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Clay Chairs

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CLAY CHAIRS

by

Lawrence Michael Brow

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 1989

Thesis supervisor: Professor Bunny A. McBride

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Lawrence Michael Brow

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art at the May 1989 graduation.

Thesis committee: _____
Thesis supervisor

_____
Member

_____
Member

_____
Member

_____
Member

To persistence, and its rewards.

Things are not difficult to accomplish.
What is difficult is to prepare ourselves to do them.

Constantin Brancusi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Professor Bunny McBride, Professor Charles Hindes, Dr. Wallace Tomasini, Professor Julius Schmidt, and Visiting Assistant Professor David Jokinen. I also owe a debt of thanks to Professors Chunghi Choo and Marilyn Zurmuehlen for being so unexpectedly encouraging and to my fellow graduate students for being such good companions.

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I make clay chairs. Life-sized, functional, comfortable clay chairs. I make them to combine the issues of sculpture and the now alienated and devalued issues of traditional pottery.

I have been reluctant to write about my work, and the chairs in particular, because I know how powerful words are, and how premature it is for me to issue manifestoes or lectures on the appropriate nature of art. However, the requirement of the written thesis forces me to act now, and perhaps that is for the best.

There are three major faults with art as I find it today. The first, and most obvious, is the domination of the visual image. Television, film, photographs, and slides have combined to persuade us that "seeing is believing" and that if we can just get a good picture of the problem, we can solve it. As a functional potter, I know all too well just how inadequate pictures are in conveying the weight, balance, texture, and design of an object.

Even the visually flawless holograms of the future can not describe the feel of a mug in your hand, its touch to your lips, the transmission of heat through its walls, or the flow of its contents as you tip it back to drink. These are the only issues which differentiate a good mug from a bad mug. No amount of surface design and decoration will matter in the least when you close your eyes to savor the coffee.

Slides, too, limit the viewer to the one "best" view, and notoriously distort the true scale of the object. We are necessarily distanced from the true nature of the object and our true

relationship to it.

In fairness, slides have allowed artists today to observe thousands of years worth of artifacts and cultural history. By preserving our treasures photographically and behind museums' DO NOT TOUCH signs, millions of people have been able to share, in some small way, the aesthetic pleasures these objects provide.

Unfortunately, this has lead to a second tyranny, the domination of the history of art. At no time in the past have so many historical movements, aesthetic theories, philosophies, and objects co-existed to influence and subvert the artist. To seek absolutely virgin territory becomes an obsessive impossibility and the culture of the "new" must settle for "new" rhetoric in support of the current variations on past examples. Many artists simply immerse themselves in the past and the near past, and the language of art, producing an art for the art intelligentsia which is purely literary in its mingling of allusions and metaphors.

This self-referential class of art threatens the destruction of public support for all art because it stupidly excludes the public and then insults it for being uninformed. These are the merchants who tell others what they ought to like, and ought to pay for, and ought to live with, and ought to drink their coffee from, even if it is painful, awkward, and unpleasant.

Clearly the past exists and each new artist's work exists within a framework of historical and contemporary connections.

But within this vast realm of "it's already been done" the artist still lives in a world of people dealing with the problems of today and tomorrow. Each artist must say, "there's nothing left to do but my own work," the problems I find for myself and the solutions I seek for those problems.

This leads to the third problem in art, the tyranny of self. I speak now of artists so full of themselves, their work, their genius, that the issues of politics, nature, society, and the public mean nothing to them. These are often artists who tout "process" and focus so narrowly on themselves in the god-like act of creation that the consequences, and results, of their activities mean nothing to them.

For some artists this is the only way to be artists. But again, this separates art from the lives of non-artists, and to the extent that it is offered to students as a philosophical solution, it is dangerous.

The public <u>does</u> matter. How the public interacts with your finished work does matter. And the effect your work has on the lives of others, publicly and privately, is the only opportunity art has for improving conditions in the world around us. Surrendering the opportunity to improve the world, for the suspect benefits of narcissistic self-absorption, is indefensible in a world which needs so much thoughtful action.

So, I make clay chairs.

They have several practical advantages. They are durable,

long-lasting, weather-proof (excepting large hail), and never need re-upholstering. They eliminate the distance between artist, art, and audience. Comfortable, sculptural, and thought-provoking, each chair is an individual, with all the ego that implies. Each give the weary a place to rest.

I enjoy making them. Each presents the sort of physical challenges which actually scare me, elevating my heart beat and respiration. I am forced to focus on the immediate physics of the clay without forgetting the needs of the future and my guests who will share the use of this object.

As I build it, layer by layer, rising from the floor (waiting for the right moment to add the next layer) I must imagine it in use, not just as I see it then, but after the shrinkage of drying and firing. Only after it has been bisque fired can I test my judgements by sitting, noticing then how it fits my body, the width of the hips, the curve of the back, the length of the legs, the arms, and so on. Each new chair then builds on my experience of the previous chairs.

It is a problem with an infinite number of solutions extending beyond the variations in human proportion and mood to the imagined proportions and tastes of fictional subjects. The Siege Perilous of Arthurian legend, perhaps, or the Thrones of Olympus and Valhalla. They are a challenge which suits me, and yet still serves others.

The chairs also quite plainly defy complete understanding through photography. To know and understand each chair you must

give up your personal doubts and "DO NOT TOUCH" training. You must sit. Only then can you begin to understand the piece. I can not prevent my work from being judged and dispersed photographically (nor do I want to), but it becomes much more obvious to any viewer that there are aspects to the experience of my art that they are missing. This should be realized with work of other artists, too, but often it is not and the picture becomes the sum total of the work.

The experience of my chairs is also not one of intellectual allusion to past chairs and philosophical rhetoric about the nature of reality. My chairs are real, similar to some past objects, completely unlike others. And though the process has been important to me, the joys and frustrations of its construction are part of my memory, evident in the shapes and surfaces of the chair, but never more important than the final product and its relationship to you. I want you to feel better because of my art.

Some may say that sitting comfortably is not the solution to any significant problem--not art.

To be comfortable is not the same as to be complacent. And sitting may not imply labor, but where we are, and how we feel about being there, is as close to a definition of "life" as many of us need. We are all "sitting" on the planet Earth and we need to do what we can to make it something we can feel better about.

Not all art needs to convey warmth and pleasure, but poking yourself in the eye never helped anything.

APPENDIX

The chairs illustrated (except the Mousehole Chair) were made with the following clay body and fired to about cone 7, unglazed.

Ochmulgee	100 lbs.
Goldart	50 lbs.
OM4 Ball Clay	50 lbs.
Custer Feldspar	30 lbs.
Silica	20 lbs.
"P" Grog	50 lbs.
Fiberglass fibers	a few ounces,

Using various wooden paddles, including one made from a two by four, and one found tossed up by the ocean in Oregon, I flattened round coils of clay on a cloth-covered table. These strips were usually 4-6 inches wide and 3/4 of an inch thick. As the lower parts of the chair stiffened, a new strip would be added, blended into the clay below (the top inch of which had been kept moist under plastic) and paddled further to reduce its thickness (down to half an inch) and to obscure the joint. For over-hanging and arched areas temporary supports were used until the clay was stiff enough to support itself.

Each chair base (leg) is domed slightly to prevent cracking and each chair has some sort of opening designed to allow air to leave the interior of the chair yet prevent moisture (rain, snow) from entering the piece.

Early chairs were glazed, originally fired to cone 9. Later, I used a cone 4 wollastonite glaze. The thesis piece is unglazed to

allow the colors of the clay body to reveal themselves and to avoid obscuring the marks of the paddles.

Each chair is completely hollow, yet very strong. Aside from traumatic concussion, persistence vibrations, or the expansion of freezing water, nothing should be able to destroy these chairs. These chairs are stable, however, if additional security is needed, sand can be poured into the chair and allowed to settle in the base, effectively lowering the chair's center of gravity.

As I prepare to leave the University, I do not know when, or if, I will be able to continue this work. I am nonetheless grateful to those who allowed me to begin it, and as curious as any others to see what comes next.

Figure 1. Chair with Mousehole (1988)

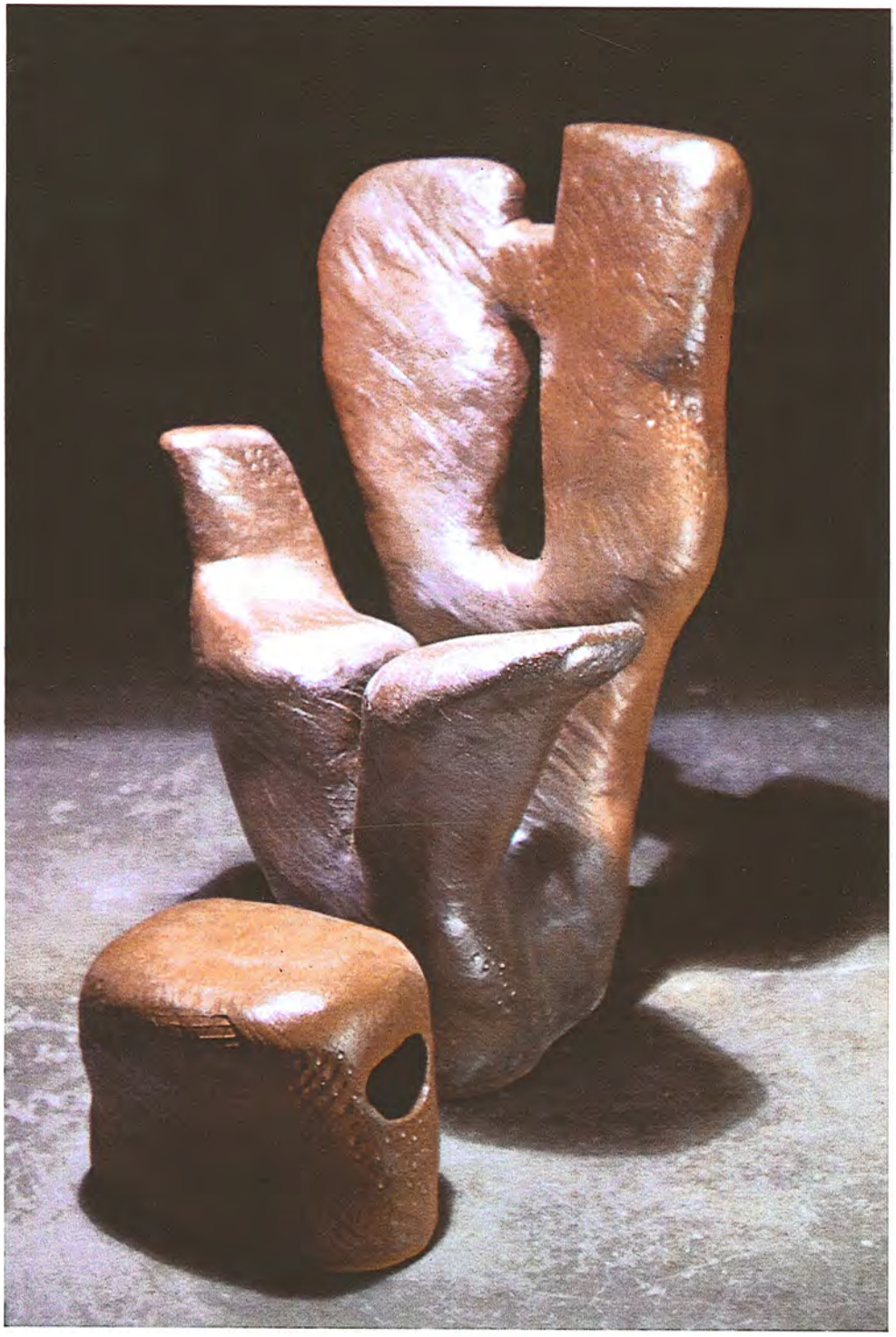

Figure 2. Wing Bottomed Chair with Foot Stool

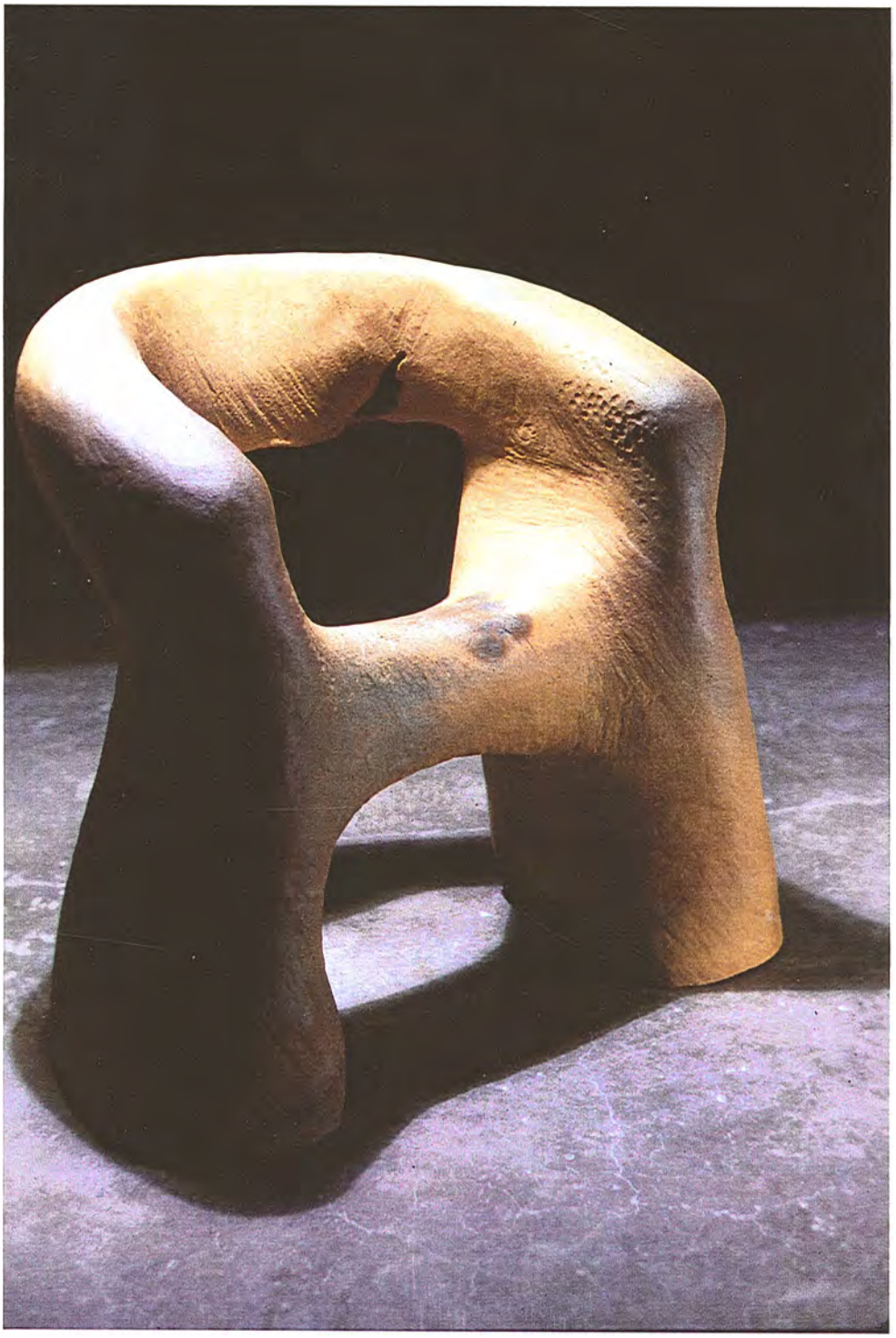

Figure 3. Two-Legged Chair (studio thesis piece)

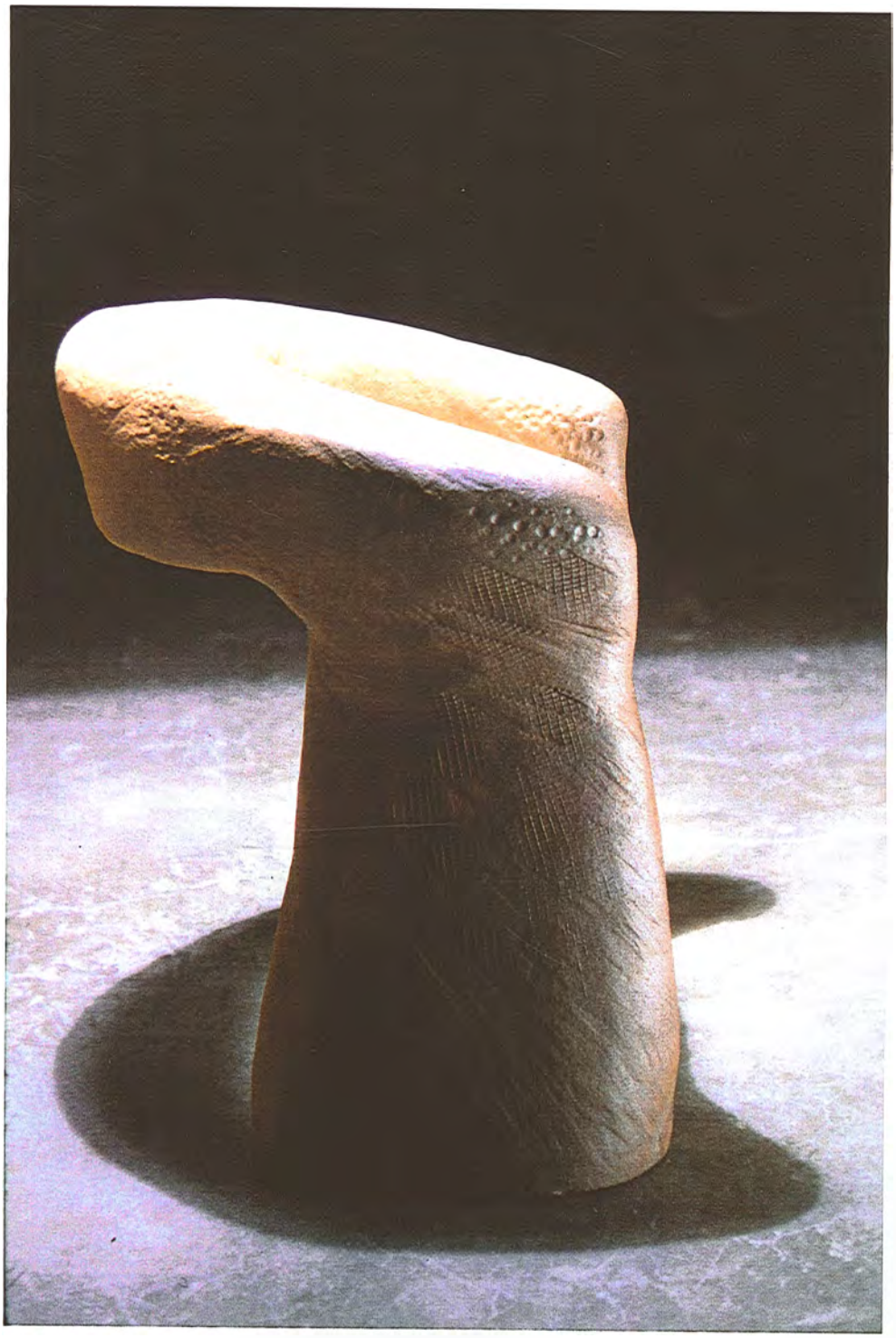

Figure 4. Side View of Two-Legged Chair

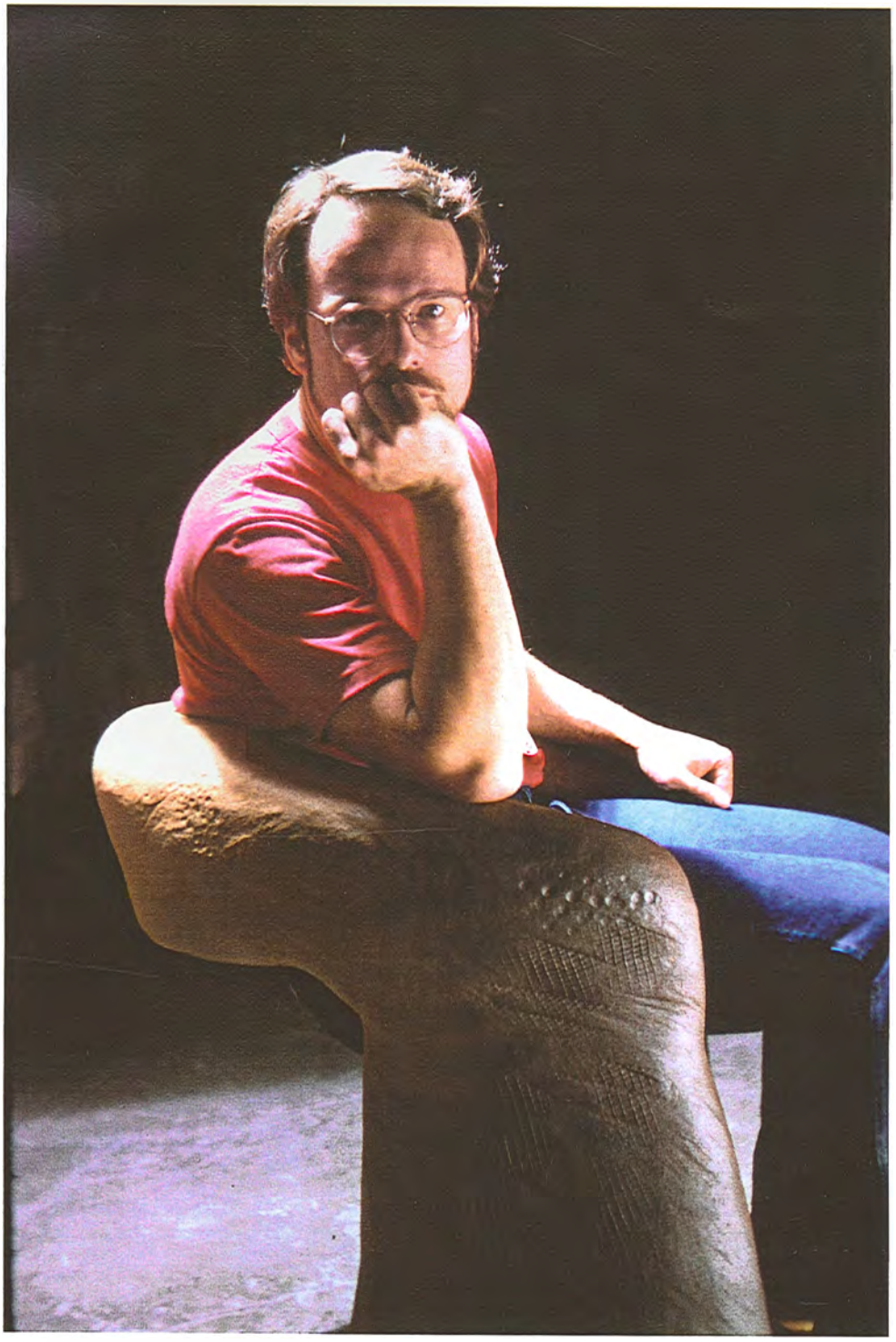

Figure 5. Artist with Chair

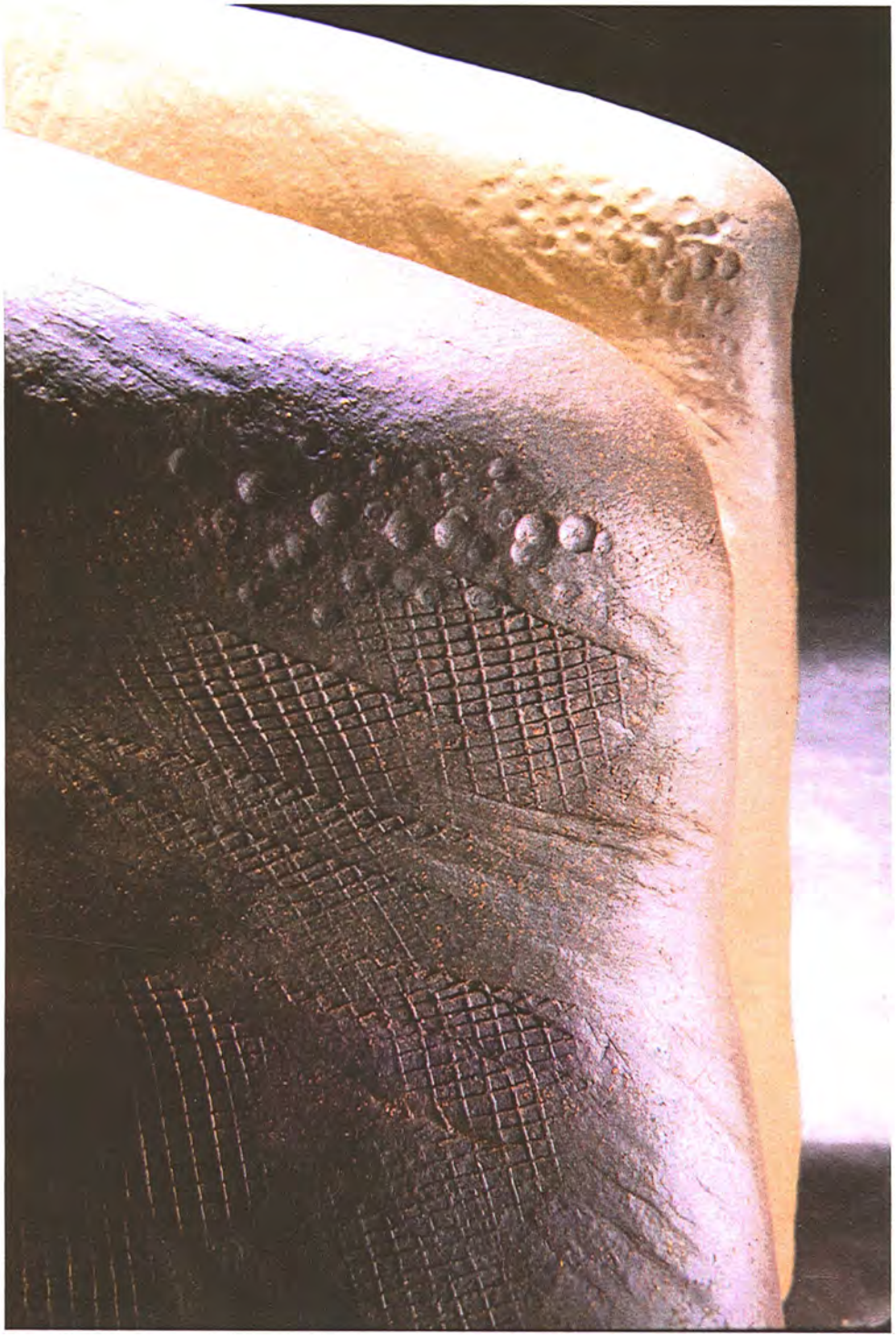

Figure 6. Detail of Two-Legged Chair

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