

REPEATED ELEMENTS: FORMAL POSSIBILITIES
FOR ABSTRACT EXPRESSION OF
RHYTHMIC LIFE PATTERNS

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

Susan E. Bennett, B.F.A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1980

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	iv
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM	1
II. STUDIO INVESTIGATION AND OBSERVATIONS	5
III. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	23

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure		Page
1.	<u>Wall Relief: Red</u>	6
2.	<u>Ground Relief with Ashes</u>	8
3.	<u>Free-Standing Wall</u>	10
4.	<u>Free-Standing Wall</u>	11
5.	<u>Finned Cubes</u>	13
6.	<u>Wheel</u>	14
7.	<u>Red Eggs</u>	17
8.	<u>Cut Fruit</u>	18
9.	<u>Adobe Houses: Gray</u>	20
10.	<u>Adobe Houses</u>	22

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Early in 1977, in my ceramic work, I became interested in expressing in sculptural forms the structure or process of repetitive, rhythmic growth patterns found in nature. Examples of these growth patterns that I observed in nature were in seasonal rings seen in cross-cut tree trunks or the yearly added chambers of sea shells.

Relatively small (18"-15") free-standing sculptures were the first vehicles for the expression of the growth process. The imagery included fossil-like, shell-like, and plant-like forms which were intended to be expressive images of the seasonal, rhythmic growth process underlying many of these life forms.

The sculptural forms were built in a segmented, slab-building process, which was an imitation of the natural growth process -- the additive, yet repetitive, process of life forms' growing new segments season after season. The segments of clay were allowed to be seen in the finished structure as representation of the visible patterns left as marks by the natural growth process.

Textures of the clay slabs between the structural lines were skin-like, bark-like, or shell-like. Other added elements were repeated, undulating fins, which represented organic outgrowths from the segmented structures.

These free-standing sculptures closely resembled particular natural life-related forms; they were most consciously identified as representational natural objects, such as shells or fossils, rather than as expressions of patterns of the life-growth process. The visible rhythmic patterns of growth were dominated by the overall nature-like forms.

It became a challenge for me to find a means to express the rhythmic patterns of the life-growth process rather than to represent the forms that grow out of the process. Since I felt the patterns of growth to be infinitely repeated in nature, I wanted to find forms that would bear a more universal expression of rhythmic structural patterns of growth than individual examples of natural forms could.

In addition to seeing the need to experiment with new forms for my repetitive, structured growth metaphors, I saw a need to change the size and scale of the forms. The free-standing sculptures had all been of similar size -- all small enough to be picked up and carried by a person. Size was perhaps as critical a factor as was form in influencing the relationship between a viewer and the forms.

The sculptures were small, recognizable objects. The human dominated the image in scale, and the human mind dominated the image through recognition of familiar form. Small scale, recognizability, and in addition, the singleness of each sculpture all compounded to identify each sculpture as an object rather than an idea.

How could the imagery be expanded to express a more universal idea of life patterns instead of a specific life form? In late 1978, I changed the single-object format of my sculptures. Instead of applying clay segments and fins to individual, free-standing, life-like clay forms;

I began applying the clay slabs and fins to non-object surfaces -- to flat slabs -- which would be hung on walls. These slabs could be hung in groups to make large wall reliefs. The most obvious representational imagery was eliminated. In these wall reliefs, I saw the potential for the expression of ideas through abstraction or reduction of form and through the repetition or progression of elements in multiple units.

As my creative project, I decided to explore the possibilities for expression of rhythmic life-growth patterns in a variety of abstracted multiple forms. The work was planned to investigate the following questions:

1. What forms can be used to communicate the idea of repetitive, rhythmic or seasonal life or growth patterns?
2. What size/scale is effective in communicating the universal, infinite character of these patterns?
3. What formats or types of presentation are the most effective?
4. How is the overall impact of the work affected by changes in size and form?
5. How do changes in the work affect my responses to it, and what subsequent directions result in the work?

A number of sculptural pieces would be constructed from small scale to large scale, using clay slabs and fins as in the earlier works, but minimalizing the basic forms. Multiple units or repeated elements would be used in each case.

It was projected that minimalization or reduction of basic forms to simple, non-objective, geometric forms such as rectangles, cubes,

cylinders and spheres would eliminate the identification of the forms with particular life forms such as sea shells or plants.

The use of multiple units or repeated elements would reduce the single-object character of the earlier sculptures and project an idea rather than a representation. Repetition would also imply continuity of the idea beyond the forms themselves.

Finally, by using a variety of sizes for the works, I could evaluate the impact of scale by comparisons among them.

CHAPTER II

STUDIO INVESTIGATION AND OBSERVATIONS

Notes and sketches were made during the studio investigation for this project. The sketches were used to record my ideas quickly and to help determine alternative possibilities for the investigation. The notes included my ongoing subjective reactions to the work and my objective evaluations of the visual and conceptual nature of the forms.

The sketches and notes, along with my observations of the finished works, both individually and as a body, were used to summarize the investigation, make conclusions, and project future directions for my work.

Twelve sculptural pieces were completed during the studio investigation. Ten of these were multiple-unit pieces; two were single pieces with repeated elements within them.

Three of the multiple-unit pieces -- a wall relief, a floor relief, and a free-standing wall -- were of much larger scale than the other works. Seven smaller pieces were series works, which included from three to six units each and were grouped together for presentation. The two single pieces were of moderate scale.

Nine of the twelve pieces will be discussed individually. These nine represent nine different approaches to the exploration of the forms and imagery.

Figure 1--Wall Relief: Red
Size: 26" tall x 70" wide
x 6" deep

Wall Relief: Red is a red-stained, smoke-fired relief made up of fourteen rectangular modules 13"x10"x6" each. The modules are

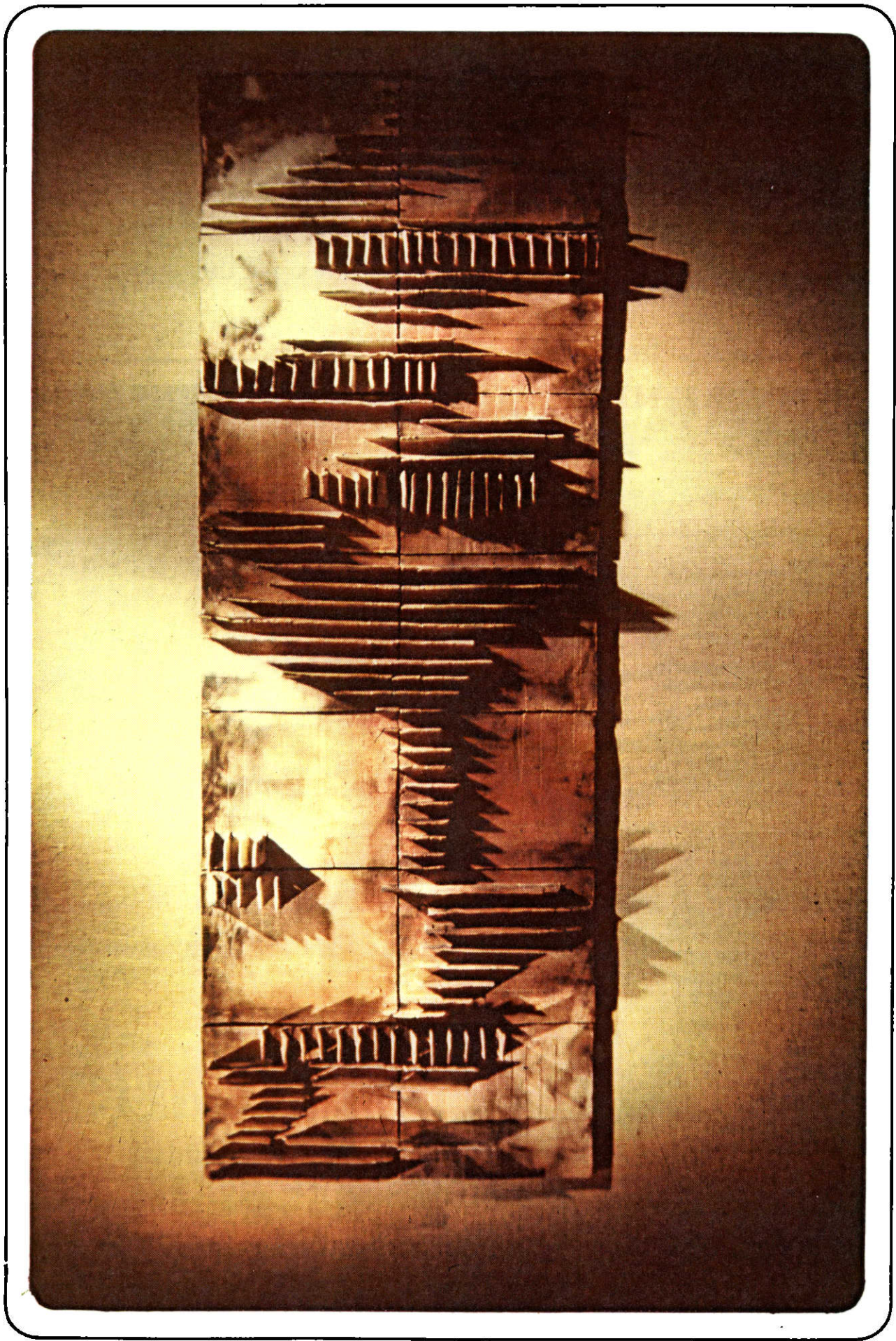


Fig. 1--Wall Relief: Red

arranged in two rows of seven rectangles each. They hang touching each other so that the relief looks like one large wall piece rather than separate units. The imagery of projecting fins is arranged in contrasting vertical and horizontal rows, which travel over the flat planes of the rectangular clay slab modules. The visible lines between the rectangles form a grid implying an ordered system for the multiplication of the modules.

Patterns of light and shadow set up a rhythmic sense of movement as the eye travels with the rows of fins. There is no frame around the relief; and although it has definite edges, the rows of fins moving toward the edges imply the possibility of continuity of the imagery into the surrounding space.

The fins are flat and rectangular, though they have slightly uneven, rounded edges. The perpendicular arrangements of the fins within the rectangular modules project an ordered sense of structure. Although such ordered patterns may be seen in nature, for example in microscopic views of crystalline structures; the scale of imagery in this relief relates it to man-made systems. It has been intriguing to me to observe the suggestion of a computer or radio wave transmission system in this relief. The repetitive, rhythmic patterns have an interesting ambiguity, evocative of both natural structure and man-made structure.

Figure 2--Ground Relief with Ashes
Size: 3' wide x 5' long
x 5" deep

Ground Relief with Ashes is a smoke-fired relief presented on the floor. Ashes cover the horizontal flat slabs of clay from which the

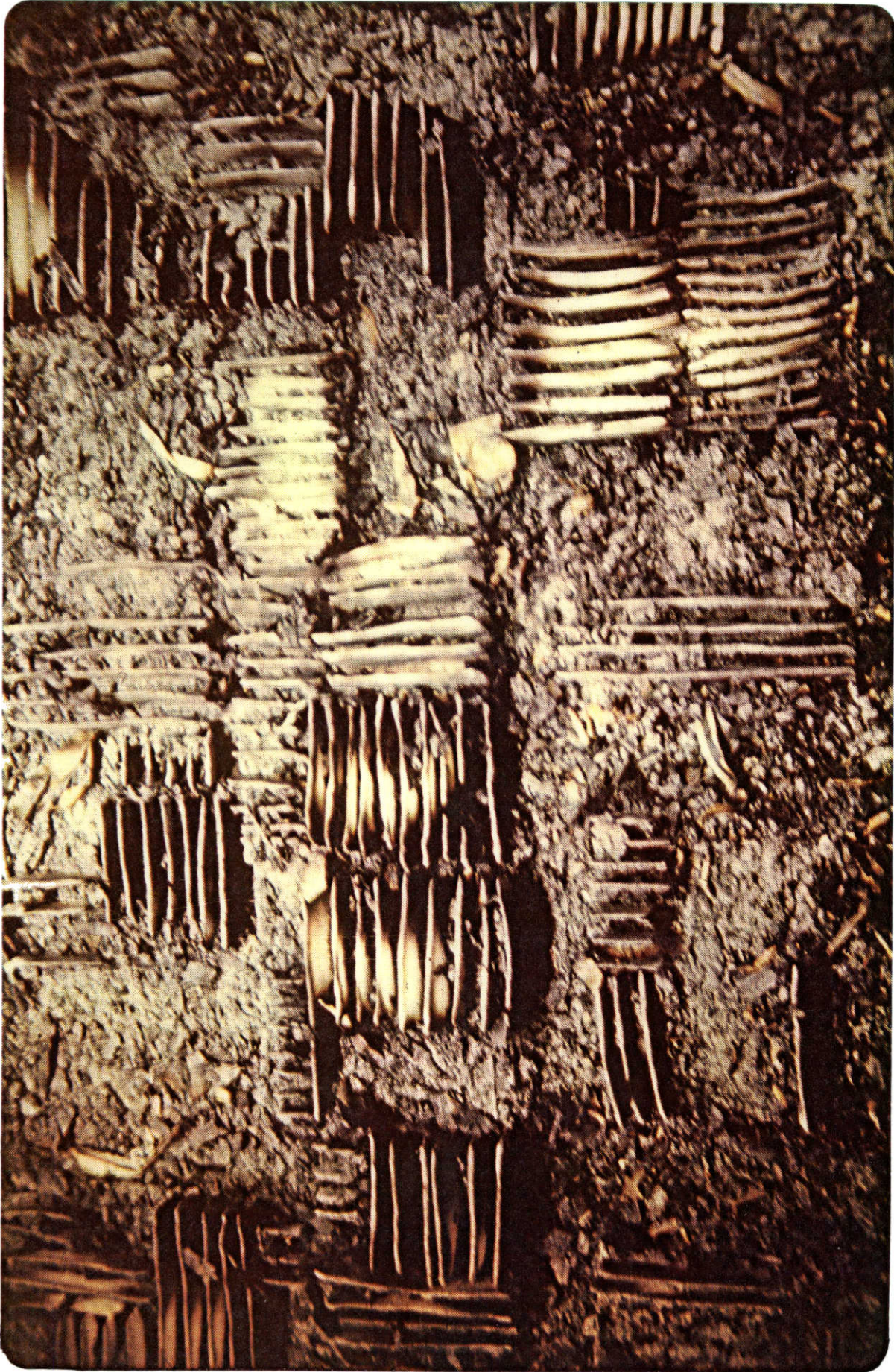


Fig. 2.--Ground Relief with Ashes

fins project upward. It appears that the fins are emerging from the ashes or that some old finned structure is buried in the ashes. The overall format of the relief is rectangular. A grid pattern is implied by the perpendicular arrangements of lines of fins across the ground, but the actual lines between the rectangular slab units of the relief cannot be seen.

Patterns of light and shadow create rhythmic movement throughout the rows of fins. The skeletal protrusion of fins has an archaeological and diagrammatic character. It has the qualities of ordered, underlying structural form; although it is non-objective.

Figures 3 and 4--Free-Standing Wall
 Size: 50" tall x 50" wide
 x 10" deep

Free-Standing Wall, smoke-fired to a gray-black with light gray highlights, is a wall of modular construction. It is built up from the floor and can be walked around. Each module is a shallow, rectangular box form. There are three rows of four modules each. The modules are used not only as the literal building blocks of the wall but also to represent units, or cells, of the form. They are similar enough to imply the possibility of unlimited continued multiplication of similar cells.

The modules are caulked together so that the wall has no gaps. Each box module has an open side revealing an interior filled with vertical and horizontal rows of fins. All the boxes are arranged so that the open sides are side by side, facing the same way; and the closed sides are facing the opposite way. Within the open boxes, the fins are arranged to imply continuity from one box to the next and from the inside of the box through the other, or closed, side. When viewed from the



Fig. 3--Free-Standing Wall

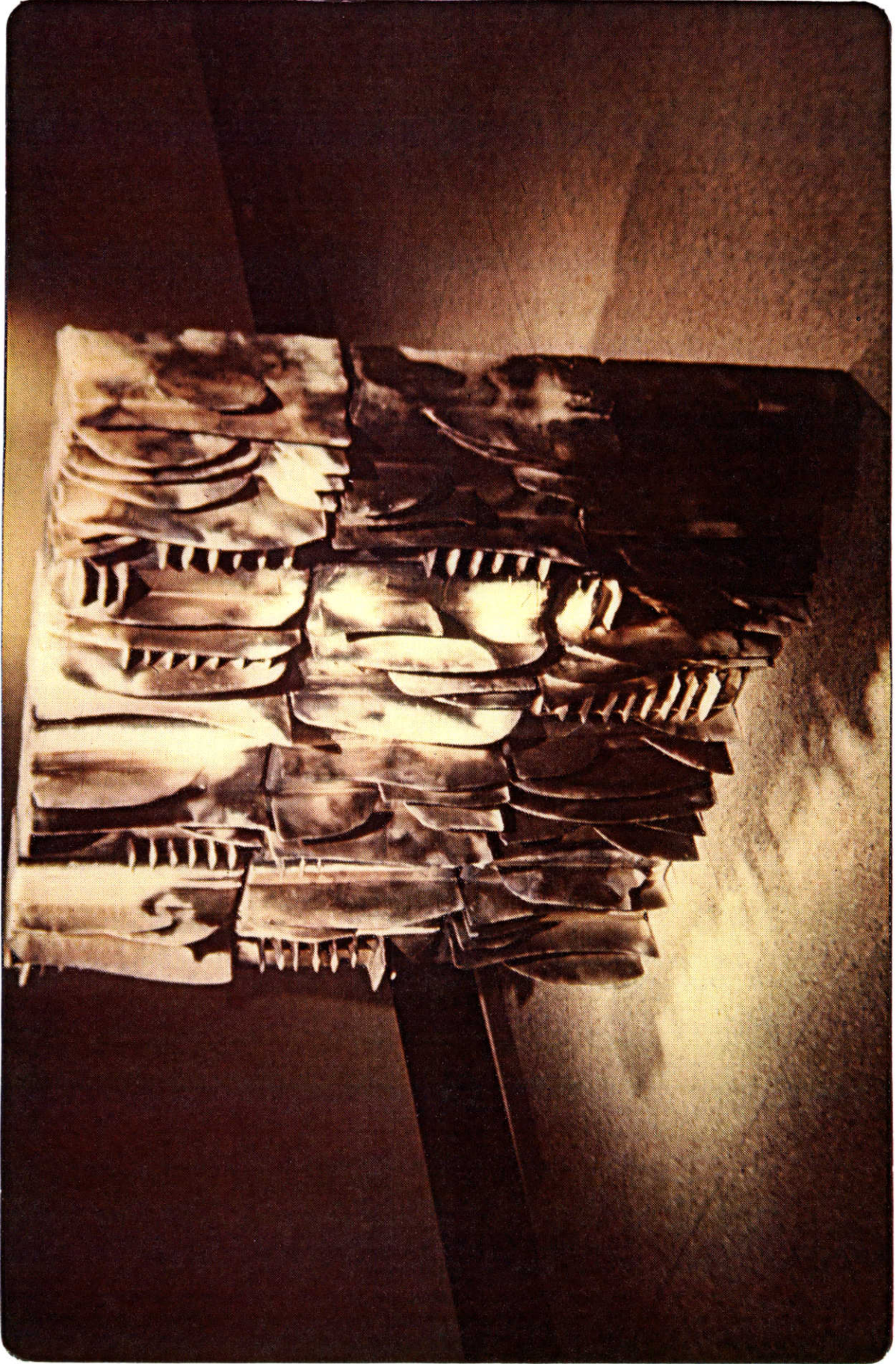


Fig. 4--Free-Standing Wall

closed side, it is seen that the fins do come through. Thus the wall can be understood as a whole form rather than as merely a two-sided wall.

On the "exterior" side (Figure 4) of the wall, the fins create a sense of movement across the entire wall; while on the "interior" side (Figure 3) of the wall, each chamber tends to contain the fins in the space within it before letting the patterns of the movement lead into the next box.

The quiet, enclosed, catacomb quality of the interior side of the wall pleased me. Because of the interior side, the wall seems not just a finned form dividing space, but a secret or protected environment, itself. I observed that this free-standing wall went beyond my projections of the idea of patterned life structure in becoming almost a place.

Figure 5--Finned Cubes
Size: group of six,
8"x8"x8" each

The group, Finned Cubes, includes six interchangeable, stackable, rough clay cubes. Four cubes have vertically arranged fins bristling out from their sides, and the other two have "vestigial" fins implied on their sides. The cubes are smoke-fired gray and black. They are thought of as building blocks, and the repeated units imply the possibility of further multiplication of themselves. Their interchangeability is successful in implying a building process that can be repeated with slight variations again and again.

Figure 6--Wheel
Size: 18"x22"

The Wheel is a single-object form with repeated units within it. It is stained red and smoke-fired. The circular wheel form was chosen



Fig. 5--Finned Cubes

Fig. 6--Wheel



as a contrast to the rectangular forms I had been using. The Wheel is based on geometric form -- a cylinder within a cylinder -- but it has none of the straight sides or right angles that dominated the previous geometric forms.

I attached the wheel form to an axle-like cylindrical form. I partially broke open the wheel form to reveal chambers which I had constructed inside it. Fins inside the chambers were arranged in regularly repeating patterns.

As a finished form, Wheel is identifiable as an object as much as it is an idea. It is suggestive of a large machine part. It also projects the idea of continuous rhythmic motion as a machine part with regular, segmented divisions and because it is set at an angle as if ready to roll in a repeating circular pattern.

I observed that the relatively geometric parts of the five works already described formed regularly structured interiors and exteriors and seemed to carry the abstract idea of geometric, architectural or mechanical building patterns. Could I project the idea of a regular structure of organic growth patterns through the use of forms that were more organic, yet still non-objective?

In the next sculptures, I modified the basic geometric form of a sphere to make several roughly rounded, organic shapes. I hoped that the idea of universal similarities among generative round forms such as the seed, the egg, and the womb would be projected rather than the image of a literal egg or seed.

Figure 7--Red Eggs
Sizes: 10"x10"x12",
12"x14"x14",
14"x16"x16"

Red Eggs is a group of three large, rough rounded forms, one of which is broken open, revealing rows of fins connected to the inside like membranes separating interior cells of an egg or seed form. The closely packed empty cells suggest multiple parts or the division of cells within a growing body.

Figure 8--Cut Fruit
Size: 20"x22"x10"

Cut Fruit is a two-section piece showing two different interiors of a cut-open, roundish form. The first interior reveals overlapping layers of membrane-like fins filling the thick-walled cut form. The second interior is revealed by a cut through the thick wall and across the fin-membranes. This interior exposes a dark cavity inside the thick wall and shows the otherwise hidden regular spacing of the fins and the repeated cells or pockets between the fins. These pockets suggest a pattern of division and multiplication of cells inside a generative and protective form.

I returned to rectangular wall-hanging modules for the next group of sculptures. The first wall relief had been a planar surface across which the added fins set up visual rhythmic patterns. Most of the free-standing forms had had interior spaces which the wall relief did not have. The partially revealed interiors of these forms added a structural logic which, although not literally representational, could successfully communicate the idea of a repetitive pattern of building or growing.

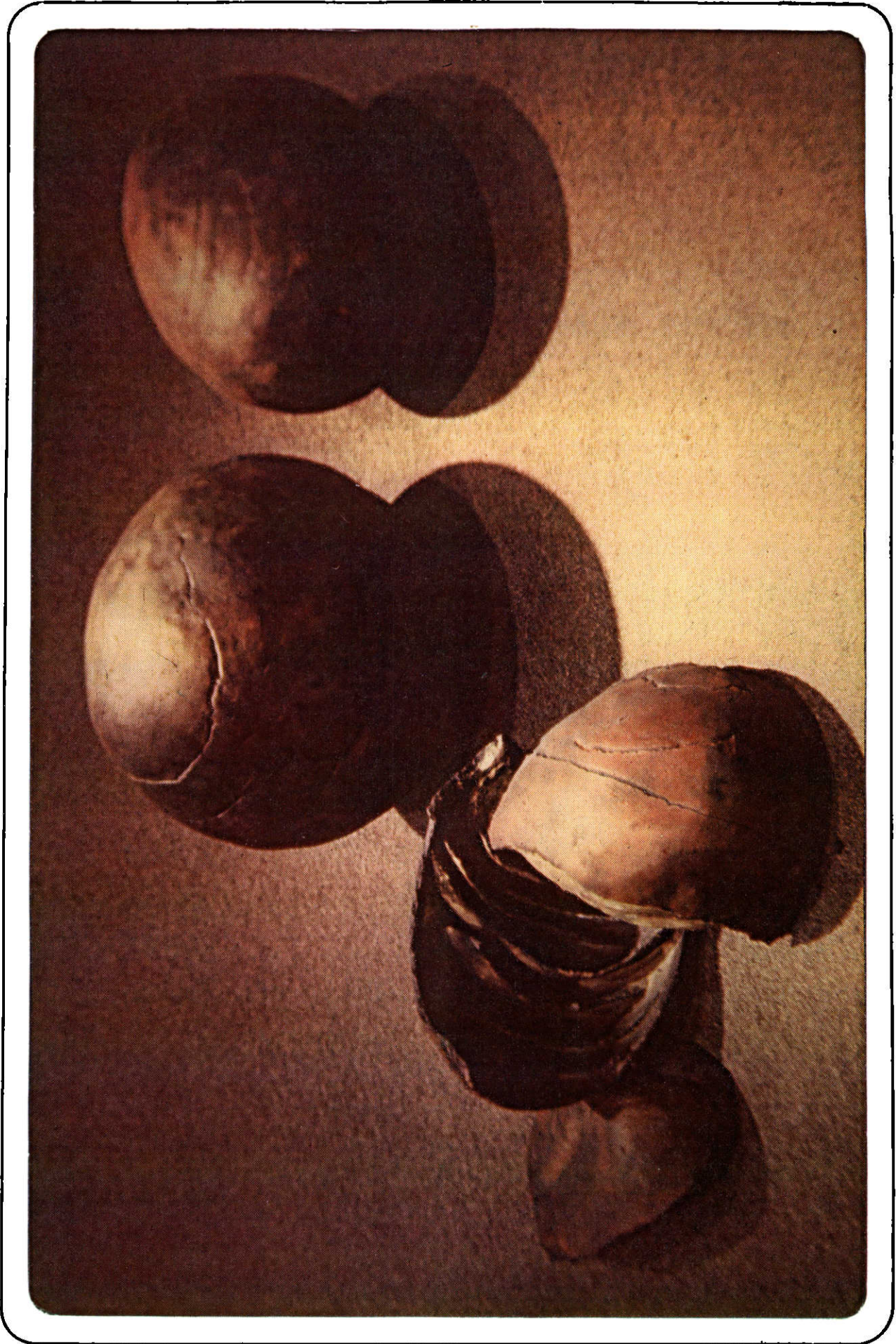


Fig. 7--Red Eggs

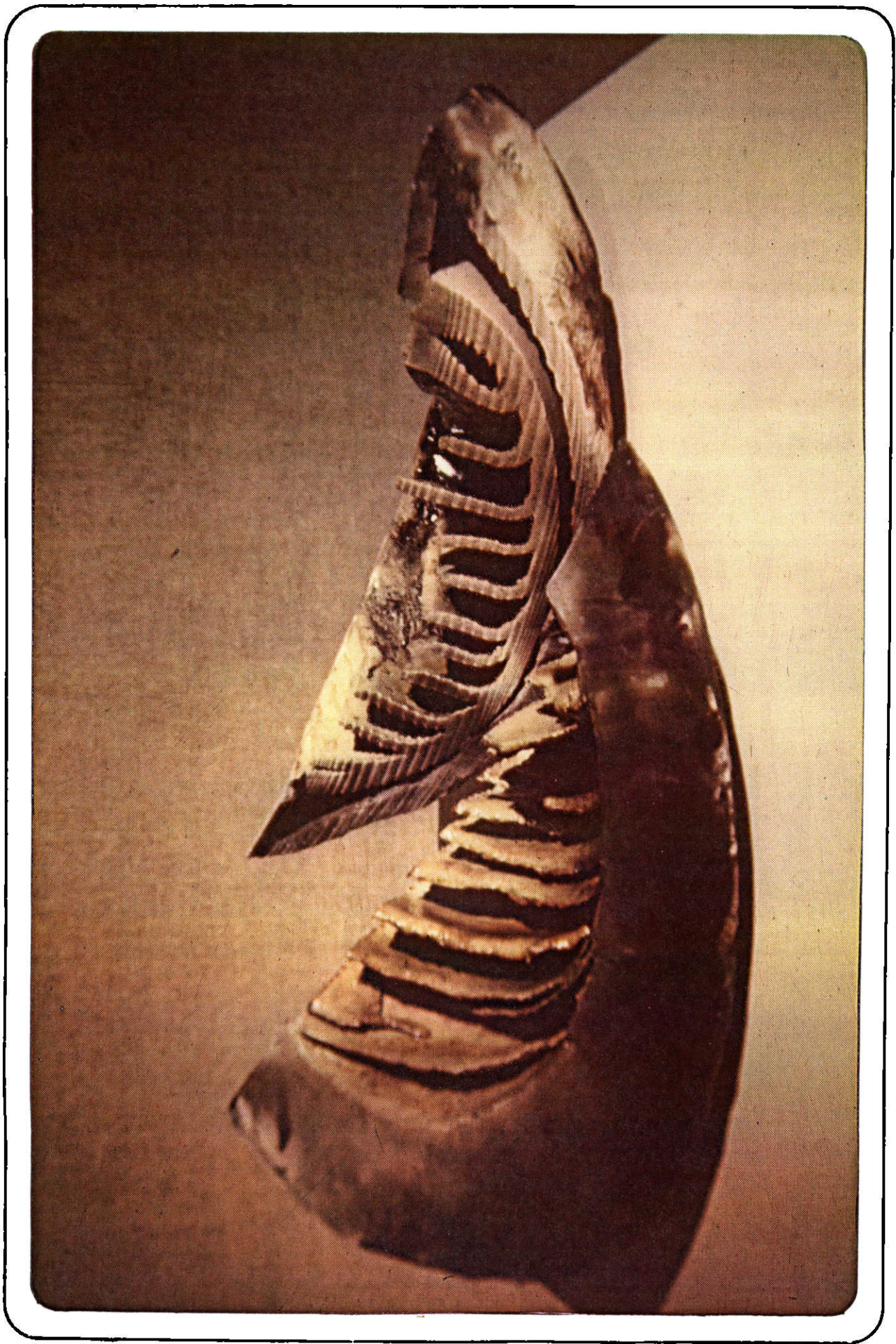


Fig. 8--Cut Fruit

I wanted to see what would happen if interior spaces were revealed or suggested in wall-hanging forms.

Figure 9--Adobe Houses: Gray
Size: five units, each
10" tall x 8" wide
x 2" deep

Adobe Houses: Gray is a series of five shallow, rectangular boxes hung side by side on the wall. The boxes seem to be closed forms, penetrated only by a few small or narrow cuts. Each cut is partly framed or shaded by a fin, which is actually the clay slice that was removed when each cut was made.

I immediately observed a difference in character in this series. A major difference in the imagery of this series from the earlier ones is that the fins added to these box modules are cut-edged, instead of round-edged; the boxes themselves are more hard-edged than were the earlier box modules. The hard edges and cut edges eliminate the ambiguity that the earlier forms had maintained between man-made and natural structural patterns and forms. These boxes immediately look like structures of man's building.

The cut openings in these boxes are so small that the interiors remain dark and mysterious. The openings are like small windows to a larger interior space rather than like individual pockets or cells as were the openings in the earlier sculptures.

There are fewer fins and openings on these forms than on the earlier sculptures. The rhythmic visual patterns set up by fins and cut openings are therefore much slower moving than were those of the earlier works. These boxes invite a reciprocally balanced pattern of movement in and

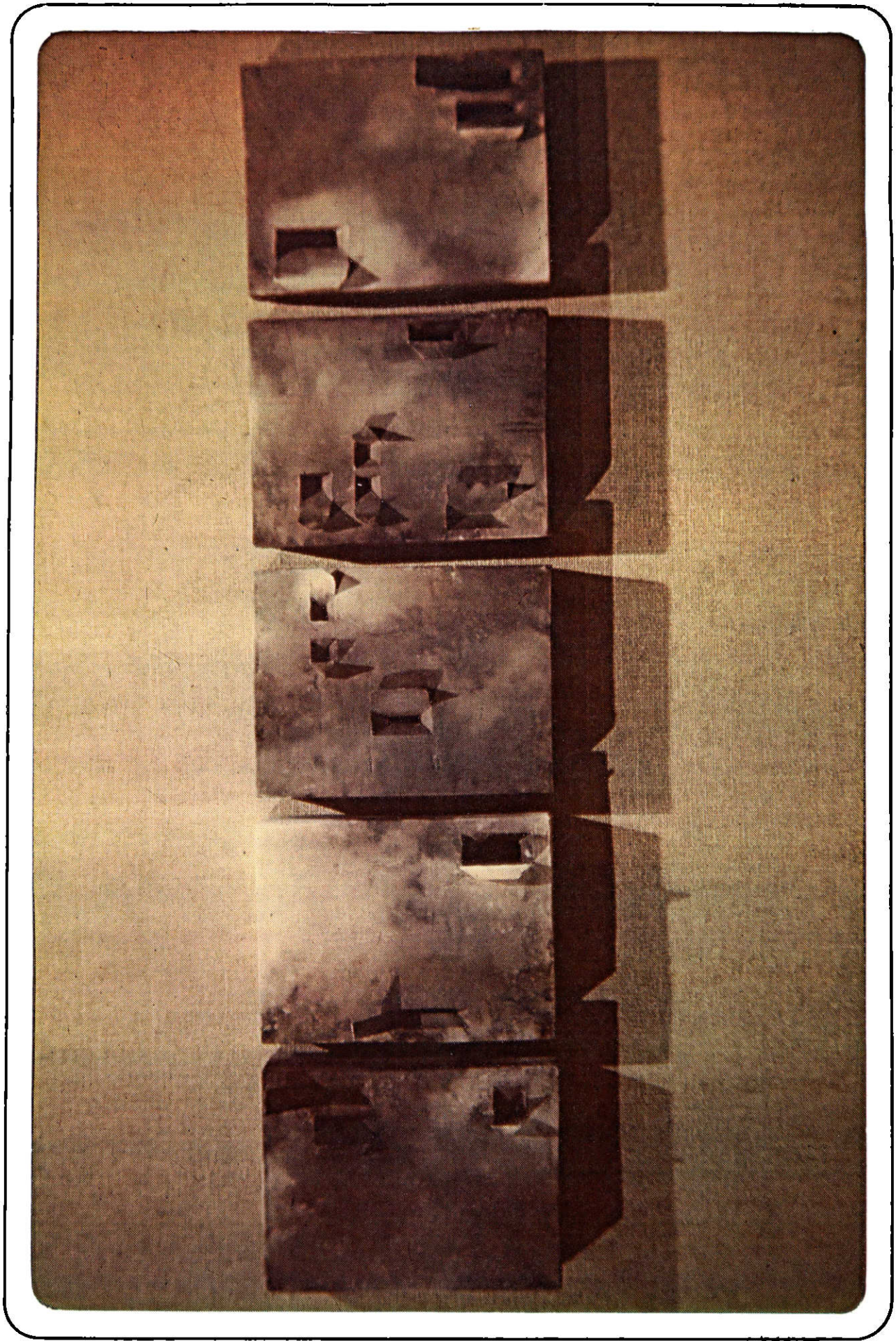


Fig. 9--Adobe Houses: Gray

out of them. As did the Free-Standing Wall, this sculptural series, Adobe Houses: Gray, goes beyond the idea of showing a construction and implies place or environment.

Figure 10--Adobe Houses
 Sizes: from 2"x3½"x10"
 to 8"x10"x15"

Adobe Houses is a group of six free-standing rectilinear and angular box forms constructed in the same manner as the Adobe Houses: Gray wall series was constructed. The forms are simple, hard-edged, and have a few widely spaced, small or narrowly cut openings. Some of the openings are partially framed by the attached cut-outs from the openings. There is not a strong sense of rhythmic motion set up among the arrangements of fins and windows. Rather, there is a sense of balance set up between interiors and exteriors and between windows and fins.

The forms have the character of dwellings with small, protective windows. The interiors are darkly concealed except for occasional glimpses of a small shaft of light from another window or a partial glimpse through a window on the other side. Although each structure resembles an object -- a house -- the use of multiple similar forms helps promote the idea of repetitive, boxlike living units for man rather than literal model houses for men.

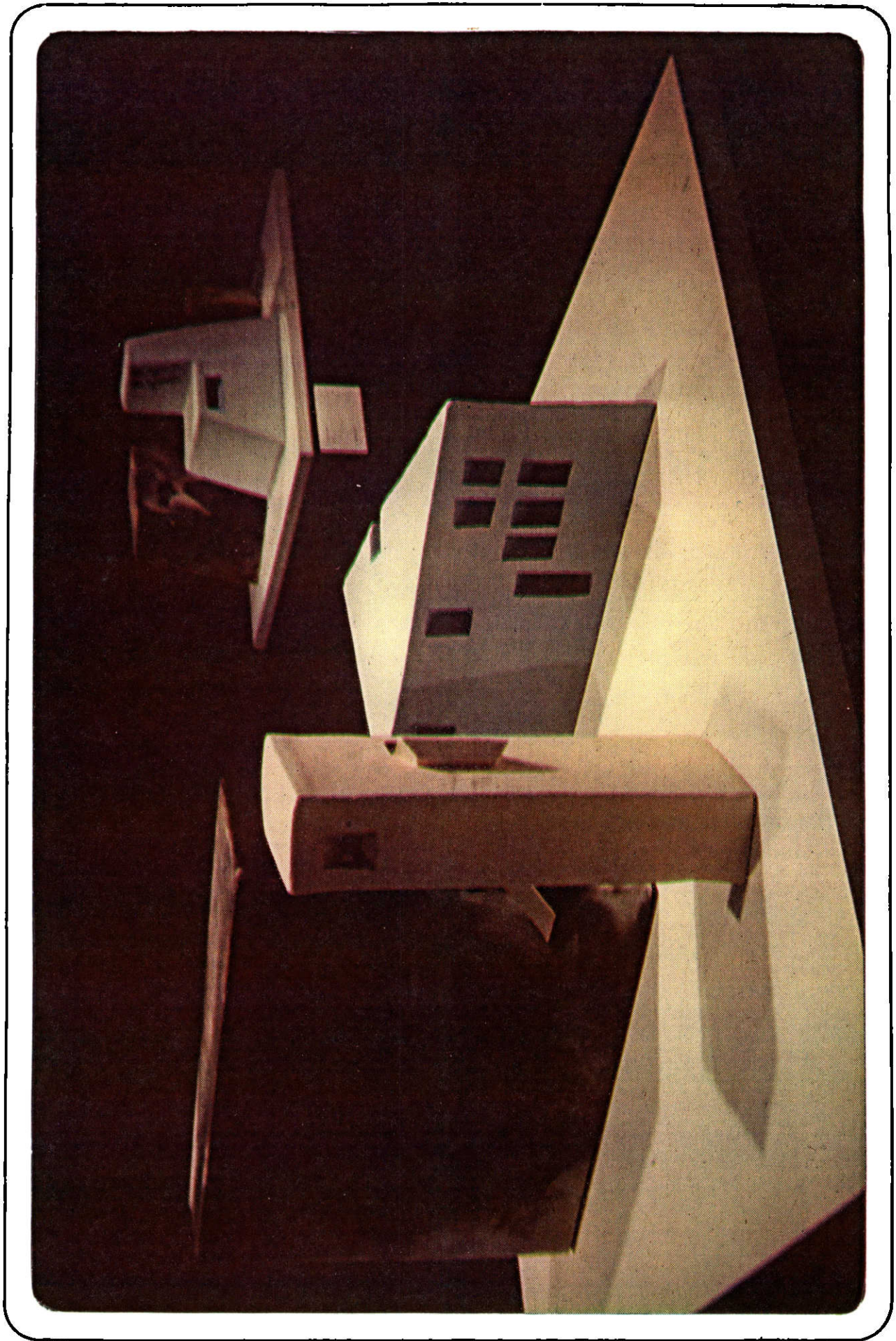


Fig. 10--Adobe Houses

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I have been pleased with the variety of forms that lend themselves for use in communicating the various facets of the idea of repetitive, rhythmic growth patterns. Although both geometric and organic forms can be used, I have found their differences to be both significant and useful. The more hard-edged and tightly ordered the geometric forms are, the more they express man-made, modular structures rather than seasonal, rhythmic life patterns. Organic forms, on the other hand, can easily carry the rhythmic imagery suggestive of life patterns such as cell division, growth or repetition. On geometric forms, the more loosely the ordered arrangements are applied, the more they can carry the suggestion of life patterns. In both geometric and organic forms, the less representational the overall form, the more successfully it can be used to communicate an idea rather than an imitation of literal form.

However, whatever the basic form -- whether geometric or organic -- the most useful format for the expression of the idea of repetition of life patterns is the multiple-unit format. The literal repetition or progression of similar units in a series or group presentation inherently carries the idea of repetition or rhythmic continuity.

The ideas of rhythm and repetitive life patterns are most successfully communicated in the forms which have an abundance of closely-spaced repeated fins or cells, which set up active visual patterns of

lines, lights and shadows. The last two series of adobe house forms have fewer relief additions and fewer openings than the other forms. Their smoother, quieter surfaces do not carry the idea of rhythmic patterns; but rather, they carry a sense of quiet balance.

The most successful form for communicating the uncomplicated idea of rhythmic patterns is the Wall Relief: Red. Since it is simply a gridded surface over which repeated fins project rows of lights and shadows, with no figurative imagery; the major experience of it is the sense of the visual motion set up by the repeated lights and darks.

The free-standing forms may have strong, rhythmic, repeated elements; but they also have other elements to be experienced besides the visual patterns of lights and darks. The chambers in the Free-Standing Wall, the idea of interchangeability in the Finned Cubes, the similarity to a machine part of the Wheel, the kinship of Cut Fruit and Red Eggs to generative forms in nature -- all suggest different facets of the idea of rhythms and patterns in life.

Comparison of size and scale among the different forms led me to two major conclusions. First, although similar types of ideas can be communicated by similar forms in a variety of sizes; size and scale do make a difference in the sense of power and immediacy of the idea. The small forms, such as the group Finned Cubes, can carry the ideas of rhythm, repetition, pattern of growth or continuity; and the idea of an infinite possibility of replication can be projected. However, there is no literal, physical power in the small scale. The large idea -- the universality of the repeated patterns -- can be "read" into the small forms, but is not communicated viscerally by them. The large forms,

particularly the Wall Relief: Red and the Free-Standing Wall, have a powerful presence in themselves that I conclude to be a direct result of the large scale.

The second conclusion having to do with size and scale is that the meaning of scale is relative; and a larger-than-human scale may be appropriate for some forms but not for others, depending on what they are intended to communicate. The relief and free-standing wall might more strongly communicate the idea of infinite repetition in a very large scale created by multiplying units. On the other hand, the Wheel, Red Eggs, or Cut Fruit might, if increased to monolithic scale, gain an aspect of humor which would change their meaning radically. The Eggs and Fruit are of large scale compared to familiar real eggs and fruit. They have been blown up in size enough to reveal their interiors for comfortable contemplation of their abstract qualities, but not so much that they become individual entities.

Significant directions in my art work have usually presented themselves as possibilities to me while I have been doing relatively arbitrary or tangential experimental work in relation to a current body of work. Sometimes this has occurred during a systematic exploration of possibilities, while other times it has come as a result of temporary dissatisfaction with and reaction to the current forms.

Thus, the initial wall relief series was begun as a reaction to the representational, literal qualities of the earlier free-standing forms. The reliefs were a form confirmed successful in a deliberate search for some very different basic forms.

The Free-Standing Wall, however, took on a life of its own out of what I thought was a perfunctory exploration of wall relief type forms. Its calm and strength, its "interior" environmental character were unexpected and have presented a challenge to me to take up a more architectural direction in my work. This direction is a viable possibility if I can arrange some appropriate shows and get some commissions to install some of the large scale works.

The organic forms done for this project were part of the systematic effort to complete a comprehensive exploration of the possible formal alternatives for the expression of my pattern imagery. Abstracted organic forms were an important contrast to the more literal organic forms of the pre-thesis works. Giving the more organic forms object-titles such as Eggs and Fruit is my concession to the tendency of these forms to resemble embryonic natural forms, despite their comparatively large scale and their abstraction. I feel that they are abstracted enough and large enough not to be readable as literal representational objects and that the titles do not limit their expressive possibilities. The mechanical cuts across the fruit-like forms effectively add to the abstraction of meaning from literal fruit imitations.

In the course of the studio investigation, it became important for me to experience each formal possibility since I had learned that striking visual and conceptual differences could occur with each change. The sketches I did provided me with quick suggestions; however, it was in the actual carrying out of formal ideas that the most successful discoveries were made.

As described in Chapter II, the adobe house series was developed out of a desire to see what differences there might be between flat, surface wall forms and wall forms with interiors. The series was not begun intentionally to simulate house forms. The modules were expected to be geometric units in which a choppy rhythm would be set up by the cut penetrations and additions. My first cut into one of the wet clay boxes took me aback. It almost completed the form by itself! Instead of cutting another opening in that box, I cut into a second box. The cuts balanced each other. In final form, there are only from two to five cuts in each box, and the cut outs are attached as fins or "window shades." The forms have an undeniable resemblance to adobe house facades.

These adobe house forms are inviting to me. I feel that they can be a strong additional direction for my work and that they can be developed concurrently with the large-scale architectural wall and wall relief forms. Both types of forms are made in a similar fashion, with clay slabs and slab additions.

Practically speaking, the adobe forms are quicker to complete, smaller, and easier to ship and show than the large works. They can sustain my interest and provide me with a growing body of show material while I search for space and opportunities to make, show or install the larger works.

I am delighted that this creative project has led me to make the discoveries of the satisfying format and powerful potential of multiple units combined into a large total scale for my wall forms and the complementary discovery of the effective use of more simple multiples for my

smaller forms. These discoveries will generate some exciting work for me in large-scale architectural works and in smaller serial or modular works.