ABSTRACT

Leah M. Force. INNER WALLS. (Under the direction of Mr. Charles Chamberlain) School of Art, East Carolina University, May 1991.

This report of creative thesis examines a series of screens constructed from clay, wood, and paper, and investigates the relationship between ornamentality and shelter.

The five screens included in this thesis are discussed individually, and in chronological order. Illustrations of each piece accompany this text, with detailed illustrations included in an appendix.

INNER WALLS

A Report of Creative Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the School of Art

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Leah M. Force

May 1991

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout my undergraduate and graduate training, I became increasingly aware of an undeniable desire to decorate. Often, the primary role of any object I made was to provide surfaces which could be adorned with texture and color; the object's function was a secondary concern. Concurrently, I grew fond of the decorating skills of several specific artists who unknowingly contributed to the aesthetic development of my work:

Ceramic artist David Keator is known for his successful variety of forms and surface treatments. Each of his pieces can be described as crisp and elegant, both in silhouette and in decoration. In addition, his dynamic usage of color and line are truly admirable.

Wendell Castle, an internationally known woodworker, recently created a series of large free-standing clocks, which assisted me in the visualization of my own work on a greater scale. Mr. Castle's impeccable craftsmanship, attention to detail, and his obvious love for rich, refined surfaces are exceptionally noteworthy.

Miriam Schapiro's works in fabrics, laces, glitter, embroidery, and paint on canvas have done much to increase public awareness and acceptance of mixed media imagery. I can certainly identify with her desire to decorate, utilizing any materials which fulfill the immediate requirements for color and texture.

Though not participants in the modern crafts movement, the hand-built functional vessels of Mexican folk potters have influenced the aesthetic development of my work most profoundly. Their curvilinear forms decorated with high-contrast geometric patterns exhibit a grace and inner spirit which I constantly seek to achieve. The potters' use of repetitive patterns which encircle their bowls and bottles allow all available visual information to be obtained from any singular viewpoint, a quality which has predominated in my work. Also, I have unconsciously borrowed their usage of subtle textural differences and incised contour lines.

Prior to this thesis exhibition, the bulk of my work could be cursorily described as flat, decorative, and completely manageable in scale. While creating the early pieces, I continued to be intrigued by the concept of a screen or room

partition, as this format is inherently conducive to ornamental treatment in a two dimensional or low-relief manner. From the standpoint of my affinity for the manipulation of shallow surfaces, the decision to make a series of screens was a logical one.

Upon further reflection, the pursuit of this avenue seemed particularly significant to my development and maturation as an artist, as I would be compelled to work within an unfamiliar set of parameters. Never before had I created a piece whose scale matched that of the intended owner, nor had I cause to wrestle with the division of interior living space. This undertaking had the added benefit of testing my technical proficiency, for I would be obliged to confront the issues of weight, stability, and structural integrity for each piece.

Other considerations became key issues to be addressed throughout this body of work. Specifically, I sought to explore the relationship between ornamentality and shelter, concealment, and protection. Furthermore, I intended to examine the contradiction between the nomadic nature of the screen and its visual permanence. A final objective in creating Inner Walls was to consciously portray a segment of my own visual and personal experiences in each piece---the selection of the subject matter was therefore not to be made arbitrarily.



PLATE I

Cat Screen: Windows for Seda and Arena in Winter

(19" x 45" x 1")

CAT SCREEN: WINDOWS FOR SEDA AND ARENA IN WINTER

Standing nineteen inches in height, Cat Screen... is comprised of thirty-two stoneware tiles, arranged in four folding panels of eight tiles apiece. The tiles are decorated with incised contour lines, latex house paint, and colored pencils, which provided the desired delicate visual effect. In an effort to experiment with untried combinations of materials, the screen's reverse side is adorned with layers of fabric sewn together and stuffed with cotton batting. The images on the two surfaces of Cat Screen... are similar in content though the compositions vary considerably. Due to its blond coloration, basswood was selected as the framing material for this traditional, though small-scaled, approach to a room partition.

During the designing process, little time was spent taking into consideration the actual needs of my cats, Seda and Arena, as they relate to this structure. Obviously they have no need for a privacy screen in the first place. However, I thoroughly contemplated various ways to meet their perceived needs. The subject matter (open windows and doors, and curtains billowing in a light breeze) was chosen on the basis of my cats' apparent preferences. It seemed important, on a conceptual level, to reinforce the feeling of security provided by the piece itself with familiar, comforting images.

This gesture was carried a step further by the depiction of a previously completed wall piece on one of the tiled panels (which the cats have undoubtedly recognized).

Technically, this piece was straightforward in its execution, but it proved to be remarkably thought provoking. While pondering the inevitable interaction between the cats and this screen, I suddenly realized that it is, indeed, possible for me to create pieces which involve the viewer in a physical manner. This realization was almost unnerving in its amplitude, as I had long been accustomed to envisioning my work being displayed "out of the way." Though Cat Screen... failed to stimulate Seda and Arena beyond a perfunctory investigation, the piece enabled me to approach my work from a refreshingly different perspective.



PLATE II

Untitled (Wall Screen)

(83" x 32" x 3")

UNTITLED (WALL SCREEN)

The next piece included in the Inner Walls series involved the trial of an entirely unfamiliar method of construction. A sheet of styrofoam insulation was selected as the innermost structure of support. After preliminary decisions were made regarding the silhouette of the piece, the styrofoam was cut and coated with concrete bonding glue, and a layer of recycled cotton linter paper was applied. In some areas, the coarsely chopped wet pulp was mixed with small amounts of plaster, which tended to result in a smoother surface. In other regions, several thick layers of paper were manipulated in order to define and activate the imagery. After the construction was allowed to dry thoroughly, acrylic paints, oil pastels, and spray paint were utilized to further enliven the surface.

The form of the arch has been explored many times in my work, especially in conjunction with stripes, references to windows and curtains, and an uppermost jagged-edged "crown" shape. Although the content may appear to be unchanging, I have attempted to manipulate this combination of elements to suggest a variety of moods. My goal in employing these items in this current context was to describe an imaginary refuge. More specifically, this piece itself (which curiously has remained untitled) has become a symbol for a sort of mental

sanctuary I seek in times of distress. Though not a free standing screen, Untitled was a definitive member of this series, owing to its role as a delineator of psychological space.

While I was initially overwhelmed by the scale of this piece and rather disturbed by the unknowns encountered during the construction process, this wall screen is one of the more successful arch forms I have completed. A balance was finally discovered between my recurrent themes and the overall composition, resulting in a more sophisticated finished product.

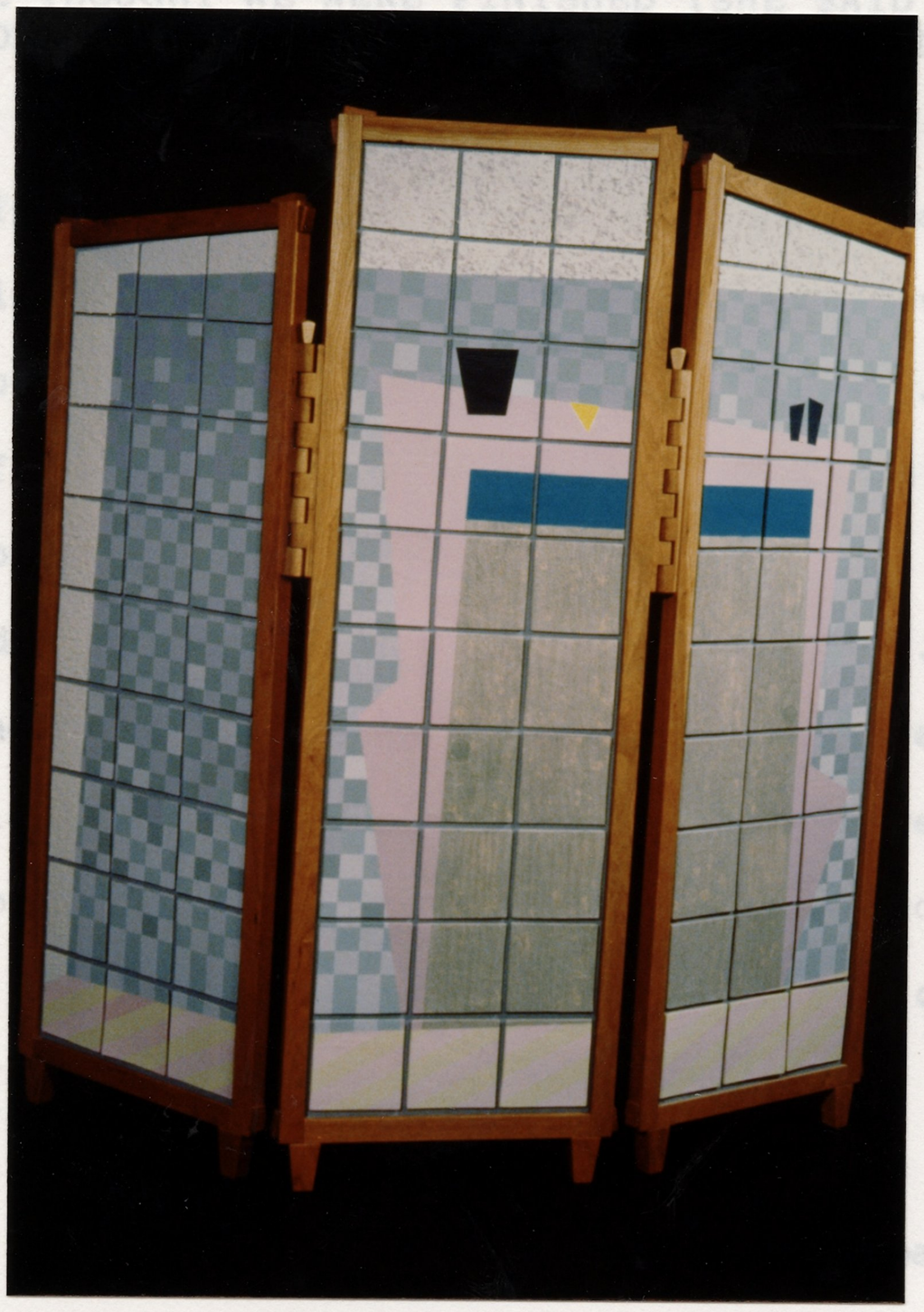


PLATE III

Just When We Thought We Were Finished (She Said She'd Prefer a Medley of Beige, and Asked Us to Repaint It)

(67" x 69" x 1-1/2")

JUST WHEN WE THOUGHT WE WERE FINISHED (SHE SAID SHE'D PREFER A MEDLEY OF BEIGE, AND ASKED US TO REPAINT IT)

Consisting of three cherry-framed folding panels, this sixty-seven inch tall construction parallels conventional parameters for the configuration of room screens. From the standpoint of practicality, it is the piece from this series which functions best as a privacy screen (though no clever features render it especially convenient to use). An entire surface of the screen is covered with eighty-seven earthenware tiles, to which acrylic paint, gel medium, and vermiculite have been applied. The panels on the reverse side have been covered with an old sheet whose destiny it was to serve as a dropcloth through many years of house painting.

My earliest intentions for this screen were to humorously illustrate a collection of my experiences as a painter in a particular home. The specific client in question had an insurmountable degree of difficulty in making decisions concerning her new color scheme. At one juncture, an enormous portion of her wall surfaces were covered with two foot wide color swatches. These disturbingly busy faces inspired the checkerboard pattern on the walls of the fictitious bedroom represented in Just When We Thought... The incorporation of the paint-spattered floral print dropcloth was perhaps more significant conceptually than aesthetically, but I believe the

inclusion was a successful venture. I also feel that the traditional format of the panels themselves was necessary: any further departure from the visual stability of the existing cherry frames would have rendered the piece too busy.

What began as a focus upon amusing experiences resulted in a fairly attractive piece about which nothing seems funny. I have concluded that the audience's ability to discern and appreciate my motives as an artist is not necessarily a key to the success of my work. Instead, the viewer can be enticed to investigate, validate, and/or reject any given piece on the basis of what he is able to relate to and comprehend.



PLATE IV

Pardon Me, Your True Colors Are Showing

(70" x 53" x 28")

PARDON ME, YOUR TRUE COLORS ARE SHOWING

Because it has the potential to appear dense and massive while remaining extremely lightweight, paper-encased styrofoam was adopted as the medium for this free-standing screen. The fabrication process was similar to the methods employed for the Untitled piece discussed earlier. Plaster was not included in the paper mixture this time however, since the paper was chopped to a much finer texture, and its dried surface was discovered to be quite durable. As with the majority of my projects, a variety of color sources were utilized for decoration purposes, such as clay slips, acrylic paints, spray paint, and oil pastels. Sheets of screen wire and abraded Plexiglas were also added to complete the central window motif.

Pardon Me... is an aggregate of numerous hiding places I have enjoyed throughout my life, though not all of the faithfully included references may be substantial for the observer. Each allusion (with primary emphasis upon the window, curtains, and fence imagery) bears a part in conveying a singular cohesive statement: "I can see and hear you, yet you have no idea that I am safely hidden here." In contrast with the aforementioned Untitled piece, which is an outward symbol of an internal sanctuary, Pardon Me... is a representation of

protective environments that have actually existed in the physical sense.

The completion of this screen was an unexpectedly instructive experience. Never before had I been responsible for the surface treatment of a three dimensional human-scaled object. (I do realize that all of these works are three dimensional in that they possess depth. However, Pardon Me... is the first piece with which I ventured into deeper space by means of intersecting planes.) For the first time I was able to physically interact with the environment demarcated by the piece itself. Additionally, the screen's dimensions provided a greater, more complex surface area than I had been accustomed to confronting.

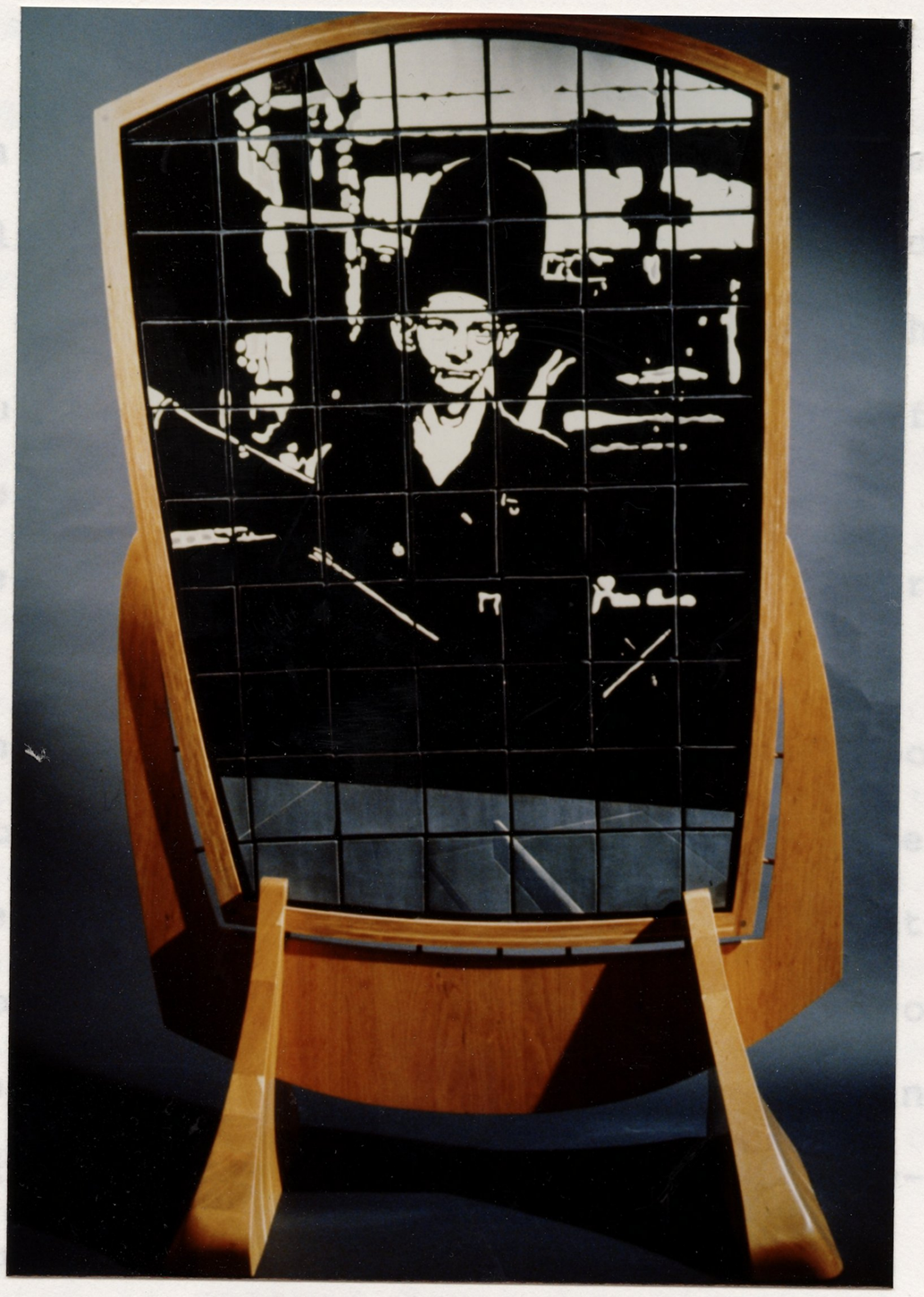


PLATE V

L. D.

(82" x 51" x 28")

L. D.

The final screen created for Inner Walls presented the most difficult technical considerations, produced the most anxiety, and consumed the most time. A full eighteen months before the fulfillment of L. D., detailed plans for its design were deeply engraved in my mind. I subsequently found myself in a prolonged, troublesome predicament: no source of information could assist me in evaluating the piece's structural integrity, and I was unwilling to alter its composition in favor of a more reliable solution. Not until the screen's components were fully completed and assembled into one unit was I able to determine conclusively that the two massive legs would be able to support this extremely heavy panel.

The finished piece features a single cherry-framed curvilinear panel into which seventy earthenware tiles were set. These predominantly gray underglazed and glazed tiles have been edged with a layer of granular ilmenite. The image depicted by the tiles is based upon a photograph of my grandfather as he worked in the "Katy" Railroad welding shop. A bronzed mirror was secured in the approximate center of the panel's reverse side; the composition here was calculated to suggest a welder's helmet.

L. D. was designed to be a tribute to my grandfather, who had a meaningful impact upon my life. A noteworthy and

pertinent example of this influence involves his sense of humor. As a child, I was distinctly impressed by Peepa's (my grandfather's) ability to make "food jokes" during meals and escape subsequent reprimands. I shall never forget myself as an awestruck youngster the day Peepa asked someone to pass the "calf slobber" (whipped cream). I continue to find that remark hilarious.

As the years passed, I vowed to develop a food joke that could make him laugh. Sadly, my grandfather died before I was able to share it with him. An inscribed message on the screen's tiled surface reads, "I finally invented a food joke of my own...One day I had some green beans that tasted like they looked back...I know Peepa would've laughed."

Due to the precious nature of the subject matter, enormous amounts of time and thought were invested in the making of L. D. Every detail was painstakingly considered throughout the exhausting construction process. Since Peepa was widely known in central Texas for his superb craftsmanship and attention to detail, only an impeccably crafted tribute could be worthy of honoring him. It was also vital that my portrayal of Peepa bear as strong a likeness to him as possible. My family's emotional response to their initial viewing of L. D. was reassuringly indicative of my long-sought success.

I do not regret my commitment to this memorial, for I gained as much from the experience as I contributed. An

enormous quantity of precious information pertaining to my heritage was amassed through the researching of Peepa's early life. My self confidence as a woodworker received a noticeable boost as a direct result of my escorting this screen on its journey from a tiny sketch to an eighty-two inch tall reality. Furthermore, I acquired much appreciated insight into what "spins my spurs," so to speak, both as an artist and as a woman. The fact that Peepa was unable to observe this thesis process remains my singular disappointment.

CONCLUSION

It is human nature to embellish those surroundings we consider to be our own; ornamentation can therefore serve to suggest ownership, instill a sense of belonging, and foster an appreciation for protection and self-preservation. I have been unable to resolve the contradiction between the nomadic nature of the screen and its implied weight and permanence, other than to discover the object itself is a metaphor for my own search for an enduring, stationary environment. As stated earlier, I have concluded that the success or failure of my work is not solely dependent upon the viewer's ability to discern and appreciate my artistic motives.

In many respects, Inner Walls acted as a catalyst to produce positive growth spurts in my maturation process. This series has assisted me in overcoming a mental block which prevented me from working in a more outspoken third dimension. I no longer assume that my creations must remain aloof or otherwise separated from the viewer; attempting to physically involve others in my art is now a goal for future works. I have enjoyed a profound sense of accomplishment in witnessing the consummation of this series, and my self confidence has reached a personally uncharted peak.

APPENDIX

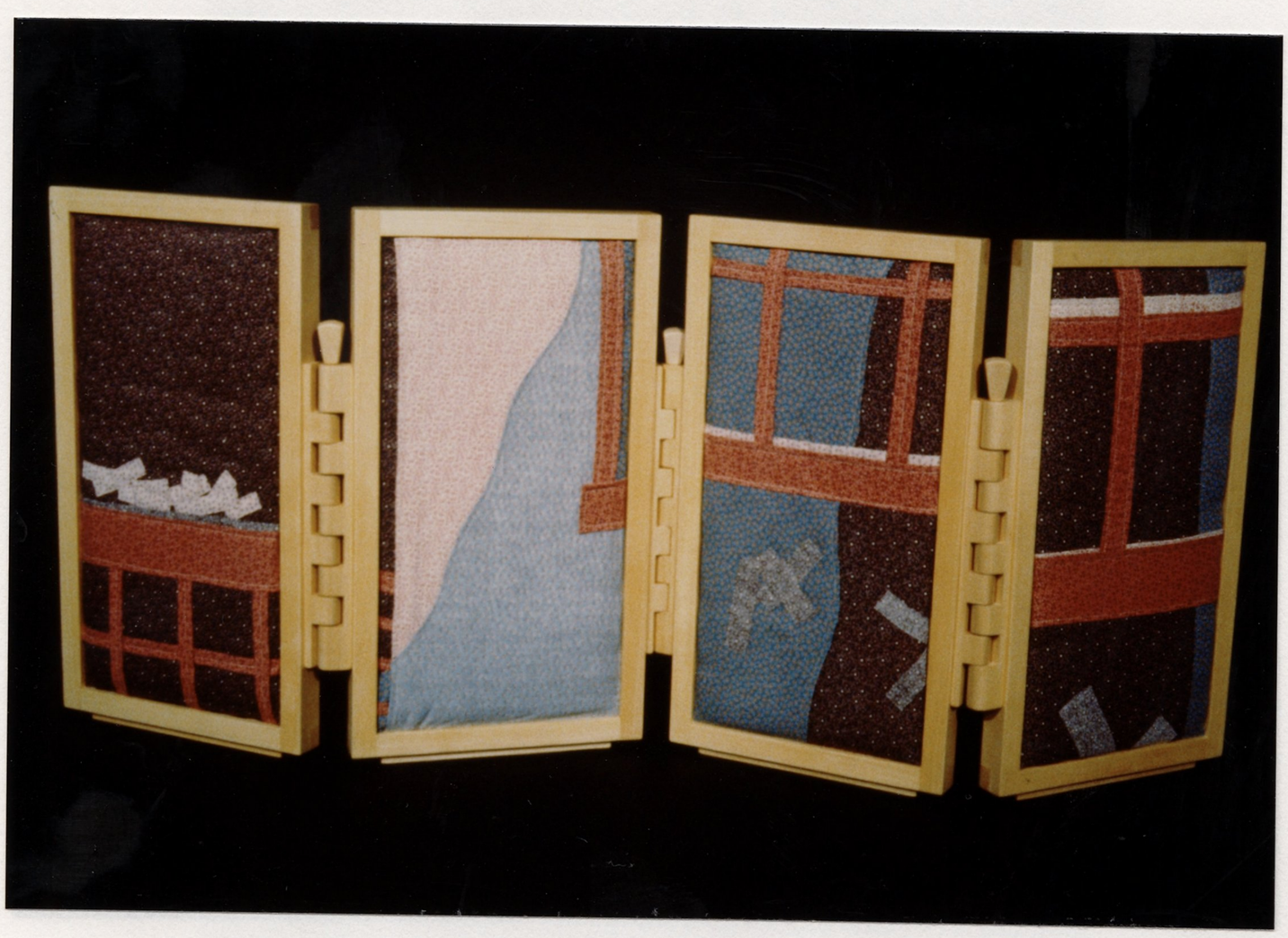


PLATE VI

Detail of Cat Screen...

Detail of Cat Screen...



PLATE VII

Detail of Untitled (Wall Screen)



PLATE VIII

Detail of Pardon Me...



PLATE IX

Detail of L. D.



PLATE X

Detail of L. D.

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