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EVOLUTIONARY ASPECTS OF MY WORK IN COLLAGE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

MAURICE WOODROW BROWN, B.F.A., M.A.

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Approved by:

Hoyt L. Sherman
Adviser

School of Fine and Applied Arts

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I would like especially to express a deep gratitude to Professor Sherman for his guidance and inspiration during the past two years, and for the insights made possible by his Cezanne and Visual Form (Columbus: Institute for Research in Vision, The Ohio State University, 1952) and Drawing by Seeing (New York: Hinds, Hayden and Eldredge, 1947).

PREFACE

> When an artist explains what he is doing he usually has to do one of two things: either scrap what he has explained, or make his subsequent work fit in with the explanation. Theories may be all very well for the artist himself, but they shouldn't be broadcast to other people. All that I shall say...will be about what I have already done, not about what I am going to do.
>
> Alexander Calder

Various artists have stated in a number of ways the general trepidation with which they regard the making of verbal statements. They have suggested that such statements by the artist release "tension needed for his work."[1] The ultimate value of such statements has been implied by the observation that the creative process does not result in a state in which one is "never at a loss for an answer."[2]

For those who regard words as their tools, and who view their objectives as being similar to the supposed objectives of the artist, these exclusive gestures are irritating. In any case, it has been the author's

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[1] Henry Moore, "Notes on Sculpture," The Creative Process (New York: Mentor Publications, 1955), p. 68. Brewster Ghiselin, Ed.

[2] Jean Arp, "Transformation," The New Landscape (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Co., 1956), p. 251.

experience that during an immediately following a period of more or less intense work, it is not that words fail; it is simply that the extensive, completely inobscure saying of them in the terms of a given convention comes only with dreadful difficulty.

Although the following statement comprises a unit in itself, its major purpose is to accompany the principal presentation of the works reproduced in the Plates.

Regarding the use of the word "collage" in the following text, a brief technical note is in order: the French word "collage" (meaning "to paste or glue") should be italicized according to literary convention. However, the author prefers to follow the example of Robert Motherwell, Editor of The Dada Painters and Poets (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1951), and others, in accepting the Anglicization of the term.

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His (Man's) nature is congenial with the elements of the planet...he cannot but sympathise with its features, its various aspects, and its phenomena in all situations.

John Constable

PART ONE

In 1955, within fifteen days, I flew to New York City, sailed the Atlantic, and visited England and Germany. This experience had the effect of cutting me off from most of the prevailing assumptions about my work. Swept through New York by a schedule not wholly my own (I was reporting for duty at a Brooklyn naval base), I was overwhelmed by the unbelievable activity of the city--its wild precision, its scale, and the infinite variety of its rooftops. I was enthralled by subway-station paraphenalia, and by the rich complex of signs and objects on each street corner. I relished the juxtapositions brought about by the endless flow of traffic. In front of a particular white-brick building would pass large multi-colored trucks, some of them bearing placards and titles that coincided in numerous ways with those on the building. One morning I studied with particular interest the facade of a beaten old building in lower Manhattan, only to realize that the "facade" had in part been a large panel, such as a stage flat, which two men suddenly lifted and carried away.

Standing beneath the massive structure of a bridge, the roar of traffic above and the hooting of boats nearby, looking at a warehouse with a hundred black iron windows and a three-storey yellow "R" painted on it, I

finally thought, "I will have to find some more direct way than 'pictures' to deal with this."

On the ship, crossing the north Atlantic, I experienced the same enthrallment. At no time before had the unique shapes to be found aboard a warship had such impact. As I had been impressed by the dark, cryptic shapes on the roofs of Manhattan, so was I particularly aware of the deck vents, davits and anchor windlasses, standing on the gray metal decks, draped in weathered canvas, or protruding from the bulkheads, their shadows gently moving as the ship swayed.

In Europe the mood was sustained. My interest was drawn by a number of things similar to those which had impressed me in New York: shaggy bundles of hemp, or "camels," that lined the pier abutments; great timber walls along the pier, with various hooks and eyelets mounted on them; huge legends in German, painted in black and white on the concrete buildings of the wharf; plaques of docking instructions, propped in long rows, their legibility altered by the slowly moving calligraphy of halyards and cranes.

On the return voyage, under the strong influence of these experiences, I began to draw with lead, charcoal, and colored inks. Suddenly, a hurricane made a rather providential intrusion. My quarters were upset, and a bottle of mucilage was overturned in an array of drawings, scat-

tered about the deck, torn and crumpled by sliding furniture. In an effort to save some of the drawings, I kept the entire patchwork together. I pinned it against a canvas-covered bulkhead where I once or twice attempted to work on it in the same accidental spirit before finally taking it apart. However, I had been aware that the patchwork somehow reflected my recent experiences more effectively than any of the separate drawings. It had a natural abruptness that was analogous to the swooping, flickering views seen from a moving subway. The hurricane and the occurence of the patchwork seemed to symbolize the impact that my experiences had had on the relatively calm assumptions with which I regarded my previous work. Henceforth, I took the meaning of the symbol literally.

I began to give to the page the same "eccentric power" that I had observed in New York and elsewhere by cutting magazines in half and rejoining the halves upside down; by aligning old drawings in comic-strip fashion; by cutting up drawings and reproductions and joining them on large pieces of illustration board. So strong was the impulse to graphically translate the experiences, and so awkward and frankly unappealing were many of the materials at my disposal, that it was nearly a week before I reflected that I had now taken up a "traditional media" called

collage.[1]

I also indulged in a pastime, the value of which is evident to me only now. Periodically, paint crews dabbed the ship with a reddish, rust-resistant paint. Before this first-coating was covered with the usual gray paint, I arranged the paint cans, long-handled scrapers and brushes among the reddish spots and deck protuberances. Then I would climb to the wings of the ship's bridge and observe the "pictures."

After using such items as tickets, mimeographed pages of copy, and miscellaneous pieces of paper on various sizes of pasteboard, I began to work on more consistent sizes with a more limited range of materials. I made "string drawings," by soaking various strings and yarns in mucilage and pressing them onto a surface, and works which combined string, yarn, and adhesive tapes with a conventional use of various inks. Through a large piece of tracing paper, I studied a few of these works. Although

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[1]This is not to be taken slightly, considering my rather felicitous reactionary stance of only a year before, when I made an <u>intellectual</u> "embargo" against the "extreme use (I had no other way to gauge it) of extraneous matter in art," when, even without a full awareness of its "incorrigibility," I questioned most of the Abstract Expressionist works that I knew as the gimcracks of New York Art World-financing.

I was not for some time to become conscious of the reason for this practice--to test the unity with which the work's basic contrasts could be read--I nevertheless attached a definite value to the practice.

Much has been written concerning the tendency of the "creative individual"--especially the so-called "formalist painter"--to "underestimate the internal content" of his work.[2] However, in the face of a particularly keen urge, there is for the artist the danger also of an opposite tendency: he may take for granted the power of his motives in finding a transformation into artistic form. As the excitement engendered by my experiences began to dam up against my limiting circumstances (my duties gave me little time or space), I had time at least to reflect anew on the magnanimity required for the balancing of these tendencies, for satisfying the total demands of the creative act--an act mixed with hot and cold, an indesoluble unity of ardor and analysis. Although the ardor had established what might be called the basic intent, it became clearer with each day that the complete elaboration of this intent would require also a degree of curious "half-detachment" that I had never before attained. Moreover, as the patchwork of

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[2]Paul Stern, "On the Problem of Artistic Form," Reflections on Art (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), p. 73. Susan K. Langer, Ed.

jumbled drawings had, through the hurricane, "spoken" concerning the direction in which a transforming might take place, I vaguely sensed the necessity to temper the ambitiousness of my efforts--to "listen more and speak less." I felt that the total clarity of any statement issuing from those experiences would not come, but would have to be worked out.[3]

An assessment of the experiences which introduced me to collage has been valuable in so far as it has helped to determine the next step in working out the "basic intents." The artistic ramifications of these experiences were far-reaching; even now their richness has an occassional, unmistakable bearing on my work.

Superficially, the most obvious influence could

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[3] A more or less common rejoinder at this point may be that the "solutions" of other artists, e.g., "the collage of Cubism," etcetera, may serve to relieve the anxiety implied here, if not dissolve it altogether. Certainly there is a general level at which an awareness of "related endeavors" should not be ignored. However, it was, and still is, my conviction that the solutions of other artists--in so far as they can even be regarded as "solutions"--can in no way specifically or operationally relieve the critical anxieties attending the formation of a truly personal realization. William Barrett, in Irrational Man (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1958), speaks close to the matter as he writes, "We do not ordinarily say a man is a lover even if he knows all about love, unless he does in fact love. And indeed the more he loves, the less confidence he is likely to have in any theory about love." (p. 141)

Furthermore, for approximately four months, sailing at sea and docking only for short periods, my circumstances did not permit an association with the works of other artists through exhibitions, periodicals, or personal contacts.

be seen in the more extreme manner in which I subsequently abstracted. More than in any previous work, there was, for example, more interest in color and shape for their own sakes. I made numerous drawings of certain objects aboard the ship, later using their shapes as incentives in the creation of other more abstract shapes. Sometimes I drew directly over the first, more "representational" drawing. Cutting arbitrary holes in my drawings, I superimposed them over each page of a magazine, making occassional changes in the drawing as different colors appeared beneath them on the pages. In short, relative to my earlier work, there was an exaggeration of configurational qualities.

Another way of expressing the artistic influences of the experiences is to observe that they drew me out to a less ambiguous treatment of the "picture plane." The dynamism of the experiences had at least partly consisted in seeing the vehicles and the white-brick building, the stage flat and the building facade, the plaques and the obscuring halyards, etcetera, as existing on one plane. For several months I kept a unique photograph which exaggerated many of the qualities that I had observed: a frenzied Forty-Second Street intersection, taken from a great distance with a telescopic lens which flattened the buildings, accented the compression of traffic, and arranged in irregular tiers the broken pavement, the crowds of people, and the profiles of tenements against the sun's dusky circle.

As stated above, I was interested in evaluating the experiences only to the extent that such evaluation helped determine a concrete, artictic realization. For this reason, and because my primary committment in any case is to act on such experiences, no conclusion has been drawn regarding their final nature, their ultimate relationships to my work, or the artistic value of such experiencing in general. Nevertheless, it has become clear to me that the artistic effects of the experiences resulted from the fact that the pace of my itenerary had prohibited any thorough-going adjustments to my surroundings. The "visual facts" of these surroundings preceded (by just enough to create a definite "mood") any notions regarding "the rooftops of New York" and "painting," or any accommodations between "land" and "sea." Free of any notions which might compromise their directness, the force and preponderance of these visual facts enabled them to cut through the layer of sophistication that had inevitably formed over previous such experiences of lesser intensity.

The word "Merz" had no meaning when I formed it. Now it has the meaning which I gave it... Merz stands for freedom from all fetters, for the sake of artistic creation. Freedom is not the lack of restraint, but the product of strict artistic discipline. Merz also means tolerance toward any artistically motivated limitation. Every artist must be allowed to mold a picture out of nothing but blotting paper for example, provided he is capable of molding a picture.

Kurt Schwitters

It is the vainest of affectations to try and put beauty into shadows, while all real things that cast them are left in deformity and pain.

John Ruskin

PART TWO

After reaching circumstances more favorable to my work, with my enrollment in The Ohio State University, and following a period of preoccupation with the formal aspects of painting, I took up again the use of collage materials that I had used aboard ship and in New York.

For several months I proceeded with a series of works which combined collage elements, oil paint, and enamels. There were also a number of collages in which aqueous paints were used. In these works, collage was viewed as an adjunct to the nuances of paint in the elaboration of a pictorial surface. These collages (or "painting-collages") were not, as the former collages had been, completed solely at the generative impulse of the experiences discussed in Part One. They had a purpose also in the more conscious refinement of means.

In these works, no essential distinction was made between the colors of a magazine reproduction, for example, and the painted colors, between the overall grayness of newspaper copy and the grayness obtained by any other means. The marks and masses of drawing and painting, and those of the collage elements, were superimposed over one another. The superimposition was both literal and visual, in that the visual properties of the collage elements were

given harmonious treatment[1] elsewhere on the surface, or the character of the element was altered to suit the overall character of the work. Oftentimes the use of collage elements was not even readily apparent.

To achieve this close amalgam, it was necessary to employ only certain kinds of collage elements. I collected an assortment of uniformly flat papers and cloths, similar to those that I had collected aboard the ship, except for their generally larger size. They were applied to the surface with rabbit-skin glue or wheat-paste, which effected a complete bond over the entire area of the element, or they were held by the paint itself. With both glues the bond was such that the collage elements in no way interupted the literal plane of action. The brush was able to move freely over the elements.

Soon, however, I began to collect a different range of materials: thicker, more heavily woven pieces of cloth, cardboard, metal objects, wooden blocks, rope,

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[1]The use of the phrase "harmonious treatment" is an example of the difficulties inherent in the use of certain concepts to discuss precise visual occurences. "Harmony" means, of course, "an agreement, concord, congruity," etcetera. However, this general meaning imparts nothing of the terms by which concord and agreement might be reached. Consequently, with the use of the word "harmony" (and its ordinary connotation of "likeness"), it is frequently necessary to engage in the complexity of stating that visual harmony can result from "opposition" as readily as "likeness," that both "utter contrast" and "sameness" may effect harmony.

etcetera. Occasionally these articles were found and "singled out for possessing, through the workings of the elements of nature, fantasy, esthetic configuration," or particular images.[2] More usually, however, the objects were selected not only for their unique properties, but for the possibilities which they offered through combination with other elements. I began to collect also a number of different surfaces: plywood crate lids, doors, and large planks to be joined together.

With the use of these materials, the collages acquired a formal simplicity that the painting-collages did not have. The emphatic size and substance of these materials offered a realm of choice beyond the capacities of paint and of the flatter collage elements. I kept the articles grouped very roughly according to their size, and in many cases cleaned, sanded, glue-sized and otherwise prepared for immediate use. Through wooden objects I hammered nails so that I might temporarily press the articles onto a surface without making more permanent connections, thereby achieving a mobility that offset their weight and awkwardness in composing with them.

Arranging all of the articles on the floor about me, as on a palette, I remembered the arrangement of paint

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[2]Robert Motherwell, Ed., The Dada Painters and Poets (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1951), p. 311.

cans that I made on the sunny decks of the ship. With this recollection I was again enthused by that whole train of experiences. On a large, weathered, gray-wood door I placed several of the objects. Immediately they were no longer mere scraps of metal and wood, but took on the character of the multitude of black, enigmatic shapes that covered the tops of New York's buildings. More clearly than before, I understood that the original collages had not only represented a new level of awareness regarding abstract configuration. In relation to this awareness, they represented also a strong response to the imagerial aspects of what I had seen. The new formal capacities were manifested in an attempt to reflect the "cultural images" that I had observed. Unwittingly, I had begun the "more direct way than 'pictures'"--or, to translate that earlier, somewhat hasty thought into more technical terms, a more direct way of "picturing."

However, if I was now concerned with the evocation of images, such evocation was made necessary by a further consideration: through the combination of palpable materials, I wished to give the collages the value of an obvious, direct reality. In the matter-of-fact planting of various items in plaster and cement, I wished to create an aura of being that would always condition any possible meaning. The occassional use of stark, single items in the collages was to assure their being looked at, however much

they might be looked into. My objective had been to move from the literal surface enough to evoke an actuality while remaining essentially planear. In short, as I continued to collect articles from construction sites, junk yards, and from the streets, I made collages in which the obvious corporeality of the component objects, and their relationship to the surface, effected a definite quality of presence.

Since its florescence in the works of Braque and Picasso, one of the most characteristic qualities of collage has been that its combinations of mundane articles give it a tangible and intangible connection to "daily reality." Through this connection, the collage itself is more easily interpreted as an "article." Some contemporary painters and critics carry this interpretation to its extremity by viewing the use of worldly elements, especially in great quantity, simply as the building of a mere "object."[3] (Without further qualification, Michelangelo's "David" is in the same category.)

However, by the use of various kinds of objects, I did not bestow upon them an inordinate concentration. Still of the opinion that meaning resides partly with the observer, I meant the collages to be not only "monuments

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[3]"...the younger generation...use synthetic sheet materials and other components...reducing the work to an object." Peter Hobbes, "Image and Environment," Ark, Number Twenty-five (1960), p. 5.

to themselves," but also "presences" emanating man, his emotional states, and his environmental situation. As I moved from ambiguous visual abstractions, through the surface, so to speak, to the planear relief of collage, the presence that I sought was not the presence only of a "thing." I sought also to evoke a <u>human</u> presence.

The following plates are photographs of seventeen paintings, drawings, and collages which constitute the major part of this dissertation. An exhibition of all but one of these works was held in the gallery of Hayes Hall, The Ohio State University, in August, 1960. "Room" (Plate 3) is the property of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and could not be exhibited.

PLATE 1

"King Tut"

Wood, plaster, tempera

41 x 31

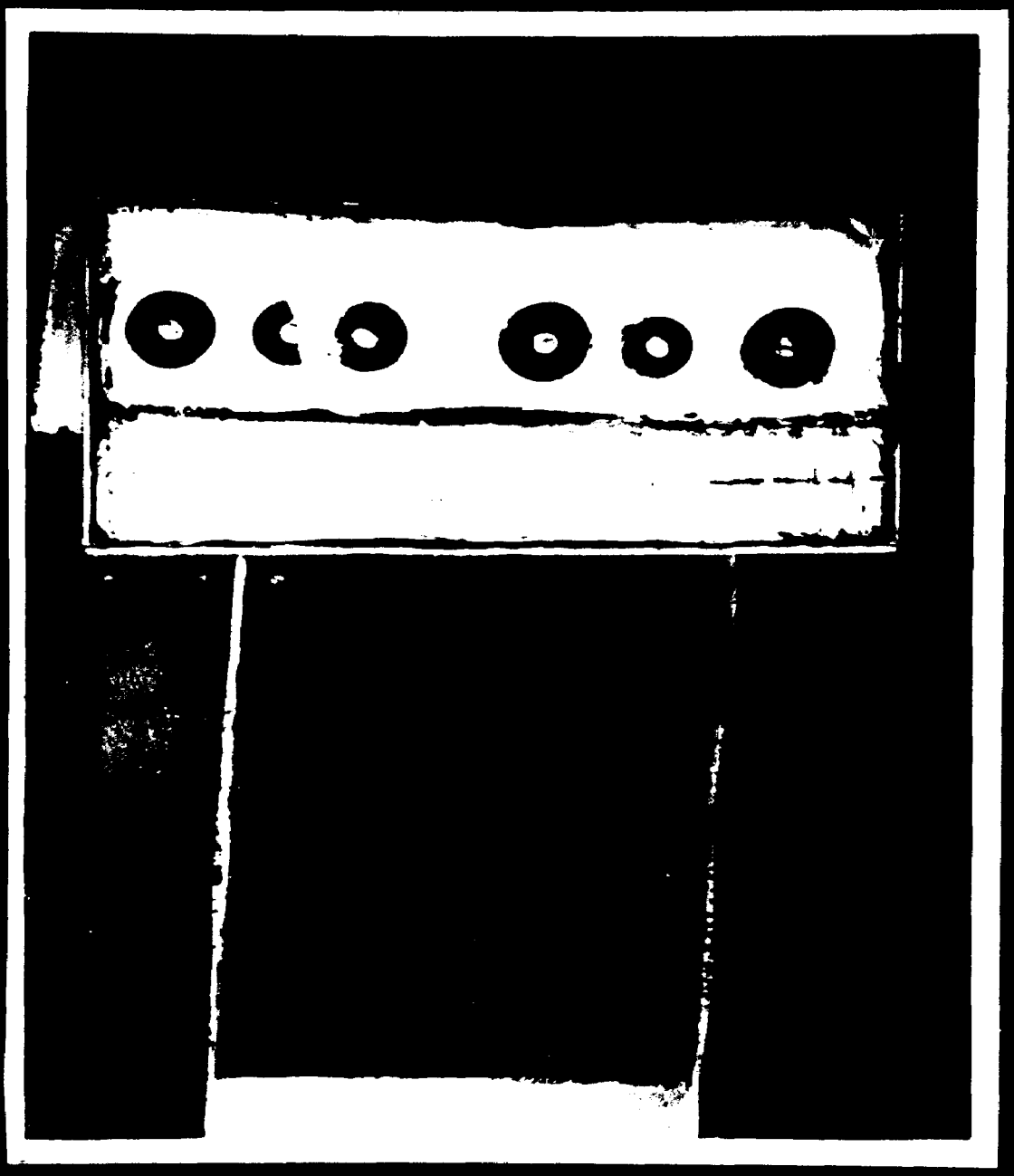

PLATE 2

"Black Scape"

Oil

35 x 13

PLATE 3

"Room"

Oil

38 x 26

Purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

PLATE 4

"Executioner"

Plaster, paper, oil

22 x 13

PLATE 5

"Ghengis"

Wood, tempera

32 x 24

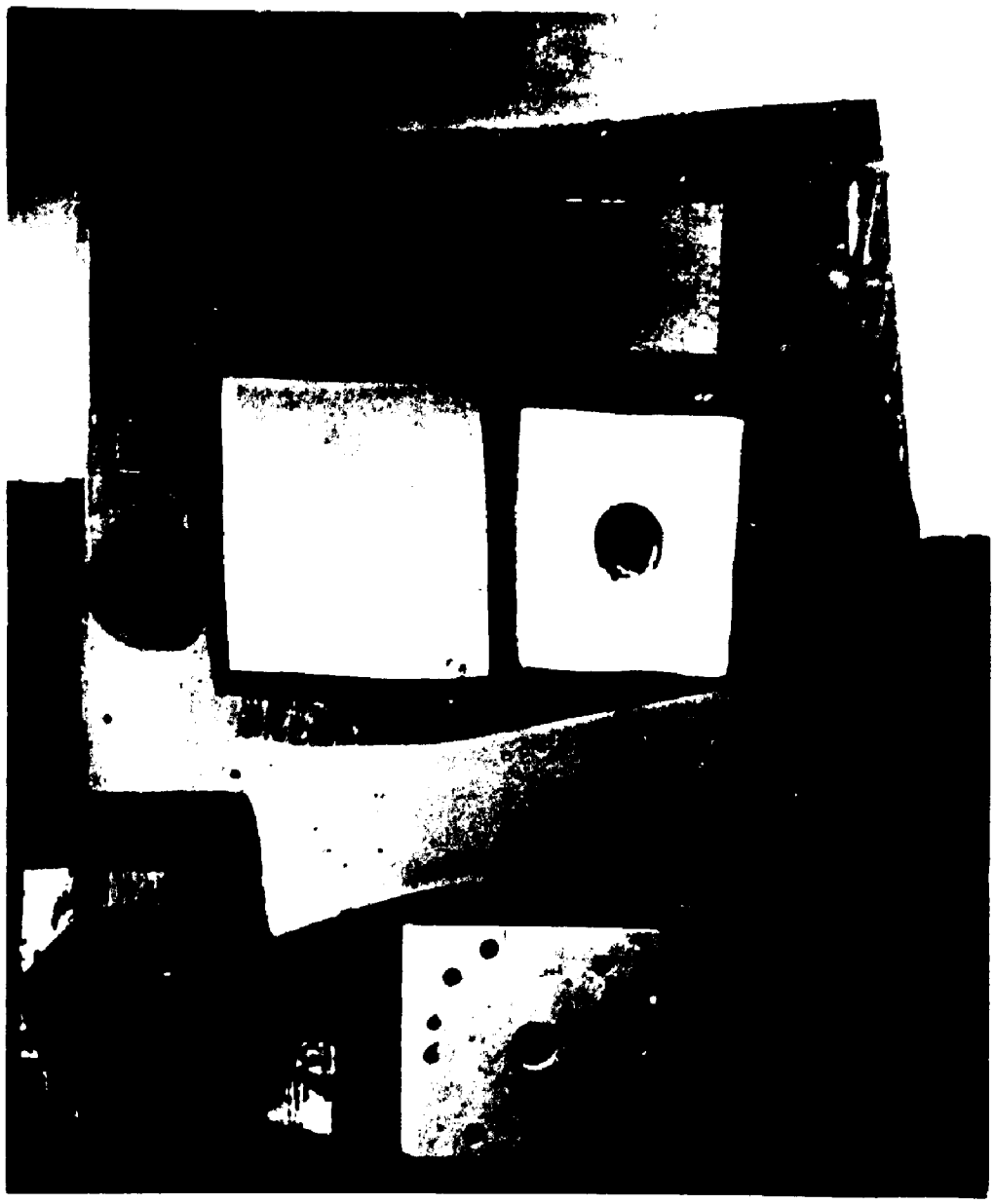

PLATE 6

"Hugger-mugger"

Wood, metal, oil

16 x 12

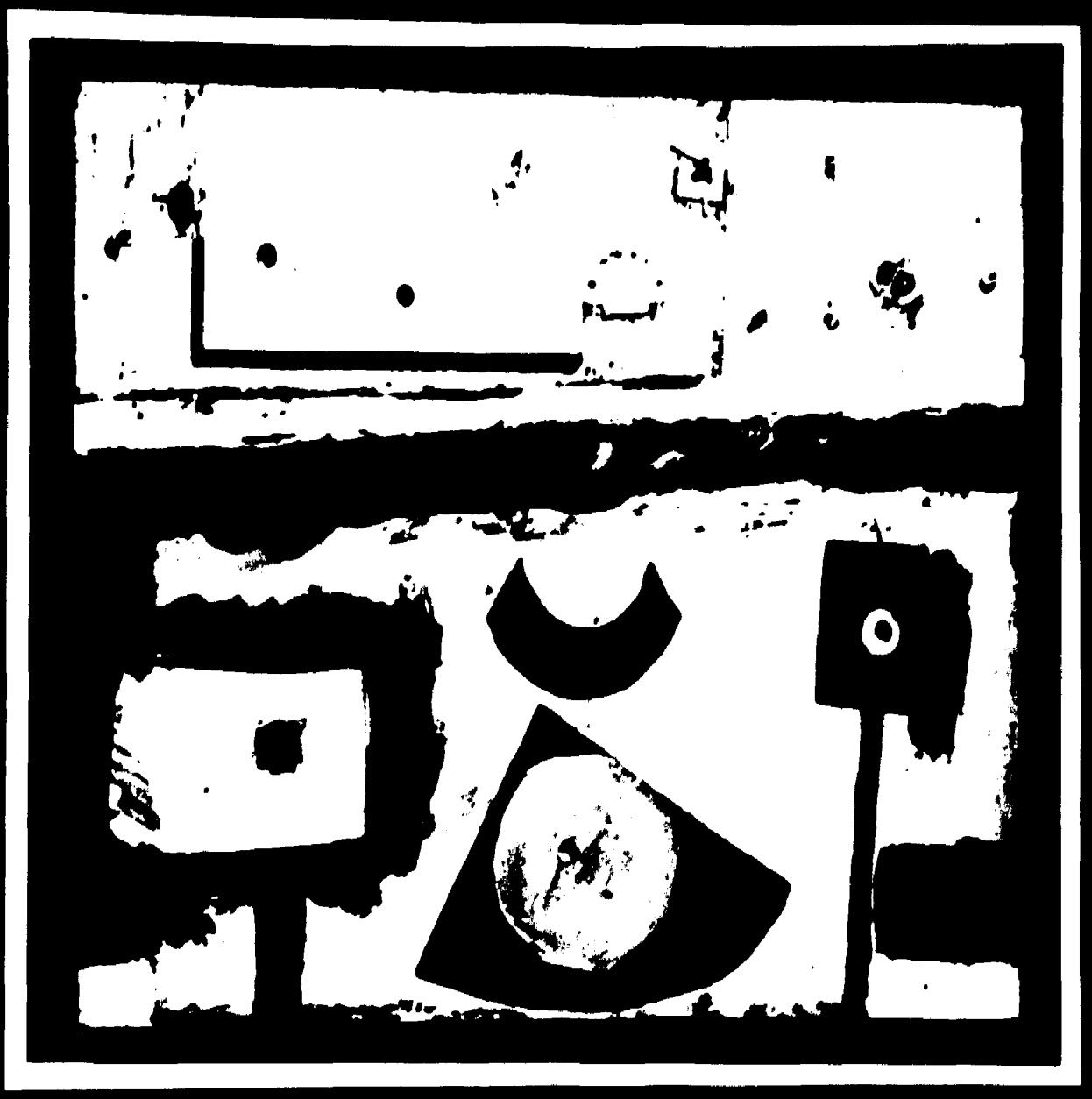

PLATE 7

"August Figures"

Oil

60 x 42

PLATE 8

"Knight"

Wood, metal, paper, oil

56 x 19

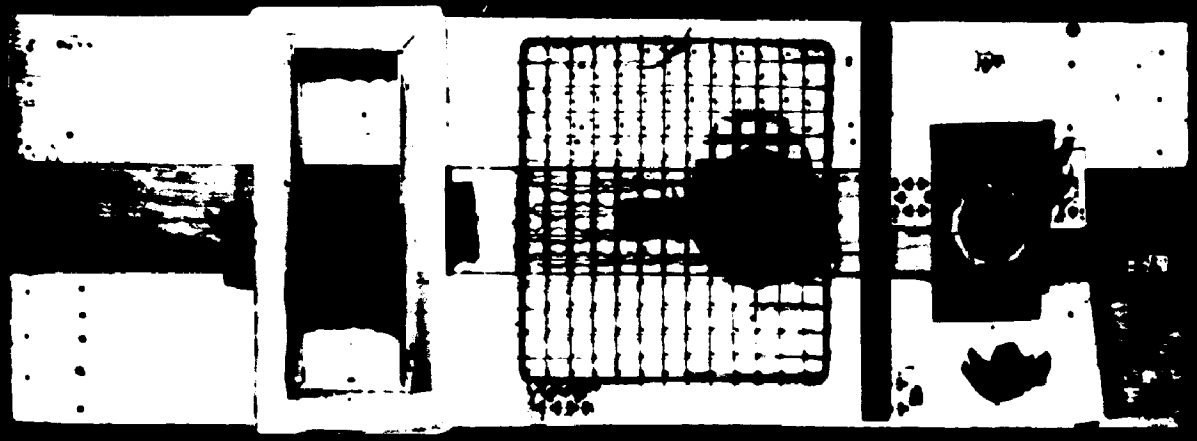

PLATE 9

"Dancer"

Ink, crayon

10 x 8

PLATE 10

"Sodoma"

Oil

60 x 42

PLATE 11

"Acquarium"

Cement, wood, paper, oil

41 x 34

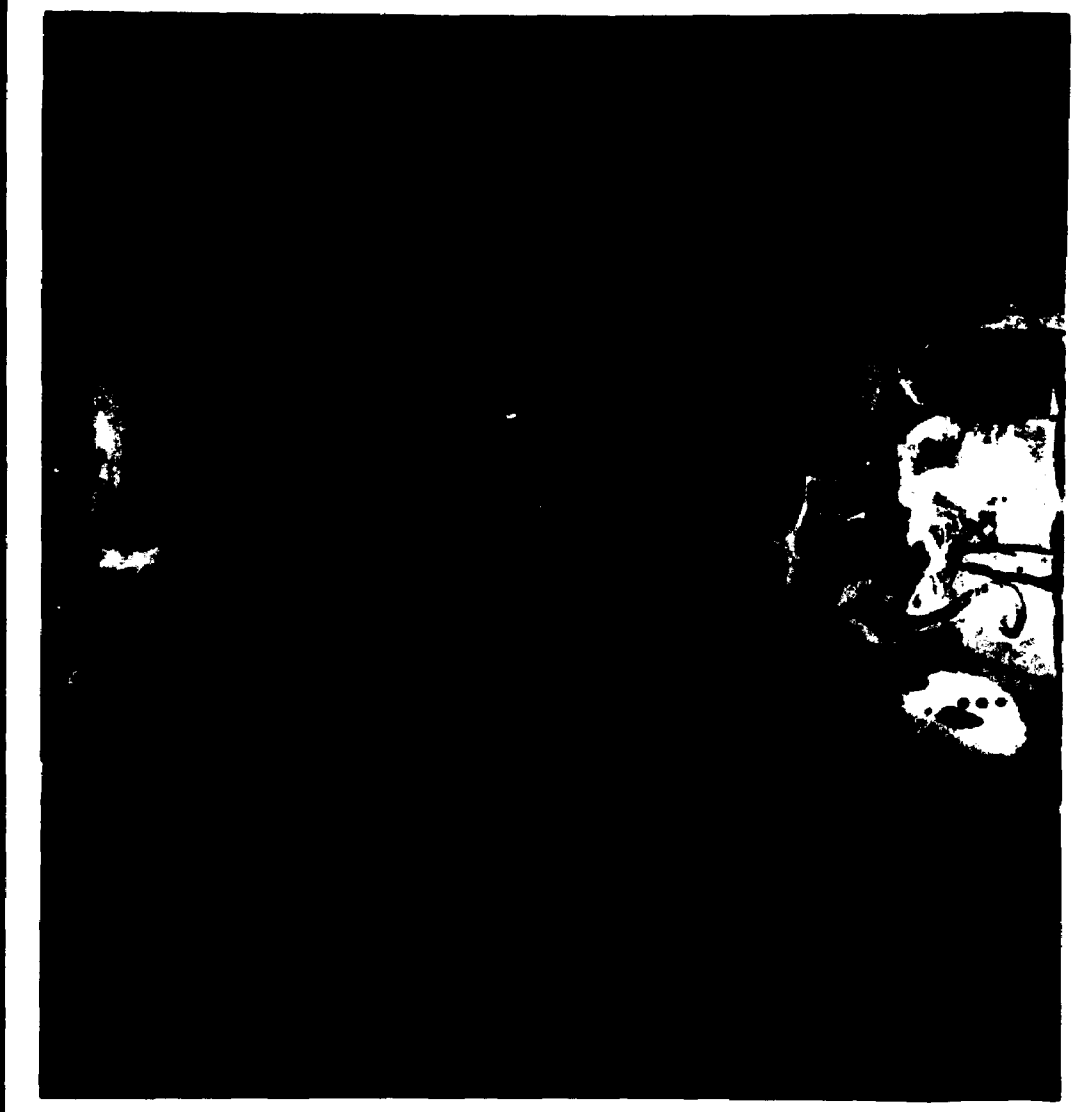

PLATE 12

"Interior"

Oil

60 x 48

PLATE 13

"City"

Oil

18 x 18

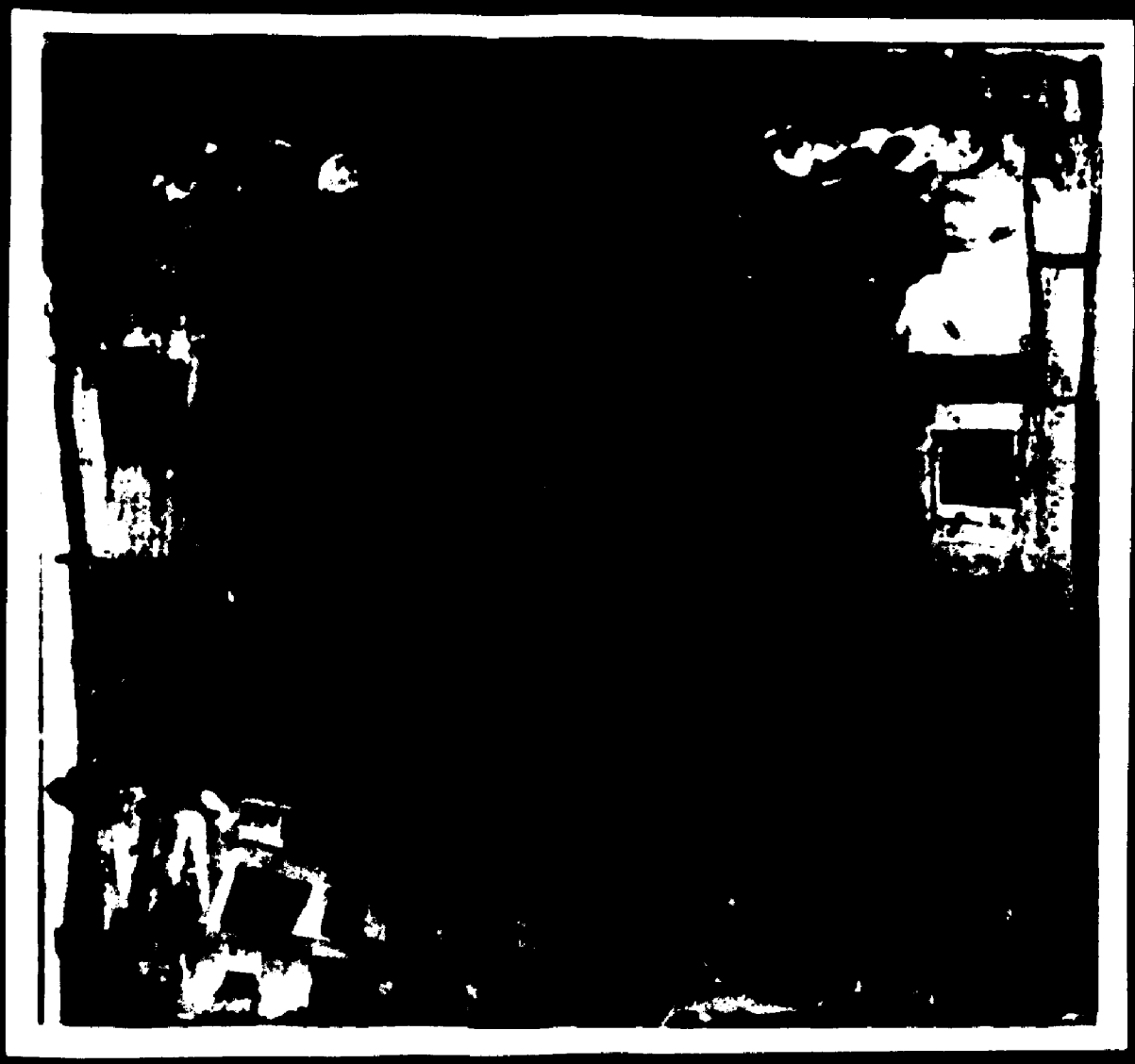

PLATE 14

"Rock Fat"

Plaster, wood, oil

22 x 16

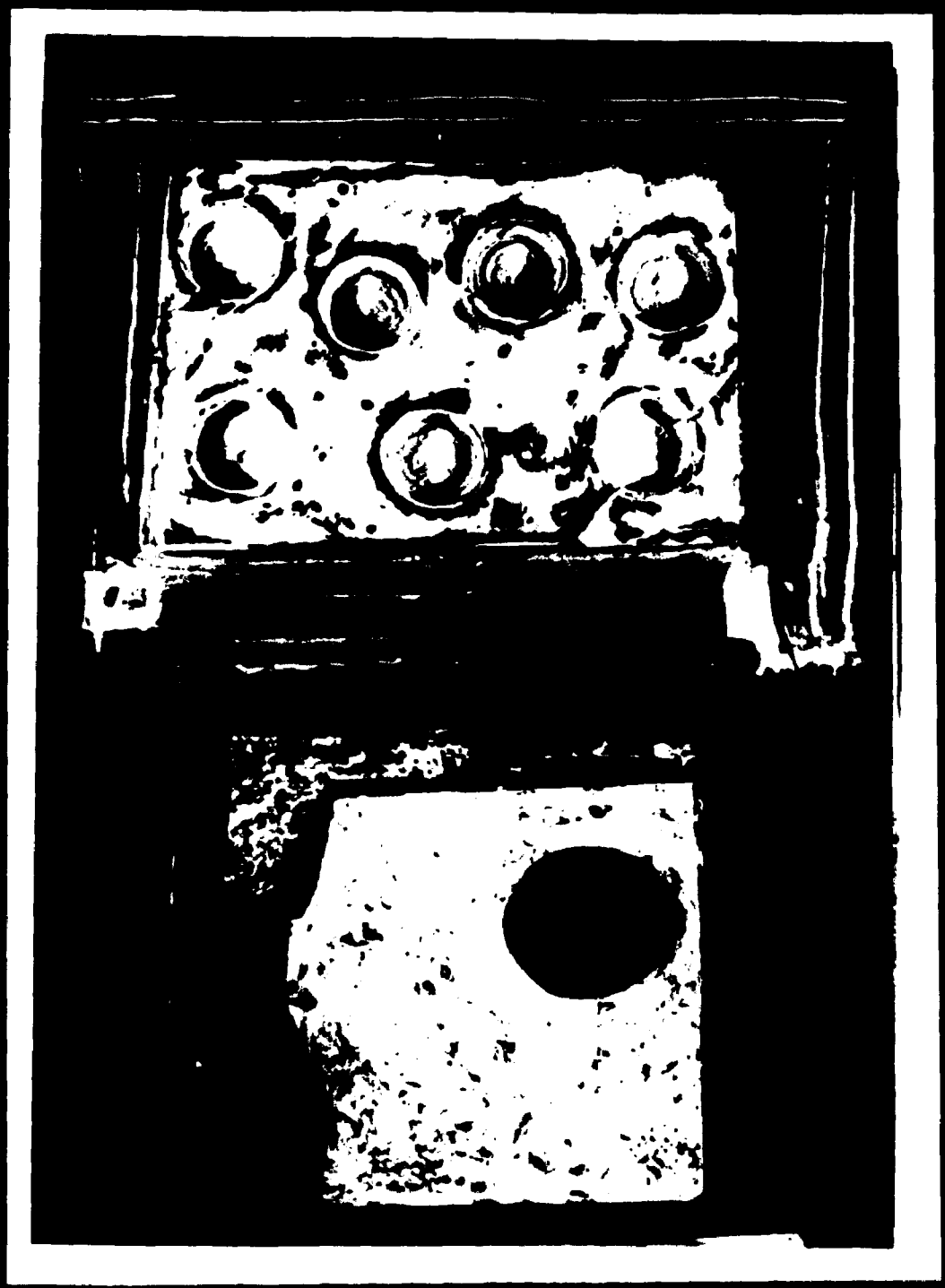

PLATE 15

"Nude"

Ink, crayon

11 x 8

PLATE 16

"Equestrian"

Paper, cloth, tempera

42 x 36

PLATE 17

"Runner"

Casein

11 x 8

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I, Maurice Woodrow Brown, was born in Cumberland County, Tennessee, July 5, 1932. I received my secondary school education in the public schools of Knoxville, Tennessee, and my undergraduate training at the University of Tennessee, which granted me the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1954. From The Ohio State University, I received the Master of Arts degree in 1958, following the award of a National Woodrow Wilson Fellowship for the year 1957-58. In September, 1958, I was awarded a fellowship from The Ohio State University Graduate School, and in September, 1959, was appointed Graduate Assistant in the School of Fine and Applied Arts, a position I held for one year while completing the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy.