



Frances Whitehead, *alembic II*, 1988–89
copper and steel 8'x5'x9'

CHICAGO

FRANCES WHITEHEAD

DART GALLERY

In the installation here, Frances Whitehead's sculptures seemed to have been strewn across the pristine spaces of the gallery. Her sculptures leaned—sometimes precariously—against spotlit walls or came to rest in haphazard patterns on the floor. Yet these large-scale pieces seemed ready, poised for some unnamed or unknowable use, as if they were immense tools momentarily overlooked or set aside. Whitehead employs various forms of tin, zinc, steel, and copper, the heavy metals of early industrial technology, the fire-formed constituent elements of an outmoded engineering. They are bent and shaped to create new forms that evoke speculation regarding potential function. These sculptures are wondrous implements for foundries that never existed, the astrolabes and crucibles of sciences that never quite saw the light of day. Yet in their presentation here they seemed palpable and true, works of solemn integrity that bore a mystical weight.

Highly tuned principles of design technology inform *alembic II*, 1988–89. The sluicelike copper ramp built into the top of this imposing sculpture, and its tapering steel core cascading down to the floor, create a strong focus of energy. The piece does not discourage a figural reading in its spiralling movement upward. The sculpture rests on the floor and against the wall as if temporarily dizzy, its function arrested, yet its profile enhanced. *cucubite*, 1989, shows the skeletal armature of two immense and fantastic laboratory beakers that now gracefully invade each other's bodies with their tapering long necks. It is an arabesque beautifully performed, and Whitehead's command of the tensile properties of steel filaments is well articulated here. *baton*, 1988–89, is an exquisite long pivot of woven steel and patined copper. Whitehead welds, perforates, adheres, stains, and meshes these materials with great skill and to focused purpose; the work is endowed with a sense of history and experience. It is suggestive of a relic, an object of veneration, the battered remnant of a rite long forgotten. Whitehead's sculptures also possess a sense of nostalgia, a willful and wistful immersion into a technology that seems more logical, mysterious, and beautiful than that of our own time. Her experience of Chicago, a city perched on the western edge of rust-belt America, a city whose outmoded industries cast very long and very rich shadows across its landscape, seems to have served her well.

—James Yood