

Thesis

Contemporary Body Adornment
Influenced By Elizabethan, Victorian
and Tribal African Design

Submitted By:

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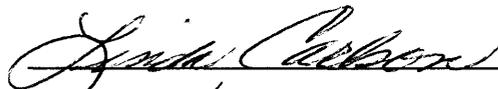
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Spring 2004

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

April 5, 2004

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY HILARY DOUGLASS ENTITLED CONTEMPORARY BODY ADORNMENT INFLUENCED BY ELIZABETHAN, VICTORIAN AND TRIBAL AFRICAN DESIGN BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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Abstract of Thesis

Contemporary Body Adornment Influenced By Elizabethan, Victorian and Tribal African Design

Body adornment is linked to a person's identity, a view of self, and how a person is viewed by others. Elizabethan and Victorian women's clothing addresses the issue of identity. Many of the ritual objects worn by some of the peoples of Africa are also strongly linked to the idea of self-identification.

My artwork has been influenced by the large-scale and dramatic presence of Elizabethan and Victorian women's attire, and by the beautiful objects of ornamentation created and worn by the peoples of Africa. Specifically, my work has been affected by the size and the visual dominance of tribal African and European adornment. The purpose of my large pieces is not to dominate, but rather to be a symbol of power and femininity of the wearer, thus enhancing their feeling of self-identity.

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My love of personal decoration begins with my fascination with process, technique, materials, repetition and how the four come together to create body adornment. Many cultures throughout the world express themselves through body ornamentation. Body decoration and fashion are among the most important of the arts and are what has inspired me as an artist. The series of pieces that I have designed and created have been influenced by the dramatic presence of Elizabethan and Victorian women's clothing, and by tribal African design and attire.

The art of body adornment is an ancient practice that today's jewelers have transformed into a modern art form. Art jewelry and body adornment play more than an aesthetic role in being beautiful. Throughout history, jewelry has performed many functions, utilitarian and spiritual. The art of adornment in itself has always been an art form.

Jewelry and body adornment have been a part of cultures for thousands of years. An object of adornment can possess great beauty and style and often display extraordinary craftsmanship. Worn by both men and women, jewelry is not merely for decoration. Body adornment has the power to speak of values, beliefs, status and achievements. These creations can also perform an important role in ceremonies, often serving as a means to honor ancestors and gods. Samburu women of east Africa mass strings of glass beads around the neck creating a visually striking display. Sometimes there can be up to sixty or more strings covering the entire neck from the chin down to well beyond the shoulders. The beaded necklaces are gifts from admirers inviting a proposal of

marriage (Fisher 35). During the Elizabethan era women used body adornment to express themselves, to express their social condition, and to express their status within their societies. The ruff, a symbol of the Elizabethan era, which was initially contained above or within the collar, began to extend far beyond the chin and shoulders. The collar became so large that it created a halo effect, giving the wearer a godly presence (Ribeiro 167-8).

Just as with jewelry, fashion is a site-specific art form that is designed exclusively for the human body. Fashion and art jewelry today utilize the human body as an exhibition space on which an object or objects can be displayed. In our daily life we may not think of our clothing and our personal items of adornment as public statements, but for people of African tribes and Europeans during the Elizabethan and Victorian eras, special pieces often held significance. For example, during the Elizabethan era, an open ruff identified the unmarried status of a young woman. The wearing of a pikuran, a belt made of multiple forged iron beads, by a young Kirdi woman of Africa represents her fertility (Fisher 138). What these women wore communicated important information about themselves relative to their societies. Today we still communicate information about ourselves by our adornment. This information may not be perceived by today's public as holding as much significance, but contemporary body adornment still projects important information about the wearer. The body acts as a physical billboard advertising a private statement in the public arena. Thus, by wearing body adornment a woman can make an effective personal statement communicating how she feels or what she thinks about herself within

her society. The wearer is confident in herself and her artistic statement (Lucie-Smith 24).

The people of Africa use the body as a traditional painter uses a canvas to produce art. Body adornment and decoration is an unspoken language or code that is expressed through jewelry, clothing, hairstyles, and the painting and manipulation of the body. The art of body adornment is a direct reflection of tradition, as seen with the Samburu beaded collars. My rings and hand pieces are strongly influenced by this concept of using the body as a canvas. My hand pieces are large and obscure. I intentionally let the distinction become blurred among functional, sculptural, or ornamental categories.

Some of my rings and hand pieces are ornamental and sculptural while also serving to function as containers. African wearable containers fascinate me because the boundaries of an object are successfully blurred. When learning about African body adornment I began to see that this adornment often served multiple purposes. For example, a forged ring worn by a warrior is viewed as a symbol of strength, but is also utilized as a defensive weapon. While my rings and hand pieces may not function with the same capacity as those that served as weapons, they are capable of serving as functional containers to hold something small and precious. Not only is the concept of the container derived from African body adornment, but the shapes and forms are as well. The design and fluidity of my three forged copper and silver hand pieces (Figs. 1-3) are directly related to the objects worn on the wrists and hands of the Pokot and Maasai warriors of eastern Africa (Fisher 63). The body ornaments created by the Pokot and

Maasai are beautifully large and prominent. The body adornments of these east African warriors convey both power and strength. These African pieces are well executed, as well as being multi-functional. Each piece has its practical value as well as being aesthetically pleasing. These African pieces also have a beauty and domestic value that influence my work.

The ring forms and container rings (Figs. 4-8) show a relationship with each other through their forms and shapes. The African influences are not as apparent in these pieces, but are there in more subtle forms. My rings and hand pieces are a series of sculptural shapes and forms that are wearable, yet these are my most practical pieces of adornment.

I feel that large-scale art jewelry is in better proportion to the human form with its contours, shapes, and movements. The large-scale dramatic presence of Elizabethan fashion is another important aspect influencing my artwork. When I study Elizabethan women's clothing I am inspired by the size and dominant expression given to the wearer. Although the large scale of these Elizabethan articles influences me, the purpose of my large pieces is not to visually dominate but rather to empower the wearer and make them feel beautiful, feminine, and important. I see my jewelry more as an extension of the human form and not just an accessory. Scale is important because I feel that small jewelry does not create as strong a relationship with the human body. For example, a relatively small brooch that may be two or three inches wide may seem rather large to some. Actually, relative to the size of the shoulders, breasts, waist, neck, and head this brooch may seem small and insignificant. Wearing an enormous

Elizabethan collar or large art jewelry encourages both the wearer and the viewer to acknowledge the piece in its relationship to the human form.

Elizabethan fashion showcased a high collar, a stiff bodice, and a full skirt. The femininity and the sense of royalty evoked by these garments gave the women the feeling of nobility that I intend in both of my collar pieces (Fig. 9-10). In the five *Box Brooches* (Fig. 11), which fit on the collarbone in a fanlike manner, I encourage a feeling for the wearer of their own strength and beauty.

The piece *Water* (Fig. 12) also presents itself as a collar, but the inspiration had a different source. The inspiration behind this piece is derived from West Africa's Mami Wata spirit. This mermaid type woman, depicted with a serpent around her neck, is said to reside in rivers and lakes and to bestow her riches upon those who present offerings. The images of the Mami Wata spirit show a woman of great beauty and power. It is my intention that when wearing the piece *Water*, a spiritual power is conveyed.

The six *Scarf* pieces (Figs. 13-18) were inspired by women's fashions of the Victorian era. I was captivated by catalogue images of women in winter coats, hats, gloves, and scarves from this historical period. The motif of the wind blown scarf moving around the body evolved from studying these wintry images. The *Scarf* pieces attempt to define the relationship between the movement seen in the fabric of the scarf and the human body form. These *Scarfs* also attempt to capture a moment in time standing still. The metal components used to create the *Scarf* pieces help to express this still quality. The *Scarf* pieces resulted from sewing metal and fabric together to soften the hard surface of the metal. Metals,

fabrics, threads and plastics come together to create these pieces. I see my *Scarf* pieces as wearable sculptures that create images of movement with neither fixed beginning nor end points.

Renew and Mountains (Figs. 19-20) are also inspired by designs and motifs of African ornamentation. These elongated pod-like pieces are signs of fertility. Kirdi women of the Mandara Mountain region wear a belt constructed using similar shapes (Fischer 138). The neckpiece and eight brooches have a seductive quality with their multiple appendages and refined surfaces. The long, slender, multiple appendages seem to tap and sway in a rhythmic motion that draws both the viewer and the wearer into the piece. *Renew and Mountains* have the ability to transform the wearer's self-image, creating an intimacy when in contact with the wearer, allowing the forms against the body to feel both fluid and natural.

To create adornment for the body, one must pay strict attention to detail, love construction, be knowledgeable of and have an appreciation for culture and history. The dramatic presence of Elizabethan and Victorian women's clothing, along with the body adornment of tribal Africa, has been a great inspiration to me. My love for materials, repetition, and my fascination with personal decoration come together to create pieces of body adornment that have the power to transform an individual's outer physical appearance as well as their inner human spirit. As a result, my intention has been to create a series of pieces that become a symbol of personal power and femininity. Jewelry has become a way for me to express myself intimately, as well as being a means to

help the wearer release and fantasize about their lives, their world, and themselves, thus elevating all of us to a more desirable, emotional, and spiritual level.

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Fig. 1
Container Ring 1

forged and fabricated
copper and silver
4 in. x 2 in. x 1½ in.



Fig. 2
Container Ring 2

forged copper, silver,
copper screen, thread
5 in. x 1½ in. x 1½ in.



Fig. 3
Fore-Finger Ring

forged copper and
silver
3 in. x 2 in. x 1 in.



Fig. 4
Computer Chip Ring

silver, 10 kt. gold,
computer chip,
garnets
1¼ in. x 1½ in. x 1 in.

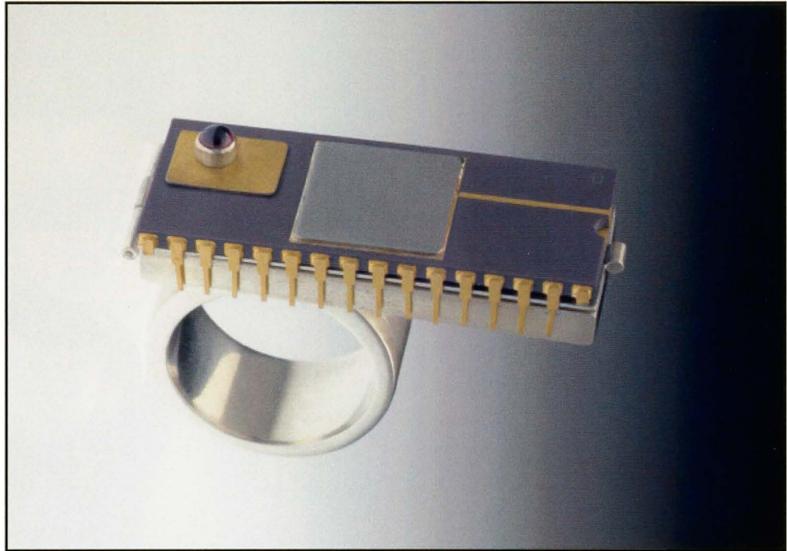


Fig. 5
Container Ring 3

fabricated mild steel
and silver
6 in. x 1 in. x 2 in.

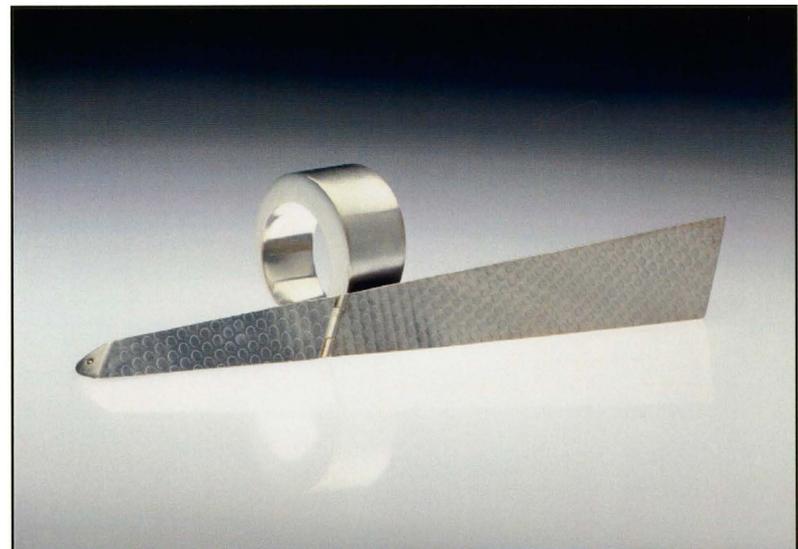


Fig. 6
Cone Ring

Fabricated silver
4 in. x 2 in.



Fig. 7
Copper Cone Ring
fabricated copper and
silver
3 in. x 3 in. x 4 in.



Fig. 8
Box Ring
fabricated silver and
mild steel
4 in. x 2 in. x 1½ in.

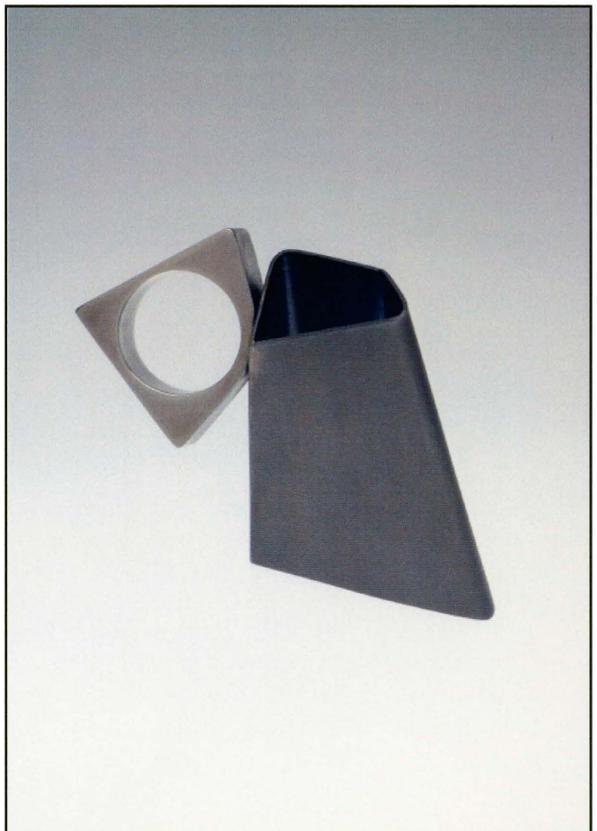


Fig. 9
Blue Collar

formed and fabricated
aluminum, anodized
18 in. x 10 in. x 12 in.

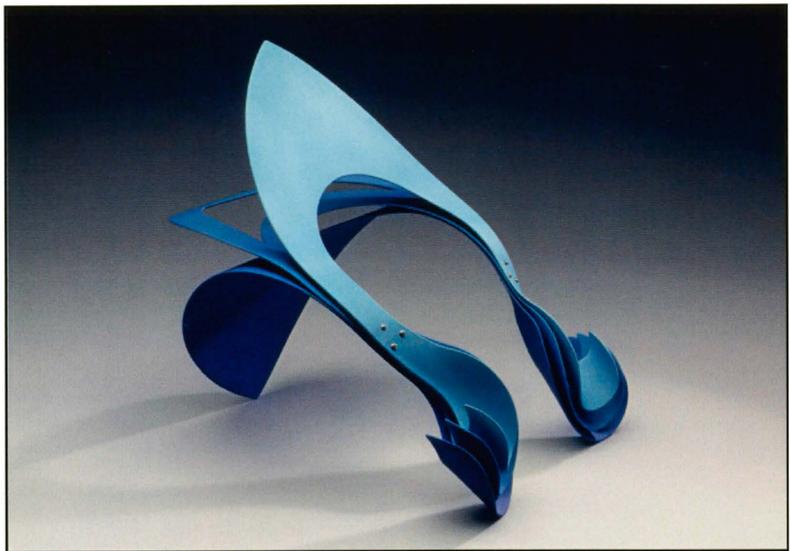


Fig. 10
Brown Collar

fabricated mild steel
18 in. x 18 in. x 1¼ in.

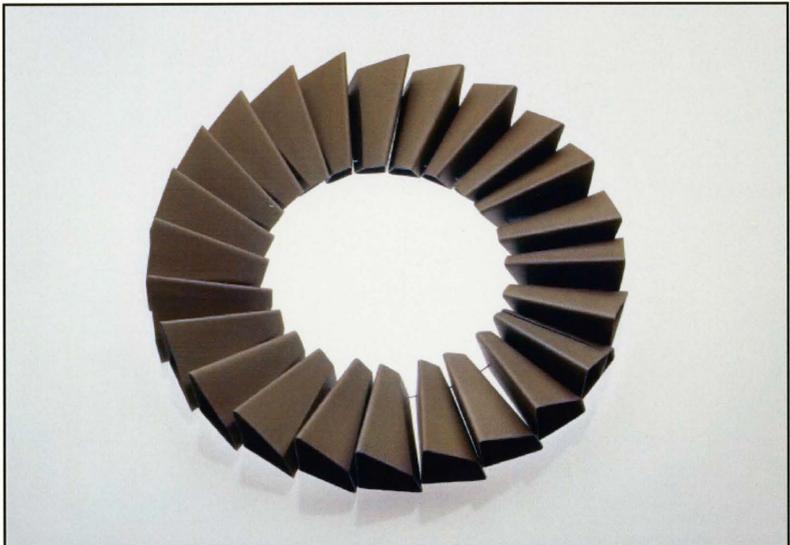


Fig. 11
Box Brooches

fabricated copper and
silver
4 in. x 1½ in. x 1½ in.

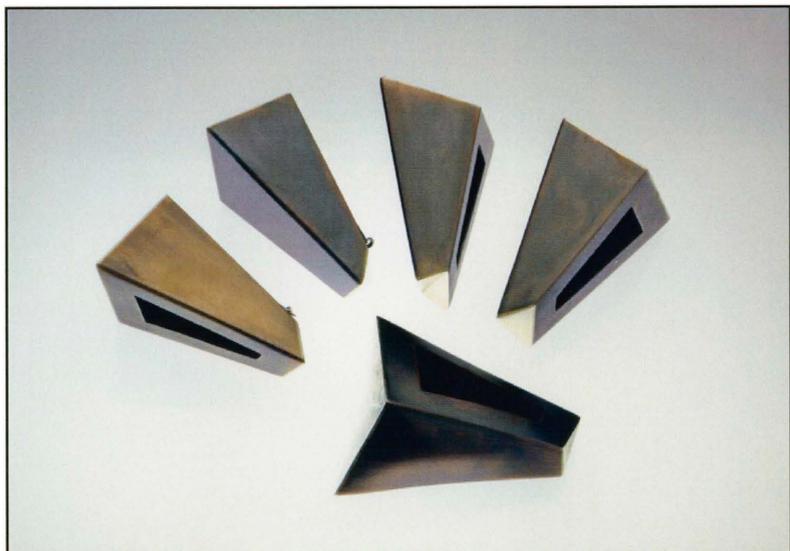


Fig. 12
Water

aluminum, plastic and
steel
18 in. x 16 in. x 3 in.



Fig. 13
Scarf 1

mild steel, silver,
stainless steel screen
and copper wire
9 in. x 9 in. x 2 in.

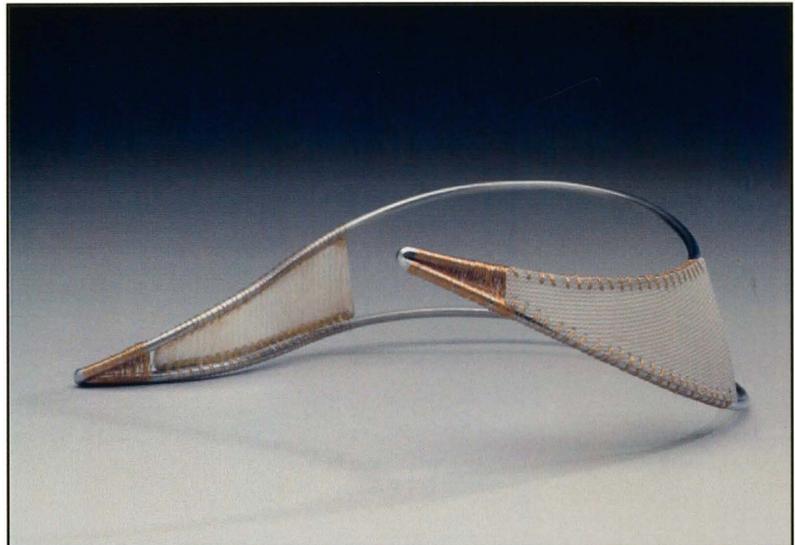


Fig. 14
Scarf 2

mild steel, aluminum,
fabric and thread
22 in. x 11 in. x 3 in.



Fig. 15
Scarf 3

mild steel, aluminum
and niobium
26 in. x 12 in. x 4 in.

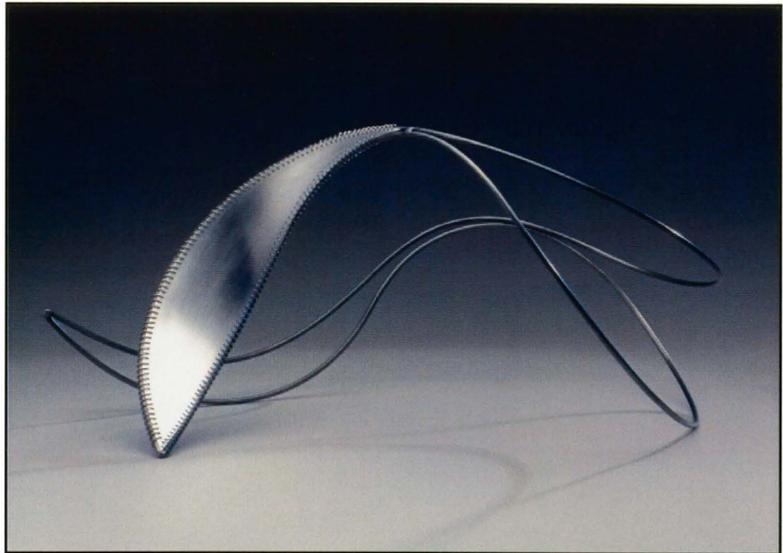


Fig. 16
Scarf 4

mild steel, stainless
steel, plastic, copper
and silver
24 in. x 24 in. x 4 in.

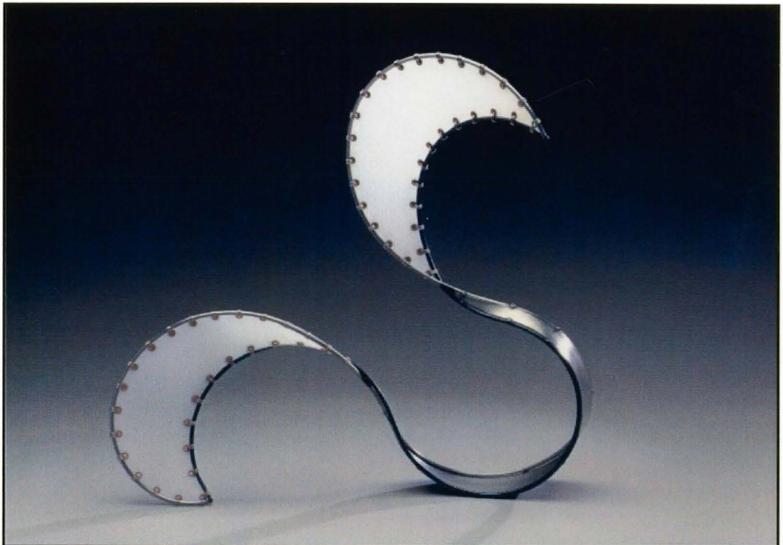


Fig. 17
Scarf 5

mild steel, stainless
steel, silver and
rubber
24 in. x 18 in. x 3 in.



Fig. 18
Scarf 6
stainless steel and
titanium
20 in. x 10 in. x 8 in.



Fig. 19
Renew
forged and fabricated
copper and silver
23 in. x 13 in. x ½ in.

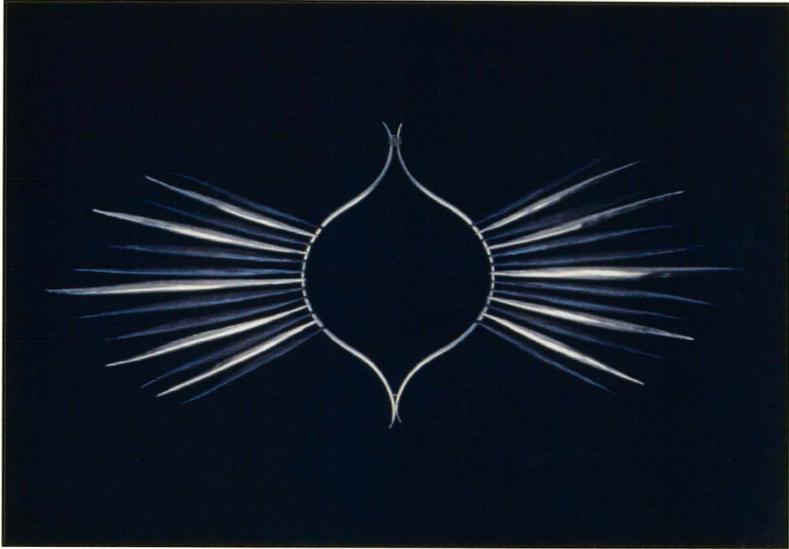


Fig. 20
Mountains
formed and fabricated
copper and fine silver
6 in. x 5 in. x ¼ in.

