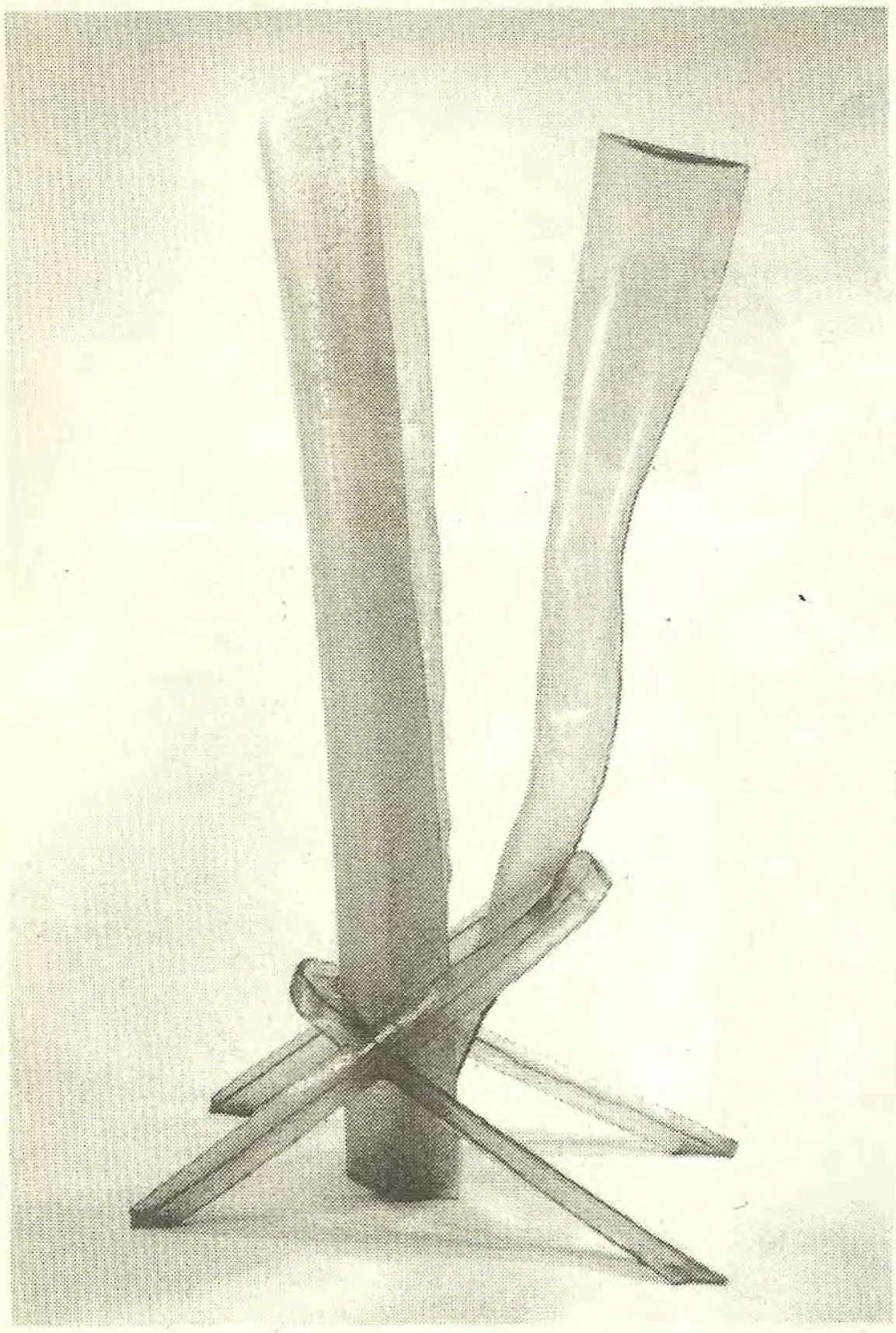
HEAD, HEART AND HANDS

Steven Kaplan



TOM BUTTER, *"S.C."*, 1985, fiberglass, resin, 93 x 40 x 23"
Courtesy Curt Marcus gallery

SAINT CLAIR CEMIN, *"SPHYNX"*, 1985, Courtesy Daniel Newburg Gallery

After years of skulking around as painting's dumb younger brother, sculpture has lately been experiencing a groundswell of support, evidenced by the increasing number of sculpture shows and by renewed critical interest in the subject. Within our insular art market place, these developments point to a movement in the making. Sculpture, once moribund, is now experiencing a miraculous resurrection. Writers, curators, dealers--everyone wants to join the New Sculpture Crusade as if in pursuit of the Holy Grail. This must come as some news to sculptors who have been working continuously for the past decade. Mark Twain once remarked that rumors of his death were "greatly exaggerated." So too with the death of painting, strenuously proclaimed during the heyday of Conceptual Art, then refuted by the burst of Neo-Expressionist canvases in the late 1970s, and now with the demise of sculpture.

Neo-Ex, followed by Neo-Surrealism and now by Neo-Geometric Conceptual Abstraction, have been the recent darlings of the art establishment. During the past few years. While critical attention has been focused elsewhere, sculpture has kept its faith privately, in art schools and studios. A whole new generation of sculptors in their 30s and early 40s have been taking advantage of their relative anonymity during the Neo-Ex steamroller to formulate new aesthetics and establish new priorities. Sculpture is now in the midst of a rennaissance, not a resurrection.

Meanwhile, sculpture has been fighting its own internal battles. Primary among these is a challenge to the Minimalist hegemony which has defined the sculptural output of an entire era, beginnning with the first critically appraised works of Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and Dan Flavin, and persisting until quite recently. Minimalism, that great shibboleth. Form reduced to pure geometry, single, unitary, without oragnic structure. Machined edges denoting the absence of the hand. Refined, seamless, industrial surfaces. The triumph of exteriority over internal reflection, irony, and humor. The end of history, or so it was thought by Judd and company.

The sculptors discussed in this article are Post-Modern as well as Post-Minimal. They are aware of their antecedents and borrowings, and in some instances display a keen sense of historical irony. Minimalism, as a paradigm of absolute form, provides a historical readymade for contemporary sculptors. The biomorphism of much current work refers to the heroic age of modern European sculpture: Brancusi, Miro, Giacometti. Elements of our collective unconscious and our instinctual totemic past are mined for their expressive potential. This pluralistic mix of sources includes materials lifted from commercial and industrial design, the decorative arts, and consumer culture. Every object, whether natural or fabricated, functional or non-functional, animal, vegetable or mineral, is fair game for sculptural interpretation. This pluralism transcends the traditional non-organics of Minimalist materials (bronze, steel, concrete) by incorporating "gentler" craft substances: fiberglass, beeswax, veneered wood, string, paper, pigment and fabric.

To those still worshipping at the altar of Minimalism, contemporary sculpture's freedom of sources and materials might be indicted as mindless and undisciplined, lacking Minimalism's conceptual edge and its commitment to dogma. But while recent sculpture is less overtly political, its blatant, celebratory physicality does not obscure its commitment to issues. These issues have certainly changed since the sixties. They have broadened and become subject to irony and self examination.

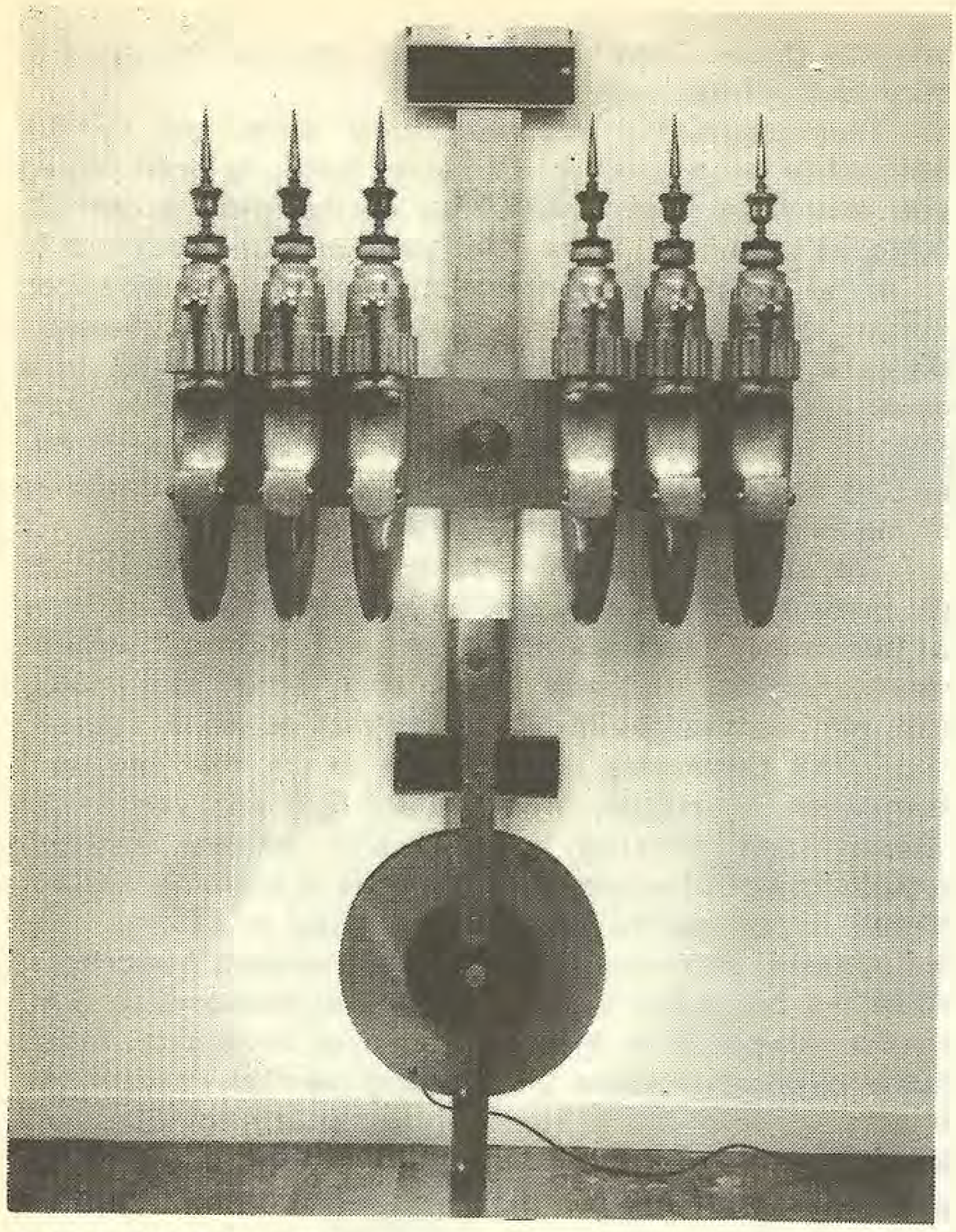
Technology, for example, once embraced by the Minimalists as a positive, liberating force, is now viewed with scepticism and ambivalence in the wake of OPEC, corporate chicanery, Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. It is no longer seen as an anonymous benefactor but as a tool, yielding up its autonomy to the will of special interests. Hence a return to work that is obviously of the hand, to a personalization that can be trusted and understood. Among some of the younger sculptors the idea of the neutral object, existing in a vacuum of aesthetic appreciation and untouched by the marketplace, is also being called into question.

The extent to which Minimalism has been subverted and yet maintains its influence can be seen in the work of **Tom Butter**, whose fiberglass and wood pieces combine organic, usually vegetative, forms (stem, vine, frond, leaf, petal, pod) with the vestiges of Minimal geometries (cone, cylinder, arc). The shimmering transluscence of the fiber and resin skin creates an interplay of volume and light, an awareness of interior and exterior space, and allows for the superimposition of shapes. Human scale is implicit in Butter's slightly larger-than-life pieces, which used to be titled with the initials of jazz musicians and other resonant personages. Often the sculptures take on a gestural, interlocutory twist, as if making a point in conversation or thriving on a riff. Butter physically realizes the "thinking reed" of Pascal. His sculpture, rooted in a botanical morphology of fiber and membrane, reaches out of the greenhouse with a measure of artiface to communicate biomorphically induced, abstract beauty.

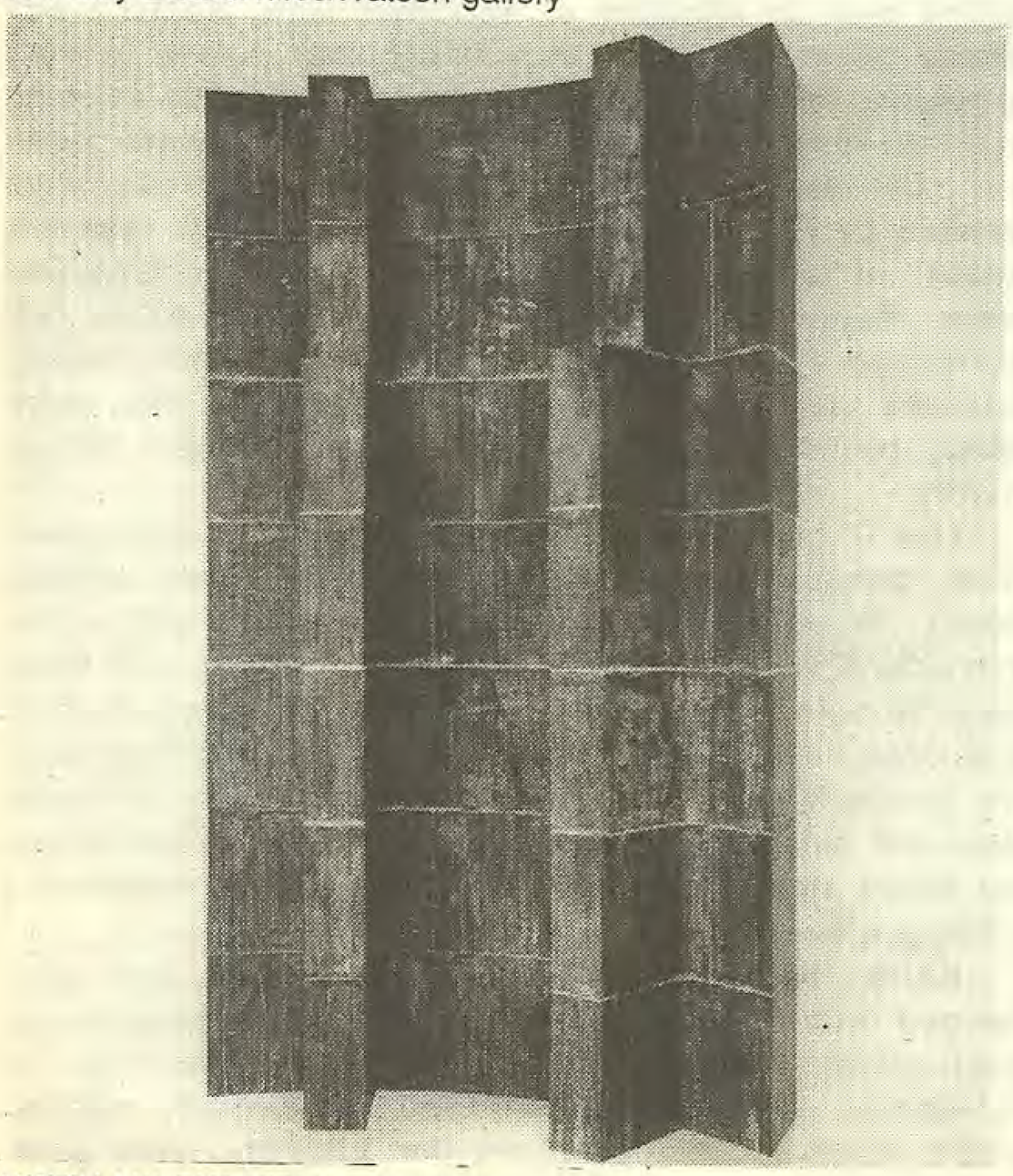
A recognizable theme recurs in **Scott Richter's** work with a tantalizing ambiguity that locates it in the terrain between the figurative and the abstract. Made of beeswax molded over an armature of wood and wire, Richter's wall objects suggest stylized, truncated human torsos in their burgeoning convexity from waist to shoulders, while adhering to a Post-Minimal austerity, like a Ron Gorchov turned inside out. The sensual, waxy surfaces, inherently organic, are enriched by Richter's spooky overpaintings, which resemble tattoos, or tribal cult markings. Over the past several years, Richter has been simplifying a basic shape, yet maintaining the connotation of torso. Alluding to primitive, ritualized violence, Richter creates "trophies" that seem equally bound for the Museums of Modern Art and Natural History.

Like Richter, **Robin Hill** models wax over a structure of wood, concrete and steel to create furled, often striated, pieces reminiscent of expressway ramps and other architectural volumes. The anthropomorphic residue of these pieces is more subdued than that of Richter's, but the drapery of a loose fitting garment can certainly be extrapolated from the gentle waves of Hill's sculpture. She contrasts geometric simplicity with rich material: a soft, tactile wax that allows structure to emerge from the depths, establishing a dialogue between interior and exterior.

Keith Milow's wall sculptures of sheet lead over plywood convey the same concern for transcendental architectural expression that informed his paintings of high-domed cathedral interiors and otherwordly, science fiction vistas. His penchant for ranked, rectangular arrangements suggests a hierarchical geometry common to Futurism and Minimalism. But Milow is no dogmatist. His art aims to elicit emotional states of awe and worship through



R. M. FISCHER, *"Northstar"*, 1986,
106" x 55 1/2 x 16 1/4", stainless
steel, aluminum, brass, elec. lights
Courtesy Baskerville&Watson gallery



KEITH MILOW, *"Untitled"*, 1986,
lead on wood, 234 x 133 x 45,5cm
Courtesy Nigel Greenwood gallery

precision and scale. The voluptuously tarnished, lead oxide surfaces provide an ironic subtext of time and mortality for these faux monuments, which explore an architectural vocabulary of concave and convex walls, slots, beams, buttresses, and joists. Milow builds his church from a heady blend of the emotionally absolute (like a Handel aria) and the physically precise (stone by stone).

Mel Kendrick vigorously explores the Constructivist tradition in his abstract, hand carved wooden pieces. Glued, sawed, drilled and chiseled, Kendrick's shapes recall early Modern forms (Cubist and Futurist) as well as primitive artifacts. The artist is strongly process oriented; each piece reveals an intensely muscular rhythm of curves, zigzags, wedges, twists and cutout holes which combine in a dizzying array of variations and counterpoints, building up a theme with the same virtuosity of invention that Bach reserved for his fugues. Kendrick is old fashioned in his attention to detail and in his schematic overdrawing and marking of surface (both preparatory to cutting and later, as a finishing touch). He often mounts his sculpture on a simple pedestal to facilitate eye level viewing, an anachronistic means of presentation, but one that communicates his respect for craft. This is work that needs to be seen in the round. Its articulation in space is so forceful and complex that the entire shape cannot be realized from any one angle; Kendrick's quirky, shifting morphologies bring us back around for another look.

Like Kendrick, **John Duff** is a virtuoso Post-Minimal craftsman, a relaxed but formidable inventor, partial to subtleties of process and presentation. Duff's abstract fiberglass wall pieces are biomorphic and seem particularly inspired by the mineralogical eccentricities of nature morte; animate life in repose or decease, the fossilized exoskeletons of marine crustacea, the husks and shells of reedy plant life. His fascination with life forms in vitro extends to simple tools, weaponry and folk artifacts; objects made from the detritus of cellulose and cartilage that is nature's burial ground. As a shell-like material that is translucent and grainy, fiberglass proves the perfect foil for Duff, and he works it like a magician. His vertical tubes, wedged, indented, bulging and twisted, are treated with enamel paint and shellac to create surfaces of mineral-like hardness, texture and sheen. They spiral inward and outward, showing the intricacies of contrasting volume, form and color.

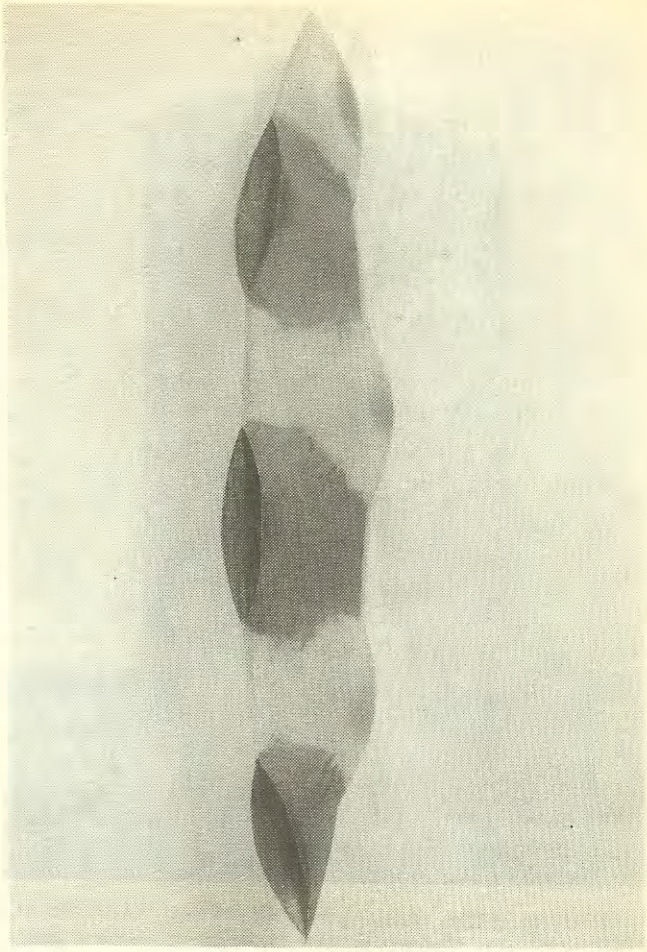
R.M. Fischer's lamps and assembled wall and floor pieces also come from an additive, Constructivist tradition, but use industry rather than nature as their given. Working primarily in fabricated, cast and found metals (favoring polished stainless steel, but often venturing into brass, steel, zinc, copper and aluminum), Fischer assumes an elegiac mock-heroic tone that befits his commentary on the brawling, romantic endeavor of American industry. Fischer's industry of choice is the movies; his take is figurative and media appropriative, a neo-Amercian Gothic straight off the classic Hollywood screen, part Flash Gordon rocketship (riveted stainless steel plates with light shining through their holes and slits), part Boris Karloff baronial dungeon (shields, spikes, spires, weapons and machines). It is no accident that Fischer's strongest statement is made in lamps. They allow him direct access to the huge vocabulary of slick industrial design, and place a functional restraint on his imagination: above all, these pieces have to work. Fischer successfully plays with cherished constructs of high and low art, contrasting cheap carnival effects with stirring passages of operatic artifice.

Wade Saunders is a rare entity, a sculptor who also writes about sculpture. ("His article, "Talking Objects; Interviews With Ten Sculptors" in *Art In America*, November 1985, covered some of the artists discussed in this piece). Saunders the critic paves the way for Saunders the sculptor, having organized his *oeuvre* into distinct periods and labelled them. As in his earlier work, his current "Indic Objects" reveals a playful biomorphism directly related to a specific culture and place, a conscious experiment that Saunders conducts on how particular cultural riffs can influence abstraction. In this series, the place is India, and the reference is Tantric cosmology, the randy, sexually transformative pantheon of gods and demi-gods that culminates in the ecstatic union of Shiva and Shakti. Saunders models the wax like clay prior to casting it in bronze. Tile-like shards seem on the verge of scaling off in "Rise," as the columnar lingam penetrates the lotus-petalled yoni, a nipple of gold marking their spot of blissful conjunction. Saunders selectively appropriates the look of a foreign mythology, playing with caricatures and quotations of form.

Saint Clair Cemin's distressed figurines, modelled after the tabletop curio or Victorian bibelot, inject traditional, figurative statuary with a sense of devolution and psychic displacement. These are the kind of objects found at antique sales, in head shops and reproduced in museum bookstores. Cemin's ostensible subjects run the gamut from ballerinas, cherubs, nymphs and busts to swans, sphinxes, bats and beasts--the paraphernalia of an overheated Victorian sensibility. In their usual functional context as bookends, ashtrays, mugs and tchotchkes, they recall the comforting effluence of a well stocked bourgeois household. But Cemin's objects, fashioned from marble, cement, plaster, hydrocal, bronze, lead, terracotta, alabaster, steel, and often jarring combinations of the above, are anything but comforting. They exist in a state of flux, caught as if in an instant of seeming meltdown or existential dislocation, their deformity a signpost for the identity of the Object and its instantaneous transformation into the Other. Cemin subjects his work to a slow boil that renders it mentally malleable, displaced in time and space.

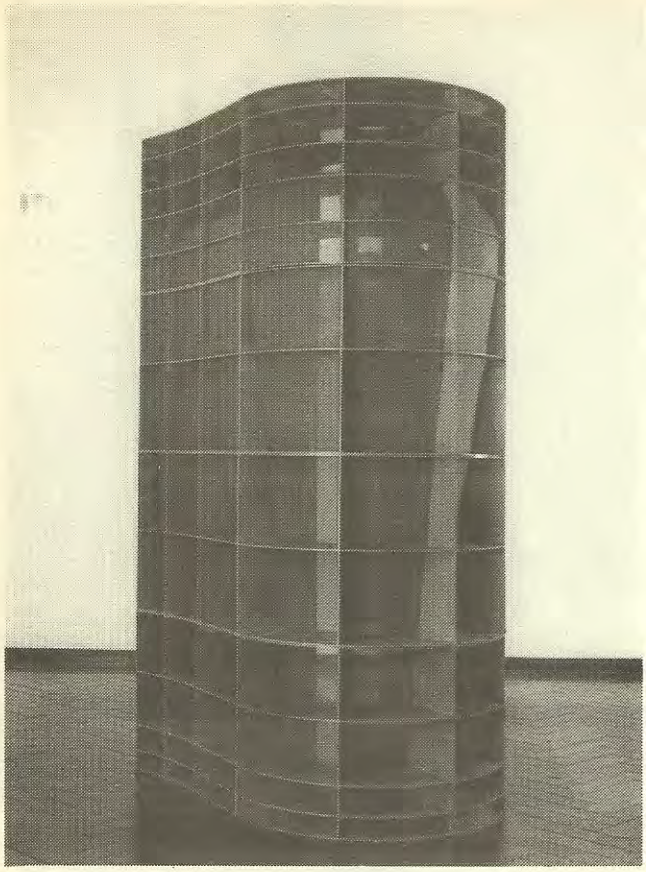
Like Cemin, **Edward Allington** uses the kitsch object to convey feelings of cultural dislocation and devaluation. His strategy, however, is not one of melt down but of replication. Allington attacks the complacency of the commodity on both the popular and art historical fronts, commenting on excesses of object fetishization. His multiple plaster casts of identical Venus de Milos or Egyptian sphinxes, stacked horizontally in sarcophogean bins or fanning out like the folds of an accordion are like goods being unloaded in a museum warehouse before they are hustled off to the souvenir shop. These massed figurines have a quality of fantasy reminiscent of the Brothers Grimm or "The Twilight Zone," of toys coming to life or space travellers landing on earth. "Take Me To Your Leader" is a particulary difficult request to fulfill in today's art climate. Other Allington sculpture, notably the Dionysian cornucopia from which storebought, plastic fruit pours out in an arrested gesture of plenty inspires our bemusement over this spectacle of simulated classicism, largesse, and good taste.

Fortuyn/O'Brien is the operative name of Irene Fortuyn and Robert O'Brien, two artists who repudiate the relative subjectivity of individual creation in favor of a corporate identity. Although they simulate the look of furniture and use the vocabulary of interior design, their objects are clearly devoid of function. One might call this a

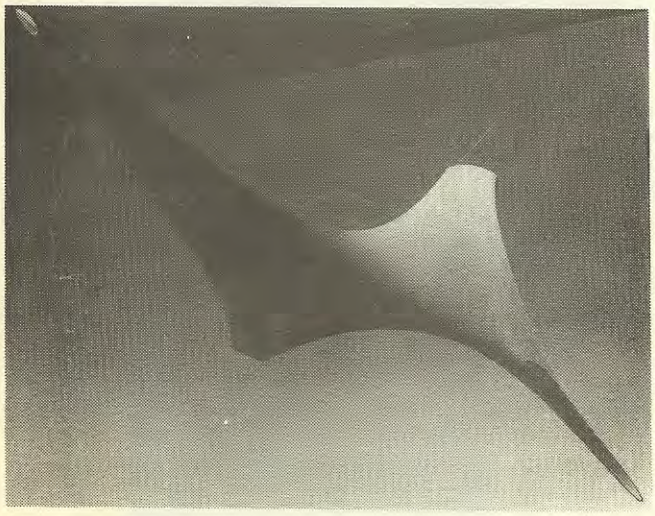


JOHN DUFF, *"Serrated Wedge (open) I"*, 1986, fiberglass and enamel paint, 77 1/4 x 5 x 17 3/4"
Courtesy BlumHelman gallery
Photo: Earl Ripling

TI SHAN HSU, *"Holey Cow"*, 1986, acrylic, alkyd, compound, ceramic tile, 75 x 102 x 18"
Courtesy Pat Hearn gallery



FORTUYN/O'BRIEN, *"I and I is I"*, 1985, wood, silk, 2,4m height
Courtesy Luhring, Augustine & Hodes Gallery



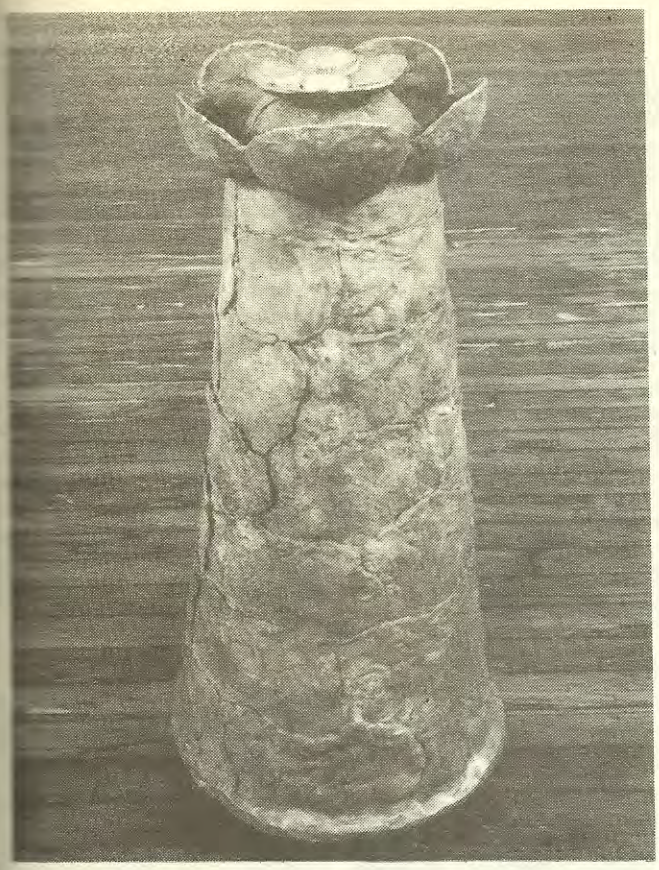
STEVE KEISTER, *"Untitled"*, 1986
fiberglass, epoxy resin, epoxy paint, nylon lycra, sand,
63 1/2 x 67 1/2 x 45"
Courtesy BlumHelman Gallery
Photo: John Back

conscious devolution of art into design, a meditation on furniture mediated by a code of the counterfeit. The viewer is placed in an ambivalent situation with regard to the object, forced to determine whether it is sculpture dreaming about becoming tables and chairs, or the reverse: domestic objects pounding on the doors of abstraction. A typical Fortuyn/O'Brien consists of sheer fabric stretched across a latticed wooden framework, creating a semi-transparent object which reveals structural variations from different vantage points. The silk sometimes bears painted outlines which appear in various perspectives, lending a *trompe-l'oeil* effect. Their meaning fluctuates depending on their function, and they play deftly with notions of negative and positive space.

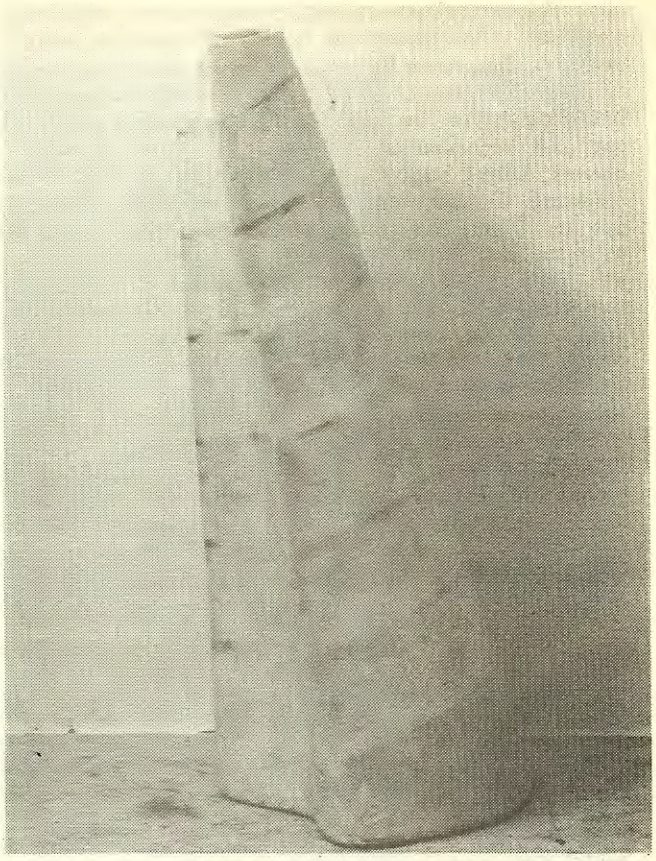
Steve Keister's free floating topological forms hang in mid air, well above eye level, suspended by slender, almost invisible wires. Having worked with pieces of plywood and funky accessories, Keister has refined his shape to a slow, continuous curve, sewn from strips of nylon spandex stretched to the floors, walls and ceiling of his studio, then cast in fiberglass and coated in sand. The result is sensuous and epidermal, at once corporeal and geometric. Keister has always been interested in contrasting interior and exterior volumes by cutting holes in his pieces and shining the gallery spots through them; the interiors are generally smoother and more brightly colored, like the inside of a seashell. Keister's work hovers between the hedonistic and the theoretical, it fuses aesthetics and mathematics.

Ti Shan Hsu is another artist concerned with the look of technology and mathematics in sculpture. His work lies somewhere between non-Euclidean geometries and objects / furniture. His wall sculptures incorporate grids, screen, lines of frequency interference, modular input/output receptacles, and gently humped, roughly textured silver surfaces, with a high tech, industrial look. His floor pieces demonstrate these strategeies on a predominantly horizontal plane, using ceramic tiles to establish a grid on which an irregularly humped, gouged and cut out surface appears to be the result of some unspeakable congress between a bathroom sink and a large spotted animal. Hsu's sculptural conceits are full of dry wit. They speak to our Post-Modern condition, wherein the new, modular world of devices, psychologically internalized, result in a hybrid consciousness, both organic and synthetic.

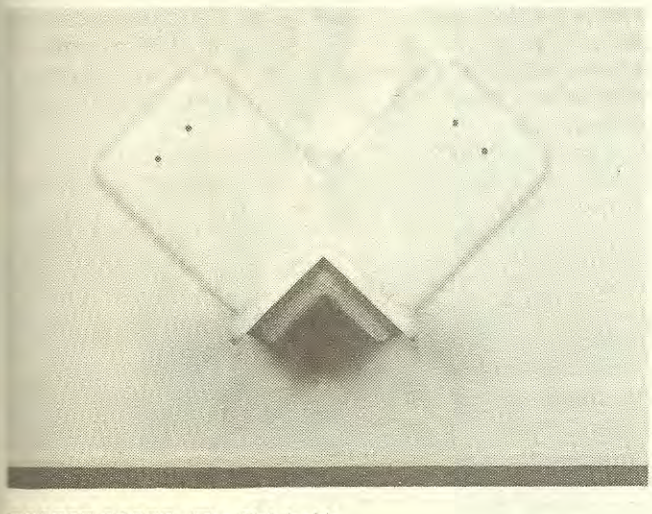
Robert Gober's sink sculptures, like Fortuyn/O'Brien's furniture, simulate a social, household function which they immediately deny. Constructed from plaster and enamel paint applied to a framework of wood, steel and wire, they look like generic white porcelin sinks in tenement apartments, with one exception: they have no drains. The conventions that a water bearing vessel brings to mind--baptism, the holy fount, the physical and metaphorical dirtying and washing of one's hands--gain an ironic edge in light of Gober's total sublimation of function to form. The central concern of these white-on white efforts (white sink, white wall) is absence: disappointed expectations, embarrassment, silence. Gober's first sinks were modeled on the real thing, and as such commented drolly on Duchampian strategies for the readymade. When arranged serially or stacked vertically, they presented a critique of Minimalist aesthetics in the contemporary arena. The more recent work maintains the pristine sink form as a central element and builds from it. Hence the bifurcate structure of "The Subconscious Sink," and the brooding menace of "The Scary Sink." Like Hsu, Gober



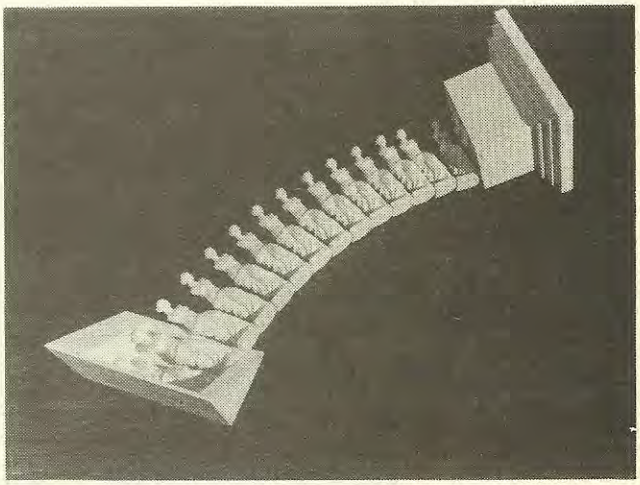
WADE SAUNDERS, *"Rise"*, 1986,
bronze, gold, 33 x 15 x 15"
Courtesy Diane Brown gallery
Photo: Bill Jacobson



ROBIN HILL, *"Lean To (Mary Lou)"*,
1986, concrete, metal, wood, wax,
62 1/2 x 38 x 28"
Courtesy Lang&O'Hara gallery



ROBERT GOBER, *"The Sink Inside of Me"*, 1985, plaster, wire lathe, wood, steel, semi-gloss enamel paint, 52 x 84 x 30"
Courtesy Paula Cooper gallery

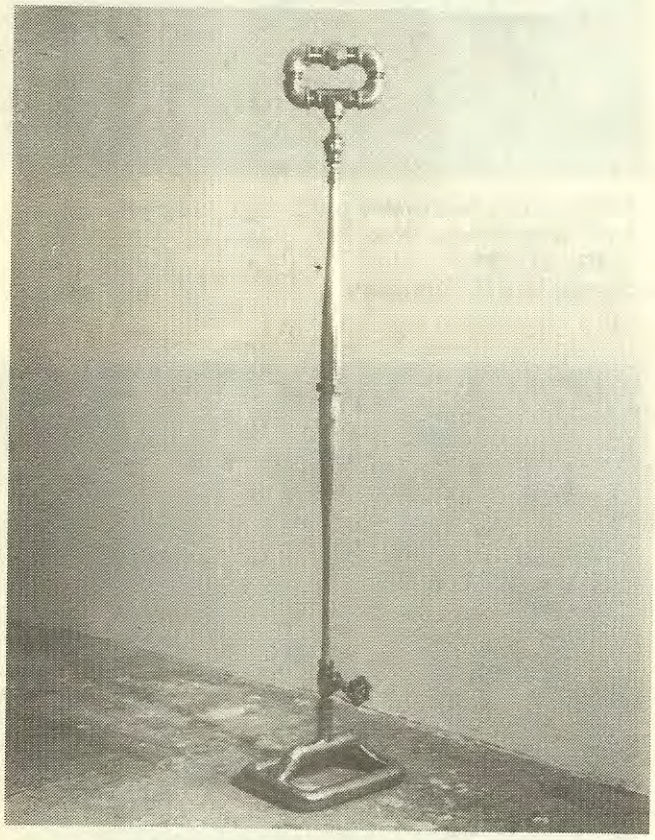


EDWARD ALLINGTON, *"Tamed Time/Aphrodite Ad Infinitum"*,
1986, plaster casts and stuccoed wood, 23 x 84 x 91"
Courtesy Diane Brown gallery

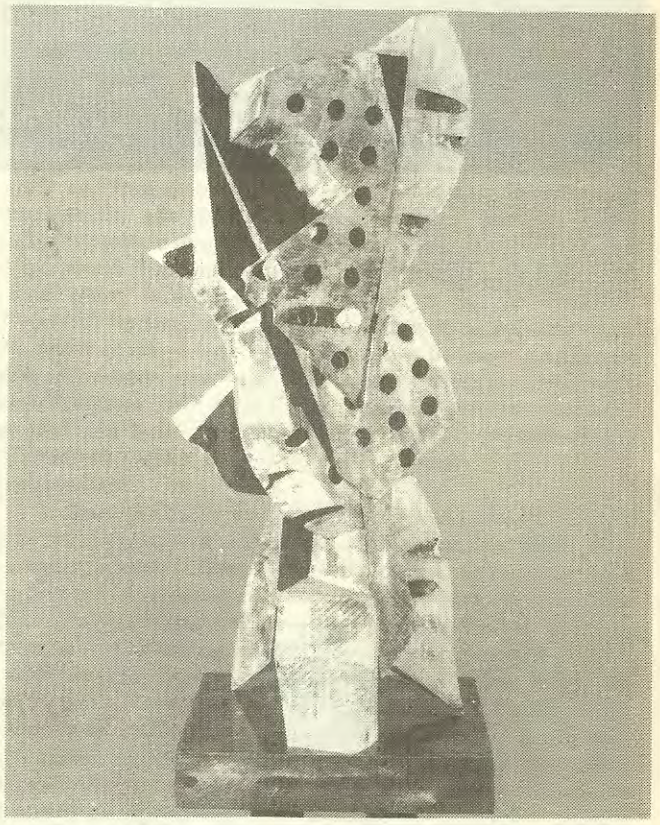
intends a consciousness that is part human, part interior projection of the objects we have synthesized for our daily use ("The Sink Inside Me").

The absorption of technology into consciousness is taken one step further by **Joel Otterson**, whose totems of capitalist accumulation are assembled from appropriated objects: sports trophies, aluminum baseball bats, copper plumbing fixtures, bronze castings of perfume bottles, detritus from junkyards, auto body shops, restaurant equipment and hardware stores. There is no simulation here: what you see is what you get. Like his slightly older contemporaries, R.M. Fisher and Donald Lipski, Otterson delights in the formal properties of these found metallic commodities, and their vertical juxtaposition. But there is a lesson in Otterson that transcends the individual object. By stacking his consumer products and depriving them of functional imperative, Otterson is threatening a modern, supermarket version of the Tower of Babel. The taller it grows, the more his sculpture is overloaded with nonsense and incongruence, until it falls from the weight of its own contradictions. Babel was the first debacle of language. If we read Otterson's linear structures as sentences, composed from a vocabulary of brand names, consumer catalogue entries and commodity disfunctions, vainly attempting to take on meaning where none exists, then we can feel the breath of the debacle already upon us.

The current generation of sculptors work with the legacy of Minimalism, but have subverted its abstract shapes, investing them with variation, organicity and anecdote. Minimalism was a revolution in perceptions and priorities when it took shape in the 1960s, but like many revolutions it has suffered from middle age calcification. Its original liberating lessons--primary forms, honesty of materials, the embrace of technology and environment--are still touchstones of contemporary art, but the reductive aspects of Minimalist aesthetics eventually led to a creative dead end. Minimalism's detached, monolithic geometry has given way to a human point of reference, a biomorphism of shape and scale. Gone is the look of the machine made object. The idea and appearance of craft by evidence of the artists' hand is reemergent. The body has been returned to sculpture, and with it a sense of the pictorial, the narrative, the psychological, and the historical. Minimalism had the head. Contemporary sculpture adds the heart and hands.



JOEL OTTERSON, *"Non Found, Un-Found"*, 1986, 80 X 17 X 13", copper, brass, aluminum, steel
Courtesy Nature Morte gallery



MEL KENDRICK, *"Basswood With Clay and Holes"*, 1986, basswood, 27 1/2 x 12 x 10"
Courtesy John Weber gallery