

ARTFORUM

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ROBERT DURAN AT BYKERT GALLERY

By Bruce Boice

The Light Gallery showed over 60 photographs by FREDERICK SOMMER from 1941 through 1972. Sommer was born in Europe in 1905, grew up in Brazil, studied landscape architecture at Cornell, took up painting in the early '30s, and photography upon meeting Stieglitz in 1935. For the last 30 years, Sommer has worked and taught in Arizona. Sommer's photographs seem to fall into three general categories: all-over landscape photographs of Arizona; architectural photographs under which photographs generally tied to a '30s view of Constructivism and Biederman's structuralism can be included; and experimental photographs derived mainly from Dada-Surrealism and the kind of abstract experimentation common in the '30s. To make things neat, a fourth category might be created to include those photographs which don't fit into the other three categories. Not that Sommer's work must be so categorized, but here Carl Andre's *Cardinal Series* has application: to not divide Sommer's work into categories for discussion, is to try to deal with each image unit separately as it forms the whole. The point of forming these categories is not to insist on them, but to use them.

In a sense, it is odd that I find Sommer's experimental photographs the least interesting. Within this category are "found object" photographs and what can be thought of as "assisted ready-mades," that is, objects which are not photographed as they are found, but are arranged and altered by Sommer before photographing. These photographs are generally more interesting as pictures than as ideas, the ideas having been more or less exhausted before Sommer got to them, though not necessarily exhausted in photography. Beyond the attractiveness of the images and the relationships between different kinds of objects within the pictures is the curious question of whether the assemblage pictured has or doesn't have some kind of extraphysical meaning. Sommer's interest in Surrealism and Max Ernst (whose portrait is included in the show) indicate that a Surrealist kind of meaning is probably intended; that is, Sommer seems more interested in working within Surrealist convention than questioning how certain combinations of objects can

take on a meaning in a photograph. Another kind of experiment are the photographs of cut paper abstractions and the no-camera photographs made by contact printing oil paint brushstrokes on cellophane and configurations formed by smoke and grease on plate glass. The problem with these experimental photographs is that Sommer's obvious interest in creating abstract patterns not only repeats experiments with decorative abstraction in painting 40 years earlier, but the concern with abstraction overwhelms the issues of photographic process which are more dormant in these photographs than implicit. The most interesting aspect of these photographs, and also the most problematic, is that



Frederick Sommer, *Ponte S. Angelo*, 1960.

they seem more photographs of art work than simply photographs as photographs. It should also be noted that Sommer's abstract photographs are his most recent work and were made throughout the '60s.

Sommer's architectural photographs are essentially photographs of architectural details such as *Ponte S. Angelo* of 1960, in which the camera is moved suddenly, causing a blurred image which is puzzling perceptually and gives a sense of movement to the inanimate; and photographs more structuralist in nature such as *Kyoto Lumber Yard* of 1969, picturing a systematic arrangement of modular units, in this case, uniform stacks of shingles. The Arizona landscape photographs of the early

'40s picture all-over horizon-lineless situations of surprisingly uniform rocks and vegetation. *Gold Mine — Arizona* pictures perhaps a mile of deep space, but the rocks and clumps of grasses in the foreground at the bottom of the picture are the same size as the rocks in the distance at the top of the picture, which creates a visually tense and interesting situation, especially when the units in the center of the picture are understood as mine buildings, which are also generally the same size as the foreground and background units of rocks or grasses. All of the Arizona landscapes have this same kind of all-over tension built into the photographs, and in the case of these landscape photographs, Sommer followed no one; and if anything, in these pictures he preceded painting. All of Sommer's prints seem about as perfect as prints are likely to get.

The abandonment of the traditional categories of painting and sculpture has theoretical strength not because of something basically fallacious in painting and sculpture as categories, but because painting and sculpture seem to have exhausted their capacity to generate new problems. But it seems reckless to assume the death of painting and sculpture, unless by "death" we mean only something temporary; this might appear an odd notion of "death," but not when the metaphorical death of an idea is understood as being different from the death of a physical entity which once had life as a biological fact. Painting and sculpture need a rest, and generally they are getting it by way of reduced expectations. Neither painting nor sculpture, for the moment, are expected to carry on art's innovations; the slack in innovation has been taken up by work in other areas which may relate to painting and sculpture, but can't be said to be within either category. But in this present state of exhaustion, painting and sculpture need more than rest or respite from too much attention; they need reformulation.

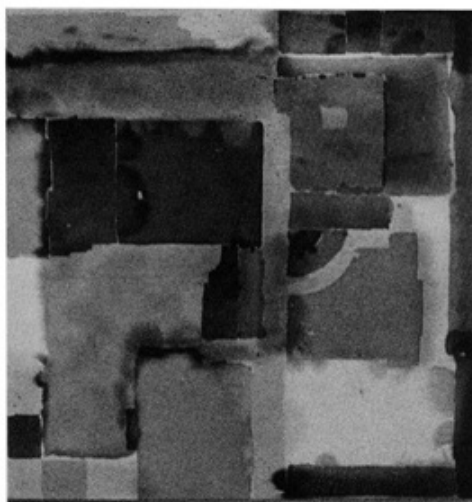
DAVID STOLTZ' sculpture at Tibor de Nagy doesn't raise any new problems or solve any old ones, though it gets increasingly more difficult to remember what the old problems were. Stoltz' sculptures are

of bent steel bars of varying widths bolted or welded within the formalist conventions established more or less by Anthony Caro. Caro's domination of formalist sculpture is apparent in Stoltz' work not because Stoltz' work looks like Caro's, but because Stoltz' sculptures appear to be trying not to look like Caro's while remaining within formalist conventions. Stoltz' sculptures would not be mistaken for Caro's, or for work Caro might have done, but it could be mistaken for the work of other sculptors generally in the same boat: trying to get out from underneath Caro, but not formalism. The problem seems to be that formalism in sculpture, at least now, is identical with Caro's sculpture. To get away from Caro means necessarily to get away from formalism as well. Stoltz' method of escape seems to be through a sculptural calligraphy. As rectangular steel bars are bent and curled, forms are produced similar to those of neon signs, especially if by "neon signs" we include the blacked out portions of tubing. However, Stoltz' direction runs into Clement Meadmore on the other side, as his work is easily thought of as complicated, linear Meadmore. But this isn't really a fair way of discussing an artist's work, always in terms of other artists' work. But that talking about painting and sculpture any other way is by now nearly impossible is an indication of their present exhaustion, and need of rest and reformulation.

ROBERT DURAN seems to be in a similar situation though there is no dominating Caro equivalent in painting. Duran showed six large new paintings at Bykert in bright juicy fruit colors (whatever that means, take it literally rather than as the color of chewing gum) and six watercolors which are pale prototypes of the paintings. In Duran's paintings, a layer of watery acrylic is soaked into the canvas as a pastel colored ground; over this ground, irregular sort-of-geometric shapes are painted in watery acrylic so that as color-shapes touch, each bleeds into the other causing areas of "dirty" color to offset so much brightness. The shapes are sort-of-geometric in that they are formed essentially of right angles and generally straight lines, but the shapes have so many right angles and are

casually handdrawn so as not to be what would normally be thought of as "geometric." The situation is generally this: the options open to formalist painting at the moment are few and of questionable significance; if one is going to make formalist paintings, one has to have some sort of variation on the canvas surface, which means shapes of some kind, however ill-defined, are going to be made. The question becomes, what kinds of things can go on within the physical boundaries of a painting? And Duran has been pursuing a way out of this problem continuously for the last few years. Dan Christensen has gotten away from roughly geometric shape by swishing thick white paint over it, leaving a gestural kind of shape which attempts a "feeling" of shapeless color. The irregularity of Duran's handdrawn shapes and the bleeding get away from the geometric without going toward the organic, gestural nonshape, or someone else's territory. Richard Tuttle's wire pieces, in this respect, offer a solution similar to Duran's in terms of the avoidance of organic and geometric shape. Some of Duran's paintings have a fairly tight, almost Novros-like structure, while in other paintings, the shapes don't fit together in that way but seem to float or relate simply by coexisting. In all of these paintings, it is difficult to get away from notions of "push-pull." In discussing Duran's paintings in terms of other artists' work, I do not intend to imply by that that Duran's paintings look anything like other artists' work, because they don't. But for all their attractiveness, Duran's paintings seem an attempt to do something within the formalist framework that isn't already exhausted. In answering the question of what can go on in a formalist painting, the question itself indicates a rather desperate situation; and it seems new questions are more important than an answer to this question.

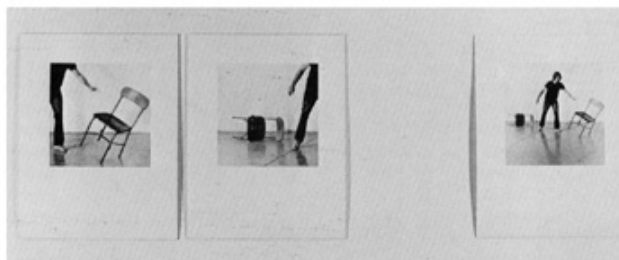
Two of the six paintings shown by VINCENT INCONIGLIOS at West Broadway looked like paintings of Carl Andre's metal plates. The depicted metal plates have the same scrubbed, spill-stained, and generally roughed-up look as Andre's plates. In the larger painting, the whole is formed of 18 2'-square panels, each of which is quartered



Robert Duran, *Spring*, Liquitex on canvas, 7'3" x 7'3", 1972.



Susan Lewis Williams, *Post Times*, newspaper and plastic, 1972.



William Wegman, *Chair Knocked Over*, photographs, 14" x 11", 1972.

by depiction so that the module appears to be a one foot square. Inconiglios' other paintings are also grid structured, two in windowlike configurations and two others in irregular diagonal grids. The grids, in the latter case, are formed by painting or rubbing graphite over masking tape which is then removed; in both of the diagonal grid paintings, the existence of the grid by means of removal and the breakdown of the regularity of the grid seem to be Inconiglios' interests, but it is difficult to tell much about his interests from this show as the work in it seems scattered and without focus. The paintings appear to be experiments in a personal sense; that is, Inconiglios seems to be trying to figure out what to do within the conventions of formalist painting, and trying to figure out as well what his interests are.

SUSAN LEWIS WILLIAMS showed two works at A.I.R. under the general heading "Sculpture Recycled." Within this general heading "Watermill (a summer experience recycled)" is comprised of about 100 glass quart jars stacked pyramid fashion against a wall; the wall is papered with reproductions of a photograph of the jars stacked similarly against another wall. In the photographs, nearly all the jars are filled with sand, but in the physical situation, about half the jars are partially filled with sand while nine jars contain a folded piece of paper. In a brief statement accompanying the piece, Williams tells of finding a jar with a note inside on a Long Island beach last June. The note was a name and address to which Williams wrote and got her letter back "addressee unknown." In September she returned to the beach, filled 50 plastic bags with sand, and asked nine friends to write notes "sharing experience or feeling with someone unknown who might someday find the note in the bottle." Bottles (presumably the ones in the show) will be "brought back" to the beach and "returned to the sea." There seems to be some confusion here (possibly mine); somehow to find one object in the water and then throw 100 objects of the same kind back into the water seems an odd conception of "recycling," even though Williams probably intends the recycling in terms of glass returning