PLASTOPODS

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ABSTRACT

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PLASTOPODS

'Plastopods' is the title of an exhibition of polyester and fibreglass sculptures. The name Plastopod is based on the biomorphic nature of the image and the synthetic nature of the material employed.

The work creates an illusion of movement, growth and vitality in an atmosphere of eerieness due to the treatment of form and the presentation of the work.

The process involved in creating the forms is closely related to the type of image produced.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis was produced in conjunction with an exhibition entitled 'Plastopods' held at Sir George Williams Art Galleries from February 26 to March 16,1976. It is a statement by the artist about the concept and aesthetics of the work in the show. Although other interpretations of the work are possible (based on individual sensibilities) this commentary deals with what the artist considers most pertinent.

The show consisted of a group of polyester and fibreglass sculptures dealing with the concept of active existence. The name Plastopod is the combined form of plasto (relating to the sculptural character of the work and to the synthetic material from which it was made) and pod (from podos meaning feet and relating to the implied mobility of the pieces). The biomorphic[1] images presented in the exhibition are the Plastopods. They are representations of the organism at its most primitive, quint-essential level.

PLASTOPODS

In dealing with an image derived from a natural source one must accept some of the limitations of working within that framework. Although the Plastopods are non-specific (i.e. not identifiable as actual existing creatures) they must conform to a certain physiological 'logic' if they are to be convincing as biomorphic images. As a result, they rely on the physical nature of the animal body as a basic model. Despite the fact that using a generalized subject allows greater freedom of form than when dealing with a specific prototype, many of the features in a Plastopod are, nevertheless, predetermined by a basic anatomical order.

With few exceptions, Plastopods have a more or less defined head area followed by the major part of the body. They are bilaterally symmetrical as biological entities although, to imply a state of mobility or mutability, they are shown in a visually asymmetrical position (Plate IV, V, VI). This lack of visual symmetry is of the same type as produced by any animal or human when moving as compared to the symmetrical appearance of these same subjects when standing straight.

It is visual movement that is a central feature of the work because it is primarily through movement, on some level, that vitality (i.e. a state of 'aliveness') is determined. The use of a biology-related image, with its inherent implications of life and growth, is an attempt to deal with the concept of active 'aliveness' (as opposed to passive existence) through visual

means. Because of a rhythmic shifting of masses and a play between positive and negative forms (both suggestive of muscular activity) the work takes on an appearance of animation. This animation is an intrinsic part of the image because it expresses the essence of an active organism (i.e. its character and spirit).

To further communicate this vital force, the work draws on the viewer's capacity for associative thinking. By dealing with primary physical experiences the work confronts the viewer on a very immediate level where he/she tends to equate his/her own physical functioning with that of the sculpture. As a result, the viewer sees a different degree of tension in a horizontal piece than in a vertical one even when the two are very similar in form (Plate II vs. Plate XII). Because of the viewer's conditioning to the force of gravity (which creates the need for greater exertion to produce an upward movement than a lateral one) he/she interprets the horizontal piece as more relaxed. The definitive factor, in this case, lies not within the form itself but in the viewer's projection of his/her own experience onto the sculpture.

Although the implied movement, the apparently pulsating masses and the organic, tactile nature of the forms are somewhat reminiscent of human characteristics the relation between Plastopod and human is on physical rather than the more common visual grounds. As a result, there is never a direct abstraction of human form but rather a projection of a basic physical sensibility. The forms themselves are essentialy animal in nature and any human attributes are the result of the affinity between

animal and human.[2]

Despite the almost convincing organicism and vitality of the work, the pieces cannot operate in the real world (i.e. within the viewer's space) because they are not recreations of life, only manifestations of an artist's psyche. They are, therefore, kept removed from the viewer's world by platforms, baseplates or other barriers. Plastopods are illusions, portraits of non-existing entities and can only occur in their own environment. Placed directly on the floor they would quickly be revealed as rigid, lifeless lumps. By being indefinite (i.e. non-specific) and remote they produce a strange feeling of quasi-reality. The work is not meant to be intimate, intended for handling; the pleasant, smooth surfaces and rounded forms are, in fact, meant to act as a partial foil for the underlying tone of the work.

This dual quality (the combination of pleasant and disturbing) is very important because it gives the work more dimension. By creating a complex emotional climate the sculptures elicit a more complex set of reactions than if there was a single principle in effect.

The absence of clearcut definitions is as much manifest in the visual aspects of the work as in its emotional tone. There is often no frontal plane, no continuous outline; forms recede behind other forms (Plate IV, XIV, XV) forcing the viewer around the sculpture in order to see what is happening. Since there is no primary or preferred view the pieces function truly in the round. In some cases the sculptures lie entirely below eye level

giving the pieces a very different appearance from a distance than at close range.[3]

Another aspect of ambiguity appears in the monochrome 'tube' sculptures (Plate VI, VII, VIII, IX) where there is a gradual mutation of form from geometric to organic. Rather than weakening or confusing the effect, however, this duality of character serves to reinforce their eerie quality by suggesting the metamorphosis of inorganic column or cylinder into biomorphic - Plastopod. Unlike the other 'tube' sculptures (Plate X, XII, XIII) where there is a distinct separation between geometric and organic components, these monochrome pieces function as a single unit with the more passive cylindrical area transforming itself or developing into an active organic form. In these sculptures the column serves to direct the activity (and the eye) to the organic area by creating an upward thrust in Gemma (Plate VII) and Polypoid (Plate VIII), a horizontal and lateral direction in Variant (Plate VI). The organic elements seem to rely on the cylinder for activation, and draw their energy from it.[4]

In sculptures like Birth of Venus, Vertical Repetical and Portrait of the Artist the cylinder becomes more distinct because it is a separate element, differing in both form and colour from the organic section. By being separate, however, the tube becomes totally static, taking on the secondary role of providing contrast to the biomorph and acting as an environment for it to function in. Although the tube is necessary to the concept of these sculptures, only the organic part is the Plastopod and, consequently, all attention is focused there.

This condition also exists in pieces like Slithy Tove (Plate III), Plastipus Negricus (Plate II) and Gallumphing 'round (Plate XVI) where the bases serve to define the activity but are visually distinct from the organic form. Because they are separate from the base the Plastopods in these works become more autonomous, capable of greater mobility. The fact that the base provides a physical space for this implied movement (forward in Plastipus Negricus, down in Slithy Tove, all over the platform in Gallumphing 'round) reinforces the suggested 'aliveness' of these pieces. Although visually different, on a narrative or representational level, the bases are consistant with the total image.

The primary concerns in the work are physical and representational and, although they are essential, visual considerations are not the only factors controlling the appearance of these sculptures. Because the emotional and physical aspects of the work play a very important role a purely visual reading would be inaccurate.

Whereas sculptures like Gallumphing 'round (Plate XVI) and Embracing Lumps (Plate XV) could be interpreted as pure form they are not intended as such. All the sculptures in the exhibition have a biomorphic origin. The variation in form between pieces like Embracing Lumps (Plate XV) and Plastipus Negricus (Plate II) is based on physical, biological and descriptive considerations as well as on visual aesthetics. The pieces all strive to communicate a state of 'aliveness'; the divergence in the forms results from a difference in the degree and nature of activity

necessary to represent that 'aliveness'. Because the circumstances are different in each piece the form varies.

The sense of activity or mobility in the sculptures is, in part, a reflection of the process used in creating the forms. The impression of movement is partly due to the fact that pieces were achieved through improvisation, through actually pushing clay around until a desired quality began to appear.

The sculptures were started with only a general concept in mind, no specific image. By assembling a few lumps of clay and moving them around intuitively a general direction or organic movement gradually emerged. Though it may have changed in the process of defining and clarifying the form, this initial direction provided the groundwork and often determined the basic character of the piece.

The impovisational method of working, together with the qualities inherent in clay (i.e. its pliability and mutability), is responsible, to a large degree, for the character of the work. Elements such as surface treatment, colour and environment act only as vehicles for reaffirming or reinforcing the qualities inherent in the concept Plastopod.

INSTALLATION VIEW. Left to Right: "Portrait of the Artist", "Birth of Venus", "Vertical Repetical", "Amurru".

PLATE I

PLÁSTIPUS NEGRICUS
l. 11½"

fig.1

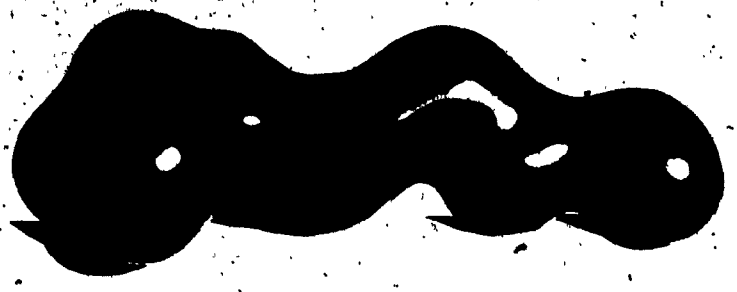


fig.2

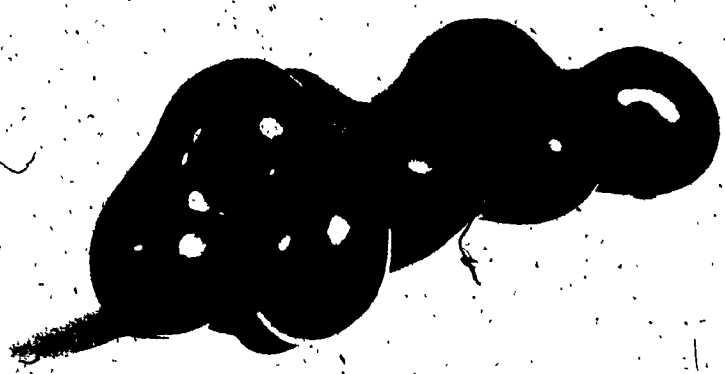


fig.3

PLATE II

SLITHY TOVE
l. 9½"

fig.1

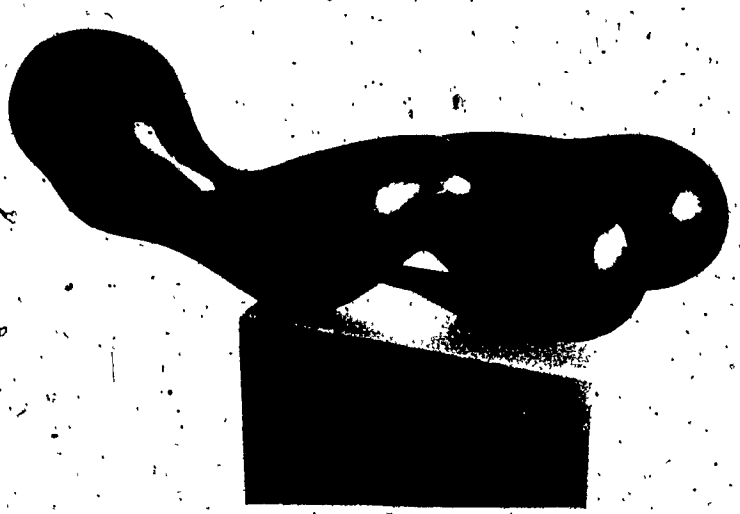


fig.2

PLATE III

PLASTIPUS BLUE
1. 11".

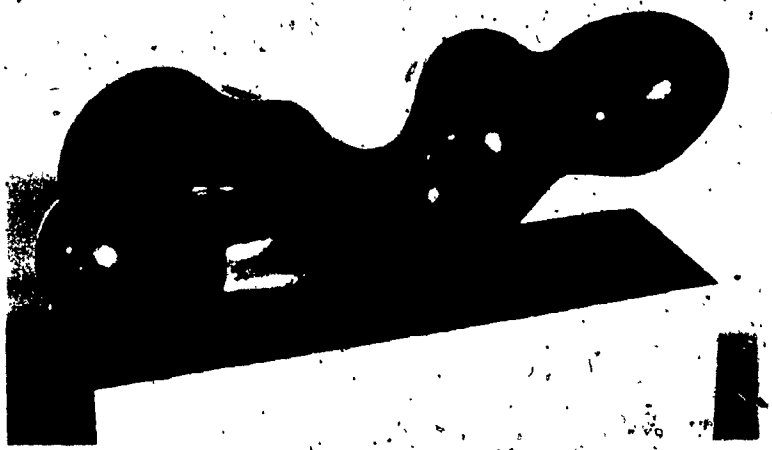
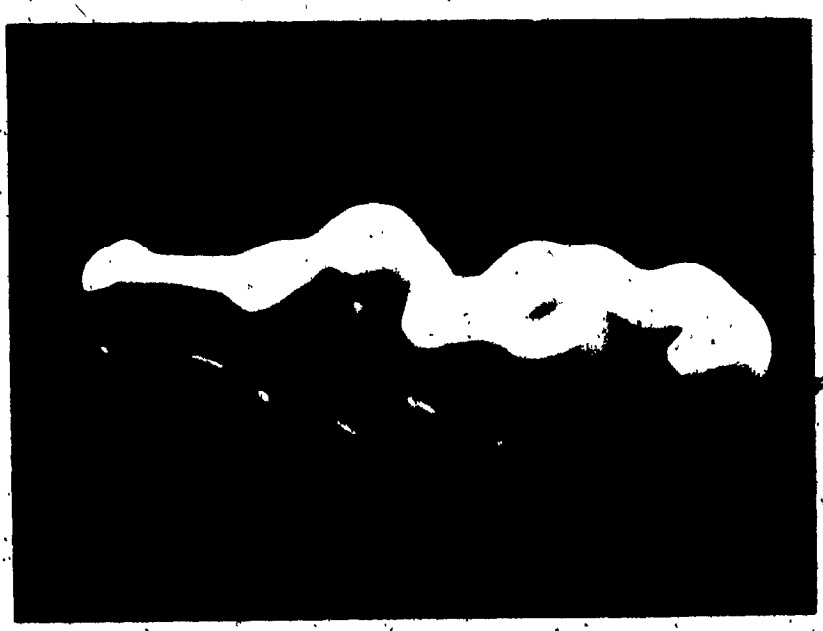


fig.1

fig.2

fig.3

PLATE IV



MOTIVE SHIFT
1.18¼"

fig. 1

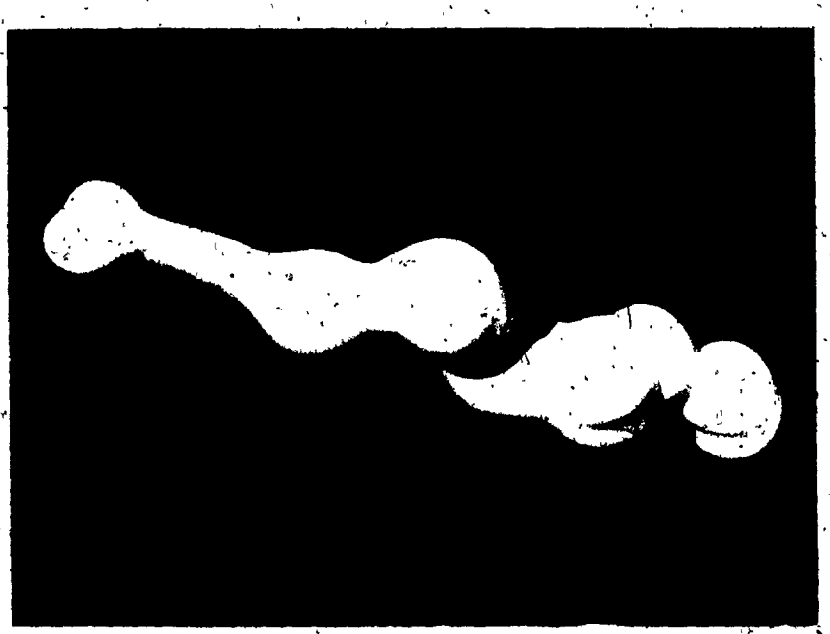
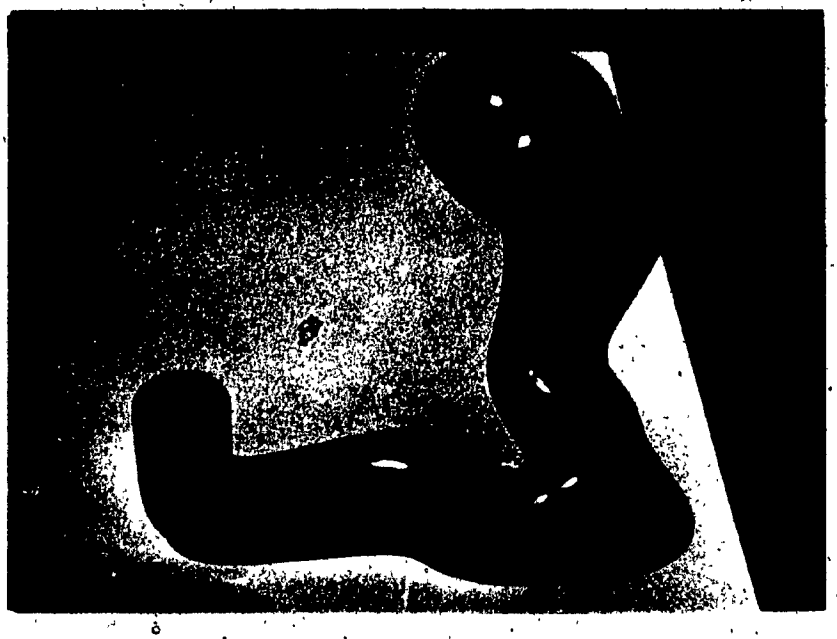


fig.2

PLATE V



VARIANT
14"x 21"x4½"

fig.1

fig.2

PLATE VI

GEMMA.
h. 69"

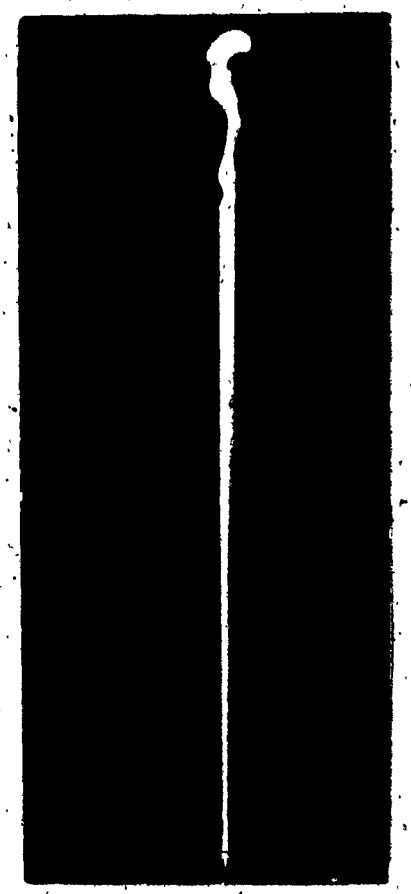


fig.1

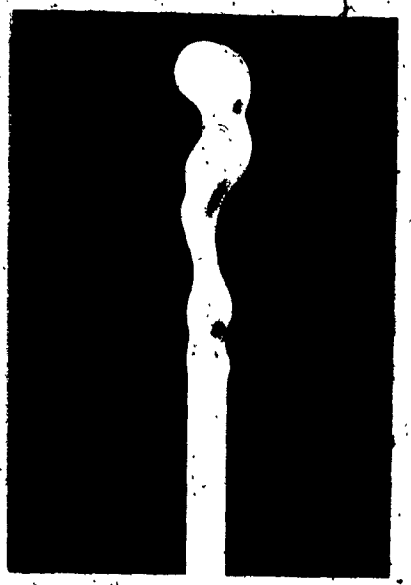


fig.2

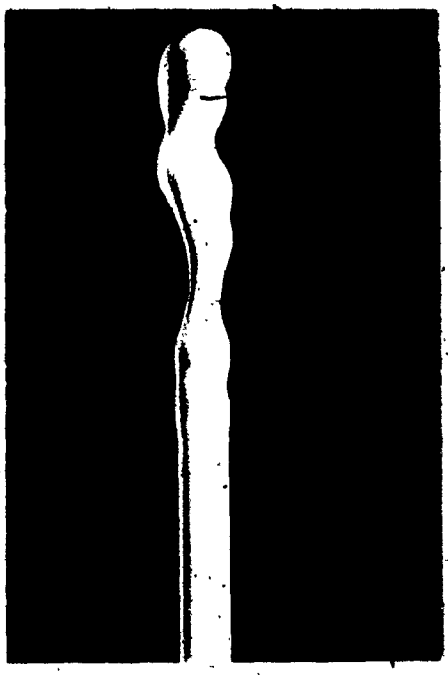


fig.3

PLATE VII

POLYPOID
h. 29½"

fig.1

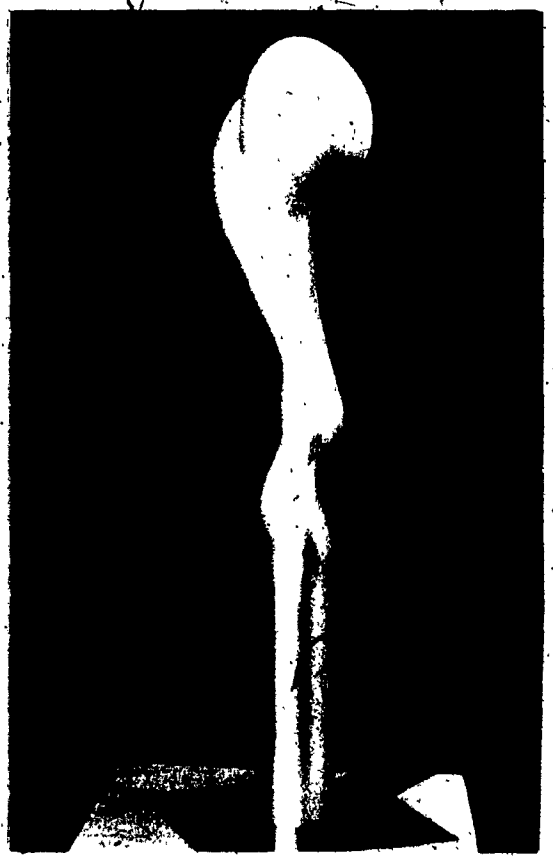


fig.2

PLATE VIII

AMURRU
h. 63"

fig.1

fig.2

fig.3

PLATE IX

BIRTH OF VENUS
h. 60"

fig.1

fig.2

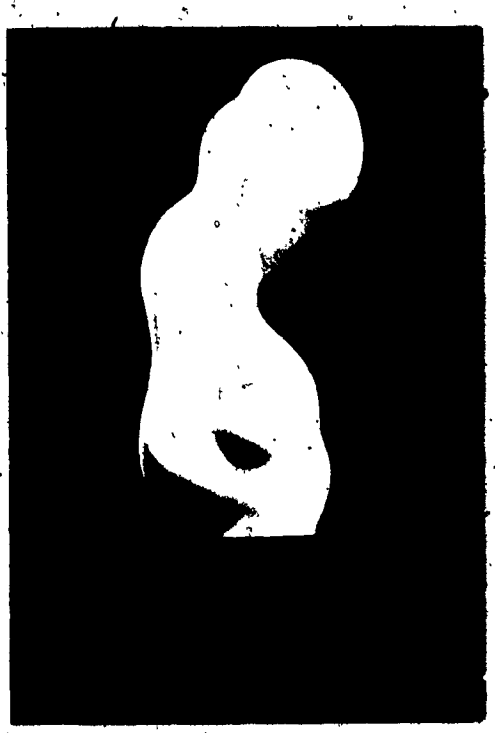
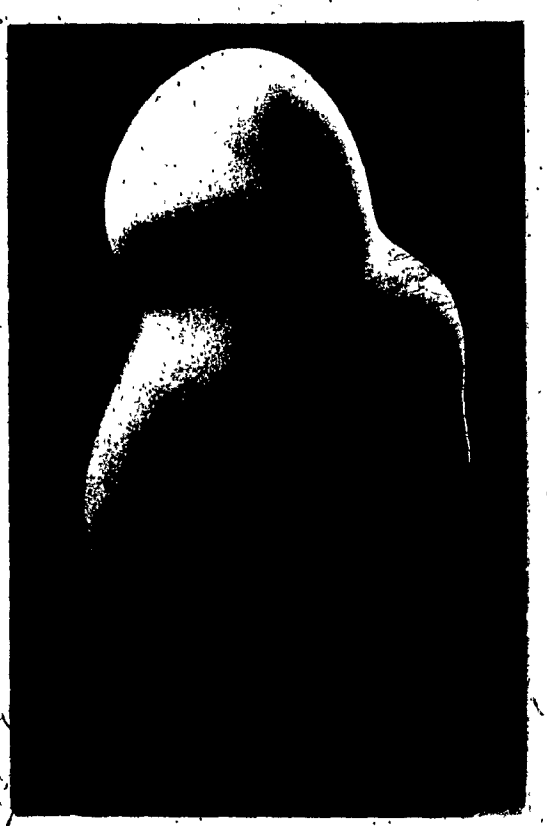


fig.3

PLATE X



LE GROS NORMAND
h. 15½"x23½"x14

fig.1

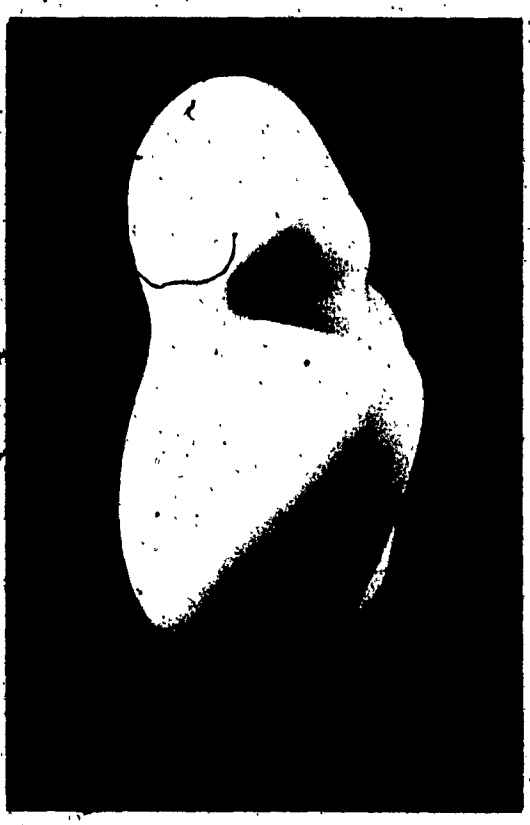
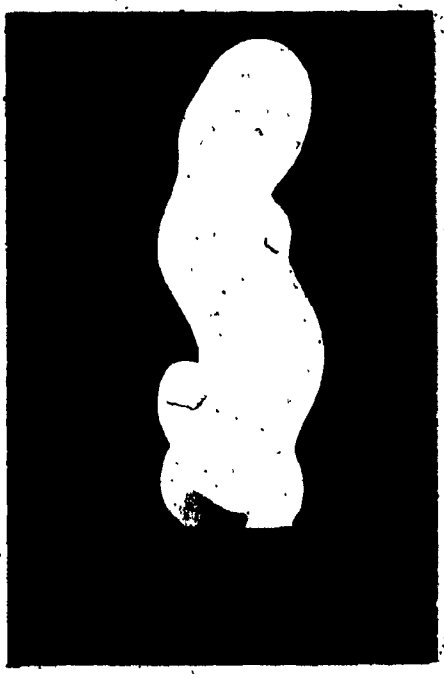


fig.2

PLATE XI



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST
h. 37½"

fig.1

fig.2

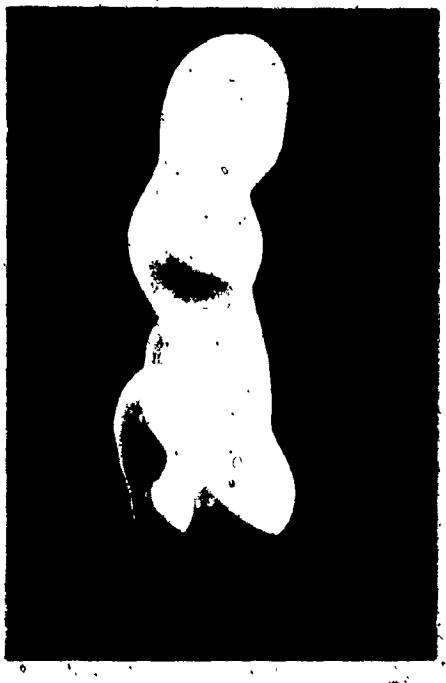


fig.3

PLATE XII

VERTICAL REPETICAL
h. 58"

fig.1

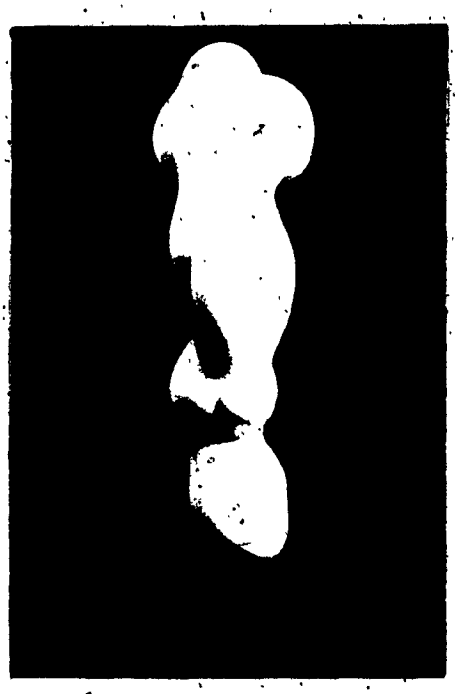


fig.2

fig.3

PLATE XIII

EPIMORPHOSIS
17½"x26½"x15¼"

fig.1

fig.2

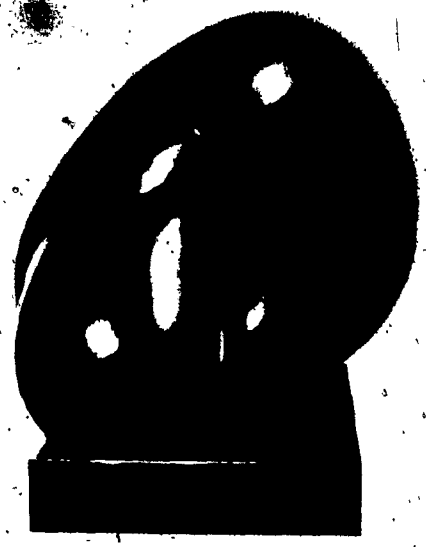
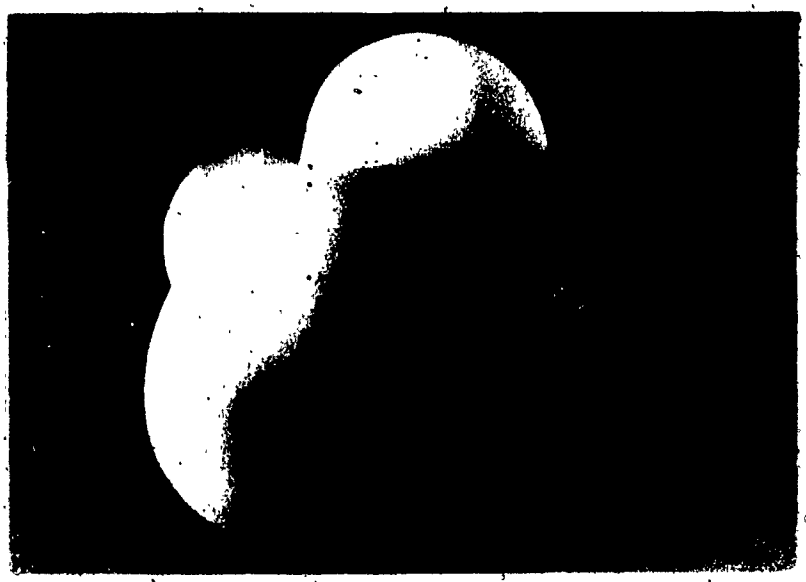


fig.3

PLATE XIV



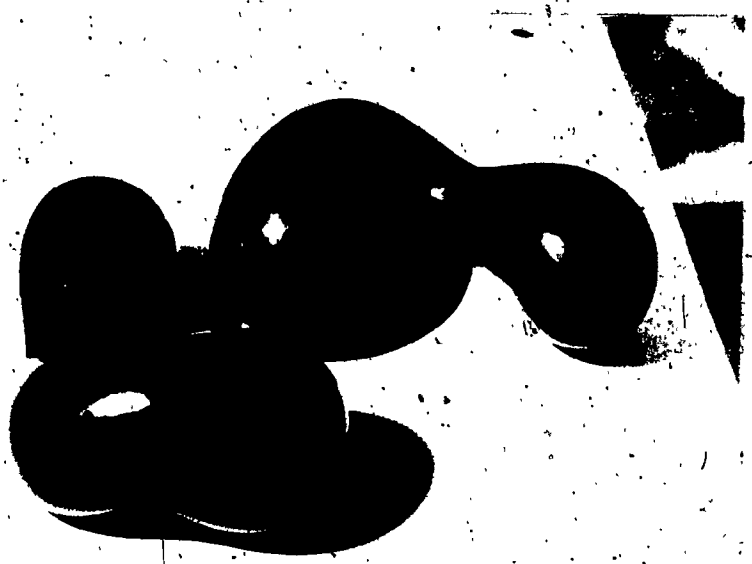
EMBRACING LUMPS
h. 5½"

fig.1

fig.2

fig.3

PLATE XV



GALLUMPHING 'ROUND
h. 3"

fig.1

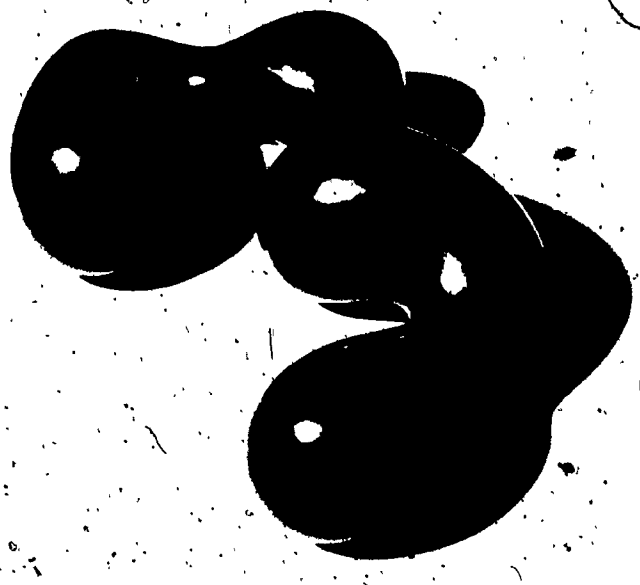


fig.2

PLATE XVI

FOOTNOTES

[1]As used in this thesis, the terms biomorphic, organic and organism refer to the sentient being as distinguished from inanimate matter and vegetable life.

[2]Since the Plastopod is meant to represent the essence of the living organism the human, being a biological entity, is, in effect, a Plastopod. It is in this sense, not because of physiological similarities, that the analogy between human and Plastopod occurs in pieces like Birth of Venus and Portrait of the Artist.

[3]The shift in direction in Motive Shift is not noticeable except from above.

[4]Some of this same sensibility appears in an earlier work (Motive Shift) where the energy seems to be drawn from the smaller end, through a tubular section, and into the animated major area. In this case, however, the cylinder is still a minor element acting as an intermediary between the two organic ends.