

1971

The Phenomenologically Perceived Symbolic Structure of the Work of Steven Huff Keplinger

Steven Huff Keplinger

Eastern Illinois University

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THE PHENOMENOLOGICALLY PERCEIVED SYMBOLIC STRUCTURE

OF THE WORK OF STEVEN HUFF KEPLINGER

(TITLE)

BY

STEVEN HUFF KEPLINGER

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1971
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PREFACE

As a preface to the paper I shall endeavor to explain what it is I believe the artist to be concerned with. The main text will be exclusively about the work I did as a Master of Art degree candidate at Eastern Illinois University. The following has to do with the author's view of artists and art in general.

The artist is a retriever. By his own introspection he rediscovers those things with which he was once consciously familiar. Probing into the attics and cellars of his experience he uncovers finely knit relationships that call out to be explored, clarified, and presented. He does this through his work. As the actual painting, sculpture, or what ever progresses, he discovers rediscovers, and illuminates with meaning ideas which were once intuitions. This is important. He instills the vague, the mundane, and the passed-by with reality. He gives new building blocks for visual vocabulary.

The vast majority of experiences we commit to our various systematized and symbolic languages are common to all men. If not common, they are at least structured and presented in such a way as to be comprehensible through one or another of the communicable systems. Interestingly, virtually all pieces of information that enter these files of knowledge do so through sensory perception. They are pieces of information which were once intuited, which is to say, felt, by enough people to achieve the status of truth.

The artist deals on a primary level with the senses, especially the visual and tactile senses. His stock-in-trade is an awareness of his intuitions and subsequent development of those

feelings into communicable signs and symbols. Even if one creates work only for himself, burning the finished pieces, he nevertheless structures his own thinking in cumulative patterns such that he may embark on even greater ventures. The visual artist is a communications expert although he has no words to work with.

Unlike those who deal with words, numbers, and other systems whose members bear onto one another in a static and specified way, the visual artist has at his disposal no symbols at all. He has only a personal system with which he creates symbols. He has no a priori techniques for their formation. He has no control over their subsequent usage or rejection.

The author would like to thank many people for their co-operation in reading this paper. First, Dr. Calvin Countryman, the author's advisor. Next Dr. F. Raymond McKenna and Dr. Carl E. Shull, members of the author's graduate committee. Thanks also to Dr. Walter Sorge, head of the Art Department of Eastern Illinois University. Special mention should be made of the Zoology department for their co-operation allowing the use of their darkroom.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will seek to explain the phenomenological basis of the art work of the author.

First, the paper will take into consideration those perceptions the author sees as influencing his work. Secondly it will describe the symbolic goal of his work. Finally, it will investigate the phenomenological basis of the art of the author.

The photographs in the text were all taken expressly for this paper. They are on one half frame thirty-five millimeter negatives and were developed and printed by the author. Insofar as is possible, they convey the visual patterns responsible for the author's position and the discussion about his work which follows. These photographs are either referred to in the text as plates or figures. The plates are photographs of the author's work; the figures, are examples of the type of inspirational material which the author sees as critical to his work.

I. PERCEPTION

The manner in which the author perceives his environment determines the visual make-up of his work. These perceptions are particularly dependent on the extent to which they function from either the perceptual field, phenomenal field, or both. In any event perception is always modified by previous perceptions. These previous perceptions are "intuitions". They determine current perceptual need and consequently what is to be perceived. One could perceive different things on different occasions given the same stimulus. This is because different intuitions could require different use of one's perceptual capacities.

These intuitions are responsible for the structure of the author's work. They operate in two major areas, 1) the symbolic content of the work, and 2) the physical content of the work. In the first case these intuitions draw upon the relationships inherent in the phenomenal field. These relationships will be discussed later in the paper. Secondly intuitions concern themselves with physical content. The physical content of a work is made up of light, atmospheric condition, color(s) of environment and work, line, and delineated and amorphic mass. Aspects of each will now be considered.

In order to see a work of art it must be bathed in light. This can be either environmental or naturally occurring light, or artificial light. In either event, its quantity and quality will govern the presence of all other visually apprehended physical constituents.

Color is perceived according to the quality of light it is

viewed in, i.e. natural or artificial light. The varieties of artificial light available cover the entire visual spectrum, such that through the manipulation of this component alone, the piece assumes various moods and attributes. Theater arts capitalize heavily on just this factor. The visual arts also take the characteristics of light into consideration.

This light consideration factor can influence construction of surface texture or choice of pigment(s). Some textures are best seen under either natural or artificial light. In the same way, various colors function to particular advantage under particular light sources. For instance, "black light" enhances certain organically synthesized phosphorescent paints so that under its influence they seem to glow. The type of light, realized at the outset by the artist, can be critical to the viewers' comprehension of the piece.

The quantity and quality of color, as well as its utilization and location within the work, are very significant. Max Luscher and Ian Scott (5), in their book Color Test, showed that particular personality types favor particular colors and combinations of colors. The presence or absence of color of a particular hue, as well as its quantitative presence, plays an exceedingly important role in viewer participation. The location of color can determine the mood and message of the work. Try to imagine Whistler's Mother in cadmium reds and yellows!

In a similar way, the environment of the work exercises significant leverage on the visual response. A twelve by eighteen inch masterpiece lying unframed on the asphalt of Michigan Avenue in Chicago would go unnoticed and in all likelihood would be destroyed by traffic. If the same piece were to be moved into the galleries

of the Art Institute a few feet away, it would attract hundreds of inspired viewers! Most changes in environment are not so severe. Still, the visual prowess impact of a work can be significantly altered by changing its immediate environment, frame, mat, etc., or by changing the color of its background or back-drop. The work must be presented under conditions most favorable to its communicative potential.

When line is considered in a work, its absence strangely predominates. This might seem paradoxical, especially in a drawing which is a two dimensional work composed mainly of lines. Nevertheless, that which is suggested and not graphically delineated in an unquestionable form, is more powerful than were every detail presented. This is because one becomes involved in where a line disappears and then begins again. The viewer must supply the omitted part or segment. This kind of forced participation causes the viewer to make what he will of the work. It tends to increase involvement as well as permit more subjective viewing. Line not only starts and stops, it also varies in thickness, certainty, lightness, and direction. The line moves. As a vector, it travels, taking the viewer's eye with it, now twisting, turning, leaping, or slowly dying.

Frequently, the line will be an outline. It will not stand alone but rather surround a shape or a mass. The mass will either explode against such delineation or shrink from the border. This mass, occupying area in the work, will affect the viewer as a bulk-head to action elsewhere in the work. Perhaps it will be the action. It may be solid, defined and delineated, or questionable, amorphic and vague. It may be anti-mass, as negative space, or background. It will allude to three dimensionality. Even in the flattist most

two dimensional work the perceptual process will assign "thingness" to the mass. We live in such a world; things.

Plate #1 shows a three by four foot drawing on canvas in black and white only. There are no shades of gray, hence, everything is a part of a mass and at the same time an outline. An occasional "pure line" to reinforce this concept. These lines are invariable throughout their length, so as to become part of the mass and not stand alone. The result is starkness. Perhaps the drawing is too stark.

If the work is sculpture, a painting with heavily textured paint, or even a textured print, the viewer can become involved in its tactile properties. He may touch the work, remembering similar surfaces and their associate experiences.

Plate #2 shows a painting constructed of a plastic-like material. This painting shows a good amount of relief, raised about one inch from the canvas. The tendency of the material to crack, and craze, and pull apart, creating definite physical texture, presents a feeling of decay and disorder. To counteract this, the author left a small area very smooth and colored it bright red. Even so, this bright area is unable to visually "push" through the tar-like skin of the painting. Again the structure has been too severe, which this time, is exactly the opposite as that seen in plate #1.

In a work seemingly devoid of texture, its absence will evoke feelings of smoothness and control, perhaps making it seem machine-like and apersonal.

Smells and sounds can also affect the way in which a work is perceived. Imagine being in a printshop, looking at a print

fresh off the press, wet, smelling of ink. The room has a particular odor common only to printshops. It contributes immeasurably to the way in which one perceives the print. Under these conditions the print seems almost magic.

The author is particularly interested in the synthesis of various reduced sensory forms into his work. He hopes that such combinations will yield work which ultimately bridges the gap between simple observation and in-depth understanding. The combinations of various elements should constitute a key which opens the door for easy analysis and appreciation of each component.

In the welded steel sculpture shown in plate #3, the author was involved with just such a combination of elements. By using identifiable building blocks, in this case railroad spikes, he hoped to stimulate interest in the form and application possibilities of what is little more than a common nail. Knowing these would rust, producing an all over regular patina, the author added a salt and pepper-like nickle coating. This produced a surface reminiscent of bark, fish scales, etc. Clusters of spikes "read" as flowers or pods, while their nickle-plated heads behave as blossoms. Through a tangled, yet open structure, the author hoped to convey a bush-like snarl. Finally, the weight and immobility of the piece gives it a certain aura of authority and presence.

II. SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

The words "sign" and "symbol" can be used to describe all works of art, but since the function of being a sign or symbol is dependent upon the viewer in each individual case, it will be necessary to describe both, differentiating between their respective meanings.

Signs are, generally speaking, qualitatively less valid in art than symbols. Signs "represent" things or ideas. They belong to a vocabulary accessible through words. One constructs a sign such that a viewer says "Ah yes, that's a such and such" (which frequently means "I'm to do such and such"). Perhaps such a sign reminds the confronted individual of a barn, girlfriend, dog, forest, amoeba, or whatever. In any event he is always reminded of a specific thing or idea. This remembrance causes him to appreciate or negate the sign. Signs illicit known responses. Snapshots, home movies and photographic slides are good examples of everyday signs collected by a large number of the population. They do not stand alone. Only with remembrance of a specific event are they fulfilled.

Symbols, on the other hand, exist in a physical state. They are real, representing nothing but themselves. This is not to say that they cannot have known subject matter, but only that it is presented in such a way as to illicit its response in direct proportion to its construction. A viewer may well be reminded of something by a symbol, or he may be familiar with the general area portrayed by a visual symbol. He reacts to perceptions which it

engenders, not to intuitions it brings to mind.

Symbols can and often are "abstract". Somehow, though, nothing is abstract. Were something abstract, it would contain only the essential information of phenomena, leaving the essence. Since any simplification whatsoever results in reduction of the original perceptual field, a symbol cannot be abstract. Nor can anything abstract exist as a symbol. Symbols are always reality, signs representational.

Consider the structure of the sculpture in plate #4. One does not immediately recall railroad spikes. Rather, there is an underlying composite of structure which interlocks, cantilevers, penetrates, and stands alone, together with its family, yet isolated. These units virtually demand physical restructure by the viewer in the same way as a Tinker Toy set demands assemblage. In this role they take on even different characteristics. Someone viewing the piece does not bother to subject it to such fine criteria. Instead he accepts it as a whole. It demands recognition as itself. As the trees in figures 1 and 2 each unit is similar, yet each is an individual.

As an artist, the author always tries to produce symbols. He does this through perception. More important, he is aware of his perceptual capabilities and their interrelationships. This awareness, however, is not a psychological awareness. He does not pattern his observation around what can or cannot be sensed and subsequently does not produce work which elicits a particular response from his audience. Rather he is aware that each of his perceptions is governed by its penetration and interaction with uncounted others. He therefore

trusts his perceptions as being truth and follows their lead. By becoming intune with his work he becomes his work, becomes his perception, such that his work is his perception.

In plate #5 the viewer is led into the drawing by familiar structure, intertwining branches. These are not branches, however, and readily prove the point through their structure. The incorporation of large mass areas, while retaining organic articulation, suggests different form. The viewer experiences a new reality. Not a sign, but a symbol.

III. PHENOMENOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR INVESTIGATION OF THE AUTHOR'S WORK

Perhaps the appropriate way to investigate the work of the author is to do so through the utilization of phenomenology. It will be used in an effort to relate the author's involvement with his environment.

Phenomenology concerns itself with comprehending perception stimulus. Things. It does this by painstakingly removing from the stimulus all data that is not directly a part of the stimulus's characteristics. Every piece of information not necessary to describe a phenomenon is removed so that the intended object stands alone. This technique is termed phenomenological reduction. According to Maurice Natanson in his book Essays in Phenomenology (6), reduction is the guts of the phenomenological approach. As a technique, it can be applied to anything from a snail to a system of government. Importantly, each identified component of the investigated phenomena must undergo similar reduction. At this point one can be said to comprehend subjectively all possible implications concerning an object or idea. It is in many ways an impossible task. Associations, relevant or not, can be made between virtually all perceptions and intuitions that one is able to retrieve. Still, if the effort is made, one learns a remarkable amount about his perception of reality. It is rather like object-psycholanalysis.

One's phenomenal field reaches far beyond one's perceptual field. As this is being written, the sound of the library air conditioner drones in the background. This is perceived. The table is walnut-grained plastic; the ashtray, tinfoil; the walls, white

and blue, with a good amount of sloppy painting; the dado, lined oak, with at least six incorporated mouldings and two different sized inserted panels. The author is sitting at a too high table in a too low chair. The chair is hung on chromium-plated steel stock, showing imperfect arc welds. Eventually the author would exhaust his power to describe his immediate perceptual field. At this point he would not have tapped his phenomenal field. It's realization would be achieved through a similar dissection of each of the mentioned objects. At the end of this he would know and believe what it is to write a paper in the Reserve Room of the library.

One does not have to go to this verbal extreme insofar as art is concerned. Nevertheless, this complexity is attained or surpassed on an unconscious level while producing a piece of art work. This interplay of perception and intuition is the breeding ground of art. It is important to note that the artist does not verbally reduce his stimuli. Still, the visual form results from the artist's ability to penetrate his phenomenal field in order to reap the dormant intuitions which are there.

IV. SUMMARY

It has been the intent of the author to put into words the kinds of relationships he has had with his artwork while a student at Eastern Illinois University.

Perception was investigated in order to delineate the phenomena which are the foundations of his work. The difference between sign and symbol was related in order to establish the direction or bent of the author's work. Phenomenology was used as a device to uncover the structure of his work.

Photographs of both the author's work and inspirational phenomena follow the text.

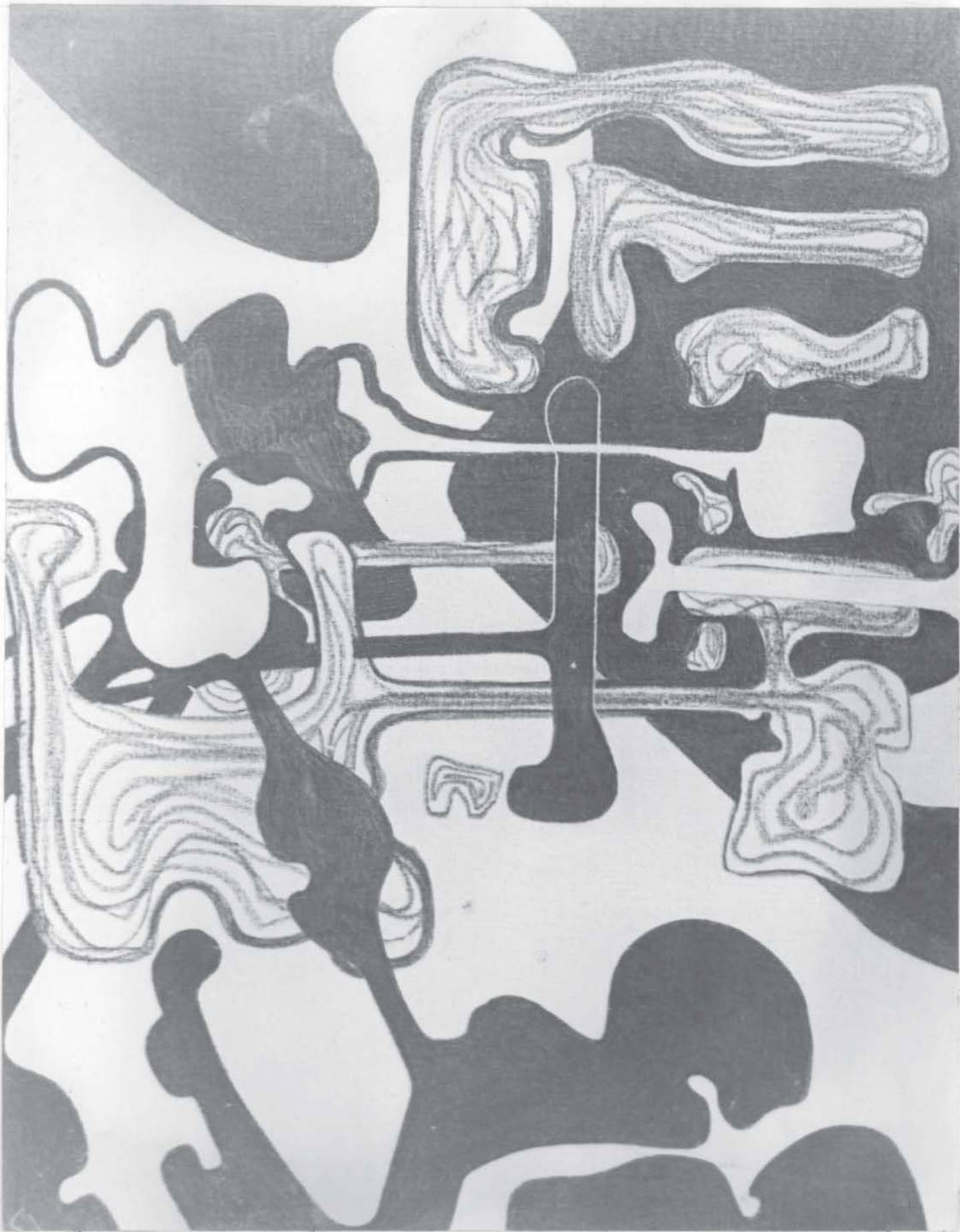


plate #1
Study in Black and White
Drawing, 3'x4'



plate #2
Breakthrough
Painting on canvas

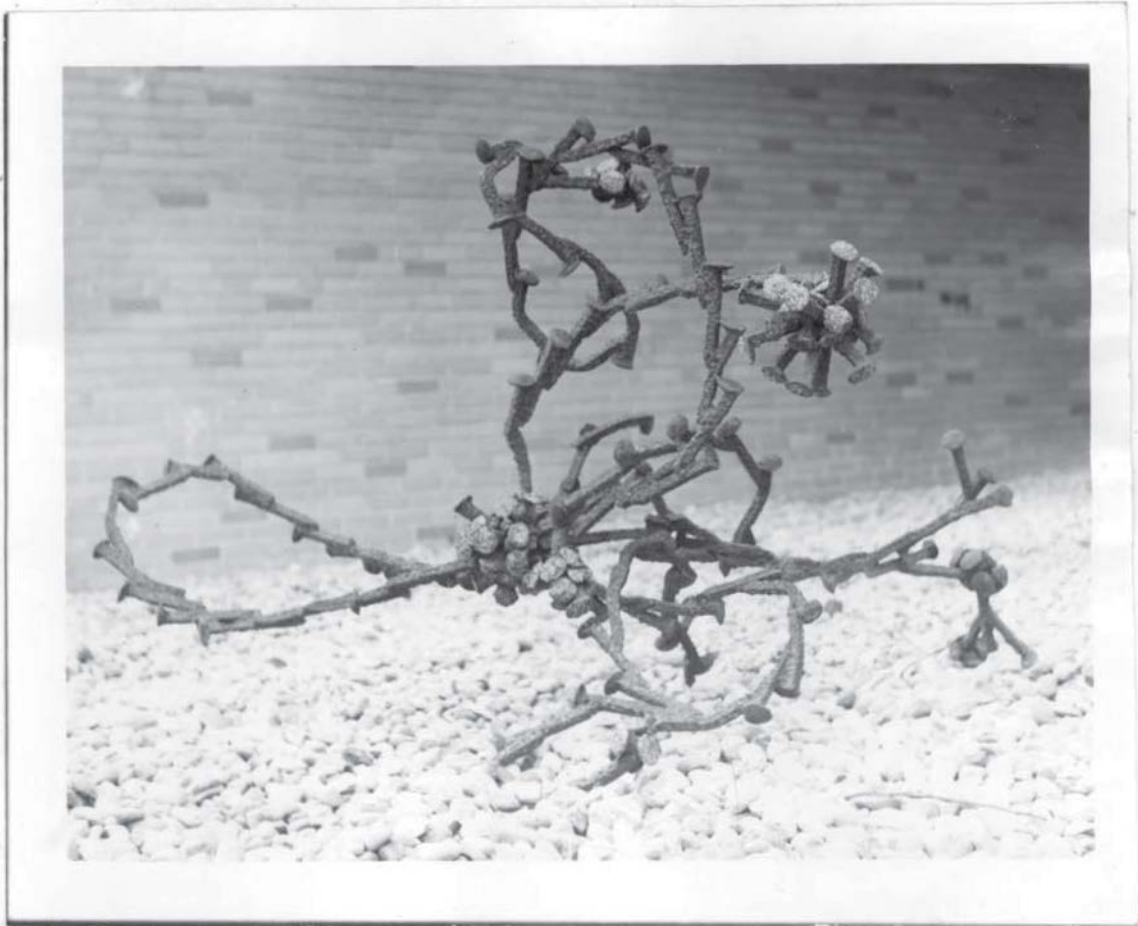


plate #3
Welded steel #3
Steel sculpture



plate #4
Do it Yourself
Steel Sculpture

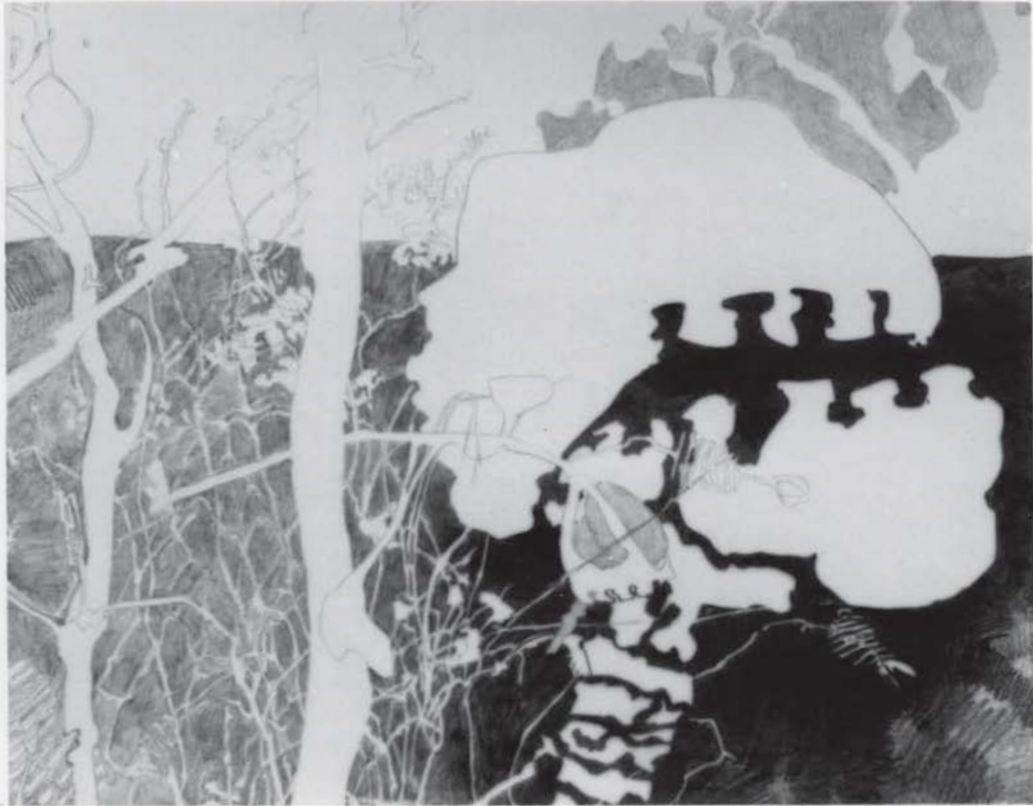


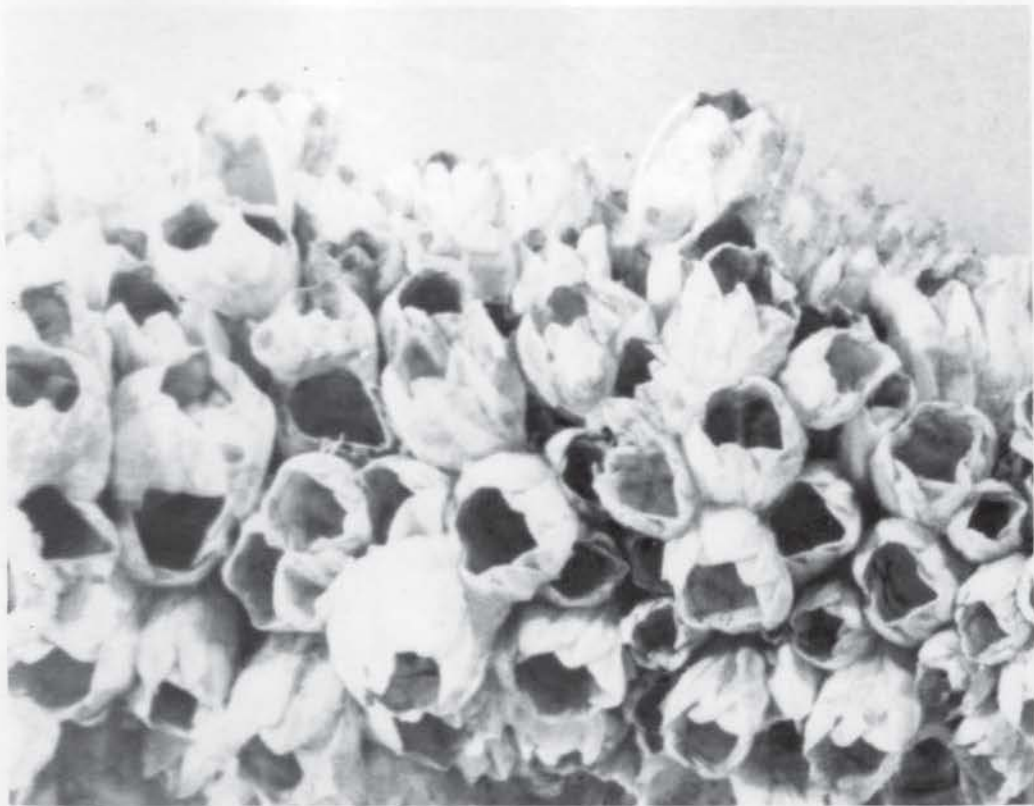
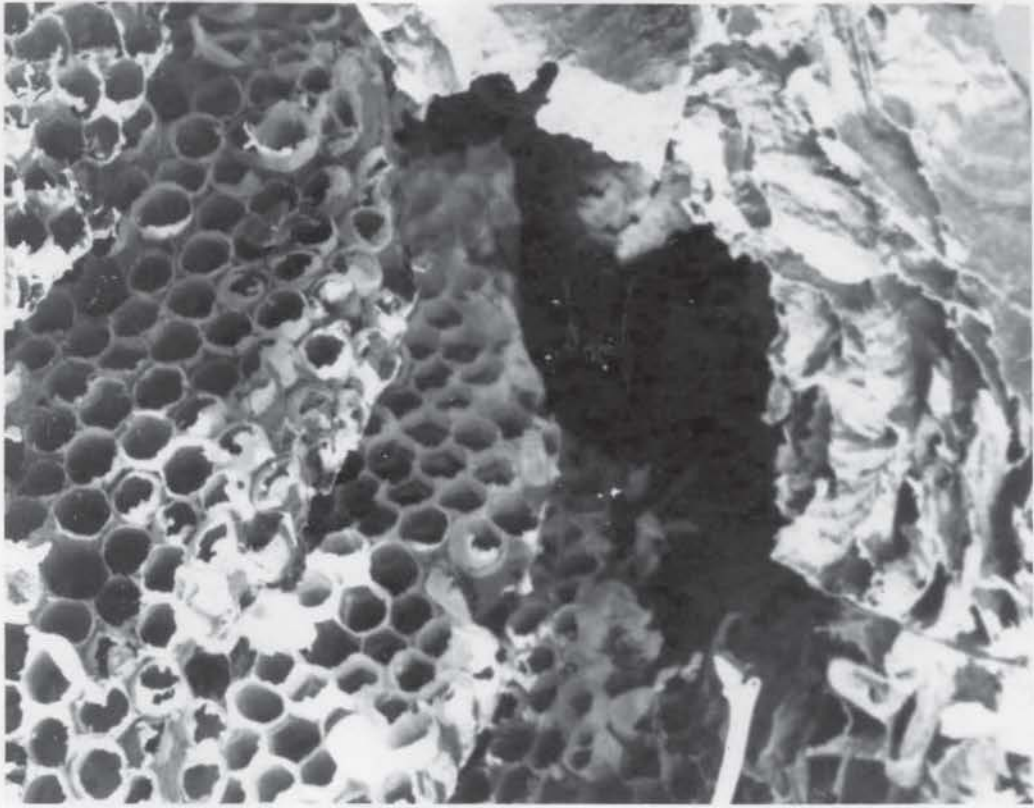
plate #5
Tangles
Drawing, 16" by 20"



figures #1 and #2
Trees
Ierna, Illinois



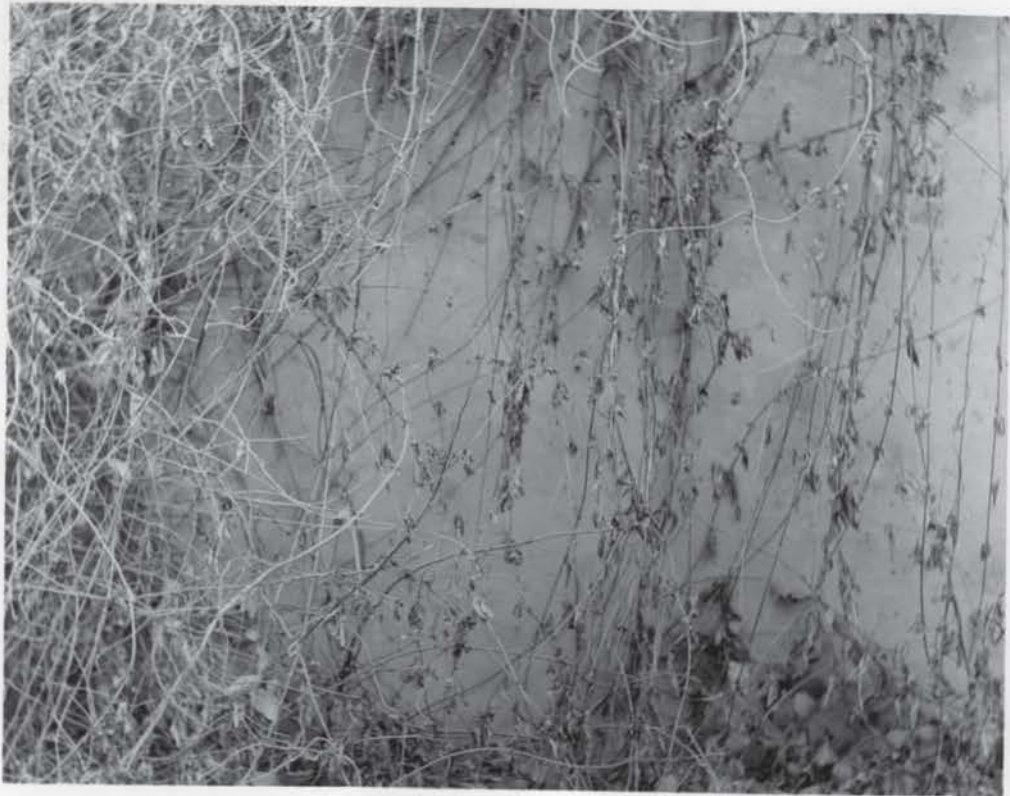
figures #3 and #4
Feathers
Pheasant and Wild Turkey



figures #5 and #6
Hornet's nest and Barnacles



figures #7 and #8
Old wall and Paper bag



figures #9 and #10
Vines and Spider web



figures #11 and #12
roots

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