Crossing Boundaries: Context and cultural transformation with reference to the Giriama *Vigango* of Kenya

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Abstract

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This research project was founded on the cultural and environmental context of Kenya, with reference to the Giriama *Vigango*, commemorative grave posts of the Gohu secret society, and the transformation of this information into contemporary sculpture. This arose from studying African artifacts in UK museums, as other European artists had done, resulting in an examination of the formal characteristics alone. This stage was supported by a literature search of both fine art and anthropological approaches to African art. Through these factors, the lack of contextual knowledge was manifest, and therefore fieldwork became a necessity, in order to consider the symbolic and functional aspects of the posts in their original context. This approach has rarely been considered by artists in the West, illustrated by the views of Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Serra, who suggested it was advantageous to the artist not to know about the context of an ethnographic artifact to make artwork.

Subsequently, I undertook a six-week field trip to Kenya in 1999 to document and record the *Vigango*. This experience brought about a change of focus from the artifacts to questions of visual context. As a result, the African context, the use of materials and constructions plus conceptual aspects of ritualistic importance came to the fore.

On return to the UK, I began the process of synthesising these observations into my art practice. The cross-cultural dynamics of the work that I was creating began to suggest further questions about context, cultural binaries and cultural interaction. In the studio, I constructed '*Shelter*', a tunnel-shaped construction of human dimensions made of clay and sticks. This work located the local African vernacular architecture as a central focus for the artwork. In the transposition of my understanding of art practice from continent to continent, I started to move away from working with organic and natural materials and started to experiment with industrial materials. Upon analysis, it became clear that commonalities as well as juxtapositions were emerging, thus highlighting questions of interpretation and re-interpretation.

I then explored issues of artistic transposition by relocating my own explorations to the African context for review. The key stage here was the reconstruction of the *'Panels'* at the National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi, in the '*Crossing Boundaries*' exhibition (2001). The responses to this work led up to the final series of three full-scale structures created as fragments of '*Walls*'. The studio practice revealed the salient theme of *concealed* and *revealed* elements inherent in the semiotic values of the materials and forms. Encompassed in this was reversal with the binary oppositions of interior / exterior, absence / presence, solid / void, horizontal / vertical and positive / negative, however taking a Post-Structuralist stance. The photographs, initially an important part of the recording process and taken from the sculptural work, became significant as artwork in their own right displayed as large digital prints. These were subsequently exhibited at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, London (2003) under the title '*Concealed/revealed*', in order to gather an informed response to the work from a Western audience.

List of Contents

Abstract 3
List of Illustrations 13
List of Appendices 14
Author's Declaration 15
Acknowledgments 16
Glossary 24

INTRODUCTION 28

European sculptors influenced by African artifacts 38
Art and artifice 42
Preliminary work 47

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH 53

1.1 The context 63
1.2 Methodology 74

CHAPTER 2: STUDIO WORK IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE FIELD WORK 76

2.1 Artwork prior to the field work in Kenya 82

2.2 Artwork after the initial field trip to Kenya 1999-2001 86

2.2.1 'Shelter' 96
2.2.2 'The Series of Five Panels' 107

2.3 Conclusion 110

CHAPTER 3: STUDIO WORK AND THE 'CROSSING BOUNDARIES' EXHIBITION 111

3.1 Overview of the '*Crossing Boundaries*' exhibition, National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi 111

3.1.1 The work of the artists at the Kuona Arts Trust 114
3.1.2 Response to the 'Panel Series' by the African audience 120
3.1.3 Reconstruction of the 'Panel Series' 125

3.2 Artwork as an extension of the '*Crossing Boundaries*' collaboration 139

3.3 Conclusion 140

CHAPTER 4: FINAL CONCLUSIONS 151

4.1 Final conclusions 151
4.2 Extension and development of the research 152

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 **List of Illustrations** 153

Part One: List of Plates I – XXXXI 198

Part Two: List of Figures 1 – 86 214

Appendix II **Outcomes of the ethnographic research in museums - case study of the Bakota Reliquary figure in Bristol Museum** 217

Appendix III **i) Map showing an overview of the original Mijikenda Settlement** 219

ii) Map of Giriama locations visited on the Kenyan coast 220

Volume 2

Appendix IV **Synopsis of the field work research in Kenya** 227

Appendix V **Field work questionnaire and diaries whilst in Kenya** 230

Part One: Field work questionnaire 232

Part Two: Field work diaries in Kenya from 14 July to 2 September, 1999 - Giriama coastal regions 292

Part Three: Field work diaries in Kenya from 22 March to 18 April, 2001 - '*Crossing Boundaries*' exhibition, National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi 316

BIBLIOGRAPHY 323

List of Illustrations

To accompany the main text of the thesis the following images are documented in Appendix I, Part One: List of Plates and Part Two: List of Figures.

Introduction

Plate I	Kenyan Environment and Landscape 1989-1990
Figure 1	Maasai Mara before a storm - dramatic lighting conditions
Figure 2	Ndoto Hills - earth roads
Figure 3	Magardi, Southern Kenya - contrast of black and white in the landscape
Figure 4	Magardi Soda Lake - early evening
Figure 5	Dead Zebra, Maasai Mara - vulnerability and mortality
Figure 6	Willow Sticks 1996 - willow sticks, recycled and mixed media
Figure 7	Willow Sticks 1996 - detail
Figure 8	Holly Sticks 1996 - holly sticks, recycled and mixed media
Figure 9	Healing Amulet 1996 - mixed media and found objects
Figure 10	BaKota Reliquary Figure, Gabon, West Africa. Bristol City Museum
Figure 11	Column with plastic corrugations 1998 - plaster, plastic corrugated sheet
Plate II	Kenyan Landscape - Suswa 1989 - emphasising earth as the prevalent and major component of the landscape
Figure 12	Details of column surfaces - plaster, corrugated cardboard

Chapter 1

Plate III	MacKenzie Karisa Ngala, craftsman and Gohu member, with Vigango to Kaina Ngala and Gandi Ngala 1999
Plate IV	Shrine showing Vibao and Koma at the homestead of Mzee Mgumbao Mkare Mlewa, Konjora, near Ganze 1999
Plate V	Vigango, Vibao and Koma at the homestead of Charo and Ali Kivalo at Chalani, Kaloleni 1999
Plate VI	House Construction in Giriamaland 1999
Figure 13	Mud column, near Ganze
Figure 14	Modern Giriama house construction at Gotani
Figure 15	Traditional Giriama grass house, near Dida
Plate VII	Contrast of Buildings in Nairobi 1999
Plate VIII	A Selection of Shelters built in Mombasa 1999
Figure 16	Local vernacular architecture - wood and tin
Figure 17	Fence made of flour sacks sewn together
Figure 18	Local vernacular architecture - wood, cement, tin, *mbati*
Figure 19	Local vernacular architecture - wood and paint
Figure 20	Shelter - wood, *mbati*, and concrete blocks
Plate IX	Baptist Mission, Gotani 1999
Figure 21	Baptist Mission left derelict showing 'outside' influences in architectural form

Figure 22 Detail of Mission house wall showing casting technique using sewn flour sacks, chickenwire reinforcement and cement, creating a cavity wall

Chapter 2

Figure 23 Workmen's huts made of earth. Tea plantations, Limuru 1989

Figure 24 Column with stick impressions, plaster 1999

Figure 25 Guttering with cement positive (and negative) stick impression 1999

Figure 26 Box - plaster, corrugated cardboard 1998

Figure 27 Egg shaped Basket and forms - withies, wax, hair, beads, pva, ribbon 1998

Figure 28 i) Plaster guttering column with finger impressions 1999
ii) Detail of finger impressions on final Wall Piece 2003

Figure 29 Window - plaster, chickenwire, computer components 1998

Plate X *Shelter 1999/2000* - panels in the process of being cut away from the main structure

Figure 30 Decomposing Kigango1999

Plate XI *Panel II* 2000 - hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal, mod-roc, chip paper, gloss paint. 54" x 47"

Plate XII *Panel V* 2000 - hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal, blue powder paint. 55" x 47"

Plate XIII *Gap Piece 2001* - plaster, wood and *Panel V.* 58" x 48" and variable thickness

Plate XIV *Final Wall Piece 2003* - Detail - plaster, clay, anaglypta wallpapers, wood, bolts, sticks, roof battening. 90" x 72" x 18"

Plate XV	*Floor Piece I 2003* - plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battening. 49" x 35" x 7"
Plate XVI	*Floor Piece II 2003* - plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battening. 49" x 35" x 7"
Plate XVII	*Floor Piece III 2003* - plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battening. 49" x 35" x 7"
Plate XVIII	*Panel III 2000*
Figure 31	*Panel III* - Hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal, mod-roc, paint. 54" x 47"
Figure 32	*Panel III* with studio brick wall
Figure 33	Ochre preparation, near Dida 1999
Figure 34	Kigango using household paint 1999
Figure 35	Giriama house structure using Mkone bark to tie stick joints 1999
Plate XIX	Mud drawing 1999 - details
Figure 36	Clay, charcoal, pencil, gum arabic, shellac
Figure 37	Clay, charcoal, pencil, gum arabic, shellac
Plate XX	*Shelter 1999/2000* - Interior. Hazel sticks, sisal, clay, sand, straw. 70" x 19" x 150"
Plate XXI	*Shelter 1999/2000* - Entrance. Hazel sticks, sisal, clay, sand, straw. 70" x 19" x 150"
Figure 38	Finger impressions in the clay 2000
Figure 39	*Shelter* - Interior 2000. Dappled light entering through the holes left in the structure

Plate XXII	*Shelter 1999/2000* - details
Figure 40	*Shelter:* exterior surface showing holes through to interior
Figure 41	*Shelter:* exterior surface showing holes through to interior
Figure 42	*Shelter*: exterior surface showing holes through to interior
Figure 43	*Shelter*: exterior surface showing holes through to interior
Figure 44	*Shelter*: exterior surface showing holes through to interior
Plate XXIII	*Shelter 1999/2000* - panel cut away from side wall
Plate XXIV	*Panel I* and Studio Shots 2000
Figure 45	*Panel I 2000* - hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal. 54" x 47"
Figure 46	Studio shot with initial panels cut out of *Shelter*
Figure 47	Studio shot with *Panel I* and drawing experiments
Figure 48	*Love Charm* - spherical forms (detail) 1996
Plate XXV	Plaster moulds from *Shelter* clay units 2000
Figure 49	Plaster moulds
Figure 50	Latex forms made from plaster moulds
Figure 51	Chickenwire maquette 2000 - chickenwire, newspaper, paint. 14" x 8"
Figure 52	Panel graphite transfer to the studio wall 2000
Figure 53	White wire contour against the studio wall 2000 - wire, paint. 20"
Plate XXVI	*Panel IV* with latex 'skin' 2000

Plate XXVII *Panel III* with latex skin being removed 2000

Figure 54 *Skin Series* - brickwork 2000. Latex. 54" x 47"

Figure 55 Drawing with glue size on tracing paper 2000. 54" x 47"

Figure 56 Drawing on tracing paper with latex covering 2000. 54" x 47"

Plate XXVIII *Chickenwire Reliefs 2000*

Figure 57 *Chickenwire Relief I* - chickenwire, newspaper, glue, paint. 54" x 23"

Figure 58 *Chickenwire Relief II* - chickenwire, tissue paper, glue. 54" x 23" both sections

Figure 59 *Skin Series* - taken from the back of a panel plaster mould 2000

Plate XXIX *Redcliffe Cave Installation*, Bristol 2000. *Shelter* units cut in half, covered in mod-roc, painted blue and placed on the floor

Chapter 3

Figure 60 Wire grid contour with weld mesh from the *Panel Series* - wire, masking tape, weld mesh 2002. 54" x 47"

Figure 61 Details of joints with masking tape 2002

Figure 62 Wire contours of individual clay units from Shelter 2001

Figure 63 *Gap Piece 2001* - back view

Plate XXX *Gap Piece 2001* - detail showing positive and negative impressions in the mould making processes, creating a sense of presence and absence

Plate XXXI Wire Maquettes 2002

Figure 64 Frame with chickenwire (freestanding). 13" x 11"

Figure 65 Frame with chickenwire (side view) wall mounted. 13" x 11"

Figure 66	Frame with wire contours, masking tape and fragmented weld mesh (freestanding). 13" x 11"
Figure 67	Frame with wire contours and masking tape (freestanding) 13" x 11"
Figure 68	Frame with layered and pierced weld mesh (freestanding) 13" x 11"
Figure 69	Frame incorporating flaccid wire frame of the same dimensions (freestanding) 13" x 11"
Figure 70	Large-scale flaccid frame based on the outer edges and dimensions of *Gap Piece* (see Plate XIII)
Plate XXXII	Plaster Maquette 2002. Negative spaces created by using clay plugs in the casting process. 13" x 11" with variable sides
Figure 71	Wire brickwork taken from the back of *Gap Piece 2002*. 54" x 47"
Plate XXXIII	Plaster and Wire Maquettes 2002
Figure 72	Wall with holes - plaster, sticks, clay impressions. 15" x 13" x 1"
Figure 73	Wall with holes - detail
Figure 74	Horizontal piece - plaster, anaglypta wallpaper, roofing batten, wire. Approximately 13" x 13"
Figure 75	Earth 'brick' on runners - plaster, earth, wood battens. 17" x 10" x 5"
Figure 76	Earth 'brick' on runners - detail
Figure 77	Platform pierced by sticks - plaster, sticks, paint. 15" x 13" x 40"
Plate XXXIV	Plaster and Wire Maquettes 2002
Figure 78	Sticks and plaster hole (blue) 11" x 13" x 13"
Figure 79	Sticks and plaster hole (blue) - detail
Figure 80	Sticks and plaster hole made from polystyrene cavity

Figure 81 Chickenwire hole and weld mesh plate. 13" x 8" x 10"

Figure 82 Plaster/earth column suspended in weld mesh. 13" x approx. 6-8" diameter

Plate XXXV Maquette showing Earth *Hole* suspended above ground 2002. Plaster, sticks, weld mesh. 12" x 8" diameter

Plate XXXVI Full-Scale *Earth Hole* in field 2002

Figure 83 Earth hole dug down 4 feet by 3 feet across tapering towards the bottom

Figure 84 Plaster lining the hole and made ready to dig out

Figure 85 *Hole* with chickenwire reinforcement

Plate XXXVII First Full-Scale *Wall Piece* 2002 - sticks, roofing batten, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta wallpaper. 90" x 72" x 18"

Plate XXXVIII Two Full-Scale *Wall Pieces* 2003 - sticks, roofing batten, wood, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta wallpaper. 78" x 56" x 18"

Figure 86 Erecting of *Final Wall Piece* with forklift truck 2003

Plate XXXIX First maquette for *Final Wall Piece* 2003 - sticks, roofing batten, wood, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta wallpaper. 18" x 10" x 2"

Plate XXXX Layers of Wallpaper 2003 - anaglypta wallpapers

Plate XXXXI *Final Wall Piece* 2003 - Front view of plaster, sticks, roofing batten, sisal, clay, scrim, string, anaglypta wallpaper, wood, bolts, polystyrene, foam. 90" x 72" x 18"

List of Appendices

Volume 1

Appendix 1 — **List of Illustrations**

Part One: **List of Plates**

Part Two: **List of Figures**

Appendix II — **Outcomes of the ethnographic research in museums - case study of the BaKota Reliquary figure in Bristol City Museum**

Appendix III

i) **Map showing an overview of the Original Mijikenda Settlements**

ii) **Map of Giriama locations visited on the Kenyan coast**

Volume 2

Appendix IV — **Synopsis of the field work research in Kenya 1999**

Appendix V — **Field work questionnaire and diaries whilst in Kenya**

Part One: Fieldwork questionnaire

Part Two: Fieldwork diaries in Kenya from 14 July to 2 September, 1999 - Giriama coastal regions.

Part Three: Fieldwork diaries in Kenya from 22 March to 18 April, 2001 – '*Crossing Boundaries*' exhibition, National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi

AUTHOR DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed:

Date: 16th April, 2004

K Parsons
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GLOSSARY

Anthropology

The generic definition of Anthropology in the Collin's English Dictionary is 'the study of man, his origins, physical characteristics, institutions, religious beliefs, social relationships, etc' which encompasses too broad an approach for this study. There are many branches of anthropology with social anthropology, cultural anthropology and even of late visual anthropology. For a discussion of the various approaches to social anthropology, Lewis (1985) in Social Anthropology in Perspective', gives a comprehensive survey. However for this study the anthropological emphasis is on 'Material Culture', or the object under investigation, which was the Giriama Commemorative Grave Posts of Kenya in relationship to their social, religious, and cultural context. This lead on to making art work in response to this information.

Appropriation

Term used to describe the borrowing of ideas or superficial appearance of objects from another culture usually associated with artists in the West who take from poorer societies without acknowledgment of their sources or reference to the context of the object. However hooks (1995:11) thought that *unless* 'appropriation' was synonymous with exploitation by the *other*, it would be mutually beneficial for artists, and that appropriation or diffusion has in fact been quite usual between cultures for centuries.

Art Povera

A group of artists practicing in the1960's encompassing conceptual art, earthworks, and raw materials used non-conventionally. They explored the relationship between art and life as it was manifest in natural processes or cultural dynamics, bridging the natural and the artificial, the urban and the rural, Mediterranean life and Western modernity (Celant, 1969; Christov-Bakargiev,1999).

Authentic

Meaning unique, or original. In the case of African ethnographic artifacts, it often refers to a ritual object that has been used in ceremonies and therefore is not made for the tourist trade. This then attracts more financial value to the objects for collectors/connoisseurs in the West. Ironically too, for the Africans, these items become a means of income although usually for the unscrupulous. In terms of modern African art, as opposed to ethnographic artifacts Enwezor (1994:6) suggests, 'the essential nature of this discourse, need not be concerned with facile categories, nor should it be tailored to fit prefabricated molds of what some might consider to be an 'authentic' African viewpoint. In a world of cross-pollination of ideas, movement between and within cultures, perception and reality, one can no more speak of authentic African art, any more than one can speak of authentic Asian or European art'. Therefore in a global context

these categories, or identities, can be more ambiguous, and therefore has less to do with 'authenticity' and economic value through historical lineage. (Feagin and Maynard, 1997; Steiner, 1994)

Binary Oppositions

In spite of being used as a 'Structuralist' methodology, used primarily in linguistic analysis, anthropology and feminist theory, I have used elements of reversal in the artwork not as inferior or superior facets of the artwork or cultural concerns, but as an enrichment of visual information and understanding through contrast. As MacCormack (1980) says, "By perceiving opposites or contrasts the mind builds up its perceptions of the world. One does not perceive light without knowing darkness, nor unvoiced fricatives without knowing voiced ones" (p.2). (Hawkes, 1977; MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Sarup, 1993)

Culture

Culture has been described by Kornhauser (1978) as 'shared meanings by which people give order, expression and value to common experiences' which was socially devised by the people in it and formed a collective identity. The definition in the Collins English Dictionary (3rd.ed, 1991) that culture was the total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group' applied to both the anthropological research and the art practice. (Clifford, 1988; Geertz, 1975; Hiller, 1991)

Cobra

A group of artists centred in three locations Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam from 1949. Like the artists of L'Art Brut they were interested in art of psychiatric patients, children and the folk art from developing countries. (Maizels, 2002).

Context

The term is often used to mean the location or country of the artifact or artwork and its relationship to the situation the object is placed in or originated from. It also refers to places such as galleries or museums or other sites, which display or collect sculptural objects/artifacts. All these contexts' are highly politic in relationship to interpretation. (Myers, 1999; Price 1986 / 1989; Tawadros and Campbell 2003)

Ethnographic

Collins English Dictionary describes this as the branch of anthropology that deals with the scientific description of individual human societies. The main emphasis in this thesis is not on Giriama society per se; although attention is paid to their rituals and ceremonies connected with death, but the philosophical and aesthetic ideas concerned with the posts

in terms of the practical work. In this regard it is an interest in material culture, not so much in how the sociological context affected the outcomes of the research exclusively, taking a relative approach over all. The social, religious, and cultural aspects of the posts are also important and therefore recorded. However, the local environment, architecture and building materials and processes become the most crucial factors for the subsequent art work, in conjunction with the examination of the commemorative posts within this context.

Exotic

Often referred to when creating a separation between distant equatorial cultures with that of our own, indicating mystery and a romantic view of another unfamiliar place. Tendency for this term to be used in the Colonial era and politically derisive in certain contexts (Clifford, 1988; Geertz, 1975; Hiller, 1991).

Hermeneutic Circle

Gray (1992:133) describes this as 'A philosophical conundrum in interpretation: how can we understand a part of a work without first having some ideas of the whole, yet how can we have a view of the whole without first understanding the part?'. This is inherent in the practical work, which started with the symbolic investigation of the posts, following through to architectural concerns, and then to the final sculptural pieces. The final sculpture, on reflection and analysis, draws symbolic parallels to the philosophical elements of the posts and therefore turns full circle.

Heuristic

Theoretical model used in this research, whereby interpretation is seen as something to be arrived at by the gradual interplay between the information gathered and the researcher's background. According to Lacey (1996: 131) it is concerned with discovery as opposed to proof, in that the procedure for achieving a result does not consist of applying general rules which would be *guaranteed* to lead to a particular result. It therefore incorporates a process of self discovery along the way, and activates an interplay between the information and experiences gathered and the researcher's position and background.

Identity

For artists this remains a complex issue, as although being part of a large group given a national identity, they will nominally be partisan to a group of people or other artists with similar values and beliefs. However their position as a group is often on the margins of society given societies' attitudes towards artists and art, and this is often accompanied by economic considerations. This appeared to be the same with both UK and Kenyan artists groups, however the level of financial deprivation in Kenya was considerably worse, exacerbated by no government welfare system and devoid of an audience educated to appreciate the type of art known in the West - referring to 'art for art's sake', whereas most 'art' in Kenya operated in connection with some reference to social, economic or

religious function.

Kaya

African word referring to a sacred burial ground in Kenya, usually followed by the name of the tribal group but sometimes place eg. Kaya Kaume, Kaya Fungo respectively. (Adamson, 1973; Parkin, 1991; Spear, 1978; Tinga, 1997; Willis, 1996).

Koma

This word can be applied to all the posts, including Vigango, Vibao and Koma, as a generic term, however it refers to the short sticks placed next to the Vigango or Vibao and represents the wives of these ancestors, or in the shrines sometimes uninitiated males, as they are sometimes classified as female in this instance.

L'Art Brut

A movement in art established by the artist Jean Dubuffet around 1948 which celebrated the self taught artist with particular reference to the art of psychiatric patients, children and some art from developing countries regarded as 'primitive' (Peiry, 2001; Maizels, 2002).

Mijikenda

This is the generic term for all nine tribal groups that first settled along the ridge of the Kenyan coast, having migrated from Somalia during the16th.century, and some sources say even earlier. The Giriama is one of these tribal groups, the others were Chonyi, Digo, Duruma, Jibana, Kambe, Kaume, Ribe, and Rabai.

Mud

This term is used to describe a mixture of earth and water to create a more fluid material especially for house building. Can be seen as politically incorrect due to Western stereotyping of African house building being referred to as 'mud huts', however in the text it is used to describe the consistency of the earth/soil mixture used in the artwork and the Kenyan architecture.

Myth

Myth in the text is used ' not [as] 'classical' mythology so much as the complex system of images and beliefs which a society constructs in order to sustain and authenticate its sense of its own being i.e. The very fabric of its system of 'meaning'. (Hawkes 1977: 107). This definition can also be applied to language and how we construct a 'reality' by its use and structure. Harrison and Wood (1992:687) refer to 'myth' as a semiological system, and Roland Barthes (1973:117) calls it a 'system of communication or message whereby a word or object (the *signified*) becomes a *signifier* eg. a Rose, which *signifies* a

meaning such as 'passion', therefore the Rose becomes a *sign*. However, the '*signifier*' or mental concept, can have multiple meanings depending on the context, culture and even syntax, and therefore can become 'free-floating'. This in consequence, leads to ambiguity or plurality of meaning, which is associated with Post-Structuralist / Postmodernist theories and Barthes describes as secondary signification – see last section of 'Myth Today' in Barthes 'Mythologies' (p.117 – 174). Therefore this then impacts on the subsequent interpretation(s) being made. This research in its interpretive approach by its very nature, constructed its own meaning through the available information and the development of a metaphorical language.

Paradigm

Used in research terminology to refer to a pattern, model or methodology.

Post-Colonialism

In terms of literary criticism it has been suggested that the previously colonized countries have taken on influences or shared basic characteristics of their colonizing country, and gradually learnt to adapt, integrate or appropriate some of these outside influences as their own. This was seen through the research in Kenya, where the Giriama had been converted to other faiths other than the traditional religion being investigated, or had adopted a hybrid form of two religions, such as Christianity or Islam with their traditional beliefs. Along with external influences modifying their religious values and beliefs, so it was with many other facets of their society, including house building, using the rectangular forms seen in Western cultures, along with building materials such as cement. Some of these changes and adaptations were positive and others not so. Kenya gained its independence from Britain in 1963.

Post-Structuralism

According to the Penguin 'Dictionary of Sociology' (1994) it is a form of analysis associated with the philosopher Jacques Derrida, and although sharing ideas of former Structuralism (see below) dealing with oppositions, and difference, it then also incorporated relativism. For example to use a linguistic analogy, "Texts can only be understood in relation to other texts, not in relationship to an external reality against which they can be tested or measured" (p.328). In the research the artwork that was made in one culture was more clearly understood by exhibiting it in another culture, by comparing creative beliefs and values, as well as materials and processes used to make the sculpture, it was not based on generalised knowledge.

Another characteristic of this theory was the idea of instability and the temporary nature of meanings, which opens up multiple narratives, or self-generated constructions or interpretations, as meanings are often dependent on the viewers social and cultural background, education and experience. In this respect, according to Gray (1992) on Derrida," Interpretation of meaning is then an endless movement that can never arrive at an absolute" (p.81). Derrida is associated with 'Deconstruction' techniques of analysis

where a text may be examined for its hidden meaning or presuppositions, by comparing the intentions of the writer with the actual form of language used (or materials and processes of the artist) and the sometimes contradictory claims that such a written form (or sculpture) implies. Therefore as well as more obvious meaning in a work of art, there are often more metaphorical, ambiguous, or hidden meanings in a piece of work, which may be revealed to us through a process of deconstruction.

Post-Structuralism has also been linked with the ideology of Post-Modernism.

Primitive

This description used to be applied to art work/people from a developing country during the Colonial era, which was often a term used in an undermining or patronizing way by outsiders. It can also imply being self taught, or used in reference to a simple or naive artistic style (Boas, 1955; Hiller, 1991; Price, 1989; Rubin, 1984). However, where it appears in this text the word was used in its historical context in the main, and occasionally in respect of the influences affecting the work of the Arte Povera and Art Brut artists.

Process-based

Sculpture where the processes involved with the making were visibly evident and form part of the decision-making process of the work aesthetically and by intention.

Recycling

As well as reusing materials which may otherwise be wasted, or found materials, it also refers to the processes of the art work I used by integrating one piece of artwork into another - described in the main text.

Reflexive

Term used to describe a research methodology incorporating a personal response to experiences or things; in this research used in the fieldwork and studio diaries and in the style adopted for documenting part of the written element of the practical art work.

Ritual

This term can mean a repetitive act which may have religious or artistic functions, in the former connected with some spiritual concern and in the latter in the processes of making an object which Gell (in Coote and Shelton, 1995) argued may also have some spiritual significance.

Semiotics

Based on the definition in Gray's 'A Dictionary of Literary Terms' (1992) as " A

Philosophical term for the theory or logic of SIGNS" (p.259). Also in relationship to literature, which was the origin for semiotic study in conjunction with linguistics, Gray notes that, " Semiologists perceive literature as a kind of CODE or institution which transmits and formalizes meanings and values" (p.259). It applies to the visual appearance of an object but also the underlying meaning which may not be so apparent; a visual analogy of this is the iceberg, where the upper tip of the iceberg is visible and maybe more comprehensible to the viewer, but the two thirds underneath the water, which is hidden, could be equated to the meanings/interpretations which may not be so apparent to the viewer, whilst also subject to cultural variation. (Barthes, 1973; Hawkes, 1977).

Sign

According to Gray (1992) "the study of the different ways in which signs function is called SEMIOTICS". The proponents of this theory were Ferdinand de Saussure, and later, Roland Barthes. This research resulted in a combination of UK and Kenyan signifiers that concealed and revealed their meaning, through the use of the materials and processes used in the practical making of the sculptural work.

Stereotype

The generic term in the Collins English Dictionary (third edition) means 'to impart a fixed usage or convention to...' something or 'a standardized image or conception shared by all members of a social group'. Its usage can be positive in order to assist cataloguing a lot of information, however it can equally be reinforcing harmful notions of stereotypes, particularly where race or developing countries are concerned. This became evident when my artwork was shown in both Kenya and UK for local response, where it was found that people viewed the work through their own value and belief systems. In the context of this research the term refers to a form of stereotyping of people, place and artifacts due to lack of knowledge and preconceptions about the unfamiliar. For a more detailed account of stereotyping and prejudice in regard to racism, please refer to my MA thesis '*A Comparative Study of FE Staff's Attitudes to Multi-cultural Curriculum Reform in Art and Design Education*' De Montfort University, 1994, p142, Appendix IV, Checklist on Racism, which includes further references.

Structuralism

According to the Penguin 'Dictionary of Sociology' (1994), certain theorists such as Claude Levi- Strauss and Roland Barthes "hold that there are a set of social structures that are unobservable but which generate observable social phenomena". Levi-Strauss "holds that cultural forms, especially myths, typically take the form of the combinations of opposite qualities, called binary oppositions, such as sweet and sour" (p.415/6), however I do not concede to Strauss's notion that one opposition stands in dominance to the other. In this research I have explored binary opposites and reversal through the way the materials and processes have been used to reflect the personal experience of the two contrasting cultures of Kenya and the UK, with reference to the oppositions found in the

rituals, but more importantly, the positioning and locating of the Kenyan *Vigango* as an artifact in the earth.

Taxonomy

Classification of something into groups. In this research it refers to the criteria applied to the exploration of the sculptural practice, providing a framework and focus for the work.

Vibao

Plural term for the smaller posts, not so elaborately carved, which stand in the shrines next to a homestead in the company of Koma. These posts are coloured exclusively with red ochre and usually stand in rows. These posts represent the Vigango when the Vigango no longer exists, as it metaphorically only had one life echoing human life. Kibao is its singular term.

Vigango

Vigango are commemorative grave posts made by most of the eleven Mijikenda tribes of Kenya including the Giriama. These posts are erected to a male Gohu secret society member who becomes a protective ancestral spirit to the relatives of the homestead. Kigango is the singular term for a post, Vigango being plural. (Brown, 1972 / 1980; Philips, 1995; Spear, 1978; Tengeza, 1998-1999; Wolfe III, 1986).

INTRODUCTION

Until I first went to Kenya my work tended to be a reflection of a Eurocentric training at Chelsea School of Art in life modelling and casting, taking a traditional approach to the making of sculpture. However, although retaining traditional techniques of the casting processes, the imagery and the methods of putting materials together was not traditional. My 'awakening' was established while spending two years in Kenya on a teaching contract (1988 to 1990), where the natural environment became synonymous with life and death for me, and became paramount to my visual and haptic experiences (Plate I Kenyan Environment and Landscape 1989-1990). Ethnographic objects such as head rests, body ornaments, imported masks, Makondi sculpture and other figurines were on the periphery of my interest at this time although the objects which I collected and brought home usually consisted of domestic items, such as baskets, coconut squeezers and cutters, sweeping brushes and the like. This experience changed my perception of my own culture and identity on both a personal and professional level, and led to an interest in anthropological artifacts. I realized how dependent people were on the natural environment for survival and how privileged I was coming from a Western society, with a welfare state. Any artifacts or possessions had significant value to the people that owned or made them, and recycling and repair to them was common place. Prior to going to Africa, the death of my father in 1984 made me more aware of my own mortality and existence, which later became the major theme in my artwork, which has continued into this research. As a consequence these experiences later motivated an anthropological study of the Giriama commemorative grave posts, which informed my art

practice in the initial stages of the research investigation.

On my return to the UK after the teaching contract, I reflected on our sense of natural identity and history, which drew me to the classical column as an icon of Western culture. This I contrasted with separate components made of what I perceived at the time to be organic materials that I associated with Africa generally. This led to an interest in Celtic symbolism combined with using sticks, forming strong associations with Kenya, which in turn led to a series of sticks, wands and amulets symbolically encoded for colour, number and often form, (Figure 6 and 7 *Willow Sticks*; Figure 8 *Holly Sticks*; Figure 9 *Healing Amulet*), involving themes based on 'rites of passage', with particular focus on death and mortality.

This collection of work, although not taken from actual artifacts I could have seen in Africa, represented 'authentic artifacts' for a lot of people in the UK and Malaysia, which fitted their stereotypes of what they assumed about an African culture, as Howell (1991:220) said in Hiller, 'largely shaped by our own ideology', which would also encompass our symbolism. This response was gained through exhibitions at the Hotbath Gallery, Bath (1997) and then at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (1998). In hindsight I may have been subconsciously reinforcing a notion of the past, as with most museums, with all its associations with a culture that seemingly did not change, and yet on a conscious level knowing that every culture has to change and adapt to survive; as Hassan Fathy (1973: 52) said: 'The visual character of a village, like the habits of its population, may change beyond recognition' and confirming this Willet (1995:239) thought that the rate of change had accelerated in the present century due to the 'ever-increasing influx of Western ideas and technology'. Therefore, although being fascinated

with the past and traditional practices, I found myself being politically ambivalent about how I was representing the Giriama to a Western audience, with all the stereotyping and inherent prejudices inherent in the UK. However, the aim and scope of the research was not an overtly political one, but rather an aesthetic and symbolic focus in terms of material culture. Eventually this lead through the art practice to semiotic elements of the work being recognizable to both the UK and Kenyan cultures. This was initiated through the visual and theoretical information and experiences gained from the fieldwork, and thereafter by exhibiting in Kenya with the '*Crossing Boundaries*' exhibition of 2001.

Leading up to the fieldwork in Kenya in 1999, I examined a number of African artifacts in museums in the UK and carried out a close study of the BaKota Reliquary figures of Gabon, West Africa (Figure 10 BaKota reliquary figure). I found that information about their function was limited and their provenance often unreliable. Coupled with this there was no reference to the environmental or cultural context from which they originated, nor any reflexive account recorded. In the light of this I identified a need to investigate these objects through making a field trip to the place where these artifacts were still used and made. As I was interested in mortality as a prominent theme, and I was already familiar with the Kenyan culture, I chose to investigate the Giriama commemorative grave posts, called *Vigango*, made for a member of the Gohu secret society. The fact that I already had some 'inside' knowledge of Kenya and how to travel internally was an essential factor when only being able to spend relatively short periods of time researching in the field and/or exhibiting there.

In the initial stages of the research I made a brief survey of a group of European artists including Picasso, Henry Moore, Turnbull and Paolozzi, who had been influenced

by the artifacts of Africa, and how they had re-interpreted or appropriated their sources from other cultures into their work. It was found that the context and original intentions of the artifacts, were often not known to the artist, or they were overlooked in order to appropriate the superficial appearance of the object, or absorb formal solutions to their own formal problems.

European sculptors influenced by African artifacts

This is *not* intended to be an art historical review of European artists, but just to suggest the role they played at a time when African artifacts were gaining interest as inspiration for art work, and the nature of ethnographic objects becoming transformed as 'art' in the West by being displayed in a different cultural context to their own making and use.

The positive aspect of artists, such as Picasso and others, taking an interest in African artifacts for public display, was that it developed an awareness and appreciation of these objects to be seen and admired in their own right, by the West - though without necessarily an understanding of their original context. It then became a new way of looking at and promoting African artifacts as art objects, however as Vogel (Shapiro, 1994: 8) said, 'using African formal solutions to address their own formal problems, Western artists made works that resembled or reinvented African Sculpture'. In other words they often directly appropriated these forms as their own, without acknowledgment of their sources, as Pennie (1995:10) described, 'According to Jack Flam, Western artists had the choice of two possible responses; either intellectually, to the remarkable formal ideas or an emotional response to a romantic view of an imagined life'. However even a

contemporary artist such as Richard Serra (Shapiro, 1994: 85) felt no necessity to understand or investigate the context behind these artifacts with comments , such as,

> I do not have any knowledge of the social and religious function of the anthropological meaning of the Lobi sculpture. The original use and meaning escape me completely.
> I am left with my own subjective response to construct a new meaning. However inaccurate or false, this meaning becomes useful to me.

Likewise, Paolozzi, a recent sculptor too, felt no need to understand the context in order to make artwork, taking the imaginative response.

In opposition to this view, the context of the Giriama commemorative grave posts became central to the production of art work, reflecting my interest in the representation and mediation of human mortality through the posts but also the shrines above the posts and the local vernacular architecture. Therefore the artistic output was not by appropriation or reinvention of forms, seen in isolation from the original context, but transformed into art work through the fieldwork experiences.

I identified very much with the comment that Turnbull made about art being part of his life experience. In this sense my experiences of travelling from an early age and having a grandfather who wrote books on travelling and attempting to fly around the world, also impacted on how l perceived and interacted in the world. As Morphet (1973: 25) said of Turnbull's work of the 1950s: 'Essential is the idea that art cannot be generated by art alone, but springs equally from experience of life outside art', and echoing this the Poiriers said 'As we encountered other cultures, other religions, we realized that it was in fact culture that interested us, and more than the ruin itself, everything that is related to it'. Contextualising the work in conjunction with a self reflexive approach, was a feature of the research – see 1.2 Methodology section for

explanation of this approach to the research.

Where I consider my work differed from more traditional Western artists, who dealt with permanency, was in the *intention*, evident in the use of materials. I used ephemeral, organic materials as a means of conveying the ephemeral nature of human life/existence, which was reflected in the temporary nature of the sculpture with an emphasis on 'process based' techniques and handling of materials. The fact that other sculptors have used seductive materials such as bronze, marble, and beautiful woods in the past to enhance their work reflected a certain type of aesthetic, however it was not my intention, in fact the reverse, indicating a different aesthetic, more along the lines of the *L'Art Brut* group of 1948/9.

L'Art Brut, whose exponent was Jean Dubuffet, advocated new ways of looking at the intellectual and aesthetic criteria of art, which could be traced back to the eighteenth century synonomy with Rousseau and the '*Noble Savage*'. Inherent in this philosophy was finding a freedom from tradition, a rejection of the modern, and the recent industrialised society, as Howell in Hiller (1991:226) suggested,

> the interest in so-called 'primitive' art in the twentieth century by many artists, collectors, curators, and the public was rooted in a romanticization of the 'primitive' – not a new phenomenon in the West, but a particularly potent one in this century, possibly reflecting a reaction against a perceived dehumanization in modern life, and a longing for a purer, less decadent culture.

This was also affirmed by Bornstein (1995) who argued that mechanization moved us further and further away from our natural environment and transformed people into 'consumers'.

After living in Kenya for two years from 1988 to 1990, I had to re-evaluate my art

college training, which meant that I started using natural and found materials as opposed to more permanent and seductive materials. Due to the prevalent economic concerns in Kenya, I also adopted a recycling ethos, which became prominent in emphasizing *process* later on in the work from *Shelter* onwards. As there was access to little or no sophisticated machinery in Kenya I also decided to continue to use processes that needed basic technology, which emphasised the hand made and human qualities in the processes of the work. As Curtis (1999: 146) said according to Moholy-Nagy in "*The New Vision*", 'Hand sculptures are nearest to the timeless forms of any age because they express the pure functions of the hands', which is evident throughout my work and can be seen in the handling of the clay in *Shelter* and in the *Final Wall Piece* in the finger prints cast inside the wall and down the edges of it – see Figure 38 Finger impressions in the clay, Plate XXXIX *First Maquette for Final Wall Piece* and XXXXI *Final Wall Piece*.

L'Art Brut had little to do with the art of 'other' cultures, although it could be seen under the umbrella term of *Outsider Art* and another form of inspiration and appropriation for artists. As Peiry (2001: 163) said, 'Many have accused Dubuffet of having enlisted him [Gaston Chaissac] in L'*Art Brut*, of having fleeced and plagiarized him, before disowning him and relegating his work to the auxiliary collections'. More recently the African artist, El Anatsui ' understood perfectly how simple appropriation the cast-off forms of other artists or cultures produces nothing of lasting merit, and betrays ones art to irrelevance in the process' (Picton et al 1998:34). However, although hooks (1995: 11) defined the negative aspect of appropriation as exploitation, she did not feel that *all* appropriation was necessarily bad, in that it was a common practice among artists to exchange ideas and be influenced by them,

'Appropriation - taking something for one's own use - need not be synonymous with exploitation. This is essentially true of cultural appropriation. The 'use' one makes of what is appropriated is the crucial factor. Now that we live in a global society this borrowing and sharing of ideas, would seem a natural and positive phenomenon where mixing is celebrated, where the cultural interchanges that disrupt patterns of domination are dismantled, so that an ethnic reciprocity and mutual engagement forms the aesthetic grounds where the subject can be constantly changing and not static, fixed and always separate'.

I appreciated the art of psychiatric patients, and the art of the *L'Art Brut* movement and *Outsider art*, having previously trained and worked as an art therapist in a psychodynamic environment. This intuitive approach to making artwork, along with a symbolic sensitivity, appealed to an anti-intellectual, anti-High art way of making artwork, which was refreshing and even more poignant to my practice, having taught art in Kenya without European materials and sophisticated equipment. A symbolic code of practice was usual in Kenya, in religious and social organisation, and from this encoding reinforced my own art work. This added meaning to it rather than it being work representing a merely pleasing visual aesthetic. Where my work differed, as an artist, from a purist approach to what Dubuffet advocated, in the self taught artists he selected for collection and exhibition, was that I operated on *both* a conscious level of aesthetic awareness, incorporating self-reflexive processes, as well as operating on an intuitive subconscious level. Therefore, not being self-taught, I was naturally working from a specific postmodernist background, not in a vacuum, unlike the artists from *L'Art Brut*.

The '*Arte Povera*' exhibition at the Tate Modern, in the summer of 2001, I found inspiring with its emphasis on process and experimentation, its potential for ideas, and sometimes quite raw presentation. Their use of basic and mundane materials 'that had been banned from the realm of high art' (Franzke 1992:15) and the way they were

combined, joined and presented was very influential to my sense of the ephemeral and temporary, as Christov-Bakargiev (1999:25) said:

> '"Arte Povera" works are often complex and multilayered, widely different from one another even when made by the same artist, and avoid the homogenising, design-orientated, recognisable artist's "style" of late Modernism.'

It was also described as 'embracing of complexity, difference and uncertainty', which I also felt reflected elements of my own working ethos from a Postmodernist position. Elements which seemed to echo some of my own were the comparison of inside and outside, positive and negative juxtapositions of organic with man-made materials, their interest in semiology, the phenomenon of 'self experiencing the world' and the fact that it was essentially nonconformist. Christov-Bakargiev (1999: 46) stated:

> 'In the 1990s, interest in Arte Povera continues, both because it sees art as communication and process, and because it critiques the purely visual in favour of a practice based on the simultaneity of perception, pleasure and a layering of cultural and contextual references. The freedom to use heterogeneous materials, such as food and live animals, has been widely taken up, as has Arte Povera's free, anti-production aesthetic that turned to cultures of the past as much as to the future, that conjoined "high" and "low", painting and decoration, "self" and "other", "Western" and "non-Western".'

In essence, I found these proclamations exciting as I liked the idea of the temporal, although I also engaged with the process and physicality of making and conveying my ideas to an audience which results in the production of an object, as do a lot of the artists of *Arte Povera* in spite of their manifestos.

Henry Moore's work can be seen to be very directly appropriated from other cultures in formal terms, in such works as Moore's '*Reclining Figure'* (1929) compared with the Mexican '*Chacmool'* figure in the British Museum, which was what he was essentially interested in when looking at other culture's work. As Goldwater cited (1986:

246)

> 'He is of course aware of its power and symbolic presence, but he has not tried to carry over this element of its "primitiveness" into his own work; he goes to it almost entirely for its formal lessons'.

The aspect of order and chaos in a lump of clay or the evolution of a rock or a series of work displaying some aspect of change interested me. This idea of change and chance seemed to reflect today's society, whereas the intentions in the work of Moore and De Kooning suggested something more static. In the former case Moore's work focused on formal arrangements of mass, and in the latter, showed considerable fluidity, but within a set 'style'. Both artists were essentially concerned with depicting the human figure rather than the 'absence' of the figure. Traditionally casting did not allow for unknown factors to happen and was fundamentally a method of translating one medium into a replica of another without changing the form, whereas in my use of casting the techniques used relied quite heavily on serendipity, by adapting the mould using flimsy and unpredictable material which allowed for this element of chance to occur.

Picasso's use of found objects challenged preconceived notions about the relationship of form to content, and the processes and materials he used in the sculpture of his time, which I found exciting and particularly in his use of serendipity. He also had a very passionate and subjective view of his art, which I empathised with. In Chipp (1968: 264), from a statement by Picasso in 1923, he said,

> 'from the point of view of art there are no concrete or abstract forms, but only forms which are more or less convincing lies. That those lies are necessary to our mental selves is beyond any doubt, as it is through them that we form our aesthetic point of view of life'.

This deeply philosophical response to life and art, it could be suggested, led to personal interpretations in the absence of more objective mechanisms for analysis, which in the

case of African artifacts, because there was little or no written evidence often, became a matter of interpretation, usually by someone 'outside' the culture. Beier (1963: 9) defended this approach, which also appealed to Barthes' later ideas of 'secondary signification' although this still only paid lip service to any contextual information,

> 'Interpretation or appreciation of African art is always subjective and there is no reason why it should not be so. Art criticism is not a science. African art is highly symbolic and it is the nature of a symbol that it allows more than one interpretation, and that it can also arouse one thing in the person who creates it, and another in the person who looks at it'.

Picasso said of his work that 'My work is not symbolic ... only the Guernica mural is symbolic' (Chipp, 1968: 487) which was perhaps where my work differed from his in that of my work adopted a symbolic approach, as Salgas (1994:17) said 'Eighty years after the 'Demoiselles d'Avignon', then, what are the conditions for speaking of – and exhibiting – a global art, in more than merely formal terms'. Although not condoning an homogenizing 'global art', a formalist approach alone without an understanding of the cultural context was not inclusive enough for me. His playful use of materials appealed to my way of working, although not for its own sake, but in a meaningful, symbolic relationship with the form, content and context of the work.

Picasso's 'ugly distortion' in his work went against the current trend in the conventional aesthetic at the time, which in some way echoed the approach that I took towards convention, in terms of a Western aesthetic. Picasso's interest in metamorphosis as a concept as in *'Bull's Head'* (1942), interested me in terms of altering and changing the nature of the materials, or in this case the handle bars and bicycle seat, into something else. Casting something can transform and present the object to give it another meaning and/or visual appearance, which occurred in my use of latex to transform the formal

properties of one material, clay and straw, into forms that were semi-transparent, hollow and light in weight and with an interior and an exterior - see Plate XXV Figure 50 *Latex forms*, and Plate XXVI *Panel IV*, detail. I also used paint and wallpaper to explore the idea of transforming or changing the appearance of the '*Panels*' - see Plate XII *Panel V*. Then finally the sculptural pieces were transformed again by producing digital photographic prints. This exploratory process through the materials and processes became the method by which I arrived at the final pieces of sculptural work - see Chapter 1, 1.2 Methodology, and Chapter 2 and 3 for the heuristic processes of the research.

The erotic nature of Picasso's work was influenced by his study of prehistoric figures such as '*Venus of Lespugne*' (of which he had casts), and by his emotional response, which was characteristic of his personality. These were elements in my work and characteristic, although not as overtly expressed by Picasso in naturalism, but symbolic form, such as layers, soft and hard materials, vertical structures, round structures, holes and rough and smooth textures.

There is still very little written critically about contemporary African artists work in this country, although Nigeria and South African critics are emerging in the field of aesthetics as applied to their own cultural heritage and understanding; as Maizels (1996:150) asserted,

> Since the end of the colonial era, African art has seen dramatic changes. A new generation of artist has created a vibrant visual vocabulary, drawing on traditional African forms and European techniques.

For reference, Katy Deepwell (1997) has edited a publication from the conference held at the Courtauld Institute titled, '*Art Criticism and Africa*' which outlined some of

the recent developments and critiques in this area, although as Nicodemus (1995:36) said, 'Social conflicts and political instability in these countries have inhibited continuity or prompted the artists' exodus'. Professor John Picton, from the University of London, has also written about contemporary African artists' work, and Daniel Shapiro in '*Western Artists/African Art*' documents a more visual appraisal of artists from both cultures, published by The Museum of African Art, New York. A great number of Africans have had an art training in Europe or USA, and therefore the context for making their art has changed, often contesting the West in terms of political supremacy in regard to the African continent/identity. This changing context for making has occurred due to increased social development and influences from the West in their countries, however there still remains vast economic disparity between cultures and thus the balance of power and opportunities not only to travel, but to gain outside knowledge. Also in poor or African countries, such as Kenya, 'art' for its own sake was still a luxury that few could afford either in time or money, unless it served some functional and often commercial purpose, which dictated the form of work made.

In essence it was the shift from the West, to Eastern Africa and back again, through the two exhibitions of my art work, first in Nairobi and then in London, and the responses I gained from them, that formed the main concerns of this research, and the impact that these responses had on the subsequent art work. My intention in this investigation was to explore the context and meanings of an African object in order to re-interpret, not misinterpret or exoticise the object, and arrive at a transformation of this knowledge into a contemporary visual art form.

This approach has rarely been considered by artists in the West, as it was through

experiencing the background to the posts and seeing them in their original location that I became more aware of the physical, social, cultural and religious contexts and sense of the surrounding environment. Consequently, it was found that the context of production was of greater relevance to an understanding of the *Vigango* than just their physical appearance. Ultimately, through studying the aesthetic and visual appearance of the posts, I also became more aware of the natural aesthetics of the local vernacular architecture, which then became central to the making of sculpture, and which was positioned adjacent to the posts. It was the philosophical ideas of the posts, which interested me most, although, ironically, it was the textural surfaces of the mud houses and other forms of shelter that satisfied my visual curiosity; especially in the way that the Kenyans put local materials together using simple processes of construction and amalgamated found materials. In my work, this integration of the spiritual with the physical worlds became synonymous with the structure and function of a wall, which for the Giriama was achieved through the posts penetrating the earth's surface, which formed a division between the two worlds, the spiritual beneath the earth, and the physical above it. The wall was both a surface and a barrier like the earth, which also became pierced, generating holes or voids, creating an oscillation, or ambiguity, between two spaces or 'worlds'.

Art and artifice

Murphy in Ingold (1994: 655) defined art from an anthropologically useful perspective as ' objects having semantic and of /or aesthetic properties that are used for presentational or representational purposes', however I would suggest that aesthetic properties are very fluid across cultures and that universals in this respect would be

difficult to define.

Although there may be some commonalities across cultures in defining what art is, it was essentially a creative activity defined by the cultural context in which the artifact was made and presented. However, Murphy (1994: 652) in Ingold noted, that 'there is a complex interrelationship between individual intention, the interpretative context of works of art and their institutional definition'. Therefore a relative position when examining an artifact or art work was important, especially when considering the the political, social, cultural and philosophical elements connected with it. In my research, the first African artifact I looked at was the Giriama commemorative grave posts of Kenya. In their original setting they would be attributed aesthetic value, only through the ritual practices and social importance put upon them by their community. The actual carving of the post was considered irrelevant. However when some Giriama commemorative grave posts were displayed at the Royal Academy in 1996 as part of the exhibition, '*Africa: The art of a continent*' they were presented as art work, or at best seen as museum objects devoid of contextual information and therefore it could be argued 'curios'. The photographs in the catalogue to the exhibition showed the posts actually mounted on sculptural plinths, rather than half buried in earth, which I found to be a very important part of their philosophy through examining the cultural and religious context of these artifacts - as documented in Appendix V, Part Two: Field work Diaries in Kenya, 1999. Therefore this exhibition display of the *Vigango* illustrated a total denial of the post's contextual significance, being surrounded by alien material and cut off from their present existence in Kenya, with the added disregard for the symbolic importance of the post, both *below* the ground as well as *above* it.

Therefore the original identity of these posts was dependent on or seen through the established value system of the other culture, in this case the UK, as mentioned previously.

Whilst reconstructing three of the *Panel Pieces* of artwork at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Kenya (2001) for the '*Crossing Boundaries*' show, I worked with some of the African artists from the Kuona Arts Trust. Outside agencies, such as the French, Italian and Japanese cultural centres in Nairobi were giving some sponsorship to these artists and showing their work locally, and therefore encouraging a Western approach to making art. However other 'outsiders' such as Christian and Islamic religious groups were often proactive in the destruction of the more traditional artifacts, such as the *Vigango*. The Giriama, in spite of strict taboos, were told by these missionaries to either burn the posts or give them away, as they were considered to be 'false idols'. This again served to illustrate how different institutional agencies interpreted artifacts in the light of their own belief systems.

The UK context for art, it could be argued, was driven by relative economic wealth in comparison to Kenyan artists, and the formal art training we receive, characterised by a conceptual and analytic approach. Therefore our notion and perception of art or artifice can differ radically from developing countries, such as Kenya, through these value systems intrinsic to specific cultural hegemonies of time and place.

The longstanding art versus craft debate in the UK has perennially been contested, out of which a less easily defined space exists. The fine art or 'art for arts sake' art culture in a developing country was found to be less established as a result of economic concerns and lack of formal art education. In developing countries the artifacts produced,

which in the UK would stereotypically be categorised as craft, were usually of social importance not only as functional/ practical objects, but often displayed some form of local symbolism recognised by that community. Therefore in the Kenyan context, this form of 'art' object would still be regarded by many Africans as more important than the 'art for arts sake', *imported* aesthetic.

The financial implications of a rare artifact either in terms of its availability, authenticity and/or pedigree of owners, tended to lend value to an ethnographic artifact, particularly for dealers and collectors in the West. This recognition and interest in African artifacts as valuable commodities in the West was in part due to Picasso and other artists of the 1920's who were very much influenced by it for their own art practice, but they also formed their own collections of it - for more discussion of the nomadic and contextual aspect of an African artifact and its value to another culture see Steiner (1994) '*African Art in Transit*', 'Capitalising on the category art' pp110-121.

It would seem from this that the art object and the artifice both operated within certain cultural and social boundaries constructed by the various contexts connected with them, such as the country of origin, with differing environmental, social, cultural, religious values and beliefs, the perceived financial value, and importantly for this research, aesthetic and philosophical factors which were explored through the art practice. This became visually represented through the various binary themes that arose whilst making the work such as reversal, horizontal/vertical, solid/void, presence/ absence, interior /exterior, positive/negative, engendered by the concept of concealing and revealing. However no intentional superior or inferior status was assigned to these binary oppositions. Derrida asserted in Sarup (1993:50) 'Deconstructors show that the

'privileged' term depends for its identity on its excluding the other and demonstrate that primacy really belongs to the subordinate term instead', therefore creating some defining co-relation between the two. Nietzsche, quoted in Sarup (1993:46) said 'Metaphor is the establishing of an identity between dissimilar things' which in this research could be read to be the interpretation or 'myth' attached to the final pieces of art work. He also suggested that 'there is no single physical reality [truth] beyond our interpretations. There are only perspectives' (Sarup 1993:45), which was borne out by the responses to the art work shown in Nairobi and London.

Preliminary work

In the preliminary work before the first field trip to Kenya it was not the classical taxonomy of the column that preoccupied me, but its verticality, surface and contour, which I experimented with by adding other building materials, both organic and synthetic, to plaster. These experiments with the column lead to a sculptural framework of the art practice, although at this stage not fully developed or realised – see Methodology Section 1.2 in *Chapter 1*. Through these experiments with materials, I was able to establish not only aesthetic juxtapositions and transformation of form and surface, but I was able to explore visual references associated with the Kenyan utilization and predilection for recycled and found materials. The last column (Figure 11), incorporating plastic corrugated sheeting, appeared to be the most successful metaphorically by bringing together the nature of the fluting on the column, combined with its formal association with corrugated iron, and in its material properties. This contrasted an industrial material with what originally, in historic terms, would have been bundles of

sticks (Figure 11 Column with plastic corrugations). Sticks were a fundamental element of my previous work, and throughout the later constructions for the sculptural work in the research.

The process of casting, although retaining some traditional techniques in the use of a fibreglass mould, in other ways was less conventional and also relied a great deal on serendipity. All the columns in the series showed an accentuation of the cast edges or seams (see Figure 12 Details of Column surfaces) and in all the sculptural work the process of making was emphasised. The techniques for the columns were further developed, by using a squeeze mould method, and then the mould filled from a vertical position. During this process the mould had gone from a horizontal position to a vertical position, much the same as the making of a *Kigango* (refer to Appendix V, Part Two, field work diary, 1999). *Vertical* and *horizontal* elements of making became a recurrent theme throughout the research, in hindsight recognising it as the juxtaposition between the ground or earth and the vertical structure of the *Kigango* itself, or the floor and the wall in the latter stages of the sculptural research. This theme, arising out of the art practice, was reflected and reinforced by what the Giriama spiritual elders in the Kaya Kaume, who told me about the philosophical relevance of the posts. This was that the posts were half buried in the ground, the lower half of the body being in the spiritual world, whilst the exposed portion of the post was revealed and present in the physical world, with the ancestor being omnipresent. To me, therefore, the earth or ground being horizontal was functioning as a barrier between these two worlds. The earth in itself was an interesting surface, along with its associations with procreation and death for the Giriama. Nostalgically it also recalled memories of the orange dust, which was part of

everyday life for me whilst living and moving through the Kenyan landscape (Plate II Kenyan Landscape – Suswa 1989: emphasizing earth as the prevalent and major component of the landscape).

The theme of *concealing* and *revealing*, and vice versa, evolved through the artwork and became the central focus of the final stages of the research. The processes I used in the '*Column Series*', of taking moulding materials away (corrugated cardboard, clay) from the parent mould to reveal the final cast was like revealing something hidden underneath. This was also significant in later work through the removal of layers of wallpaper on the '*Wall Pieces*' revealing its history and origins. This concept of being seen, and yet partially hidden, was the most exciting feature of the *Vigango*, being otherwise rather repetitive in form and aesthetic appearance.

The element of recycling evident in the initial stage of the research was sustained throughout the work from the reusing of materials, therefore creating some form of repetition and continuity, and in later work it was actually combining one piece of work into the next. This started with a mud and stick construction entitled '*Shelter*', using natural materials, taking the measurements from my own body, which echoed the fact that the '*Vigango*' were conceived as being human height. From this structure three panels were cut out of it and used to create the '*Panel Series*' and *'Reliefs'*, followed by the latex '*Skins*' which were in turn taken off the *Panels* as casts, and eventually *Panel V* was incorporated into '*Gap Piece*' (see Plate X *Shelter*; Plate XXIV *Panel I*; Plate XVIII *III*; Plate XII *V*; Plate XXVIII *Chickenwire Reliefs*; Figure 59 *Skin*). After this, the *Walls* were made reusing some of the stick grids and found materials along with new materials.

Elements of decay and regrowth were present in the structure of the columns and

most of the work, which manifested itself through the deconstruction and fragmentation of the sculptures, which was strengthened by the accidental occurrences in the surface textures (Figure 12). The idea of fragmentation runs through the whole research reflecting the symbolism of mortality through decomposition.

The methods I used to construct the final pieces of work revealed the origins of the piece though the combination of materials and construction techniques used, which was an amalgamation of Kenyan techniques with that of my own knowledge of casting, thereby forming a cross-cultural link visually between the two locations. The inherent properties or symbolism of the materials used, also revealed, on examination, their cultural origins. However, it was perhaps through the viewer's perception and cultural hegemony that only one specific set of visual signifiers could be recognised, which was borne out by exhibiting my work in different contexts and countries.

The methodology adopted for the research was both anthropological and sculptural, encompassing philosophical and aesthetic features, using a heuristic approach. It would seem that there was some affinity between traditional anthropological fieldwork, which was rarely defined, and the in-depth investigations that an artist carries out prior to and often during the production of art work. This often utilized a semiological approach, based on observation and investigation, which included a reflexive element (ref. '*Fieldworks*' conference, 2003, Tate Modern). I used diaries, measurements, drawings and photographic records for both my fieldwork in Kenya and the art work produced in the studio. The sculptural work involving the processes and materials included an investigation into scale, measurement, form, materials, colour and texture through casting and construction techniques in each series or group of work, along with the context which

was achieved through exhibiting the work both in Africa and in the UK. The experiments led to insights into making the art work and the evaluation of my intentions, and the contrasting contexts revealed different visual interpretations of the work by audiences across both cultures, thereby enabling me to build on the semiotic features of the work. The *Panels*, *Reliefs* and *Skins* were shown at the National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi (2001) in the solo exhibition, '*Crossing Boundaries*', for comment and evaluation. This was accessed through reconstructing three of the *Panels* with artists from the Kuona Arts Trust and giving various lectures. Then subsequently, after a period of two years, large digital images, taken from sections of the final sculptural work, were exhibited at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, London (2003), where artists and anthropologists came to view and comment on the work.

Photography, was an important part of documenting the art practice, and became progressively significant as images in themselves, often of fragments or details of the sculptural work. By using this process I gained a new insight into the work through the framing and isolation of the object to assist in the analysis of the formal and aesthetic qualities of the work, but later semiotic values. These details became very potent images, which stood alone and were another important outcome of the research.

Towards the end of the research I realised that I had integrated and strengthened, through the use and combination of materials, a semiotic approach, which was recognisable and accessible to a Western audience. The use of anaglypta wallpapers was particularly important as a signifier of domestic interiors in the UK with cracks and holes giving a sense of unease and insecurity, with associations of protection and comfort *usually* afforded by shelter and the home. The use of modern technology to create the

photographic images taken from the sculptural work was also tacitly perceived as being derived from the West. I also realised that the philosophical elements of the *'Vigango'* were reflected succinctly within the sculptural forms I had made, with the piercing of the *Wall Piece*, taking on the features of the Kenyan landscape as well as the posts. Therefore, through the art practice I have attempted to visually absorb and concentrate the contextual and conceptual knowledge, gained while researching the posts and the local architecture, which became focal, into inventing and metaphorically transforming these experiences into a new contemporary art form.

Outlining the research, Chapter 1 sets out the background to the research in describing the approach, context and methodology of the investigation. In Chapter 2 the development of the artwork is described from 1999 to 2001, from the first field trip to Kenya until the *Crossing Boundaries* show in Nairobi, and Chapter 3 deals with the art work from 2001 after this exhibition until 2003, which resulted in the final pieces of sculptural work and subsequent exhibition at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London, of photographs taken from the sculptural pieces. In Chapter 4 the outcomes of the art practice in relationship to the initial research are discussed, and a brief outline is given of the future development and extension of the research. The Appendices document the visual progression of the art practice through the plates and figures listed, and records and locates the anthropological research, providing more detail.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

After investigating a number of African artifacts in museums, both visually through drawing and through the records, and having looked at artists who had been influenced by African artifacts in their art practice, it became evident that a field trip to Africa was essential in order to understand more about the artifacts through their original context - refer to Appendix II, for the case study of the BaKota reliquary figure in the Bristol City museum, registration no.E2412 (see Figure 10 in Appendix 1, Part Two). The field trip provided the background to the research through the anthropological study of the Giriama commemorative grave posts in Kenya.

The Giriama were said to have originally come from Somalia in the sixteenth century, or even earlier than this, and according to Odaga (1977) settled in Ethiopia for some time before moving south into Kenya due to frequent cattle raids and attacks by neighbouring tribes. In Plate III MacKenzie Ngala proudly shows his metal armband denoting him to be a Gohu secret society member and standing next to the *Vigango* that commemorated his two relatives, also Gohu members. The posts were a flat narrow plank-like piece of wood with facial features incised on the circular shape at the top of the post. They were generally viewed frontally and rarely carved on the back. Cloths were usually tied at the neck and 'waist', and were described as *clothing* or *dressing* the post, therefore humanizing it. The colours and positioning of the cloths, relative to each other, also had importance and were connected with specific spirits. The triangular decoration was inlaid with white and blue industrially produced pigments. The blue was

said to represent the sky or a spirit, and the white was also associated with another spirit, and the red ochre had associations with the earth, and was made using a natural mineral with water. For more full descriptions of the posts please refer to the field work diaries in Appendix V, Part Two. Some of the posts displayed the original organic materials used from the environment for decorating the posts -- black made from charcoal, white made from ground down snail shells and the main pigment a red ochre, a product from the earth (see Figure 33 Ochre preparation). The *Kigango* was said to represent human height and should be facing West towards the setting sun. The cloths tied at the 'neck' and 'waist' of the '*Koma*' were particular colours representing spirits, and if still 'fresh', indicated recent libations had been made. The shorter '*Koma*' are the wives of the deceased; Plate IV shows a well kept shrine for the *Vibao* and *Koma* (although in this particular shrine no *Vigango* were present), here the *Vibao* replaced the 'fallen' *Vigango*. Generally the scale of the shrine was such that a person had to bend down inside it, in spite of the larger scale of the structure relative to the '*Koma*' displayed here – '*Koma*' can be used as the generic term for all three posts. Local materials were used in the form of sticks, palm leaves and bark or twine to bind the lattice work together which was distinctive of Giriama building techniques shown in the horizontal and vertical structure of the walls, but also in their house building. Plate V displays an alternative decorative pattern on the *Vigango*, although still representative of the designated colours. This relief pattern shows some affinity to the final wall pieces, where anaglypta wallpapers function as a decorative element on the front of the '*Walls*'. (For detailed documentation of the posts refer to Appendices IV, and V).

I discovered through this investigation that these posts had a social and religious

function and were not perceived as 'art work', as we might interpret it in the West. As Hawkes (1977:126) cites of modern art in the West,

> The general principles of New Criticism can be simply formulated. The work of art...should be autonomous, and so should not be judged by reference to criteria or considerations beyond itself.

Therefore it would appear that African artifacts in the West, if exhibited in a gallery context, would be viewed through our own aesthetic interests and interpreted from this perspective without any contextual information. However, I wanted to discover the posts' authentic meaning through the people who commissioned, made and respected the posts, being a practice that was contemporary to the Giriama. This aspect of examining an artifact in its original context, I learned, demystified the object and could therefore be seen not through a veil of fantasy but of reality whereas, divorced from this context, artists had often imagined or constructed their own ideas or interpretation of the piece. Art critics such as Fry (1920:65-8) advocated a purely formalist approach to African artifacts and the examination of art work, which impacted on British art education. As a consequence certain stereotypes of African 'art' in this respect were also perpetuated in art education in this country. This was articulated through a focus on the formal aspects of West African artifacts such as masks and figurative statues, along with museum collections displaying objects with no reference to context. As a result, the interpretation was dependent on the values and beliefs of the viewing audience in the specific cultural context. Inclusive in the research, was testing the contextual response to my work, firstly in Nairobi, Kenya at the National Museum and Art Gallery of Kenya in a show entitled *Crossing Boundaries* (1999), and then at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London in an exhibition entitled *Concealed/Revealed* (2003). Through the first show I

was able to reflect on the semiotic value of the materials and processes I was using in a cross-cultural context.

I chose the Giriama commemorative grave posts to study thus maintaining my interest in mortality. I experienced and observed the fragility of life in Kenya whilst teaching there, especially when I travelled and walked around Kenya with the Mountain Club of Kenya (MCK), and with Maasai friends in the bush. The teaching contract was to teach art to African pupils who wanted to follow the British GCE examination system, in order to enter higher education in British or American institutions. As a result, my experiences were mixed between local people and my working colleagues.

This formative experience had initiated my interest in the culture and the dramatic natural environment, which I spent most of my spare time exploring. The natural environment was extensively documented through photographic means (see Plate I, Figures 1-5). I decided to return to Kenya for the research, as having prior knowledge of the culture helped to facilitate communications, transport and accommodation, taking into account *local* time factors. The latter meant that I had to allow extra time for the research tasks as the pace of life was much slower than in the UK, and forward planning was essential to the success of a short trip. As Sarup (1993:48) said, 'Time is money, time is a limited resource and time is a valuable commodity' however 'There are cultures where time is none of these things', indicating a different value system to that of the West, which is the case in Kenya.

The investigation of the posts in Kenya started by examining their formal and aesthetic characteristics; however, as the research progressed I found that the posts' importance to the research became secondary, as their form and aesthetic detail became

rather repetitive, fitting into a predetermined schema. Therefore it became less interesting to extend or transpose any visual information gained from them, being 'complete' as funerary sculptures in themselves. It then became clear that the ambient architecture in the form of domestic dwellings and the shrines constructed over the *Vigango, Vibao* and *Koma*, on the margins of my vision became central for the production of art work. It was the juxtaposition of the materials and how they were put together that fascinated me most about the ambient architecture (Plate VIII, Figures 16-20 local vernacular architecture). These structures were more varied than the posts and displayed a variety of materials and fixings that displayed a myriad of textures and surfaces, and therefore potential for artwork. The scale of the shrine, which housed the *Vibao* and *Koma*, formed a close relationship with the posts inside, in that the shrine was only sufficiently large enough for conducting the rituals connected with these posts. This aspect of scale and proportion was important to me. The natural environment had become the context for both the posts and the buildings, in relationship to the materials and processes they used, which was later to impact on my art practice, as will be discussed.

It was only by studying the posts in their original context that I found out about their philosophical intentions, which was that the ancestor was both present in the physical and spiritual worlds simultaneously. I would also not have been made so aware of the shrine construction and the houses, had I not had time to sit and ponder them while the translator was talking during an interview. Therefore it was the architecture, with its infinite variety and invention, that attracted me visually more than the posts. This experience on the field trip changed my perception of the posts, realising the importance

of their function above any formalistic approach, which changed the initial motives for making the artwork in response to this new information. I found from a contextual point of view, through what the spiritual elders said about the posts being hidden beneath the earth and revealed above it, that the philosophical and spiritual relationship to earth, land and sky was fundamental (see Plate 1). The natural environment was also reflected in the making of the *Vigango, Vibao* and *Koma* by the use of sticks and specific trees as a source of material. These elements eventually became embodied in the concepts of my sculptural work through the exploration of the architecture. The importance of the environment for me was summed up and succinctly noted in my diary from a passage I found at random, which read: 'this very special place provides the inspiration, the material, the studio and the exhibition space'.

1.1 Context

Since my first experience of living in Kenya I realised how romanticised that period of time had become in my mind, when I was removed from the location into the more comfortable environment of the UK. This romanticized view took the form of remembering the aesthetic beauty of the landscape, the sun and shadows and contrasts in climate between the two countries. These contrasts became more exaggerated with distance of time and location away from the country. These ideas were reinforced in my studio research diaries on a regular basis. Henri Bergson (1998:8) said, 'there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of past experience' (see Bergson quoted in the '*Location'* catalogue at the *Fermoy Gallery,* with Polly Binns and Shirley Chubb).

On my return to the UK after two years of teaching in Kenya, I felt a marked sense of dislocation, not repatriation. Before going back to Kenya for the initial research trip in 1999, although excited about the prospect of returning, I was also reminded of how vulnerable I sometimes felt there as an outsider, of which I became more acutely aware again when visiting more rural areas with unreliable transport.

Being a white woman investigating a male secret society meant being privileged, on one level, and kept as an outsider on another. As a European I was seen to be educated, wealthy by comparison, and associated with past colonial rule in Kenya. However having previously taught in Kenya commanded some respect, but also by assisting the Mombasa Museum in archiving part of the Giriama heritage, I was considered to be elevating this group of people amongst others, as well as adding to the museum documentation. Naturally, as an outsider and being female, I was not told some of the things connected with these particular rituals, but as an artist it became inevitable that I would select certain information as being more interesting to work from. As Barthes in Hawkes (1977: 86) said " we 'encode' our experience of the world in order that we may experience it....We thus invent the world we inhabit : we modify and reconstruct what is given". However at the same time, having lived in Kenya, the ethical issues of representing the Giriama to a different culture were also important concerns.

Kenya being a familiar culture to me was one reason for selecting this particular African country for research, as I knew the coastal region was more accessible than other parts of Kenya, and was relatively stable. It was an advantage to have some prior knowledge of the culture in order to carry out the fieldwork research over short academic holidays. Curious to know more about the country I had lived in, and not having

previously known about the Giriama commemorative grave posts before, I found that they were not an artifact relegated to the past, but very much a living part of this particular society.

It was through my first experience in Kenya that I realised I could be resourceful and more inventive without using sophisticated tools and machinery, and I developed a correlation between natural and found materials with the outdoor environment as the Kenyans had done. However, in the UK, because the climate tends to be cold, wet and inhospitable, in practice I would have found working out of doors, in association with the natural environment, for most of the year difficult and unpleasant. Therefore this was rather a romantic notion, but in Kenya working and being outside would have been quite possible. As a result, I found it difficult to relocate myself back into the UK climate.

The security aspect of being in the field had to be considered at all times; not taking expensive equipment such as tape recorders or ostentatious camera equipment with me reduced the risk of being robbed in what were often quite remote and poor areas. Being a white woman travelling alone made me very visible as an outsider, which was often regarded with suspicion, especially whilst investigating a male secret society, which was still active.

Conducting the interviews with Mr Kalume Tinga from the Fort Jesus museum, who was Giriama, was invaluable, especially in the initial greeting and tribal affiliation procedures prior to the interview. Having a translator also gave me time to observe and watch the people whilst being interviewed and to observe the surrounding environment, which had led to my interest in the materials and processes used in constructing their buildings, shrines and three-dimensional objects in the immediate vicinity. (For details of

the anthropological research refer to Appendix III showing the locations, Appendix IV giving a synopsis of the field work and Appendix V with the questionnaire used and field work diaries)

Each house, being hand-built, showed individual differences and the element of process in application of the local, usually organic, materials. None of these houses were standardised in the same way that Western architecture might be considered, using machine-made components. However, as I learnt later from the second trip to Kenya in 2001, there were very specific rules and regulations to building the mud house according to each different tribal group, which fitted into either a structural and/or symbolic consensus. Therefore in this respect the differences between cultures was visual, and the similarities were evident in abiding by a set of building regulations or rules; although different to ours because of the materials and processes used. According to the Kikuyu, the rectangles of the grid system of the walls had to be smaller than I had constructed them for security reasons, and measured by the span of the hand. Each rectangle was filled with small pieces of wood to give it strength, which again added security, so that nobody could put their hand through it. It was then splattered with liquid mud from the interior and exterior of the structure, often with the addition of small stones to strengthen the mixture, and when this layer was sufficiently dry, a final smooth coating of mud would be applied. Sometimes a thin textured layer would be applied to the exterior wall symbolising Mount Kenya, where God was believed to reside (see diary entry in Appendix V, Part Three). The Giriama built their houses slightly differently from the Kikuyu, however a relative approach (as with this research) was often used in anthropological studies, as with Post-Structuralist concerns, which accentuated the

similarities and differences. At this stage during the first field trip, however, I was more interested in the visual appearance, on a less conscious level, than in gaining a very formal understanding of these structures. In a few houses there was evidence of outside influences, as in one mud house where the owner had introduced mud and stick columns (Plate VI, Figure 13 Mud house with column), possibly an Islamic feature, being a Swahili culture. In others it was the use of more modern materials such as cement and corrugated iron, but generally it was a move away from a round form to a rectangular system of building (Plate VI, Figure 14 Construction at Gotani).

Traditionally the Giriama house was oval in structure, with a continuous wall and roof making it domed in order for water to run off (Plate VI, Figure 15 Traditional Giriama House). The materials used were grass and sticks, bent while still green and stuck into the ground, and formed into a lattice tied at the joints with natural materials. This house had one door and no windows. These houses were no longer being made, I was told, by a local, because it was difficult to obtain the grass locally, which could also have been another reason for the change in style besides outside influences. The other houses I saw were usually mud-built, with palm leaf roofs and often rectangular in shape with pitched roofs, which could have been a reflection of Western influences; however, the more wealthy were gradually replacing their mud walls with coral boulders shaped into rectangular blocks, for increased security and defense against termite damage. In other areas their increasing wealth was shown by making their house out of concrete with corrugated iron roofs, which appeared less aesthetic from a personal perspective, and was less functional in that it made the house very hot inside. In spite of this, it was considered to be of higher social status in this rural area. Similarly, the graves that were considered

modern were made of cement and were rectangular box forms.

In contrast to these rural houses, which touch on the stereotypes of buildings from Africa, as perceived by people in the West, as non-progressive and primitive, were the high-rise corporate buildings in Nairobi made of glass and steel, in modular regularity which were singularly uniform in character and could have been placed in any modern city in the world (Plate VII, Contrast of buildings in Nairobi). It was this contrast between the old locally built structures and the new office blocks that gave Nairobi its sense of identity and for me emphasised Kenya as a country of contrasts and diversity.

The use of sticks and found materials for making shelters in Kenya was evident in the making of the final sculptural works entitled *Wall Pieces,* by forming an internal grid system like the houses, and Giriama shrines to the ancestors, but also the wooden ephemera used indicated the way in which pieces of wood were tacked together to form outer walls or shacks (Plate VIII, A selection of shelters built in Mombasa). Similarly, the use of clay in my work, a metaphor for earth, in conjunction with this process of construction was a reflection not only of the building materials used in Kenya but also, and importantly, the natural environment or context for building (see Plate II The Kenyan landscape). Plaster used in the *Wall Pieces* can be recognised not only as a sculptural material often used in making traditionally cast work in the UK, but also as a decorative internal building material in the West - in *Wall Piece* III it was used to create a wall by *casting*, not constructing a wall in the conventional sense of building a wall *vertically*; this technique I saw used in Kenya, which was very unusual in terms of using the casting process to make the wall and which was *not* traditional in appearance in itself. Here was evidence of a process that had travelled across cultures and had been adapted to local

materials and conditions (Plate IX, Baptist Mission house built for 'outsiders').

At the end of the fieldwork study a detailed report with visuals was compiled for the National Museum of Kenya, who had granted me a fellowship to carry out the anthropological research, and a copy was given to the British Institute in Eastern Africa, who had also sponsored this research. This remains unpublished, although elements of this and other material have been published in articles for the *Journal of Museum Ethnographers*, the Museums of Kenya in their publication of *Kenya Past and Present*, *Azania* published by the British Institute in Eastern Africa, and Kenyan Airways' magazine *Msafiri* (see Bibliography for references).

The context for the artwork was tested in two ways, to see what impact the cultural context would have on the work in terms of what it *communicated* – according to Layton (1991) the main function of art was aesthetic value and /or symbolic communication, which he felt could be applied across cultural boundaries. This idea of symbolic communication was achieved through the semiotic value attributed to the various materials and processes I used in the sculptural work. The first stage of the research, after the fieldwork, involved taking the initial body of art work out to Kenya for a solo exhibition entitled *Crossing Boundaries* in March / April 2001 at the National Museum of Kenya, in conjunction with setting up a collaboration with African artists from the Kuona Arts Trust to reconstruct three of the sculptural works together. This involved sourcing and testing the materials, which we found within the museum grounds. Through this interaction with the artists, I gained some insight into the nature of their art and cultural preferences, but this was also gained through the responses received from the exhibition audience and lectures delivered (see Appendix V, Part Three). I also

concluded from this that house-building could not be generalised as each tribal group showed considerable diversity depending on variables such as climate, religious values and symbolism, whether they were nearer a main road or set more into the countryside, accessibility of certain materials, exposure to 'outside' influences, and size of family. Therefore the house building around Nairobi was found to have differences from those of the coastal areas.

The second and final stage of the research was to test out the semiotic significance of the work embodied in the idea of *concealing* and *revealing*, through the semiotic values revealing themselves to a Western audience and how they received the work as contemporary art. This was accomplished by mounting and documenting an exhibition of photographic work entitled *Concealed / revealed* at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African studies, London University October /December 2003. On reflection, the use of this technological process of converting the photographic images to large digital exhibition prints enhanced the perception in the West that this was a contemporary art form. This resulted from the final stages of the large-scale sculptural pieces, which explored and subsumed a juxtaposition of the Giriama context with Western contemporary sculptural forms and materials. Through this, I realised that my fascination with the elements of vernacular Kenyan architecture had revealed the philosophical ideas of the posts, which were coincidentally embodied in the work, as a result of the practical processes of making and structuring of the *Wall Pieces.*

After studying the *Vigango* in UK museums, devoid of contextual information, the first field trip was crucial to the research, as it challenged any preconceptions that may have been made about the posts and generally any museum artifacts removed from

their original context. The second trip made to Kenya was also very significant to the research, in that the responses to the artwork, which were made in the UK, but three of which were reconstructed and exhibited within the African context, made me realise that I was uninformed about what I had seen in reference to house building. However the subsequent information gained from museum staff and the artists about house building was essential to the next phase of the artwork, and at which point another transformation took place, situating the work within and integrating it into a Western contemporary art context.

In conclusion, at strategic points described in the Methodology section 1.2 the work was analysed and re-evaluated in relationship to the contextual environment, and how the materials and processes were contributing symbolically to the interpretation and transformation of the information gathered. As for instance sticks, red clay, sisal were materials familiar to the Kenyans, along with an appreciation of hand-made vernacular architecture. However some of the techniques used for construction were not recognized through regional differences, and the work was isolated from an outdoor location, where there would have been more immediate cognition. A UK audience would more readily make associations with the industrial materials such as latex, mod-roc and wallpapers, as well as being exhibited indoors where anaglypta wallpaper would normally be found. As a result of this I found that the materials and processes revealed the semiotic value placed upon them by the two different cultures, although only some materials being recognisable as familiar, whereas other materials were 'hidden' in terms of meaning. The anaglypta wallpaper was strongly identified within the UK in relationship to Victorian interiors and often domestic space, whilst symbolically representing home, comfort and security.

However the disruptive element of this for this audience was the introduction of holes and cracks and the fact that earth could be seen as part of the composition of the wall indicating a sense of instability in the structure and ultimately feelings of insecurity – see Plates XXXVIII Two Full Scale *Wall Pieces*, Plate XXXX Layers of Wallpaper, and Plate XXXI *Final Wall Piece*). From a Kenyan perspective the wallpaper was not familiar and culturally less relevant to their daily environment, as any decorative surface would have been applied to the exterior, not the interior of their living spaces. The Kenyans identified more with the earth and sticks, which were materials they encountered in their daily lives; the earth was more usually associated with fertility, growth and often connoting female occupations with house building, planting and food. The sticks were used in furniture making, house building, fencing and walking sticks and therefore, although recognisible or revealed as signifiers of these, became secondary signifiers, or 'free floating', thus creating greater ambiguity of meaning for this audience (refer to artists response to the *Panel Series* in Chapter 3, 3.1.2. Response to the *Panel Series* by the African audience. As well as recognising these associations in the materials from a Kenyan viewpoint, I chose these materials in particular to represent the visual experiences and associations I had made with the Kenyan environment and context, as an 'outsider' looking in. The recognition of cross cultural elements in the work therefore became dependent on their original contexts, for their interpretation or meaning, which had differing relevance to their viewing audiences. As Stolnitz (1960:174) argued symbolism was commonly taken from a cultural tradition and could be employed 'to make an object...."public" and "shareable" '. In spite of producing work, which ultimately transformed and integrated these two cultures through the symbolism of the

materials and processes, it was my intention that not all the inherent meanings were revealed to each audience. This is reflected in *Structural* binaries of 'absence' and 'presence', which from a Derridean perspective, the' absent' meanings contribute significantly to the whole interpretation, as Sarup (1993:37) described as 'First principles are often defined by what they exclude, by a sort of 'binary opposition' of other concepts'. With this construct, the work was meant to create feelings of unease, along with some symbolic ambiguity, informed only by a knowledge of the respective cultural codes, and connotations. This is represented in the artwork in terms of the *familiar* opposing the *unfamiliar*. Other binary opposites manifested themselves throughout the sculptural work to form a new visual language, which operates from a *Post-Structuralist* perspective, rather than a *Structuralist* one, albeit the latter informing the former.

1.2 Methodology

The proportion of studio practice to theory was 60% and 40% respectively. The research aimed to re-interpret the language and symbolism of the *Vigango, Vibao* and *Koma* used by the Giriama tribe in Kenya through the development of sculpture.

This research used a heuristic approach 'to articulate in various ways ...the variety of chance events which ...constitute an enigma and lead to its solution' (Hawkes 1977:94) in that through various experimental procedures adopted in the art practice, I was able to create an equivalent to the symbolic value of the Giriama commemorative posts. As Hawkes (1977;131) succinctly describes it, " The key concept is obviously that of 'poetics': a concern, not with *content*, but with the *process* by which content is formulated".

It was through the art practice, which was influenced by my previous experiences and knowledge of Kenya, that a new symbolic, non-verbal language developed between 'two worlds', or cultures. The 'narrative' of the research is associative, vertical and diachronic. It set out sequentially the journey from the anthropological fieldwork (1999) through to the exhibition '*Crossing Boundaries'* at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Nairobi, where I gained an African response to the artwork, and then to the final outcomes in the *'Concealed/revealed'* exhibition at the Brunei Gallery in London. The art practice was syntactic, horizontal and synchronic, forming a contemporary transformation of the information through a semiotic approach.

Post-Structuralist strategies, accepting a fluidity of meaning, were adopted in the research. While *Structuralist* binary oppositions, were used to set up comparisons between the two cultures and the themes that arose within the art practice. However, there was no hierarchy intended within these oppositions in this research. According to Hawkes (1977: 121/2) binary oppositions emphasized "difference" as Derrida alluded to in the study of linguistics, whereby the '*one*' illuminated the understanding of the '*other*'. The element of ambiguity in these oppositions, attributed to Post-Structuralist interpretation, offers some possible resolution between them, rather than attributing any hierarchical differentiation, as for instance between *nature* and *culture,* where culture is considered to the superior and defining category. This ambiguity allows for a shift in terms of reference incorporating both positive and negative values and meanings to each. These oppositions can therefore form a relationship with one another, rather than form a single dichotomy as *Structuralists*, such as Levis Strauss, proposed. Derrida, indicative of the *Post-Structuralist* stance, 'opens up the vista of an endless play of signifiers that refer

not to signifieds but to other signifiers, so that meaning is always ultimately undecidable" (Sarup 1993:52).

Contributing to this symbolic method of working was the use of the materials and processes, which formed semiotic recognition, or 'signs', descriptive of the two contrasting cultural contexts. The working process, including chance and change, was very much part of the development of the artwork and for me reflected the Kenyan environment in its unpredictability and fragile balance between life and death. The associations or references drawn from the binary oppositions I use in my work, in this Post-Structuralist era, cannot be interpreted from one perspective alone, which leads to a certain amount of ambiguity and therefore meaning, unlike the posts; as the posts have a more universal function and symbolic code within the Giriama community, the meaning is more clearly recognisible. However I have been inventing a symbolic language of meaning and value which visibly may not be so easily identifiable in universal terms, and therefore to some extent relies on prior knowledge of my values and beliefs as an individual artist. This also reflects my position as an artist in the West, who is generally divorced or disassociated from a social or religious context. This apparent 'detachment of art' from the praxis of life has lead to a metaphoric approach to the creation of signs through the materials and processes I have used, although I do not see creativity per se separated from everyday life. In this respect the work does not exemplify a scientific 'truth', but aims to challenge aspects of Western materialistic culture, in comparison to Kenya, through the use of simple inexpensive materials and methods of fixing, casting and recycling, forming a new symbolic code. These signs also have more complex or multiple meanings to varied audiences as a result of the subjective elements of the

research, and other peoples alternative readings of the signs. As illustrated by Shklovsky in Hawkes (1977:47),

> The aim of poetry [art] is to reverse that process, to *defamiliarize* that with which we are overly familiar, to 'creatively deform' the usual, the normal, and so to inculcate a new, childlike, non-jaded vision in us. The poet [artist] thus aims to disrupt 'stock responses', and to generated a heightened awareness; to restructure our ordinary perception of 'reality', so that we end by *seeing* the world instead of numbly recognizing it.

This was the aim with the final pieces of work to disrupt the semiotic boundaries, which lie between the two cultures and reinvent a system of signs that were both familiar but unsettling to both audiences. This was achieved through the development of the sculptural practice and its documentation, which arose out of the initial investigation.

The final research report uses the first person when discussing the practical work, therefore emphasising a more interpretative and self-reflexive approach than other methodologies. As Weedon (1997: 32) pointed out, from a Feminist Post-Structuralist perspective,

> "'Subjectivity' is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world".

However to expand on the political role of being *female* within a patriarchal society in either culture, is here beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice to say that I was aware of my privileged, if not vulnerable, position as an *outsider*, as well as being *female*, in investigating these commemorative posts belonging to a specifically *male* secret society.

The thought and decision-making processes of the artwork sometimes took, I discovered, days, or even months to resolve, and also to realise the full implications of what I had done. As with previous work, but also life experiences in general, I needed

time for 'absorption' in order to satisfactorily evaluate the work.

Economic concerns were paramount throughout the work, which at times meant the cessation of work to fund-raise and make grant applications, but this also meant being more resourceful in approach and in the collection of materials.

The anthropological collection of data was written up in the form of diaries, photographs and visual logs. The visual logs or sketchbooks documented each *Kigango* by measurement, materials, location and orientation, and the people connected with it, and a photographic record was made of the *Vigango* and related phenomena.

The sculptural information was recorded through the studio diaries. Newbury and Stanley (2001) confirm and expand on the importance of the research diary in respect of practice-based research in Art and Design. It was these diaries that documented my observations, comments, decisions, technical data, thoughts and ideas as the work progressed. It also became a way of formulating philosophical and ideological thought in the work, although at times rather self-consciously, particularly at the beginning of the research. The diaries formed the initial *'thick description'* - as Geertz (1975) described it in relationship to collecting a lot of anthropological data before any analysis started. The diaries were used to *analyse* and *interpret* and finally *evaluate* the work, both in the Giriama artifacts and in my own work. These diaries were interpreted through Ed Feldman and Ralph Smith's methodology of critical analysis applied to artwork in 1968, and by Feldman in 1967 (in Pappas, 1970). It was through the continual but also final analysis and the assimilation of the studio diaries, the sculptural practice and the photographs together, that I was able to verify the recurrent themes, processes, form, content, cultural and symbolic references, and which often revealed elements in the work,

that I was unaware of at the time of making. This process recorded and enhanced my understanding of the work, as it revealed potential directions or stages in it. This helped to focus and advance the art practice at different times, thus affecting change in the working practice, or having an impact on the patterns and the way in which I was working. Similarly, the photographs, as well as documenting the progression of the work, helped to direct the work, but out of this came a separate interest in the photographic details taken from the sculpture. This enhanced and focused the semiotic characteristics of the sculptural pieces, and these photographic images eventually became artworks in their own right.

The work and the diaries were evaluated at key stages of the research, which were before and after the fieldwork study in Kenya, at the transfer stage of MPhil to PhD level of work, and again after the '*Crossing Boundaries*' exhibition in Kenya, and finally at the end of the art practice culminating in the examination and subsequent exhibition at the Brunei Gallery, London, '*Concealed / revealed*'; although the practical evaluation occurred in response to each series of work, using different materials, and addressing certain criteria as mentioned below.

By writing about the work in the diaries, but also writing articles for journals (see Bibliography), a sharper focus was brought to what I saw or thought about the practical work, and the research as a whole. In this respect it became another device for evaluation.

The initial anthropological research took place in museums, which included the Bristol City Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, British Museum and the Sainsbury Centre at the University of East Anglia. The Sainsbury Centre produced a catalogue on a

collection of artists working with their collections and responding to the objects in terms of a fictionalized approach and often appropriating imagery and form – reference Sekules and Tickle (1997) in the Bibliography and likewise the British Museum commissioned artists to work with their Egyptian collections, but again visually appropriating from these artifacts – refer to the catalogue entitled *Time Machine: Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Art* (1994) at the *British Museum.* The Pitt Rivers Museum, also invited artists to exhibit within the museum and found that "the artworks that parodied the collection closely could not signal themselves so clearly", therefore depending heavily on appropriation. Added to this at the Pitt Rivers in the exhibition "Snares of Privacy and Fiction' (1992) Dorsett writes in the *Museums Journal* (1995: 32) about artists reinventing the artifacts in "a flight of the imagination" which bore little relation to the artifacts' original context. This investigation accompanied a literature search into how African artifacts influenced the work of European artists, which has been mentioned in the *Introduction.* I then chose to study the Giriama commemorative grave posts from Kenya, but through this it became clear that a field trip was necessary to gauge what impact the original context had on these posts, in order to arrive at a more balanced interpretation.

Before the fieldwork in Giriamaland began, a visual analysis of the ethnographic artifacts belonging to the Giriama was carried out, firstly at the National Museum in Nairobi and then at Fort Jesus Museum in Mombasa. Through this study and observational drawing I became familiar with the patterns and shapes used to design and decorate their artifacts. These were triangular and geometric shapes, which often alluded to house building, the colour of the beads indicating various spirits, and these triangular

designs and colours were occasionally seen in their stools and storage containers, as well as in their body adornment. This would therefore suggest that the Giriama made objects or structures in relationship to each other but also, by implication, in conjunction with their environment or context, as has already been discussed in terms of accessibility of materials, such as grass to build their traditional houses, which had important implications for the research and subsequent production of art work.

On the field trip I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the target groups, which were recorded in notebook form according to a questionnaire (see Appendix V, Part One), compiled to validate and cross-reference the information gathered, to be analysed at a later date, and which also contributed to the final evaluation process. This form of collecting information was considered to be less intrusive than tape-recorded interviews, also more friendly and informal, thereby attempting to facilitate a more co-operative response. I was also careful to pick up non-verbal actions and expressions in conjunction with this. The latter was important to gauge the reaction and response to the questions asked, and how forthcoming the respondents might be to being interviewed.

I became acutely aware of my ethical and moral responsibilities towards promoting equal opportunities and other cultures' values and beliefs when I returned to the UK. Having lived and worked in Kenya, and my subsequent MA research into FE staff's attitudes towards anti-racist reforms in art and design education, I was also conscious of our colonial past which was very evident in Kenya as a country colonised by the English. However, appreciating the ethical issues involved with this type of research, I feel that the political elements of colonialism are not appropriate to detail here and are

beyond the scope of this research.

A sculptural language evolved through the different stages of the practical exploration, which comprised aspects of form, content and context as described below in the framework for the sculptural practice, along with the two exhibitions, as previously mentioned. This was documented through the studio diaries in conjunction with numerous drawings and maquettes at different stages, and a comprehensive and continual library of photographs taken from the sculptural work. The cultural contextualisation for the research arose out of the anthropological study field trip to Kenya, and subsequently exhibitions. The following criteria formed the basis for the sculptural investigation.

Framework for the Sculptural Practice

2.4.1	Change in materials -	i)	from one material to another through casting
		ii)	from one material to another through symbolic reference
2.4.2	Change in scale	i)	indicating portability
		ii)	monumentality
		iii)	through the process from maquettes, working models and full-scale sculpture
		iv)	through contradiction
2.4.3	Change in texture	i)	through type of material
		ii)	surface patination
2.4.4	Change in colour	i)	natural
		ii)	symbolic
		iii)	emphasis in relationship to form or shape

2.4.5 Change in context/meaning

i) environment: interior, exterior, rural, city, domestic, public, private etc

ii) cultural

iii) social

iv) local, national, or global

v) religious

vi) communal or individual

vii) symbolic imagery

2.4.6 Change in Intention/function

i) function

ii) economic value

iii) of the artist

iv) of the spectator

v) aesthetic criteria

vi) symbolic meaning

The art work explored and embodied binary oppositions of order and chance, male and female, physical with spiritual, visible with invisible, past and present, sacred and secular, and formal elements of rough and smooth, solid and void, transparency with the opaque, asymmetry with symmetry, within the specified Western and African contexts in order to form a new symbolic language within the artwork. This language or code reflected a *Post-Structuralist* approach, whereby the signifiers could be open to

numerous interpretations, but which formed affinities with specific audiences within the already cited cultural contexts. This relational analysis, as described above in the binary oppositions, was essential to the evaluation of the communicative value and symbolic references of the materials and processes investigated. However there was no intended hierarchy as with Structuralism between these binaries, which were used to accentuate contrast in the artwork through formal and conceptual art practices.

Through the analysis of the art practice diaries, specific themes highlighted and reinformed the practice. For full reference to this, see Chapters 3 and 4 Final conclusions to the research. By keeping a continual photographic record as well, accentuated and concentrated certain aspects of the practice, which informed the later work. This was achieved by the framing of the image and bringing to attention detailed examination of the surfaces, the relationship of the forms to one another, and the studio environment. It was through these relative processes that the central focus of the work became evident within the theme of *concealing* and *revealing*. Elements of this central theme are present in the public and private gaze through the walls of *Shelter*; the layering of the *Panels* first with mod-roc and then with latex; the solid structure of *Gap Piece* revealing the invisible space between the wall and the Panel; the chipping away of the plaster fascia on *Gap Piece* to reveal the hidden *Panel V* beneath; the construction of the final *Wall Pieces* forming a barrier between one side and the other, but connected through the holes in the structure; the layering and peeling of the anaglypta, and numerous other processes described in the following text. The idea of concealing and revealing was itself fundamental to the concept of the commemorative grave posts in that they were half *concealed beneath* the earth, but *revealed above* it.

ln Chapter 2 the development of the art work from 1999 to 2001 is described in more detail, from the first field trip to Kenya until the *Crossing Boundaries* show in Nairobi.

CHAPTER 2

STUDIO WORK IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE FIELD WORK

Until I first went to Kenya in 1988 my art work tended to be a reflection of my art college training. This involved a considerable amount of life drawing, which I found gave me greater observational skills, not only in drawing but also increasing my observation of the world around me. However, after my experiences of living and working in Africa from 1988 to1991, I discovered new possibilities of making art work, using a symbolic approach.

When I returned to the UK I started a series of work using the classical column with 'Africanised' elements on top of them (forming a hybrid), and worked on sticks and amulets based on rites of passage, as mentioned in the *Introduction* – this work displayed an essence of what was later developed into binary oppositions within this research. This collection of work particularly the sticks and amulets, fitted stereotypes of what people in the UK assumed about an African culture (see Figure 6 *Willow sticks 1996*; Figure 9, *Healing Amulet 1996;* and Figure 11/12 *Column work*).

This made me aware of how viewers might perceive subsequent artwork that was made during the research. The artwork produced after the initial anthropological field trip (1999) had a tendency to be more illustrative than metaphorically representative of the vernacular architecture that took precedence over the commemorative grave posts for visual exploration. This meant that I relied upon what I saw alone, rather than an informed response to the architecture as I had initially gone out to Kenya to make a study of the posts, not the architecture. This meant that I too was perhaps working with certain

visual stereotypes of African house styles. However after the *Crossing Boundaries* exhibition, Nairobi (2001), where I reconstructed some of the *Panels* with African artists and museum staff, I gained a deeper understanding of the architectural elements and what I had made and understood. This lead on to a transformation and condensation of the information gathered here forming work that incorporated a semantic approach. This then facilitated an autonomous progression from the anthropological study, although this contextual information was very influential in the eventual outcomes. This transformation and reinterpretation was confirmed through exhibiting the work to a UK audience at the Brunei Gallery, London (2003).

2.1 Art work prior to the field work in Kenya

In the column series of work I was attempting to contrast this very powerful 'totem' with the organic nature of the environment experienced in Africa, where vertical trees broke up the vast horizontal planes. The column being an architectural feature, representing beauty, proportion, strength and stability, contrasted with an architectural material I had associated with Kenya, which was '*mbati*' or corrugated iron. This material, being fluted, visually and symbolically linked with the surface of the classical column. Although the buildings constructed with wood and corrugated iron arrested my attention as they were unfamiliar, I found the surface and construction of houses made with mud more aesthetic, both before (Figure 23, Workmen's huts made with mud, 1989) and during the field trip (Plate VI, Figure 13 Column made of mud 1999).

Initially corrugated cardboard was integrated into the column, drawing a parallel with Kenyan building materials to produce a hybrid form, in an attempt to amalgamate

the two contrasting cultures through form, process and material. To begin with, a series of maquettes were made exploring colour, texture, height, inversion, segmentation, additions and slight deviations from the vertical. The casting of these was achieved by filling cylinders of cardboard with solid plaster; they were approximately twenty inches in height and two inches in diameter and lined at random with the corrugated cardboard. However, on a larger scale the casting process had to be more sophisticated, in order to accommodate the volume of plaster being poured. Therefore the two halves of the fibreglass mould were laid horizontally, with the addition of corrugated cardboard layered in each half to roughly correspond when put together, and then 'squeeze moulded' together. At this point the column was then strapped upright and more plaster was poured down the seams inside and reinforced with more scrim. To make it hollow a greased drainpipe or cardboard tube was inserted centrally (see Figure 11). The column showing stick impressions on the outer surface was made using a clay lining inside the mould, instead of the cardboard as before, and negative impressions of the sticks pressed into this, before casting in plaster (Figure 24, Column with stick impressions).

The seam in the casting process deliberately remained prominent to further accentuate the two elements coming together, or separating, until a stage of complete separation was reached, as can be seen in Figure 24. Then the final solution brought the two halves together again. The edges and contours of the columns were by the same token important to the ideas of boundaries and later work.

During this phase of the research, as with other periods of the research, there were digressions (Extraneous Works: Figure 25 Guttering with cement positive and negative stick impressions; Figure 26 Box; Figure 27 Basket and forms). However, some

elements of these I later realised acted as precursory elements in later works. An example of this was the use of the finger impressions made in clay using the guttering for a mould in which to pour the plaster, and then this appeared in the final *Wall Pieces* at the bottom of them making contact with the ground. The use of finger marks and hand marks links in and forms a strong association with methods used in Kenyan house building where the earth is applied by hand to the stick frameworks of the walls (see Figure 28: i) Plaster guttering with finger impressions; ii) Detail from final *Wall Piece*). The use of reversal in the cement and guttering casts using positive and negative stick impressions can also be seen later in the reversal of the anaglypta wallpaper on the final *Wall Pieces* in a similar way, to create a more subtle sense of positive and negative (see Figure 25 Cement and guttering stick impression compared with Plate XXXX Layers of Wallpaper, showing reversal of pattern). The next two pieces of work were too illustrative of an idea rather than symbolic or metaphorical (Figure 26, Box; Figure 29, Window). The casting of a television box in plaster, with corrugated cardboard in the interior, which was pressed onto the setting plaster, did not work as a useful structure. This was aiming to explore some other way of using a different shape, which related to shelter; as I had previously seen Spanish gypsies construct and enter a series of cardboard boxes. The plaster and corrugated cardboard relief of a window did not work formally either. This was attempting to explore the contrast between the two cultures by incorporating computer and electronic parts into it, bringing in the idea of modern technology. This work was unsatisfactory as my thought processes at this stage were rather too literally interpreted and showed no transformation.

In Kenyan vernacular architecture the materials used, particularly in more urban

areas, were often 'found' materials, which were re-used or recycled. Recycling had become a necessity to everyday living in Kenya, not to save the environment but because various everyday commodities were scarce. My previous work had incorporated a lot of waste materials from industry, and the *Panel Series* arose out of a need to recycle materials for economic reasons, but also importantly, used as a means of exploring the elemental nature of the *Shelter* (see Plate X *Shelter 1999/2000*).

Visually the materials used in Kenyan architecture due to their collection from random sources, presented a richness of surface, and variation in colour and texture. As a result of this each structure had its own characteristics depending on size, shape, juxtaposition of adjacent materials, methods of fixing, selection of materials and arrangement of these materials (see Plate VIII, Figures 16-20).

My fascination with the use of sticks was seen on the surface of one of the columns and embedded in the guttering piece, but also essential in the making of most of my work, which was a result of living in a society where sticks were a significant feature and used for building, fencing, walking, gathered for firewood and making charcoal among other things. Sticks were the fundamental structural material used for all rural house building, including the Giriama shrines above the *vibao* and *koma*. Sticks remained an important feature throughout the research.

At this time, during the research, I was developing my preferences for the organic, contrasted with the industrial in terms of building materials in the use of clay, string, withies and cardboard, in juxtaposition with expanded foam, cement and plastic. Plaster, being a neutral material, could technically be considered to belong to either category, being industrially produced and refined, and yet made up of organic compounds. Plaster

in this country tended to be used as an interior material for decorative purposes, although in the artwork it retained an ambiguous status concerning interior and exterior, positive and negative. The column with impressions of sticks on the exterior surface was contrasted with the manufactured corrugated material on the inside. Again the theme of exterior and interior was evident at this stage of the research, and also this contrast between industrial and organic elements, which in this series of work became resolved in the combination of corrugated plastic with plaster in the last Column (see Figure 11, Column with plastic corrugations). This concept was present throughout the research, forming cross-cultural links through the developing semiotic language of the materials themselves.

Imperfection was another influence on the work that became evident through the research diaries and my initial anxieties to make 'finished' objects, which I considered worthy of exhibiting. This, it could also be argued, removed the object from a craft-based or skill-based approach to making, and raised it to the realms of a conceptual space, linking, as Curtis (1999: 160) described, 'concept with ... material process'. This became a positive force in the work in terms of visually signifying a sense of vulnerability. Kenya was a country that was fundamentally unpredictable and, as a white person living there, for safety one would rarely travel alone into remote areas or at times of political unrest; in addition, disease and wild animals contributed to this way of life. For the locals, their lives were equally insecure for many of the same reasons. Mortality, being a universal phenomenon automatically making life unsure, I represented metaphorically through architectural decomposition in the columns, rather than through figurative representation. The *Vigango* traditionally only had one life, and therefore

decayed after a period of time imitating human life, as they were never repaired, replaced or moved, and would last between fifty and seventy years (Figure 30, Decomposing *Kigango*).

My interest in a 'formless' aesthetic, as Morris described, it might be argued, could be seen through the process-based nature of my work at times, where serendipity was inherently part of the approach. Often the work incorporated a sense of the 'unfinished'. This added to the feeling of unease and change, and therefore demonstrated the liability to disintegrate over a period of time. Morris (1993: 46) described it in his own work as 'considerations of ordering are necessarily causal and imprecise and unemphasised ... chance is accepted and indeterminacy is implied'. These columns were no longer functional, in a practical sense by supporting weight and being totally vertical, and through this deliberate breakdown in structure created uncertainty through this decomposition and fragmentation. However, they were not totally devoid of any formal considerations. I was not aiming for a conventional sense of beauty and harmony, present in the column's historic context, and in fact opposed this ideal, much as groups of artists have done in the past, within theL'Art Brut, Cobra and Arte Povera movements – for commentary on these movements please refer to the *Glossary* and *Introduction*.

Through the series of columns, experimenting with building materials as a means of exploring a possible transposition of ideas from Africa to a UK context and experimenting with how these materials were put together and taken apart, drew my attention to the traditional vernacular architecture in developing countries, which became more apparent to me when I became immersed in the Kenyan environment once again on the field trip in 1999. For comparison the theoretical commentary on rural architecture of

various developing countries, reference was made to Aboudramane and Bodys Isek Kingelez (1993); Alexander (1967); Denyer (1978); Gardi (1973); Hassan (1975); Oliver (1975); and Rudofsky (1964).

It was also through the series of columns that I formed the methodological basis for the subsequent sculptural investigation (refer to Chapter 1, 1.2 - Methodology). However it was essentially through a lack of contextual knowledge and cultural experience relating to the commemorative grave posts in UK museums that initially made a field trip to Kenya necessary. This information gathering, in conjunction with the literature search, afforded a greater understanding and appreciation of these current practices as the symbolic language of the posts was revealed, and led to the subsequent artwork.

2.2 Artwork after the initial field trip to Kenya 1999-2001

As a result of investigating African artifacts in museums and through the study of the literature, I concluded that their original context, which was absent, might provide the key to a greater understanding and interest in these artifacts. It might also demystify the object in terms of a Western interpretation. Therefore the context seemed key to an in-depth approach to the meaning and function of these objects. I chose to return to Kenya to investigate the Giriama Commemorative Grave Posts for the reasons already mentioned in Chapter 1, 1.2 in the Methodology section.

The field trip study raised issues of aesthetic value in terms of craftsmanship, function, beauty and value attributed to materials; cultural symbolism as related to context; the impact of the environmental context on both the *Vigango* and my own

sculptural practice; and the personal preferences in conjunction with the traditional research processes.

The field trip began with an investigation into Giriama artifacts in both the National Museum in Nairobi and then at the Fort Jesus Museum in Mombasa, the region where the Giriama were located. At a recent conference given by the Museum Ethnographers Group (2003), Georgina Hague of the Bristol Museums and Art Gallery wrote:

> 'The notion that "objects talk" was queried; it was suggested that objects don't talk themselves, instead we impose meaning on them. In the same way, we also impose meaning on the "other" when we try and include them, e.g. "Saris, Samosas and Steel drums" type of representation. In order to challenge these constructs curatorial voices need to change, be flexible and open to interpretation, as well as combine different "truths": the "voice" of one Yoruba person can be very different from another and neither can be taken as a single truth.'

This was why the field trip was so valuable, in gaining primary knowledge from the Giriama themselves, and through this the ambiguities and slight differences in the way that respondents told their 'stories'. For the most part, their recall was fairly consistent on factual information concerning the rituals (see Appendices IV, and V, Part Two and Three, and other published material listed in the bibliography), but more subjective when it came to talking about the reasons for aesthetic judgements as we would describe and emphasise them in our culture. Although fitting into a religious schema of shape, colour, orientation, materials used and surface detail, each post had its own idiosyncrasies, and specific identities. This meant that the craftsmen could recognise their own work if the post had been stolen, and shown to them for reidentification and return.

However, fundamentally I found that the social and religious function of the *Vigango* was more important to the Giriama than the visual appearance of them. The

craftsmanship was considered to be secondary to the ritual value of the posts, particularly to the spiritual leaders, however the makers felt that they should also look attractive to both the living and the dead, the former for economic reasons in order to obtain more commissions, and the latter to appease the ancestor. The 'decoration', although showing some individual differences, tended to fit into their religious schema. Beauty, I was told by a spiritual leader, was socially constructed, and in the case of the *Vigango* it was clearly linked with the rituals associated with the making, erection, installation and ceremonies of the posts, which included a form of shelter to protect them. If the rituals were not carried out correctly the *Kigango* would have been considered ugly from their perspective. In the light of this statement it became clear that this was very different to a Western aesthetic, as Beier (1975:89) noted, 'In Oshogbo [Nigeria] the people pass no aesthetic judgment on an image: there is no good carving and no bad carving, if the work was successful it would radiate the *function* of the object' – in this case religious function too.

The symbolic value of the posts would have been recognised by the community as belonging to the *Gohu* secret society and, being male, the white and blue pigments represent particular spirits, the red ochre the life-giving earth, the cloths represent recent rituals or erection and the spirits connected with them. Meanwhile, an uncarved post meant that the person had had a serious disease, etc. Most of this information would not have been recognised visually by an 'outsider', and certainly not gained from the background literature alone. It appeared that the meaning took precedence over the craftsmanship of the posts, as we might consider their formal qualities in the West, and therefore indicated a different aesthetic to our own. It was the ad hoc way the Kenyans

collaged materials together and sourced them that attracted me to the buildings and away from the posts. I liked the variety of shapes, textures, colours, scale, proportions, fixings, materials and processes used in these structures, which was unfamiliar to me. These structures I recorded photographically as my camera was used as a visual sketchbook for ideas, as well as a tool for further evaluation of the actual sculptural work. Later I discovered that these photographs would lead on to significant images in themselves, and contribute to the final outcomes of the research.

This information and focus for the research I could have only gained from being in this environment, which became the context for both the posts and my own sculptural work, as the final sculptural *Wall Pieces* became an amalgamation of the philosophical ideas of the posts and an exploration of the materials and processes used in the local buildings.

Importantly, the earth evoked for me the natural environment of Kenya and was a universal element for most people living there. Therefore, amalgamating my interest in shelters and the shrines set over the *Vigango,* coupled with my interest in the earth, I resolved to make a large-scale architectural structure called *Shelter* using the information I had already gathered about the posts (see Plates X and Plates XX and XXI). This was the first structure I built on my return to the UK following this field trip.

This then led to a series of *Panels* (see Plate X and XI, *Panel II*) which were cut away from this main structure and used to make other works through to incorporating a whole *Panel* (Plate XII, *Panel V*) into a sculptural piece entitled *Gap Piece* (Plate XIII). The *Panels* are discussed at length in section 2.2.2. After this, a few more experimental phases occurred which included latex *Skins*, *Chickenwire Reliefs*, wire, metal rod and

weld mesh works, and numerous maquettes. Then, as a result of this extensive exploration, the final *Wall Piece* (Plate XIV, *Wall Piece*) and *Floor Pieces* (Plate XV, *Floor Piece I*; Plate XVI, *Floor Piece II*; Plate XVII, *Floor Piece III*) were made. However, it was during the *Panel Series* that I first discovered that I was visually connecting with the industrial nature of the studio wall through the holes left in the panels, therefore assuming an environmental context, which emphasised the organic nature of the *Panel*. Through this, sharp contrasts became apparent in the industrial or geometric form of the studio wall in juxtaposition with the organic and random nature of the clay of the *Panels*. The different methods of construction of these two walls also became manifest (Plate XVIII, Figure 32 *Panel III* with studio brick wall). Therefore the juxtaposition of the artwork with a context became an important part of the artwork itself, which lead to the semiotic value used in relationship to the walls I constructed. This work will be discussed in more detail in 2.2.2 and subsequently in *Chapter 3*.

2.2.1 'Shelter'

Shelter, importantly, was fuelled by the Kenyan rural vernacular architecture as a source and ultimate focus for the practical work. A transformation of surface and space was discovered through the nature of the *Shelter* walls which were cut away and isolated from the main structure; this led to other works involving the essence of walls, until the last three large-scale autonomous *Wall Pieces* were cast and erected.

Prior to this, a large mud drawing was made to explore surface and to experiment with ephemeral natural materials, other than paint, which could be found in the Kenyan landscape: these were in the main terracotta clay, mud and charcoal, which I bound with

egg but later found that gum arabic was also a useful binding agent. These natural substances were also originally used on the *Vigango* to add colour – refer to Plate III. The proportion of this rectangle was altered several times from being approximately 5ft 6ins x 19ins to 6ft x 2ft. However, the most important aspect of this drawing was the shifting layers and constant change in its surface, *hiding* and *revealing* in a somewhat ritualistic application of the mud and marks. These were at times present and absent, leaving traces of haptic interaction between hand and material. Although as a piece of art work it was not finally resolved, it proved to be significant to the working processes and eventually the philosophical ideas linked to the posts, with presence and absence, concealing and revealing (Plate XIX, Figure 36 and 37 Mud drawings - details).

Incorporated in this phase of the work were elements taken from the information gathered on the field trip which were that: (i) the *Kigango* only had one life and it did not get repaired or replaced - except by a *Kibao* - if stolen or rotted away, linking in with human mortality (see Figure 30, Decomposing *Kigango*); (ii) the *Kigango* was made to reflect human height; although it was possible that this was a conceptual construct not an actual measurement of human height (refer to Plate III); (iii) the sense in which the people and *Vigango* were in direct contact with the earth and physical aspects of the natural environment. The open air and natural environment was very important to me. As the contemporary African artist El Anatsui, in Picton (1993:47) commented, 'Most African architecture is more sculpture in the environment to me....something that engages the open atmosphere or environment. And that is not new'. The *Kigango* was usually coated with red ochre found in the area. Most *Vigango* seen traditionally used red ochre, with the exception of those using modern paints which was rare (see Figure 33,

Ochre preparation and Plate I and Plate II The Kenyan Landscape); and Figure 34, *Kigango* with household paint); (iv) the use of *Mkone* tree bark to bind the house structure together chosen for its protective and medicinal properties (Figure 35, House structure using *Mkone* bark, which links in the methods of construction used in *Shelter*, although this was substituted with sisal, which is grown in Kenya); (v) the relationship and scale of the *Koma* (or objects) to the shrine constructed above them to protect them (refer to Plate IV); and (vi) the shrine in relationship to the position of the other buildings in the homestead and immediate context.

Shelter was a structure measuring 150 ins in length by 70 ins in height at the entrance, but tapering towards the far end to about 45 ins, and 20 ins in width. These measurements I related to my own height and width across my shoulders, although the length, originally intended to be double my height, for aesthetic reasons became more elongated. Therefore it was not a literal translation of my dimensions, as with the height of the posts, which were, on analysis, not replicating exact human height, although they were purported to be so. Therefore, rather than a literal use of measurement, there was an element of personal preference or inventiveness, which was *symbolic* of human dimensions. This means of measurement in the *Shelter* was overly self-conscious and, on reflection, could have worked better if constructed on a purely visual basis in order to form a relationship to human proportions. The final *Wall Pieces* were more successful in this respect and gained a monumental presence, being proportionately taller than human height and sufficiently wide to obstruct a view either side of the wall.

What I began to discover, on a more conscious level, was that every object in the environment in some way interacted with us and us with it/them, and therefore

automatically through scale and proportion made an impression on our psyche. However, on a large scale, this visual process in making sculptural work became technically more difficult and necessitated the assistance of other people, turning it from a solitary occupation into a more co-operative activity. In the same way, house building in African cultures was a co-operative process, although more communal as a means of survival rather than an altruistic exercise. Nevertheless, the factors that were significant in using these predetermined measurements from my own body were the unease that I created through the squeezing of the human form along the narrow tunnel-like space (Plate XX *Shelter* interior) of what was quite a delicate structure (as the sticks could not be embedded into this concrete floor, as if in the natural earth), ending up in an even smaller space at the end where it was a necessity to bend almost double. It was difficult, if not impossible, to turn around in this tunnel to make an exit, therefore the person would have to move backwards in order to gain access to the outside, the side walls brushing against the body. The shrines built to protect the *Vigango, Vibao* and *Koma*, although varied, tended to constrict the body by their low roofs and narrowness from front to back. This sense of space I associated with Shelter. The house building related to human height although relatively small inside and was usually one storey high, with two rooms. From this experience too, I gained a feeling of confined space, as generally Kenyans spend most of their time outside in the natural environment. *Shelter* did not function, in any traditional sense, as a means of giving continuous shelter and comfort, as it restricted movement inside to the point of discomfort, and smelt of rotting straw and earth, akin to burial chambers through the nature of the organic material used. It was also built indoors in the studio, which contrasted with what would have been its more usual

location, outside in the natural environment. Therefore the element of reversal in the work was, even at this stage, becoming apparent.

The fact that *Shelter* was made of organic materials gave it an ephemeral quality, especially in the UK with the damp atmosphere and frequent wet weather, which would both encourage mould to grow and erode the structure, thereby rapidly destroying it. This also affected a sensation of unease and instability in what would otherwise provide security and comfort in its functional, rather than aesthetic sense. As Gimenez (1997:108) cited 'The baffling effect of porous shelters that do not shield well or for long puts an intolerable pressure on the meaning of mental security', which this evoked in a sense of human mortality for me, contrasting materially with a more Western traditional sculptural need for permanency.

The initial framework for the *Shelter* was constructed out of hazel sticks, being naturally straight, and tied with sisal at the joints. The two longer side walls of the structure were made first by creating a frame laid horizontally on the floor, and enough uprights and horizontal sticks tied in for it to stand vertically without twisting. Then the end wall was made and once these three walls were standing, the ceiling struts were incorporated. A Giriama house in comparison would have been made vertically from the beginning with the sticks pushed firmly into the ground for stability; however, with a concrete floor and the possibility that this structure would eventually have to be moved, this was not an option. This stick structure was then double-lined with parallel sticks on the horizontals, like the construction technique of the initial framework for the Giriama houses (see Figure 35). This technique afforded the eventual interlocking of the clay into the walls giving a more secure hold. In order to give the whole structure more stability to

compensate for the sticks not being driven into the ground initially, two cross-bars were incorporated at the top and the bottom of the entrance. This also meant that, as well as achieving greater stability, on entering *Shelter* the person would have to bend down and step over this, which in effect meant that they had to bow, as if to an imaginary deity like the plank put across the doorway of a Chinese temple in Kuala Lumpur to make the people entering bow to the deity in front of them, as I was told by a monk from my previous experience when teaching out there (see Plate XXI, *Shelter* - Entrance).

The preparation of the terracotta clay, straw and builders sand for the walls took some time, with the chopping of the straw, the mixing of these materials together and treading them in together in a mixing tray. Treading these materials in together was found to be an easier method, and a quicker process than trying to mix them together with a shovel. This was a traditional technique, which was still found to be the most efficient method of combining them. Each stick was tied with sisal, the grid system being initially placed on the floor in a *horizontal* position, and then erected to a *vertical* position to complete. Then each space in the framework was filled with the clay mixture, having first been moulded by hand into a round ball, then squeezed into place, however leaving some openings or holes so that some light could penetrate, and also contributed to the variation of the surface of the walls. By working the clay by hand it left finger and hand impressions which reflected the process used in the building of the walls and the organic nature of the material itself. This method of working emphasised the *human* and *personal* element of making, as opposed to a *machine* or *industrial* process. The indentations of the fingers manifested an impression on the clay and therefore, it might be imagined, the memory of human activity made visible by this physical mark, signifying

absence. This more tactile approach therefore influenced the visual form of the structure, emphasising the organic nature of the materials in conjunction with the form (Figure 38, Finger impressions in the clay). In formal terms this gave the structure a varied surface in form, texture, light and dark, and contours. The hand, often being a means of calculating proportion and measurement in African countries, became a more informal method of measurement. Industrial bricks, in spite of not having the visual appearance of relating to the hand, were in fact based on ergonomic use in size and weight with the hand and became standardised. The cement floor of the studio space seen inside the structure looked incongruous alongside the organic nature of the walls and ceiling, so it was covered with more of the clay, sand and straw mixture but tamped down firmly. This also provided greater stability.

This process of preparing the materials and the way of putting it all together could be likened to a ritual series of actions, as with the making of the posts, as Gell in Coote and Shelton (1995: 42) said: 'we have sacralised art: art is really our religion'. It could be argued that this process was intrinsic to the aesthetic outcome of the work alone, not merely a means to an end. However, both the posts and *Shelter* shared an embodiment of ideals which, through these accumulative processes, formed the final object, which would be viewed by the spectator in the case of the artwork, and by the client in the case of the posts. Where they differed, was in the interpretation, in terms of the values and beliefs held by the maker. As a maker of the posts, he would have fulfilled his duty to the client, spiritual leaders and community, but also would have aimed to please both the living and the dead in a decorative sense. In the case of the *Shelter* I also intended it to be symbolic of protection but in a secular sense, not as part of a religious system. However, it may

not have been without some form of spiritual allusion. As the artist Doris Salcedo said about her feelings for museum spaces 'It is almost the only place left for us to experience a barely perceptible sense of the sacred and ritual'. (Tate 2000). From an anthropologist's point of view any object lavished with money, time, social or religious values would be considered valuable but this may not necessarily be true of an art object in the West because of critical trends.

As a potent sign for absence and memory, this structure, once built, was taken apart and sections of it became recycled. Here, visual parallels can be drawn between the building in Plate VI, Figure 13 where spaces were deliberately formed to make arches and openings, with the remains of *Shelter* after the *Panels* were cut away (refer to Plate X and Plate XXIII Shelter). After being dismantled it left a stain on the floor where it had once stood, which implied the presence of a structure now absent, or in the case of the stain on the floor in Fig.13 a human presence, although absent, but having left a trace. This idea of *presence* and *absence* seemed to reinforce the spiritual nature of the *Vigango* (being both seen and unseen) and also in the sense of ritual practice, both being paralleled by the making and dismantling or disappearance of *Shelter*.

The intention of deliberately leaving holes in the walls of *Shelter* was to let in shafts of light to penetrate the darkness inside, but not enough to reveal or illuminate the interior. With hindsight this could also be related to the piercing of the earth's surface by the *Kigango,* which simultaneously occupied a light space above ground and a dark space below ground. Symbolically, going from a *light* environment to a *dark* environment also conjured up ideas of entering different states of consciousness by entering and leaving this structure. These facets of the work, which remained hidden to me at the point of

building the structure, often became revealed to me later on, some of which I became more aware of through the analysis of the finished structure by a process of *description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation* as described in Chapter 1, 1.2 Methodology, but sometimes it would take longer to assimilate. These periods were important parts of the absorption and assimilation of the ideas and decision-making, which were necessary to advance the work.

However, at this stage I was still thinking literally, in this case about the experience of sitting in a mud house where the sun light dappled through the cracks and crevices where repairs were needed (Figure 39, Dappled light entering *Shelter* through holes in the structure). Reminiscent of this was Wilson's (1971:17) comment,

> As we grow older we acquire memories of space and instinctive reactions below the conscious level. These memories are associated with unique configurations of space we have experienced. Similar spaces evoke a twinge of nostalgia.

This aspect of leaving holes in the walls of *Shelter* was less to do with vulnerability in this piece of work, *although this was later to be the case*, but the idea of seeing into or seeing out of the structure, as many of the 'holes' were set at eye level, or at a level lower than waist height for variation (Plate XXII, Figures 40-44 Details of *Shelter*).

Even at this stage I was considering the notion of concealing and revealing, although thematically more in terms of identifying contrasts, through the idea of *public* and *private* space, *exterior* and *interior*. The fact that someone could look out of the structure without being seen within a private, *dark interior* contrasted with the more public, *light exterior* space, was interesting to me, and that the gaze could be reversed, looking into the structure from the outside (see Plate XXII). With hindsight it was reminiscent of the ancestral spirit being *omnipresent* and yet *visibly absent*, or like the

post being seen above the earth and simultaneously being hidden beneath it. The main thrust of concealing and revealing, at this stage, was not obvious to me on a conscious level and I saw no direct connection with *Shelter* and the posts at this point in my thinking.

Taking this idea further, Bachelard (1958: 15) related a more subjective view of a house or shelter as a place of sanctuary and memory:

> The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for daydreaming.

This was perhaps another explanation for becoming more visually aware of the houses as it produced a more imaginative, aesthetic and personal response in me linked to memory of what I had seen and touched. The finger and hand marks left in the clay were also physical reminders of that. The purpose of creating this structure was not for any practical function, as it was not durable, the materials not suited to this climate for prolonged shelter, too restricted spatially to allow for living paraphernalia, and stood in an inappropriate context. Therefore it inevitably served no perceived useful purpose as a 'Shelter' but instead a metaphorical embodiment of my experiences. As a structure, in its proportions and shape, it was not so successful aesthetically, and its attempt to make cross-cultural references failed, as it still made very strong connections with African building, which reinforced English stereotypes of African countries. *Shelter* became more interesting once I had dismantled it by cutting a series of wall panels from it. This let light into the interior, revealing the inside surface which was subtly different in appearance from the exterior surface, while the remaining sections of wall still concealed the inner space of the structure from external view (Plate XXIII, *Shelter* with panel

missing - side view). This selected removal of the panels, as 'fragments' of an existing structure, was also reinforced by the photographs of individual sections of the wall, which accentuated the texture and organic nature of the surface (refer to Plate XXII as an example of this). These photographs became more than merely the documenting process involved with making and evaluating the sculptural work, although this was the main function of the photographs at this stage. These panels lead to the *Panel Series* of work.

The elements and details of *Shelter*, which have previously been discussed in this section, later manifested themselves as important philosophical ideas linked to the grave posts themselves in terms of death and regeneration. As the *Shelter* was destroyed, it also became regenerated or recycled into the next series of artwork by the removal and reworking of several panels from the original structure. This process of recycling one art work into another by changing, adapting and / or by incorporation, became metaphoric for recreation throughout the research. In terms of regeneration, the post although a symbol associated with death, was also symbolically regenerated into the 'living' ancestor; the funeral ritual also incorporated sexual intercourse, a regenerative process, with the inherited wife; and the post representing the deceased ancestor, might also be seen as a phallic symbol penetrating the earth representing fertility, the earth becoming associated with the female in this respect.

At this point I did not realise that the research would in fact travel full circle away from the posts, through the architecture and back to the posts through an architectural transformation and interpretation, in a hermeneutic circle. *Shelter* was therefore found to have important implications for the approach and methodology of the whole research inherent in the subsequent sculptural pieces, outlined below.

2.2.2 The series of five 'Panels '

These 'fragments', or panels, from *Shelter* instantly became more abstract, isolated from the main structure and bringing to the viewer's attention a magnified surface quality. By isolating these panels from the main structure it bestowed an ambiguity of time, place and function on them, essentially removing them from their original context (Plate XXIV, *Panel I* and Studio Shots). Whereas the *Shelter* as a whole was a reminder of memories of being in a homestead made of mud with dappled light entering the structure through holes in the walls (see Figure 39). This was also the case with the African artifacts seen in museums and so in both instances an interpretation often had to be based on a visual interpretation alone, formulated by one's present knowledge. Isolating the structure of the *Shelter* still further, by photographing details of it, removed it from another context and through this facilitated another view of the work, which was valuable for progression. However, the materials still held strong connotations with traditional African house building from a European perspective, although from a Kenyan viewpoint they bore no real resemblance to house building at all (see Chapter 3, Section 3.1: 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 - *Crossing Boundaries* exhibition with comments from the artists from the Kuona Arts Trust). At this point I began to experiment with other materials in addition to the clay, straw, and sticks of the panels. These materials included mod-roc, which transformed the surface by unifying the separate units, changing the colour and texture of the surface and forming more affinity to the white studio walls. Chickenwire was used by Kenyans as fencing material and emphasised the linear and contours in the surface of the panel, but also made what was originally *solid* and *opaque*, *transparent* and *light* in weight, as with the latex forms (see

Figure 50). Paint in *Panel V* transformed the surface through colour giving it a *synthetic* appearance in contrast to the *natural* colour of the clay. It also transformed the surface by making it smoother and more uniform in texture. The additions of woodchip wallpaper in *Panel II* and a smaller section of anaglypta in *Panel V* further explored the juxtaposition of man-made and natural materials, but also pattern and texture and later cultural associations.

Through the *Panel Series* I was investigating the transformation and changing identity of one material into another through the casting processes, addition of materials, layering of materials and use of colour. In doing this I further explored the relationship of the natural materials with the more industrial materials of this country. In exploring transformative methods using different processes and materials I aimed to develop deeper insights into the *Panel Series*.

This stage of the research was characterised by a more visual and less conscious way of working, as opposed to a more illustrative approach where the outcomes were predefined. Therefore my interpretations, prior to the *Panels*, had tended to be more literal, taking precedence over more intuitive insights.

On the first *Panel* I layered up mod-roc on one half of the panel, *concealing* the mud and straw mixture underneath, which transformed the original surface from rounder forms to more angular forms, and this white surface emphasised a change in colour and texture, which was juxtaposed by the original surface. I then tried to take paper impressions of the surface, the first being with woodchip wallpaper, which was too inflexible, due to its thickness, to achieve a good relief form from it. However, during this process I decided that it would make an interesting addition to the mod-roc idea in

Panel II (see Plate XI), thus *further concealing* this side of the panel, and attempting to incorporate more Western industrial materials. Woodchip also evoked European wall coverings as a means of providing texture and often *hid* what might otherwise be seen as an imperfect wall surface; it was also a cheaper and more abstract alternative to patterned wallpaper. The function of wallpapers was always to mimic something else such as cloth, carving and even textures according to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In this sense it was symbolic, and in my work it became synonymous with memory and time through layering, and domestic space. Here in *Panel I* the wood chip paper's textural qualities shared some affinity with the earth and straw texture but instead of being entirely natural was manufactured to machine-made specifications, thus forming the contrast required. It was only after the '*Crossing Boundaries*' exhibition that I discovered that the Kikuyu used a delicate textured surface as decoration on the *outside* of their house (see Chapter 3, section 3.1). The hole naturally appeared, registering with the hole in the mod-roc and panel beneath it, which I emphasised with shiny white gloss paint (see Plate XI, *Panel II*).

Elements of female imagery entered into this thinking from previous work manifested in the *Love Charms* (Figure 48, *Love Charm).* There was also a natural tendency to link the earth of the panel with fertility and the female which the head of ethnography, Mr Lagat, had pointed out in the reconstruction of this panel during the *Crossing Boundaries* exhibition. MacCormack (1980) emphasized this link between nature and the female, but also setting against this, in opposition, culture and maleness. However in the light of contemporary society I would agree with Strathern (1980) that there is more ambiguity surrounding these categorisations than previously thought, with

the advent of Feminism.

Having photographed this panel at a significant stage in its development, I decided to take it further by transforming it into another form or panel, through more casting and layering of materials, to produce *Panel III.* This new - or recycled - panel I covered completely with mod-roc, *hiding* the original surface and thereby translating the clay surface into a different, smoother, more angular surface, and further transforming it with the addition of white matt emulsion paint. The sticks forming the matrix or underlying construction were still evident as forms, in spite of the paint, which revealed a symbolic language concerning the structure and surface, in their association with the horizontal and vertical construction of Kenyan houses, and the nature of the Kenyan landscape. Yet it possessed an ambiguity through the layer of mod-roc concealing the surface beneath it - much like the ideas behind the posts, where half of it was buried beneath the surface of the earth (see Plate XVIII, *Panel III* at this stage).

During this time I also covered a group of hand moulded 'bricks' of clay and straw units dismantled from the *Shelter* and *covered* them in plaster, in order to see how this liquid material would affect the form of the clay. Since it did not appear to effect the form in an interesting way I decided to saw them in half, thus *revealing* the inside, which I scraped out in order to use them as moulds. Each one was a similar unit, yet individually different, like each of the *Kigango* in style, nevertheless conforming to one schema (Plate XXV, Figure 49 Plaster moulds). However, instead of filling them with more plaster or more solid materials, as in the conventional casting process, I used several layers of latex. I deliberately emphasised the seams, as I had done in the columns, to focus on two elements of the form. Here the form was transposed from dense matter

into semi-transparent, from *heavy solid* matter into a *light hollow* form, and from a *natural* material into an *industrial* one. This idea of reversal, which permeated the process of making throughout the research, was evident in the reversal of the casting process, using a moulding material such as latex as the positive cast, rather than using it conventionally the other way around (Plate XXV, Figure 50 Latex Forms). This challenged notions of *positive* and *negative* space which became evident in the final pieces of work, where negative space, became a spiritual dimension but also a linking mechanism between two surfaces of wall. The positive material became the solid matter that the wall was made up of, occupying space as a physical presence. This reflected the ideas behind the *Vigango*, where the posts penetrated the earth, moving between the physical and the spiritual worlds.

Panel III was subsequently covered by dipping latex on top of the mod-roc and paint concealing and changing this surface, back to more rounded forms. The latex was then peeled away, again revealing the mod-roc. This 'new' panel consequently only existed in photographic form (Plate XXVI *Panel IV* with latex skin). This Panel therefore became *concealed* by the latex and was again *revealed* by the removal of this latex 'skin' (Plate XXVII, *Panel III* with latex skin being removed). It was at this point that I became aware of the environmental context of the studio space and the studio wall in relationship to the *Panel.* The organic nature of the panel contrasted sharply with the geometric and industrially made bricks of the wall behind it. The latter was revealed through the holes deliberately left in the panel and by the continuation of the sticks beyond the panel, drawing the eye along and past them (Plate XVIII, Figure 32 *Panel III* with studio wall). It was then that I worked deliberately with the studio wall, first

utilizing scale, with a maquette in chickenwire, newspaper and paint, which appeared vulnerable in size and construction in relationship to the wall (Figure 51, Chickenwire maquette).

Having done a rubbing of one of the panels on tracing paper, this was transferred to the wall, contrasting the *solid strong geometric* elements of the wall with the *delicate, organic linear* nature of the drawing, exploring surface. However this also had associations with *presence* and *absence*, the drawing marks taking on the appearance of a shadow, an impression or trace left by solid matter (Figure 52, Panel transfer to the wall). Then a wire contour painted white and taken from the original panel was assembled diagonally against the wall and onto the floor exploring a linear taxonomy, which sharply contrasted with the symmetry of the wall (Figure 53, White Wire Contour). A latex '*skin*' was later taken off the wall, which transformed the inherent characteristics of the wall into a thin, transparent, flexible, cloth-like sheet (Figure 54, *Skin Series* with brickwork). Also during this period I was experimenting with drawings on tracing paper, involving tracing the memory of the panels, taking glue size to emboss the paper onto the panel (Figure 55, Drawing with glue size); coating a rubbing of the panel with latex *concealing* the rubbing underneath (Figure 56, Drawing with latex); and worked on several layers of tracing paper at once which both *hid* and *revealed* the marks being made beneath. The choice of using a transparent drawing material, such as tracing paper, conceptually reduced the *thick* and *solid* characteristics of the panel and the brick wall, to a *thin, transparent sheet*, thus reversing these qualities.

A further experiment involved making a relief in chickenwire, taken from the front surface of the original clay panel. This produced a light, fragile and hollow contour,

which had affinities with some of the *juakali* fencing in Mombasa using chainlink, sticks and sewn-up flour sacks (see Plate VII, Figure 17 Fencing in Mombasa). This piece, initially one piece, was again exploring surface, which was later made into two related panels from the one original clay panel, thereby expanding the former chickenwire relief in width. These two relief panels were made using less material, creating an even more fragile result which was then placed collapsed at the bottom of the studio wall, thus further exposing the idea of *strength* and *weakness*, *solid* with *transparency*, but perhaps more importantly the contrast between *permanency* and *ephemeral* concerns in terms of materials (Plate XXVIII, Figure 57 *Chickenwire Relief I*; Figure 58, *Chickenwire Relief II*). Permanency was linked to value and worth in both UK and Kenyan cultures in terms of their buildings, with few exceptions. European cultures managed to achieve this through high economic standards in comparison with those of Kenya and other developing countries, where in rural areas in particular the enemy of the mud house was termites and the labour-intensive process of continual repair. However, these materials in hot climates were ideal for very high temperatures, were cheap to build, and afforded some individual variation and extension and had in fact been known to last for centuries.

One of the panels was covered with plaster with the intention of making a cast from it, however a layer of latex was applied to it instead, on the *back* of the mould, which when peeled back produced a surface reminiscent of magnified skin, hence the series of *Skins* which were made (Figure 59, *Skin Series* - from the back of the plaster cast). This reflected a process through casting of *concealing* a surface, which metamorphosed through another medium, in this case latex, to *reveal* a mirror image; as with all casting techniques, reversal was intrinsic to the process. This *Skin Series* in

essence dealt with a reversal of formal considerations and concepts, changing the form, material and functions of the original substrates. The plaster mould for this panel was later cast in latex to form a positive, however of little interest conceptually as it produced a *conventional* cast; however, when laboriously picking out the clay and straw from this panel mould, it was the process of slowly *revealing* the surface beneath that had previously been *concealed*, that interested me most.

The last *Panel* in the series was painted a deep royal blue using powder paint, which transformed the clay through colour (see Plate XII, *Panel V*). The *synthetic* nature of the paint contrasted with the *natural* materials of the earth, producing another binary concept in the work through *man-made* and *natural*, the *materialistic* and the *spiritual*. This use of colour in the form of painted mud walls was not usual in Kenya but, as I discovered later in the research, decoration was often a textured layer, not immediately recognisable by an 'outsider' such as myself. This colour was chosen as a spiritual colour, similar to the blue used in the *Kigango* as inlay in the triangular decoration where, as well as a spirit, this colour was said to represent the sky. If this colour was to represent the sky and the spiritual, then by implication one could assume that above ground could also be considered a spiritual space thereby making reversal implicit, in contrast to what was said before about the posts being below the ground in the spiritual world. It might be suggested here that creating ambiguity through this anomaly was usual in many mythological descriptions.

Some of the neck cloths and those tied around the waist of the *Kigango* were also blue, representing various spirits whose position, *above* or *below* another coloured cloth, was said to be of importance (refer to Appendix V, Part Two, Fieldwork Diary in Kenya

1999). My addition to *Panel V* along with this blue pigment was a strip of anaglypta wallpaper, equating this in my mind with decoration, although in our society decoration, paint and wallpaper were conventionally on the *inside* of our houses, whereas most decoration in Africa tended to be on the *exterior*, as Fathy (1973: xii) said: 'Philosophically, one may argue that men need beauty as much as protection', however I found that the decoration on the *Kikuyu* house was not merely of aesthetic concern, but religious - reference diary (2001) with remarks made by David from the Kuona Arts Trust. The contrast of *exterior* and *interior* appeared here in the form of decoration as opposed to dark and light in the *Shelter*. This anaglypta wallpaper also represented industrially produced materials in contrast to the natural forms it was fixed to. According to the Victoria and Albert Museum, anaglypta was mass-produced for the poorer people in the UK during the lndustrial Revolution to mimic interior wooden carving found in wealthy houses, then became a suitable substitute available to most people. This juxtaposition of industrial and man-made with *rich* and *poor* cultures as contrasts or binaries, reflected the research interests and economic contexts. The most natural comparison from a Western viewpoint is to categorise developing countries as poor economically, in contrast to the West, which would be a fair assumption in materials terms. However in spite of this l found Kenya to be a very rich country in terms of their natural environment, hospitality, and spiritual concerns, in opposition to this country, which dwells on consumerism and an obsession with the new, progress (change for the sake of it) and self interestedness. Living in both these countries and experiencing them both, these characteristics are not so black and white, and therefore some ambiguity is created through a relative stance within each culture or group of people. This is evident

through my use of materials, and recycling these and the artwork, instigated by financial hardship, although relative to Kenyan artists, I am considerably fortunate. I also chose to work in this way as it reflects my value system within both societies, challenging my own and celebrating the 'other'. The exhibition photographs taken from the final *Wall Pieces* emphasise these concepts and ambiguities in de-stablising the Western idea of domestic security and comfort by the cracked and distressed wallpapered surfaces indicating aging and deterioration, with the imminent intrusion of the organic.

Panel V became part of an installation piece I made in Redcliffe Cave as part of the '*Work/Place'* project in Bristol in 2000. I had previously coated some clay and straw units with mod-roc, which I now painted blue, and cut in half and placed on the floor of the cave, and so recycling the materials. However, more importantly for later developments in the work, I had taken what were wall elements and transferred them to the ground or floor (Plate XXIX, Redcliffe Cave interior). These were again shown like this in the *Crossing Boundaries* exhibition of 2001, and in 2003 a series of three *Floor Pieces* were made, incorporating elements usually found on the wall but now made into horizontal planes, two of which were exhibited at the RWA Open Sculpture exhibition in this year (see Plates XV, XVI and XVII, *Floor Pieces*). In the *Floor Pieces,* the vertical nature of a wall was reversed, by laying it horizontal and parallel to the ground. In the other pieces the elements or units placed on the ground taken from the *Panels*, further fragmented the ideas of solidarity and strength of 'wall'. The *Floor Pieces* emphasized their isolation from an architectural structure, whereas the *Wall Pieces* became monolithic fragments, which indicated some past or closer association with an architectural structure.

Before I left for Kenya for the second visit, to put up the *Crossing Boundaries* show at the National Museum of Kenya, in Nairobi, I made a series of experiments using paper maché. These were not successful as I had temporarily regressed to a more illustrative approach, I found the material too brittle, and the material itself was found to have the wrong inherent associations in this instance, so this phase was quickly abandoned.

2.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Shelter* piece was fragmented forming a series of separate panels. These panels started to lose their identity as part of the original sculptural piece, through this process of isolation, casting and recasting processes. This transformation occurred after I had taken some photographic details of the *Shelter*, which interested me as images, as these facilitated a more focused view of the surface structure. The textural reading of the surface also became more emphatic through this disunion with the whole structure, by extracting the panels along with the photographic details.

By hanging the panels on the studio wall, slightly proud of the surface, they became functionless in terms of walls, by not retaining any contact with the floor or supporting any other structure above or to the sides. This imbued the panel with more abstract qualities, although still indicative of Kenyan architecture contained in its associations with the materials themselves. This then opened up various metaphoric opportunities with which to experiment, which resulted in an in-depth investigation into the characteristics of the structure and surface of the panels.

The casting processes aided the transformation of the *Panels* in that it disguised

the material's identity still further and neutralised its characteristics by changing the material from one to another. The actual casting processes conceptually *concealed* and *revealed* the forms and material through the *addition* and *subtraction* of layers. Through the exploration of different surfaces and casting techniques, it both *concealed* the original surface but also *revealed* new and different ones. By using wallpaper it created a surface of layers which linked to memory and time, which was used in further work which also linked it with architectural interiors in the West (see Plate XI *Panel II*; Plate XV, XVI, XVII *Floor Pieces*; Plate XXXVII First Full Scale Wall Piece). The use of blue paint gave the panel a more even surface, illuminating some of the original texture and through the selection of this specific colour drew parallels with the spiritual, connected with the same use of colour in the posts (Plate XII *Panel V*). Latex transformed the surface from an organic material into a synthetic industrial one but also translated the clay, which was solid, into semi-transparent, hollow forms as seen in Figure 50 Latex Forms. Then as sheets, the latex took on characteristics of fabric, which could be folded, but also made associations with skin (see Plate XXV, Figure 50 Latex forms; Plate XXVI and XXVII *Panels* with latex skin and Figure 59 *Skin Series*). Chickenwire with its links to Kenyan fences transformed the *Panels* into lightweight transparent reliefs, which were layered up with paper to accentuate the contours. Scale was also explored here in conjunction with the studio wall (see Figure 51 Maquette, and Plate XXVIII *Chickenwire Reliefs*). Wire was used to extend the idea of contours juxtaposed with the brickwork of the studio wall (see Figure 53, Figure 71), and later work that explored the negative space between the studio wall and the *Panels* (see Figure 60-62; Plate XXXI). The conjunction of wire and plaster was another development found in Plates XXXIV and XXXV). Experiments

with paper transformed the surface into an even thinner layer. Tracing paper was chosen in contrast to the opaque surface of the clay panel (see Figures 55 and 56), and the rubbing transferred to the actual studio wall, which almost integrated the brick wall and the panel together through the ambiguity of the rubbing, which looked like a shadow on the wall (see Figure 52). Through this, aspects of *interior* and *exterior* arose through the use of wallpaper and paint; *positive* and *negative* through working with latex and the reversal of form in mould making; *solid* and *void* through mod-roc or paint following the contours of the holes left in the panel, which therefore emphasised or disguised certain formal qualities of the original nature of the panels.

It was as a consequence of this series of work that the environmental context became *revealed* by means of the relationship of the panels to the studio wall behind them. This led on to an exploration of this spatial relationship between the panel and the wall by casting the *void* between the two into a *solid* form, which resulted in *Gap Piece* (see Plate XIII *Gap Piece*). This was the initiation of a truly transformative stage in the work by reinventing the nature of a wall through the casting of a void forming a solid structure standing alone, but raised off the ground. This transformed *Gap Piece* into becoming an exhibit, as it amalgamated the semiotic cultural signifiers of the Kenyan and UK contexts; the integrated panel, through the sticks and negative impressions of clay, and therefore memory, and the rest of the piece with its more angular fascia created with polystyrene shuttering and the overall geometry of the work, which also included an impression of the industrialised brick work on the back of the piece. This was the first piece of work that began to integrate the two cultural contexts through the semiotic nature of materials and form, metaphorically transforming what was invisible space into a

tangible form, like the posts representing the ancestral spirit, or absent relative.

At this time I was unaware of this growing preoccupation with *horizontal* and *vertical* concepts in the casting processes, which had come to light through the later analysis and examination of the work and processes. Through contrasting materials it helped to focus the cultural elements of both countries from a *relative* position; similarly, relative knowledge of other cultures sometimes assisted with looking at the culture being examined, as with the similarities and differences between Egyptian and South African rural architecture. Serendipity was a very important factor in the progression of the work and at times, through the drawings and 'playing about' with the materials themselves, I found unexpected routes through to subsequent work. With hindsight, it seemed that the periphery of the visual and phenomenological experience was becoming more central to the conceptual elements of the research.

Throughout this period until the *Crossing Boundaries* exhibition in March 2001, the photographic documentation of the work was becoming more important to me in this study as it assisted in the metaphorical concepts of the work, examples of this can be seen in Plate XXII *Shelter* and Plate XXVI *Panel III*. The details or photographic fragments enabled me to isolate shapes, textures, crevices or cracks and took away a sense of representation still further. This was possibly one of the main contributing factors towards a semiotic view of the actual materials.

CHAPTER 3

STUDIO WORK

AND THE '*CROSSING BOUNDARIES*' EXHIBITION

3.1 Overview of the '*Crossing Boundaries*' exhibition, National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi

This exhibition was held at the National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi, where five artists from the Kuona Arts Trust helped in the reconstruction of three of the '*Panel Series*' for showing alongside other artwork and *Giriama* artifacts. The aim of this exhibition was firstly to gain an insight into the artists' view of the work, which consisted of the *Panels, Skins, Chickenwire Reliefs* and A4 photographs of details of the artwork and the anthropological fieldwork, and secondly, to gain responses from the exhibition and accompanying lectures, from an African audience.

Working with the artists on making the *Panels* for the exhibition, and interacting with the museum staff enabled me to gather information informally, revealing specific information of importance of the artists/staff otherwise less forthcoming through more formal approaches. It gave me a direct insight and understanding of local house building with the relative rules and regulations assigned to this process, and how they perceived the '*Panels*' in relationship to this. By exhibiting in Kenya I was working with and exploring the context of the artwork, in relationship to the intentions of the work. It was therefore through this context that I was able to reassess the work in terms of a genuine, cross-cultural interpretation.

3.1.1 The work of the artists at the Kuona Arts Trust

The artists who assisted me had no formal art training, except what they picked up from the organisers of the Trust and any visiting artists carrying out workshops with them. Essentially they were self-taught. The sculptors showed a limited knowledge of the Western materials I used such as latex, scrim, fibreglass, mod-roc and straw, but more easily recognised materials such as earth, sticks, grass, and sisal, which grew in Kenya. They were also familiar with cement as a material, which in house building in rural areas had sometimes been mixed with red earth or sand, but this meant some financial outlay and therefore cement was used less often. In some cases they invented their own materials. Wood for carving was the main material used as it was readily available, and they would use found materials such as metal which they would weld together. The majority of the artists had a traditional approach to making art, using clear definitions between painting, sculpture and printmaking, although they practiced all three media, with only a few specialising in one. The art in Kenya tended to reflect craft skills and tourist art, involving figurative subject matter. This included animals and plant forms primarily with a commercial intention, rather than any conceptual concern, albeit sometimes illustrating some myth or narrative. This type of work was generally produced to sell to white Europeans; as wealthy Africans had yet to establish art as a status symbol, valuing art for its own sake through art education and training, or constructed 'art world', which separates art from religious, social or cultural practices. Their school education was often founded by

Crouching Woman

Shivering Bird

lslamic or Christian religious groups; the Christians in some government schools, however, viewed sculptural form as 'false idols' to be destroyed, or not valued at all, and generally lslamic artistic practice was a reflection of its doctrines which excluded figurative work. As a result *Giriama* Commemorative Grave Posts would often be burnt by the local missions.

The concept of '*art for art's sake*' had been superficially adopted by the Kenyan artists but they found it very difficult to financially support this type of art in a culture that was not used to perceiving art in this way. A lot of visual information in this respect they gained via the internet. Therefore their understanding of Western art tended to be visual, appropriating the outward appearance of what they saw with little understanding of its context. If I had only been to Kenya on the first research trip, and not *lived* in the country prior to this for two years, I have no doubt that my understanding of their culture would not only have been superficial, but also greatly distorted; suffice to say that as an outsider my interpretation was inevitably conditioned in part by my background, education and culture. As Appiah (1992:xi) said 'in thinking about culture....one is bound to be formed, morally, aesthetically, politically, religiously by the range of lives one had known'. However Oguibe warned the researcher to be aware of ones position as an outsider in saying that, 'Invention and contemplation of the Other is a continuous process evident in all cultures and societies. But in contemplating the Other, it is necessary to exhibit modesty and admit relative handicap since the peripheral location of the contemplator precludes a complete understanding', therefore the reflexive aspect of the research was an important referent in this respect.

The artists were generally supported by the French, ltalian and Japanese Cultural

Centres in Nairobi and marginally by the museum - itself a Western conception. Few of the artists have travelled outside the country and, because of very limited information sources, they rely on personal contact with people coming into the country. However, some manage to make contacts abroad, although currently this has become more difficult due to the internal politics and the poor economy of the country.

3.1.2 Response to the 'Panel Series' by the African audience

Initially the artists did not associate the three *Panels* with house building as they took quite a literal view of it, and therefore found it difficult to make the necessary associations, explaining to me that as a fragment, lifted off the floor and presumably not having a direct relationship with the ground, and mounted approximately eight inches off the wall, it made it *unfamiliar* and *out of context*. The materials, being familiar to them, appeared invisible until the ideas of using these materials were explained to them, and therefore the meaning. For a *white* audience in Kenya, that is, people from a European background who had settled in Kenya, they recognised these materials and made the links with house building and therefore from my art practice they understood that I was bringing the 'everyday' in the Kenyan environment to their aesthetic attention. This was made apparent through the comments made at the lecture given to the British Institute in Eastern Africa which was held at the museum in Nairobi, and in the visitors book to the exhibition (2001).

The *Panels* seemed to be more easily understood than the less identifiable work of the *Skins* and *Chickenwire Reliefs*, which used less familiar materials and form (see Figure 54 and Figure 59 *Skin Series* and Plate XXVIII for *Chickenwire Reliefs*). On

viewing these works in the show, the Africans seemed to identify with the materials but not always the process I used, as I was using a technique not familiar to the *Kikuyu* tribe but only to the *Giriama* tribe. My artwork remained quite alien to their comprehension, in part due to its lack of practical function and also because of their more traditional methods of making art themselves. Their response was that it was strange and therefore did not fit in with their stereotyping of what Western art looked like. Therefore they based their response to it on their current knowledge of Western art, which tended to be more visual rather than conceptual. The meaning of the work, once explained to them, could be identified with, as it was then within the realm of their lived experience. The concept of house building made a very strong connection in most people's minds through their own experiences of building for themselves, and which also had very important affiliations with their own tribal group in terms of identity, through the construction and making. Everyone also shared an affinity with the earth as a material with its associations with fertility, as well as having a practical purpose. One of the artists described a *Kikuyu* house as having an earth and dung floor as opposed to the more modern and frequently used cement flooring, as it allegedly kept down the fleas and jiggers. This appeared to be a reversion back to more traditional techniques for practical reasons, however it may have also been an individual choice for other reasons unknown to me. As Fathy (1973: 27) said:

> 'Any man's mind is so complex that his decisions are always unique. His reaction to the things around him is his alone. If in your dealings with men you consider them as a mass and abstract and exploit the features they have in common, then you destroy the unique features of each.'

However, the casting processes I used in the work may not have been very clearly understood, as casting was not a familiar practice in Kenya, and therefore its connections

with the concepts, inherent in the work, were often unrecognised. Although working on individual pieces of wood, or metal, in their art making, the artists were used to working co-operatively on traditional tasks such as house building and so seemed somewhat perplexed by being confronted with the *Panels* as artistic production. Therefore something recognisable in one context was not so evident in another, as for instance the panels being *indoors*, *hung* on the wall and mounted as a *fragment* and not fitting into any recognisable scheme of familiar vernacular building regulations.

Working collaboratively with the artists from a different perspective made me reassess the nature of decoration too as being for them, both textural and symbolic, although only a few remembered any symbolism associated with house decoration or surface. The way they worked was very pragmatic, concentrating on function, and strength and less on the conceptual and aesthetic qualities. I appeared to work with a different set of aesthetic values, biased towards formal concepts, but not intended to be functional or representational. The making of the object as a process, concept and ritual activity was as important for me as the end result, whereas the end result was more important to the African artists in order to sell their work as a crafted item. The *Kikuyu*, in contrast to the *Giriama*, were renowned as business people and were located around Nairobi, whereas the *Giriama* were more self sufficient, although depended on nomadic trading. This perhaps also reflected their attitude towards making art as a commodity, which appealed to Western tourist taste, rather than more conceptual or spiritual concerns. I was told that if one artist had sold work of a particular style, then others would copy this in the hope of selling more of their own.

As well as the similarities I experienced while working with the artists, there

appeared to be more fundamental differences between my concepts of contemporary art practice and theirs, which was that in the West conceptual and analytic approaches were more evident through our training, whilst in Kenya craft skills were more dominant. However, as already mentioned, economic factors would have largely affected this outcome although the lack of formal art training may have been another factor. However, that is not to say that the Kenyan artist should follow a Eurocentric training in order to be acknowledged.

Mr Wambugu, Head of the Botanic Gardens and Forestry at the museum, told me that the span of the hands, using the thumb outstretched at right angles, was the gauge used to create the rectangular grid system of the house infrastructure in *Kikuyuland.* This tended to be between 9" x 6" or 9" x 4" and anything over this measurement would pose a security risk by robbers. The rectangles in the matrices that I had made bore no relation to measurement in this way, and so were considered ergonomically insecure. However for me this sense of vulnerability, that they experienced on viewing my work, reinforced my intentions in the work. These were to remove the materials and processes from a *purely* functional role and imbue the work with some ephemeral qualities. The fact that I had deliberately left open spaces was also thought by the Kenyans to be unfinished or incomplete, although I felt that this made the process of building more evident, and by seeing through and beyond this structure, it revealed the wall behind it facilitating a comparison to be made between the two structures. The proportions of the *Panels* were such that they referenced human proportion by the relative arm span to height ratio.

It might also be inferred from these experiences that the original identity of a piece of ethnographic material metamorphoses from one context or culture to another,

becoming dependent on or seen through the established value system of the other culture. These hegemonic concerns, which shape and form people's attitudes and expectations about location, are very important factors in an interpretative approach. It was found that Kenyan culture, in spite of modern ambiguities and anomalies, was still very much shaped by social, economic and even religious concerns, whereas my training had been formal and analytical. How people viewed these artifacts as artwork or ethnographic material, depended on personal attitudes, education and cultural conceptions. It could be suggested that ethnographic material culture had an aesthetic value in art in the West as we perceived it through our own value systems and not theirs, which differed radically from our own. However, rarity could also lend perceived value to the object both in availability and authenticity, which would have had an impact in financial terms, particularly for dealers and collectors in the West.

The journalist, Gichuki Kabukuru, from the '*People*' newspaper told me that in spite of Western influences, religious and social values were still very much tied up with the artifacts that people made in Kenya today. This was evident to me through researching the *Gohu* secret society and their commemorative grave posts, which was a current and active traditional religious practice, with growing initiates.

There was a feeling that these 'new' religions, of Christianity and lslam, were taking away a past and personal identity and were attempting to replace it with their own, which I found to be true. Traditional artifacts like the *Giriama* posts linked with indigenous religious practices were often confiscated or burnt. This illustrated another example of misinterpretation by outside influences of, in this case, religious values wrongly perceived.

Through the research it became clear to me that the main influence from these experiences in Kenya was that symbolism often had a local context, and outside this context it would often become undecipherable and therefore not understood or misinterpreted. This was the case with reconstructing and exhibiting the *Panels* in Kenya where the signification of the materials and processes I was using were not easily recognisible as influenced by local house building, however to a UK audience these materials and processes were what they associated with African building. The Kenyans felt some ambivalence towards the earth used in this way, as their strongest association with earth was fertility, and because of the techniques and processes I employed they did not link it structurally with those of house building; although one artist thought the surface was decorative, as it displayed texture made by the finger printing. Therefore the symbolic intentions in the artwork are not necessarily fixed, as in the case of the *Post-Structuralist* - approach taken in this research, where one signified may have varied and different signifiers (or literally different symbolic meanings and values) across cultures, but also within a smaller group of people. Later in the final pieces of work these ambiguities were deliberately increased by mixing cultural referents, so that one set of symbols linked to a UK audience would be revealed, whilst others were hidden or not recognised so clearly as they were less familiar. This formed a new language or representation which visually amalgamated both cultures, although the recognitions and identification of the signs within the work were dependent on the cultural context, exhibition location (museum or gallery), and inherent semiotic ambiguities created through personal, and as well as cultural, signification.

At this stage of the work however I was still exploring materials, processes and

form and the symbolism of these materials and casting processes. I also discovered that for my work to be recognisible by a Western audience I needed to explore familiar symbolism in this country in order to evolve an appropriate, although not universal, semiotic code – see the development of this process in Section 3.2 Artwork as an Extension of the *Crossing Boundaries* Collaboration.

3.1.3 Reconstruction of the 'Panel Series'

In reconstructing the three *Panels* I first set about collecting the raw materials locally for making them, with the assistance of five artists and Mr. Wambugu, the Head of the Botanic Gardens and Forestry section of the museum. Those coming from a more rural area outside Nairobi had more knowledge of house building and materials than did the city dwellers and the younger people. I tested the soil for suitability in combinations with water, grass and cement. The first sample was soil and water, then soil, water and grass, then soil, water and cement, and lastly soil, water, cement and grass. The first cracked badly, the second seemed strong, the third and fourth were little different from the second in strength, except the grass gave it texture as well as strength, and the cement made little difference and made the mud a duller colour overall, so I decided on the second mix, combining strength, texture and visual appearance. The main concern for me was aesthetic appearance, as cement and earth may have been *functionally* stronger, but function was not of primary importance. I also liked the idea of integrating a natural material with an industrial material, but the visual appearance of the natural mixture prevailed. The sticks used were Eucalyptus as they were fairly straight, although these consisted of hard wood and soft wood, which I was not informed about until later. One

of them had a rough bark coating whereas the other had a smooth green exterior. Having noticed that there was a difference in appearance in the two types of Eucalyptus tree to me added visual variety, although for the Kenyans the harder wood would have been selected exclusively if it had been for house building, affording more durability and permanency, as soft woods were prone to termite damage and early decay.

Only hardwoods such as *Muhumba*, *Mwanga* and *Muhuhu* were selected for the *Vigango,* which were enduring and stable, although their other function was symbolic, and often considered a wood that possessed medicinal properties. The fact that the post lasted for between fifty and seventy years may also have been significant in relationship to the wood, in the belief that it had only one life and was not replaced or repaired, which was comparable to human life. House building has had to change to more readily available materials because of shortages of common building materials, as previous research has shown that it was cultural and ecological influences that affected the old style of construction, as with the Giriama grass houses. The *Giriama* now build rectangular houses using soil and sticks, often with a palm leaf roof. However, in some African cultures rectangular houses would not have been constructed due to the belief that evil spirits collected in corners, but on a practical level, a rectangular house would have the added difficulties of jointing the corners. Therefore the rectangular plan could have been a Western influence, as this type of building was often seen in mission stations, schools and dispensaries introduced by Westerners. James (one of the artists from the Kuona Trust) thought that the prevalence of round houses was that they were easier to measure with a stick and a piece of string, rather than to obtain measuring tools, which were rare and costly in rural areas. David (another artist) used a stick as a

measuring tool, marked off with lines, for aligning and installing my exhibition work for the gallery wall. Therefore it could be argued that measurement was more of a visual process, rather than a more standardised procedure, which I have previously discovered in my own working process. This method of measurement also suited an intuitive way of working.

As I was searching for the materials and discussing their properties with Mr. Wambugu, he mentioned that the last layer of the *Kikuyu* house would be a textured surface applied to the exterior. This would be a mixture of clay soil and dung, the latter having a fibrous material in it. The white soil in it symbolised the snow on Mount Kenya, which was where the *Kikuyu* people believed God resided - this white material could also be wood ash. It had no practical function but instead a decorative and, most of all, spiritual and symbolic significance as this outer layer was not used for strength, unlike the rest of the building process and materials, as it formed a delicate surface which was susceptible to flaking away. Peter (also an artist) remembered the houses being decorated with white (chalk), yellow and red (soils) and black (charcoal) patterns and even the floors, but did not remember why. He thought people now were less creative because they only had plain walls and floors, through which they identified with a Western notion of modernity and progression. A female artist at the Trust really liked the finger marks I left behind in the clay, as theirs would have been smooth, and she saw it as decoration or texture, whereas I saw it as indicative of the handmade process alone. However, this was an interesting comment and tied in with the idea of texture and repetition being identified as decoration, which, later on in the final *Wall Pieces*, led to my more extensive use of anaglypta having an embossed surface, indicative of Western

decorative wall coverings.

Dr Paul Lane of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, had seen a pot being 'decorated' by the inclusion of a textured / patterned mat in the *process* of actually making a pot, in spite of decoration usually being applied to a vessel conventionally *after* an object had been made. This was in Mali, West Africa. Whether this decorative surface was in fact 'decoration' in its purest sense, or whether it had some other symbolism not recognised by an 'outsider' was questionable. Although through the act of repeating this process it must have indicated an intentional act, not reliant on serendipity, or just part of the making as otherwise the pattern might have been smoothed away. Therefore texturing again seemed another form of decoration, not necessarily in the form of a repeated pattern of shapes, which to anyone else outside this society might ignore.

Ageing a piece of artwork in order to give the work antique value was also discussed which to a foreign market would add authenticity and therefore financial value. However, it was sometimes used to achieve a uniform grain, or surface of an unattractive wood. Subsequently it could be argued that this first interpretation might be imposed on these objects, as we perceived it through our own stereotypes of these cultural artifacts, because these were often the criteria by which we have, in the past, judged or attributed value to these artifacts.

Working with Peter (artist), in the main, whilst making the *Panels*, he commented on how these panels were more time-consuming in terms of the method and in the different way the mud was applied, than in traditional house building, so it might be supposed that he was looking at it from a pragmatic point of view; although he also

qualified this by saying that he thought it was more interesting. The implications here might have been that this unfamiliar way of working made him question familiar patterns of his own, which the Kenyan culture had promoted in my own work practice.

In conclusion, by working closely with the artists I was able to discuss cultural, religious, social and aesthetic ideas in terms of their own value systems rather than the way I could have perceived it without this inside information, or contextual knowledge; and also from the Giriama in the way the posts were incorrectly mounted on plinths in the RA show of 1995 – refer to the *Introduction* concerning the presentation of these posts. This threw my own values and beliefs, as well as those of the West, into focus through this comparative analysis. The spiritual function of making 'art' in the Giriama community and the way they used materials and processes in a symbolic context appealed to my sense of bringing meaning and aesthetic content together into a piece of artwork. The *Kikuyu* artists, on the other hand, had adopted the materials values of the West in terms of making art to sell, which was dependent on what they thought Western tourists wanted, however their traditional values in terms of house building exhibited a less self-interested approach, and shared some affinity with the posts spiritually and aesthetically. This understanding and appreciation of how and why they made 'artifacts' gave me a more truthful insight into a culture, which was found to be subject to their own stereotypical beliefs, as it was in the UK. Most importantly for my own work I gained an insight into the meanings the Kenyans attributed to the materials and processes I was using, and they mine. Earth was attributed to the ideas of fertility by the Kenyans and to me was reminiscent of their landscape and house building; sticks were used for building houses, fences, furniture, shrines, walking sticks, bows and arrows, and to me reminded

me of the natural environment, vertical structures and the rural culture of Kenya; wallpaper to me was a decorative interior wall covering, whereas the Kenyans associated it with symbolic textures or patterns as an exterior surface to their buildings, the former being uncommon; the latex I used for the '*Skins*', they thought was an organic material and assumed they were real skins until smelt, whereas I knew it be an industrially made material; hessian and cotton scrim used in the UK as building materials were also not recognised, likewise mod-roc, all of which the artists then wanted to experiment with.

This experience of working with the artists enabled me to incorporate aspects of their culture, as they perceived house building, into my work, which would be recognisable to them but concealed or unfamiliar to a Western audience. This was evident in the use of sticks, red clay, recycled wood and the way the work was constructed by hand. However through this interaction I was also able to identify the aspects of Western culture that to them were unfamiliar, and yet to me were representative of my own European background. In regard to this, I was then able to explore elements of reversal in the work to emphasise the contrast and similarities between the two cultures.

For more detailed accounts of working with the artists and information gathered, please refer to Appendix V, Part Two, Fieldwork Diary in Kenya 2001, '*Crossing Boundaries'* exhibition, National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi.

3.2 Artwork as an extension of the '*Crossing Boundaries*' collaboration

When I returned to the studio after the *Crossing Boundaries* exhibition I started

working with thin wire, using it to make *horizontal* and *vertical* contours of the previous *Panels*, again forming grids, and extending the possibilities of *transparency* and *lightness* in weight, in contrast to the original materials used in the construction of the *Panels*, which were *dense, opaque*, and *solid*. This phase was the start of a linear exploration of the formal qualities in the *Panels* investigating the organic surface of the clay and sticks. Wire was used as an *industrial* material in contrast to the *organic* nature of the original *Panels*. Here the binary oppositions, rather than inherent within one piece of work are applied now to previous and present bodies or phases of work, working from more solid matter to more transparent solutions, although eventually culminating in an amalgamation of these in the final *Wall Pieces*. The binaries can be seen here as presence and absence in a physical sense in the working processes and materials, although at the same time it reflects a Derridean concept of including the opposite, or absent, aspect of the 'material' and present, in interpreting the whole. Aspects of the two cultures, symbolically embodied in the final pieces of work, are at any one time both present and absent, as when one set of signifiers is recognized within a specific context, the other set are not so clearly present or identified, and vice versa in the other cultural context. These signifiers from both cultures are also made more complex and multifarious through subjective or personal interpretation. This became more focused as the photographic documentation of the practical work progressed, and accentuated the symbolic elements within the work.

Through the investigation at this stage I was exploring the space or void left between the brick wall of the studio and the clay and stick *Panel,* which hung in front of it. Here I was attempting to describe the void by linear configuration creating an active

space between the two surfaces. An example of this in the vernacular can be seen in Plate VI Figure 13. The contrast of solid and void, in later work, metaphorically came to represent the *physical* and material with the *solid* materials, and the *spiritual* or *absence* with *void* or *spaces*. This to me represented the piercing of the earth by the commemorative grave posts, which straddled both the physical and spiritual worlds. This then later developed into creating holes, cracks and crevices in the wall to represent this and notions of decay and mortality.

Several lengths of wire were pressed and hammered both horizontally and vertically on to the surface of the original clay and stick, *Panel I.* The independent wire joints, taken off the panel were taped together, initially as a temporary measure, in order to assemble the horizontal and vertical wires together, but I decided to retain the masking tape to accentuate the joints; much in the same way as accentuating the seams in the columns and latex forms. These 'tabs' were also numbered by horizontal and vertical numbers going across from left to right and from top to bottom, in order to assist with the assemblage of the whole network. Here again the *vertical* and *horizontal* theme was prominent, perhaps emphasised by the joints where horizontal meets vertical like the vertical grave posts meeting and crossing over into and beneath the earth's surface (Figure 60 Wire grid contour with weld mesh and Figure 61 Detail of joints with masking tape). At the same time, I made individual wire contours of the clay units used for the *Panels* which only used two pieces of wire crossing over at two points at the top and underside of each - these on some of them began to look like a crucifix form (Figure 62 Wire contours of individual clay units). Tracing paper 'drawings' were also made using the long vertical and horizontal wire contours to trace along onto the flat surface of two

sheets, a third sheet was used to reveal these joints by placing crosses at these strategic points.

The wire contours made from the preceding *Panel* were fixed to a weld-mesh back, which was later broken down into brick-sized spaces by eliminating some of the vertical and horizontal bars. This particular one-inch-square weld-mesh was industrially made to prevent missiles, such as stones, from shattering windows, so in cutting into this I was destroying its protective function so rendering it insecure, ironically using another form of reversal. I had also inadvertently done this with the *Panels* by leaving holes in the surface of the structure, which as walls in an African house, as I was told, would have left it vulnerable to thieves. Here again I was deliberately weakening a potentially strong structure. as the Africans perceived their earth walls. However, I was equating earth walls with an ephemeral quality, as well as being attracted to their visual appearance. I perceived these walls as ephemeral, less durable and more susceptible to erosion, in contrast with Western building methods, which drew a sharp comparison.

Prior to the *Gap Piece,* numerous tests were made with different materials such as rectangular fragments, casting off casts continuously, from the back of the original and then from the front of the original, taking clay impressions of pieces of cracked wall, using combinations of wax and chickenwire, using clingfilm and scrim with plaster. All these did not lead on to anything substantial nor reveal anything particularly interesting in the process, although it did provide me with a period of absorption and analysis, which was essential to the creative and exploratory processes inherent in the research method.

This contrasting of the organic nature of the wire contours with the industrial, geometric shapes of the weld mesh, although having a visual aesthetic, did not seem to

resolve the more physical with the spiritual elements of the posts. In light of this, I then explored the negative space between the studio wall and the back of *Panel V* by converting it into a solid mass. This resulted in the *Gap Piece* (see Plate XIII *Gap Piece*).

The *Gap Piece* was cast vertically using shuttering between the wall and the relief, *Panel V.* Due to a leakage in the outer shuttering on the face of the clay relief, where the gaps were in the clay, the outer surface of the relief was flooded with plaster and became *concealed* from view, as it was then embedded in the whole block. Through breaking up this surface, the relief once again *revealed* its organic properties, in contrast to the geometry created by the polystyrene blocks wedged against the relief (to prevent leakage) and the overall form. The back of this structure took on the brickwork as the surface pattern of the studio wall, almost like wallpaper (Figure 63 *Gap Piece* - back view). As I removed the clay from the holes created in the front of the sculpture, it further revealed the back of the original relief, leaving a negative impression in the plaster poured into the gap. Here again, through negative impression it created a sense of absence or void (Plate XXX *Gap Piece* - detail). This was reinforced by the traces of blue paint and sticks left from the original relief Panel, which had become recycled into this piece of work, and evocative of memory and place.

The whole work was initially resting on wooden battening to assist maneuverability, but this seemed to emphasise its relationship to the ground as a solid mass in contrast to the space created underneath it, having previously been a void left between the wall and relief panel made palpable. However, this reversal of solid and void became more successfully integrated through form and process, in the final *Wall*

Piece. It embodied various aspects of the posts in the absence and presence of the ancestor through spiritual association. This was manifested in the void above the earth's surface, with the solid tangible mass of the earth beneath it, and yet the reverse was also true, as for the Giriama the spiritual world was represented as being beneath the ground, and the physical world above the earth, in spite of it being *intangible* space. In the *Wall* and *Floor Pieces* the voids could be seen to represent the penetration of the earth by the *Kigango*, acting as a mediator between the two worlds, which in the case of the *Walls* was intentionally ambiguous. Hence the holes created an oscillation between the two worlds, or the two spaces either side of the wall, and yet visually impart a sense of mortality and imminent decay.

Following the *Gap Piece,* numerous maquettes were made in wire and in plaster, attempting to bring some resolution between the ephemeral and the physical and the space in between the studio wall and the *Panel* hung proud of the wall (Plate XXXI Figure 64-70). This was still proving difficult, the artwork still remaining within two distinct categories of solid or transparent. One or two of the maquettes in plaster were pierced by holes extending from the front to the back of the piece. This was achieved by using a lump of clay vertically positioned in the mould which was horizontal, to form a negative space in the plaster, which revealed the internal space between the front and the back surface (Plate XXXII Plaster maquette with negative spaces). This was a precursor of techniques I used on a larger scale in the final work.

Some more work using wire was then executed, based on an investigation of the *Gap Piece*, using techniques of wrapping which I had seen in Kenya to join wire together (Figure 71 Wire brickwork taken from the back of *Gap Piece*). These experiments in

themselves were interesting as combinations of scale, gauge and type of wire, but technically I found the method of working frustrating in its lack of strength in forming a more formal structure, without resorting to thicker gauge materials and welding techniques. Having turned to welding using thicker gauge rod, I found that this led to more prescriptive forms being made, which limited and contained the extension of the work. Therefore this series of work was abandoned and I returned to exploring the type of joining and fixings of structures and objects seen in Kenya, together with using casting techniques.

The next phase of maquettes using a combination of wire and plaster were much more successful in (i) exploring the combination of these materials, (ii) the ideas embodied in the philosophy of above and below ground with the posts, and (iii) the formal structure. These maquettes incorporated weld mesh as an industrial material, and plaster casting against terracotta clay as representing the organic red earth of the Kenyan landscape, amongst other materials, such as clingfilm, scrim, anaglypta wallpaper, nylon woven bags, withies, sticks, wood, string, polystyrene, chickenwire, earth and tar (reference Figure 17 in Plate VIII for environmental influences). These structures displayed a variety of surfaces, including low, flat forms, round constructions and vertical constructions displaying elements of solid and void, suspension, positive and negative impressions, industrial and organic, horizontal and vertical, colour, and reversal (Plate XXXIII Figures 72-77 and Plate XXXIV Figures 78-82). The concept of being above ground was most succinct in one of the maquettes, which showed a cast of an earth hole suspended on sticks within a weld-mesh circular wall (Plate XXXV Maquette showing earth hole suspended above ground). The visual appearance of this structure and

combinations of materials seemed to relate to the symbolism of the posts. Thereafter, I decided to try and recreate this on a larger scale and so started by digging a hole in a field four foot deep and three feet wide across the top, which I then cast in plaster with chickenwire reinforcement (Plate XXXVI Full scale earth hole in field). When the 'hole' was pulled from the earth I did not like the shape or proportion of the object and, even taking into account a different surface quality, it seemed to lack the vitality of the original maquette. Therefore this piece was abandoned and I returned to working with the wall as a structure. However the photographic image of the hole, at the stage when the plaster cast being reinforced (from the earth mould) with chickenwire, became a powerful image in its own right (see Figure 85 in Plate XXXVI).

The wall maquettes were cast in layers on a horizontal plane and then these layers were stood upright, after sandwiching them together with more plaster and/or other materials such as wire mesh or grids made of withies, sticks or pieces of wood. Although on a large scale, this technique had to be changed in some way to accommodate the extra weight and the handling of the surfaces. In order to create the surfaces required I had to cast a whole layer in situ. Previously, I had seen a derelict building once a Baptist mission in the Gotani region of Kenya, where a cavity wall was constructed in sections on a horizontal surface and then erected upright (see Plate IX Baptist Mission in Gotani). There were also similarities here between this and the materials and processes I had seen in constructing a fence in Mombasa (see Plate VIII Figure 17). This ad hoc method of working, with available materials, influenced my way of working. These concrete sections of the Baptist Mission were cast against a series of nylon woven flour sacks and reinforced with chickenwire which was evident through the holes and cracks in this wall

as a result of neglect and partial demolition (see Figure 22 in Plate IX). In the light of this, a whole wall section was cast on the ground (horizontally) and different layers were added to this to construct a wall, rather than using a more conventional method of building a wall from the ground upwards, vertically. These large thin layers were relatively easy to handle on my own with the aid of scaffolding to keep them upright, but ultimately I had real difficulty with the stability of the piece as a whole.

By this time I had already identified negative space, made by cracks, holes and openings, as representing an absence or spiritual concern, and the wall as a surface, creating a barrier between one space and another, interior and exterior. It was not until I had made the *Floor Pieces* later on, that I realised I had on a number of occasions, often through the processes employed, transposed the vertical with the horizontal, and vice versa, therefore linking in with the earth or ground as a pierced barrier or surface by the *Vigango*.

On re-examination of this first large-scale wall structure made of layered panels, I realised through the process of making that more permanent fixings between the two outer layers were needed and also a simplification of the whole construction (Plate XXXVII First full-scale wall piece). This was achieved by making the wall more solid altogether, and by grounding it at the bottom by the addition of more weight. This was fulfilled by incorporating more plaster between the exterior layers of the wall which was reinforced by the stick and wood matrices layered between these (Plate XXXVIII Two full-scale wall pieces). At ground level finger impressions were incorporated (reversed in the casting process) using terracotta clay as the moulding agent. This indicated some connection with the ground, and had been used in earlier work going back to the Column

Series (see Figure 28 i) Plaster guttering column with finger impressions). However, the sides of the walls were not visually very satisfying and did not conceptually relate to the two outer surfaces, although solving the practical problems of basic stability. The area between the front and the back of the wall did not make a conscious transposition from one side or surface to the other, only by implication.

After making this initial *Wall Piece*, I made a series of three *Floor Pieces* (see Plates XV, XVI, XVII) consisting of two stacked layers of plaster measuring approximately 49" x 35", with a joint height from the ground of 7". These resolved some of the problems of constructing on a large scale. They used less in the way of materials, which at this time was rather crucial financially, and I was thinking about trying to resolve the relationship of the vertical structure with the floor or ground, so it was easier to work on a smaller scale.

These *Floor Pieces* related to the ground successfully in two ways, firstly through the organic association of the base layers with the earth, incorporating finger impressions as memory, and secondly, through a connection with stacked materials in a builders' yard set up on laths, which would normally protect it against the dampness of the ground. The wallpaper layer on the top layer was a reversal or subversion of a vertical structure, now laid horizontal, linking in with the verticality of the posts and the horizontality of the earth's surface. ln the making of the posts, the wood was ritually laid horizontal for carving, and only later became vertical, on ceremonial recognition that this post had been transformed into the living entity of the ancestor (refer to Appendix V, Part Two, for more details of the ritual involved with the carving and erection of the posts). The holes piercing the two layers revealed the interior structure between the outer layer and the

ground, drawing parallels with the *Vigango* piercing the earth. It was from this perspective that I became aware that this was the solution to the union of the two surfaces of the wall.

In order to achieve the last and final *Wall Piece* with the sides taking on the finger impressions in the clay, and the holes and crevices through the form, I realised that I would experience problems unless a different method of casting was performed from the other full-scale *Wall Pieces*. This was tested out in two maquettes. One maquette was cast in two halves and stood vertically to register the two halves together. Then plaster was poured in from the top and the sides, but the difficulty here was that the clay inside would have dropped down inside and pouring in this way would have created air locks around the clay plugs, so this was not an option (Plate XXXIX First maquette for final wall). The second maquette was a better solution, as it eliminated problems with registration, air locks and the clay plugs potentially being dislodged. However, the difficulties here lay in the surface of the upper side and the eventual erection of the whole wall from the horizontal position. The potential weight of the final full-scale wall from its horizontal position to the vertical was reduced slightly by the polystyrene used as core material, but the wall still had to be erected with the forklift truck (Figure 86 Erecting of the final *Wall Piece*). Once upright, the bottom plate of the casting box was removed which exposed the wallpaper surface of the underside. Through this unpredictable process, what was initially *hidden,* then became *revealed* to the eye. All three walls included casting a surface from the back in a horizontal position and therefore it was initially hidden from view. It was not until they were in the upright position and the outer moulding material taken away that the surface was revealed. This process had parallels

in the carving of the *Kigango* in that the post was carved horizontally, in secret at night and therefore *hidden* from view. It was not until the post was erected vertically that it was *revealed* to people in daylight. This process of *hiding* and *revealing* was also evident in the layering of wallpaper by stripping away selected areas and in the use of clay to construct voids in the plaster which were then removed to *reveal* the underneath and interior surfaces. On the final piece, the layers of wallpaper were more deliberately layered to reveal the previous layers of wallpaper hidden underneath them, indicating memory and time (Plate XXXX Layers of wallpaper). This was a characteristic of vernacular buildings in Cappadocia (Oliver 1975:98) where 'largely due to the irreversible process of carving into the same rocks previously and ...progressively obliterating or changing the previous spaces....[using] the same techniques ... perennially, in both carving and decorating' lead to a layering of memory, and time; which also occurs in the personalising of domestic architectural spaces over periods of time in this country.

In the final *Wall Piece* I decided to retain the outer walls of the casting box. This displayed the working process of the wall, which I felt had become an integral part of the work. It also seemed to give the structure even more presence and height through a relationship with the viewer's own height and proportion, as Grabow (1995) mentioned proportion as being a measure of dimensional relativity, which here was the human form, which Scholfield (1958) expanded upon in relationship to Le Corbusier's modular system in architecture, which was based on human measurement (Plate XXXXI Front view of the *Wall Piece*). I liked the fact that it was suspended above the ground on the blocks, which was initially to facilitate lifting and moving, but here related to the ground by

forming a tension between the bottom of the piece and the ground below, as echoed in the *Gap Piece* and the *Floor Pieces*.

The sharp rectangle of the box frame contrasted well with the organic forms and edges inside, emphasising this juxtaposition. This was also a prominent feature of the photographic slides, in that the rectangle of the frame defined the contents of the image through contrast with the geometry of the slide mount, thus emphasising the organic nature of the forms. This box frame or moulding also made the processes involved more evident to the viewer.

This *Wall Piece* satisfied none of the functional characteristics of a conventional wall, being solid, strong, enclosing or dividing, a continuous surface or supporting a ceiling; instead, it asserted fragility and erosion alluding to historically romantic notions of the ruin or fragment, but more directly impermanence as in the architecture in Kenya.

Symbolically, a wall, representing a division between two spaces, I felt shared an affinity with the flat surface of the ground, which the *Giriama* described in conjunction with the posts as dividing the spiritual world beneath, with that of the physical world above. Although here the surface was vertical and not horizontal, which had its own reference to life and death respectively. The wall embodied a feeling of the physical coupled with a sense of absence or void conveyed through the holes, which amplified its fragile existence in space.

Vulnerability as a concern was visually central to the work through the processes of making in the ephemeral nature of the materials and structure, with its layering and openings, and eminent expectation of decay and/or intrusion. This became a metaphor for life in its unstable and shifting dynamics, which was experienced on a day-to-day

basis by the Kenyans who had no recourse to a welfare state or National Health Service and therefore were often prey to hunger and disease. Further to this, unease was created through our notions of security which shelter usually symbolizes; as Bachelard (1958: 17) related: 'A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability'. Therefore feelings of insecurity would be engendered as a consequence of this fragmentation and decay relative to a domestic dwelling. The anaglypta wallpaper being synonymous with Victorian domestic interiors and the comfortingly familiar was incorporated as a decorative layer on the front surface of the wall pieces.

The red ochre used on the main body of the posts linked in with the red earth and house building, but also fertility in this connection, with the use of terracotta clay. The earth in both cultures was associated with growth and regeneration, and was also connected with the *Giriama* funeral ceremony through sexual intercourse and procreation, as described in the diaries, so here again reversal features strongly, both in the conception of the posts, but also in the work. Reversal of the wallpaper was intended to subtly convey these philosophical ideas, along with the ambiguity of interior and exterior surfaces, and repeatedly with positive and negative, solid and void, industrial and organic elements. The anaglypta wallpaper was essentially used to signify and identify cultural associations with a UK audience, whereas the triangular motifs on the post were recognisable as a decorative aesthetic in a Kenyan society, but with the addition of colour used for religious coding.

In relationship to my studio space, the overall organic nature of the work contrasted with the brick walls and the use of concrete in this industrial setting, where each was made more prominent by the presence of the other. This echoed the importance

of the environment to the making and presentation of the work and its influence upon it.

3.3 Conclusion

After the *Crossing Boundaries* exhibition the practical work moved from an anthropological bias where I was considering the work in rather a literal way, to a less self-conscious and visual means of interpretation. Ironically, I found the final *Wall Piece* brought me closer to the essence of the grave posts, in the symbolic concept of them, than I could have anticipated.

A large part of the process which was very important to the concepts inherent in the work, were the recycling elements of one work into another, like the *Shelter* into the *Panels*, the *Panel V* into the *Gap Piece*, the wire work taken off the *Panels* and the *Gap Piece*, the casting and recasting methods employed and some of the sticks reused to construct matrices. This reflected the culture I was investigating, coupled with ideas of decay and regeneration on a symbolic level. The horizontal and vertical processes of casting, constructing and erecting became significant by association with the ground and the posts, and in the ritual process of making the posts as well, as mentioned previously. Reversal was evident throughout the work in concept and physical processes, which included formal aspects of solid and void, positive and negative, organic and geometric, interior and exterior, and other *Structuralist* binaries.

From the collaborative experience of setting up my work, but more importantly, working with the African artists on reconstructing work I had already made in the UK, I gained a deeper insight into their aesthetic preferences for materials and processes, which often had symbolic significance. This gave me a different view of my work, whereby my

original intentions in the work were not easily read and that I had been working within certain stereotypical suppositions, taken from the vernacular architecture that I had seen but not fully understood. Through talking to the artists and working with them I gained an African perspective on house building that would have otherwise been denied me. This reassessment made me realize how I might integrate the two cultures through the materials and processes using them symbolically.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Final conclusions

Through the process of making the artwork and the field trips to Kenya I discovered that the context was fundamental to the production and interpretation of the artwork. The Giriama Commemorative Grave Posts were initially the main focus of the anthropological investigation but through experiencing the context and natural environment of Kenya, these became peripheral for a while when the local Kenyan architecture took precedence. However through the heuristic self-reflexive approach, I realised that the research had turned full circle and the artwork had metaphorically transformed and incorporated the essence of the posts. It was through the *processes* of making the artwork that the main theme of *concealing* and *revealing* evolved, through an exploration of binary oppositions, whilst it was the architecture and environment that provided the *content* for the production of artwork. Concomitant to both the posts and the architecture the binary themes emerged.

These themes in the artwork were made clear on analysis of my studio diaries, in which I kept a log of the processes, thoughts and ideas as I was engaged in the artwork. It was evident that contrast and difference was one of the main and influential aesthetic factors in the work. These included concealing and revealing, horizontal and vertical processes, absence and presence, above and below, public and private, male and female, along with more formal binaries of solid and void, interior and exterior, positive and negative, light and dark, and reversal. Concealing and revealing can be seen in numerous

works such as, Plate XII *Panel V* hiding the original colour of the clay but revealing the form; Plate XIII *Gap Piece* where the front fascia was chipped away to reveal an impression of the earth panel beneath; Plate XV, XVI, XVII *Floor Pieces* where the holes revealed the earth layer underneath and yet most of the surface remains hidden from view; Plate XIX Mud drawings where hiding and revealing was part of the process of making these drawings with the marks appearing and disappearing; Plate XXII *Shelter*, where holes in the structure revealed the interior and sometimes continued through to the exterior again; Plate XXIII *Shelter*, with a panel cut away from the side revealing the interior and letting light into the structure; Plate XXVII shows the surface of *Panel III* first concealed using latex and then revealed again by peeling it away; Plate XXXVIII and Plate XXXXI incorporating holes, cracks and crevices which both hid and revealed what was the other side of the structure, or elements of the interior of the walls; and Plate XXXX where the layers of anaglypta wallpaper metaphorically revealed hidden layers of time and memory.

Horizontal and vertical processes are inherent in the making of all the *Wall Pieces* as seen in Plates XXXVII, XXXVIII, XXXIX, with Figure 86 showing the erection of the final wall piece from its horizontal position to the vertical, and XXXXI, but prior to this in the casting of the preliminary column series of work.

Absence and presence is indicated in Plates XIII and XXX *Gap Piece*, where impressions of *Panel V* once existed within the structure; Plate XIX in the mud drawings, containing the essence of absence and presence through the continual process of mark making in layers; Figure 38 shows the impression of human hand prints indicating a human presence and interaction with the original making and yet now

absence, which follows through all the work in the form of finger impressions in the clay and often castings – see *Floor Pieces* , *Wall Pieces* and early column as seen in Figure 28 i).

Solid and void, interior and exterior, positive and negative are very apparent in the mould making and casting processes, but also in the creation of holes, cracks and crevices; containment of spaces such as in *Shelter* and the interior of the *Walls*; back and front of the *Walls*; *Chickenwire Reliefs*, and *Gap Piece*.

The ideology of perfection cultivated in Western society through the machine and the Industrial Revolution as a sign of progress, was anathema to my preferences for irregularity, natural materials, more relaxed time constraints, and organic forms, and yet it was only through contrast or binary opposition that this could be realised, as Bachelard (1958: 39) stated: 'Behind dark curtains, snow seems to be whiter. Indeed, everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate'. Through my teaching and research experiences in Kenya, I gained a more objective view of my own culture by comparing and contrasting. However, it was not until later that I learned, through the research that I had obsessively maintained a romantic identity with being in and part of the Kenyan environment and culture, and had not challenged this romantic notion. Therefore I was disregarding my own cultural legacy, although later on in the research I began to shift and adapt my own identity in relationship to my nationality and the artwork I was producing, to include positive elements of my own background.

I found on my first research trip to Kenya (1999) that the way people used, recycled and put together local and found materials was of major interest to me, and that they not only used organic materials, but used imported industrially produced materials

and products such as cement and emulsion paint, even in these rural areas - however plastic utensils have long been exchanged across regions. The second research trip to Kenya for the *Crossing Boundaries* exhibition (2001) made me much more aware of how people in the UK perceived stereotypes of other cultures through exploring the aesthetic and functional aspects of the *Panels* with the Kuona Arts Trust artists and museum staff, who perceived the artwork differently, as described in *Chapter 3*.

The architecture attracted my attention through its variety of shape, size, material, decoration, function and fixing along with elements of recycling, natural and found materials, whereas the posts became less interesting in comparison through their fixed schema. However, the philosophical aspect of the posts, straddling as they did the two worlds of the spiritual and the physical by contrast, gave me more scope to develop a creative response, directly linking with them. In terms of materials and processes it was the vernacular architecture and environment that I gained most from with their immense wealth of visual material. The latter I had previously experienced whilst teaching in Kenya, which naturally impacted on the work.

Vulnerability, as an intrinsic aspect of the surface and method of constructing the sculptural pieces, not only represented architectural decay, but metaphorically stood for human mortality. In this respect the research adopted a symbolic ethos which was reflected in the semiological methodology, with reference to Barthes and Post-Modernism – see the *Glossary* and *Methodology* sections. This was implicit in reference to the fragment, which runs through the work from the *Panels*, to elements of the *Panels*, to the photographic details, to the final large-scale *Wall Pieces*. Through the fragment, the work maintained an abstract quality emphasising texture, material and form. It also

alluded to the classical fragment, with its inherent absence of the whole, however imparting very specific cultural connections or contexts through the semantic references of the materials themselves. The fragment also lent an ambiguity to the work and particularly in the photographic details which, coupled with the maquette making and drawings, moved the work forward. The photographic images confused scale, proportion, size and vastness, changed colour, seemingly to magnify detail and texture through framing it, and further abstracted the work, thereby increasing semiotic opportunities. As Umberto Ecco (Gravity and Grace Catalogue 1993) suggested, ambiguity distinguished the modern work of art from all that went before. Modern works have several meanings / interpretations whereas traditional or classical works generally have very clear meanings, confirming 'existing attitudes'.

By selecting another culture very different from my own, and becoming more cognizant of my own culture, led to an inevitable analysis of the similarities and differences between the two cultures, finding more differences than similarities but recognising these as positive and enriching elements for the production of artwork. Through the differences between the cultures, the similarities or more universal concepts emerged. Apart from our shared feelings of mortality, one other theme for me was the human need for shelter. The idea of shelter, both as temporary and permanent structures, being both vulnerable to decay and yet revealing their creation through their disrepair, often revealed layers of time and location. What I also learned from this study and the transformations of the work, was that one culture's symbolism was not so easily recognised by another's and therefore people's interpretations depended on their cultural experiences and reference points. This became apparent to me, and confirmed by

Barthes, and previously through the feedback from African artists about the *Panel Pieces* as related to house building and shelter (see Chapter 3, sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3).

As a result of exhibiting the artwork in the *Crossing Boundaries* show at the National Museum and Art Gallery of Kenya in Nairobi (2001), where I also reconstructed three of the *Panels* and gave lectures to various audiences, I discovered that to a white audience there, I was bringing the familiar to their aesthetic attention, whereas to the Africans it looked unfamiliar. Yet to an English audience, the work from this exhibition reinforced their stereotypes of a culture they had not experienced. Therefore an artwork, or indeed an ethnographic artifact was interpreted in relationship to its cultural context. As a consequence of this, it led to my interest in the semiotic value and messages of the materials and processes I was using in relationship to differing cultural audiences. This eventually resulted in the mounting of a photographic exhibition at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, London (2003), entitled *Concealed / Revealed*, to elicit a Western response to the work. The photographs, which were all taken as fragments from the sculptural work, had originally been part of my documentation of the artwork as it progressed, although I began to realise their increasing importance in terms of what they isolated and framed in the work, and therefore represented symbolically. I realised that these images became dynamic indicators of meaning in themselves. They did this by focusing on the materials and processes involved. I found through working with the African artists that these materials and processes had different associations for them and were therefore seen or read semiotically differently by various sets of people. This also made me more aware that there were perhaps hidden concepts in the sculptural work, which I went on to make more explicit in the work (see Chapter 3, section 3.2). By

bringing the artwork to Kenya, and then subsequently, showing the work to a UK audience, I was afforded an insight into the aesthetic preferences for decoration, construction, materials and processes and the cultural symbolism of both countries. This cross-cultural exchange also promoted a sharing of ideas and was found to benefit both myself, and the artists I was working with in Africa.

Photography as a medium appeared to be more accessible to a UK art audience than the sculptural form, and transformed the sculptural work into the realms of modern technology and hence into the currently perceived contemporary art context of the UK. These large photographic prints further removed the sculpture from any concrete or illustrative form into one created through less tangible means.

I found that a creative interpretation of the commemorative grave posts depended on a personal interpretation and selection process, along with direct and primary sources of information. This self reflexive element of the research methodology proved a valuable mechanism for making conscious what would have otherwise remained subliminal. This form of retrospective analysis from the diaries at different stages facilitated a more immediate progression of the art practice. Within this approach my background as a researcher also contributed to the nature of the research. This was most directly evident in the experiences of teaching and living in Kenya, but also my previous experiences and knowledge of travelling abroad from an early age.

Most anthropologists would argue that a reflexive approach to an anthropological investigation combined with a 'scientific' one assisted and contributed to a more holistic view of a subject, as verified by Sylvia Caiuby Novaes at the *Fieldworks* conference (Tate Modern, 2003). However she took this further by lamenting that there had been a

shift away from visual documentation by anthropologists due to an over emphasis on social organisational, genealogical methods, and oral traditions. But more fundamental than this, she argued that a lot of anthropologists did not possess the visual mechanisms for recognizing and understanding the symbolism or semiotic values that an image can portray. She quoted Malinowski's diaries revealing 'an author behind the text', otherwise about publicly disseminated, but obviously contributed to his other, considered more empirical, information gathering and final publication – however as Pearce (1996:303) stated 'Values and attitudes determine what are to be recorded as events'.

The sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi argued, in the catalogue to the '*Lost Magic Kingdoms'* exhibition at the Museum of Mankind, that it was advantageous to the artist not to know about the context to an ethnographic artifact in order to make artwork, as it would presumably circumscribe the imaginary and mysterious aspects of the object, which was the other end of the continuum in ignoring the context as being relevant to the production of art. More recently, Richard Serra in Shapiro's '*Western Artists / African Art*' (1994: 85) has been accredited with similar beliefs. In spite of the fact that certain aspects of the Gohu secret society were revealed to me, I was made very aware that there were particular practices that were being censored. This idea of secrecy - or not 'fully knowing' - was appealing to me in that the knowledge surrounding the posts still retained a certain amount of mystery about it, therefore as an artist I could support these artists' views of the power of an imaginative element in the creation of artwork. However as Greene (1988:120) related, 'Reflectiveness, even logical thinking remain important; but the *point* of cognitive development is not to gain an increasingly complete grasp of abstract principles. It is to interpret from as many vantage points as possible'. As a

result, the outcome of this research presented a more balanced amalgamation of both an imaginary approach and an academic one, the latter based on the knowledge gathered from the literary research, fieldwork documentation, and from the Giriama themselves, and the former, a condensation of previous experiences in Kenya, the artwork executed and by necessity selected knowledge passed on to me by the Giriama. In order to transform this knowledge into making artwork, without it becoming illustrative, I had to find a way to metaphorically represent my findings through my art practice. This I found could only be achieved through the creative process and progression of the artwork, which emphasized the semiotic values of the materials and processes. This also meant that for a large part of time I had to temporarily suspend the intellectual engagement with the anthropological aspect of the research. This facilitated and helped to synthesise the concepts and ideas inherent in the information gathered, which eventually formed the final pieces of sculptural work and resulted in an original interpretation.

Anthropologically, I was dealing with contemporary religious practices of the Giriama, and through the fieldwork based not on a secondhand or historical interpretation. Naturally the Giriama practices have been modified considerably over time, due to outside influences from missionaries, aid workers and educationalists. Nevertheless, I felt quite strongly that these practices represented an identity, possibly over and above the religious value and function, and therefore defining for this community, when patterns of life were changing rapidly around them. My only ethical reservations about choosing to carry out this anthropological research was whether I had represented the Giriama as they would have liked to have been represented to the world outside their community, as a great many of the people that were interviewed, being oral

arbiters of their cultural heritage, were old and some have already died since this research began. I was also conscious that this information was going to be archived in the Nairobi and Mombasa Museums for future generations and other researchers to access. This documentation I have written up as a separate report for the museums, and the fieldwork documentation is recorded in this thesis in Appendices IV and V, Parts One, Two and Three. In regard to this, I feel I have at least contributed to the documentation of the Giriama practices and to that body of knowledge through the descriptions recorded both visually through photographs and drawings, and also through written accounts, but without making evaluative commentary.

The main purpose of this practice-based study, however, was to examine how this information could be transformed into a visual and contemporary sculptural form, recognisable in the West, and yet still retain something of the fundamental essence of the information gathered in the anthropological aspect of the research. This was achieved through the methodology applied to the practical investigation and the development of each piece of work, which built on the previous one through systematic analysis and evaluation processes, until the research culminated in the visual expression of the final *Wall Pieces* and *Floor Pieces*. It was also through the field trips that I was able to establish the focus for the research and contextualise the information already gathered about the posts. It was as a result of the first field trip that I discovered new information about the posts and the philosophical nature of them being half buried in the ground and therefore mediating between the physical and spiritual worlds. This led on to being visually influenced by the Kenyan environment and the local vernacular architecture which prompted my aesthetic interest in the way the Kenyans used materials and

processes of joining them together. This also had affiliations with the artists of the Arte Povera, and Cobra groups, especially in the materials and processes used such as in the construction of the igloo structures of Mario Merz and some of the materials used by Marisa Merz, where the combinations of materials and the temporary nature of them were emphasised. Stokvis (1999:11) talking about the Cobra group said that, 'The material, regarded until now as the least interesting aspect of the creative process....was now seen as a mysterious element with hidden powers, a significance impossible to put in words and arousing an endless succession of associations', in this respect echoing my semantic concerns. The feedback from the Kenyan artists on the second trip to Kenya, for the *Crossing Boundaries* show, was a crucial factor in refocusing the research and gaining insights from an African perspective on my own art practice, along with their cultural and tribal traditions. This finally led to the production of a body of work recognized by a Western audience as being related to architecture with a spiritual concern, which both concealed and revealed cross cultural signifiers to differing audiences, which were directly connected to the materials and processes used.

4.2 Extension and Development of the Research

My preoccupation with the ephemeral quality of the work to date made me consider the Western concern for permanency, and in fact the ambivalent nature of permanency. Many mud structures have lasted for centuries in a climate that suits this material, likewise a great many buildings in other developing countries withstand hurricanes and other natural disasters better than a Westernised construction that may not be as flexible. Therefore it would seem that our interpretation is often based on our own

assumptions of the culture we originate from, as mentioned previously.

I liked the idea of translating 'concrete' three-dimensional forms and materials into the illusory two-dimensional photographic image. Using the digitised photographic image as material in itself, as a Westernised, high-tech, synthetic means of production, identified by the West and other cultures as a contemporary medium, subtle contradictions and cultural signifiers could be created in relationship to specific contexts. This could be achieved by the manipulation of content, positioning, sizing and cropping, and especially in the printing process of the images, as I found when preparing my slides for exhibition prints at the Brunei Gallery, London.

However I would also like to extend some of the work, such as the *Floor Pieces*, into a more permanent material, such as bronze, which would be the antithesis or reversal of notions of vulnerability and yet still retain this idea within it, by the visual appearance or translation of 'throw-away' materials, which would still embody some of their own characteristics. Here, the subversiveness of the initial materials and/or form might be hidden behind what would be generally considered a material of great inherent strength, beauty and value in the West, but on closer examination through some incongruity of form and material it could reveal a sense of vulnerability and unease.

The sense of concealing and revealing, as a result of gathering contextual information, became a reflection of the cultural and environmental differences and similarities between Kenya and the UK, which the work embodied and communicated to the viewer through a semiotic approach to the materials and processes.

APPENDIX I

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Part One: List of Plates I - XXXXI

Part Two: List of Figures 1 - 86

List of Plates

Plates in reference to the main text, incorporating multiple figures in some plates, here marked with an asterisk, and detailed in List of Figures.

Introduction

*Plate I — Kenyan Environment and Landscape 1989-1990

Plate II — Kenyan Landscape - Suswa 1989 - emphasising earth as the prevalent and major component of the landscape

Chapter 1

Plate III — MacKenzie Karisa Ngala, craftsman and Gohu member, with Vigango to Kaina Ngala and Gandi Ngala 1999

Plate IV — Shrine showing Vibao and Koma at the homestead of Mzee Mgumbao Mkare Mlewa, Konjora, near Ganze 1999

Plate V — Vigango, Vibao and Koma at the homestead of Charo and Ali Kivalo at Chalani, Kaloleni 1999

*Plate VI — House Construction in Giriamaland 1999

Plate VII — Contrast of Buildings in Nairobi 1999

*Plate VIII — A Selection of Shelters built in Mombasa 1999

*Plate IX — Baptist Mission, Gotani 1999

Chapter 2

Plate X — *Shelter 1999/2000* - panels in the process of being cut away from the main structure

Plate XI — *Panel II* 2000 - hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal, mod-roc, chip paper, gloss paint. 54" x 47"

Plate XII — *Panel V* 2000 - hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal, blue powder paint. 55" x 47"

Plate XIII — *Gap Piece 2001* - plaster, wood and *Panel V*. 58" x 48" and variable thickness

Plate XIV — *Final Wall Piece 2003* - Detail - plaster, clay, anaglypta wallpapers, wood, bolts, sticks, roof battening. 90" x 72" x 18"

Plate XV — *Floor Piece I 2003* - plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battening. 49" x 35" x 7"

Plate XVI — *Floor Piece II 2003* - plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battening. 49" x 35" x 7"

Plate XVII — *Floor Piece III 2003* - plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battening. 49" x 35" x 7"

Plate XVIII — *Panel III 2000*

*Plate XIX — Mud drawing 1999 - details

Plate XX — *Shelter 1999/2000* - lnterior. Hazel sticks, sisal, clay, sand, straw. 70" x 19" x 150"

Plate XXI — *Shelter 1999/2000* - Entrance. Hazel sticks, sisal, clay, sand, straw. 70" x 19" x 150"

*Plate XXII — *Shelter 1999/2000* - details

Plate XXIII *Shelter 1999/2000* - panel cut away from side wall

*Plate XXIV *Panel I* and Studio Shots 2000

*Plate XXV Plaster moulds from *Shelter* clay units 2000

Plate XXVI *Panel IV* with latex 'skin' 2000

Plate XXVII *Panel III* with latex skin being removed 2000

*Plate XXVIII *Chickenwire Reliefs 2000*

Plate XXIX *Redcliffe Cave Installation*, Bristol 2000. *Shelter* units cut in half, covered in mod-roc, painted blue and placed on the floor

Chapter 3

Plate XXX *Gap Piece 2001* - detail showing positive and negative impressions in the mould making processes, creating a sense of presence and absence

*Plate XXXI Wire Maquettes 2002

Plate XXXII Plaster Maquette 2002. Negative spaces created by using clay plugs in the casting process. 13" x 11" with variable sides

*Plate XXXIII Plaster and Wire Maquettes 2002

*Plate XXXIV Plaster and Wire Maquettes 2002

Plate XXXV Maquette showing Earth *Hole* suspended above ground 2002. Plaster, sticks, weld mesh. 12" x 8" diameter

*Plate XXXVI Full-Scale Earth *Hole* in field 2002

Plate XXXVII First Full-Scale *Wall Piece* 2002 - sticks, roofing batten, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta wallpaper. 90" x 72" x 18"

Plate XXXVIII Two Full-Scale *Wall Pieces* 2003 - sticks, roofing batten, wood, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta wallpaper. 78" x 56" x 18"

Plate XXXIX First maquette for *Final Wall Piece* 2003 - sticks, roofing batten, wood, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta wallpaper. 18" x 10" x 2"

Plate XXXX Layers of Wallpaper 2003 - anaglypta wallpapers

Plate XXXXI *Final Wall Piece* 2003 - Front view of plaster, sticks, roofing batten, sisal, clay, scrim, string, anaglypta wallpaper, wood, bolts, polystyrene, foam. 90" x 72" x 18"

Plate I Kenyan Environment and Landscape 1989 - 1990

Fig.1 Maasai Mara before a storm - dramatic light conditions

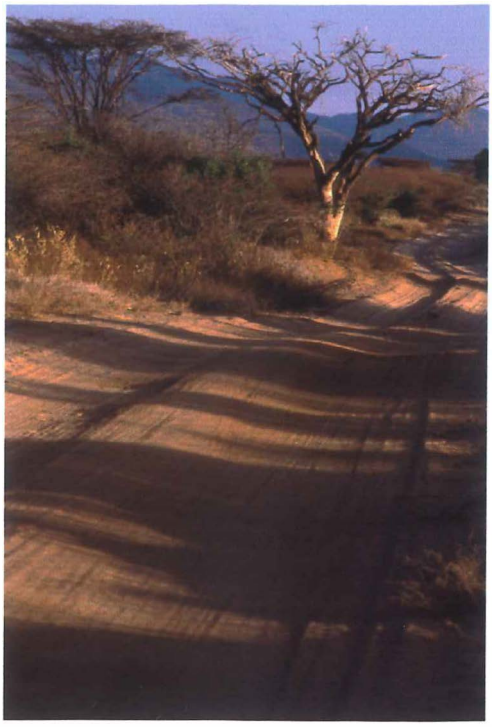


Fig.2 Ndoto Hills - earth roads

Fig.3 Magardi, S.Kenya - contrast of black and white in the landscape

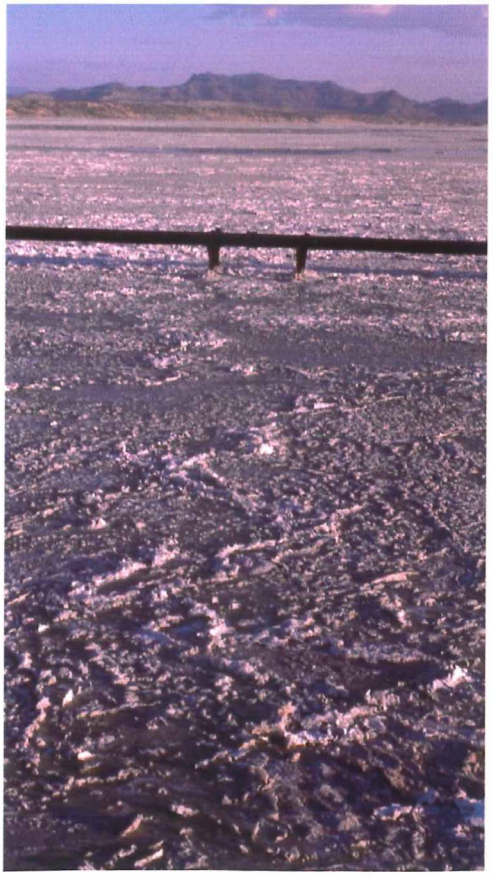


Fig.4 Magardi Soda Lake - early evening

Fig.5 Dead zebra, Maasai Mara - vulnerability & mortality

Plate II **Kenyan Landscape, Suswa 1989**
Emphasising earth as the prevalent & major component of the landscape

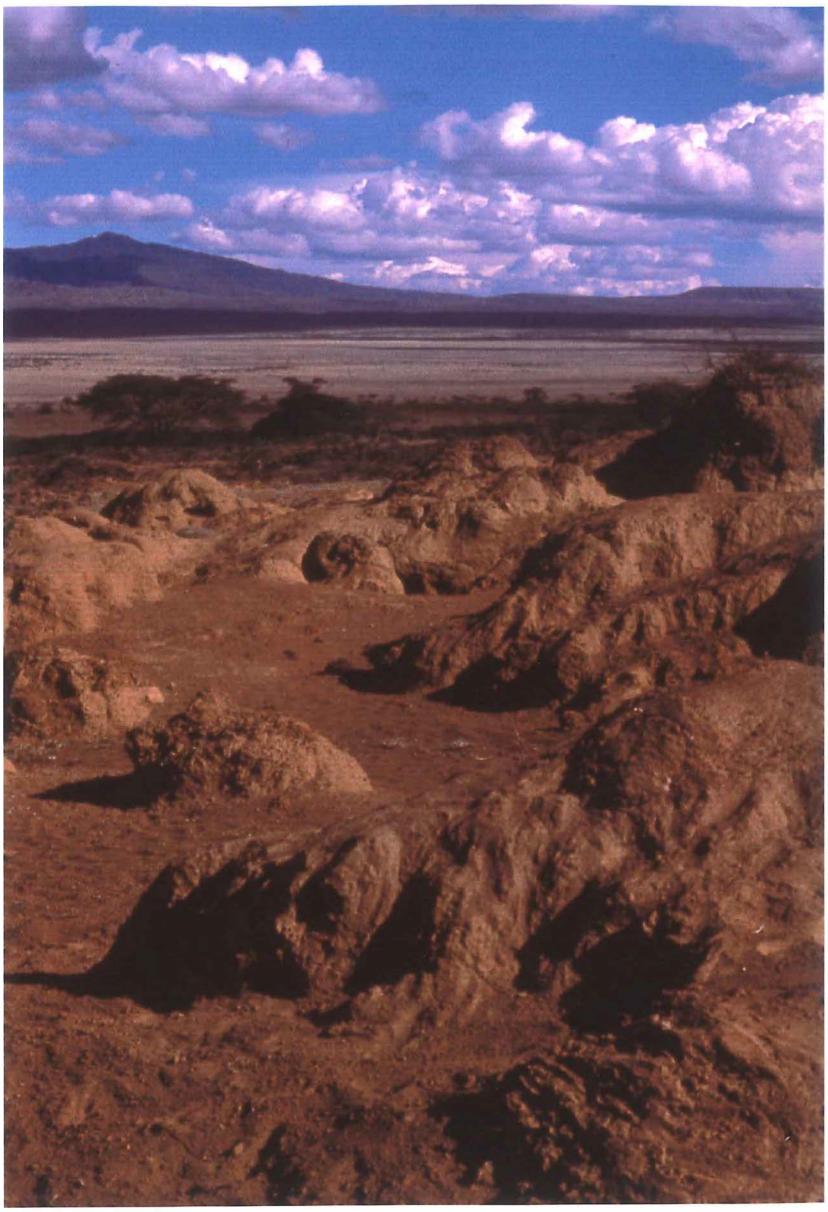


Plate III **MacKenzie Karisa Ngala, craftsman and Gohu member with Vigango to Kaina Ngala and Gandi Ngala, Chalani, Kaloleni 1999**

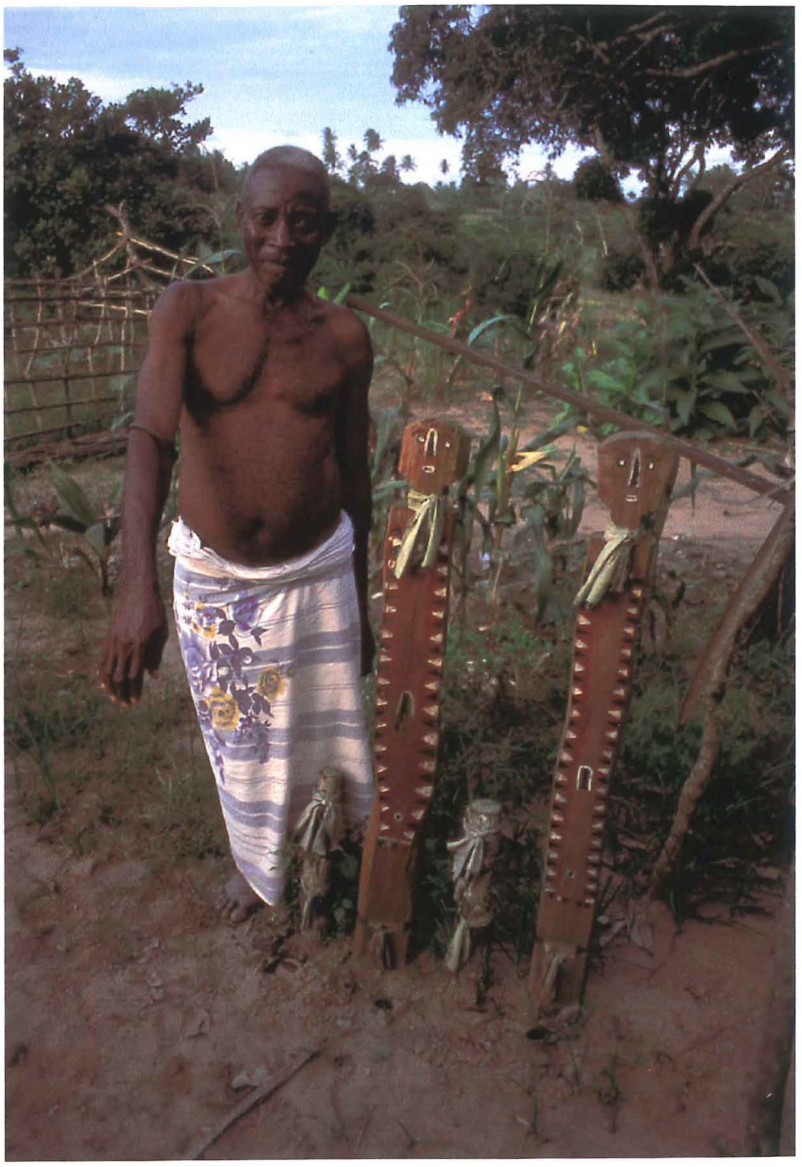


Plate IV **Shrine showing Vibao & Koma of Mzee Mgumbao Mkare Mlewa, Konjora, near Ganze, 1999**

Plate V **Vigango, Vibao & Koma of Charo & Ali Kivalo, Chalani, Kaloleni 1999**

Plate VI House Construction in Giriamaland 1999

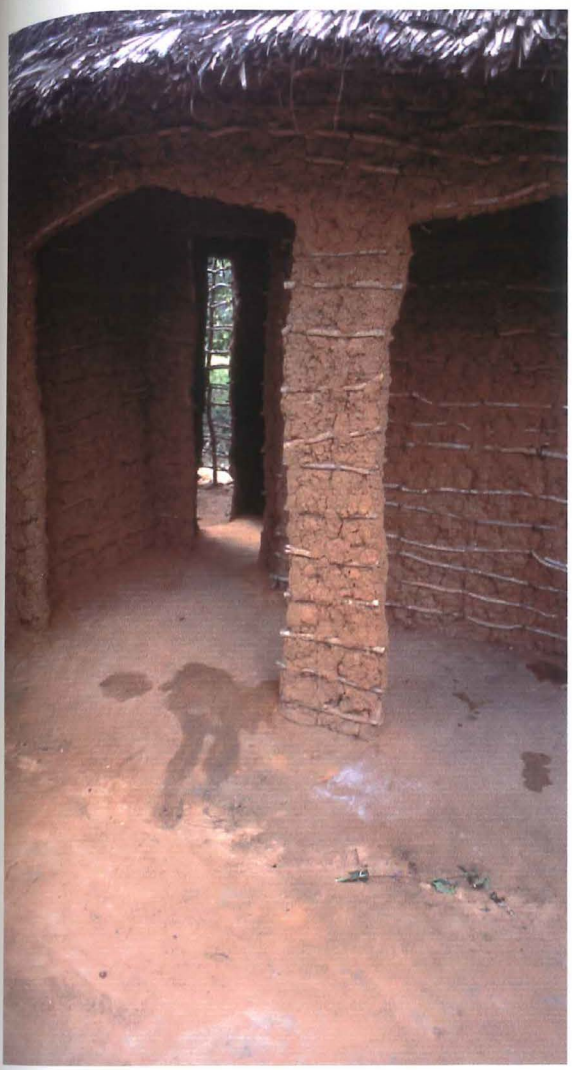


Fig.13 Mud column, near Ganze, Kenya

Fig.14 Modern Giriama house construction at Gotani, Kenya

Fig.15 Traditional Giriama grass house, near Dida, Kenya

Plate VII Contrast of Buildings in Nairobi 1999

Plate VIII A Selection of Shelters built in Mombasa (1999)

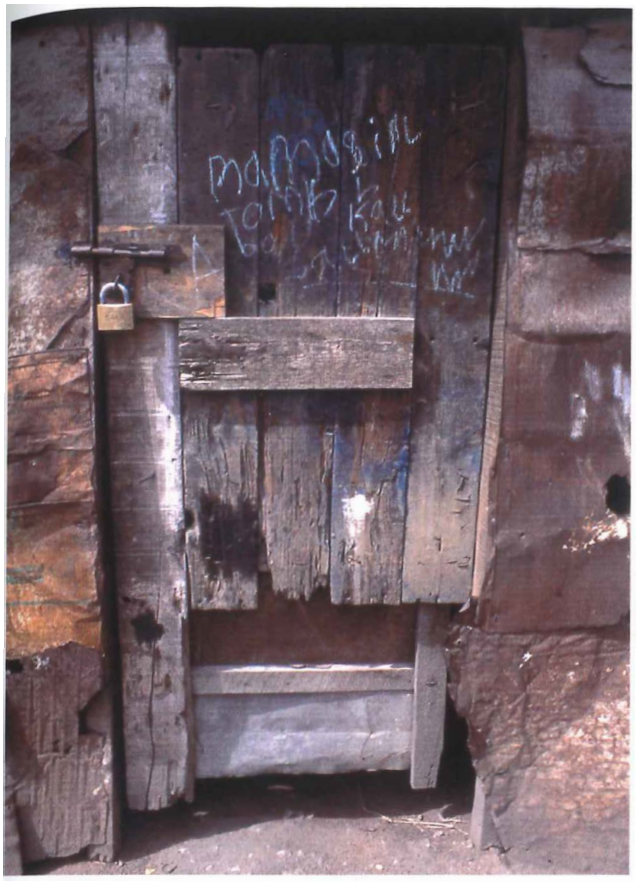


Fig.16 Local vernacular architecture - wood, tin

Fig.17 Fence made of flour sacks sewn together

Fig.18 Local vernacular architecture - wood, cement, *mbati*, tin

Fig.19 Local vernacular architecture - wood, paint

Fig.20 Shelter - wood, mbati, concrete blocks

Plate IX Baptist Mission, Gotani, Kenya 1999

Fig.21 Baptist Mission left derelict showing 'outside' influences in architectural form

Fig.22 Detail of Mission house wall showing casting technique using sewn flour sacks, chickenwire reinforcement and cement, creating a cavity wall

Plate X *Shelter* 1999/2000

Panels in the process of being cut away from the main structure

Plate XI ***Panel II*** **2000**

Hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal, mod-roc, chip paper, gloss paint
54" x 47" ins

Plate XII ***Panel V*** **2000**

Hazel sticks, clay, sand straw, sisal, blue powder paint 55" x 47" ins

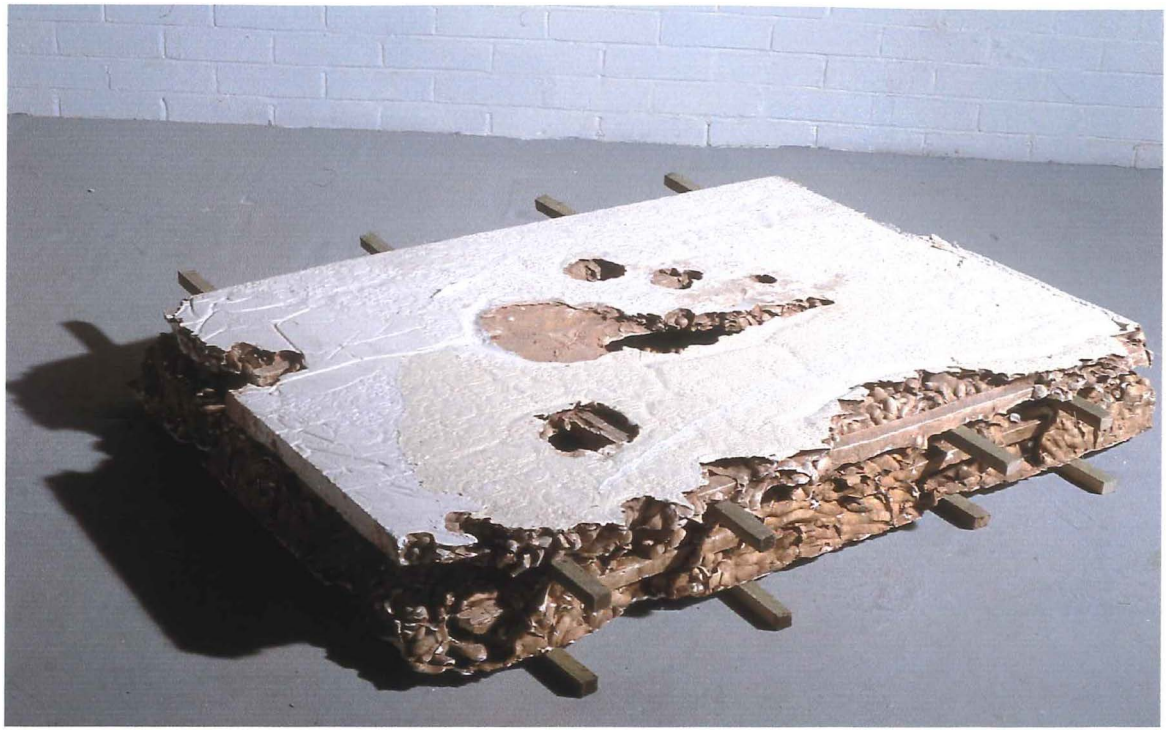
Plate XIII *Gap Piece* 2001

Plaster, wood and *Panel V* **58" x 48" ins and variable thickness**

Plate XIV *Final Wall Piece* 2003 - Detail

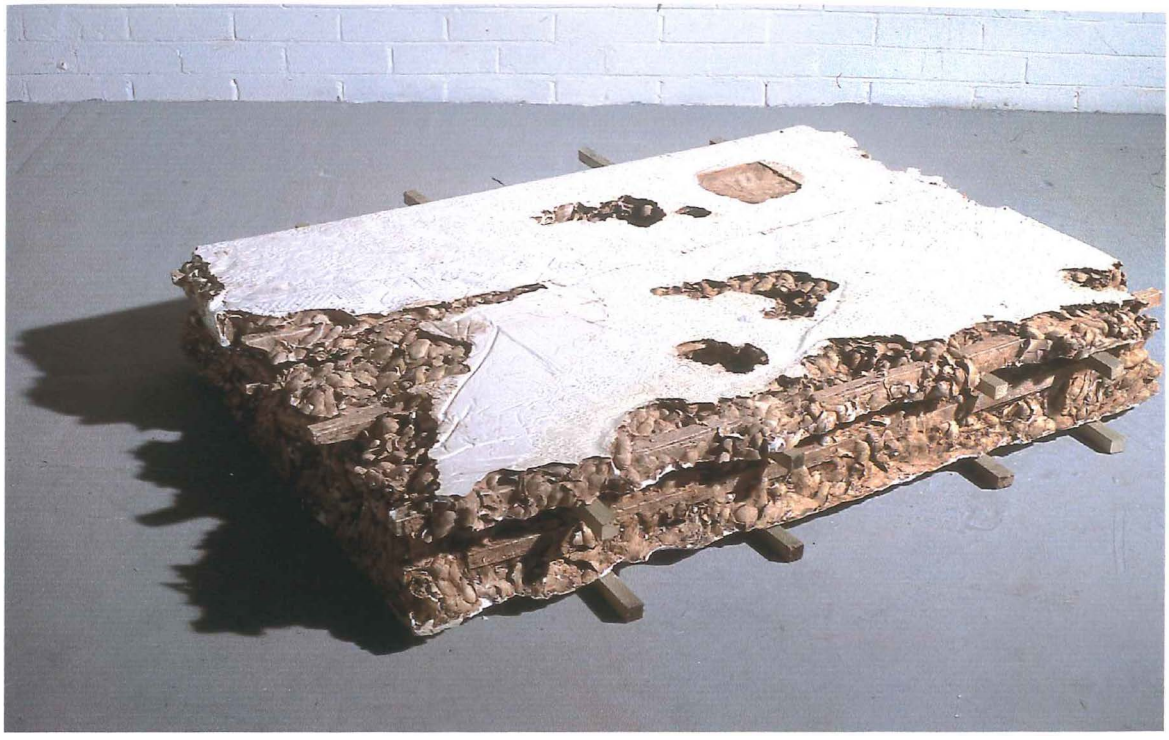
Plaster, clay, anaglypta wallpapers, wood, bolts, sticks, roof battoning
90" x 72" 18" ins

Plate XV *Floor Piece I* 2003



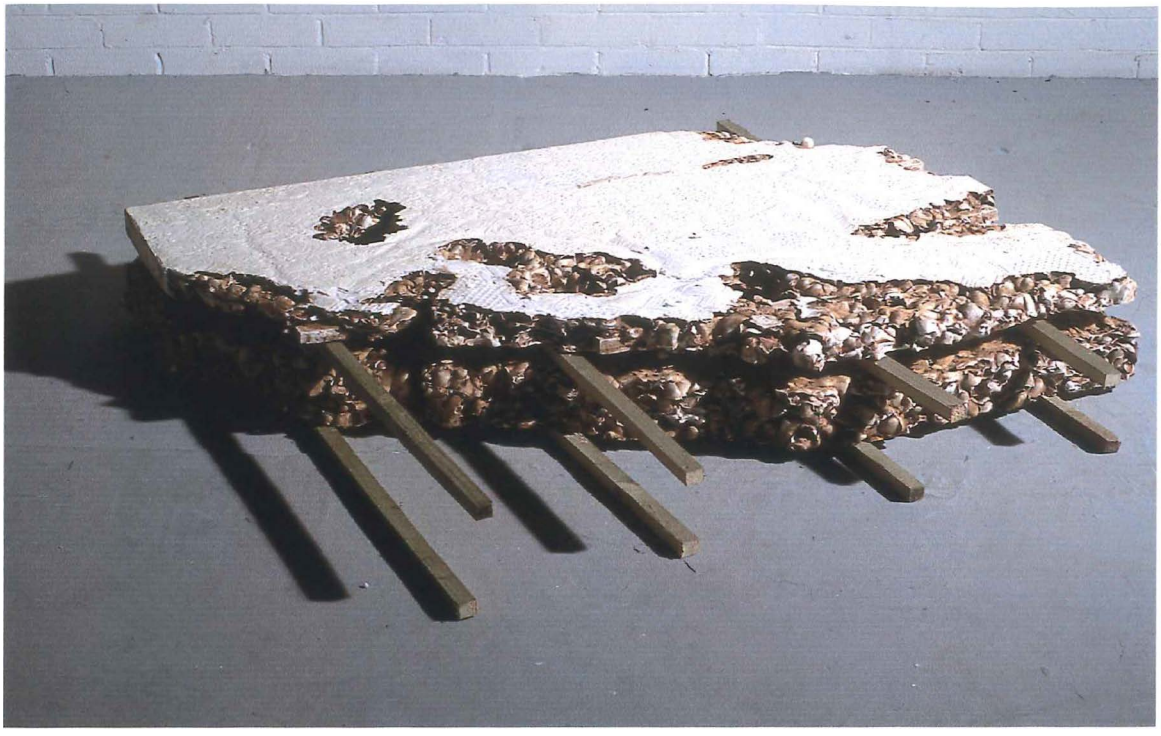
Plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battoning 49" x 35" x 7" ins

Plate XVI *Floor Piece II* 2003



Plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battoning 49" x 35" x 7" ins

Plate XVII ***Floor Piece III*** **2003**



Plaster, wood, anaglypta wallpapers, clay, roof battoning 49" x 35" x 7" ins

Plate XVIII *Panel III* 2000

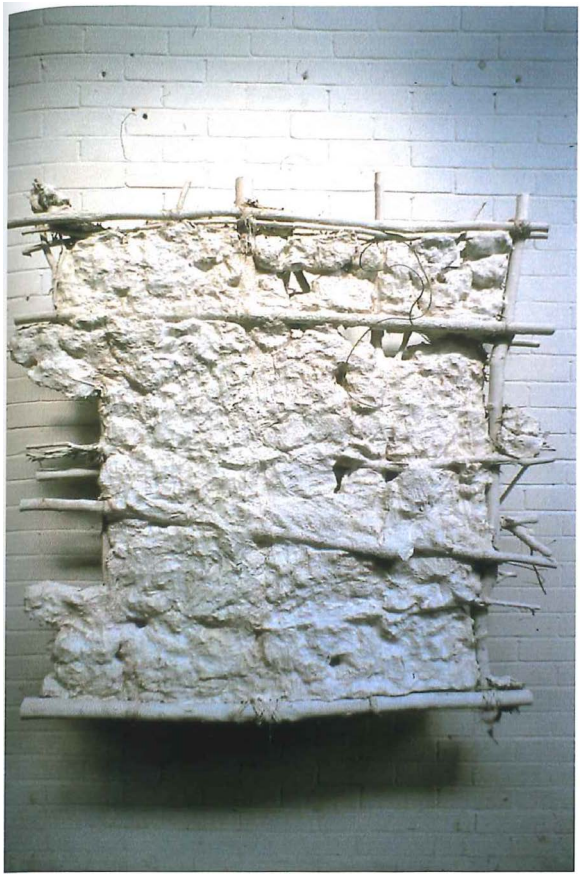


Fig.31 Hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal, mod-roc, paint 54" x 47" ins

Fig.32 *Panel III* with studio brick wall

Plate XIX Mud drawings - Details 1999

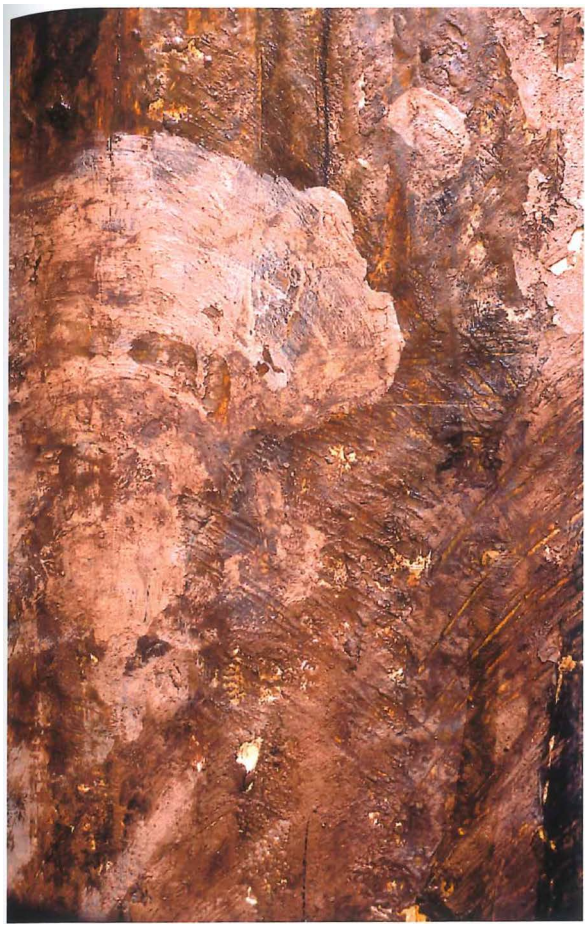


Fig.36 Clay, charcoal, pencil, gum arabic, shellac

Fig.37 Clay, charcoal, pencil, gum arabic, shellac

Plate XX *Shelter* 1999/2000

Interior **Hazel sticks, sisal, clay, sand, straw 70" x 19" x 150" ins**

Plate XXI *Shelter* 1999/2000

Entrance **Hazel sticks, sisal, clay, sand, straw 70" x 19" x 150" ins**

Plate XXII *Shelter* 1999/2000 - Details

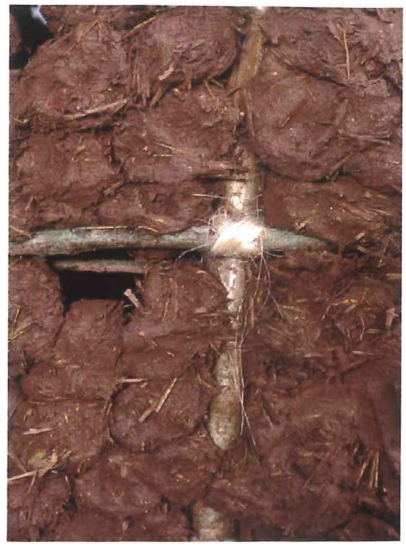


Fig.40 ***Shelter*****: external surface showing holes through to interior**

Fig.41 ***Shelter*****: external surface showing holes through to interior**

Fig.42 ***Shelter*****: external surface showing holes through to interior**

Fig.43 ***Shelter*****: external surface showing holes through to interior**

Fig.44 ***Shelter*****: external surface showing holes through to interior**

Plate XXIII *Shelter* 1999/2000

Panel cut away from side wall

Plate XXIV *Panel I* & Studio Shots 2000

Fig.45 ***Panel I 2000***
Hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal
54" x 47" ins

Fig. 46 Studio shot with initial Panels cut out of *Shelter*

Fig.47 Studio shot with *Panel I* & drawing experiments

Plate XXV Plaster moulds from *Shelter* clay units 2000

Fig.49 Plaster moulds

Fig.50 Latex forms made from plaster moulds

plate XXVI *Panel IV* with latex 'skin' 2000

Panel IV **- Detail**

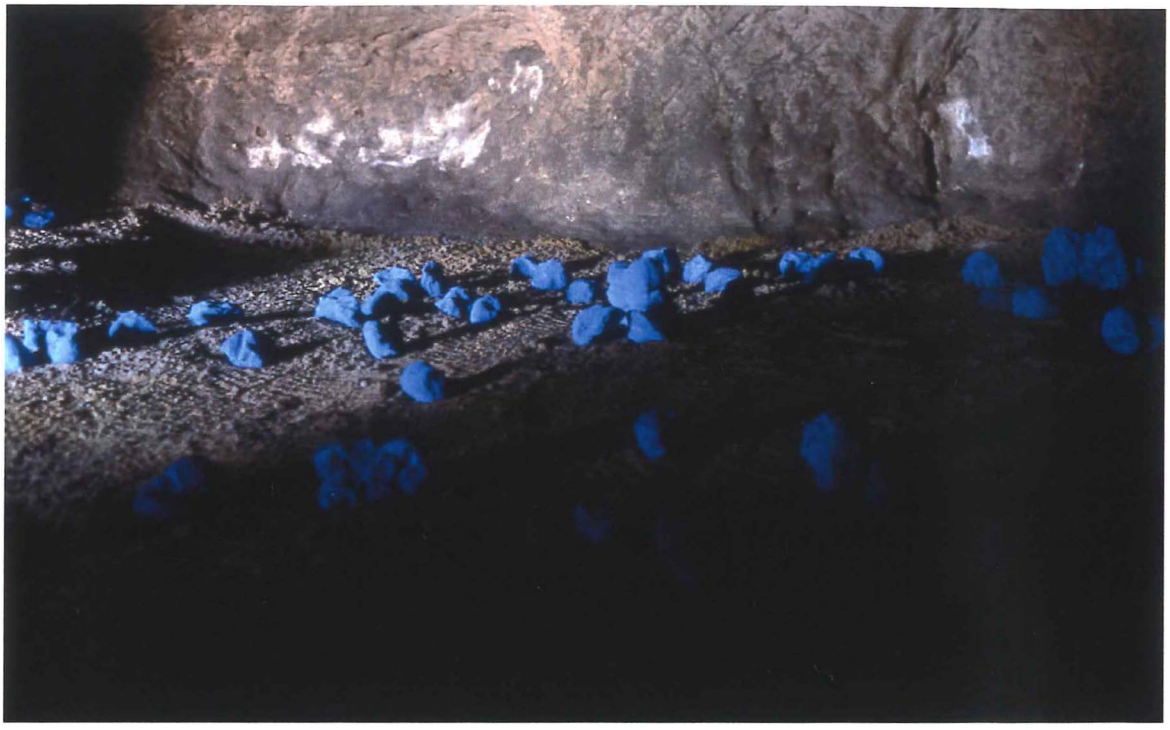
Plate XXVII *Panel III* with latex skin being removed 2000

Plate XXVIII *Chickenwire Reliefs* 2000

Fig.57 ***Chickenwire Relief I***
Chickenwire, newspaper, glue, paint
54" x 23"

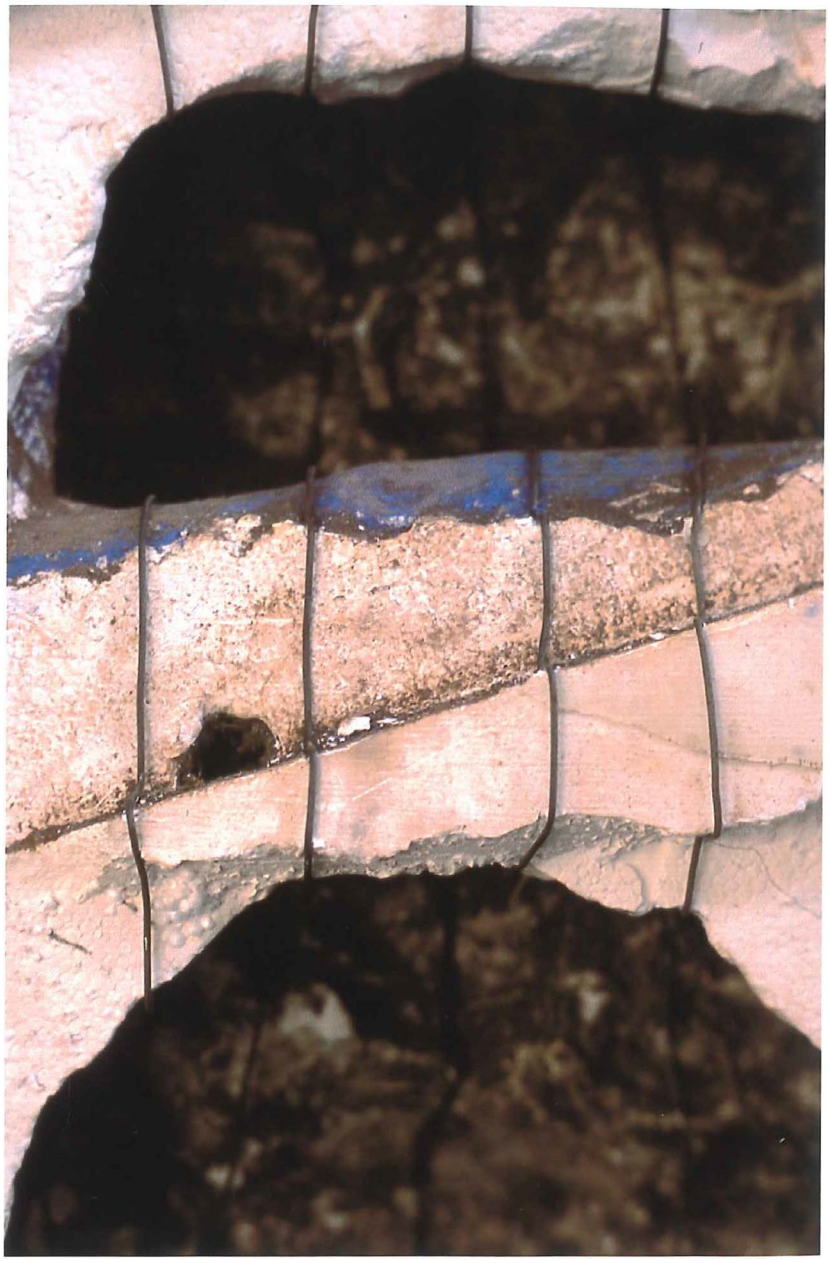
Fig.58 ***Chickenwire Relief II***
Chickenwire, tissue paper, glue
54" x 23" both sections

Plate XXIX *Redcliffe Cave Installation* , Bristol 2000



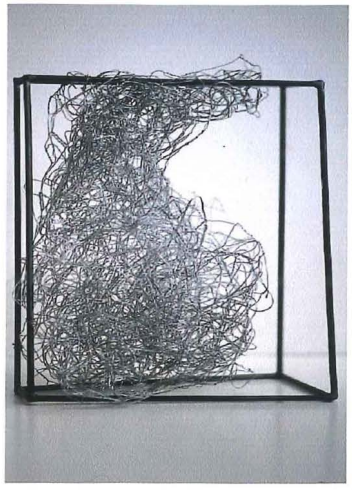
Shelter units cut in half, covered in mod roc, painted blue and placed on the floor

Plate XXX *Gap Piece* 2001



Detail showing postive and negative impressions in the mould making processes, creating a sense of presence and absence

Plate XXXI Wire Maquettes 2000



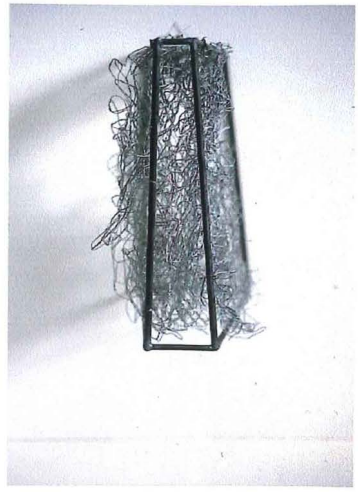
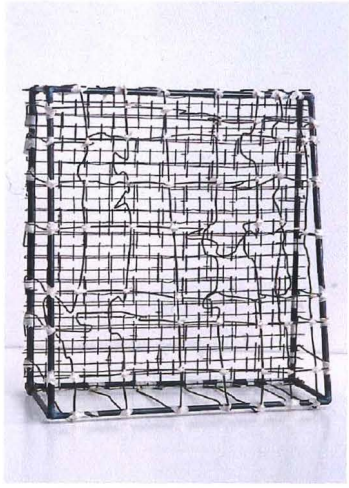


Fig.64 Frame with chickenwire - freestanding. Fig.65 Side view wall mounted 13" x 11" ins



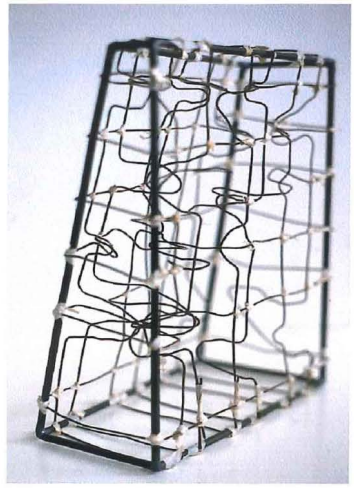


Fig. 66 Frame with wire contours/masking tape 13" x 11" ins
Fig.67 Frame with wire contours/masking tape/fragmented weld mesh 13" x 11" ins
Fig.68 Frame with layered and pierced weld mesh 13" x 11" ins

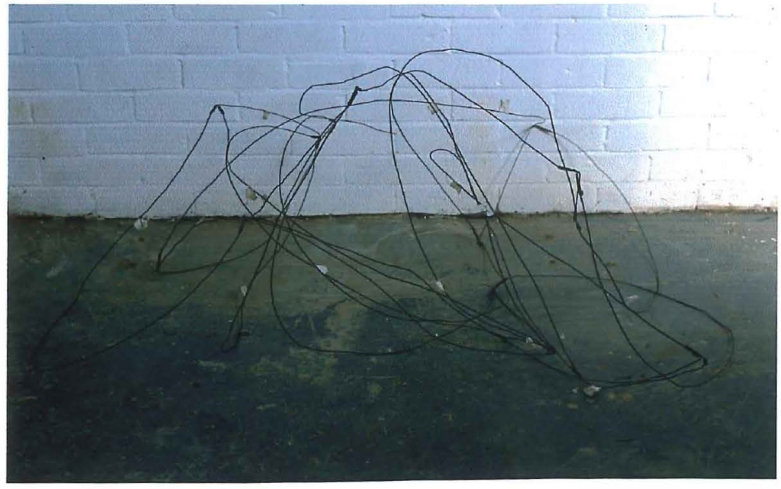


Fig.69 Frame incorporating flaccid wire frame of the same dimensions as the outer one 13" x 11"ins

Fig.70 Large scale flaccid frame based on the outer edges and dimensions of *Gap Piece* (see Plate XIII)

Plate XXXII Plaster Maquette 2002

Negative spaces created by using clay plugs in the casting process
13" x 11" with variable sides

Plate XXXIII Plaster and Wire Maquettes 2002

Fig.72 Wall with holes
Plaster, sticks, clay impressions 15" x 13" x 1.5" ins

Fig.73 Wall with holes - detail

Fig.74 Horizontal Piece
Plaster, anaglypta, roofing batton, wire Approx. 13" x 13" ins

Fig.75 Earth 'brick' on runners
Plaster, earth, wood battons 17.5" x 10.5" x 5" ins

Fig.77 Platform pierced by sticks
Plaster, sticks, paint 15" x 13" x 40" ins

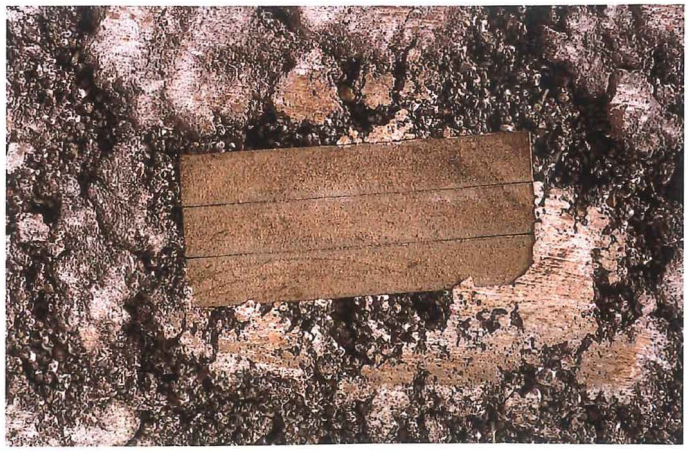


Fig.76 Earth 'brick' on runners - detail

Plate XXXIV Plaster and Wire Maquettes 2002

Fig.78 Sticks & plaster hole (blue)
11" x 13" x 13" ins

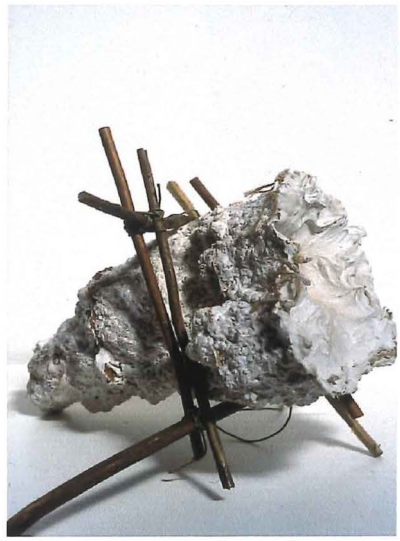


Fig. 80 Sticks & plaster hole made from polystyrene cavity
8.5" x 13" x 10" ins

Fig.82 Plaster/earth column suspended in weld mesh
13" and approximately 6-8" ins diameter

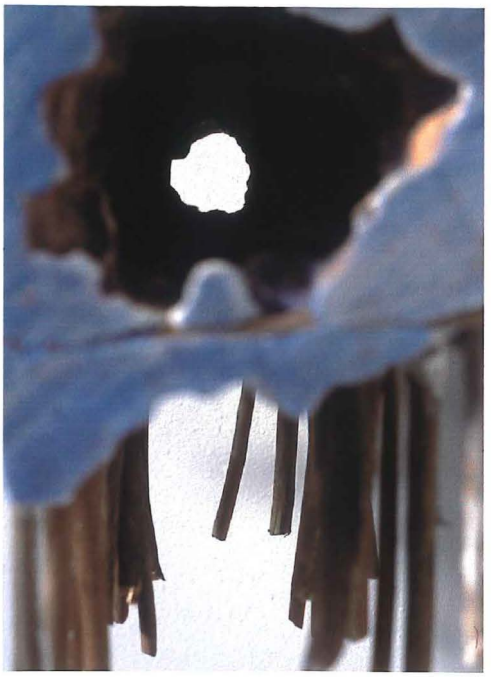


Fig.79 Sticks & plaster hole - detail

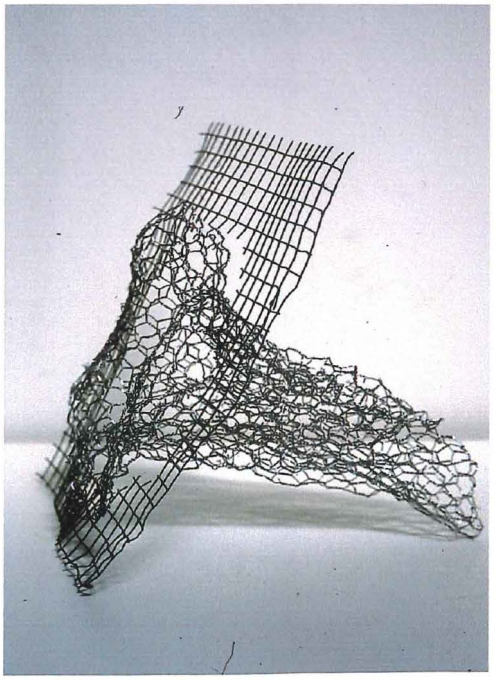


Fig.81 Chickenwire hole & weld mesh
8.5" x 13" x 10" ins

Plate XXXV Maquette showing earth hole suspended above ground 2002

Plaster, sticks, weld mesh, clay residue from casting
12.5" x 8" diameter

Plate XXXVI Full Scale Earth *Hole* in field 2002

Fig.83 Earth hole dug 4ft. by 3ft. across, tapering towards the bottom
Fig.84 Plaster lining the hole and made ready to dig out

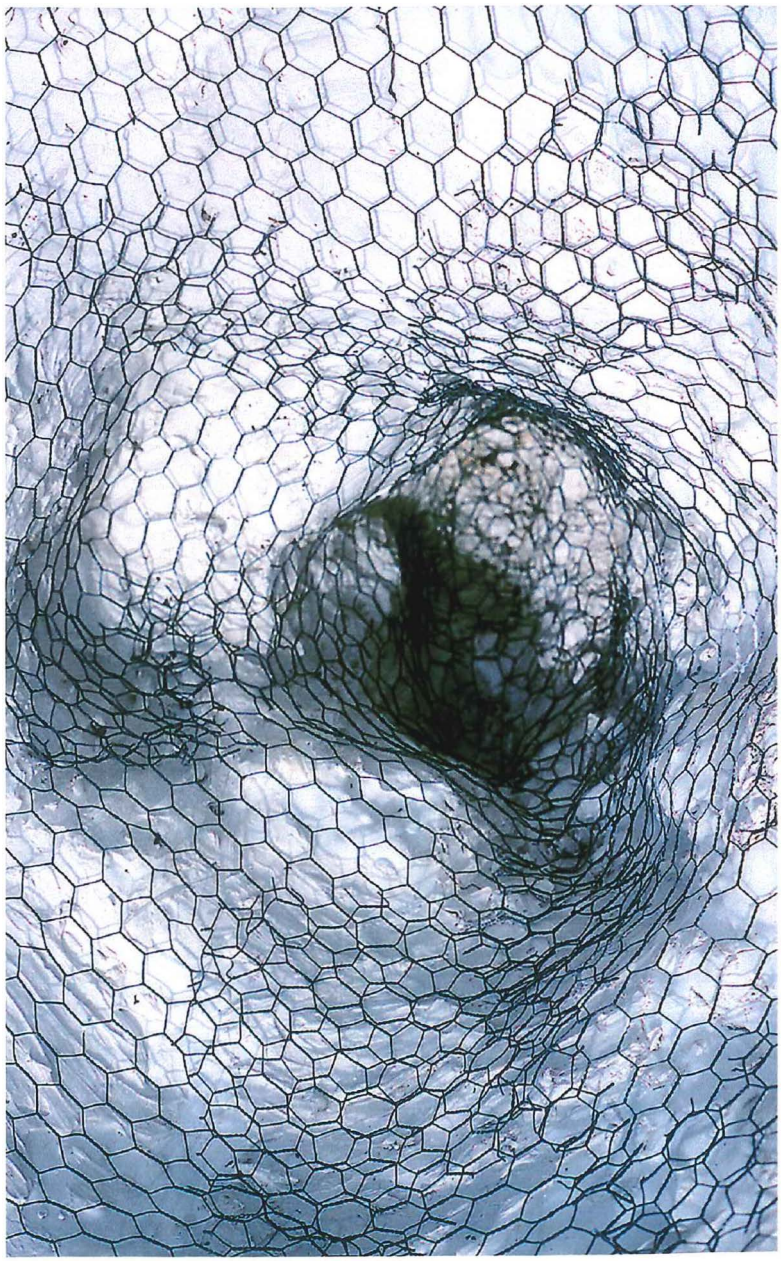
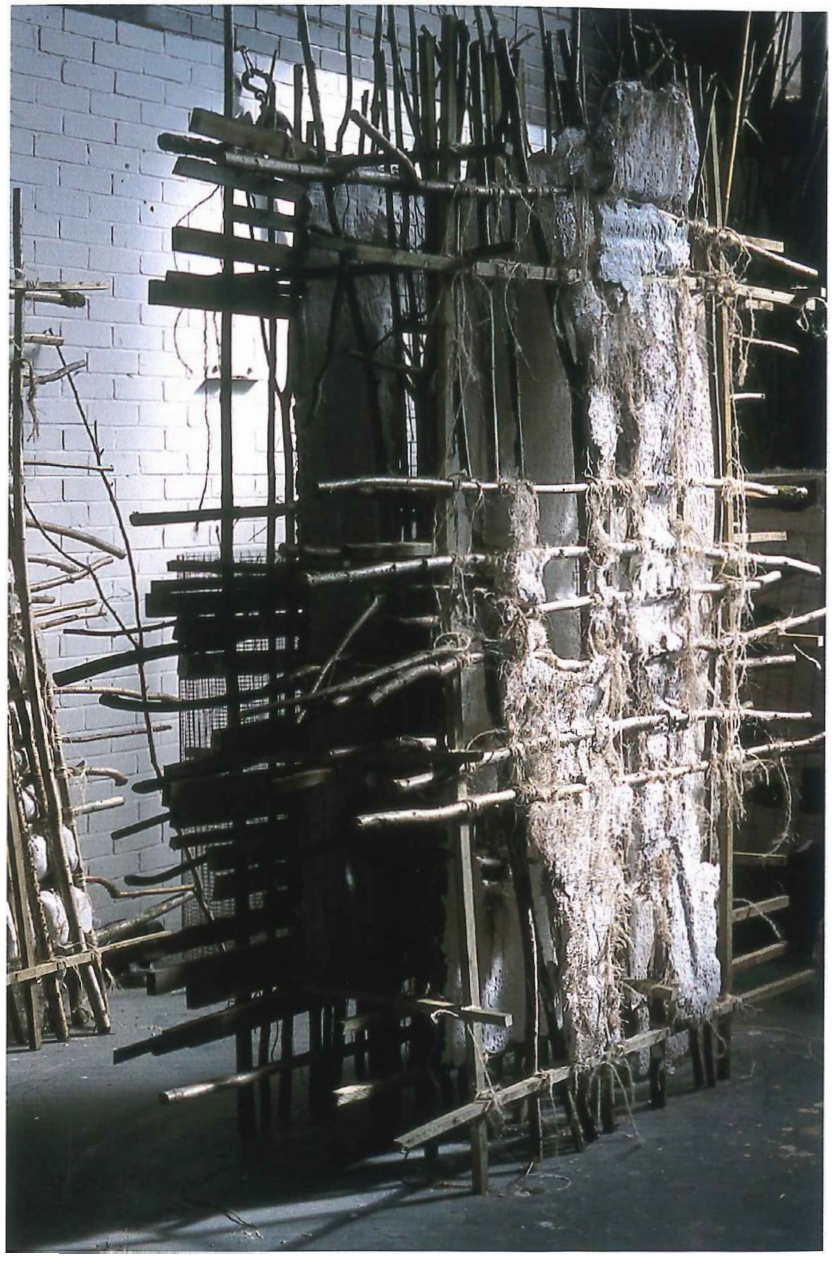


Fig.85 *Hole*: with cbickenwire reinforcement

Plate XXXVII First Full Scale *Wall Piece* 2002



Sticks, roofing batton, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta wallpaper
90" x 72" x 18" ins

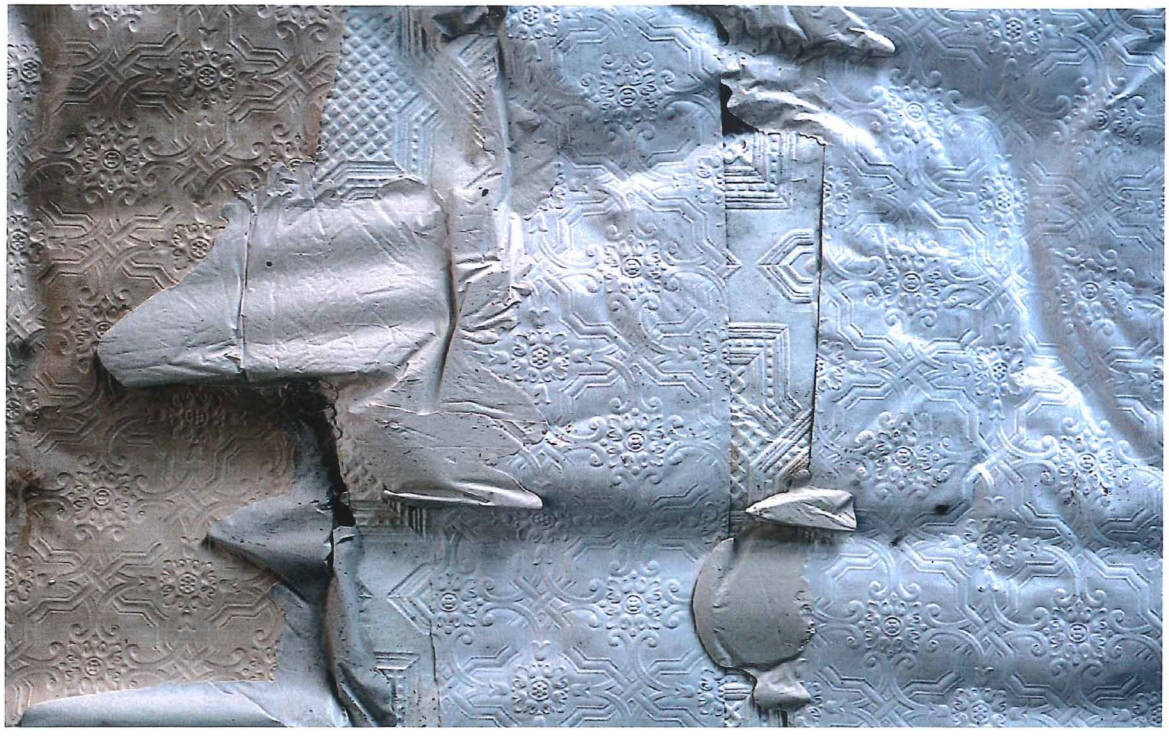
Plate XXXVIII Two Full Scale *Wall Pieces* 2003

Sticks, roofing batton, wood, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta wallpaper
Approximately 78" x 56" x 18" ins each

Plate XXXIX First Maquette for *Final Wall Piece* 2003

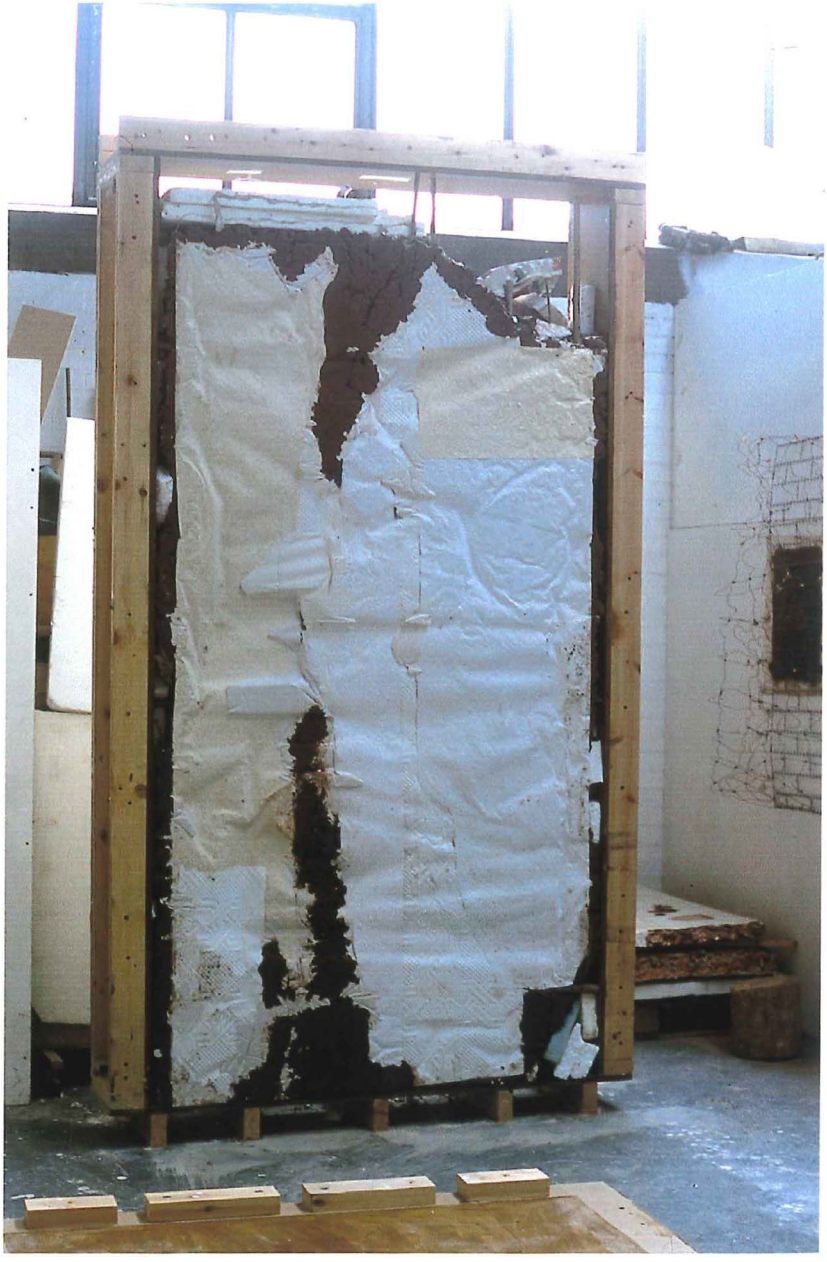
Sticks, roofing batton, wood, sisal, scrim, plaster, string, anaglypta
18" x 10" x 2" ins

Plate XXXX Layers of Wallpaper 2003



Detail of Final Wall Piece **Plaster and anaglypta wallpapers**

Plate XXXXI *Final Wall Piece* 2003



Front View
Plaster, sticks, roofing batton, sisal, clay, scrim, string, wood, bolts, foam polystyrene, anaglypta wallpaper **90" x 72" x 18"ins**

List of Figures

Figures in reference to the main text. * Figures incorporated into Plates, in reference to the main text.

Introduction

*Figure 1 Maasai Mara before a storm - dramatic lighting conditions

*Figure 2 Ndoto Hills - earth roads

*Figure 3 Magardi, Southern Kenya - contrast of black and white in the landscape

*Figure 4 Magardi Soda Lake - early evening

*Figure 5 Dead Zebra, Maasai Mara - vulnerability and mortality

Figure 6 Willow Sticks 1996 - willow sticks, recycled and mixed media

Figure 7 Willow Sticks 1996 - detail

Figure 8 Holly Sticks 1996 - holly sticks, recycled and mixed media

Figure 9 Healing Amulet 1996 - mixed media and found objects

Figure 10 BaKota Reliquary Figure, Gabon, West Africa. Bristol City Museum

Figure 11 Column with plastic corrugations 1998 - plaster, plastic corrugated sheet

Figure 12 Details of column surfaces - plaster, corrugated cardboard

Chapter 1

*Figure 13 Mud column, near Ganze

*Figure 14 Modern Giriama house construction at Gotani

*Figure 15 Traditional Giriama grass house, near Dida

*Figure 16 Local vernacular architecture - wood and tin

*Figure 17	Fence made of flour sacks sewn together
*Figure 18	Local vernacular architecture - wood, cement, tin, *mbati*
*Figure 19	Local vernacular architecture - wood and paint
*Figure 20	Shelter - wood, *mbati*, and concrete blocks
*Figure 21	Baptist Mission left derelict showing 'outside' influences in architectural form
*Figure 22	Detail of Mission house wall showing casting technique using sewn flour sacks, chickenwire reinforcement and cement, creating a cavity wall

Chapter 2

Figure 23	Workmen's huts made of earth. Tea plantations, Limuru 1989
Figure 24	Column with stick impressions, plaster 1999
Figure 25	Guttering with cement positive (and negative) stick impression 1999
Figure 26	Box - plaster, corrugated cardboard 1998
Figure 27	Egg shaped Basket and forms - withies, wax, hair, beads, pva, ribbon 1998
Figure 28	i) Plaster guttering column with finger impressions 1999 ii) Detail of finger impressions on final Wall Piece 2003
Figure 29	Window - plaster, chickenwire, computer components 1998
Figure 30	Decomposing Kigango 1999
*Figure 31	*Panel III* - Hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal, mod-roc, paint. 54" x 47"
*Figure 32	*Panel III* with studio brick wall
Figure 33	Ochre preparation, near Dida 1999
Figure 34	Kigango using household paint 1999

Figure 35	Giriama house structure using Mkone bark to tie stick joints 1999
*Figure 36	Clay, charcoal, pencil, gum arabic, shellac
*Figure 37	Clay, charcoal, pencil, gum arabic, shellac
Figure 38	Finger impressions in the clay 2000
Figure 39	*Shelter* - Interior 2000. Dappled light entering through the holes left in the structure
*Figure 40	*Shelter:* exterior surface showing holes through to interior
*Figure 41	*Shelter:* exterior surface showing holes through to interior
*Figure 42	*Shelter*: exterior surface showing holes through to interior
*Figure 43	*Shelter*: exterior surface showing holes through to interior
*Figure 44	*Shelter*: exterior surface showing holes through to interior
*Figure 45	*Panel I 2000* - hazel sticks, clay, sand, straw, sisal. 54" x 47"
*Figure 46	Studio shot with initial panels cut out of *Shelter*
*Figure 47	Studio shot with *Panel I* and drawing experiments
Figure 48	*Love Charm* - spherical forms (detail) 1996
*Figure 49	Plaster moulds
*Figure 50	Latex forms made from plaster moulds
Figure 51	Chickenwire maquette 2000 - chickenwire, newspaper, paint. 14" x 8"
Figure 52	Panel graphite transfer to the studio wall 2000
Figure 53	White wire contour against the studio wall 2000 - wire, paint. 20"
Figure 54	*Skin Series* - brickwork 2000. Latex. 54" x 47"
Figure 55	Drawing with glue size on tracing paper 2000. 54" x 47"
Figure 56	Drawing on tracing paper with latex covering 2000. 54" x 47"
*Figure 57	*Chickenwire Relief I* - chickenwire, newspaper, glue, paint. 54" x 23"

*Figure 58 *Chickenwire Relief II* - chickenwire, tissue paper, glue. 54" x 23" both sections

Figure 59 *Skin Series* - taken from the back of a panel plaster mould 2000

Chapter 3

Figure 60 Wire grid contour with weld mesh from the *Panel Series* - wire, masking tape, weld mesh 2002. 54" x 47"

Figure 61 Details of joints with masking tape 2002

Figure 62 Wire contours of individual clay units from Shelter 2001

Figure 63 *Gap Piece 2001* - back view

*Figure 64 Frame with chickenwire (freestanding). 13" x 11"

*Figure 65 Frame with chickenwire (side view) wall mounted. 13" x 11"

*Figure 66 Frame with wire contours, masking tape and fragmented weld mesh (freestanding). 13" x 11"

*Figure 67 Frame with wire contours and masking tape (freestanding) 13" x 11"

*Figure 68 Frame with layered and pierced weld mesh (freestanding) 13" x 11"

*Figure 69 Frame incorporating flaccid wire frame of the same dimensions (freestanding) 13" x 11"

*Figure 70 Large-scale flaccid frame based on the outer edges and dimensions of *Gap Piece* (see Plate XIII)

Figure 71 Wire brickwork taken from the back of *Gap Piece 2002*. 54" x 47"

*Figure 72 Wall with holes - plaster, sticks, clay impressions. 15" x 13" x 1"

*Figure 73 Wall with holes - detail

*Figure 74 Horizontal piece - plaster, anaglypta wallpaper, roofing batten, wire. Approximately 13" x 13"

*Figure 75 Earth 'brick' on runners - plaster, earth, wood battens. 17" x 10" x 5"

*Figure 76	Earth 'brick' on runners - detail
*Figure 77	Platform pierced by sticks - plaster, sticks, paint. 15" x 13" x 40"
*Figure 78	Sticks and plaster hole (blue) 11" x 13" x 13"
*Figure 79	Sticks and plaster hole (blue) - detail
*Figure 80	Sticks and plaster hole made from polystyrene cavity
*Figure 81	Chickenwire hole and weld mesh plate. 13" x 8" x 10"
*Figure 82	Plaster/earth column suspended in weld mesh. 13" x approx. 6-8" diameter
*Figure 83	Earth hole dug down 4 feet by 3 feet across tapering towards the bottom
*Figure 84	Plaster lining the hole and made ready to dig out
*Figure 85	*Hole* with chickenwire reinforcement
Figure 86	Erecting of *Final Wall Piece* with forklift truck 2003

Figures - Introduction

Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 refer to Plate I

Figure 6 and 7 Willow Sticks

Figure 8 Holly Sticks

Figure 9 Healing Amulet

Figure 10 Bakota Reliquary figure, Gabon, West Africa
Bristol City Museum
Registration no. E2412
Donation 1918
Collected by E. Kennedy

Figure 11 Column with plastic corrugations 1998
Plaster, plastic corrugated sheet

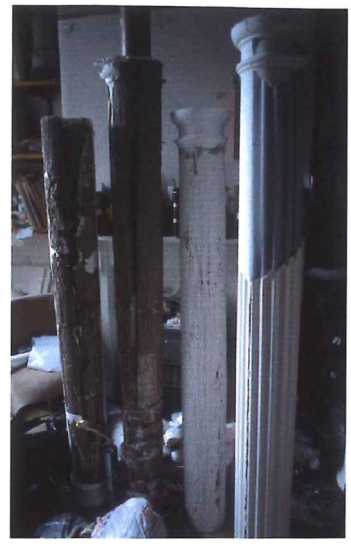


Figure 12 Details of column surfaces
Plaster, corrugated cardboard

Chapter 1

Figures 13, 14 and 15 reference Plate VI
Figures 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 reference Plate VIII
Figures 21 and 22 reference Plate IX

Figure 23 Workmen's huts made of earth.
Tea plantations, Limuru 1989

Figure 24
Column with stick impressions, plaster 1999

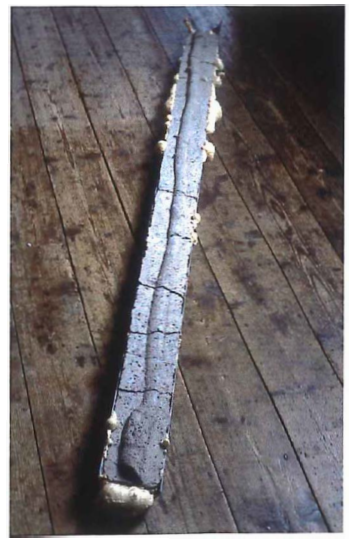


Figure 25
Guttering with cement positive (and negative) stick impressions 1999

Figure 26 Box
Plaster, corrugated cardboard 1998

Figure 27 Basket and forms
Withies, wax, hair, beads, pva, ribbon 1998

Figure 28

i) Plaster guttering column with finger impressions 1999

ii) Detail of finger impressions on final Wall Pieces 2003

Figure 29 Window
Plaster, chickenwire, computer components 1998

Figure 30
Decomposing Kigango 1999

Figures 31 and 32 refer to Plate XVIII

Figure 33
Ochre preparation near Dida 1999

Figure 34
Kigango using household paint 1999

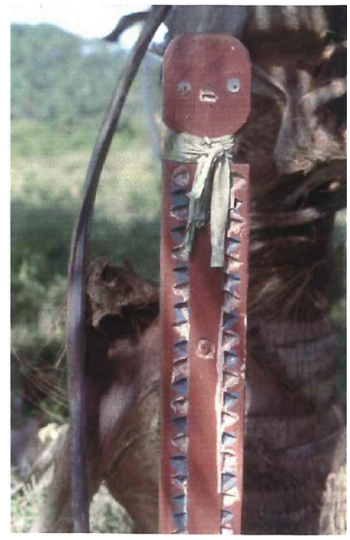


Figure 35
Giriama house structure using Mkone bark to tie stick joints 1999

Figures 36 and 37 refer to Plate XIX

Figure 38
Finger impressions in clay 2000

Figure 39 Shelter - Interior 2000
Dappled light entering through the holes left in the structure

Figure 40, 41, 42, 43 and 44 refer to Plate XXII

Figures 45, 46, and 47 refer to Plate XXIV

Figure 48 Love Charm
Spherical forms (detail) 1996

Figure 49 and 50 refer to Plate XXV

Figure 51 Chickenwire maquette 2000
Chickenwire, newspaper, paint 14" x 8"

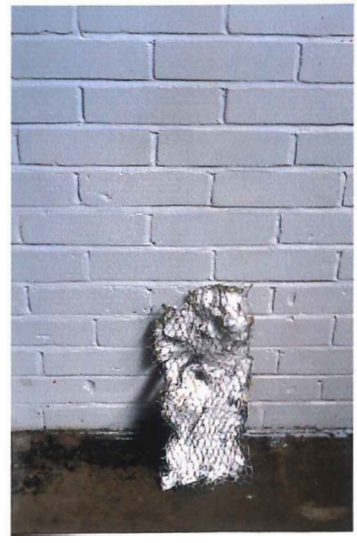


Figure 52
Panel graphite transfer to the studio wall 2000

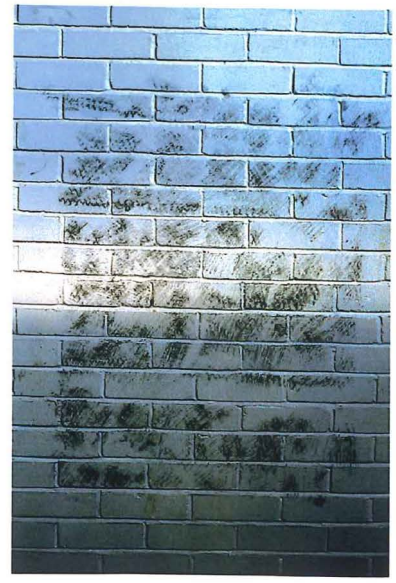


Figure 53
White wire contour against the studio wall 2000
Wire and paint 20"

Figure 54 Skin Series - brickwork 2000
Latex 54" x 47"

Figure 55
Drawing with glue size on tracing paper 2000
54" x 47"

Figure 56
Drawing on tracing paper with latex covering 2000
54" x 47"

Figures 57 and 58 reference Plate XXVIII

Figure 59 Skin Series 2000
Taken from back of a Panel plaster mould

Figure 60
Wire grid contour with weld mesh from *Panel Series* 2002
Wire, masking tape, weld mesh
54" x 47"

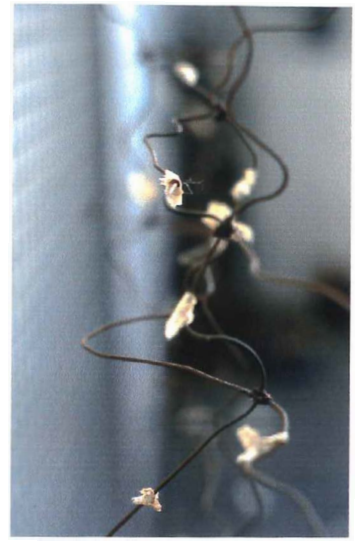


Figure 61
Details of joints with masking tape 2002

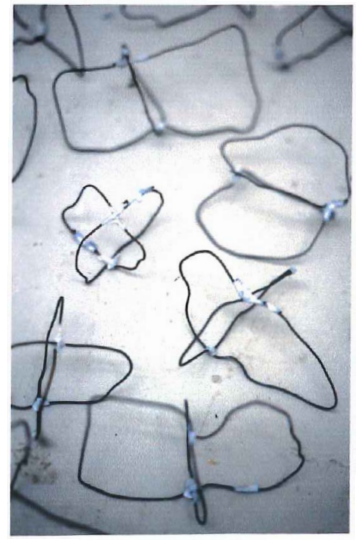
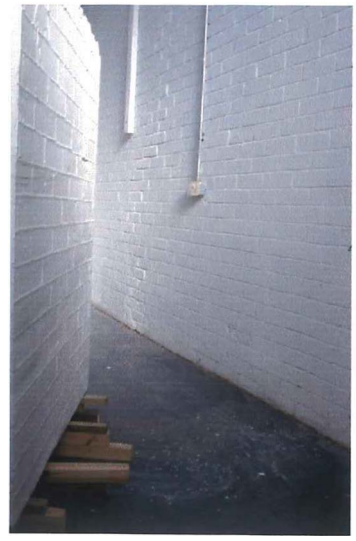


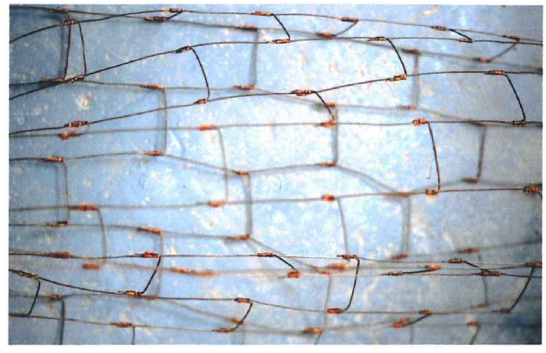
Figure 62
Wire contours of individual clay units from *Shelter* 2001

Figure 63 *Gap Piece* 2001
Back view



Figures 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69 and 70 reference Plate XXXI

Figure 71
Wire brickwork taken from the back of
Gap Piece 2002
54" x 47"



Figures 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, and 77 reference Plate XXXIII
Figures 78, 79, 80, 81 and 82 reference Plate XXXIV
Figures 83, 84 and 85 reference Plate XXXVI

Figure 86
Erecting of *Final Wall Piece* with forklift truck 2003

APPENDIX II

OUTCOMES OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN MUSEUMS

Case Study of the BaKota Reliquary Figure, Bristol Museum

Before the initial field trip to Kenya in 1999 I studied various artifacts in museums, which included the Bristol City Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford and the Sainsbury Centre at the University of East Anglia, and this accompanied a survey into how African artifacts influenced the work of European artists. Through this grew an increasing unease about the lack of contextual information and how the artifact would in fact interact with its natural environment or place of origin.

I started this investigation by choosing to make a case study of a Reliquary Figure (Figure 5) from the BaKota tribe of Gabon, West Africa. This I carried out through an observational drawing in charcoal at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, of their BaKota reliquary figure, (cabinet 49), and a dimensioned drawing taking direct measurements from the reliquary figure at the Bristol City Museum, registration no.E 2412. This was augmented by a review of what literature was available in various libraries in the UK. However this aspect of the research was often incomplete and inconclusive concerning aspects of the artifacts provenance, due to historical circumstances, which meant that important data had not been appropriately documented and therefore various hypotheses and interpretations surrounding these objects were still debated (Chaffin, A and F, 1981). Therefore a qualitative approach in conjunction with this more positivistic research was considered more useful for arriving at a more holistic understanding and interpretation of the object studied. It felt as if there was something missing, concealed or absent from studying this object in a museum alone, which required a more direct insight into the original context surrounding the object. This unknown quality I felt would only be found by experiencing the object in its original location with the people who made and used it – thus enriching my understanding and response to it. This discovery initiated the necessity for a field study trip to Kenya in order to explore the context of the object I eventually chose, which was the Giriama commemorative grave posts, for the reasons I have identified in *Chapter 1*. Also refer to the section 'Art and Artifice' in the *Introduction*, where the *Vigango* were exhibited in total ignorance of any contextual information in *'Africa: The Art of a Continent'* (1996) at the Royal Academy.

It seemed that the contextual knowledge I read about, although limited and often re-invented in the light of new evidence, lead to a greater and enhanced understanding of the artifact in two important areas. Firstly it clarified the conceptual aspect of the form by the Kota (in that it was conceived as an idea, rather than drawn from direct observation), which was evident through the use of the forms and the materials of the artifact. This was also seen in the attention paid to the proportions, which became particularly evident through the visual analysis of the object itself. Secondly, through the literature search, I

found a way of exploring the meaning of the object through its religious, social and historical function and background, relative to its indigenous culture and specific location.

Through the visual analysis of this BaKota figure it became clear that the conceptual ideas coupled with the form and material, were worked together to produce an artifact that reflected both the intuitive and intellectual aspect of its creator and the object itself. The spiritual value of it was intrinsic to the making and use of materials, but it was only with the added knowledge of this, where the artifact was located, and that it was part of a bigger structure, (incorporating a basket of bones beneath it, being either lost or destroyed) that validated a religious interpretation of it.

The 'power' of the object was thought to be greatest when it was seen to be reacting with an environment, and therefore it seemed to beg the question, through the visual analysis, whether it would have accumulated even more presence in its indigenous setting, surrounded by people with a common belief in its spiritual value, rather than the economic value by which it was often seen in the West. However, this may be ironically true of contemporary Africa attitudes towards trading these sorts of artifacts to the West as well - Pennie (1991:65) stated this reliquary figure fetched £300,000 at a Paris auction in 1989.

However, in spite of dispelling some of the mystery of this object through what knowledge was accessible visually and through the available literature, it raised a few questions. How far can anyone understand or define the meaning of another cultures' artifact, which is in a culture sharply contrasted to our own? Is an 'outsider's interpretation of an object as valid as another's from the indigenous culture, or only if this interpretation is complemented by the other 'insider'? This in some way equated with the artist's view of his/her own work compared with the view of the spectator, or 'outsider'. Is there a hierarchy to these interpretations by commentators or critics and should there be? Can an artifact only be fully appreciated in one similar cultural context alone, or could there be some point at which some universal, cross-cultural concepts can be identified? Misinterpretation in the arts can be an opportunity for divergence, and imaginative innovation, as many contemporary artists felt was true, such as Paolozzi, Serra and Picasso to name but a few, however if the artifact was to be viewed and labelled not as art, but through the eyes of an anthropologist or archeologist, the strategies for analysis would require a more systematic approach. This type of approach I replicated in the art practice by devising a taxonomy or framework in order to explore facets of the art practice in relationship to the research information - see *Chapter 1*, 1.2 *Methodology*. The full extended case study of the Bakota reliquary figure with plates was given to the Bristol Museum Ethnographic department for their records, however this report was based, not in the original context but on the information gathered in the UK from a literature search and looking at other BaKota reliquary figures in other museums.

In conclusion I felt that it was important to gain first hand knowledge of an artifact still being used in its original context to assist with these questions, and to use primary sources to authenticate any knowledge I might gain from studying an artifact in the field,

in contrast to the museum context, which was limited; as often these artifacts had been collected by missionaries, priests or travellers in the past who had little knowledge of the importance of correct documentation. Often the way ethnographic objects were displayed in museums was misleading which exacerbated this lack of insight too (for discussion of these points see Coote and Shelton, 1995; Hilty, Reason and Shelton, 1995; Phillips, 1995).

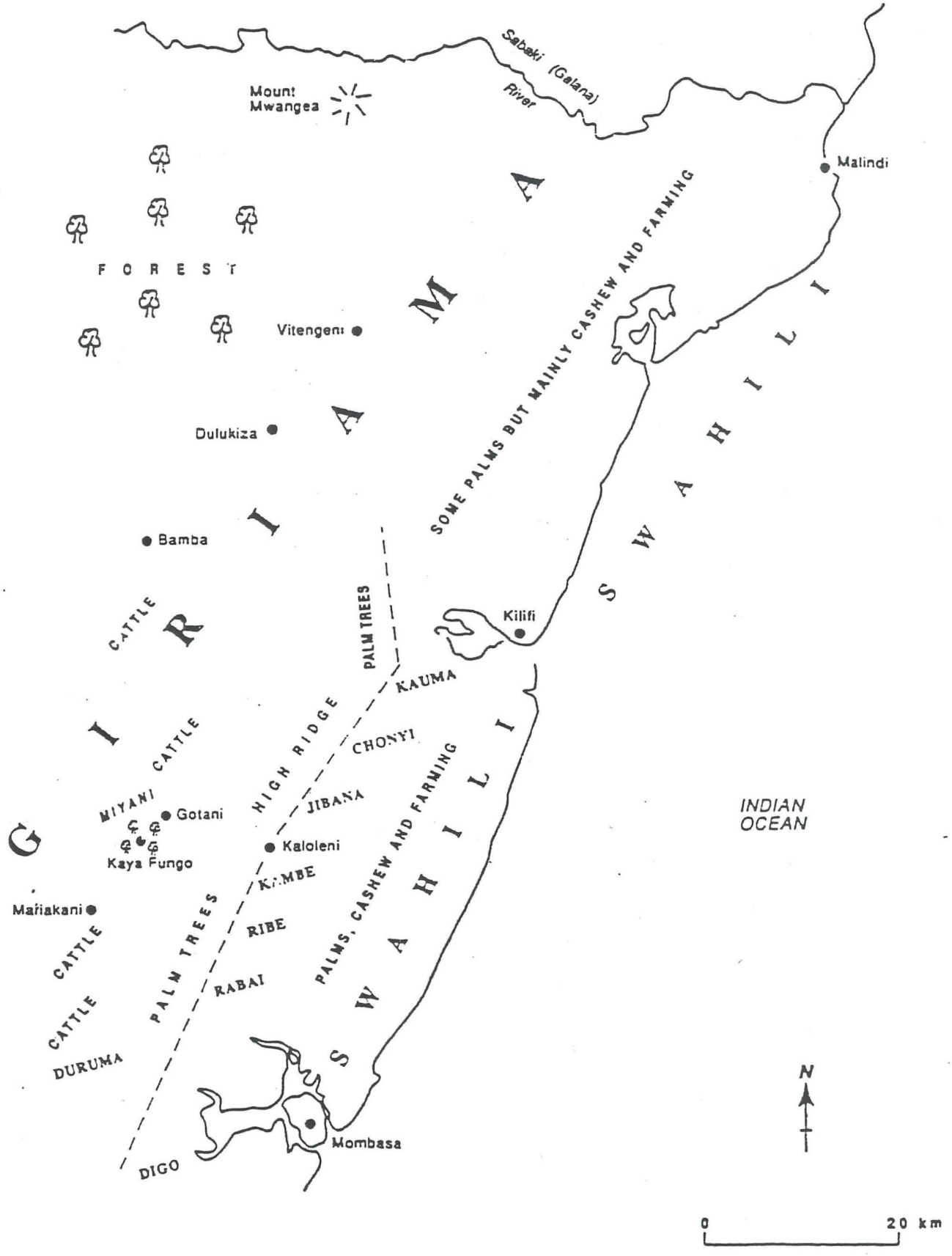
As a result of this, I decided to study the Giriama Commemorative Grave Posts of Kenya, which were linked to mortality, which was a recurrent theme in my artwork. By selecting this location I was also building on previous knowledge of a culture that I was familiar with, having lived and worked in Kenya for a couple of years, which assisted the field work in terms of the practical aspects of carrying out the anthropological research in a relatively short space of time.

APPENDIX III

i) **Map showing an Overview of the Original Mijikenda Settlements**

ii) **Map of the Giriama Locations visited on the Kenyan Coast**

i) Map showing an Overview of the Original Mijikenda Settlements



ii) Map of Giriama Locations visited on the Kenyan Coast