POST WAR AMERICAN

STUDIO CERAMICS

1950 - 1980

ANDREW BOWEN

History of Art and Design
N.C.A.D. Dublin

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Figure 1. Woodfired Plate 1980's
Peter Voulkos

"Pots and all other artefacts serve the mind as well as the body. They are born of a marriage between use and beauty. They are not just art for art's sake, so much as art for life's sake.

Whether less or more conscious they are extensions of people striving to make human products with as much wholeness and naturalness as a sea-shell or the wing of a butterfly. If human beings do not make peace with themselves as part of the whole of nature, how can they expect maturity either in themselves or in their pots."

Bernard Leach[1]

INTRODUCTION

Pottery as a distinct descriptive term today has become blurred. No longer can we hear the word pottery and confidently conjure up an accurate image. Pottery is vessel, sculpture vessel, or essentially anything made of clay. Potters now refer to themselves as ceramists, clay workers, and ceramic sculptors as well as potters.

At present, all styles and movements, whether that particular discipline is painting, architecture, sculpture or pottery, are inter-linked, sometimes even inseparable. Both thought processes, and techniques involve an integration of ideas. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists of world importance such as Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso explored the potential of ceramics as a vehicle for personal expression. The works of these artists and many others such as Miró, Chagall and Arp and later the Abstract Expressionists and pop artists, can be seen as influential in the developments of trends which have influenced the work of many individual potters, and sometimes entire cultures. Contemporary craft pottery to-day owes much of its current practice and theory to two men, Bernard Leach and Peter Voulkos. This is not to say that they were necessarily the best or that they were the only innovators or even the most original potters of their respective generations, but both possessed great personal confidence and their ability to extend the boundaries of accepted sensibilities should not be disputed.

Certainly Leach (1887-1979) was one of the most important figures in hand made pottery in the 1920-1950 period. His impact was felt in Germany, France, Denmark and the U.S.A. as well as his native Britain. Leach was born in Hong Kong, lived in Japan for a number of years and travelled to England for his education.

He was in his early twenties when he returned to Japan to teach. It was while attending a Japanese tea party that he encountered "Raku" pottery for the first time; the experience was to change his life. He became a potter, and was taught by the Japanese master potter, Kenzan. Leach returned to England in 1920 after many years

training in the techniques of the Japanese traditions, with his Japanese friend and assistant, Shoji Hamada. Their intention was to open a studio pottery which would appeal to local people, such as he had experienced in Japan.

During the late 1940's and early 1950's in the United States, painting was at the vanguard of the arts. In particular, Abstract Expressionism was beginning to achieve respect and recognition from mainstream institutions and influential bodies. Jackson Pollock was one of the early initiators of the style, which drew interestingly on the Zen Buddhist tenet of personal enlightenment achieved through spontaneous impulse. The notion of art as performance was born. In ceramics Peter Voulkos was a rising star in the U.S. His appointment in 1954 to head the graduate programme at the Los Angeles County Art Institute had far reaching consequences.

Voulkos was given a free hand to establish and build the institute's programme from scratch. He insisted that the ceramics department should be kept open twenty four hours a day, creating an innovative environment for potters who were encouraged to take chances and to explore unchartered territory. The first of his innovative students was Paul Soldner, returning to college to complete an M.A. Approaching his mid thirties, Soldner was interested in becoming a traditional, functional potter and living in a rural setting. Voulkos was to change his views and visions forever.

Standards which had been adhered to for decades were being questioned by an empowered youth culture of the 1950's in the U.S. For the first time, this became a major influence in society. The ceramic art that was to spearhead this Americanization was not in any sense traditional, the key was innovation and more innovation. The Art World took notice of these renegades. Soldner made massive thrown, stacked shapes and later, in the 1960's, started what became known as the "American Raku Movement" in clay, while Peter Voulkos began exploring an entirely new direction using Abstract Expressionism in clay. Voulkos's ceramic art explored with vigour torn shapes and freely thrown non-functional forms with glazed splashed on the surface.

In order to improve my knowledge and understanding of American Studio Ceramics in the post war years, I have chosen a number of key figures of this century involved in the Americanized "revolution" in clay, in particular Paul Soldner and Peter Voulkos.

The studio ceramists that I have chosen from this post-war period of 1950-1980 have absorbed different cultures and different traditions in an effort to advance their studio work. I hope to show the significant contribution that these potter artists have made in the latter half of the twentieth century, discuss their styles, techniques, innovations and work in Chapters two and three.

Bernard Leach absorbed the traditions and cultures of the East and was quite willing to share his understandings with the American West, to which he travelled in the early 1950's with his message from Eastern culture. In Chapter one I intend to explore the travels and work of Bernard Leach and the influential part he played in post-war American ceramics in relation to Paul Soldner and Peter Voulkos.

"A potter should start with an intuitive concept, he thinks of a combination of shape, pattern and colour which will answer a given need of utility and beauty at one and the same time. God knows from what source the mental image springs. He can analyse that later if necessary. He brings love and experience, knowledge of material and technique into play as shadow following light, intellect supporting intuition and so carries the image into actuality."

Bernard Leach[2]

CHAPTER 1

Bernard Leach was not the only pioneer and did not single-handed rescue craft pottery from oblivion or reinvent the tradition. But he was able to formulate a philosophy justifying what he did, and it was so persuasive, so rich in its appeal to puritan aesthetics, that it captured the craft pottery movement's imagination. One publication did the trick, A Potter's Book published in 1940.

Born in 1887 in Hong Kong, he travelled to England to study art at the Slade School in London. Stirred by the writings of Lafcadio Hearne (of Irish descent), he left England once again to travel to Korea, China and Japan.

Bernard Leach was above all an artist who became a potter. Leach had become fascinated by the Far East, in particular Japan, where he spent over ten years studying traditional Japanese and Chinese pottery. Leach recognised a great beauty and simplicity in the life style of the people, and admired above all their ability to produce traditional high quality pottery of great charm.

It was while in Japan in 1911 that he was invited to a Japanese tea party and introduced to pottery for the first time. As part of the tea drinking ritual, he painted on tea cups that were being prepared for a "Raku" firing. These wares were traditionally associated with the tea ceremony which played such a vital part in Japanese art.

The choice of simple pieces of pottery for the ritual of tea drinking was much to Leach's liking, and from this time onward he set about learning the potter's art from his Japanese teacher, Kenzan (Fig 2 and Fig 3). In 1920 Leach returned to England from Japan to set up a studio pottery at St. Ives in Cornwall, near to the local materials he needed for his work. With him was the Japanese potter and his friend, Shoji Hamada.

It was Leach's writing, in 1940, of A Potter's Book that propelled him to his position of influential authority on the principles and ideals of craft pottery. The book

Figure 2. Raku tea bowls 1920. Kenzan master-potter.

Figure 3. Raku Tea Bowl 1920. Kenzan master-potter.

begins with an opening essay called "Toward a Standard", in which the following judgement is typical:

> "The upshot of the argument is that a pot in order to be good, should be a genuine expression of life. It implies sincerity on the part of the potter and truth in the conception and execution of the work".[3]

The rest of the book is full of prescriptive recipes for making good honest pots, and lays down an approach which later endorsed several generations of plain, crinkly brown pots wearing their humility on their surface.

In 1950 Leach was invited by Robert Richman, the director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Washington DC, to visit the United States. Richman had organised a series of seminars for potters at various centres. Leach's work along with Hamada's and a few others', travelled at this time throughout the United States in museum exhibitions. He writes an interesting observation in his book Beyond East and West in 1979:

> "When I came to teaching in Washington I did not find a standard by which their contemporary pots rang true and beautiful. Nor did I discover it at a chief centre of pottery, teaching in the United States, Alfred University in upstate New York. That a path finder will emerge as have poets, prose writers and some artists is my greatest wish not only for America but for all the newer countries such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. So far the only pots which express the land and the people have been native pots "born" not "made"".[4]

Leach saw his own life as a courier bringing the old news of the East to the West and the new news of the West to the East. (Fig 4 Fig 5)

Figure 4. Vase, Porcelain, decorated with oriental scenes in blue on a white ground made in Tokyo 1912 B. Leach.

Figure 5. Part of Coffee Set. Coffee pot, sugar bowl and five cups and saucers, stoneware, with celdon glaze. Made in Tokyo 1919 B. Leach.

> "The issue is urgent and will determine the directions of our endeavours not in arts alone, but in the very nature of work itself. America stands at the cross-roads of Eastern and Western thinking. The two world wars have caused New York to take the place of London".[5]

Leach sought to make sense out of man's striving in a world civilization marked by industrialism, materialism and individualism. Coventry had been bombed, Dresden gutted, and Hiroshima grotesquely mutilated. The trauma of perceiving a waste land drove Leach to the pursuit of happiness in faith. Ironically, it was not to be Zen Buddhism but the Bahai Faith, a religious eclecticism of nineteenth century Persian-Moslem origin which allowed him to see the significance of true art and true crafts as worship, the absence of prejudice, superstition, priests, great wealth and great poverty. For Leach, in the lowly craft of the potter, the high art of consciousness could be experienced. (Fig 6). Exploring art and philosophy with his pottery decoration.

Leach was to travel in 1952 to the United States for the World Craft Conference in Dartington, New York; SoetsuYanagi and Hamada were to accompany him. Yanagi was professor of Japanese Art/Craft traditions in Japan and teacher of philosophy in the Buddhist tradition. This conference was the first of its kind and was attended by craft and art critics such as Muriel Rose and George Wingfield Digby. The three men (Yanagi, Hamada, Leach) were to travel across the United States lecturing, demonstrating and discussing ceramics and Zen..

The philosophy and Buddhist aesthetic expanded by Yanagi was demonstrated by Shoji Hamada without many words. Here was the silent voice of the oriental telling the West with fresh clarity, the virtue of people working in harmony with nature, as it should be done, with heart, head and hands. During this American tour they travelled to North Carolina to the progressive Black Mountain College. They were also to visit the Archie Bray Foundation at Helena, Montana where they met Peter Voulkos, then a young ceramist. (Fig 7).

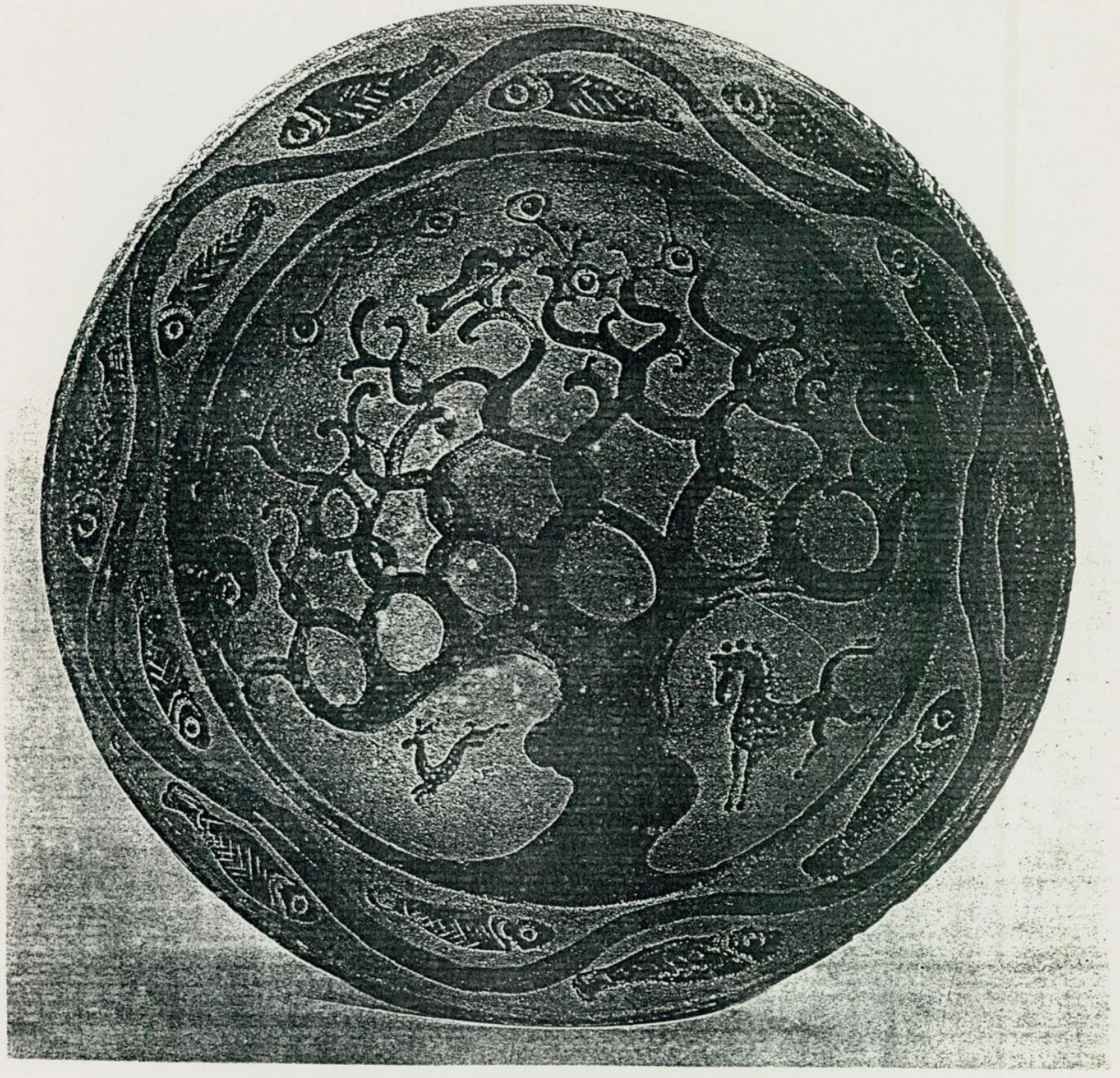

Figure 6. Lead glazed earthenware. A shallow bowl decorated with a tree of life pattern at the centre, and a border of fish in brown slip St. Ives 1923.

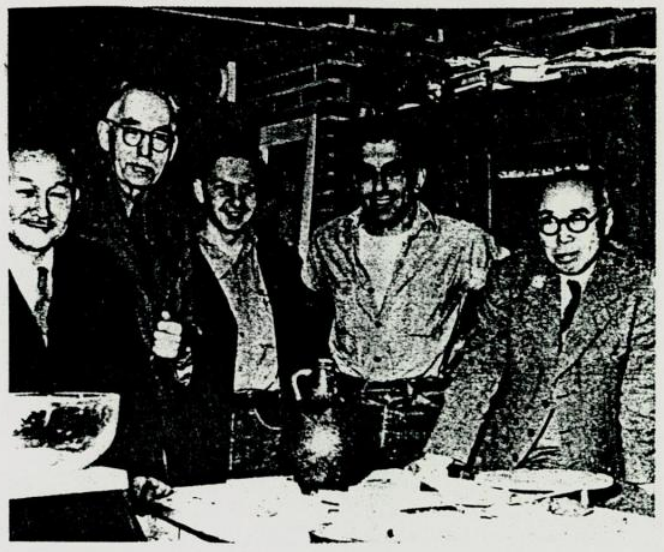

Figure 7.
From left Professor Yanagi, Bernard Leach, Rudy Autio, Peter Voulkos and Shoji Hamada. Leach's visit in 1952 to Archie Bray Foundation where Voulkos and Autio had opened a ceramic workshop. The visit helped open the minds of the young ceramists. Within a short time Voulkos's ceramics was to change completely taking on a new direction and dimension.

Leach observed :

> "To these young Americans tradition was not virtue, simple fuddy duddy habit".[6]

For some, Leach was evidence that talent qualified the success of the best technically trained ceramist. Further, the crafts movement could also appropriate Leach as a patron, for he pointed potters to the persistent folk and communal life in the indigenous arts. He could comfort and give solace to the lonely studio potter.

But not all agreed. Marguerite Wildenhain, then a lecturer in ceramics at Black Mountain College, wrote in the mid 1950's of Leach :

> "I have fought a tough battle against Leach and I did not lose it either. The more I see of him the more I dislike his approach and his narrowness of mind. His arrogance is extreme. Just imagine him saying that out-side Japanese and Chinese pots, and his own, and perhaps a few of his students, there were no good pots in the world! I also feel that his way of teaching is destructive and unimaginative. It shows a man who has never had anything in his mind except what he has been taught".[7]

Eventually, humility as a style in pottery went out of fashion, because it was a style that cut potters off from the modern world and its art. Essentially, A Potter's Book tries to repudiate the effect that modern art and design had on the crafts and design throughout the 1920's and 30's. Leach did not receive outstanding critical success with his own ceramic work. However, the important question is: was Bernard Leach an important influence in America who helped shape the direction of studio pottery. There can only be one answer, yes. With the assistance of Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi, the influence and challenge of Bernard Leach was indeed far-reaching.

"Americans have the disadvantage of having many roots but no taproot, which is almost the equivalent of no root at all. Hence American pots follow many undigested fashions and, in my opinion, no American potter has yet emerged really integrated and standing on his own feet".

B. Leach[8]

The drama of Leach's presence on the American campus was the drama of oriental folk motif pottery, juxtaposed with western industrial ceramic design.

One can identify certain national characteristics in ceramic production and design. For example, Holland owes little to a craft ideology and much more to design, whereas in Britain, pottery, especially functional pottery, is frequently nostalgic or at the very least borrowing from the past. American potters, irrespective of whether they are making art or tea pots, are frequently inclined to make it "big", and to make it in a rough but very sound way. Obviously these are generalizations but they should not be surprising since, as in applied art pottery is bound to reflect a culture's dominant aesthetic to some extent.

Leach gave some extremely successful lectures in the U.S.A. in 1950 and 1953 though by no means all those who heard him were converted. William Daley, the ceramist, recalled an irritation created by Leach telling Americans that they needed a taproot for their pottery and suggesting they "look to the past". As Daley says "The American potter's taproot was in the present, in contemporary painting and sculpture".[9]

The U.S.A. has become vastly important to the development of modern pottery. It gained from European emigrants and their influences and also by the philosophy of Zen. The American-based ceramics/historian Garth Clark describes the position in the early 1950's as follows :

> "The dominant influence was the impact of Japanese pottery and the Zen Buddhist theories that accompanied it. On the West Coast in particular the artists were sympathetic to oriental philosophy and a popular interest in Zen was growing under the leadership of scholars such as Alan Watts in San Francisco".[10]

The Zen concept of beauty appealed to the American potter for a number of reasons. In the Raku wares of the tea ceremony, they saw new forms of expression in the subtle asymmetry, the simplicity, and often random abstract decoration. (Fig 8 Fig 9). According to Clark, the first contact that American potters had with oriental philosophy on a wide scale was through Bernard Leach's A Potter's Book published in 1940. When visiting the United States in the 1950's Leach demonstrated to the American potters how work on a potter's wheel could become more expressive by slightly altering the wheel-thrown shape. The potters themselves avoided imposing mechanical precision on a living form. It was an oriental approach to clay in keeping with the uninhibited ceramics of Picasso and Miro and one which Leach had absorbed from many years living and working in Japan.

As a result of meeting Leach on his 1950 and 1952 tours of colleges in America, many ceramists spent time as apprentices at Leach's St. Ives pottery in England. Two of them in particular, Warren and Alix MacKenzie, graduates of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, began working with Leach in the early 1950's. Returning after two years to Minnesota, they set up a pottery work shop studio, moulded on the St. Ives principles of workshop practice, which became very successful for its functional ceramics. The approach to pottery taken by the McKenzies was an obvious reflection of Leach's influences.

Although Leach demonstrated the technique of Japanese "Raku" firing during his tours of America, it was not until the early 1960's that this evolved as a wider exploratory ceramic concept through the work of Paul Soldner.

Warren Gilbenrson is regarded as being the first potter to work in Raku in this century in the United States. He had lived and worked in Japan between 1930-40 and, upon returning to the States, held a number of exhibitions in the Art Institute of Chicago. Hal Riegger, another early pioneer in the American Raku movement, began with and maintained, a steadfast commitment to a more traditional and spiritual involvement with Raku.

Figure 8. Square Raku food dish made at Sano by Kenzanthe master potter 1923. Teacher to Bernard Leach.

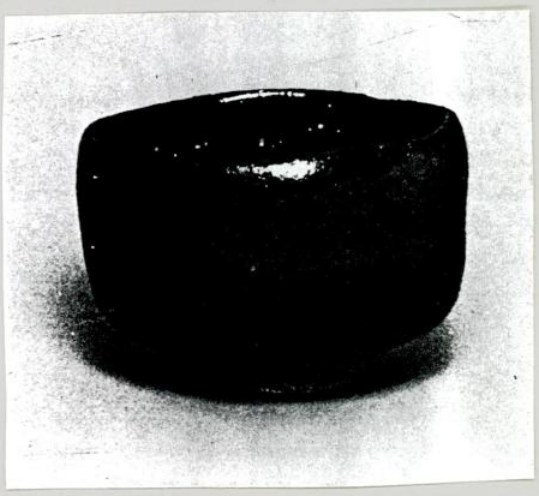

Figure 9. 17th and 18th Japanese Raku tea bowl. Simple yet possessing great charm.

Riegger advocated the use of wood and coal-burning kilns, as well as making Raku ware using standard hand-building methods. It is probable that American Indians worked with low fire ceramic ware, as it was an accepted technique in what was then considered a primitive culture. But it was Paul Soldner who was to Americanise the whole technique which subsequently evolved into a new ceramic adventure.

Soldner began his Raku experiments around 1960 with only information gathered from Leach's A Potter's Book to guide him. Being somewhat bored and dissatisfied with the apparently bland nature of the colour developments in his pots, Soldner spontaneously put a piece of red hot ceramic Raku ware into some fallen leaves to cool, creating a reduction effect in the glaze. Thus was born our contemporary incarnation of the Raku process 'post firing reduction'*.

The story of Soldner's first Raku firings is now well known and has entered the annals of American ceramic history. In the words of Paul Soldner:

"I had read Bernard Leach's descriptions and was intrigued by the subtlety of the Raku tea bowls that Leach spoke of and what seemed to be an exciting way to fire pots. This interest coincided with several other events which contributed to my first attempts at Raku.

Firstly, I begun to exhaust my interest in the range of formal stoneware I had been making prior to 1960 and was looking around subconsciously for another direction. The other event was to demonstrate publicly some form of pottery entertainment. With only Leach's book as a guide I decided to try to make Raku".[11]

Raku had long been prized by Japanese tea masters because it is unpretentious but aesthetically pleasing and embodies the ideals of Zen Buddhism and 'Wabi'. In Japanese aesthetics 'Wabi' encompasses austerity, transcience, seclusion and tranquillity. The name Raku first appeared in 16th century Japan when it was first bestowed by the Emperor Hideyoshi upon the son of a Korean immigrant potter living

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*Reduction - an atmosphere which is starved of a full supply of oxygen.

in Kyoto. Roughly translated, it meant contentment and enjoyment, paying homage to the work of the Japanese potter, who had been chosen by the influential tea masters to produce ware of refined simplicity for the tea ceremony.

The importance of the Japanese tea ceremony, or the way of serving tea which embraces the philosophical and religious thinking behind the ritual, is difficult for non-Japanese to appreciate. However, from A.D. 1550-1850 it was by far the most important influence on Japanese culture, and even today its tenets are widely studied and highly regarded by many in Japan.

Over the past few hundred years the name 'Raku' has been passed down through successive generations. There are those who maintain that the only real Raku is that which is done through the traditional techniques in order to obtain spiritual harmony. But, for many, 'Raku' in the west is a creative pottery technique, with undeniable connections to a rich spiritual and cultural heritage.

Any discussion of the aesthetics of Raku must consider Zen and the Japanese tea ceremony. Its practice is designed to involve a uniform aesthetic response emanating from the strict preparation and drinking of tea. Knowledge of the tea ceremony offers us much in the way of knowledge and understanding of a culture very different from ours in the west. On the practical side of things, the porous clay body of Raku acts as insulation between the hot tea and the hand and produces a dull quiet sound when it comes in contact with utensils or the table top.

Paul Soldner, Hal Riegger and others were truly breaking creative ground. They had no experts to guide them and no one to answer their questions. Their experiments were simply carried out through trial and error and they tried to make their accidents work aesthetically. But it was Paul Soldner who managed to inspire the use of Raku in creative minds throughout American studio ceramic culture.

CHAPTER 2

"Its funny to say breaking rules because we never thought we were breaking rules, we just did not work with the rules. We used other criteria and tried everything. Painters didn't accept rules sculpture was not accepting rules. If it was OK for them why not for us ?"

Paul Soldner[12]

The post-war era saw the American economy booming and with it came a self-confidence in Art. Europe no longer provided the bench mark against which all art was to be judged. "Standards" which had been adhered to for decades, were being questioned by a newly empowered youth culture.

In ceramics, Peter Voulkos was a rising star in the southern states of America. Having won a series of prestigious awards for his ceramic vessels in Montana, he was invited in 1954 to head the graduate programme at the Los Angeles County Art Institute. Voulkos was given a free hand to establish and build the programme from scratch. A dynamic figure he insisted that the department should be kept open 24 hours a day, students were encouraged to take chances and to explore uncharted territory.

The first student with whom Voulkos was to come in contact was to be Paul Soldner. Paul Soldner, now thirty three years of age, had returned to college to sit an M.A. under the guidance of Peter Voulkos, whose work he admired.

Voulkos's teaching was not confined to the classroom. He considered the whole city an education. Students, teachers and anyone who wanted to join in, travelled to exhibitions and museums, to see new architecture or even to check out the latest jazz or pop bands. Voulkos, with a keen interest in Zen, maintained no rules, no absolutes, a philosophy that brought together John Mason, Ken Price, Malcom McClain, Billy Al Bergston and others - some of the most important American innovative ceramists in post-war America.

Although Soldner was part of this group that subscribed to Zen philosophy, he resisted applying Zen principles to his work at this time. Concentrating on thrown traditional forms unlike the other students he was not prepared to make asymmetrical pots or to look at pots in terms of the unexpected, the accidental and the spontaneous. Instead, Soldner began by producing wheel-thrown vases and pots, decorated with brush strokes or slabs of clay applied to the surface. (Fig 10).

In what became typical Soldner fashion, he worked his way through the collapse of many pots until the clay helped him to discover a successful alignment with the thrown

Figure 10. Wheel thrown stoneware, slip decoration. White matte textured glaze reduction firing cone 10.

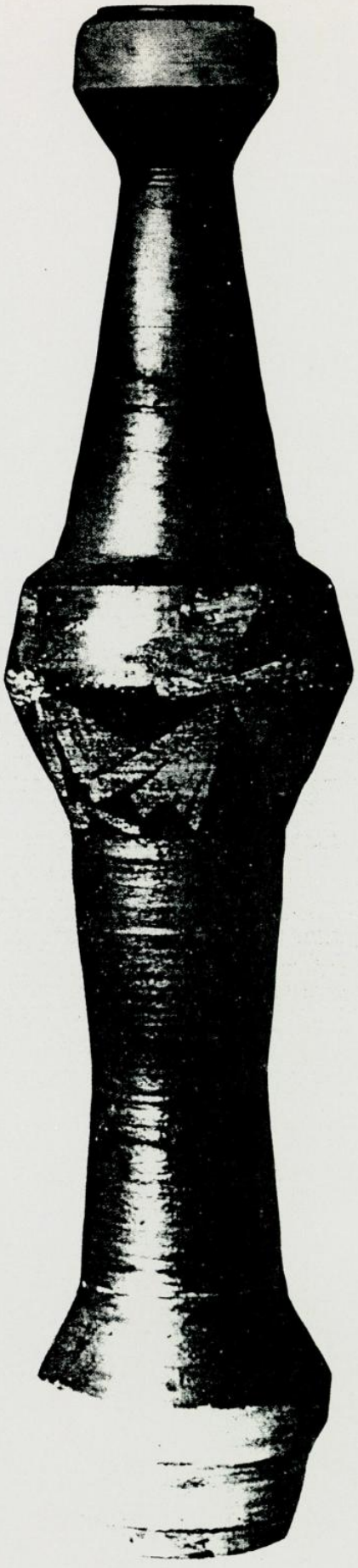

Figure 11. Wheel thrown stoneware extended technique. Iron and cobalt decoration, wax resist clear glaze reduction firing cone 10 1959.

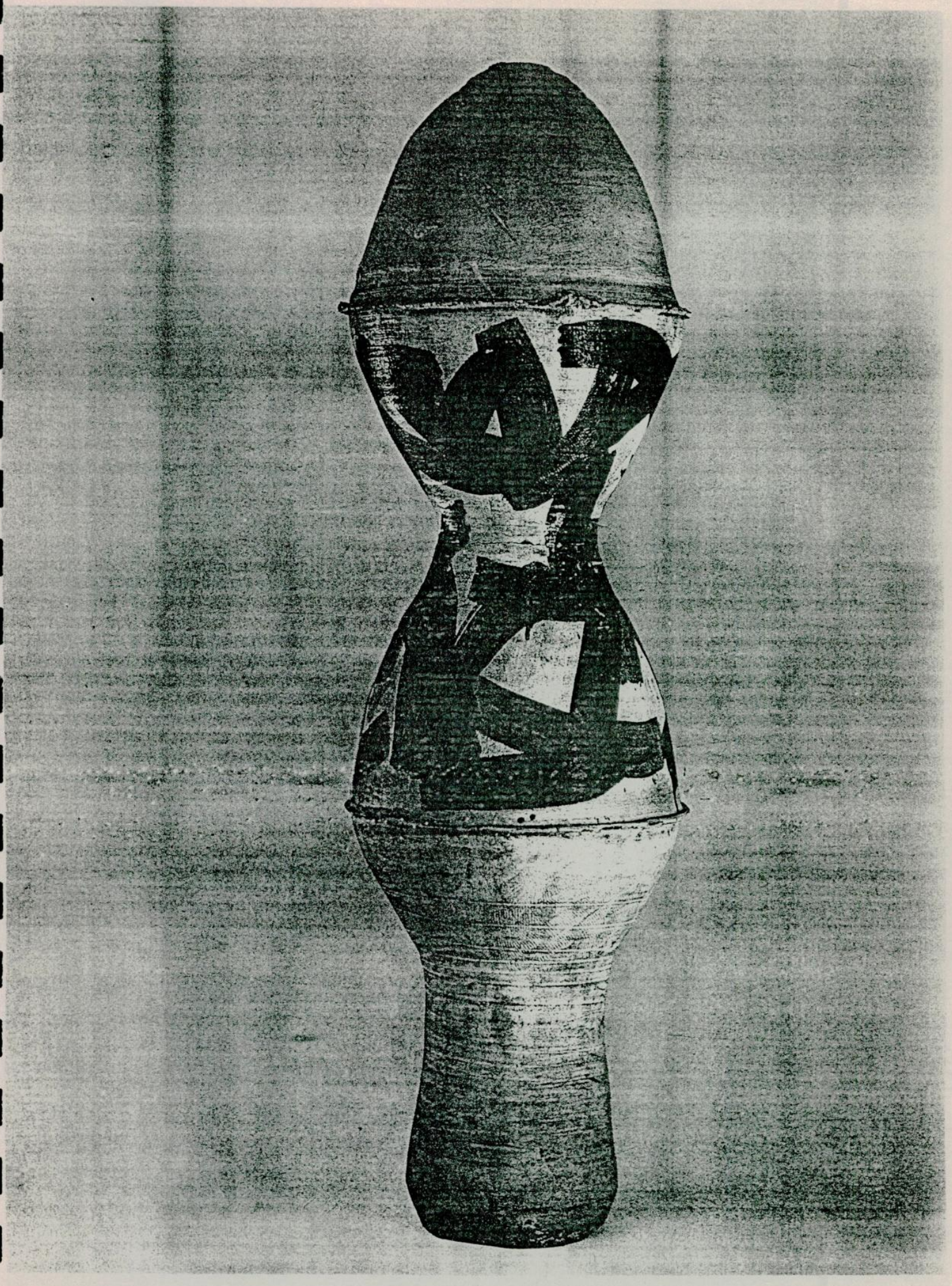

Figure 12. Wheel thrown stoneware extended technique. Polychrome slip and oxide decoration. Reduction firing. 1959.

forms. At the beginning of his professional work, Soldner's forms reflected traditional style. However, Soldner's inventively thrown four to six foot floor pots were achieved by being thrown in one piece, pulling the form higher and higher, and by adding a "dough nut" of clay to the rim of the vessel on the wheel, as needed, to continue to develop the piece. (Fig 11). As the pots grew taller and close to human height, he devised a special foot control while standing on a high stool. His primary interest in clay was to allow the material to reveal its character. His floor pots were so unconventional that in 1957 the Director of the Lowe Gallery in Florida refused to accept a Soldner pot for the Gallery collection, even though in the gallery's own competition the pot had been awarded the "Best of Show" award.

> "I find that the long scale put me in a field of exploration which is void of centuries of examples and without contemporary influences. Therefore all problems presenting themselves in this foreign form need to be solved by my own devices".
>
> Paul Soldner[13]

Soldner essentially took an aged technique and gave it a contemporary identity. The large pots produced at this stage were glazed by pouring slips and glazes over the entire surface in a loose, asymmetrical pattern.

This aided in breaking up the vertical thrust of these pots produced between 1956-59. It also provided contrast to the symmetrical character of the form. At other times Soldner decorated only one section of the thrown floor pots with calligraphic brushwork. (Fig. 12).

Though only a few potters followed this particular method of throwing, it did become popular to work with a number of forms thrown at the same time and then to assemble them, a method which Peter Voulkos was to use and perfect in the 1960's and '70's.

A conscious concern for monumental size was yet another development of sculptural attitudes towards pottery. Whereas previously most pots were not more than twenty four inches high, the late fifties and early sixties saw a dramatic increase in the scale of pots. The craft of ceramics as, Rose Slivka put it, "grasping for a new aesthetic", but divisions within its ranks and mixed reception of the non-functional forms indicated it might be some time before this emerged.

> "The experimental potters want containers to hold the improbable possibilities in a kind of reinterpretation of basic function. It is natural in a sense, that it should be so expressed in pottery with its already established influence of the Zen pottery of Japan and its suggesting of the crude and primitive, the imperfect, the anti-aesthetic, the spontaneous."
>
> Rose Slivka[14]

Soldner learned to follow his own instincts about the possibilities of clay. This self-confidence, combined with his inventive mind, prepared Soldner for making discoveries that would change the course of low-fired American contemporary ceramics.

It was only in 1960 that Soldner first attempted Raku. His respect for the organic qualities of clay profoundly influenced his work. Because most Americans were not prepared to accept what appeared to be an imperfect pot, it required courage for Soldner to work in this fashion. At the beginning of his professional work as a ceramist, Soldner's forms reflected traditional styles. When he began to explore Raku, shapes, generally labelled bottle, vase, or bowl, reflected only a fleeting connection with conventional forms when he submitted a number of Raku pieces to the 1964 National Ceramic Exhibition at the Everson Museum in Syracuse. He was to win first prize for one of the pieces. In a world focused on stoneware, this was a major

achievement for a low-fired ceramic piece and gave Soldner's new work the legitimacy it needed. (Fig. 13).

Raku ware differed radically from most ceramics produced in the late 1950's and early 1960's. At this period, the discerning American public was very comfortable with the sophisticated style derived from European ceramics.

To withstand a Raku firing, the clay had to be more resistant to temperature fluctuations but at the same time it was softer and more fragile. The ceramic vessels that were fired in this way were often relatively small, since each piece had to be removed from the red hot kiln with tongs. All Raku fired ware is fragile, porous and thus generally unsuitable for functional use. It is best thought of as decorative.

The genesis for Soldner's Raku experimentation occurred in 1960 at the Lively Arts Festival at Scribbs College, California. In preparation for the festival, Soldner decided to demonstrate Raku firing which he had read about in Leach's A Potters Book. Soldner expanded on Leach's minimal directions and built a small portable kiln in the college courtyard. Encouraged by the more attractive surface decoration produced in the *reducing atmosphere* of leaves, Soldner began detailed experiments after this first attempt. (Fig 14). [Vase '64 resist technique]. Although Bernard Leach was the seminal influence on Paul Soldner's exploration of Raku, it remained for Soldner to see the fresh potential in Raku, however, and to fire the imagination of ceramists nationally and internationally.

One aspect of Raku that particularly appealed to Soldner was the relationship between planning and accident. The potter might plan the shape of the pot but the firing and post-firing reduction ultimately determine surface texture and colour. Not bound by tradition, Soldner knew little of the appearance of Japanese Raku and so was free to invent methods whose results pleased him. (Fig 15).

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* Reducing atmosphere : Soldner is credited with the development of reduction Raku technique in America. A technique that reduces the oxygen in a glaze, forcing enhanced colouring on the vessel.

Figure 13. Wheel thrown Raku clay iron and copper oxide low temperature clear crackle and lustre glaze post firing smoke cone 08 1964.

Figure 14. Wheel thrown and altered Raku clay white slip iron oxide and copper oxide clear glaze post fire smoking. 1964.

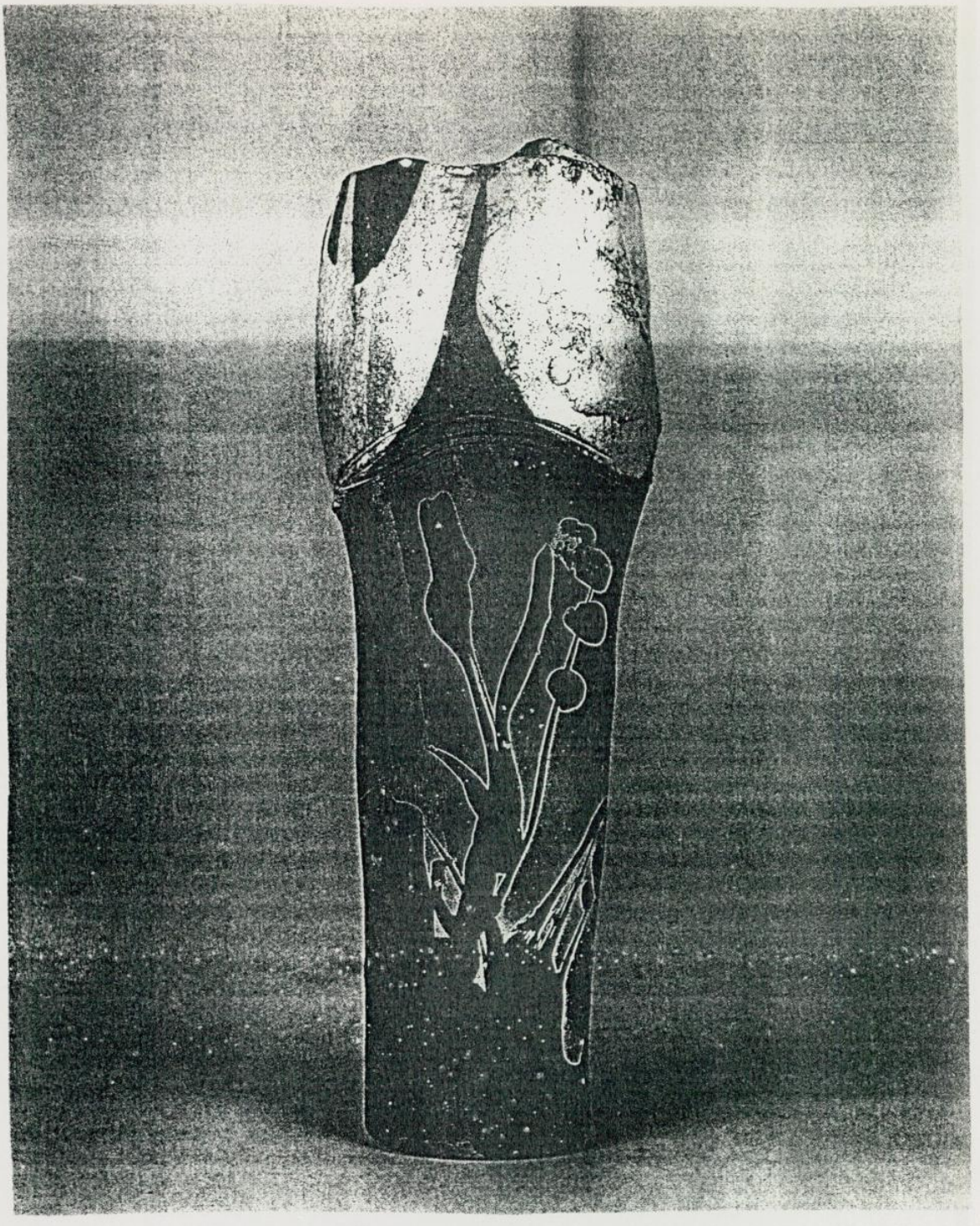

Figure 15. Vessel 1974.
Wheel thrown and altered Raku clay white slip iron and copper oxide clear glaze post fire smoking.

In the early 1950's, Peter Voulkos had questioned the vessel's relationship to function. But it was the impact of Voulkos's transformation of form and surfaces in the late fifties and both the artists and the cultural upheaval of the sixties that encouraged the rise of Raku. The American Zen attitude of "going with the flow", a new interest in low fired ware and Soldner's post-firing use of different reducing agents contributed in some measure to its popularity.

Soldner's exposure to Asian art, which he remained interested in, and the Zen concept now made sense. He was prepared to accept conditions he could not completely control. Raku necessitated a close relationship between vessel and potter and in order to capitalise on unexpected results, it demanded flexibility. Elements of the process continually evolved as Soldner tried different post-firing materials: sawdust, news-paper, straw, rope, some of which left interesting imprints. (Fig 16).

Raku suited an expressive use of clay that was part of the times. Indeed, because the potter had more control over the fire and was able to judge the atmosphere in the kiln, each piece could be fired differently. Accidental effects and a spontaneous approach to decoration were encouraged by the process which at the same time also permitted Soldner new areas for control. He did not find traditional glazes, which he had essentially discarded earlier, appropriate for this new ware; instead he brushed on stains and oxides that interacted with gestural incised lines and patterns, produced when the pot was placed in post-firing containers for smoking.

The process and results were in keeping with the expressionist aesthetic that continues in Soldner's work to the present day. Quickly cooling a thickly applied glaze produced a wild crazing (cracks). Placing the pot in a container filled with sawdust allowed the smoke to penetrate, making the crackled lines highly visible. Applying a white slip on a pot and smoking it under different conditions changed the colour to jet black.

Figure 16. Bottle 1974.
Wheel thrown and altered Raku, clay white slip iron and copper oxide brushwork unglazed post fire smoking.

He explains :

> "I like to discover what is happening with the clay. I'm more comfortable not knowing what to expect than with knowing. To allow yourself to be playful, to be at ease with the asymmetrical is difficult but necessary. Complete control is in conflict with the creative act and with personal inventive decision making".[15]

Raku offered western cultures new insights into new concepts of beauty. Whereas we have long admired balanced symmetry, unblemished surfaces and rigid, machine-like control as examples of perfect craftsmanship, Raku, in contrast, places emphasis upon the beauty of the accidental and spontaneous, upon asymmetry, and upon value and appreciation of organic naturalness.

Raku firing extends creative involvement as far into the process as we care to go. The maker's eyes are always on the piece - judging, determining, deciding and altering, ending the firing when they see fit, without the aid of cones or other temperature - measuring devices. In addition, the rules on conventions in Raku change as the maker's expectations change.

Indeed, the spontaneity and speed with which Raku could be made drastically influenced form and opened the way to create shapes which capitalised on a new freedom - freedom from the rigid control of an older, utilitarian, high temperature tradition.

Although the production of Japanese tea bowls was initially of interest to some, the tea ceremony itself was never part of American Raku. Consequently, Americans making Raku could be more experimental than their Japanese counterparts, who continued to make Raku in a ritualistic way.

Paul Soldner's work with the Raku process permanently altered his concept of form. No longer concerned about western principles of classic vessel proportion, he

gently modified wheel-thrown shapes by paddling* and by adding an inverted saucer or doughnut of clay as a neck. This was the same technique he used to develop his "floor" pots. (Fig. 17).

Uneven surfaces, like the flattened coil of clay defining the neck some of Soldner's vessels, were heightened by the Raku process. Incised lines, splashed or brushed with oxides and stains and combined with a minimal use of glazes, animated his vessels. (as in Fig. 17).

When creating plaques, Soldner worked on the floor, flooding, creasing and texturing slabs of clay with any available defects, such as wood, burlap, tennis shoes. Dissatisfied with his own drawings of figures he made stencils from familiar images - pictures in magazines, images of Twiggy, the Beatles or the Marlboro Man linked his Abstract Expressionist plaques to Pop Art. (Fig 18). These figures imparted a sense of movement and linked his work to art history especially to Matisse's supple cut-outs of dancers. Soldner often combined the Abstract Expressionist mode with familiar images that were humorous and light hearted, with other figures whose purpose was social and political commentary. (Fig. 19)

Such experimentation with form, fire and post-firings inevitably produced some puzzling marks. What caused these intriguing shadows became clear only after years of testing. What Soldner developed, he labelled Raku. But, as he discovered on a trip to Japan in 1971, his low-fired process had but a faint resemblance technically to original sixteenth century Japanese Raku.

While both procedures shared the same philosophy of highlighting the character of the clay body, Soldner's Raku displayed more kinship to contemporary American

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* Paddling - a technique of using a stick or wooden spoon to develop the throwing forms.

Figure 17. Vessel 1975.
Wheel thrown, altered Raku clay white and copper slip stenciled figures clear glaze post fire smoking.

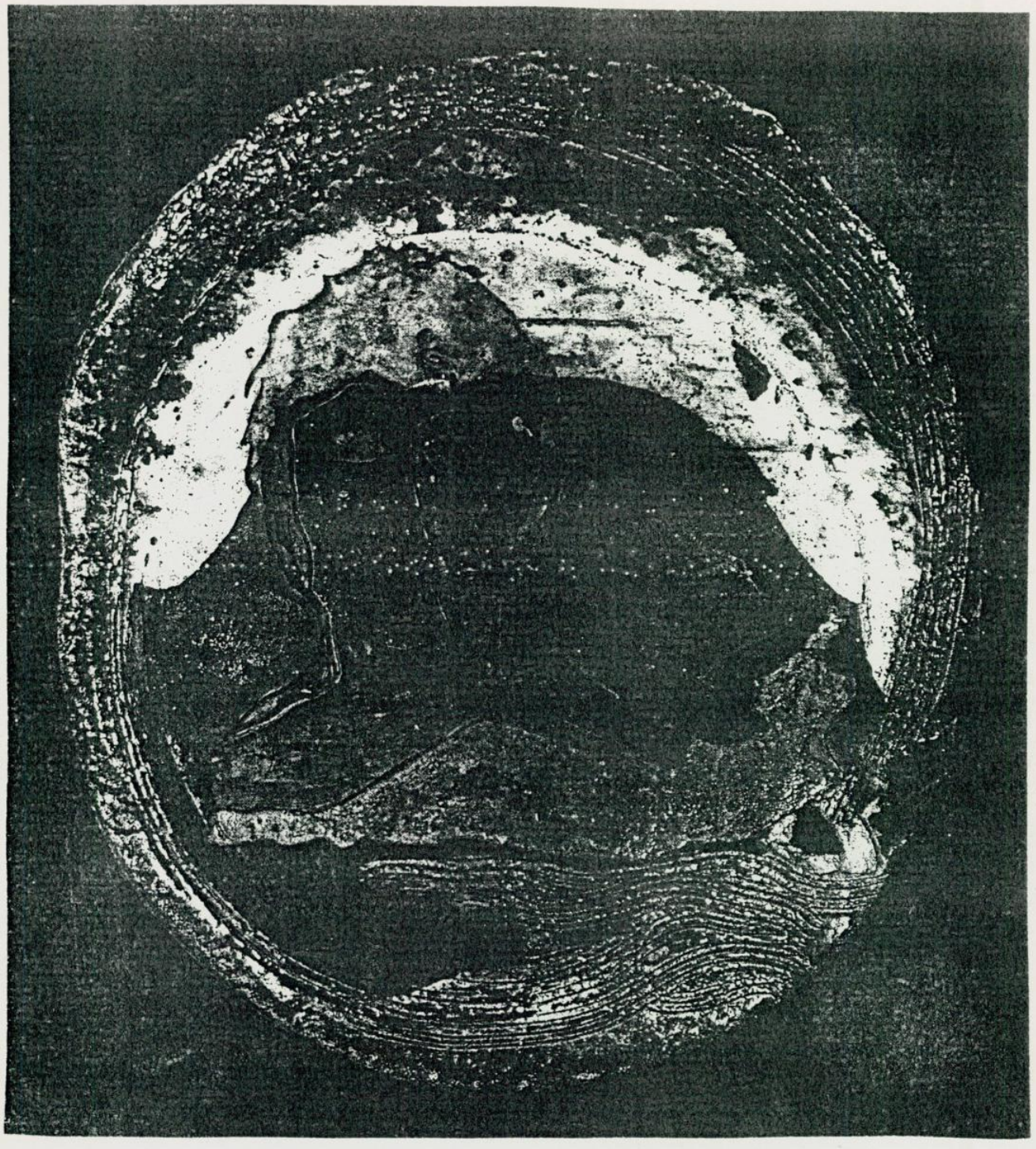

Figure 18. John Lennon hand built Raku clay white and copper slip cobalt oxide clear glaze post fire smoking 1969.

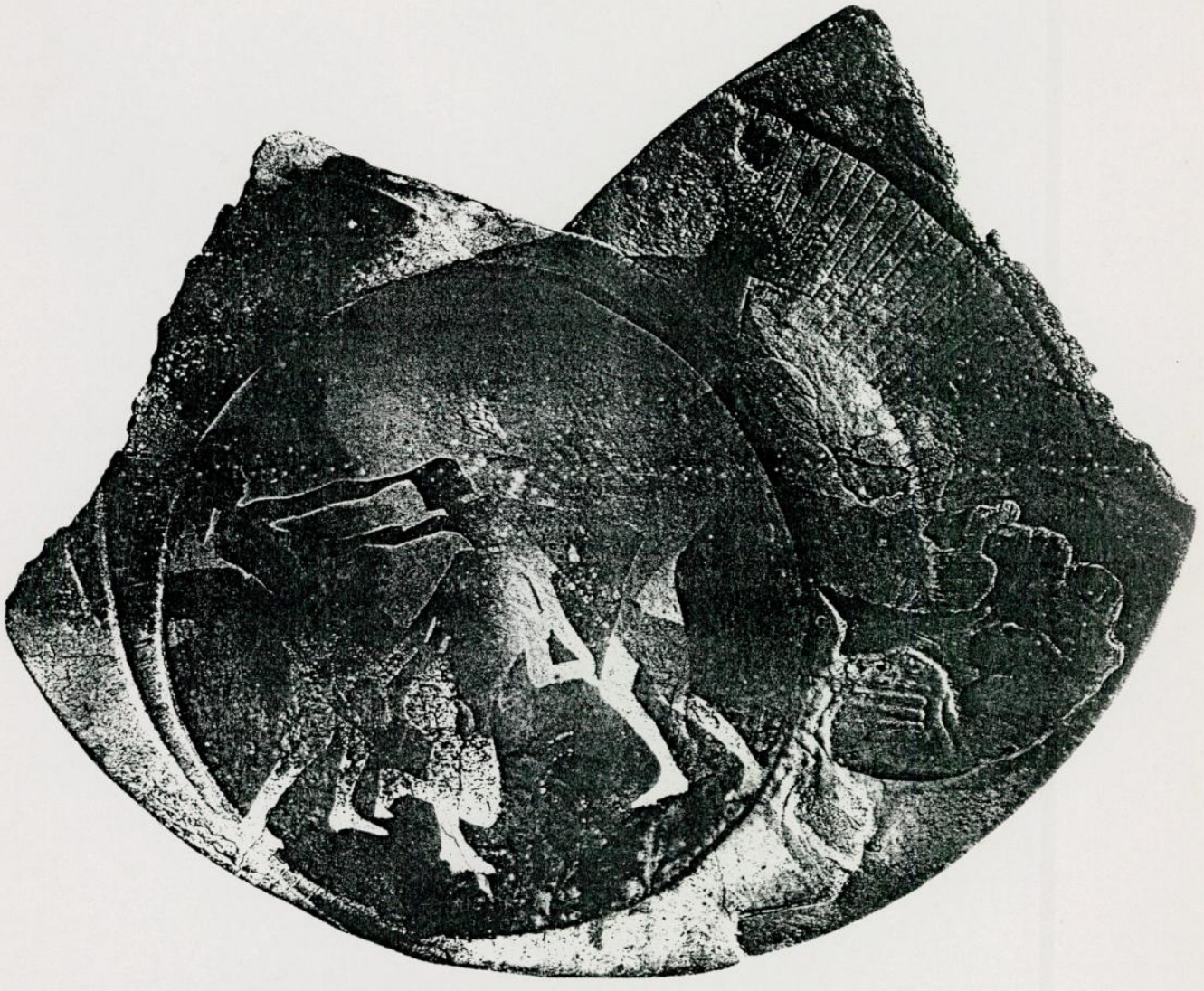

Figure 19. Wall Piece 1979.
Hand built Raku clay white and copper slip stenciled figures partially glazed low temperature post fire smoking.

action painting in is appreciation of surfaces, embellishment and in the potter's intimate involvement with every part of the process.

He knew the Japanese defined Raku as "comfortable" or "free" a definition that became meaningful to Soldner during his Japanese visit in early 1970. But he was quite shocked when he realised just how much his style of Raku differed from the Japanese style.

Both were fired in a kiln in the same way, but the American technique differed in a number of ways, notably the smoking of the ware outside the kiln at the end of the firing to produce a rich black surface. Other American innovations were a dramatic quenching of the red hot vessel in cold water, the production of brilliant and many-coloured copper lustres, a forceful crackling of the glaze with smoke penetration, a mysterious white line halo or ghost image surrounding a black metallic decoration. Another important difference in American Raku from Japanese was the breaking away from the tea bowl shape.

Soldner's mature Raku work, for which he is best known in the late '70's and '80's, as entitled "Pedestal Pieces". These were thrown and altered pieces combined with slab constructed assemblages, more sculptural and inventive than ever. Although earlier bowls and vases had supported thorn edges and slab additions to the pots, he now applied wing-like appendages to his pots or assembled forms which overwhelmed the base. (Fig. 20 Fig 21).

The energy, curiosity and ingenuity he has brought to a multitude of undertakings have in subtle ways advanced and interacted with his aesthetic developments. Soldner has consistently grasped opportunities to go beyond the familiar into the unknown. In spite of his identification with his low fired process, his work has been anything but static.

Peter Voulkos had the greatest influence on Paul Soldner. Voulkos converted the classroom into a studio where teachers and students worked together, an approach

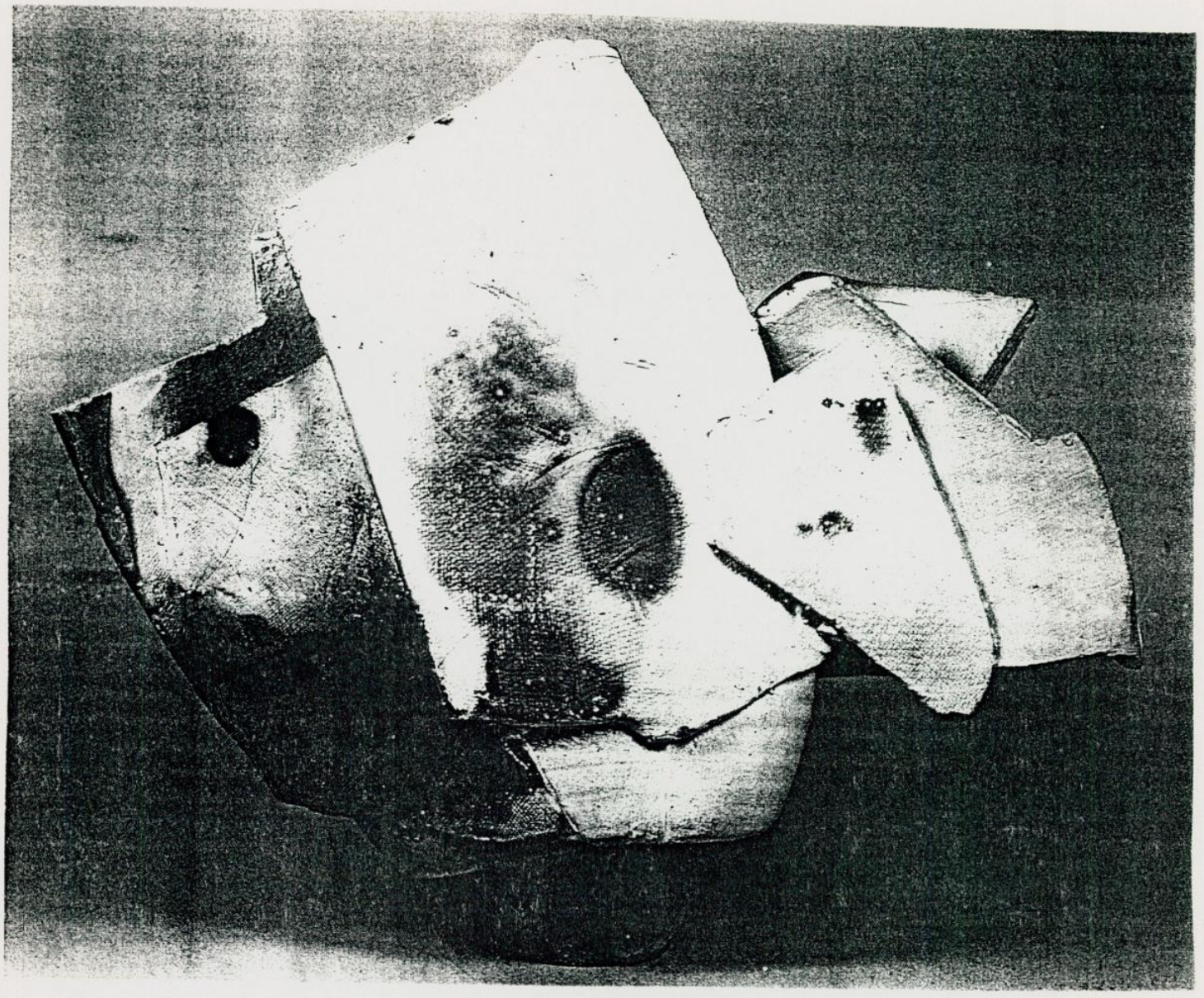

Figure 20. Pedestal piece 1980'. Copper slip unglazed low temperature salt vpor fired.

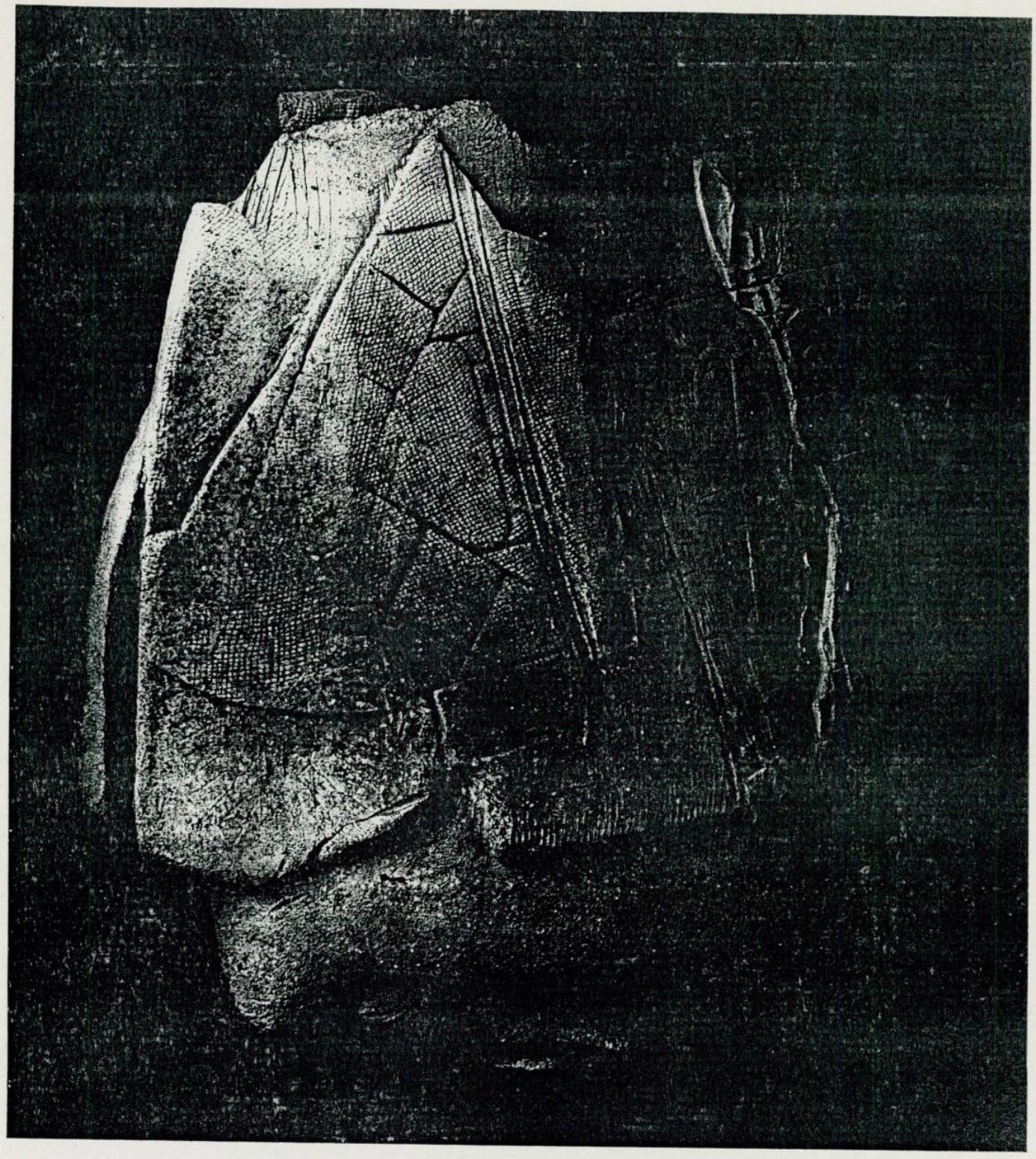

Figure 22. Wheel thrown and altered Raku clay. Unglazed low temperature salt vapor fired cone. 1980's.

that was influenced by the Japanese system of apprenticeship. Voulkos, who was on the threshold of making clay an expressive medium in the early 1950's, opened the door to contemporary art for Soldner and many others.

> "To make an idea good or bad it takes not only craftsmanship but a sense of identity. Most hand-crafted objects are made according to a narrow set of rules. There are too many rules and too little feeling. How is it possible to create without excitement".
>
> Peter Voulkos[15]

CHAPTER THREE

The phenomenon of Peter Voulkos could have taken place in no other country in the world; he is truly an American artist. He communicated the magic of clay, its nature and possibilities and, more than that, the excitement of working it.

Peter Voulkos entered the ceramics field at a time when it was entering a new phase. There was a fresh interest in it as a creative medium and everyone was learning from it. However, it had been used within limited circles to produce dinner ware or for industrial purposes.

Voulkos's message "not to make important things for the unimportant sake of being important",[16] reflects his dynamic personality. He is truly a West Coast American artist. Taking their cue from Voulkos, some artists in the United States are an irreverent crew and are not afraid to try anything. He is the first ceramist of his generation to make a pioneering reconnaissance into all the possibilities of clay as a creative medium, pushing clay into raw forms, new ideas, new areas of personal handling. Rose Slivica wrote in 1975 about Voulko;s work:

> "Its mood and conceptual range runs from sheer corn to buffoonery, to sad clowning to intelligent and elegant wryness. In fact, if there is one single element or direction one could point to the dissident diverse works of the sixties and seventies, it is the Voulkos humour and anti-seriousness, with profoundly serious purpose".
>
> Slivka[17]

A part of the Voulkos charm is this primitive sense, a strength vested in an intuitive and sharp intelligence. The entire presence of Peter Voulkos suggests sure and total communication among all elements:

> "I'm not a gambler I'm a player".
>
> P. Voulkos[18]

Peter Voulkos was born in Bozeman, Montana in 1924. He attended Montana State University and the California College of Arts and Crafts, having served in the Pacific in 1943-46. He established a pottery with his artist friend Rudy Autio at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana in 1951. He learnt the perfection of his ceramic craft by continuously throwing his work on the potter's wheel often late into the early hours of the morning until it became second nature. His early forms were quite classical, perhaps due to his Greek background. Information about what other ceramists were doing came to him largely through reproductions in magazines. At this time he was throwing classically shaped pottery, freely decorated with calligraphic brush work and wax resist design that was immediately recognised nationally by a small but appreciative audience of collectors and ceramists. At this time Voulkos was using elaborate wax resist techniques to scratch his line into the clay and then laying coloured slip into the line. Examples of his early award-winning pieces from the late 1940's to early 1950's are seen in Fig 23 + Fig 24.

Voulkos began to study ceramics as a young art student at Montana State College under Frances Senska. Senska was teacher to both Voulkos and Autio at Montana State College in Bozeman. Senska, in turn, had studied with Marguerite Wildehain and Edith Heath i.e.

When the Archie Bray Ceramics Foundation was founded in the early fifties in Helena, Montana, Bernard Leach, together with Soji Hamada and Professor Soetsu Yanagi, came to conduct a workshop in late 1952. Hamada's technical knowledge and artistic talent, combined with the work of Bernard Leach, had an important impact upon Voulkos and Autio as young artists recently out of college. Also, hugely important, Bernard Leach can be held responsible for introducing Soetsu Yanagi when he lectured and discussed the philosophy of Zen in folk art and the innate sense of beauty in ceramic form.

Shortly after this visit, Voulkos visited the Black Mountain College of Art in North Carolina in 1953. This is where he became acquainted with the painting movement and artists associated with Abstract Expressionism.

Figure 23. Rice Bottle 1952.
Wax resist stoneware with slip gas fired.

Figure 24. Covered Jar 1953. Stoneware with slip wax resist.

At Black Mountain he met artists like the dancer, Merce Cunningham, the composer, John Cage and Abstract Expressionist painters like Jack Tworkov and Robert Rauschenberg. On a visit to New York, Voulkos also met with painters Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock and the sculptor David Smith, famous members of that movement in New York. It was at this time also that Voulkos became familiar with the ceramic works of Miró and Picasso and later Isamu Noguchi, the famous sculptor.

After this exploratory experience, Voulkos was appointed as head of the Ceramic Dept at the OTIS, Art Institute, California, where he brought his forceful energy to his students, as well as some new-found ideas.

Voulkos' work at Otis was a fertile time of experimentation in which he began to formulate ideas that continue to occupy him today. Like the impastoed surfaces of paintings by Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, Voulkos' incised lines and rigid brushstrokes are traces of his creative thought. Voulkos had begun experimenting with ceramics in the Spring of 1955, but when he returned from spending the summer of 1955 at Black Mountain College, his work clearly showed a new direction. He found energy not in refinement but in rawness, rejecting the aesthetic of smooth flawless glazes. (Fig 25). "Much like the Abstract Expressionist, I go for gut feeling" P. Voulkos.[19]

Among the first students at Otis College were Paul Soldner, the Raku artist, and John Mason, and Rudy Autio, who became well known for their experimental work in clay, Henry Takemoto and Mac McClain all well known ceramists. The art world began to take notice of these clay renegades. Rudy Autio, with his figurative themes raggedly drawing into the surface of the vessels, and John Mason concentrating on building forms of clay reflecting the physical properties of the medium, in a series of wall reliefs.

This revolution in clay took place in the brief period of ten years from the time Peter Voulkos started producing clay work in 1949 until he went to teach at the

Figure 25. Vase stoneware with slip, wheel thrown. The surface is painted freely relating to European styles.

University of California at Berkeley in 1959 and turned his attention to bronze. He produced a massive amount of work that was to trigger off the start of the whole new ceramics movement in his country. He became the acknowledged leader of the "Revolution in Clay".

In many cases his early work continues the seeds of ideas that emerge later in different ways in his mature work. The stacked pots, the plates and ice buckets all have their roots in the work at OTIS.

Voulkos' work from 1955 shows him absorbing new ideas, especially primitivism, which Picasso had explored in his ceramics. His forms became more awkward, and transitions between sections no longer hidden, but obvious.

He saw in the work of Picasso's ceramics a forceful element whose expressive, decorative value was not subservient to the form but equal to it. His main influence, however, was to be Abstract Expressionism, an American-based art form which he was to embrace in the mid 1950's. Rocking Pot, 1956 is an example of Voulkos in transition. The wheel-thrown form is deliberately gouged out and roughly cut clay forms are assembled seemingly at random, depending on the mood of the maker at a particular time of making. (Fig 26). Voulkos used clay in the same way as the Abstract Expressionist painters of the time did paint. The act of making is crucial, the energy of the experience is paramount.

Rocking Pot, which was exhibited at his first solo show in 1956 at the Landau Gallery in Los Angeles, won him the admiration and protest of both potters and artists. Reviewing the show, Rose Slivica wrote

> "The influence of Picasso, Japanese Raku Pottery and the New York school of painters are there along with Peter Voulkos himself who emerges as a truly magnetic experimentalist".[20]

Voulkos was indeed absorbing all influences at this time; from Picasso to Henri Matisse, attaching cut-out slabs to his forms. At other times it was the Abstract

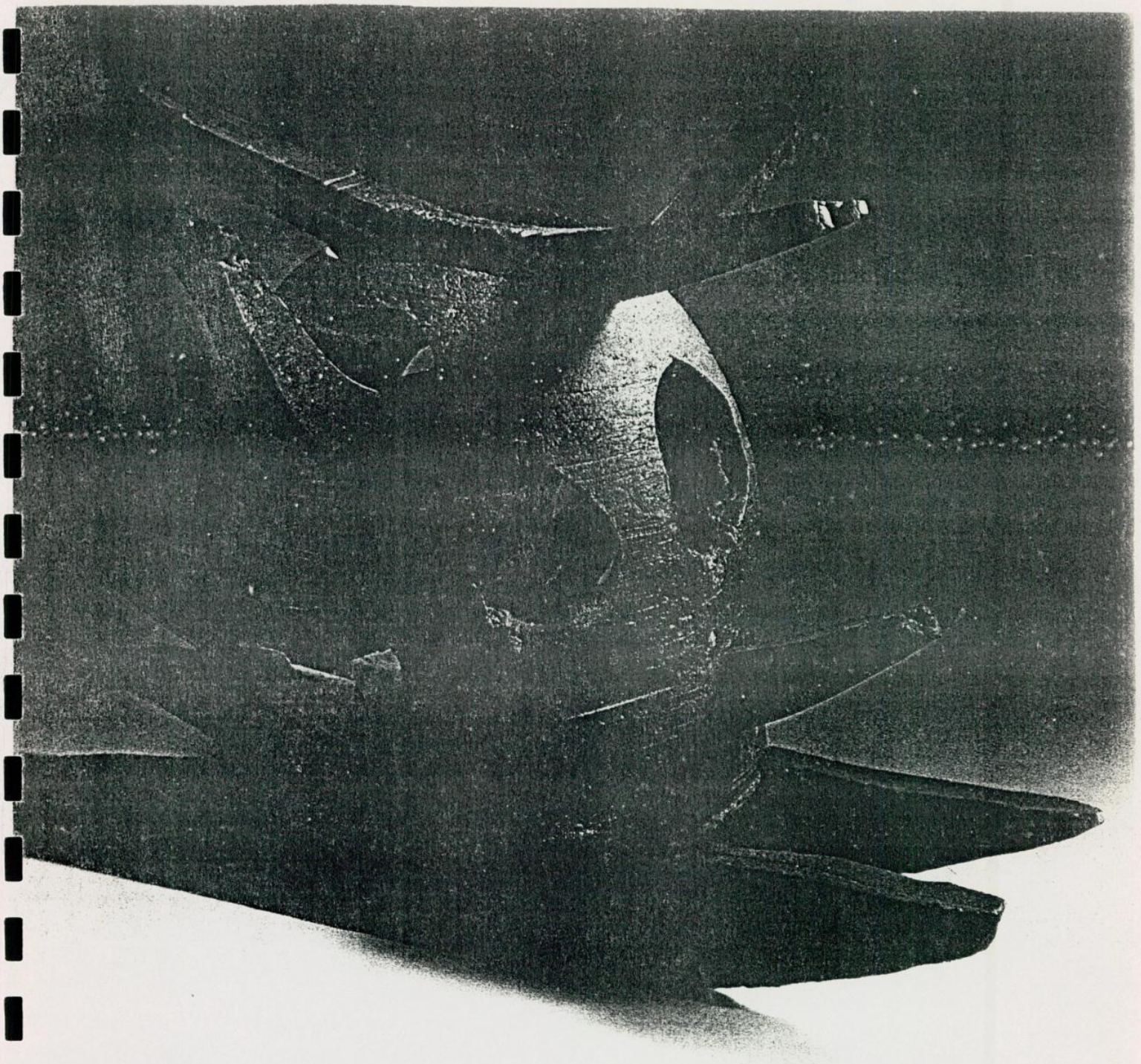

Figure 26. Rocking pot. Stoneware with glaze. Voulkos in transition 1956.

painters: Voulkos would use paint and glaze application on his forms in the same spirit as Franz Kline or Willem de Kooning's fragmentation of form or colour on his canvas.

A major influence, which provided a breakthrough at this crucial period for Voulkos, was the chance happening of an exhibition by the Austrian sculptor Fritz Wotruba, at the Los Angeles County Museum. Voulkos was moved by the methods Wotruba used to assemble his forms, sometimes simply stacking his pieces. Immediately afterwards, Voulkos began stacking his forms as in Fig 27, entitled 5000 feet Paul Soldner remembered after the exhibition that

> "Peter went back to the studio and started stacking rock like forms, you could see the influence right away. In Wotruba, Voulkos saw sculptural jagged forms and rough matte surfaces which were a tonic to the traditional curvilinear shapes and smooth high gloss glazes of studio pottery". [21]

Clearly Voulkos couldn't wait to get away from traditionalism. In assemblage, as in Zen, Voulkos found a way out of European aesthetics, from the well made object that possessed little feeling, into an aesthetic that embraced the discarded and the ugly.
Few books on ceramics existed then, so the only way potters in the United States could learn more about their craft was to travel to wherever it was being made and learn from direct observation. Voulkos revolutionized contemporary American ceramics by refusing to accept clay's traditional status as craft and by insisting instead that clay be seen as art sculpture.

In 1957 and '58 Voulkos's forms became larger and larger. The forms themselves began on the potter's wheel by being thrown and then altered. He would throw or alter six to eight pieces before assembling them. He had to work rapidly, due to the nature of the clay and its tendency to dry out unequally, choosing to build the forms around a central clay armature, which remained an integral part of the form. These pieces developed into a series of massive voluptuous sculptures, the largest self-contained ceramic work that he produced at this time. All of this period's work was

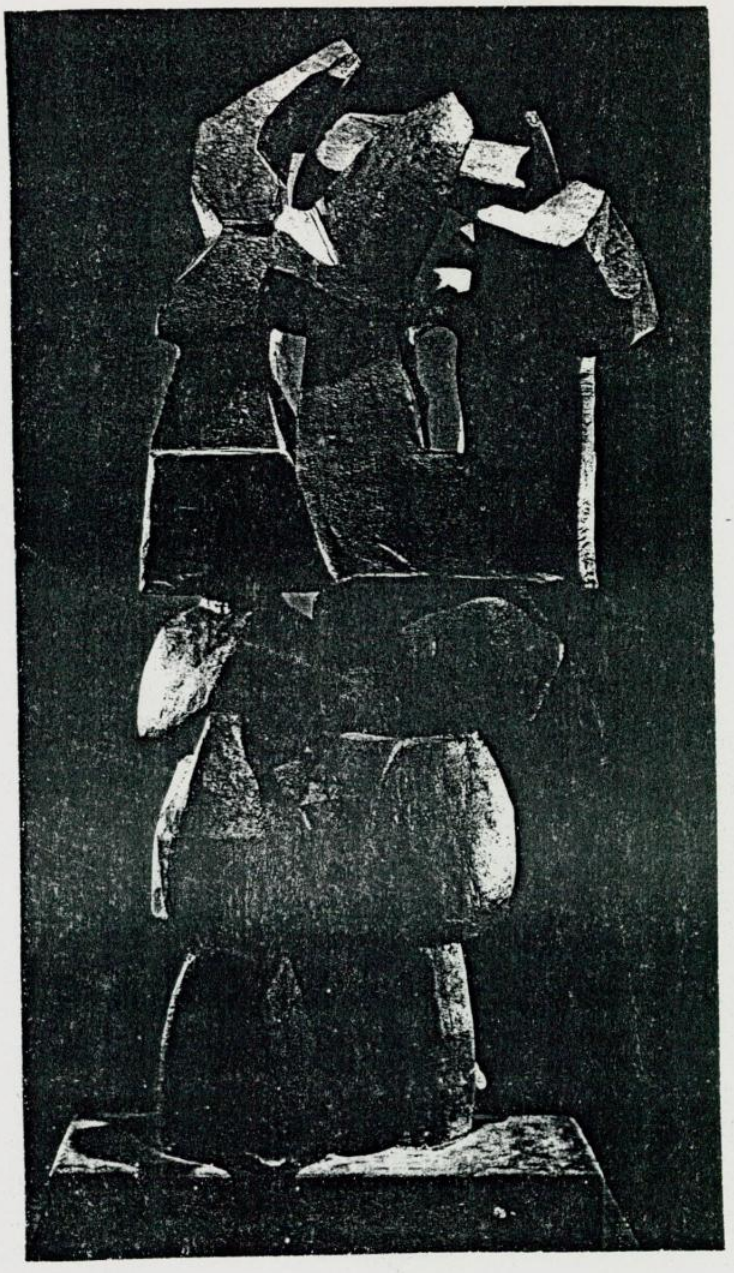

Figure 27. 5000 Feet 1958.
Stoneware with slip gas fired. Influenced by the stacking methods of Fritz Wotruba, Australian Sculptor.

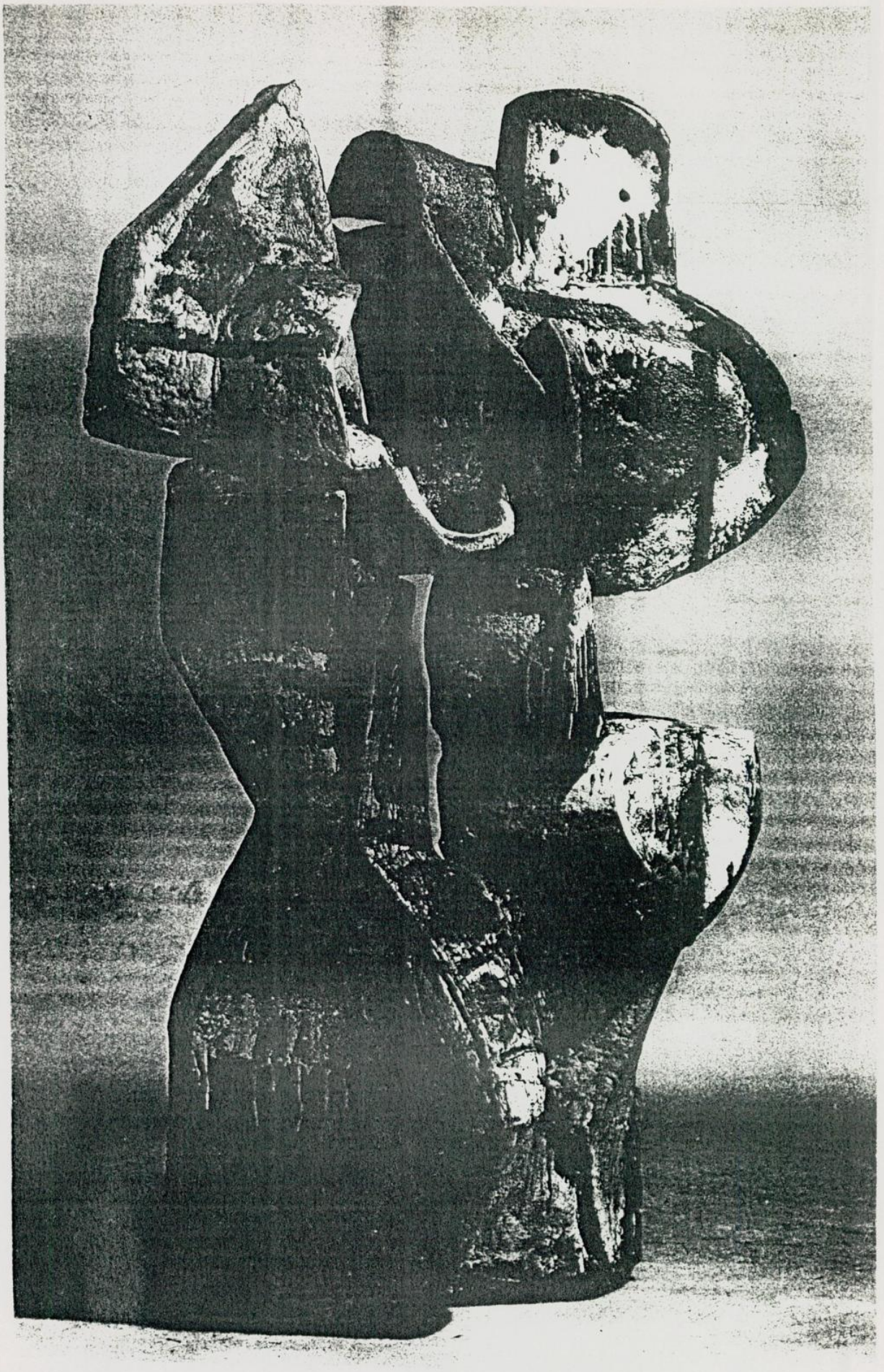

Figure 28. Solano 1959. Stoneware with slip gas fired.

Figure 29. Little Big Horn 1959
Stoneware with slip and glaze assembled forms cut from wheel thrown pieces.

assembled from basic pottery forms, none of which related to traditional pottery methods or techniques. (Fig 28 Fig 29).

Dynamic, swelling, bulging, these massive sculptures were like ponderous ancient brooding beasts, timeless monoliths of the earth. The support system for these ceramic sculptures was itself astonishing. They were constructed by using cylinders to support the outer forms, which remained part of the inner structure of the form. He managed to build huge clusters of bulbous forms, each piling on top of the other. Most of them were painted in black iron slip and a thin wash of glaze, stacking the forms as high as possible without risk of falling over. There were many times, however, when the ballooning shapes did collapse. Voulkos had to work rapidly on both the inner structures and outer forms simultaneously. They were directly and abruptly joined to each other in different directions, groupings and volumes. In his ceramic sculptures, as with his pots, he worked rapidly through a series. In the short period of a year and a half, he completed twelve large scale sculptures of which Gallas Rock is considered his masterpiece of this series (Fig. 30).

Another strategy for creating visual energy was to jettison round symmetry and fabricate angular asymmetry by 'paddling' wheel-thrown forms, as is evident in Gallas Rock. (Fig 30).

Valuing spontaneity is an artistic approach with its roots in Zen, a method that puts the artist in touch with the unconscious and 'natural' self. Voulkos made process and spontaneity visible in all of his Otis sculptural forms, stacking forms, altering them by cutting gaping holes, and adding jagged protrusions. These gouged surfaces are the basic elements of Voulkos' stacked pots from 1970 onwards. Of the seven foot high Gallas Rock sculpture, Voulkos wrote :

> "I was trying to learn to throw big chunks of clay one hundred pounds or so to make continuous two foot cylinders with thick base. Knowing

Figure 30. Gallas Rock. Stoneware with slip and glaze. Gas fired assembled with over 100 hundred thrown pieces.

> when the formed clay has dried enough so it does not collapse but still soft enough to be malleable able to withstand more handling plus the weight of more clay forms is crucial".[22]

Voulkos is the master of a fine tuning that he has made strictly his own, a matter between the clay and himself. Paul Soldner expressed his view of Voulkos's attitude as follows :

> "People misinterpret his casualness and ease. He knows exactly what he's doing. He is in absolute touch with the material and with himself. It's like watching a dancer, the precision looks easy, effortless".[23]

The inner construction and outer formal complexity of Gallas Rock were equally matched and connected in an extraordinary achievement of engineering and of Voulkos's creation. It is the culmination of six years of abstract experimental work from Otis. Reaching seven feet in height, it contains all the vocabulary, technology and spirit of his work and all the elements of his work to come. Containing one hundred thrown and slab pieces, it moves in a combination of gyration and sudden stops, winding in and out. It is led on by its own nature, by anything it can do and anything Voulkos can make it do. In that struggle are the dynamics of his work, a never ending search for the perfect abstract ceramic form. There were still difficulties in the art world however, because of his craft connections. After a solo exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art New York in 1960, the craft world welcomed him as their hero, but the art world remained aloof in the traditional posture of disdain for craft connections. This may have been one reason why he turned to bronze casting in the early 1960's.

> The minute you begin to feel you understand what you are doing you lose that searching quality. You finally reach a point where you're no longer concerned with keeping this blob of clay centered on the wheel,

and up in the air. Your emotions take over and what happens, happens".

Peter Voulkos[24]

An appointment in 1960 as assistant professor of ceramics at Berkeley in the University of California coincided with the beginnings of his work in bronze, which he approached with the same energy, technical expertise and productivity that characterised his work in clay. He did continue to produce clay work throughout this period, but to a lesser extent compared to the previous decade.

Once he was no longer confined to the limitations of clay, Voulkos began to cantilever forms out into space. Attempting to cast everything and anything from paper napkins to tree branches, he achieved amazing technical skill within a short number of years. (Fig 31). There was nothing he was not willing to try. Voulkos hungered for a scale that would not be inhibited by material limitations or the confinements of the base, just as he had struggled with the nature and building of clay sculpture. Although Voulkos followed a procedure similar to the one he used to produce his large clay structures, this time he was casting forms which he would then assemble by welding together.

The vocabulary of his shapes or forms remained the same during this energetic bronze period, so that he cast spheres, cubes and domes and often used bought-in prefabricated tubes or cylinders which he then assembled with his own cast forms, deciding on the placement of each part as he moved around with his forklift and a small crane (Fig 32 Mr Ishi).

In 1967 Volkos was commissioned by the city of San Francisco to design and assemble a piece of sculpture for the entrance lane of the Hall of Justice.

This monumental group of bronze pieces measuring over thirty foot is an assemblage of tubes and cubes on a spaced platform, erected on bronze poles arranged at different levels. (Fig 33).

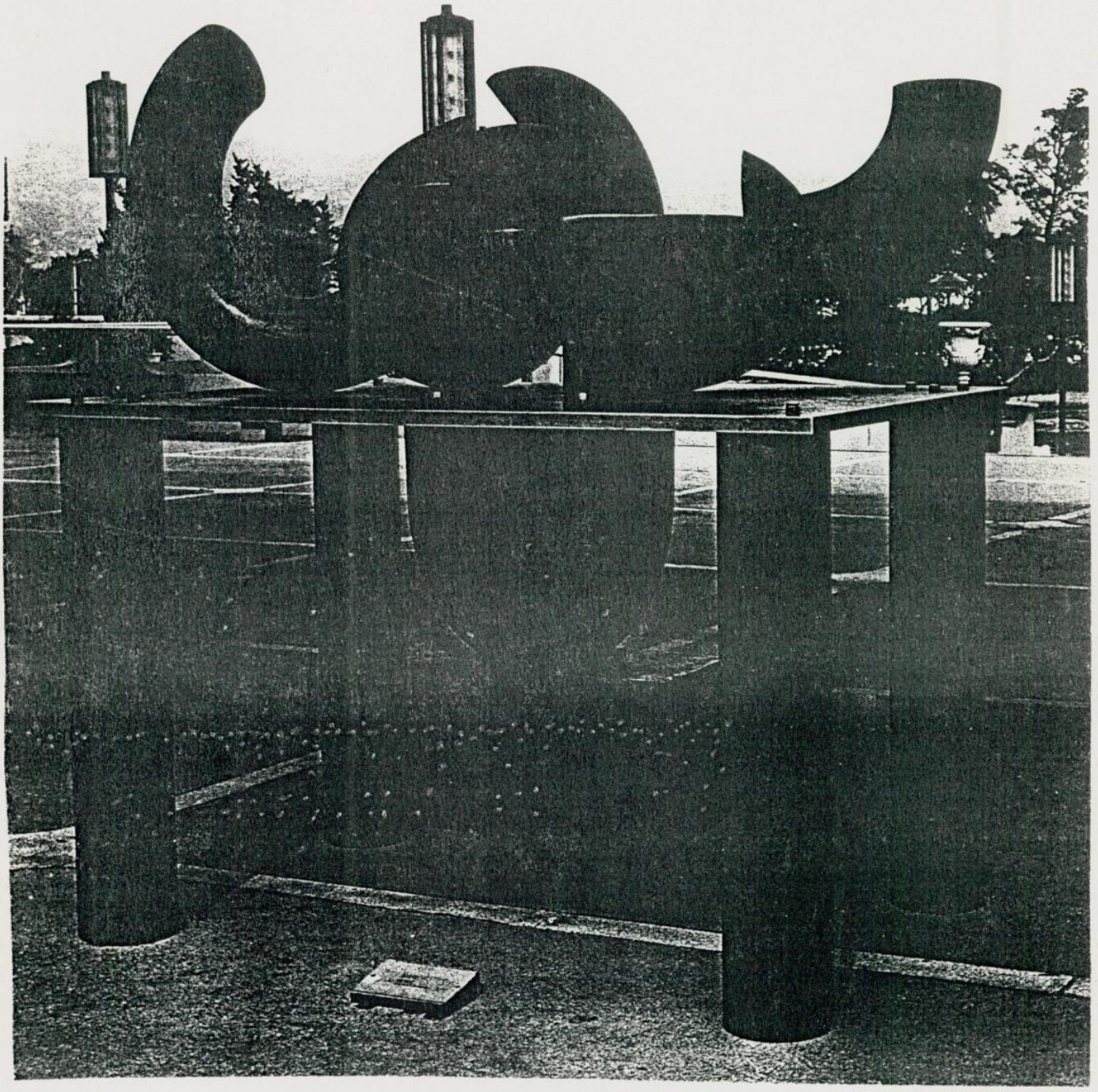

Figure 31. Firestone. Early cast bronze sculpture 1965. 80x72x48.

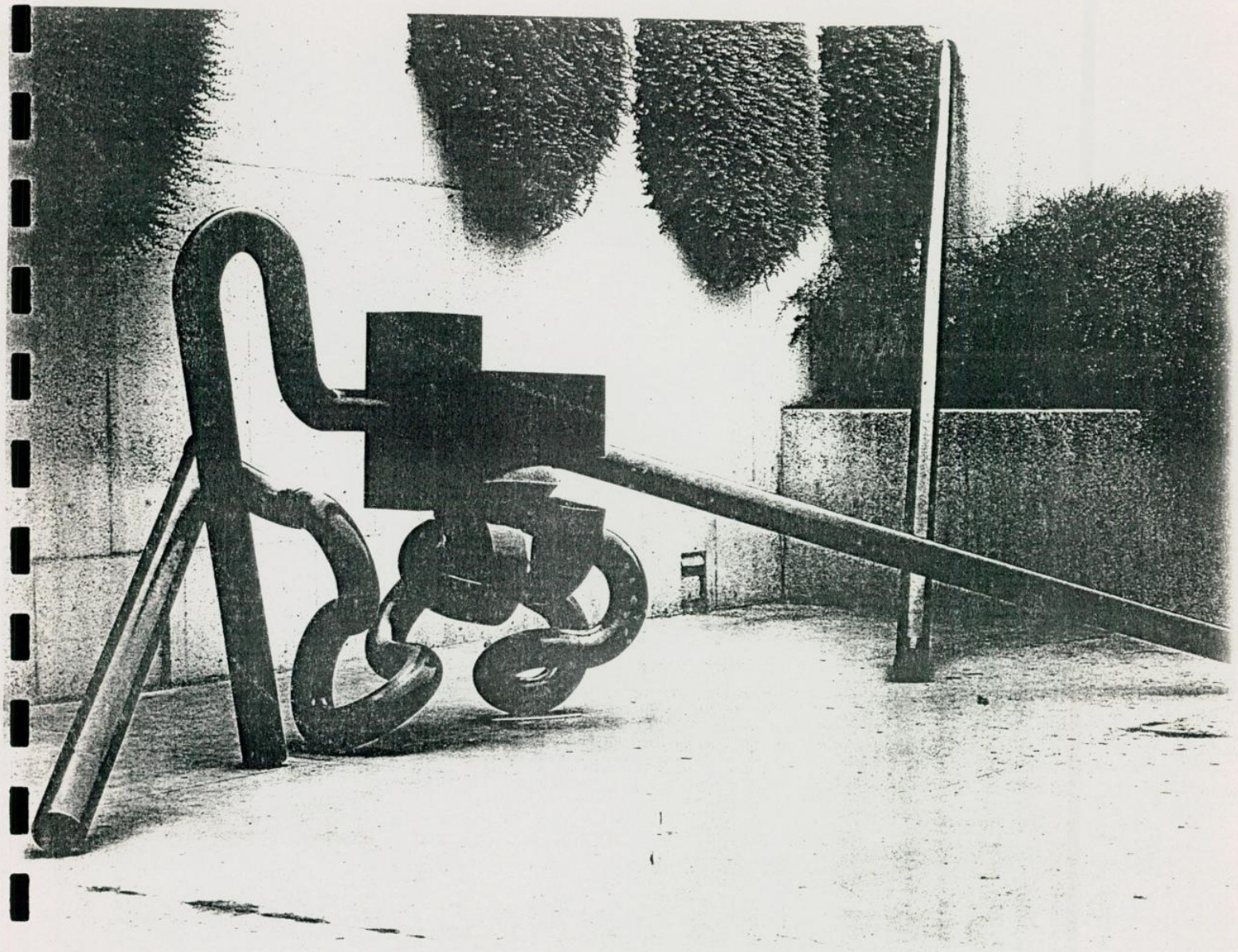

Figure 32. Mr Ishi. '69 '70.
Bronze forms were assembled on site to suit the environment.

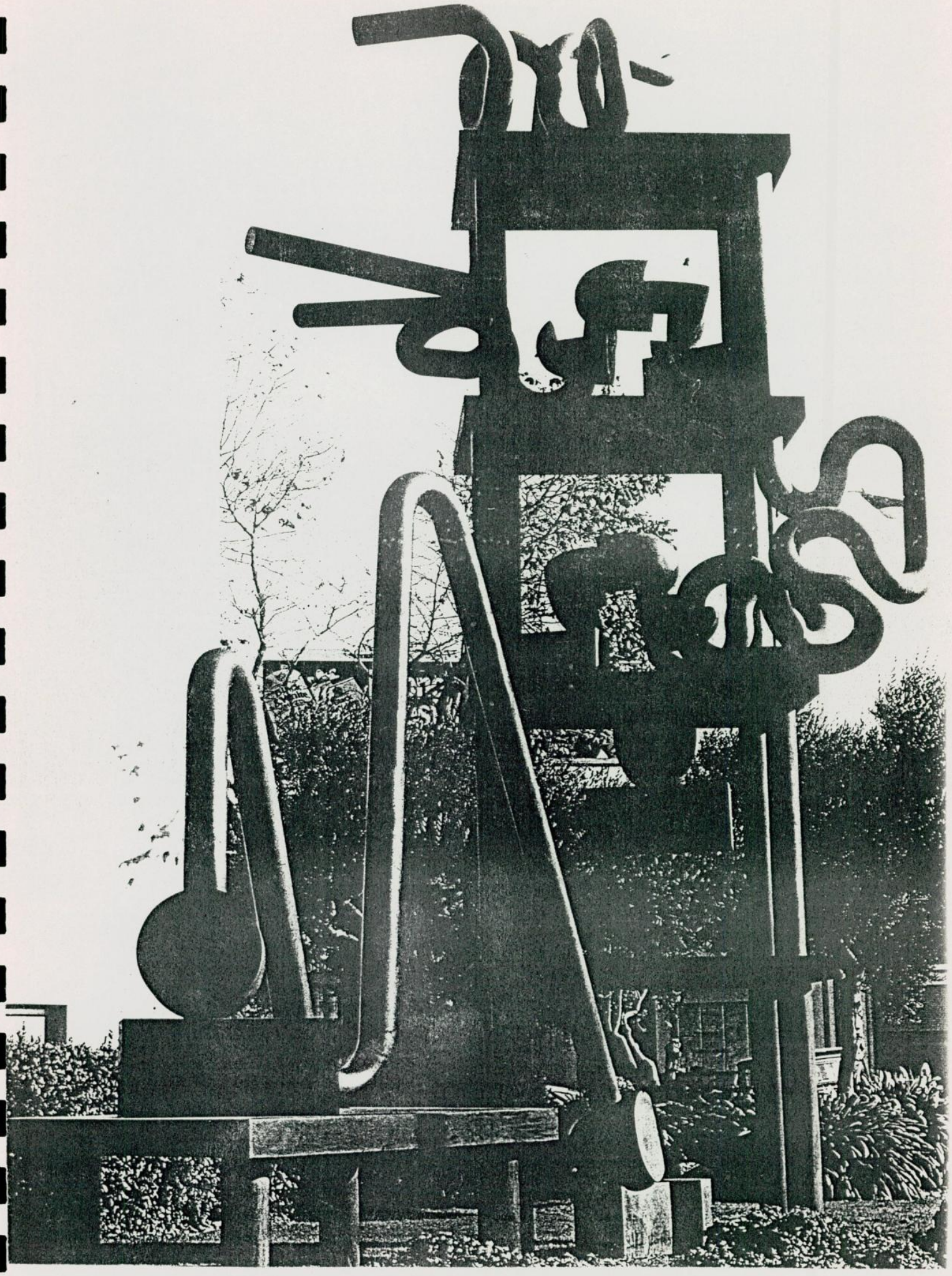

Figure 33. Hall of Justice Bronze. A lyrical force unique in modern sculpture.

"The composition is charged with a lyrical force that is considered unique in modern sculpture".

R Slivica[25]

Returning once again to clay full time in the early 1970's Voulkos was commissioned to design and produce two hundred plates, by the Louis Honiq family in San Francisco. Voulkos met the challenge with vigour. The restrictions that a small form placed on him opened up a new dimension in Voulkos's work.

By throwing the basic form on a wheel measuring about twenty inches wide, he treated the plates like a circular canvas,a classic form once again violated by Voulkos in a combination of sculpture and drawing (Fig 34).

"Using the slash of a knife and the touch of a hand as pen and brush he scored, slip tore punctured fingered and gouged the clay. Scratching and slitting, slashing, he made pass through holes into the surface and jagged edges of the rims drawing in and on the clay, and claying the drawing with all the delicacy power speed spontaneity and consummate skill that identify his work".

Rose Slivica[26]

A dark blue-black glaze sometimes underscores Voulkos's marks, while the rest of the matte and colours go from cream to brick (Fig 35). During this period he fired the plates to stoneware, often plugging the holes with white porcelain.

The large stacked forms were seen re-emerging in the late 1970's, only more massive and architectonic in form, more tortuous in feeling (Fig. 36).

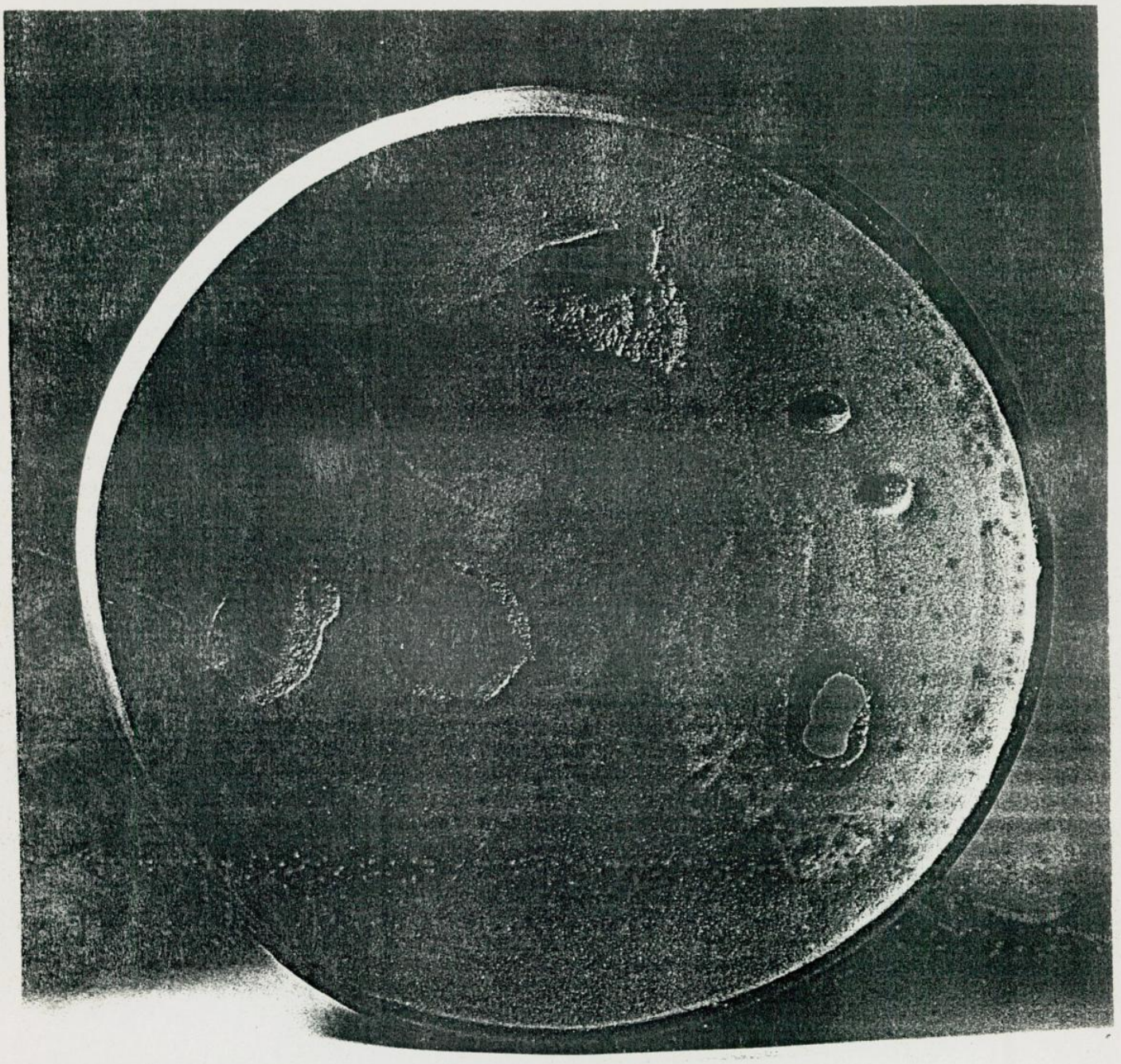

Figure 34. Untitled Plate. One of a commission of two hundred plates gas fired 1973.

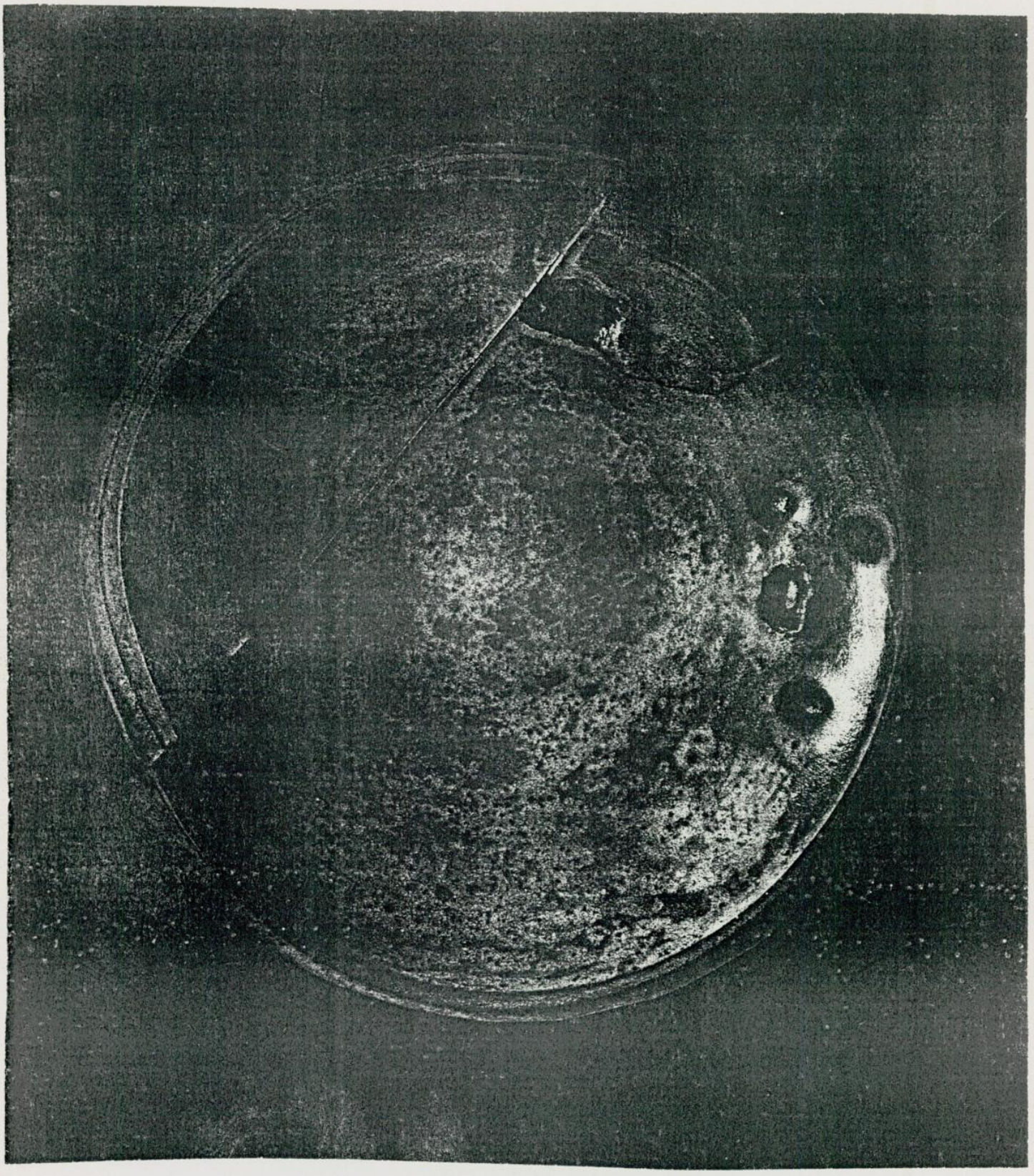

Figure 35. Untitled Stack 1978. Stoneware with porcelain, with glaze, gas fired.

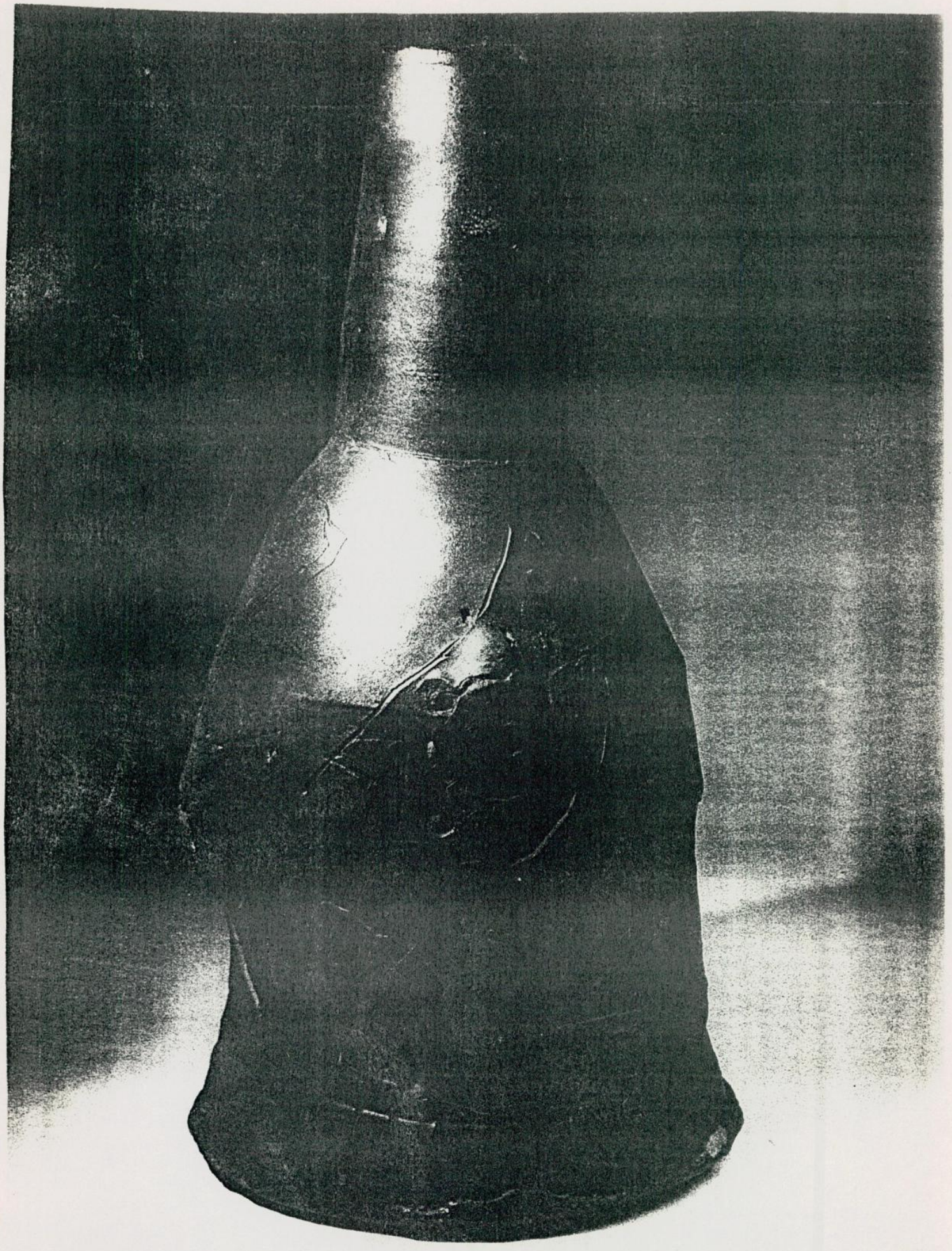

Figure 36. Large stacked forms re-arrange in late 1970's.

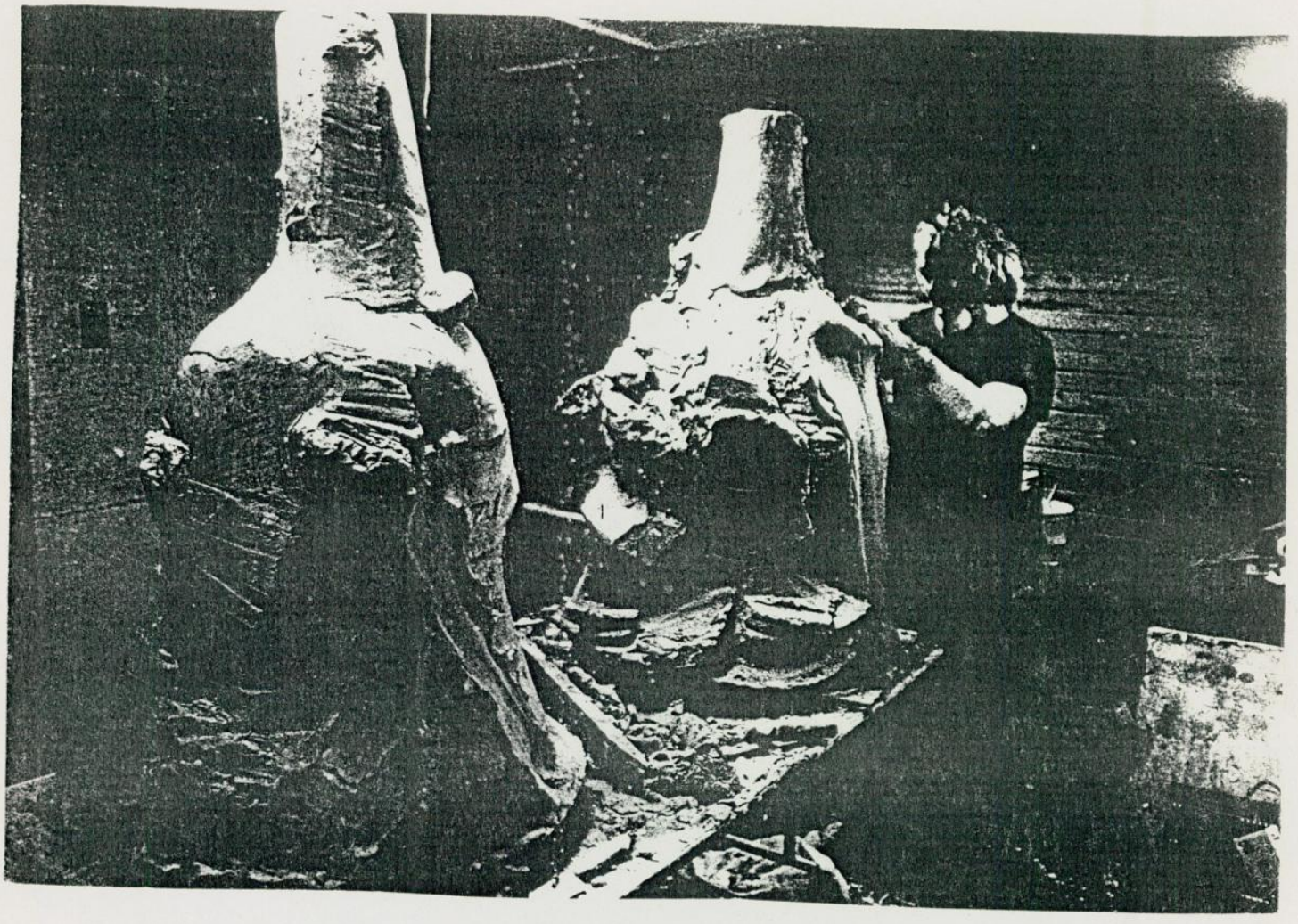

Figure 37. Voulkos working on a stacked form. Kansas City. Late 1970's.

Forever searching for the raw and original, the creative, the human, Voulkos' approach to decoration and surface exploration is closest to Zen philosophy. Zen is fully in the spirit of his ongoing quest for the pure, combined with the ideals from the American Abstract Expressionist Movement.

> "Technique is probably the most difficult tool to master, because it is a necessity, but can so easily become an obsession. Nothing can drown out a new idea as fast . . . Technique is nothing if you have nothing to say".
>
> Peter Voulkos[26]

From the beginning, Voulkos has always preferred working with large masses of clay, from stacks made from more than two hundred and fifty pounds of clay. Voulkos literally stacks heavy clay cylinders on top of the other, then he begins hacking, gouging, piercing and drawing into its skin. (Fig 37). Inspired by mythology and ancient culture, the stacks evoke myriad impressions: remnants of architecture, birth, resurrection and the mingling states of decay and death.

A chance meeting in 1978 with a young ceramic artist Peter Callas, who had studied in Japan, encouraged Voulkos to experiment with the Japanese technique of "Anagama" wood firing. Voulkos found rugged clay forms were completely compatible with the rough earthy qualities that resulted from this primitive Japanese method (Fig. 38 and Fig 39).

At a solo exhibition in 1984 of Voulkos's wood-fired work at the Quay Gallery in San Francisco, the critic Thomas Albright observed

> "Voulkos' work suggest the actions of an inspired Zen master who has reached the exact stage where intelligence, and intuition, mind and body, design and accident all come to work miraculously together. A

Figure 38. Wood fired stack form stoneware. 1982. In Anagama Japanese style kiln.

Figure 39. Wood fire plate untitled. 1980's stoneware.

stage where he can do nothing wrong. They are the most profoundly, beautiful and moving things that Voulkos ever has done".[27]

For Voulkos, the search for the perfect imperfect form continues. Bringing the Abstract Expressionist spirit of spontaneity and gesture to realization in the neglected sculptural medium of clay, Voulkos has had a catalytic effect on the formal evolution of the ceramic medium in the 1950's. Now in the 1990's, throwing sculptural plates and pots and firing in wood fired kilns, Voulkos continues to explore the unexplored. He continues to open new territories for the artist and craft-makers of his time.

CONCLUSION

One of the most remarkable features of Post-War American Studio Ceramics has been continuity. The chief requirement for this is not only the constant stream of fertile and inventive new ideas, but also the appearance at regular intervals of at least one or two potters of outstanding integrity.

As we have seen, it is undoubtedly Bernard Leach who must be given credit for laying down the foundation for the interchange of cultures between western traditions and Far Eastern Japanese and Chinese ceramics. Leach possessed an intimate understanding and experience of the East. He could be said to have assumed the role of propagandist, awakening the western potter to a Zen aesthetic that grew out of life and not out of design.

Leach, like a number of other scholars, artists and intellectuals in the 1940 and 1950's, shared an interest in the Orient and particularly in Zen concepts of beauty and simplicity, and saw therein the seed for a revitalization of Western ceramic art and art in the broader sense.

After publication in 1940 A Potter's Book was immediately adopted as a bible for British and some American studio potters. By association, Leach became a Messiah, a role he accepted most willingly. The oriental aesthetic (which Leach had learned from his master potter in Japan, Kenzan and the Zen Buddhist philosophy of Shoji Hamada, his Japanese companion) is that beauty derives not from the victory of science or craft, but from the sensitivity of every element of the process by which an object has been made.

A pot is therefore a diary of a journey and this is the root of its aesthetic worth, not the constant striving for intellectually held visual principles.

The simplicity of Paul Soldner's work is one of the keys to his power as a potter/ ceramist. His early pots were precisely thrown, and beautifully balanced. Nothing was overdone, but everything was deeply considered.

Raku was prized by the Japanese tea masters, because it is unpretentious but aesthetically pleasing and embodies the ideals of Zen Buddhism. The potter who is responsible for establishing Raku as a popular creative method of pottery making is Paul Soldner. He began his Raku experiments around the 1960's, with only the information gathered from Leach's A Potters Book.

Raku is a process comprised of many tools, clay, glazes, kiln and fuel, as well as the potter's own drive, desire and imagination. Paul Soldner has created a wide range of complex designs and lyrical surfaces over the past thirty years, using vessel forms thrown on the wheel and then usually altered. In the 1970's, Soldner resorted to hand building methods, often embellishing them with motifs derived from the human figure, by endlessly experimenting with various slips, glazes and smoking techniques.

Throughout the United States, Raku has become an integral part of the ceramic artist's repertoire. Paul Soldner has been at the forefront of Raku from the earliest days, while American forms of Raku continue to expand and develop.

Peter Voulkos has shown the possibilities of using the thrown vessel as a basis for formal and expressive exploration. Few potters have been able to manipulate clay to their needs with as much conviction; he is a thrower of prodigious skill. He took a small number of shapes, all formed on the wheel, and in great depth and with great subtlety explored their variation in proportion and scale with different surfaces, textures and limited colour.

Voulkos had been deeply radicalized by his work at the Archie Bray Foundation Montanna where he had met Bernard Leach in 1952, by his exposure soon afterwards to Abstract Expressionism during his summer at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina and on his subsequent visit to New York city.

He introduced, established and extended alternatives to the uses of clay for sculptural expression, liberating a new generation of artists from restrictions and traditions imposed by ceramic history and technique. In the course of his own unique development he has opened new territories for artists and crafts people, not only in America but wider afield.

Ceramics have become a popular art form, expressive, often domestic in scale and familiar in form but often with sufficient variety to engage the mind as well as the eye. As soon as the potter turned from merely designing and decorating to making clay forms, he/she could gain a new and deeper feeling for the materials used. The tension between these extremes, together with the diversity of work found along the way, give contemporary ceramics their special flavour and interest.

Voulkos is largely responsible for the opening out of the ceramic tradition to embrace other art forms, and to ensure that it was regarded with equal status as the so-called 'fine arts'.

From his early days, when he was using elaborate wax resist techniques to scratch his line into the clay and lay coloured slip into the line, to today, when he continues to draw by incising the clay, he has emboldened the scratch with a crack and the pass-through line with a slash, using ceramic sculpture as his canvas.

By exploring the key figures in Post-War American Studio Ceramics, I believe I have shown the rich potential of the ceramic medium. It is so various and adaptable, varying from simple functional oriental tea bowls to large sculptural forms such as those of Peter Voulkos.

Pots can succeed because they move the spirit like art, or because they exactly fulfil a design requirement. That one discipline can straddle both areas with dual emphasis is exceptional.

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