

**MAGICAL REALISM AND SUBJECTIVE REALITY: AN INVESTIGATION OF POETIC SYMBOLISM  
AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELATED SCULPTURES.**



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For Jules, my four parents and my siblings.

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## PROPOSAL

To meet the requirements for the Master of Fine Art degree at the University of Cape Town my intention was to develop a series of sculptural assemblages which address a sense of subjective or poetic reality, using symbolically resonant found and fabricated objects. The body of work is to be understood as a sculptural parallel to (but not illustrative of) Magical Realist literature, in which arcane phenomena are incorporated into a narrative in order to achieve just such a sense of subjective reality.

**PART ONE**

**MAGICAL REALISM, SUBJECTIVE REALITY AND ASSEMBLAGE**

## CONJURING REALITY - A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

By way of introduction to the field of study a conceptual framework will be established, connecting Magical Realist literature with art works where images or objects (in the case of assemblage) are used poetically as symbols or metaphors describing inner experience.

As a term applied to literature Magical Realism refers to a narrative style which accepts magic and supernatural phenomena as part of the fabric of everyday reality. Magical Realist writers like Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Márquez draw their material from cultures where magic, supernatural phenomena and supernatural beings are part of the everyday reality in which people live. Beliefs in the supernatural are often interpreted literally in the novels.

The daily realities described in the writing of these authors are often populated with ghosts and spirits passing freely between this world and another. People have clairvoyant insights and portents are seen in simple everyday events. Unnatural sickness and bad luck descend from unexpected sources and are overcome through the accessing of miraculous inner resources on the part of the victims. Objects and spaces take on additional meanings, become symbols and metaphors within the fabric of a narrative.

In considering beliefs in the existence of ghosts and spirits in the everyday world, it appears that there is an affinity between those which inhabit the 20th century Nigeria of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992) and the medieval demons depicted in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450 - 1516). Gregory Martin describes the fantastical demons and hybrid creatures in Bosch's paintings as being 'a mixture of folklore, adage, astrology and pessimistic spiritual beliefs' (Martin 1969: 6). The demons torturing sinners in *The Last Judgement* (1504) (fig. 1), part human, part animal are similar to those found in Okri's writing:

'I watched crowds of people pour into the marketplace... I shut my eyes and when I opened them again I saw people who walked backwards, a dwarf who got about on two fingers, men upside down with baskets of fish on their feet, women who had breasts on their back..., beautiful children with three arms. I saw a girl among them who had eyes on the side of her face... who was more beautiful than forest flowers... the girl pointed and cried:

"That boy can see us!"

They followed me. One of the men had red wings on his feet and a girl had fish gills round her neck... That was the first time that I realised it wasn't just humans who came to the market places of the world. Spirits and other beings came there too.' (Okri 1992: 15)

Magical Realism, taking its cue from magically orientated beliefs (constructing realities where supernatural beings are involved in everyday life and where supernatural forces can be harnessed to override the causal laws of nature), is not bound by empiricism and logic and as a result is able to apply full poetic licence in blurring distinctions

between, or wholly conflating, facts and metaphors, subjective perceptions and actuality, feelings and things. In this way Magical Realist writers use the magical to communicate a sense of the subjective realities of their characters. In many ways the magical phenomena and the magical transformations which characters undergo may be understood as metaphorical extensions of inner realities into the perceived realities of other characters in the novel.

In Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978) Mauricio Babilonia, the illicit lover of a young girl, becomes associated with the presence of yellow butterflies:

'It was then that she realised that the yellow butterflies preceded the appearance of Mauricio Babilonia...'  
(Márquez 1978: 234)

Although the butterflies do not have a direct effect on the relationship between the lovers they do function as an indicator of something about the man, something romantic and wistful which she finds attractive. Their effect on the girl's mother, and her attempts to get rid of them, symbolise a desire to control her daughter, and prefigure the death of the lover at the mother's instigation:

'Every night on her way back from her bath (where she received her lover) Meme would find a desperate Fernanda killing butterflies... "This is terrible" she would say "All my life they told me butterflies at night bring bad luck"... there were so many butterflies that she could scarcely breathe' (Márquez 1978: 237)

In *The Famished Road* the narrator's father, an aspirant boxer, is challenged one night by a man who turns out to have been a boxer from the spirit world - a legendary fighter in his own lifetime.

'The man went on beating Dad, pulverizing, crushing him with an avalanche of ceaseless punches. I could see Dad falling around in exhaustion and bewilderment. There was a terrified and cowardly look in his eyes... [but] He took the blows... He soaked them into his body and his spirit'. (Okri 1992: 356)

At this point Azaro's father resurrects himself through a supernatural act of will.

'Then I saw how Dad was transforming... I felt a great energy rising from him. He was drawing it from the night, and the air, the road, his friends... And with all the concentrated rage and insanity of those who have a single moment to choose between living and dying, Dad broke the chains of his exhaustion and thundered such blows on the man as would annihilate an entire race of giants.' (Okri 1992: 357)

This transformation of the body evokes the strength of will required to beat the odds stacked against him as an impoverished labourer. Later in the novel the metaphor is extended when he enacts a similar resurrection to defeat the colossus representing the political party of the rich.

Through metaphor and symbolism Magical Realism manifests inner experiences and perceptions as poetic interventions in the everyday and the prosaic. A similar device is used in the paintings of Mexican artist Frida Khalo

(1907 - 1954). *Henry Ford hospital*, (1932) (fig. 2) painted after the miscarriage of a much wanted child, contains symbolic references to the experience juxtaposed with a diminutive image of herself lying on a bloody hospital bed.

'Six objects symbolic of her feelings at the time of the miscarriage are suspended from the ends of six veinlike ribbons which she holds against her stomach as if they were umbilical cords. Indeed, one of the ribbons is tied to the stump of the umbilical cord of a male foetus, the little "Dieguito" she longed to have... Other symbols of maternal failure include the orchid, which looks like an extracted uterus. It was, she said, a gift from [the painter Diego Rivera (1886-1957)] when she was in hospital. "When I painted it I had the idea of a sexual thing mixed with the sentimental." The snail, she said..., referred to the slowness of the miscarriage. The salmon-pink female torso is a plaster model of the type used to illustrate anatomy...her "idea of explaining the insides of a woman." The cruel looking machine ... she had invented to "explain the mechanical part of the whole business."' (Herrera 1991: 72)

In *Self portrait* (1940) (fig. 3), Kahlo represents herself wearing a necklace of thorns which are piercing her neck.

'By wearing Christ's crown of thorns [dropped to her neck], Frida again presents herself as a Christian martyr. Hanging from the thorn necklace is a dead humming bird... The bird must point to Frida's feeling of being cut down in flight or to her rejection by Diego: in Mexican folk tradition dead humming birds were used as charms to bring luck in love... Among the leaves [in the background] two flowers transformed into dragonflies may be symbols of transcendence, as are the filigree butterfly brooches on Frida's headdress.'

(Herrera 1991: 142)

Her pets, the monkey and the cat behind her shoulders, along with the forest of leaves in the background, represent the untamed natural environment of Central America and, as such, symbolise the more primal part of herself.

The portrayal or use of symbolically resonant objects in an emblematic rather than narrative manner in Kahlo's paintings and in the assemblages and installations discussed later, have parallels in animist altars and fetishes in Africa and Latin America. Symbolic and supernatural meanings are ascribed to found objects used in figurative assemblages.

The animistic world view is structured around belief in the existence of inherent or potential supernatural potency in all living things and naturally occurring substances. These potencies may be harnessed in order to fulfil needs or achieve desires. The animistic belief is that magical power is generated in effigies and amulets assembled from various objects and substances, the cumulative effects of which perform specific supernatural functions for the user (protection, fertility, good luck).

In animistic religion the world is presided over by *orishas*, a large pantheon of deities, each of which holds jurisdiction over a different aspect of life and human endeavour. Altars to *orishas* are decked with offerings, symbolic objects and effigies. Like amulets and effigies, they are assemblages of 'activated' materials, but stationary and more complex; locations for the veneration of *orishas*. Made as agents for the fulfilment of needs and desires

and protection from misfortune, the artifacts of animistic magic may be seen to symbolise aspects of inner reality. Indeed an entire shrine may take on this function. In addition to representing the *orisha* to which it is devoted, the energy involved in setting up a shrine and maintaining it represents an investment of self in the home or shrine. It becomes a symbolic extension of the self, or the mirror of an internal reality (see *Mami Wata*, fig. 8 and 9, and *Home-Shrine* cat. no. 3).

The identification of the individual with the magical object, or the symbolic representation of the 'self' in the magical artefact, occur in Bakongo *minkisi* (protection fetishes) (fig. 4) and in *Fetish 2* (1988) (fig. 5) by Renée Stout (1958-). Stout, drawing directly on the form of *minkisi* figures, created a self portrait in the image of a fetish. She has cast herself as author, subject, shaman (who would normally make the effigy for a client), and as the *nkisi* itself.

'She is at once presiding over the ritual and participating in it ; she is the activated force resulting from it, and beneficiary of it.' (Harris 1994: 50)

There is an affinity between *Fetish 2* and the *Apparitions d'êtres-objets* (fig. 6), shown in the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris in 1938, each of which ostensibly contained 'the essential traits of its artist-creator' (Martin 1987: 50). Stout's self portrait has pouches (presumably containing amulets) which, as suggested above, correspond to her subjective reality, while the Surrealist mannequins are embellished with idiosyncratic symbols which transform an anonymous dummy into a self portrait of an artist - teaspoons for Dali and mushrooms for Wolfgang Paalen.

There is a further parallel to be drawn between Surrealist assemblages and assembled animist artefacts. Both ascribe abstract properties and metaphysical meanings to objects and substances found in the natural world. As a world view animism provides a conceptual framework for coming to terms with the world and one's place in it. Similarly, surrealist assemblage incorporates objects found in the urban environment on the basis of aesthetic or evocative potential as part of a sculpture.

'In thought-provoking ways assemblage is poetic rather than realistic, for each constituent element can be transformed. Physical materials and their auras are transmuted into a new amalgam that both transcends and includes its parts. When, as in a primitive cult object, a shell becomes a human eye because of its context, the accepted hierarchy of categories (as the surrealists delighted in pointing out) is disrupted. When the meanings of highly charged units impinge on a poetic as well as on a physical or visual level, significant expression becomes possible... Figuratively, the practice of assemblage raises materials from the level of formal relations to that of associational poetry... '

(Seitz 1961: 83 -84)

Often the evocative power and the poetic qualities of assemblage derive from the imprint of human usage and the effects of wear and tear on the object. Clothing worn thin through use, a battered and rusty car part, bits of furniture with patterns of peeling paint or an old wig imply a role played by the object in people's lives over the years and that a trace of that life inheres in the object. Second-hand objects used in assemblages may also evoke memories from the past experiences of the spectator. Ritual assemblages like Komo masks (fig. 7) acquire a spiritual identity through

use. They are passed down from generation to generation growing in attributed power and sentience with each ritual consecration or addition to the assemblage.

'Nature hardly mattered for the surrealists. Their substitute for the variety of nature was the intricacy of culture - the endless profusion of manufactured objects that washed up at the flea market... Almost anything could be had at the flea market for virtually nothing. It was like the unconscious mind of capitalism itself: it contained the rejected or repressed surplus of objects, the losers, the outcast thoughts.' (Hughes 1981: 241)

Magical Realist literature uses material relating to animistic magic, folklore and superstition to develop poetic themes relating to the subjective realities of characters and whole societies in the narrative. In the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch the literal interpretation of demons and spirits as they existed in medieval popular culture are equivalent to the ghosts and spirits which exist in the popular reality of Africa, as described in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. Frida Khalo uses images emblematically, sometimes positioned with a disregard for the perspectival, illusionistic space of the paintings they are placed in, to symbolise her personal experience of events in her life. There is a similarity between this device of Khalo's and the use of magical elements in a story, elements which disrupt the fabric of rational, Cartesian reality, as a means of metaphorically describing the subjective realities of characters in Magical Realist literature.

Animism, which is lived magical reality, involves projections of self, motivation to action, and emotional needs into the production of artefacts. Animated by the projected emotions of the makers, animist ritual assemblages

autonomously fulfil the needs which prompted their creation. In other words the need to resolve an inner conflict is projected into an object which then symbolically and metaphysically represents the conflict and its resolution. The objects used in animistic assemblages are released from their positions in the everyday scheme of things as plant or animal parts and given new identities as parts of a supernatural entity. Surrealist assemblage, picking up on this, disrupts the ordinary hierarchy of relationships between objects to set up an unprecedented interrelation of objects and meanings. This works an intangible magic in the mind of the viewer as it stimulates associative networks to come to terms with the new arrangement, to unravel its implicit but elusive meaning.

Sympathetic magic, superstition, poetic expression, symbolic self-portraiture and psychology (which laid the foundation for the Surrealist's exploration of autonomy and the unconscious) are directly involved with subjectivity. All attempt, in one way or another, to express or describe reality in terms of subjective experience.

Subjective reality is reality defined in terms of an accumulation of experiences, the way in which an individual understands and comes to terms with past experience and the way this understanding affects and is affected by the perception of new experience. Subjective realities may be collective to the extent that many experiences and beliefs are common within cultural groups but, in that no one's life experiences are exactly the same, subjective realities are different. Objective reality, which, paradoxically, most people claim their subjective realities to be, is defined as independent of human subjectivity, finite and governed by causal laws. While the objective universe certainly exists, and is lived in by us, we are unable to perceive it as such by virtue of our emotional nature. All perception and judgement is influenced by past experience, by subjective reality.

In his *Sketch For a Theory of the Emotions* (1939) Jean-Paul Sartre suggests that 'emotion is, in fact, a particular way of apprehending the world. Instead of seeing the world as governed by causal laws, to experience emotion is to see the world as governed by magic.' (Warnock 1970: 107). Sartre's thesis is that our emotions alter our mode of perception (magically transform the world) to enable us to perceive the world in a manner suited to our state of mind, to our understanding of the world.

In terms of Sartre's theory as well as the preceding discussion, magical reality and subjective reality are synonymous. Magical Realism or subjective realism is constructed by allowing subjective experience predominance as the determinant of reality; the universe may be governed by causal laws but reality is constituted emotionally.

## EMBLEMATIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY

Assemblages incorporate found and fabricated objects as components of composite sculptures. Through the cumulative meaning of the various elements and the tensions and associations set up by their juxtaposition, they generate a meaning different to and greater than the significance of the individual objects.

Although all assemblages made in the mainstream of 20th century fine art in Western Europe and America are rooted in surrealist assemblage of the 20s and 30s, these works are to be distinguished from Surrealist assemblage in that the intention which informs the selection and configuration of objects has to do with the construction of identity. Objects are included in an assemblage because of the symbolic resonances they will have in terms of the subject of the work. Although the significance of certain objects in the works discussed here may be ambiguous to the viewer, the field of interpretation, in terms of the artist's intention, is narrower than in most Surrealist assemblage. Surrealism is concerned with subversion of the established interrelation of objects and images in order to induce spectators to review their perception of the reality they may have taken for granted. Surrealist assemblage seeks to reveal hidden beauty in the objects themselves and to discover chance meanings and unexpected associations through the juxtaposition of normally unrelated objects. The focus here is on artists who exploit the potential cultural associations inherent in objects and their interrelation, to construct identity or poetically convey a sense of subjective reality.

The incorporation of objects into sculptural assemblages and the superimposition of symbolic meanings in the manner described above is not limited to the practice of contemporary western art. Shrines dedicated to *orishas* and spirits and ritual masks produced in the context of west African animist traditions are of particular interest in this context.

As discussed earlier, animists assemble magical artefacts (some of them figurative) using found objects and natural materials selected on the basis of their inherent supernatural potencies. The intention of animist assemblages is to construct the identity of spirits in terms of the metaphysical meanings of the objects and materials used; corresponding to the powers of the spirit and the aspects of human life over which it presides. *Komo masks* (fig. 7) are used in Mende masquerades as instruments of divination and as destroyers of criminals and sorcerers. This example, from Mali, is assembled from carved wood, seeds, beads, antelope horns and mirrors and is consecrated with sacrificial blood. Not only do these masks represent the spirits they depict they are also considered to be incarnations of the spirits.

The identities of spirits are also evoked by the contents of shrines devoted to them. Sculptures, magical substances and symbolically resonant objects assembled in the shrine evoke the appearance and the attributes of a spirit. The shrines devoted to the West African water spirit *Mami Wata* (fig. 8-9) are excellent examples of this. They are also rich in the eclectic appropriation and recontextualization of objects which characterises the art of assemblage.

'In their religious practices involving Mami Wata, African peoples take exotic images and ideas, interpret them according to indigenous precepts, invest them with new meanings, and then re-create and re-present

them in new and dynamic ways to serve their own aesthetic, devotional and social needs. In doing so they evaluate and transform external forces, using them to shape their own lives... Mami Wata shrines of Igbo devotees [are] expressions of selves, others and spirits' (Drewal 1987: 38).

The primary image of Mami Wata with a snake and long dark hair originates from a European chromolith reproduction of a snake charmer, printed in 1885 (before this she was associated with images of mermaids). Mami Wata is considered a spirit of European origin and the chromolith, believed to be an underwater photograph of the spirit, is taken as proof of this. Being European, and therefore Christian, Christian iconography is incorporated into her shrines. The Mami Wata cult also adopts Hindu images and practices. Prints representing Hindu gods are found in her shrines. 'Africans interpret these as a host of Mami Wata spirits associated with specific bodies of water' (Drewal 1987: 39).

The shrines contain objects which evoke the personality of Mami Wata. The walls of shrines are often painted blue to denote an aquatic environment. The water serpent associated with her is invariably represented as well. Mirrors are used to evoke the reflective qualities of water. They are also meant to attract the spirit because, as an attractive and vain woman, she likes to see her own reflection. Similarly the sunglasses which often adorn the carvings of the spirit evoke her element and her vanity. Also included in the shrines is an assortment of cosmetics which attest to the spirit's beauty and the status and success she brings to her devotees. Because of her delight in glamour and style the cosmetics also serve to attract the spirit to the shrine. All shrines include an offering table on which various offerings and petitions are placed. As tables are not traditional items of African furniture the significance of the

offering table is believed to derive from at least four sources:

'First is the dressing table of European ladies, filled with the cosmetics that are so dear to Mami Wata. Second is the dining table set with a white cloth, flowers and fruits. Among the Ewe and Mina in Tongo, knives, forks and spoons are ritual implements that are kept on Mami's altar/table. Third is the Christian altar with its crucifix, candles, ritual vessels and flowers... Finally, the Hindu household altar with its pictures, candles and incense also serves as a model' (Drewal 1987: 44).

While a shrine's primary function is to construct the identity of a spirit and serve as a locus for worship, on a secondary level, shrines are an expression of the subjective reality of the priest or healer who installs and maintains the shrine. Dr Candido, an Igbo healer and Mami Wata priest, explained how his shrine represented his inner reality:

'...all the images in the shrine were a sign that the spirits he had reached were inside him. He said nobody could see such invisible spirits except in visions. People made the images just to show their power; the images of Mami Wata and of the other spirits were from the imagination, or vision, of the person who made them so that people could visualise them. He went on to say that "invisible spirits dwell within people." and that "there are places called temples, and temples are shrines. But you should also know that the temple is within me".' (Drewal 1987: 42).

The assemblages of Pepón Osorio (1955-), a Puerto Rican artist based in New York, have a formal affinity with

Mami Wata shrines in the profusion of objects used to construct identity. Indeed Osorio's work is clearly influenced by the religious altars and shrines found in numerous homes throughout the Americas. 'In each we find diminutive saints and figurines, artificial flowers, shiny accessories and photographs.' (Jones 1991: 31) Osorio's work is characterised by the use of plastic toys and other colourful knick-knacks as signifying detail attached to household objects. The profusion of colourful tzatskes is derived from the popular culture of working class Puerto Ricans who are the principal subject of his work. For example, *El Chandelier* (1988) (fig. 10) was inspired by the sight of numerous chandeliers in the upper story windows of a housing project occupied by Hispanic families. According to the artist, in many working class Hispanic homes chandeliers are focal points of colour and brightness in otherwise drab and difficult lives (Leval 1991: 12). *El Chandelier* is

'...a chandelier all right but decorated with a thousand tiny knick-knacks. There are toy cars and squirt guns, dominos and swans, plastic saints, plastic lepers, plastic rhinos and giraffes and monkeys. The light bulbs are surrounded with little plastic palm trees and set in gold cups from which kewpie dolls peep out, some in turbans, some in straw hats. On every perch there hover little white doves, little brown ballerinas. From every arm of the chandelier plastic babies dangle, wrapped in white blankets and tied with ribbons, some pink, some blue. Looping from arm to arm are swags of pearls, cascades of fringe. And, sticking out here and there- piece de resistance- are plastic finger nail extenders, disembodied fingertips with scarlet nails simultaneously pointing at and beckoning to you.' (Acocella 1992: 59)

Osorio's work is produced according to a personal philosophy that 'More is more' (Rivera 1991: 37). His decorative

exuberance is a conscious reflection of '... the urge, among Latinos, of creating an abundance which is not really there.' (Leval 1991: 12)

Even more so than *El Chandelier*, *La Cama* (The Bed, 1987) (fig. 11) vividly adheres to this philosophy,

'...featuring an elaborate four poster bed. Each of the bedposts is painted a different colour- green, purple, red and orange- and studded with the same kind of gimcrack treasures that adorn the chandelier: combs, pearls, zircons, decals of chickens and fairies... Wrapped around its foot board is a huge plastic serpent, the devil. Atop one of the posters, a death's head bride and groom are frying an egg. To counteract these evil spirits, there are doves and angels everywhere. The pillows are covered with saints medallions... , the entire surface of the bedspread is covered with *capias*, Puerto Rican party favours: little rosettes of lace with ribbons painted in gold, saying things like "happy birthday Jay and El Baron" and "Cookie's baby shower".'

(Acocella 1992: 59)

*La Cama* has personal meaning for Osorio. He made the work as tribute to Juana Hernandez, his mother's housekeeper, and a second mother to him. Included in the piece is an inscription of a dream he had in which he visits Juana on her death-bed and tells her about Miran Soto, his fiancé. The headboard of the bed is a golden sunburst which frames a photograph of Soto as a child. On the reverse side a picture of a very young Osorio is

'...framed in a burst of cigars, plastic bride grooms and garlic bulbs. [fig. 11a] Studding almost every surface

of the bed are little plastic baby dolls, some black, some white, the imagined product of Osorio's and Soto's union (he is black, she is white). Riding across the top of the headboard are toy carriages, fit for Cinderella, drawn by plumed horses, and at the base of Soto's photograph is a pair of pink ballerina slippers. So almost everything is here: man and woman, art and life, black and white, childhood love and adult love, New York and Puerto Rico, God and the Devil, birth and death. Together, of course, with popular art- thousands of examples of it- plastered and glued and wired together...' (Acocella 1992: 59)

*La Cama*, with its carnivalesque love of garish things and religious paraphernalia is - as implied by the inclusion of childhood photographs - reminiscent of Osorio's formative environment. By recreating aspects of his childhood world he is portraying an aspect of himself. All the elements of the piece symbolise events and influences which shaped Osorio's world view. The work is also an affirmation of his relationship with Merián Soto. The photographs, the dedication of the work to Juana, already deceased at the time it was made, and the inscription of the dream in which he tells Juana about his fiancé, lends *La Cama* the qualities of a votive offering to the dead, requesting that their marriage be blessed.

In a similar manner to the way in which the objects found in shrines construct the identity of Mami Wata, Osorio uses common objects, of seemingly trivial significance, to construct a tapestry which conveys a sense of his subjective reality.

'...like the gypsy in Gabriel Garcia Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, who maintains that "things

have a life of their own, its simply a matter of waking them up", Pepón knows the innate magical properties of objects and their power over the people in whose midst they land. For Pepón, objects transform over time: as they are passed along or passed down, they develop alternate purposes, become layered with personal associations and memories and enact an alchemy of the ordinary.' (White 1991: 25)

Renée Stout (1958-) is another artist who explores the innate magical properties of objects and works with the personal associations and evocative qualities which build up around objects with age and use. As pointed out earlier, her sculptures resonate with Bakongo ritual magical artefacts (fig. 4) and reflect surviving African traditions in contemporary African American culture. She is concerned with reconnecting with a lost African heritage by drawing on the form and meaning of Bakongo *minkisi* and other ritual artefacts to produce works which construct an ancestrally conscious African American identity. In *Fetish 2* (1988) (fig. 5), by casting herself as a *nkisi* she re-creates herself as a power figure protecting herself from malignant forces (cultural hegemony) and symbolically connecting her with her spiritual past. The pouches of medicines and box of magical substances attached to the body allude to Stout's subjective reality: they represent the fears and aspirations which motivate the construction of a power figure.

Similarly the jars containing various substances and objects, the brown paper parcel and the other objects attached to *Power object (Homage to Joseph Cornell)* (1991) (fig. 12) symbolically construct a fragment of the artist's subjective reality. The artist's own hair which adorns the doll's head, mounted on top of the piece, helps to identify the artist as the subject. The head is mounted on an electrical transformer (a pun on the title). Joseph Cornell (1903-

1972) was an artist associated with the Surrealists in the 1940s and 50s. In this work Stout refers to Cornell's *Apothecary* (1950) (fig. 13), notably the glass jars on glass shelves, and to birds in his *Habitat group for a shooting gallery* (1943) (fig. 14), among others. With references to western technology and twentieth century art combined with 'her power figures and certain African American occult references [she has created] a work that blurs boundaries and presents elements from all the cultural tributaries flowing through her experience.' (Harris 1993: 140)

Stout's *She kept her conjuring table very neat* (1990) (fig. 15) conveys a sense of the subjective reality of the (fictitious) woman who owned and used the conjuring table central to this piece. An accompanying text describes her relationship with a lover and the conjuring she does to keep him: 'They always told her to conjure for good and never evil. She figured that conjuring to try to keep the man she loved home with her was good. She always wore those beautiful beaded slippers he had given her when she performed her love spells.' (Harris 1993: 145). One can readily picture the woman described kneeling before the conjuring table working spells. The evocative power of the piece is partly achieved through a sense that the objects on the table, worn smooth with age and frequent use are steeped in history and accumulated, concentrated emotions. This imprint of activity, of human contact which lends such credibility to the work is also what gives the found objects in Surrealist assemblage their evocative power (see Hausmann's *Mechanical head* (1918) (fig. 16), Man Ray's *Compass* (1920) (fig. 17)).

Certain tableaux by Edward Kienholz (1927-) and Nancy Reddin (1943-) include figurative assemblages constructed from various found objects, cast-offs of American material culture. In the works discussed below such objects are employed as metaphorical statements about aspects of American society. In works like *Roxy's* (1962) and *The Wait*

(1965) the objects used to construct the figures also construct a sense of the artist's interpretation of the social stereotypes they represent.

*Roxy's* is a tableau representing a brothel, recording an event in Kienholz's life when, as a youth, he visited one and was '...appalled by the whole situation...' (Pincus 1990: 24). A series of figurative assemblages representing prostitutes are included in the tableau along with tables, chairs, beds, a jukebox and other furnishings. The figures are identified by nicknames: *Ben Brown*; *Miss Cherry Delight*; *Five Dollar Billy*; *Diana Poole*; *Miss Universal Joint*; *Cockeyed Jenny*; *Fifi*; *A Lost Angel*; *A lady named Zoë* and *The Madame*.

*The Madame* (fig. 18) consists of a boar's skull, wearing a wig, as the head, with a dress-form as the body. The aged madam, is equated with the living dead. *Five Dollar Billy* (fig. 19) is assembled from various mannequin and dummy parts. The figure is laid over an old sewing machine stand - seen as a mechanical device used by the clients. *Cockeyed Jenny* (fig. 20) also has mannequin legs, but her torso is a rubbish bin with a brassiere stretched around it. Her head is the lid of the bin framed with a wig. *A lady named Zoë* (fig. 21) consists of a doll's head and torso atop a box featuring the coin slot of a dispensing device. Beneath this another box has its lid thrown open to reveal a feather lined interior. The figure has a single mannequin leg. None of the prostitutes in *Roxy's* are '...fully realised characters so much as differing visual metaphors for the same social reality: the dreary existence of the prostitute.' (Pincus 1990: 24) The objects used in these figurative assemblages convey a sense of the prostitute's subjective reality in terms of what their profession has reduced them to.

*The wait* (fig. 22) explores a different kind of pathos: that of the aged awaiting death surrounded by the memorabilia of a life gone by. Central to this piece is a figurative assemblage representing an old woman sitting in a chair, apparently awaiting death. The figure's head is a jar containing a deer's skull. Around the neck of the figure is a necklace or rosary of preserving jars, storing the keepsakes and mementos of the woman's lifetime. The body of the figure, like the skull-jar head, evokes age and decay: the arms and legs emerging from a threadbare dress are made of bones hinged together. A framed photograph of a young woman (the subject in her youth) is attached to the front of the jar. A collection of photographs on a table next to the figure and a portrait of a young man on the wall above the figure, represent the friends and family she has probably out-lived. *The Wait* constructs a sense of an old woman's world, preserved in the jars and photographs which surround her. The jars containing memorabilia represent her past in much the same way as the containers of magical substances in animist shrines and fetishes, and certain works by Stout, symbolise subjective reality.

Unlike *Roxy's* and *The Wait*, *The grey window becoming* (1984) (fig. 23) features a body - cast of a female figure rather than a figurative assemblage. Yet various symbolically resonant objects, assembled on the dressing table at which the naked woman is sitting, convey a sense of her subjective reality.

'...a family bible rests open on [the dressing table]. One of the woman's hands rests on a replica of a pig's head [fig 24], attached to the neck of a banjo which, in turn, is gripped by a disembodied masculine hand. She is resting her head gently on the head of the pig - clearly the surrogate male - as if listening to the music he might offer... Other props, too, suggest an air of futility; a headless stuffed bird rests atop her other hand;

and a photograph of a woman's face gazes sadly at the seated figures face, like a second and more revealing reflection... Most unsettling of all is a gun resting next to the bible. Is she contemplating suicide? One inevitably wonders.' (Pincus 1990: 103)

While this tableau of a woman sitting at a dressing table with a bible, a gun and a meagre bunch of roses establishes a possible narrative, the other props, being inconsistent with the possible narratives, suggest symbolic meaning.

People define themselves, and indeed are defined by others, in terms of ethnicity, professional or social values and material culture. Objects of material culture have been effectively employed to symbolically construct identity in the assemblages discussed here.

Although the shrines devoted to Mami Wata construct the identity of a spirit she is nevertheless considered to be European and Christian. Thus objects associated with Europe and Christianity are included in her shrines. Mami Wata is further ascribed the human characteristic of vanity, and consequently cosmetics, symbolising vanity or the pursuit of physical beauty, are present in the shrines. The profusion of plastic knick-knacks in Osorio's work correspond to the busy and garish aesthetic apparently favoured by working class Puerto Ricans. The elaborate *El Chandelier* as well as the 'capias' or party favours on the bedspread of *La Cama*, also expressions of Puerto Rican culture, are used by the artist to construct a sense of identity. Stout draws on the material culture of traditional African religion, traces of this in contemporary African American culture, and the material culture of 20th century America to re-construct her identity as an African American. The works of Kienholz and Reddin mentioned here

construct generic identities or social stereotypes. While it is the intention of their works to convey a sense of subjective reality, the realities they construct are also a form of social criticism. They are based on a generalised interpretation of what the subjective reality of their subjects could be. The hypothetical constructs of Kienholz and Reddin are to be distinguished from the elements of portraiture and self-portraiture in the work of Osorio and Stout.

Since the significance which a viewer may ascribe to objects in an assemblage may differ from that intended by the artist, no absolute meaning can be conveyed. However, artists working in this manner probably share a certain commonality of cultural experience with their viewers. The high level of literacy and education and the pervasiveness of mass media in the West make this a safe assumption.

Subjective realities differ, in fact are in constant flux. Consequently an ability to assess a person's appearance in terms of what it reveals may be described as a necessary social skill. Facial expressions, gesture and use of language may suggest mood and personality traits. Yet the social status and world views of others are interpreted in terms of the material culture associated with them. This might include their clothing, the contents of their homes or the objects related to their profession. Indeed accumulated material culture may convey a sense of someone's subjective reality even in their absence. It is this interpretive reflex which enables people to conjure a sense of subjective reality from an assemblage of symbolically resonant objects.

## **VISUAL REFERENCES**



Fig. 1.  
Hieronymus Bosch, *The Last Judgement*,  
1504.



Fig. 2.  
Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford hospital*, 1932.

Fig. 3.  
Frida Kahlo, *Self portrait*, 1940.

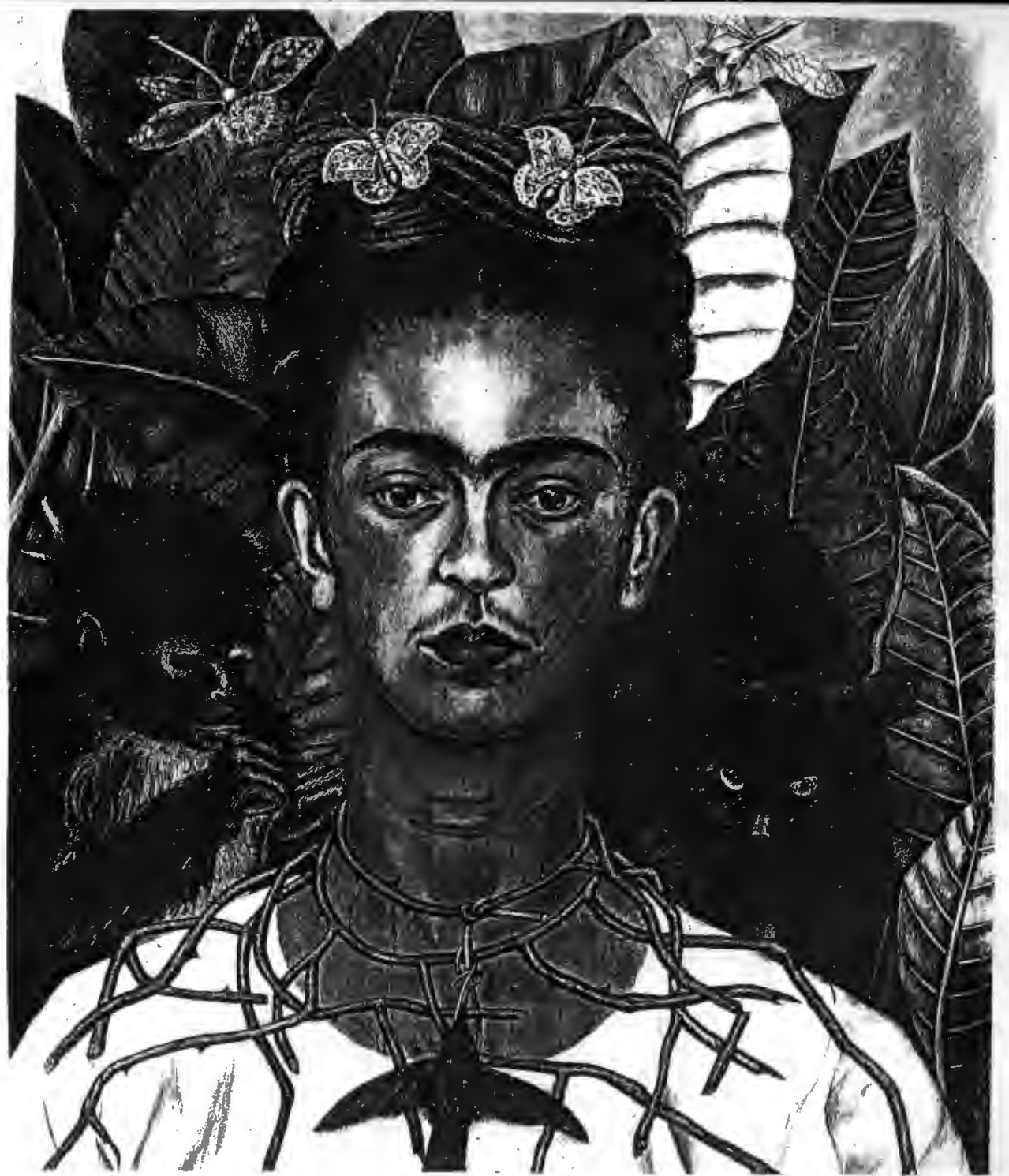




Fig. 4.  
Bakongo *nkisi*, a protection fetish.



Fig. 5.  
Renée Stout, *Fetish 2*, 1988.



Fig. 6.  
Salvador Dali and Wolfgang Paalen,  
*Apparitions d'êtres-objets*, 1930.

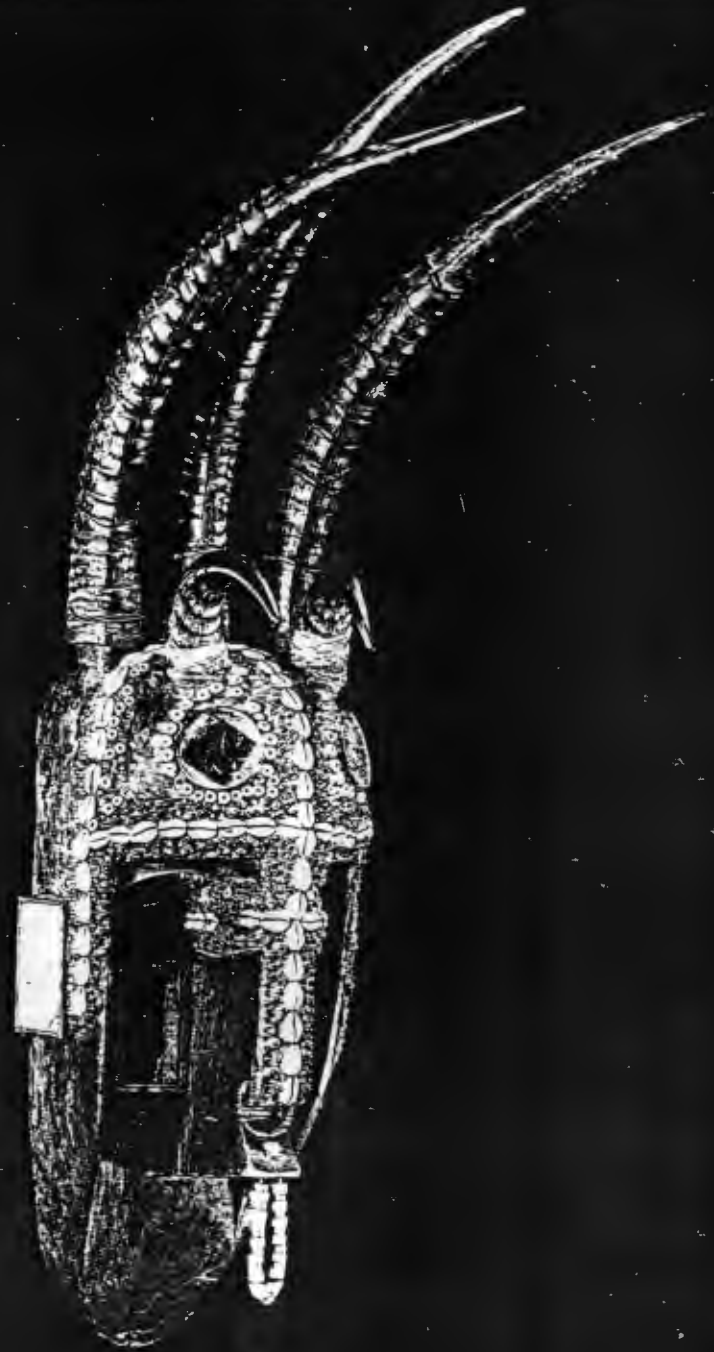


Fig. 7.  
Mende *Komo mask*, used in ritual  
masquerades.



Fig.8.  
West African *Mami Wata* shrines.

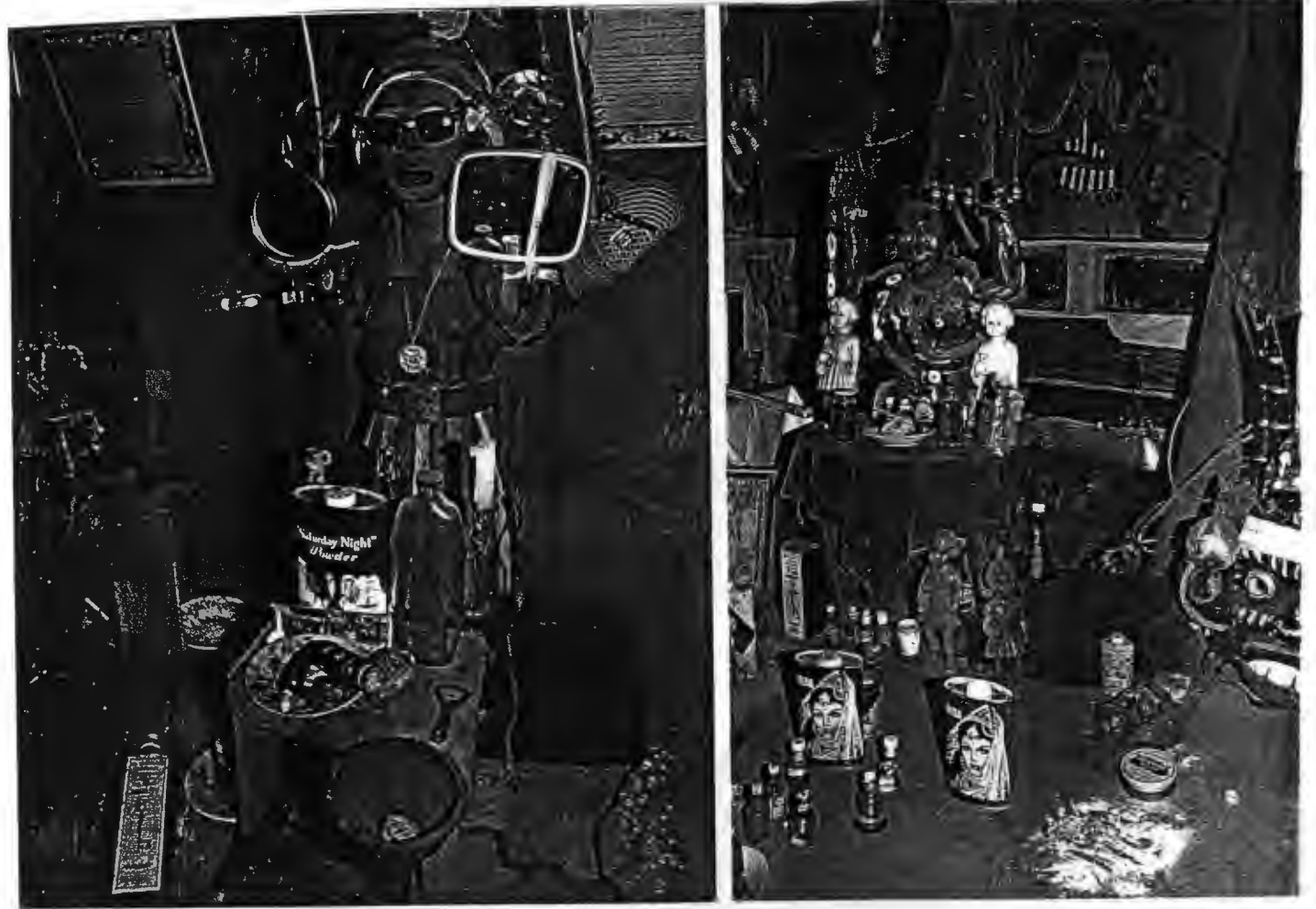


Fig. 9.  
West African *Mami Wata* shrines.



Fig. 10.  
Pepón Osorio, *El Chandelier*, 1988.

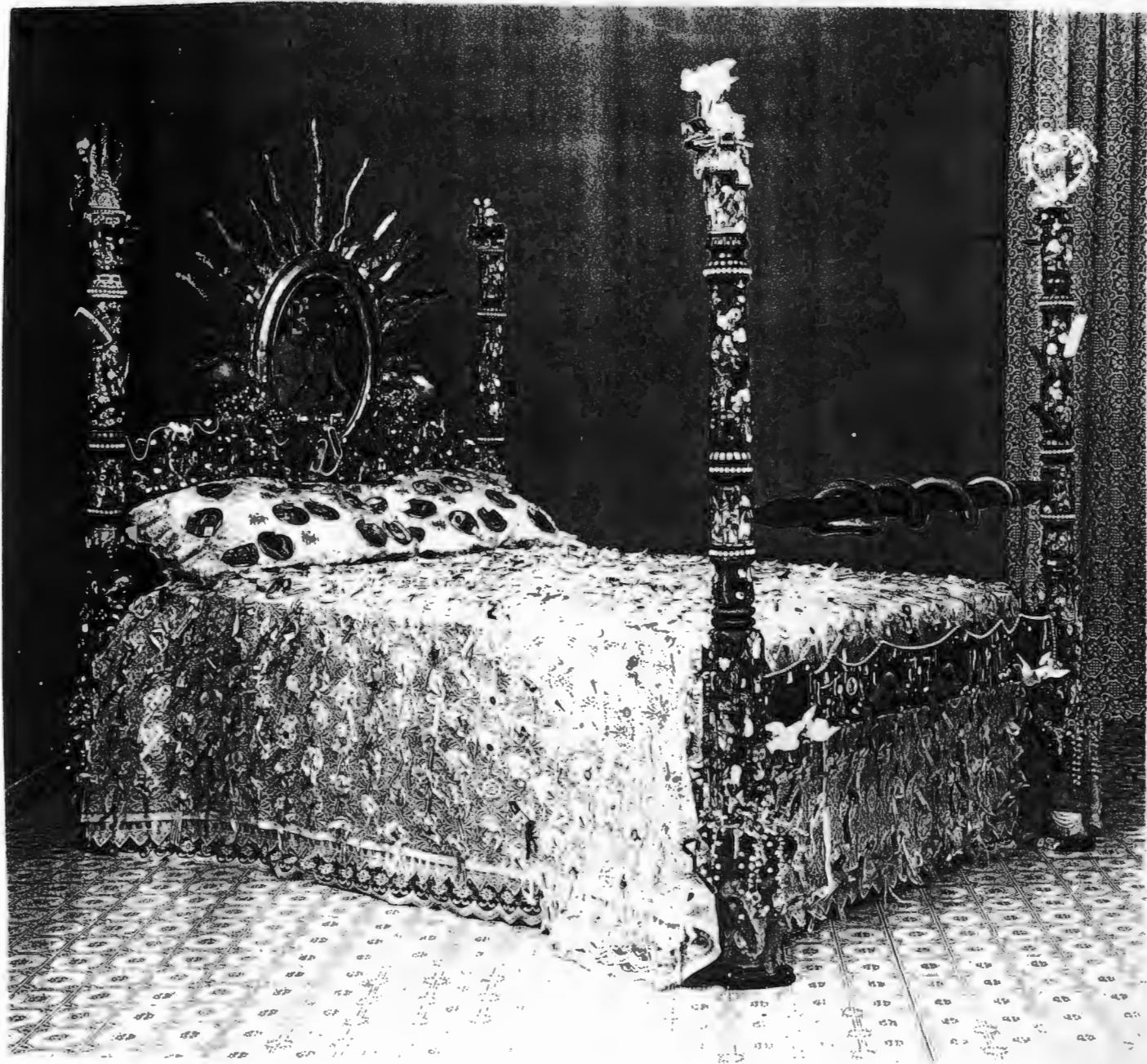


Fig. 11.  
Pepón Osorio, *La Cama*, 1987.

Pepón  
OSORIO



Fig. 11a.  
Pepón Osorio, *La Cama*, 1987, detail.

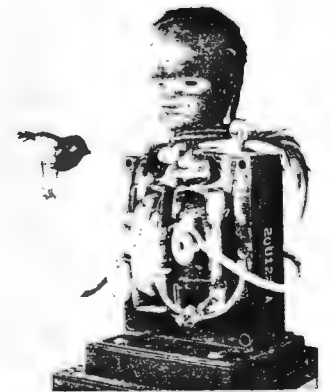
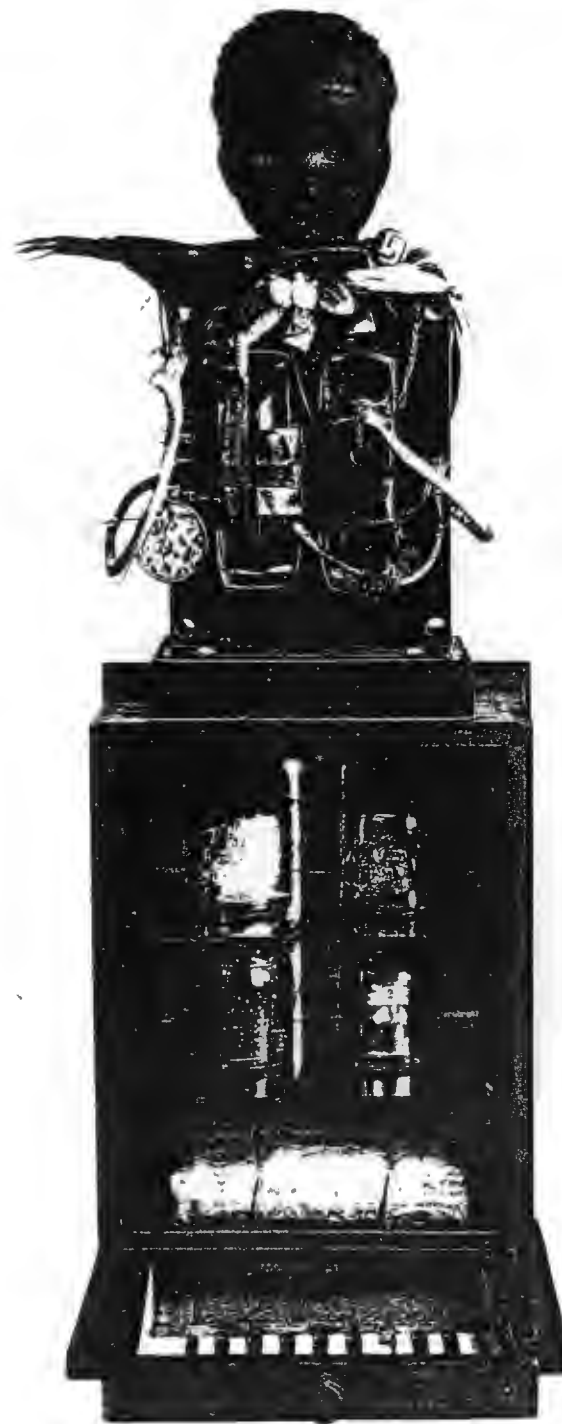


Fig. 12.  
Renée Stout, *Power object (homage to Joseph Cornell)*, 1991.



Fig. 13.  
Joseph Cornell, *Apothecary*, 1950.



Fig. 14.  
Joseph Cornell, *Habitat group for a  
shooting gallery*, 1943.

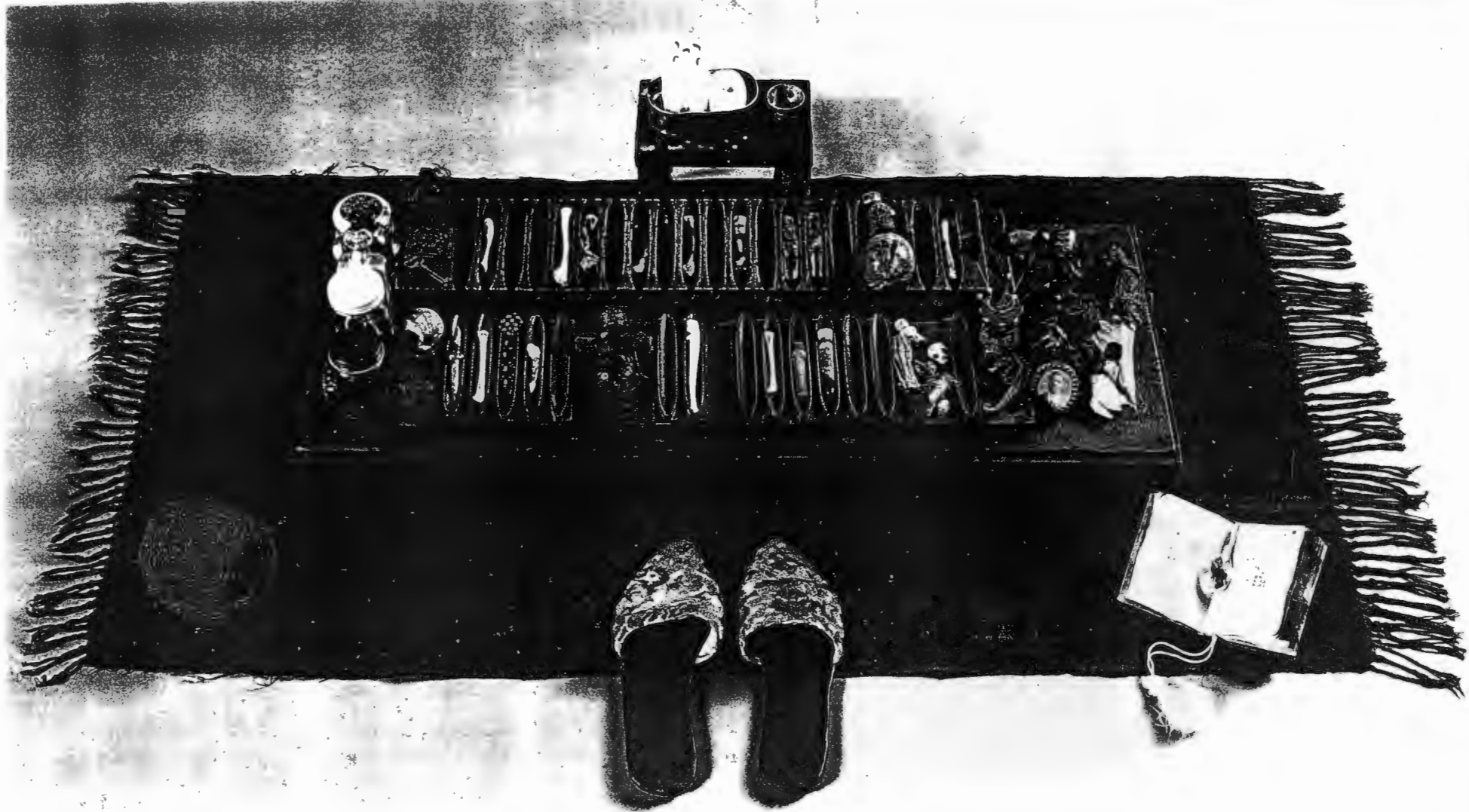


Fig. 15.  
Renée Stout, *She kept her conjuring table  
very neat*, 1990.



Fig. 16.  
Raoul Hausmann, *Mechanical head*, 1918.



Fig. 17.  
Man Ray, *Compass*, 1926.



Fig. 18.  
Edward Kienholz, *The Madame*, part of the  
*Roxy's* tableau, 1962.



Fig. 19.  
Edward Kienholz, *Five Dollar Billy*, from  
*Roxy's*.

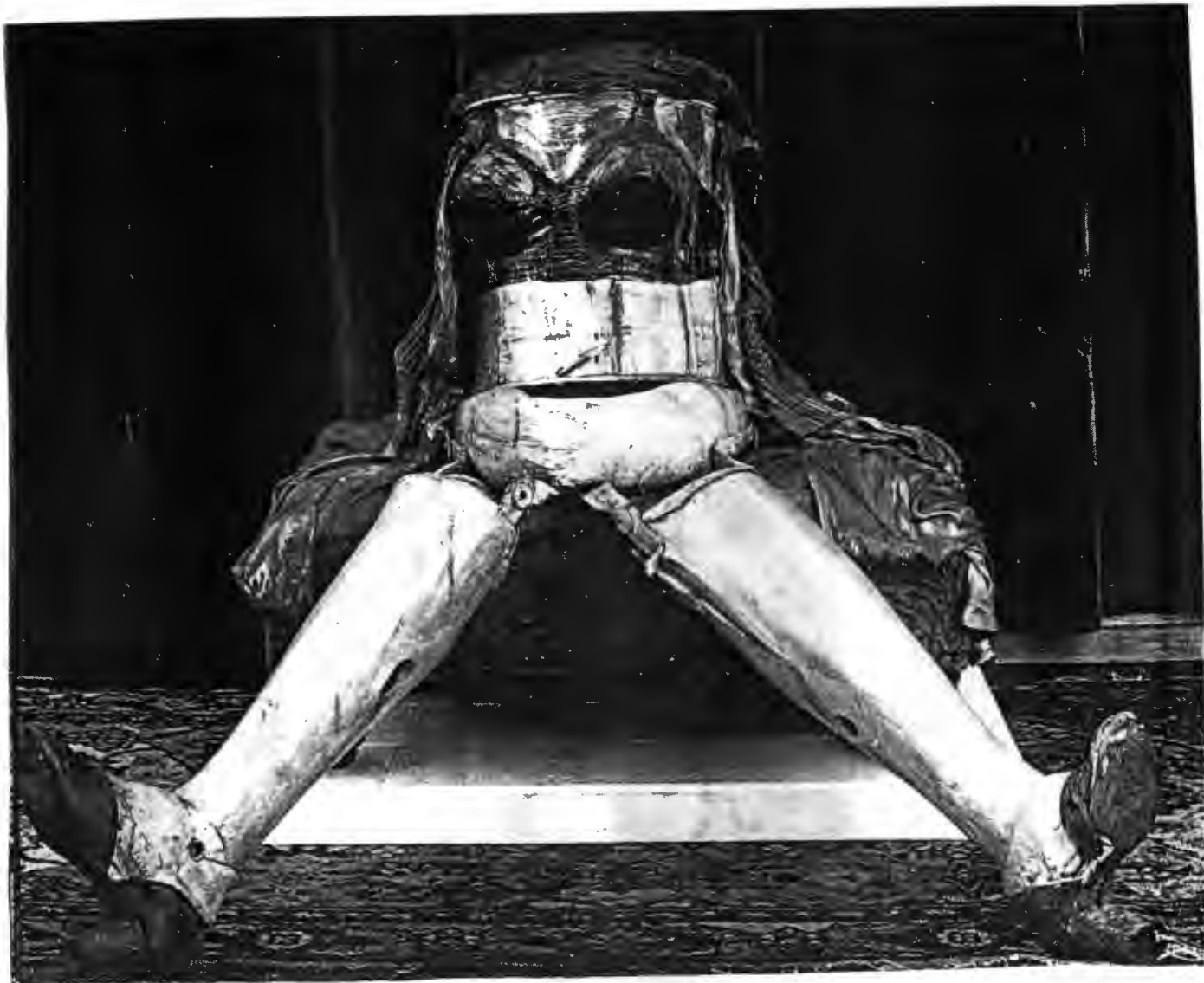
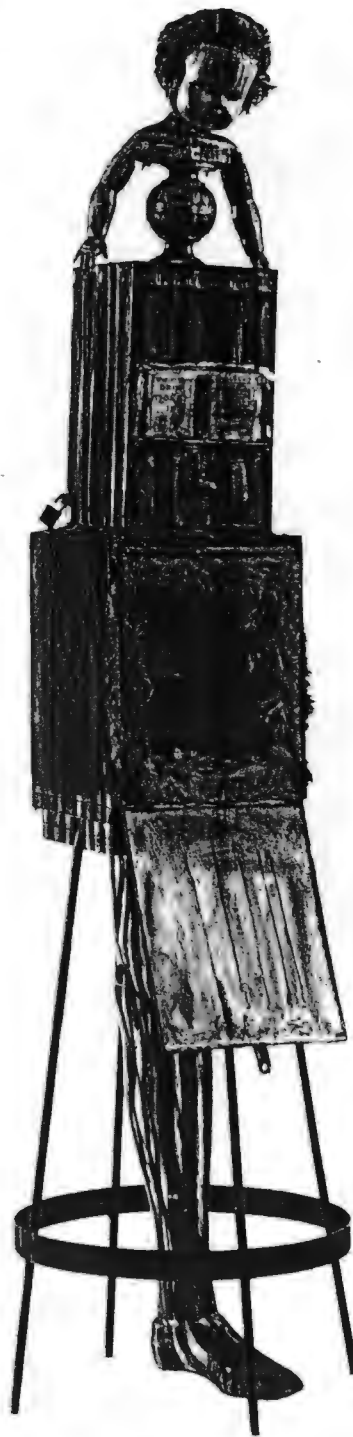


Fig. 20.  
Edward Kienholz, *Cockeyed Jenny*, from  
*Roxy's*.

Fig. 21.  
Edward Kienholz. *A lady named Zoë*, from  
*Roxy's*.



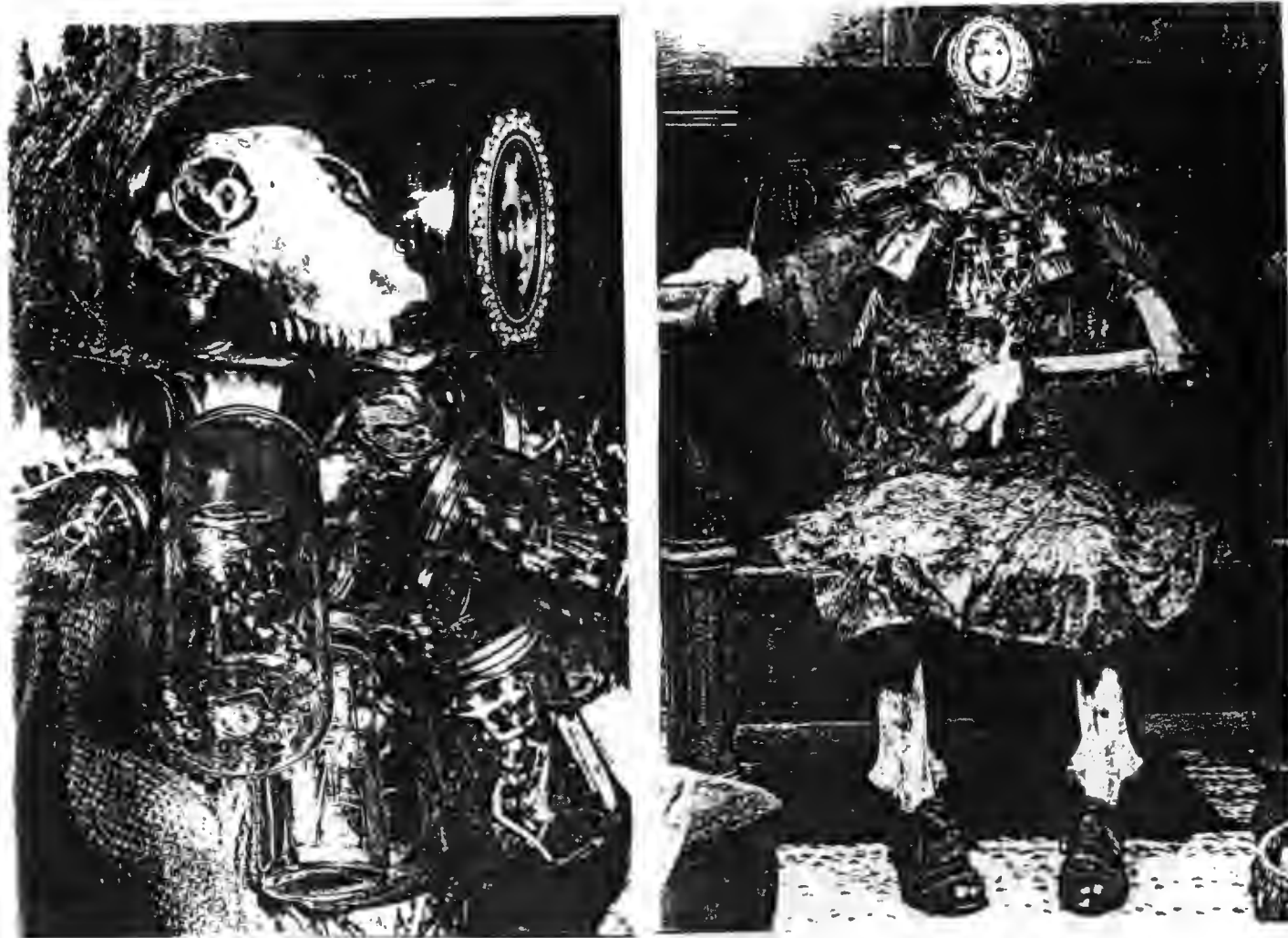


Fig. 22.  
Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin,  
*The wait*, 1965.



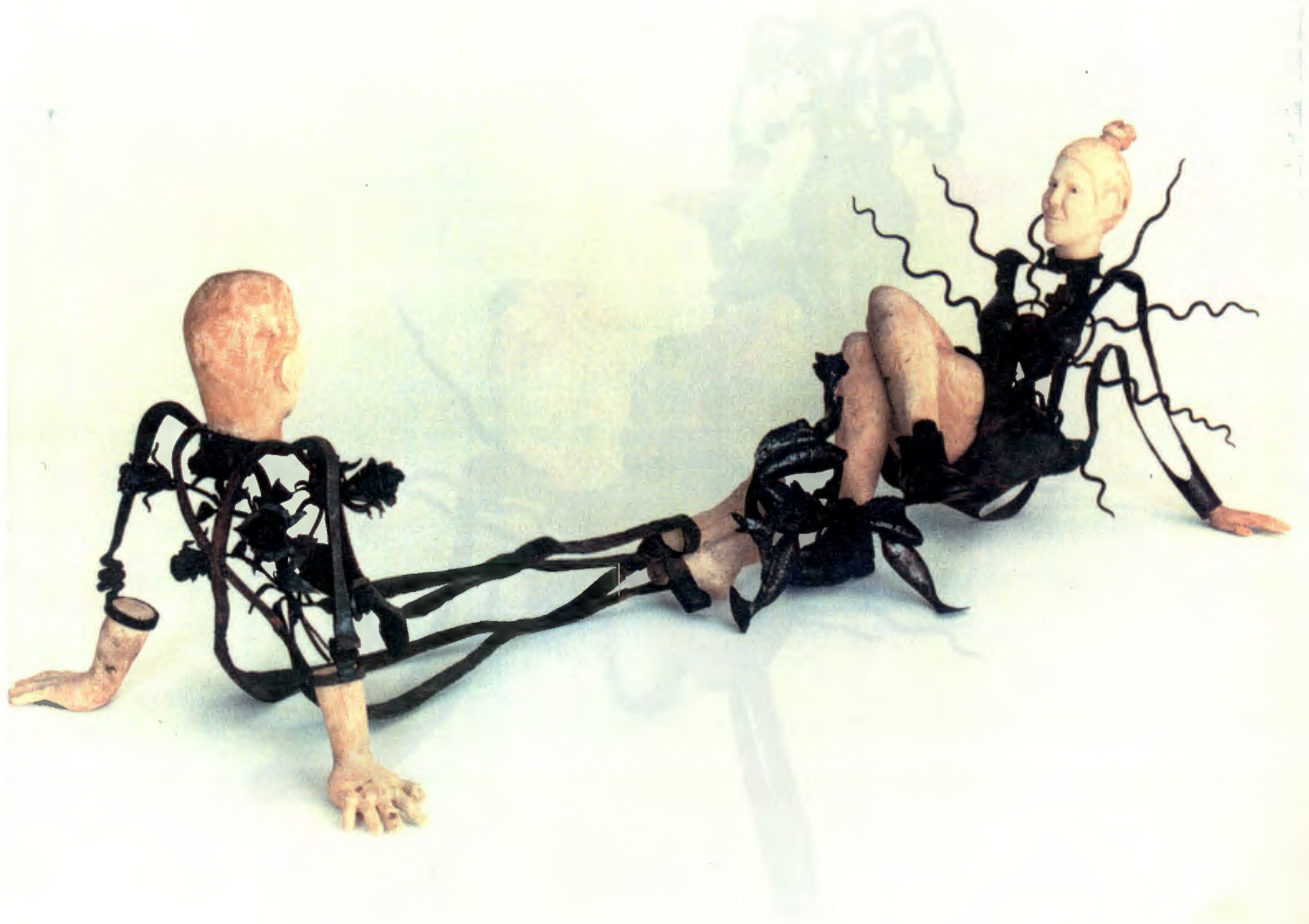
Fig. 23.  
Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin,  
*The grey window becoming*, 1984.

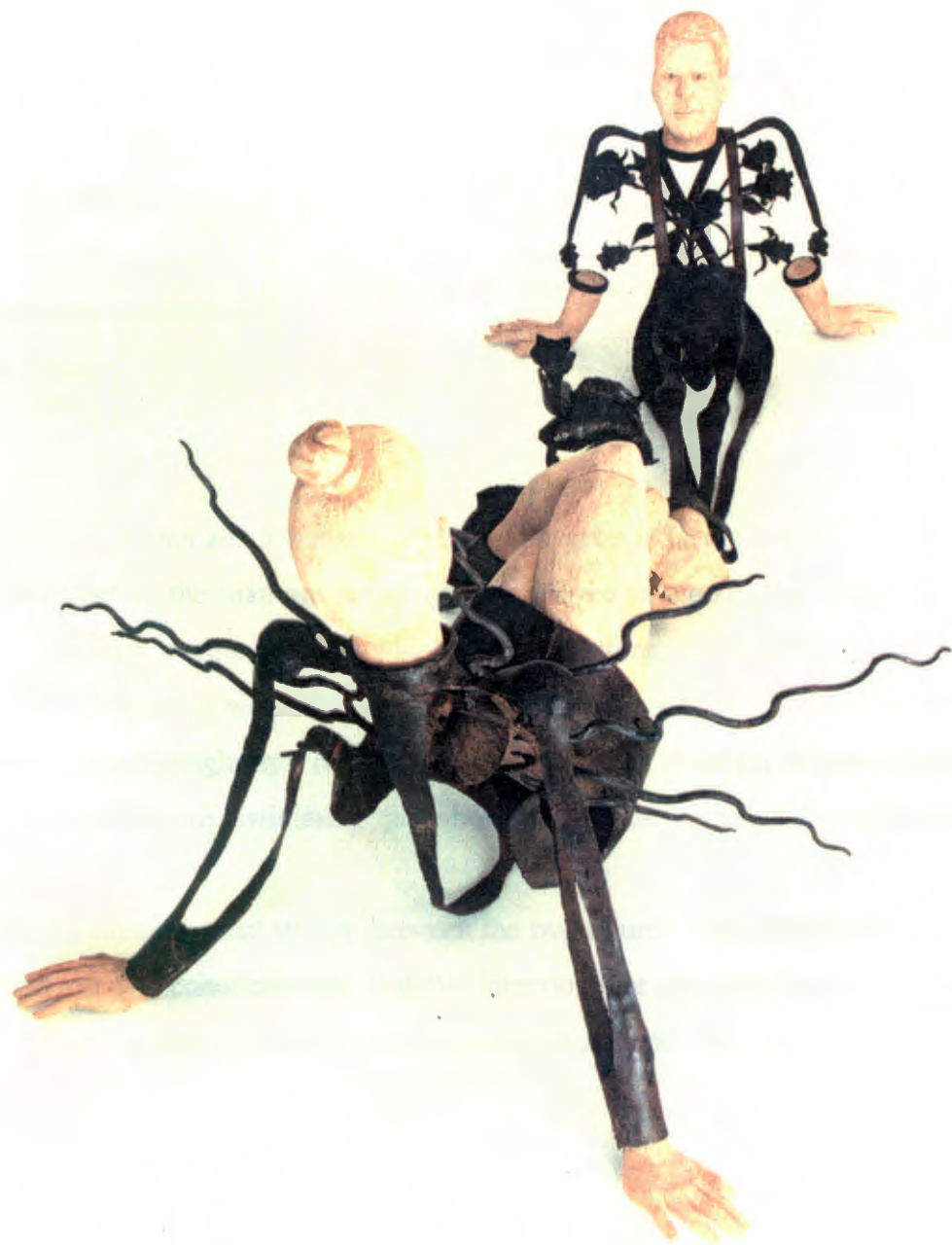


Fig. 24.  
Detail of *The grey window becoming*.

**PART TWO**

**DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE**





**1. ANTE - UP AND SEE**

Carved wood and wrought iron

100 x 300 x 90cm

This piece consists of two figures, a man and a woman, seated on the ground facing one another. The heads, hands and legs of the woman and feet of the man are naturalistically carved in wood. The bodies of the figures are constructed from wrought iron bars tracing contours which suggest clothing: a body hugging dress on the woman and dungarees on the man. The woman is wearing boots. Inside the woman's body is a large 'sacred heart' carved in wood, with stylised light rays in wrought iron radiating outwards from it. A bunch of roses is bursting from the chest of the male figure. Several fish are 'swimming' just above the, almost touching, feet of the two figures.

It is the intention that the fish symbolise sexual tension between the two figures. The crossed legs of the woman and ankles of the man may suggest self consciousness. It is the intention that the roses suggest a youthful romantic enthusiasm, and the 'sacred heart', referring to religion, a more reticent attitude. The facial expressions are intended to set a tone of intimacy.

*Ante - up and see* is the first piece in the series of sculptures exploring symbolic representations of subjective reality. The title, a conflation of poker terms, refers, metaphorically, to the exchange of personal information between lovers. The fish, the roses and the 'sacred heart' function as an initial, tentative exchange from which the events and images presented in the subsequent works develop.



2.           **WITBLITZ**

Carved wood, wrought iron, found object

200 x 190 x 70cm

In this work textured wrought iron bars describe the outline of a life-size figure in overalls. A naturalistically carved wooden head emerges from the collar of the overalls. Standing on an iron carpet, the figure leans backwards with head thrown back as though off balance. Suspended in the position of the left breast pocket is a carved wooden flip-top box similar to a cigarette box. It contains etched iron plates resembling playing cards or tarot cards. A Superman emblem is attached to the front of the box. In a breast pocket to the right is a wine bottle containing wine and chilies. In the abdomen is a stylised radio. Entwined around the top of the aerial an elongated iron spiral culminates in a large iron beetle. This and two other beetles, attached by iron spirals to the figure's shoulders, circle the head of the figure.

The flat bar used to construct the figure has been textured to suggest the rumpled fabric of an overall and also to 'invigorate' the iron, to disrupt the sterile industrial uniformity of milled iron. The distortion of the radio and the embellishment of the beetles mark the first instance, in the body of work, where the form of objects has been altered

to suggest symbolic meaning. The abbreviation of the figure to a brief two-dimensional description serves to place the focus of the piece on the attached objects and on the head.

This work is concerned with the alteration of perception through drugs. The wine bottle, cigarette box and the Superman emblem (referring to a brand of LSD) are intended to suggest stimulants used. The Superman emblem is further intended to suggest states of euphoria or intoxication. The beetles may be seen as 'hallucinatory'.

The playing cards in the box are intended to represent the element of chance. As tarot cards they are meant to symbolise hidden or unacknowledged aspects of the psyche. The function of the radio is to suggest that the figure is dancing, either metaphorically, to an inner tune, or simply to music nearby.







3.           **HOME-SHRINE**

Carved wood, wrought iron, found object

230 x 60 x 90cm

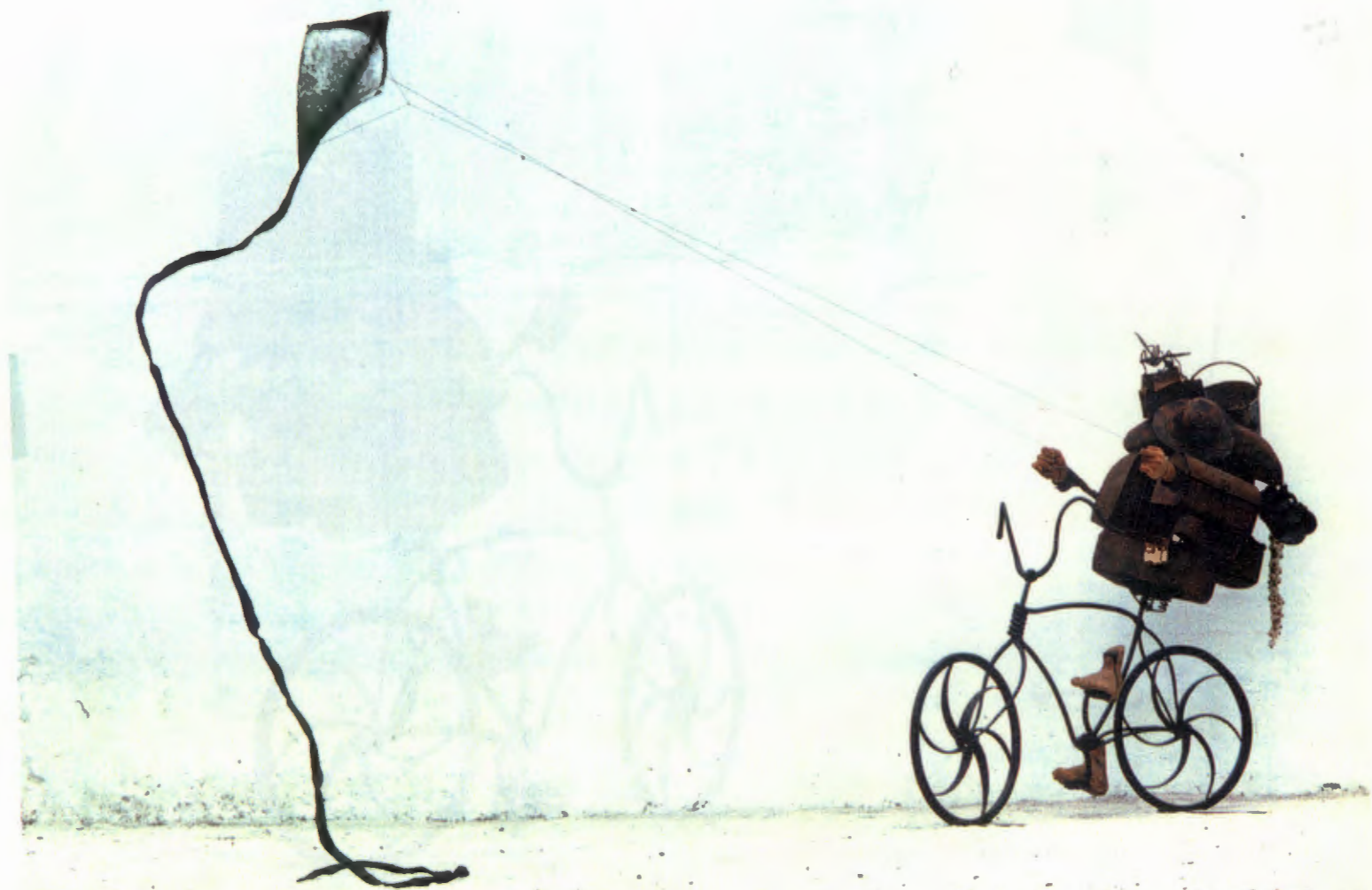
*Home-Shrine* is supported by a rectangular wrought iron framework consisting of four vertical bars joined together by short horizontal bars at the top and in the middle. A wooden platform spans the lower crossbars, flush with the outside edge of the frame. A pair of rusted iron platform shoes is suspended beneath the platform. On the platform is a chopping block with an open drawer containing an iron flower. A disembodied wooden hand holding a knife is cutting iron carrots on the chopping block. Behind the chopping block, protruding slightly from the other side of the frame, is an iron arum lily in an iron bottle. Also on the platform is a three level wooden bookshelf occupying one corner of the stand, flaring out of the frame towards the top. A wrought iron worm is crawling up the side of the shelf. On the bottom level of the shelf, wrought in iron, are a pack of beedies (Indian cigarettes), two dice and a pair of drumsticks with elaborate woven handles. On the second shelf are books, leaning to the side and a blue painted sheep's skull. On the top shelf are an abstracted wrought iron clock, a perfume bottle and more books. Attached to one of the upright bars, jutting outwards, is a curved iron keyboard reminiscent of an African thumb piano. The fingertips of a disembodied hand rest on the keyboard as if playing. Hanging from a horizontal bar above

the chopping block are various fantastically shaped wrought iron coat hangers and a ladle. Surmounting the whole piece is an iron box, wrought to resemble a tomato box. Protruding partially from the box, a carved head peeps out.

The piece stands above eye level to achieve the visual status of a roadside shrine or icon. The supporting structure is unstable and spindly, emphasising the height of the sculpture, giving it a sense of precariousness and self-consciousness. The rhythmical widening and narrowing of the square bar from which the structure is made animates the iron (and the work as a whole) in a similar manner to the texturing of the *Witblitz* figure (No 2).

*Home-Shrine* explores the notion that a home, as microcosm of the occupant's world view, has an affinity with a religious shrine; a microcosm of a spiritual reality. A shrine contains symbolically resonant objects and images and is a symbolic transition between the individual and the metaphysical. The objects assembled in a home often correspond to the occupant's world view, and symbolise beliefs and experiences which give meaning to life. As such a home functions as an interface between subjective reality and the outside world.

The objects assembled in this piece are intended to suggest a living space and the activities of an occupant. It is also intended that possible associations made with the objects in juxtaposition to one another, and the symbolic meaning suggested by the embellishment of selected items, construct a sense of subjective reality: a particular manner of perceiving and interacting with the world. On one level the head and hands are intended to suggest the presence of an occupant within a home. On another level they suggest that the whole piece may be read as a symbolic figure (a symbolic portrait).





4.

### **THE INCREDIBLE BALANCING ACT**

Wrought iron, carved wood, found objects

300 x 500 x 85cm

This piece features a wrought iron bicycle rendered carnivalesque by the transformation of a traditional bicycle shape into twists, curves and dramatic flourishes. Piled onto the saddle of the bicycle are an assortment of iron bags, suitcases and parcels, a bird in a cage and a large wrought iron wasp. Also included in the pile of baggage are various found objects and a naturalistically carved wooden head, hanging in a harness of rope. Welded to this impossible load (hence the title) are iron shirt cuffs into which two wooden hands are fitted. The hands are holding the strings of a stainless steel kite which appears to be pulling the bicycle along. The kite 'flies' ahead of the bicycle, held aloft by a three metre long wrought iron tail.

The bicycle and the baggage piled on top of it are intended as a metaphor for a journey through life and the baggage of accumulated memory and experience. The different shaped containers and the various loose objects suggest diversity of experience. The position of the baggage on the seat of the bicycle is intended to identify the baggage as a metaphorical figure (with the head being just another item of baggage). Another intention is that the piece might

evoke a gypsy-like traveller peddling marvels from town to town like Melquíades, the gypsy in Márquez's *One Hundred Years Of Solitude* (Márquez 1967: 9). A final intention is that the piece should evoke a sense of carnival, a showcase of the fantastic, the unbelievable and the magical - phenomena which quicken subjective reality.





**5. YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT**

Wrought iron, carved wood, found object

150 x 90 x 85cm

The various objects included in this piece are attached to a wrought iron tripod, similar to the kind used to hang cooking pots over an open fire. At the apex of the tripod is a naturalistically carved pig's head and a rusted iron lobster with its pincers pointing up into the air. Hanging, one above the other, between the tripod legs are three bowls. The first contains iron discs resembling pills. The second contains numerous wrought iron twist-wrapped sweets. The third bowl contains wrought iron potato chips, rusted a dark brown, and two iron mushrooms. Three curved iron rods are attached to the tripod legs. From one a weathered green whisky bottle is suspended. Another loops around the sticks of three wrought iron lollipops. A large, painted red, iron chili hangs from the downward curving end of the rod. A rusted iron rooster is perched on the third rod. Suspended by a hook, at the end of this rod, is a fish 'caught' leaping out of a sardine tin. A much larger fish, attached to the bottom of the second leg, 'swims' underneath the tripod.

The use of hooks and simple friction catches to attach the various elements to the stand is intended to emphasise the

assembled nature of the piece.

The objects incorporated in this work represent different kinds of food or edible substances. They are intended to suggest a certain 'identity' with a specific attitude towards food. The assemblage of objects sketches a psychological profile in terms of food preferences and associations which may be made with the foods presented.

The description of the animals in the piece as alive (rather than cooked and ready to be eaten) reflects the ironic play of the title. The cross-referencing of animal characteristics and human characteristics is associated more with behaviour than with appearance: 'You eat like a pig', '...are as cold as a fish', 'as scared as a chicken'. The irony, which lies in the literal interpretation of the adage 'You are what you eat', corresponds to popular use of animal characteristics to describe personality traits. This formula of interpretation can also be applied to the inanimate elements of the piece.



**6. LISTEN**

Carved wood, wrought iron, found objects

180 x 110 x 90cm

The legs of the tripod stand of this piece are made from tapering square bars which have been 'pinched' flat (forged) at regular intervals along the entire length, with each flattening being perpendicular to the next. Surmounting the tripod is a stylised windmill. A wrought iron jew's harp hangs by a thin hook from the direction vane. Hanging by a hook inside the tripod is a ring of wrought iron bells in various shapes and sizes. Beneath the bells, resting on cross bars of the tripod, is a large, carved wooden, conch shell. Supported by an upward curving iron rod attached to one of the tripod legs, is a wrought iron violin. The form of the violin has been distorted to appear slightly arched and swollen. Attached with iron rods to the other legs are a brass tap and a segmented clip of bullet cartridges. A fourth iron rod, attached to the same leg as the violin, curves inward, through the ring holding the bells, to hold a carved wooden hand, making the deaf-mute hand signal 'listen', in front of the windmill. On the ground, under the tap, is a larger than life wrought iron cricket.

The hand included in the piece is treated as a symbolically resonant object on the same level of significance as the

other elements. Unlike the heads, hands and feet in earlier works it is not intended to imply that the assemblage is a metaphor for a figure.

*Listen* is an assemblage of objects associated with music and other emotionally evocative sounds. It is concerned with subjective responses associated with sounds, and with memories associated with sounds. The piece derives its title from the deaf-mute hand signal for the word listen. The injunction to 'listen' expressed in the language of the deaf, suggests that the hearing pay more attention to the extent to which ambient sounds, noise and music play a role in constructing their realities, and the extent to which identity and memory are composed of remembered sounds.

Each object in this piece is intended to represent a specific sound. The assemblage of objects associated with sounds is also intended to suggest a parallel arrangement of those sounds into a composition.

The windmill represents the sound of wind and the squeaking and clanking of a pump; the cricket the chirping sound of crickets. The tap could evoke the sound of dripping or running water; the conch shell the sound of the sea. The bullet cartridges may evoke the alarm felt at the sound of gunshot. The sound of bells can evoke the calling to prayer and other ritual events. The violin and the harp could suggest music.





7. **GO STRAIGHT TO GO**

Carved wood, wrought iron, found object

210 x 125 x 80cm.

Central to this piece, supported by three twisted wrought iron legs, is a convex wooden target. Embedded in the target are an assortment of wrought iron arrows, knives, darts, spikes, bullets, and a wooden vibrator. Attached at regular intervals around the rim of the target are various wrought iron objects. On top are three large trophies with a carved wooden teddy bear placed in the central one. On the right side is a wrought iron toy motor car and an antique sadiron. On the left side is a small iron ship and an iron top hat. Hanging directly underneath the target is a wrought iron toy gun. A small trophy hangs on either side of the gun. Pierced by thin spikes protruding from the sides of the target, four iron playing cards, the aces, are suspended between two of the top trophies, the car and the sadiron. The joker is depicted on the opposite face of the cards.

The target and the projectiles embedded in it, referring to contests of excellence (where the target may be seen as a surrogate quarry or enemy, and the projectiles as implements of subdual), are intended as a metaphor for competitiveness and one-up-manship. The wooden target, embedded with rusted iron blades and spikes is also intended as a reference to West African wooden effigies into which numerous nails and blades have been driven. The

trophies are meant to symbolise the rewards and recognition which come with success, and the toys to suggest that the need to win is instilled during childhood. While the target suggests a contest of physical skill, the cards and the ship, motor car, sadiron and top hat (based on pieces from the board game Monopoly), point to a more subtle, psychological gamesmanship.

The title of the piece *Go straight to go* is derived from 'take a chance' cards from Monopoly. One reads: 'Go straight to jail' and another, 'Go to go and collect R200.'

## CREATIVE METHOD

The idea around which the sculptures documented here are developed originated in a love of Magical Realist literature. Such novels are characterised by the seamless integration of magical and supernatural phenomena into the fabric of contemporary reality. Although set in familiar 20th century environments the conflation of the prosaic and the magical creates a sense of reality which is poetic. Generally speaking, this poetic sense of reality is a sense that the everyday reality in which we live is subtly permeated with principles of connectedness which are not governed by the causal laws of western orthodoxy. Synchronicity, Jung's acausal connecting principle, is a case in point. On a subtle or even subconscious level many people sense that their lives are influenced by inexplicable good luck, misfortune, coincidence, irony, joy or misery. Subjective realities, perforce, must incorporate such sensibilities, perhaps be founded on them. My intention has been to develop a series of sculptures which convey a sense of subjective reality similar in tone to Magical Realism.

Assemblage using material culture as iconography was a visual language I felt was capable of describing such a sense of reality. Material culture is a source of material which can be manipulated to simultaneously evoke the commonplace and everyday and a sense of deeper or subtle significance. On one level the objects which surround us are taken for granted as of arbitrary importance, yet on another level we associate certain objects with aspects of

past experience, with events in our lives which shape our world view. It is the associative meanings attached to often unimportant objects which enables artists to use them as symbolic references.

On the whole I have chosen to fabricate the objects included in these assemblages in wrought iron and carved wood rather than to use found objects. The principle reason being that re-making objects enables me to alter their scale and form to expressive ends. The intention behind slightly transforming or embellishing objects (without obscuring their identity) is to elevate them to new levels of symbolic resonance within the piece. Plants and animals need to be sculpted in order to convey an illusion of animation.

The formulation of ideas and themes for these sculptures has usually been initiated by a sight or interaction which sparked a feeling or sense of the ethos of a complete sculpture. The initial germ of an idea is then developed through a process of visualisation and drawing. The drawing functions to confirm or record the mental images and to work out technical details. This process doesn't produce blueprints for the final work, rather it clarifies a fragment to begin working on. Having started working, a piece will evolve out of the process of making it, continued drawing, contemplation, writing of notes and flashes of inspiration which arise out of unexpected encounters. Many technical and compositional problems can only be resolved in three dimensions.

Within the series there is a progression from the inclusion of figures in the first two pieces to a more conceptual construction in the final three. In *Ante - up and see* (cat. no.1) and *Witblitz* (cat. no. 2) the idea was that the figures, the heads in particular, would establish an identity with which the objects would be associated. In *Home - Shrine*

(cat. no. 3) and *The incredible balancing act* (cat. no. 4), while carved figurative elements are included to suggest an individual as the subject, a complete figure is not represented. In these works the symbolic detail is given a greater role in the construction of identity. The final three works are not intended to directly evoke a personage. Here there is a departure from the construction of a single hypothetical subjective reality to an exploration of the way in which our responses to food, sounds, toys or games influence the formulation of subjective reality.

## MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Each of the works documented is composed of wrought iron and carved wooden elements which are either placed on a wrought iron supporting structure or fitted to it in various ways using hooks, friction catches or iron pins.

The wrought iron elements are produced by beating, twisting, bending or folding the metal in a heated state. As it approaches melting point iron becomes plastic and ductile. The iron is heated in a coal fire fanned by a regulated blast of air from a centrifugal blower. Various hammers are used to beat the iron over an anvil, or different shaped swages or forming blocks placed on the anvil. The component parts of an object are bent, twisted or arc-welded together.

Objects made from sheet metal are first developed in a cardboard maquette to determine the exact patterns, which, when shaped into three dimensions and joined together, will achieve the required form. The final maquette is then taken apart and the pieces are flattened and traced onto an iron plate. The shapes are then cut out of the iron plate using an oxy-acetylene cutting torch before being worked in the forge. On most of the wrought iron objects the hammer marks and other imprints of the forging process have been retained as expressive elements. In some cases the iron has been filed or ground down with an angle grinder or bench grinder to achieve the required form.

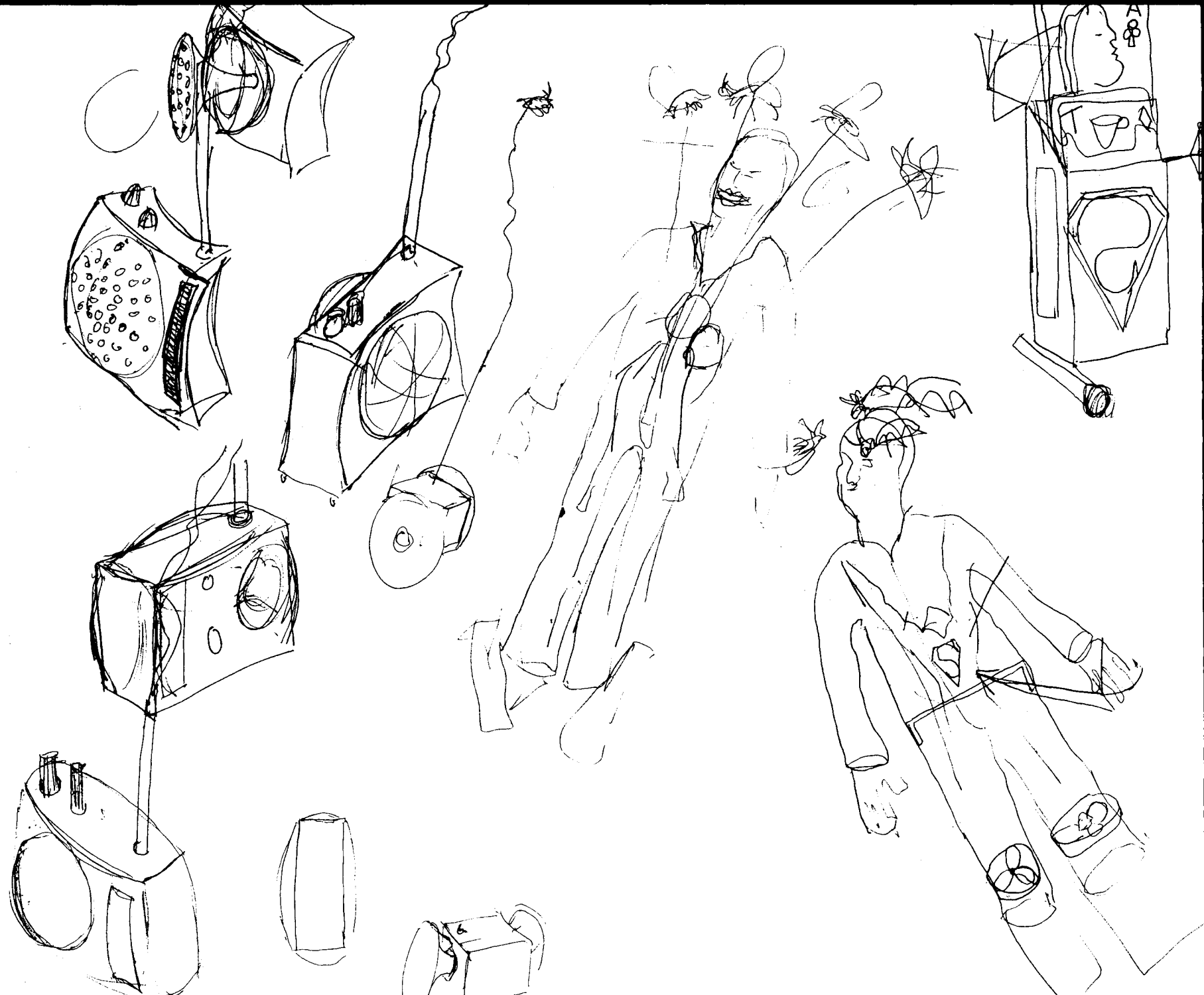
The repeated heating of the iron produces a mottled dark grey scale of oxidation on the surface. On some objects this has been left as a finish. On other objects the scale has been removed with a wire brush and the object polished with wax. This creates a shiny silvery grey finish. Through a process called 'blueing' iron is heated and worked with an oil soaked rag, or dipped in a bucket of oil. The hot iron absorbs the oil. This technique has given some elements of the works a blueish-black surface which doesn't rust. In some cases objects have been allowed to rust. The rusting process is accelerated by sandblasting all scale off the surface. The slightly pitted sandblasted surface rusts evenly and quickly.

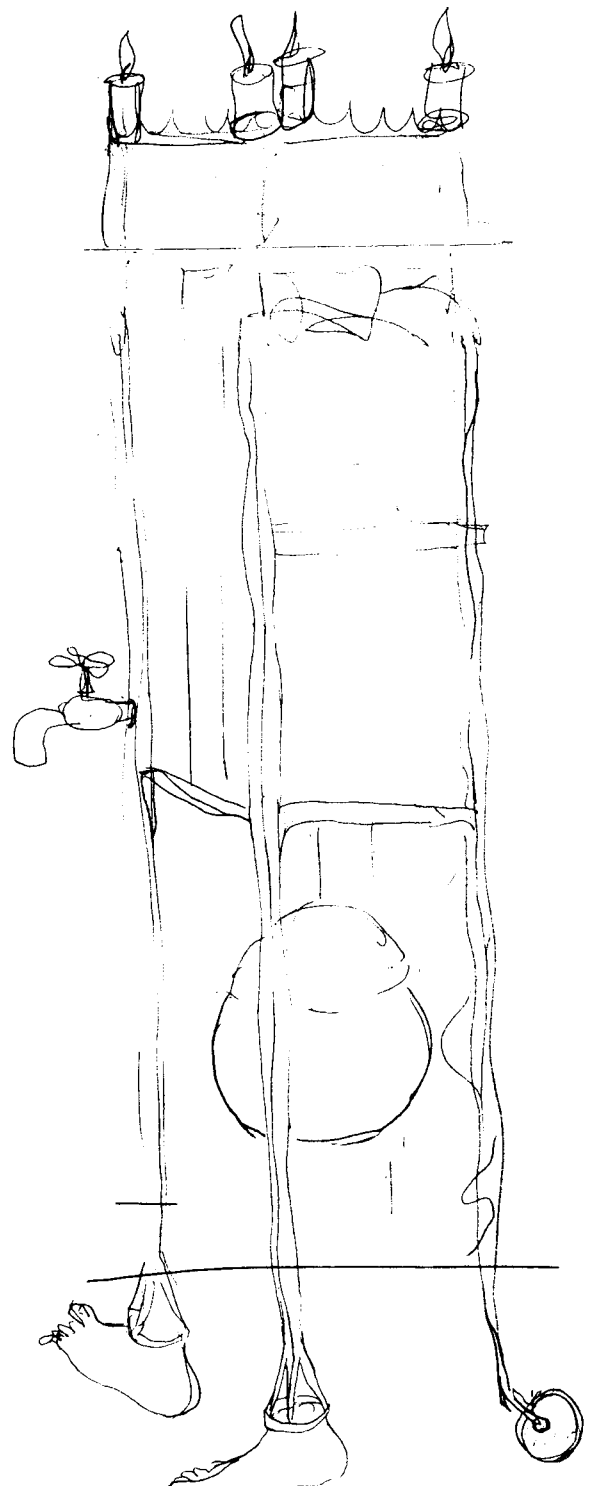
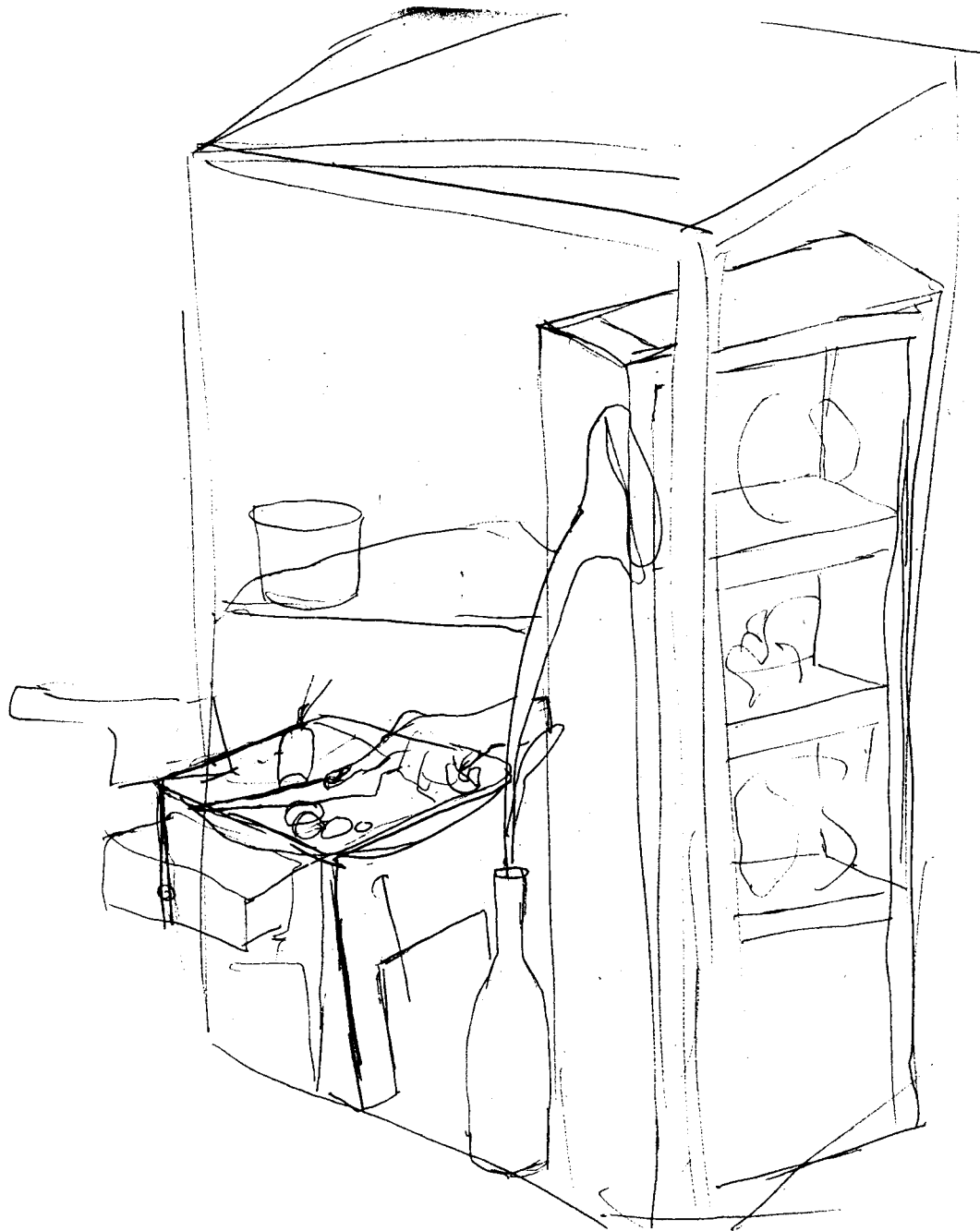
Most of the carved wooden objects have been carved from cured blocks of Jacaranda. Redwood, Jarrah, Bluegum and Pine have also been used to a lesser degree. The rough forms of pieces were blocked out using a chainsaw, whereafter gouge chisels, a rasp and various rifflers were used to achieve the final form. Chisel marks and the texture left by the rasp and rifflers have been retained. Some of the wood has been oiled with Flurit furniture oil to enhance the colour and the grain.

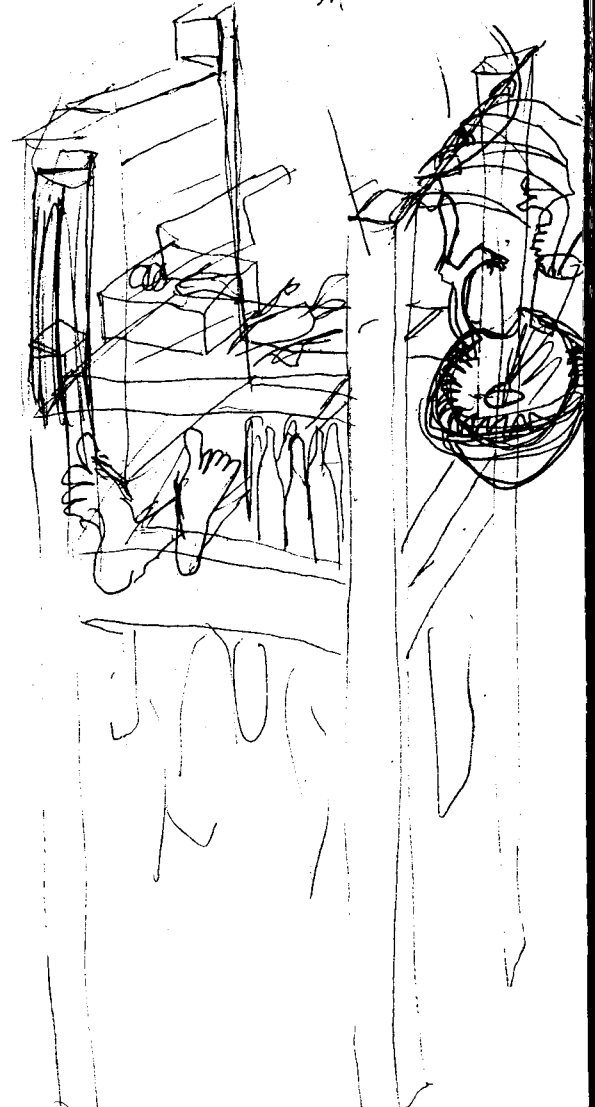
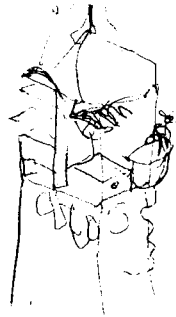
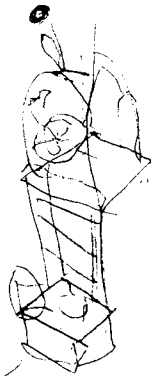
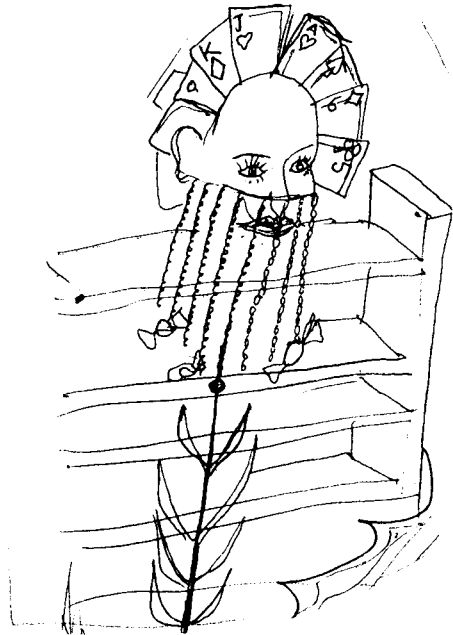
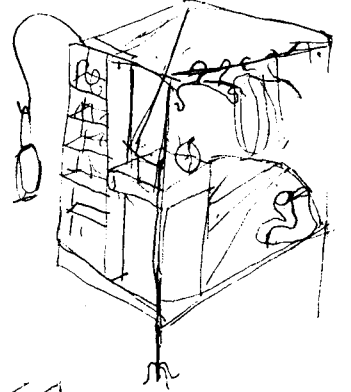
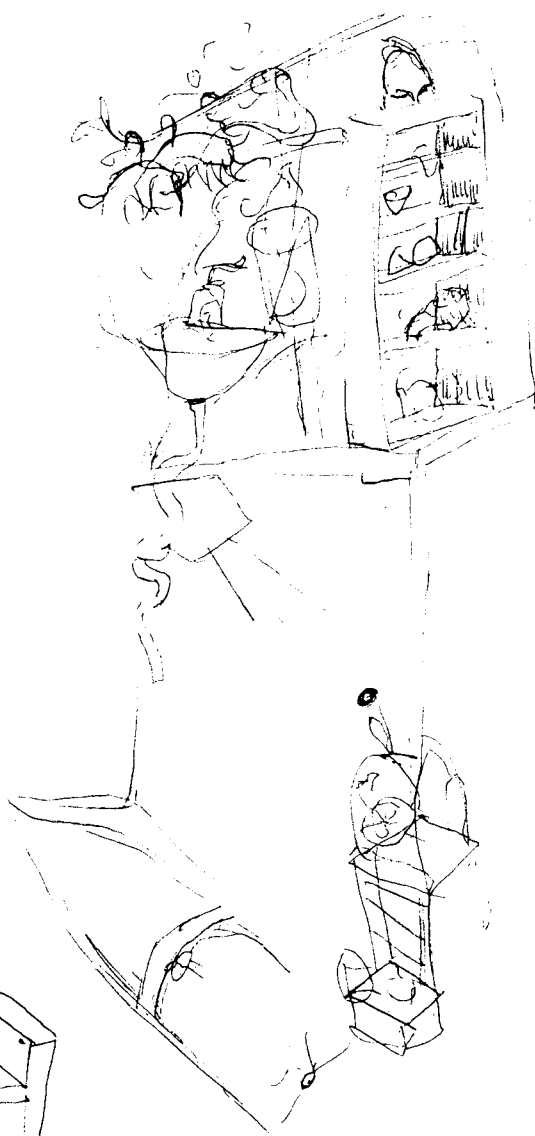
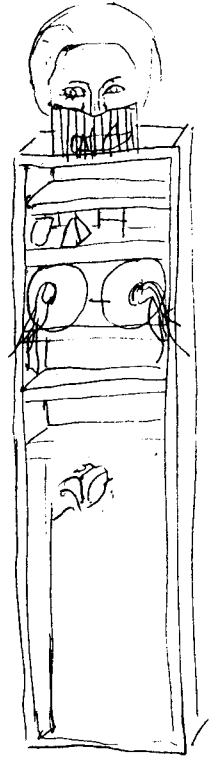
**WORKING DRAWINGS**

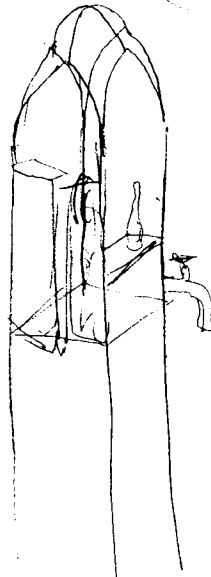
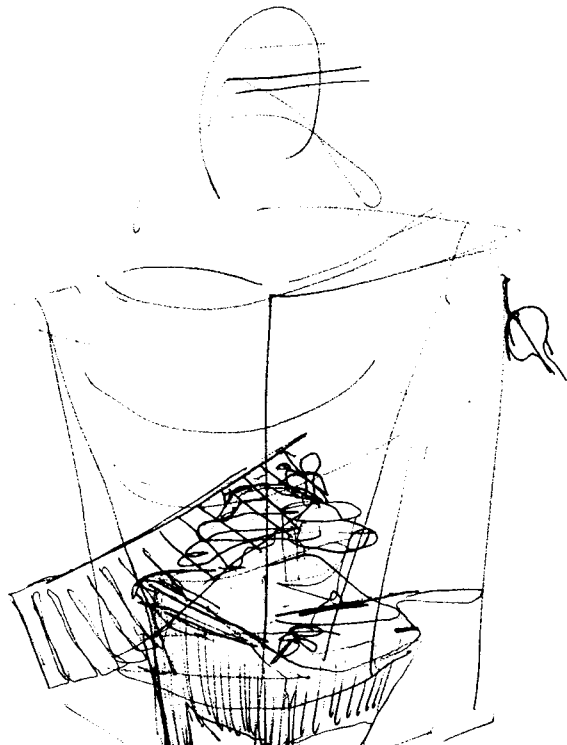
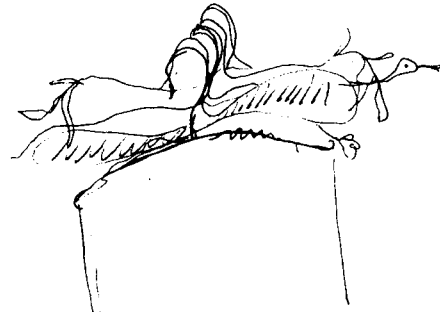
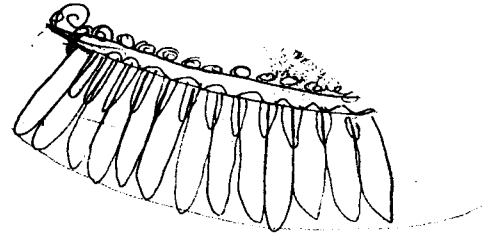
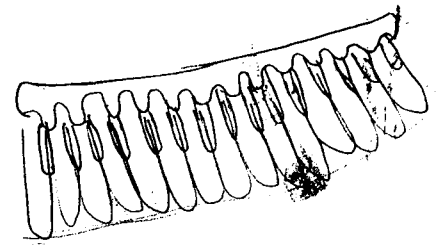
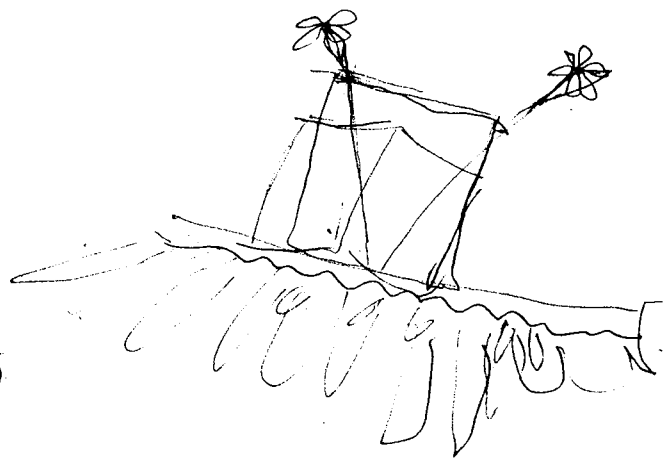


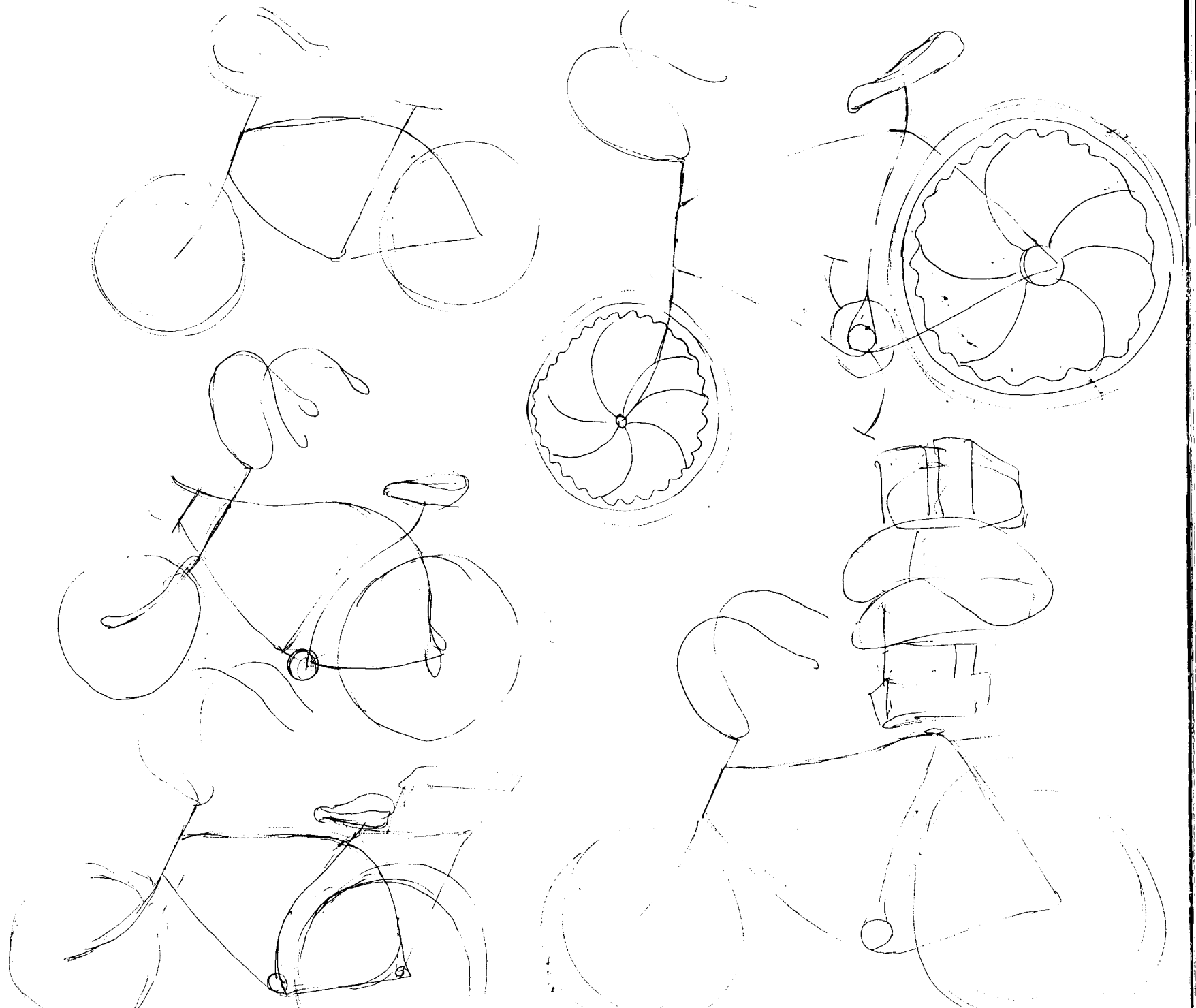


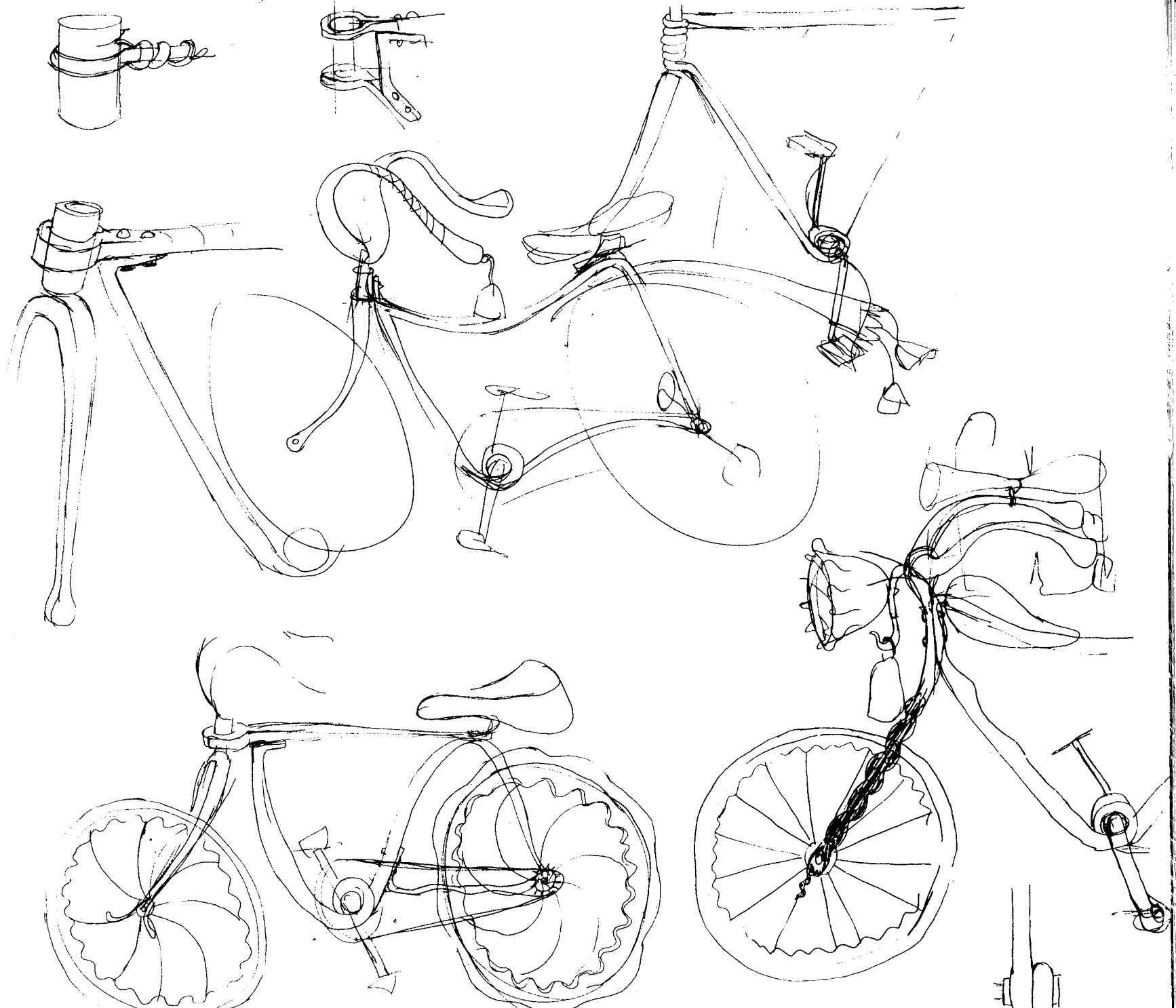


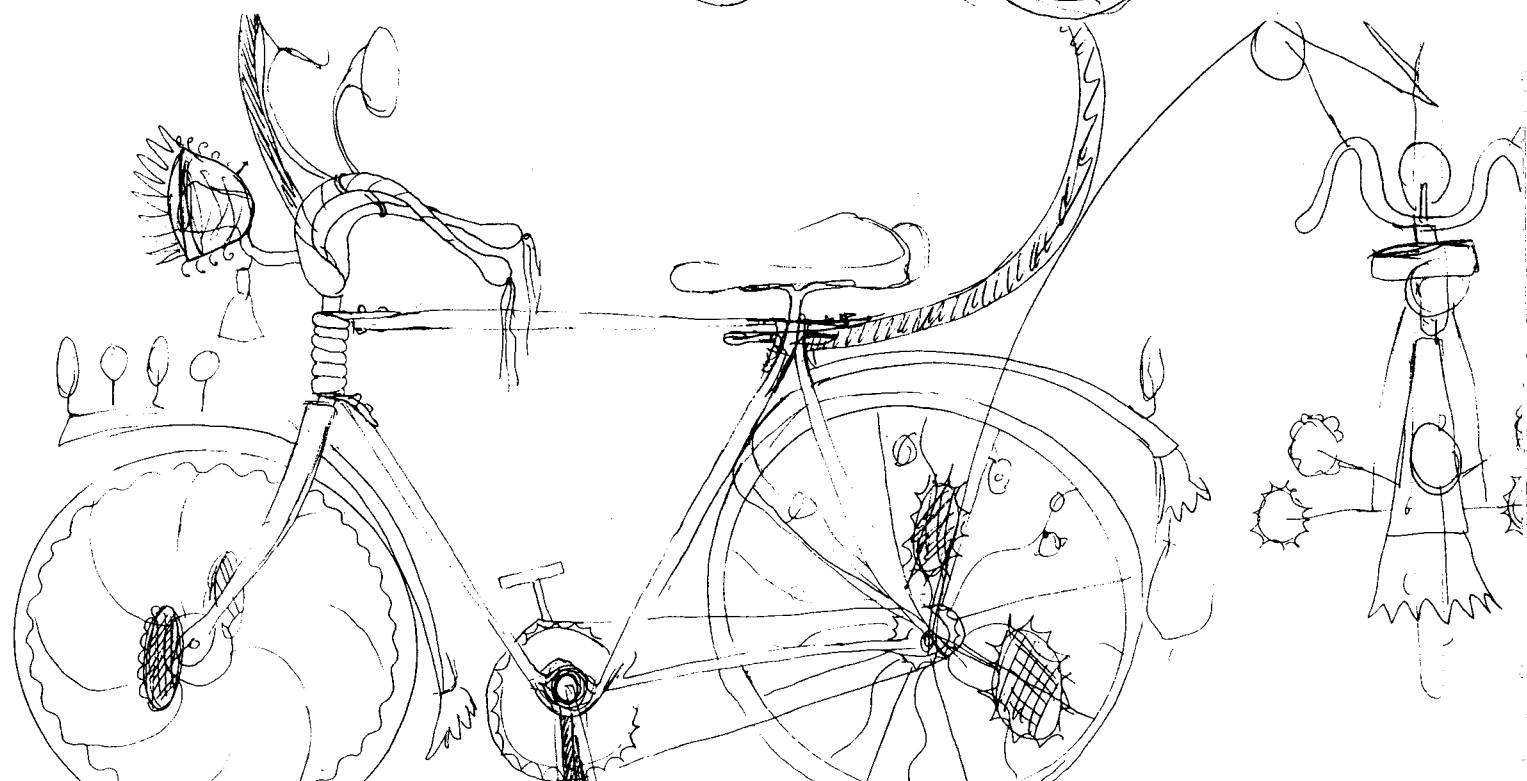
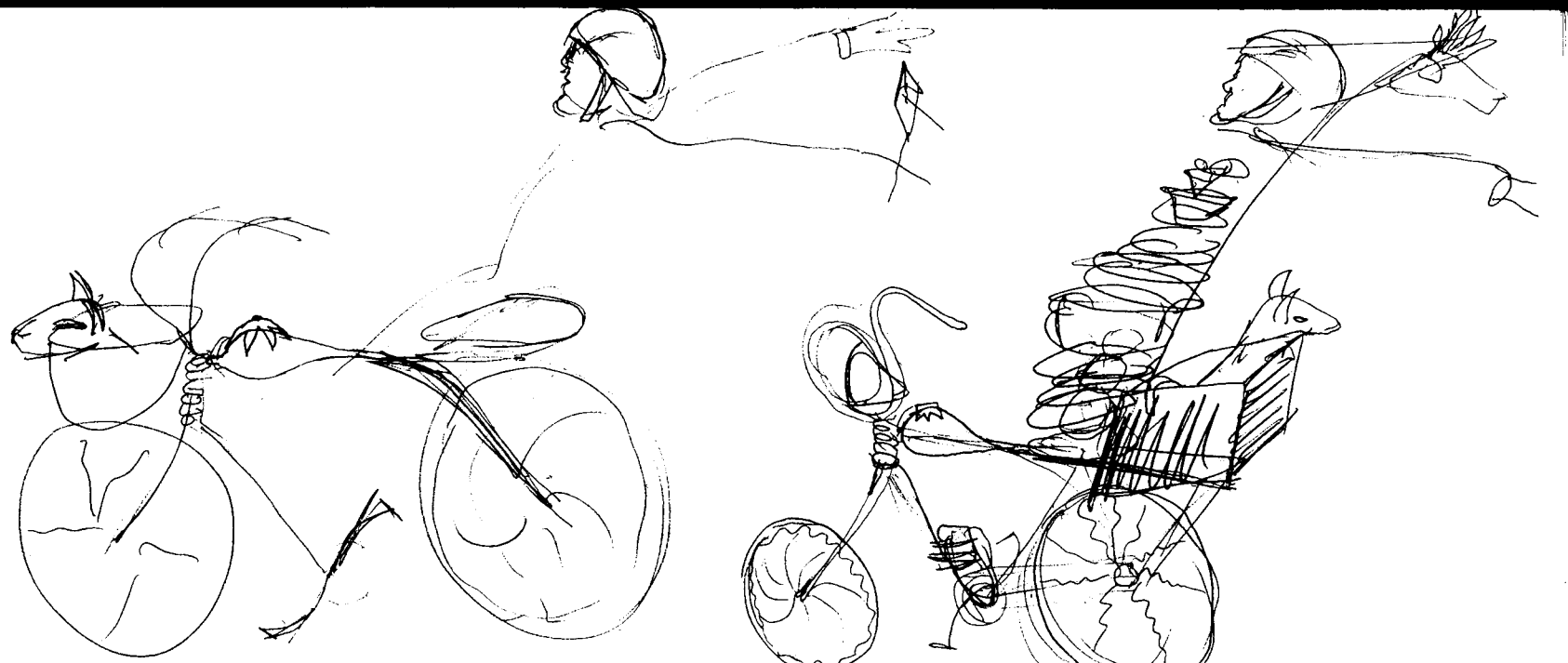


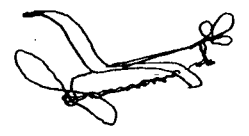
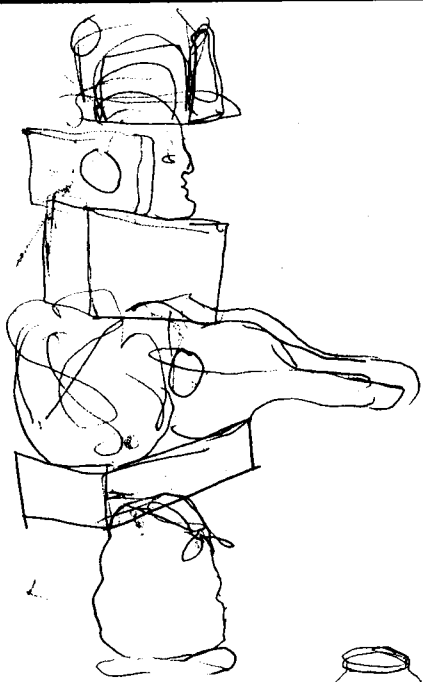




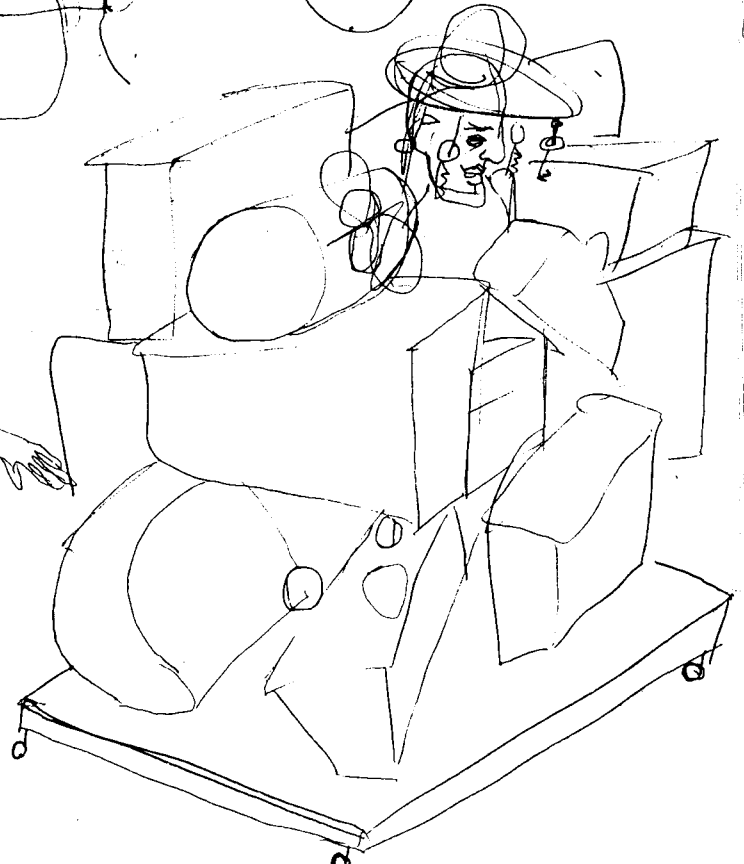
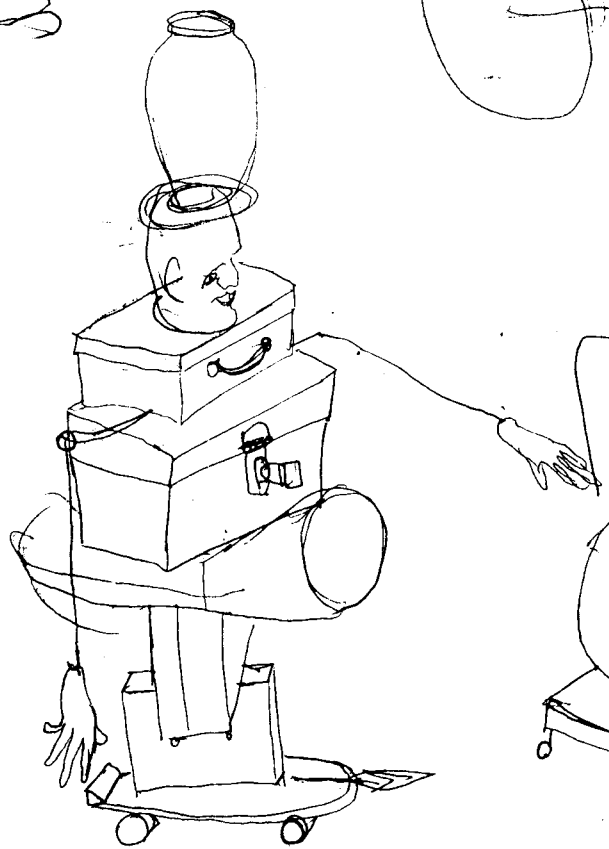


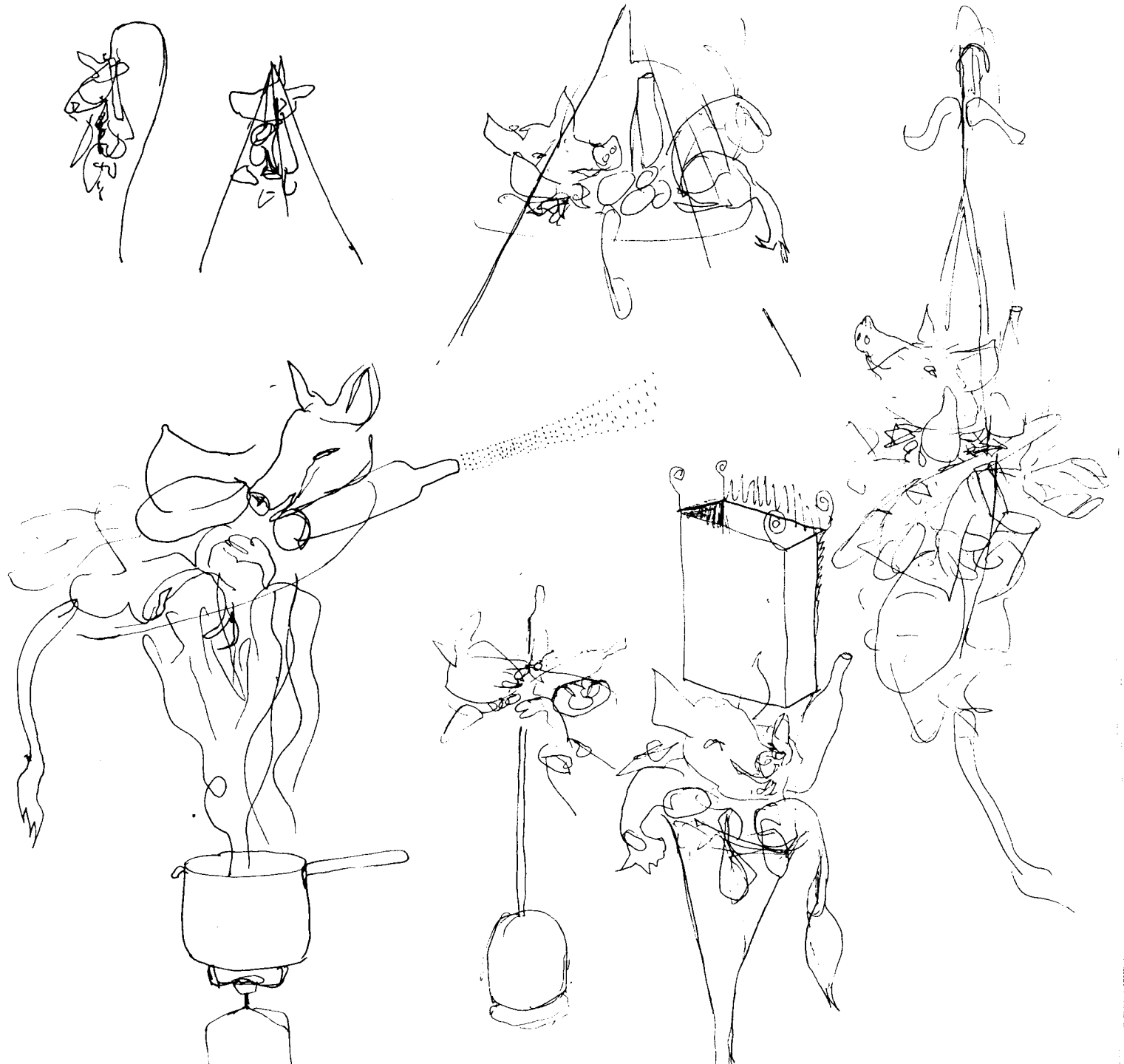


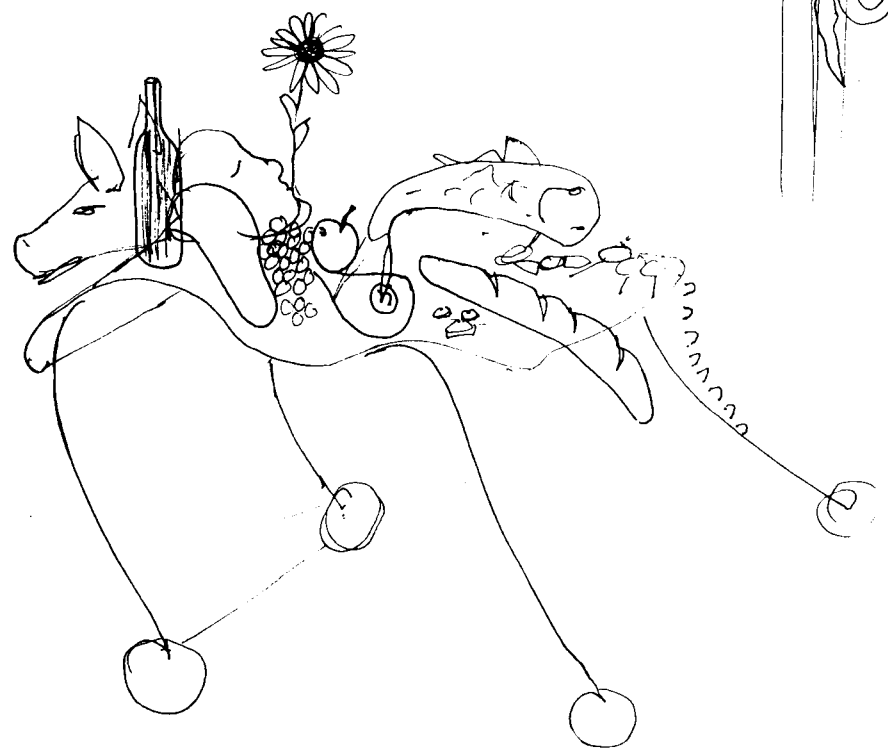
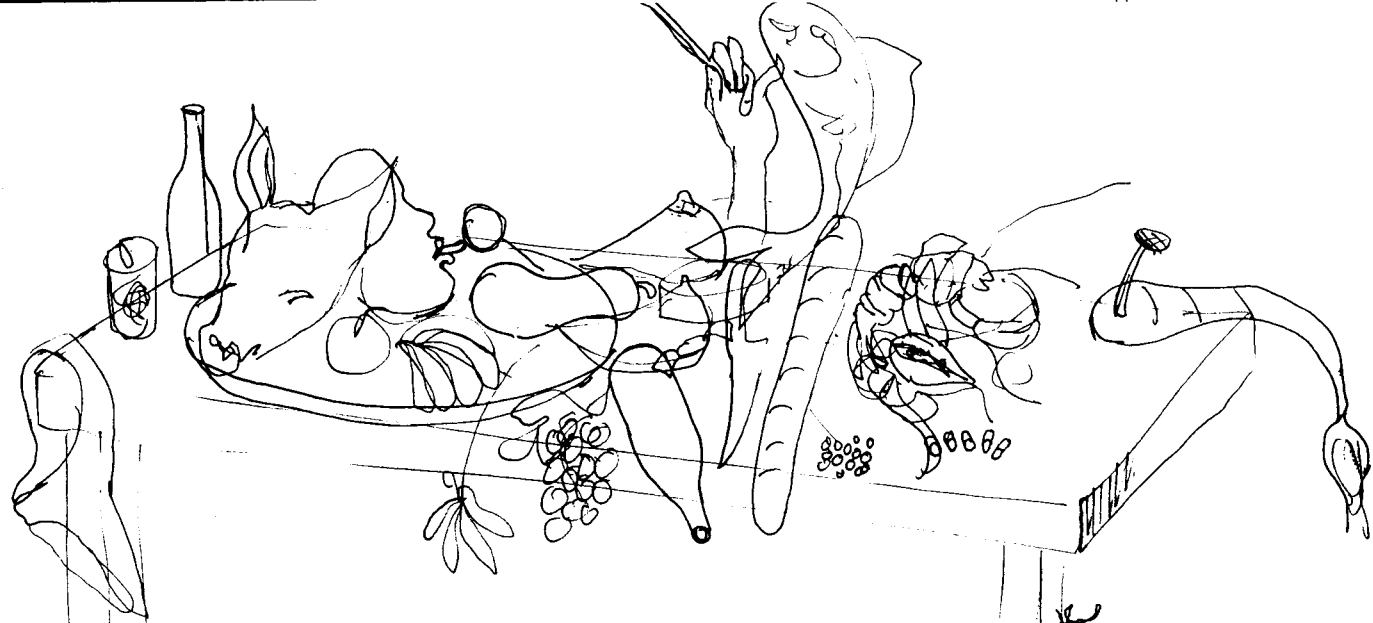


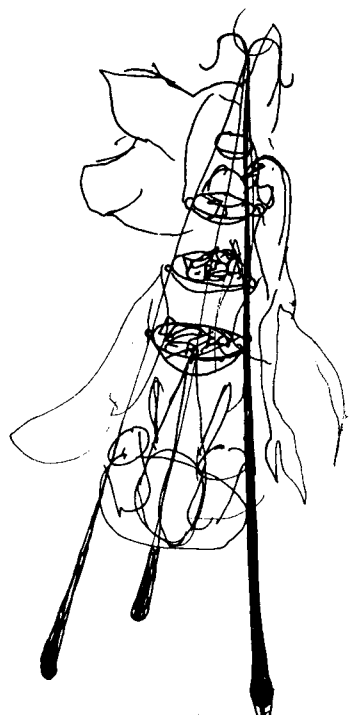
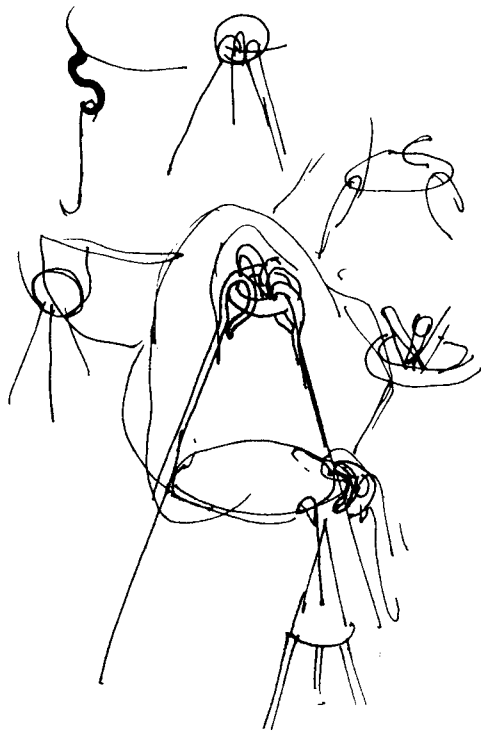
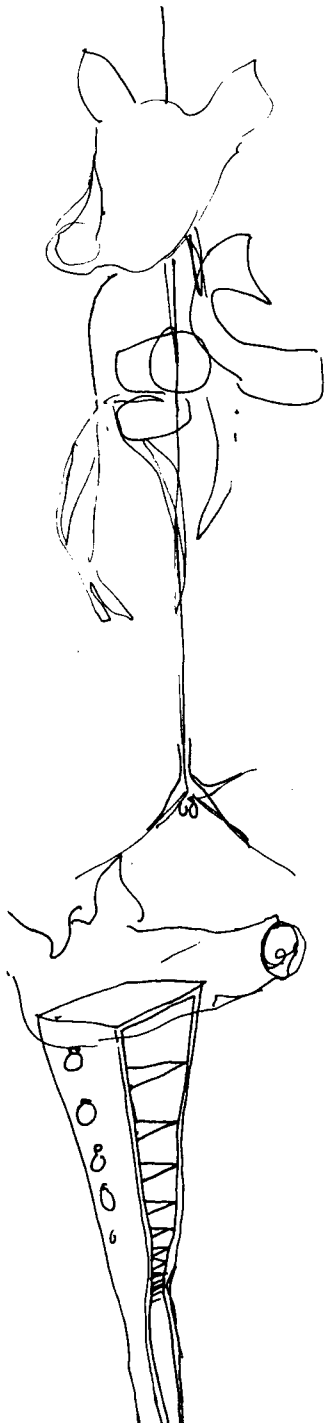


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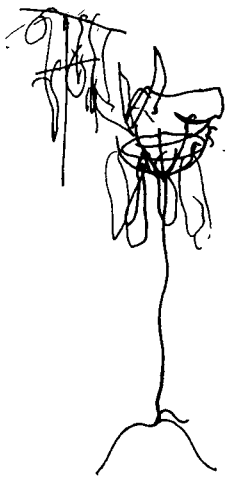
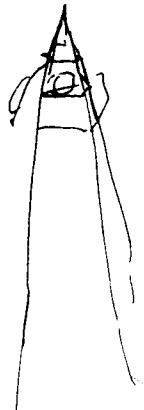


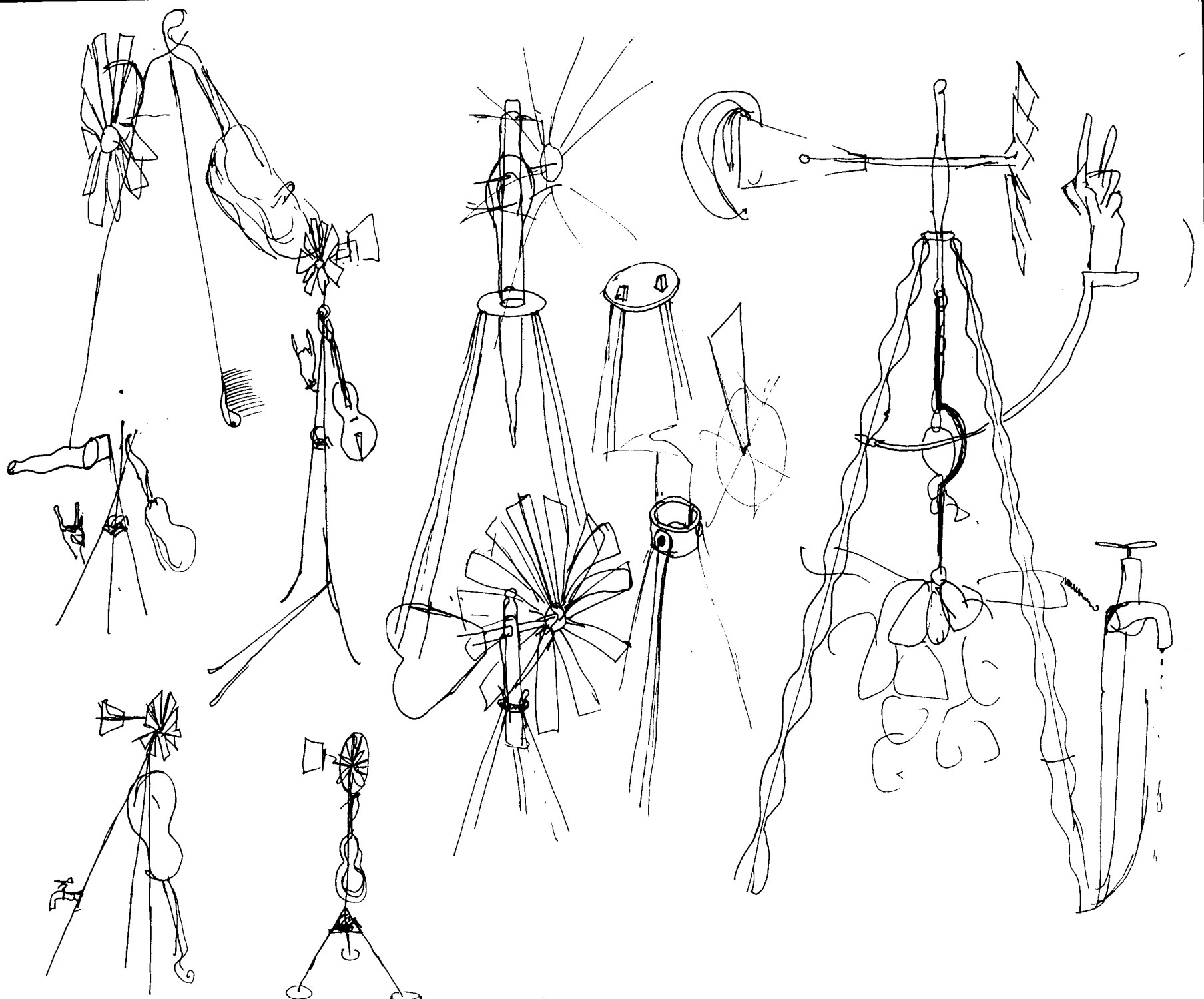


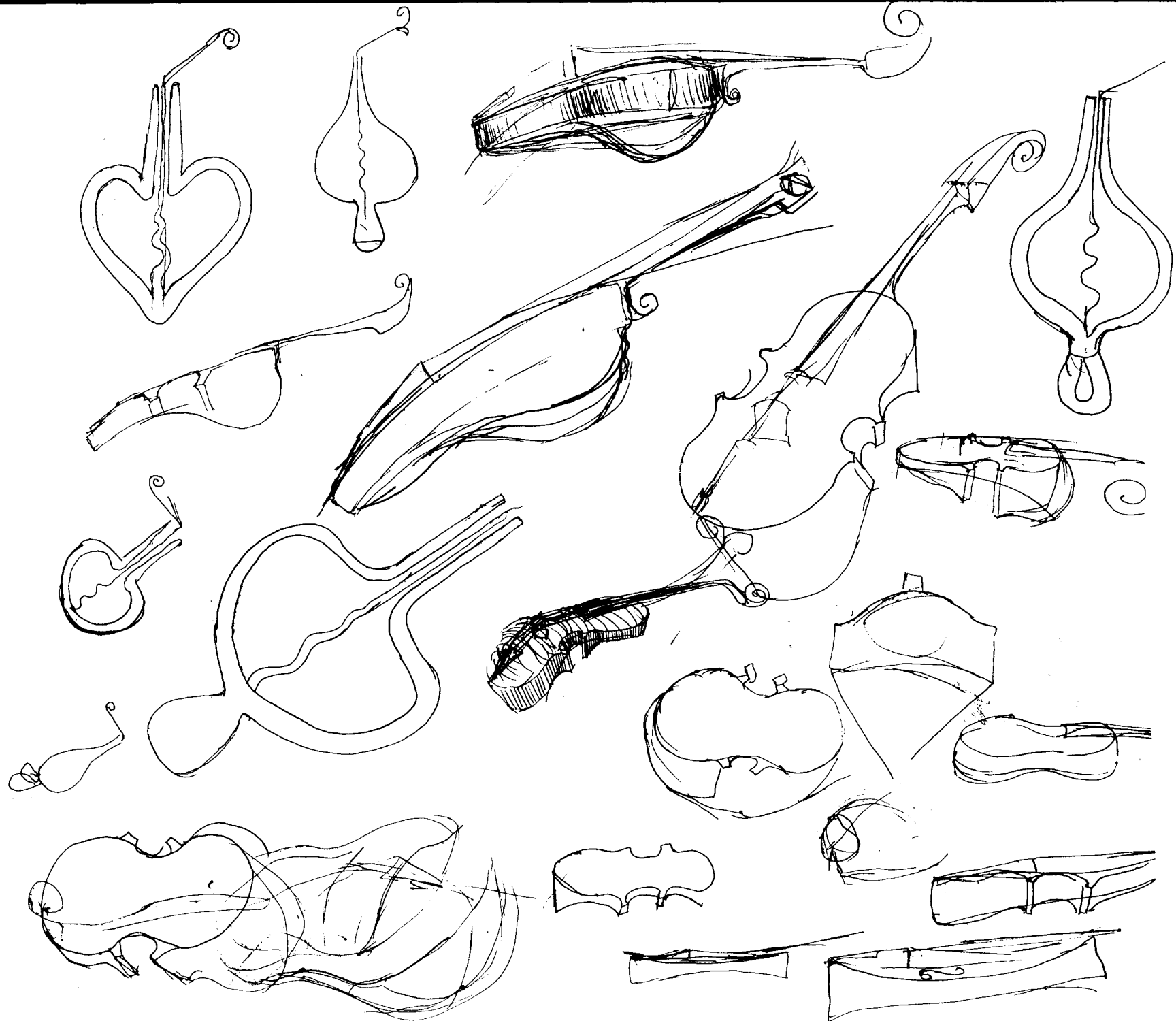


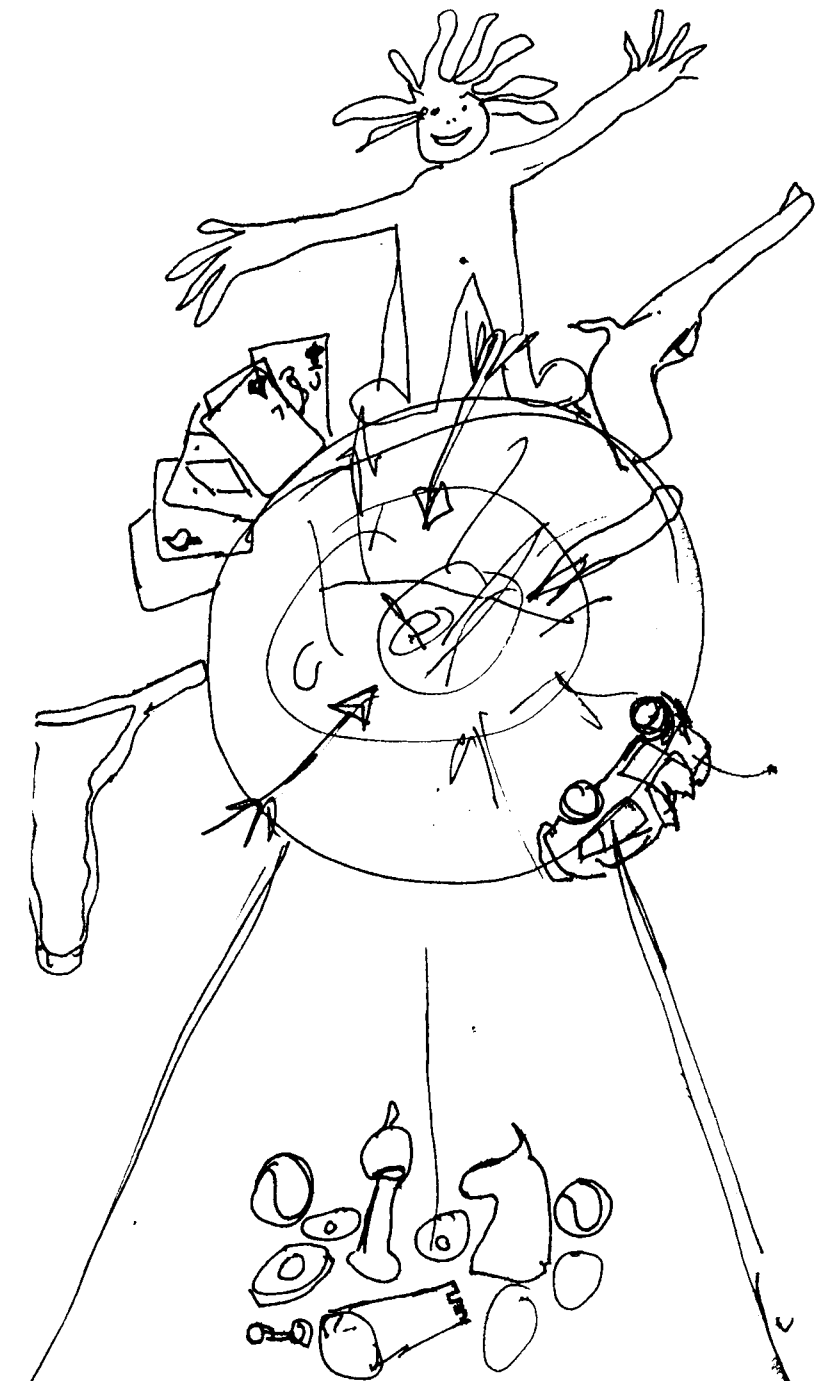


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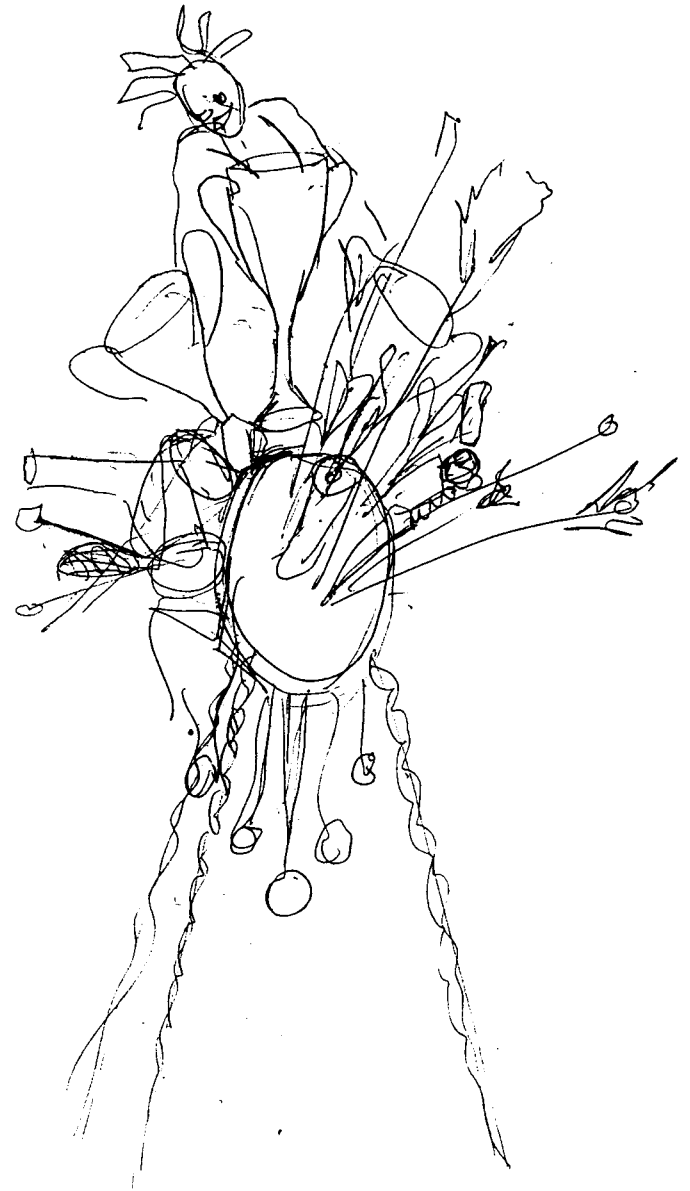


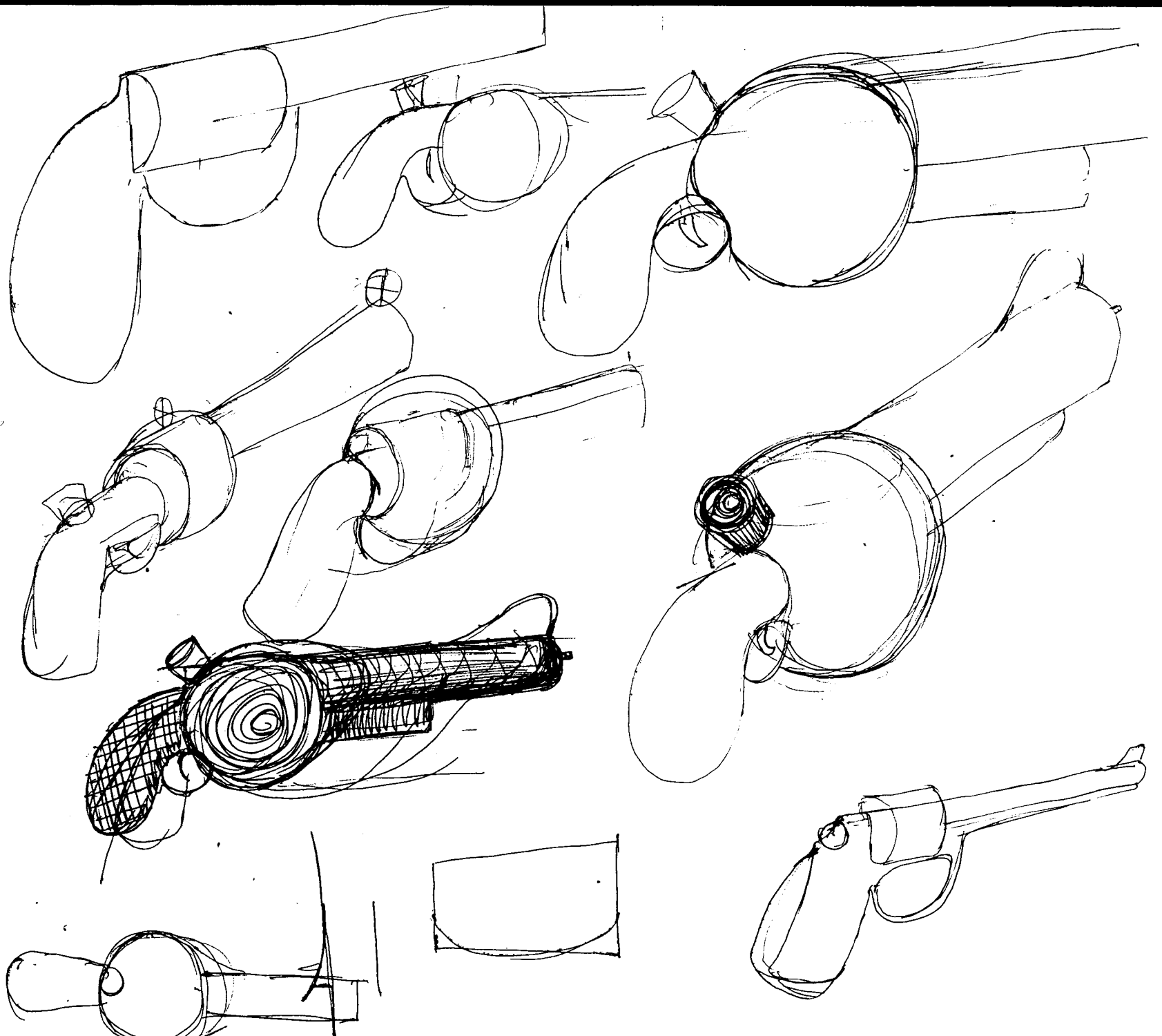


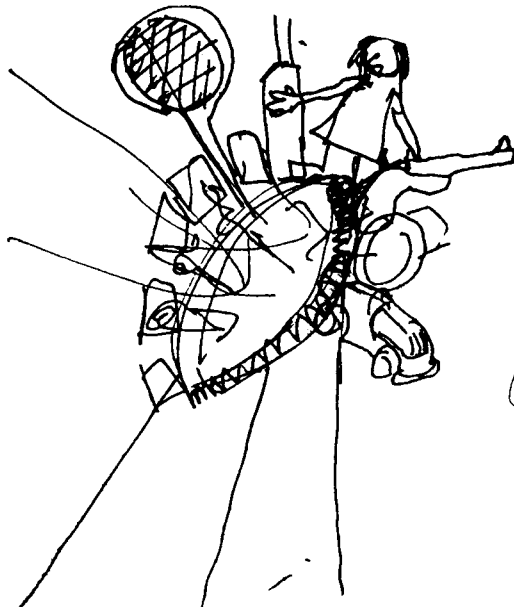
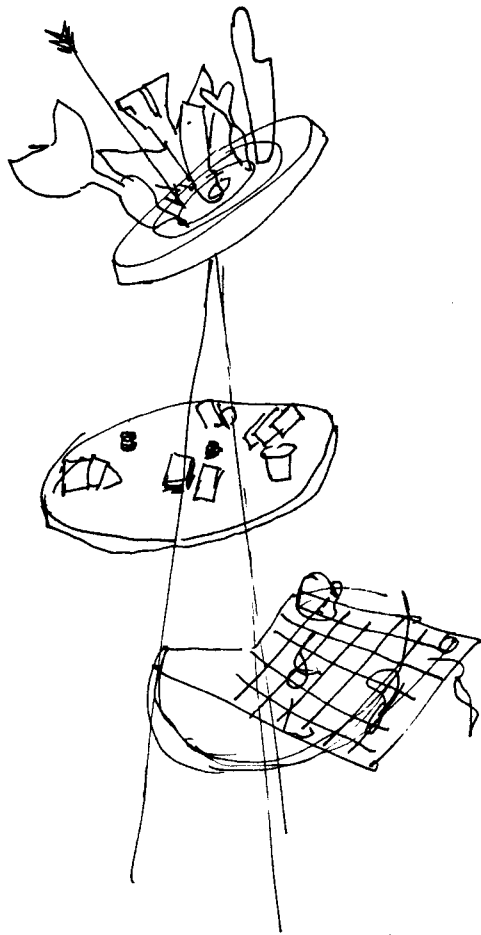
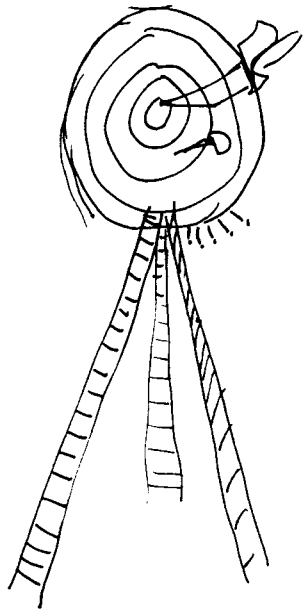


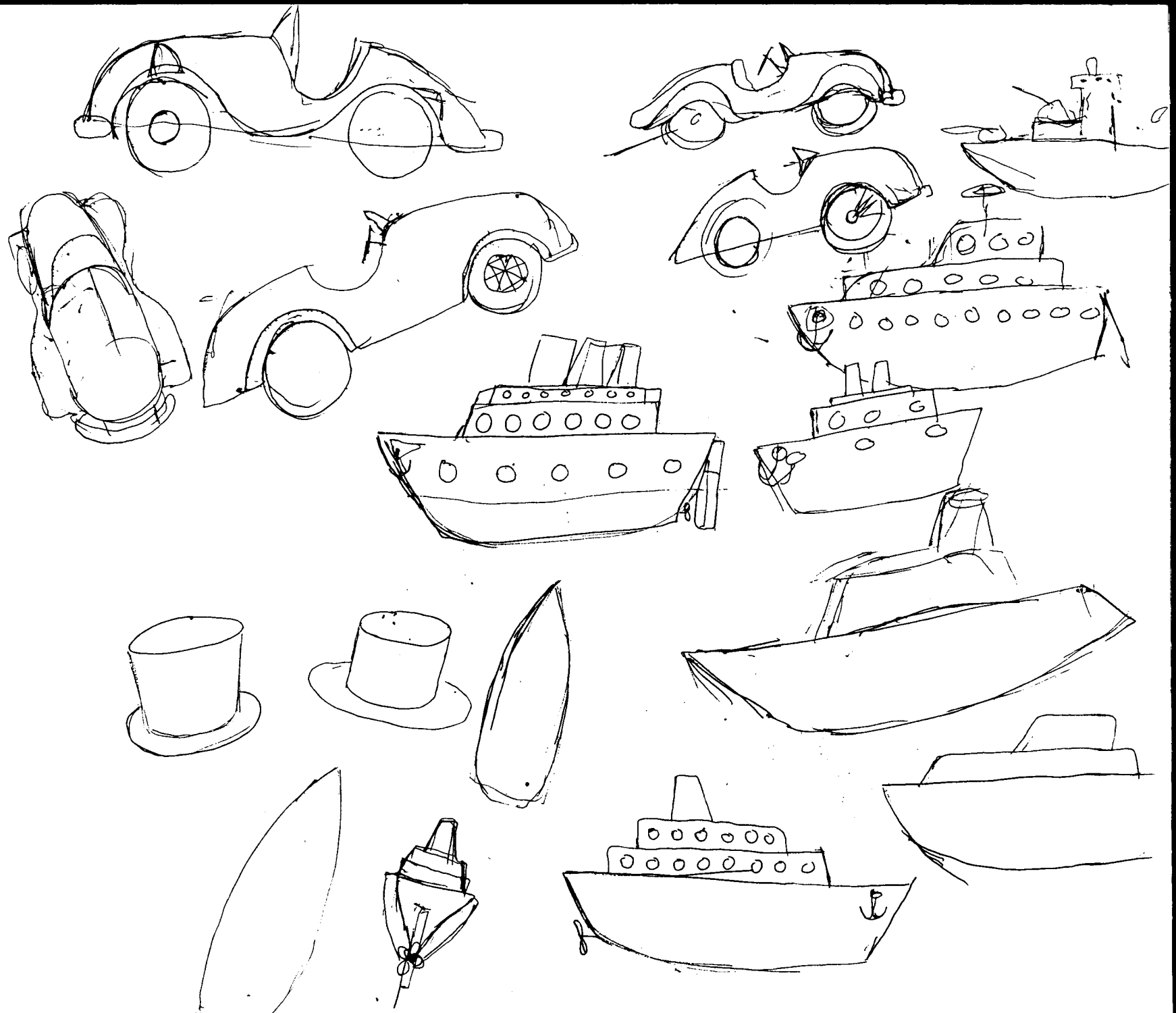


"I'm the king of the castle."









## A NOTE ON THE SCULPTURAL APPLICATION OF WROUGHT IRON

Although forged iron has been used throughout the ages to produce tools, weapons and architectural fittings, iron sculpture has not been common until this century. This can probably be ascribed to the fact that the naturalistically rendered figures which dominate pre-twentieth century sculpture could not be easily achieved in wrought iron. The rapid corrosion of iron also made it an unsuitable medium for sculpture. However, although functional or, at best, decorative, much pre-industrial wrought iron is sculptural (fig. 25-29).

The development of faster and more effective technologies for the working of iron and steel during and since the industrial revolution has rendered the craft of the blacksmith all but obsolete. However, although modern means of cutting, forming, welding and grinding iron are efficient, quick and convenient, modern technology cannot reproduce the plastic, organic, twisted, moulded, folded and textured qualities which can be produced in a forge.

In Europe and America, in the late 1920s and 1930s, when sculptors like Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Julio Gonzalez (1876-1942) and David Smith (1909-1965) began producing iron sculptures, industrial techniques and the aesthetic influence of mass-produced objects had already effectively marginalised the blacksmith. The iron works of these sculptors are characterised by a gestural, expressive use of iron. They explore the expressive potential of the modern iron working process, the textures produced by grinding and welding and the rough edges left by a gas cutting torch

on industrially produced iron. Nevertheless, they did forge their iron from time to time, to transform the industrial symmetry of milled iron, and to achieve the plastic qualities best attained by working iron when hot.

Picasso's *Woman in the garden* (1930-31) (fig. 30), fabricated by Gonzalez, includes a fig leaf shape which appears to have been forged. Gonzalez, who came from a family of blacksmiths, only developed an interest in making iron sculpture while assisting Picasso. Influenced by Cubism and Picasso's assemblages, the sculptures Gonzales produced in his own right are generally angular and faceted, seldom exploring the organic expressive possibilities of wrought iron. However some of his works do have a softness and fluidity achieved by forging the iron: *Woman combing her hair* (1936) (fig. 31) and *Petite Danseuse* (1935) (fig. 32).

David Smith, who acquired his metal working skills working in a locomotive and tank factory during the war, had a pragmatic approach to the production of iron sculpture:

'My method of shaping material or arriving at form has been as functional as making a motor car or locomotive...I have no aesthetic interest in tool marks, surface embroidery or molten puddles. The locomotive method...utilises the respective merits of castings, forging, rivetting, arc and gas welding, brazing, silver solder, bolts, screws, shrink fits, all because of their efficiency in arriving at an object or form in function' (David Smith, quoted in *Gimenez 1993*: 301).

In certain of Smith's works elements exploiting the expressive qualities of wrought iron have been used: *Cathedral*

(1950) (fig. 33) and *Agricola IX* (1952) (fig. 34).

Some examples of Art Nouveau wrought iron, produced in Europe at the turn of the century, and traditional West African wrought iron may further demonstrate the distinctive character of forged iron. The forms of Art Nouveau were ideally suited to the blacksmith's craft. The central stylistic theme of Art Nouveau was a celebration of natural forms, of gracefully curved and flowing lines and floral motifs (fig. 35 & 36). The Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi (1852-1926), who worked within the Art Nouveau style, is particularly well known for his innovative and expressive use of materials. The wrought iron work on his buildings are fine examples of the plastic and sculptural qualities which can be achieved in a forge (fig. 37-42).

In West Africa, where an indigenous blacksmithing tradition exists, smiths occupy a revered position in society. Not only do they produce tools and weapons, they are also spiritual practitioners producing supernaturally potent artefacts for use in the rituals of animistic religion. These include masks, carved from wood and a variety of stylised wrought iron figures and animals used as head dresses, capitals for ritual staffs or as fetishes and amulets (fig. 43-47).

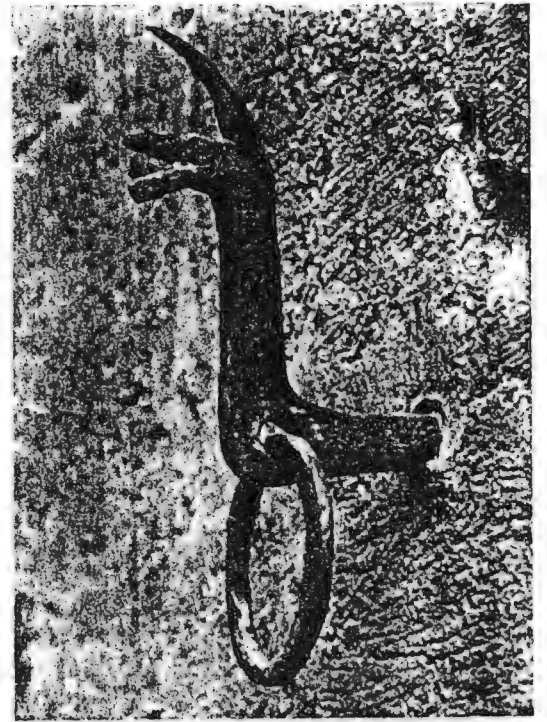
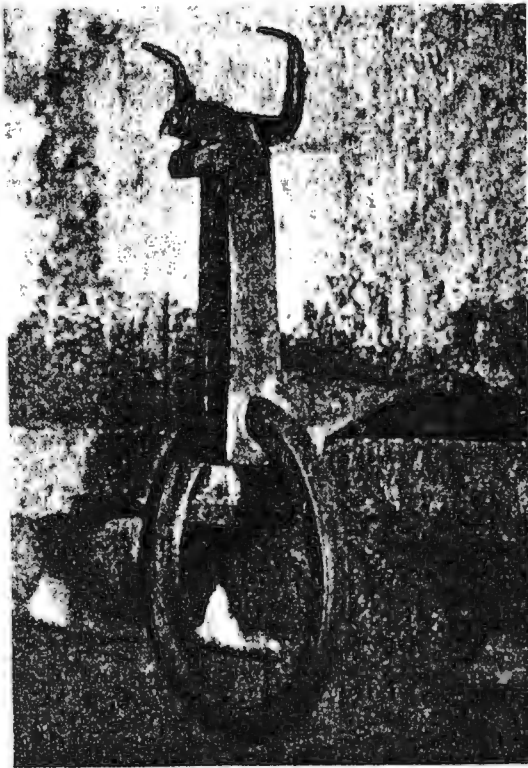


Fig. 25, 26, 27.  
Knockers in different houses in Sienna,  
1200-1400 AD.

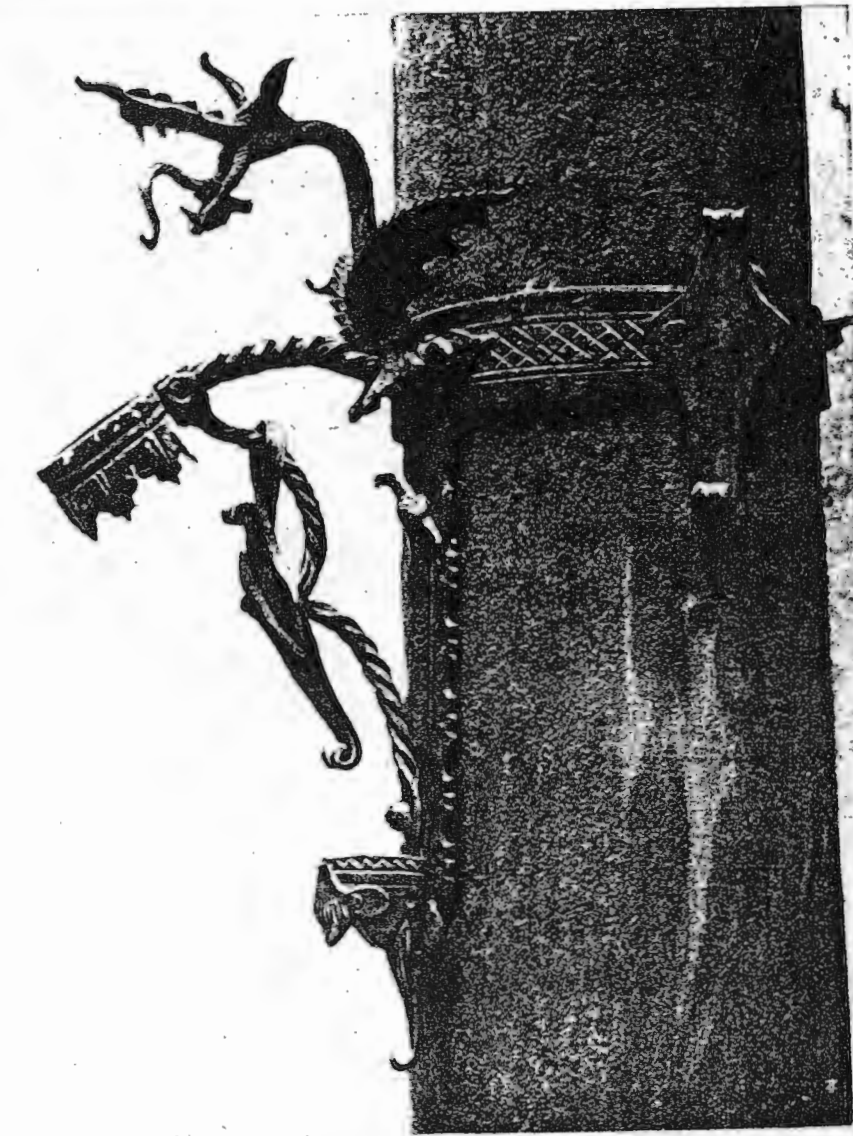


Fig. 28.  
Decorative flagstaff holder, 1400-1600.

Fig. 29.  
Decorative flagstaff holder, 1400-1600.





Fig. 30.  
Pablo Picasso, *Woman in the garden*, 1931.



Fig. 31.  
Julio Gonzalez, *Woman combing her hair*,  
1936.



Fig. 32.  
Julio Gonzalez, *Petite Danseuse*, 1935.

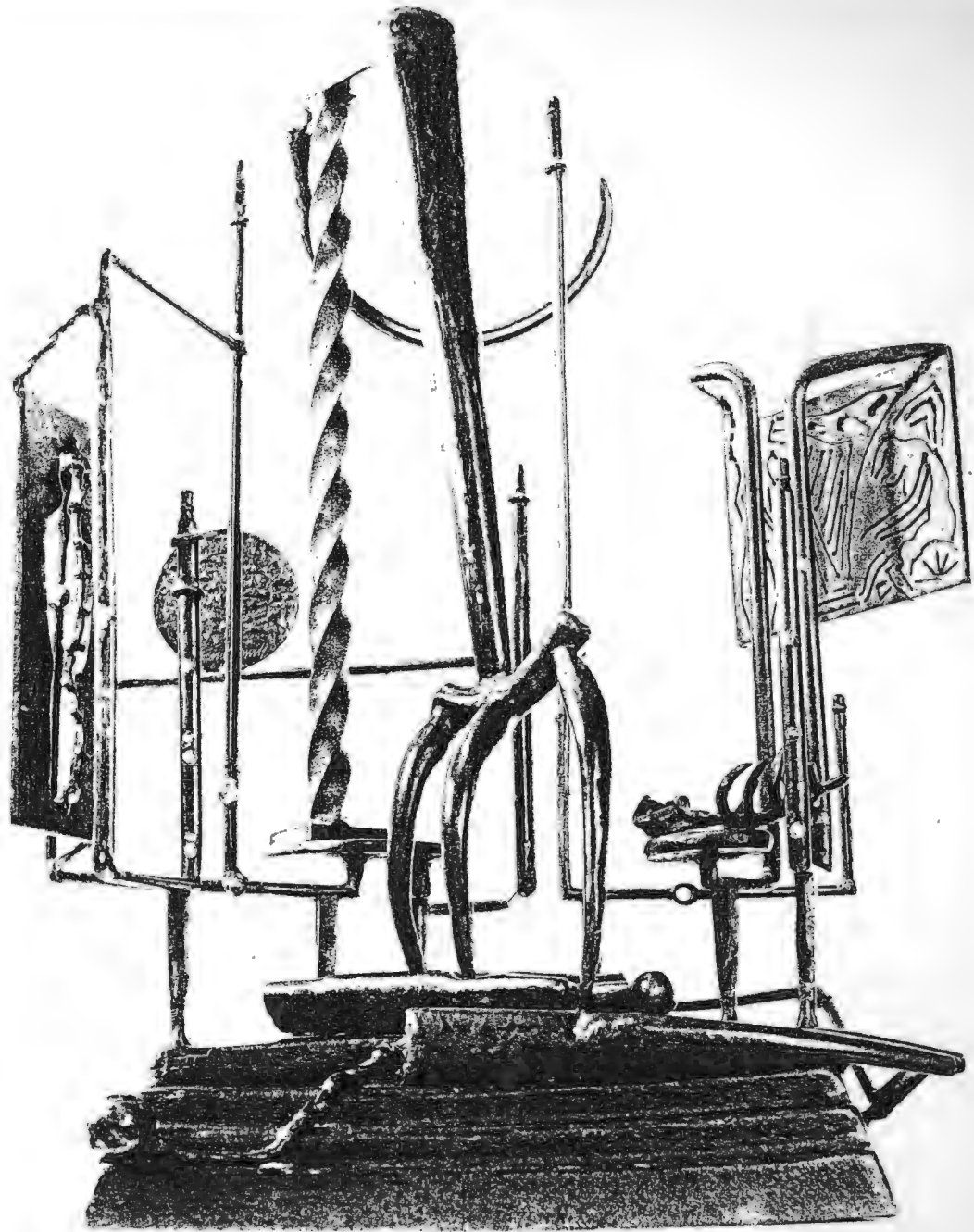


Fig. 33.  
David Smith, *Cathedral*, 1950.



Fig. 34.  
David Smith, *Agricola IX*, 1952.

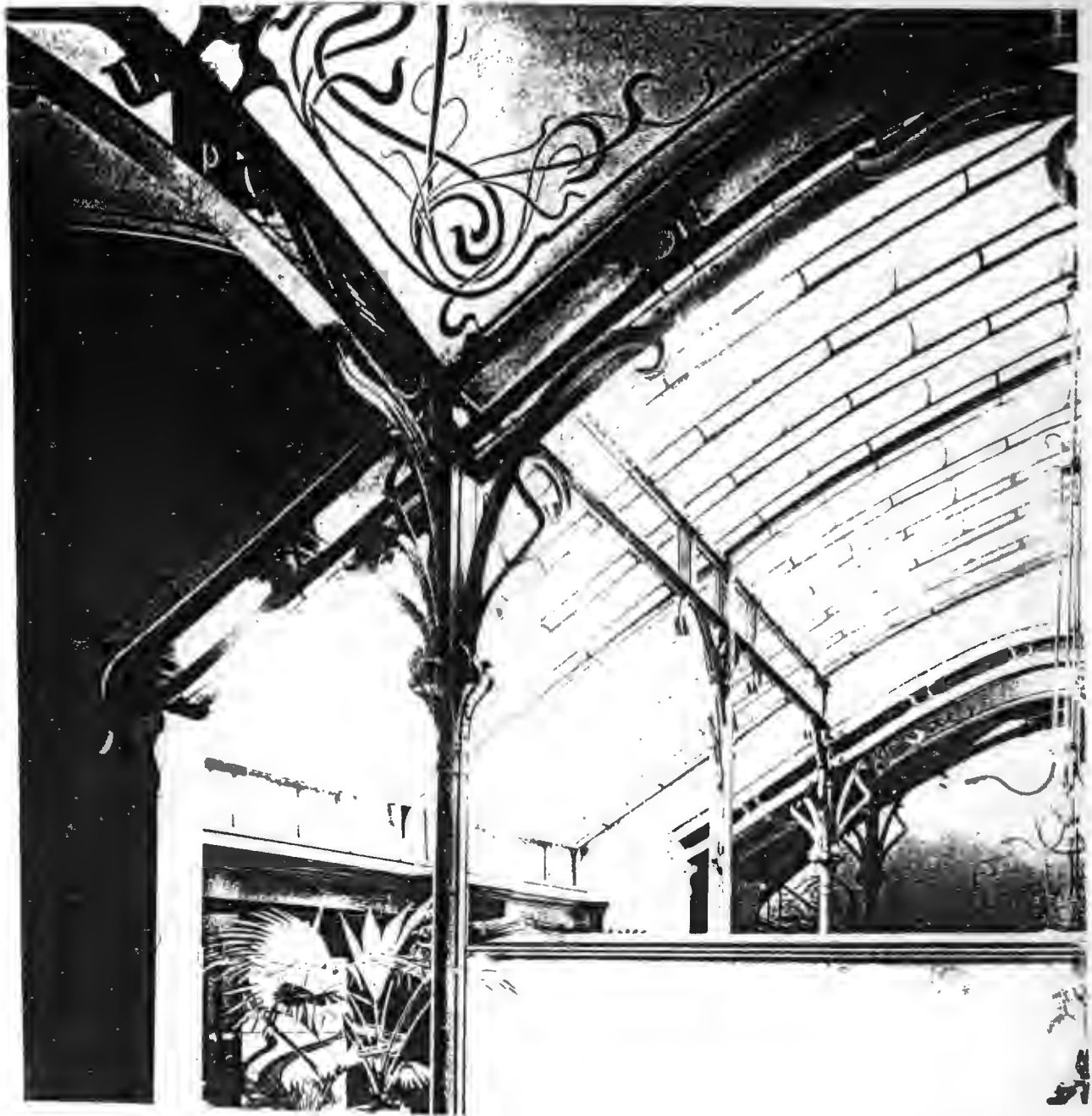


Fig. 35.  
Victor Horta, staircase in *Tassel residence*,  
Brussels, 1893.

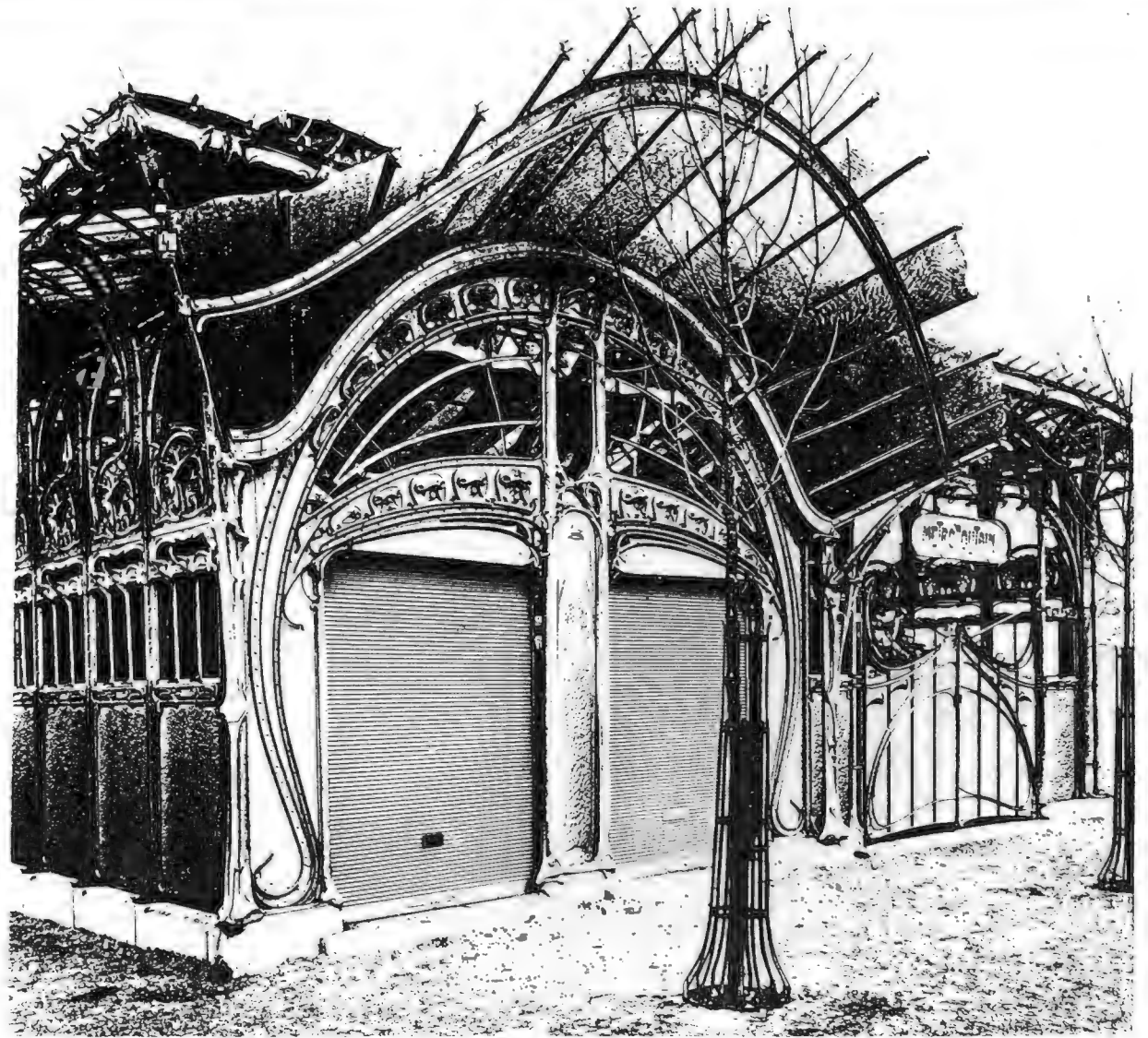


Fig. 36.  
Hector Guimard, *Paris Metro station*,  
1900.



Fig. 37.  
Antonio Gaudi, wrought iron balcony of  
*Casa Mila*, 1910.

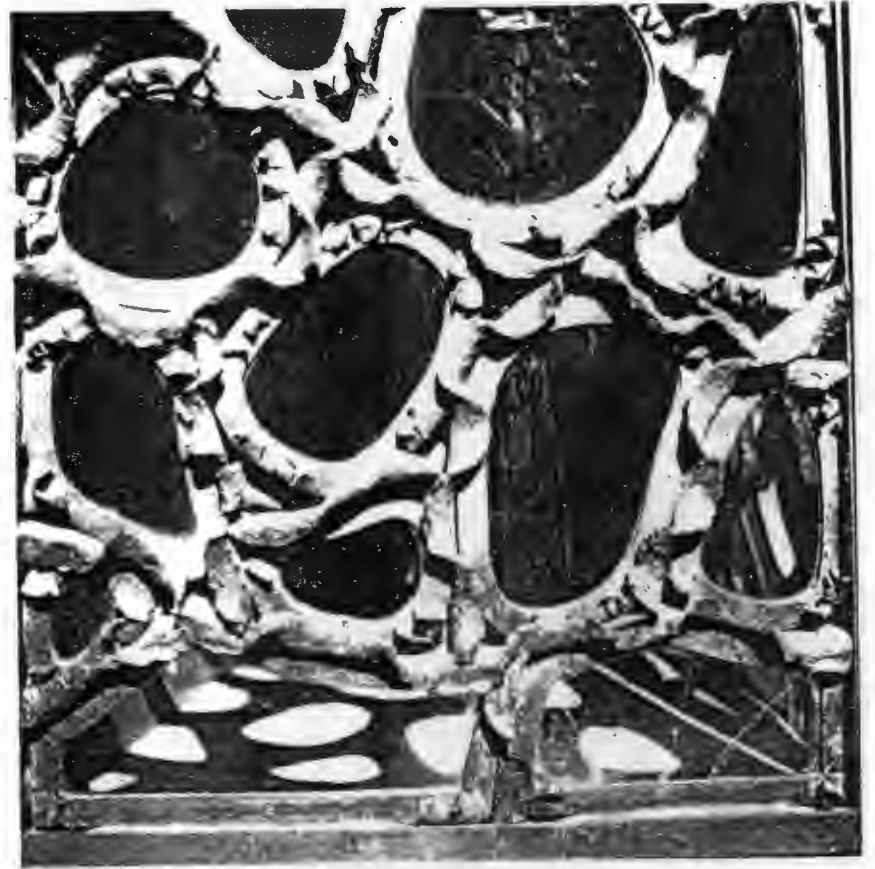


Fig. 38.  
Antonio Gaudi, detail of window frame,  
*Casa Mila*, 1910.

Fig. 39.  
Antonio Gaudi, detail of balustrade,  
*Casa Mila*, 1910.



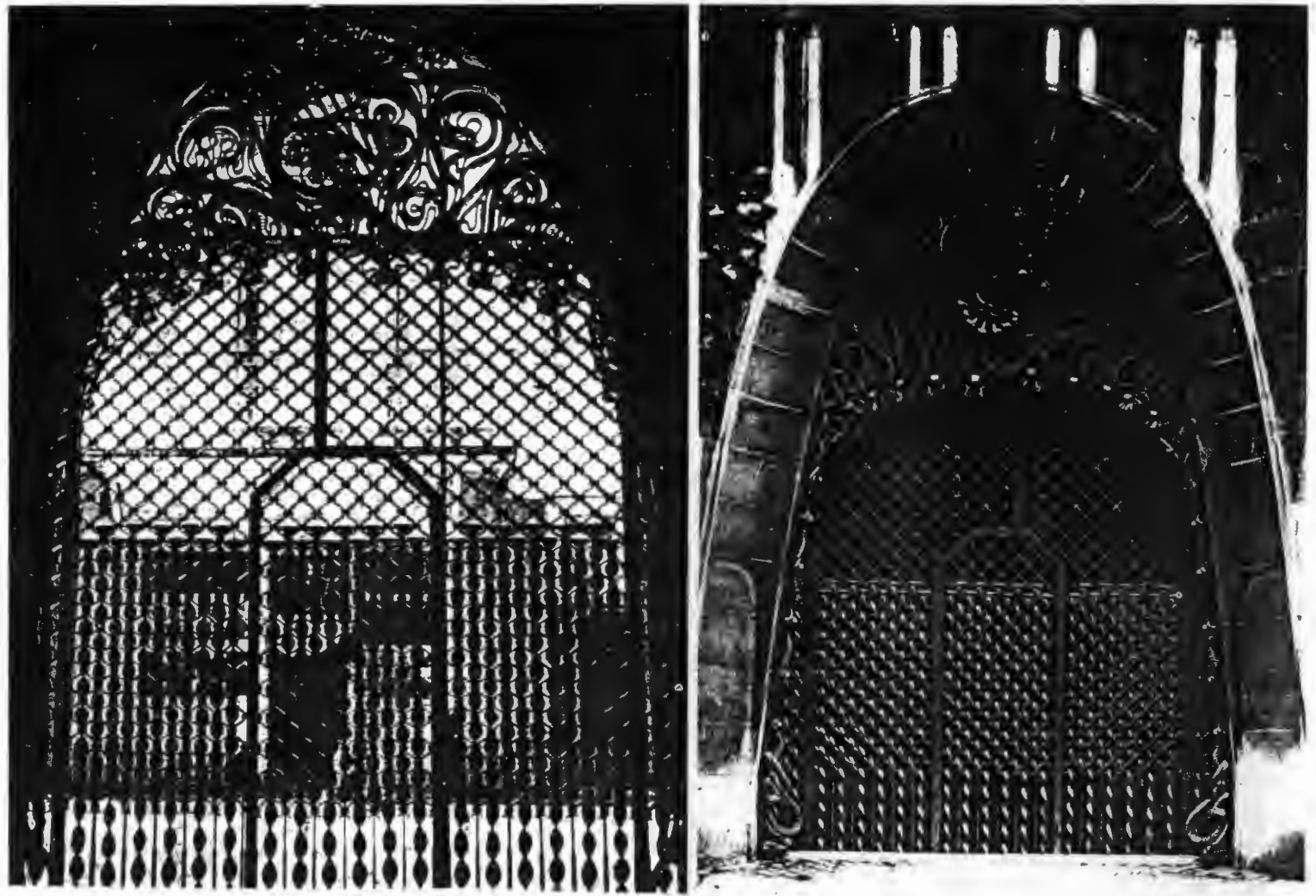


Fig. 40. Antonio Gaudi, entrance *Palacio Guell*, 1889.

Fig. 41.  
Antonio Gaudi, ornamental detail in a  
bedroom of the *Palacio Guell*, 1889.





Fig. 42.  
Antonio Gaudi, gatepost of the *Finca Guell*.



Fig. 43.  
West African wrought iron sculpture  
representing the *Orisha Ogun*.

Fig. 44.  
Banama wrought iron figure and staff.



Fig. 45.  
Banama Wrought iron equestrian figure  
and staff.





Fig. 46.  
Small iron figure coated with sacrificial  
material, used to deter sorcerers.

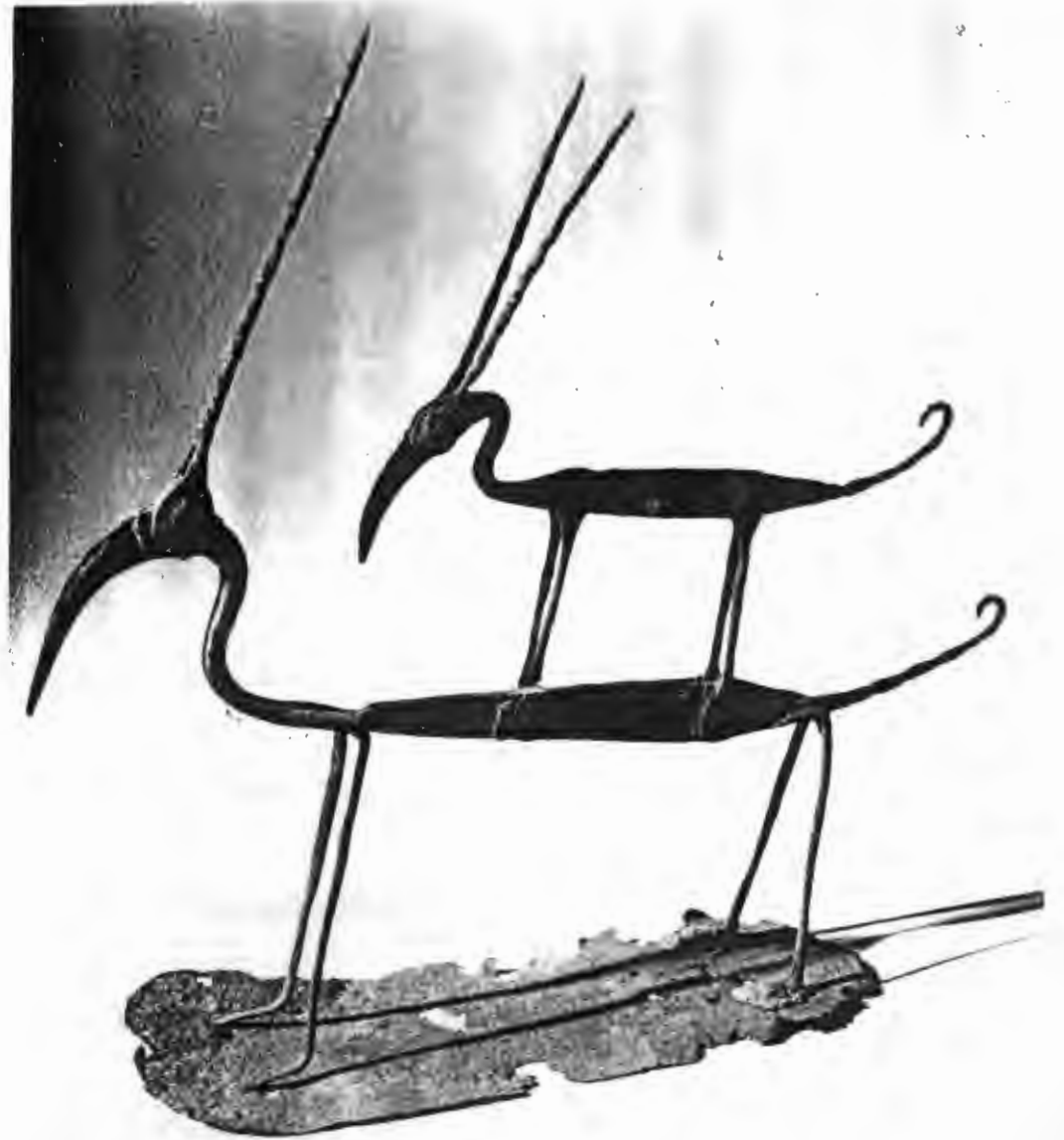


Fig. 47.  
Wrought iron antelope headdress.

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