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Don Gummer - The Armature of Emotion:  
Drawings and Sculptures - Ephemera

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3-2016

## Don Gummer Brochure

Fairfield University Art Museum

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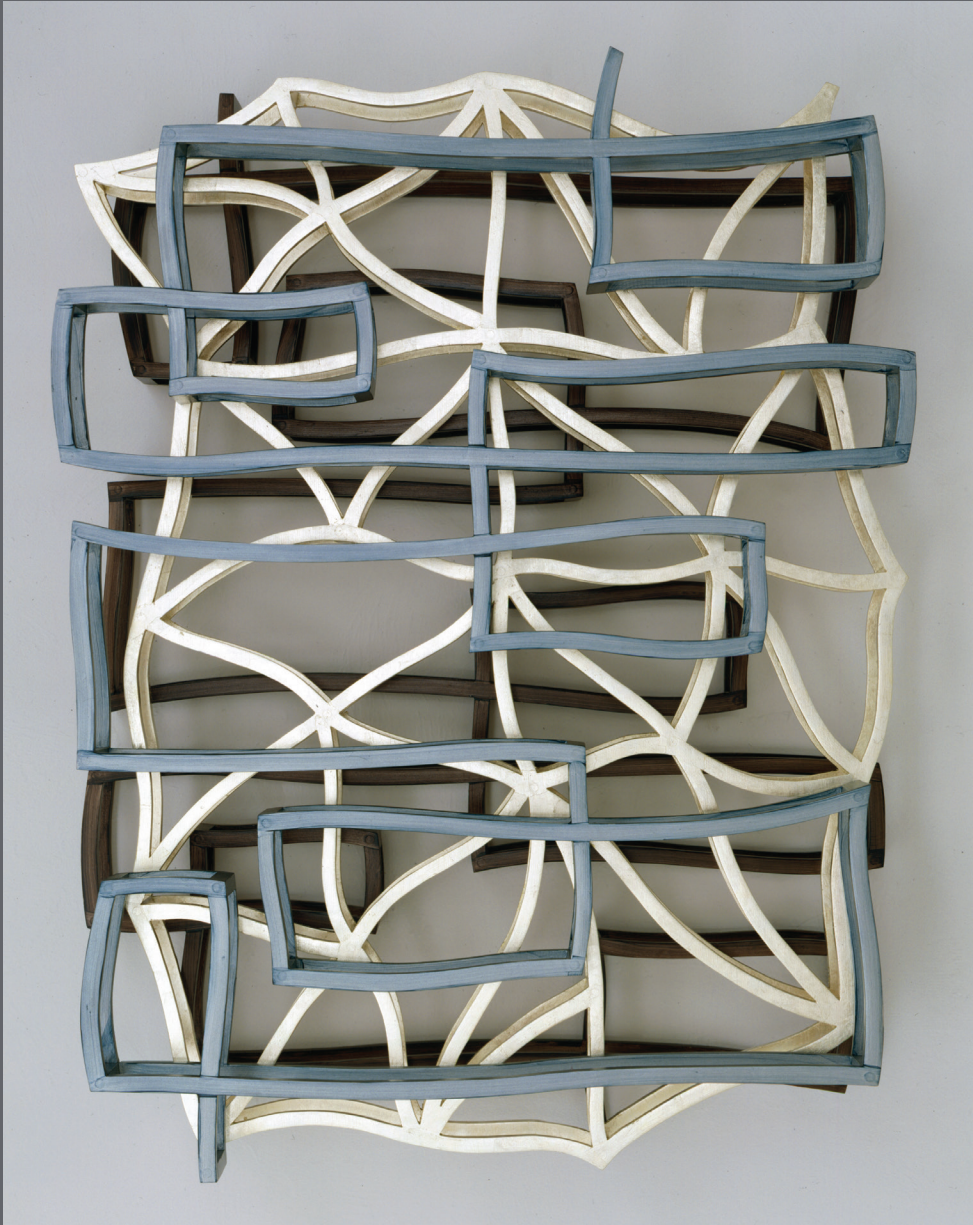
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# Don Gummer

The Armature of Emotion: Drawings and Sculpture



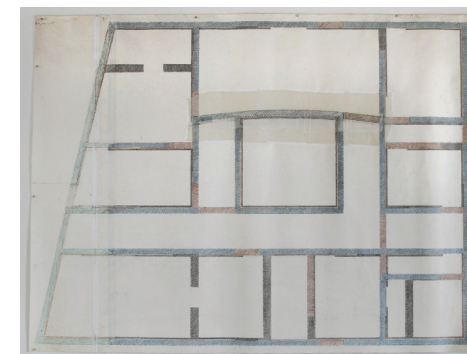
Walsh Art Gallery • Fairfield University  
March 3 - June 11, 2016

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## Acknowledgments

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dialogue from that conversation is incorporated in the following essay and in the exhibition app. A longer version of the interview is available on the Fairfield museum website ([fairfield.edu/museum](http://fairfield.edu/museum)).

Linda Wolk-Simon  
Director and Chief Curator  
University Museums  
March 2016

# Don Gummer

## The Armature of Emotion: Drawings and Sculpture

Equilibrium and imbalance, stasis and flow, gravity and loft, muscularity and grace, emotion and reticence—these paradoxical impulses are poetically reconciled in Don Gummer’s art. But it’s not just about a bold fusion of antitheses. Offsetting this dialectic is a subtle countercurrent—continuum. A fluid and seamless metamorphosis of forms through different iterations lies at the core of Gummer’s approach to making drawings and sculpture. This is one of the principal themes explored in the present exhibition, which presents more than fifty works by this acclaimed artist whose career to date spans nearly four decades.



Fig. 2

Don Gummer is perhaps best known for his Constructivist sculptures (fig. 1). These powerfully graceful, ascending creations of bronze and steel are to be found in public and private collections around the world. But his considerable body of work, fully represented in the exhibition, also comprises painted wood wall reliefs, collages, drawings, watercolors, and painterly, grisaille encaustic (pigment suspended in hot wax) on paper (fig. 2 and back cover), as well as earthworks incorporating rock, soil and water (fig. 3). Though he has abandoned printmaking and oil painting, these too are part of his repertoire going back to his time in art school, first the Herron School of Art in Indiana, and subsequently the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Yale University. A poetic self-portrait done years ago on view in the exhibition stands in for this early chapter of his activity (fig. 4).



Fig. 1

Drawing and sculpture are the dual focus of the exhibition. Historically, drawing was an integral part of a sculptor's training and practice—an essential skill, and a preliminary step in the creation of a finished marble or bronze sculpture. The early Renaissance master Donatello purportedly avowed that drawing was the very foundation of sculpture, and artists like Michelangelo, Bernini, and Carpeaux made drawings in order to experiment with, elaborate, or delineate ideas to be cast in metal or carved in stone: what would ultimately be a three-dimensional work was first given life as a two-dimensional sketch. This seamless union of drawing and sculpture is no longer intact. Many contemporary sculptors are also draftsmen, but their ideas for sculpture are not necessarily first explored in drawings. Sculptors who draw often make drawings as parallel, autonomous and discrete bodies of work—independent, finished creations in their own right—rather than as tentative, provisional, often messy stages in an artistic process that culminates in a sculpture. Don Gummer is an exception to this generalization. His drawings are part of a process, and they almost always have some connection to his sculpture (fig. 5), even if they are artistic digressions or byways rather than preparatory studies in the strictest sense (see fig. 8d).

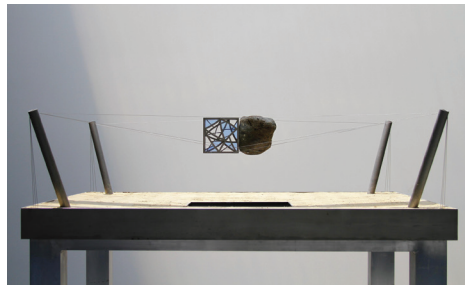


Fig. 3

Gummer's richly layered and cerebrally composed drawings begin with a light pencil line and variously incorporate color, encaustic and collage. They range in scale from quick, small sketches to monumental panels that are mural-like in their



Fig. 4

grandeur, proportions and richness of surface (figs. 6 and 19). Regardless of size, most of his drawings have a finished character, yet many are in fact stages of a genesis: they are preliminary ideas for sculptures in which he evolves and experiments with different vantage points or

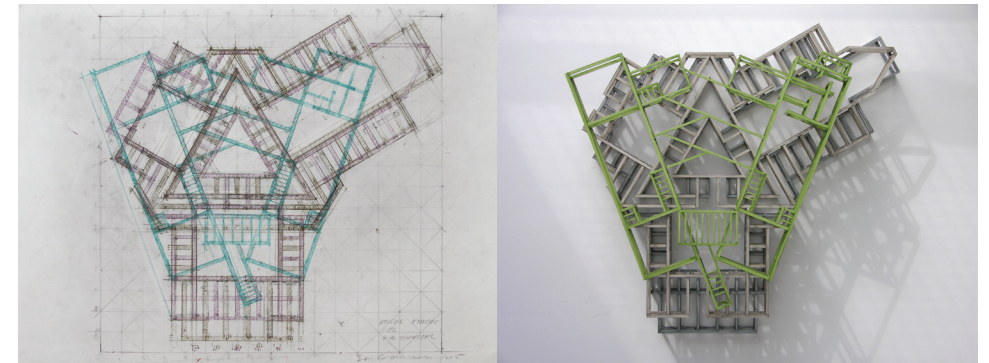


Fig. 5a-b

compositions, and ultimately pins down the final conception (fig. 18d and front cover). Even the most cursory, if supremely confident, initial sketch for a free-standing sculpture shows the ground and a horizon, immediately placing the form in space and thereby capturing, through the agency of two-dimensional,

"flat art," its a priori three-dimensional character (fig. 7). Sequences of drawings, especially when paired with corresponding sculptures, provide insights into Gummer's working method and underscore the essential role of drawing in his creative process. The juxtapositions also reveal

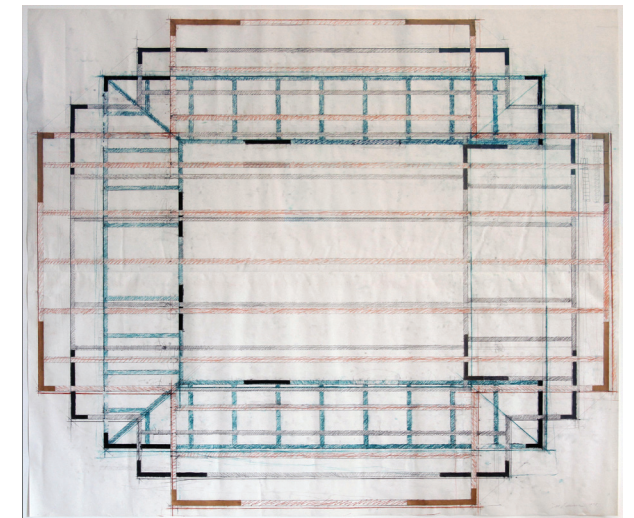


Fig. 6

the fluidity and unity of forms and ideas that migrate and mutate between media (figs. 8a-d). With elastic boundaries separating drawing, collage, relief, and fully three-dimensional form, Gummer's work partakes of the "post-medium condition" that art historian and theorist Rosalind Krauss posited as a central tenet of contemporary art.

Don Gummer conjures a lost continent as the imagined topography for his sculptures. In this collateral universe, what is normative and routine gives way to the surprising and the unexpected. Vaguely familiar yet new and elusive, things in this artistic Atlantis are askew, slightly off balance, different somehow.



Fig. 7

Freed from the constraining laws of physics, they are bound only by their own internal logic, structure and contradictory rhythms (fig. 9). Such a place could be perilous (a shifting, topsy-turvy world has long been fuel for dark and subversive poetic visions—we need think only of Goya) but in Gummer's fundamentally



Fig. 8a-d

optimistic formulation, balance is ultimately restored and equilibrium achieved. "I'll start something, and then as I'm building it, I do something to shift the flow, or the composition, or the balance. I have to then redirect to correct it. Something happened, and then something was recovered. A sculpture is a sort of a series of corrections that I put in, something that would cause imbalance," is the way he describes this dialectical genesis. "Then I get it back to balance, and the world's all right again" (figs. 10 and 22). Gummer's outdoor sculptures are found in many countries and continents, which means that his aspiration to have at least one of his pieces seen in daylight somewhere at any given moment is almost a reality.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

"The sun is always shining on something I've done," he observes, the reference to meteorological conditions offering a glimpse of the pervasive, unwavering optimism that inflects his view of the world.

Where does the spark of an idea originate? For Gummer, whose narration tends more toward the laconic than the bombastically philosophical, there is seldom a moment of revelation. "You have to start from zero and begin, just by starting." Sometimes he knows from the outset where he's going—what

form and shape a sculpture will take—while other times he admits to having no set idea. "To start something without knowing what it's going to be in the end is much more exciting, and more alive," he avers. In this organic process, the artist is at once creator and observer, an author who begins a novel without yet knowing how it will end, but who follows his own unfolding plot with keen interest. Whatever the starting point, for Gummer the objective remains the same, and that is to move from the complex to the simple. "A lot of my work has some complexity at the bottom, and it strives to get a more simple result. It's sort of like a building. There is a lot of stuff underneath, a lot of foundation work. But the penthouse is where you're headed, and you want that to be a clear, open space" (fig. 11). This evolutionary process of simplification and stripping away literally describes a recurring principle of his free-standing sculptures, which tend to be more densely layered and weighted at the bottom and open and airy at the top (figs. 9 and 22). Such distillation also underlies the creation of his disciplined, geometrically pure, and ethereal wall sculptures (figs. 5b, 12, 14, and front cover).



Fig. 11

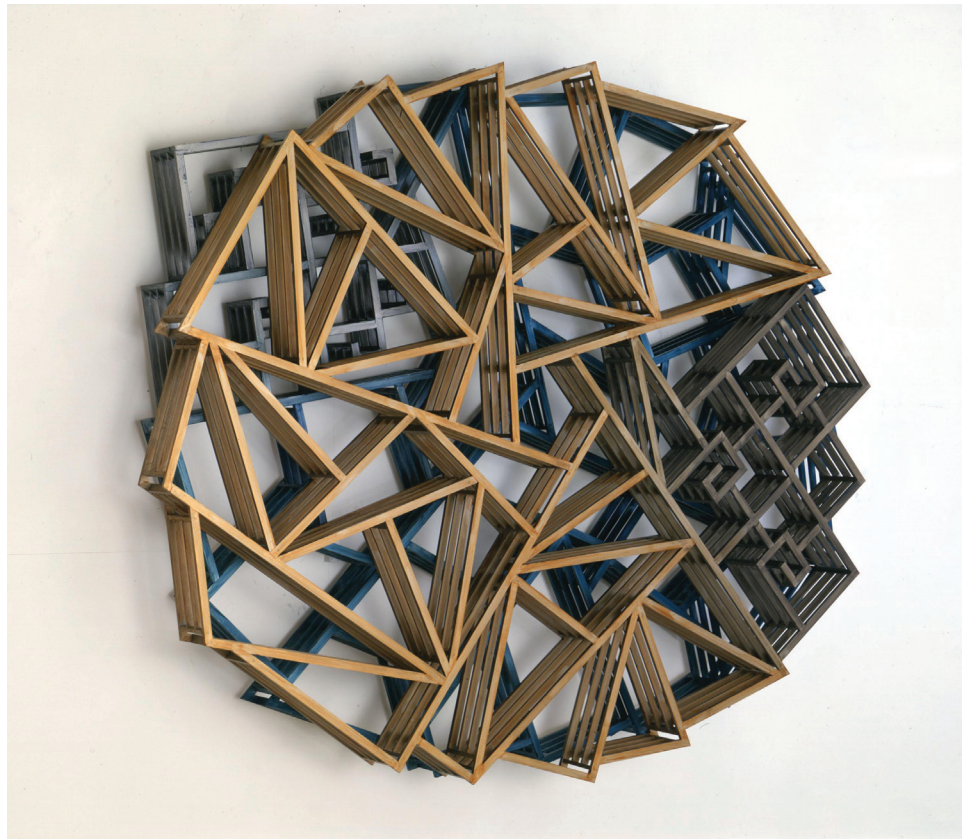


Fig. 12

Buildings, penthouses, houses of memory, of ideas, and of imagination—References to architecture and the process of construction are threaded through Gummer’s biography and his work (figs. 13, 14 and 16; see also fig. on pg. 12). Real and imagined architectural floor plans and elevations, and improbable structures like birdcages and tents—lithic or diaphanous, literally depicted or suggestively evoked—are recurring elements of his drawings and wall reliefs (figs. 5, 13 and 14). Moreover, many of his monumental sculptures have the character of a building erected to the framing stage (figs. 10 and 15). “The heart of architecture and sculpture is sort of the same,” he says. Both “take up space and deal with gravity.” In the earlier part of his career Gummer created sculptures that were horizontal because he was thinking of houses. A shift to



Fig. 13

a vertical idiom occurred when he moved to L. A. in 1989 and began to produce works reminiscent of towers, skyscrapers, and their iron-beamed skeletons. This was not some facile appropriation: Gummer has a uniquely intimate familiarity with the “bones” of such architectural behemoths from having been part of the crew that built the 51-story Olympic Tower in Manhattan in the mid-1970s, not long after receiving his MFA from Yale. A union carpenter, he was involved in the construction of poured concrete columns, stairways, elevator ramps and other interior framing elements. The experience gave him a privileged knowledge of how buildings are built

and, in the case of skyscrapers, how things get wider and open up as they go higher—a proposition he applies to his vertical sculptures (fig. 15). Few can say with such authority that “something massive like a 55-story building is built very simply. It just takes more people and a lot of cement.” But behind the simplicity of the armature, of course, is a cognitive and structural rigor. This contrapuntal play between the simple and the complex underpins Gummer’s art.

One of the subjects that features in a group of works in the exhibition is the Twin Towers. With what proved to be an eerie prescience, Gummer executed a series of watercolors of the buildings only weeks before they were destroyed on September 11, 2001 (fig. 16a). In some they appear rigid and immutable; in others shifting, precarious and ephemeral,



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

dissolved in an atmospheric haze. As for most New Yorkers, impressions of that unthinkable day linger in his memory. Glimpsing “the big hole gaping with smoke was like seeing death,” he recalls. At the same time, the builder in him wondered “how are they going to fix that?,” as he assessed the magnitude of the challenge of erecting scaffolding at such a great height. In the wake of the disaster he put the drawings away, but some years later he returned to the subject of the Twin Towers on paper and in a stainless steel sculpture (figs. 16b and 17). One tower stands erect, firmly planted on the ground; the other, untethered and inverted, floats like an apparition.

It is not surprising that cartoons have inspired an artist like Don Gummer who loves to draw. Donald Duck was a childhood favorite (Gummer found the querulous, eponymously named character infinitely more interesting than the squeaking Mickey Mouse), and he drew him obsessively, often, he confesses, while in church. Donald Duck’s prodigious curved bill, its contours endlessly reiterated, held a particular fascination; echoes of that sail-like shape endure in his drawings and sculpture to the present day. Another influence came from a Nickelodeon cartoon series, *The Wild Thornberrys*, which he would watch with his youngest daughter. Intrepid explorers, the family had a chimpanzee named Darwin, and the cartoon would chart

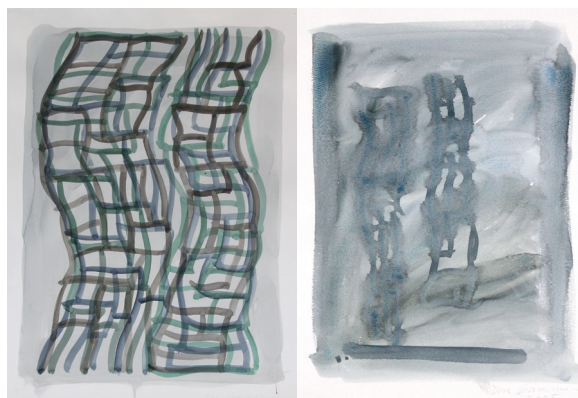


Fig. 16a-b



Fig. 17

his wanderings by showing his footprints weaving across a terrain. As they watched the show, Gummer and his daughter made drawings whose lines followed the path of Darwin’s footprints. It struck him that his drawings looked like maps of a place one could actually go to—a line you could follow. “There was no real logic to it. It crossed over places that he’d been before, and would go here and there. I was always making these drawings, and overlaying webs of composition. Then I thought, ‘gee, well, some of these are interesting,’ so I blew some of them up and made the collages, and then after I made the wall sculptures.” Thus, the extraordinary series *Darwin’s Map*, with its layered, kaleidoscopic ribbons of color, was born (fig. 18a-f and front cover).

Like most artists, Gummer has favorites from the canonical roster of art history. His list includes Cézanne, Picasso and—unsurprising for a sculptor—Michelangelo. The early 19th-century French painter Delacroix earns praise for his “looseness, color and expression,” as does his contemporary Ingres, advocate of an alternative, more sculptural and sober manner of painting. So does Ingres’s revered hero, Poussin, whose style is fundamentally about order, structure and classical reticence—qualities

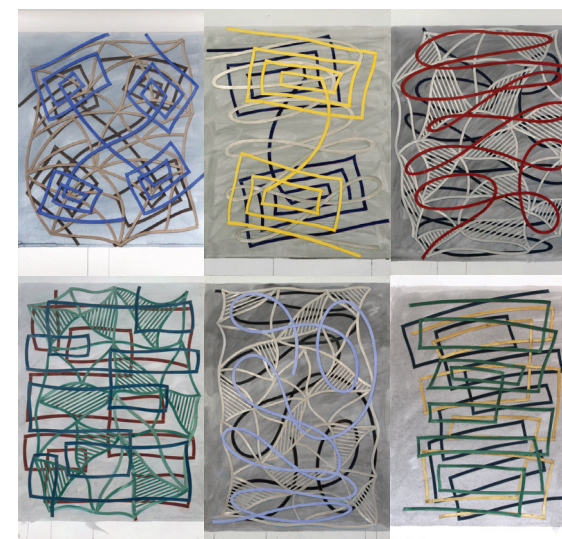


Fig. 18a-f



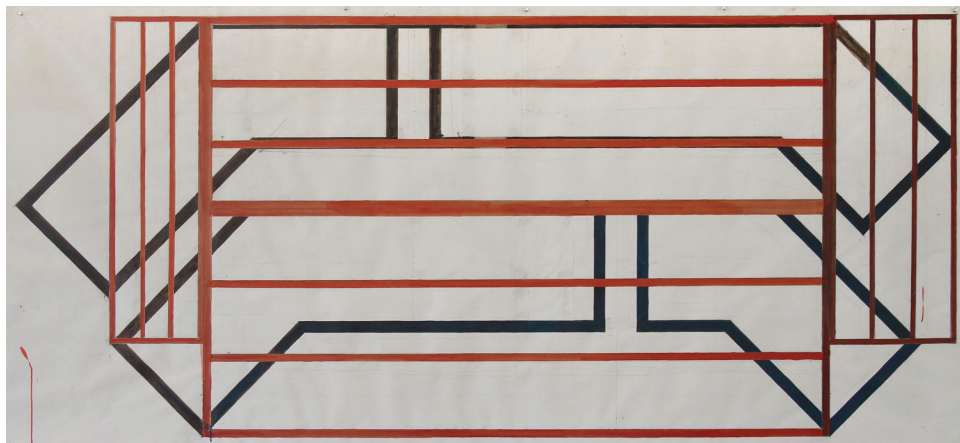


Fig. 19

that are also central to Gummer's own art. And Donatello? The great Renaissance sculptor, too, garners the admiration of this modern-day practitioner, who endorses the maxim imputed to Donatello that drawing is the foundation of sculpture. It is, in fact, "the foundation of everything," Gummer avers. An anecdote confirms the truthfulness of this pronouncement. Among the items littering his desk are a hand-sharpened pencil

and a lump of modeling clay. Asked which of those rival implements he instinctively reaches for while day-dreaming or talking on the phone, he doesn't hesitate to reply that the pencil triumphs. Drawing prevails.



Fig. 21



Fig. 20

As a final word, the language of the exhibition's title, *The Armature of Emotion*, warrants brief explanation. Armatures are familiar fixtures in sculptors' studios. In traditional practice, an armature is the metal framework around which a clay sculpture is modeled. An armature can also be an exterior skeleton that holds up and contains a sculpture in progress. (Some of Gummer's drawings actually depict sculptures inside armatures, and his studio is littered with models of all sizes supported within such structures that he fabricates; figs. 20 and 21).

The presence of armatures, literal or implied, thus signals internal and external controls. They are the supporting frameworks that keep forms from collapsing and hold excess or imbalance in check. They are also scaffolds for channeling the energy and indelible optimism that animates Gummer's work—that sense of infinite ascent toward some higher plane. Armatures, then, are always present in some way in Don Gummer's sculpture, signifiers of the structure he brings to everything he creates.



Fig. 22

