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Symbols and Colors

Linda Eileen Thias

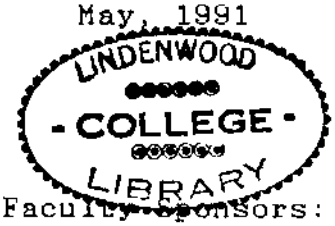
THESIS:

SYMBOLS and COLORS

by

Linda Eileen Thias, B.A.

May, 1991



Faculty Sponsors:

Dean Eckert

Grant Hargate

John Pohlman

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Studio Art at Lindenwood College.

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PREFACE:

The culminating project for completion of studies for the degree of Master of Arts in Studio Art consists of an exhibition and this thesis.

The exhibition, to be held in the Hendren Gallery beginning September 22, 1991, represents a total of forty-five art works completed during the course of the graduate studies at Lindenwood College. The pieces selected for the show will include paintings, drawings, ceramics and fabric art. The range of media includes oil and acrylic paints, colored pencil, clay and fabric. The accompanying thesis is a discussion and analysis of this body of work.

> Creation is dominated by three absolutely different factors: first, nature, which works upon us by its laws; second, the artist, who creates a spiritual contact with nature and his materials; third, the medium of expression through which the artist translates his inner world.
>
> Hans Hofmann. (Leland, 111).

INTRODUCTION:

After finishing my Bachelor of Arts Degree and teaching for several years, I sought to fulfill dreams of successfully maturing as a well-rounded studio artist. The graduate program at Lindenwood College provided not only the space, but also the technical skills and guidance through which my identity and self-confidence as an artist matured. Through this experience in art, I acquired a deeper appreciation for art and the creative activity as well as the motivation to continue to learn by teaching others.

Attending Lindenwood College between the years of 1988 and 1991, provided the opportunity to participate in a variety of courses in painting, drawing, and ceramics. In class I thrived on setting my own goals by experimenting with a wide range of media. Studies at Lindenwood College have guided me through the personal growth and the development of teaching skills as an artist.

The following paper is an analysis of my personal beliefs, goals and influences through the study of art history, painting and ceramics. The exploration of new media allowed me to extend my ideas into a variety of art pieces.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND IN ART

Interpreting shape of nature by manipulating a variety of art materials in new and exciting ways was a very rich and positive part of my childhood. My curiosity with art began as a child. Since I grew up surrounded by woods, my parents helped instill the appreciation of nature. I remember art prints hanging in our home which strengthened the visual experiences we shared. Painting beside my father, I tried to imitate the way he moved the brush strokes in flowing lines to create shapes. Art and nature were an important part of my life.

Positive painting experiences from my childhood, directed me to teach art to young children. I find teaching to be rewarding and stimulating by observing students discovering the world around them through artistic experiences. I feel that each child, regardless of his or her abilities, should have exposure to the unlimited possibilities that art provides. Students grow by gaining new skills and confidence with the discovery of each new art medium. From clay to paint everything is new and exciting to young students. They have very vivid imaginations which flourish given the opportunity to gain

expression through art. I teach my students that mistakes are part of the learning process. Though my teaching experience I have discovered that children should be allowed to struggle like a butterfly; if a worm in a cocoon is not allowed to struggle to get out, it will die. The struggle will win out and be beautiful! I teach my students that art is about caring, thinking, feeling and putting their thoughts and feelings carefully into an object or an action. I enjoy planning stimulating art lessons, teaching media skills and aesthetic appreciation. In keeping with these objectives, I attend various art conferences and workshops which help keep me up-to-date on new ideas and techniques used to create an enriching art experience for all students.

Throughout my graduate work, my self-esteem and skills as a studio artist have been strengthened. I have painted to please myself knowing the impact of my paintings will differ with each viewer. The process of creating art is as powerful as the colors and forms of these images. My intention as an artist is to allow the viewer to gain their own interpretation from what they see and experience. As Frederick

Franck has commented,

> You are not coping nature but responding to nature in full awareness, to the way nature expresses itself in that object. (Leland,27).

MOTIFS OF MY ART WORK

On my first day of class at Lindenwood College, I experienced the excitement of contemplating new images on a large stretched canvas. My instructor walked in and said, "Paint whatever you want, any size, and the first critique will be in two weeks; now get started." It was a thrill to feel free to begin painting images that were inside me. It must have been the fresh smell of oil paint and the studio environment that released this energy. I remember back to earlier experiences in painting classes where the instructor dictated the subject matter and media. The studio atmosphere at Lindenwood College provided the opportunities to investigate painting and drawing the same way I teach my students. By allowing them to choose subject matter of personal interest and to experiment with the media which best represents their ideas, students are more likely to value their art as a truly personal experience.

In keeping with this philosophy of teaching, I began seeking shapes in nature which possess true beauty and

seeking shapes in nature which possess true beauty and meaning. Many floral plant forms allowed for the expression of the senses through lines and shapes. These flower symbols expressed the meaning of life, growth and beauty. Each blossom was painted so as to unfold its petals to the purest form. Once the composition was sketched, the blending of paints and new colors on canvas resulted in a combination of representational forms and man-made shapes. Blending of paints directly on the canvas allowed for fascinating new colors to be revealed.

The canvases were rectangular shapes which could be hung as a separate pieces or temporarily connected. The painting once finished resulted into a display of one large screen or separate individual panels. The first painting was a screen of four hinged canvases which stood vertically (Figure 1, Screen Orchids). The arranging of the composition with vertical and horizontal lines allowed the orchid shapes to be encased within the borders of the frame. This composition explodes with curvaceous flower and fauna forms in varied color combinations. Working with a border idea, the laying down of large areas of opaque acrylic color provided a background for the modeled shapes of orchids. Bold, geometric designs

Figure 1 Screen Orchids. 1968. Oil on canvas [illegible]

nature became a way to relate the shapes. As there are more than twenty thousand species of orchids, I sought new ways to capture the essence of each flower by feeling the movement of the contour lines.

In the same way that the flowers became a source of inspiration, the underwater world of tropical fish was another. Understanding the impact of the numerous ways to create powerful compositions, I began to arrange the fish shapes within the quilted backgrounds (Figure 2, Fish Panel). The rich curvilinear forms and fluorescent glowing colors of the fish filled the need to express color and design. The contour lines and patterns of the fish blended well with the geometric quilt composition. The orchid and fish motifs have been a very personal source of subject matter.

Seeking new ways to express my sense of color and design, I enjoy visiting many galleries. At the Faust Park Gallery in St Louis County I experienced the magnificent beauty of quilts. Quilt patterns have now become a source of design for the background for many of my paintings. This interest led to the making of quilts by piecing together large colorful

Figure 2: Fish Panel. 1986. Acrylic on canvas. 40 x 72".

making of quilts by piecing together large colorful pieces of fabric. In designing a quilt, the drawing and planning of how shapes fit together is important. The quilting process lends itself to be easily transported; having the fabric in your hands or on your lap, the artist becomes one with the material. In the same way as does the layering of paint, the layering of fabric creates bold, angular and repetitive motifs.

Drawing was another way to bring images together. Many hours were spent in front a drafting board drawing with prisma colored pencils. The series of geometric drawings were a combination of elaborated quilted patterns (Figure 3, Quilt Drawing). A straight edge was used to draw repetitive, geometric forms to fit within a smaller space of the paper or canvas. The result of blending of the colored pencils is similar that of mixing oils paints. Precise lines and edges create a vibration when looking where the these lines meet. The viewer can look at every section and find stimulating areas of color and form.

After completing six credit hours in drawing, I found clay was another expressive avenue to

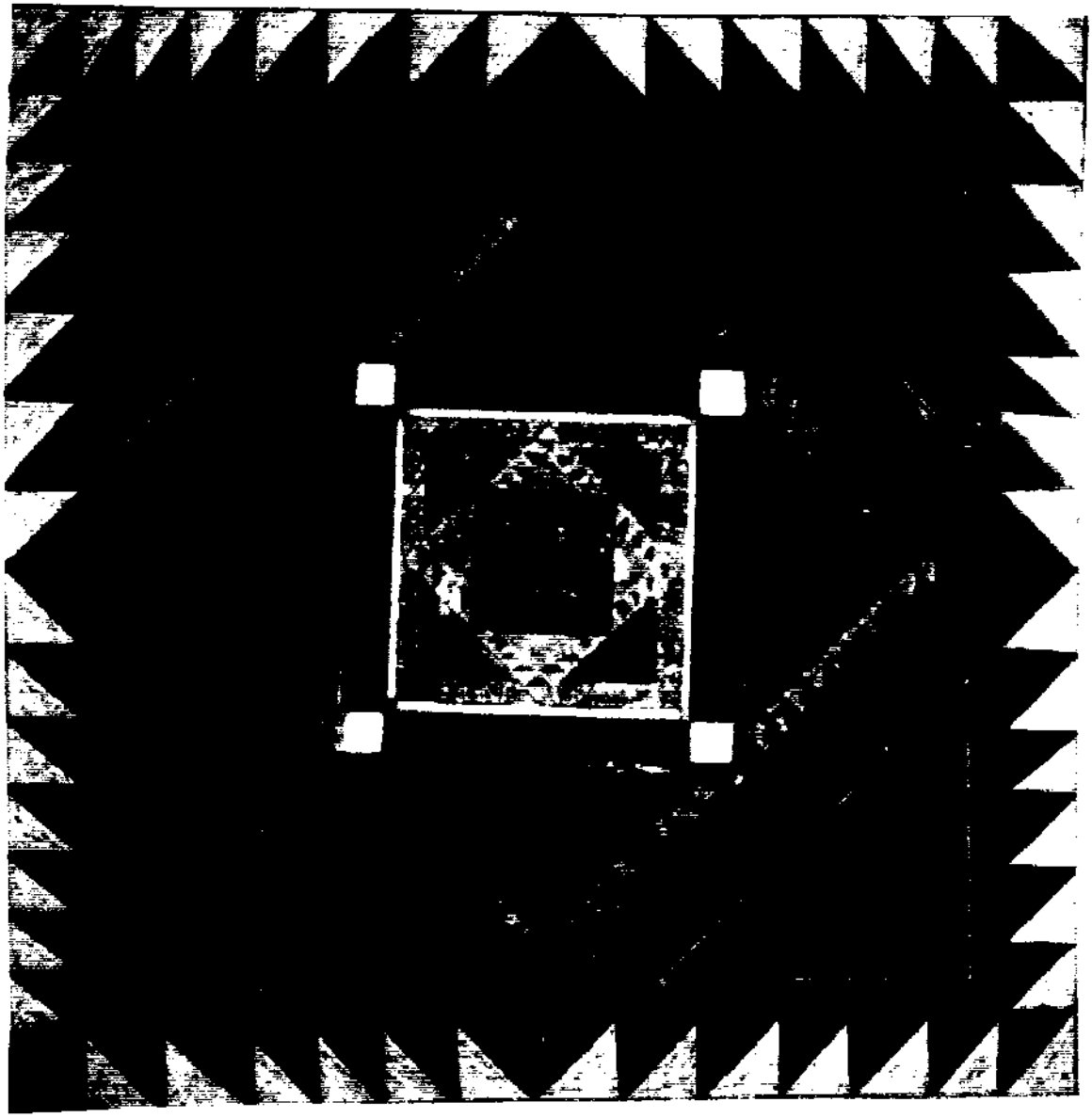

Plate 3 Wall Drawing, 1968. Pencil on paper
11 x 11

maintained an interest in geometric and organic plates. The clay body was a new canvas to be contemplated. After I threw a piece on the potter's wheel, I often altered its shape to become more organic in appearance. Numerous underglazes of lusters for tints and shades of color were then applied to each piece. Working three- dimensionally allowed me to find another medium to express my style of organic and geometric forms. One of my favorite pieces was a combination of quilt drawing incised into clay. Rectangles and squares clay slabs were cut and incised as geometric shapes of the quilt. This was pieced together to form a mosaic table design. The mosaic quilt design consisted of the colors of turquoise and magenta (Figures 4 and 5).

Not limiting myself to stretching canvas over wooden stretches, the motifs could be varied by painting on a variety of surfaces. Much joy and satisfaction came from allowing the fabric or cloth to determine the outcome of each new design. Painting on material lent itself to brilliant border designs with stylized motifs (Figure 6, Cardigan with Mask). The acrylic medium could be used on a variety of fabrics. Previous techniques explored in classes led to the creation of many fashion accessories. Earrings, necklaces and

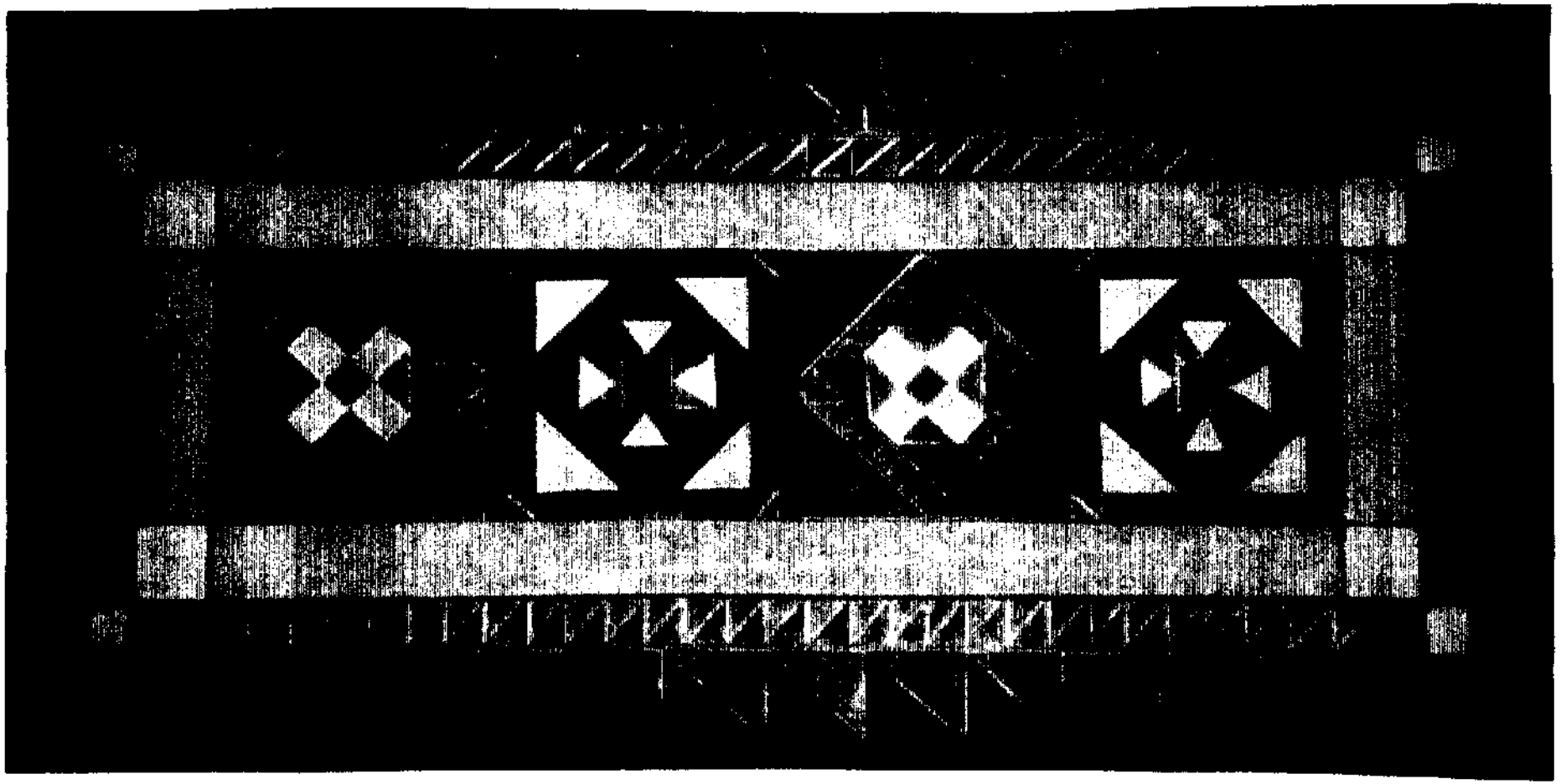

Figure 4: Drawing Detail of Quilt

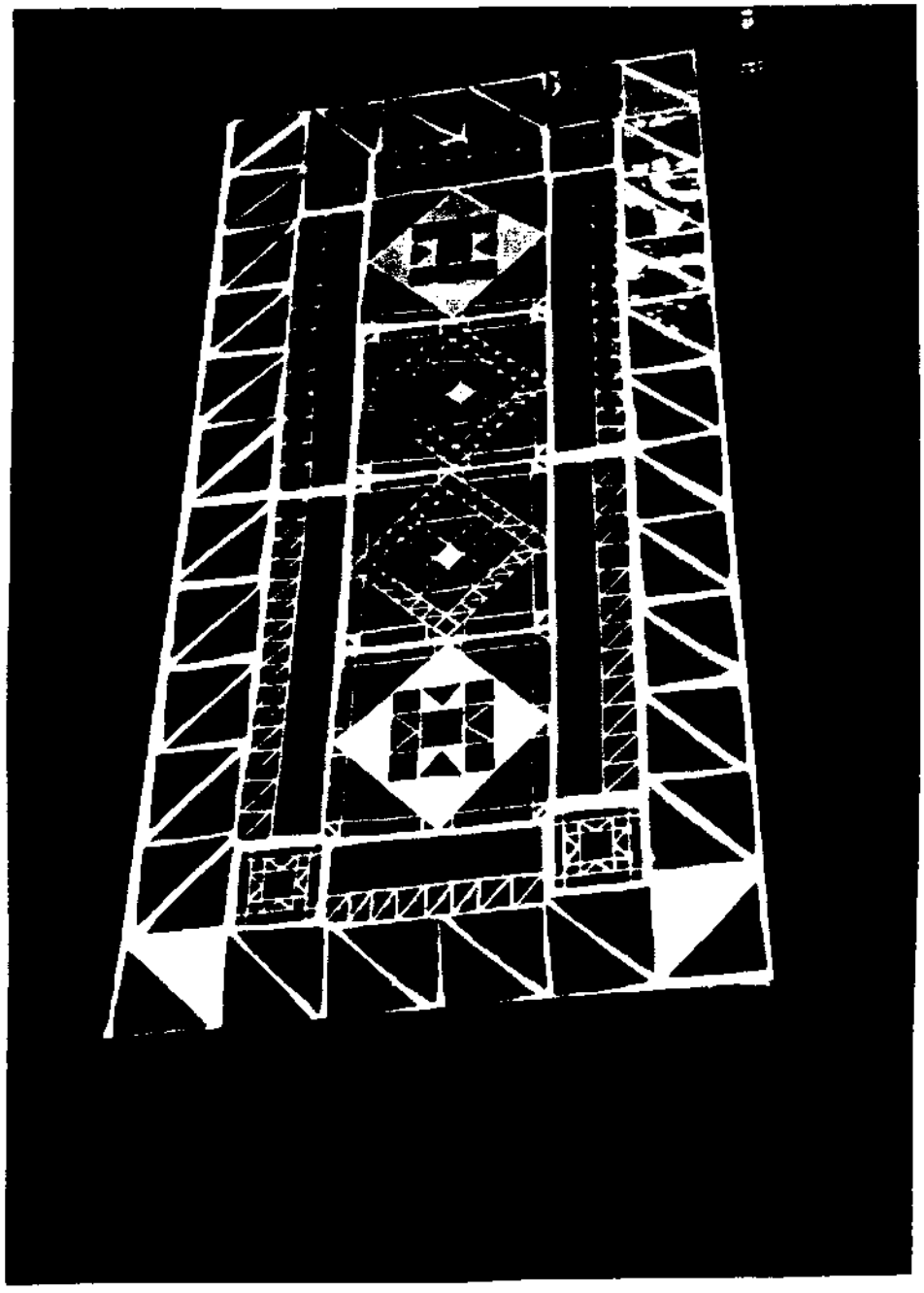

Figure 5: Mosaic Table. 1988. Clay tiles painted with underglazes. 22 x 44".

Figure 6: Cardigan with Mask. 1990. Acrylic on fabric. 12 x 24".

pendants were made from clay and paper, (Figure 14, Paper Jewelry).

The combination of courses taken at Lindenwood College allowed me to gain exposure to a variety of art forms. Studio work combined with other resource materials contributed to my understanding of art as a pure form of self-expression. Expressing myself with a variety of materials resulted in culmination of many new ideas.

INFLUENCES OF OTHER ARTISTS AND ARTS

Numerous artists and styles have influenced my art work. Modern artists as well as folk and primitive arts have provided new images which have become entwined with my own ideas.

The art of Georgia O'Keeffe has influenced me the most. Her images vary from desert scenes and bones to pure abstractions and huge flowers. O'Keeffe's paintings combine the ideas of realism and abstraction. While visiting New Mexico, I viewed the area where she lived and painted. Hiking and exploring the landscape I experienced firsthand the

beauty of the desert. In New Mexico, half of the artist's work is provided by nature herself. While walking on top of the mesas and looking over the landscape, I experienced the intensity of pure light and the colors of exotic hues that O'Keeffe experienced everyday. In addition to her smooth brush - work and modeling, the sensuous biomorphic forms intrigued me. O'Keeffe was constantly probing, exploring and expanding her consciousness of shapes to the fullness of her imagination. She portrayed the essence of each subject, whether a flower, a shell or a landscape. Observing how O'Keeffe balanced the control of light and dark, of small and large, and of delicate and dense forms has helped me understand the power of the image. Painting subjects in many versions, O'Keeffe adjusted to changes of light, using various angles and often only painting fragments of a shape to show simplicity. The images would loose their resemblance to reality by empowering one's feelings. In many ways, I feel much like O'Keeffe when she stated "I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way, things I had no words for" (O'Keeffe 57). Reading about O'Keeffe in a Metropolitan Museum of Art article, there is the comment that the "contours of her flowers were a realization in nature of the

purest abstract forms" (Bulletin, 32). Georgia O'Keeffe,s interpretation of nature continues to make her one of my favorite artists.

In the same way that I was attracted to O'Keeffe's organic shapes, the pure geometric shapes of quilts also astonish me. Discovering that many quilt patterns use the same basic elements as abstract painting of the twentieth century, I incorporated them as a beginning point for many of my compositions. The sophisticated color combinations and patterning are important fundamentals helping to create the visual experience of a quilt. One is easily aroused by the simplicity and brilliant colors of the Amish style. The simple and modest lifestyle of the Amish lends itself to the use of basic geometric shapes of squares, triangles and rectangles. It would take hundreds of hours to design, cut, sew and finally quilt the layers of fabric. By painting the design of the quilt with solid acrylic paints, the image appears in a few hours. The star pattern is an example of my combination of a quilt with an exquisite cathina orchid. In this painting the pure pink petals of magenta color extend beyond the borders of the diamond shape in Orchid and the Star Quilt (Figure 7) and Star Quilt with White Orchid (Figure 8). Using

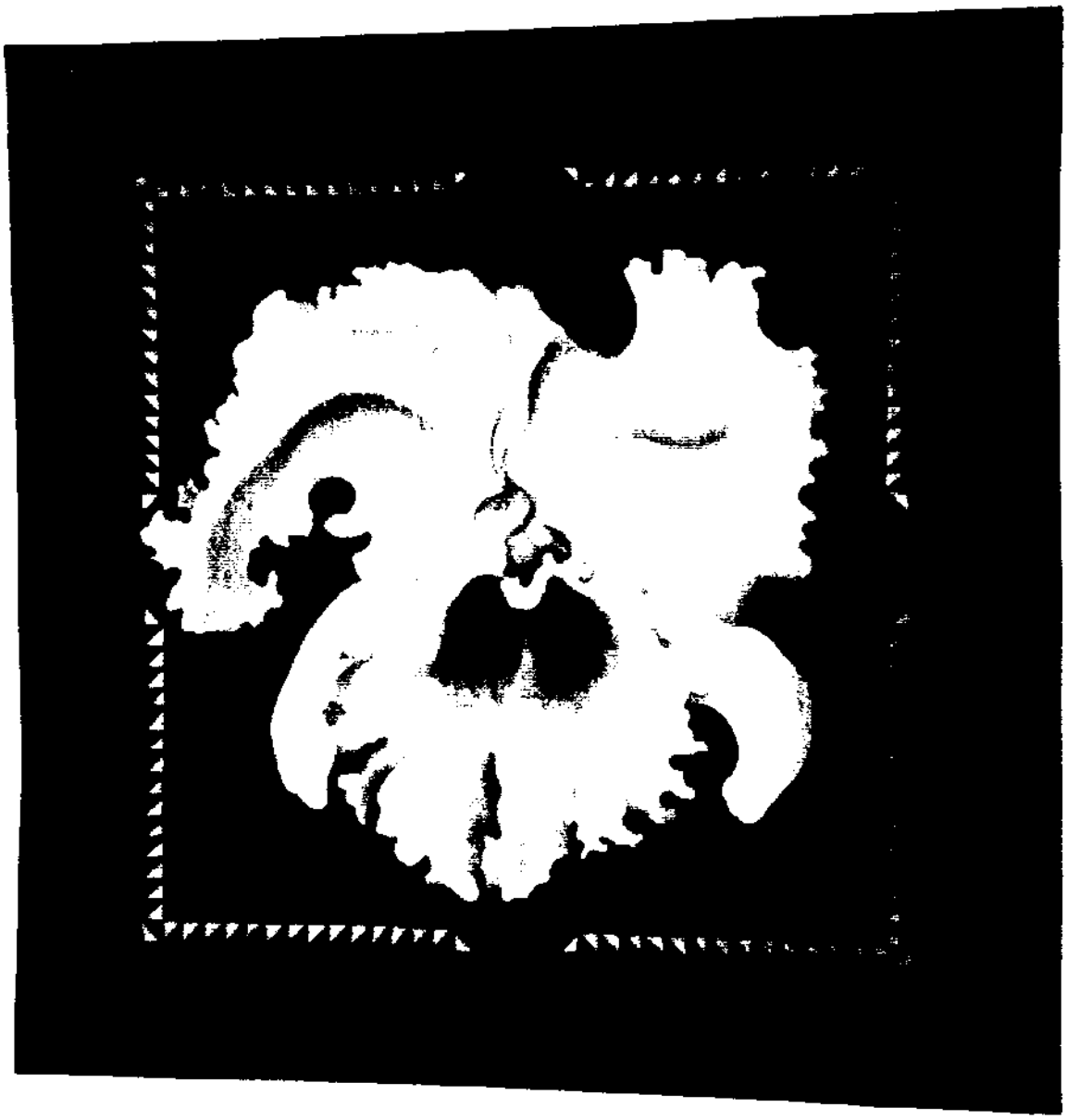

Figure 7: Orchid and Star Quilt. 1988. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 40 x40".

the traditional process of quilting motivated me to make a authentic functional bed quilt. My Wedding Quilt (Figure 9) is made with four brilliant colors, purple, magenta, pink and turquoise. The star design is used in combination with an quilted heart motif. Many hours of love and patience went into finishing this quilt. Quilts are very personal to the creator and to the owner; quilts will always be a special part of my life and a source of inspiration.

Using colorful fabric as an expressive art medium, I was able to find another "extended canvas" to work on. I became captivated by the fabric molas made by the Cuna Indian women of the San Blas Islands of Panama. The mola technique involves intense precision to the detail of layering of colored fabrics. Composing a mola lends itself to a deep appreciation of this fabric process. My Mola Symbol Belt (Figure 10) exhibits fantasy creatures and flower designs by using applique and the reverse applique methods of sewing. The mola is made by layering brightly colored fabric to expose each new color or design. Extremely small embroidery stitches and designs to fill in every space are unique characteristics. Full of tropical flora and fauna, the Cuna Indians environment makes

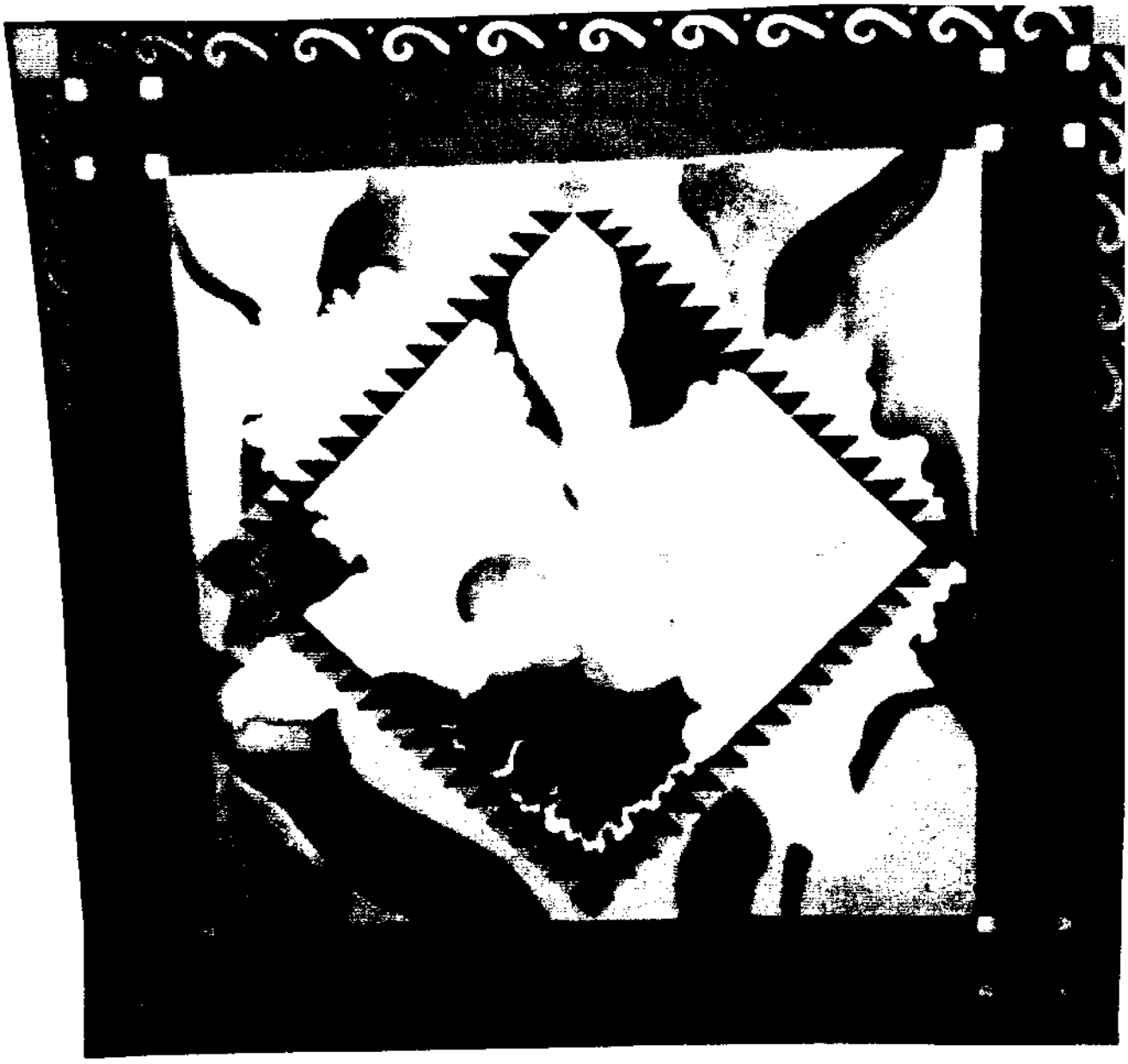

Figure 8: Quilt with White Orchid. 1988. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 48 x 48".

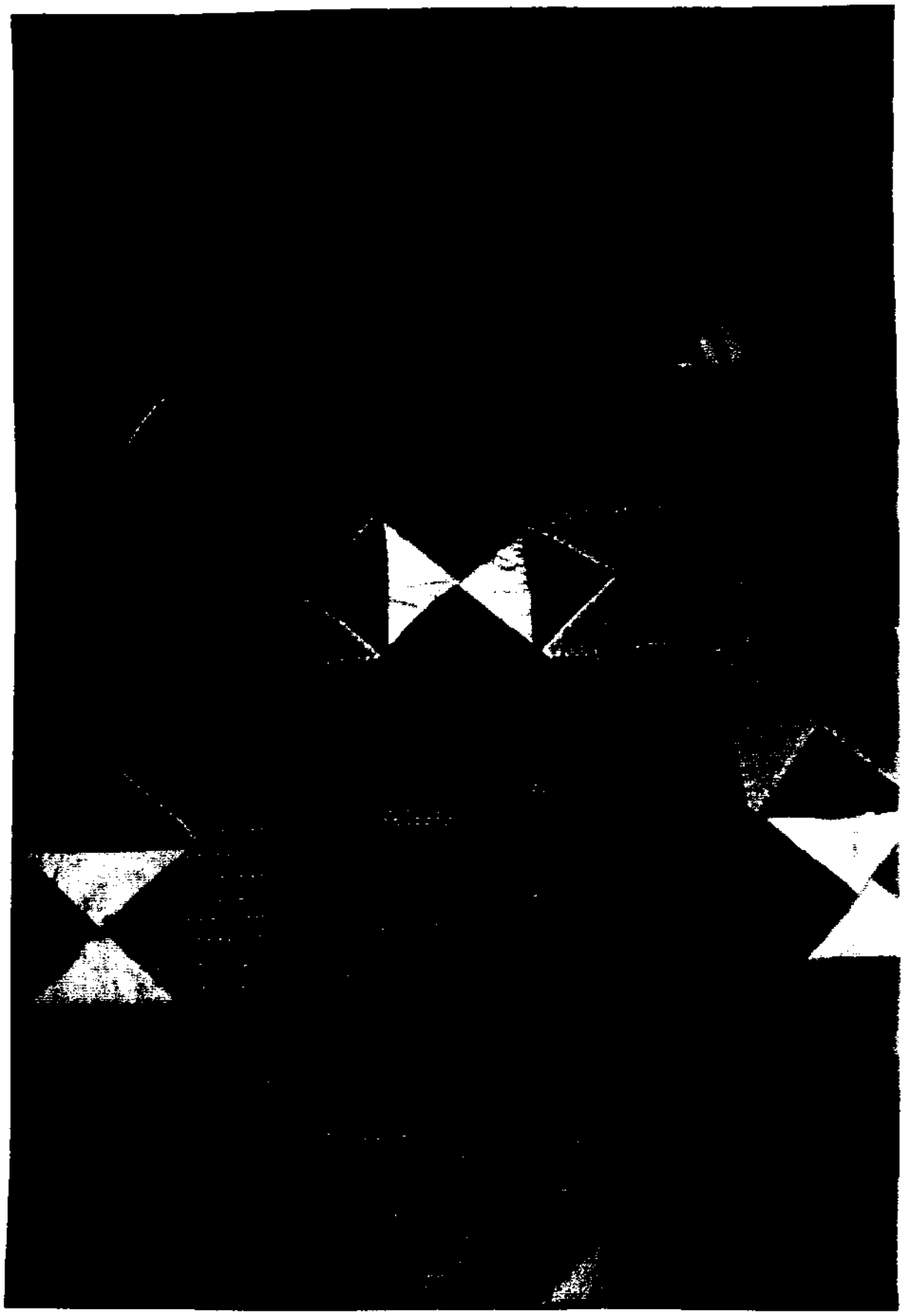

Figure 9: Wedding Quilt. 1989. Fabric Quilt. 72 x 96".

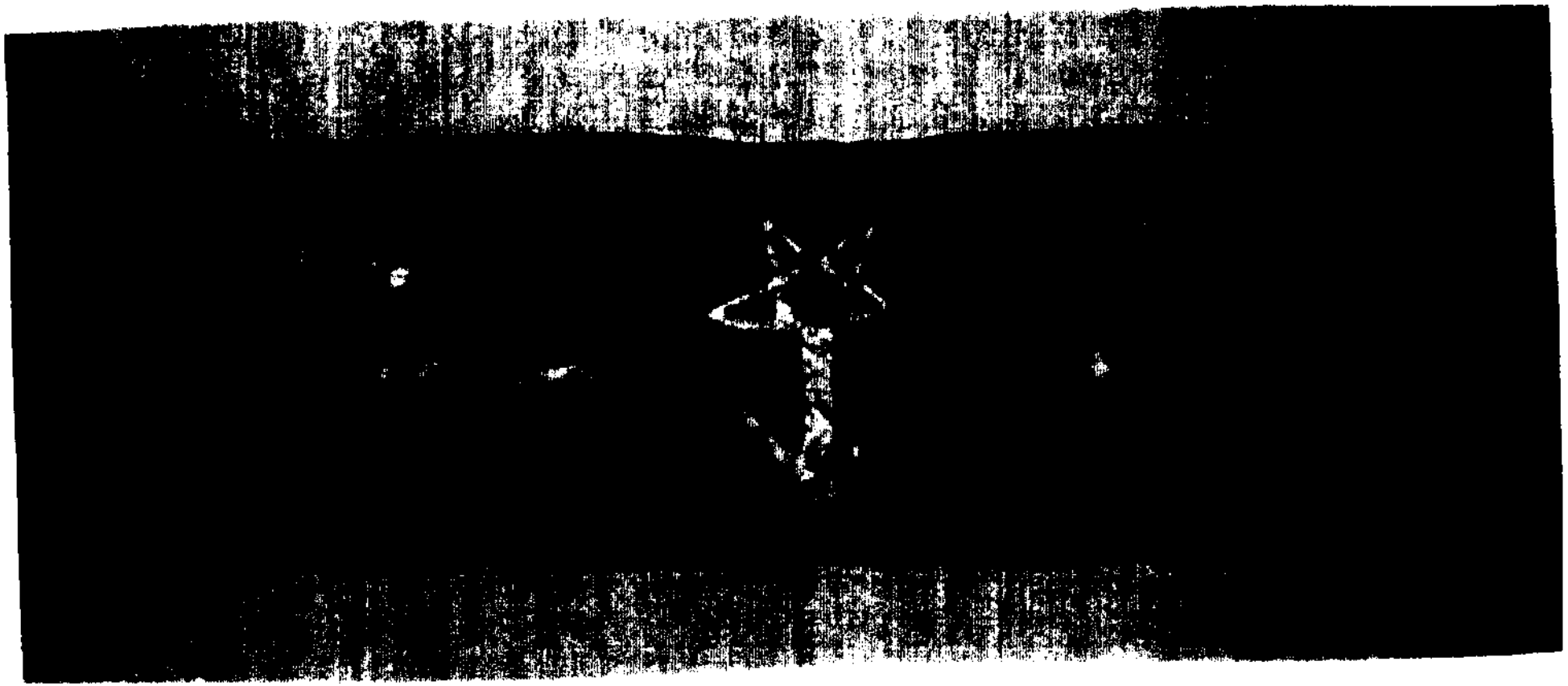

Figure 10: Mola Symbol Belt. 1989. Fabric Applique. 4 x 48".

up most of the mola compositions. The mola belt and Mola Fish Jacket (Figure 11) are tributes to the beautiful culture and world of the Cuna people.

After spending many intense hours at sewing, I began to apply this layering technique to colored paper. Cutting and gluing designs of brightly colored paper provided a similar effect to the fabric mola (Figures 12 and 13, Paper Mola Fish). The paper medium allowed for the faster production of mola designs by eliminating the long hours of sewing and intense eye strain. The fish motif provided many exciting new patterns for layering. Once the mola paper motifs were formed, colored pencils were then used for adding detailed patterns. Using this mola technique, I created paper jewelry pieces (Figure 14, Paper Jewelry).

The experimentation with quilts designs also extended into the paper medium. The Woven Paper Quilt (Figure 15) is a composition using a repeated star motif. Working with paper allowed for pure solid colors to be layered and drawn upon.

Paper cutout shapes allowed the investigation into the delightful works of Henri Matisse. His Jazz series in the Fauvist style is among my favorites because I

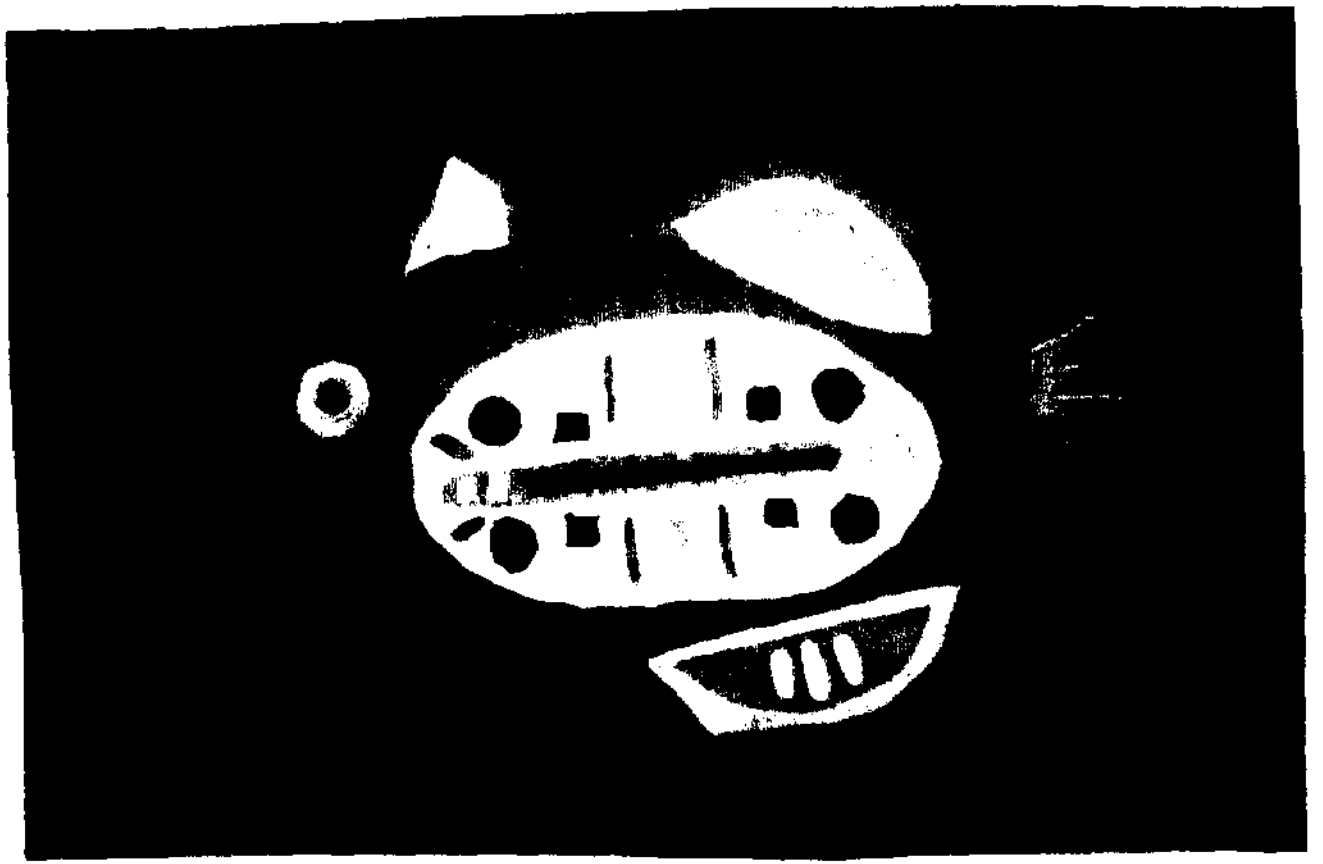

Figure 11: Mola Fish Jacket. 1990. Fabric Applique. 12 x 24".

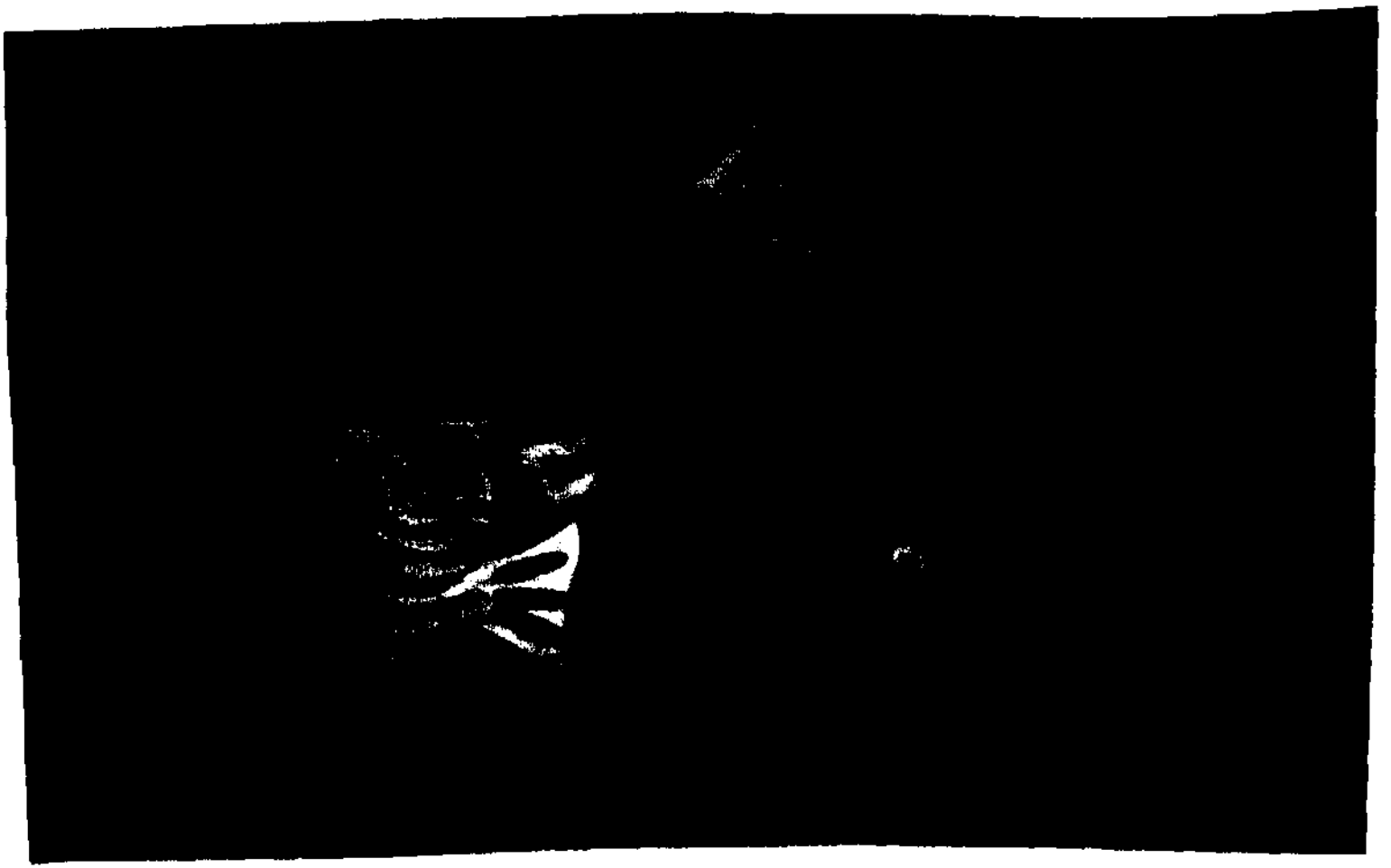

Figure 12: Paper Fish. 1989. Layered Paper. 17 x 28".

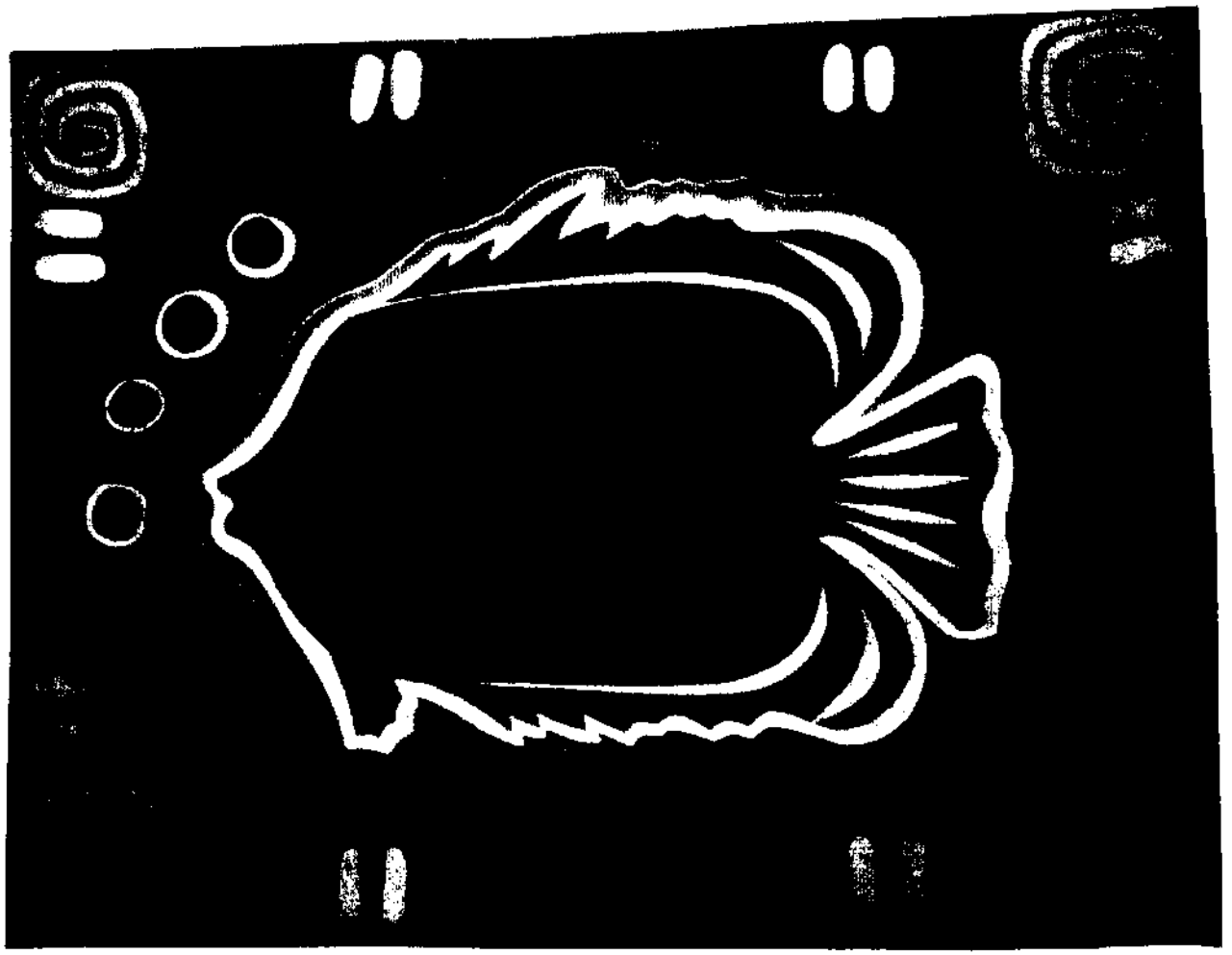

Figure 13: Mola Fish. 1989. Layered Paper. 19 x 24".

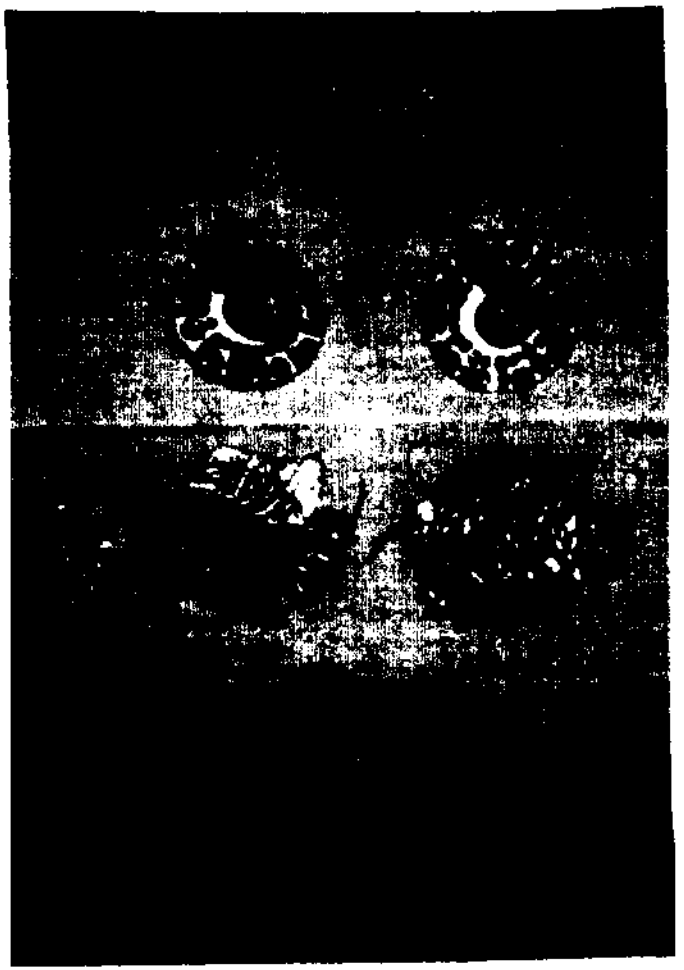

Figure 14: Paper and Ceramic Jewelry. 1990. Paper and Clay.

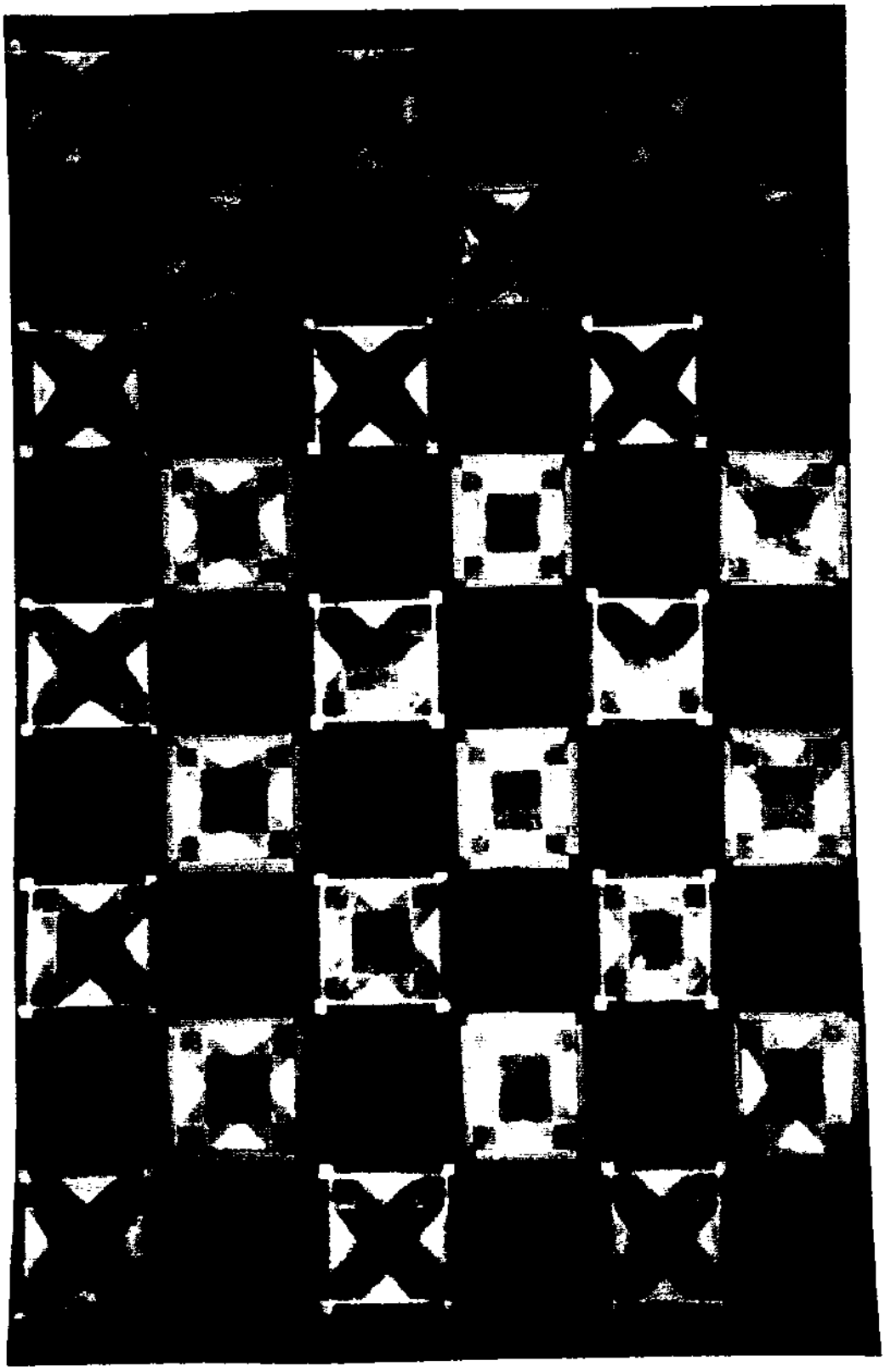

Figure 15: Woven Paper Quilt. 1989. Colored pencils on paper. 21 x 24".

find his use of brilliant colors and simple shapes so intriguing. Patterning, borders and organic shapes were models to emulate. Other influences of well-known artists include: Paul Klee's graduations of color, the abstractions of Kandinsky, and the rich tropical compositions of Gauguin and Rousseau. All of these artist have been an inspiration to me as well as to my students.

Ken Done's decorative work on fabric has also helped develop my style of painting. His use of bold brilliant splashes of vibrant color is combined with his rich images of sail boats, flora, and animal life on the continent of Australia. His tropical scenes of native life are painted or printed on umbrellas, T-shirts, jackets, dresses, handbags and swimsuits. Ken Done's motifs come from the continent of Australia, the Great Barrier Reef, and Sydney Harbor.

Learning more about Australia's rich culture led to a fascination with aboriginal art. The "Dreamtime" paintings provided new images and meaning with their concentric circle landscapes, dot paintings and figures of mythological animals. While these symbols may appear simple, they are complex. Their use in

I have derived much meaning and inspiration by using symbols in my art. Symbols or totems are used to explain and to reinforce many aspects of life, even the inexplicable. These extensions of thought stretch beyond time and space in an abstract manner. My use of line represents the movement of grace and beauty. Spirals reveal energy while triangles symbolize the eternal that generates the power of creation.

Looking at different cultures and their arts led to a discovery of the ancient art of petroglyphs and pictographs. The artists simplified animal and plant drawings to their purest forms. Traveling to the Four Corners area in the American Southwest introduced me to the discovery of picture writing. Petroglyphs are incised rock carvings while pictographs are painted images on rock walls or on pottery. Red ocher colors are made from the earth in the surrounding environment. While hiking at Bandelier National Monument, I examined these amazing symbols. Sacred ceremonial sites remain preserved for Native American celebrations. As a modern artist I have found much inspiration from the pureness of Indian

art. I plan to research further the rich sources of material made by the Native American Indians such as Kachina dolls of the Hopi and Zuni Tribes, and the totem poles of the Northwest Coastal Indians.

I have taken the opportunity to use children's books and illustrations as a source creating while teaching art. I have shared stories with students from a variety of books ranging from African tales to pop-up dinosaur books. The use of story telling as a means of a self-expression will enhance my art classes. My aim is to help students develop these skills by acting out stories. Illustrating children's books is one avenue that could express my artistic style.

> When I see, I remember.
> When I hear, I forget.
> When I do, I remember.
> Chinese Proverb (Leland,72).

MEDIA SPECIALIZATION

During my graduate studies, many types of media have been explored to express my emotions and images. By combining different media I have been able to apply past knowledge and skills to new images of interest.

In using a palette of specific colors, I investigated the effect of tint and shade combinations and the use of warm and cool hues. My line quality fluctuates from straight and angular to curvilinear. The forms may take either organic or geometric shapes. Some areas are opaque, flat surfaces while others are modeled and eloquently curved in appearance.

My subject matter begins with a deep love and respect for nature. Looking at the orchids at an exhibit at the Missouri Botanical Garden, I was able to make drawings of the shapes by using charcoal. Sketching the flowing curves of each delicate petal or leaf was a joy. Looking at the whole grouping of flowers or at a close-up section, I was able to take the flower apart in my mind. Through this experience, I put the flower back together with my own feelings. My intent was not to directly copy the blossom as much as it was to incorporate the emotions and sensations experienced while painting. Once the image was sketched, the choice of color combinations directly accentuated the essence of each flower. There is a gentleness and openness to the composition as the flowers run off the edges of the canvas. The viewer has no focal point, thus allowing the eye to move about the canvas freely. Yet the three-panel orchid compo-

composition permitted the loose and spontaneous brush strokes that express growth patterns of the flower. Centering on the clusters of the cynbidium orchids with their graceful arching shapes and long pendant tapered green leaves resulted in flowing movement throughout the composition (Figure 16, Three Panel Orchid). The repetition of the orchid motif allowed the flower to be seen in all stages of growth. The elevated emotional reaction I felt while painting the orchids is much the same feeling as listening to rhythmic music. Listening to Mozart while painting helped me feel the shapes as the paint is pushed and pulled. Concave and convex areas of light and shadow were created in much the same way. The solid magenta background helped to give focus to the shapes of the orchids. The orchid panels illustrate the grouping of paintings that relate together. My intent is to continue this use of panels, but using a lighter weight particle board for a more delicate treatment. By using this material, the cutting of interesting shapes could easily reveal the shapes of the subject.

The series of four paintings which combines the quilt background and orchid motifs represent my strongest images; in this set, I learned to plan the composition very effectively. In using the quilt

Figure 18: Three Panel Orchid. 1988. Oil on canvas. 53 x 79".

design as a background, the orchids were symmetrically placed in the middle of the composition. The petals and leaves were allowed to run out beyond the borders. The Andrews Academy Orchid Panel (Figure 17) is another example; it was a gift to the school in return for the years of education I enjoyed. This flashy Polirara (living on a tree) orchid is distinguished by its overwhelming beauty of color and form. The cool colors of this quilt designs contrasts with the warm pink and magenta flowers.

Symbols of fish and reptiles led to the discovery of still other spacial relations. The fish motifs fit symmetrically into the quilt squares (Figure 18, Repeating Fish Motif). Layers of acrylic paint captured the abstract patterns and brilliant hues of each fish. For me, the fish is a symbol of the ultimate design and beauty of nature.

The planning of each composition is as important as the final result. Many experimental sketches were made to obtain the best possible arrangement. The desired sketch was transferred and enlarged on the canvas with charcoal or pencil. Once basic lines were laid out, the painting process took over in

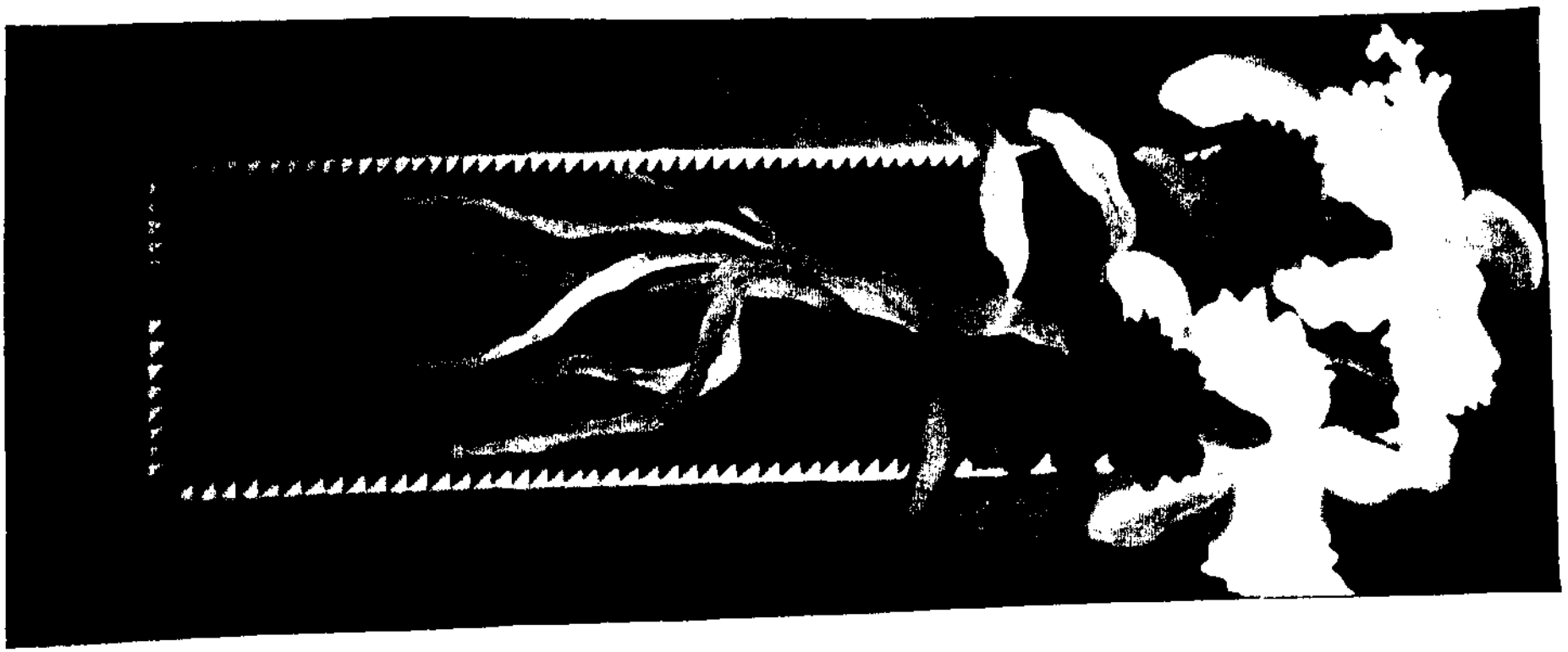

Figure 17: Andrews Academy Orchid. 1988. Oil and Acrylic on canvas. 20 x 46".

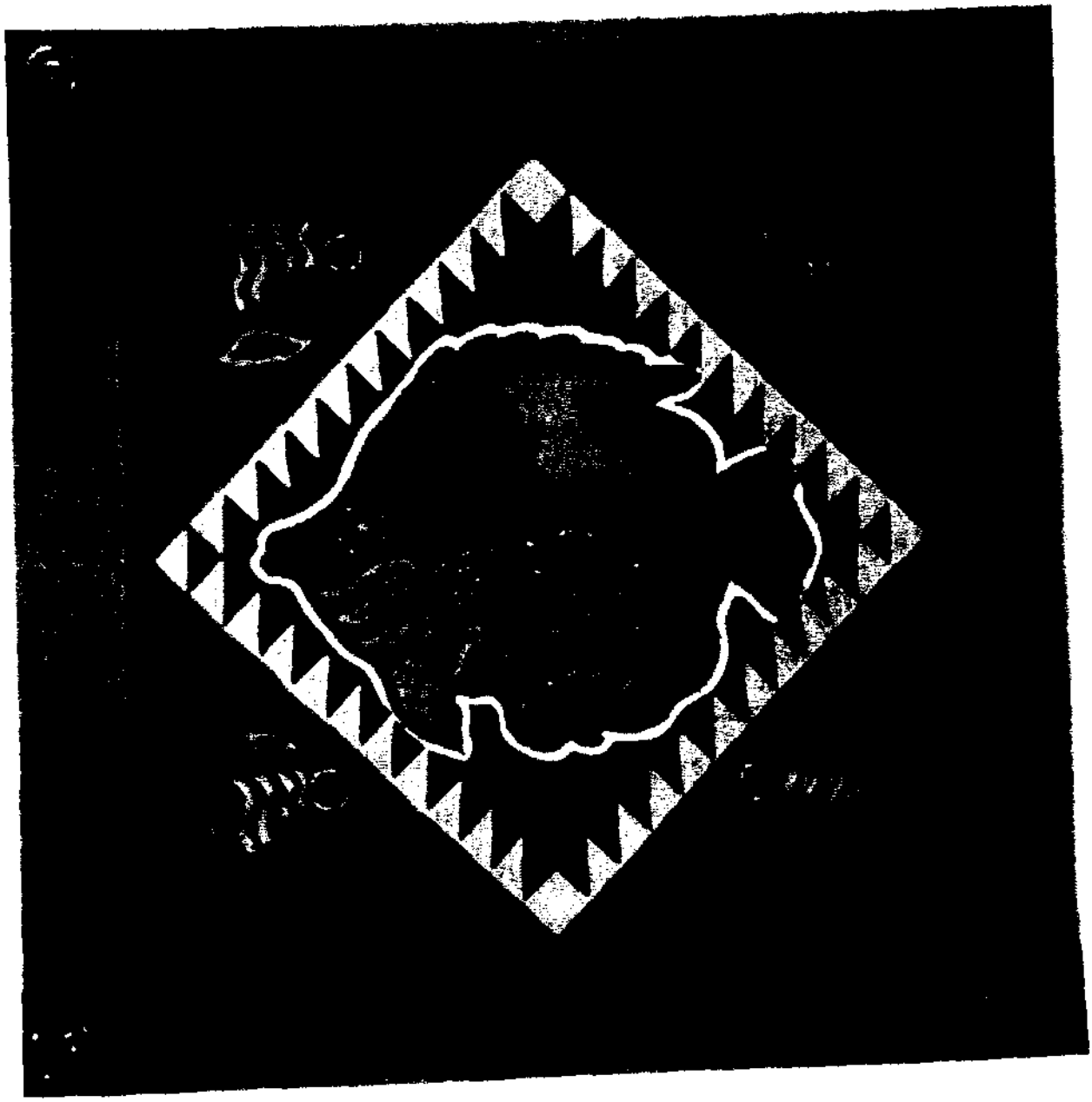

Figure 18: Repeating Fish Motif. 1989. Acrylic on canvas. 44 x 44".

often developed as the paint was applied with the forms. Geometric shapes of triangles and squares joined with curved lines to create balance and unity in the painting.

The defined areas of colors enabled the painting and drawing to acquire simplicity and directness. Color treatment and placement reflected a strong sense of color theory and the elements of design. Warm colors of pinks and magentas resulted in visual vibrations of energetic movement. The cool colors of blue and turquoise are calm and allow an area for the eye to rest. This can be seen in my fish compositions Paper Fish. (Figure 19). The Kissing Lizards painting (Figure 20), on the other hand, presents a visual tension in which the colors appear to jump out of the composition. The use of oils paints creates many areas of contrast by using light and shade within the fluid forms. The use of a limited palette and specific color combinations has helped in refining my work.

Symbols and colors again extended into my clay work, allowing for the decoration of a three-dimensional surface. While the process of actually forming the

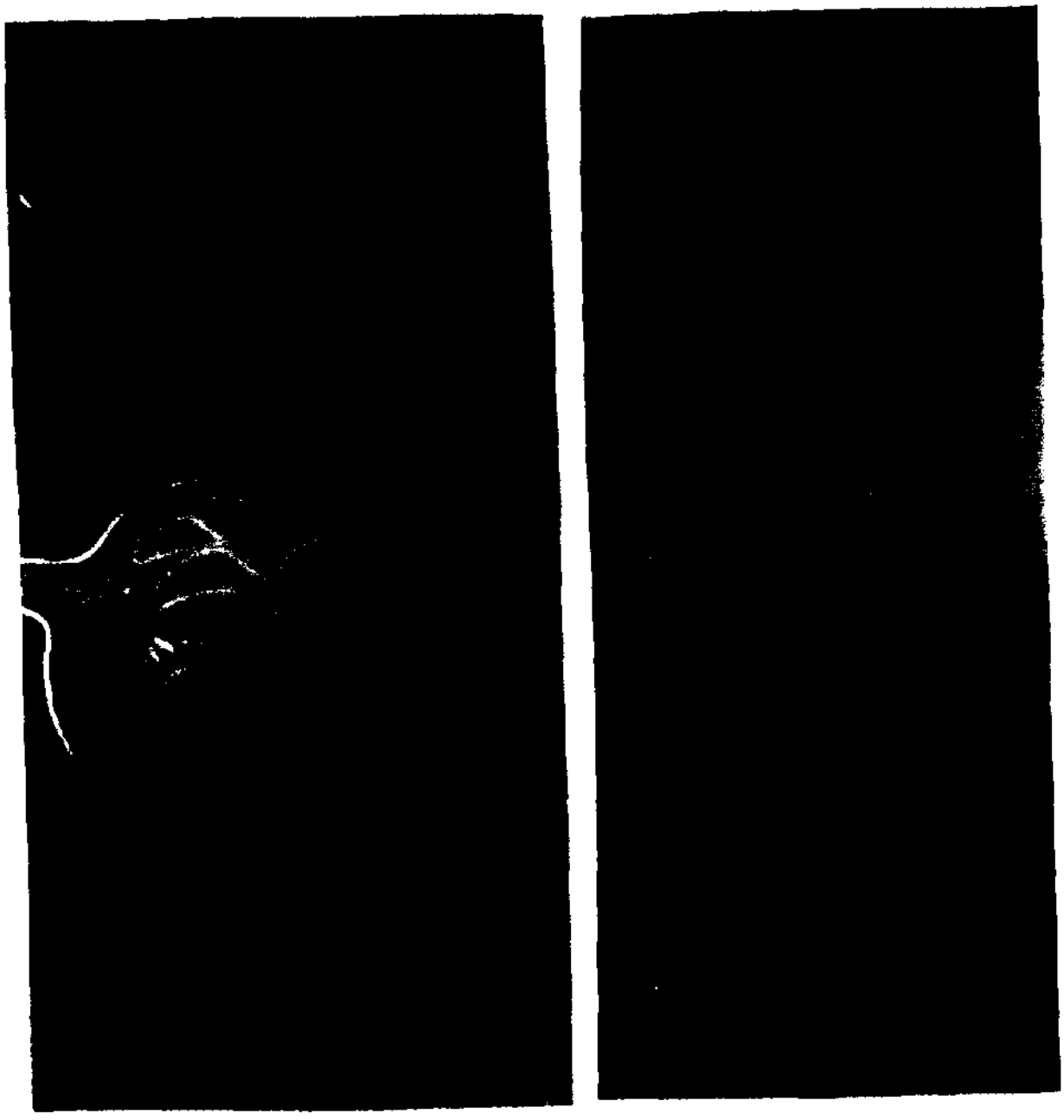

Figure 19: Paper Fish. 1990. Layered Paper. 16 x 24".

Figure 20: Kissing Lizards. 1990. Acrylic on canvas. 22 x 78".

vessel on the pottery wheel was enjoyable, true satisfaction came from painting designs on the surface. The majority of there work are vases, plates, and bowls (Figure 21) Ceramic Bowls and Plates.

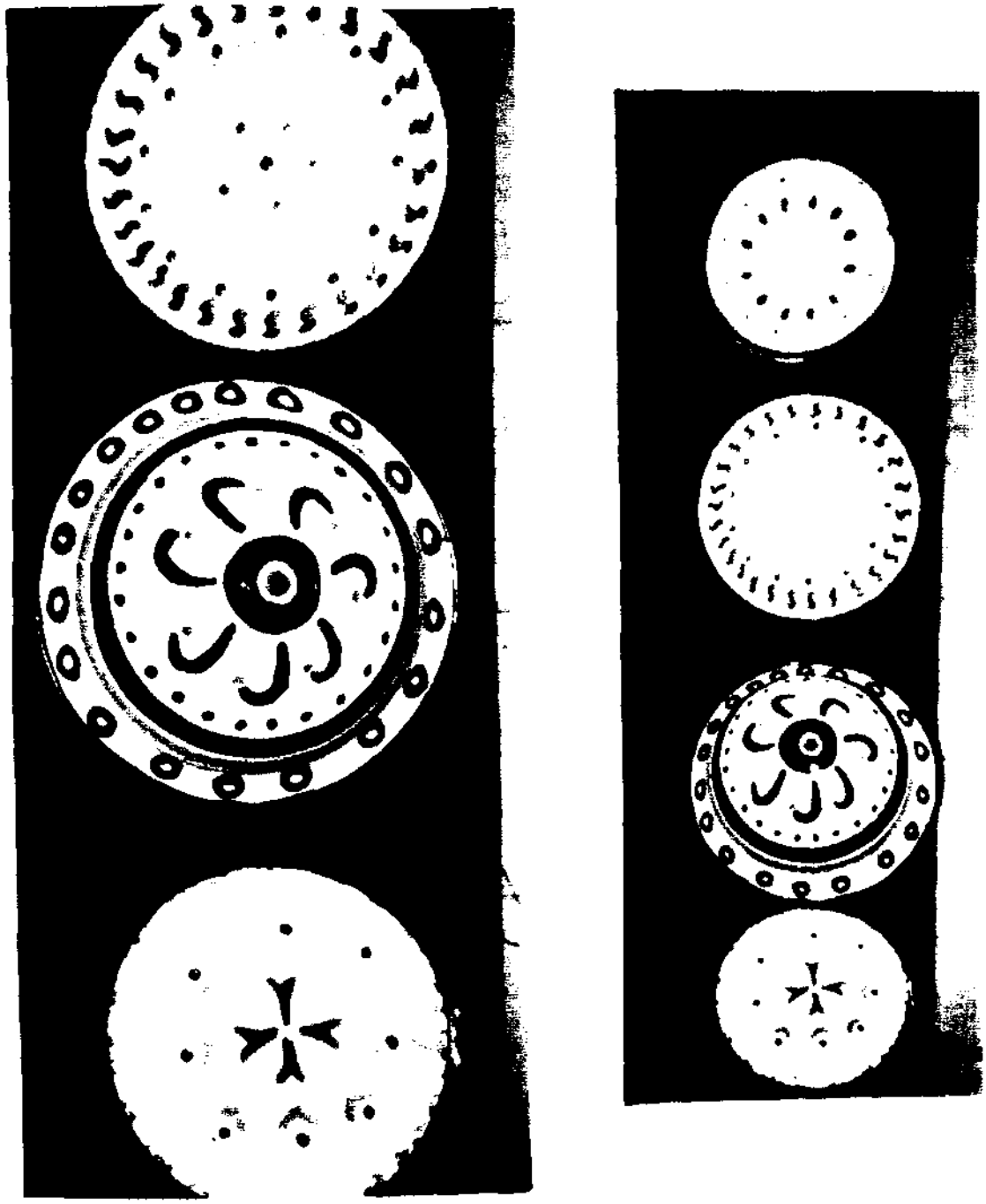

Figure 21: Ceramic Bowls and Plates. 1989. Clay painted with underglazes. 9 x 9".

CONCLUSION

I find that my current stylistic development continues to be stimulating and surprising. In the future I hope to continue to working in the media which I have recently explored. I anticipate to continue working regularly, always experimenting and discovering new methods, techniques and relationships in my work. The graduate show in September 1991 will help me gain the experience of planning an exhibit of my work. I hope this experience will give me the confidence to show my artistic endeavors at galleries in the future.

From a professional perspective, the continuation of teaching in the public school setting will still be very rewarding. The deep satisfaction I experience by teaching will continue my commitment to guide students through their development in art. As an exhibiting artist I will be a mentor and a resource person for those students interested in the visual arts. The following statement by Zoesephe Zinker expresses how I plan to approach my life as an artist: "Creativity is a celebration of one's grandeur, one's sense of making anything possible. Creativity is a celebration of my life! It is a bold statement: I am here, I love life. I love me! I can be anything.

here, I love life. I love me! I can be anything. I can do anything!" (Leland, 7).

I expect to enhance my appreciation of the world cultures through various travel experiences. Some of the experiences I look forward to include: a safari to Africa to study African sculptures and masks; visiting the ruins of the Inca city of Machu Picchu in Peru; travel to the San Blas Islands to learn the mola technique within its environment; exploring the tropical rain forest to help save endangered animal and plant life; and voyaging to New Guinea to study intricate carvings and masks designs.

Currently, a river rafting trip down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon is a must. I have recently received my certification in scuba diving. I will be able to experience the underwater world I've come to love through my paintings of tropical fish.

I wish to continue to work for the personal enjoyment and self-satifaction which is derived from the creative process. My most significant accomplishment is the renewal of my self-confidence and motivation that was reached through my studio work in the graduate program at Lindenwood College.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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