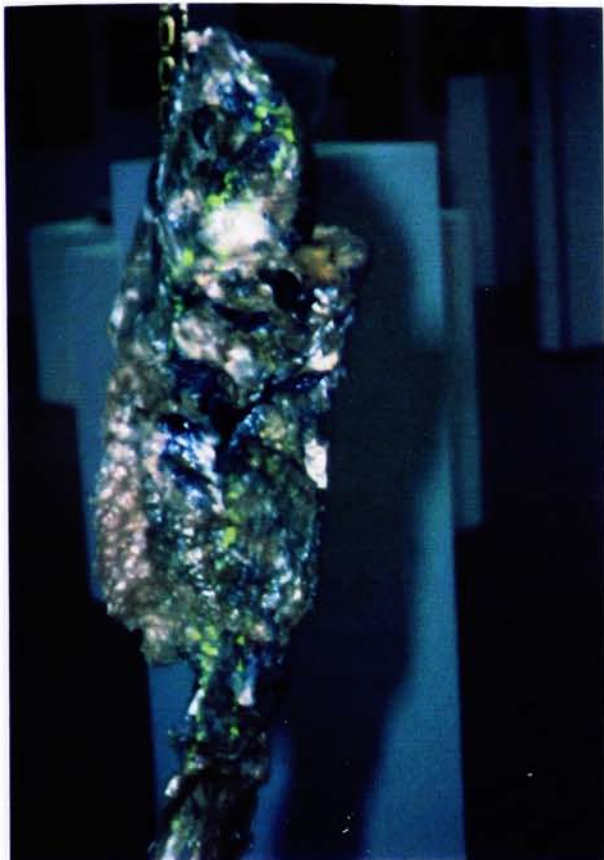
The process of my graduate thesis began in earnest my second year at RIT. I considered many topics for my thesis: dreams, poetry, and decomposition. Dead fish articulated my vision. They express transformation from living to dead to beyond and discuss the path we all travel. The fish are frightening and traumatic and express our own fears. We have to look at them and have to look away.

The desire to artistically express began in 1996 when I took my first course and fell in love. The journey has been the most intense, focused, and all consuming of my education. I cannot imagine I did all this; I cannot imagine not doing art. I never thought I was creative, never believed I could draw. As I encounter difficult times, I know I have the skill and passion to continue. Artists frequently discuss their love of art as passion, of their soul entering their work, and I certainly concur. It was frightening to display so much of me and hysterical to watch others. And, I still have no desire to force the audience to understanding.

“And when I finished the painting & looked at that poor leatherjacket which now lay dead on the table I began to wonder whether, as each fish died, the world was reduced in the amount of love that you might know for such a creature. Whether there was that much less wonder & beauty left to go around as each fish was hauled up in the net. And if we kept on taking & plundering & killing, if the world kept on becoming every more impoverished of love & wonder & beauty in consequence, what, in the end, would be left?” (Flanagan 200)



1. *Family Tree*, Installation view,
2003



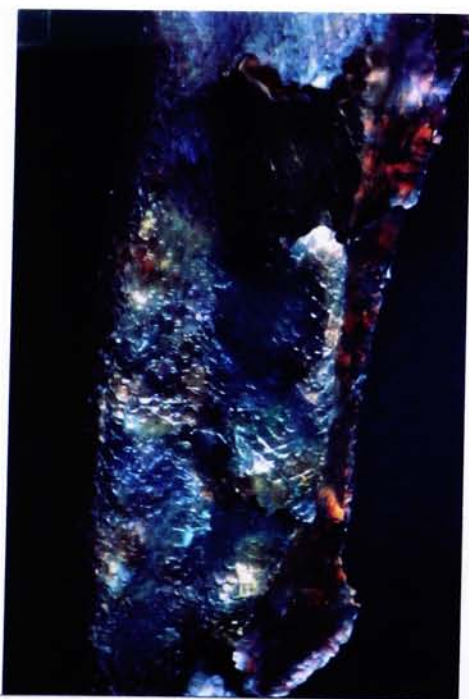
2. *Family Tree*, (details), 2003
cast wax and oils
Dimensions variable



3. *Dissipation* (and detail), 2003
wax, encaustic, oil, copper on
canvas board, 60"x48"



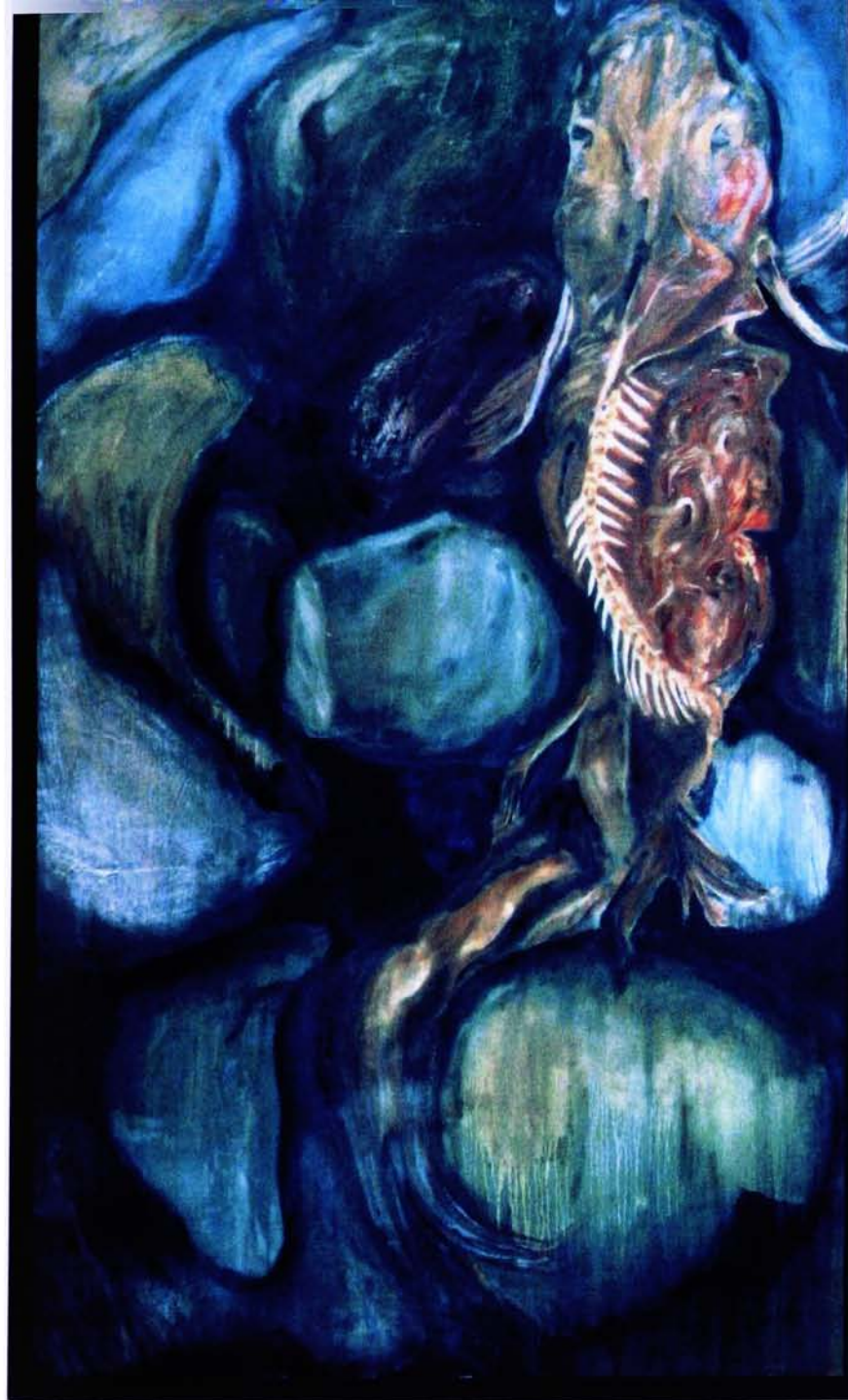
4. *Sacrifice (and details)*, 2003
hammered copper, oil, gel, and
bone, 60"x16"x4"





5. *Gravity of Love (and detail)*,
2003,
oil on paper, 78"x48"





6. *Who Wants to Live Forever (and detail)*, 2003
oil on paper, 78"x48"



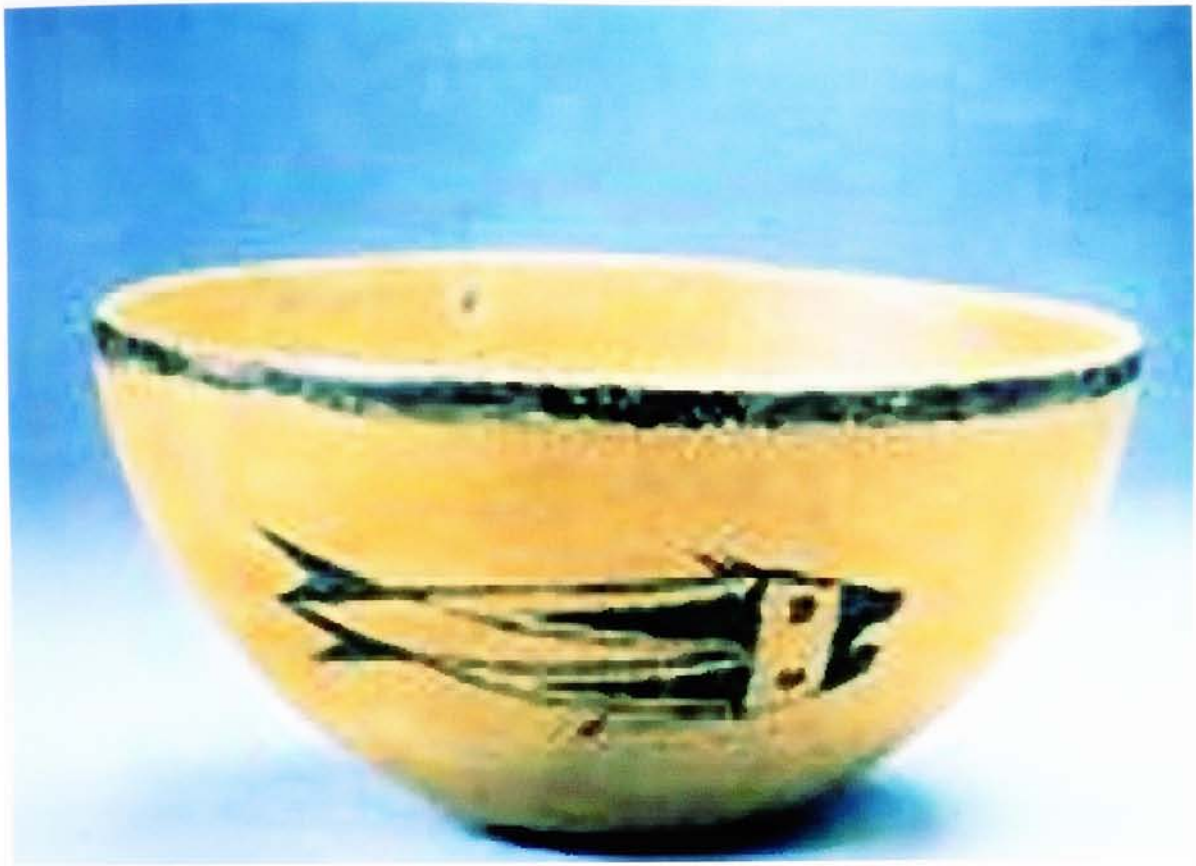


7. *Universal Justice* (and detail)
2003,
acrylic, gel, nylon netting on
paper, 63"x30"

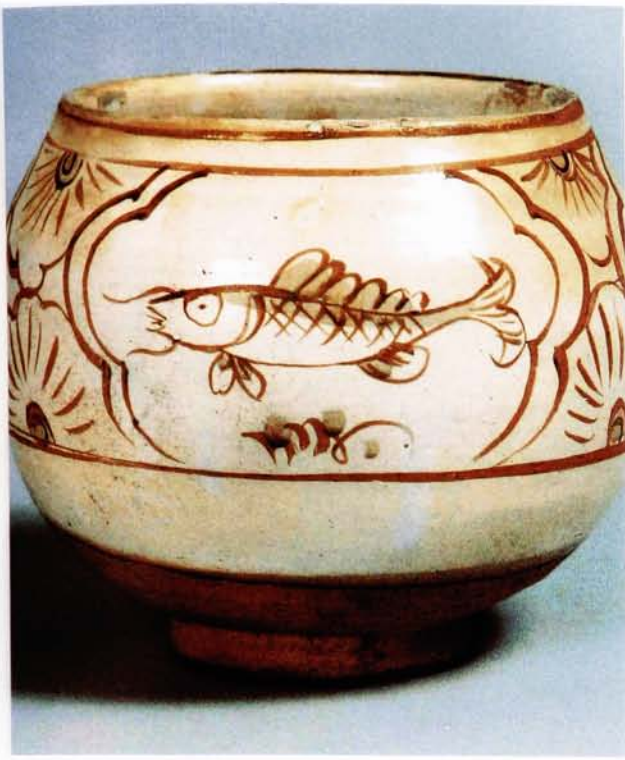




8. *Altered States* (and details), 2003
rubber and oil on paper
24"x14"



9. *A Painted Pottery Bowl
Decorated with Twin Fish
(Neolithic, Ban-Po)*



10. Red Fish patterns on a Bowl,
Tz'u Ware
(Chin Dynasty)



11.a. One Belt Ornament, Jade
(Liao Dynasty)
b. Fish Figurine, Changsha Ware
(T'ang Dynasty)



12. *A Jar with Chinese Duck in a Lake*
(Qing Dynasty)



13. *A Fish*
(R.O.C.)

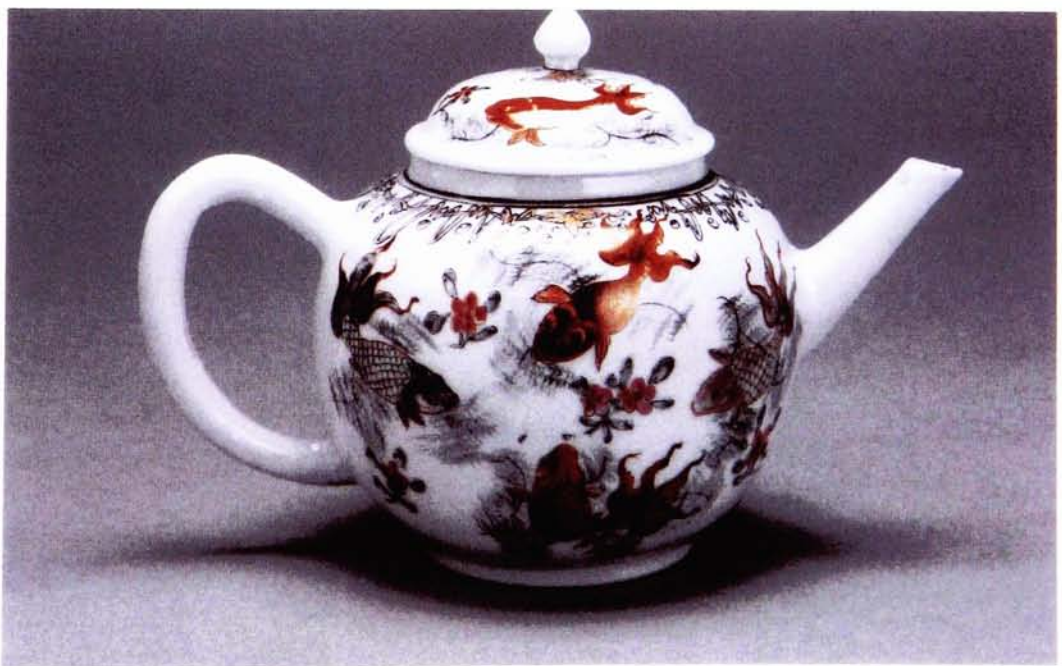


14.a. *Yearly Fortune*
(R.O.C.)
b. *A Fish*
(R.O.C.)





- 15.a. *Gold Fish*
(R.O.C.)
b. *Famille-rose Teapot with
Goldfish Design*
(Qing Dynasty)



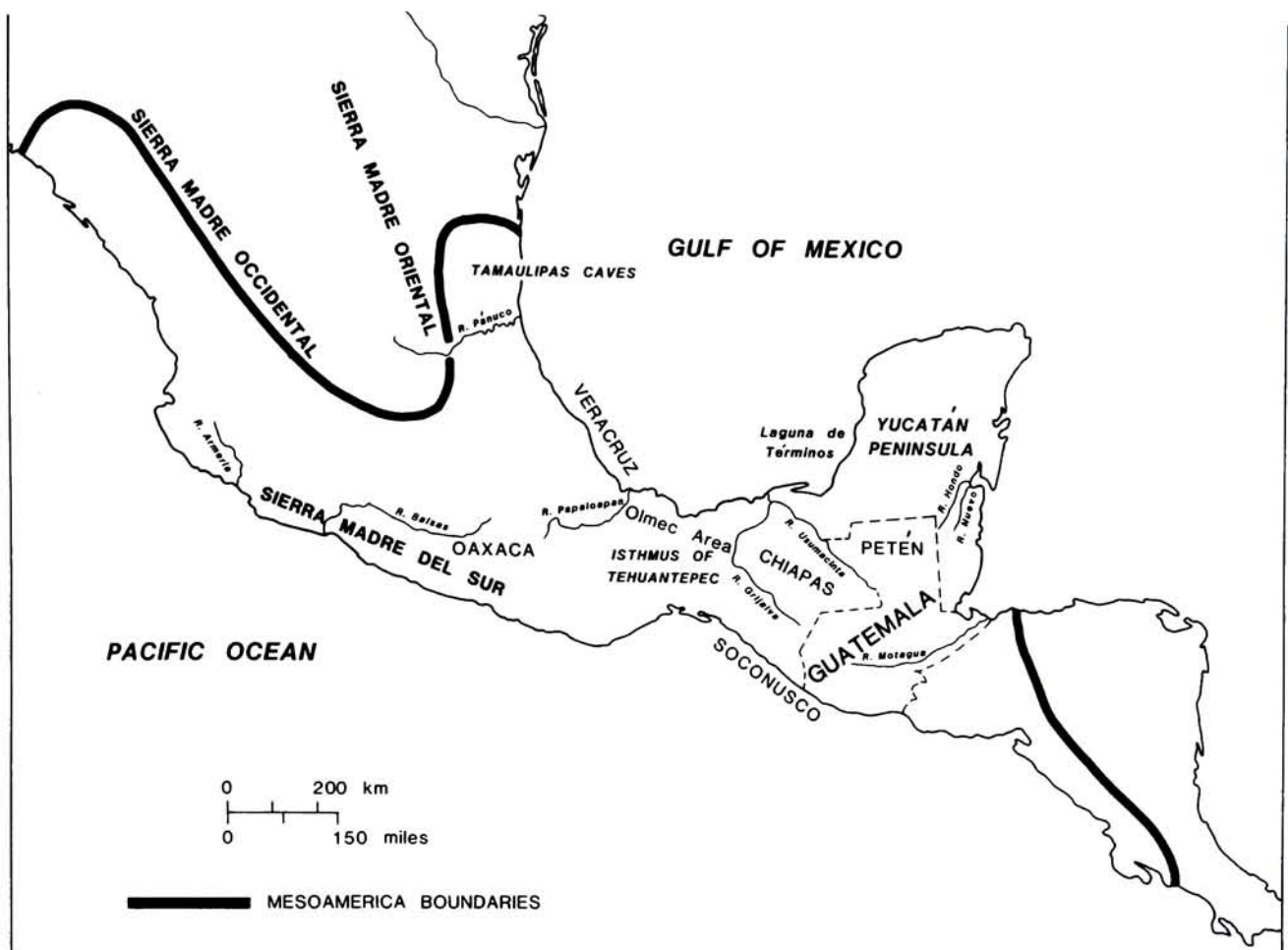


16. *Cloisonné Jar with domed cover*
(Ming Dynasty)

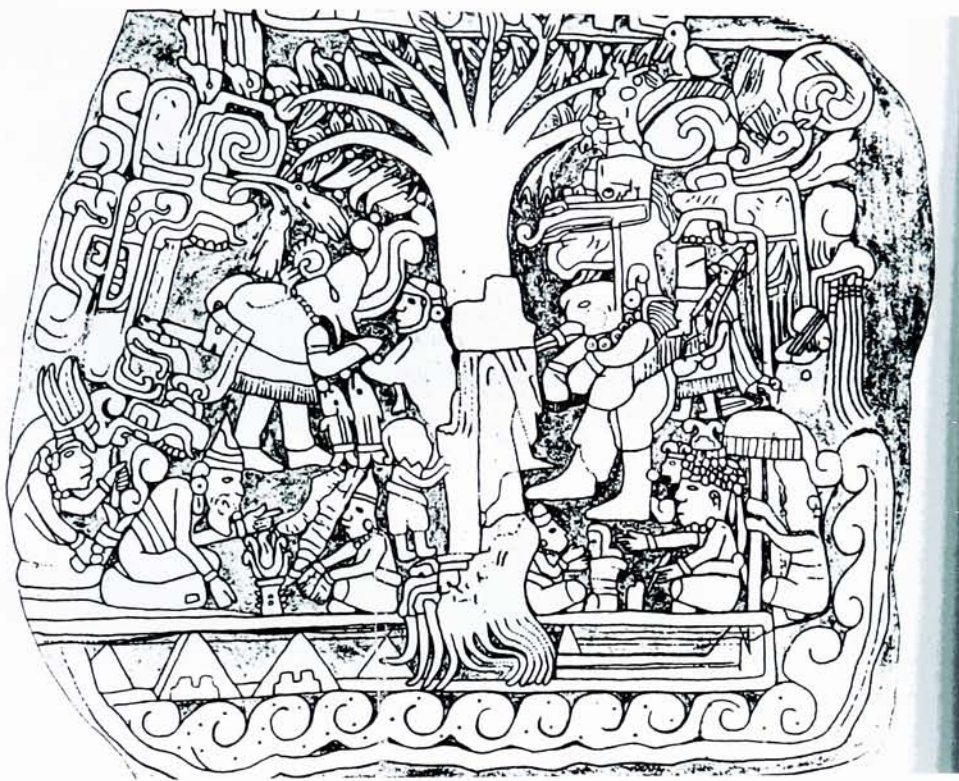


- 17a. *A Young Fisherman with His
Good Harvest*
(R.O.C.)
- b. *Embroidered Fish Shaped Lamp
Shade*
(R.O.C.)

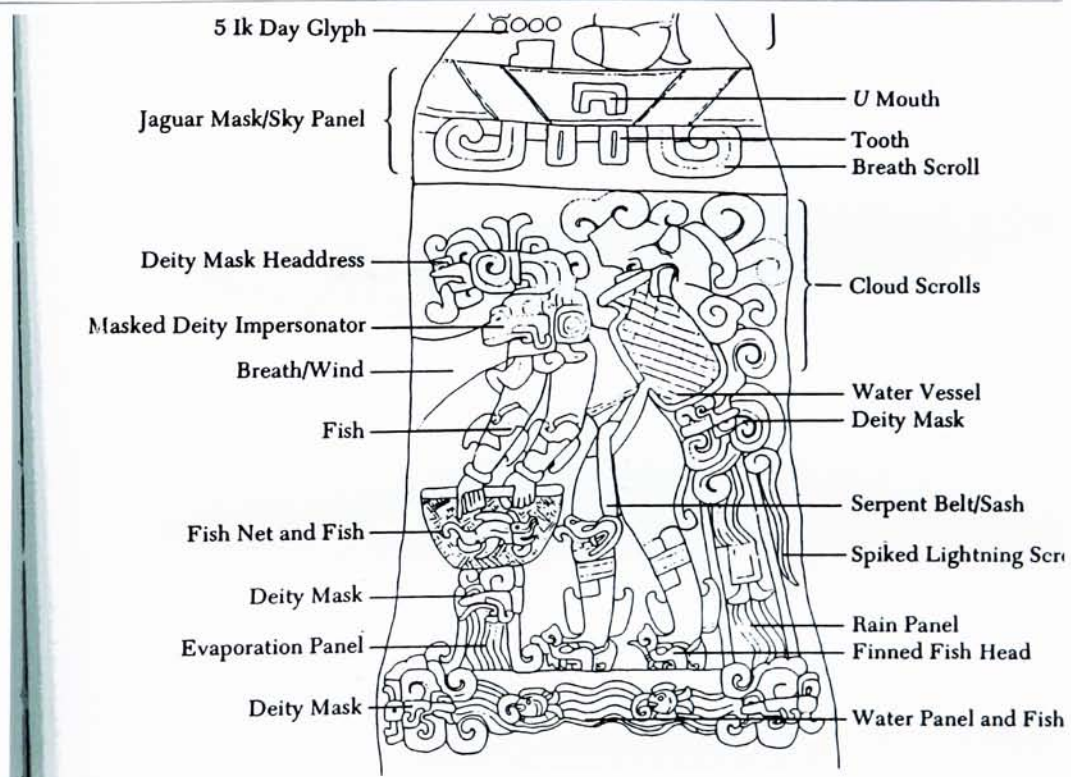




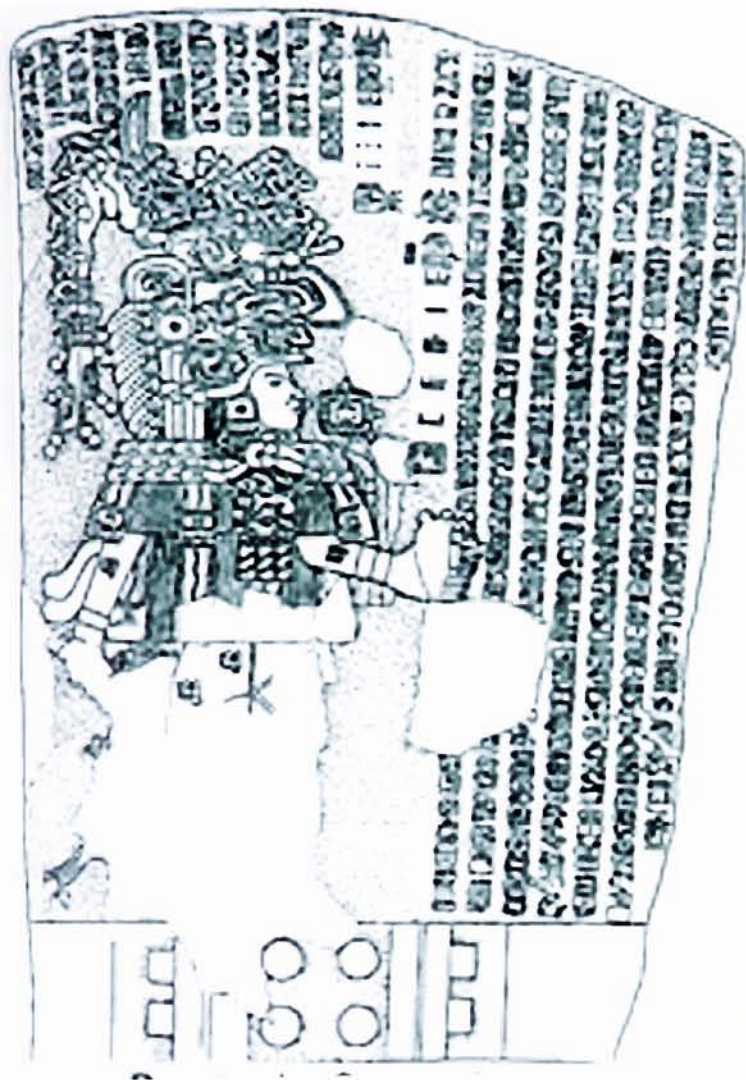
18. Map of Mesoamerica



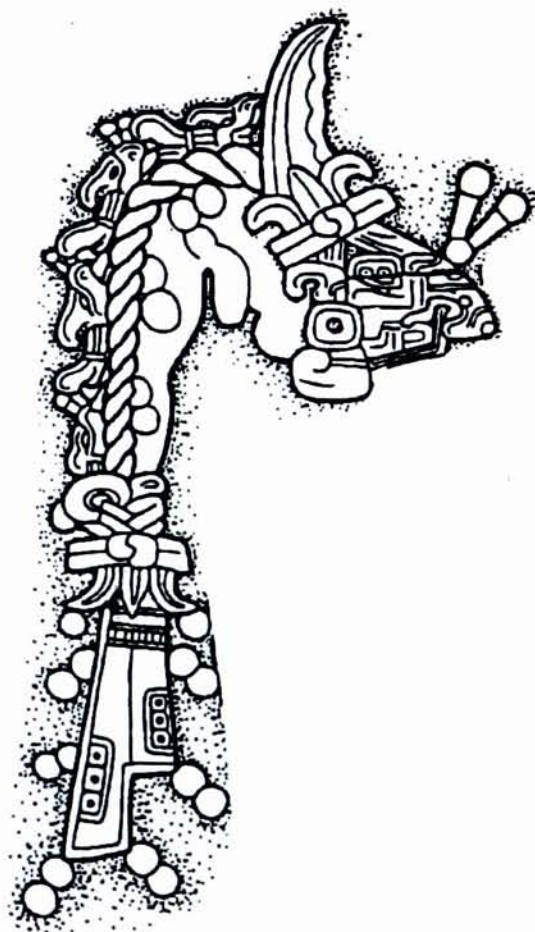
19. Stela 5



20. Detail – location of fish on Stela 5



21. *La Mojarra Stela 1*
Drawing: George Stewart



22. Headdress Detail, *La Mojarra Stela 1*
Drawing: George Stewart



23. *Monument 20*, La Venta
Museum, Villahermosa,
Tabasco
Basalt sculpture of dolphin or
other cetacean, 73"

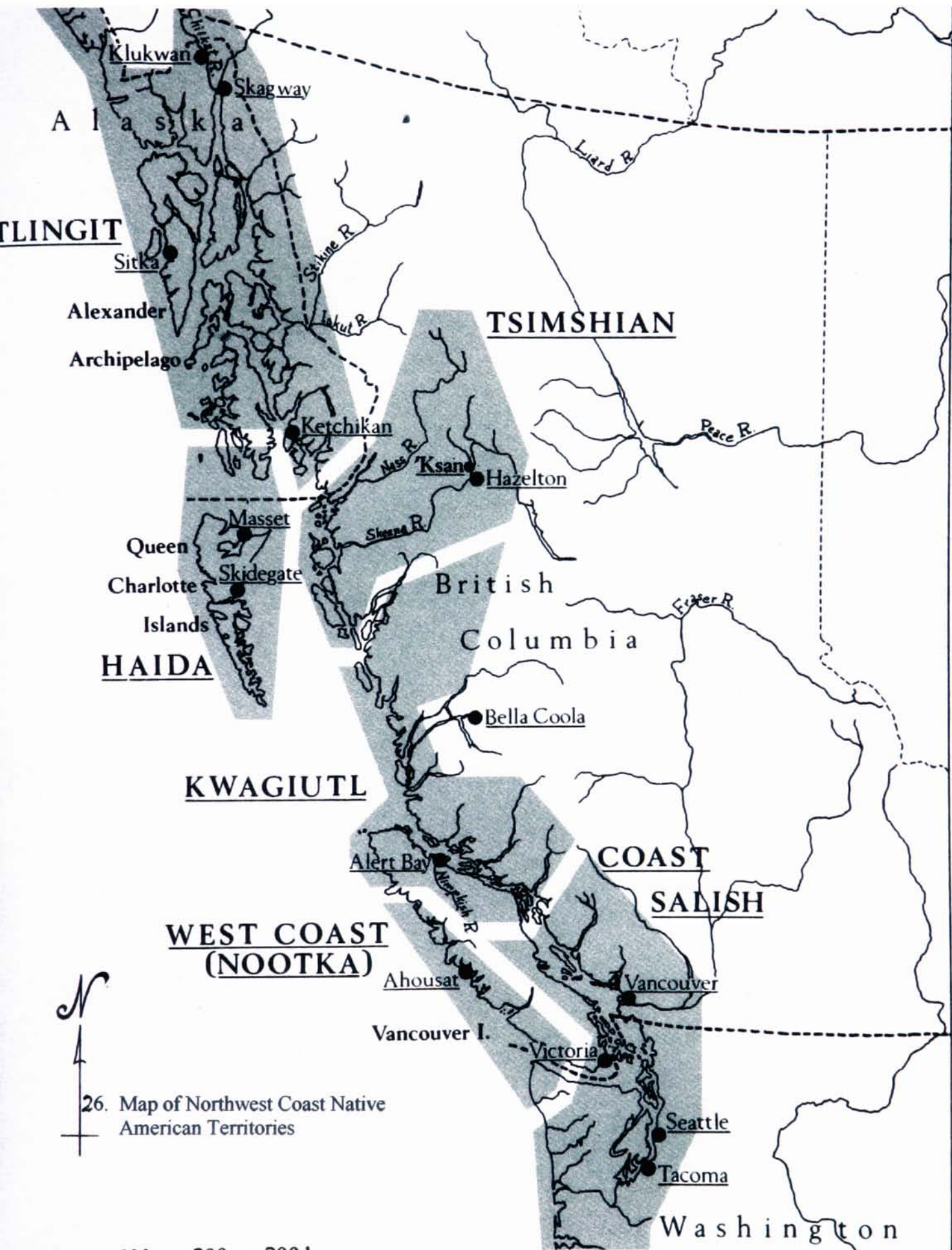


24. Polished black terracotta vase
With scraped and incised
decoration. Freshwater fish
from Tlatilco, Cuenca, 4.75"

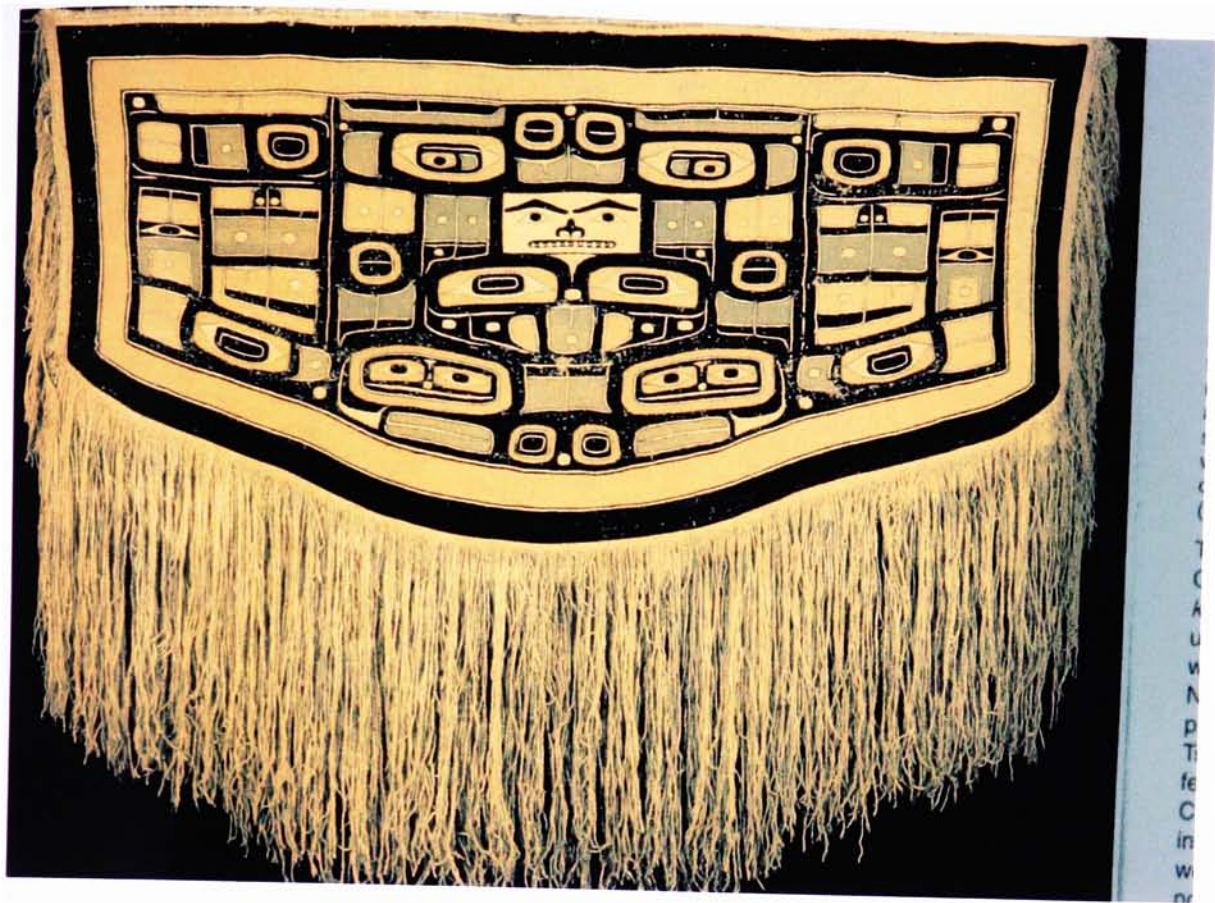


25. Contemporary fish masks from Mexico courtesy of Ebay

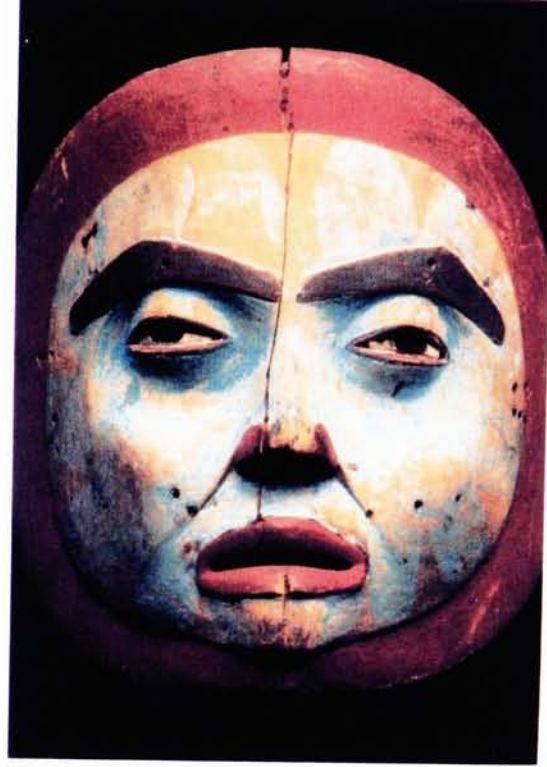




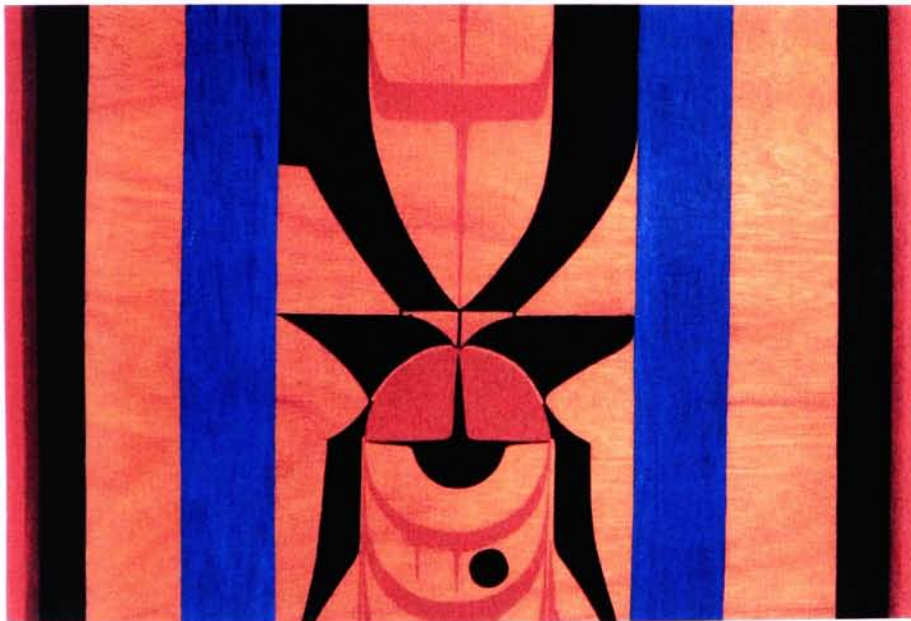
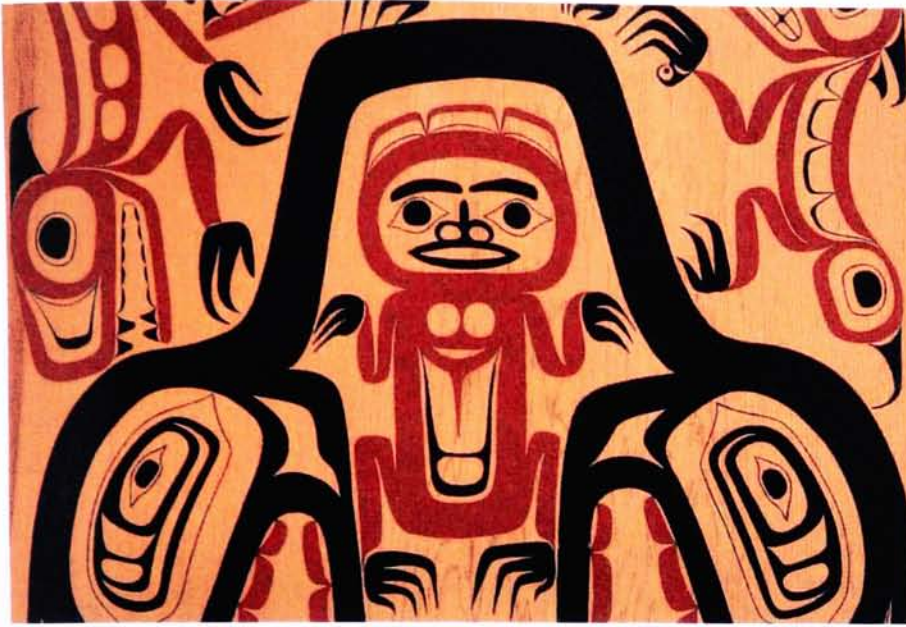
26. Map of Northwest Coast Native American Territories



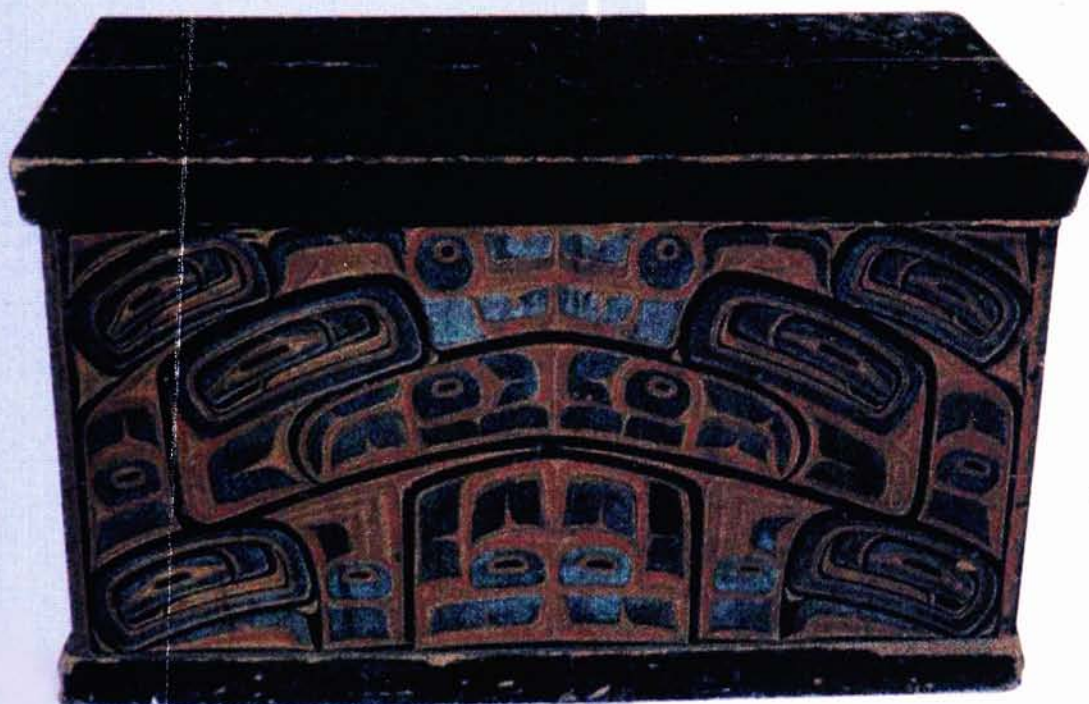
27. Blanket attributed to Tsimshian,
Early 19th C., Mountain goat
wool, yellow-cedar bark;
yellow, black, and green dye



- 28.a. Dish by Bill Reid, Haida 1972
 Bear Mother myth,
 Gold, 2 7/8"x2 3/4"x2"
- b. Mask, Tlingit, 1830-1850,
 Wood, 10", black, blue, white
 pigment
- c. Sea Eagle Kwi-gwis
 by Henry Speck Jr. 1958-64
 Watercolor on paper 12"x 16"
- d. Pole in old Gitksan Village of
 Kitwancool, Tsimshian,
 Family of the Wolf Clan



- 29.a. Tlingit box by Dempsey Bob
with assistance of Edgar Frank,
1992
- b. Canoe by Doug Crammer 1978
Acrylic on mahogany plywood
25"x24"



30.a. Panel from bentwood chest
possibly Haida, 1840-60
yellow-cedar 30"
b. Bentwood chest, Tlingit
1860-70 36"



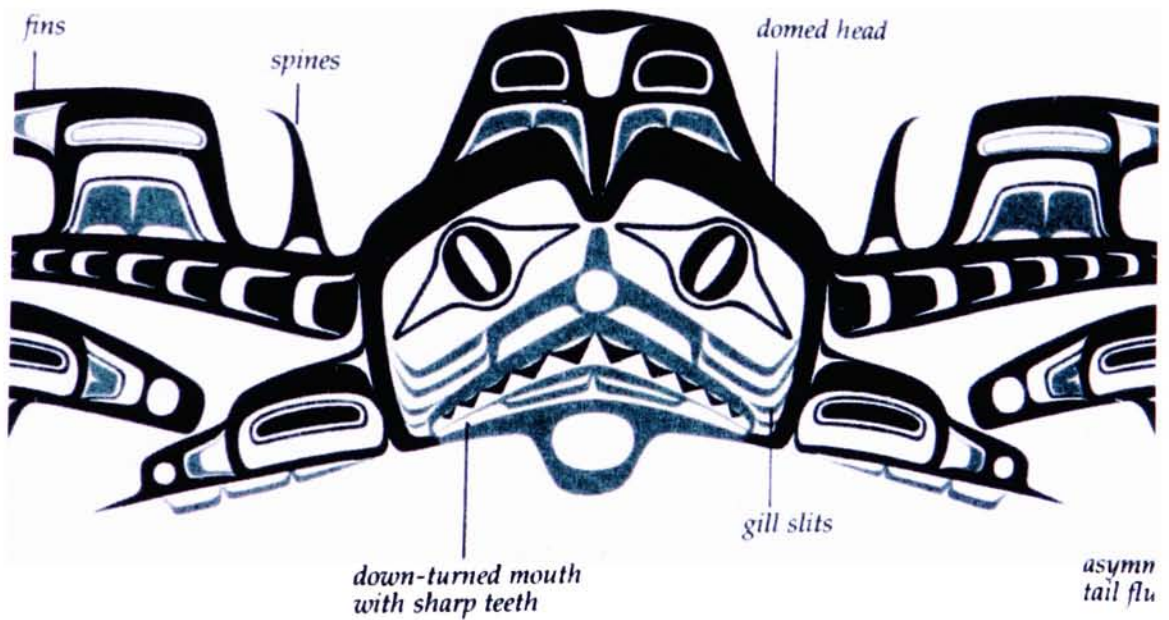
31. Salmon wall painting
by Bill Reid, Haida



32. Killer Whale by Robert
Davidson, Haida, 2000
Acrylic on canvas
30"x40"



33. Red snapper print by Richard Hunt, Kwakwaka'wakw



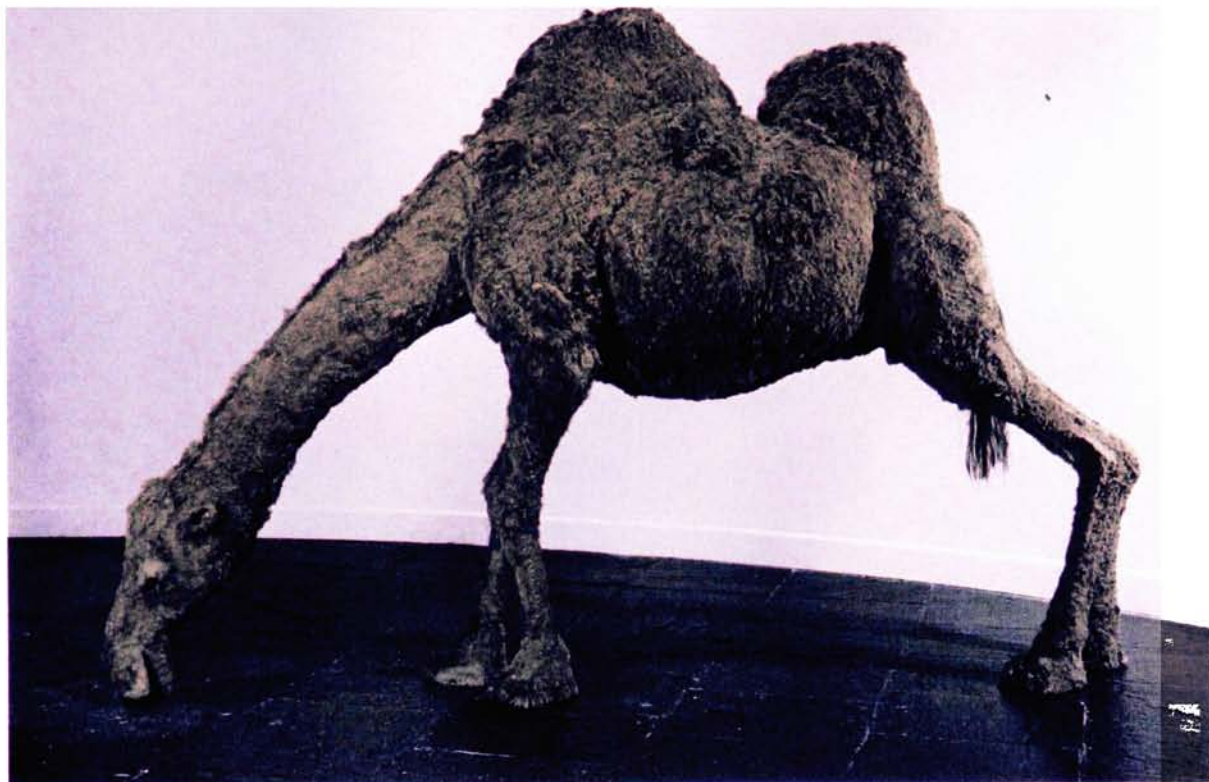
34. Dogfish by Robert Davidson, Haida



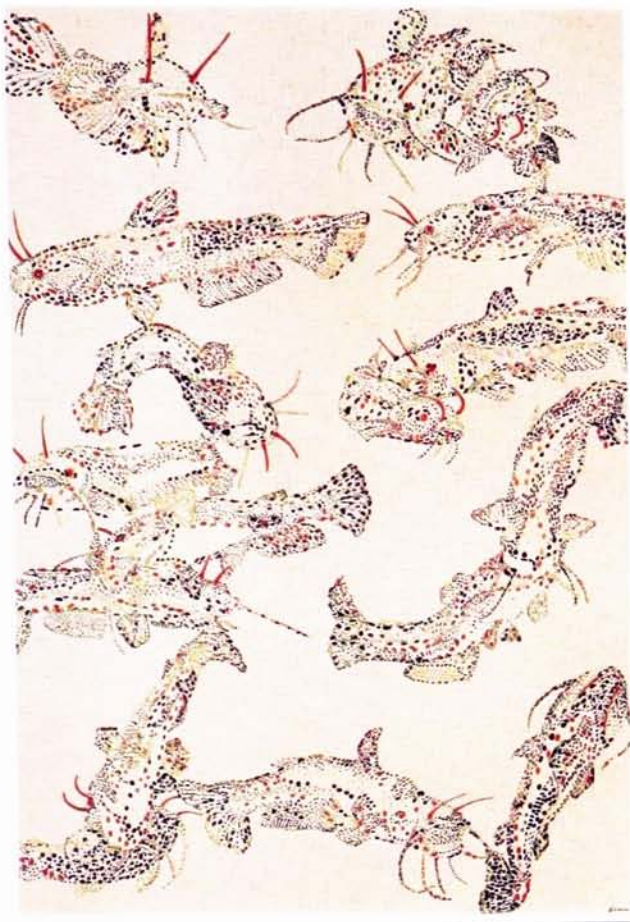
35. Halibut by Larry Ross,
Kwakwaka'wakw



36. Bullhead by Earl Muldoe
'ksan



37. *Camel VI*, 1969, wood, steel,
Burlap, polyurethane, skin, wax,
Oil 96"x126"x48"



38.a. *Interaction Between Strangers*
1971, gouache on paper
30"x20"

b. *Mutual Implication*, 1990-92
mixed media, dim. variable

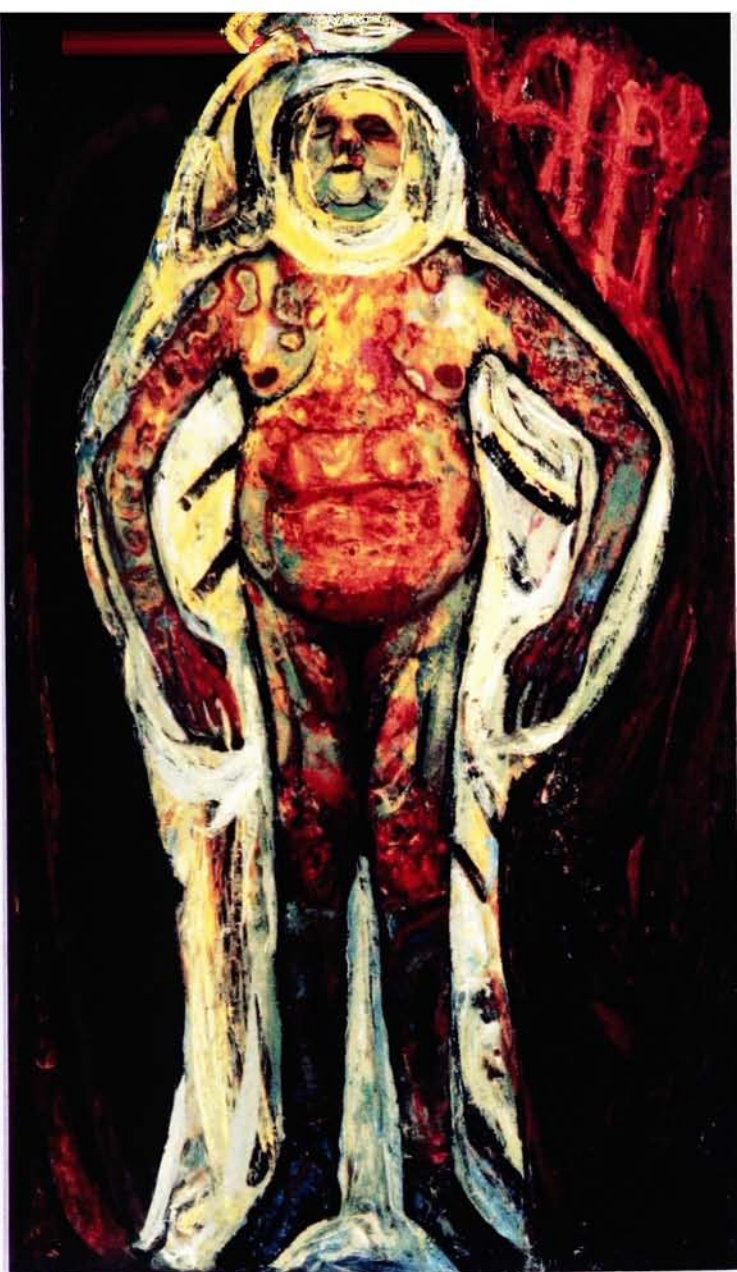




39. *Between Sign and Symbol*, 1992
mixed media, dim. variable



40. *Materializing Medium*, 1951
oil on canvas
61"x48"



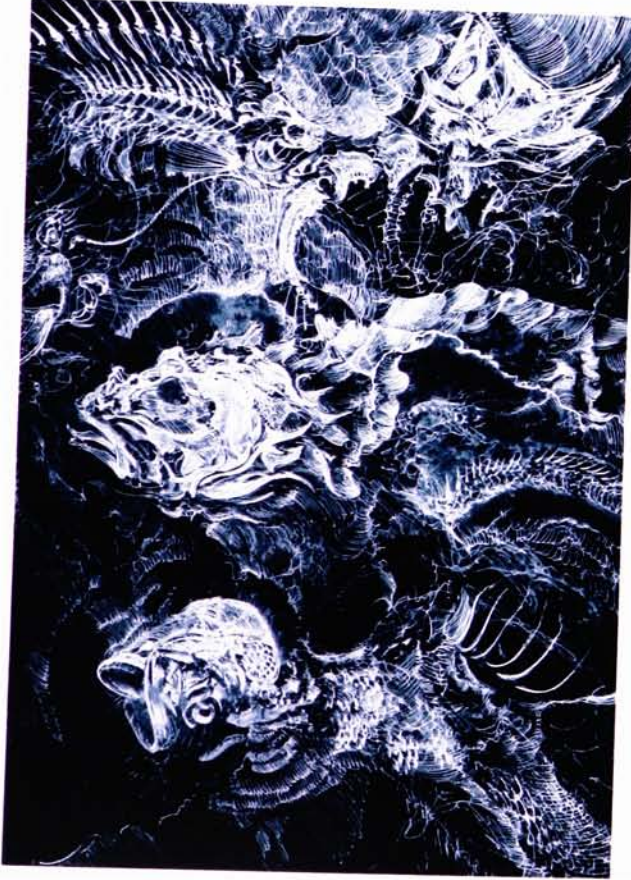
41. *Female Corpse, Front View*,
1945, oil on canvas, 70"x42"



42. *Corpse of an Elderly Male*,
1944, oil on canvas, 72 1/4"x
34 1/4"

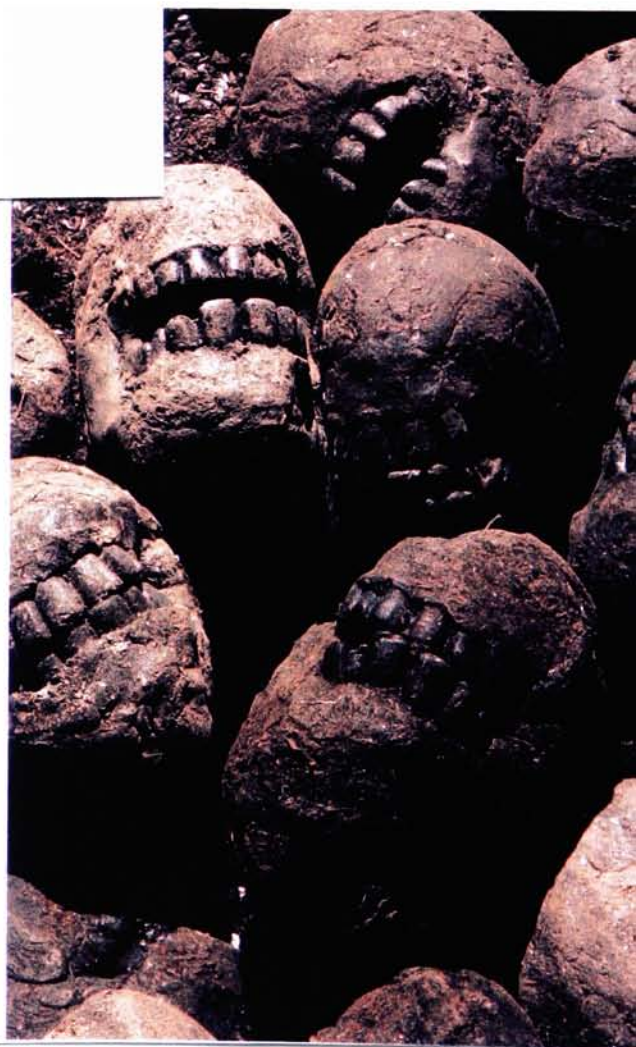


43 a. *Fish Skeletons*, 1956,
white ink on maroon tinted
paper, 17"x23"
b. *Fish*, 1953(?),
charcoal, 17 1/2"x23 1/2"
c. *Fish Skeletons*, 1956,
gouache on brown paper,
24 1/2"x37 3/4"





44.a. *Swinger*, 1992,
wax, plastic, newspaper,
chattering teeth, shoe, wire
28"x20"x10"



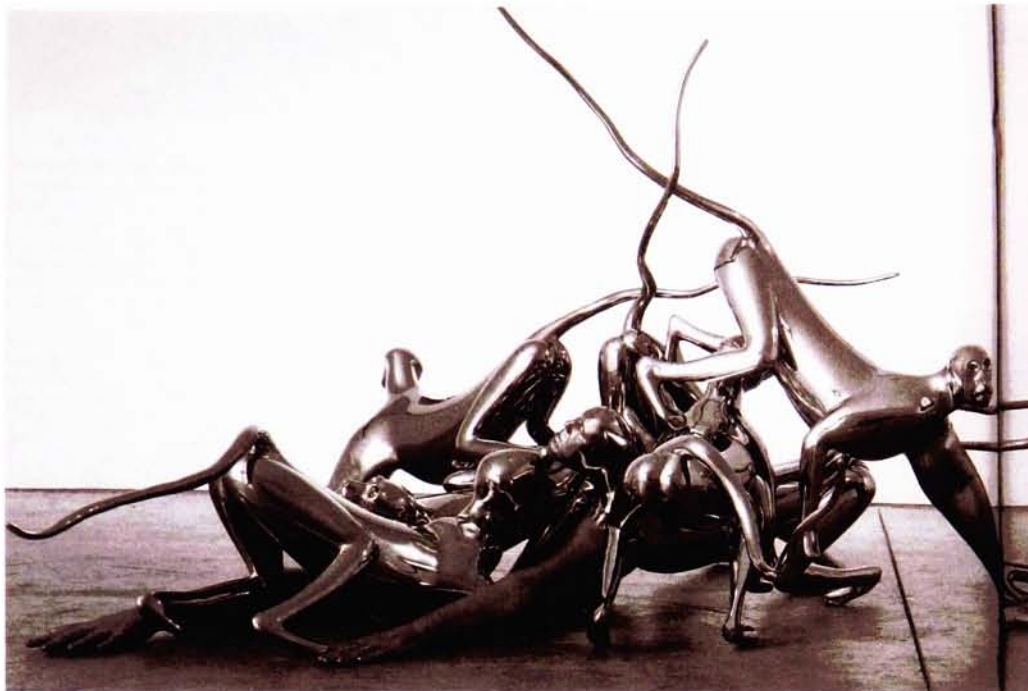
b. *Dirt Head* (detail), 1997
earth, wax, and thermoplastic
400 elements, approx.
3"x3"x3 1/2"



45. *Mouth* (detail), 1992-93
rubber teeth, plastic, nipples,
flax, 600 elements, approx.
3"x5"x2 3/4"

46. *Little Bathers* (detail), 1990-91
wax, plastic, rubber teeth,
500 elements, approx.
2 1/2"x4 3/4"x4"





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6"x29 1/4"x21"

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