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Hipólito Rafael Chacón

Derek Webster & Mr. Imagination

Mr. Imagination and Derek Webster, two self-taught African American artists from Chicago, are visionary sculptors who have caught the attention of the art world in recent years.¹ With little access to traditional venues of authority and legitimacy, they would have been excluded from serious discussions of contemporary art just a few years ago. At best, they might have achieved the status of "primitives," "naives," or "savage artists" in the midst of the modern world. However, they are now considered modern *griots*, *ngagas*, and *babalawos*, visionaries who combine art making with a spiritual discipline. Not only are they part of the vanguard in contemporary art circles, but they seem to play a corrective role in a cynical society and world seemingly devoid of spirit. The late Janice Brill eloquently wrote that,

Derek Webster and Mr. Imagination practice the making of art as a means to access the sacred and harness the divine. To them the art object expresses, elucidates, and connects, helping to provide meaning and purpose to a society seemingly gone adrift...It is through the example of such modern practitioners and through the wisdom of traditional societies that our own may be salvaged, redeemed, and healed.

Sharing a deep sense of individual purpose, Mr. Imagination and Derek Webster are committed to their history, vision, and the belief that art can heal and restore. While the "discovery" of these "outsiders"

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may seem like romanticizations on the part of altogether jaded critics and historians, there is no doubt that these artists have shifted the focus of contemporary art in the post-modern world. Flattery is indeed the highest compliment and these "naives" have a fair number of admirers and copyists, even among trained artists who are taken with the prolific nature of the work, the simplicity and elegance its design, and the breadth of its vision.

Derek Webster

Derek Webster leads a dual life. By night he is a maintenance man in a downtown office building in Chicago, a hardworking Central American immigrant who has successfully carved a piece of the American pie for himself and his family in the course of three decades. The rest of the time he is a self-taught, prolific sculptor and a *cause celebre* in the art world, a rising star in the field of contemporary art. Since 1979 this untrained artist has been collecting discarded materials, scrap wood, used bottles, broken dishes, and shards of colored glass to compose dynamic sculptures that seem to vibrate with electric colors and rich textures. He has transformed his home and garden in a tidy working-class neighborhood on Chicago's southside into a festive carnival of richly decorated whirligigs, wooden trellises, picket fences, life-size figures, and other assemblages.

His sculptures are predominantly anthropomorphic figures, often with multiple identities. They are usually made from scrap wood, given dynamic poses and encrusted with broken bottles, bottle caps, old fabrics, wigs, etc. The figures might be described as totems, haints, ancestors, guardians or portraits of known individuals. However, the artist shies away from identifying them and it is entirely possible that he himself does not know who they are or what they represent. Critics have been tempted to associate Webster's fanciful constructions with the disparate tendencies of African American folk art of the United States or even with the gritty urban images that tend to characterize contemporary Chicago art. However, his aesthetic and cultural roots lie in his homeland Belize and therefore in the colorful festival arts of the British Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa.

Fig. 1 In this construction from 1994 Webster renders two regal figures riding on the back of a turtle-like creature, whose shell is decorated with found objects much like a sumptuous carnival float. The Gulf Coast of Central America, where Webster spent his youth, is also known as the "Turtle Coast" because of the annual migration of sea turtles and the veneration of this animal in ancient times as a symbol of the regeneration of the life cycle. (Photograph by Bob Luce, Clayton Photography. Courtesy of Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana.)

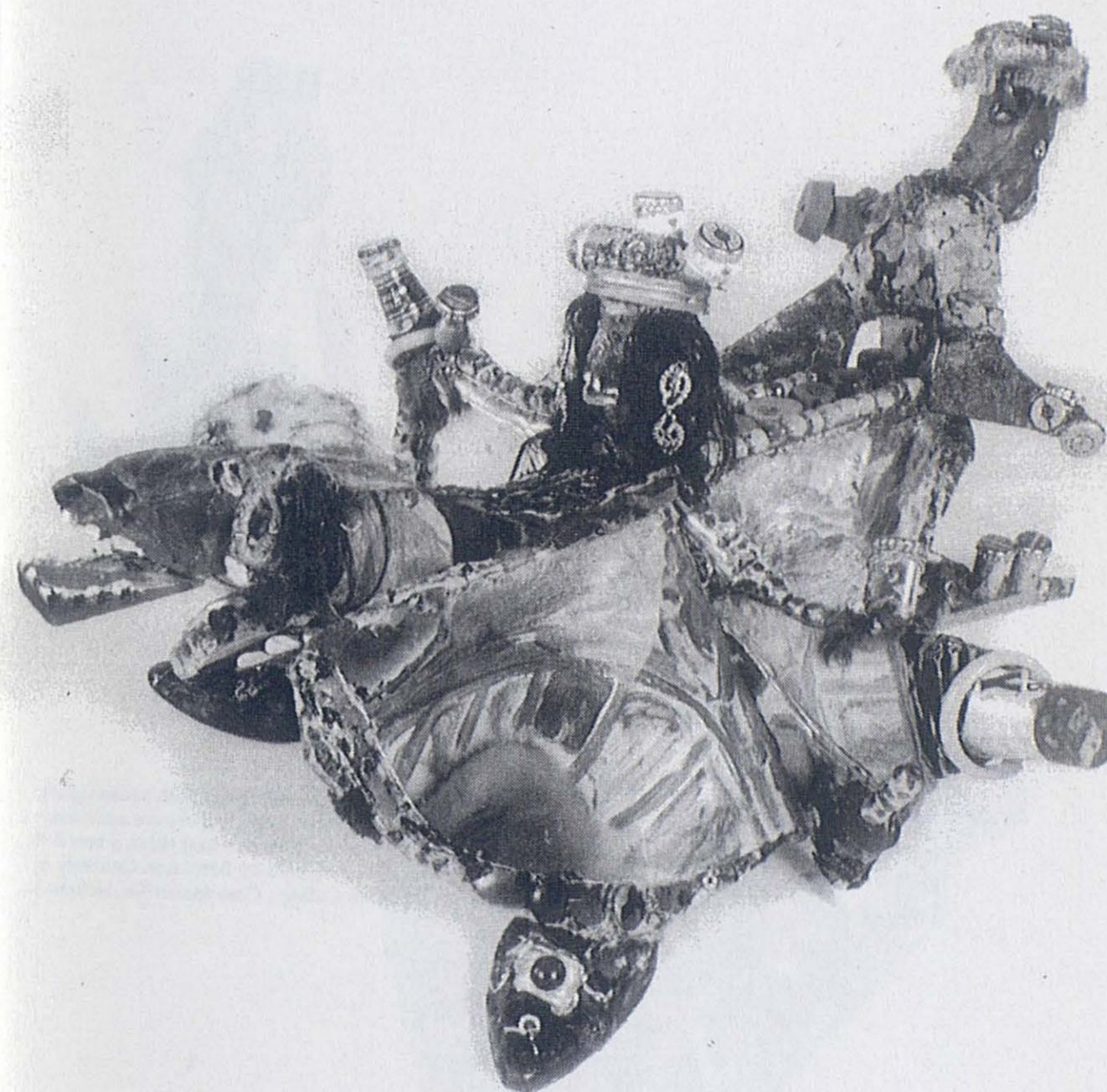


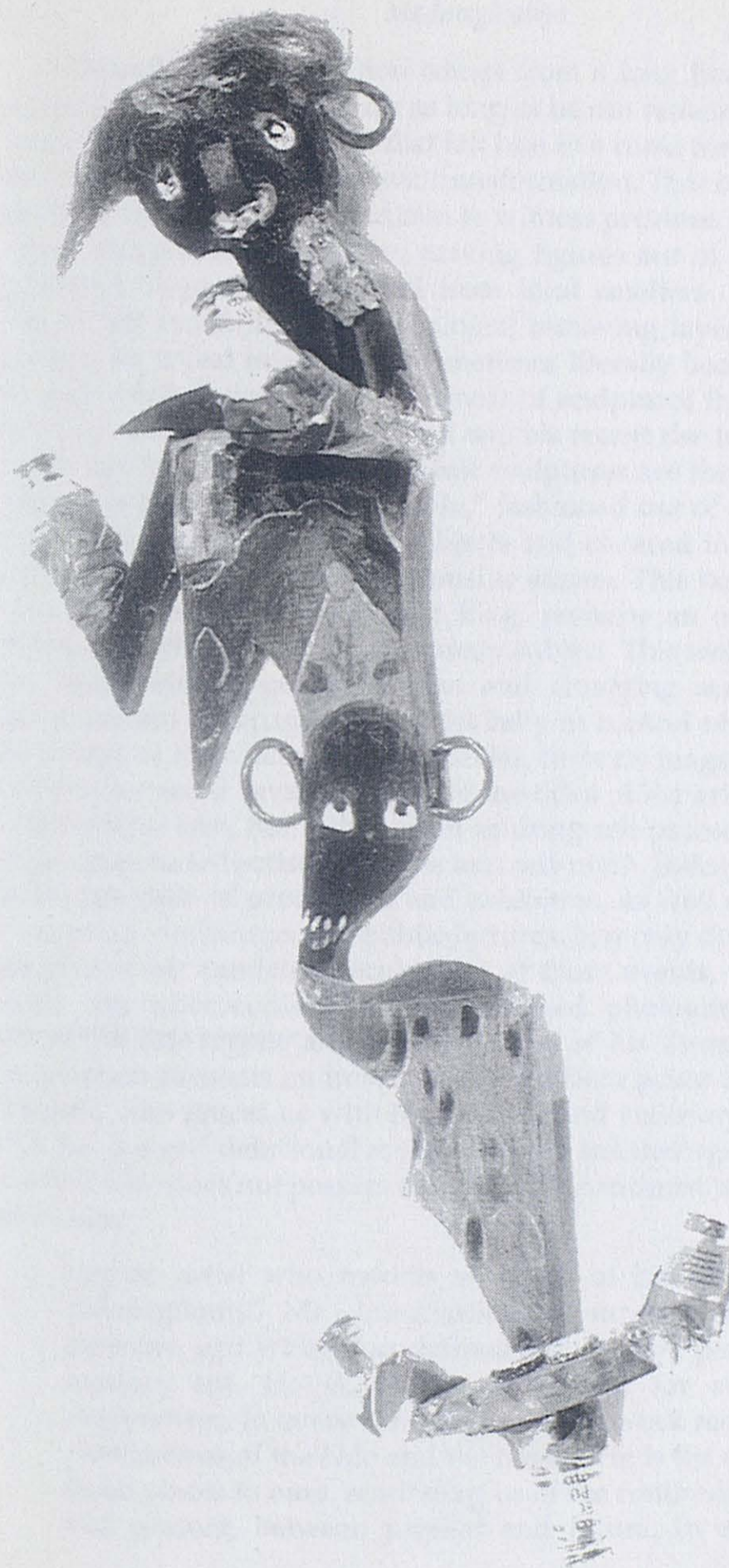
Fig. 2 Webster's "turtles" are low, squat creatures with thick carapaces encrusted with broken glass, plate shards, and bottle caps. Though usually humorous in tone, these lively critters are sometimes menacing in character. This one rears its head and threatens to dismount its shocked rider, a bearded figure who sports dread-locks, jeans, and children's sneakers. (Photograph by Bob Luce. Courtesy of Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana.)



Fig. 3 This animated, almost life-size figure strides with jagged movement and dancelike rhythm. Various parts of its body seem to bud new faces and the back view has an altogether different face, in this case, a haunting visage. (Photograph by Bob Luce. Courtesy of Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana.)



Fig. 4 Webster's individual figures are in a constant state of flux. For example, a creature with recognizable features and familiar attributes transforms itself into something completely different and unexpected before our very eyes. This figure carries within its belly a frightening, ghostly image reminiscent of Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. (Photograph by Bob Luce. Courtesy of Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana.)



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Mr. Imagination

Although Mr. Imagination comes from a long line of crafters and has been a practicing artist for as long as he can remember, he points to a near-fatal shooting in 1978 that left him in a coma for six weeks as the source of a personal and artistic transformation. That coma transported him back in time and allowed him to witness previous incarnations. After his recuperation, he began carving figures out of a sandstone-like industrial by-product collected from local smelters. The artist states that he felt much like an archeologist removing layers of sand, dust, and dirt to reveal images that sometimes literally beckoned him from the past. He has since made hundreds of sculptures that are ambitious in design and sumptuous in detail and his recent rise to fame in artistic circles has been meteoric. His latest sculptures are thrones, staffs, rich vestments and "paintbrush people," fashioned out of discarded furniture, tools, and other recycled objects and covered in flattened bottle caps, imitation gems, and inexpensive stones. This body of work features the likeness of a bearded king, perhaps an ancient pharaoh, prophet, or self-portrait, as its primary subject. This work, coupled with Mr. Imagination's public success and emerging sense of business savvy, creates an image of an artist fully in control of his themes and the course of his career. In some circles, he is no longer perceived as a newly-discovered savant, subject to the tides of the art market and the critical status quo, but rather as an untiring self-promoter of an elaborately constructed artistic persona and self-myth. Indeed, he keeps a feverish schedule of production and exhibition, as well as traveling and conducting workshops and public lectures. Not only does he give away samples of his sandstone sculptures at these events, but he liberally hands out photocopied and autographed photographs of himself dressed in full regalia and seated on one of his thrones. Indeed, Mr. Imagination presents an image of a beneficent priest and enlightened pharaoh, who graces us with his largesse and visionary presence. Perhaps his is a self-delusional myth or overly inflated ego, but I know of no artist who does not possess one. The late Africanist Janice Brill wrote about him:

For an artist who models so much of his work on his own physiognomy, Mr. Imagination is surprisingly free of the assertive ego which has defined the creative personality in the modern era. He is, rather, the model for everyman, from everywhere, in every time. Much of his work recalls the ancient civilizations of the Nile and the Niger...He is the messenger from those places to ours, reminding us of the continuity between past and present, between present and future. In exhorting us to

recognize and recover the beauty and wonder around us, he speaks with the wisdom of those who preceded us on behalf of the those who will follow.

What seems to matter is that Mr. Imagination is unfaltering in his humanistic message that beauty is everywhere and the creative process is open to all.

Fig. 1 When asked about the source of his limestone portraits of pharaohs, Mr. Imagination states that he does not know precisely what inspires them. With their probing, all-knowing eyes, these sculpted portraits of bearded rulers on staffs and paintbrushes present the possible reappearance of ancient ancestors or manifestations of the artist himself in a previous life. (Photograph courtesy of Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, Illinois.)



Fig. 2 Modern self-mythification or the reappearance of an ancient sage? Mr. Imagination wearing full regalia and seated on one of his many thrones. (Photograph by Ron Gordon. Courtesy of the artist.)



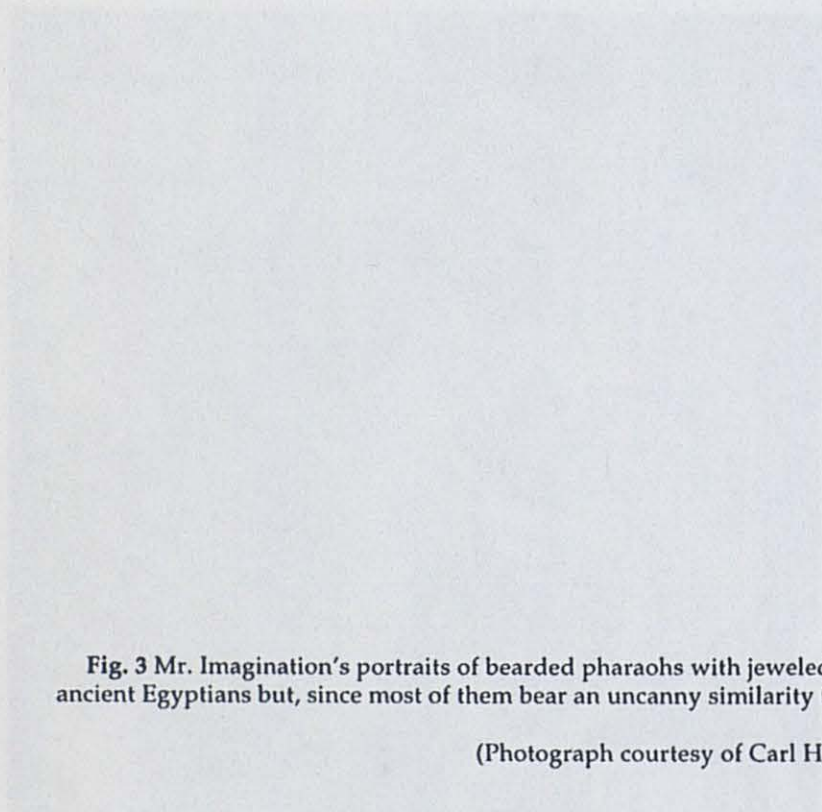


Fig. 3 Mr. Imagination's portraits of bearded pharaohs with jeweled headresses may be evocations of ancient Egyptians but, since most of them bear an uncanny similarity to his own likeness, they are more likely self-portraits.
(Photograph courtesy of Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, Illinois.)

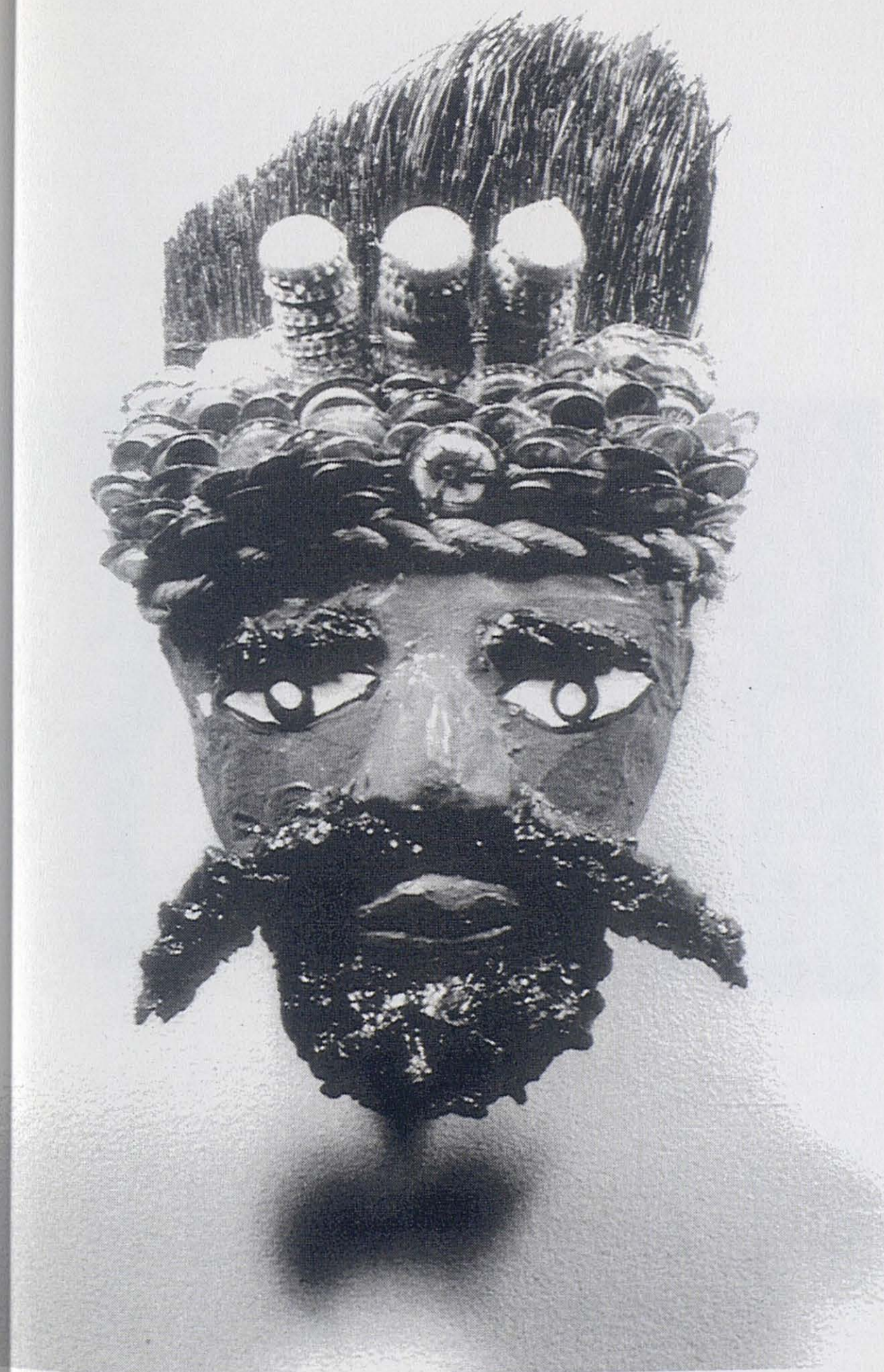


Fig. 4 The "paintbrush people" represent a case of humorous self-reference on the part of the artist. They have become favorites of artists who often collect used and discarded brushes for Mr. Imagination. Local bar owners in Chicago's Wrigleyville neighborhood save bottle caps for him. (Photograph courtesy of Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, Illinois.)



Fig. 5 Like an ancient African or Northwestern Indian totem pole, this sculpture from 1993 contains a host of ancestor figures stacked atop each other. Mr. Imagination often hears their voices as he sculpts these assemblages.
(Photograph courtesy of Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago, Illinois.)



endnote

1. This photo-essay derives from interviews with the artists and the catalogue the exhibition *Healing and Transformation in the Art of Africa and African America* (Crawfordsville, Indiana: Wabash College, 1994) by Janice Brill and Hipólito Rafael Chacón.