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## Bones

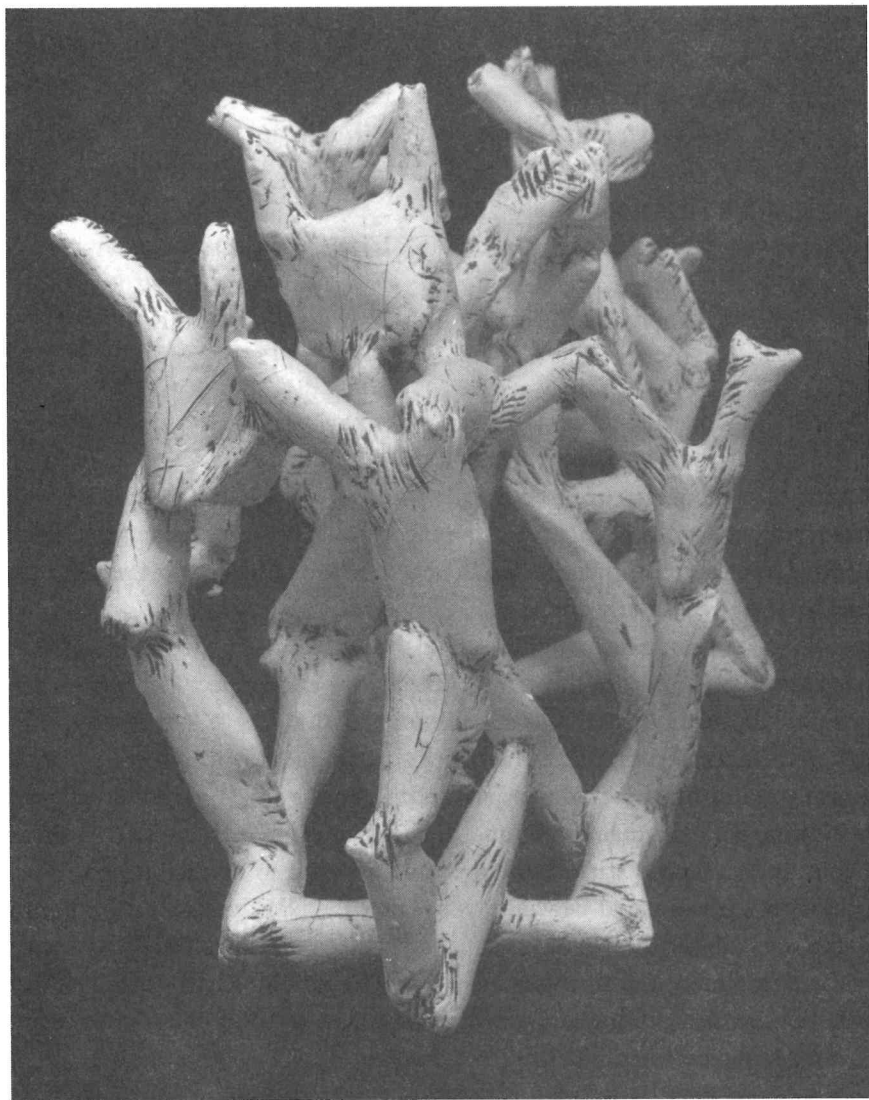
*Roy Strassberg*

**T**HROUGHOUT MY ARTISTIC CAREER I HAVE INTERMITTENTLY TURNED TO IMAGERY THAT REFLECTS UPON MY CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND THE UNFORTUNATE EVENTS THAT HAVE occurred during our history. For example, I would typically make some work relative to Holocaust imagery and then return to the business of making art that was not particularly offensive to the viewer.

As I settle into middle age I feel a sense of deep, pervasive sadness. My alienation from a culture that I deeply love and respect stems from the geographic isolation from Jewish communities that I have had to endure in order to make a living as an artist, living in rural Minnesota. I have a complete and utter lack of understanding of the kind of individual and institutional hatred that could (and did) culminate in a Holocaust. At times this sadness manifests itself in anger, and a desire to be direct. Recently a gallery owner wondered why, fifty years after the Nazi genocide, I bother to make work about the Holocaust. I politely suggested that I had for a long while been interested in this. Later, I wondered why I had not asked her whether she thought that anti-semitism was over, whether issues of ethnicity no longer had pertinence in this imperfect world.

In 1993 I applied for a faculty research grant at Mankato State University where I teach to study the Holocaust through a body of related pieces. I wanted to create a work that—because of a fundamental change in how it was conceived and constructed—would be significantly different than anything I had made previously.

The making of art is a discovery process. To my students I preach the



*Jazzmen on the Road to Heaven*

1994 • Ceramic • 20" h x 31" w x 12" d

Roy Strassberg

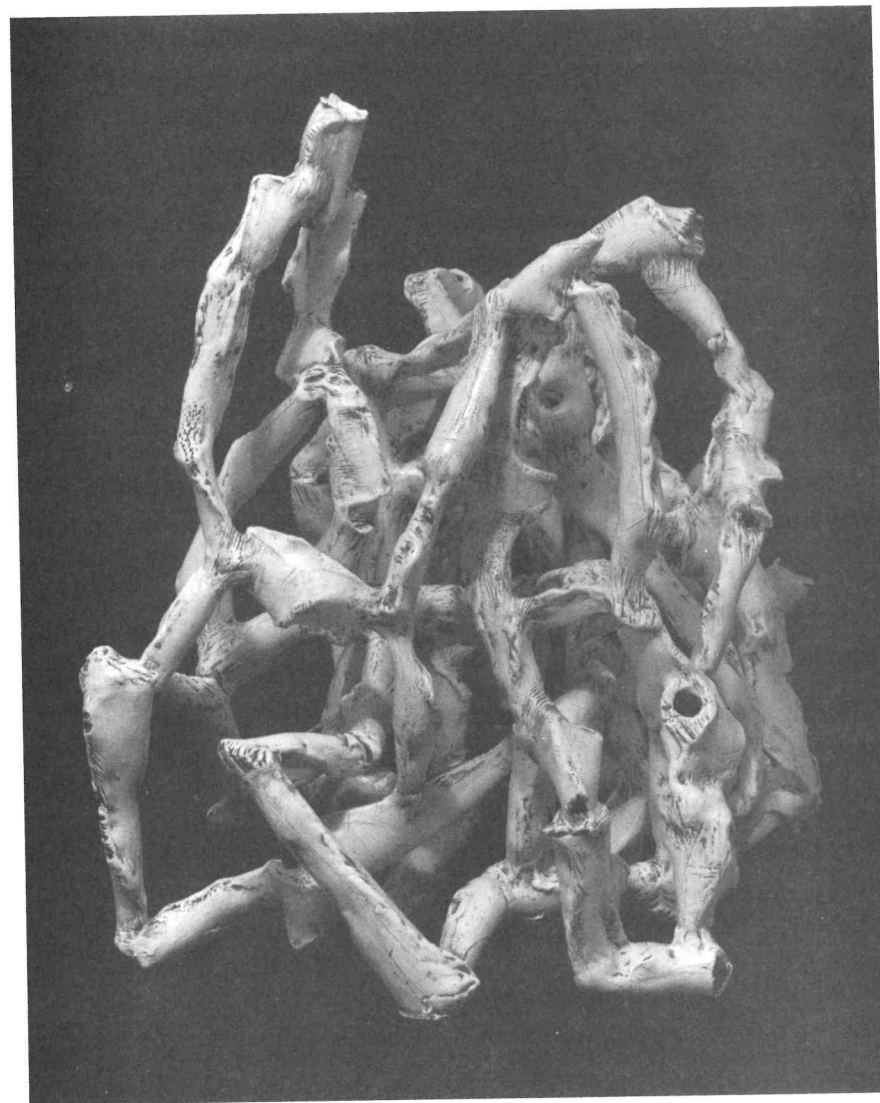
value of introspection and its relationship both to conscious decision making during the creative process and the unconscious influence upon our work of that which we have experienced. During what Rollo Mays calls creative engagement, ideas that reflect specific agenda are typically subordinated to the vagaries of intuition, spontaneity, and improvisation. Many times the content of the work is a revelation to the artist during the course of the working process. In this work, I have a specific agenda: to reference the Holocaust through the complex interaction of a variety of sculptural components. This referencing has little specificity, does not discuss any particular event or circumstance, has no name and cannot be identified as a specific place of thing. I want to evoke, instead, the enormity of the tragedy that has befallen individuals of my ethnic heritage. The work does not narrate nor does it illustrate; it is not propaganda. Rather, it suggests, through a consciously ambiguous process or organic integration, the events that have initiated my creative research.

I grew up in Queens, New York and Long Island in the late 1950s and 1960s, a product of second generation Jewish American parents. All of my grandparents came from Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century. Many of my grandparents' siblings remained in Europe and were murdered by the Germans. My father's parents were devout while my mother's were not, but still strongly identified with Jewish culture. Although my father had attended yeshiva and even considered the rabbinate, we were not particularly religious. I attended Hebrew school with great dispassion and soon quit because of bad behavior.

When I was about ten years old my father and I sat down to watch "Remember Us," a television program about the concentration camps and the destruction of the Jews of Europe. In retrospect, I realize this was unusual for my father. He has never been a big fan of watching or reading things that make him unhappy. The most powerful images for me were pictures of naked Jewish women forced to run through the streets of Germany while soldiers and others jeered, threw rocks and insulted them. I had never seen a naked woman before, so I laughed embarrassedly, which infuriated my father. The documentary introduced me to a new way of seeing the world. I was growing up in a loving, nurturing Jewish household with kind, attentive parents. Here on television were images of middle aged women, not unlike my own mother, running naked, forced to scrub streets, and subsequently tortured, gassed, and cremated.

EVERY SUNDAY MY FAMILY WOULD TRAVEL FROM QUEENS OR LONG ISLAND TO Brooklyn to retrieve my grandparents for visiting. Through a process of frequent observation I became enamored of skyscrapers, bridges, concrete support systems for highways, overpasses, and such. Eventually, I used the idea of rigidity and technical superiority for a series of tower forms entitled "Jazzman meets the Technicians." These sculptures referenced the artists who had been murdered by the Nazi technicians of death because of their "decadence."

The bone image emerged as a way of suggesting to the viewer that this work implied information not readily available upon first viewing, but it could easily be construed as a symbol of death on a gigantic scale—in a word, genocide. The work is consciously ambiguous so as to avoid specific narrative. The complex assembling of most of the pieces caused me to reflect upon the huge undertaking that the "Final Solution" actually was: cooperation between the government that conceived and executed the plan, the business community that profited immensely as a result of Jewish slave labor, and the general populus who turned a deaf ear, ignoring the events that occurred. The use of color was an interesting question in the work. My recollection of the Holocaust is in black and white. Moreover, it seemed particularly inappropriate to make the work "attractive" in a traditional sense. Sometimes you have to make "ugly" work when it is driven by events that are particularly appalling.



*Untermenschen—Subhumans*

1994 • Ceramic • 31"h x 34"w x 25"d

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