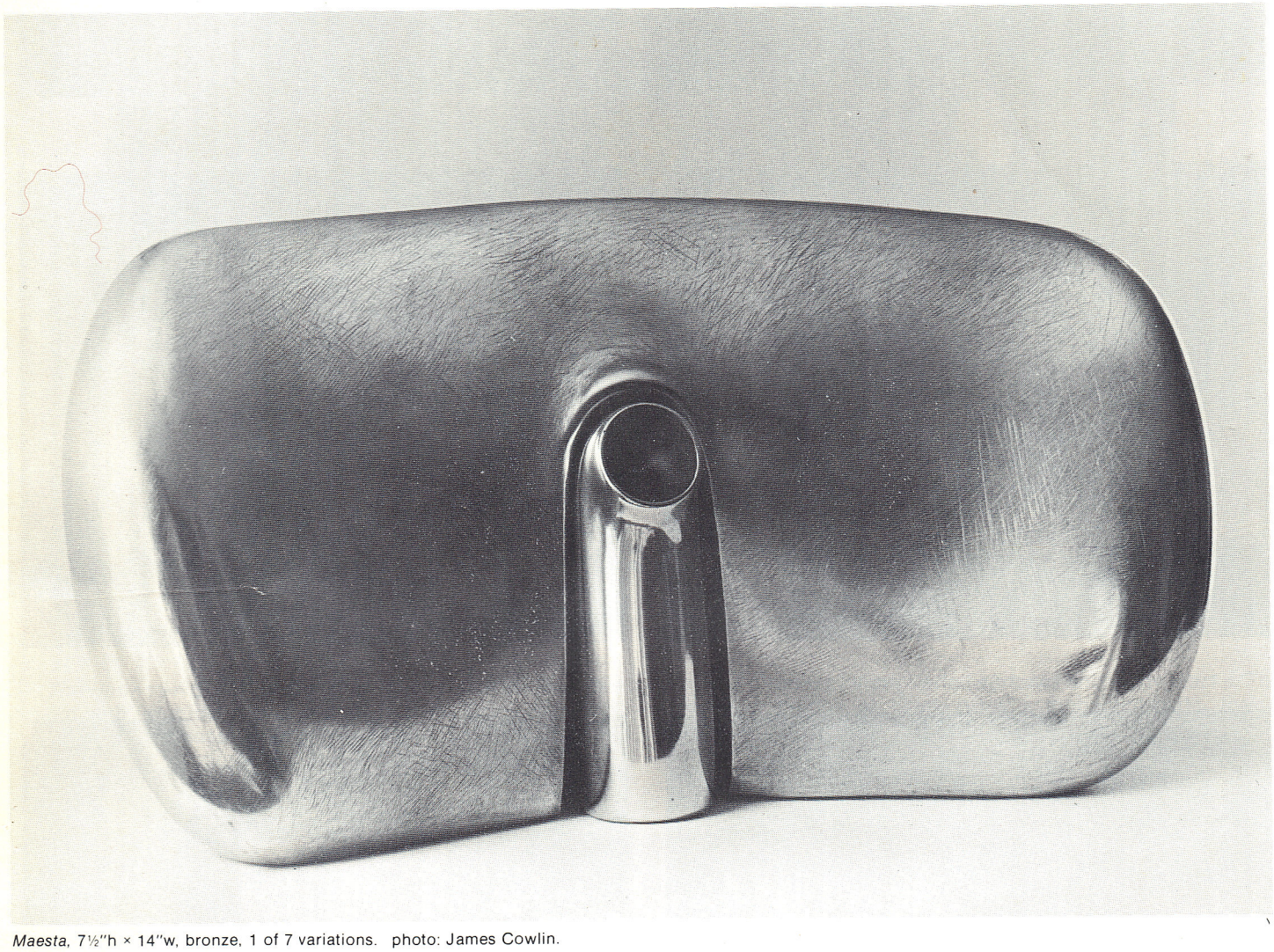
DONALD LOCKE



Maesta, 7½"h × 14"w, bronze, 1 of 7 variations. photo: James Cowlin.

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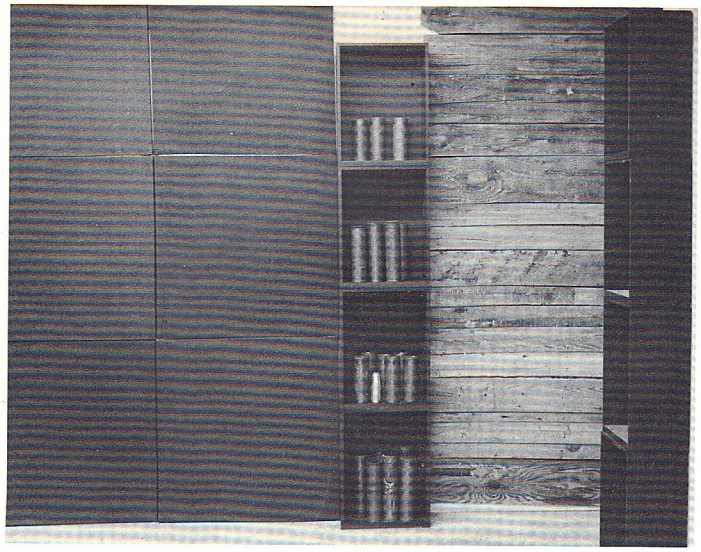
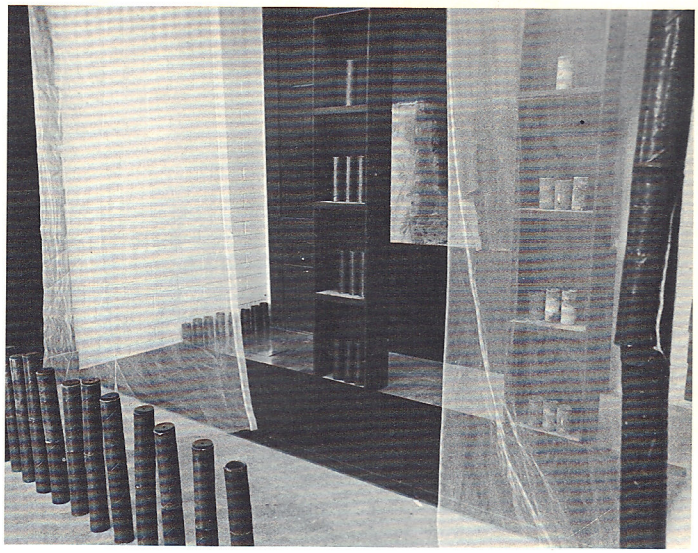
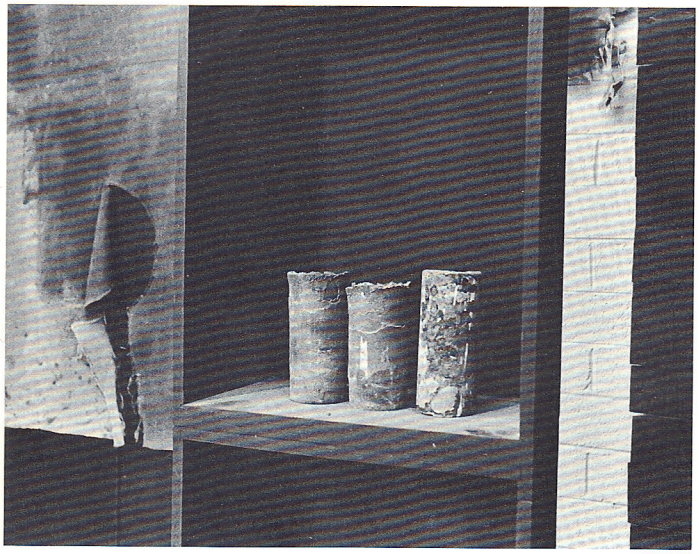
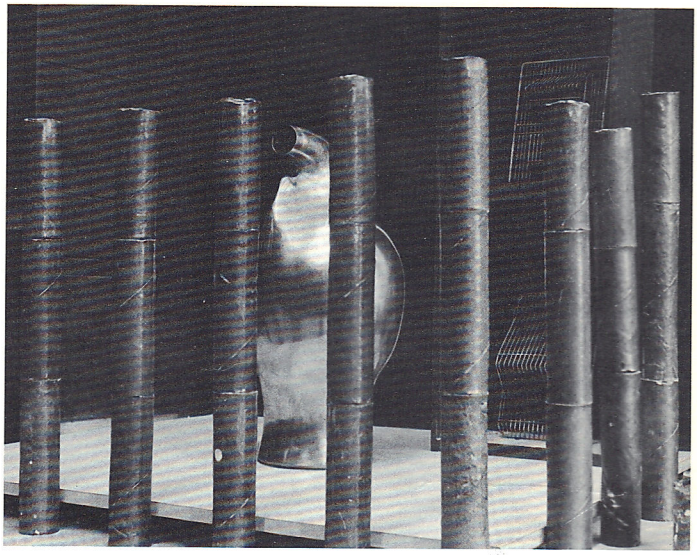
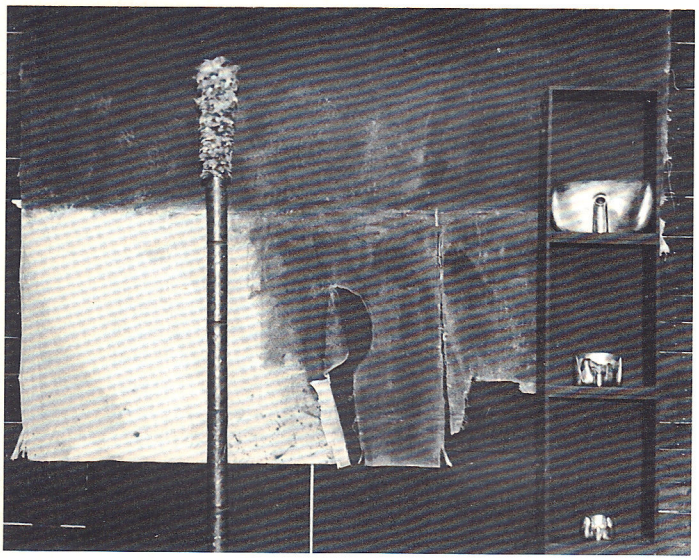
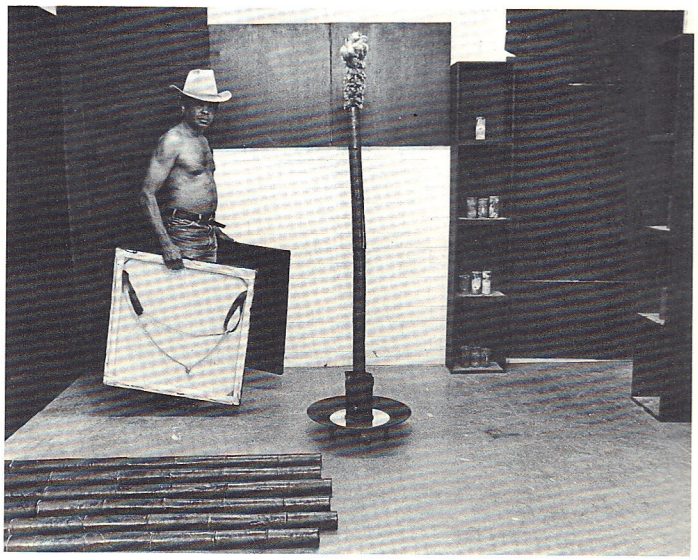




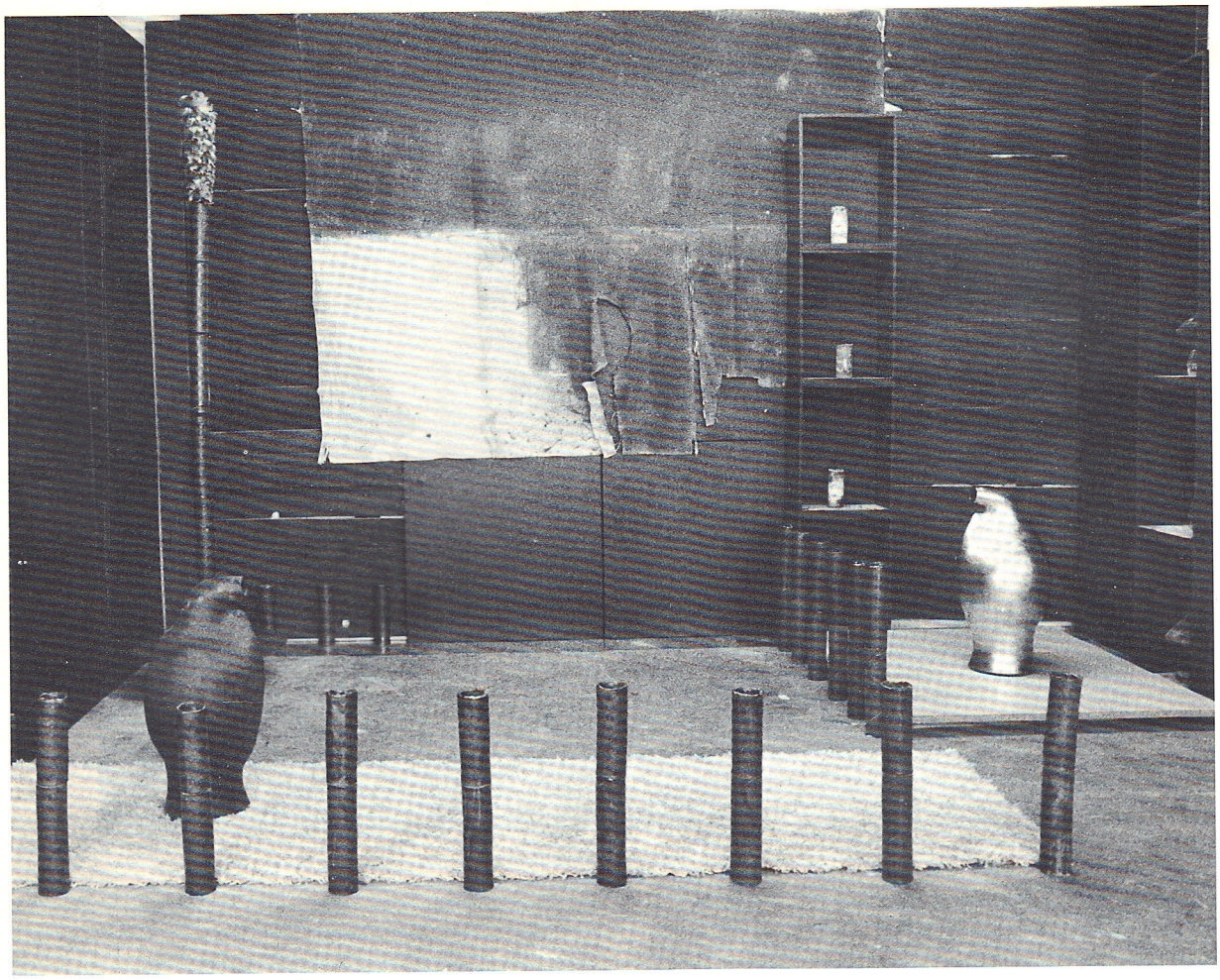








photos by Brenda Stephenson



Donald Locke, *The Room: An Environment with Fifteen Black Surfaces*, a variable installation.

DONALD LOCKE

CLARIBEL CONE

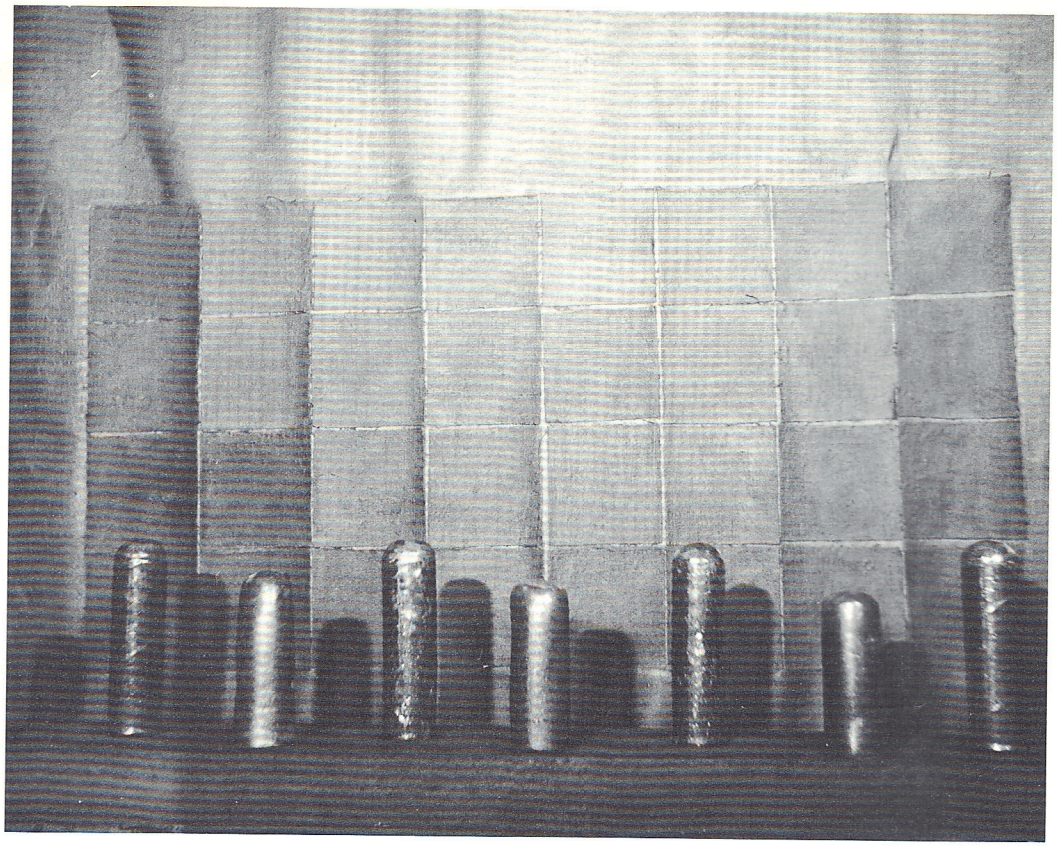
The Room: an Environment with Fifteen Black Surfaces is a room with ten different arrangements. The forms are wood, canvas, paint, glass feathers, rug, epoxy and bronze. This sculptural environment has been built, formed, found, arranged and rearranged. It maintains its volumetric character as sculpture yet it is a novel, a narrative of the personal history and visions of the sculptor himself, Donald Locke. Born in Guyana, South America, Locke studied art in England. He has collected and built materials to form myths: private myths, private histories.

As Matisse had once used a cast of familiar still-life actors, Locke has created a cast of sculptural images. He has departed from the single, one, monolithic form of traditional sculpture and entered the realm of component parts. Certain parts of the room—the "shield" pieces, the "phoenix bird"—work as one-piece sculptural forms. The entire room is interwoven with the placement of each element in relation to whatever happens in another part of the composition. Yet, there is a definite sense, a mood, to the whole room. Unlike the more figurative *Palace at 4 A.M.* by Giacometti, this room by Locke is of a scale that one can enter. The forms are diverse and stem from modern considerations of ceramics and sculpture. While Giacometti was influenced by the surrealist writings of Raymond Roussel and there is a mysterious narration in his *Palace,* Locke is perhaps closer to the surrealism of Magritte, incorporating the pun and the displacement into the mystery of his room's narrative.

It is a room of many varied surfaces and many blacks. The intuitive choice of black gives a monochromatic, formal simplicity. Black is an organizer of divergent forms, as Louise Nevelson found. In Locke's room there is no background and no foreground, only this environmental whole. Yet Locke's coat of black is as varied as the materials it covers. His cabinets are changing grounds for the placement of colored clay, bronze and wire.

Locke was born in a village between two sugar plantations. Parts of the room evoke this early landscape. The cylinders of epoxy joints are sugarcanes, the wooden boards are cabin walls; this is an historical landscape translated into sculpture. And the sculptural making or finding comes first for Locke, ahead of the historical evocation and reference. His process of constructing a room of found materials was influenced by Kurt Schwitters, though the *merz* pictures and clusters of Schwitters' environments more clearly reflect the choices of a painter. Schwitters applied found paper, color patches and fabric textures in a series of flat designer's decisions. Locke is a three-dimensional sculptor and is directed by his sculptural history.

The room's walls of black, stacked canvases and black, painted wooden boards create a silent boundary. Like the walls of a cabin, the blank fronts of the canvases recede but they also structure the ground as a grid, giving a geometrical austerity to the often biomorphic shapes of objects placed in the room. The drama's hero, the bronze *Phoenix Bird,* is an



Donald Locke, detail from *The Room*.

"anthropomorphic articulation of a circle and a cylinder." It bursts like a pregnant pot. It has other black-painted compatriots that stand nearby. The sugarcane cylinders stand like bars in forest rows. There is a platform in one set-up for the drama's hero, though Locke is not trying to make a legitimate theatre space, but a sculptural environment. Eventually he plans the paths in his room to be sided by glass.

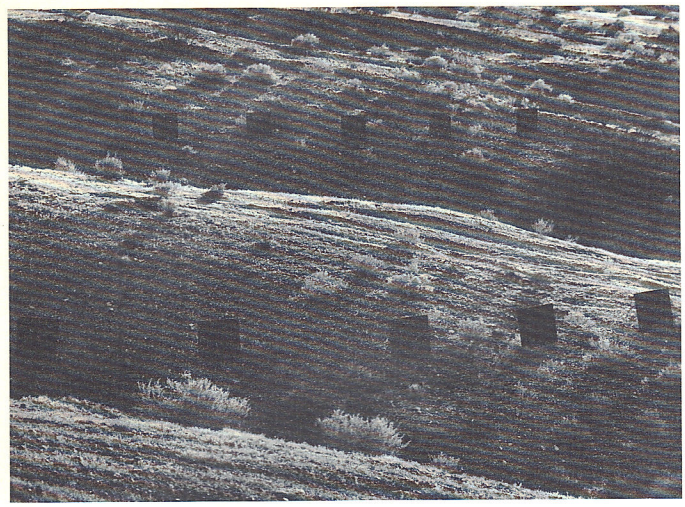
This introduction of glass would affirm the three-dimensional quality of the space for Locke, yet it would also create a more ambiguous space. And this glass, or even its idea, suggests a denial of personal entrance to the spectator in a physical way. This maintains a sculptural hermetic vision of history and forming. It's interesting, in this regard, that Locke found artistic use of an arc mirror, one he had used otherwise in a daily way. Formerly he had studied and used the "Timehri" sungod image and arc shape. This mirror reminded him of the Aztec sungod yet he found the placement of the mirror a delicate problem. It seemed to have to reflect only interior images from the room rather than gather exterior reflections. The mirror, like the room, is a sealed history with alternate arrangements and reflections. But the use of mirrors could destroy the unity and austerity of the room if there were more reflective surfaces than transparent ones. It is a room that is not a stage, not a box, but a personal narrative chamber that is also a formal, austerely balanced work.

There is a balance of color too, not merely in the varied surfaces of blacks, but other colors edge in at moments. There is the gold and silver of the metal forms, in the cabinets are found clay cylinders with many shades of brown, white and pink, and the "big sugarcane" has a box-like base lined in bright red. The rug is gold and white and the hanging painting with an arc-shaped tear has a lower section of stained white-green. This lime-green falls in the area of Locke's pieces that are found or happened upon through material restrictions. Locke quotes Picasso: "I don't search, I find." Locke feels like a soldier depending on his position and timing in the field of battle for his results.

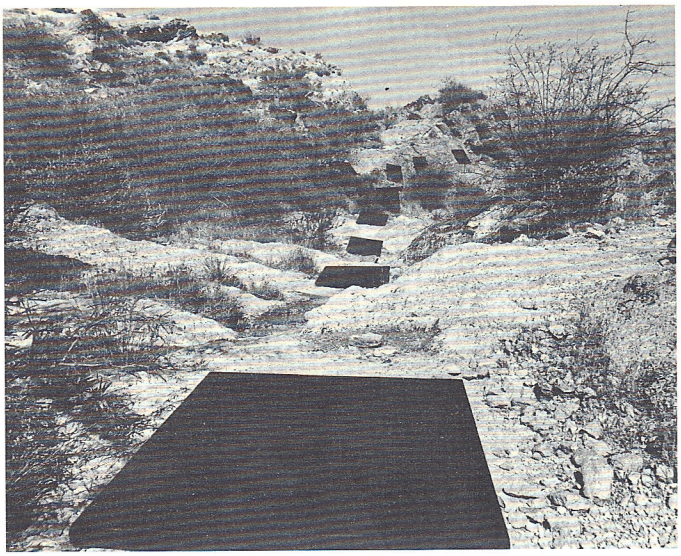
In one cabinet he deals with linear space. There are rusted animal cages, perhaps an influence from Henry Moore's string figures or Duchamp's sugar cube cage. But the cages also become private images, displaced objects, though wedded to the "plantation history." There were pests eating cotton, apples and beetroots in Guyana which plagued almost to biblical proportions. Locke remembers the bamboo animal cages with poison to kill these pests.

The island of Barbados near Guyana was once a British penal colony. It is said one can still find an extant Elizabethan language spoken there. In Locke there may be an Elizabethan inclination to pun. Shakespeare, whose work formed a large part of Locke's schooling, often stops his plays for a game of punning. The narrative elements are reviewed and reconstrued by puns. Locke's room uses sculpture in a punning manner, aligning the cylinder to the sugarcane, the male lingam shields, the female back; the bird with a chest to a pot; the wall boards with those of a cabin wall. But, independent of this symbolic punning, each form also enters a plastic punning rhythm by reflecting and playing against one another's shapes and echoing and balancing these in different parts of the room. A line of Shakespeare is read or sounded by the modern ear only to go back and find another meaning in its resonance and historical place. Locke's forms in their cabinets or sections resonate as displaced elements of a hermetic historical narrative inviting us to reflect upon them again and again.

From form to image, from plot to sub plot, this room is a "play written before the book of the play was created," says Locke. He speaks of a writer from Guyana, Wilson Harris, who does not use the narrative of persuasion but writes of time in an altered way with climate, landscape and language restructured. Locke's room is seen in its silence of black, with its geometrical, underlying lines and sheets of glass, as a labyrinth inviting entrance and yet barring it, exposing and enclosing. It is seen as a theatre, but a theatre of one. □



photos by James Cowlin

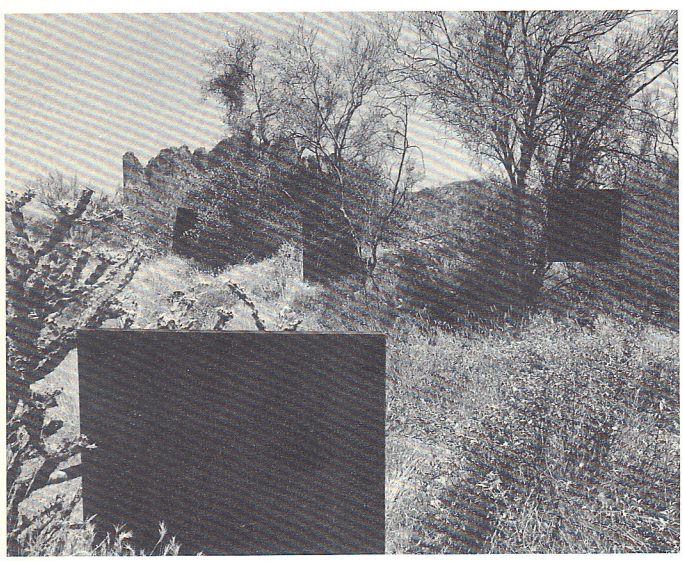


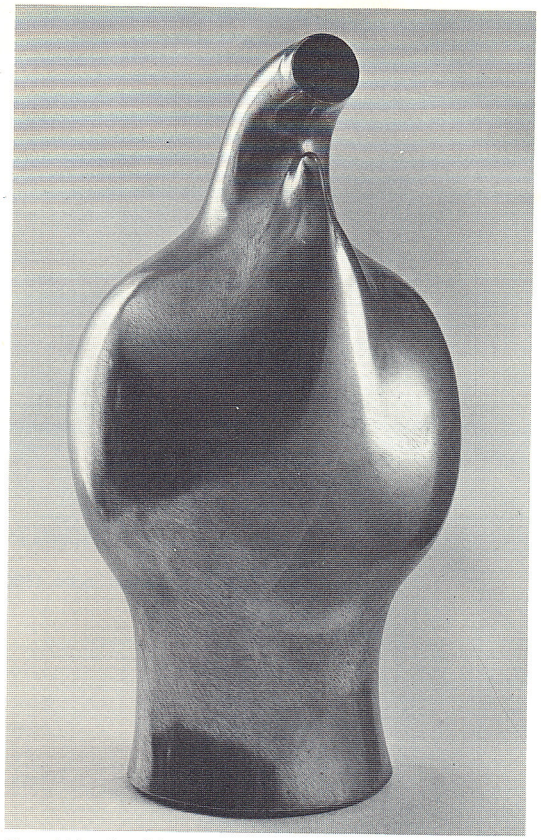
Editor's Note:

Born in Guyana, South America in 1930, Donald Locke studied art at the Bath Academy of Art in England and in Scotland at the Edinburgh University in conjunction with the Edinburgh College of Art. A frequent visitor to the United States, in 1979 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in sculpture and travelled to Arizona where he has been Artist-in-Residence at the Arizona State University in Tempe.

In addition to the variable *Environment with Fifteen Black Surfaces,* Locke has also organized the landscape event called *Arizona Squares,* aspects of which are illustrated on this page. With photographer James Cowlin, Locke took 15 black canvases (30″ × 30″) out into the desert in mid-summer at mid-day and arranged them in various configurations to be photographed. Attempting a completely new statement about the Arizona landscape, the project will eventually entail 80 slides and perhaps a publication of photographs.

Upon first viewing the results of this project, I was struck by a feeling that the black canvases offered a complimentary experience to that of the group of square mirror surfaces used by the late Robert Smithson in his *Mirror Displacements in the Yucatan.* Set out in the jungle and seashore landscape, Smithson's group of mirrors fragmented and reflected their environment, while the mute black surfaces of Locke's canvases absorb the light and assert their difference from the landscape. Yet, despite such suggestive visual parallels, a conversation with Locke revealed that he was unaware of the Smithson project. Instead, the *Arizona Squares* had grown directly from his own environmental concerns and certain of his earlier explorations with the placement of foreign art objects into anonymous landscapes in England and Europe.





Donald Locke, *Phoenix Bird,* 24" high bronze.
photo: Brenda Locke

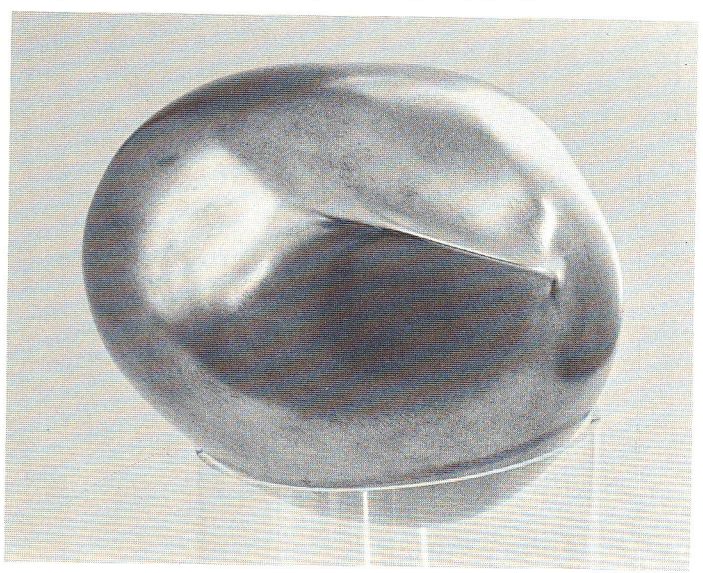
Donald Locke, *Phoenix in Caput Rex,* 10½" × 8" × 6½" plaster for bronze.
Collection: John and Nancy Kitchell. photo: Brenda Locke

AN INTERVIEW WITH
DONALD LOCKE

BARBARA CORTRIGHT

Donald Locke's classically elegant sculpture, a condensation of organic form, is as much of this century as Arp or Brancusi, as timeless as a Noh mask. It might have come from anywhere. In fact, Locke came from Guyana and works now in Tempe, where he arrived on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979. Currently on exhibit at the Kitchell/Newlon Design Studios in Scottsdale, is his series *Phoenix Imagii.* He is familiar to ARTSPACE readers for his series of critical essays on current art in Arizona.

Donald Locke, *Phoenix Ovum in Vis Vitae,* 6½" × 8½" × 7" bronze, mounted on plexiglass disc. Collection: Beverly Zell. photo: Brenda Locke



BARBARA CORTRIGHT:
Artists are not expected to be able to write with the force and clarity with which they do their art. Yet you write with a lot of vividness and dash.

DONALD LOCKE:
I try to communicate. I received my elementary and secondary education in Guyana at a time when it was *de rigeur* to be proficient in the literary arts if you wanted to make your way up in the world. The three R's were rigorously taught. If you couldn't read or write you were regarded as being at the bottom of everything. A United Nations report in the early '60s showed that Guyana, then British Guiana, had the third highest literacy rate in the world. We were poor but, by God, we could read and write like nobody's business.

BC: *Did you attend a university in Guyana?*

DL: No. In those days there were no universities in the British West Indies or in Guyana. The few graduates around, men with gilt-edged careers, were from Oxford or Cambridge—*Oxon.* and *Cantab.* if you please, to give the diminutives from the Latin. There were also a few graduates from Howard in Washington, as well as Dublin, London and Edinburgh but, these, except the M.D.s were regarded as inferior stock. We were all brought up to have the right prejudices, you see. That was a long, long time ago.

BC: *And art?*

DL: Art was as remote from our perception of every day things as was Timbuktu and the peninsula of Kamchatka. They all existed in books. My older brother (I am the second of three sons) was the artist. He did great copies in pencil of photographs of Winston Churchill and General Eisenhower. This was during the War. They might have been terrible copies but I thought his skill was fantastic. My father never thought much of this talent and continually grumbled about his having a good baritone voice, as if anything could be done about it in that remote corner of the old Empire.

BC: *Did you ever draw and paint when you were at school?*

DL: In a very haphazard sort of way, and very, very rarely. I did my first painting, right out of the blue, at the age of about ten. I'll never know how or why I acquired a watercolor set and drawing book, and how or why I wanted to paint my own face—without a mirror. I remember at the time thinking that it made me look about 40 years old.

The next lot of drawings were done at seventeen when I joined an art class run by a very great man, an artist and teacher as well, E.R. Burrowes. He is totally unknown outside of Guyana and the Caribbean.

BC: *But what about sculpture?*

DL: Sculpture was even more remote from our thinking. When I went to England in 1954 on a British Council Scholarship I was going to paint. With the arrogance of youth I was going to be the greatest painter in the world. I was so wrapped up in this, I didn't have the faintest idea what clay was, for instance. At Bath Academy of Art, I did pottery and sculpture for the first time—I was 24 years old. Even when I went back home I was still painting. I did a large series of canvases in black and white using Amerindian motifs from Petroglyphs, which in Guyana are called *Timehri* writings or carvings.

BC: *And how does that lead to the present series of sculptures* Phoenix Imagii? *It seems a long way away from those folkloric paintings you were doing.*

DL: It most certainly is. I had become dissatisfied with what I had been doing. I believe in the concept of stylistic unification in art. I know this is very opposite to the American love of stylistic diversification. At any rate, I detected this factor in my work, and was dismayed; every painting seemed to be done by a different artist. It may be okay for Max Ernst or Paul Klee, but in my work, I interpreted it to mean that I was not a painter at all.

I was also writing a lot at the time, around 1965-68, poetry, prose, art criticism and art-teaching material. I drew up the master-plan for a Festival of Child Art in Georgetown and published an art teaching booklet for Elementary Schools. I seemed to be at the center of every art activity going.

Then one thing led to another and I came to a firm decision. I packed away or destroyed all that stuff; one completed novel, another halfway through, and tons of poetry and assorted writings. With all this luggage unloaded, I slowly began to go back to the sculptural forms I had started to develop in Edinburgh, and it was very good to be able to focus in on one range of artistic problems.

BC: *And what does this series represent? You'll object to that word 'represent' so let us re-phrase the question. What are the artistic concerns behind this current series of sculptures?*

DL: I prefer that. My view is that most types of sculpture can be measured against the old Wordsworthian dictum changed round a bit: "The correct forms in the correct order." Of course this is perfectly all right if one never, ever, asks how is it possible to test and find out which forms and which orders are correct, out of the endless variety possible. I find that in object art, the basic building blocks the sculptor uses, the cone, cylinder, cube and sphere, can be permutated into an infinite variety and complexity of sculptural compositions. One only has to find the right forms in the right order. Remember Matisse's statement that "When color is at its richest, form is at its plentitude." In my case I want the same plentitude of form, but through purely formal anti-chromatic means. I want a sculptural form of maximum tactility.

BC: *But for ten years you did mixed-media sculpture in your studio in London. From what I know of your work this period ended with the indoor environment you constructed at ASU last year and the outdoor environment you installed at Yuma and at Phoenix and which you had photographed by your wife and by Jim Cowlin.*

DL: Yes, that is true. I used every medium I could find to work. My motto was "when in doubt, cheat—or use epoxy resin." And the same criteria were applied. I do believe it is always a matter of finding the right form—even in writing, I might add. Sometimes I go through 12 typed drafts and still end up by being not satisfied. Sculpture is worse. When the rough cast comes back from the foundry I go over the entire surface as much as fifteen times. The *Phoenix Bird* was removed from the Gallery three times, worked over again and again before I was finally satisfied that the form was right.

In the *Phoenix Imagii* one is dealing with single-unit monocoque structures in one medium, so the notion of the articulation of cone, sphere, cylinder, etc. might seem more relevant. In the *Environment* these alphabet forms were supplied by the furnishings which inhabited the interior space. Not only that but unlike the *Phoenix* sculptures they supplied those other vital elements, the square and the cube without which we can have no intellectual or conceptual life which would qualify us as homo sapiens. That is very important.

BC: *I am not quite convinced of that.*

DL: I am not sure of that myself. But look at the Yuma photographs. They consist solely of square black canvases spread out on those sensuously rolling sand-dunes. They were like Freudian black holes or Euclidian belly-buttons, if you like. I know I haven't really answered your question.

BC: *Not quite. But to come back to the* Phoenix Imagii—*what started you on this subject and why "Phoenix" and not Quetzalcoatl or Guyana? That is a lovely sounding name. It means land of many waters, doesn't it?*

DL: Now, that would be too transparent. Not only that, but I don't see the 'form' of Guyana reflected in the form of the sculptures. Even if this were so—I would want to hide this connection. I can then manipulate and deal with it much better if I don't have to share it with more than a tiny handful of spectators. So I've got to give clues and directions which lead away from the things in my head and in my body and let viewers have an explanation and understanding of their own. This is often very difficult to achieve—one's art can be very transparent at times.

Incidentally, I found the title the same way John Lennon found the title for "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds"; it sounded good and that made it right. Some months before the sculpture was completed I had formed an inter-media alliance with the Phoenix photographer Jim Cowlin, among other things to do the photographs for the outdoor environment. We made plans for all sorts of collaborations and decided to give ourselves a name. "Phoenixbirds" was one name I made up, but it seemed too silly for words so we scrapped it. Then one day in my studio at ASU after the bronze had been cast, somebody, I can't remember whom, said "That's a bird." After that the title *Phoenix Bird* seemed to fit like glue. In fact, it fits so well that all other representations of the mythical Phoenix now seem to me far too literal and simple.

BC: *Why Latin names? Isn't that a bit pretentious?*

DL: Maybe so. It's a kind of bastard Latin I made up. They are literary abstractions intended to keep the viewer on his own track of comprehension, if you see what I mean. For instance, *Phoenix Ovum in Vis Vitae* could be translated to mean *Phoenix Egg in Virile Force. Phoenix in Caput Rex* and *Phoenix Juvenalia Juvenalis* should be self-explanatory.

BC: *I must say it certainly looks and feels like a very credible Phoenix. For the precise meaning, looking into the Britannica World Language edition of Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary, we find Phoenix is "in Egyptian mythology a legendary bird of great beauty, unique of its kind, which was supposed to live for 500 or 600 years in the Arabian desert and then consume itself by fire, rising again from its ashes young and beautiful to live through another cycle: a symbol of immortality." Second meaning, "A person of matchless beauty, or excellence. A paragon."*

DL: Ah yes! That is the city of Phoenix. And that, I also hope, is my *Phoenix Bird.*

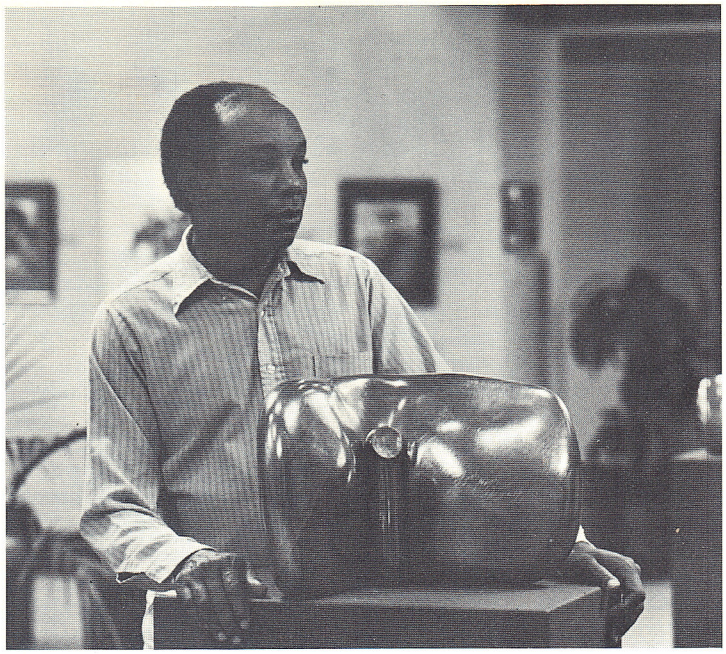


photo: Brenda Locke.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Donald Locke was born in 1930 in Stewartville, Guyana, South America. He first studied in Guyana under E.R. Burrowes, M.B.E., and later won a British Council Scholarship to Study at Bath Academy of Art in England, 1954-57. In 1964 he graduated from Edinburgh University (in conjunction with Edinburgh College of Art) with a Masters Degree with Honours in Fine Arts. He taught in Guyana but returned to live in London from 1971 to 1979. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979 and was Artist-in-residence at Arizona State University until 1980. He now lives with his wife in Arizona where he is studying and writing about the contemporary art of the American Southwest. He is currently art critic for the New Times, in Phoenix, Arizona and a correspondent for ARTSPACE, Southwestern Contemporary Arts Quarterly.

Locke has exhibited internationally and his sculpture is to be seen mainly in private and public collections in South America, Europe and Great Britain.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1980 Guggenheim Project: "THE ROOM—An Environment With Fifteen Black Surfaces"; Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona.
1979 Inaugural Exhibition, Foyer Gallery, Sir John Cass School of Art, London.
1979 West Norwood Library, London.
1978 Galleria Lorenzelli, Milan, Italy.
1977 The Gallery, Hampstead, London.
1976 Round House Theatre, Chalk Farm, London.
1975 Retrospective of 1965-1975, Commonwealth Institute, London.
1967 John F. Kennedy Library, Georgetown, Guyana.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1981 ABCA at Arizona Bank Galleria, Phoenix, Arizona.
1981 "The Circus," Rosenthal Galleries, Chicago (including Miro, Chagall, and Calder).
1980 South West Invitational; Yuma, Arizona.
1979 Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition, London.
1978 Two-man Exhibition, Amalgam Gallery, London.
1978 36th International Competition of Artistic Ceramics, Faenza, Italy.
1978 International Biennial of Art, Campione d'Italia, Italy.
1978 VIth International Biennial of Ceramic Art, Vallauris, France.
1977 World Festival of Black Art, Lagos, Nigeria.
1976 Katie Horsman Commemorative Exhibition, New 57 Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland.
1975 International Biennial of Sculpture, Budapest, Hungary.
1972 International Exhibition of Ceramics, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
1972 Biennial of Art, Medellin, Colombia, South America.
1971 XIth Sao Paulo Biennial XI. Sao Paulo, Brazil.
1971 Caribbean Artists in Britain, Commonwealth Institute, London.
1970 Hampstead Artists Council Invitational, Camden Arts Center, London.
1969 Inaugural Exhibition, Chase Manhattan Bank, Georgetown, Guyana.
1968 "The 1967 GROUP", John F. Kennedy Library, Georgetown, Guyana.
1967 "The 1967 GROUP", British Council Library, Georgetown, Guyana.
1964 Guyana National Exhibition, Georgetown, Guyana.
1963 New Vision Center, London.
1962 West Indian Federation Commemorative, Paperback Gallery, Edinburgh.
1958 Working People's Art Class Annual, Georgetown, Guyana.

SELECTED AWARDS AND PRIZES

1979 Guggenheim Fellowship in Sculpture.
1978 Exhibition Award, Greater London Arts Association.
1977 Exhibition Award, Arts Council of Great Britain.
1970 Travelling Fellowship, Brazil Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
1970 British Council Bursary, to Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland.
1964 Special prize for Ceramics, Guyana National Exhibition.
1961 Lowenstein Fellowship to the Hague, Holland.
1959 Abstract Painting of the Year, Guyanese Art Group, Guyana.
1954-56 British Council Scholarship to Bath Academy of Art, England.
1953 Gold Medal, First Award, Working People's Art Class Annual, Guyana.