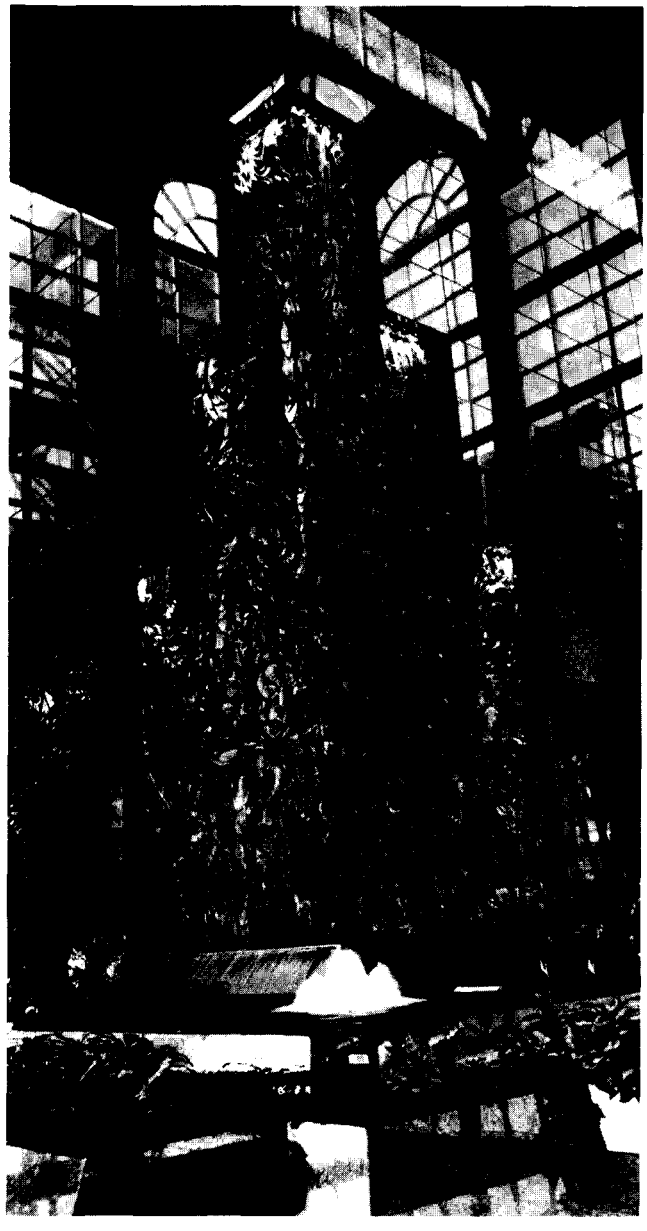
SPOTLIGHT
on Rockface

One of the largest and most exciting cast murals in the world has been erected in Johannesburg, forming the focal point of the large atrium in the new headquarters complex for Johannesburg Consolidated Investment Company Limited (JCI). Known as 'Rockface', this is a waterwall structure formed of cast stainless-steel panels. The structure is 13 m high (the height of four floors) and has a base width of 9 m that 'folds' round a right-angled corner. It took 25 tons of cast stainless steel to produce the panels, and water flows continuously down the face.

The original atrium design by the architect responsible for the entire complex indicated a water feature that would blend with the other materials being used, which were Finnish granite, glass, and stainless steel. However, Mickey Korzennik, a local muralist, designer, and graphic artist much acclaimed for his innovative use of materials, felt that the design should be related to JCI's interests. He therefore started with the concept of a rock face in a mine and designed a wall with water apparently seeping out of it and flowing down. 'The choice of cast stainless steel as the material to be employed was a combination of two factors', says Korzennik. 'Firstly, I had just finished four stainless-steel wall sculptures, and, secondly, it would blend very well with the materials already planned for use in the atrium.'



An initial sketch was drawn and water was run down one of the wall castings. It became apparent that, with various grinding and polishing finishes, stainless steel was tailormade for the design and the situation, being in Korzennik's words 'a material rich in quality and textural possibilities, dramatic, non-corrosive, and with a remarkable surface-tension quality that holds water to the surface over and around very strong contours'. 'One must say', he continued, 'that, unless someone in the big business organizations has a feel for the arts, exciting art forms such as Rockface would never be possible'.

As nobody before had used stainless steel as a material for sculpture, or had designed it so that water would flow over it and be held in intricate positions—at least, not on such a large scale—a great deal of 'proving' of the design was necessary.

At Korzennik's studio the original form was carved from polystyrene blocks, and a mould was then made from special non-hardening foundry sand. From this mould, a master was made of plaster of paris reinforced with a specially designed frame to facilitate handling. These cast plaster masters were carved to the final required stage, and care was taken to ensure perfect registration, panel to panel.

The completed masters were then moved to the engineering works of Thomas & Pillner (Pty) Limited, and erected on a mock-up wall for a series of water tests. After that they were taken to Thomas Foundry for the manufacture of the final panels in stainless steel. After fifty-four panels of varying sizes had been cast, they were fitted together and tested with water in the same way as the plaster versions had been. They were then bolted together into larger units, ranging from two-panel to six-panel units, and the seams were welded, ground, and polished.

On site they were fitted together, welded, ground, and polished so that the joints cannot be seen. Situated in the atrium as designed by the architects, Rockface, with the water flowing down its surface and the entire sculpture enhanced by lighting, has proved to be one of the most spectacular examples of mural art to be seen anywhere in the world.