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## Clay and creative vision

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**CLAY AND CREATIVE VISION**

**AN EXHIBITION PAPER**

**by**

**RAYMOND C. POCQUETTE**

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

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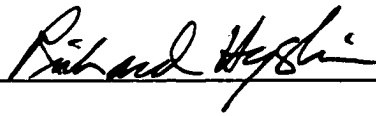
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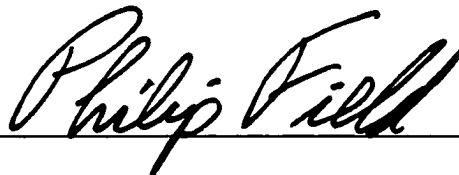
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May 2003

## ABSTRACT

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My work reflects my attitude towards life. Experience has taught me that I am the only person that I can change, and then, only if I am willing. My work is not intended to be a mirror of society or in any way represent a model for change of any kind. I throw pottery, sculpt, and paint because these activities please me and help define my humanity.

This disquisition is a record of my journey through life as an artist, from the inception of my efforts through the work represented in this thesis show. The paper is divided into major categories in which I discuss the major influences in my life and work, the methods by which I create my sculpted vessels, and where I expect this exploration to lead me.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I have searched for perfection in form since I threw my first pot. In this search I created thousands of beautifully shaped, but static forms. These forms were static because they were well balanced and symmetrical, but far from perfect. They were imperfect because they were not alive.

Over time I could see that my work needed a different focus. I needed to breathe life into my vessels and thus, give them movement and character that went beyond mere utilitarian forms. The inspiration that gave shape to these concepts came from my experiences as a scuba diver in the Florida Keys. Within these pages you'll see shapes inspired by sponges, corals and marine organisms of the living sea. These vessels are alive because of the manner in which they activate the space in which they reside and express the sense of flow and movement that had been absent in my "perfect", symmetrical vessels. They are an expression of both physical and spiritual balance and harmony.

Living vessels: from the spirit, by the mind and hands of Ray Pocquette.

## PERSONAL CONTEXT

In an effort to understand how my work fits into an artistic context, it was first necessary for me to come to a greater understanding of myself as an artist. For years, I did not think of myself as an artist and, as a result, did not think of my work as art. I thought that, because of my lack of formal training as an artist, my work could not be considered art. I considered myself an experimenter, a builder, and a craftsman, because of the craft tradition from which much of my work springs. I considered the process by which I create to be nothing more than a series of unique problems to solve. I love the technical challenges that present themselves during the creative, constructive process. Whenever I view an exquisite piece, whether it is a table, ceramic vase, or painting, I cannot help but ask myself: "How did the artist do that?", "How would I make an authentic celadon glaze?", "How would I keep the tile for a tabletop from curling as it dries?" Because I have come to define myself by the way in which I confront these challenges, it has seemed at times that my very sense of self was dependent upon my success at conquering the next challenge. Immersion in the process of creating the pieces for the thesis exhibition and the writing of this disquisition has helped me to understand myself in an artistic context. The very nature of my responses to the technical challenges revolving around the creative process contributes to the fact that I am an artist. The exhibition of my work exemplifies my evolution as an artist. Through this work, the reader will see the craft tradition from which I have grown to become the artist that I am.

## EVOLUTION AS AN ARTIST

I come from a tradition of builders and craftsmen. My mother and grandmothers used their skills as seamstresses to provide clothing for their families. My grandmothers also constructed a variety of functional craft objects for household use, such as quilts, rugs and doilies, which were admired for their beauty but were considered to be craft, not art. Although the work was beautiful, function always preceded form. An examination of my forebearers' craft reveals a consistent pattern of creativity but creativity directed at the creation of functional objects. One of my grandfathers, Joseph Mathe, was a blacksmith and inventor who envisioned and built the first automated car wash in the United States; it was in his shop that I learned to work with tools.

In growing from this background I realize that I have always been a builder of things, always experimenting with some new machine or gadget and consistently seeking the unique and unusual way to get a job done. When my mother told me to clean my room, I first went to the garage to build a plow or some other "labor saving" device to assist in the process. I eagerly anticipated visits to my grandfather's house because I had access to his shop. I knew that when I arrived, there would be a box of scrap wood pieces set aside for my use on projects that were only limited by my imagination. While my family visited, I worked in the shop, cutting and shaping wood. The earliest object that I can recall making was a wooden sailboat, albeit a rough rendering of a sailboat, but it was functional and it did sail. I think that it is these early experiences with wood, under the occasional tutelage of my grandfather that led to my appreciation of the functional form. I have continued to work with wood throughout my life. As my woodworking skills have

improved, the difficulty of the projects that I have tackled has increased. I went from making cabinets for my kitchen to making furniture on a commission-basis for stores and individuals, directing my creative energies to function rather than form.

Even as a child, I held function in high regard and my desire to create beauty has its origins in these roots. The beauty in art that I have come to appreciate is fairly universal, but the beauty that I endeavor to create is nearly always functional. Throughout my life, I have dabbled in the creation of "art", but rarely as a means of expressing some artistic idea or ideal.

I decided to become a painter during the summer after my first year of college. I was unemployed and had no idea how to fund the coming school year, and although I had never painted before, I decided art was an avenue for monetary gain. I devised that if I could sell twenty paintings at an average price of twenty dollars each, I could cover tuition and books. I painted anything that I thought would sell and, by the end of the summer, I had sold twenty-one paintings to cover my expenses. The following summer I got a job that paid well and I no longer needed to paint; so ended my brief career as a painter. Interestingly, although I've painted numerous portraits, I've never painted one in color. It was enough initially for me to know that I enjoyed grayscale painting, and could not see how the use of color would add to the image. While in school taking my first philosophy class a major influence in my life and work began to evolve.

In the late 1970's I undertook a search for my own spiritual identity through an independent study of the world's religions that continued in earnest for the next twenty years. I began by researching and reading seminal as well as major works of all established religions. The Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita, Tao Te Ching, Koran, and Bible

are just a few of the works I have studied. My search led me to an awakening within myself in which I achieved some understanding of the apparent forces in opposition that exist within all life as well as the need for this apparent contradiction. My understanding of these forces is best expressed in the Tao Te Ching:

When all under heaven know beauty as beauty, already there is ugliness;  
 When everyone knows goodness, this accounts for badness.  
 Being and nonbeing give birth to each other,  
 Difficult and easy compete with each other,  
 Long and short form each other,  
 High and low fulfill each other,  
 Tone and voice harmonize with each other,  
 Front and back follow each other-It is ever thus. (Tzu, 46)

With this understanding came the need to achieve and express the same type of balance in my own life. Family and career resided on one side of my personal balance, but there was no creative component for the other side. By 1988 I was finally ready to pick up a paintbrush again. I painted a series of seven original works over a period of fourteen months. Through these paintings, I made my first attempt at expressing ideas of my own. This series of work was intended only to express emotion. Although I was relatively satisfied with these original works, they were not well received. I possess the technical competence to paint subject matter that would have sold, but I didn't want to rediscover landscape art or wildlife art that would have been commercially profitable but redundant and imitative. In retrospect, I had begun to discern that I was at first too willing to allow the market to dictate my perception of success and my philosophy toward art as creative expression had started to evolve.

The next major breakthrough for me as an artist came in 1990 when I attempted pottery. In retrospect my move towards creating pottery on the wheel seems a natural result of my search for balance in my life as well as my evolution as an artist, but at the

time it seemed a total nonsequitur. I bought a new Brent wheel from a local dealer, a kiln at a garage sale, some clay, and the book, Pottery On The Wheel (Woody, 1982) and set out to teach myself to throw without ever having seen a pot made on a wheel. At first, my struggle and desire was to simply produce a pot, but this desire soon evolved into an obsession to throw the "perfect form". I was searching for balance, trying to find perfect symmetry and thin, even walls from the lip to the foot in uncooperative lumps of clay. At the time I thought I was merely enjoying the technical challenges involved in throwing ultra thin walls of 1/8 inch to 3/16 inch thick on a vase that stands 15 to 17 inches tall. I now realize that this quest for symmetry was in reality an obsession with the space that is the pot. When throwing or examining the work of other potters, I would always focus my attention on the space within the vessel, as it is the space that provides the essence of the vessel. In the following quote translators often substitute the word "essence" for "usefulness". For my purposes I could use both. "Essence" is descriptive of my spiritual identification with the space within the vessels, while "usefulness" is indicative of my desire to create functional vessels. "Clay is molded to make a pot, but it is in the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the clay pot lies." "Therefore, benefit may be derived from something, but it is in nothing that we find usefulness." (Tzu, 55)

Although I still don't know if the perfect form exists, I completed some amateur pottery that I was pleased with. Interestingly, I was only able to achieve this limited success after learning to breathe all over again. By incorporating breathing exercises into the centering process, I was finally able to establish control over my body, which allowed the clay to center itself, and pottery to rise from the wheel head. This "control" is more accurately expressed as a joining with the clay. The creation of the pot on the wheel is an

intimate connected experience in which the potter and the clay must give equally of themselves. When I fought the clay it took forever to make a bad pot, but when I focused on breathing and joined with the clay as part of a process I began to bring to life some exquisite vessels. Lao Tzu expresses this interaction:

When you wish to contract something, you must momentarily expand it;  
 When you wish to weaken something, you must momentarily strengthen it;  
 When you wish to reject something, you must momentarily join with it;  
 When you wish to seize something, you must momentarily give it up;  
 This is called "subtle insight."  
 The soft and weak conquer the strong. (Tzu, 80)

During the first months of my experimentation in pottery, I discovered San Antonio potter, Harding Black. Harding Black was one of the founding members of the Southwest Craft Center in San Antonio and had been active teaching ceramics in the area for over sixty years. Since I had never even seen anyone throw a pot but had taught myself my craft through reading and experimentation, I endeavored to meet Mr. Black. I took one of my unglazed pots to his studio and spent hours in his studio talking with him about pottery. He offered me a job as his apprentice. I was unable to accept his generous offer, but through our conversation, I learned a great deal about the creation of ceramics. As Mr. Black talked about clay bodies and palettes of glazes, which I had never considered, a whole new world opened up to me, a world that in many ways continues to be a mystery. It was through this conversation with Harding Black that I learned to look beyond the form and look forward to the glaze. He taught me that the form was only necessary as a medium on which to apply the glaze in much the same way that a person buys the painting not the canvas. The beauty and variety of Harding Black's glazes inspired me to begin my own investigation of ancient Chinese glazes.

I first became aware of the beauty of Chinese, most particularly Sung Dynasty



glazes when I toured the Smithsonian Museum in 1973. Although I had never really given any thought to producing pottery at that date, I was truly awe-struck by these ancient vases and bowls. I saw in these shapes and glazes an enduring vibrancy and life. As I researched these glazes and began to experience some success in creating them, I became aware that there was still something missing in my own work. My pots still did not seem to have motion and life.

My continuing investigation led me to Soji Hamada (Leach, 1984). Hamada was a devotee of the *mingei* movement and a champion of tradition and the work of the folk potter as an expression of personal rather than universal values. He espoused the importance of truth in materials, craft, and lifestyle with integrity at all levels, ideas that are important to me as well. He found beauty in the work of the untutored, the innocent, and the common. Hamada placed great importance on beauty and the sensual. He made exquisite, simple, earthy pots whose simplicity masked their power. These were made completely from local materials and wood ash from his hearth, which inspired me to work with glaze materials from sources as simple as local clay, wood ash, and onion skin ash. Hamada's pottery had a quality that set it apart from all others. His pots seemed alive with movement! I had been searching for some way to translate the movement of the process of making pottery to the finished pot and breathe life into my own work. Hamada had found the secret. He understood that the movement of the wheel is alive and that this movement can impart life to the pots that rise up from it. He did not create barriers to this life in the way that many potters do by forcing the manufacture of a particular object. He nurtured the growth of the pot from the head of the wheel, recognizing that each life is unique. If a pot went off center he allowed and encouraged the growth so that the pot

could realize its own potential. Then he focused on this potential and the innate, latent personality of each pot to bring out the beauty that already existed. It wasn't until I read accounts written by potters who observed Hamada at work, like Bernard Leach, (Leach, Beyond East And West, 1985) that I understood the difference between craft pottery and art, the difference between a static pot and the pot that was alive. I had been so focused on finding the perfect form, the perfect pot, and the perfect glaze, that I wasn't allowing my pots to live.

For eight years, I investigated and emulated the pottery forms and glazes of the ancient master Chinese potters in an attempt to co-opt the enduring legacy of their art form. My personal philosophy of art as a creative endeavor awakened and evolved during this time. I voraciously read everything I could get my hands on related to the history and creation of pottery. I endeavored to totally immerse myself in the art and craft of this medium. Ultimately this immersion led to an in depth study of the glazes of the Sung Dynasty of China. Through this research I decided the best way to learn about this ware was to try and reproduce it. My reproduction of Chinese pottery was rewarding for me in many ways; I learned a great deal about process, clay bodies, a wide variety of beautiful glazes, and about the interaction between a pot's clay body and glaze. However, my attempt trying to emulate the legacy of the ancient Chinese potters revealed itself to me to be imitative, derivative, and unexpressive of my own creative sources. The time had come to find a way in which I could use this body of knowledge to fulfill my own promise as a ceramic artist.

Although my work was not informed by that of J. Sheldon Carey, because I devised my own system of throwing pottery upside down in order to produce pots of

extraordinary height and wall thickness, I have since investigated his work and found serendipitously that our experimentation with throwing pots from an inverted position parallels precisely. Carey states in his work, *Throwing Upside Down*, (Carey, 1954) that his pots reached a maximum height of thirty inches in one section by using a conventional electric wheel, centering and opening ball of clay, turning the wheel (which was mounted on the vertical shaft of a drill press upside down), and sitting close to the floor to throw. In my own experimentation, I do the wheelwork for my pots on bats, which enables me to set a piece aside and allow it to firm before returning to it. This wait-time also enables the pot to hold together while I flip the piece and hang it upside down. After the vessel firms, I work the interior of the vessel with my hands or wooden ribs and pull the walls of the vessel, thinning and shaping, and then I separate it from the bat.

My artistic maturity has evolved to include regard for the reaction of my audiences. Mark Rothko stated that he painted to express emotion (Chipp, 1968, 549). He stated that he knew he was getting his intentions across when he would see a viewer standing in front of his paintings weeping. For me, expectation of viewer reaction is complex. I am pleased when a visitor to my studio picks up a pot and cradles it, or holds it for a time while looking at and studying some of my other pottery. However, I now realize this could change. My pottery now has a much greater sculptural quality. The vessels that I am creating do not invite the patron to touch as my symmetrical work does but that is all right. This is just a different direction for me. My body of work now includes a greater variety of ideas and forms than it ever has. But it is one thing to have these ideas and fully another to bring them to fruition.

**My work has evolved to the present time such that I concentrate my artistic energies on the creation of pottery with dynamic vibrancy and movement. I am still interested in the functionality of my art but it is subsidiary to its form. My roots as a potter lie in function, but the expression of these roots will continue to evolve.**

## CHAPTER II

### PROCESS

#### LIVING CLAY, LIVING VESSELS: A DISCUSSION

I only recently began to understand how to breathe life into my vessels. All of my vessels that seem to have the movement and life that I hope to impart to my work share one thing in common: in some way, they each activate the space in which they reside. In my search for the "perfect" form, I initially created static forms; they were static because they were stolid, well-balanced, symmetrical forms. They looked and felt the same all the way around. Now, in creating my vessels, I intentionally play with the aspects of shape and balance. My work no longer appears the same from every point of view and, as a result, has some of the movement that I have been looking for.

In contemplating my life as an artist from painter to potter, I can discern one common thread. When I painted, I was very concerned with the archival value of the materials that I used and checked pigments for light-fastness as well as canvas for acid content; I wanted my work to stand the test of time. As a ceramic artist, I can see the connection between the archival value of a particular type of paint and the archival value of pottery. Pots embody permanency via both clay and glazes. This permanence in pottery and the need for permanence in the colors of my glazes is a concept that I have given a good deal of thought to. I fire at cone 6 or higher because the glazes at these temperatures (2236°F) are more durable and the clay that I use in most of my work is

nearly vitreous.

In addition, I am no longer limited in the range of colors that I use. My goal has been to thoroughly investigate the limits of firing and produce every glaze color that the fire will allow without the use of stains. I have resisted the use of stains for the very reason that other potters and ceramic artists prefer them; in a word, predictability. I've tried various stains but I do not care for the results. Stains offer perfectly predictable results every time but the colors tend to feel lifeless to me. I see the fire of the kiln as being a living entity, the catalyst that imparts life to my glazes. With the use of stains, I see no life and no magic. With the natural materials that I use, such as clay, crushed stone, and ash, the results are not entirely predictable so there is the possibility for an exciting, unexpected result that does not exist with stains.

In my current work, I see a recurring theme of emergence and growth. Sometimes vines that appear to be growing up the sides of the pots represent these ideas. Another way in which this growth or change is represented is through the carving of flame patterns in the clay, as with the "Alaria" group (Page 44). The flames are particularly significant because they represent a painful means of rebirth. To me, these flames have the same significance as the flames of a forest fire. A forest of old ideas that were nurtured and developed over a period of years is turned into the minerals that will feed kiln fires from which a new generation of ideas will emerge.

The theme of emergence is central to work displayed in this thesis show. In this series, I use vessels made of clay, created through a combination of pottery and sculptural techniques in which people are depicted as emerging from the clay sides of the vessels. This is representational in nature because I see myself as having been mired in a single

form of expression and looking for release. In this series, the fired clay represents unchanging nature, but the texture of the walls is a swirling mass, which indicates a disruption in what is perceived as unchanging. I have studied Taoist Philosophy, and I also see in this series a sense of being a part of the interaction in the natural rhythm and flow of all creation. This sense of flow and movement is another feeling that I have endeavored to impart to the viewer with the pieces in this show. In Taoist philosophy, enlightenment can only come to one who understands their part in the interconnectedness of all. One way to describe the concept may be to say that as you stand with your toe in a river (a river of water, or the river of time or life) you have an awareness of your toe in the river, but you have an equal awareness that you are also the river. You are time. You are all life. You are all. No single physical experience has helped me feel as connected, or as much a part of the process of life as SCUBA diving. This feeling of being an individual as well as a part of all existence is just one of many dualities. My use of clay is the medium that I choose to express this duality. As a SCUBA enthusiast I am keenly aware of the sensation of being a weightless entity, pushed and pulled at the whim of the forces that surround me, but in the silent world beneath the waves I also experience a euphoric sense of being one with all. I think of a lump of clay on a wheel-head in much the same way as my being in the ocean. I am the force that surrounds the clay, pushing, pulling, and shaping, but at the same time, at one with the clay. Since the shapes in this show are inspired by naturally occurring life forms from the sea, the trick in expressing this feeling of one-ness in clay, this sense of flow, was to temporarily suspend the effects of gravity. I did this by hanging the vessels in an inverted position while working the clay, as described in further detail on page sixteen.

Although I am right-handed, another potter once observed that I throw left-handed because of the way in which I open the clay and pull the walls. 'Opening the clay' is the term that applies to establishing the inside diameter of the bottom of the pot. I do this with my left hand. I use the fingers on the inside of the pot to push it out to the appropriate diameter as I use the thumb of my left hand as a guide. Then, in nearly the same motion, I begin my upward pull to form the walls. I pull with my left hand, and use the index finger of my right hand as a guide. An important philosophical point is that I only throw the inside of the pot. Some potters pull the walls of the pot and then use ribs or other tool to shape the outside of the pot and create the final form. I don't do this. I only make the inside of the pot. When the interior is correct, the exterior follows. This is an excellent metaphor for the spiritual aspect of my work. Without changing from within, I would not have been able to achieve the external that which other people see in my work and myself.

In finishing a pot, I try not to erase the evidence of the creative process. I do not cover up or smooth over the marks that my fingers made in the clay during the pulling of the walls, but I will trim the bottom of the pot. When I trim, I will often try to match the size of the base with the size of the opening for a balanced symmetrical look and feel. This is just about the only circumstance in which I will use tools other than my fingers to make a pot. When I was a less experienced potter, I thought that all of the beautifully-shaped pottery was made with the aid of ribs and tools. This concept was reinforced in me every time I looked through pottery supply catalogs, which always display a wide variety of expensive tools. I've learned that as I've become a better potter, I have less need for these tools. I don't know if this is evolution or devolution, but the only tool I use



on any kind of regular basis is not a potter's tool at all but rather is an ordinary ice pick. I use it for cutting, trimming, and even some clean up.

When I first began throwing I thought of gravity as an enemy. I would fight the clay, struggling to pull a wall and impose my will. When I did get a pot the walls were thick, the bases heavy, and the shapes generally unattractive. While still working with my first fifty pounds of clay, I would sit at the wheel and wonder if I was going to be able to make a pot. Success usually took many attempts and deciding when a pot was finished was more a question of knowing when to give up than the realization of a plan. As I progressed through my first 500 pounds of clay, I found success less elusive, and I even began to think about attempting certain shapes. Then, when I learned to work with my breathing and steady my hands, and I found a way to make peace with the clay, the motion of the wheel, and gravity. As I wedged the clay, I learned to visualize the final, finished form. I learned that with thirty ounces of clay I could (usually) make an elegant nine-inch vase. As I grew more skillful I found that I progressed through various phases. I went from wondering if I would get a pot, to knowing I'd be able to make a pot but I wouldn't know what it would look like when finished. I threw hundreds of pots while in this very frustrating phase. Frustrating, because when I'd get a shape that I really liked I found it nearly impossible to duplicate. Hundreds of pots later I found myself able to visualize the final shape while wedging with the knowledge that I would be able to execute the exact form. The final phase came only after I learned a great deal about clay bodies, glazes and their interaction at the interface layer. With this knowledge I was able to shape or carve the body with some degree of certainty as to the way in which the glaze would be affected by the body during the firing. The result of this evolution was literally

thousands of beautifully symmetrical yet somehow lifeless pots. I was finally ready to learn to make art.

Thus concludes the basic methodology that I use for my throwing. With most of the ceramic items in the thesis exhibition of my work, however, I take this procedure one step further.

## ALTERATION WHILE HANGING

Much of the work in this thesis exhibit is hand-thrown and altered. The primary means of alteration is the hanging of the vessel. I do the wheelwork for these altered vessels on bats because of the versatility they allow. Bats enable me to set the piece aside and allow it to firm before returning to it. The bats are specially constructed to enable me to flip a piece and hang it upside down. This method of hanging pots is the principle means of altering the vessels in this exhibit. Typically, I'll throw the basic form, flip it upside down, and place it on one of a number of specially constructed supports that I've designed for this purpose. After the vessel is allowed to firm, still wet but far from leather hard, I'll go into the interior of the vessel with my hands or wooden ribs and begin pulling and altering the vessel. I'll continue until I either achieve the desired shape or until I can go no further without damaging the vessel, in which case I'll let the vessel rest a bit before continuing. After concluding the process of attaining the general shape of the vessel, it continues to hang inverted until it is leather hard. I then separate the vessel from the bat and shape the foot of the pot.

My methodology differs from that of J. Sheldon Carey, who utilizes a conventional electric wheel mounted on the vertical shaft of a drill press upon which he centers and opens his clay, inverts the wheel, reverses the direction of the motor, and sits close to the floor to throw (Carey, 1954, 18).

## ALTERATION WITH SLAB CONSTRUCTION

Of the work in this exhibition, the best example of the use of hand thrown shapes with clay slab additions is *Triton Trumpet* (page 66). When I anticipate the use of slabs as a major component part of a thrown and altered design, I find it particularly necessary to begin with the visualization of the completed final form. To aid the process I begin with sketches of the form in a general sense. These preliminary sketches allow me to see if the object can in fact be created using clay. The sketches also enable me to figure out how and where braces may be needed, and whether the piece can be realized without the use of temporary supports. Since I like to work with relatively thin slabs (3/16 to 1/4 inch in width), I roll out the clay and sandwich it between sheets of exterior sheathing (a type of fiberboard used in housing construction). This fiberboard allows the clay sheets to shed moisture slowly and evenly. After the clay has had an opportunity to stiffen, I will begin the actual construction by wrapping the clay around an armature made of rolled paper insulation. This material will allow the clay to continue to dry in a very slow, controlled manner, yet hold it in a vertical position so that I may continue the construction. Once I have the basic vertical form, I will add the horizontal elements and the other attachments. I'll finish by smoothing out the canvas and other roll marks with a rubber rib.

## DRYING

Drying these vessels can be a bit tricky because of the shapes, the varying thickness of the walls, and the South Texas climate. I understand that ceramic artists typically wrap their sculptural work in sheets of plastic to control the drying process. I have found this to be unsatisfactory due to the number of pieces I have in process at any given time and have concluded that I really need a drying box in which pieces could be stored, hung inverted if necessary, and allowed to dry slowly in closely controlled conditions. My answer to this dilemma came in the form of three aluminum traffic control boxes. Each of the approximately three foot by four foot by twenty inch boxes has a gasketed lid and an exhaust fan; they allow the hanging of the vessels in an inverted fashion as well as controlled drying that is required to avoid the cracking that is common to irregular shapes of variable thickness. An additional modification that I have made to the drying process is the use of exterior sheathing on all drying shelves, commonly available in four by eight foot sheets at any lumberyard. The sheathing is a fiber composition with a tar-like coating. This material is an overlooked but extremely versatile tool for the potter. The use of this material makes good sense to the potter because it wicks moisture away from the pot as it is drying, thereby allowing it to dry more evenly. Sheathing is a lightweight material that is also very useful in more traditional pottery applications because it can be used as a lid or cover to a vessel that will eliminate airflow around a pot and enable the vessel to dry evenly.

## FIRST FIRE

When the pottery and sculpted forms have thoroughly air-dried, I bisque fire them to cone 04 (about 1936° F) in an electric kiln. In this firing, it is important to closely monitor the rise in temperature. I've found that the uneven thickness in the walls of the pieces dictate a slow, carefully monitored temperature rise. I've found that the best way to avoid damage is to allow the temperature to rise no more than 250° F per hour. In addition, I'll allow a soak at 900° F. This firing is hot enough to give strength to the pieces so that breakage during the handling required for glazing is negligible. A second important function of this rather hot bisque firing is to solidify the body enough to minimize the absorption of soluble salts. Many of the glaze formulae that I use contain unwashed Mesquite wood or seaweed ash, both of which contain a variety of soluble materials that can be absorbed by the body. This absorption can cause irreparable harm during the glaze firing in the form of moderate to severe pitting and cratering of the glaze surface. This firing temperature is appropriate for ware if a glaze containing raw ash is sprayed, but if the piece is to be dipped, there will generally be pinholes or cratering. Since many of my low temperature and cone 6 glazes contain raw ash, it is the glaze formula application that dictates the bisque temperature, not the final firing temperature.

## GLAZE APPLICATION

After bisque firing, I glaze. The glazes that I use for my stoneware are my own formulae, based on four years of my own research with Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) glazes. When I began my investigation into glaze chemistry, these glazes were of particular interest to me because of their incredible beauty and because they were no longer commonly produced in their original form. For example; if a celadon glaze of a type made in China about a thousand years ago is examined and compared to current production celadon, it is immediately noticeable that the current glaze seems to have a synthetic, lifeless quality, whereas the thousand year-old glaze appears to almost breathe with life. The buttery translucence of the original is easy to elucidate among reproductions. My goal in this research was to remake authentic celadon glazes and then apply the knowledge gained to a wider range of glazes and firing conditions.

I began my research with what I thought was a very correct, scientific approach. I examined collected glaze recipes from around the world. I also closely read the research of Robert Tichane, a leading researcher of Chinese glazes (Tichane, 1983, 1985). Through his books I was able to obtain and interpret data acquired through the use of scanning electron microscopes, optical micrographs, and energy dispersive x-rays of celadon glazes. The use of this information led me to develop a number of formulae that unfortunately resemble modern replicas that have become so popular today. I had formulated some very good glazes but they seemed to lack the life of the glazes of the Sung Dynasty and there were some lingering questions that troubled me. Certain elements continually show up in Sung Dynasty pottery that had me stymied. For example: Where would a Chinese potter of a thousand years ago get titanium? Then,

while continuing my research in vaults of the Freer Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, the obvious occurred to me. I had been using the modern purified materials available to all modern potters. The ceramic artists of the Sung Dynasty did not have the luxury of ordering 200 mesh silica or copper carbonate from the local art supply house. They used the materials at hand. I then refocused my investigation by trying to understand the simplest means of formulating celadon and other Sung glazes.

As I continued my investigation, it became obvious to me that the trace elements were the reason for the unique life in the Sung glazes. I then directed my research towards the mineral properties of elements that could be commonly found six hundred years ago. The obvious result of the search included various types of ash, clay, and stone. I then began to reformulate my glazes so that my entire palette could be made with these simple, "living" materials. My white glaze is now made of only three materials: PV clay and two types of crushed stone, Gerstley Borate and Wollastonite, and my favorite Celadon is made from crushed stone, clay, and ash. This palette now includes nearly every color that the fire will allow, but my favorites are the glazes that show the effect of the fire.

In examining my ceramic art, there are a couple of notable differences that set my work apart from the work of other artists. First, my means of applying the glaze is very simple. I brush it on using a paint stroke that resembles that used when painting a house, then dip the pot in a glaze or use a siphon sprayer of my own design and construction to spray the glaze on. I do not paint figures or designs on my work because I do not want the end result to be completely predictable. I try to formulate glazes that will allow for an



**occasional serendipitous accident and then structure the firing to encourage this result.**

**Therefore, method of firing the glaze is critical to success.**

## SECOND FIRE

I used three different firing methods to achieve the results seen in the work represented in this show:

- Firing Method Number One: Electric Fire to cone 6
- Firing Method Number Two: Gas fire to cone 4 with heavy, in kiln, post-fire reduction
- Firing Method Number Three: Gas fire to cone 6 in a reduced oxygen environment

### Firing Method Number One

Glaze firing in an electric kiln is a fairly simple process. I begin by coating the shelves with a liberal dose of kiln wash. The wash that I use is fairly simple. It consists of two parts (by weight) EPK, two parts 200 mesh silica, and one part 40 mesh silica. I add enough water to achieve the consistency of house paint and then I brush it onto the shelves. I allow the shelves to thoroughly air dry prior to loading the kiln. As a studio potter who is paying the electric bill, I try to maximize the utilization of space in loading the kiln. This serves two functions. The first is arguably economy. The second is a function of the type of glazes that I use. In firing with gas, it is of critical importance that the end of the firing be monitored. With an electric kiln, when the sitter shuts the kiln off, the process is complete. I wait for it to cool. However, cooling can be retarded somewhat if, in the loading of the kiln, every possible cubic centimeter of space is used. I rely on a fully loaded kiln to retain the maximum temperature long enough to allow the glazes to

flow just a bit. One of my favorite glazes is specifically designed to take advantage of this phenomenon.

### Firing Method Number Two

Gas firing is entirely different from electric firing. The firing begins with a careful monitoring of the temperature rise as in the electric firing. Again, I allow a temperature rise of only 250° F per hour. I allow the temperature to rise to approximately 1600° F using an oxygen environment. From 1600° F to finish, about 1940° F, I fire in an environment of moderate oxygen reduction. My test for the degree of reduction is simple: I adjust the fire ports and chimney damper so that, upon opening a one-inch viewing port, I obtain a bulb of dull red flame that protrudes from the port. This is contrasted with a heavy reduction, in which I have a three-inch tongue of flame licking from the port.

As soon as the target temperature of 1940° F is reached, my son, Nicholas, and I don our insulated silver fire suits for protection and proceed with the post-firing reduction. I begin by shutting off the burners and sealing the flame ports. Then, my son opens the kiln and I pour in sawdust or chopped straw, depending on the degree of reduction that I want, close the kiln, and allow it to cool. As in the electric firing, loading this kiln is also critical but for a different reason. In loading the electric kiln, the intention is to achieve maximum utilization of space to hold in the heat and allow the pottery to soak. With this firing, the kiln is not loaded as fully to allow quick cooling. The idea is to affect the glaze with a reduction environment and then chill the glaze to allow separation of the reduced surface. This separation is manifest through a web-work of lines in the glaze surface, which will allow the oxygenated subsurface colors to be seen between

patches of reduced glaze. Thus, with a single sprayed or dipped application of glaze, I am able to achieve a pattern of turquoise around patches of red and an amazingly complex surface texture.

### Firing Method Number Three

This firing also begins with a careful monitoring of the temperature rise. Again, I allow a temperature rise of only 250° F per hour until a temperature of approximately 1600° F is reached in an oxygen environment. Then at 1600° F, I fire in an environment of moderate oxygen reduction until a temperature of 2100° F is reached. I then increase the reduction to a moderately heavy reduction and maintain it through the end of the firing. When the target temperature of 2250° F is reached, I adjust the ports to maintain the reduction and soak for an hour. I then shut off the burners, close the ports and dampers, and allow the kiln to cool.

## CHAPTER III

### AN ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL PIECES AND GROUPINGS IN THREE PARTS

#### GROUP 1

The pieces within the first section all share the characteristic of having been wheel-thrown, and if altered, the alterations are very minor. These pieces are placed on extruded ceramic stands. Some of these pieces have been altered while hanging in an inverted position.

The shape of the stands for these vessels is inspired by a variety of marine organisms. Tunicates, tubeworms, and some corals have this tubular shape. These organisms grow in a low gravity environment, and although they are very delicate, often grow in a layered, overlapping manner. Clay is an ideal material to represent these organisms. Because of the plastic nature of clay, it can be shaped, layered, and molded to shapes that effectively emulate the tube idea and at the same time provide stable stands for a variety of vessels.

*Abyssal World 1* (page 42): The stand is extruded ceramic tubing fired to cone 6, (firing method 1) glazed with #48 honey brown over a copper carbonate wash. This vessel is glazed with a modified raku glaze that acts as a carbon trap glaze and is fired to cone 04 (firing method 2). It is wheel-thrown with minor alterations.

*Abyssal World 2* (page 43): This vessel is glazed with a modified raku glaze that acts as a carbon trap glaze and is fired to cone 04 (firing method 2). It is wheel- thrown with minor alterations.

*Alaria* (page 44): This grouping is included in the exhibition because it represents a departure in thought for me as an artist. Here is represented the beginnings of thinking of pottery as an art form instead of mere pots and dishes. This group is glazed with G-216, over-painted with a copper carbonate wash, and fired to cone 6 (firing method 3).

*Astartes* (page 45): At a height of 35 inches, this is one of the larger vessels in the exhibition. It is glazed with R-22, a petalite base, raku glaze and fired to 1950°F (firing method 2).

*Caulerpa* (page 46): The bowl is thrown and altered stoneware glazed with #391 Mesquite ash variation "C", fired to cone 6, (firing method 1). The stand is extruded ceramic tubing, also fired to cone 6, (firing method 1). It is glazed with #48 honey brown over a copper carbonate wash.

*Coquina* (page 47): The bowl is wheel-thrown and glazed with #67, Marshmallow White, (firing method 1). The pools of blue and green are glass runs. The stand is extruded ceramic tubing, also fired to cone 6, (firing method 1). It is glazed with #48 honey brown over a copper carbonate wash.

*Moray 1 and 2* (page 48): The bowls and stands are wheel-thrown and assembled. The “fins” are cut out of slabs, shaped, and attached. The fins are first washed with copper carbonate, then the piece is sprayed with glaze #67, Marshmallow White, (firing method 1).

*Nautilus* (page 49): This is the largest of the work in the exhibition. It stands 52 inches in height. The vessel is wheel-thrown in three pieces and altered. The fin-like projection is wheel-thrown and altered with slab additions. The glaze is a colemanite-based raku glaze that is customarily fired to only 1800°F. If fired in reduction, it is an oxblood color with metallic flashes. This piece was seeded with splashes of copper carbonate, sprayed with the colemanite glaze, and fired using a method similar to #2, without the reduction during the tail end of the firing, but with a chopped straw post fire reduction.

*Neptune* (page 50): The vessel is wheel-thrown and altered. The fin-like projection is also wheel-thrown and altered with slab additions. I made an underglaze by combining a commercial orange stain with EPK and enough Ferro 3110 to bind it all together. By weight, it contains 20% stain, and 80% EPK. Then you find the total weight and add an additional 10% frit. It is then overglazed with a modified R22 glaze. The glaze is modified through the use of only half of the required copper and tin. The pieces are then fired using method #2.

*Tsunami* (page 51): The bowl is wheel-thrown and glazed with #67, Marshmallow White, (firing method 1). The encrustations on the bowl are created through the addition of pieces of clay that are tapped onto the bowl surface with a wire brush. These are coated with a saturated copper wash prior to the over spray of the #67 glaze. The stand is extruded ceramic tubing, also fired to cone 6, (firing method 1). It is glazed with #48 honey brown over a copper carbonate wash.



## GROUP 2

The pieces have all been wheel-thrown, then altered while hanging inverted.

*Argonauta* (page 52): The bowl is wheel-thrown and glazed with #67, Marshmallow White, (firing method 1). The stand is extruded ceramic tubing, also fired to cone 6, (firing method 1). It is glazed with #48 honey brown over a copper carbonate wash.

*Briopsis* (page 53): When above the surface, looking through water, the objects on the bottom appear distorted. The intention in the alteration of these pieces was to give the illusion of looking at the pottery through water. The piece is glazed with G216 and fired using method #1.

*Delicata* (page 54): These are the only pieces in the show that were fired in University of Texas-Pan American's kiln. They are fired to cone 10.

*Laminaria* (page 55): These pieces are glazed and fired in a manner identical to *Neptune*.

*Murex* (page 56): This vessel is thrown in two pieces and assembled. It is glazed with R22 and fired using method #2.

*Ridges and Rift* (page 57): This piece is glazed and fired in a manner identical to *Nautilus*, with the exception that I sprayed a thin copper wash over the piece prior to firing.

*Sargassum* (page 58): This group was glazed using R22, oversprayed with the modified R22 (containing no copper or tin) then overfired in heavy reduction to 2000°F. Following the firing, I post fire reduced using chopped straw.

*Sponge Group 1* (page 59): The underglazes for these pieces were made with yellow and orange stains using the same method as *Neptune*. The piece is then overglazed with a modified R22 glaze (sprayed) and fired using method #2. The glaze is modified through the use of only half of the required copper and tin. The post fire reduction is accomplished with a combination of damp sawdust and straw.

*Sponge Group 2* (page 60): These are glazed with R22 that is mixed without any copper. They are fired using method #2 without the post fire reduction.

*Venus* (page 61): The pot in the interior is glazed with #48 honey brown over a copper carbonate wash. The encrustations on the vessel are created through the addition of pieces of clay that are tapped onto the bowl surface with a wire brush. These are coated with a saturated copper wash prior to the over spray of the #67 glaze. The piece is then carefully glazed (to avoid contamination of the interior) with G216 and fired using method #1.

### GROUP 3

The works within this section are assembled through a combination of slab construction with thrown and altered additions.

*Chimaera* (page 62): This is a 20-inch assembled, shallow bowl on a thrown stand. The bowl and fish shapes are slab-rolled. The stand is wheel-thrown. The piece is glazed with a copper red and fired in reduction using method #3.

*Gelidium* (page 63): This is a 22-inch assembled platter on a thrown stand. The deck and cutout wave shapes are slab-rolled. The stand is wheel-thrown. The piece is glazed with R22 and fired using method #2.

*Mojarras* (page 64): This is a 24-inch assembled platter on a thrown stand. The deck and cutout fish shapes are slab-rolled. The stand is wheel-thrown. It is sprayed with glaze 390 variation C. The fish are painted with a mixture of mesquite ash and rutile. It is fired using method #1.

*Polyphonia* (page 65): This is a 22-inch assembled platter on a thrown stand. The deck and cutout wave shapes are slab-rolled. The stand is wheel-thrown. The piece is underglazed as is Sponge Group #1, sprayed with a clear version of G216, then brushed with a mixture of mesquite ash and rutile, and fired using method #1.

*Triton Trumpet* (page 66): At thirty-nine inches in height this is one of the larger pieces in the show. Only the bottom eight inches of this piece is wheel-thrown. The rest is constructed through the use of slab-rolled additions. An internal armature was used during construction for support. The piece was sprayed with a white R22 (no copper). Then the edges and fins were sprayed with the standard R22. It was fired using method #2.

### THE PAINTING

*Daytime* (page 67): This painting is executed in oil on five wood panels. Each panel measures two foot by eight foot and is supported with a steel stand.

The intent of this painting is the expression of a dream. Dreams can sometimes seem very real but they cannot be fully apprehended in a waking state. As we awaken we are often left with only the emotion of the experience and the harder we try to remember the dream, the more elusive it becomes. This painting, like a dream, can only be fully apprehended from a distance. If you attempt to get close to it to make a closer examination it seems to dissolve before your eyes. Like a dream, the painting frustrates. You can appreciate the emotion at a distance but it is impossible to grasp when you are near. The optimum viewing distance is 40 meters.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION AND CONTINUANCE

I find that working with clay is very challenging and, perhaps because of the challenge, this work is personally very fulfilling. When I make a Kuan bowl, I truly feel connected to the few potters in history who were able to make this almost impossible ceramic. I enjoy being a part of an art form that, in this age of technology and machine production, would be lost were it not for artisans such as myself. The next step for me is to continue to allow my art to evolve and grow. The use of clay as my means to expression has removed any limits that may have once impeded my creativity.

Chinese potters of a thousand years ago routinely produced ceramic art that was considered impossible for their time. That is the tradition that I hope to continue with the next series. With this series I hope to incorporate the use of hand-crafted glass in combination with clay vessels. I am currently working on the mating of clay and glass in an annealing kiln. Although the results of these early experiments are mixed, the products show promise. In addition to glass, I am also interested in mating brass to clay and brass to glass. With this series, I expect to continue to make use of the theme of emergence. This theme will be represented through the use of organic forms as well as the continued use of the human form emerging from swirling bodies of glass and clay.

As for the question of how this series will help me achieve my artistic vision, the answer is complex. My work will continue to evolve as my ability to meet the new

**technical challenges improves. At this moment in time, however, with this body of work, I know that I have not yet fulfilled my intention and expectation as an artist. Perhaps with continued experimentation I can begin to realize my potential as a ceramic artist.**

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## APPENDIX A

### GLAZE FORMULAS

#### R22

12 oz. P25

4 oz. Petalite

2 oz. EPK

150 grains Copper

48 grains Tin

Glaze matures at 1800°F

Variations include variation or elimination of colorants.

#### G216

32 oz. PV Clay

19 oz. Colemanite

13 oz. Wollastonite

6 oz. Ultrox

Glaze matures at 2100°F but is stable through 2250°F in oxidation and reduction.

#### 390C

9 lb 7 oz. Nepheline Syenite

5 lb 7 oz. Colemanite

3 lb 2 oz. 350 Mesh Silica

15 oz. sifted, unwashed, 60 mesh Mesquite Ash

10 oz. EPK

7.5 oz. Calcined EPK

2 oz. Ilmenite

6.5 oz. Red Iron Oxide

13 oz. Light Rutile

3.2 oz. Cobalt oxide

Mature at cone 6



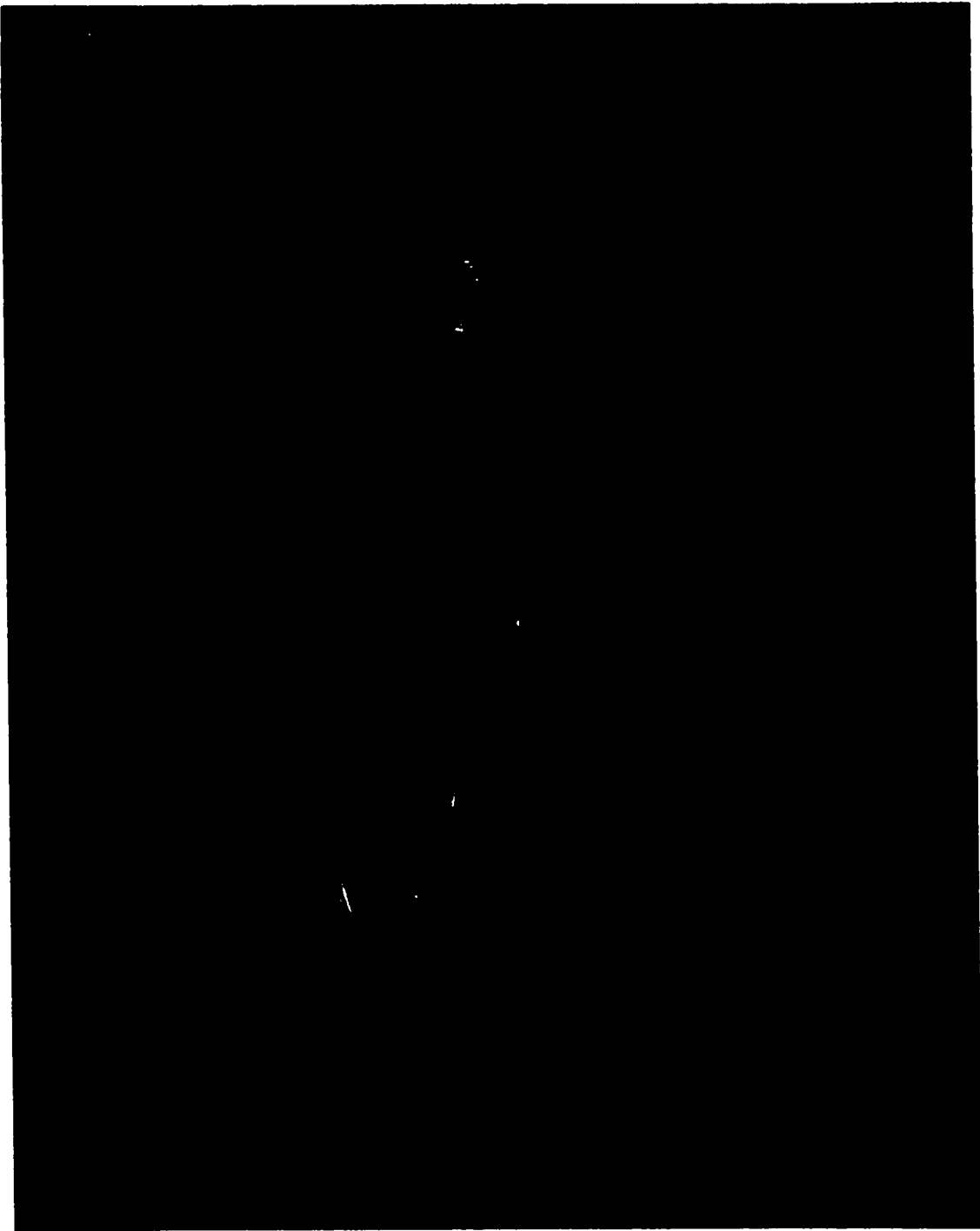
**48 Honey Brown**

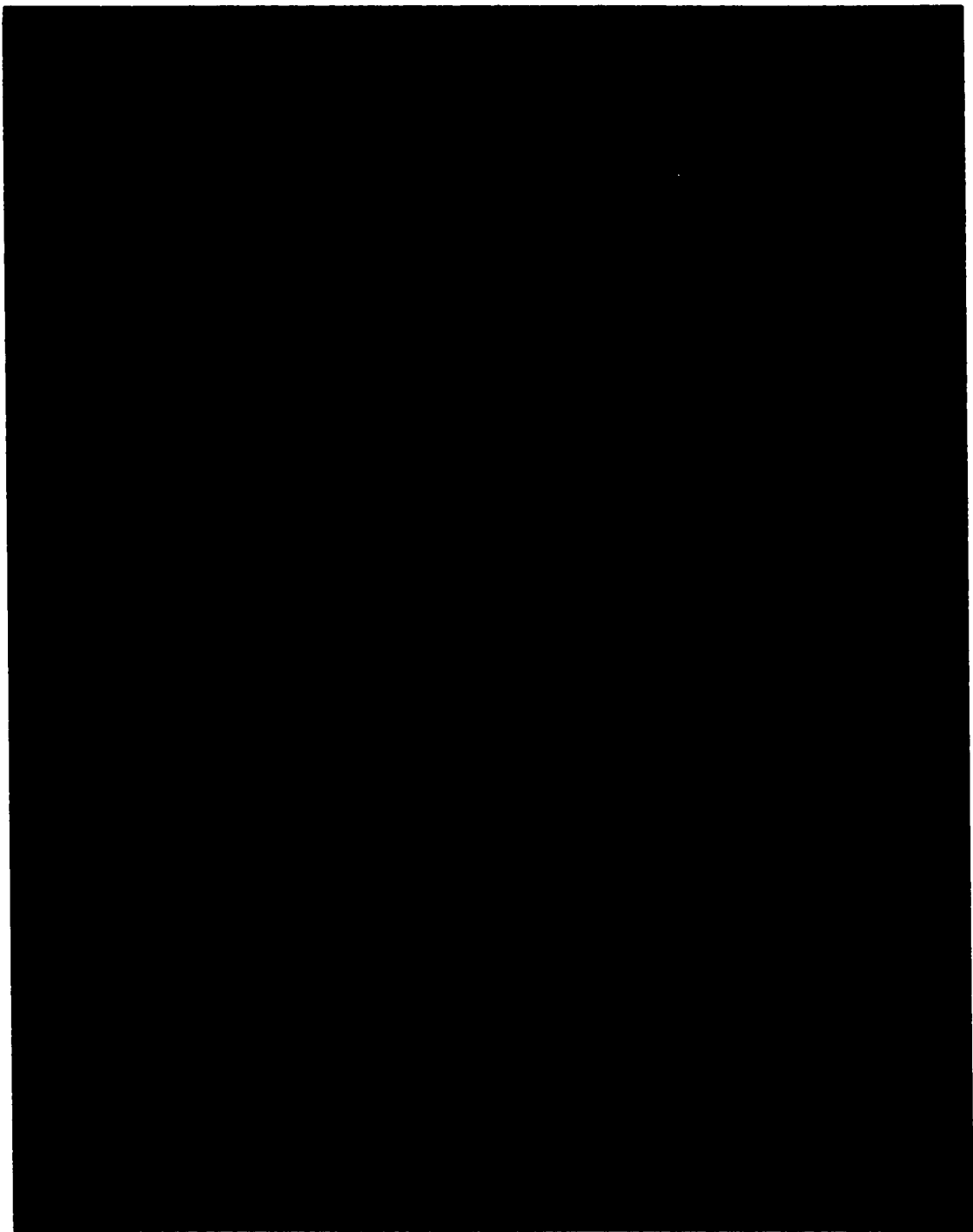
8 oz. Spodumene  
4 oz. 350 mesh Silica  
4 oz. Colemanite  
12.5 oz. Red Art  
3.5 oz. Mesquite Ash  
220 grains Manganese Dioxide, 60/80 mesh  
200 grains Talc  
Mature at cone 6

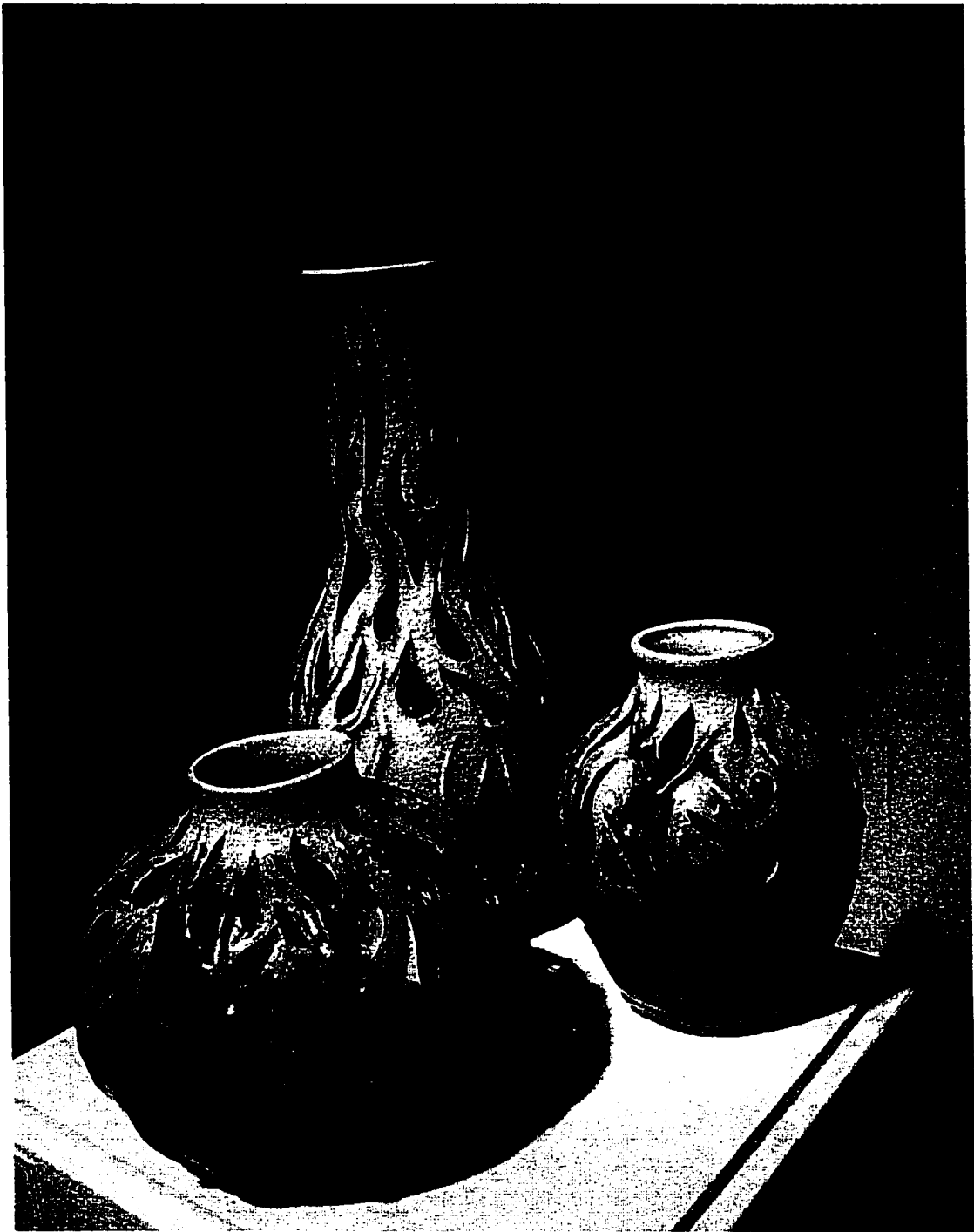
**67 Marshmallow White**

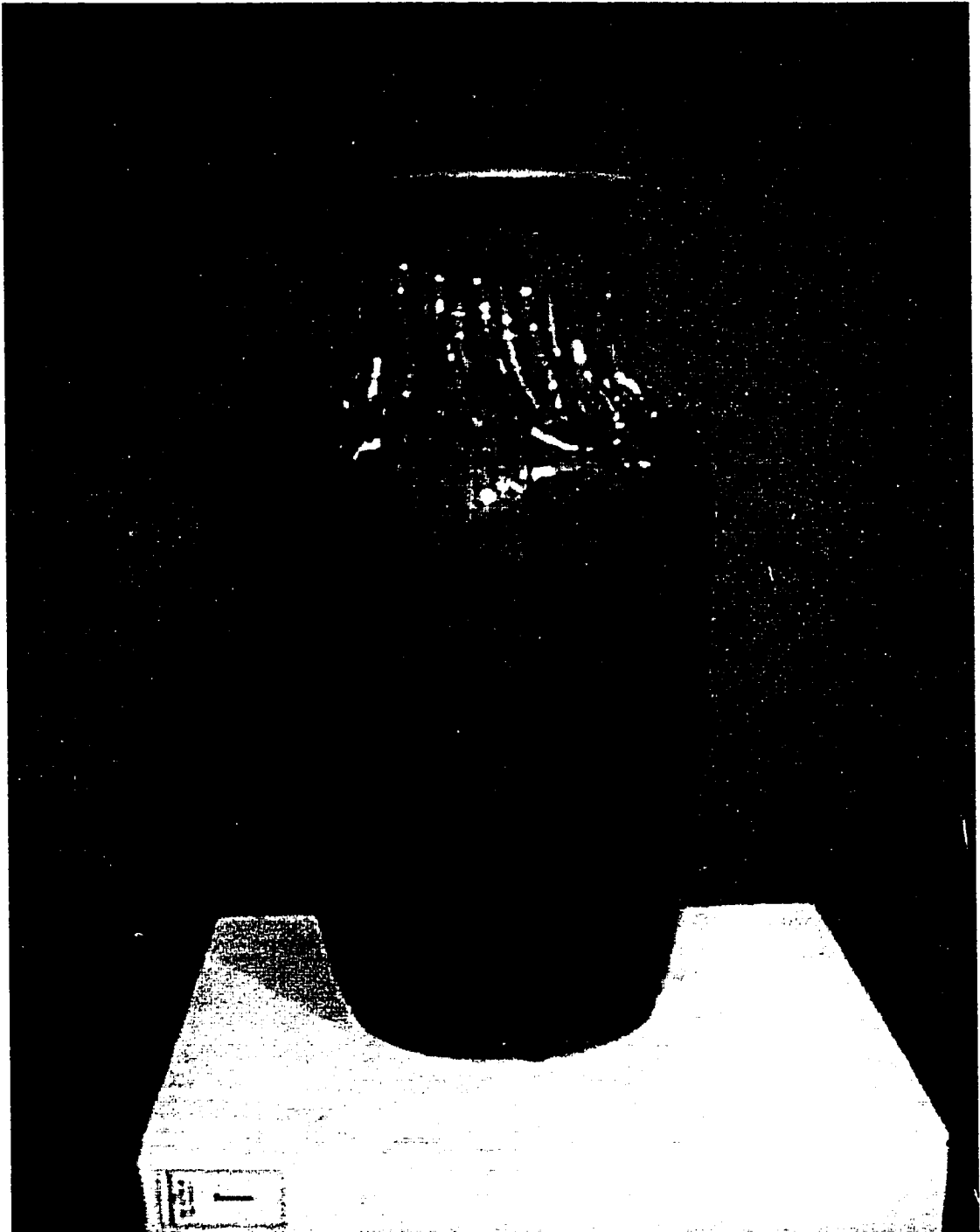
45 oz. Nepheline Syenite  
9 oz. Dolomite  
3 oz. KT Ball clay  
2 oz. Bentonite  
5 oz. Ultrox  
Mature at cone 6

**APPENDIX B**  
**ILLUSTRATIONS**







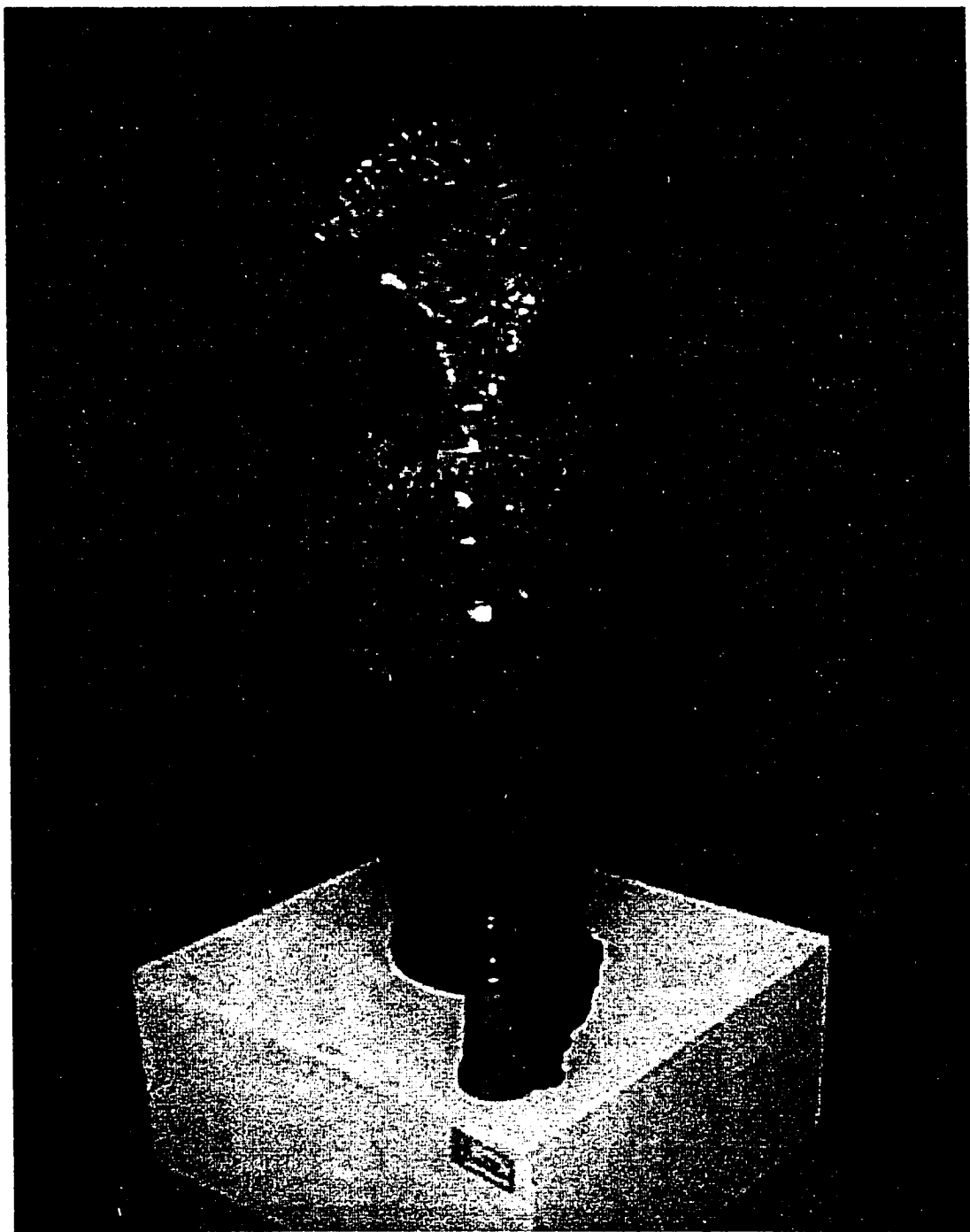


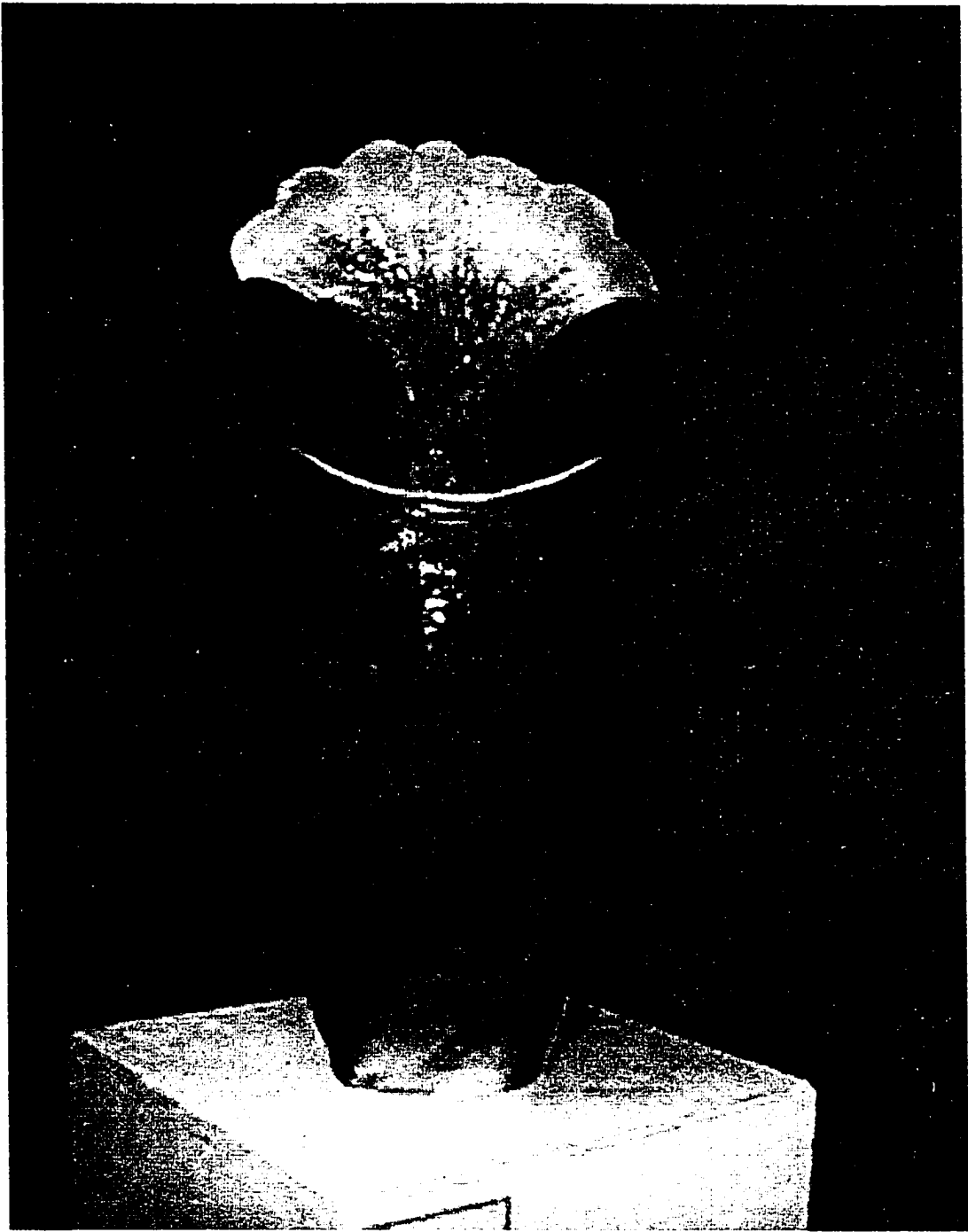


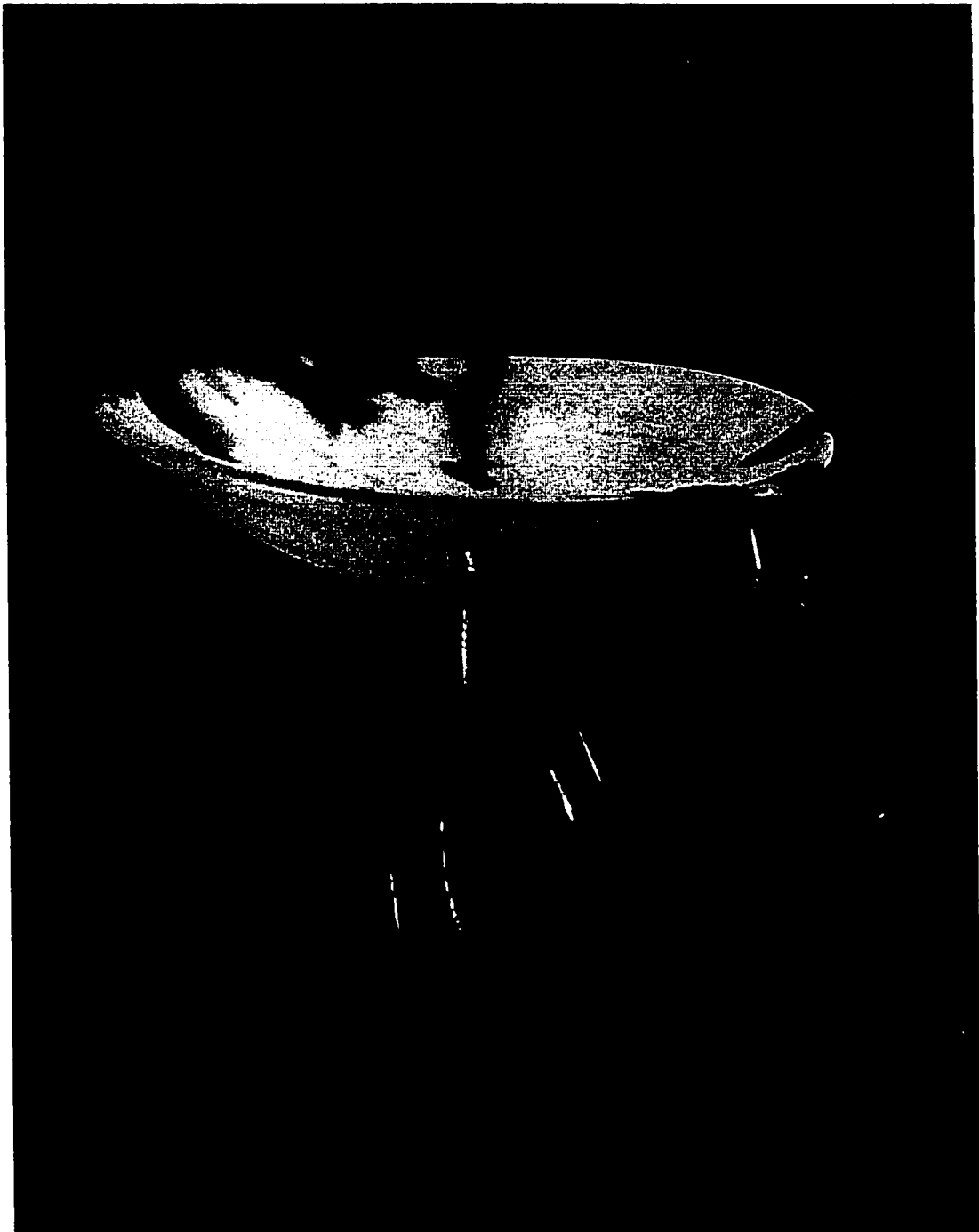


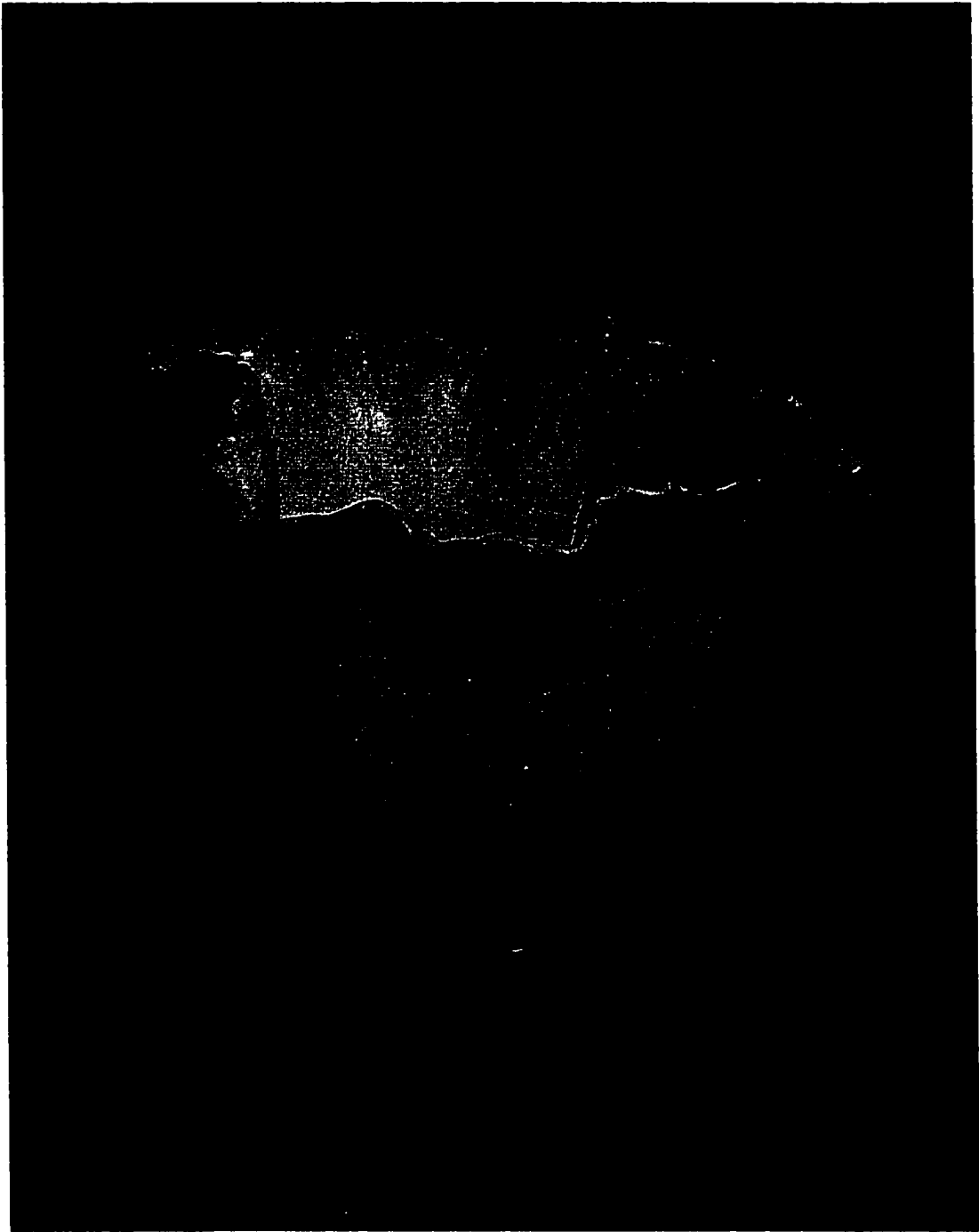


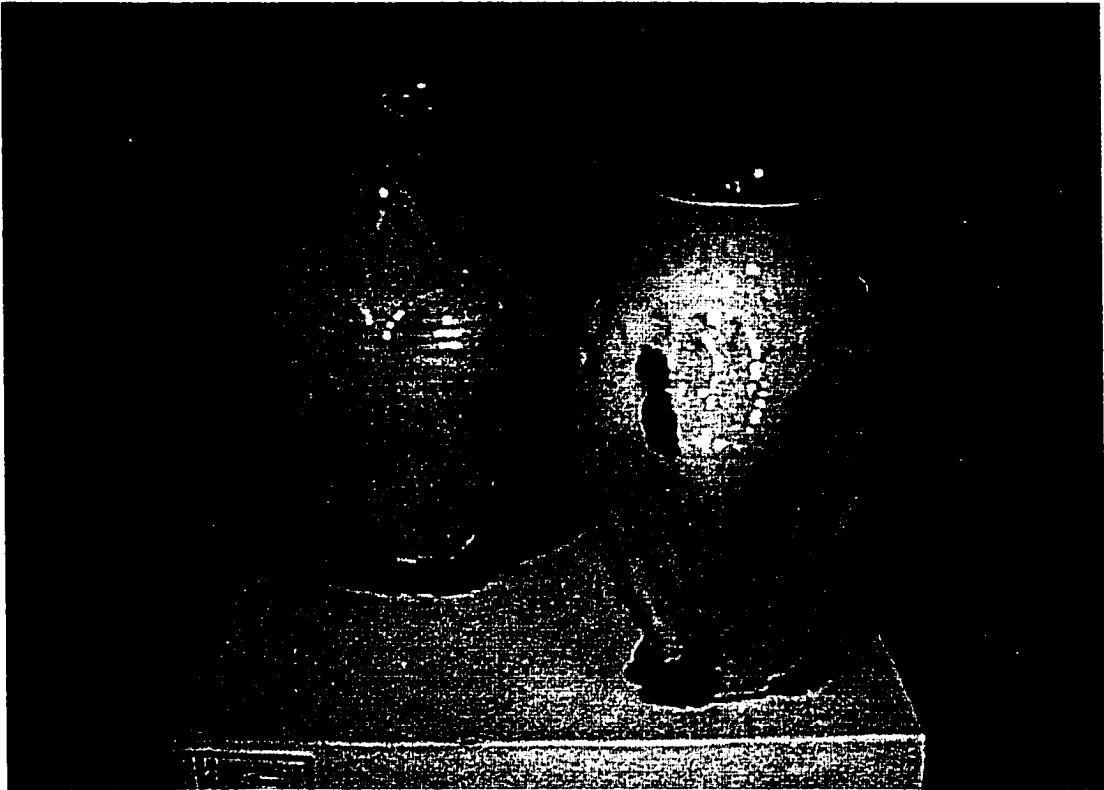


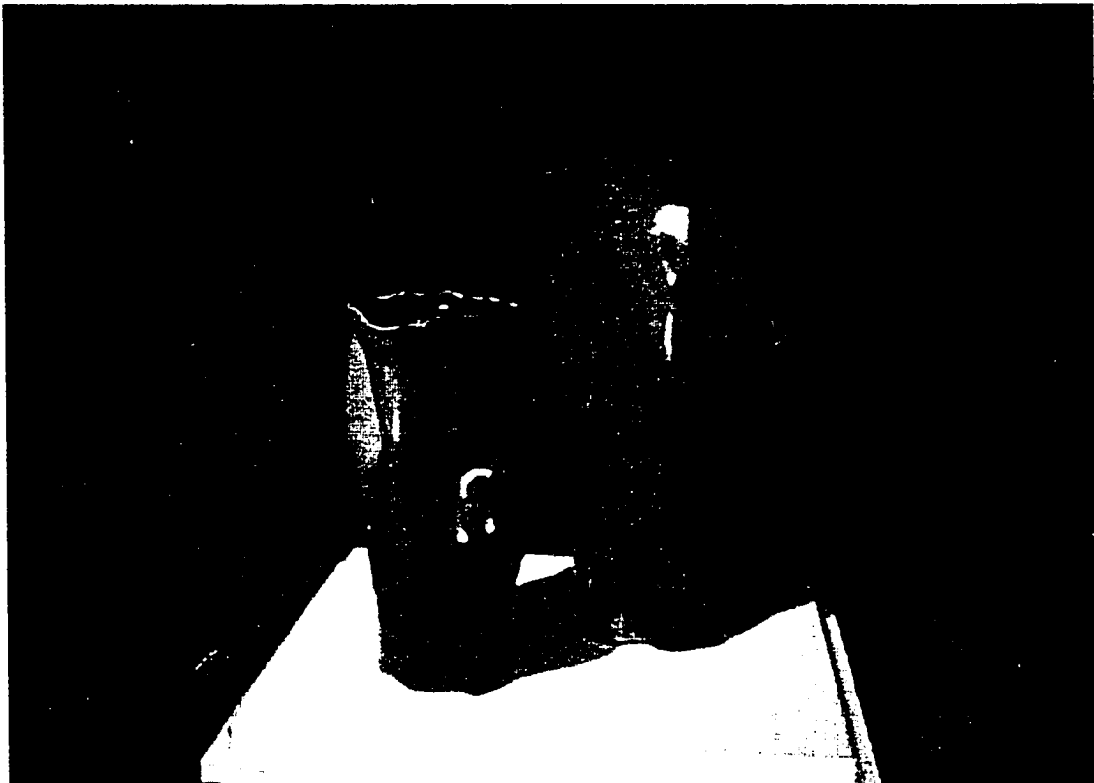






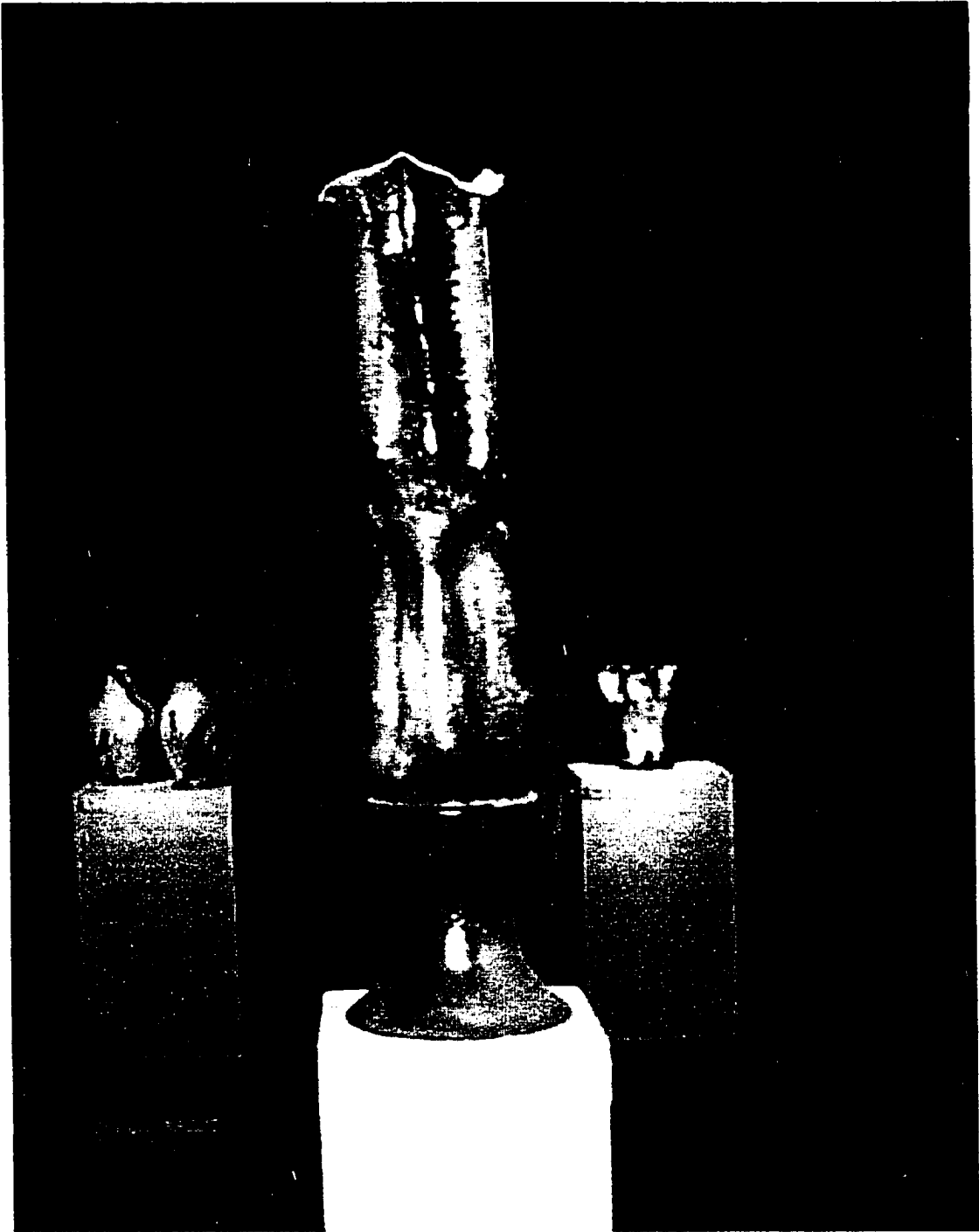


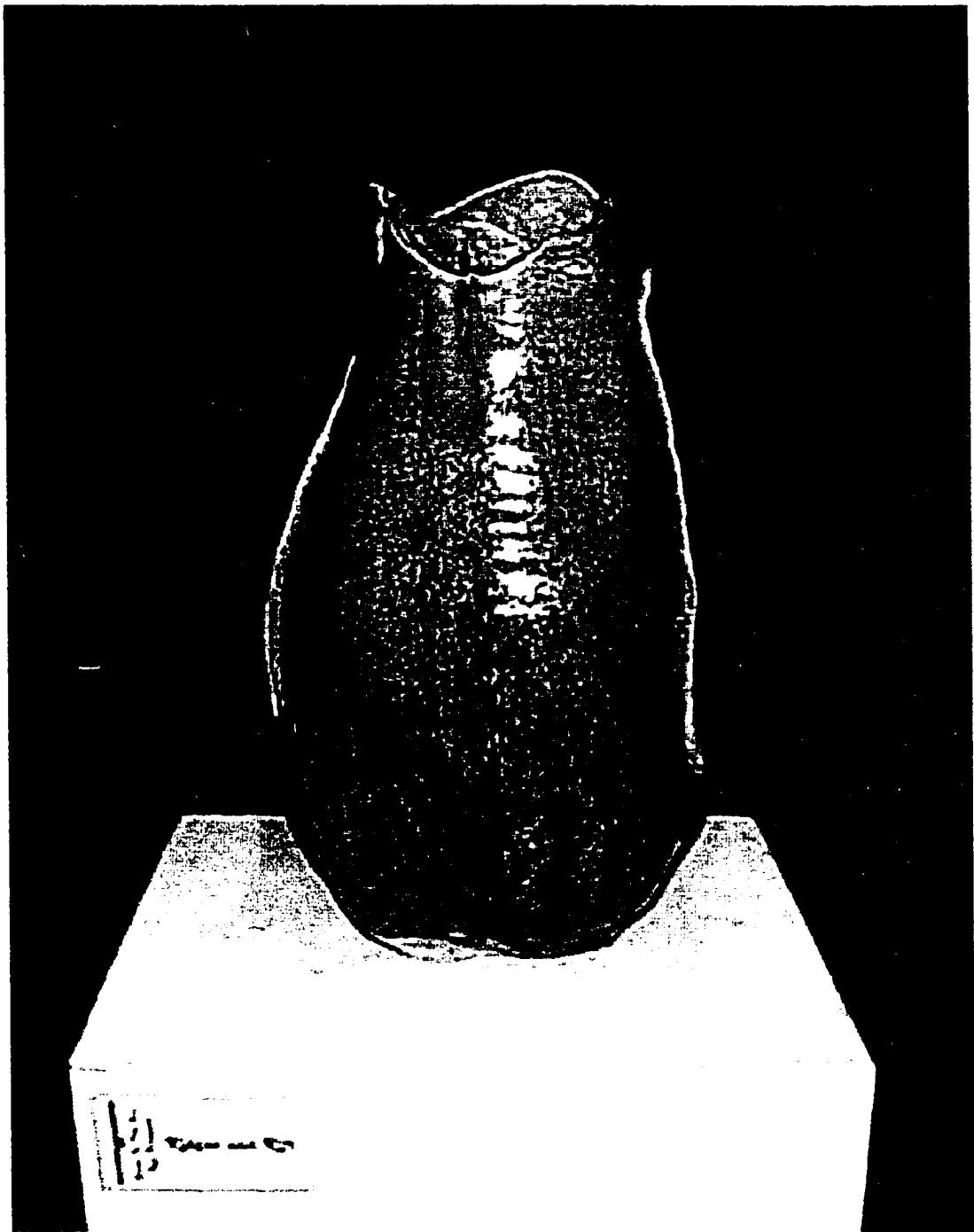


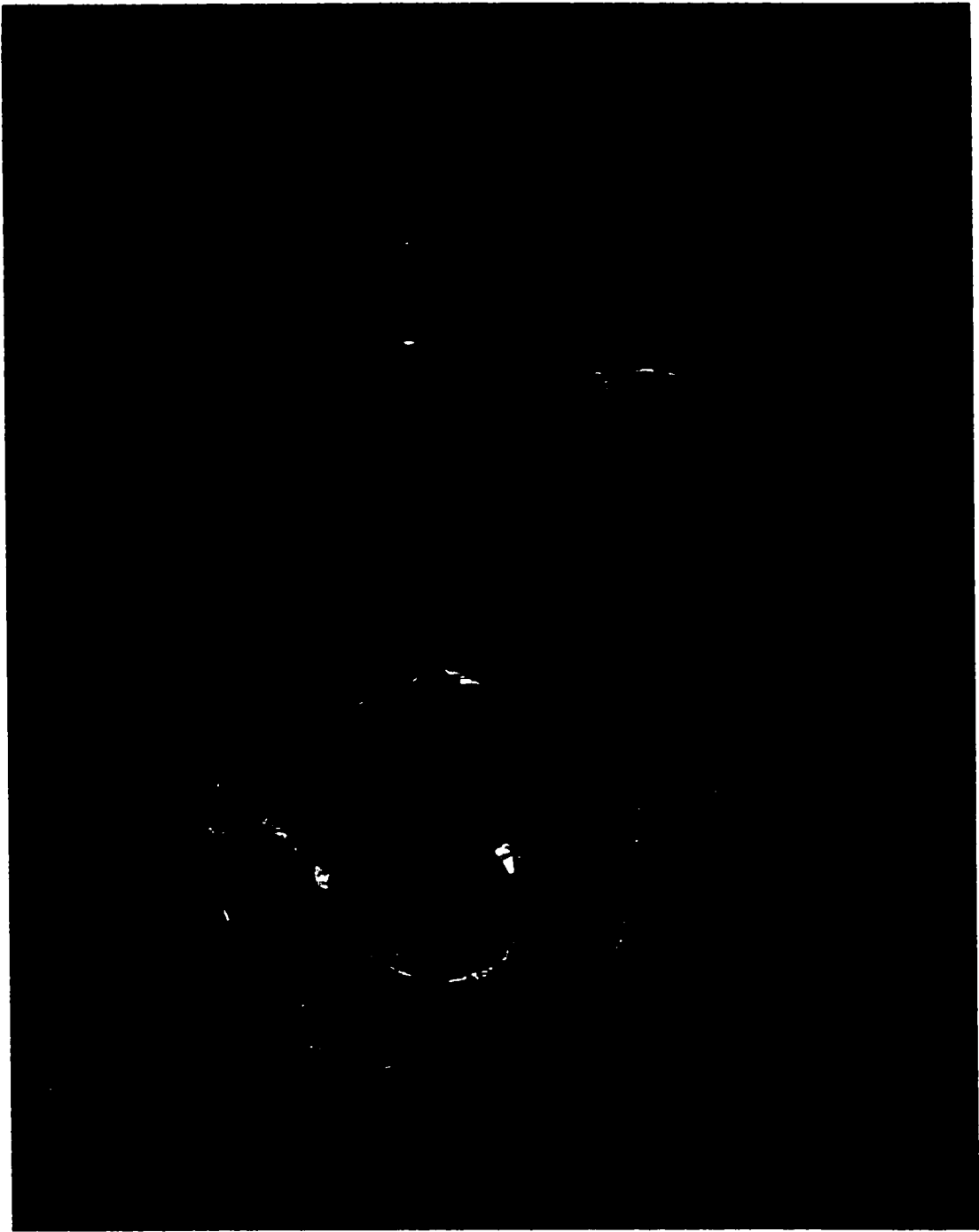




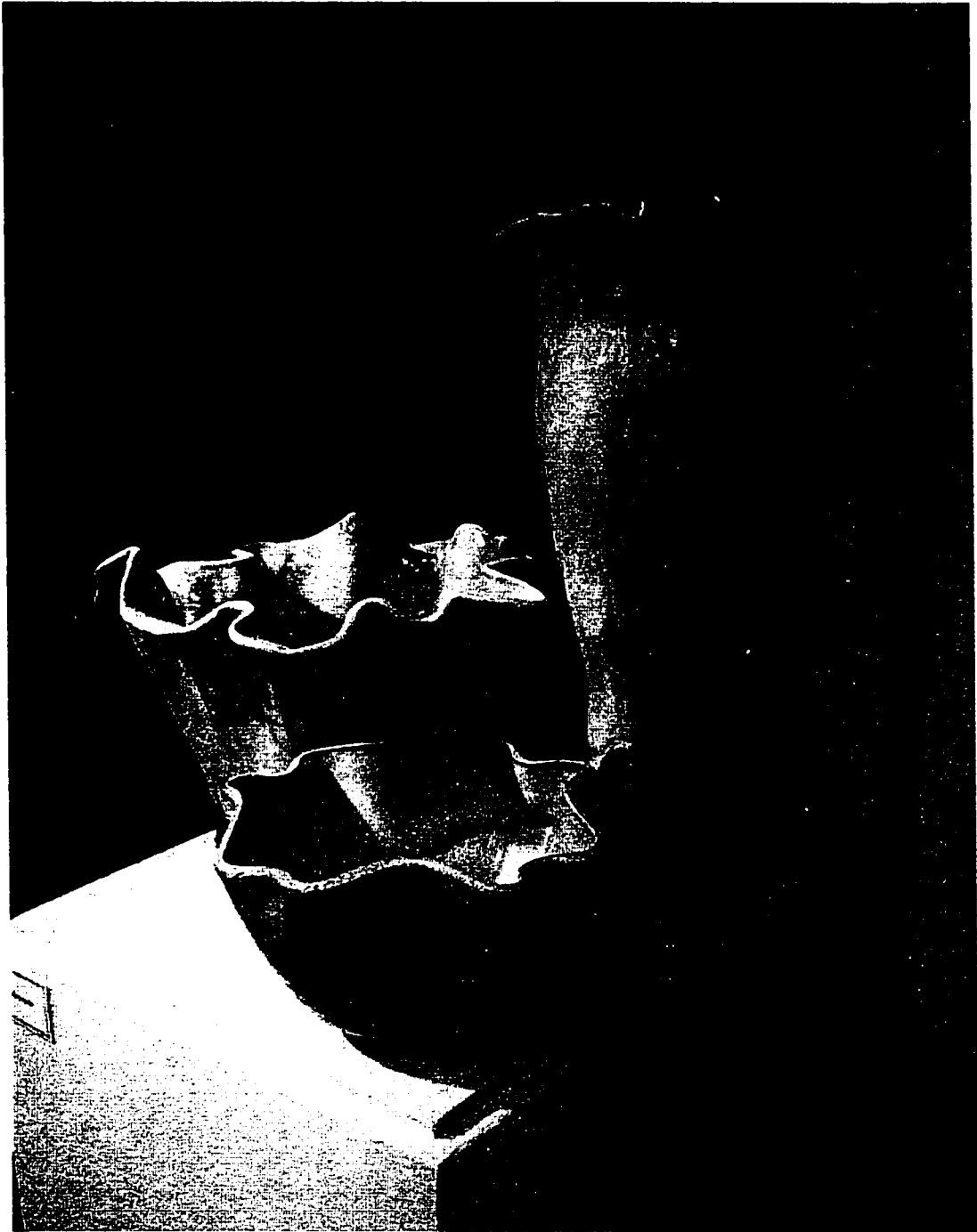










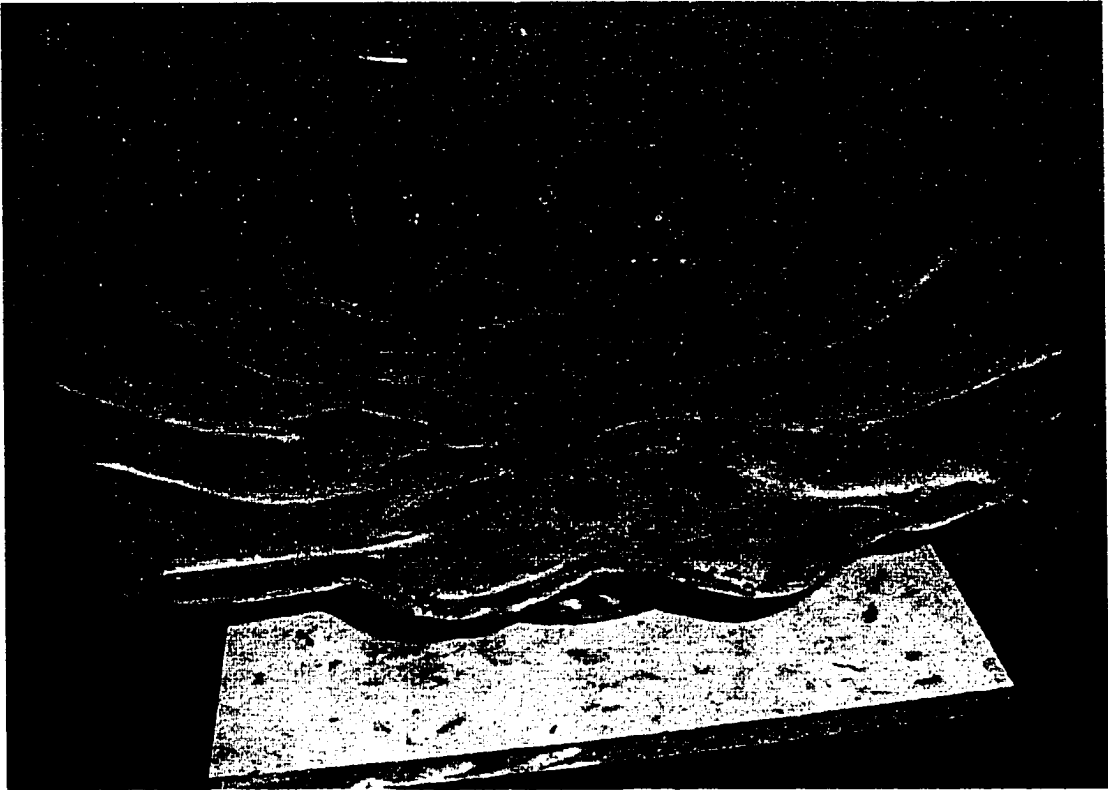




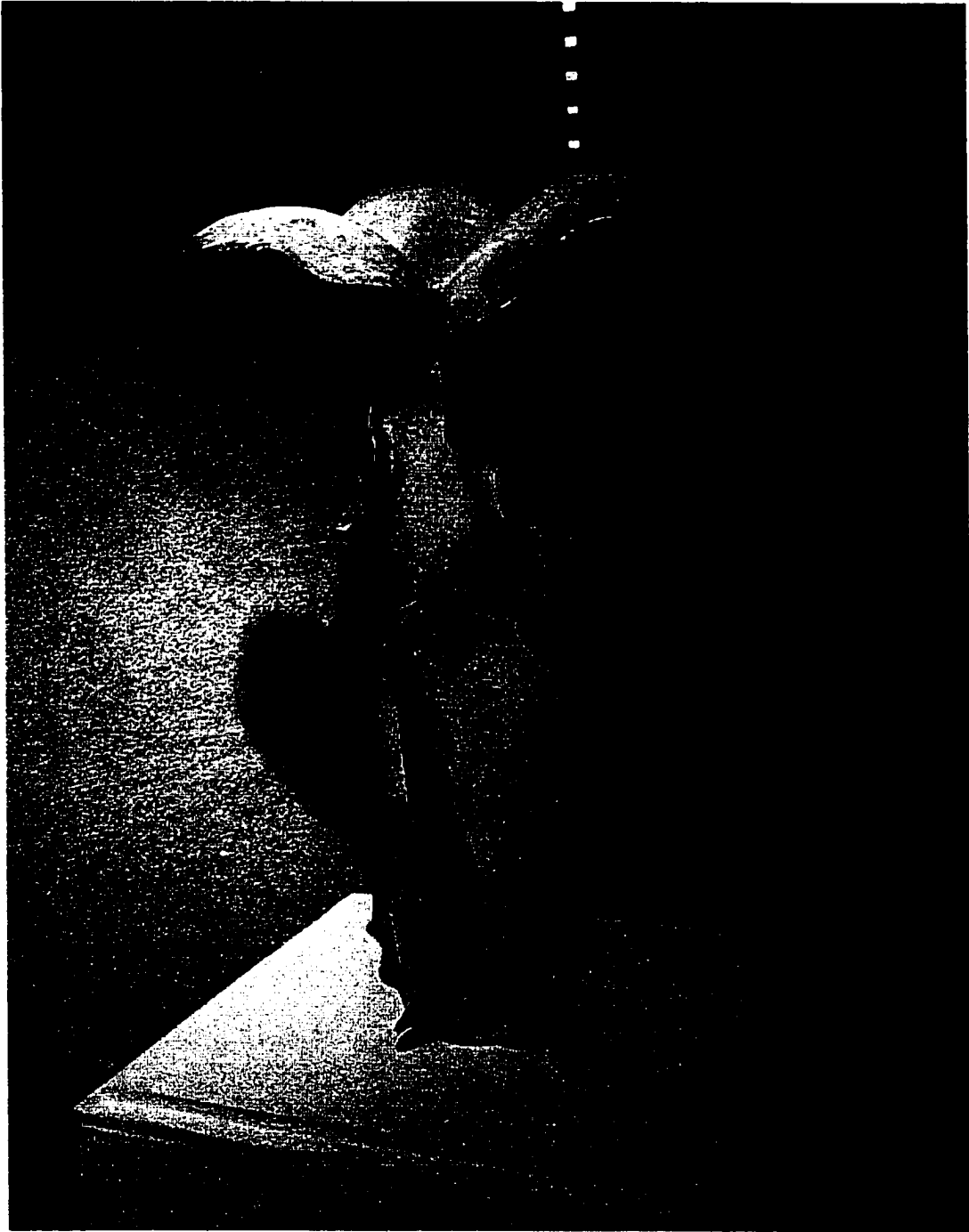


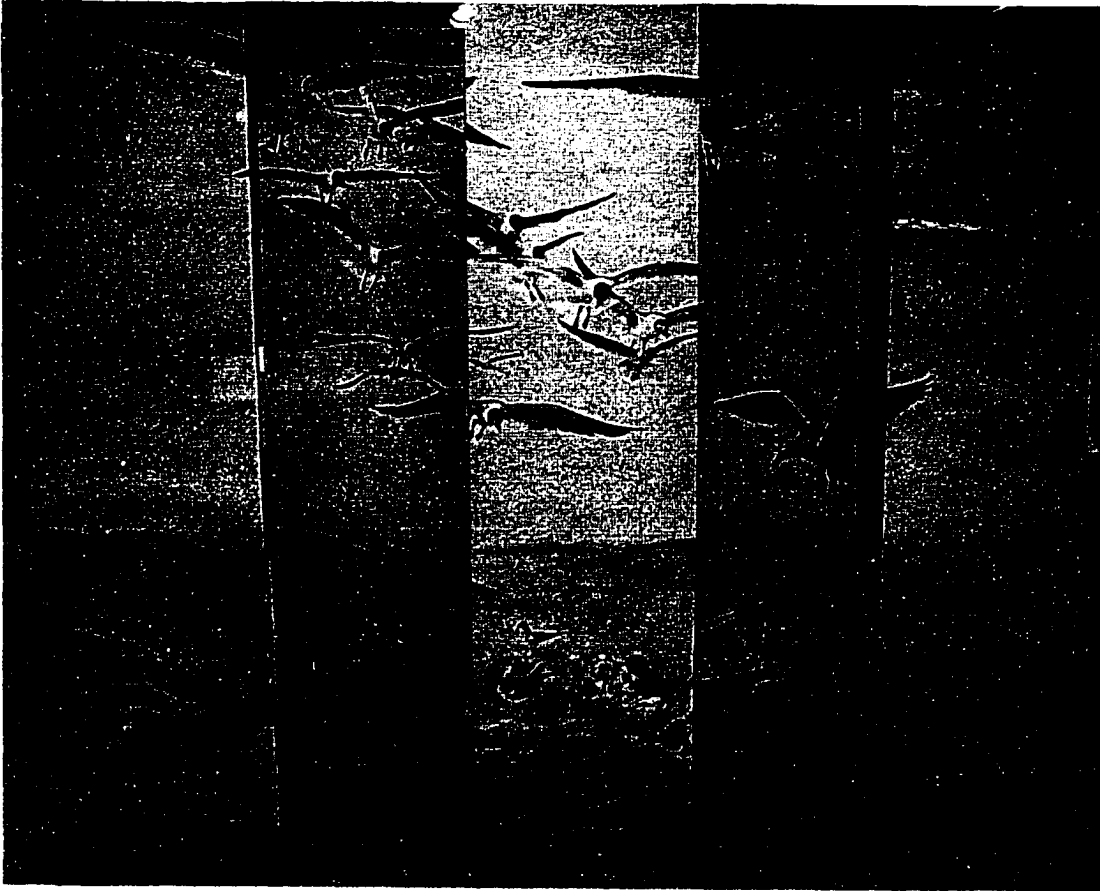












APPENDIX C  
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