ROBERT CUMMING
INTUITIVE INVENTIONS
JUNE 22 – OCTOBER 10, 1988

ROBERT CUMMING FREQUENTLY
won contests as a boy for his drawings, which
were regularly published in a local newspaper.
His early successes nourished his identity as an artist.
By the time he was ready to graduate from the
Massachusetts College of Art in 1965, his youthful
fascination with architecture, industrial machinery, and
model building had begun to appear in the imagery of
his fastidiously detailed pen-and-ink drawings that
often recall the hyperbolic architectural ruins depicted
by the 18th-century Italian Romantic artist Giovanni
Piranesi.

A skilled craftsman, Cumming has always displayed
great technical virtuosity. His urge to create handmade
objects that appear to have been industrially fabricated
is visible in his earliest constructed sculptures, which
look like high-school wood shop projects gone awry.
He made such works while in graduate school at the
University of Illinois where he was also introduced to
large-format photography. Fascinated by this medium,
he later learned to use an 8-by-10-inch view camera,
often documenting his sculpture with it. A natural for
any mechanically precise process, he soon became
intrigued with the optical distortions in the camera's
translation of three dimensions into two. Thus intro-
duced to the deception implicit in the photographic
process, he decided to explore the disparity between the
experience of an object and the inevitable abstraction
that occurs in its flat representation. Cumming then
realized that the photographs of his sculpture were as
interesting as the objects themselves because of this
discrepancy and decided to exhibit them together.

After he finished graduate school, Cumming began
teaching at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee,
and soon became involved in the phenomenon known
as Mail Art, an outgrowth of Fluxus, the international
avant-garde movement that originated in Europe in the
1960s. Creating such art helped him expand and refine
his literary skills because he had to write every day to
keep up with the infinitely expanding network of artists
who used the post as a conceptual system of sculpture.
At first, Cumming wrote about whatever came into his
head. But, typically, this stream-of-consciousness style
gave way to his highly disciplined approach—both
rational and convoluted—always delighting in the dis-
gressive, the episodic, and the anecdotal. Simultane-
ously, he began to make studies for his photographic
works with quick, often idiosyncratic sketches. A few
years later these sketches would become more elaborate
as he increasingly explored and applied his considerable
drawing skills.

In 1970 a teaching offer brought Cumming to south-
ern California. The allure of Los Angeles—its exotic
environs, decorative architectural details, and cli-
mate—induced him to abandon the intellectual and
theoretical dogmas of Conceptual Art. An artist of droll
wit and humor, he acknowledged his need to shift
aesthetic gears, saying: "I didn't want those puritanical
problems anymore. . . . I wanted to load up the work
with meaning. I wanted to open it all up and let in some
light, and some fantasy, and turn metaphor loose
again."

Cumming's desire for "light and fantasy" found
literary counterparts in the Hollywood studio stills he
began collecting from Los Angeles area shops. He
carefully studied the techniques of illusion revealed by
these highly detailed photographs of film sets taken by
studio professionals. The stills appealed to many of
Cumming's loves: sculptural and architectural construc-
tion, model building, fastidious yet casual detailing,
theatrical staging and lighting, obliquely fictitious
situations, and precise, large format black-and-white pho-
tography. Over the next several years he created the
body of work upon which his primary reputation has
been built. One of the earliest artists to create "set-
ups"—sculptural tableaux whose only raison d'être was
to be photographed—Cumming, along with William Wegman
(a fellow New Englander and classmate in both art and
graduate school), has exerted significant influence on
numerous younger photographers, including Cindy
Sherman, Bruce Charlesworth, and Boyd Webb.

While in California, Cumming continued to develop
his writing. He published several books himself that
combined his unusual narrative style with photographs
and drawings serving as illustrations. Characteris-
tically, he moved toward a rejection of the method for which
he was (and probably still is) best known in favor of
charcoal drawings and acrylic paintings on paper. Like
Bruce Nauman and Jonathan Borofsky, two other
American artists of his generation, Cumming is at his
best exploring the possible permutations of ideas in
many media—sculpture, drawing, photography, video,
printmaking, prose, and painting. The change to
drawing and painting represented in this exhibition
paralleled his decision in 1978 to accept a teaching
position at the Hartford School of Art and move to
rural Connecticut. "I moved back to New England to
find out who I am and where I come from, and about all
these memories I have from childhood."

At this time, Cumming's writing became his working
context, which ultimately yielded another book. Equi-
librium and the Rotary Disc (1980) features no
Fig. 1. *Equilibrium Rotary Disc*, 1978. Scratchboard; 7¼ x 9¼ in. Collection of the artist. Photo: Lee Stalsworth.

human protagonist, a parallel to his visual work and its orientation toward objects. "I depict objects usually; they're my vehicle. Strung together over the years, they've been my tickets of passage." The rotary disc [fig. 1] is the central character and dominant metaphor. From this point forward, Cumming understood that his writing and his visual work were related symbiotically. "Ideas become words and pictures. Pictures become words and generate ideas. Words generate pictures and ideas." Since about 1980 the images in his drawings and paintings appear entirely plausible and almost logical, yet somehow disconnected, nearly melancholic in their dislocation from the earnest ideas that they echo rather than illustrate.

The artist's love of drawing is matched by his appreciation of history, especially his fixation on the Industrial Revolution as well as his sober resignation to inevitable obsolescence symbolized by the rotary disc. Once the driving source of power (a water wheel), then a building tool (a circular saw), to Cumming the disc's circular motion now implies the precariousness of a world within a solar system that is comparably shaped and spiraling inexorably outward, continuously getting farther away from the other solar systems in its galaxy. His gentle but relentless pessimism has assumed an increasingly desperate urgency.

Cumming's world is filled with eccentric machinery and desolate dwellings, much of which appeared after he visited Hiroshima in 1981 while a Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission fellow. The logic of physics and technical diagrams, so long an escape for Cumming from the perplexing and oppressive reality of the postnuclear world thrown into an ominous state, also play a part. In Monuments 1982 Made Sense, 1982 [fig. 2], completed soon after he returned from Japan, Cumming depicts a seesaw weighted down with an artillery shell, a manmade symbol of destruction. A beehive, whose occupants represent industriousness and the selfless work ethic, sits at the other end. Between the two conically shaped objects is a vessel dramatically frozen in the moment before it tips, fluids spilling, and shatters. It is not insignificant that the artist saw fit to create Monuments, 1982, a three-dimensional realization of the same subject.

Other images of impending demise or disaster, never overtly apocalyptic but charged with smoldering omens and dark murmurs, recur throughout Cumming's mature work. Even the luminous color and sensuality of a work such as Shield House of the South, 1986 [cover], do not offset its imagery—awnings turned into armor, implying the depressing reality of the need to fortify and secure private homes, once symbols of the American dream and personal freedom.

In 1984 Cumming defined an art work as "an out loud (objectified) speculation, an answer to the rhetorical questions of the physical universe, a personal antidote to the chaos of the world and finally, a gesture of interpretation and good will to my fellow humans in hopes that these intuitive inventions may somewhere generate a small degree of enlightenment." His work, visually complex and rich, probes the relationship of truth to fiction in order to critique our technologically based society. The recurrence of geometric patterns in many of his images, for example, the precision of the watermelon step-cut by some eccentric kitchen device [fig. 3], manifests his struggle to maintain a balance between order and chaos, and perhaps his need for a dynamic equilibrium between the two. He prefers now to make his art by hand again rather than use a camera. Although his approach has changed technically over the course of his career, Cumming's vision has not radically altered, only deepened.

Ned Rifkin
Chief Curator for Exhibitions

2. Ibid., p. 39.
4. Cumming, letter to the author, May 1988. For nearly eight years the artist has been working on a novel that has been central to much of his visual art since the publication of Equilibrium and the Rotary Disc.
5. Awards in the Visual Arts Three, p. 36.

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Fig. 3. Connecticut Section, 1984. Acrylic, charcoal, ink on paper; 60 x 77 in. American Express Company, New York.
BIOGRAPHY
Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, October 7, 1943.


Awards include Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Medal and Prize, Art Institute of Chicago, 1969; National Endowment for the Arts, 1972, 1975, and 1977; Guggenheim Fellowship, 1980; Award in the Visual Arts, Southeast Center for Contemporary Art, 1983–84; Creative Arts Award, Brandeis University, 1985.

Lives and works in West Suffield, Connecticut.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1975  Verevis-Poirer Gallery, Brussels.
1976  Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art.
1979  Friends of Photography, Carmel, California, Robert Cumming Photographs: Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, Robert Cumming Photographs and Props 1971–78, and tour.

ARTIST’S BOOKS
A Discourse on Domestic Disorder. Irvine, California, 1975.


Interruption in Landscape and Logic. Orange, California, 1977.


CHECKLIST
All works are courtesy the artist, unless noted otherwise.

Sketches, 1973–78. Ink on paper; 16 sheets, each 8⅛ x 11 in.

Large Pen, 1976. Wood, metal; 11 x 57 x 7 in. Catherine and David Partridge, San Marino, California.

Easel Chairs, 1976. Wood, metal; two units, each 56 x 44 x 17 in.


Equilibrium Rotary Disc, 1978. Scratchboard; 7½ x 9½ in.


Spinning Disk Posed on Waterfall Crest, 1978. Ink on paper; 16½ x 24 in.

Chaos/Order Alternatives, 1979. Scratchboard; two drawings, each 6 x 6 in.


Motorized Comma, 1979. Ink wash on paper; two drawings, each 3½ x 8½ in.

Pen Knife, c. 1979. Ink on paper; 4 x 3 in.

Planes, Commas, Saw Blades, Mosquitoes, 1979. Ink on paper; 8½ x 11 in.

Tile Setter Lost in His Work, 1979. Scratchboard; 7 x 8½ in.

Gunnar and Ted, 1980. Typewritten text and ink on paper; 8½ x 11 in.


Worksheet for Molar Marks, 1981. Charcoal on paper; 25½ x 40 in.

Worksheet for “Shelter,” 1981. Charcoal on paper; 25½ x 40 in.


Plan for ‘Chip-Carve Head,’ 1984. Watercolor, ink on paper; 5⅜ x 7⅛ in.


Shield House of the South (Perspective Study), 1985. Pencil, ink, acrylic on paper, 15½ x 24 in.


Berlin/Brazil Study, 1986. Pencil, acrylic on paper; 13 x 7 in.

Floors and Ceilings, 1986. Acrylic, pencil, ink on paper; 77 x 60 in. Schwebel Collection, Kings Point, New York.

Left Zone, Right Zone, 1986. Acrylic on paper; 60 x 76¼ in. M. Anwar Kehar, Jacksonville, Florida.


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