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Department of Craft Design - Ceramics.

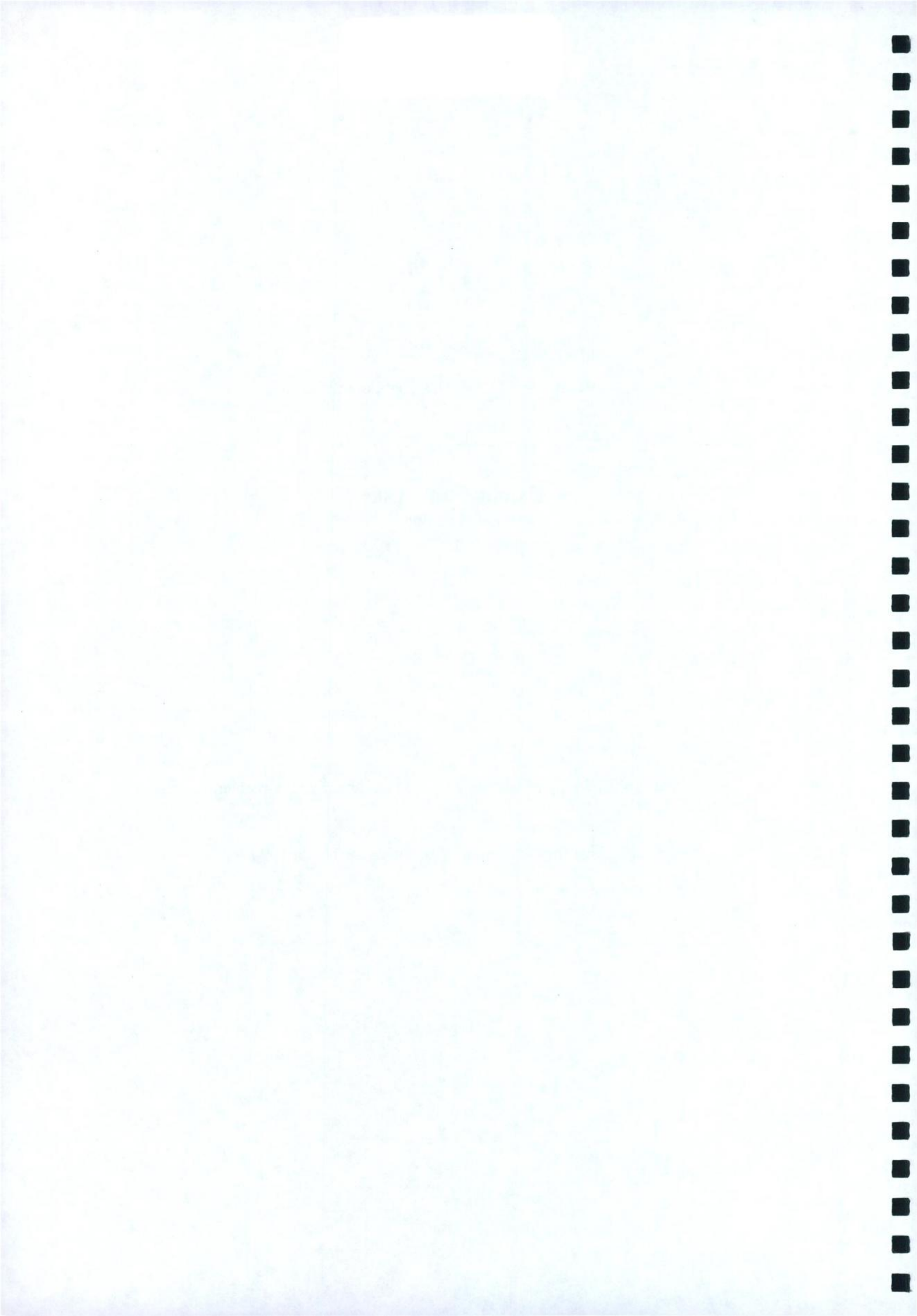
CARMEN DIONYSE
Ceramic Sculptor

by

Fionnuala Nolan

Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art & Design and Complementary
Studies

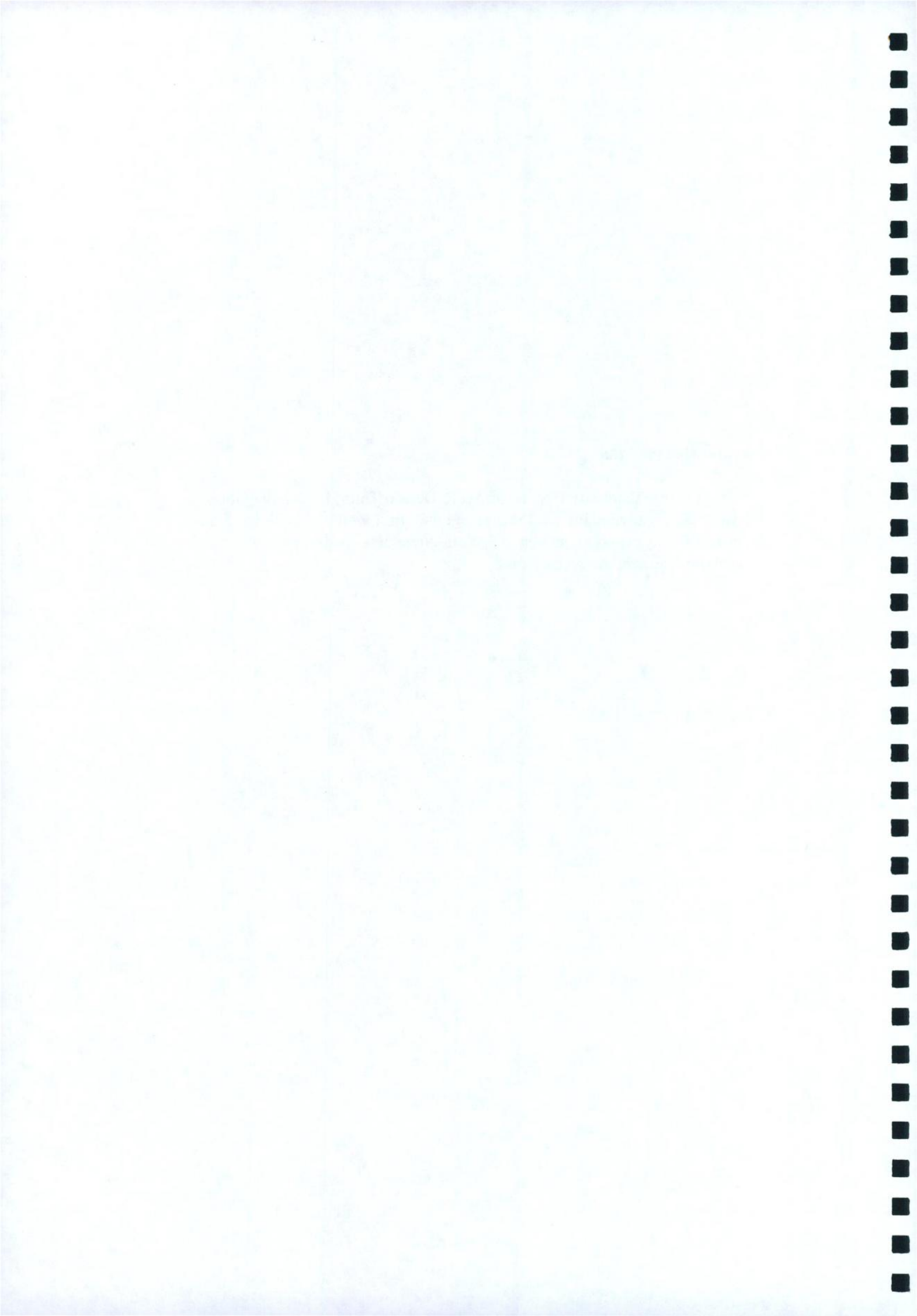
in candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Design 1994.



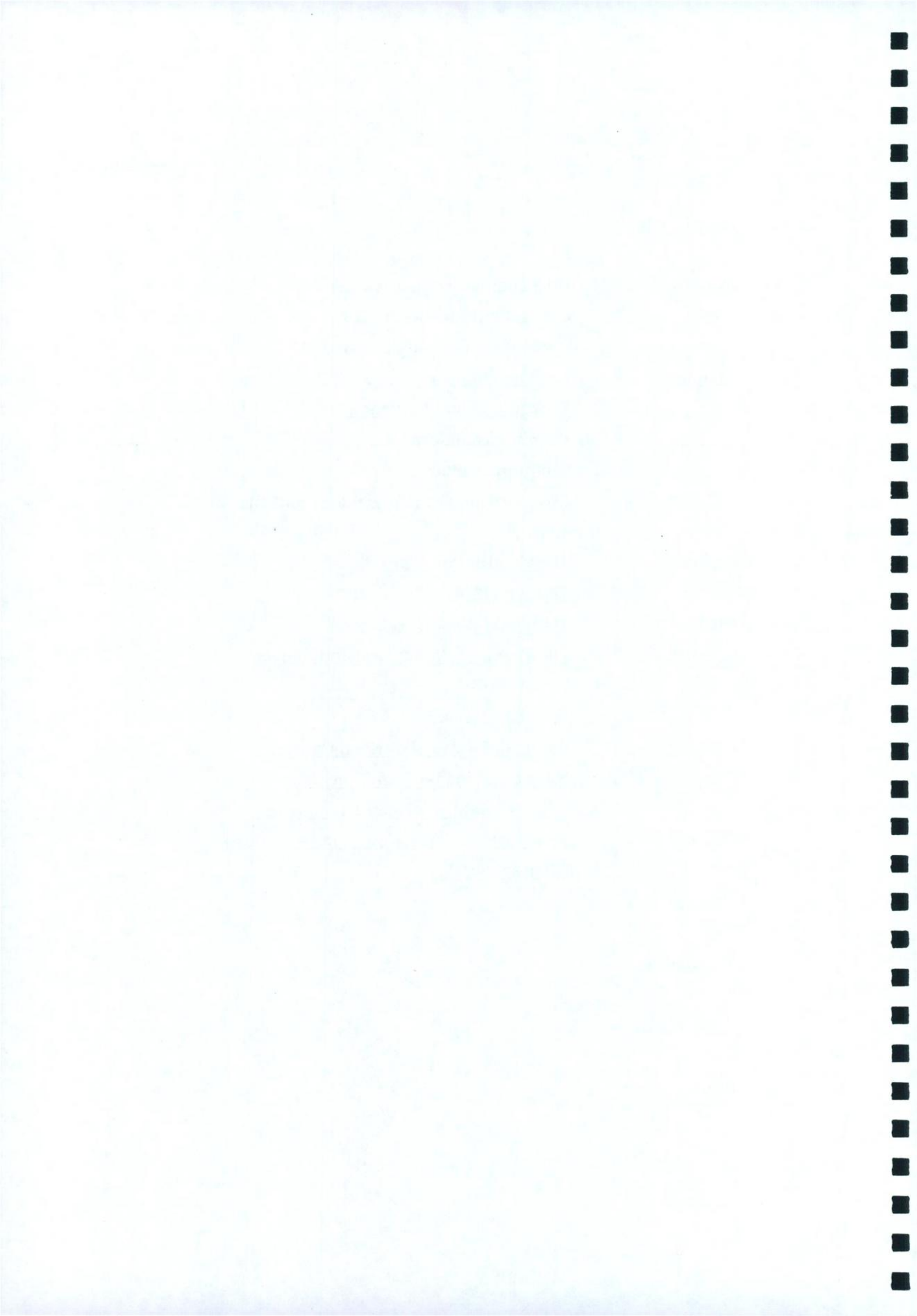


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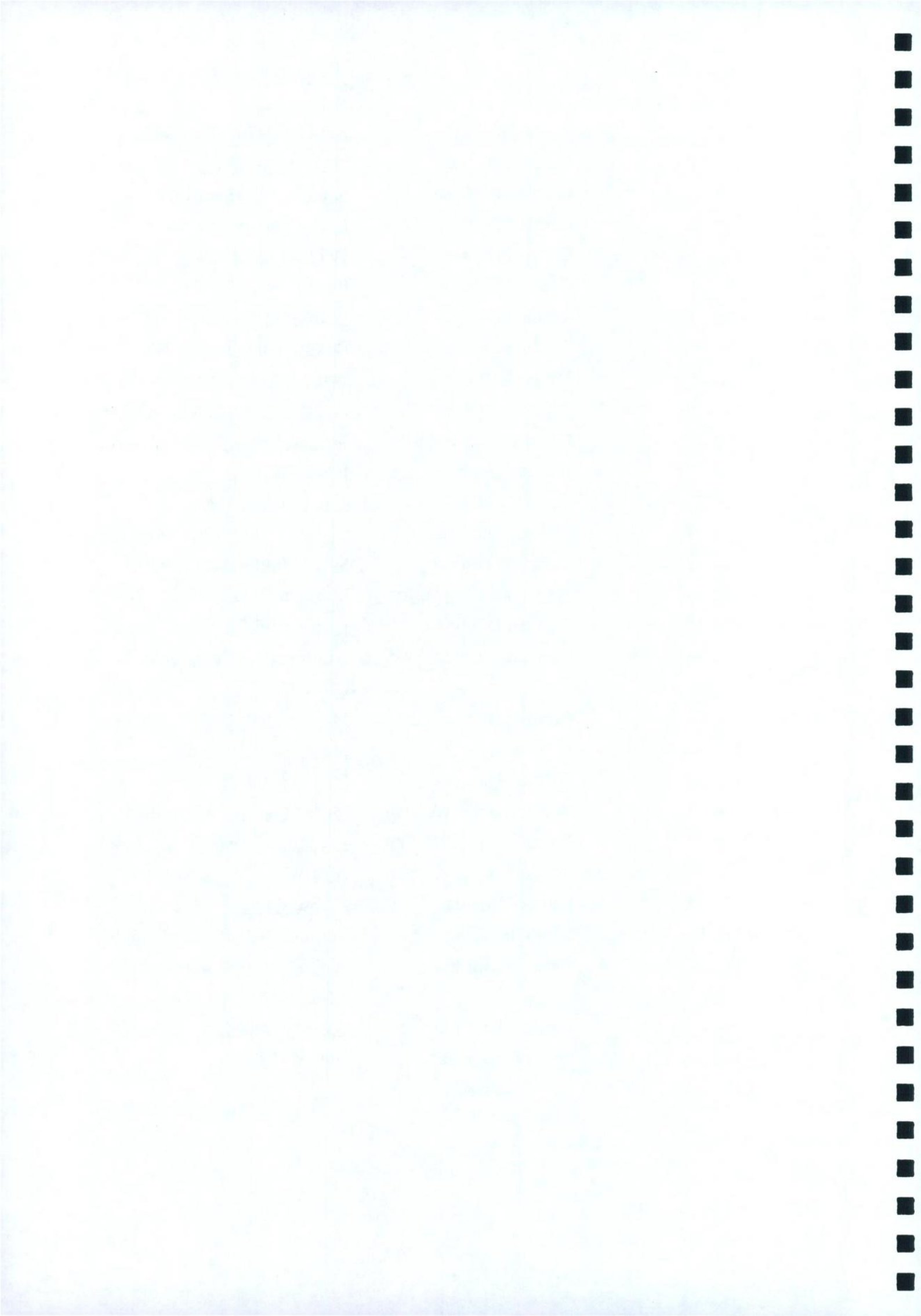


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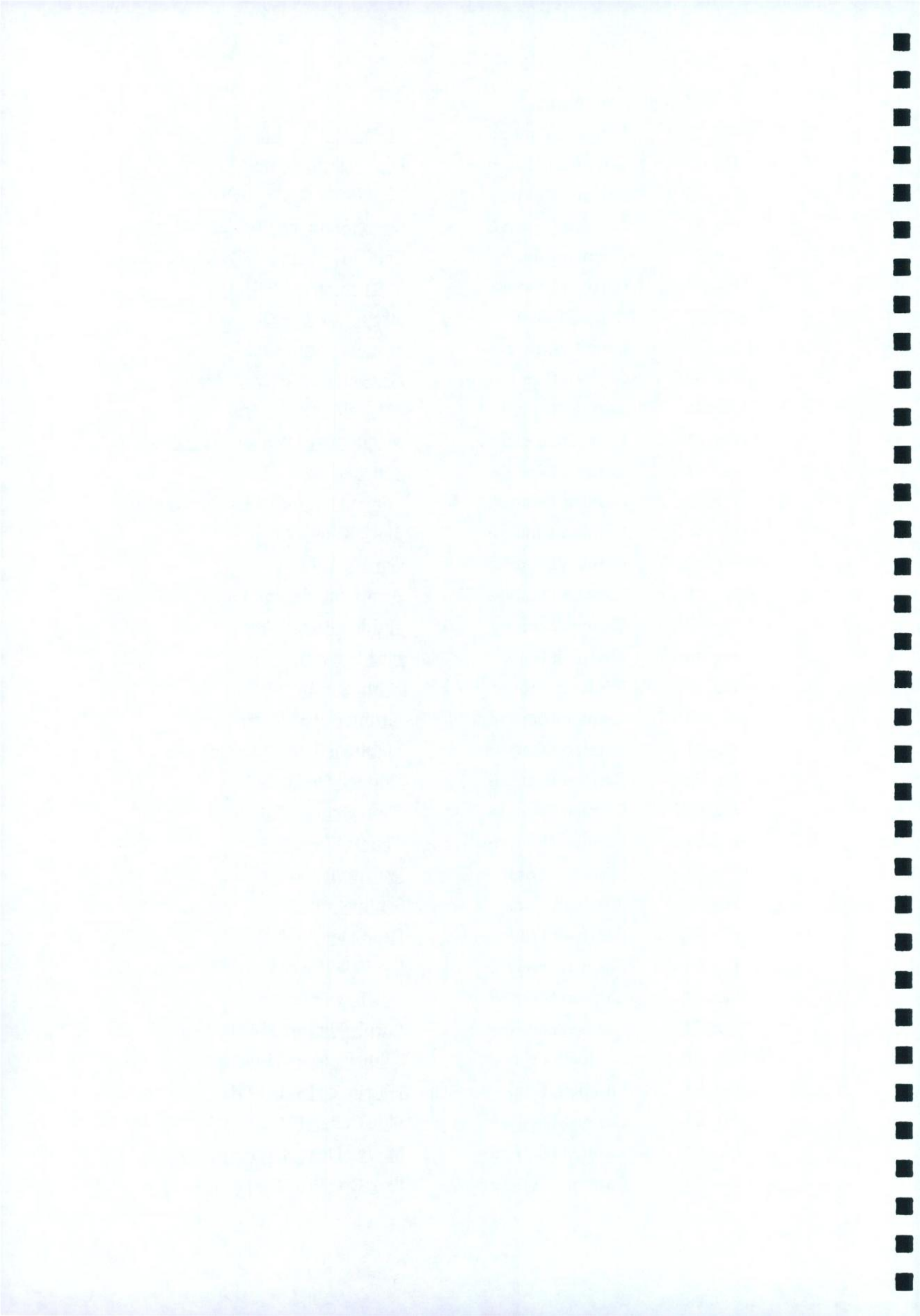
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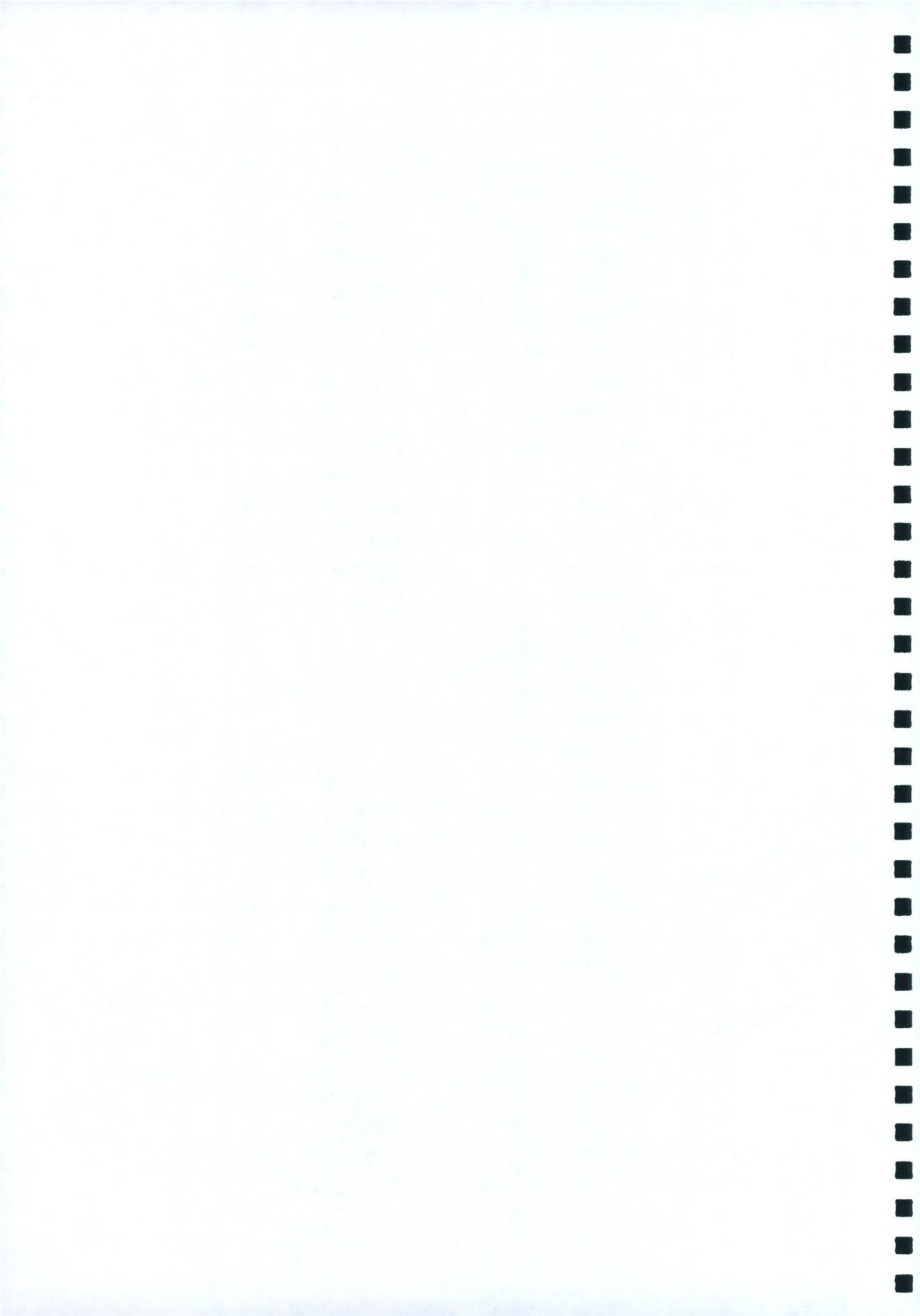
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Brief Summary of Thesis

My thesis begins with a general introduction which introduces the themes and ideas which I intend to explore. This followed by a short exploration of what led me to research the work of Carmen Dionyse. Then, there is a brief biography of Dionyse, discussed in the context of European figurative sculpture in the first half of the 20th century. I proceed to explore possible sources for her imagery and forms. This is followed by a discussion of Dionyse's strong sense of history, which pervades her work. I then relate the work of Dionyse, a contemporary Belgian to that of the 15th century Flemish Symbolists. Her method of working is the next issue I examine.

The remainder of this paper takes a more thematic approach. I analyse the important theme of withdrawal and retreat in Dionyse's work. I begin this analysis by proposing that Carmen Dionyse may have been influenced by World War II and I examine her work in relation to that of other post war sculptors, notably, Lynn Chadwick (b.1914) and Elizabeth Frink (1930-93).

I proceed to explore Dionyse's ideas relating to nature and the body, and her belief in a natural cycle of renewal and regeneration. I compare the themes relating to nature in her work with particular ideas in the work of the Polish sculptor, Magdalena Abakanowicz (b.1930). Finally, I focus on Dionyse's interest in the spiritual, although the spiritual aspect of her work is such an integral and inextricable part of all her themes and work that it is in fact discussed throughout the paper. I isolate it only to examine the more esoteric aspect of Dionyse's fascination with the inner world of the spirit.

In conclusion, I briefly review the reasons why Dionyse's work has such a powerful and historical effect. I isolate what seem to be its most salient features and the most important messages that her work communicates.

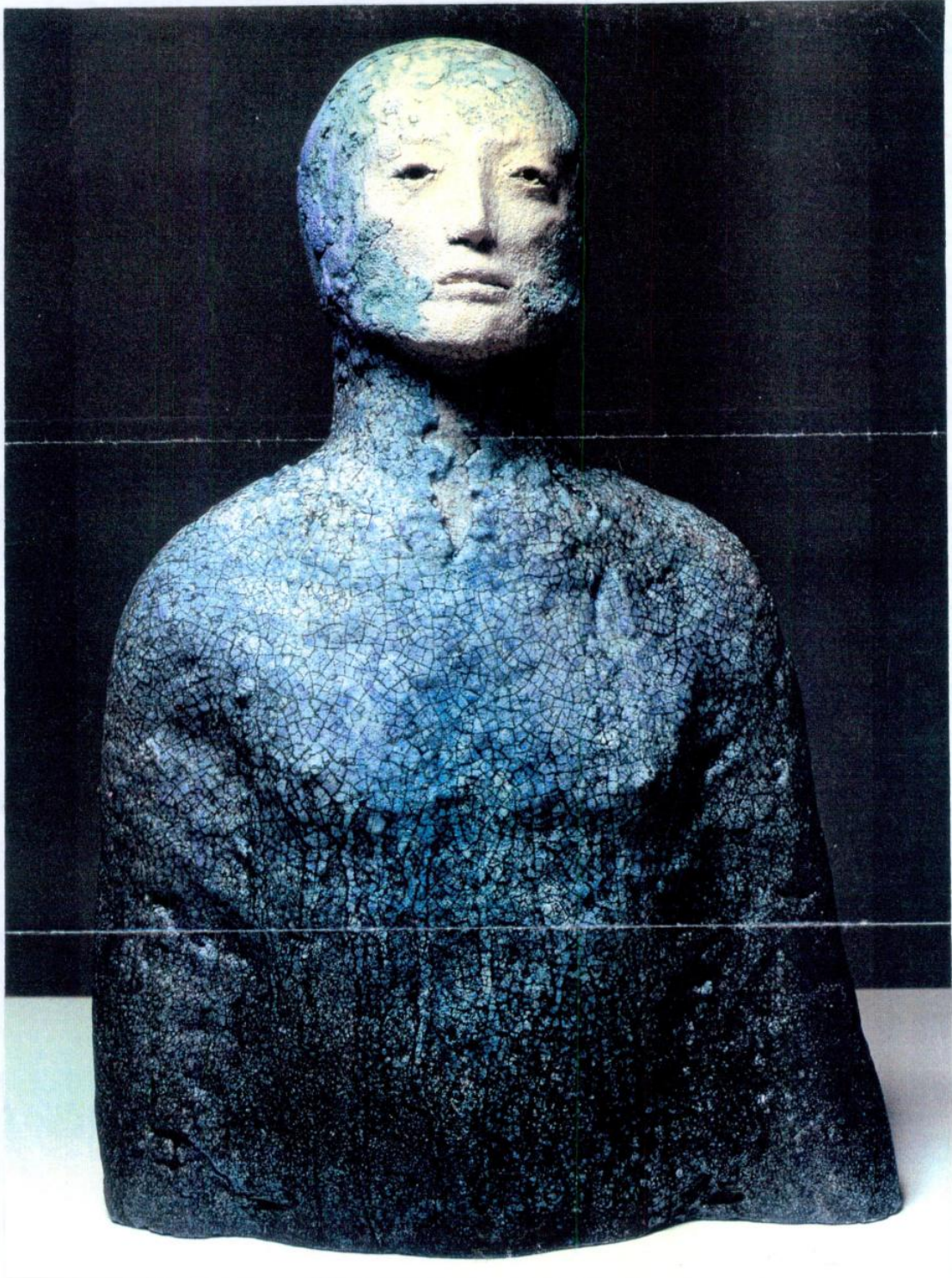


Fig. 1.

Carmen Dionyse

Azul 1987 (18 inches high).

Introduction

Carmen Dionyse is an enigmatic figure. She is a very private person.(1) She has rarely spoken or written about her work: what she has written relates mainly to her method of working. She suggests a "visual and perhaps tactile"(2) approach to her work and she says that it is up to the work "to speak its own language"(3).

In other words, she does not see it as losing her role to articulate interpretations of her work. She expects her images to evoke a direct response, uninhibited by explanatory texts.

My aim in this paper is not to attempt to explain what her works mean. I do not believe that they are open to definitive interpretations. Her work evokes very powerful associations and images. It is multi-layered and there are many different levels of response possible, the most immediate perhaps being the purely personal enjoyment of the colours and surfaces she creates.

What I do aim to do is to explore possible origins and sources of her imagery and forms. I hope to isolate what I see to be her main preoccupations. I have accumulated some factual information about Dionyse but very little about her personal life or about any major experiences that may have affected her and her work.

Thus, partly by piecing together snippets of information about Dionyse, and mainly through examining her works, I have isolated the themes and influences which seem to me to be the most salient. I have suggested visual associations between her work and that of other artists from various periods. I compare her work with that of some of her contemporary 20th century sculptors whose imagery and forms seem to display a similar ethos and preoccupations. I can not claim that Dionyse was in fact influenced by these sculptors, I simply compare in order to gain insight into the imagery and forms which she uses.

I have not attempted an analysis of all Dionyse's work, nor have I discussed all the issues which her work raises. Instead, I have concentrated on what I see to



Fig. 2.

Carmen Dionyse

White Mauve Head 1970.



Fig. 3.

Carmen Dionyse

Small White Head 1972.



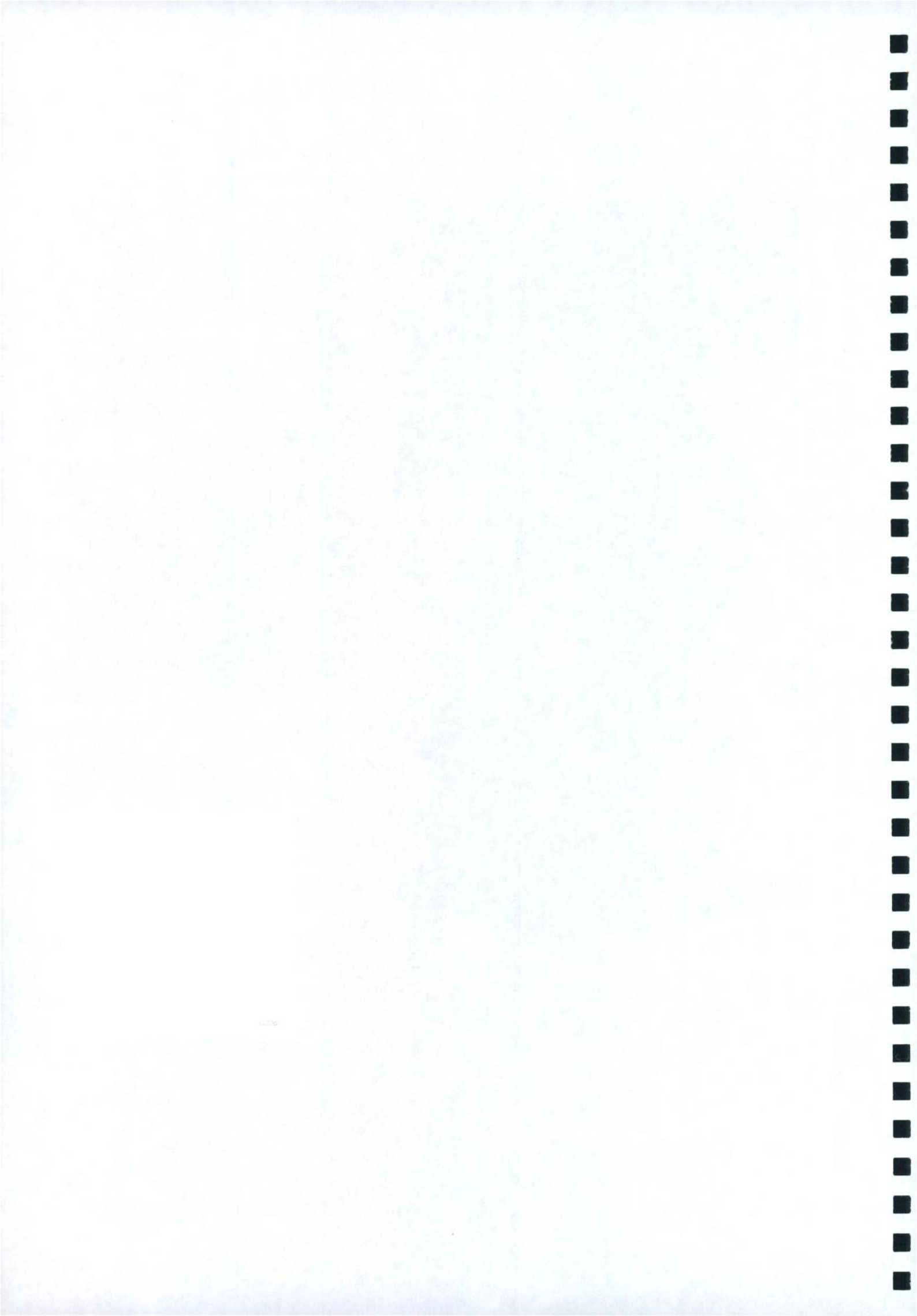
Fig. 4. Carmen Dionyse
Rock Woman 1959.



Fig. 5. Carmen Dionyse
Twofold Figure 1960.



Fig. 6. Carmen Dionyse
Revolving Cube 1961.



be the predominating themes underlying the body of work. These can be summarized under three main headings: the concept of withdrawal and retreat; Dionyse and her attitude to nature; and the spiritual dimension of her work. The theme of retreat refers to man's apparent need to withdraw from the world and to put up barriers against reality. Dionyse's figures retreat as a means of self protection and also to isolate themselves for spiritual contemplation. Dionyse's love and awareness of nature is apparent throughout her work. She believes in an underlying natural unity and in the interconnectedness of man and the natural world. For her, existence is cyclical, the skin is merely a physical wrapping for the spirit, the spirit lives on after death though in an altered form.(4)

She describes this phenomenon as a "type of eternal humanity which embodies the cycle of life and death" (5). I also focus on Dionyse's association with anything related to the spiritual, the esoteric or the unconscious. This interest has led her to study ancient religious and mythologies and it explains her attraction to Rosicrucianism, Alchemy, and to all those who pursue the life of the spirit such as prophets, sybils, stylites, etc.

My Reasons for choosing to study Dionyse's work.

I was initially drawn to Carmen Dionyse's work for two main reasons. The first was the deep sense of history which I felt pervaded it. The second was my attraction to her method of using clay. I found that her works seemed to draw one into the past. They have, for me, strong links with primitive sculpture - pre-historic idols, stone statues, ceramic figures. I also found that they tended to cause memories to emerge - for example, they evoke images from ancient Egypt, figures from tombs, medieval relic busts, helmeted knights, renaissance portraits, bandaged lepers. I was fascinated by the power that her work had to evoke such associations and allusions from such a diverse range of sources and periods. Along with this power to release a string of historical allusions, I felt there was a strong archaeological sense about her work. On a surface level, the works often appear as if they have been recovered from the earth, they seem like ancient artefacts, cryptic clues to a remote hermetic culture. I have an image of Dionyse as an archaeologist, sifting back through metaphorical layers of past cultures and histories, digging for the images and symbols that will best

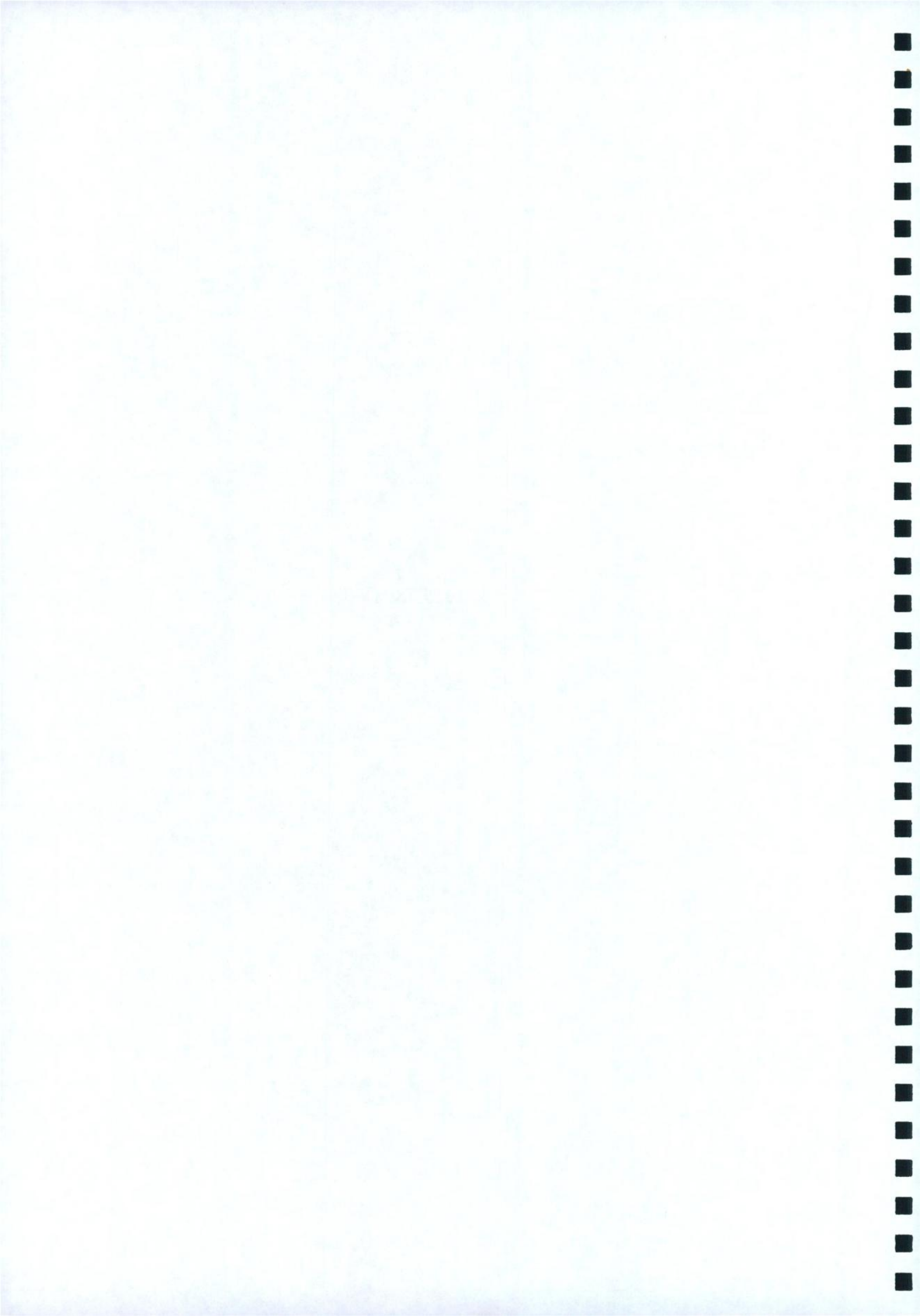


communicate her message. There is a romantic nostalgia in Dionyse's longing to escape from the 20th century world which she dislikes (6), to the silent remote cultures which she admires so much; her works provide this escape for both the artist and her audience.

I was also fascinated by how Dionyse uses clay. I had not encountered such a direct and physical way of working with clay in figurative sculpture before. She creates a spontaneous evocation of what her husband, the art critic, Fons de Vogelaere, has called "her fractured vision", by working directly with the clay "which is kneaded, beaten, rolled, built-up and pushed out to bursting point"(8) Combined with this active approach is a passive approach. She also waits to find what the material will direct her to do. Creating for Dionyse is more about discovering, revealing surfaces, images, symbols and accepting accidents than inventing. This approach as been described by Irish painter Louis le Brocquy, in relation to painting, in a way that seems pertinent to Dionyse's methods with clay. " Painting is groping and watching; when you are painting you want to discover, uncover, reveal, images tend to emerge automatically"(9) I like this passive intuitive approach, it allows the wealth of imagery and allusions that Dionyse - who has read very extensively about a wide range of subjects, especially history, religion and mythology - has acquired to emerge in an uncontrived, spontaneous manner that is sympathetic to the way in which she uses her clay.



CHAPTER ONE



Chapter One

Carmen Dionyse

Background and Influences.

Carmen Dionyse was born in Ghent in 1921. She began studying the visual arts in her teens with a private tutor. At the age of seventeen, in 1938 she entered the Royal Academy of Art in Ghent. She studied there for eight years. The syllabus included drawing, painting, etching and the applied arts. Eight years later, at the age of thirty three she returned to the Royal Academy to attend a ceramics course which was just established at that time. This was 1954 and it was to be the beginning of her life long career as a ceramic sculptor. Dionyse has said that at that time ceramic art was in its infancy in Belgium. Of the ceramics course she has written, "It was of no significance, I was given a large kiln and the opportunity to benefit from the advice of (more experienced) fellow sculptors and other beginning ceramists"(10)

In 1958 she was awarded a Grand Prix at the Brussels World Fair (11) "I started to distance myself radically from the ornamental style of the Brussels masters and turned towards contemporary sculpture"(12). Her early works bear witness to the influences of a wide range of sculptors and styles. She admits that Henry Moore influenced her (13). This influence is evident in early works like **Rock Woman** (1959) (fig.4). Later she did a series of helmeted figures which would have been inspired by Moore's **Helmet Heads** of the 1950's and his war time drawings. She certainly was and still is, very interested in dealing with the themes that Moore explored, for example man's exposure to the threats of war, of his need to seek shelter and protection from aggression.

During the '50's and '60's Dionyse experimented (mostly in clay) with a variety of styles and forms. Some pieces are quite angular and cubistic in form, for example **Revolving Cube** (1961) (fig.6). It is possible to see similarities between Dionyse's work and that of various sculptors working at that time, such as Jaques Lipchitz, Paolozzi and Brancusi. However, despite her experimentation

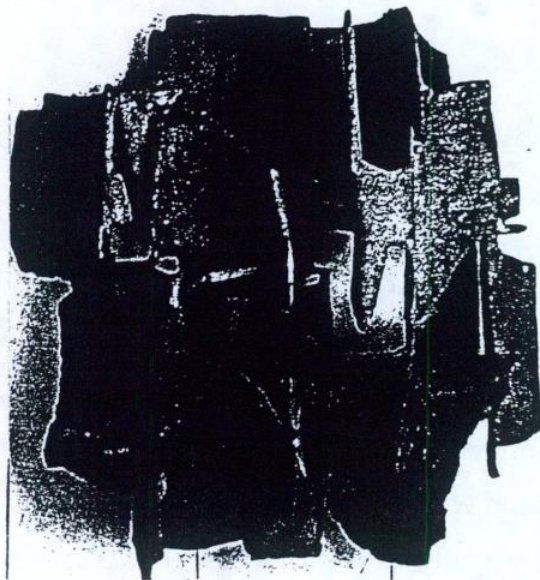


Fig. 7.

Carmen Dionyse

Beginning 1965.

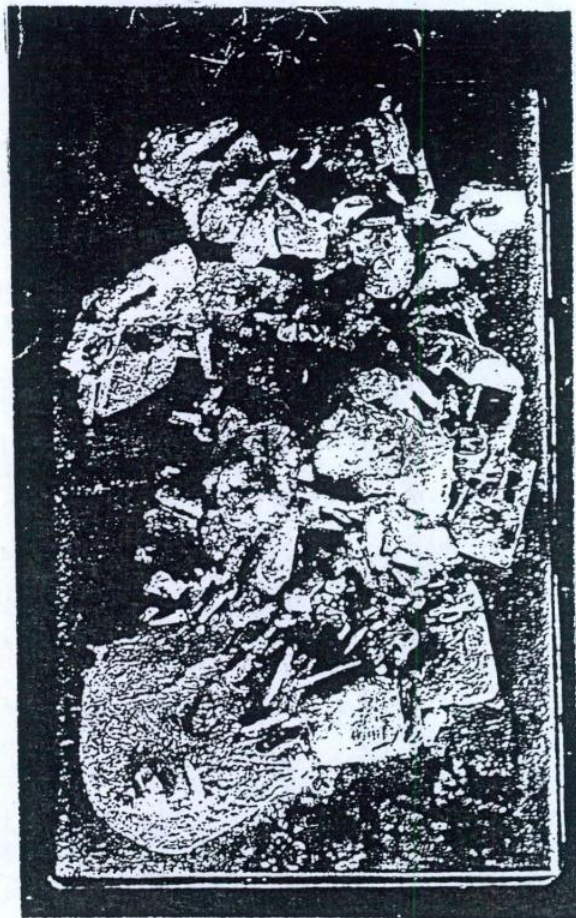


Fig. 8.

Carmen Dionyse

Redundant Guards 1961.



Fig. 9. Medardo Rosso
Behold the Child 1906.



Fig. 10. Auguste Rodin
Portrait of Baudelaire 1898.

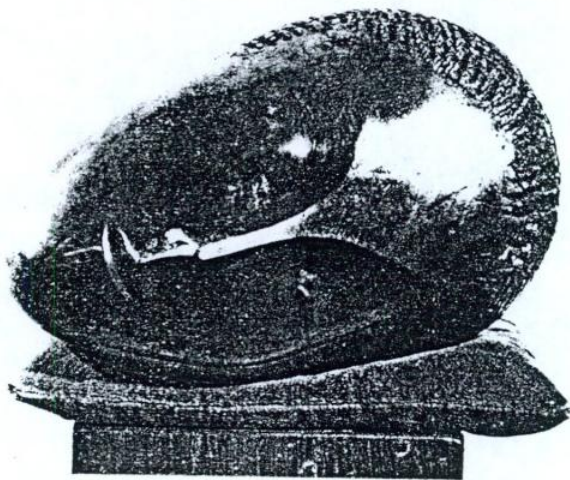
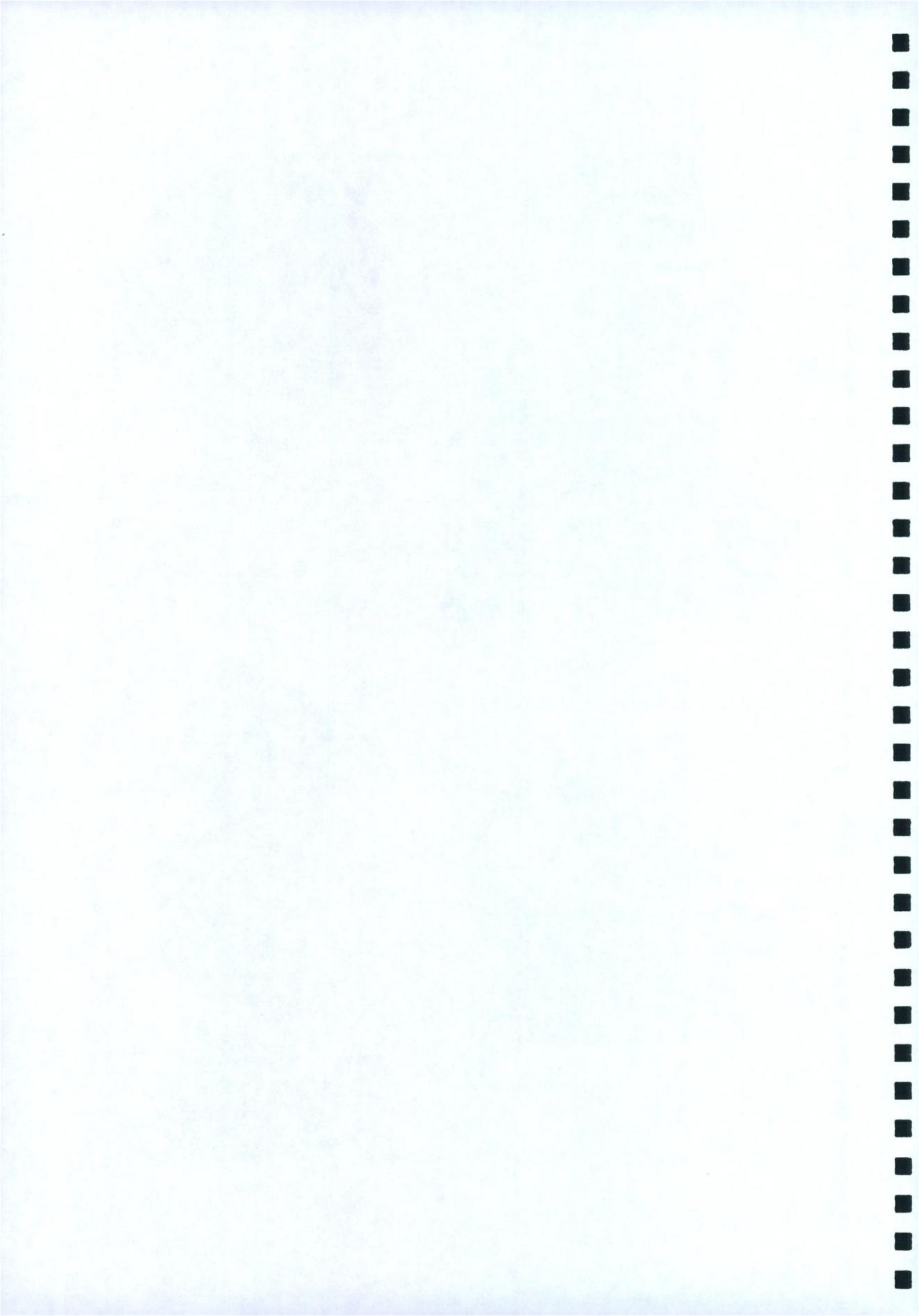


Fig. 11. Constantin Brancusi
Sleeping Muse 1910.



Fig. 12. Jacques Lipchitz
Head 1915.



with forms and surfaces, her early work explores the same mythical, telluric and human themes that continue to obsess her. In general, one can say that the early works, for example **Beginning** (1965)(fig.7) and **Redundant Guards** (1961) (fig.8) are far more abstract than the style she went on to develop. From the 70's onwards she says that her "art freed itself from its informal and suggestive straitjacket. Human form centred in the look and started to occupy my work" (14) Since then her work has been based almost exclusively around the human form, mainly heads and busts.

Dionyse has been involved in teaching ceramics both in colleges and at various workshops. She taught at the Hoger Art College in Hasselt from 1968 to 1984. She also taught at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent from 1969 to 1984. She has taken part in several international symposia. She has been a visiting lecturer and attended workshops in many parts of the world such as the U.S.A., Canada, the Netherlands and Australia. Throughout her career Dionyse has received several awards and prizes for her work. She is an active member of the international Academy of Ceramics which is based in Geneva and they have published a catalogue of her work (15). Dionyse has been involved in several group and personal exhibitions both in Belgium and abroad. Her work can be seen in many galleries and museums in Belgium but also in Japan, Australia and many other parts of the world. (For further information see Appendices).

In the early 20th century European sculptors working with the human head began to experiment more freely with their materials, using the natural qualities of the material to express the nature of their subjects. Primitive art was a major influence in the first half of this century and many artists experimented with primitive styles and imagery and there was a particular emphasis on the woman head. There was a wide range of different approaches to the portrayal of the head in the early 1900's. I have included a few examples - Medardo Rosso's **Behold the Child** (1906)(fig.9), Brancusi's **Sleeping Muse** (1910)(Fig.11) Lipchitz's **Head** (1915)(fig.12) - to give some idea of the sort of figurative sculptural tradition that preceded Dionyse. Dionyse claims the early 20th century sculptor, Ossip Zadkine (1870-1967) (16) as an influence. He created mainly stylised figures but from the works of his that I have seen I could not find any stylistic or formal similarities with Dionyse's work. However, I did discover one piece - **Tete Heroique** of 1908 (fig.13) in the Musee Zadkine in Paris - which

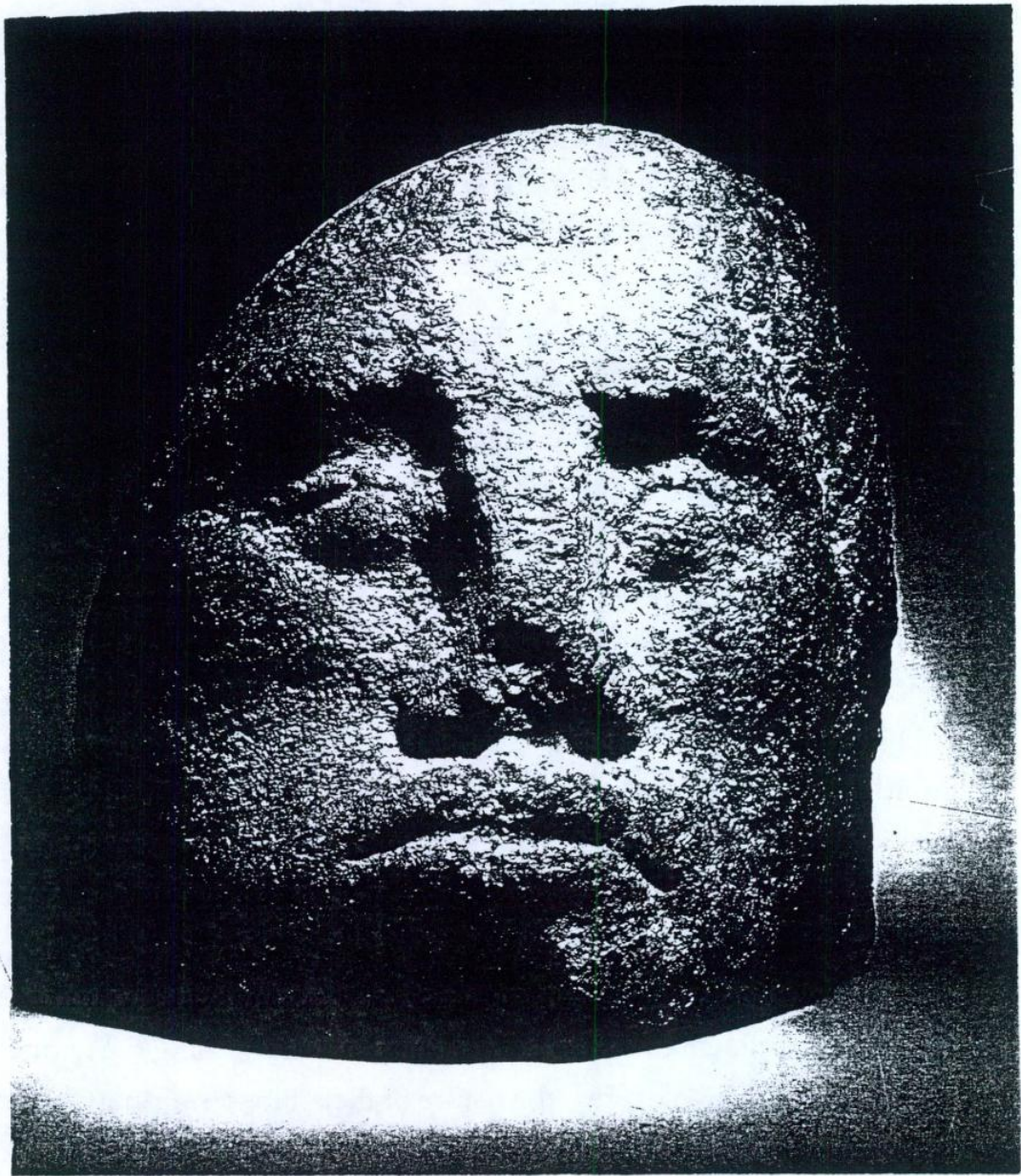


Fig. 13.

Ossip Zadkine

Tête Heroïque 1908.

is a primitive roughly carved stone head and which definitely does bear a strong relationship with the ethos and form of some of Dionyse's works.

The general mood in the sculpture of the late 50's and 60's when Dionyse began to sculpt, was not one that she had much sympathy with. Obviously there were exceptions and later I discuss the similarities between the work of two of her contemporaries, the sculptors, Lynn Chadwick and Elizabeth Frink and that of Dionyse. However, the prevailing mood coming into the '60's was one of optimism, an attempt to get away from post-war obsessions with pain and wounds. Matching the new mood of hope in industrial progress, many sculptors escheived organic materials such as wood clay and bronze in favour of man-made materials; industrial steel, fibre glass, perspex, and other plastics. Organic forms also went out of fashion. The British sculptors for example, Philip King, Eduardo Paolozzi and Anthony Caro abandoned their figurative work and spearheaded the emergence of a lively school of abstract often colourful, sculpture. It was not only figurative art that was out of favour, but Frinks and Dionyse's concerns with the darker side of human nature was also out of tune with the heady mood of '60's expansionism and free love. These women, therefore, worked against the tide, using materials and themes that were unfashionable. Perhaps now in the '90's Dionyse's work has become better known because the issues which she explores have become particularly pertinent again.

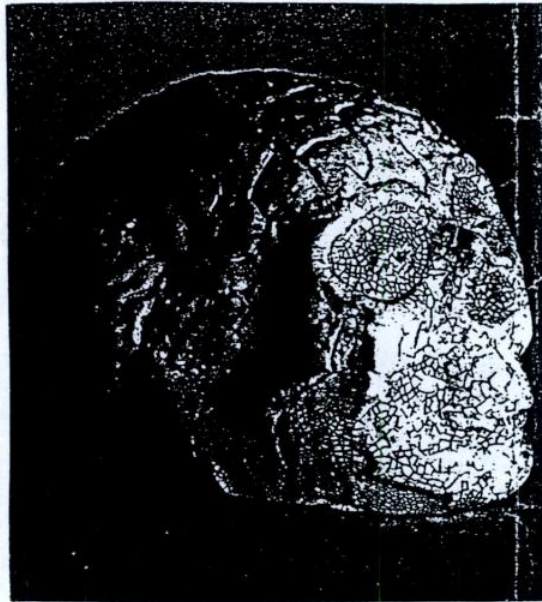


Fig. 14.

Carmen Dionyse

Crackled Skull 1983 (14cm high)

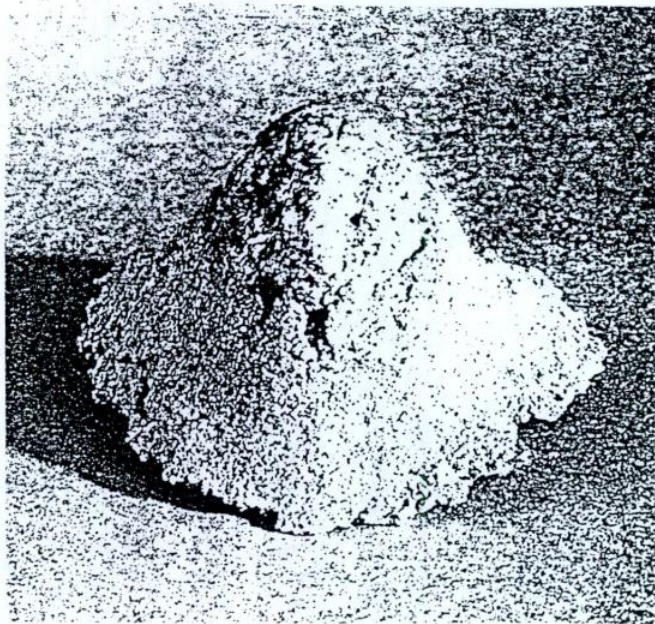


Fig. 15.

Carmen Dionyse

Small Hidden Head 1982.

Carmen Dionyse - Influences & Interests.

Dionyse's work contains a wealth of allusions and references. Like all artists, she is by nature a visual magpie, collecting information from a variety of diverse sources. It is fascinating to see how various interests and images are combined and transmitted into a finished work of art. She has been very influenced by ancient source material such as artefacts from ancient Egypt and pre-Columbian America (17). Her work conveys a strong sense of association with primitive sculpture. We are reminded of Holy Stones weathered by time, of ancient human images recovered from the earth. The surfaces of her pieces have the aged geological look that makes them seem as if they have survived the elements for centuries. Some of her smaller works, for example **Crackled Skull** (1983)(fig.14), remind one of ancient clay artefacts and pottery shards from a museum display case. Her work contains within it a deep sense of history and an awareness and appreciation of past civilizations and generations.

This effect is partly achieved through her use of the abstracted human form which is full of associations and allusions. From the stone age, man has made figures from clay and other materials. The earliest known fired clay sculpture known as **The Venus of Dolni Vestonice** (fig.16) was excavated at an ice age site in Mokavia, along with fired clay animal figures, it has been dated at c.26,000BC. Thousands of female images have been found all over the world and they were common among all paleolithic groups. They were probably used as fertility amulets but they may also have had a role in primitive man's attempt to ensure the fertility of the soil and in confirming the seasonal rhythm of decay and regeneration. Early man's awareness of and sensitivity and attunement to the natural cycle is important to Dionyse. She is aware of modern man's alienation from the natural world, through her clay figures she attempts to renew the link between man and nature. Dionyse's deep awareness of the earth and man's relationship with nature is conveyed through many of works such as **Man of Earth** (1982)(fig.19), **Rock Woman** (1959)(fig.4), **Terra Heads** (1970)(fig.90). Many of her works appear as if they have been recovered from the earth; **Small Hidden Head** (1982)(fig.15) seems to be in the process of emerging from the earth or possibly submerging into it. **Recumbent Figure**



Fig. 16.

Venus of Dolni, Vestonice, Moravia, c. 26,000 B.C.

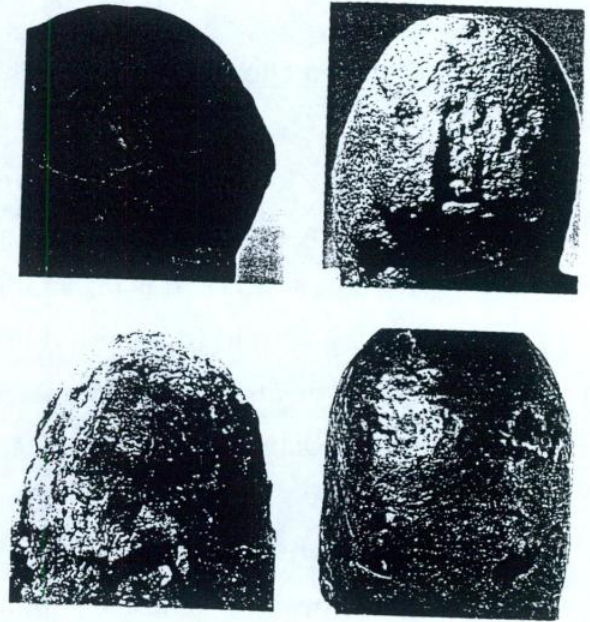


Fig. 17.

Carmen Dyonise

Heads 1970-71.

(1977)(fig.87) and **Autumnal Cyclops** (1984) remind me of bodies recovered from the bog because of their brown leathery stained skins. There is an archaeological sense about these works and also an attendant sense of the earth as a preserver of the remnants of the past. We are thus reminded of past generations and brought into contact with earth and nature in Dionyse's works; a whole series of symbolic links and connections are therefore effected by her figures, Carl Jung has written:

"We no longer believe that our surroundings speak to us....we have stripped all things of their mystery and numinosity. Man's contact with nature has gone and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied"(18)

Dionyse attempts to renew this symbolic connection and also reminds us of our organic link to the past. She believes also that existence is cyclical and in the continuous survival of the human spirit. Despite death the spirit lives on, though in an altered and perhaps organic form. She refers to this phenomenon as the "cycle of eternal humanity"(19).

Carmen Dionyse spent much of her childhood reading about ancient cultures and civilizations and their mythologies. Her grandfather was a publisher and a bibliophile and she had free access to a whole range of magazines and books (20). She is deeply aware of the many myths relating to clay and the earth and this consciousness is conveyed partly through her reverence and respect for her chosen medium, clay. Through myths of creation (cosmogonies), man has always tried to find an explanation for his existence and his earth - bound corporality. That man is born out of the earth is a common mythological theme. In Egyptian Myth, the potter God, Khum, modelled clay bodies and breathed life into them - In Greek myth, Prometheus shaped the first humans from clay into whom Athena breathed life. In the Old Testament, God forms man from the dust of the earth, Adam being Hebrew for soil on earth. In the Christian tradition man comes from the earth and will return to it ; "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis3:19). This telluric sense of man's vital connection with the earth, as well as the earth as a giver of life, pervades Dionyse's work.

Dionyse's sculpture is influenced in many ways by her interest in various cultures and their religious mythologies. Many of the titles of her works refer to

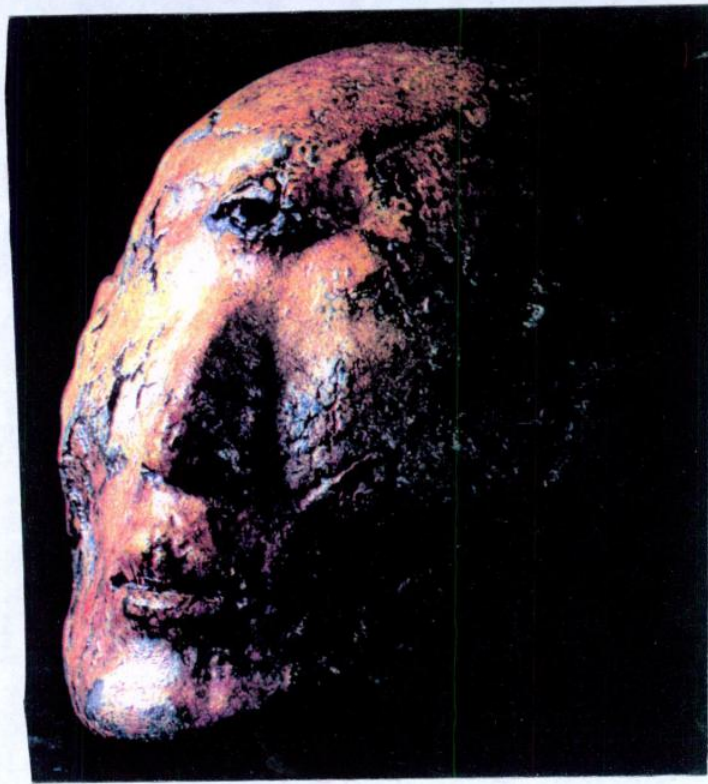


Fig. 18.

Carmen Dionyse

Autumnal Cyclops 1984



Fig. 19.

Carmen Dionyse

Man of Earth 1982.

characters from Greek mythology, about which she is obviously very knowledgeable (21). I have chosen not to explore the Greek references in her work but instead I will briefly look at her interest in another ancient culture, that of early Egypt. I do so in order to examine how an artist's interest in another civilization can permeate their work, both consciously or unconsciously. As a general comment I think that Dionyse's sculptures manage to convey something of the sense of static sublimity that surrounds ancient Egypt sculpture. More specifically I can see a distinct connection between Egyptian mummified heads and Dionyse's torn, damaged and bandaged heads. I think the whole idea and image of the mummification process has greatly attracted Dionyse, especially the idea of the body being a mere wrapping for the soul. Dionyse's own method of wrapping thin layers of clay creates the illusion of a skin vessel being created to contain the invisible spirit (see pg.18). Many of her heads and figures appear to be partially bandaged, see for example **Gloss Brethren** (1978)(fig.77), **Mauve Introspective Bust** (1977)(fig.76) and **Sick Boy** (1972) (fig.59). Another Egyptian image which seems to bear some relation to Dionyse's busts is that of the canopic jar. These jars were used to store the organs of the dead. The actual bell shape of the vessel is similar in form to that of her busts - for example **Eos** 1986(fig.21) and **Purple Hiram** (1986) (Fig.60). The tops of the jars heads, which are like Dionyse's heads, are far more finely modelled and detailed than the basic body of the vessel. Although Dionyse might sympathize with the beliefs of other cultures, she never obviously or didactically represents them. Her work is always subtle. She absorbs images and ideas from other cultures and somehow transmutes them and makes them relevant to the 20th century audience. However, part of the appeal of her work lies in the fact that we can still recognise vestiges of her historical inspiration. This makes her work appear rooted in the past and gives it an Atavistic sense of solidity and endurance.



Fig. 20.

Photograph

of Egyptian Mummy



Fig. 21.

Carmen Dionyse

EOS 1986 (60cm high).



1954. 501. 176

CHAPTER TWO



Fig. 22.

Roger van der Weyden

Mary Magdalene Reading



Fig. 23. Roger van der Weyden A Young Woman



Fig. 24. Roger van der Weyden A Lady





Fig. 25.

Petrus Christus

A Young Lady.



Fig. 26.

Carmen Dionyse

IOSIS 1990



Fig. 27.

Carmen Dionyse

White Nina1988/89_



Fig. 28.

Carmen Dionyse

Feiresia 1983

Chapter Two

The Flemish Primitives

As I have already mentioned, Dionyse has, like all artists, absorbed a wide range of influences, all of which it would be impossible to isolate and explore in this paper. There are however, two groups of artists, both of them Belgian, which I think provide an interesting background of ideas and images against which to view Dionyse's work. The first of these are the 15th century Flemish Renaissance portrait painters known as The Flemish Primitives; the second group are the 19th century Belgian Symbolists.

The Flemish Primitives were concerned with the expression of the inner spiritual essence of man, while realistically representing the physical features of their subject. In comparison with the 20th century, theirs was an age of definite and assured religious belief (22) and this sense of stability and sensitivity pervades the portraits. One author has described this sense as "the certitude of a bond linking the natural to the supernatural, man to God "(fig.23). Petrus Christus's (d.1473) portrait of **A Young Lady** and Roger van der Weyden's (b.1398) **A Lady (fig.24)** both convey complete calm. There is no inner turmoil in evidence, no 20th century alienation or stress. The women are static, their eyes fixed on a distant inner world. They remind me of the purity and sensitivity expressed by many of Dionyse's female heads and figures such as **Iosis** (1990) (fig.26), **White Nina** (1988/9)(fig.27), and **Many of Egypt** (1989)(fig.36). The collar head dress in many Renaissance portraits, for example van der Weyden's **A Young Woman** (fig.23), is a motif that Dionyse uses quite often; she uses it in **Chinstrap**(1978)(fig.74) and **Green Slumber** (1978)(Fig.34). This image could also contain a reference to nuns, who wore this type of head dress well into the 20th century. **Mary Magdalene Reading** (fig.22) by van de Weyden captures that sense of remoteness and other worldliness that the best work by these painters conveys. The world that the Flemish Primitives created is dominated

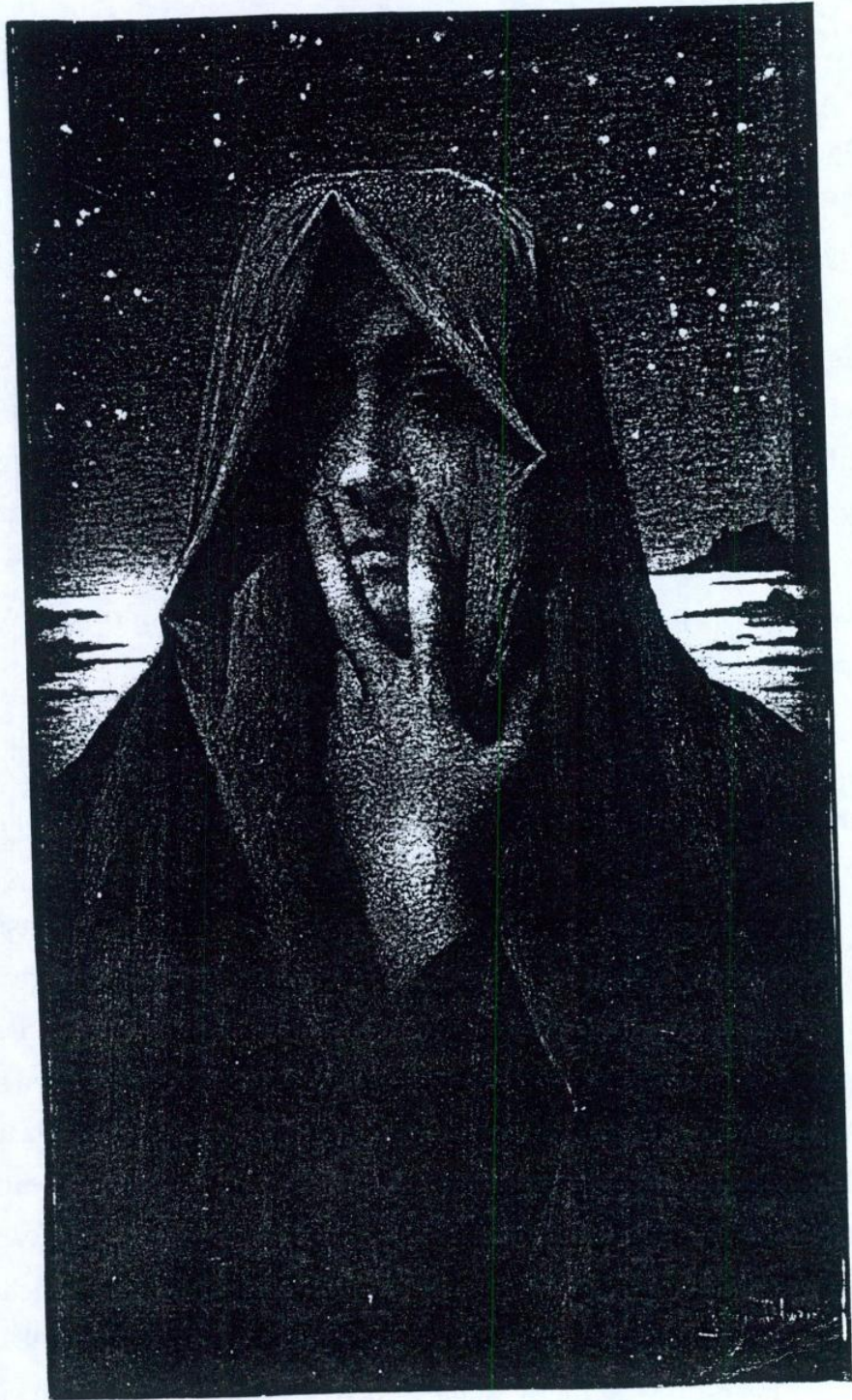


Fig. 29.

Levy-Dhurmek

Silence 1885.

by an imposing silence and sense of inner spirituality. It is these qualities , along with an echoing of certain images that creates a link between the work of Carmen Dionyse and her artistic Flemish predecessors

The Belgian Symbolists.

Silence and spirituality were important to another group of artists, the Symbolists. The symbolist movement was a late 19th century reaction against the "sole concern with the world of phenomena"(24) which had dominated the art of the 19th century. The symbolists wanted to communicate the invisible world of the psyche. Odilon Redon's (fig.30) painting of **Silence** (1911) is often cited as the epitome of symbolist style and intent. The silent figure contains the suggestion of the mysterious reality beyond appearance which was part of the symbolist ascendancy. In Lévy-Dhurmer's **Silence** (1895)(fig.29) it is apparent that we are in the presence of a spiritual experience and we are being told to be silent in order to become aware of it.

The Belgian symbolists, both artists and writers, gave particular importance to the idea of withdrawal into silence for the purpose of penetrating the spiritual realm. Maeterlinck, the Belgian symbolist writer, believed that "the life that is genuine and the only one that leaves some trace is made of silence alone" (25). Another Belgian writer, Emile Venhaeren, wrote of symbolism that "it means withdrawing to the innermost recesses of existence, to the dark and fantastic place where dreams and visions have their dwelling"(26) This idea of withdrawing into solitude for the purpose of exploring one's inner self is a very important theme in Dionyse's work.

Fernand Khnopff is probably the best known of the Belgian Symbolist painters. His works express many of the issues that Dionyse explores such as loneliness, sleep, death and isolation. In a painting of 1891 called **I lock the door upon myself** (fig.31) Khnopff uses an interior full of objects symbolic of sleep and dreams (poppies, a Hypnos mask etc) to express the mental state of the woman in the room. Faces dominate Khnopff's art, still silent faces, with eyes that gaze into another world and invite the viewer to be swept into their eternal world of contemplation. Khnopff, with his searching curiosity about the sub-conscious,



Fig. 30.

Odilon Redon

Silence 1991



Fig. 31.

Fernand Khnopff

I lock the door upon myself 1891.

was a herald of many of the issues that Freud was to publicize. He recognised the central significance of dreams and even created an altar to Hypnos, the Greek God of Sleep, in his house. Dionyse shares this interest in sleep, dreams and the unconscious. Many of her figures appear to be sleeping, for example **Lethe** (1987)(fig.33) and **Green Slumber** (1978)(fig.34). Works like **The Oneirants** (1978)(fig.104) refer to her interest in dreaming and her seers, prophets and sybils reveal her fascination with those who in various ways try to probe and reveal the unconscious. One critic has written of Khnopff's work, "Fernand Khnopff paints the way Maeterlinck writes.... he is the painter of the interior life ... Khnopff seems to paint the words of secret voices emanating from eternity"(27). The same could be written of Dionyse's ceramic work.



Fig. 33 Carmen Dionyse
Lethe 1987



Fig. 32. Fernand Khnopff
Une Aile Bleue 1894.



Fig. 34. Carmen Dionyse
Green Slumber 1978

CHAPTER THREE

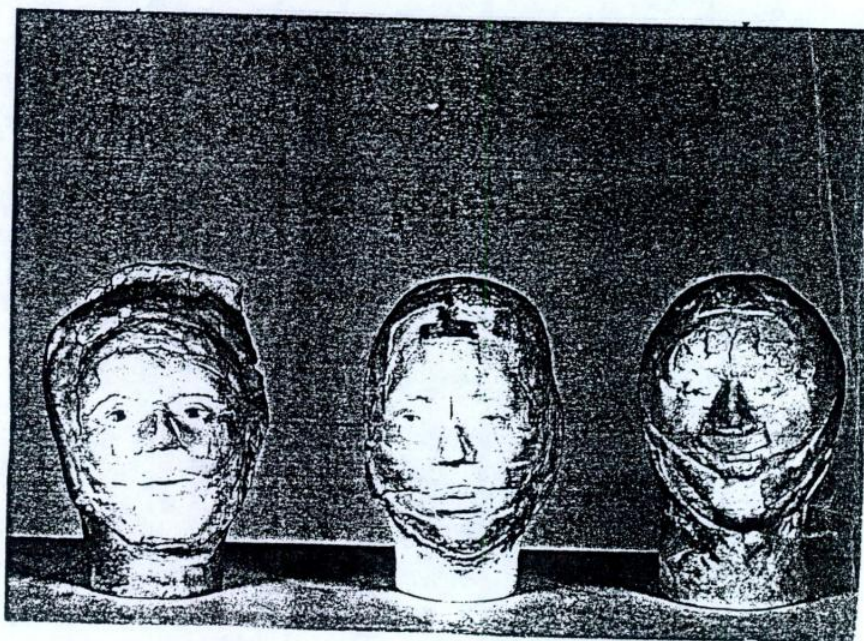


Fig. 35. Carmen Dionyse The Three Lights 1976

Chapter Three

Dionyse's Method of Working

Before proceeding to examine Dionyse's work in more detail it is important to examine her method of working. The fact that she uses clay as opposed to any other material is vitally important to her work. Her method of using clay is very particular to her. Dionyse is very conscious of the fact that clay is a natural substance and has its own organic form. She does not force the clay into moulds but allows it to express its own essential nature.(23) Therefore, there is a looseness and randomness in her work. She enjoys the tension between the plasticity and pliability of the material and her power of control over it. The paradox of form and formlessness, merging and remaining separate is embedded in her work.

In the first stage of creation the clay starts off wet, pliable and responsive to touch, Dionyse's relationship with clay is very tactile and physical - no intermediate moulds or machinery are used to create forms . She makes busts and torsos from thin slabs of clay, smaller heads are pinched out of lumps of clay. All of her heads and figures have thin walls and are hollow in contrast to much sculpture in other materials which are solid. The clay becomes skin encasing the spirit. The skin marks the surface of contact between the inside and the outside. The figures contain empty space. This sense of hollowness is very important to the spirit of her work. A quotation from another sculptor, Anthony Gormley, who also creates hollow figures, mainly from lead, helps explain this concept:

"I want the work to function as vehicle. Sculpture, for me, uses the physical means to talk about the spirit, weight to talk about weightlessness, light to refer to darkness - a visual means to refer to things which cannot be seen"(29).

One critic has written, "When Dionyse says 'I put a skin around 'nothing, we

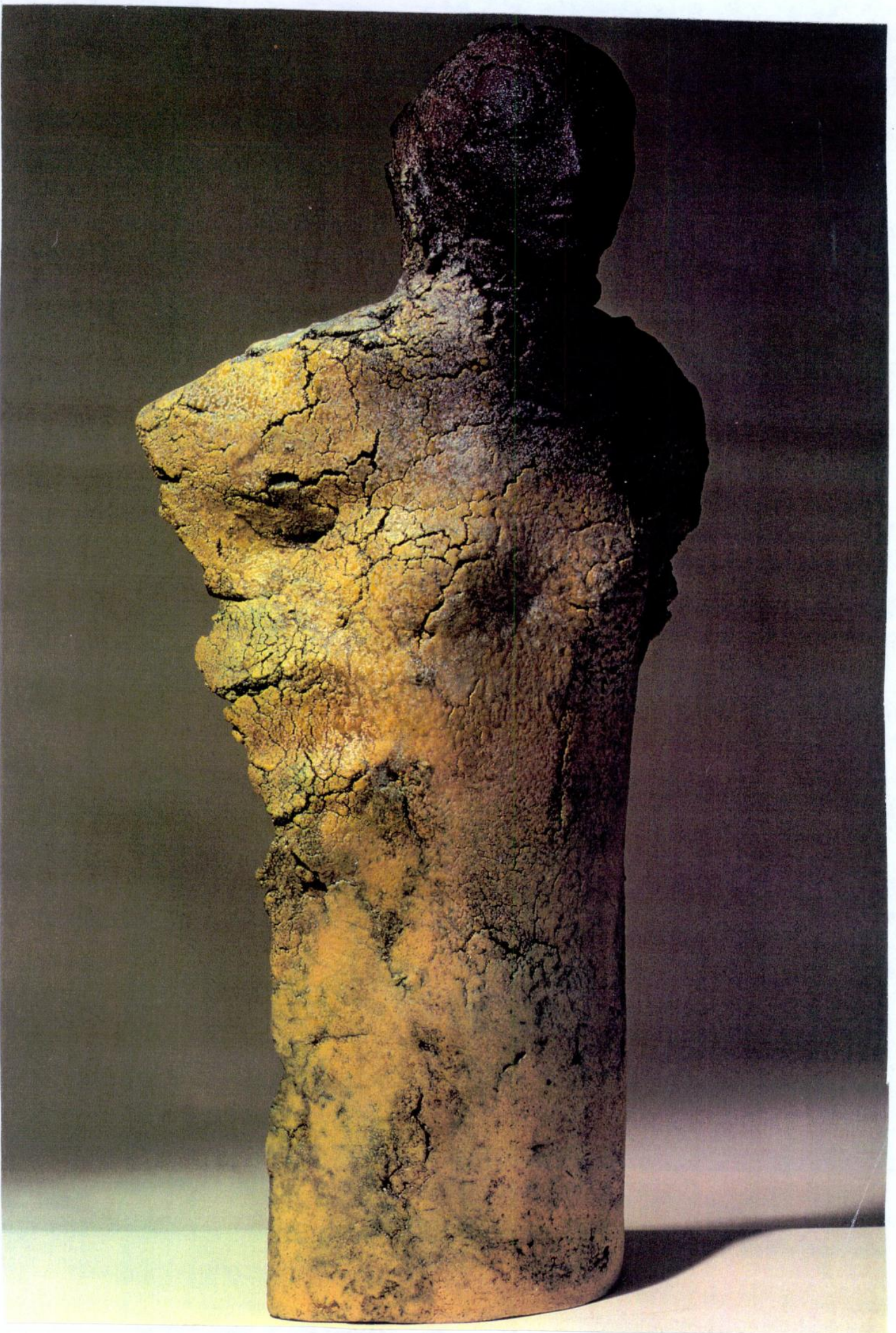


Fig. 36.

Carmen Dionyse

Mary of Egypt 1989.

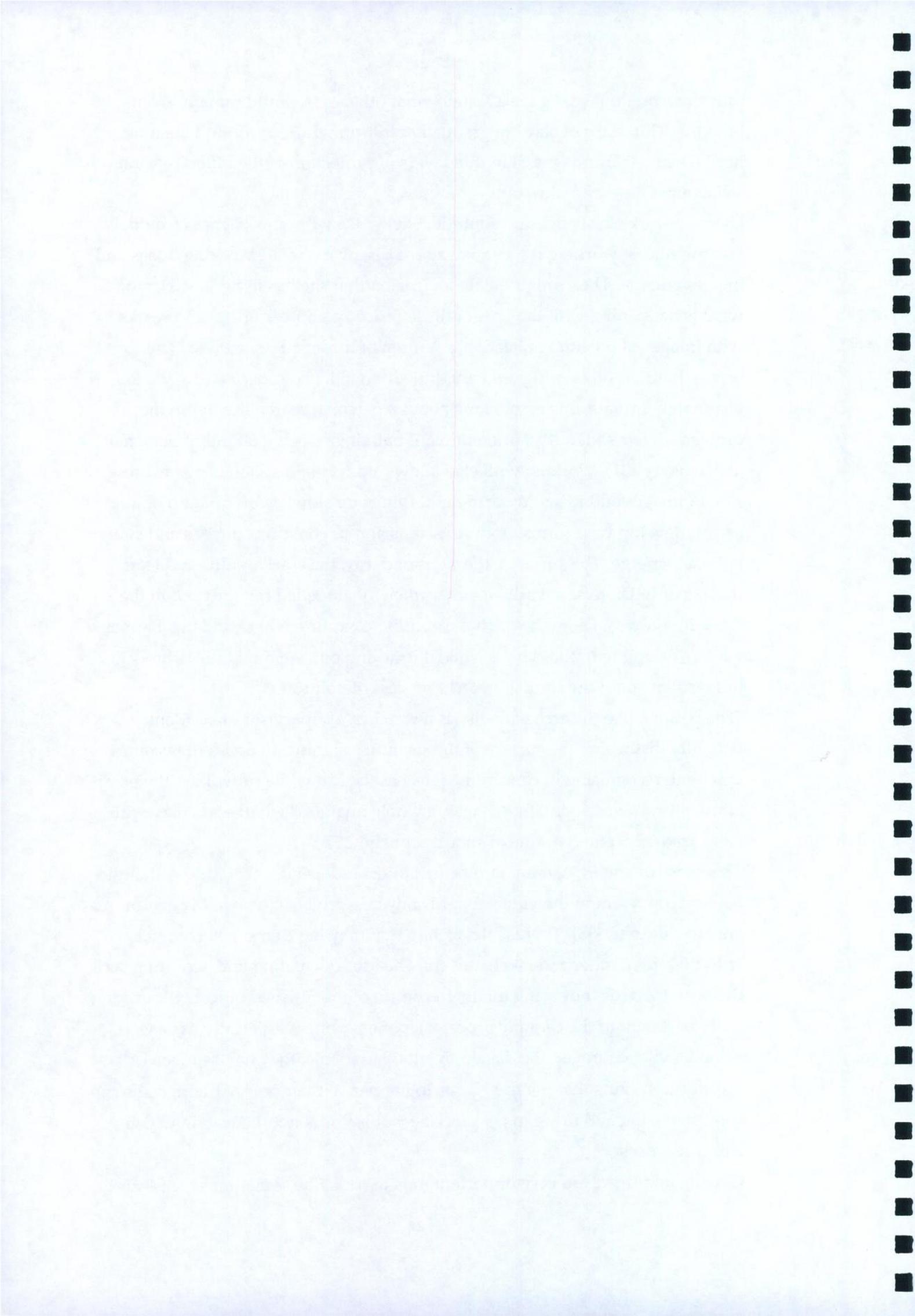
must interpret this as, I gave a skin to what otherwise would remain invisible"(30). Thin slabs of clay are gradually built-up wrapped around creating heads, helmets, bandages, skin thin layers of protection of the inner invisible self against the external world.

Dionyse works in silence and solitude. She works without sketches or models. Her method of working is like a voyage of discovery, while working, ideas and images emerge. These might relate to a vision that she has in her head or to what is happening with the clay. Louis le Brocquy, another artist who works with images of the human head, has written of the creative process: "The preoccupations of painting are very difficult to talk about because they seem to be innately private, one is speaking about a personal search involving the problem of one's identity, I often think of painting as being a kind of personal archaeology"(31). Working with clay allows a direct and spontaneous expression of images and ideas. You can build things up slowly, you can add or alter as you develop your forms. Both conscious and unconscious images and symbols can emerge. The surfaces, the signs of decay, the cracks, splits and tears that occur in Dionyse's work are not artificially modelled but induced in the working process. Dionyse watches carefully to capture what accidents happen while working with the clay or while it is drying out. Again, Louis le Brocquy has written about the similar creative process of painting:

"The painter, like the archaeologist, is a watcher, a supervisor of accident; patiently disturbing the surface of things until a significant accident becomes apparent, recognising it, conserving it as best he can while provoking the possibility of further accident. In this way, a whole image, a "whatness" , may with luck, gradually emerge, almost spontaneously"(32).

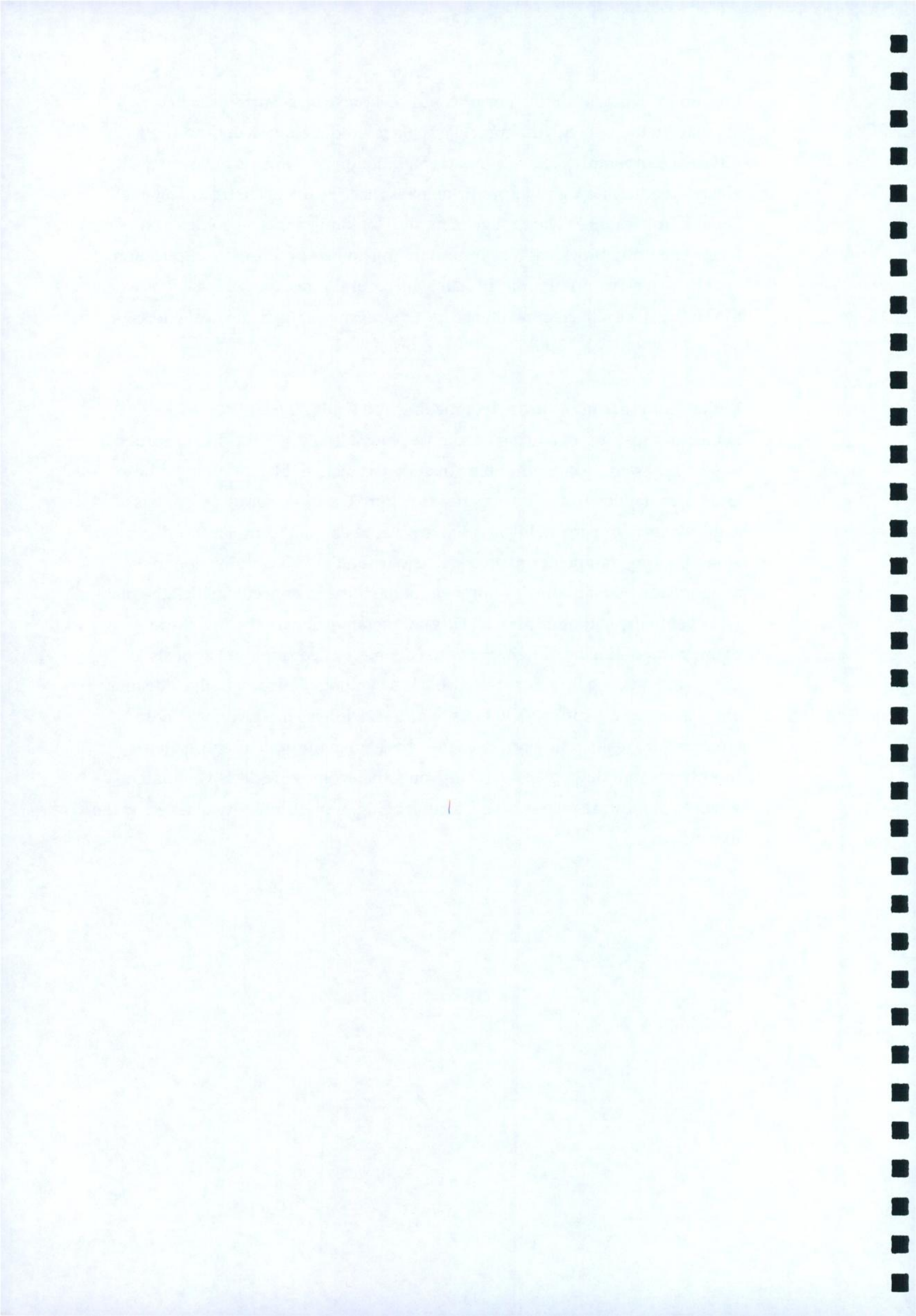
This sense of a work coming into being almost independently of the will of the maker is apparent in the video about Dionyse in which she says "My sculptures are my children" (33). There is the feeling that they have emerged complete with their own independent characters. The idea of creating and accepting accidents, of the artist not being totally in control of the finished outcome is especially pertinent to the ceramic process. Japanese potters especially have welcomed and encouraged the development of accidents, they have spoken of accepting the gifts that the fire causes to happen to their pots. Although she can control glazing and firing to get precise results, this is not the way in which Dionyse works.

Glazing and firing are very important to her work. She sometimes glazes and



fires up to 16 times, but the norm would be 4 or 5 times. Surfaces are intensively treated with different clays, glazes and metallic salts and fired at different temperatures. Such a broad combination of elements will nearly always produce new and unpredictable results. The intensive treatment enables Dionyse to create her wide range of natural looking, cracked geological surfaces. The firing process is also important to Dionyse because the application of heat to turn clay into ceramic, imitates the natural processes which occur when the landscape is affected by intense heat, for example the geological effects of volcanic eruptions.

While Dionyse is in the process of making and firing, she jots down ideas, names and features in a firing notebook. They initially serve as identification marks; for example, her notes may include words like "black", "pointed head" (34). These names and references remain approximations until a piece has acquired its own personality and has arrived at its final form. They are steps along the way, signposts on the creative journey, they give a direction to the imagery and assist in the development of the ideas or concepts which the piece will eventually communicate. The idea of metamorphosis, the transformation of one form of life into another, clay to ceramic, is a concept that appeals to Dionyse. Thus, the firing process also has a symbolic function in the allusions and associations expressed by her sculptures. Dionyse has written: "These creatures are really only born once they have gone through all those metamorphoses (building, glazing, firing); only then comes the decisive moment when each creature takes on its essential being, with its identity marked by the name"(35).



CHAPTER FOUR

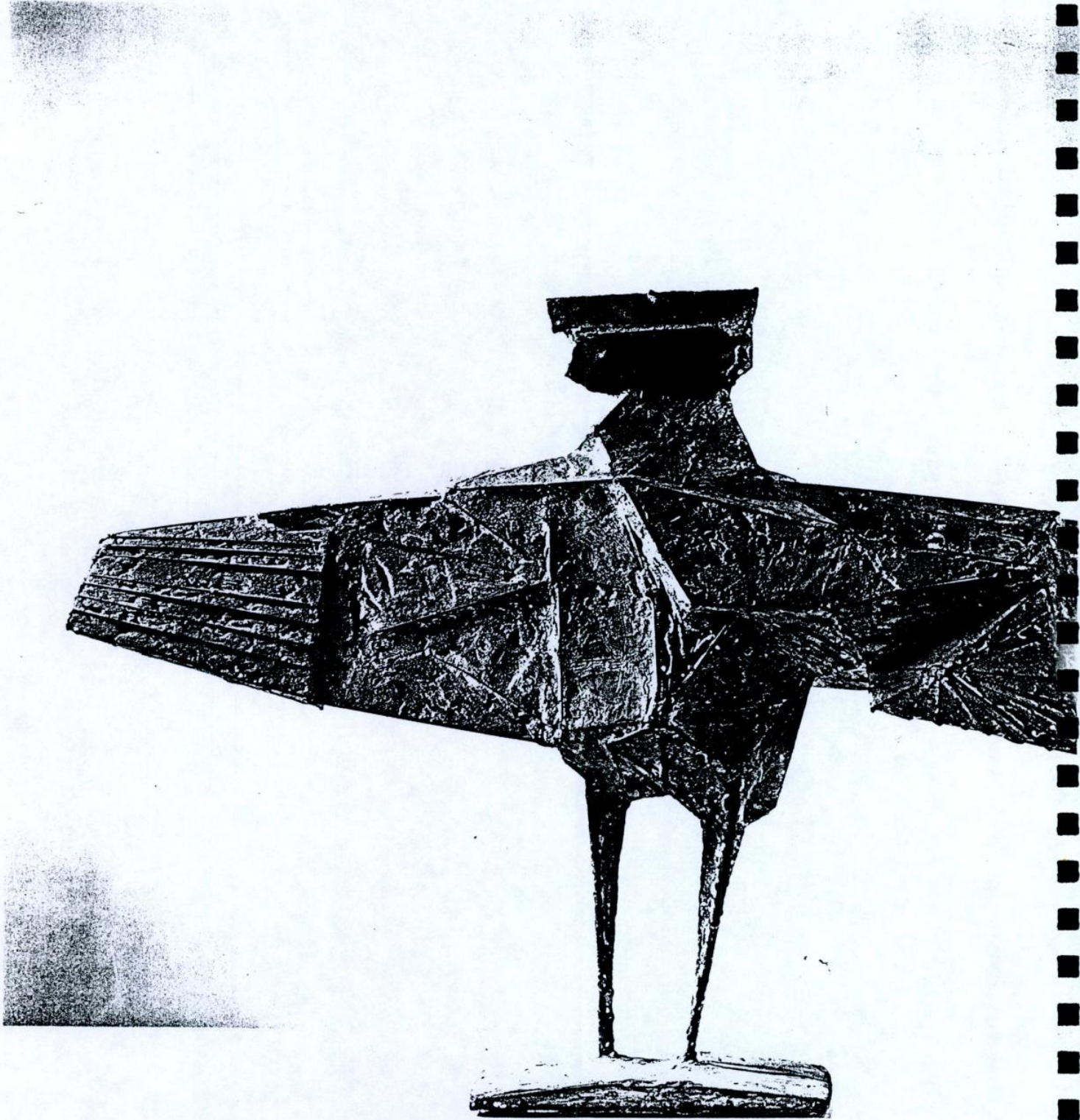


Fig. 37.

Lynn Chadwick

Stranger VII 1959.

Chapter Four

The Theme of Withdrawal and Retreat

Dionyse and World War II.

Many of Dionyse's figures are wounded, sick, damaged and bandaged. They convey anguish and sadness and an unwillingness to get involved with the world. Dionyse has spoken of her own desire to retreat from reality (36) but apart from claiming to be introverted by nature, she has not further elaborated in writing or interview on her reasons for wanting to withdraw from the world. As she was born in 1921, she is likely to have been affected in some way by the Second World War (1939-45). I intend to examine the work of some sculptors whose work reflects their reaction to their experience of the war in order to gain some insight into Dionyse's forms and imagery.

The post-war school of expressionist british sculpture included sculptors such as Lynn Chadwick, Kenneth Armitage, Eduardo Paolozzi, Reg Butler and the much younger Elizabeth Frink. They all had been influenced by their war time experiences and may of the men, like Chadwick for example, had served with the R.A.F as pilots. The craggy angular forms which they created expressed their attempts to come to terms with their terrible experiences, their fear, their isolation, their closeness to death. There are strong resemblances in theme and form between Dionyse's early works and those of certain other of these sculptors. I have chosen to concentrate on the similarities between her work and that of Lynn Chadwick and Elizabeth Frink.

Lynn Chadwick combines human and animal forms in his figures. Most are unparticularized, oracular or minatory presences. They convey predatoriness often expressed through beaks and claws. They incorporate elements of insects such as heads, wings and antennae, perhaps Chadwick's attempt to equate the basic instinct for survival of the lower animals to the basic instincts of man.



Fig. 38. Lynn Chadwick

Winged Figures 1955.



Fig. 39. Carmen Dionyse
Artevelde 1966 (23cm high)



Fig. 40. Carmen Dionyse
Artevelde 1968 (52cm high)

Stranger VII (1959)(Fig.37) and **Watchers II** (1964)(fig.41) convey man's loneliness, his aloofness, his numbness, his loss of identity. Those figures stand and wait and watch. They are insecure, no longer sure of their place in the world. They refer to the sense of confusion people experienced after the war, the difficulties of re-adjusting to "normal life" and somehow absorbing and incorporating the atrocities that they had experienced or witnessed.

Dionyse's **Artevelde** (figs.39&40) figures of 1966 and 1968 and **Mattheus** (1966)(fig.51) are similar to Chadwick's **Winged Figures** of 1955(fig.38) - The same half human/half animal creature - all awkward ungainly figures with jagged edges and rough surfaces. Chadwick created a series of 'watcher' figures based on his **Maquette for Watchers Version II** (1964)(Fig.41). This theme of detachment and of watching from a distance is important in Dionyse's work also. In 1989 she created her own sculpture entitled **Watcher** (fig.42). Her figures, like Chadwick's, are wounded survivors/for example **Black Knight** (1975)(fig.44), **Garuda** (1973)(fig.45) **Armoured Figure** (1968)(fig.46). Their surfaces are eroded, torn and damaged. They are isolated. Some have small slits for eyes others have black holes which draw you into their hollow blackness. Chadwick's figures convey the same sense of reserve, isolation and hurt. They watch, as if they are soldiers on duty. They are suspicious and wary, perhaps reminders of the need to be vigilant and cautious of human nature. The post-war legacy must have been an immense loss of faith in the basic humanity of man, thus Chadwick's **Winged figures** totter uncertainly on thin insecure legs and his watchers wait, anonymous and expressionless. Dionyse's **Hidden Face** (1978)(fig.47) peeps cautiously out at the world from behind a curtain-like veil. The theme of retreat, the need to withdraw in order to seek protection from an alien world pervades all of Dionyse's work. Perhaps it is partly the experience of having lived through the Second World War that has caused her to have such a strong sense of man's vulnerability and fragility and his need for protection from the harshness of reality.

As well as creating retreating introverted figures, Dionyse has also produced a series of sinisterly aggressive, hooded, helmeted and armoured figures. They are more disturbing than the silent watching figures. One critic has written;

"Some pieces, in spite of the half tones are nevertheless aggressive; they are disturbing one doesn't know how to deal with them.....
Dionyse's head is full of storms and torments which come to her in

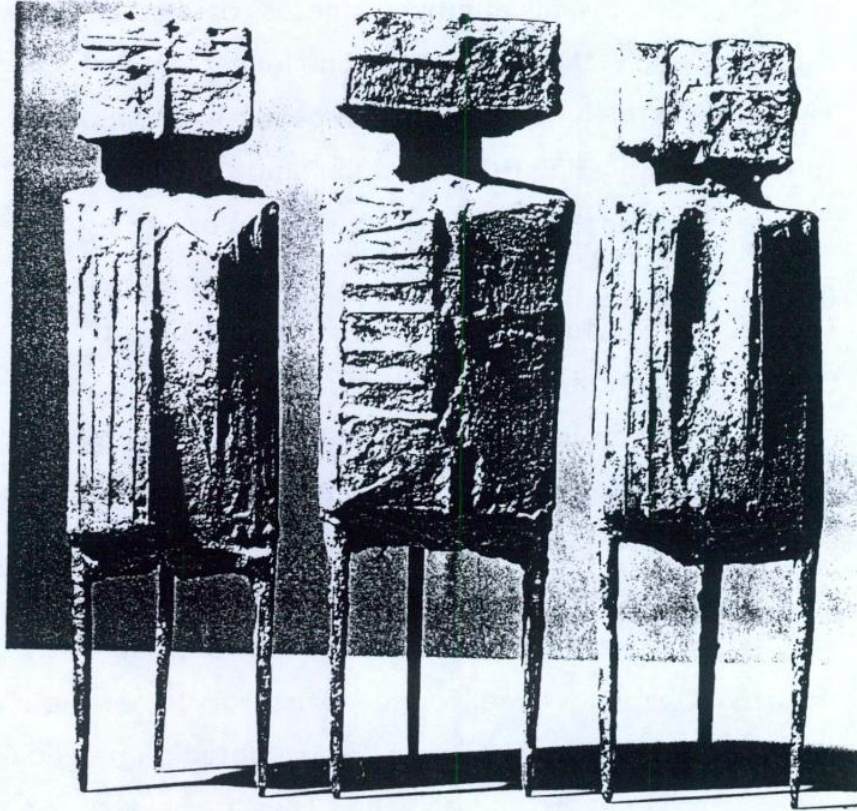


Fig. 41. Lynn Chadwick

Maquette for Watchers Version II 1964



Fig. 42. Carmen Dionyse
Watcher 1989



Fig. 43. Carmen Dionyse
Winged Figure 1990 (50cm high)

waves. The clay cracks, splits and splatters the beholder"(37).

Dionyse does not openly discuss these 'torments' which this critic refers to. In order to come to some understanding of them, I think it is useful to examine the work of Dionyse's contemporary, the sculptor, Elisabeth Frink. There are links between their work in terms of imagery and sensibility. There are also very obvious differences between them, for example Frink only worked with the male figure, male heads and animals. Her work is more obviously figurative and much larger in scale than Dionyses'. Nevertheless, I think an examination of Frink's work helps illuminate that of Dionyse.



Fig. 44. Carmon Dionyse
Black Knight 1975.



Fig. 45. Carmen Dionyse
Garuda 1973.



Fig. 46. Carmen Dionyse
Armoured Figure 1968



Fig. 47. Carmen Dionyse
Hidden Face 1978.

CHAPTER FIVE

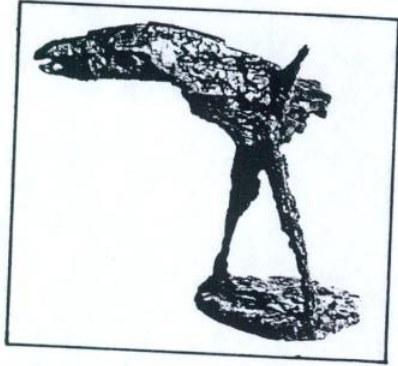


Fig. 48. Elisabeth Frink
Bird 1959.



Fig. 49. Elisabeth Frink
Harbinger Bird 1961.



Fig. 50. Carmen Dionyse
Birdman 1968

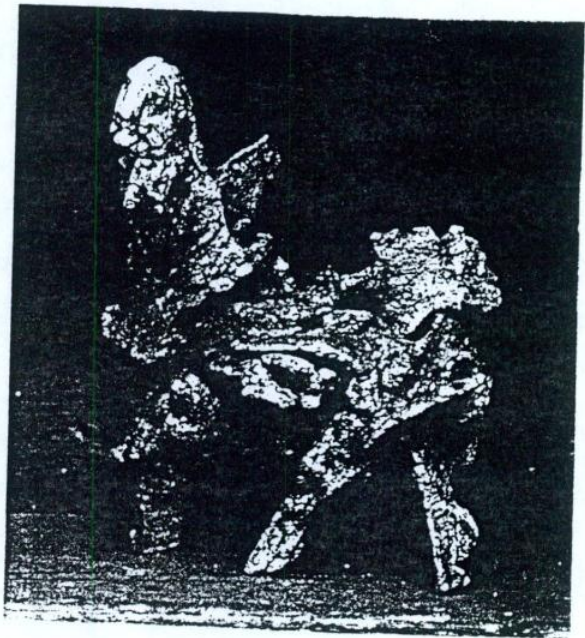


Fig. 51. Carmen Dionyse
Matheus 1966 (35cm high)

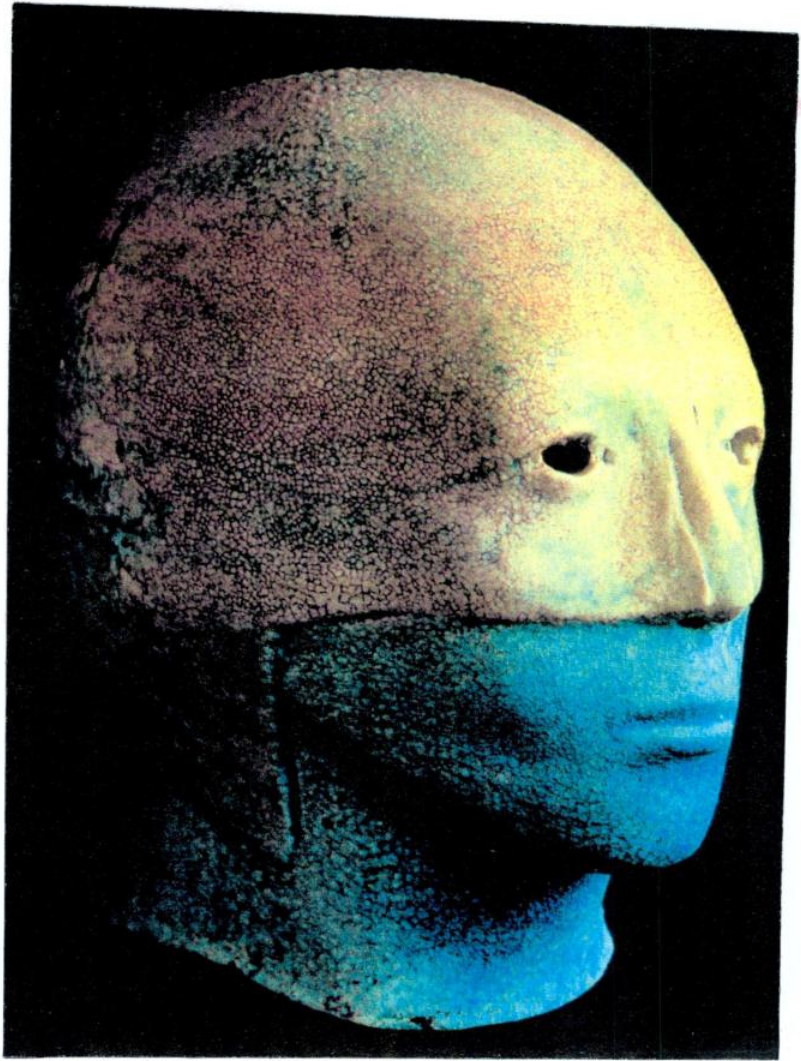


Fig. 52. Carmen Dionyse Hooded Head 1984.

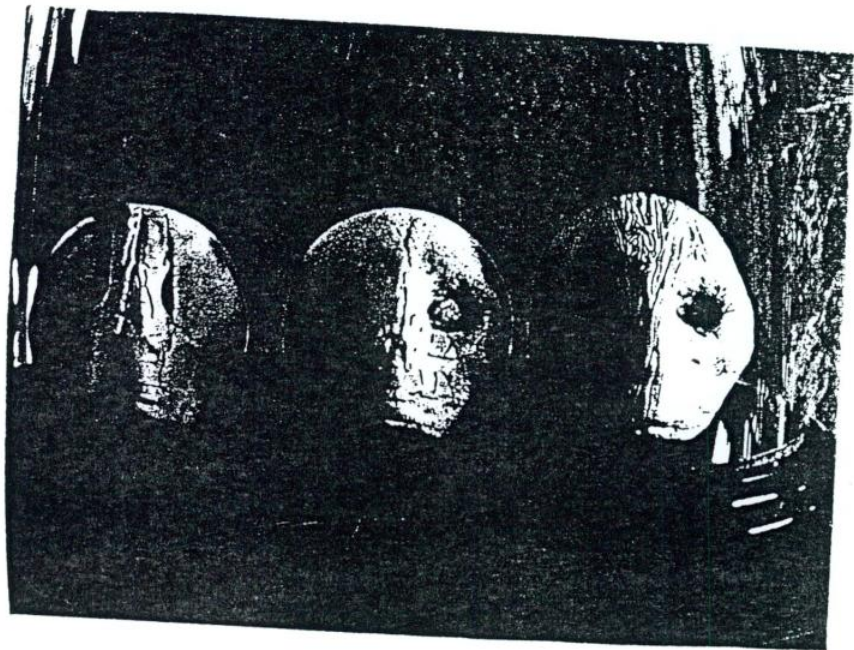


Fig. 53. Carmen Dionyse Three Skulls 1978.



Fig. 54. Carmen Dionyse

Charon 1986.

Chapter Five

Elisabeth Frink and Carmen Dionyse.

Elisabeth Frink was born in 1930. Her father was a soldier and had been at Dunkirk. The family lived near an airfield in Suffolk where bombers often returned to base in flames. Unlike Dionyse, Frink has spoken about her early background and the forces which impelled her to create the images she did. She had vivid memories of the war; referring to her **Bird** series of the '50's she has said:

"The birds at that time were really expressionist in feeling - that is, emphasis on beak, claws and wings.....and they were really vehicles for strong feelings of panic, tension, aggression and predatoriness"(38)

This feeling is also present in Dionyse's **Birdman** of 1988 (fig.50) and in her armoured figures. However, Dionyse's works are far more muted in effect, there is none of the intense bitterness and rawness that pervades some of Frink's early works. Frink's 1959 **Bird** (fig.48) and **Harbinger Bird**(1969) (fig.49) contain a really strong sense of evil. In **Bird**, the head and body are taut and horizontal, ready at a moments notice to lunge and strike,his beak open ready for the kill. **Harbinger Bird** stalks in a slow ugly and predatory fashion. We don't find that rawness in Dionyse's work, but beneath sometimes cold, apparently detached surfaces the sense of evil is there, perhaps even more uncanny because it is controlled. Dionyse may also be trying to express as Frink was, the horrific images bequeathed to her by the war. **Hooded Head** (1984)(fig.52) is a dramatically cold piece. It is a white male skull, wearing a turquoise executioner-style hood. The colours, the expression and the smooth surface convey a merciless bitterness and tautness as if every nerve is tuned in anticipation of action and killing. Wide open eyes stare out, silent and aggressive beneath his disguising hood. There is also a strong sense of morbidity about alot of her works, for example **The Three Skulls** (1978)(fig.53) represent the cold white reality of death. **Charon** (1986)(fig.54) is one of the



Fig. 55. Elisabeth Frink
Warrior II 1964.



Fig. 56. Elisabeth Frink
Sentinel I 1961



Fig. 59. Carmen Dionyse Sick Boy 1972



Fig. 57. Elisabeth Frink
Dead Hen 1957.

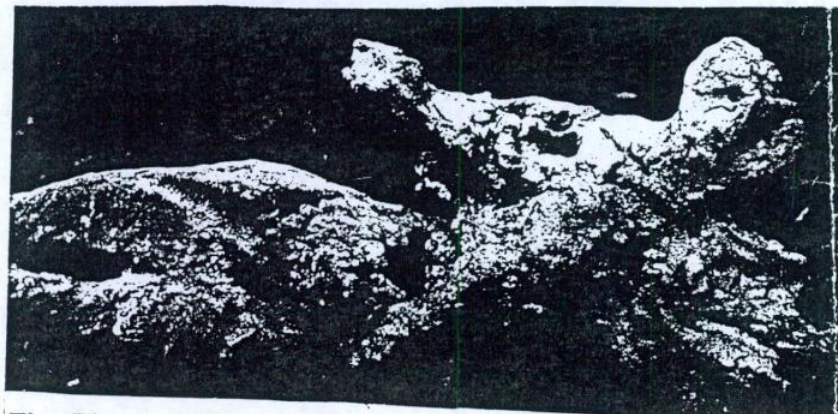


Fig. 58. Carmen Dionyse Job 1968

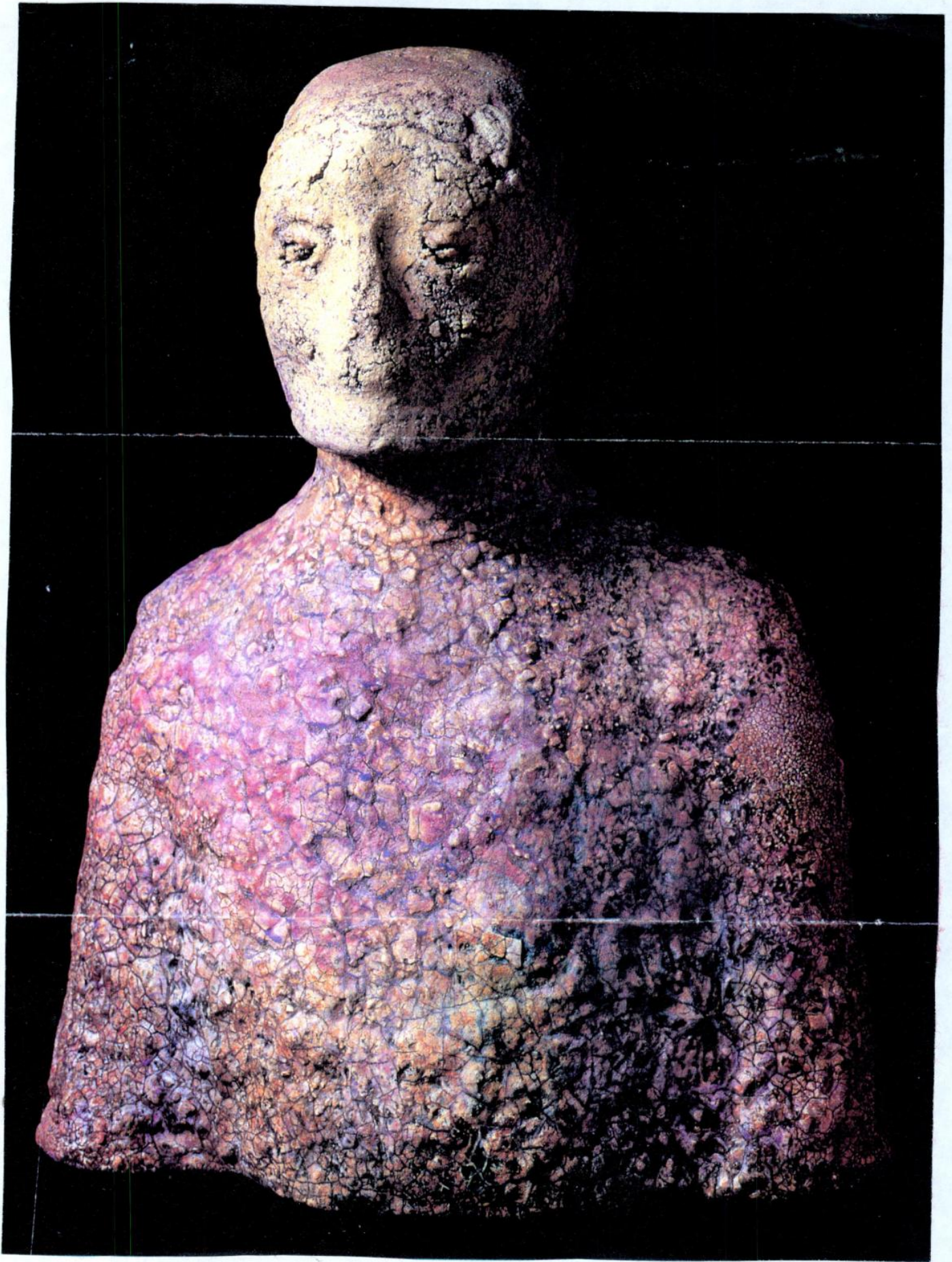


Fig. 60.

Carmen Dionyse

Purple Hiram 1986 (17"high)



Fig. 61. Elisabeth Frink Soldier's Heads i-iv 1965.



Fig. 62. Elisabeth Frink Warrior's Heads 1954.

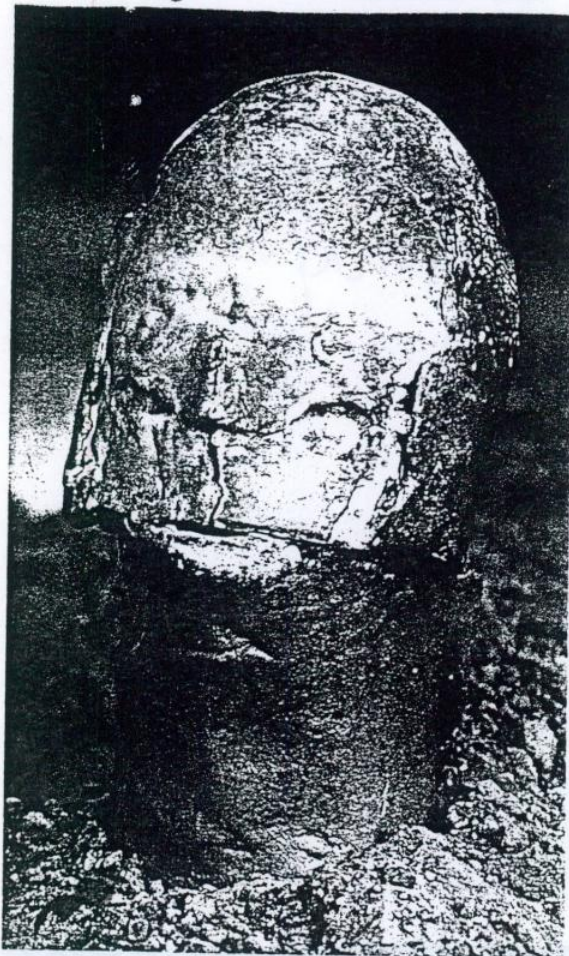


Fig. 63. Carmen Dionyse Blue General 1970.



Fig. 64. Carmen Dionyse Mauve Helmeted Head 1973.

mostdemonic of her works. In Greek mythology **Charon** is one of the demons of the underworld who seizes the soul at the moment of death. Dionyse's **Charon** presents a cruel,merciless demeanour. His surface is black and charred, mottled with a cold turquoise colour. His eyes are disturbing gouged out black holes. He conveys a harsh reminder of the evil side of human nature.

There are echoes of Dionyse's damaged, broken and bandaged figures and heads in Frink's warrior series of the 1960's. They are damaged, armless, anonymous soldiers who look dazed, confused, unsteady and uncertain of which way to turn. Frink first saw newsreel footage of the inmates at Belsen when she was 15 and this had a lasting impact on her. Her work in the '50's was largely dealing with her reaction to those images from Belsen. **Carcass of a Dead Cat** was produced in 1954 as was **A Dead Rabbit, A Dead Hen** (fig.57) was created in 1959. Their projecting bones and twisted limbs speak of the agony of hunger, cold and slow death. They also remind one of the jagged fuselage of crashed aircraft. Dionyse's **Job** (1968)(fig.58) is very similar in form and pose to these pieces especially **Dead Hen**, perhaps similar sources are indicated for Dionyse. Dionyse's work certainly express sickness, pain and death, but apart from **Job** her works are more static than Frink's. Frink's **Dead Hen** communicates the sense of a body writhing and twisting in pain. While physical mutilation and sickness are very much in evidence in Dionyse's work they seem to be more concerned with disease and longterm illness, the gradual decay of the body or perhaps the isolation of longterm convalescence. Works like **Sick Boy** (1972)(fig.59) **Purple Hiram** (1986)(fig.60) and **Hiram** (1985)(fig.80) all deal with illness. In **Purple Hiram** we can see sickness and decay in the fragile face. The purple/red glaze on the body reminds me of the colour of organs and the red of blood. It is at once beautiful and repulsive and it contrasts sharply with the pale bloodless head. Judging solely from her work I imagine that Dionyse may have had some contact with those suffering from ill health, injury or disease, or perhaps experienced it herself.

Both Frink and Dionyse have worked with the human head. In 1954 Frink produced her first soldiers head, **Warrior's Head**.(fig.62) It is very similar to many of Dionyse's soldiers, for example **Blue Doge** (1977)(fig.65) and **Blue General** ((1970)(fig.63). The ancient helmet dominates the head in Frink's **Warrior's Head** it links the soldier back to past generations of warriors, to past battles



and wars. The helmet also acts as a screen, a means of hiding from reality, the reality of the violence he and others perpetrate in the name of duty. I think Frink's later **Soldiers Heads I-IV** (1985)(fig.61) are among her most dramatic works. They have heavy loutish faces, they look empty, perhaps shell-shocked, certainly stunned, possibly by the brutality they have witnessed or committed. Yet they are intensely human, despite their toughness they also seem vulnerable and exposed.

Dionyse has created a series of soldier / guard type figures throughout his career. The early **Armoured Figure** (1968)(fig.46) and **Mauve Helmeted Head**(1973)(fig.64) are quite abstracted, far more so than Frink's figures. However, there is in both women's work the same sense that the armour and the man have become one, an echo perhaps of Moore's **Helmet Heads** of the 1950's which I mentioned earlier. One can no longer identify the man apart from his role as soldier. The man and his armour appear to have become one. The helmet of Dionyse's **Blue General** (1970)(fig.63) has totally subsumed him. His eyes appear closed perhaps indicating his blindness to the violence he commits. The features of **Black Guardian** (1987)(fig.67) and **Canberra Guard** (1988)(fig.66) have also disappeared. Perhaps the loss of one's senses symbolizes the loss of that which makes one human.

Frink moved to France in 1967 and there was a change in her work after that date. She shifted emphasis from a concentration on the oppressor to the victim. She focussed on the development of a gentler more introverted and sensual masculine ideal. In 1975 she created a series entitled **Tribute IV** (fig.68). The faces of these heads are masks of suffering, the eyes are closed against blows, their lips sealed in a narrow line of endurance. Frink has written that they epitomize the Stoicism and courage of prisoners of conscience to act as

"a tribute to all people who have died or suffered for their beliefs. These men are heroes in the sense that they are survivors but they are also victims, stripped of everything but their human courage"(39)

There are parallels in Dionyse's work; **Masked Bust** (1981)(fig.69) is a powerful and emotive piece. It is the body of a victim ready to be executed. The head and the figure quite realistically modelled. He waits, stilly and proudly. His eyes have been masked so that he cannot see his executioner or the execution. The executioner is also hooded which is ironic as the victim cannot see him anyway.



Fig. 65. Carmen Dionyse Blue Doge 1977.



Fig. 66. Carmen Dionyse
Canberra Guardian 1988.



Fig. 67. Carmen Dionyse
Black Guardian 1987.



Fig. 68. Elisabeth Frink
Tribute i-iv 1975.



Fig. 69. Carmen Dionyse Masked Bust 1981

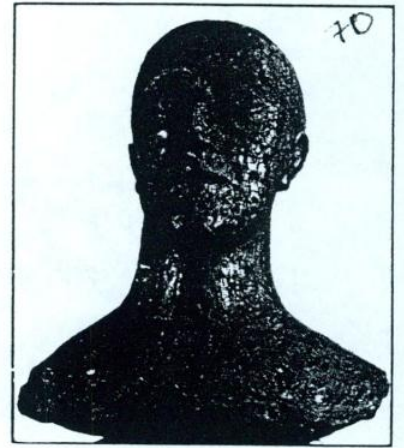


Fig. 70. Elisabeth Frink
In Memorium III 1983

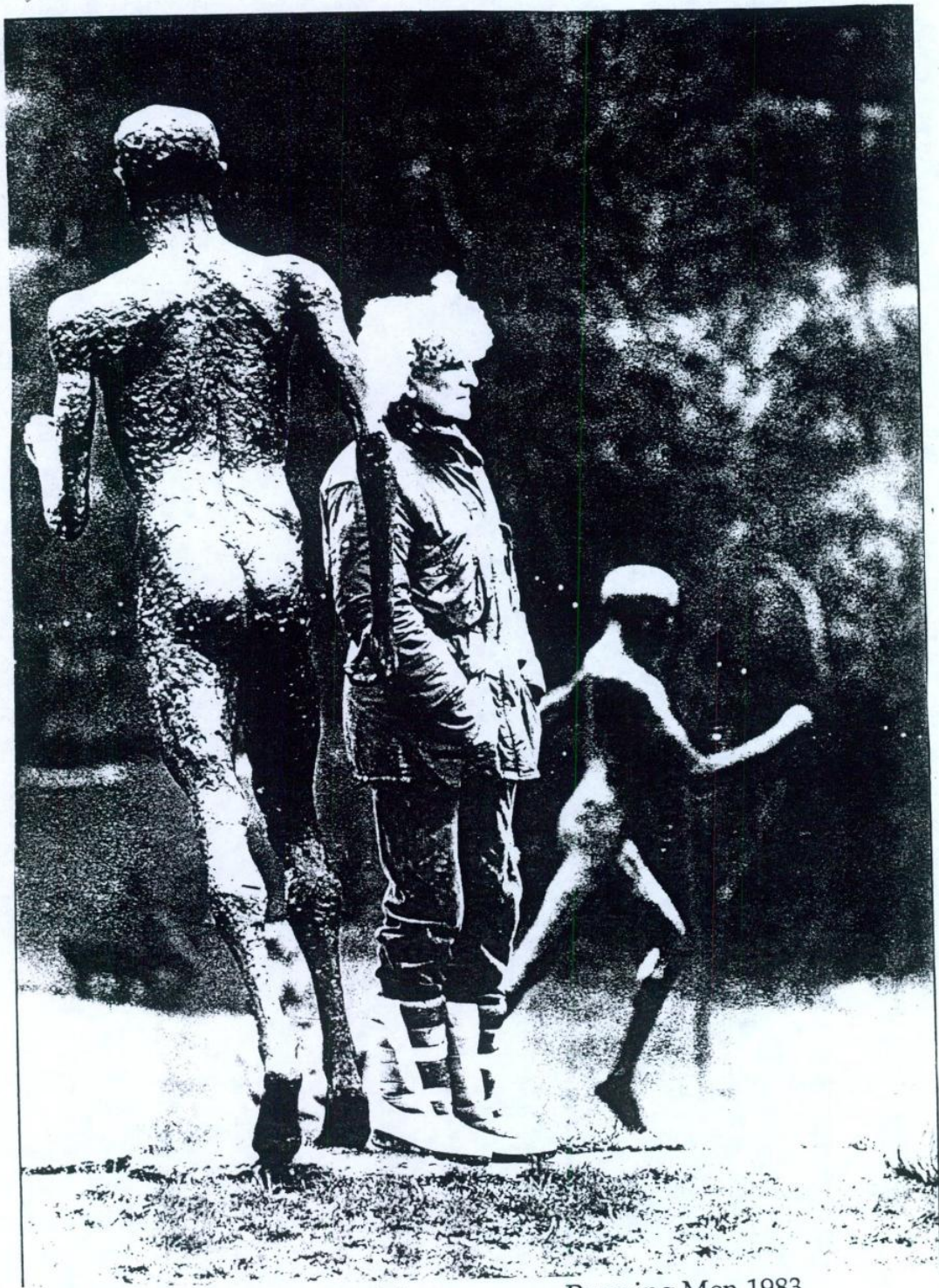


Fig. 71. Elisabeth Frink Running Men 1983.

It points out the fact that the hood is really a form of disguise, a way of hiding behind a uniform, a means of avoiding the reality of the act of execution. Within Dionyse's work this sense of layers of disguise and covering up is very prevalent. People hide behind armour, masks and veils. There is a constant emphasis on the senses being covered or disappearing, the layers of bandages, veils etc. serve as layers of protection and disguise. Man protects himself not only from a difficult world but also from truths he does not want to face - for example, the executioner hides behind his hood, the soldier behind his helmet. They therefore can avoid facing the full consequences of the actions they commit. Man's ability to deceive himself and avoid the reality of what was going on around him must have seemed especially pertinent and sinister after the revelations about the concentration camps were made after the war.

Elizabeth Frink's last work was far more calm and relaxed than her early tortured forms. It was an expression of her admiration for the natural life force within man. Her men sit, stand, run, they are relaxed and in tune with their environment. There is a sense of inner strength and a realisation of inner potential, rather than the need to externally dominate or control.

(See **Running Men** (1983)(fig.71).

Looking inwards is an important characteristic of Dionyse's pieces. She has written "my figures are characterized by a common characteristic which might be termed introverted and by a type of eternal humanity"(40). Many of the figures seem to have retreated into themselves. Some, as we have seen, have put up barriers to protect themselves, others are victims silently accepting their fate. There are others, however, who seem to be silently retreating from the world without any of the anguish or aggression associated with the victims or soldiers. Many of the figures are female and they seem to positively welcome their withdrawal from the world into an inner reality. They take one back to the work of the 15th century Flemish Primitives. **Pink Silence** (1976)(fig.72), **Chinstrap** (1978)(fig.74), **Silent Woman** (1978)(fig.75) and **White Nina** (1988) (fig.73) and **Mauve Introspective Bust** (1977)(fig.76) all share this retiring quality. There is a prevailing gentleness about these works, their surfaces are smooth, their colours are soft or white. They seem to convey the essence of receptivity and acceptance. **Silent Woman** (fig.75) with her eyes closed, her mouth covered, her head tilted back seems to offer herself up to some greater



Fig. 72. Carmen Dionyse
Pink Silence 1976



Fig. 73. Carmen Dionyse
White Nina 1988/89



Fig. 74. Carmen Dionyse
Chinstrap 1978



Fig. 75. Carmen Dionyse
Silent Woman 1978

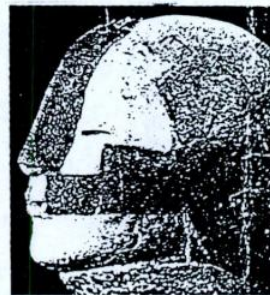


Fig. 76. Carmen Dionyse
Mauve Introspective Bust 1977



Fig. 77.

Carmen Dionyse

Gloss Brethren 1978.

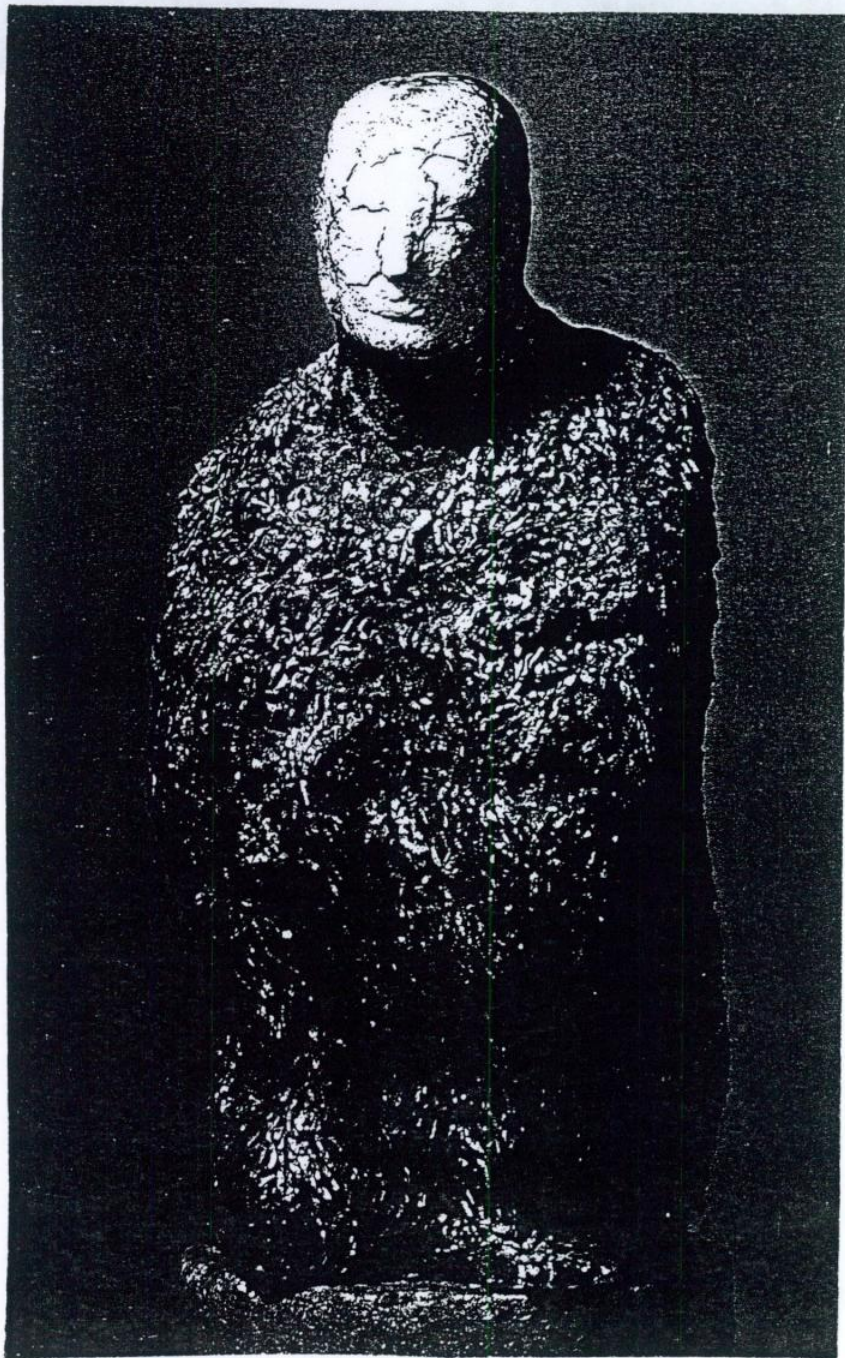


Fig. 78.

Carmen Dionyse

Man in a Fleece 1981

force. There is a great sense of silence and peace about her, as there is about **White Nina** (1983). **White Nina** is glazed with a white porcelain slip and has an air of saintliness and spirituality. The piece is similar in ways to **Gloss Brethren** (1978)(fig.77). **Gloss Brethren** is unusual in that it consists of two heads. The word 'Breathern' has religious connotations. The head on the left is similar to Dionyse's hooded helmeted heads. He seems alert and aggressive, his eyes appear to be watching. The other head which appears female in form is more like the passive female heads such as **White Nina** or **Silent Woman**. Her eyes are closed, her head tilted upwards and her mouth bandaged. Her nose is also covered and there is a collar around her chin. All of her senses are blocked in some way, she seems to have totally reverted into herself. She appears at peace, undisturbed, as if she has accepted her fate. One is reminded of the essentially passive approach of the Eastern religions. Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, are concerned with the quest to be absorbed by God. Man is seen as an integral part of the natural cycle. In Christianity, individuality is not obliterated but is consciously inrelationship with God. The male western approach is to see God and man is perceived as master of the natural world.

The **Gloss Brethren** heads are white with a delicate intricate surface. They point to the fragility and complexity of the human psyche. They highlight the duality within war, the man and the female, the need to look outwards and be active and the need to withdraw and look inwards, to be passive and meditative. These heads, like most of Dionyse's figures have no ears. Dionyse has written, "ears get blocked and become superfluous, it is only in retreat and isolation that spiritual concentration can reach its maximum"(41).

These themes of withdrawal and isolation are Dionyse's main concerns in her work. Her pieces are veiled, bandaged and armoured against the intrusion of reality. The idea of the isolation of the self for spiritual enlightenment is one that appeals to her. She has created a series of stylites (a stylite was an ancient or medieval ascetic who lived on top of a pillar). **Man in Fleece** (1981)(fig.78) and **White Stylite** (1981)(fig.79) are two very powerful examples of these ascetics. One critic has written of **Man in a Fleece**.

One is confronted by the man of all times, crushed under the weight of his condition, huddled in his animal fleece which is also his armour, bearing within his

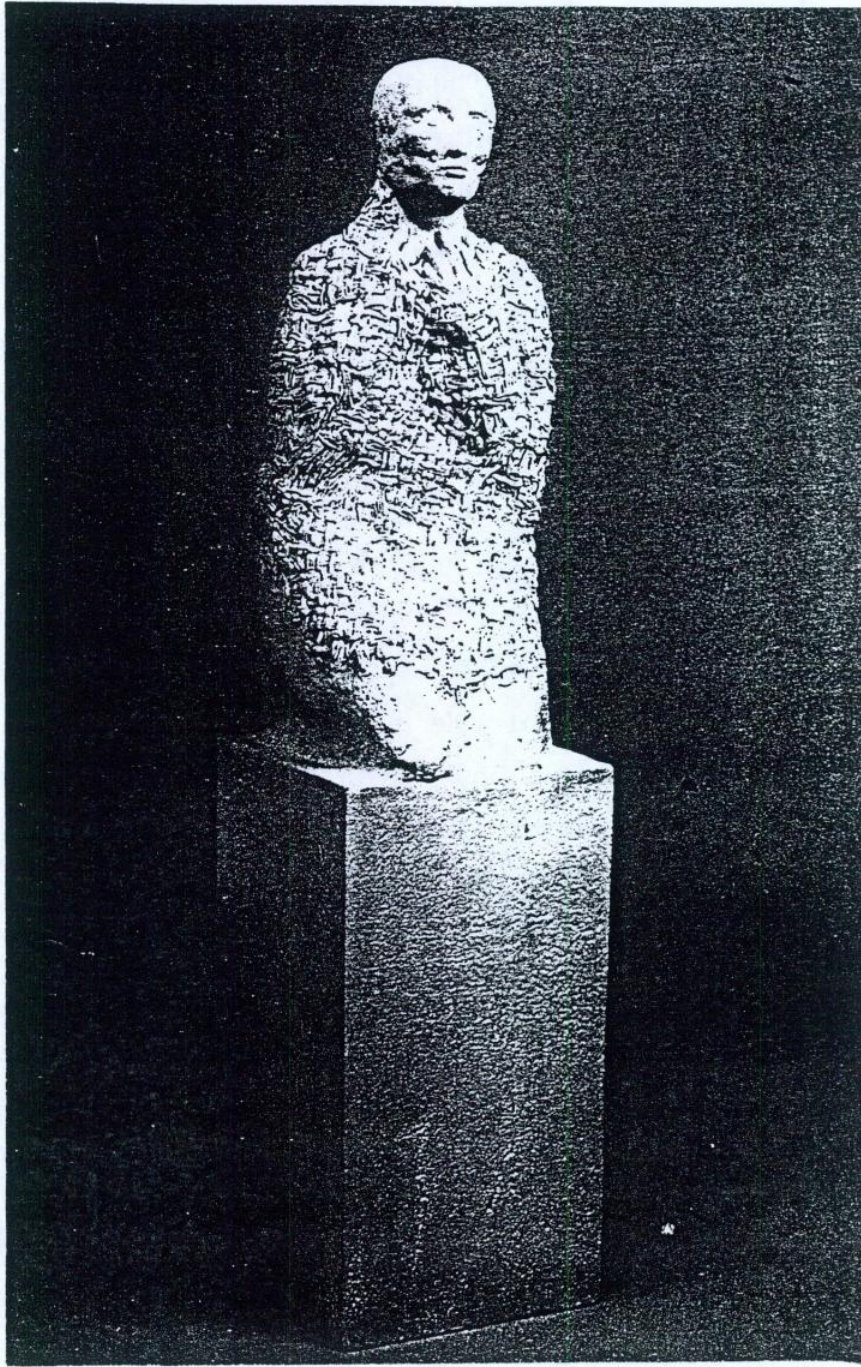


Fig. 79.

Carmen Dionyse

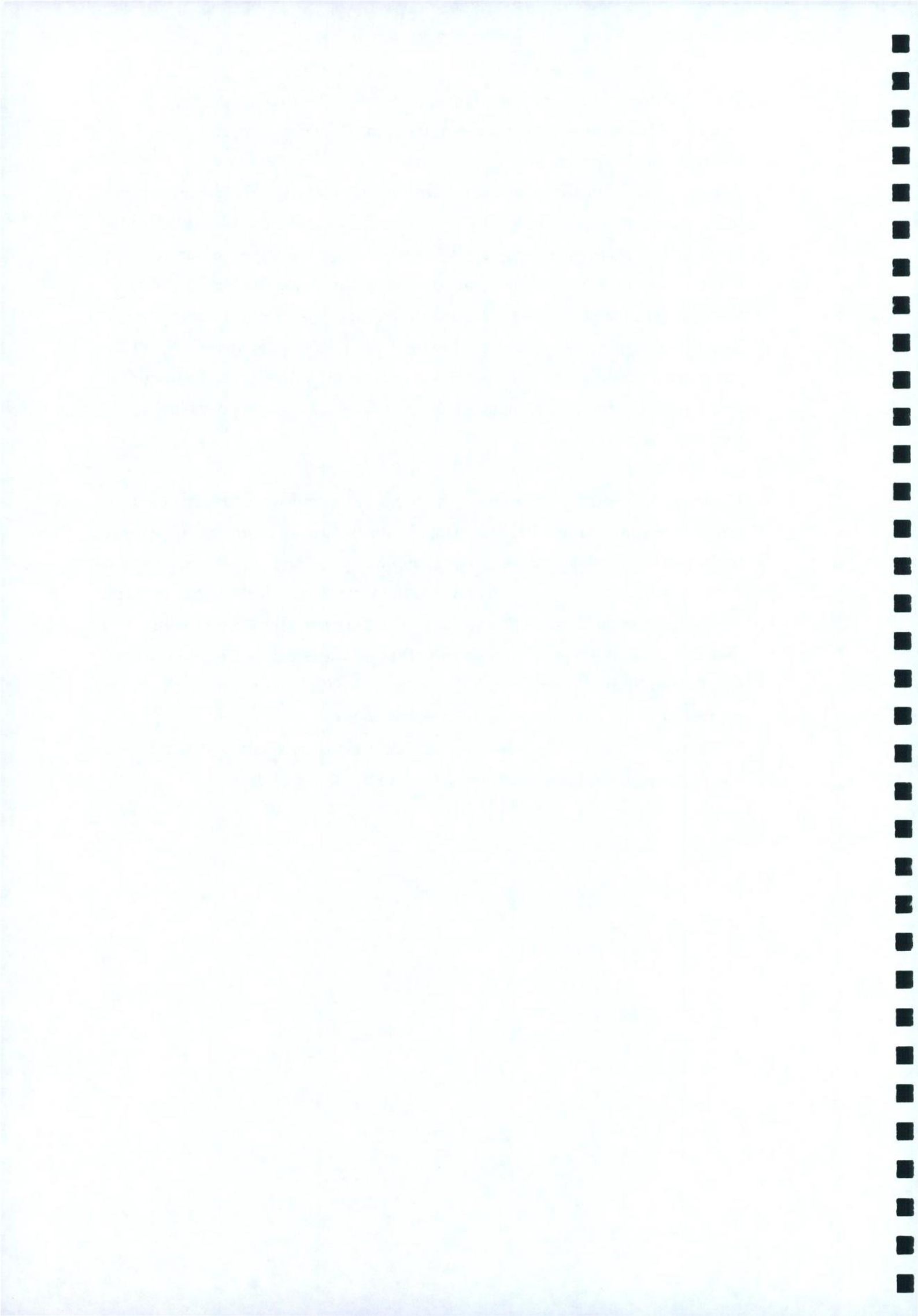
White Stylite 1981.

bulk an immense power for thought, a bottomless depth of meditation, consumed by infinite sadness and at the same time radiating an inextinguishable presence"(42)

When we are faced with this and other stylite figures we make the pilgrimage inwards, we are faced with past sorrows, injustices and pain. We are reminded of the sufferings of past generations. Yet we are also reminded of our humanity and that our ancestors survived and overcame hardship. The human spirit fights on. Perhaps Dionyse's belief that out of death, sorrow and decay comes life, growth and hope, grew out of having lived through the Second World War. After the war the only way forward was to accept the decay and destruction and look to the future, retain ones belief in humanity and the possibility of regeneration.

Dionyse's art confronts us with an innerness about which we may have forgotten. She reminds us that we live inside our bodies. The interior hollowness of the work mediates between inner and outer space. She uses the body and the head as vehicles to refer to things which cannot be seen. Her message is that it is only by looking inwards that we can come to terms with the void with, only then can we find the peace and serenity that pervades works like **Pink Silence** (fig.72) and **Silent Woman** (fig.75). Her concern with inner stillness is well expressed in the words of Anand Coomaraswamy:

"Over against the world of change and separation there is a timeless and spaceless peace which is the source and goal of all our being"(43).



CHAPTER SIX

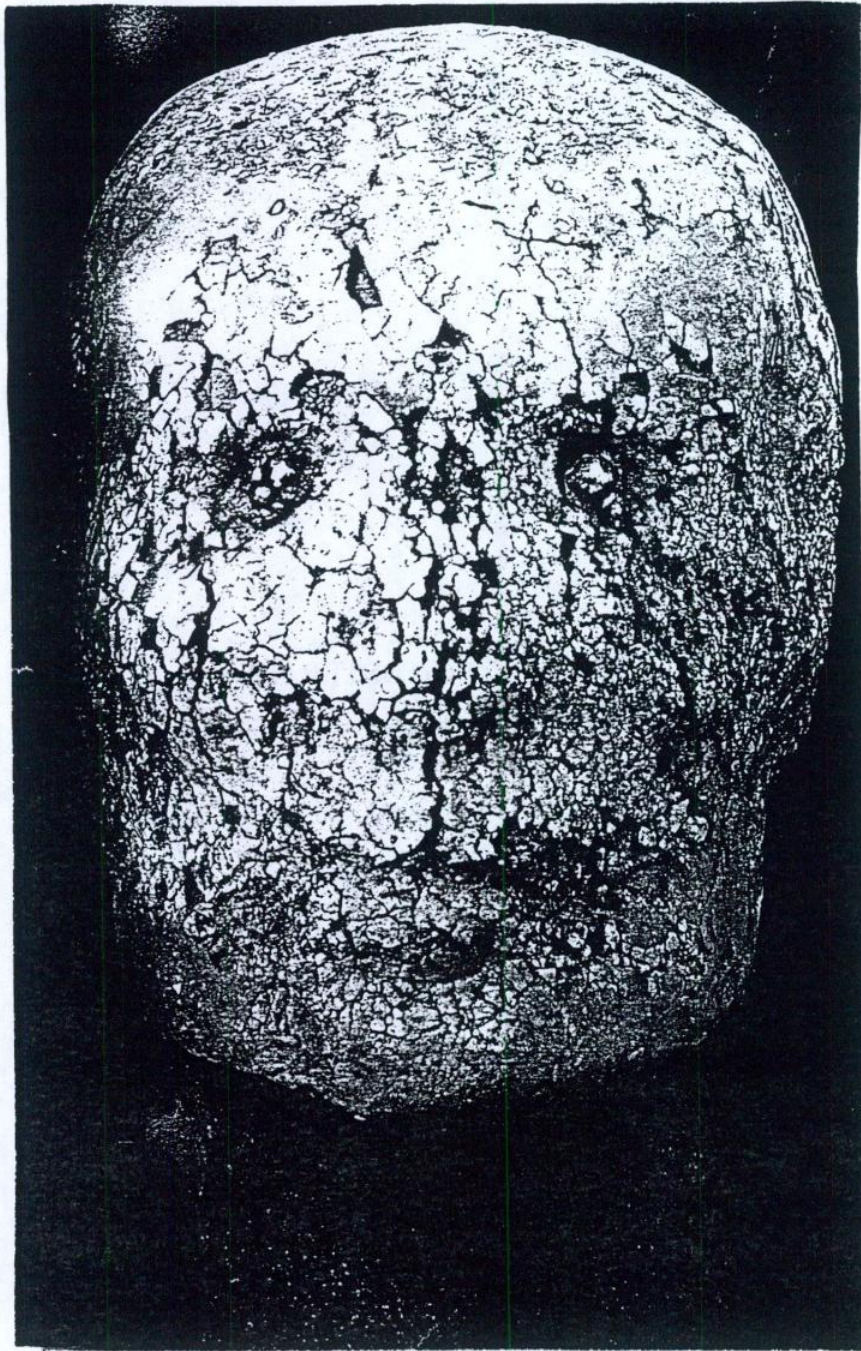


Fig. 80. Carmen Dionyse

Hiram 1985

Chapter Six

Nature and the Body in Dionyse's Work with Reference to the Work of Abakanowicz.

The human body and the head are the forms Dionyse uses almost exclusively in her work. Her pieces contain a strong sense of the duality of the body and the soul. Her material, clay, assists in the creation of this notion of duality. The figures retain a sense of the indefiniteness and plasticity of the wet clay to create human figures stripped down to their most elemental, revealing their archaic bodiliness. She does not, like Frink, glorify the body, instead she see it as a mere wrapping for the soul. Louis le Brocquy explains a similar concept of the head held by the ancient Celts, "they saw the head as the magic box that holds the spirit prisoner"(44).

However, despite her concern with the spiritual, there is a strong sense of the physical in Dionyse's work. Some of her surfaces are fleshy and tactile and morbidity immediate: the body and its natural functions link us to nature. We are reminded of the "mystery of the flesh"-

"The nearness within the nervous system of pain and pleasure, the ambiguity of the body as a cage containing an animal and the body as an expendable servant of the heart; the fact that the same muscles move in the shoulder whether the arm is raised to caress or do violences"(45) quote. ?

Dionyse attempts to reconnect us with the fact that we live inside our bodies and with our essential finiteness. Some of her rich, sensuous, coloured surfaces glorify the physical. Other works have hard cold white surfaces like polished bone and contain within them a knowledge of the limitations and fragility of the body, so although works like *Hiram* (1985)(fig.80) and *Purple Hiram* (1986)(Fig.60). Show the effects of illness and decay on the body, they are not depressing because Dionyse sees the body as no more than a temporary shell



Fig. 81. Carmen Dionyse
Flora 1988



Fig. 82. Carmen Dionyse
Dryad 1990.



Fig. 83. Carmen Dionyse
Dark Daphne 1984.

which houses the spirit which lives on after the body has died. This belief seems to permeate her work and give it an aura of optimism, joy and transcendence.

Magdalena Abakanowicz (b.1930), a Polish woman sculptor who is a contemporary of Dionyse, also explores the issue of the body being an enclosing vessel for the inner spirit. Of her works **Seated Figures** (1974-79) and **Backs** (1976-82)(fig.84). Abakanowicz has written:

"The shell like negatives of the bulk of the human body - deal with the problem of containing and enclosing"(46). Many of her body forms are placed on the floor. They sprout from this horizontal surface like crustations of earth. She only uses natural fibres and her colours are natural. The forms are reminiscent of the residue of an excavation. They are like things that time has left behind, sinking imperceptibly once more into the earth. Dionyse's work also conveys this sense;

she, however, takes this idea of returning to the earth even further. Some of her figures such as **Dryad** (1990)(fig.82) or **Flora** (1988)(fig.81) are half plant, half human. Others like **Small Hidden Head** (1982)(fig.15) seem to be in the process of sinking back into the earth. Dionyse uses mythological figures to elucidate her theme of man's return to the earth and his role in the "eternal cycle of humanity". **Eurydice** (1985)(fig.85) is an example of this theme. In Greek mythology Eurydice was the wife of Orpheus who died after being bitten by a snake. Orpheus is allowed to go to the underworld and take Eurydice back to life provided he does not look back at her until they have left Hades. He does look back and his wife is turned into stone. Despite the apparently tragic outcome of the myth, Dionyse presents the transformation into stone as something positive and beautiful. She portrays Eurydice passively accepting her new altered form and the wonderful cream and turquoise cracked surface is far richer and more interesting than the surface of the head which presumably has not yet become stone. This implication of transformation being positive and welcome is echoed in **Dark Daphne** (1984)(fig.83). Daphne was a character in Ovid's **Metamorphoses** who was turned into a tree by the Gods to prevent her from being pursued by Apollo. Dionyse's presentation of their return to nature symbolizes her belief that existence is cyclical and that there is an underlying unity between man and the natural world.

Abakanowicz's **Embryology** (fig.86) is about the changes brought about by



Fig. 84. Magdalena Abakanowicz Backs 1976-82.



Fig. 85.

Carmen Dionyse

Eurydice 1991.



growth, development and decay in nature and humans. Like Dionyse work, her figures are full of non-human and natural forms. Both artists works often seem to verge on the inarticulate and incoherent. They contain within them an ancientness, a formlessness, a propensity to gradually disintegrate into the earth.

Perhaps it is partly because they both use natural materials (fibre and clay) that their work seems drawn downwards towards, "the humid pull of the earth"(47). As I have mentioned Dionyse's "Autumnal Cyclops"(fig.18) and **Recumbent Figure** (fig.87) appear to have come out of the earth.

Dionyse's **Black Lazarus** (1980)(fig.88) is black and dark green in colour. He is decaying and putrefying. His skin is cracked and leathery. He has died and has begun to disintegrate into the earth. He reminds me of Seamus Heaney's poem "The Grauballe Man" (1976)

"As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep
the black river of himself" (quote)(48)

Lazarus died but he was resurrected. He is the Christian symbol of physical resurrection and the immortality of man. Dionyse has created several Lazarus figures. They convey the message that out of decay, suffering and death comes hope, growth and life. Ted Hughes has written of the power of poetry, but it could apply to the power of Dionyse's art also, to somehow transmute suffering into a positive force. "That's the paradox of poetry, as if poetry were a biological process; it seizes on what is depressing and destructive and lifts it into a realm where it becomes emergising and healing.(49).

Abakanowicz's work also explores suffering and transcendence. She created a series of 16 heads, 42 inches high between 1973 and 1975 (fig.89). Despite being far larger than Dionyse's heads, I believe they bear a strong resemblance to them and it is interesting to study Abakanowicz's reasons for making them. They are standing ovoid forms which are stuffed, wrapped and stitched together. "These forms, which I also refer to as heads relate to my fear that to exceed the rate of ones biological rhythms leads to a loss of ability to mediate. I am apprehensive about the consequences suffered through the effects of an artificial environment and unlimited stress" writes Abakanowicz (50) .

The first head in the series is calmly contained within the "skin wrapping"(9)

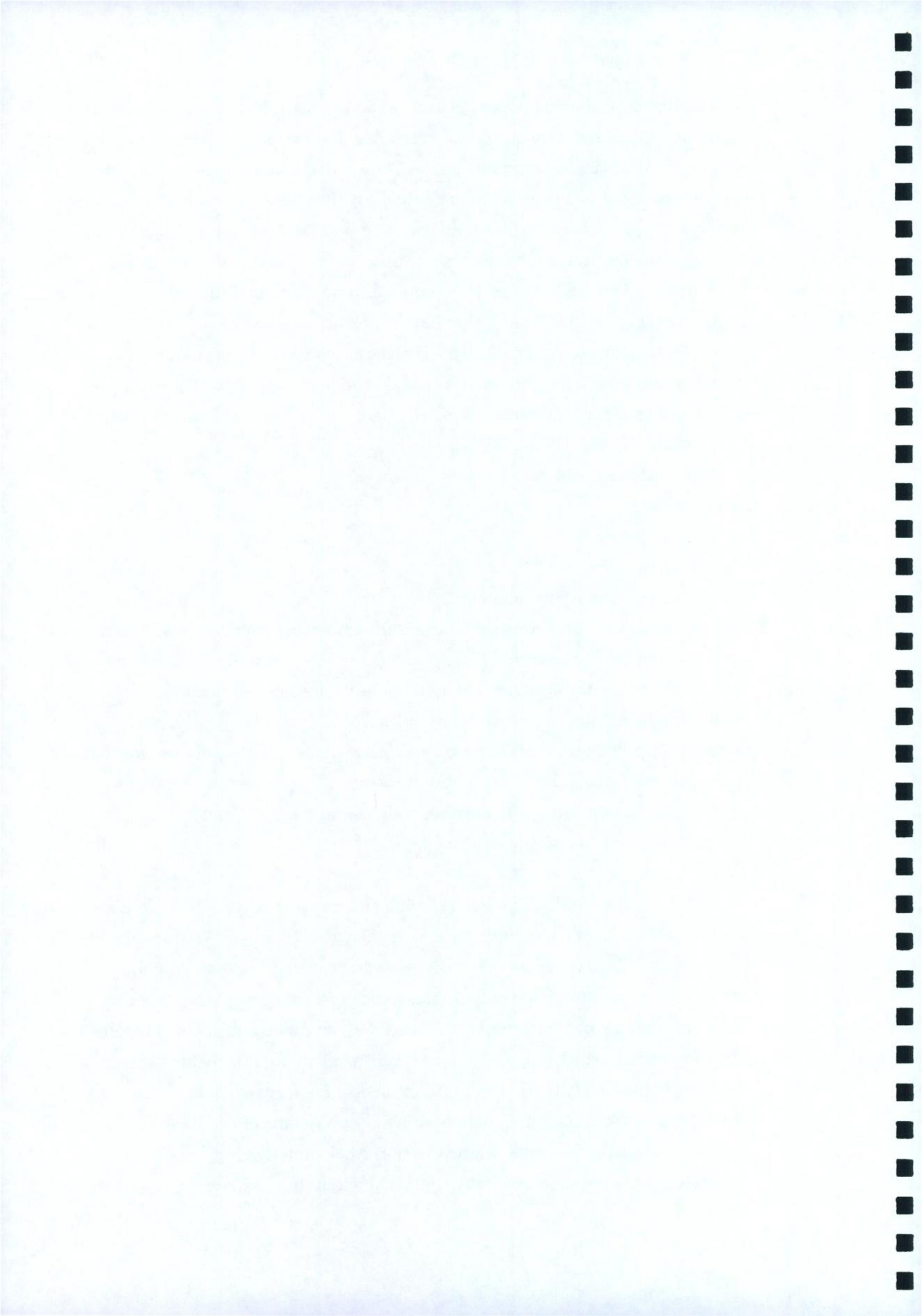




Fig. 86. Magdalena Abakanowicz Embryology 1978-80.

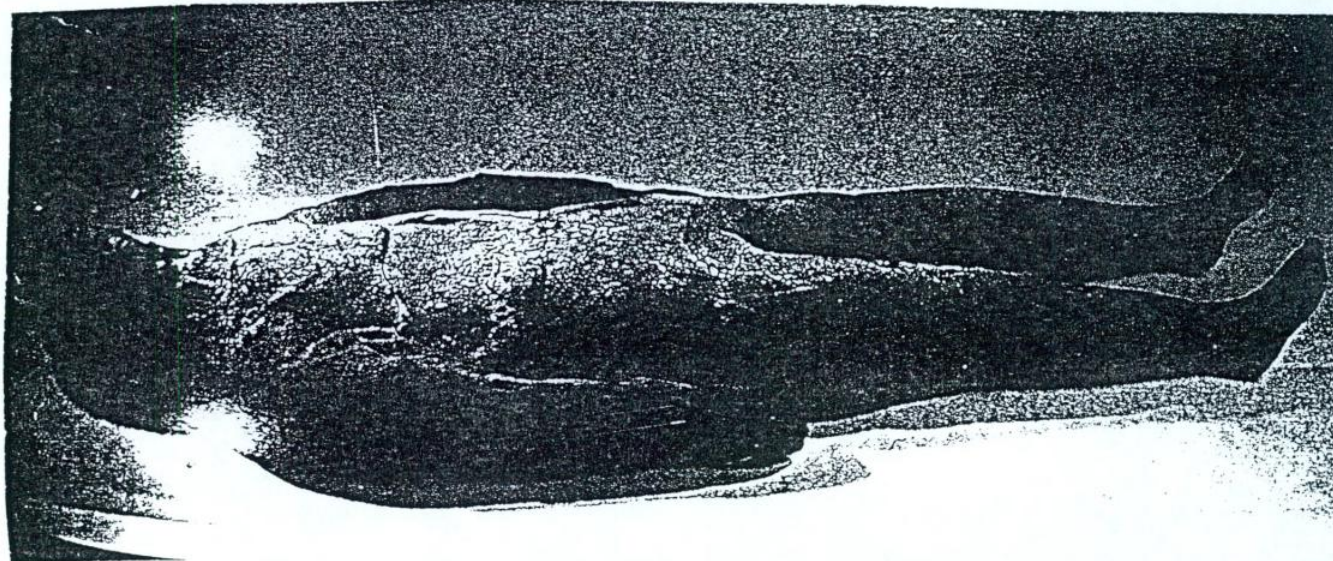


Fig. 87. Carmen Dionyse Recumbent Figure 1877.



Fig. 88.

Carmen Dionyse

Black Lazarus 1980.



Fig. 89. Magdalena Abakanowicz Heads 1973/75.



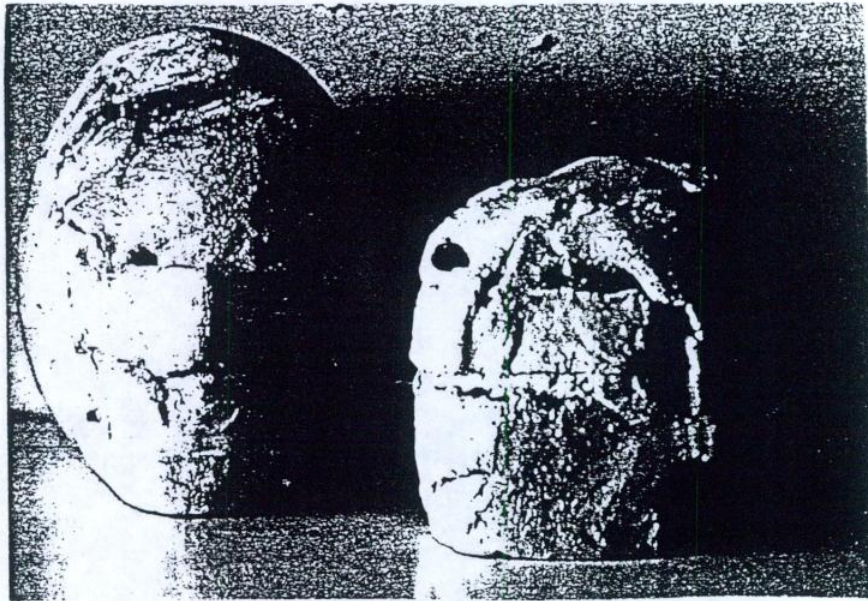


Fig. 90. Carmen Dionyse Terra Heads 1970.



Fig. 91. Carmen Dionyse Melancholia 1988.



Fig. 92. Carmen Dionyse The Introvert 1970.

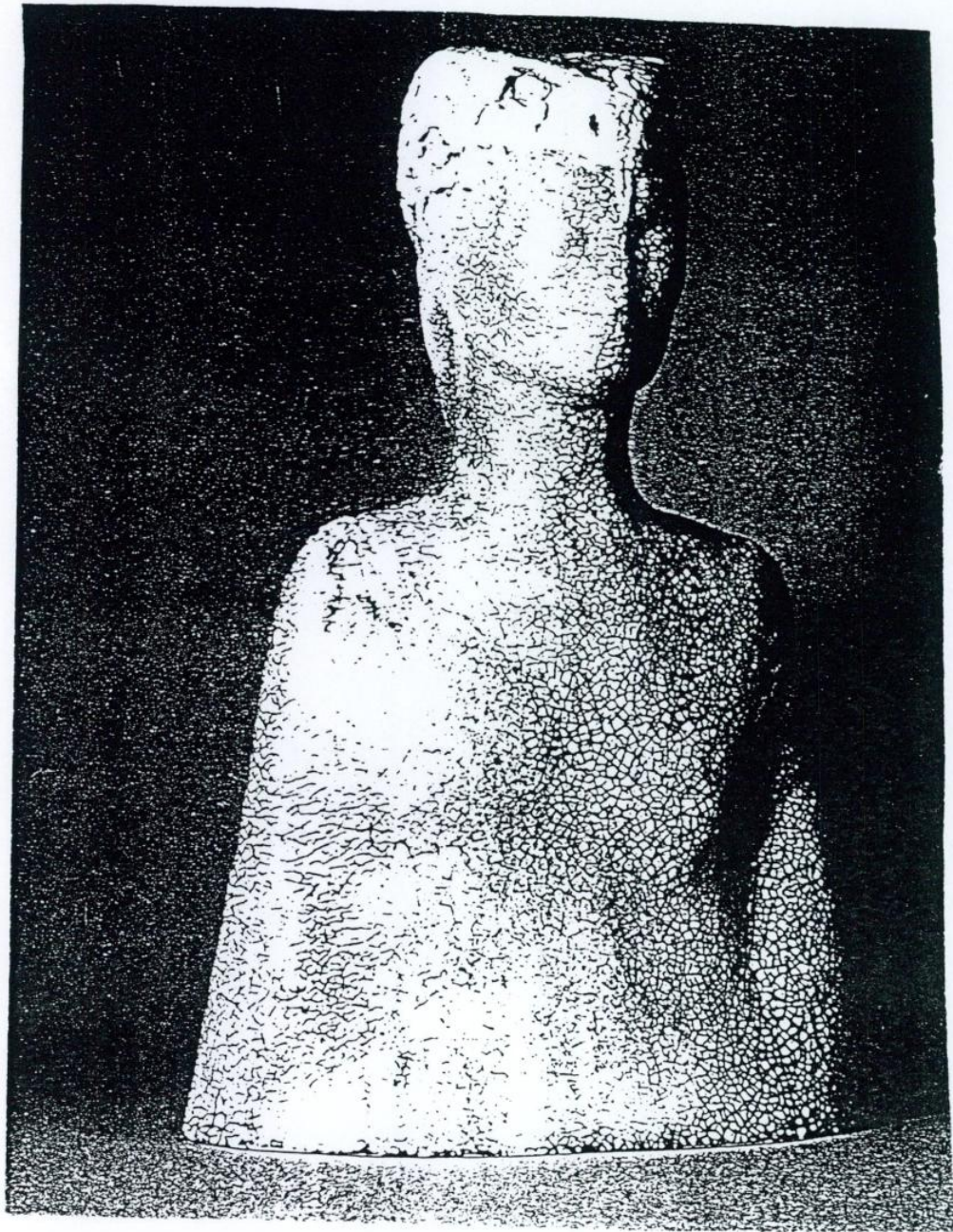


Fig. 93. Carmen Dionyse Snake Totem 1982.



Fig. 94. Carmen Dionyse Belakane 1985.

the seems of successive pieces begin to open like festering wounds, tearing apart and bursting and spilling their insides. Finally they re-emerge unwrapped, fully exposed their internal parts now carefully bound together in rows, a transcendental state after a period of turbulence.

Abakanowicz's heads are reminiscent of Dionyse's **Terra Heads** (1970)(fig.90) and **Introvert** (1970)(fig.92), they contain a similar sense of cracking open, perhaps also as a result of the stresses and strains of modern life. Dionyse's has commented on her inability to cope with the world. Dionyse's scarred surfaces, the effects of multiple firings and cracking convey a deep woundedness and pain that is present in Abakanowicz's work also. Despite Dionyse's many references to illness, death and decay for example - **Sick Boy** (1972)(Fig.59) and **Melancholia** (1988)(fig.91) her work is not totally pervaded by gloom. This is because, as we have seen with the Lazarus theme, she retains her belief in renewal and regeneration. This belief is reinforced in her works by the use of certain symbols which are incorporated into the pieces in various ways. I have chosen to analyse the symbolic significance of just one of the symbols she uses quite frequently; that of the serpent. I do so in order to reveal the way in which Dionyse uses her imagery to embellish both her themes and her forms.

Dionyse has created several works relating to snakes, such as "**Belakane**"(1985)(fig.94), **Snake Bust** (1981)(Fig.95), **Snake Totem**(1982)(fig.93). In many primitive religions and mythological systems, serpents symbolize nature's regenerative potential. In Hindu iconography the bracelet bands, ankle rings and Brahminical thread adorning the body of Shiva as he sustains the forces of creation and destruction, stand for living serpents, manifestations of the Godhead's creative energy, the force underlying the world and everything in it. In Graeco-Roman mythology the serpent is a curative symbol mediating between heaven and earth, standing for Asclepius, the God of medicine. The snake is persistently linked to renewal because it sheds its skin regularly. **Belakane** (1985)(fig.94) is one of my favourite of Dionyse's pieces. The body is covered in a broken green surface as if bursting forth and breaking through the old skin. It also looks like old mossy tree bark. The small coiled serpent embedded in the forehead of the figure is like an amulet or talisman, it wards off evil but is also a reminder of nature's regeneration powers.

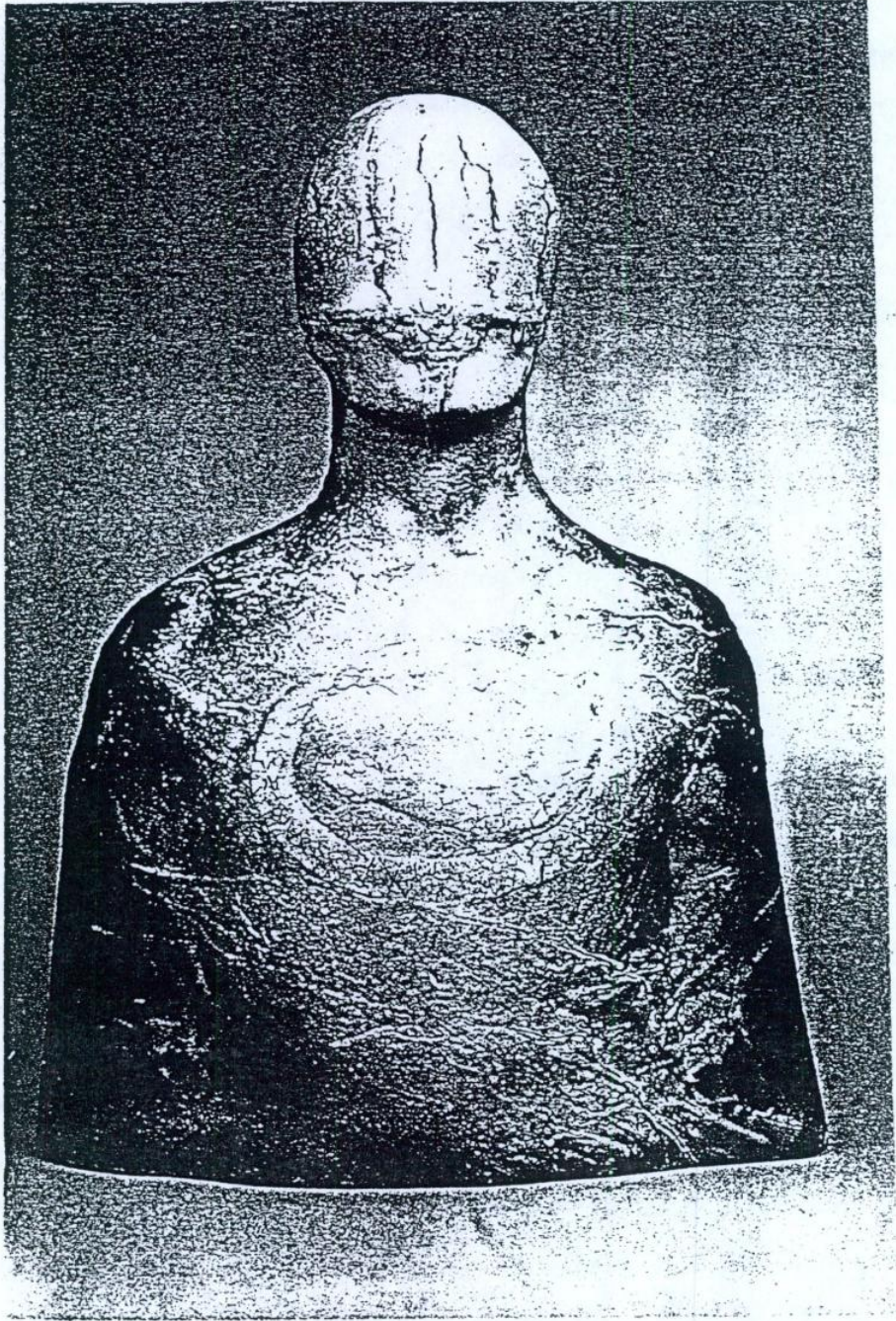


Fig. 95.

Carmen Dionyse

Snake Bust 1981.

CHAPTER SEVEN

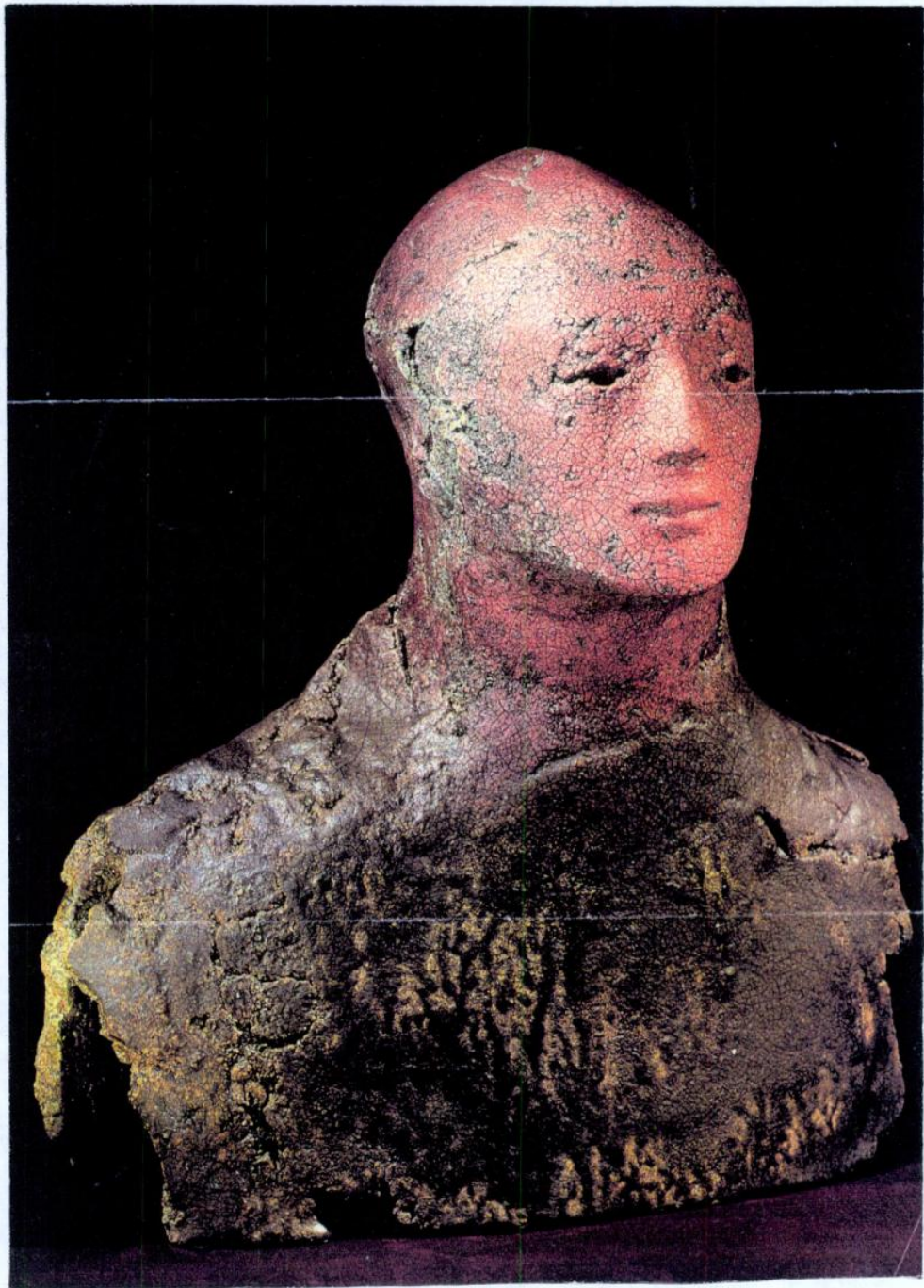


Fig. 96.

Carmen Dionyse

Sunset Glow 1988 (16" high)

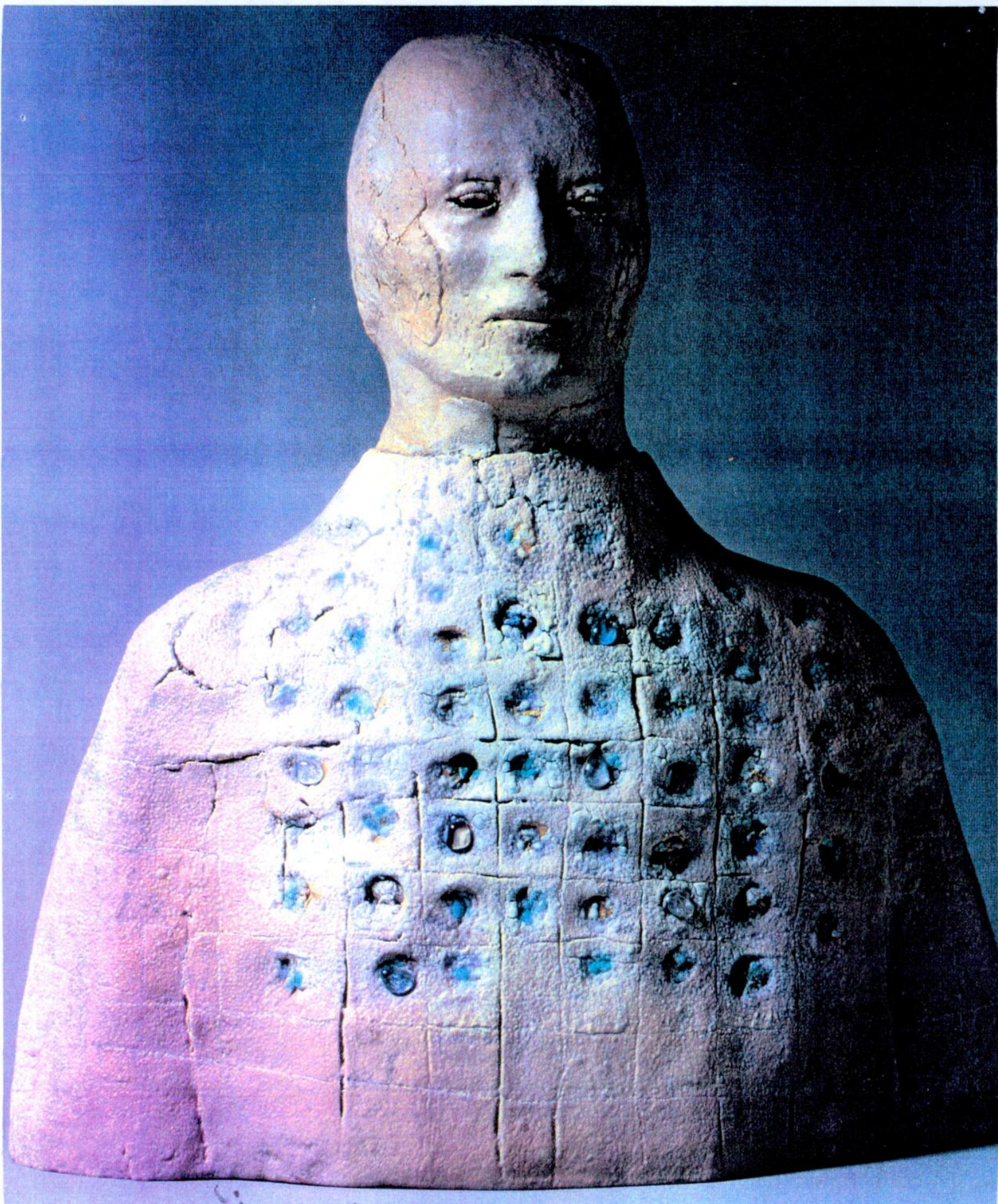
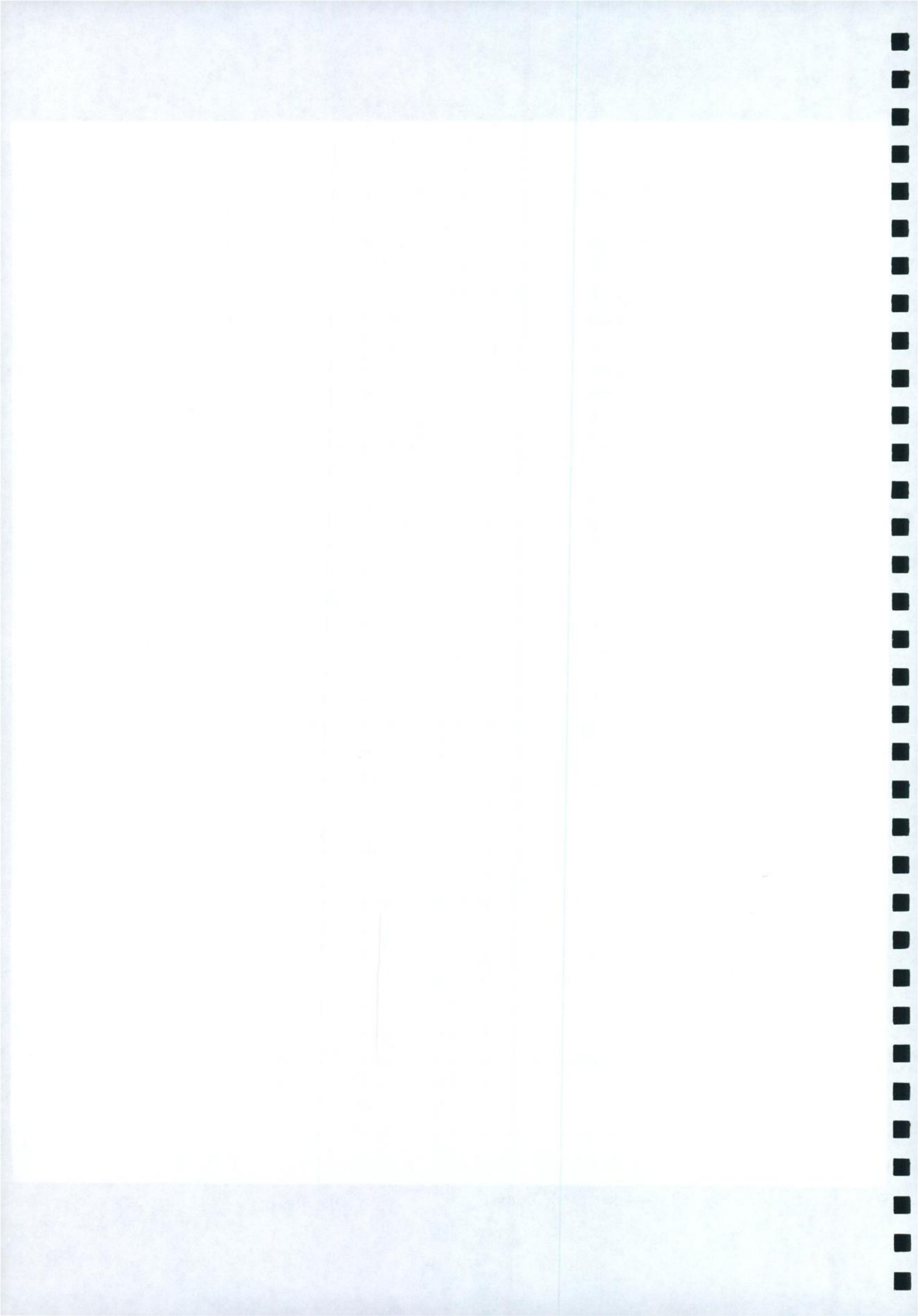


Fig. 97.

Carmen Dionyse

Dew Bust 1984.



Chapter Seven

Dionyse enjoys using such esoteric symbols as the serpent. She is attracted to the secret and the hidden. She is a natural esotericist who senses that more is hidden than shown and that one must seek the secrets of reality. Abakanowicz has expressed similar desires "to search for and reveal secrets inherent in structure...the structure being the phenomenon which all the organic world on our planet has in common"(51).

The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus wrote "Nature loves to hide"(52) and Dionyse's figures appear to travel in the remoteness of nature to find its hidden secrets. Works like **Small Hidden Head** (1982)(fig.15) partly buried in earth and half plant/half human forms like **Dryad** (1990)(Fig.82) and works **Rock Woman** (1959)(fig.4) all give this impression. Paul Klee, the 20th century Swiss artist, shares similar beliefs; what he has written about his quest into the soul of nature would apply to Dionyse.

"But chosen are those artist who penetrate to the region of that secret place where primeval power nurtures all evolution. There, were the powerless of all time and space -call it brain or heart of creation - activates every function; who is the artist who would not dwell there? In the womb of nature; at the source of creation, where the secret key to all lies guarded. He continues to say that the function of art is to "make secret visions visible"(53)

Dionyse's works drew our attention to the natural world - for example **Sunset Glow** (1988)(fig.96), **Green Pebble** (1982). They also convey a sense of luminosity and other worldliness, a link with a deeper reality. They lead us into Klee's secret 'womb of nature'. **Dewbust** (1984)(fig.97) is a work that seems to convey these mysterious qualities. The surface of this sculpture is white and purple; it is cold and glacial, conveying the crisp iciness of winter and frozen dew. The chequered bust conveys other connotations; it looks like a priests vestment, perhaps this is the human priest who will link man, nature and the world of the spirit. The bust is also like a chequered board for a secret game with glass playing pieces, a game whose rules are only known to the initiated. This idea of secret rules and rituals appeals to Dionyse. She is drawn to secret sects and obscure religious groups. Various of her works such as **The**



Fig. 100. Carmen Dionyse
Sibyl 1978



Fig. 98. Carmen Dionyse
Blue Prophet 1985.



Fig. 99. Carmen Dionyse
Rosicrucian 1978.



Fig. 102. Carmen Dionyse
Alchemist 1986.



Fig. 103. Carmen Dionyse
The Alchemists 1984.

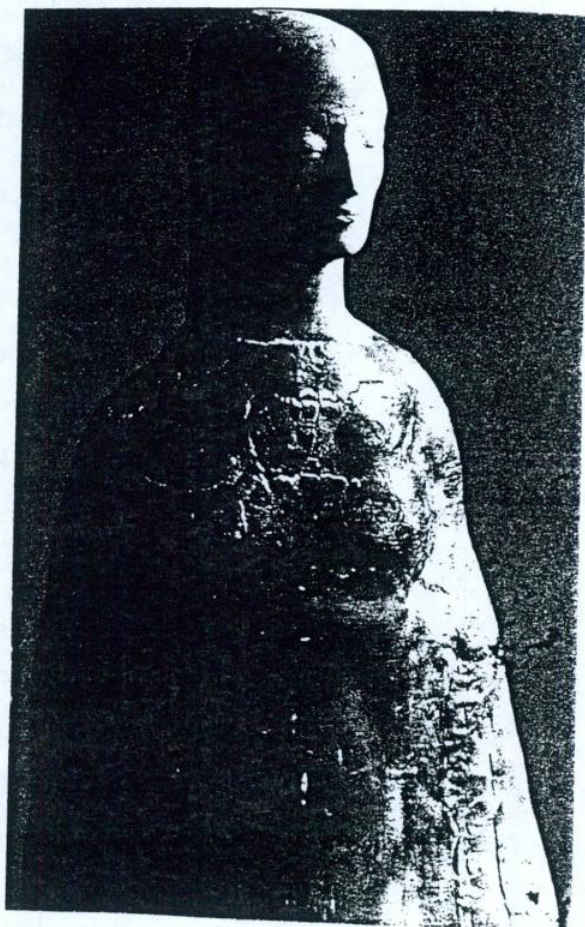


Fig. 101. Carmen Dionyse
Black Sibyl 1980.

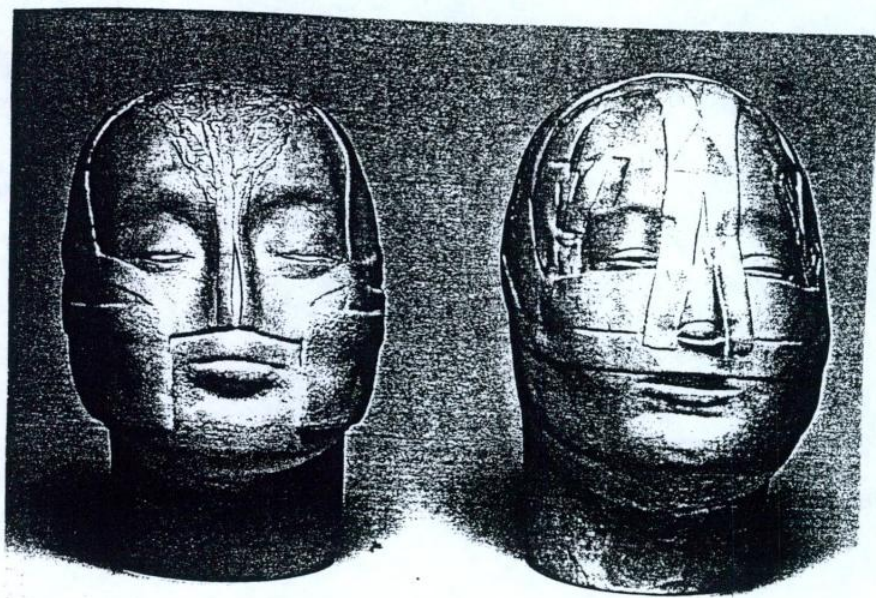


Fig. 104. Carmen Dionyse Oneirants 1978.

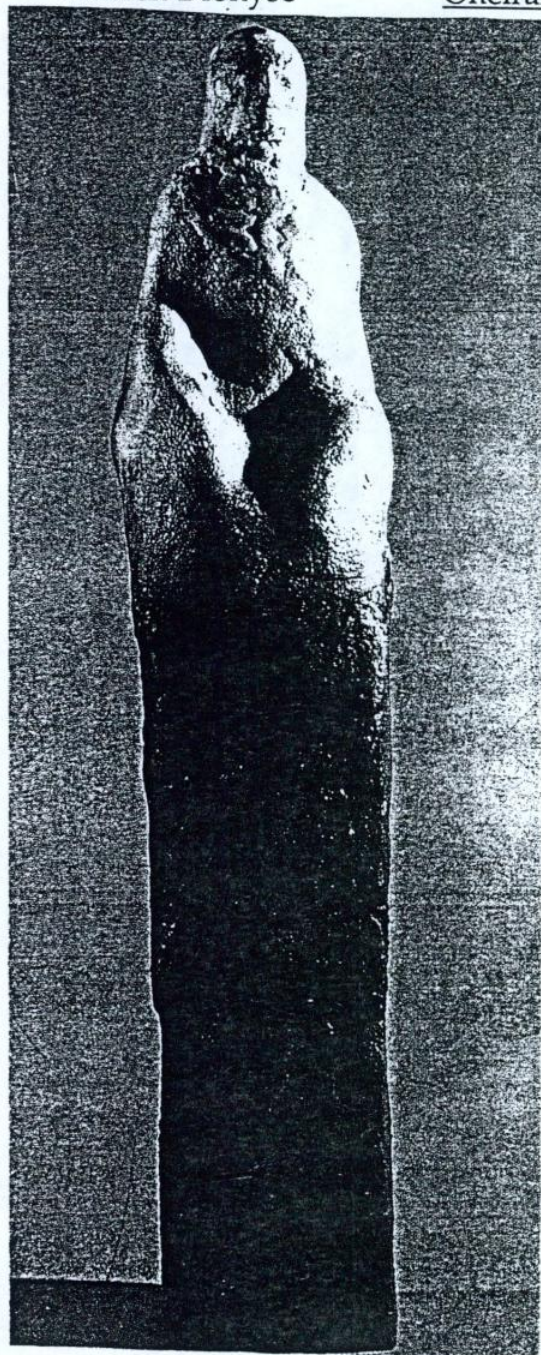
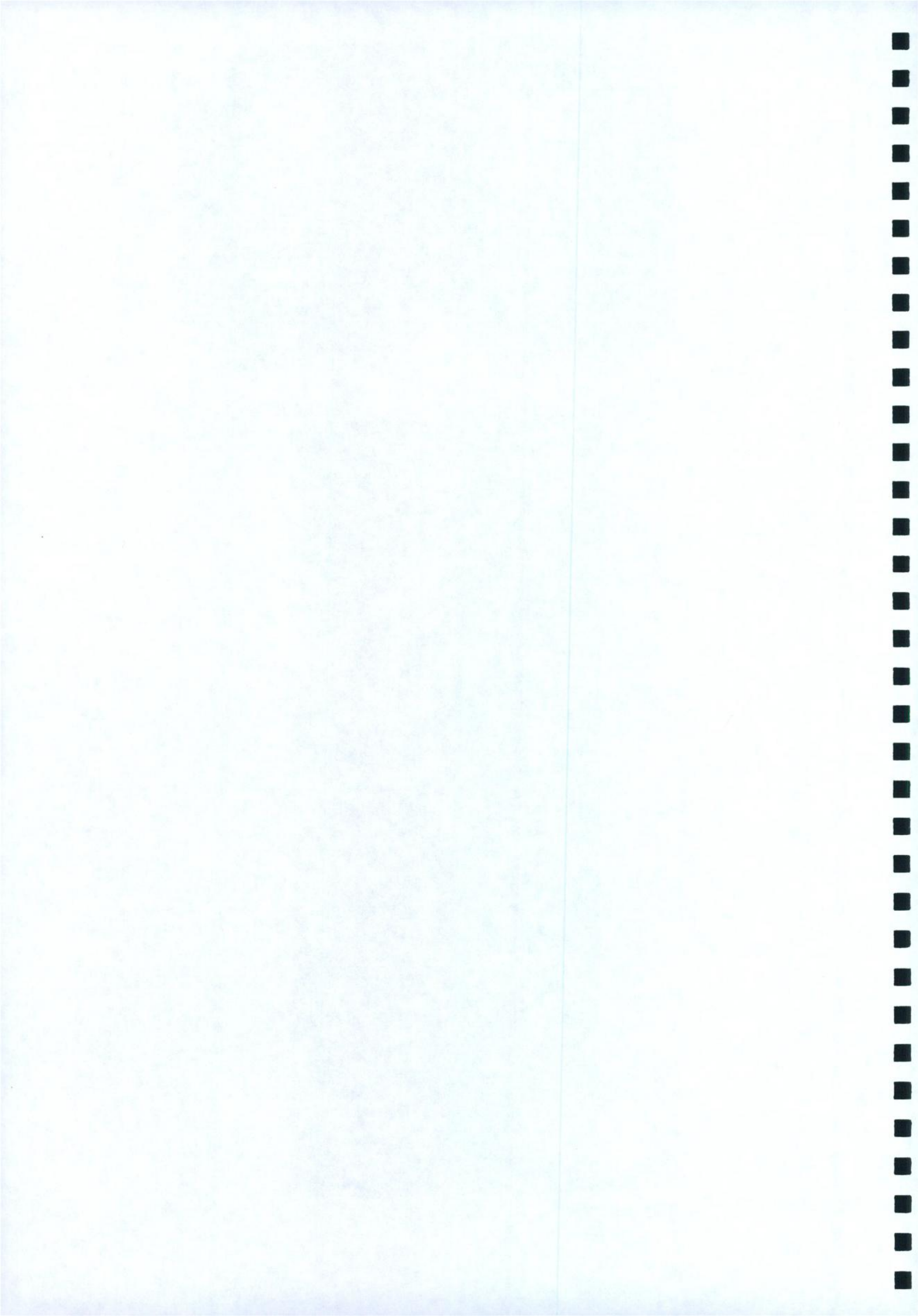


Fig. 105. Carmen Dionyse Stylite 1977.



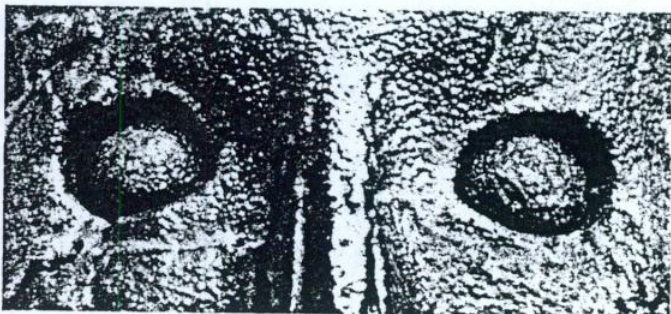
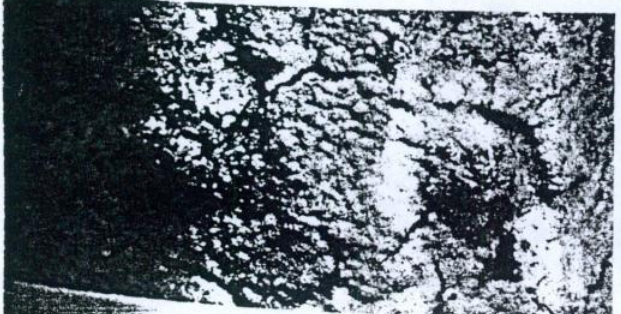
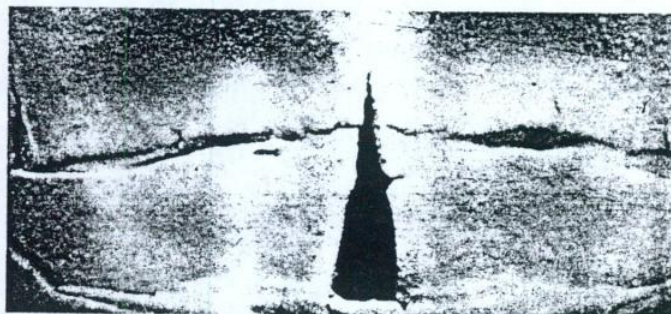
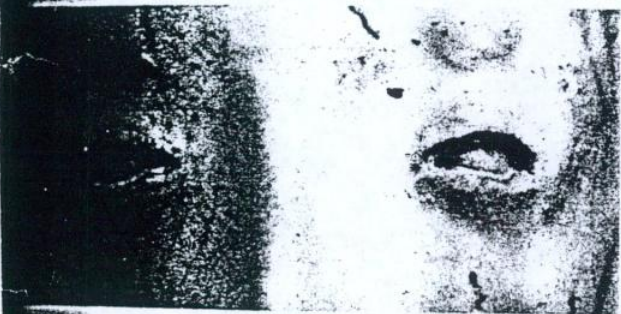
secret rules and rituals appeals to Dionyse. She is drawn to secret sects and obscure religious groups. Various of her works such as **The Rosicrucian**(1978)(fig.99), **The Blue Prophet** (1985)(fig.98) bear witness to her fascination with all those who seek to explore and understand the world of the spirit; all those who try to communicate secret inner visions. Most of her work is about the journey inwards which must be made in silence and about discovering the secretly surviving soul within, Kandinsky has written; "Everything has a secret soul which is silent more often than it speaks"(54) Dionyse would, I believe, fully agree with this.

Fig. 106.

Carmen Dionyse

Eyes

FACES



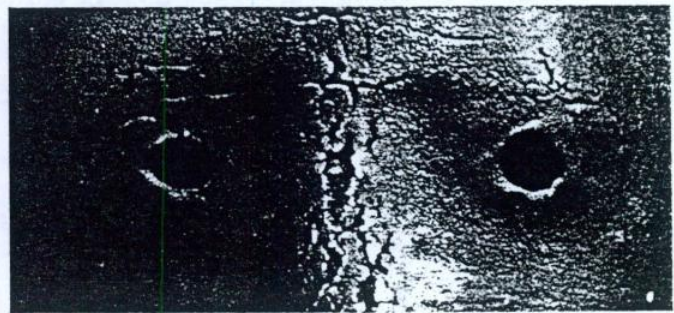
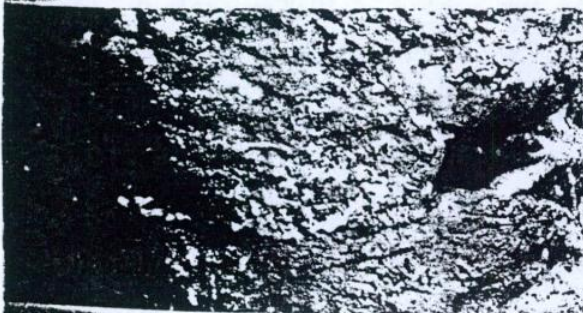
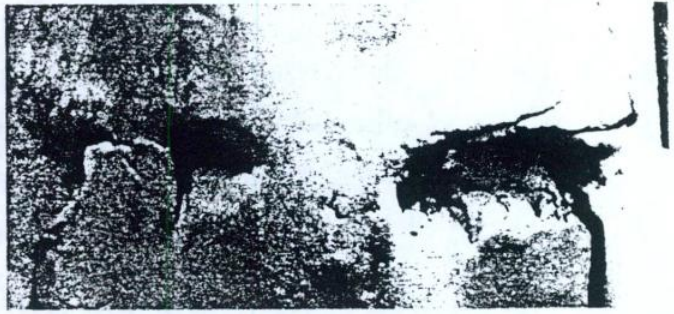
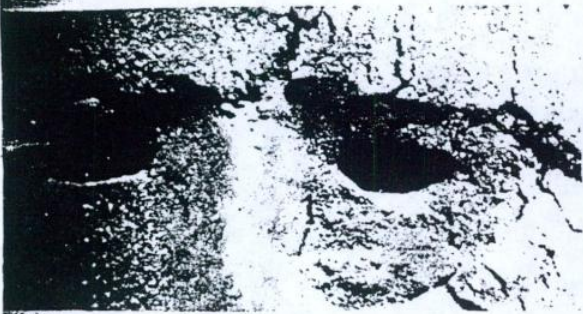
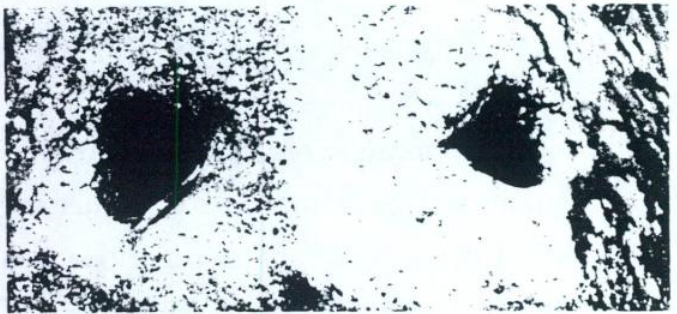
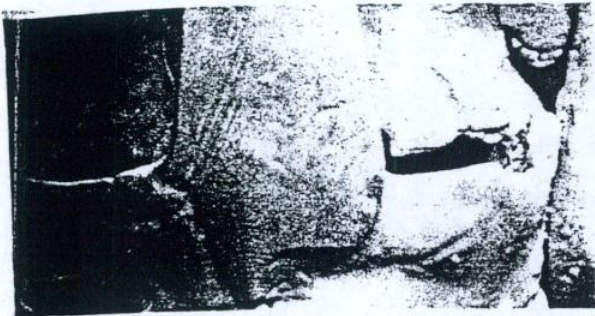
Conclusion

This exploration of Dionyse's work has enabled me to consider how she has managed to create works with such a profoundly historical and spiritual sense. Both consciously and unconsciously she allows imagery and symbolism to emerge from the deep reservoir of visual and historical information which she has collected. St. Augustine wrote "Whatever is in the memory is also in the soul"(55). Dionyse allows herself, her memories, her soul to flow into and to be revealed in her works. She can do this because of her consummate mastery of fired clay as a sculptural medium. She interacts directly and instinctively with the clay allowing images and forms to emerge spontaneously.

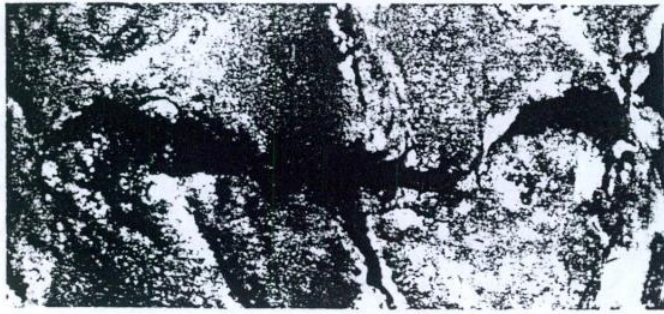
My discussion of the various ideas and themes expressed in her work has led me to believe that Dionyse's basic concern is with the essential paradox of human life - that man is material and finite and yet has such a spiritual capacity. The paradox is reflected in her use of clay, her emphasis on and embellishment of the tactile surface of the figures, remind us "that man and his body bear the mark of congenital infirmity, like a stigmata, the seal of the impermanent and fleeting is branded on them"(56) However, Dionyse's sculptures go beyond the physical skin/clay wrapping to what it is like inside oneself. Another sculptor, Anthony Gormley, who also makes figures has expressed this desire to explore the inner nature of man.

"I am trying to deal with what it feels like to look out and see, what it feels like to be cold and frightened, what it feels like to be absolutely quiet and just aware of the passage of air around your body."(57).

Dionyse creates hollow clay vessels which draw you inside them through cracks and holes into the empty space within. Her work is concerned with what it is like to live inside a fragile skin, to feel vulnerable and threatened, to be aware of illness and death. In Greek tragedy, the onlooker must come to face grief, pain and death, acknowledge it and yet transcend it, the basic message is



that out of death and destruction comes rebirth and a reaffirmation of the will to life. Dionyse's sculptures achieve a similar effect, she somehow takes what is depressing and destructive and transmutes it into something healing and joyful. Even if we do not share in her optimistic belief in the survival of the spirit after death, her "eternal cycle of humanity"(58), her work can still provide us with a silent contemplative space. Her figures and heads with their natural clay surfaces remind use of our connection with nature and the earth. They also, through their power to evoke memories and images of the past, link us to previous generations, to their experiences of war, hardship, disease and to their will to struggle and overcome their wounds and difficulties. Carmen Dionyse's sculptures with their intensely ceramic quality and their tangible sense of history, function as esoteric monuments to the survival of the human spirit.



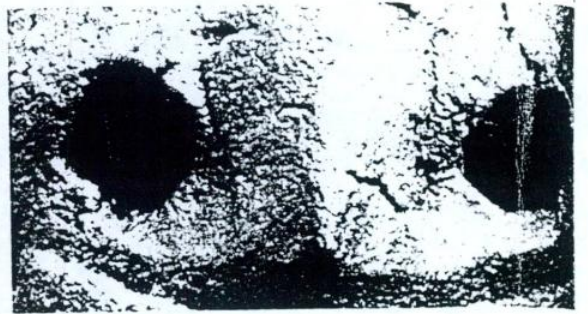
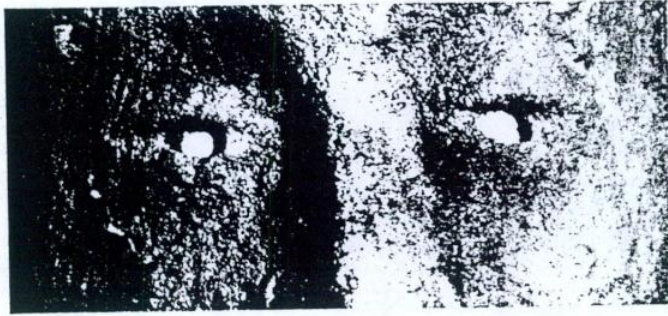
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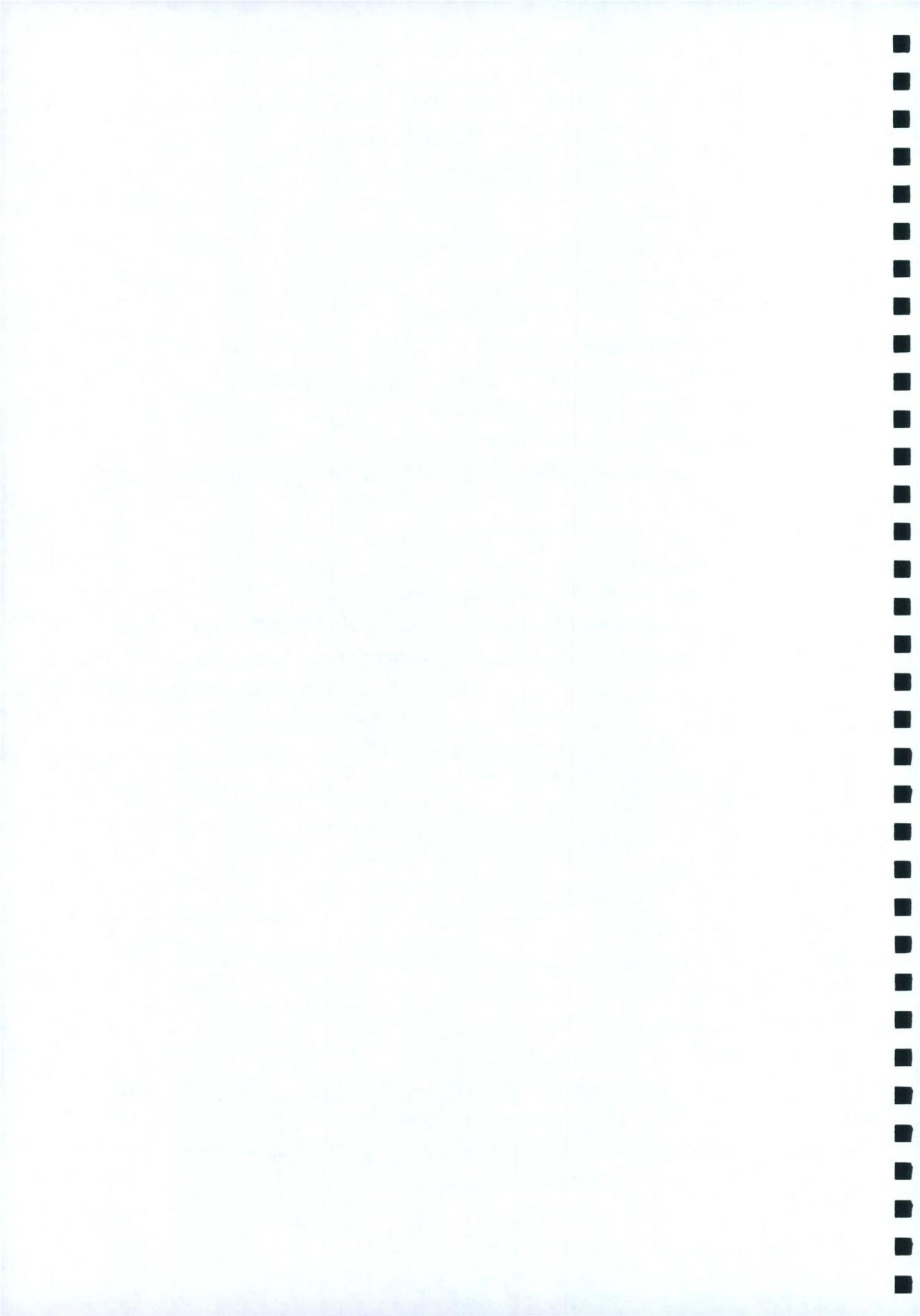
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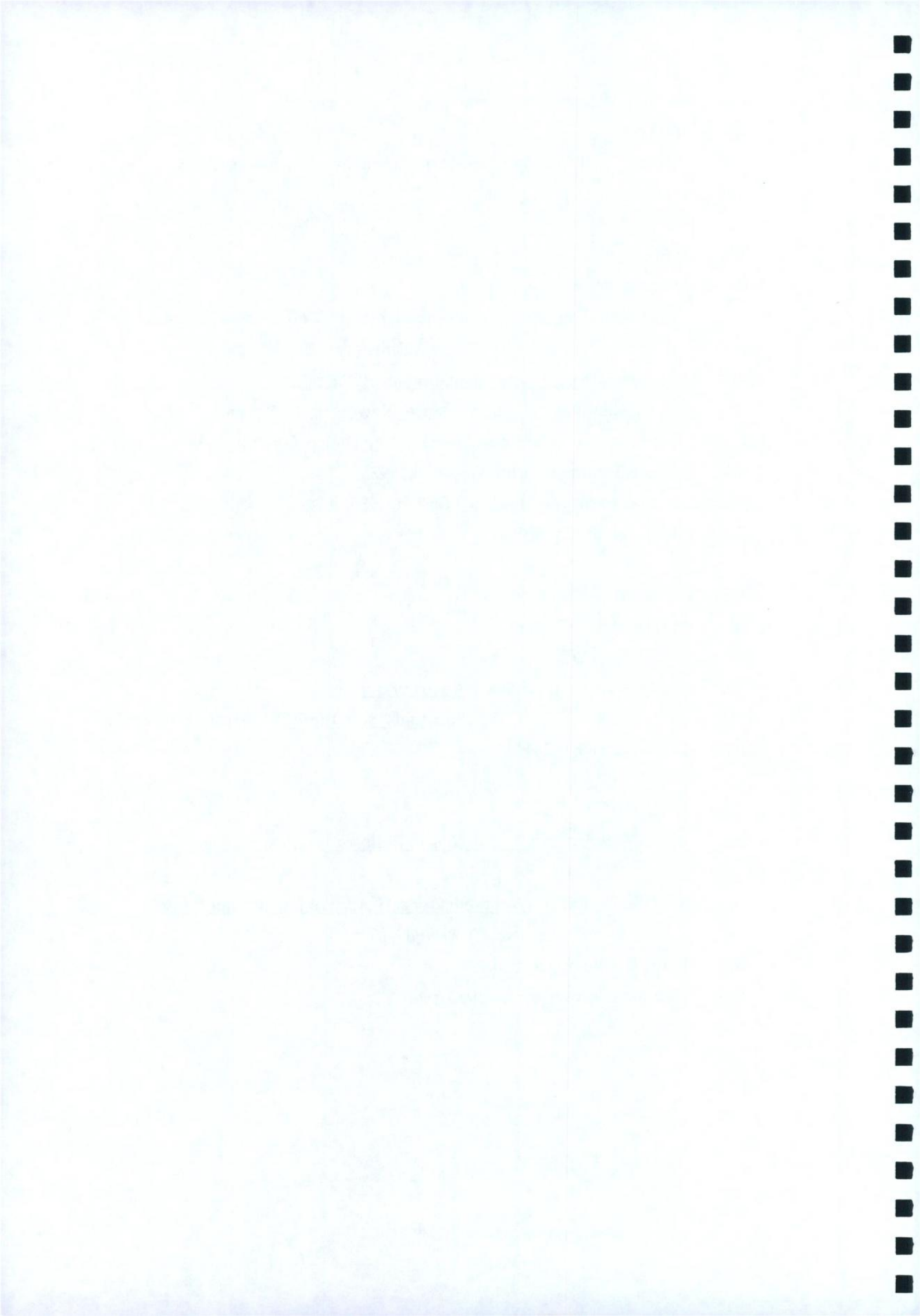
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Appendices

Carmen Dionyse, ceramic sculptor.
Member of the International Academy of Ceramics (I.A.C.)

Biographical Notes

Born 19 March 1921, Ghent, Belgium.
Address: Duihuisstraat 126, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, tel 32.91.211.077

Training

Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten (Royal Academy of Fine Arts), Ghent.
1938 - 1946: drawing, painting, sketching, etching and applied arts.
1955 - 1958: ceramics (First Class Honours).

Teaching posts

1966 - 1969: Hoger Instituut voor Paramedische Beroepen (course of ergotherapy) Ghent.
1968 - 1984: Hoger Instituut voor Kunstonderwijs (Art College), Hasselt.
1969 - 1984: Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten (Royal Academy of Fine Arts), Ghent.

International Symposiums

1964: Bechyn%, Czechoslovakia
1975: Gatlinburg (Tennessee), USA
1988: Canberra, Australia

Visiting lectureships, workshops

1969: Bechyn%, Czechoslovakia
1974: Lawrence (Kansas), USA
1975: Gatlinburg (Tennessee), USA
1979: Aix-en-Provence, France. Heusden, The Netherlands
1980: Eerbeek, The Netherlands
1982: Groningen, The Netherlands
1987: Montreal, Canada
1988: Canberra and Sydney, Australia

Prizes, awards, honors

1957: Prize for animal figures, Ghent, Belgium
1958: Expo 58 Grand Prize, Brussels, Belgium
1962: Gold Medal (I.A.C.), Prague, Czechoslovakia
1962: Knight in the Order of Leopold II, Belgium
1965: Ravenna Prize, Faenza, Italy
1967: Member of the International Academy of Ceramics, Geneva, Switzerland
1973: Ceramic Art of the World, First Prize, Calgary, Canada
1981: Officer of the Order of Leopold II, Belgium
1981: Albertus Paul Kammer Award, Mönchen-Gladbach, Germany
1984: Maestra Invita, Faenza, Italy
1984: Career Award of the Flemish Community
1988: Officer of the Order of the Crown, Belgium

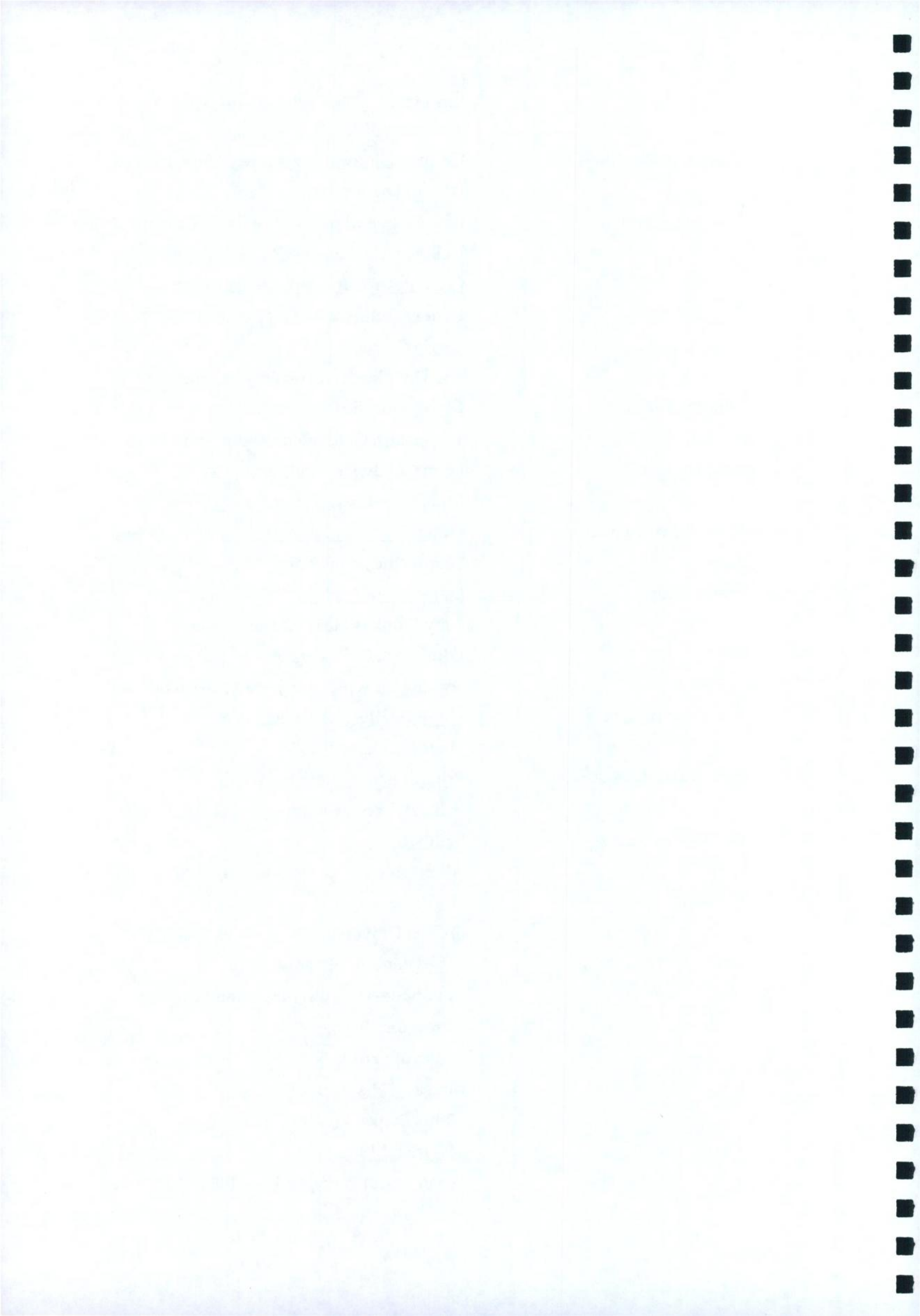


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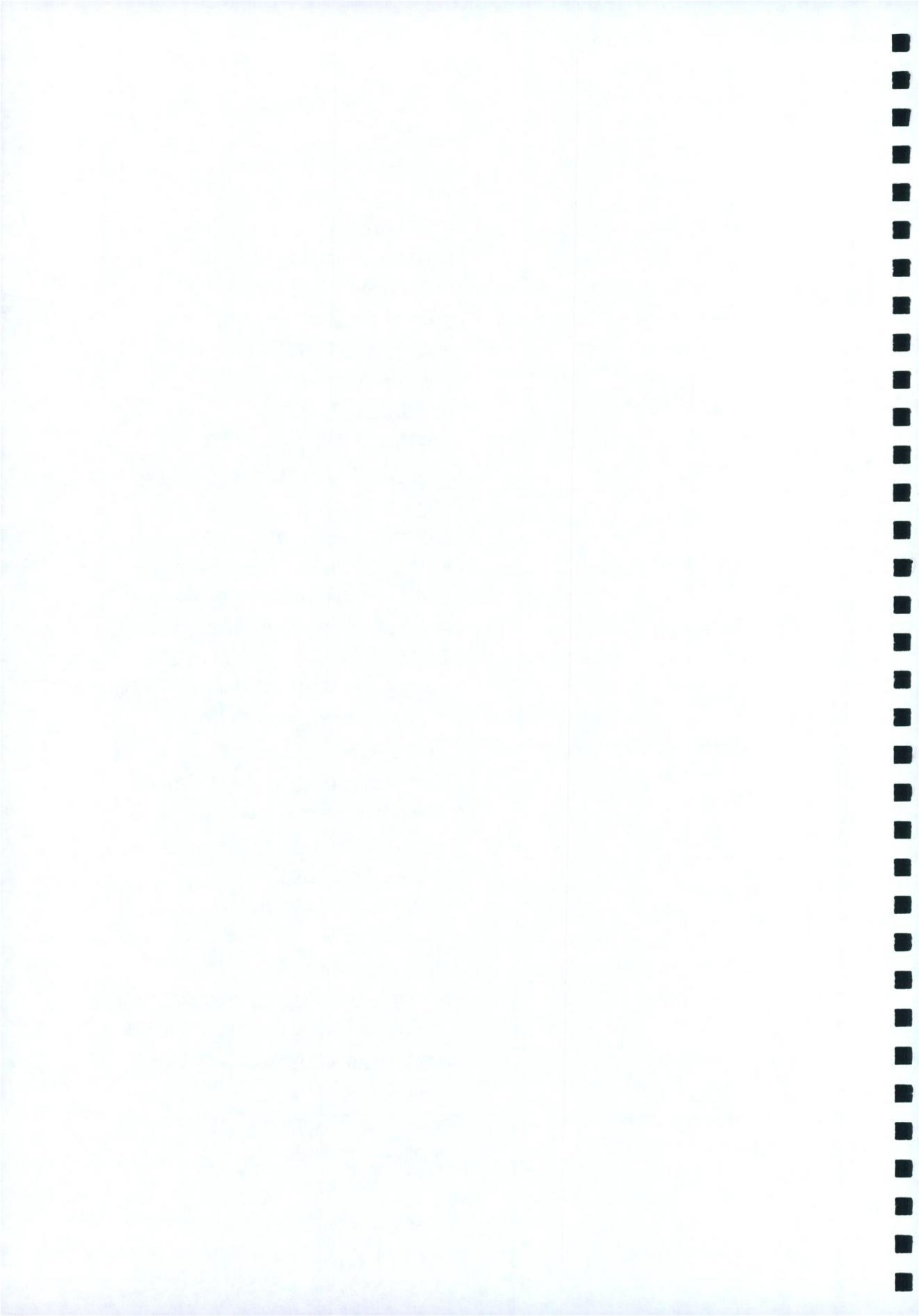
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