

Nocturnal images / Hollow objects

by

Carol H. Faber

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INTRODUCTION

Intention

The intent of this paper is to document the thesis exhibition and explain how this direction of work was accomplished. The primary concept of this exhibition is to relate two-dimensional images and three-dimensional objects through the intrinsic and aesthetic qualities of the vessel form. This interaction between drawings and ceramic forms combines the duality of images and objects.

Artist Statement

My process of creating is influenced by working with the three-dimensional object as an original source and starting point. The manipulation of materials and exploration of surfaces enables me to better understand the object. It could be said, I draw from the process of working. To actually create the object helps me to better understand the physical qualities and limitations in which I work. This also creates a duality between the physical world and the world of illusion, which interacts with the autobiographical content of the art work. The experience and expression that I bring to my work helps to relate the object, the image and the artist as a complete process, not as separate entities.

HISTORICAL COMPARISON

Source of Imagery

The origins of my work are derived from the clay. It is the structure that I use to bind meaning to the object and the image, making them one. In retracing my thoughts and actions in developing the work for my thesis exhibition, I cannot disregard this common link with other artists. The creative process that comes from my perception of the actual world are similar to those who work with clay. Robert Turner, a potter speaking about his process of creating says:

In art, mine has been a participatory experience in the way things seem to be and to happen in a perceived world. Indeed my pottery in retrospect is about perception, our connection-making, metaphor-making and a process of possibilities. Perceptions I see as openings toward knowing the universe we observe and toward an identity as a human being who is of the particles and working of the universe....in using our capacity to perceive connections-thus we alter the sense of our world, our reality. (Speight, 176)

It is from this reality that my concepts and ideas began. The clay vessel is the catalyst for my thesis exhibition.

Autobiographical and Environmental

My creative force comes from my environment, which in turn is my life's experience. I tend to work with the things that I know best. "One could say that all art is in some manner autobiographical, but the work of certain artists seems to deal more directly with their personal experiences than that of others" (Speight, 183). Jim Dine is an artist which whom I can identify because of the way he views his content. He says:

I think drawing is a kind of autobiography. (Roger-Lafferty, 21)

I am on a life-long journey to express my feeling about me in the world. The subject matter is essentially me and exists as examples of my feelings, the channels through which my feelings pass. (Roger-Lafferty, 19)

The drawings I've made of tools are of hand tools, and in that sense they are autobiographical because- it's stale news but I spent my earlier life amongst people who sold them and who were carpenters and things...And, at times, that's very autobiographical because of the experience one has had. (Roger-Lafferty, 21)

It is from these similar expressed experiences that I began working on my thesis exhibition.

My experiences with nature are influenced by my childhood, growing up on a farm in rural Iowa. The physical endurance of farm life was reality. My family raised livestock on a small 80 acre farm for the purpose of survival. It was the traditional family farm idea that brought me close to the cycle of life and death.

The clay vessel represents life and death. On the farm, it was a common occurrence for animals to die for any and all kinds of reasons. And when an animal died, its remains were burnt. I relate this process of cremation to the same process of firing the clay vessel. The origins of the vessel form were inspired from bird and insect nests. The organic materials of the nest were created as a way to begin life. These same materials were used to fuel the fire that ended the containment in which life existed.

The organic qualities of nature have inspired my art. I have found materials that represent my perception of life, through nature and my present environment. This derivation is not different from other artists. Frank Boyden, a ceramic artist, speaks of his influences gained from traveling through Peru, viewing the pre-Columbian pottery,

These are things that are so exquisite and so mysterious and so powerful that they literally changed my life and the way I think about my environment and the way I felt about myself...These things are really about the people's lives, where they live, a total reflection of their environment. Really nothing was passed up. Every aspect of their culture was dealt with, somehow or other, and it's all right here. I really felt akin to that in many ways because of the microcosm of the material that I deal with in my own backyard. (Speight, 179)

The materials and found objects that I refer to are similar to the same discovery process that Frank Boyden spoke of. From found objects, I began to build forms that expressed my ideas of the inherent qualities a clay vessel should possess. The uniqueness of the found objects were considered. From these preliminary observations, sketches were made of the found objects, while at the same time clay models were made from the sketches. This manipulation of the small clay forms eventually led to the larger final form. The organic materials inspired the surface qualities that were explored through texture. The final form became a personal statement which a vessel represented, almost like giving it a personal identity using my own finger prints. Important questions of the formal aspects still needed to be addressed, such as size, scale, shape and color.

PROCESS

I started to create my interpretation of a vessel form, by working with the clay. A red earthenware clay body was mixed to adopt the rich browns that were from the original found objects and organic materials. I also started to experiment with various materials that had reddish brown pigments. The brown coloration was important to the surface because it was inherent of the organic objects that initially inspired the work. I connect the organic quality and the natural cycle of life and death to the earth. The earthen colors of reds and browns are an attempt to complete this idea in the surface quality of the clay. The clay needed a red earthen color, so a terra sigillatta mixed from red iron oxide was added. It is similar to a slip or engobe used to decorate or coat pottery. The terra sigillatta is a mixture of clays and oxides which works as a seal around the clay body to give a luster or finish. The red earthenware clay alone would produce a light pink to flesh color after the bisque firing. The intention for the sigillatta was to produce a darker red color, rather than the traditional bisque color. The terra sigillatta is a liquid mixture and was sprayed on to combine with the leather hard or bone dry clay body. After the bisque fire, the vessel form was fired a second and last time in a pit firing. The pit firing uses organic materials such as straw, sawdust and small pieces of wood to give fire marks or flashings of color. I used garbage cans as kilns, rather than a pit or a open-top brick kiln. I could monitor the air intake by positioning the lid. The combustible materials were alternated around each bisque clay piece so that greater amounts of fire marks or flashings of color would occur. The flashing effects are achieved by the reduction of oxygen in the red iron oxide

clay body, changing the color. This process is all by chance, depending on what type of materials are used or what oxides were applied to the clay body.

This first firing did not give a satisfying finish to the ceramic vessel's appearance. The shape and size seemed complete but the outside surface needed a richer texture and color. From my earlier experiences with bronze sculpture, I had worked with a wax that was used for casting. The microcrystalline wax had a dark brown appearance and seemed to be the right color. The wax was used as a color and texture test and was easier to work with than traditional glazes. If it worked, this color could be imitated in a glaze for a more permanent covering later. The melted wax was applied to the form with a brush and later rubbed into the surface. It was an appealing texture but it still did not satisfy my expectations.

This is when the series of drawings, which promised to solve the problems with the vessel form and its texture, were started. I had to maintain sense of purpose with the drawings. The drawing techniques that I wanted to use had to relate back to the vessel and the firing process. I perceived the seeing skills of drawing and personal feelings of the object to be combined in the image. Matisse wrote in his diary in 1939 stating,

I have always seen drawing not as the exercise of particular skill, but above all as a means of expression of ultimate feelings and states of mind. (Roger-Lafferty, 19)

Because I was exploring new materials, the task seemed self consuming, at times. Many different kinds of materials were tried, both traditional and non-traditional. First, there were experiments with ink washes using brown and black inks that would duplicate the brown of the wax. Then the ceramic form

was drawn on paper in hopes of finding a suitable texture in this medium. The paper could be given a texture by rubbing it with sandpaper, but this image did not appeal to the overall statement of the vessel form. The search continued by tearing tar paper into the shape of the vessel form and applying wax to this surface. After this I used collage, pasting the tar paper pieces to a larger paper format of ink washes. This composition (Fig. 1) depicts the first three-dimensional vessel form interacting with the two-dimensional image. However, a new problem arose. The vessel form progressively changed in appearance. The two-dimensional imagery had become a way in which to solve the texture of the vessel form. My intention was to have the images interact with the form to suggest its origins and my ideology of the vessel.

These new ceramic forms had a new texture in the clay surface. The texture problem had been solved by using the cross hatching marks from an ink drawing. These same drawn marks were incised in a plaster slab with a knife. This became a mold for the clay slabs used for building the vessel forms. The clay would be pushed in to the surface texture on the plaster to pick up a relief impression. The vessel form had also changed slightly in appearance by the addition of thicker clay pieces to the top ridge. This was done to give visual weight to the form without actually adding the same thickness everywhere. Now there were drawings of different shaped forms and forms that had their own textural surface. If the wax was applied on the newer forms, it would hide the texture that the clay had transferred from the plaster slab. Somehow, there had to be a new two-dimensional solution for the newer forms.

The new ceramic vessels were made from the same red earthenware clay body, which provided a lower firing temperature. It had a high mixture of

grog or ground particles of fired clay to reduce thermal shock and warping. The pit firing procedure was even more unpredictable than the gas kilns. The firing was hard to control with all of the various materials. It was important the clay body withstand sudden changes in temperature and uneven heat. The terra sigillata was also applied by spraying to provide a darker red color. Experimenting with the burning materials provided various flashings of color and carbon residue deposits. The results were random areas of subtle grays to deep blacks. There could be some control of the flashing effects by the way the form was positioned in the kiln. It seemed the more controlled the firing, the more unsatisfactory the results. If there were undesirable results from a firing, the pieces could be fired again to improve the surface quality.

It was from these flashings that the second and final series of drawings were created. One form in particular had very successful flashing effects (Fig. 2). It created the same shape of the vessel form, only smaller. This form gave way to a new idea. Instead of using the texture as the basis for the two-dimensional compositions, I would use a material that would work effectively on both paper and clay. The coloration on the form had the alluring quality that characterizes the clay vessel. The decision to use charcoal to create the drawings best completed what I had struggled to find. Only now the process of working with the clay had to be changed into working with a two-dimensional plane. It was like working in two separate worlds, that required different ways of thinking. At least now, there was a commonality between the two.

It was at this time that the vessel forms were used as models to draw from, as one would use a still life. Since a total of twelve different variations of the forms had been created out of clay, I could observe the forms in different ways.

The total group of vessels set up into rows provided an interesting way in which to display them. This was the first way in which they were composed on paper. I worked with large sheets paper, approximately 4 feet by 7 feet. Since the ceramic vessels were all approximately 1 1/2 feet to 2 feet high, they were represented on paper at the same size or larger. This way of drawing is also used by Tony Hepburn, an artist who uses clay sculptures and drawings on an interactive basis. He says:

I usually draw on a one to one ratio with the pieces they may relate to. The reason for this is crucial to my acts of making drawings and sculpture. On one level it helps me understand the elusive, fugitive notion of scale but more importantly it establishes body rhythms that help in the making of the work. (Tony Hepburn, 38)

The first attempts at drawing with ink were over worked because of the unfamiliarity of the scale, size and materials. The use of ink washes along with several different kinds of charcoal made the drawing too dark and did nothing to enhance the concept. The drawings had to possess an object-like character without neglecting the surface image.

The drawings that I sought to complete were partially aided by research collected over the previous two years. I had looked at many different artists, and had studied their techniques by seeing their work in person. One artist in particular came to mind because I had recently seen a retrospective of his drawings from 1973-1987 in Minneapolis. The approach of Jim Dine had illustrated a way in which to study the forms. By looking at his work, I noticed that he modified the background slightly in the value relationships he placed in the object. The light hit the object from the same direction but values varied by the use of line and solid colors. His approach went beyond the observation

and effects of light. It was most evident in his figurative works. I needed to create a way of seeing that would develop my drawing style.

Working with conte alone, I drew the images just with line. Then going back over it, the charcoal was added to give value. I tried to vary the way in which the background interacted with the object, but I had no intention of completing the background. All the textures were created with value and line. Even the drawings that used groupings of vessels were intended to project the object as being isolated. The first drawing, entitled *Ring around the Rosie* (Fig. 3), was a grouping of vessel forms which could either be seen in rows or in a circle. The charcoal was blended and rubbed to give a velvety feel to the forms. This is a natural characteristic of the charcoal. I wanted the honesty of the medium to remain in the drawing style.

As the drawing progressed, I started to combine shadowed forms with the vessel forms (Fig. 4). This was done by lighting the ceramic forms and looking at the shadows cast on the walls. I found that the best time to observe the vessel was at night because the studio could be made completely dark. I used a spotlight to play with different lighting situations. This is when the title originally developed for the exhibition, *Nocturnal Images / Hollow Objects*. I had purposely waited to work on the drawings at night, composing and arranging the objects in the best possible lighting. I could later finish them during the day, but the night provided the catalyst for seeing the ceramic vessels at their best. It also seemed that the forms became truly isolated, and the hollow area of the forms became as dark as the room at night.

This directed me to make drawings of individual vessel forms on smaller sheets of paper, 41 1/2 inches by 29 1/2 inches. I composed the vessel forms

alone in the center of the paper (Fig. 5) to give the appearance of floating forms. I believe part of this was from my interest with Mark Rothko's color field painting. The paintings that he produced gave me the visual feeling that the colors floated and vibrated away from the canvas. It almost seemed like they had a life of their own. One might find it peculiar to study Rothko's work as an expressive style, but that is the way I perceived it. Rothko's teacher, Max Weber had impressed upon his student his theory of art stating:

A color must be more than a color. A form must be more than a form; it must suggest the sacred more only found in the spiritual. Everything must be more than it is visibly....Matter is merely matter; it lies and knows not. Matter inbreathed with spirit, moves and transcends; it illumines darkness, and fills emptiness, and enlivens even the vacuous. (Clearwater, 17)

And even Mark Rothko had stated about his own paintings:

You might as well get one thing straight. I'm not an abstractionist. I'm not interested in the relationship of color and form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on. (Seldes, 38)

I wanted this same kind of presence to exist in my own work. I continued to work on the smaller paper size isolating some of the vessel forms, drawing others as just shadows and combining others as both shadows and objects. In one of the smaller compositions, I worked with lights to achieve multiple shadowed forms (Fig. 6). This composition was a study using an effect similar of the work Donald Sultan. Sultan's images of lemons used mass of objects, with no value definition between each object. He uses a shape of the object to isolate each form. "In the process of translating things from the real world, Sultan discovered the joy of ambiguity: images that could take on more than one meaning. For example, his lemon forms could also be interpreted as an eye-

socket" (Dunlop, 12). I found the ambiguity somewhat intriguing and tried to combine this to the vessel form as one way to show a grouping. The blackness of the objects still conveys an object with a slightly highlighted edge giving form.

After I finished all of the smaller compositions, I worked on the remaining two larger pieces, again approximately 4 feet by 7 feet. The composition *By the back of my hand* (Fig. 7) was an attempt to work with very positive and negative objects. I wanted to see how the forms would be affected by the use of a reversed background. When this composition was started, I looked at the way in which Robert Motherwell handled his large painted images. It was my intention to try to make the white areas become more important and positive. I found that the vessel form had to remain more white, with a high contrast of shadows to be effective on the black background. The addition of straight lines into the composition was taken from the studio wall, suggesting a way in which to section off the objects.

Robert Motherwell's abstracted images have contained an intriguing use of color, or for the most part, lack of color. Motherwell himself had said of his *Spanish Elegies* that the color "black is death, anxiety; white is life, eclat" (Flam, 10). "Mainly I use each color as simply symbolic: ocher for the earth, green for the grass, blue for the sea and sky. I guess that black and white, which I use most often, tend to be the protagonists" (Flam, 10). But his use of color is a way to compose "sensations, feelings, ideas, and memories. Black and white, for example, may evoke the abstract ideas of death and life" (Flam, 10). But Motherwell explains his paintings best by saying:

I realized that that picture (*Black and White No.2*) had been

painted over several times and radically changed, in shape, balances and weights. At one time it was too black, at one time the rhythm of it was too regular, at one time there was not enough variation in the geometry of the shapes. I realized there were about ten thousand brush strokes in it, and that each brush stroke is a decision. It is not only a decision of aesthetics-will this look more beautiful?-but a decision that concerns one's inner I: is it getting too heavy, or too light? It has to do with one's sense of sensuality: the surface is getting too coarse, or is not fluid enough. It has to do with one's sense of life: is it airy enough, or is it leaden? It has to do with one's own inner sense of weights: I happen to be a heavy, clumsy, awkward man, and if something gets too airy, even though I might admire it very much, it doesn't feel like my self, my I. (Flam, 12)

It is from these parts of Motherwell's work that I connect my own work. His ideas of black and white are symbolic, where mine tend to be more subdued into form. Though the subject of life and death are used within my work, I do not isolate it just to the use of color.

The last drawing (Fig. 8) completed for the exhibition had larger vessel forms than most of the previous drawings. This drawing was completed along with the two larger ceramic forms. These forms were a bit taller and had a different kind of surface than the rest. In the drawing *The Gathering* (Fig. 8), the quality and texture change slightly, just as the original ceramic forms. I had thought while working on the images, that my drawing style had remained the same. But after I had partially finished the drawing, it became apparent the style had changed. I believe this was a result of changing the scale and surface of the clay vessels.

The final clay vessels had been resolved by the combination of wax along with the clay texture. The first time, I applied the wax to the clay with a brush and covered up the the clay texture. Later, instead of leaving the wax thick after applying with the brush, I used a torch to melt away the wax to bring up the clay surface. I had to be concerned with not melting away too much, so

that the color and gloss of the wax would remain. Only two pieces were completed this way for the exhibit. They were much larger and the piece entitled *Balancing Act* (Fig. 9) was built in an attempt to suggest a precarious balance of form. It was built from the base up, as all the other vessel forms, but there was a larger contrast in size from top to bottom. The opening at the top was also larger than the other pieces. This combination of elements made the form difficult to build. I weighted each side as I built it piece by piece, distributing the weight evenly so it would not fall. The clay also had to have time to dry, so the wet clay could be supported. Too much drying time would cause the whole piece to collapse.

The final thesis exhibition consisted of 14 drawings and 7 vessel forms. All of the titles were derived from personal meanings associated with the imagery. My interest in poetry helped in creating titles for my work, as well as giving content. This was another way that the artist Robert Motherwell has influenced my work. He too used poetry to generate work and give content and meaning. The thesis title originally developed from a necessity for seeing the clay form better during the night, but poetry supported this idea. Since I do work in an expressive manner from sources in my life, the poem by Dylan Thomas, *In My Craft Or Sullen Art* came to mind. His poem sums up the personal feelings I had at the time I was creating this work, or at least, came to identify with it better.

In my craft or sullen art
 Exercised in the still night
 When only the moon rages
 And the lovers lie abed
 With all their griefs in their arms,
 I labour by singing light
 Not for ambition or bread

Or the strut and trade of charms
On ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art. (Dylan Thomas, 142)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is clear to me that the process of working with materials is the very fiber that binds me to the art and its making. It is through the discovery process, that I find the multiple reasons for the imagery. Many of the materials that I use have dual meanings and purposes. The same materials that are used in the pit firing relate to the origins of charcoal through the process of fire. In the charcoal drawings, I wanted to give the effect of smoke, again relating back to fire. The shape chosen for the vessel refers to basic elements in nature.

The concept of the imagery was taken from my personal experiences. The vessel form, for me, refers to the soul. It contains the ideas of life and death. It is not just about myself but about life and the people in my life. It is about the effects of my surroundings, memories and feelings. The clay is the origin of myself and my art. The drawing and its process "is a lineage from cradle to grave" (Tony Hepburn, 38). I take my ideas from what I know. I cannot explain all that I am, for some things cannot be put into words. That is why I aspire to art.

And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it over again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it (Jeremiah 18:4).

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**APPENDIX:
SELECTED WORKS**



Figure 1. *Is There Safety in Numbers?* 1989

Ink wash, tar paper, and wax collage 52" x 97". Clay Vessel. 20" x 10" x 10".



Figure 2. *Keep My Grave.* 1989

Earthenware vessel, pit fired. 11" x 11" 10".



Figure 3. *Ring around the Rosie*. 1990

Charcoal, conte on paper. 52" x 92".



Figure 4. *Between Two*. 1990

Charcoal, conte on paper. 52" x 82".



Figure 5. *Vessel One*. 1990

Charcoal, conte on paper. 41 1/2" x 29 1/2".

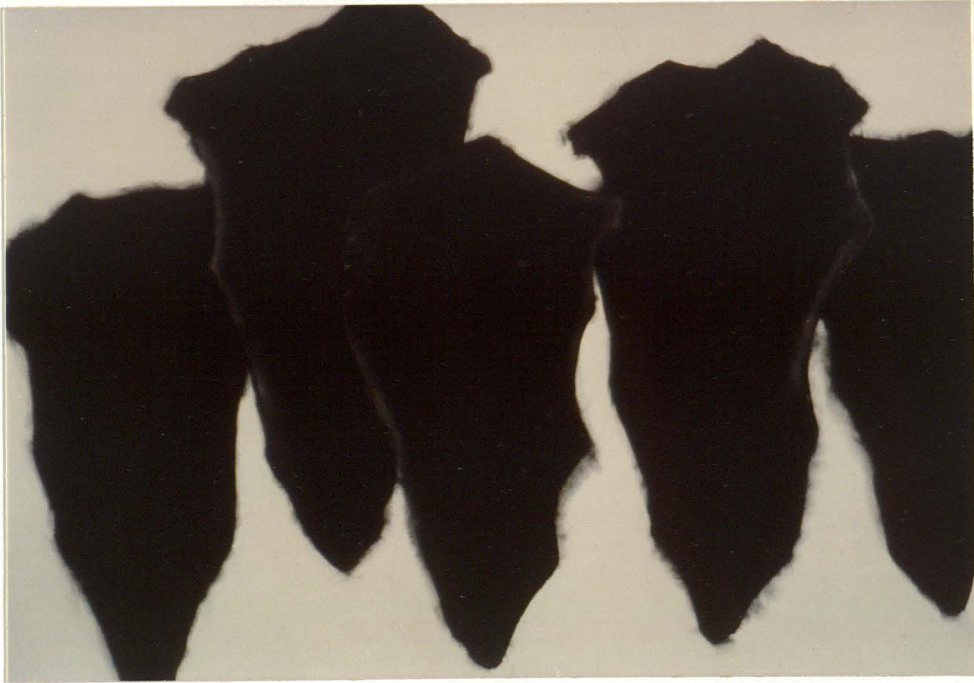


Figure 6. *Empty Promises*. 1990

Charcoal, conte on paper. 29 1/2" x 41 1/2".

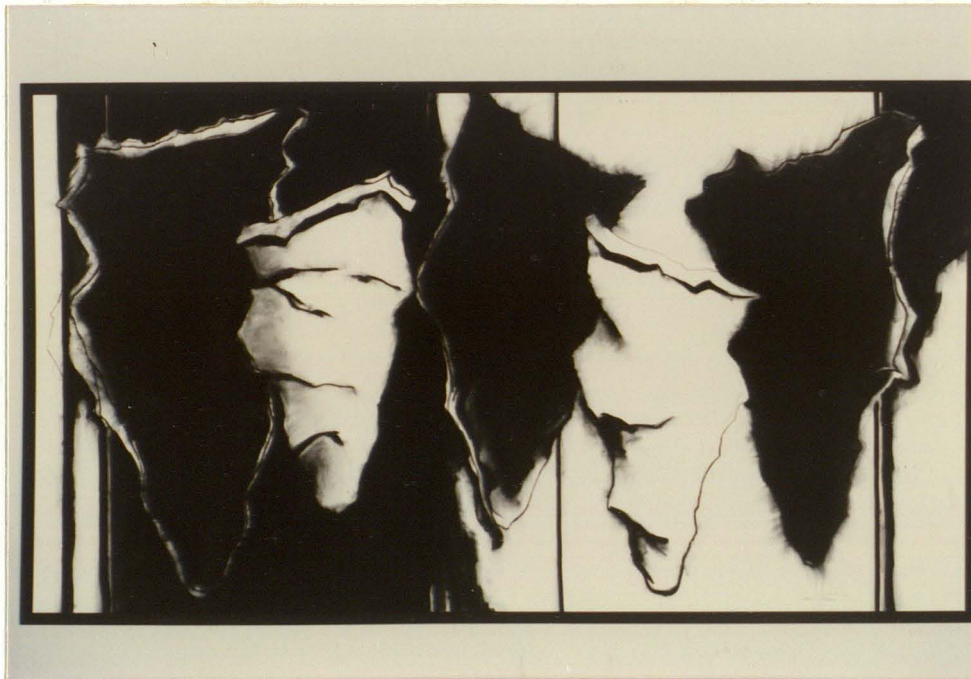


Figure 7. *By the back of my Hand*. 1990

Charcoal, conte on paper. 52"x 92".

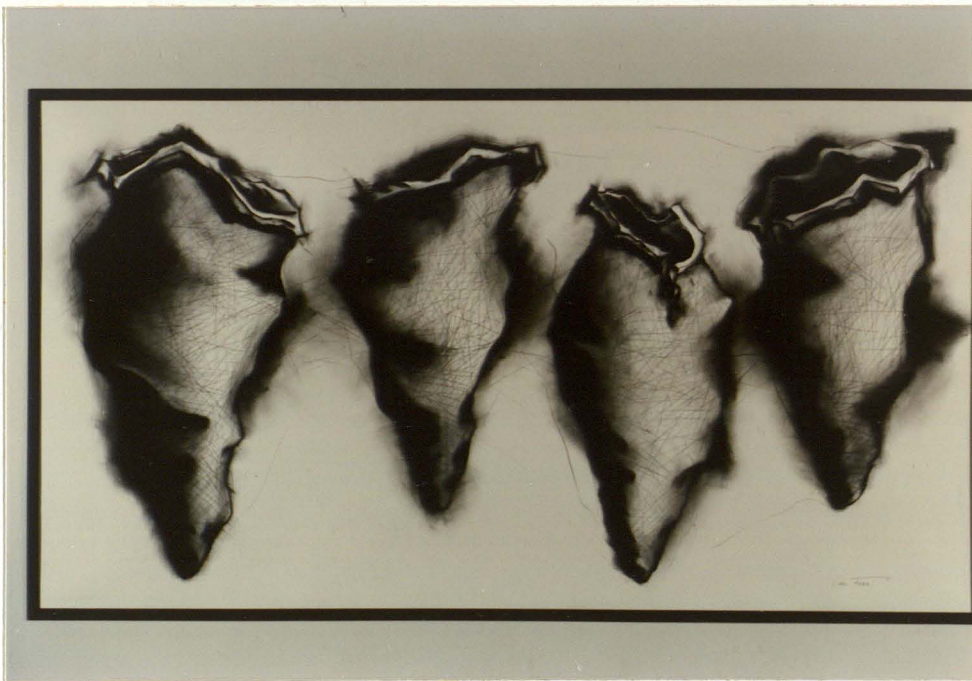


Figure 8. *The Gathering*. 1990

Charcoal, conte on paper. 52" x 94".



Figure 9. *Balancing Act*. 1990

Earthenware vessel and wax coated. 35" x 14" x 10".

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