

Good Times

Frederick Sommer: Photography Beyond Picture-Taking.

As Polaroid constantly reminds us, taking photographs is as easy as 1-2-3. Even a child can do it. Facile, capable, pleasant photos abound . . . a fact that makes the rigorous, uncompromised life's work of Frederick Sommer all the more valuable.

Sommer has spent 75 years refining his aesthetic standards and he expects his audience to have done the same. No pandering. The images challenge the observer to look and look again. To recognize that photography often goes beyond mere picture-making. A perfectionist in both vision and technique, Sommer has produced a slim but sophisticated body of master works. And Leland Rice has curated a rare retrospective of these works, now on display at Cal State University Long Beach thru March 9.

Sommer was raised as a European in Brazil where influenced by his father's career, he studied art and architecture. Upon moving to the United States, he made the acquaintance of Alfred Stieglitz, Charles Sheeler, Georgia O'Keefe and other artists. They were a formative in-

fluence on his life and his art, endorsing a commitment to a composed economy of design. But his exposure to the rich, silvery tonal range of Edward Weston, in particular, focused his attention on the sensitized surfaces of the photograph. In his poetry he writes, "Our fundamental empathy is to the structure that content reveals." The surface structure of the composition was always more important to him than a "real" image.

In 1935, Sommer settled in Arizona (where he still lives) and documented the desolate "poetic decay" of the landscape. The photographs have no foreground and no horizon. They have no sense of distance whatsoever. They worked from a radically new spatial concept, the primacy of the picture plane in photography. Sommer always wanted to use photography to confront the problems of drawing and painting and here he had taken on concerns soon to be explored in the skein paintings of Jackson Pollack and the white writing work of Mark Tobey. The all-over detail of cactus and rock seems abstract, yet it captures the very essence of that miserable terrain.

In the '40s and '50s, Sommer began to work with "found objects," creating collages to be photographed with metaphorically poetic titles. The Surrealist movement and his association with Max Ernst certainly affected this work but Sommer remained the inveterate renegade, never swearing allegiance to any movement. Rather, his allegiance has been to growth and change. He did a series of musical scores based purely on the visual qualities of line, form, color, and space. Musicians would then translate these visuals to music. He did drawings, wrote poetry, made photograms from smoked cellophane and photographed some remarkable nudes. An energetic, inquisitive and uninhibited body of work, an echo of his belief that "Life is the most durable fiction that matter has yet come up with and art is the structure of matter as life's most durable fiction."

—Hunter Drohojwska