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FIRE THE PHENOMENON IN THE ARTS AND CULTURE

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" If all that changes slowly can be explained by life then all that changes quickly can be explained by fire. Fire is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into the substance and hide there, latent and pent up, like hate and vengeance.

Among all phenomenon, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is a pleasure for the good child sitting prudently by the hearth; yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames. It is well-being and it is respect. It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity both good and bad. It can contradict itself thus it is one of the principles of the universal explanation.

(BACHELARD, Gaston, 1964. The Psychoanalysis of Fire, p7).

INTRODUCTION

" We have only to speak of an object to think that we are being objective. But, because we chose it in the first place, the object reveals more about us than we do about it. What we consider to be our fundamental ideas concerning the world are often indications of the immaturity of our minds. Sometimes we stand in wonder before a chosen object; we build up hypotheses and reveries; in this way we form convictions which have all the appearance of true knowledge. But the initial source is impure: the first impression is not a fundamental truth."
(BACHELARD, 1964p.7)

I found it important to start with this reference as, with any point of interest, it is difficult always to be objective. There is a certain seduction connected with learning and it is here we find that we incorporate all the naive qualities of children in so far as knowledge excites us, no matter how clever we perceive ourselves to be. Bachelard begins his book, The Psychoanalysis of Fire in this manner because of the complexities, ironies and contradictions which arise in the difficult task of analysing fire (or any other element). Although I did not use the same method as he, I also believe that the significance of fire can be difficult to evaluate.

In the first chapter, I am attempting to look at the phenomenon of fire in social structures, focusing on the role it has played in primitive man's rituals and religions so, rather than wading endlessly into universal perception, I have chosen a few examples to highlight its deep rooted power.

Chapter two concentrates on the use of fire and burning specifically with reference to alchemy. In the history of fire I have found alchemy to be a natural progression in the utilisation of the element. I will also be looking at psychology in alchemy with reference to the work of Carl Jung.

It is also evident that in the literature of the medieval period, Dante's Inferno is a classic example of the use of alchemical symbolism.

In chapter three, I will be looking at Yves Klein and comparing his alchemical influences to those of Toshikatsu Endo. I believe Endo embraces the qualities of Nigredo both physically and spiritually in all its intensities and I will argue this with regards to his burning and blackening of his wooden installations.

CHAPTER 1

FIRE IN RELIGION AND TRADITION:

"Because of its purity and activity, fire was considered by the ancients ¹ to be the noblest of elements, the one which came closest to divinity, a living image of the sun." (GLUSBERG, Jorge, 1990, Myth, magic and gold, p7)

It is precisely this element which Jorge Glusberg goes on to say is the most concrete expression of the primitive mind and one which is present in almost all mythology. It could be suggested that the sacred funeral act of cremation in various religions embraces this opinion to the fullest extent. The Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer insisted that primitive man saw solar fire and earthly fire as identical (as both give off light and heat), therefore fire could also have been seen as the Sun on Earth and to be engulfed by the flames could represent becoming one with the Sun to enter into eternal light.

Cremation in the Hindu religion is the sixteenth sacrament; it is known as Antyeshti and is the last and final sacrament. The funeral hymns of the Hindus regard fire as the servant of Gods who conveys the dead to where Gods and ancestors dwell. This is expressed here;

"Unless the body is burnt the soul will never reach the land of the dead, in the hot smoke , it rises up to the shining sun to rejoice in its warmth and light; then it flies away to the happy land of the west." (GLOB, P.V. 1977, The Bog People, p44).

The hymn suggests a portal is created when the smoke rises and a spiritual pathway or tunnel is made. The soul's departure from its earthly body is represented by the smoke. Burning in the cremation rite of the Hindus is intensified by the use of ghee.² Large spoons are tied to staves so that the oblations ³ of molten ghee may be offered to the fire from a distance. The ghee makes the fire flare up, intensifying the blaze. The more oblations, the longer the fire will burn. This offering of oblations also ensures that the corpse has completely disintegrated.

¹ Referring to the ancients of South America

² Indian oil or butter also used for cooking.

³ Oblations are offered for example to the eyes, ears, tongue, goodwill etc.

"Dear departed, after your death may the power of your sight be absorbed into the sun, your soul into the atmosphere; may you go into the luminous religion or the earth, according to your religious merit, or go to the waters if it be your lot."

(KANITKAR, Hemart V.P.1988, Hindu Festivals and Sacraments, p230)

Another example of a Hindu hymn recited during Antyeshti refers to the process of sublimation⁴ which occurs. It is in this manner that the soul is expected to reach the next life in whatever "form " is merited. There is a transformation from a solid(corpse) through the application of heat or fire; the soul departs by clinging to the vapour(smoke); when it reaches its destination e.g. the sun, the water or the earth, it returns to a solid once again. Cremation is also seen as the acceleration of the decomposition of the body:

It is interesting, now that cremation has entered into the Christian religion, do not recognise that its arrival and acceptance are largely due to the pressure which was forced upon Europe by the onset of World War One.⁵ Death rates were high and time, effort and space were not available so long elaborate funerals and burials had to be abandoned for a quicker method. Before this involuntary procedure occurred, the concept of Christian cremation first arose in the mid-eighteen hundreds as a monumental and controversial, scientific theory was announced by Charles Darwin.⁶ Darwin's theory of evolution changed the concept of God as creator and destroyer and thus created doubts about the meaning of life and death. Scientists attempted to demonstrate that thought was an electrochemical discharge. Psychology and biology were creating an intellectual construct that, according to physician Willams Osler

"dispensed altogether with the soul ...science continued to lessen God's providence by demonstrating that disease was a result of small microbes, not an individual's sin against an all - powerful being (SLOANE, David C.1984,The Last Great Necessity, p145).

The importance of Darwin's finding and theories is imperative to the causes of diminishing belief in spirituality and in all matters of religions. Desperation with religion was not at all surprising at the time; the industrial revolution was at its peak with the majority of the population in the towns and cities. There was mass congestion as the the population boomed and, with that, so did disease and the death rates. Cholera was one of the worst diseases of the time and the graveyards could not cope with the pressure for space, also the

⁴Dictionary definition: Sublimation; To change from a solid to a gas without first becoming a liquid.

⁵1st World War , 1914 - 18

⁶In 1859



Fig 1; Two Dominican monks burned at the stake by order of the Inquisition for allegedly signing pacts with the Devil. From the Histoire veritable de Quatre Iacopins, Geneva, 1549.



infection was so great it was feared that the water was becoming infected from the victims who had been buried in the graveyards. Hence the concept of cremation arose. Many of the arguments were against the use of heathen conventions, but mostly they were due to Victorian conventions.

During my research on cremation I found it ironic that today the Reverend W. H. Molland still holds the belief that fire is not the right manner to leave this world. He believes that other priests and vicars are leading Christians along the wrong path by allowing cremation into the community. In his Death, Mourning and Cremation fire he describes how in the word of God is largely connected with sin and judgement; if this article had not been dated one could easily have mistaken it for a typical Victorian argument against the practice.

Evidence of burning 'sinners' because of Biblical teaching can be found. This burning reached its zenith in the medieval period was derived directly from the scriptures. Fig: 1 shows the burning of two monks who were said to have signed pacts with the Devil. These images date from the sixteenth century.

"The sacrificial victims of sin, trespass offerings, having been charged with the sins of the people were then slain and the carcasses were burned with fire."(Exodus, 30:12)

On Mt. Sinai the

"golden calf was burned with fire and ground to powder."(Exodus, 32:20).

"Tamar the harlot was to be burnt" (Genesis , 38:24)

"Daughters who played the whore were to be burnt with fire" (Leviticus, 21:9)

It is precisely these connections which vexes the Reverend Molland, that we should voluntarily choose this means of disposal instead of being laid to rest, i.e. mimicking sleep. Molland is highly vexed that cremation, which stemmed from 'babel', and such 'pagan' religions as Buddhism and Hinduism, is now practised within the Christian church:

"Can any Christian who thinks seriously ever contemplate cremation?; for their body to be consumed by flames - a body which has been redeemed from original sin in the act of baptism, a body which is Christ's. Is hot fire, which is a symbol of judgement, not a most terrible means to select for the last rites of a boy which has just been pardoned and justified?" (MOLLAND, W.H., Death, Mourning, Burial and Cremation1992 p.9)

The funeral pyre will naturally have its admirers and critics; an example from Bachelard's The Psychoanalysis of Fire ⁷ shows how the rite of sacrificing oneself in the flames of a blazing fire⁸ was considered a most sacred and holy act. "After gaining all through skill, through love, and through violence you must give up all and annihilate yourself " (Bachelard, 1964,p. 23)

This was the highest form of worship among the 'old races'⁹ Bachelard describes how this gesture was viewed by anthropologists of the time:

"...among people whose religious philosophy and religious cruelty have rendered them anaemic to the point of total desiccation so that the head has become a globe of pure intelligence," only these intellectual people "...can force the doors of the furnace open and enter into the mystery of fire."

(Bachelard, 1964, p.24)

The Scottish anthropologist Sir George James Frazer, in his book The Myth and Origin of Fire,(1907-1914) found these human sacrifices to be disgraceful; he had studied many ceremonies which involved worshipping the sun, but flagrant murders such as these were unforgivable. He referred to them as exploitation's controlled by professional magicians. Frazer was of the belief that myth makers who told of the power fire held (like, for example, the power to fertilize couples who leaped over fires at certain times of the year) or of the personalities of fire, were poets, but those who manipulated the power of fire through knowledge of its properties, such as the magicians were in complete control of the reins of a 'savage society'. He felt that the sooner people were aware that fire could not decide their fate, they would benefit, and release themselves from this exploitation. "Magic is a spurious system of laws, as well as an erroneous guide to conduct; it is a false science and an aborted art." (Glusburg, Jorge 1990 Myth Magic and Fire p.8) A milder form of sun worship was present in Europe at the time in France and Ireland; for example, the time from the winter solstice to the summer invoked a great number of rites in the countryside. They were concerned with festivities which, until the church finally put a stop to them, revolved around the sexual aspect that fire is known to provoke. It was this immoral conduct which Frazer refers to and also those practised at the festivities in Estonia and many of the villages in North India which he could not understand. He was noted to have written in his book Myths on the origin of fire about his disgust at "the scenes of debauchery in which the Estonians engage on the day of the solstice" and the fire festival in

⁷In 1100's

⁸Practised in India and in the Hawaiian islands, North America and South America

⁹As among the Indians of India and the Aztecs.

northern India, a festival "which is accompanied by singing and gestures which are licentious to the point of obscenity." (Bachelard, 1964p.34) Bachelard argues that Frazer eludes any detail of such activities as he refuses to concede that fire is connected with a very sexual desire and that fire could have symbolised the heat created during the physical motion of sexual intercourse. Fire over the years has largely been connected with love: 'Burning' passions and 'burning' desires etc. Tradition often recommends that the fires be lighted by a young man and woman together or by the last man in the village to be married.

The original purpose of the lighting of bonfires was to maintain the energy of the sun on its journey around the earth. It is interesting to see to what extent the sun is traditionally thought to need humans to maintain its heat and light, especially in some villages in the High Alps, in France - Comte, Lorraine, and Aquitaine where large wheels of straw were plaited, set ablaze and rolled from the top of the hill down to the nearest river.¹⁰

However is this marking how fires were made to worship the sun or was it primitive man's attempt to imitate the sun on earth. Apart from the sun worshipping, these fires were used to fertilise orchards, the land and even couples.

From the bonfires of these rituals ashes were taken which went to fertilise fields of flax, wheat, barley, whatever the crop. These ashes from such fires not only go to the land which is to yield a good harvest, but also mixed into the fodder of the cattle to make the animals fat or sometimes, it is so the cattle will multiply.

"Medicinal herbs gathered at the dawn of June the twenty-first, for example, they were supposed to have special powers, sometimes miraculous ones, provided that they were gathered before the sun rose and in accordance with the rites that varied from village to village. Newly wed couples that year for example would jump over its flames in the belief that they would bear children that year." (Singh, Madanjeet, The Sun in Myth and Art. 1993,p323)

¹⁰This custom dates back to the 1800s and was viewed as a form of sun worship (Sebillot Folklore de France) taken from Singh, Madanjeet 1993 The sun in Myth and Art p. 322



Fig 2; The tower as it is put on fire during the festival of St. Jean at Urbes, Vallee de Thann, Alsace, France.



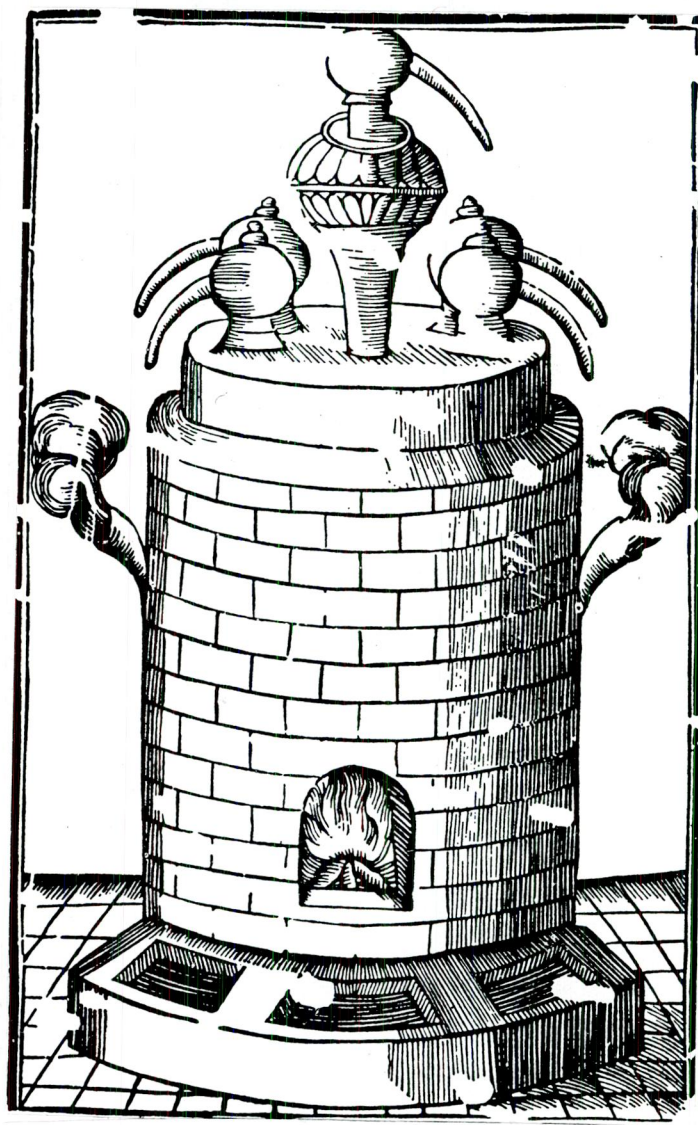


Fig 3; The Anthanor, alchemical furnace.

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Main body of text, appearing as a large, faint rectangular area, possibly containing a document or a large figure.



CHAPTER 2

PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRE : NIGREDO

Do you really believe that the sciences would ever have originated and grown if the way had not been prepared by the magicians, alchemists¹¹, astrologers and witches whose promises and pretensions had first to create a thirst, a hunger, a taste for the hidden and forbidden powers? Indeed, infinitely more had to be promised than could ever be fulfilled in order that anything at all might be fulfilled in the realm of knowledge. (O'Hear, Anthony 1988, The Element of Fire, Science, Art and the Human World, p. 54)

? This rhetorical question by Nietzsche gets straight to the point of how science tries to clinically dissect hundreds of years of tradition and belief by pickling them and labelling them in jars as samples of 'times of ignorance' or 'stupidity'. Naturally, science must progress and Nietzsche accepts this but is frightened at what little spiritualism remains. This excerpt is taken from his book The Gay Science of 1887, (which runs parallel to Darwin's theory of evolution; the effect on the psyche of the people is as relevant to the demise of alchemy here) .

Nietzsche's sentiment also points out how the sciences dried up the imagination and enthusiasm of the people. There was no more fear of the unknown, or rather excitement from the fear of the unknown. Alchemy was thanked for its contribution to the field of science but what it had stood for had been completely abandoned. This was so that new science could take over painlessly and without much of a struggle. Nietzsche only maintains that there was such strength and passion for the discovery of the elixir of life. In an effort to investigate the psychological background behind this great enthusiasm, I will attempt to briefly outline the religious and psychological problems which directly relate to alchemy.

¹¹ Some alchemy was practised in China and India before the birth of Christ. But it developed into a major system during the next three hundred years. The Greek speaking scholars of Alexandria used it in trying to explain how Egyptian artisans made jewelry. Greek-Egyptian alchemy spread through Syria and Persia to the Arabs. It first spread to Western Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

(World Book Encyclopedia p.110)

The most commonly understood doctrine of alchemy is the desire to produce silver or gold from a base metal (most commonly considered to be lead), by freeing the crude materials of their impurities. First a combination of chemistry and magic studied in the Middle Ages, alchemy tried to prepare a liquid which would work this change on any metal, also cure any ailment and prolong life: the elixir of life.

Aristotle¹² believed that all nature was created from prima materia¹³ or, prime chaotic matter. It was believed that the form which a substance may take depends on the proportions of each of the four elements, earth, air, fire and water, when combined with hot, cold and wet or dry.¹⁴ He thought they could change one substance into another merely by changing the balance of these elements, a process called transmutation.

"In its fullest sense alchemy is a philosophical system containing a complex and mobile core of rudimentary science and elaborated astrology, religion, mysticism, magic, theosophy and many other constitutes. Alchemy dealt not only with the mysteries of matter but also those of creation and life; it sought to harmonise the human individual with the universe surrounding him." (The World Book Dictionary, p52).

The alchemist took all the scientific information which was available to him and incorporated it as one; this, in the alchemist's doctrine, was the only logical explanation of life in the kinetic universe. Alchemy and astrology became closely related because of the belief that each heavenly body represented and controlled a certain metal:

"Some thought the sun represented gold; the moon silver; Mars iron; Venus, copper; Jupiter, tin; Saturn, lead; and Mercury, the metal mercury also called quicksilver. Alchemists believed that the positions of these bodies influenced the success or failure of their work." (World book Encyclopaedia 1957. p121).

"The importance of alchemy for the historical development of chemistry is obvious, but its cultural importance is still as little known that it seems almost impossible to say in a few words wherein it consisted" (JUNG, Carl, 1953 Psychology and Alchemy, p234)

¹²Aristotle, Greek philosopher, educator, and scientist 384-322 B.C.

¹³Prima materia was believed by Aristotle to be the original state of all matter before transmutation, without any character or features.

¹⁴From Fabricus Johannes 1976, Alchemy p.11

Alchemy, however, can also be seen as a metaphor for the pursuit of golden enlightenment; this is seen in the search for the 'philosopher's stone' (a magical substance that was supposed to make transmutation easier) This 'philosophical gold' is mirrored in religious belief or icons; for example:

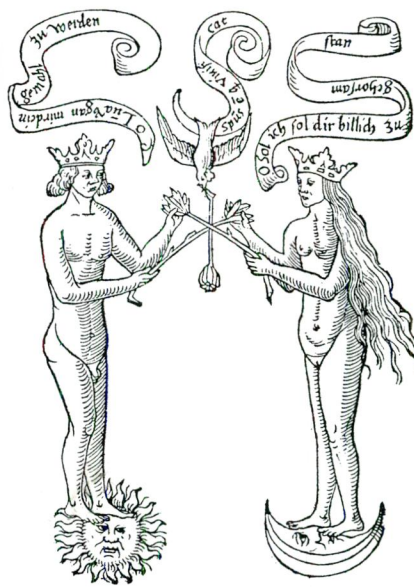
"The Christ symbol is of the greatest importance for psychology in so far as it is perhaps the most highly differentiated symbol of the self (apart from the figure of Buddha)...however the self is a union of opposites and this is where we differ from the symbol of Christ. The androgyny of Christ is the utmost concession the church has made to the problem of opposites." (JUNG,1953, p78).

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, alchemy endeavoured to fill in the gaps where the image of Christ did not suffice. Through the use of allegory, the alchemists ran counter to the church in preparing to seek through knowledge rather than find through faith. From the alchemical illustrations it is clear that it was through this union of opposites that we have creation, especially in the imagery of the king and queen, or brother and sister joined in incestuous love. It is the basic understanding of reproduction seen as the union of male and female, which is depicted as sol (sun) and luna (moon); figs.4 and 5 demonstrate this theory behind the alchemists symbolism. The alchemists imagery of the king and queen as day and night is based on the universal understanding that there has to be a union of the opposite sexes for reproduction to occur. So it is natural then that they would come to represent man and woman as day and night, as one, not possible without the other. These fundamental observations show how it could be viewed that alchemy stood on the verge of Heresy by shamefully highlighting how the church avoided the subject of sex. Sex was to be kept hidden or private and even the singular, omnisexual image of Christ as 'the one God' and 'the creator of all living things' (without the presence of a female) went against all primal knowledge.

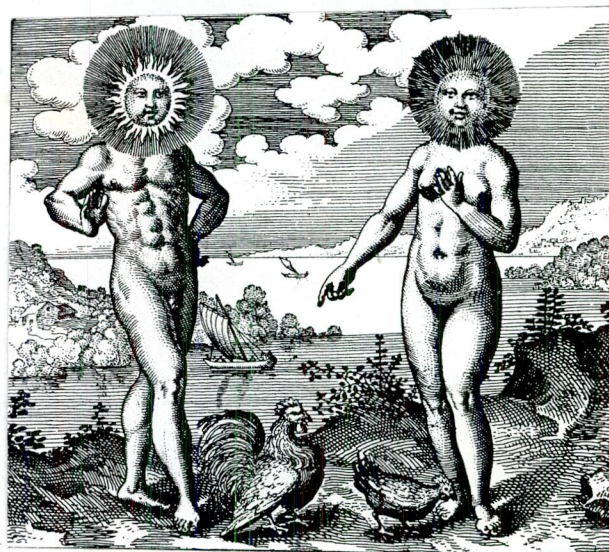
It is interesting also how the church perceived night or darkness. The church's insistence that light is good, on one hand and darkness is not, on the other, is another example of an unnatural balance:

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness; and the darkness grasped it not." (John:1:1-14)

This darkness is what I found intriguing in the insistence of the alchemical pursuit for 'gold'. This brings me to the specific stage in the alchemical process known as Nigredo on which I am focusing my investigations. The



54. The incestuous roots of sex unveiled.





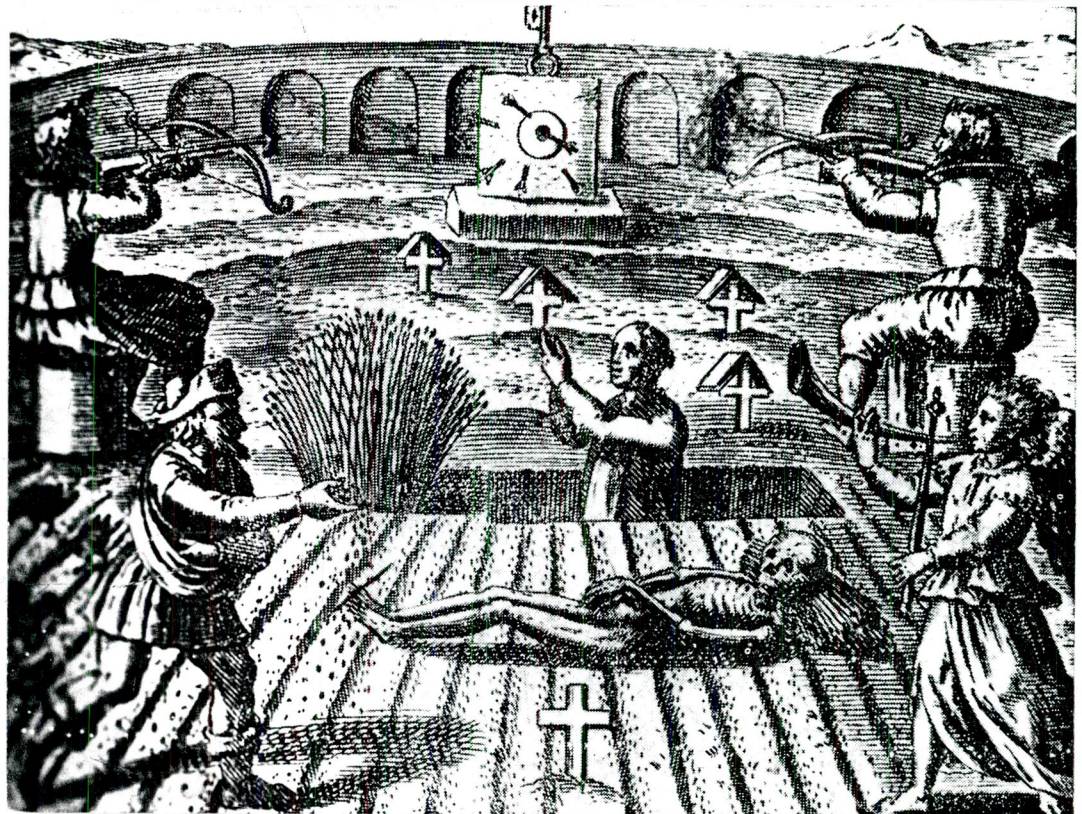


Fig 7; The putrefactio without which the "goal" of the opus cannot be reached from the target-shooting. Solcius de Stolcenberg, Viridarium chymicum, 1624.

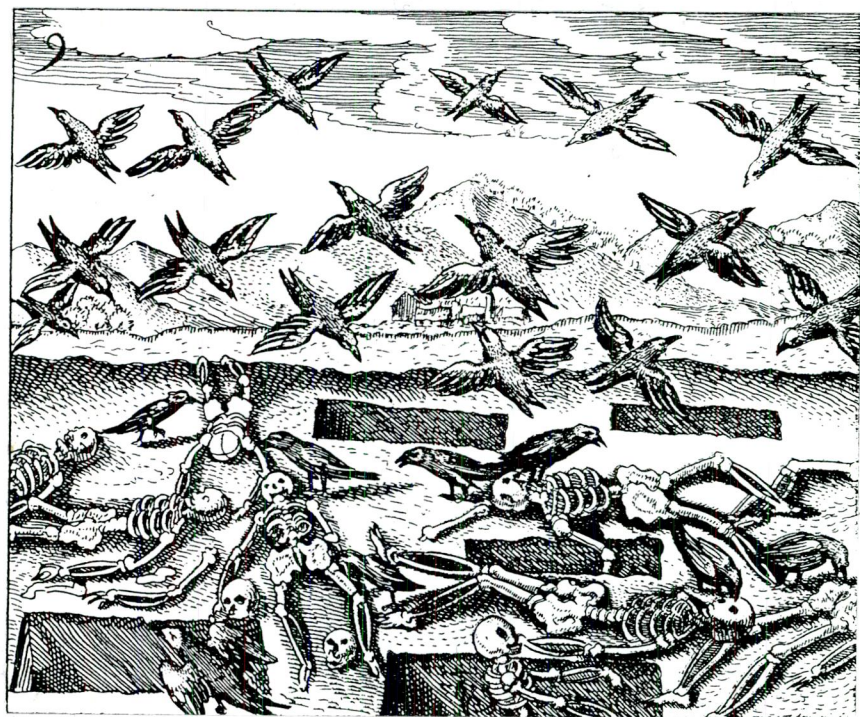
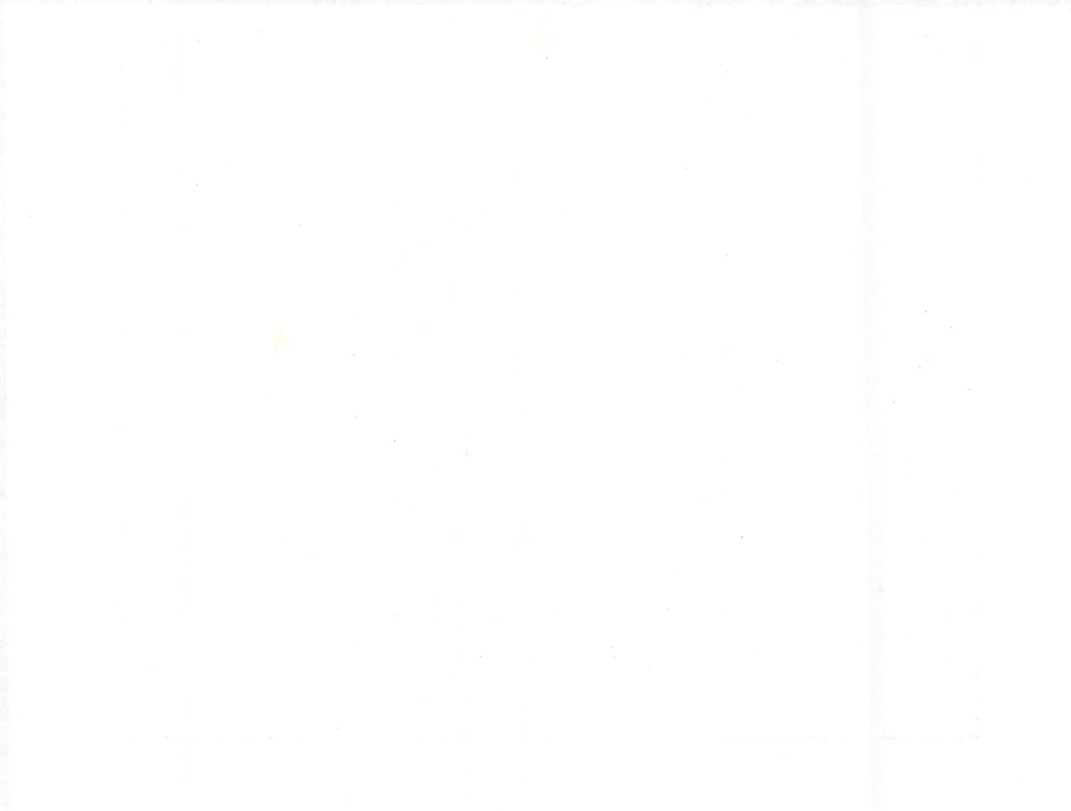


Fig 6; Fears and horrors of the damned; the stench of graves and putrefying corpses.



alchemists believed this was the signal, the first sure sign, that they were on the right path. The Nigredo phase in alchemy can only be attained on returning to primal matter (prima materia).

“Prima materia is a state of death through extraction of all characteristics and features, when a body is dead featureless mass.” (Fabricius, 1976, p.15)

This stems from the alchemical principle of putrefaction and the belief that all nature is renewed after dying, that, in order to grow, (as seen in figs.6 and 7) an organism must first die. Any fruit must putrefy before its seeds can take root and produce more fruit. Similarly, dung, which is considered to be matter in a state of putrefaction and hence close to death, is renowned for its life-giving properties as a fertiliser. The burning of wheat fields to carbonate is also Nigredo, the blackening before the new crop begins its next life cycle. It is the time after putrefaction (when the wheat has been reaped, so nothing worthwhile remains).

The symbolic use of black for Nigredo is parallel to human belief that things must always get worse before they get better, that we must reach the lowest of lows, the blackest of blacks before we can see the light. This is to say that it is at this black stage we realise we are to emerge from this ‘death’. Nigredo is symbolised by the black crow, black sun, a dead or decaying corpse, a black bird, black man or slaughtered king.¹⁵
(Figs. 8 and 9)

Traditionally Nigredo¹⁶ is followed or announced by Massa confusa (fig. 10) the moment before rebirth or redemption. The light emerges from the darkness. The process in alchemy starts with the Nigredo, the pivotal stage, the first of four stages when the alchemist is said to be loved by the four virgins of the Sun, which are the four regiments of fire, the four degrees of fiery love by which the alchemist is seduced (fig.11). In the four stages represented on vessels balanced on their heads, Nigredo appears first as an inky man; this heat is described as "Slow and mild as of the flesh or embryo " (FABRICIUS, 1976, p15). This represents conception, when the embryo lives in darkness before it starts its external life of light. Even the reference to the embryo

¹⁵The alchemic symbolism of Nigredo or putrefaction, with its graphic representation as black crows, skeletons, skulls and other funeral signs embraces the concept of life renewed. Hence it has been said that it signifies "rebirth of matter after death and the disintegration." (World Book op, cit p10).

¹⁶(Massa Confusa i.e. chaos: compelled disorder and confusion Collins Dictionary) in the alchemical it relates to the elements and strictly followed astrological charts.

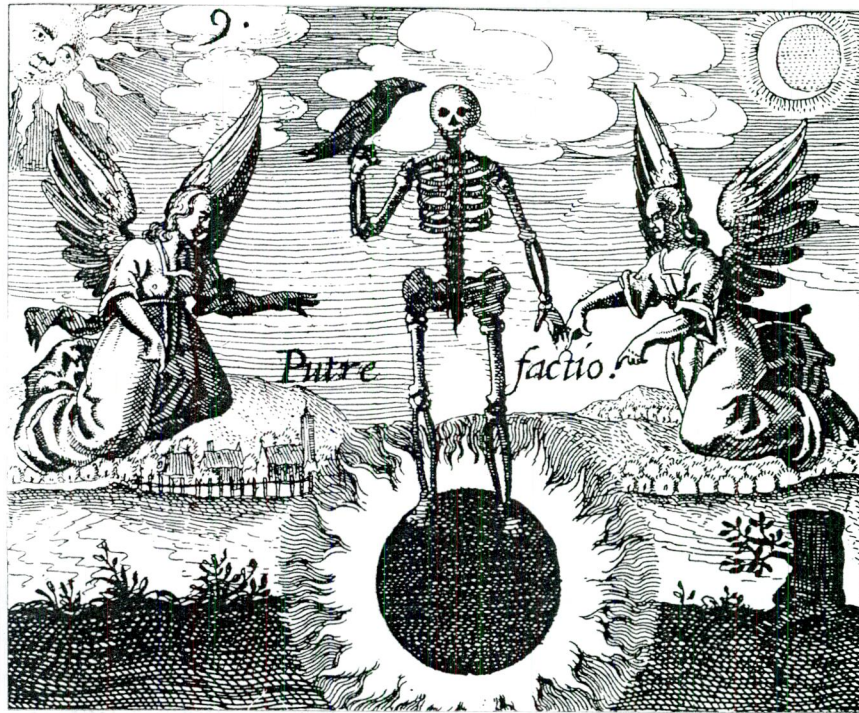


Fig 9; The stone of solar and lunar conjunction turned into the black sun of death.

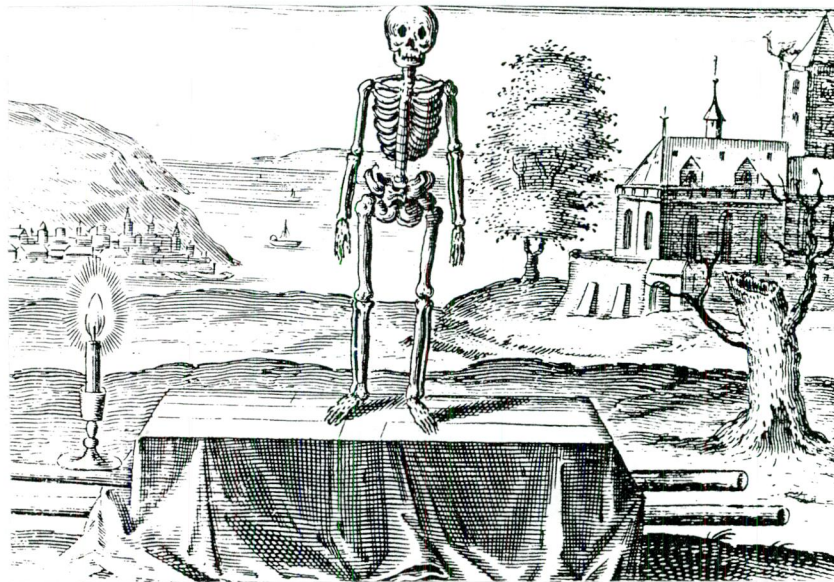


Fig 8; Blackening of the sun at its zenith: "In the midst of life we are in death."





Fig 10; The unfettered opposites in chaos. "Chaos" is one of the names for the prima materia. - Marrolles, Tableaux du temple des muses, 1965.



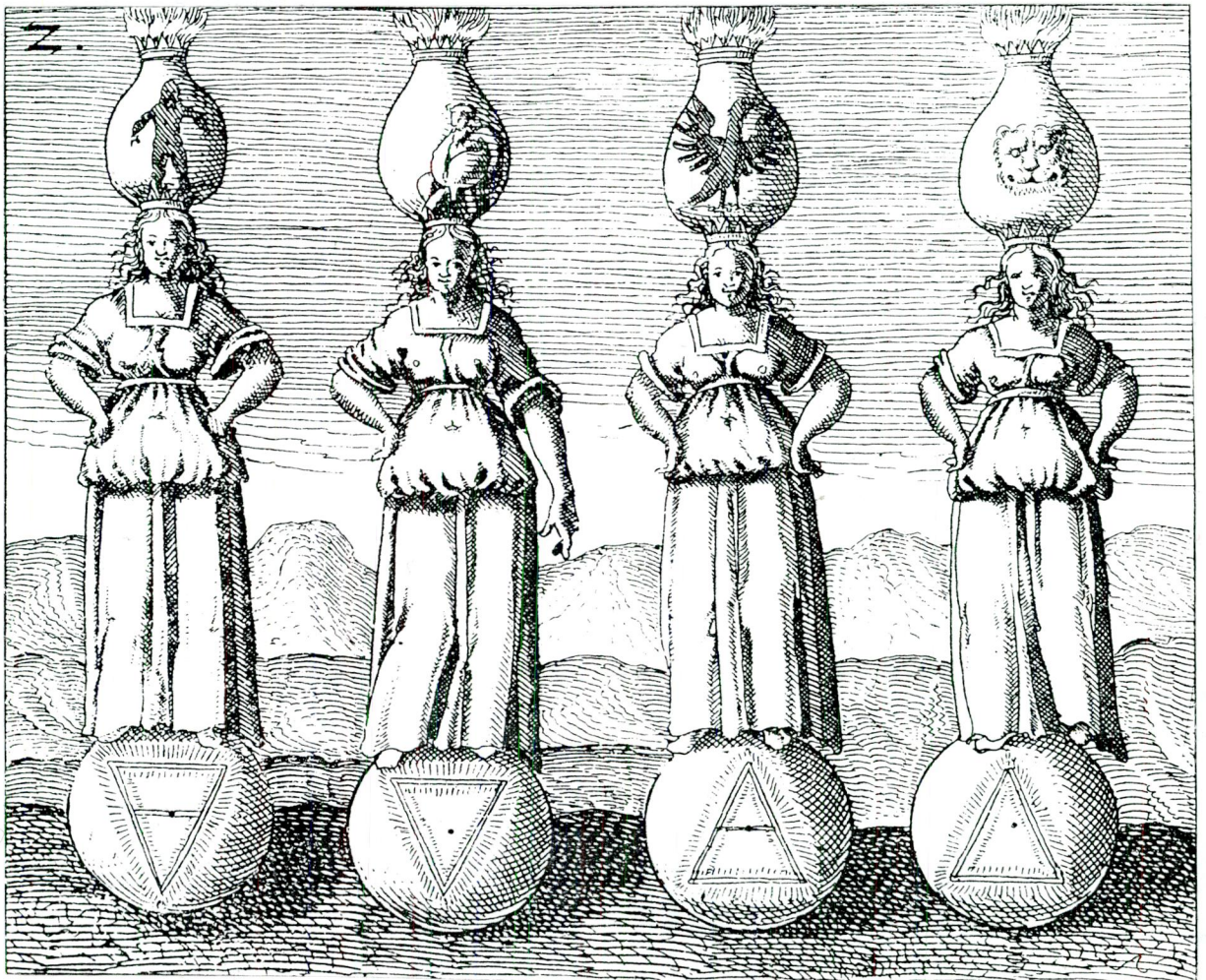


Fig 11; Four sisters, four elements, four fires, four colours, and four stages of the work.



symbolises the birth of something new, another specific reference to birth and darkness:

"Darkness is a matrix: It bears the embryo within it. Metals grow in the earth's depths, it is the furnace of transmutation. Copper will only find rest in gold, the other pole is that of the icy light of pure crystal. (Houshiary, Shirazeh,1993,Dancing around my Ghost p.94)

Nigredo will appear during our lives many times when we experience changes. Today it is recognised as depression, 'the change of life':

"The terms life and death are too approximate in a reverie the word death is vulgar. It ought not to be used in a micrometaphysical study of the being which appears and disappears only to reappear. Besides if one dies in a certain dreams in reveries or in other words in the peaceful oneirism, one does not die. It is necessary to add that, in general manner, birth and death are not psychologically symmetrical, in the human being, there are so many forces being born which do not, at their beginning know the monotonous fatality of death. One dies only once but psychologically we are born many times "

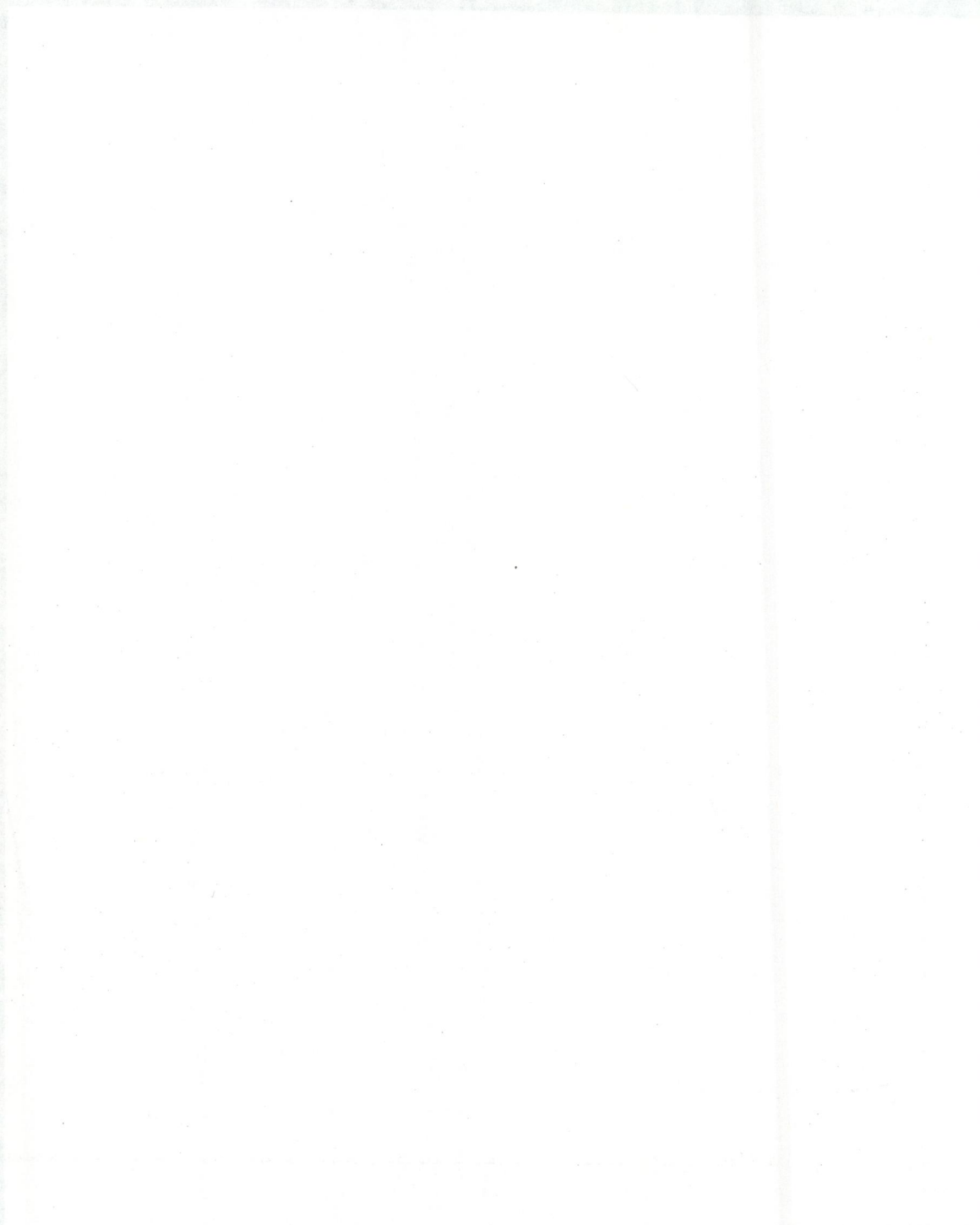
(BACHELARD, 1949 Poetics of Reverie p.110)

Bachelard, in his The Psychoanalysis of fire never once comments on the blackening due to the burning action created by fire but in his Poetics of Reverie he makes clear references to the psychological Nigredo we all experience in our lifetimes. And equally Carl Jung speaks of how Nigredo is present in our minds, in the darkness of ignorance, when we feel we will never actually know what is hidden from us,

"When the exploring consciousness was confronted by the dark void of the unknown, in which figures the laws were dimly perceived and attributed to matter although they really belonged to the psyche " (JUNG, 1953 p232)



Fig 12; Dante is approached by a fierce lion on straying from the right path.



NIGREDO IN DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY 1: INFERNO

The psychology of Nigredo has been embraced and used by many artists and poets. Dante's¹⁷ Inferno is an example of the common use of Nigredo imagery in contemporary literary society. Dante skilfully uses the allegory of his character (of the same name) to tell of his exile from his native Florence; Dante in his poem confesses to thoughts of lust and pride but the covetousness symbolism of the she-wolf is not mentioned. It is this sin (the charge of corruption in public office) that Dante was charged with and which caused his exile.¹⁸ The Nigredo is symbolic in so many areas here. He dates his story 'the middle of life', when Carl Jung in his Psychology and alchemy date suggests it is not uncommon for this spiritual Nigredo (melancholy) to occur, in modern society it is more commonly recognised as a 'mid-life crisis'. Dante finds he has strayed from the 'right' road and is lost in a dark wood. He tries to escape by climbing a beautiful mountain, but is turned aside, first by a 'gambolling' leopard then by a 'fierce' lion (Fig;12) and finally by a 'ravenous' she-wolf. As he is fleeing back into the woods, he is stopped by the shade of Virgil. It can be suggested that the dark wood is the beginning of the putrefaction of the poet Dante. But, it is in these dark woods there the three beasts dwell. The beasts represent sins of lust, pride, and covetousness, respectively thoughts within him that must be discarded before the Nigredo can begin; therefore, Dante is experiencing putrefaction. On shedding such sins, he is returning to prima materia. The alchemical furnace in this case is the merciless fire of hell:

" Once lost in the dark wood, a man can only escape by so descending into himself that he sees his sin not as an external, but as the will to chaos and death within him (Hell) . Only when he has died to sin can he repent and purge it "
(Sayers,Dorothy .L. 1949, Dante: The Divine Comedy, Inferno, p23).

Dorothy Sayers refers directly to the commencement of chaos and how it is inevitable before redemption is achieved by Dante's eventually reaching Heaven (gold). Purgatory marks the top of the beautiful mountain which he

¹⁷Dante Alighieri 1265-1321 his, Inferno dated 1300.

¹⁸Dante The Divine Comedy, 1: Inferno 1939 trans. and comment by John D.Sinclair.

hopes to climb and marks the next stage in the alchemical process called the Albedo.¹⁹ While previously the poet spoke of new hopes and optimism, when obstacles are put in his path:

**"So the sweet season and the new - born day
Filled me with hope and cheerful arguings." (Canto 1:line 41).**

Dante, now with a dawning and registration of what he must do, says:

**"Despair and whelming terror pinned me fast,
Until all hope to scale the mountain sank.**

**Like one who loves the gains he has amassed,
And meets the hour when he must lose his loot.
Distracted in his mind and all aghast." (Canto 1: lines 53-57).**

Finally Dante makes reference to the black sun as the she-wolf approaches him and forces him back slowly:

**"Which little by little edged and thrust me back,
back to wherein the sun is mute." (Canto 1: lines 59-60).**

¹⁹There are four stages known to the alchemists which mark the progression in finding the golden enlightenment,when transmutation into gold occurs.



Fig 13; Yves Klein: "Leaping the Void" Paris, 1960.

Gay's 100 Voids.

100

100

100

100

CHAPTER:3

Yves Klein is probably best known for his Monochromes of the early 1950's. Klein was a deeply religious man and saw the role of the artist as something sacred . In 1961 he gave his manifesto from The Chelsea Hotel, New York:

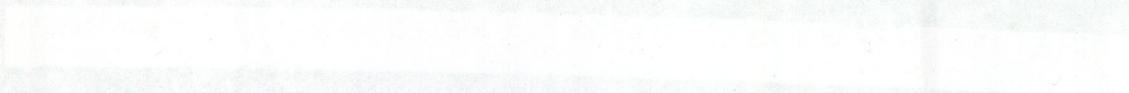
“In sum my goal is twofold; first of all, to register the trace of human sentimentality in the present day civilisation; and then, to register the trace of fire, which has engendered this very same civilization - that of fire itself. And all this because the void has always been my constant preoccupation; and I believe that fires burn in the heart of the Void as well as in the heart of man.”(Pierrer Restany,1990, Fire in the Heart of the Void, p. 6.)

During his brief artistic career (ended by his death in 1964) he exuded an energetic passion for the phenomenon of fire. He was deeply influenced by the writing of Gaston Bachelard, and saw links between his void and Bachelard's investigation into the nature of fire. Fig;13 is a performance Klein gave in order to express a type of literally leaping a void - the void of gravity, the void of air and earth. A retrospective of his work was exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in July 1995 which consisted of a cross-section of his pieces; the exhibition was called “Leap the Void”. This Void, which was Klein's obsession came from a great sense of absence he felt in his life. He said he sought something in his life, “that was never born and never died” (Weitemeier, Hannah, 1995, Yves Klein p. 7)

He learned gilding in London in 1949 to attain a physical result, He was fascinated by the delicacy and precious nature of the gold leaf (Fig; 14). He wanted to use gold to restore the idea of precious objects, to turn around the accepted use of gold or money as a means of exchange. This transformation was used gold to make the work more valuable in the sense of material value and also drew on the alchemical idea of the philosopher's stone. Gold would bring with it or lead to enlightenment. When Klein sold his pieces, payment for which was made in gold, he promised to return half his earnings to “the



Fig14 ; Yves Klein Untitled: Monogold, gold leaf on canvas 75 x 60cm, 1961.



mystical circulation of things", by putting it into new work, seeing gold once more as a symbol of perpetuity, physically and spiritually a force which transcends human affairs.

Klein saw the financial transaction as equivalent to the chemical reactions of the alchemists. The exchange would produce a form of enlightenment through the act of restoration.

The three main colours Klein was using in 1949, gold, pink, and blue had been an inspiration from the heart of the flame. He felt this was transforming and unifying the nature of fire. Klein's Fire Sculpture and Fire Wall of 1961 (Fig;16). Exploit the idea of the primal relationship between man and fire. I have placed Toshikatsu Endo's Erosion VI, Fig;15, here also to show a similarity in their goal's but as we will see in the next chapter this is where the similarities end. Klein would literally light these pieces as a physical gesture which expressed his spiritual quest, so fire became the creator, destroyer that gives away secrets of the universe. The use of fire in religious ceremonies was also an important factor that adds to the power of Klein's art. Fire was very much Klein's tool, as it served his purposes. Fire Sculpture and Fire Wall were recorded by his allowing them to scorch paper. The contrast between the flames and the scorch marks reinforce the paradox of fire, with the light of the flame and the dark of the scorchmarks Fig .16(a) of the burnt paper. Klein in the same year went on to produce about thirty 'fire paintings', using a flame thrower and cardboard. Some of the pieces were lightly scorched and others were reduced to charcoal. I can see how Klein was attempting to show similarities by his use of the alchemical symbolism of transmutation (his use of fire), but in many ways it seems to be a half-hearted attempt to convey such deep feelings about the void which was his fascination. This, however, is only if we consider Klein's extrovert behaviour; if indeed he believed himself to be an alchemist, would it not be a contradiction to the alchemist's oath of secrecy²⁰ to announce this search for the elixir of life? Could it not be said that the alchemist's maintained their power through their use of allegory, and it is arguable that Toshikatsu Endo, is more successful in filling the absence he feels by his subtilty and understated qualities in his minimalist style.

Klein is not completely unsuccessful in his interpretations. Klein would also used female models to wet the front of their bodies to make an impression in water on the cardboard as in Fig;17 and 18. The wet areas resisted the

²⁰ In 1400

(Fabricius 1976, p.11)



Fig 15; Toshikatsu Endo: Water Erosion VI; water, fire, glass board, beaker, 1990.

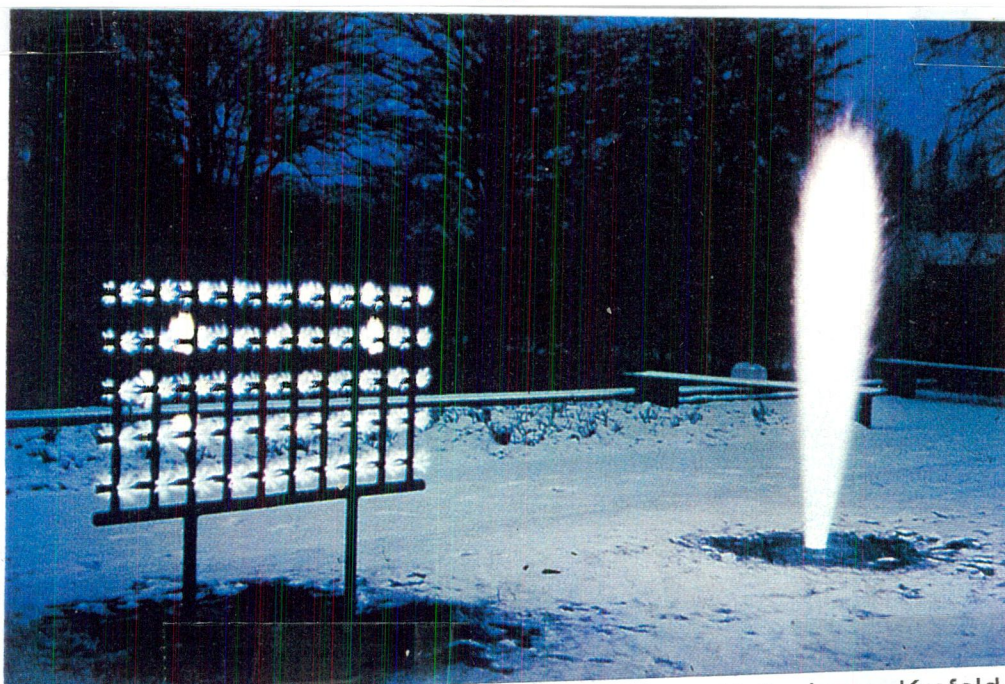
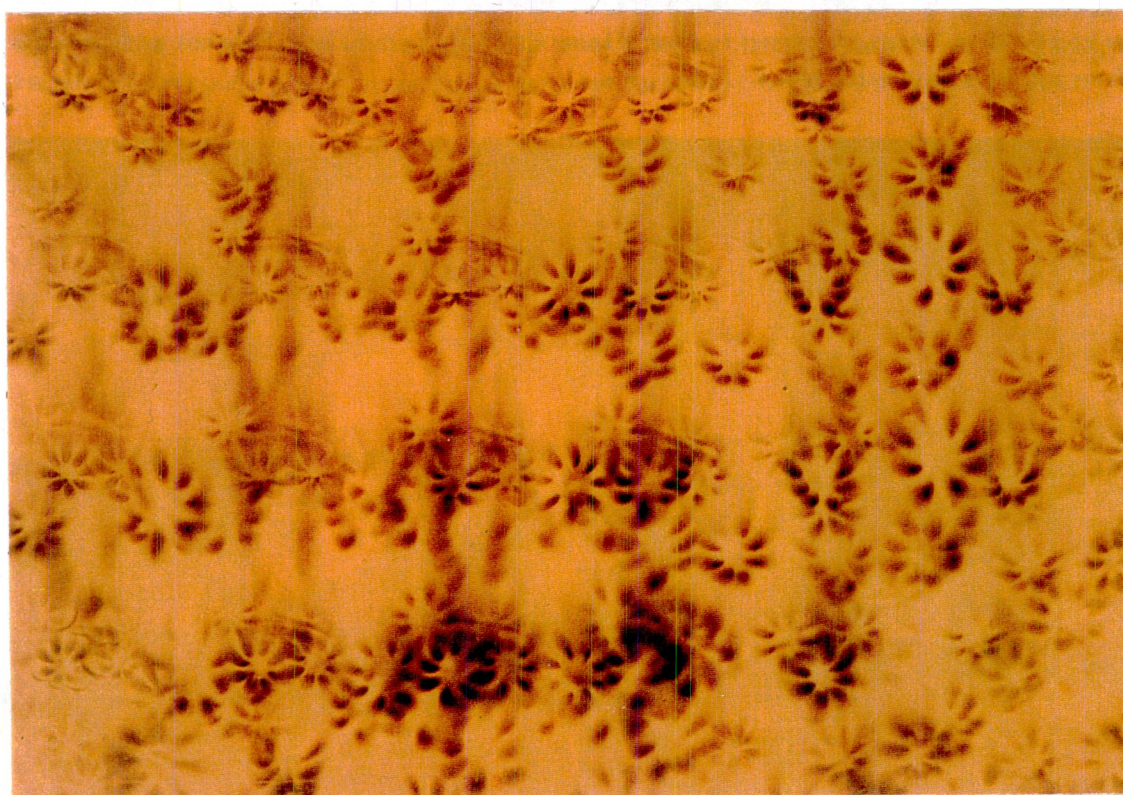
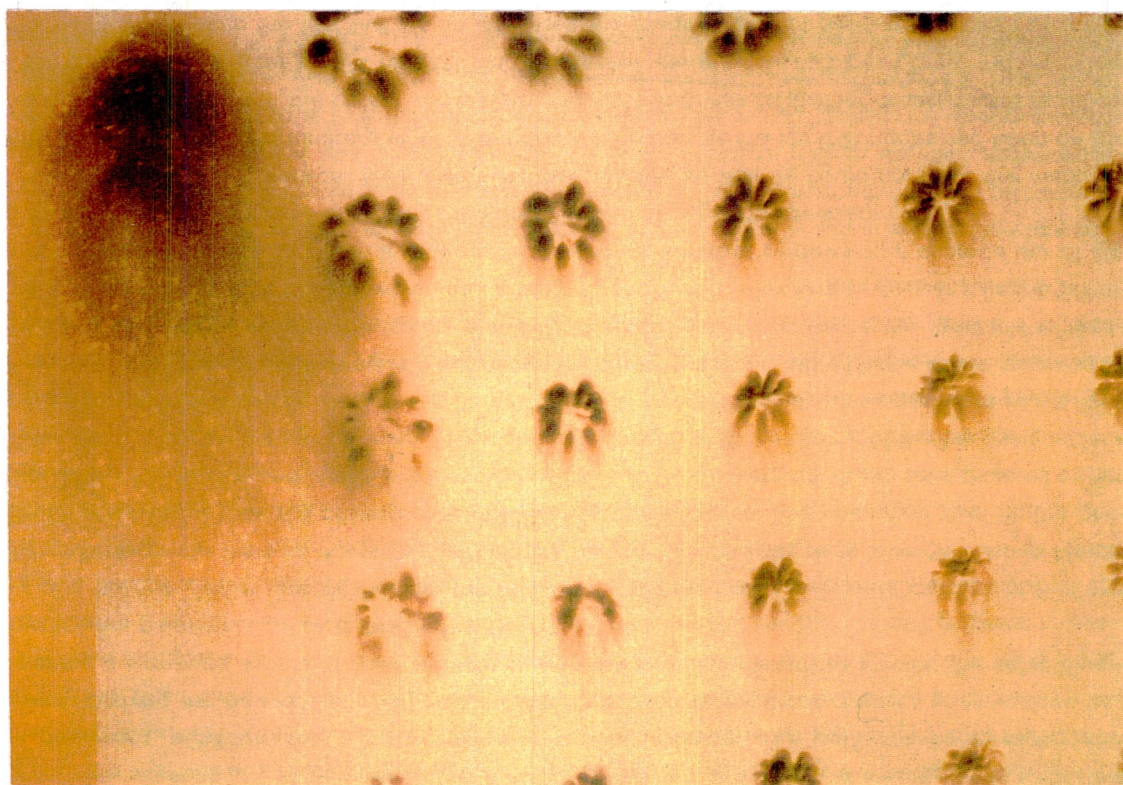


Fig 16; Yves Klein: Fire Wall and Fire Fountain, Museum Halls, large, Krefeld, 1961.





flame for longer and left a shadowy image of the figure. Fire would be used by the alchemist's to try to bring about material transformation. Klein's flame would create an image; the transformation of the model's form and the surface of the paper.

Critics wrote about the transformation Klein underwent as he worked, as if he were possessed. He must have understood, however, what he was doing and had been aware of the many mythical and psychological ideas he was playing on. To see Yves Klein attacking the cardboard with his flame thrower is to see the work. With Klein's fire paintings the event holds more significance than the results created on the cardboard. Therefore the painting viewed on its own is less experimental than the act of painting it as, when viewed this way, the work could be seen as simply a different way of painting a nude; which is not what Klein intended at all. The void, and his interpretations of that idea, is not a static concept. Klein's void is dynamic fire at the heart of the void it is a vessel for change to occur. The void can shape, mould or destroy. Therefore in my opinion, without keeping in mind the creation of these pieces, they would become poor representations of his idea.



Fig 17; Yves Klein Untitled: Fire painting, 130 x 97cm



Fig 18; Untitled: Fire painting, 130 x 97cm, 1961.



CHAPTER 4

“ You cannot get the idea of fire only by contemplating the phenomenon of fire. Fire is one of the world’s primitive forces, along with such materialistic phenomenon as earth, water, air and the sun. The most important thing is that a real sense of these things is attained only by coming into cosmological contact with such things as fire, earth, water and the sun

(Endo On Fire, 1989 Nordic Exhibit p.32.)

Toshikatsu Endo was born in 1952 in Japan. He is one of the only artists I have found to be so completely aware of the element of fire. In his numerous essays on his work,(which revolve around the application of the element), I believe he has shown a rare interest in both physical and psychological fire. Gaston Bachelard wrote extensively and very naturally about the psychoanalysis of fire, but Bachelard’s study focused on reactions, beliefs and a subliminal fire which is in our everyday lives. Endo has incorporated spiritual and ritual (sacred) fire, the phenomenon of fire and the actual burning and blackening(Nigredo) in his work. He says

“This has long been a part of man’s knowledge. And finally, unison with Eros, the world catches fire, and holiness is born through ecstasy and horror. Destruction cannot be attained without contact with what is holy. Death and life cannot be separated from the problems of image and language. This is the reason for man’s need for funerals and the mysterious, lucid atmosphere connected with them”.

(Endo On Fire, 1989 p.32.)

Endo's portrayal of the need for these opposites sheds a light of acceptance on Julia Kristeva's anxious view of contemporary art. He has a calm perspective, stemming from his understanding that we must have 'chaos ' in order to live.

"My overriding impression is that we have never been in such a state of crisis and fragmentation in terms of both the individual - the artist, and the aesthetic object. The crisis is such that not only do we have difficulty with the question of

the work of art, but also the question of beauty itself seems unbearable." (KRISTEAVA, Julia, 1995 Rites of Passage p.8)

There are strong undertones of melancholy or depression (which Jung sees in the signalling of Nigredo) derived from the dawning of the year two thousand. Endo is constantly aware of this fear, and explains it will be a perpetual fear as long as we exist.

" My wish is that this could continue endlessly and peacefully. However, the feeling of agitation inside me follows the light born in moments when the chain is breaking. Do people really believe on the overcoming of evil? They admire unions that try to abolish imperfections; marriage that is the union of man and woman, peace that is a union between states, friendship, a bow to God. Nevertheless, the ultimate and extreme form of union is nothing other than losing oneself; it is death; destruction."

(Endo On Fire, 1989 p.32.)

In the midst of chaos comes calm, tranquillity, and solace. Endo expresses in one broad circle the anguish and fears of a society and subjects them to ravages of fire. This depression which hung heavy in the air is now unrecognisable under the blanket of black charcoal ready to start anew. Fire acts as a tool to remove all unnecessary elements, but is not to be looked upon as fire the 'chisel'. Endo does not desire to create a figure or sculpt with the fire, rather he wishes us to experience the phenomenon of fire. On the surface, Endo's pieces consist of an accumulation of scorched wooden circles, cubes and rectangles. These basic forms are occasionally accompanied by water. Originally I chose Endo because I recognised the Nigredo in the blackening and burning of his work. I was surprised to discover his work was based on an inner ideology of mythology, spirituality and the human existence. Endo's compositions are very minimalist, this is true, although he denies adopting a minimalist style.

"Endo chooses to work with these simple forms not because of a predisposition of the formal minimalism (although he acknowledges its influence), but because, in his view they are infused with a kind of elemental presence. Yet he also tells us that his work stems from a profound sense of absence." (HUTCHINSON, John, 1990, Earth, Air, Fire and Water p.18.)

He describes why he removes these unnecessary elements:

This removal of the unnecessary is part of Zen Buddhist teachings which have had a significant influence on his ideas; but it also strongly resembles the

Alchemist doctrine of putrefaction. Only by this blackening or return to prima materia can Endo and his work achieve golden enlightenment. He says:

"I often burn my works to complete them. I think of this final burning as a form of burial . . . It is as though I am burning a sacrifice. It is a somewhat sadistic act, but at the same time a holy one. After everything has been removed, only the absolute remains." (FOX, Howard N.1990 A Primal Spirit p.25)

It is interesting to perceive Endo's spiritually imersed work within the context of minimalist doctrines; it is a feature of his work which is prominent and should not be overlooked. The well known minimalist artist Donald Judd delivered a lecture in Yale University U.S.A dealing with the issue of proportions 1983. He referred to his understanding and belief on defined space and proportions. These are imperative in the analysis of Endo's work and enforces his ideology of life and death. He says:

"...defined space is by its nature a detention defined by the human mind. The eye meets up with one or more clearly distinguished and easily comprehensible objects, and discovers in them the principal in its purest and most unembellished."(Donald Judd, Baden- Baden 1990 .p. 23.)

Equally Endo's pieces are so pure in composition that the burned wood provides a "black, blacker than blacks" (FABRICIUS,1976 .p.103) which can only contrast to white²¹Life and death he says is strictly a human preoccupation and it is precisely this threat to human existence which he would like to express in his work. In death there is absence, therefore it is the residue of what once was present.

The primitive imagination is thus presented as a phenomenon where death and life struggle with each other. Fire is directly connected with the present and the presence of the holy. Water, again signifies chaos, despite its tranquillity. When talking about the earth I have the feeling that there is no need to talk at all. The earth accepts all the words, and I would like to merge with the earth. In this state one could see the two contrasting lights. One could see fire and the earth setting off the reaction.(NANJO,Fumio,1989 On Endo Nordic, p.48.)

²¹In the state of Nigredo the following colour can only be white. As there is nothing else more black.



Fig 19; Toshikatsu Endo: (Event) Epitaph - Cylindrical II; wood, tar, fire, earth, air, sun; diameter: 250 x 240cm, 1990.

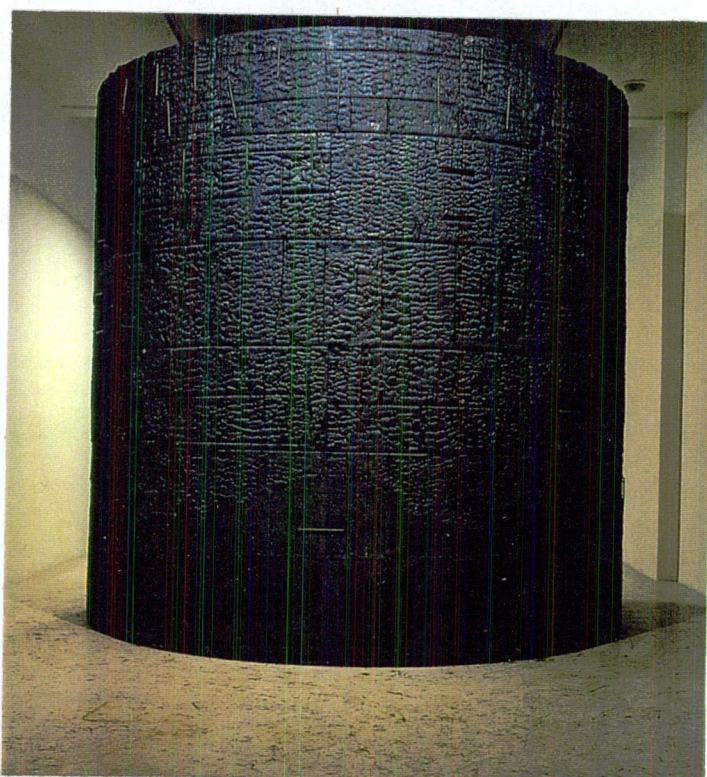


Fig 20 ; Toshikatsu Endo: Epitaph - Cylindrical II; wood and iron; diameter: 250 x 240cm, 1990.





Fig 21; Toshikatsu Endo: (Event)

Fountain , Earth, air, sun, wood, tar, and fire; nine pieces, each 130 x diameter 75cm, 1989.



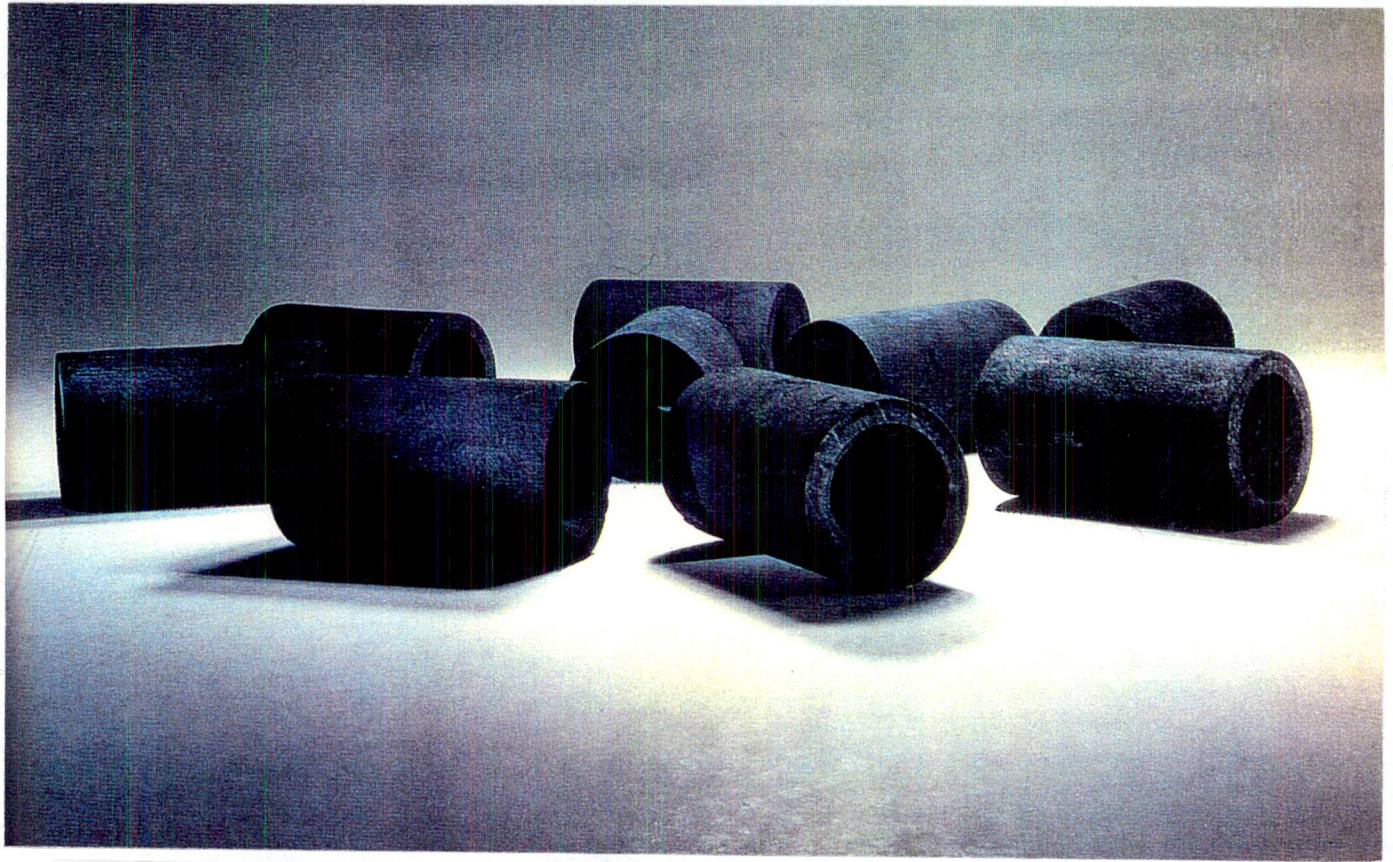
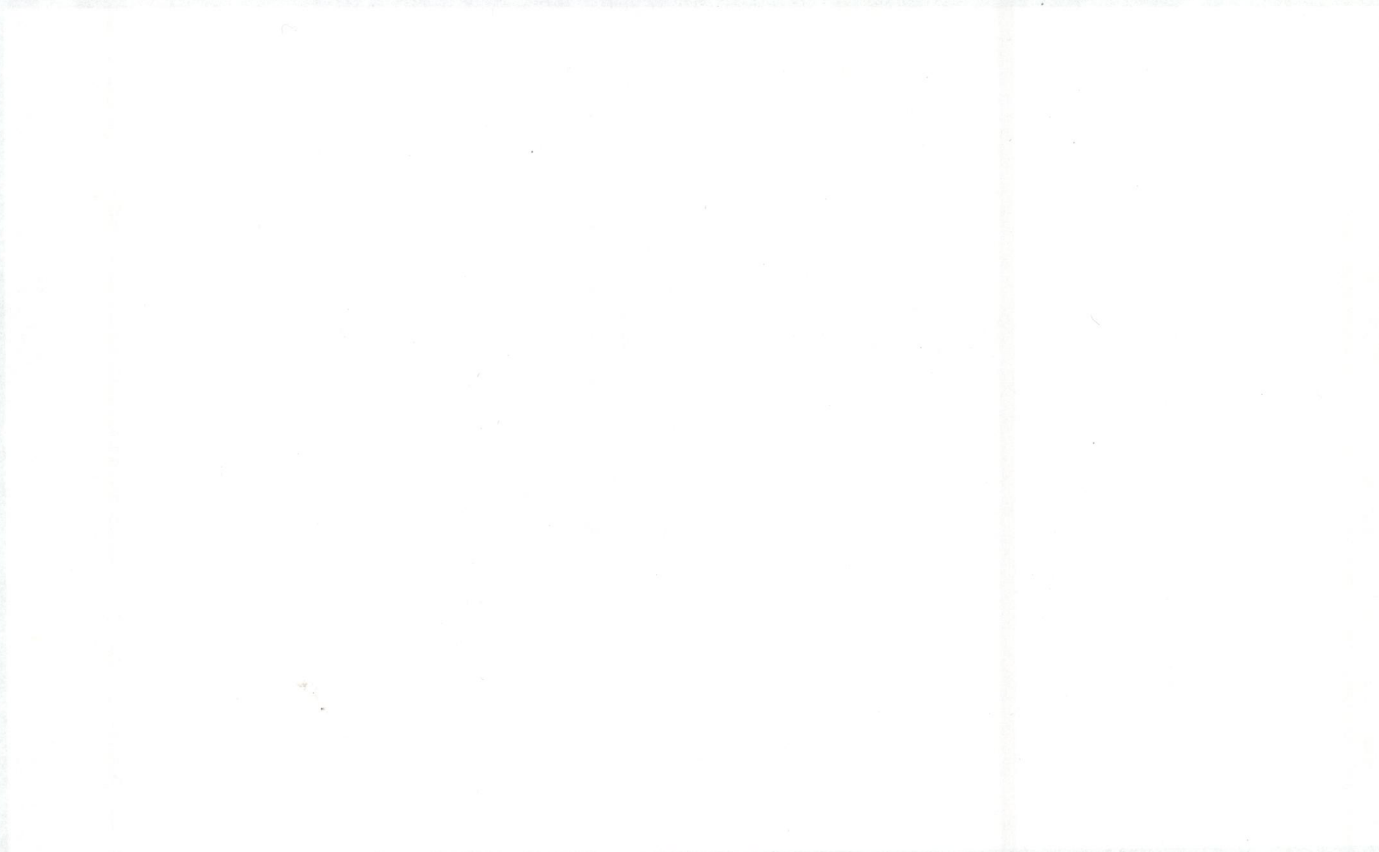


Fig 22; Toshikatsu Endo: Fountain , Earth, air, sun, wood, tar, and fire; nine pieces, each 130 x diameter 75cm, 1989.



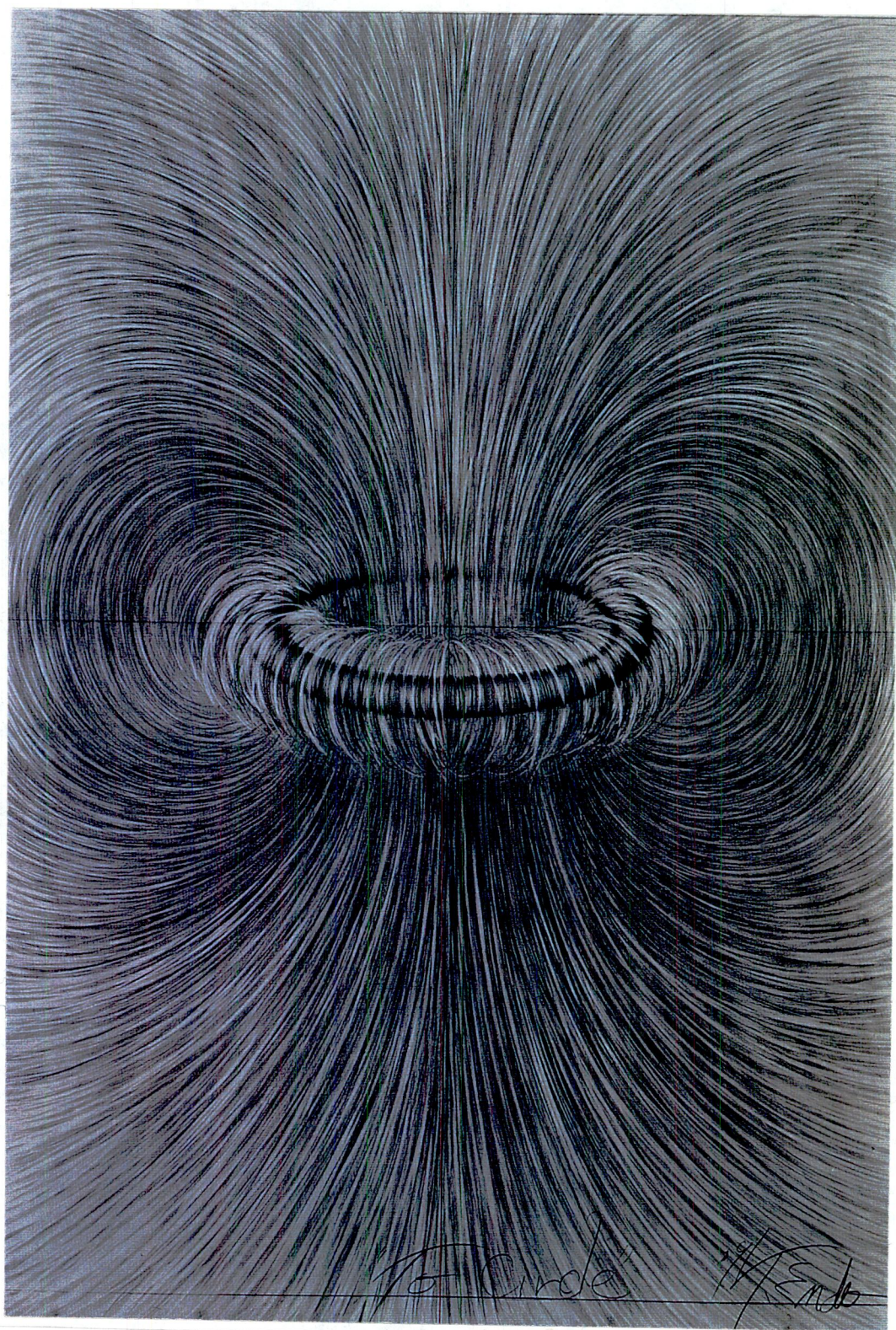
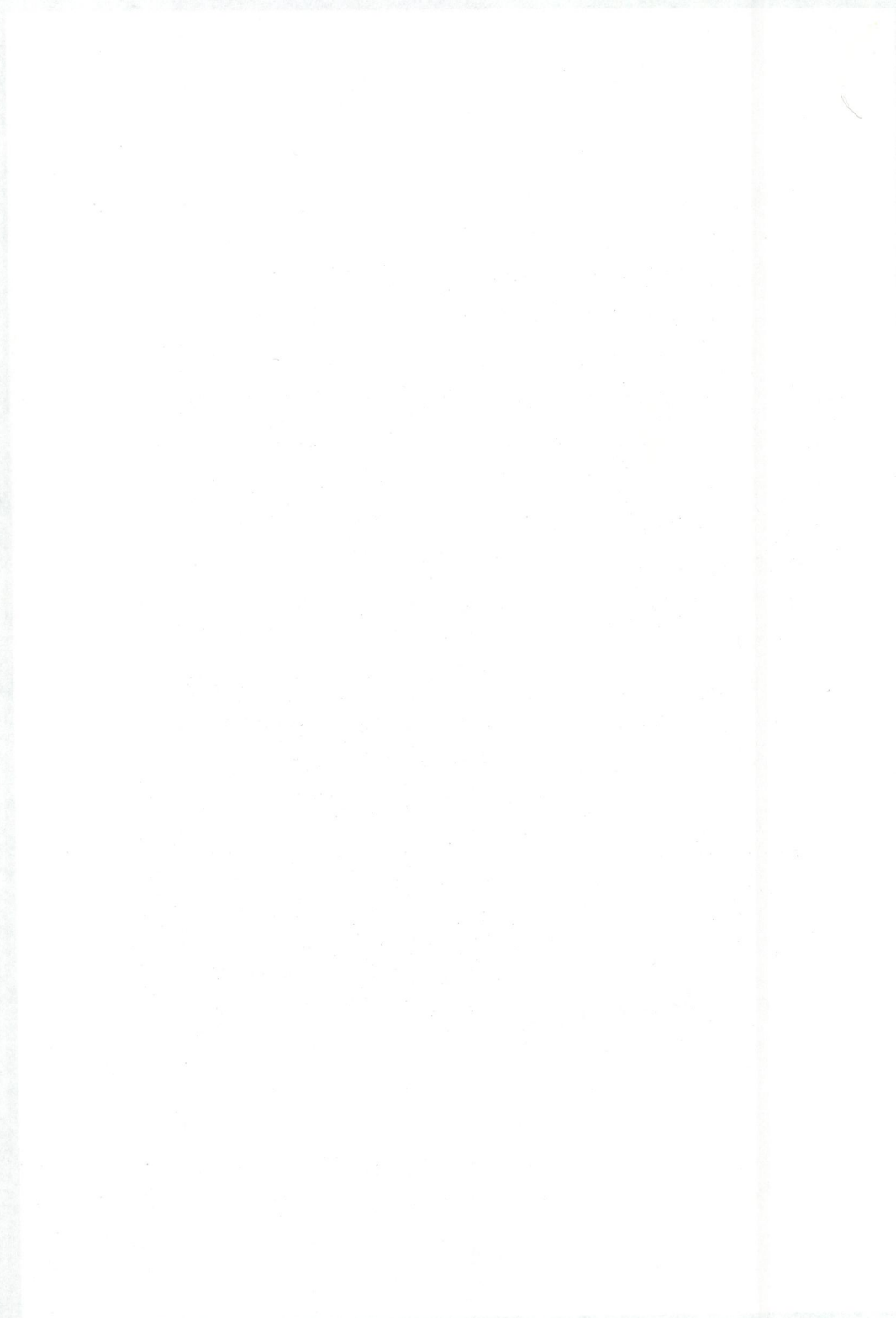


Fig 23; Toshikatsu Endo: To Circle; pencil and charcoal on paper; 202 x 138cm, 1991.



"The scorched black surface of the wood and its massiveness create a functional beauty which is simple and serious." (NANJO, 1989, p.49.)

The contradiction of life and death, absence and presence is also demonstrated in his proportional sensitivity which Judd remarks again on proportions, "embraces both evenness and beauty. This does not distract from autonomy, but the influence and experience is not to be underestimated" (Donald Judd, 1990, Baden- Baden p.24)

Endo's work relates to the fundamental human states of mind and has no need for specific interpretation. He speaks quite frequently on the ideals surrounding his work and admits there is room for irony; which he leaves the individual to explore in their own consciousness.

Endo takes liberties in relating to the alchemical symbolism of the anthanor more commonly known as the Alchemist's furnace. He compares hollowness to the eye of a hurricane: He says, "Accelerates the boundary centre into the furnace of transmutation" (Endo, Nordic, 1989 p.16). Endo possibly conceived the metaphor of the hurricane from the burning of Epitaph - Cylindrical II (fig 19 and 20.) the flames rise with such vehemence they are reminiscent of the "chaos" and "massa confusa" described by the alchemists to echo the onset of Nigredo. One can imagine elaborate transmutations occurring within the cavity when such is the intensity of the fire set upon it. Endo never makes any alliance with alchemy, but it is ever present in his symbolism, hence Fig. 21 and 22, Fountain 1990 (nine barrels) the ferocious force of the fire portrays the onset of Nigredo.

"Endo's thinking is aligned with the traditions of alchemy.

Alchemical fire blackens, destroys and magically revivifies: new understanding is ushered through scorched portals".

(Hutchinson, John 1990 Earth, Air, Fire, Water p.11)

So can we compare Endo to an alchemist in pursuit of the 'Philosopher's Stone', is he attempting to prepare a medicine, an 'elixir of life' (which is supposed to prolong life), the wood in his work has now become more resilient and will last longer from the burning Fig. 24 and 25. But does he see his work as comforting and reassuring not to fear the inevitability of death because in death comes rebirth? Endo stresses:

"He emphasises that his work is not about his wish to express his individuality it is universal. This art represents man's basic identity, but also a life in communion with the great universal truth." (Nanjo, 1989 p.15)

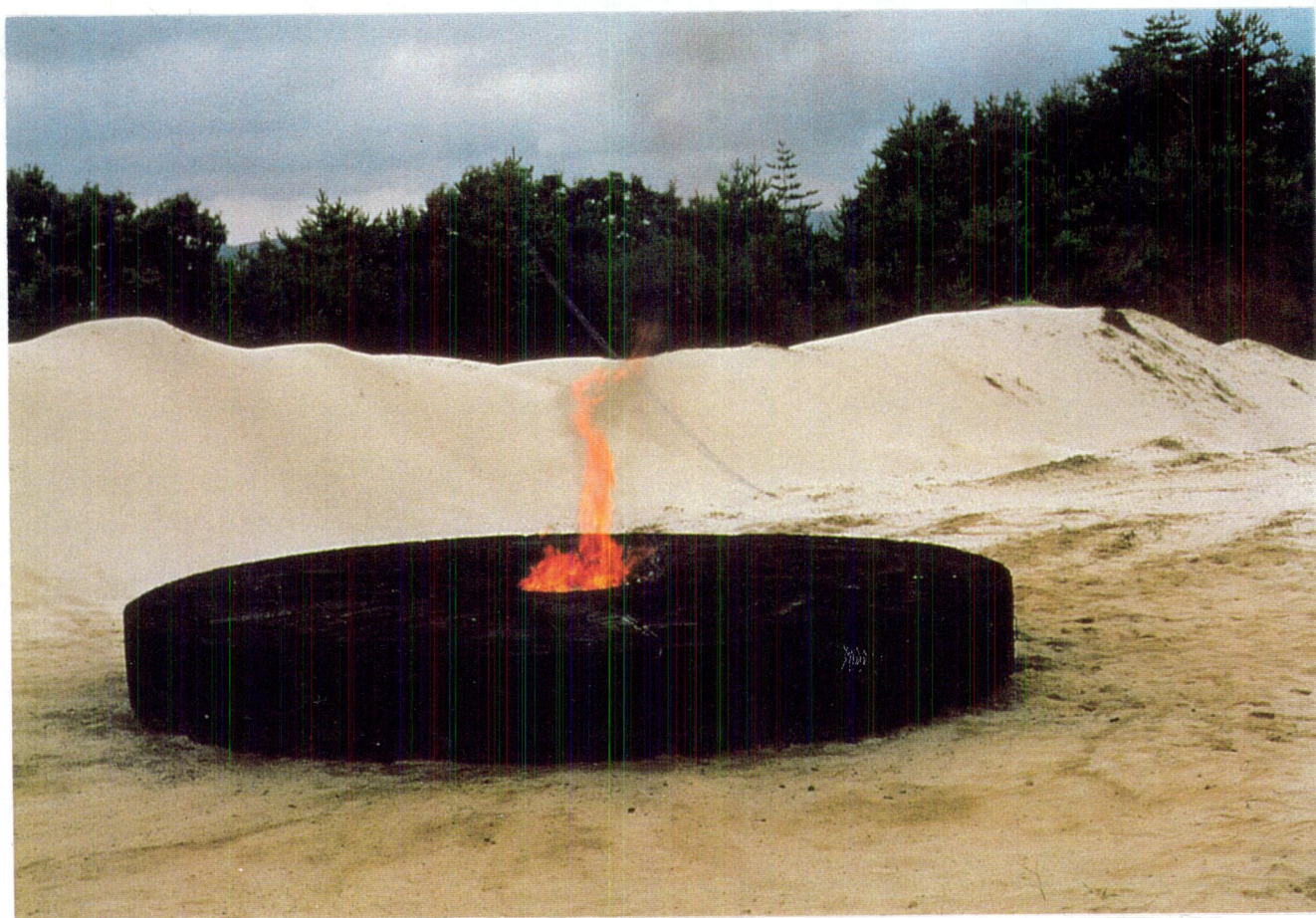


Fig 24; Toshikatsu Endo: (Event) Untitled; wood, tar, water, fire, earth, air sun; diameter: 35 x 330cm, 1989.



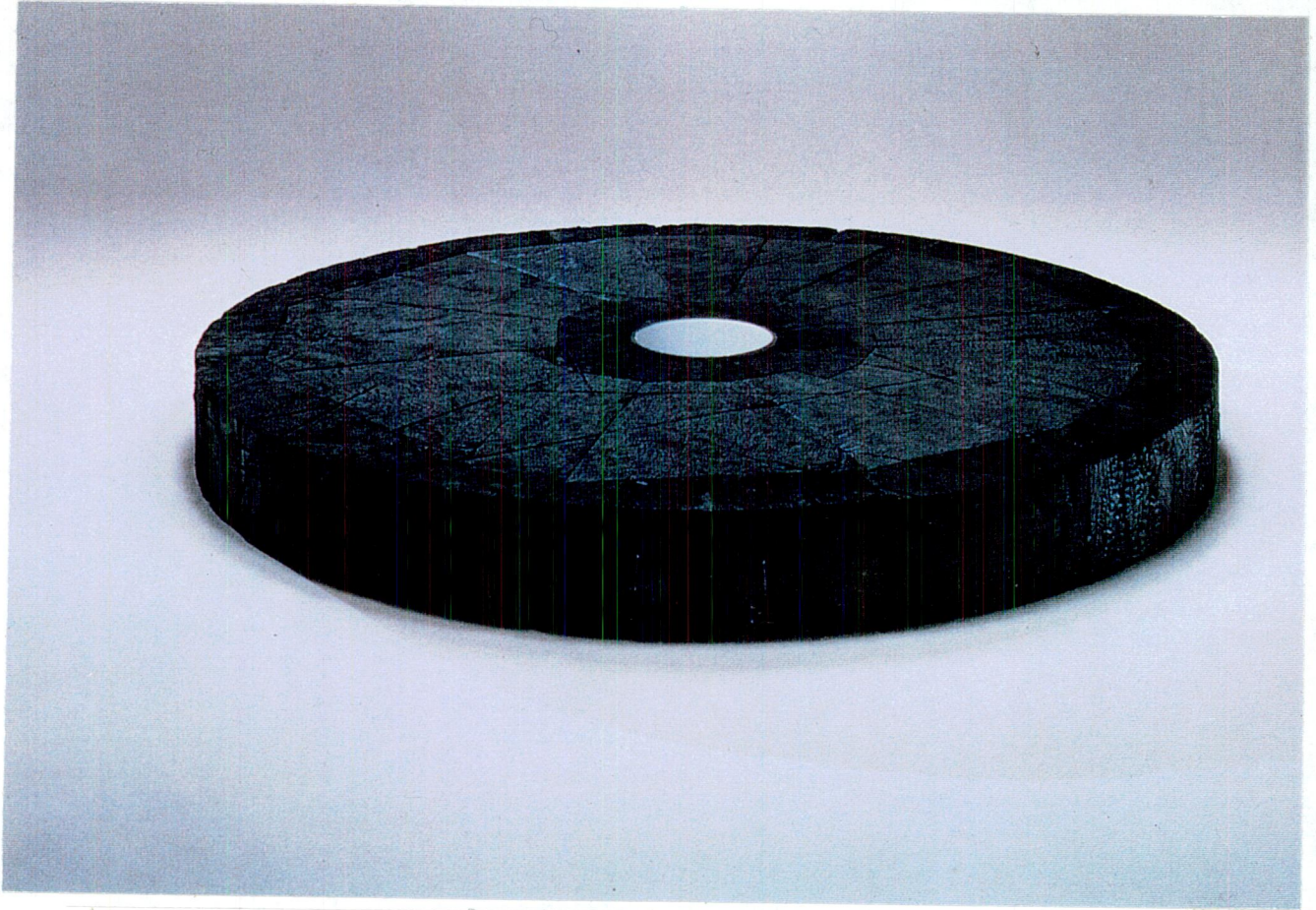
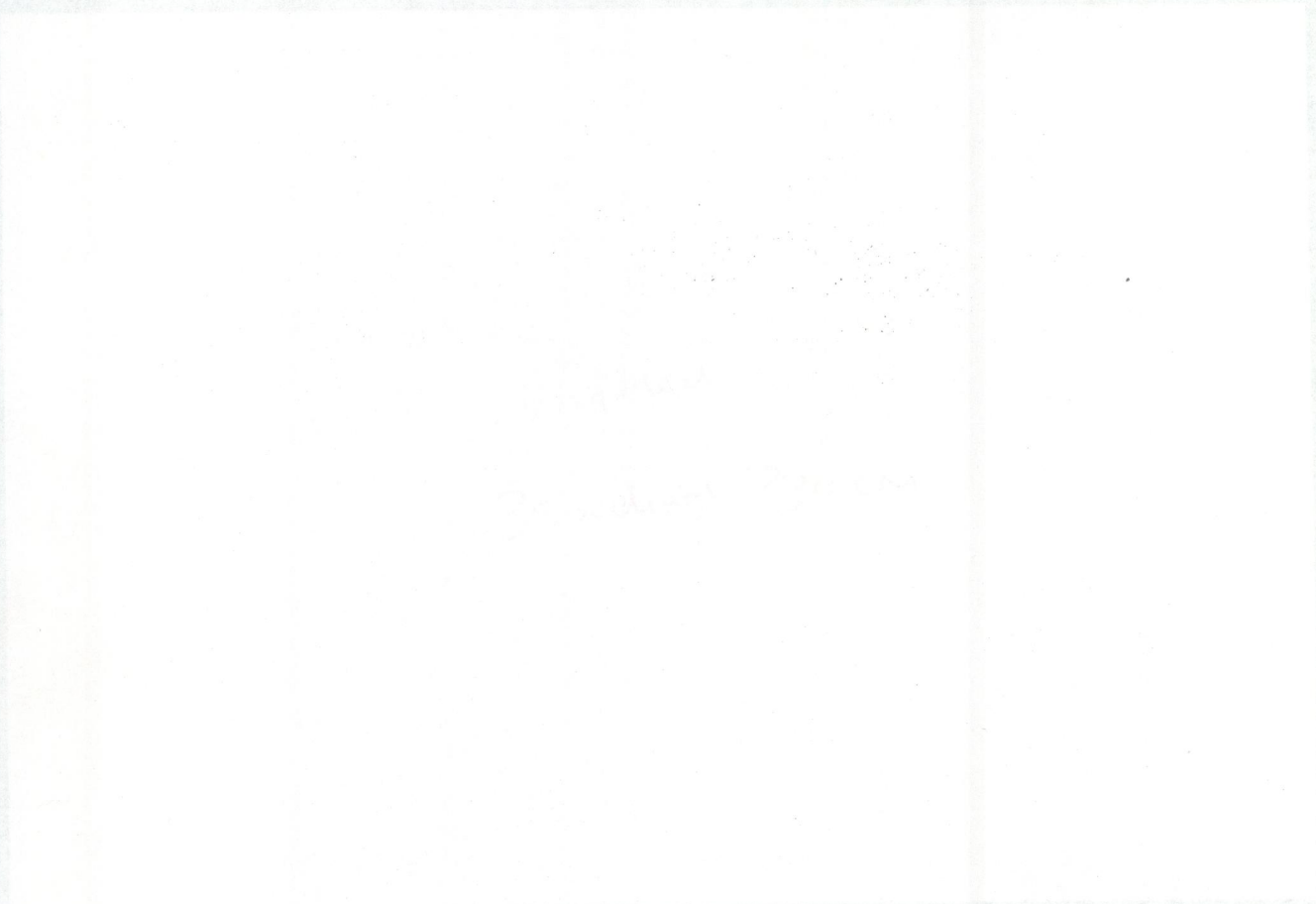


Fig 25; Toshikatsu Endo: Untitled; wood, tar, water and fire; diameter: 35 x 330cm, 1989.



POSTSCRIPT

The hearth has lost its place in the home, the idea of being lost in a concentrated stare at the flames is not applicable in today's society. The days of the hearth as the centre of the house, the gathering point are diminishing. No stories are exchanged. There is no need, television has banalised everything and separated us from the "real world" but arguably this is the contemporary real world. The utilisation of fire has arrived at its next stage, it has evolved into a slave to industry's needs or kept strictly for ritualistic and religious events.

I feel this is unfortunate as we have become separated from a phenomenon which in the past provided an energy unique to what is available to us today. The fire in the alchemist's furnace was never allowed to be extinguished. It could be said that artists like Yves Klein and Toshikatsu Endo were and still are of the same belief that this search for the elixir of life should continue. Endo represents a disillusioned generation. For him this is more prominent; Japan has evolved into a metropolis of technology, distancing itself more and more from the natural environment. Endo through his art recognises the necessity to return to Prima Materia. Hopefully the presence of Nigredo in Endo's work is symbolic of a light that can only follow darkness.

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