

DIRECTIONS

ROBERT CUMMING  
INTUITIVE INVENTIONS

JUNE 22 - OCTOBER 10, 1988



*Shield House of the South*, 1986. Acrylic on paper; 50 x 77 in. Schwabert Collection, Kings Point, New York.

**R**OBERT 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 introduced 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 digressive, the episodic, and the anecdotal. Simultaneously, 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 southern California. The allure of Los Angeles—its exotic environs, decorative architectural details, and climate—induced him to abandon the intellectual and theoretical dogma 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."<sup>1</sup>

Cumming's desire for "light and fantasy" found literal 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 construction, model building, fastidious yet casual detailing, theatrical staging and lighting, obliquely fictitious situations, and precise, large format black-and-white photography. 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.

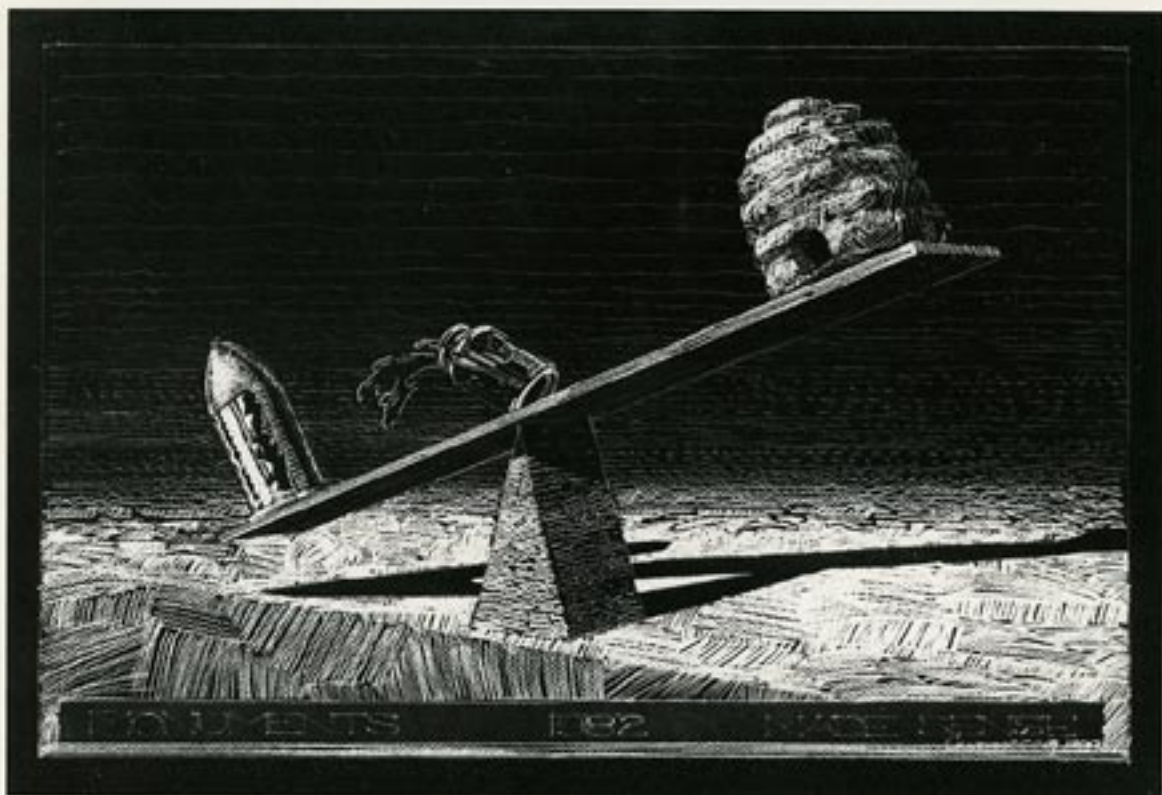
While in California, Cumming continued to develop his writing. He published several books himself that combined his unusual narrative style with photographs and drawings serving as illustrations. Characteristically, he moved toward a rejection of the method for which he was (and probably still is) best 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."<sup>2</sup>

At this time, Cumming's writing became his working context, which ultimately yielded another book. *Equilibrium and the Rotary Disc* (1980) features no



Fig. 1. *Equilibrium Rotary Disc*, 1978. Scratchboard; 7 1/2 x 9 1/4 in. Collection of the artist. Photo: Lee Stalworth.

Fig. 2. *Monument: 1982 Made Sense*, 1982. Panel, pencil on paper, 22 x 32 in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. Photo: Lee Stalworth.



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."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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-look (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."<sup>3</sup> 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

1. Charles Hagan, "Robert Cumming's Subject-Object," *Artforum* 21, no. 10 (Summer 1983): 37.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

3. *Awards in the Visual Arts Three* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Southeast Center for Contemporary Arts, 1984) p. 36.

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.

This exhibition is supported in part by a grant from the Smithsonian Institution Special Exhibition Fund.

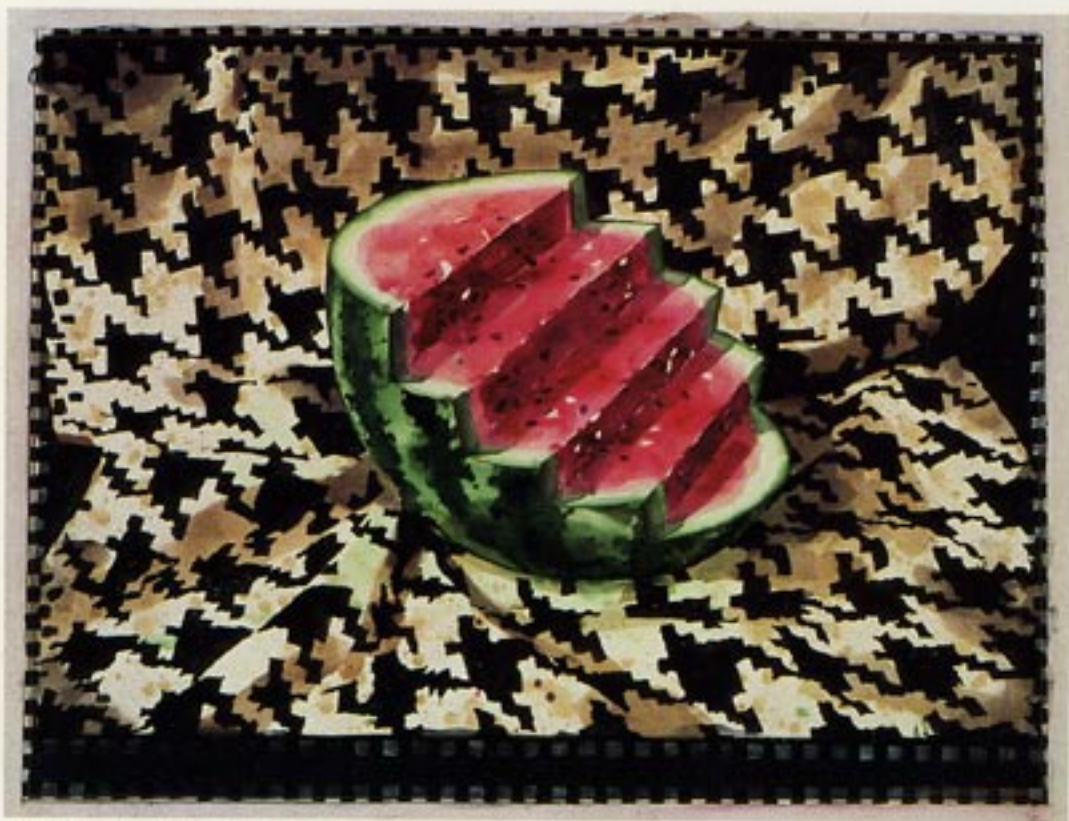


Fig. 1. *Connecticut Section*, 1944. Acrylic, charcoal, ink on paper; 60 x 77 in. Americas Express Company, New York.

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, October 7, 1943.

Educated at the Massachusetts College of Art, 1961-65, B.F.A., 1965; University of Illinois, 1966-67, M.F.A., 1967.

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 Arts, 1983-84; Creative Arts Award, Brandeis University, 1985.

Lives and works in West Suffield, Connecticut.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1973 Phoenix College, Arizona.  
1975 Verelst-Poirer Gallery, Brussels.  
1976 Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art.  
1977 John Gibson Gallery, New York.  
1979 Friends of Photography, Carmel, California, Robert Cumming Photographs; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, Robert Cumming Photographs and Props 1971-78, and tour.  
1982 Castell Graphics, New York (also 1984, 1985).  
1985 Matrix Gallery, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley; Matrix Gallery, Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut.  
1986 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Facets of the Collection: Robert Cumming, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Mechanical Illusions by Robert Cumming.

## ARTIST'S BOOKS

*A Discourse on Domestic Disorder*. Irvine, California, 1975.

*Equilibrium and the Rotary Disc*. Providence: Diana's Bimonthly Press, 1980.

*Interruptions in Landscape and Logic*. Orange, California, 1977.

*Picture Fictions*. Anaheim, California, 1971.

*A Training in the Arts*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973.

*The Weight of Franchise Meat*. Anaheim, California, 1971.

## CHECKLIST

All works are courtesy the artist, unless noted otherwise.

Sketches, 1973-78. Ink on paper, 16 sheets, each 8½ 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 and the Rotary Disc*, 1978. Ink on paper, 7½ x 9½ in. Private collection, New York.

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

*Rotary Disc*, 1978. Scratchboard, 13½ x 10½ in.

*Rotary Disc Poised on Crest of Waterfall*, 1978. Pencil on paper, 8½ x 11 in.

*Rotary Disc Perspective*, 1978. Pencil on paper, 25 x 28 in.

*Spinning Disk Poised on Waterfall Crest*, 1978. Ink on paper, 16½ x 24 in.

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

*Laconic Valley Mill Town*, 1979. Ink on illustration board; 12 x 16 in.

*Molozized Comma*, 1979. Ink wash on paper; two drawings, each 3¼ x 8¼ 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.

*Gutnar and Ted*, 1980. Typewritten text and ink on paper, 8½ x 11 in.

*Jackknife Boy*, 1980. Charcoal on paper; 25½ x 40½ in. Sandra Cumming, West Suffield, Connecticut.

*Martyr*, 1981. Charcoal on paper; 40¼ x 25½ in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 3000

*Set Plan for "Conversations"*, 1981. Charcoal on paper; 25½ x 40¼ in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 3000

*Trophy*, 1981. Charcoal on paper; 40¼ x 25½ in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 3000

*Worksheet for Molar Marks*, 1981. Charcoal on paper; 25½ x 40¼ in.

*Worksheet for "Shelter"*, 1981. Charcoal on paper; 25½ x 40¼ in.

*Boat Swamped/Reflection Sinking*, 1982. Conté crayon on paper, 22 x 32 in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 2500

*Light Bulb, Energy, Wire*, 1982. Cutouts mounted on board; 14 x 11 in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 2000

*Monuments*, 1982. Wood, paint, metal; 16 x 19½ x 4 in. Private collection, New York.

*Monuments 1982 Made Sense*, 1982. Pastel, pencil on paper; 22 x 32 in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 3000

*Vessel and Fast Water*, 1982. Pastel, pencil on paper; 22 x 32 in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 2500

*Chip-Carve Head/June 1983/Pocketknife*, 1983. Watercolor on paper; 6 x 7½ in. 1000  
Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York.

*Chip-Carve Diagram*, 1983. Charcoal, acrylic, ink on paper; 53 x 68 in. James Jensen, Honolulu.

*Cup, Incline, and Swell*, 1983. Acrylic, charcoal, ink on paper; 53 x 68 in. Betty Blake, Dallas.

*Body and Soul*, 1984. Carved and laminated wood with metal inlay; 13½ x 4½ in. (diameter). Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 2500

*Connecticut Section*, 1984. Acrylic, charcoal, ink on paper; 60 x 77 in. American Express Company, New York.

*Plan for "Chip-Carve Head"*, 1984. Watercolor, ink on paper; 5¼ x 7¼ in.

*Words, Bar, Gone, Sign (Sketch for Soap Plan)*, 1984. Watercolor on paper; 9½ x 13 in. Joyce and Robert Menschel, New York.

*Nine Line Light/Room and Home*, 1985. Acrylic, pencil, ink on paper; 60 x 77 in. The Capital Group, Inc., Los Angeles.

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

*Water Above, Water Below*, 1985. Acrylic, charcoal, pencil on paper; 60 x 77 in. Security Pacific Corp., Los Angeles.

*Berlin/Brazil*, 1986. Lithograph, silkscreen on paper; 48 x 37½ in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 1800

*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. Schweber Collection, Kings Point, New York. 15000

*Left Zone, Right Zone*, 1986. Acrylic on paper; 60 x 76½ in. M. Anwar Kama, Jacksonville, Florida.

*Radio Transit*, 1986. Acrylic on paper; 60 x 77 in. The Interpublic Group of Companies, New York.

*Shield House of the South*, 1986. Acrylic on paper; 60 x 77 in. Schweber Collection, Kings Point, New York. 15000

*United*, 1986. Watercolor, collage, wood ruler on paper; 13 x 16 in. Jody and Martin Grass, Wormleysburg, Pennsylvania.

*Induct/Deduct*, 1987. Pastel on paper; two drawings, each 10½ x 48 in. Courtesy Castell Graphics, New York. 8000



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