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Frederick Sommer: Photography at the Limits of the Avant-Garde

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Catherine Barth
M.A., Emory University, 2016

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

Frederick Sommer: Photography at the Limits of the Avant-Garde By Catherine Barth

This dissertation offers a comprehensive account of the work of American photographer, Frederick Sommer (1905-1999). Looking closely at the works produced between 1939-1962, I argue that a defining quality of Sommer's work is its commitment to effects of density, opacity, and complexity. My claim is that Sommer's approach to density provides not only a new model of photographic expression but a new form of engagement and viewership, challenging and reanimating the normative terms of straight photography. Putting Sommer in dialogue with canonical modernist photographers Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Minor White, I aim to elucidate the competing paradigms of modern photography at mid-century. Through the detailed analysis of key photographic works, archival materials, and interviews with living artists, I aim to present a new approach to the study of mid-century photography, one that will have ramifications for the understanding of photographic history in the crucial period of the transition from modern to postmodern practices.

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the Amon Carter's expansive library, my bibliographic research in the first year would not have been as robust. I was also the recipient of a Kenneth J. Botto Research Fellowship, awarded by the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona. Designed to assist projects that investigate "collage" and "constructed imagery" in photography, this fellowship—and the kind assistance of Leslie Squyres, Head of the Volkerding Study Center, and Emily Una Weirich, Associate Librarian for Research Services—served as an opportunity to examine Sommer's fragile smoke on glass negatives and original cut papers. In the second year of my dissertation, I served as the graduate curatorial intern in the Department of Photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum. While gaining substantial experience under the guidance of associate curator Amanda Maddox and curator Virginia Heckert, I also had the chance to catalog works by Sommer in the Getty Museum's collection. I am honored to have worked with the Getty curators and it forwarded my research on Sommer through research and study. In addition, in 2019 I conducted research at the Princeton University Art Museum as an awardee of the Minor White Archive Research Grant. Curator of Photography, Kate Bussard, as well as Molly Gibbons and Bobby Walsh were crucial to my visit—Kate shared tremendous knowledge of the White archive and relevant curatorial opportunities. I am thankful for travel support from the Luce Foundation through the Department of Art History at Emory, during the final year of my project.

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Introduction

The world is not a world of cleavages at all,
the world is a world of bonds.

— Frederick Sommer

This dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive account of the works of Italian American photographer, Frederick Sommer (1905-1999). As I will argue, Sommer's corpus is best understood in terms of its commitment to qualities of density and narrative. Focusing on works produced from 1939-1966, I demonstrate how Sommer both challenged and reanimated conventions of straight photography, the crucial set of background assumptions for understanding Sommer's inventions. Without a doubt *Aperture* magazine was the central voice in the straight photographic tradition at mid-century. As Minor White and others argued at length in the pages of *Aperture*, the straight photograph must maintain a "tether to reality," one that provided clear communication of ideas and a mode of photographic production that projected effects of direct and undistorted contact with a referent.¹ Straight photography, of course, did not preclude highly stylized productions, but the effect was to suggest that the style emerged with the artist's eye and not with his manipulation of the print at any stage of the process. Sommer, who learned straight photographic technique from Edward Weston, used the 8 x 10 view camera popular with straight photographers to create putatively straight images but ones that were alarmingly full, or overfull, with referential detail.² This quality of density led Ansel Adams to describe Sommer's work as "difficult and decadent."³ Nancy Newhall wrote that the *Arizona*

¹ "The Aspen Photo Conference" by Beaumont Newhall, October 30, 1951, Box 3, Folder 13, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. "The photographic approach as opposed to the painterly is characterized, White felt, by the totality of the image, its tether to reality, its immediacy, and its lack of the mark of the hand."

² Keith F. Davis, "Living Art: The Sources of Frederick Sommer's Work," in *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage*, ed. Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 18.

³ Adams comments "FS is 'difficult and decadent.'" Notes between Ansel Adams and Minor White on Sommer polaroid ad, Box 3, Folder 2, Ansel Adams correspondence, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

Landscapes have such “fine detail” that they “present almost insuperable problems” for “exhibition installation.”⁴ Sommer reshaped the photographic medium by *testing* the amount and kind of material it could contain, loading his images with collected, found and manipulated elements. With works such as *Arizona Landscape* (1943), *Circumnavigation of the Blood* (1950), and *Moon Culmination* (1951), Sommer invited his viewers to engage in-depth with the complexly layered content of his work.

Previous studies of Sommer have tended to focus on his war-era works, a series of pictures he made in Arizona dating 1939-1945, and my aim here is to expand the canon of his works to include his corpus as published in *Aperture*, including close examinations of the work done in the 1960s. Sommer’s first photographs are compact prints that require unorthodox modes of close looking, as they are about 2 x 2 inches. The pressed, compacted nature of these photographs indicates the dense quality of later works. Examining the war-time works, I further consider several landscape scenes previously unexamined in an effort to expand the current consensus on the nature of chance production in photographic modernism. Sommer’s collage and assemblage-based works of the early 1950s received lukewarm reception at the time of their production, both at Aspen and in subsequent critical reviews. They remain relatively understudied even now. Charles W. Millard, reviewing the works in 1965, found the collage and assemblage photographs caught up in “technique,” while Bruce Boice, writing in 1973, dismissed the photographs as Surrealist nostalgia.⁵ In my last chapter I address Sommer’s unusual paint, smoke, paper and nude prints, photographs that reimagine the formal properties of

⁴ FSA, CCP. Box 9, Folder 17. Nancy Newhall to Frederick Sommer, letter dated August 2, 1944.

⁵ Charles W. Millard, “Frederick Sommer: An Exhibition of Work from 1943 to 1965,” in *Frederick Sommer: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, ed. Sheryl Conkelton (Oxford, England: Clio Press, 1995), 65 and Bruce Boice, “Frederick Sommer [An excerpt],” in *Frederick Sommer: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, ed. Sheryl Conkelton (Oxford, England: Clio Press, 1995), 92-94. On the collage/assemblage works, Boice states their “ideas [have been] more or less exhausted before Sommer got to them” by the Surrealists.

the photographic negative and its positive. By extending the series of works studied, this dissertation aims to give a more complete picture of Sommer as an artist, his philosophy, his works, and his place within the history of photography.

Photographing his surroundings and studio constructions, Sommer consistently sought to test the bounds of the photographic medium. “I constantly revise my stockpile of ideas. / The value does not diminish / because it has been revised, restacked. / The more beautiful the text, / the greater the chance you can reorder it,” Sommer reflects.⁶ In this comment, the photographer reflects on his process as one grounded in the “revision” of found material. The more depth this material has, the more possibilities it presents. Sommer exploited the ontological nature of the medium, its indexicality, and marshaled it to create images that are materially rich and layered, both at the level of form and content. While photographing the desert and its vegetation, Sommer often chose the most detailed patches of any given vista to photograph, further emphasizing this detail by deliberately trimming the print’s edges to amplify the fullness bordering on excess of the depicted scene.⁷

Sommer aggressively experimented with new photographic formats, an approach most visible in his collage and assemblage images. While some saw these and other works as “obscure and difficult,” he also reinvigorated the medium by considering how items could be transformed through the act of photographing.⁸ Sommer’s contemporary, Henry Holmes Smith, embraced this kind of difficult photography in his important 1961 essay, “Photography in Our Time.” At the conclusion, Smith wrote “the unfamiliar or difficult image may actually be a complete and

⁶ Weiss, *Venus, Jupiter, and Mars*, 17.

⁷ He refined focussing techniques to obtain even greater precision for exposure, as he detailed in a 1944 letter to Edward Weston. Frederick Sommer to Edward Weston, March 23, 1944, Box 5, Folder 1, Edward Weston Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

⁸ Amon Carter Museum of American Art, artist file on Frederick Sommer. Julian Cox, *The Photographs of Frederick Sommer: A Centennial Tribute*, 2005. Cox admits that the works “can sometimes be obscure and difficult.”

important human utterance.”⁹ He went on, “In our difficult and complicated world, we should be wary of the easy message; the plain one will be hard enough to believe.”¹⁰ “Difficult” photography refused notions of clear artistic legibility, it was meant to challenge the viewer, force them to address the work in unfamiliar and demanding ways. The collage and assemblage photographs, generated from objects Sommer found in local waste sites, caused controversy due to their inclusion of unusual, found material.¹¹ In works such as *Moon Culmination* (1951) dissimilar, disjointed parts are brought together, in the most improbable way, into a unified shape. *All Children Are Ambassadors* (1950), *Circumnavigation of the Blood* (1950), and *Moon Culmination* (1951) are especially emblematic of the densified qualities of Sommer’s photographic oeuvre, comprised of works that are symbolic, metaphoric, and literary. Yet, as Minor White described in his introduction to Sommer in the 1956 *Aperture* article “Collages of Found Objects,” while it may be difficult to interpret Sommer’s photographs, they do reward the persistent onlooker.¹² As I will argue, for Sommer, complexity and confusion were means to a unified, coherent work of art, not their undoing.

Density functioned at the level of narrative as well. Emmet Gowin, speaking of the mid-century work, noted that “They illustrate Fred’s belief in the validity of the association of unconnected things.”¹³ Photographs like *Circumnavigation of the Blood* (1950) demonstrate Sommer’s efforts to narratively densify the work through added illustrations and allusive titles.

⁹ Henry Holmes Smith, “Photography in Our Time: A Note on Some Prospects for the Seventh Decade,” in *Photographers on Photography*, ed. Nathan Lyons (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 103.

¹⁰ Smith, “Photography in Our Time,” 103.

¹¹ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018.

¹² Henry Holmes Smith et al., “Fredrick Sommer: Collages of Found Objects,” *Aperture* 4, no. 3 (1956): 103. In his introduction, White writes: “Fredrick Sommer makes no concessions to the casual observer in his photographs. He packs every bit of picture space with significance of one kind or another. Consequently a superficial glance at his pictures reveals about as much as a locked trunk of its contents. But the lock can be picked with a hairpin—the time to find one’s own hairpin is sufficient.”

¹³ Emmet Gowin, “Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer,” in *Books on Photography, III* (New York: Roth Horowitz, 1999), 57.

The photographer's skillful pairing of text and image was featured in the *Aperture* monograph of his work in 1962.¹⁴ In the monograph, Sommer reproduced photographs and poetry side by side. His elaborate combination of text and images tested photographic standards of "communication," as articulated by Newhall in the 1951 Aspen report.

Sommer's philosophy of inclusion extended to the range of materials he used in his constructions. This inclusive quality is most evident in the last series of work I consider, including paint on cellophane and glass, smoke on cellophane and glass, out of focus, and nude prints, where he rigorously investigated a variety of substances and "surfaces."¹⁵ In his "Extemporaneous Talk" from 1971, Sommer described the smoke on glass works as an example of his desire to combine multiple processes and techniques—from drawing and collage to painting—into his work with the medium of photography. He took advantage of the absorptive surface of the medium to expand the scope of its use and expressive reach.¹⁶ These series introduce several processes that complicate straight photographic convention by including non-photographic materials and post-production effects.

The terms "density," "surface," "allover," and "tension" appear in historical criticism of Sommer's corpus, beginning as early as 1944. Critic Bruce Boice comments on the formal "tension" of the *Arizona Landscapes*, writing: "All of the Arizona landscapes have this same kind of allover tension built into the photographs."¹⁷ The overpacked character of Sommer's photographs presented a convincing model of photographic agency. Gerald Nordland noted that a pair of works fashioned from copies of Dürer, titled the *Dürer Variations*, condense "forms

¹⁴ Frederick Sommer, "Frederick Sommer: 1939-1962 Photographs," *Aperture* 10, no. 4 (1962): 134-75.

¹⁵ Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 53.

¹⁶ Frederick Sommer, "An Extemporaneous Talk," in *Aperture Magazine Anthology: The Minor White Years, 1952-1976*, ed. Peter C. Bunnell (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2012), 375-377. (Originally published in *Aperture* 16, no. 2 (1971): 20-27.)

¹⁷ Boice, "Frederick Sommer [An excerpt]," 95.

into a compressed prospective space.”¹⁸ Three separate woodcuts from Dürer’s *Large Passion* were combined and folded into an accordion shape, then photographed, to produce *Dürer Variation* (1966).¹⁹ Sommer “densifies” the rich and meticulously detailed woodcut through narrative compression, as the photograph represents three individual scenes from the *Large Passion* simultaneously. Roberta Hellman and Marvin Hoshino similarly observe how Sommer “make[s] pictures with density not seen in Western art since Van Eyck.”²⁰ A museum press release sums up the matter: Sommer “presented the Arizona desert as a horizonless scene, packed edge to edge with an overall, decentralized distribution of detail.”²¹ My aim here is to elaborate and clarify the specific character and nature of Sommer’s complex set of commitments to a photographic practice defined by layering, density and the depiction of extreme modes of fine-grain detail.

The study is arranged chronologically, beginning with Sommer’s earliest photographs made in 1935 and concluding with works made in the early 1960s.²² Chapter one examines the early works of the 1930s, asserting that Sommer’s meticulously scaled and trimmed prints were meant to signal a new mode of photographic agency, one that abraded against dominant conceptions of the medium as passive to the world. Making prints just below the standard 8 x 10 dimensions, Sommer also rigorously framed his prints to augment the visual intensity and density of the works. Further on in chapter one I consider procedures of packing and layering

¹⁸ Gerald Nordland, *Frederick Sommer: An Exhibition of Photographs at Philadelphia College of Art, November 1 through November 30, 1968* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia College of Art, 1968), 14.

¹⁹ Frederick Sommer Foundation, “Dürer Variation,” accessed September 2017, http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=130&piece_id=1081.

²⁰ Roberta Hellman and Marvin Hoshino, “Delay in Glass,” in *Venus, Jupiter, and Mars: The Photographs of Frederick Sommer*, ed. John Weiss (Wilmington, DE: Delaware Art Museum, 1980), 55.

²¹ Amon Carter Museum of American Art, artist file on Frederick Sommer. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, press release, dated 1981.

²² April Watson, “Sommer Chronology: 1905-2005,” in *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage*, ed. Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 220. 1935 is the date of Sommer’s earliest photographs.

that constitute the multi-faceted character of the collage and assemblage photographs.²³ The work *The Thief Greater Than His Loot* (1955) exemplifies Sommer's belief that the photograph is both found and invented, and that the photographer must always work in relation to a found world as he constructs images.

Chapter two focuses on the war-era works. Here I also address the recent writings on Sommer by Robin Kelsey, Ian Walker, and John Timberlake. Kelsey, Walker, and Timberlake emphasize chance-driven qualities in Sommer's photographs over artistic agency.²⁴ Taking a different path of interpretation from Kelsey, Walker, and Timberlake, I suggest the Arizona landscapes represent Sommer coming to terms with the desert landscape. Examining *Colorado River Landscape* (1940), *Arizona Landscape* (1943), and *Arizona Landscape* (1945), I study the all-over composition of these works and their development as formal and technical studies. Sommer's photographs of Arizona posit the desert as a site of death and renewal. The photographs *Coyotes* (1945) and *Untitled* (1945) are discussed as iterations of the theme of disintegration and resurrection. Carefully composed, the photographs offer up animal corpses and ancient marks as evidence of past conditions and present encounters.

Chapter three explores the collage and assemblage photographs that Sommer created at the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s. These photographs were presented, alongside the objects used to make them, at the 1951 Aspen Conference on Photography.²⁵ The constructed, handcrafted nature of these works was cause for concern as Newhall, in a report on the

²³ Lanier Graham, "The Art of Frederick Sommer Parts I and II," *Image* 33, no. 3–4 (1990-91): 31. Lanier Graham notes in his writing on Frederick Sommer that the works are in nature "combinatory," again drawing on the idea of inclusivity.

²⁴ Robin Kelsey, "Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature," in *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 214-248; Ian Walker, "'As If One's Eyelids Had Been Cut Away': Frederick Sommer's Arizona Landscapes," *Journal of Surrealism of the Americas* 2, no. 2 (2008): 180–208; John Timberlake, "The Sapphic Sublime of Frederick Sommer" (PhD diss., University of London, Goldsmiths' College, 2012).

²⁵ Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 53.

conference proceedings, observed that photography's capacity for "communication" was the most significant and common thought to emerge from the conference.²⁶ Newhall wrote "The validity of so-called 'experimental' and 'abstract' photography was challenged more than once."²⁷ This chapter examines works such as *Flower and Frog* (1947) and *Valise d'Adam* (1949), considering how objects are revived in their new collage, assemblage, and finally, photographic settings. The collage and assemblage photographs are widely inclusive of all types of materials and found objects for the artist's invention.

Chapter four turns to the photographer's paint, smoke, paper, and out-of-focus works. Through these pictures, Sommer asserted perhaps more forcefully than in his earlier work, that the photograph can be generated from any material and with different "supports." Here, I consider works ranging from *Smoke on Glass* (1962), to *(Paint on Cellophane)* (1957), to *Figure* (1965), and *[Untitled: Night Cut Paper]* (1981), examining the photographer's body of smoke and paint-based works, nude studies, and paper sculptures. An abstract, smoke-blown figure emerges from the illuminated ground of *Smoke on Glass*, in *(Paint on Cellophane)*, a very loosely figural form gestures to the photograph's edge, *Figure* (1965) depicts the figure of a woman, tightly framed within the 13 ¼ x 8 ¾-inch print, while *[Untitled: Night Cut Paper]* (1981) represents two abstract forms intertwined in a darkly lit embrace. In these works Sommer adds new materials to his palette, and as the compacted negatives for the paint on cellophane works reveal, with these works a sustained practice of compressing and densifying the visual field remains.

In his "Extemporaneous Talk" at the Art Institute of Chicago, Sommer noted that "the sensitized surface" of the photograph "has an honesty, an inevitableness." He continued: "It

²⁶ "The Aspen Photo Conference" by Beaumont Newhall, October 30, 1951, Frederick Sommer Archive.

²⁷ Ibid.

shows you what some process showed to it.”²⁸ Sommer put this impressionable surface of the photographic negative to use as a base for joining painting, drawing, and collage. Working at the limits of avant-garde photography, Sommer sought to re-establish the unity of the photograph by loading his surfaces with a variety of material, testing and expanding the possibilities for straight photography. From animals to landscapes to collages to paint-based pictures, Sommer consistently sought to find and replicate the richness of his surroundings, from the field to the darkroom. He noted: “Everything is shared by everything else; there are no discontinuities.”²⁹ This quote communicates the artist’s conviction that the camera served to connect different forms. Sommer was an artist who was “always living in translation,” as his last assistant describes.³⁰ Speaking five languages, Sommer searched for “bonds” between seemingly disparate words and images.³¹

²⁸ Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 375-376.

²⁹ Weiss, *Venus, Jupiter, and Mars*, 16.

³⁰ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018.

³¹ Keith Davis, “Triangulating an Era,” in *Callahan, Siskind, Sommer: At the Crossroads of American Photography* (Santa Fe, NM: Radius Books, 2009), 17. Davis notes: “He [Sommer] became proficient in five languages (Italian, German, Portuguese, French and English) and was devoted to the study of a broad spectrum of human achievement.”

Chapter 1

A New Process: Slow Revelation

“In a night sky of endless constellations, in overlays of levers and fulcrums, heavenly bodies travel at great distances from masses and compression[s]. To describe these forces is to look into nature and art. As artists we are custodians of order, and in ordering a collection we also learn what it is.”³²

--Sommer, Princeton University, 1979

The notion of the “constellation” outlines Sommer’s basic philosophical and aesthetic commitments. “A pictorial surface,” he further writes, “is essentially an over-layering of many levers. Bundles of levers.” The “pictorial surface,” that is, mirrors the constellations of nature. Some pictures, like the night skies they emulate, are structured as dense, compact webs, whereas others “travel at great distances,” expanding the space between “lever” and “fulcrum.”³³ What purpose does this metaphor serve in Sommer’s photographs and working practice? I argue that it captures a fundamental aspect of his artistic philosophy. This chapter will advance the idea that the root of Sommer’s practice lies in procedures of ordering and organization. The constellation serves as a natural model of the organic beauty that the artist seeks to imitate, while also signaling the instinctive need for humans to organize their surroundings in a meaningful way (through narratives, fictions, myths, and designs). In the pages that follow, I attempt to explore the function of ordering and display in Sommer’s works, which emphasize the artwork as a site of active negotiation between nature and man. It is through the work of art, the photograph in Sommer’s case, that the basis of human perception is best understood and directed toward “new insights.”³⁴

³² Center for Creative Photography, Frederick Sommer Archive (hereafter FSA, CCP). Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 1, dated September 19, 1979. (Tape 1: PS 1)

³³ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 1, dated September 19, 1979. (Tape 1:1)

³⁴ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 6, dated November 7, 1979. (Tape 11:8)

Sommer's photographs are intended to cultivate a greater sense of awareness on the part of the viewer. Consider, for instance, this comment from Princeton seminar 3: "We have bundles of perceptions, all sorts of input and output that we practice."³⁵ The individual continuously translates exterior forms of perception into interior forms of meaning and order. For the artist, this process of reception and reorganization eventually makes itself known through new organizations on the canvas or photographic emulsion. Sommer notes that he chose photography as a medium of expression partly for its potential to increase his awareness: "I went into photography because it meant the extension of my attention span in so many ways. I thought it was something that would make me more alert."³⁶ For Sommer, "quality of attention span" is something to be valued, and the best works of art "hold our attention."³⁷ It is the aim of this chapter to show the various techniques by which Sommer directs and holds our attention, and which also suggests the broader ways that subjects order the unknown into patterns of relationships.

The chapter will unpack the methods Sommer used to focus his viewer's attention, to unveil a world comprised of bundles of relationships and interrelationships. Here, I will specifically highlight the scale of the works, Sommer's printing and lighting techniques, and various forms of layering that are internal to the work, furthering a sense of dimensional complexity. Prints including *Jack Rabbit* (1939) (fig. 1.3) and *Max Ernst* (1946) (fig. 1.16) will be discussed as a way of understanding the techniques that inform the presentation of the photograph, and the perceptual awareness they intend to convey. By examining the techniques

³⁵ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 3, dated October 3, 1979. (Tape 5:5)

³⁶ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 10, dated December 5, 1979. (Tape 19:2)

³⁷ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 7, dated November 14, 1979. (Tape 13:1) He notes: "Art will never elicit quality of attention span unless it *is* art. Something lightly made could call attention to itself; but it is something of some profundity that holds attention span. That is the closest possibility of love between a human and an object. It holds our attention. And the means by which it does this is the history of art."

that define Sommer's production as well as the manner in which these developed, it is my goal to shed light on how his photographs encourage a more "comprehensive way" of seeing.³⁸

These works actively challenge the viewer and challenged normative ideas of the photograph during the mid-twentieth century. Criticism of Sommer's photographs at the time of their production was mixed. Nancy Newhall, while acting curator of the Department of Photography at MoMA, wrote to Sommer:

I think you are developing a very exciting new direction – the subtle one of the giant cactus reduced to a pattern from the hillside for instance. Do remember, however, that such photographs present almost insuperable problems of exhibition installation. The detail is so fine that the print should be hand held and the meaning is such that only a very sensitive person would be apt to sense it while walking through the show. Perhaps a better print might help.³⁹

Newhall here presents her concerns about the difficulty of Sommer's photographs for the ordinary viewer, perceptual puzzles that call for close, sustained attention as though they were pages of a dense text. The photographs strain the normative ratio of subject-matter to frame, dense with "fine detail." When an exhibition including Sommer's prints did open at MoMA in 1949, they were given this description:

His work shows a calm, dispassionate approach that might be expected only from a man on another planet using some kind of super micro-telescope – for his work seems to show more detail than the eye can see. His emphasis of the minute with an almost unbelievable precision leads him away from photography of scenery in the usual sense. Views of miles of the non-pictorial desert land might almost be thought to be close-ups of one square foot of pebbles on a beach.⁴⁰

This writer uses the same language – of telescopes and interplanetary visions – that Sommer employed while speaking of the "constellations" of his work. The key phrase here is "his work

³⁸ Frederick Sommer, *Words / Images* (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1984), 28.

³⁹ FSA, CCP. Box 9, Folder 17. Nancy Newhall to Frederick Sommer, letter dated August 2, 1944.

⁴⁰ FSA, CCP. Box 9, Folder 18. Press release for "Realism in Photography" exhibition, MoMA, July 26-September 25, 1949. The show was mounted after Edward Steichen had taken control of the department.

seems to show more detail than the eye can see.” Newhall and the press writer for the 1949 show both note that the intensity of detail in Sommer’s prints invites closer looking, a kind of looking that asks the viewer to see the work as layered, with multiple views contained within it.

According to Sommer, this dual action of shock and slow revelation is precisely the way in which works of art should function. He explained:

A work of art has a tightness ... It’s an unraveling, a giving away of one secret after another. But you will not get down to the bottom of what is the real tightness of this thing, because as you unravel it and become clearer about what is going on there, you become also more familiar with the hierarchies of relationships. So let’s have a lot of respect for the education of the gifted bystander.⁴¹

In this passage, the artwork is characterized as a dense object, requiring “unraveling” by the viewer. Noting the acuity of the “gifted bystander,” Sommer acknowledges that his photographs require time and patience to understand. He also compares the artwork to a “gifted person”:

“Sooner or later, and usually sooner, it will give you the appearance of being quite different from what you thought it was. So you are seeing other aspects, but he is still the same person.”⁴² Like the intelligent being, the work reveals parts of itself, bit by bit, over time. Multiple layers are revealed and, importantly, these layers all belong to the same work, like different facets on the same stone. A work with this kind of outward “tightness” may at first seem obscure, but in reality it is not. A novel may not “reveal” all aspects of its plot “at once,” but this is “part of the craft of the fine writer,” to lead the reader through an imaginative unfolding of the text.⁴³ A pictorial work, Sommer thought, was no different.

While Sommer’s work received short shrift from his contemporaries, its richness has also been undervalued in current criticism. Robin Kelsey’s monumental recent study, *Photography*

⁴¹ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 9, dated November 28, 1979. (Tape 17:5-6)

⁴² FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 9, dated November 28, 1979. (Tape 17:4)

⁴³ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 11, dated December 12, 1979. (Tape 21:11)

and the Art of Chance (2015), for instance, argues that Sommer was committed to picturing a chance-driven dispersal of vision. Works including *Jack Rabbit*, *Chicken Parts*, *Arizona Landscape*, and *Glass* (figs. 1.3, 1.10, 1.1, 1.5) depict “an unspeakable array of difference.”⁴⁴ Emphasizing dispersion over density, Kelsey leaves to chance what for Sommer was a calculated intervention into the status of the photographic medium. Sommer, here, provides the perfect reply: “So there is much more lying around in the world of music and poetry that is going to be investigated and looked into in terms of what people have loosely, up to now, called chance. But we know it’s not chance, it’s just other ways of proceeding. It is a more distributive world.”⁴⁵

Although discussions of Sommer’s work are often bound up in the discourse of chance, it is important to signal the artist’s active presence in the work. The greatest tragedy, Sommer stated, is “the un-elaborated life.” Life and the creative act is a “thing *you* invent” from what is inherited or found.⁴⁶ He expands:

Everyone’s living of his life is an elaboration of his own. If it is not an elaboration of his own, it’s a disaster, a tragedy. Because if it is not your own elaboration, it is the elaboration of others. To judge from what passes as art generally, I would say that it is an enslavement of a great many people, to exactly whom I don’t know. A life worth living is a life that is elaborated by oneself.⁴⁷

The work of the individual and of the artist is one of perpetual elaboration, the construction of fictions that give meaning and order. Elsewhere, in a text that he published later in life titled *The Constellations that Surround Us*, Sommer described his approach as one of “environmental relationship awareness,” processing and reformulating vast sets of visual data that the environment presents. Here he wrote: “Photographic composition is the conjunction of how

⁴⁴ Robin Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” in *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 242.

⁴⁵ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 12, dated December 17, 1979. (Tape 24:11)

⁴⁶ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 9, dated November 28, 1979. (Tape 17:13)

⁴⁷ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 6, dated November 7, 1979. (Tape 11:2)

elements want to come together. To what degree they interact positionally. My first thought, when I look through a camera, is how does this fit on the ground glass?”⁴⁸ Through this passage and the title of his text Sommer suggests that all around us, order can be discovered or made. The photographer works with pre-inscribed materials, but they are given over into a new life in his work. This Sommer characterizes as a “re-birth” in the image: “The beautiful thing is, things do not survive as they are laid away. There seems to be a re-birth, a renaissance, under all conditions and all situations, and things are dug up again. They become influential again. The whole process of life is its own archive. How we contribute, how we file things away into it, is what we are really interested in.”⁴⁹ In these statements, Sommer foregrounds his intervention, demonstrating his presence in the making of the work.

My discussion will ultimately underscore the methods by which Sommer, through his invention, calls attention to the creative agency of his photographs. Through tight cropping, heavy layering, and meticulous printing, Sommer signals the construction of meaningful relationships in his works. He compares the photograph to a mosaic, bringing together various individual elements into a greater design.⁵⁰ Like the constellation, the photograph as mosaic is the “convincing fiction” that the artist makes.⁵¹ By focusing on the techniques of Sommer’s production, this discussion hopes to redirect the discourse around Sommer’s work from a broad

⁴⁸ Frederick Sommer, “The Constellations that Surround Us: The Conjunction of General Aesthetics and Poetic Logic in an Artist’s Life,” in *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage*, ed. Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 207 and 211. This is an interview between Frederick Sommer and Michael Torosian originally published in 1992. See: Frederick Sommer, *The Constellations that Surround Us: The Conjunction of General Aesthetics and Poetic Logic in an Artist’s Life*, ed. Michael Torosian (Toronto: Lumiere Press, 1992), 1-29.

⁴⁹ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 9, dated November 28, 1979. (Tape 17:2)

⁵⁰ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 2, dated September 26, 1979. (Tape 3:3)

⁵¹ In the first seminar, Sommer explains that the work must be a “convincing fiction”: “Art is not arbitrary. Sometimes it takes some knowledge to see the order in a painting. There can be misrepresentation in both display and language, but fiction has to be convincing. It’s the only thing in the world that *has* to be convincing.” FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 1, dated September 19, 1979. (Tape 1:3)

focus on chance procedures to the specific practices that bind creation and concept in his oeuvre. The hope is that through this observation and specificity, we might be able to begin to understand his production on its own terms.

The first half of the chapter will look at the physical parameters of the work, managed through scaling, printing, and trimming – activities that focus our attention and highlight Sommer’s handiwork. Sommer precisely scaled his photographs, often to smaller than standard dimensions. By producing diminutive negatives and trimming prints, Sommer intensified the content within the four corners of the frame. In opposition to accounts that read the resulting density and near disorder of these photographs as a sign of his lack of intervention, here I show that Sommer’s scaling is a subtle yet effective gesture that calls attention to his careful manufacture of the works. The second half examines the process of layering, as it functions for Sommer. Within meticulously-scaled frames, Sommer pictures found scenes of piled, stacked debris as well as collages and assemblages of his own construction. Though layering, in his assemblages, often begins at the level of physical manipulation, through the photographic capture it is transformed into something that is internal to the work and activates the viewer’s visual discovery of the image. Works discussed in this section highlight Sommer’s layering as an activity of recovery and invention, adding to what exists to create something new. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on how these intertwined techniques inform a practice that is dense with the artist’s “elaboration,” offering up a new model of agency for photography. For Sommer, the artist’s work enacts novel possibilities of picturing and perceiving. By “unraveling” the tightly packed artwork, the “convincing fiction” of social and artistic life is made visible.

Sommer's 7 x 9's

“The scale of everything in the world of art is of a very personal order and has to be used with care.”

– Sommer, *Words / Images*

In Frederick Sommer's *Arizona Landscape* (1943) (fig. 1.1), the viewer is confronted with the vastness of a landscape as well as its minute particularities. Although the proliferation of detail might initially strike the viewer as overwhelming, it gradually invites closer looking. The engaged viewer will notice an internal rhythm to this landscape, subtly delineated in the rolling undulations of hills dotted with saguaros, rocks, and round shrubs. In the foreground, the shape of a curving hill is traced by a line of shrubs, which intersect on this downward slope with a group of five rocks, descending in bright sun and heavy shadow on the hillside behind. This traversing pattern recurs at (at least) two separate moments in the composition. A sand path at center, white hot in the desert's bright light, echoes the line of the curving hill in the foreground and marks the base of a hillside that slopes down to meet the path. In the upper third of the photograph, a rocky outcropping forms the shoulder of another arching ridge. The hills in the foreground are saturated with light, while the middle and distant ground become darker as the eye travels back through the image. This transition, from light to dark, focuses the eye and leads it to the top corners of the image, where thin black lines of cacti appear in miniature, spreading out into the far distance. The photograph projects a sense of expansiveness while the intense, repetitious detail remains bound within the confines of the 7 9/16 x 9 1/8-inch frame.

Sommer's decision to produce his prints at slightly smaller than the standard 8 x 10-inch frames is a slight yet significant aspect of this and many other works in his corpus. This action compresses the proliferation of detail within his frames and functions as evidence of the photographer's intervention. Often, Sommer focuses in on vast subjects, like the desert

landscape, or cast away items – both rich with visual information but seemingly unstructured. The visibly contracted frame, then, serves to assert Sommer’s agency over the chaos of material before his lens. Though at first the frame produces an overwhelming effect of shock, in photographs contact printed to show “more detail than the eye can see,” over time an underlying structure is bit-by-bit revealed. My discussion, in this section, will draw on multiple works from Sommer’s corpus of the 1940s-50s, demonstrating that the artist’s scaling of prints is one sign among many of his meticulous, deliberate production, within spaces that suggest anything but the manipulation of the artist’s hand. This interpretation of the *Arizona Landscape* and other works by Sommer directly challenges Robin Kelsey’s 2015 chapter on the photographer. While Kelsey solely focuses on the shock effect that works like *Arizona Landscape* produce, writing of them as “the finely discriminated irrelevance of empty terrain,” I aim to carry the question further – to unpack how Sommer’s intensive cropping of prints directs the viewer to the rich meaning embedded in the works.⁵² Kelsey’s account, grounded in a discussion of chance, fails to come to terms with the depth of Sommer’s artistic agency, which is revealed most perspicuously through Sommer’s cropping. Sommer’s methodical process of scaling prints resists the overarching label of chance that Kelsey applies to his photographs.

Michael Fried provides a helpful model for thinking about agency as defined through technical and compositional choices like cropping, framing, and printing in his recent writing on photography. Discussing the photographs of Robert Adams, Fried coins the phrase “density of decision” in defining multiple aspects of the works, including choice of focus, “rightness of the composition,” and their pointedly small scale.⁵³ The quality of the work, he asserts, is based on

⁵² Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 246.

⁵³ Michael Fried, “Density of Decision: Greenberg with Robert Adams,” *nonsite* 19 (2016): 9-12, accessed November 2016, <http://nonsite.org/article/density-of-decision>.

the “weight” that accompanies all of these choices.⁵⁴ For Fried, Adams’ technical choices are fundamentally linked to his creative agency. Through the “density” of his decisions, Adams not only fashions images that are masterful in their aesthetic display, but which also signal his attention to every aspect of their production. Here, I extend Fried’s application of “density of decision” from Adams to Sommer. Through cropping, intensive contact printing, small, unique negatives, and images that are internally framed through “post-production” techniques, I contend that the photographer establishes the density of his decision making precisely through choices governing the physical construction of the print.

Sommer’s first photographs were exposed and printed at extremely small proportions. *Untitled* (1936) (fig. 1.2) measures at just 1 9/16 x 2 inches (about 2 x 2). Given its scale, this image is more easily viewed with the aid of a magnifying glass than with the naked eye. Here, Sommer pictures rocks and vegetation, demarcated through simple tonal contrasts. *Untitled* is a small, unassuming image, but it importantly reveals the photographer’s initial preference for small and tightly arranged compositions, as he tested out his comfort and confidence with the medium. In the summer of 1936, when Sommer met Edward Weston, he shared with the older photographer his recent work, including prints like *Untitled*. Weston encouraged Sommer to begin making exposures on 8 x 10-inch film, with a view camera. By 1938, he had purchased his first large format camera and *Jack Rabbit* (1939) (fig. 1.3) is one of the early photographs made with the new equipment.⁵⁵ The image shares formal similarities with *Untitled*, in the all-over arrangement of strewn pebbles, rocks, and dirt, with the stark addition of a flattened rabbit at center. In the expansion from 2 x 2 to 7 x 9, little changes compositionally. Though *Jack Rabbit* is larger, it remains a tightly cropped image; at 7 ½ x 9 7/16 inches it was smaller than the

⁵⁴ Fried, “Density of Decision,” 3.

⁵⁵ Watson, “Sommer Chronology,” 220-221.

standard trimmed 8 x 10-inch print. Like *Arizona Landscape* and *Untitled*, the allover detail is compacted within this restricted frame. The composition and cropping of *Jack Rabbit* indicate an effort on the artist's part to unify and order his work, subtly but crucially altering the standard range of the print to intensify the qualities of compactness in the scene, to enrich the space with unprecedented degrees of visual density and compression.

Weston and Sommer maintained a close relationship during the 1930-40s, evidenced by Weston's portrait of 1944 (fig. 1.4). From Weston, Sommer adopted the practice of contact printing from his (now larger) 8 x 10-inch negatives, which involves a one-to-one translation of negative to print. The closeness of paper and negative during exposure, with this method, yields prints that are unmatched in their clarity and detail. Sommer used contact printing to add and intensify the detail within his now expanded frame. *Jack Rabbit* was contact printed, and so was *Glass* (1943) (fig. 1.5). Made in the same year as *Arizona Landscape*, *Glass* is an example of Sommer's contact printing at its finest. Packed from edge to edge, the image contains copious shapes, tints and sizes of glass. Bottles, intact and broken, and thin plate sheets pile one on top of another, competing for space in the picture field. While the bottles mostly occupy the upper half of the image, in the bottom half layers of sheet glass rest, sandwiched together. The majority of these plates are smooth and clear – window or picture glass – but a few textured pieces make their diagonal entry from the lower left. At center, a broken shard marked (read upside down, from right to left) “W O” draws the eye into the composition. By opening up the frame and, through contact printing, intensifying the detail of his chosen subject, Sommer acknowledged disorder as the basic thematic material of his image. The slight cropping, then, serves an important role, as evidence of Sommer coming to terms with the chaos, the large piles of cascading glass briefly held in balance for the length of the exposure. This photograph presents a

further paradox in its achievement of opacity through glass. The layered transparency produces a kind of visual occlusion, although one that does not foreclose the desire to see further into the image.

As James Alinder has noted, contact printing was a highly significant decision for a photographer to make in the 1940s. During Sommer's *Arizona Landscape* period (1941-45), the use of more portable 35mm cameras quickly gained popularity. By 1945, these smaller cameras had widespread use and "for an artist to use a view camera and to make contact prints after 1945 became a rare exception," Alinder remarks.⁵⁶ These practices lost interest among those who found them to be laborious and time-consuming, outdated by newer, faster technology. Large-format cameras, for instance, urge the photographer to make more concentrated decisions about what to photograph, having far fewer frames to work with than a 35mm camera.⁵⁷ Only a small number of artists continued to choose these methods for the special range of effects they allowed. Contact printing increases the shock effect of Sommer's images, displaying the detail of works like *Glass* and *Arizona Landscape* with the sharpest, most extreme precision. This methodical, slow process of making photographs, paired with a ubiquitous effort to scale and trim prints to smaller than standard dimensions forecloses any account that aims to reduce Sommer's work to its chance bases.

Not only did Sommer make contact prints throughout the 1940s, but he continued the practice in a long career that extended into the 1990s. In works like *Circumnavigation of the Blood* of 1950 (fig. 1.6), Sommer combined contact printing with in-camera cropping. To make this photograph, Sommer inserted slats into his camera that "mask[ed] portions of the projected

⁵⁶ James Alinder, ed., *The Contact Print, 1946-1982* (Carmel, CA: Friends of Photography, 1982), 2-3.

⁵⁷ Alinder, ed., *The Contact Print*, 3-4.

image” during exposure.⁵⁸ This was a technique that he employed for multiple prints produced in the early 1950s, including *Circumnavigation* and *All Children Are Ambassadors* (1950). After exposure, these negatives were contact printed and then cropped further through hand trimming. Sommer referred to *Circumnavigation*, which is approximately the size of a 4 x 6-inch index card, as what he called a “miniature metaphysical inventory.”⁵⁹ The decision to both expose and print the negative at a smaller scale compresses this layered image and heightens its narrative impact. *Circumnavigation* is composed of multiple found illustrations collaged onto a weathered background of varying textures and tones. The central subject – the woman at center – is placed within a set of interwoven relations that the viewer must unfold. Just as with *Arizona Landscape*, *Jack Rabbit*, and *Glass*, the extraordinary detail of *Circumnavigation* draws the viewer in while simultaneously bringing awareness to the decisive limits of the photograph’s frame.

Constantly developing and expanding his practice, at the end of the 1950s Sommer began a new series of experimental works made from paint and smoke on cellophane and glass surfaces, which functioned as camera-less negatives. For these photographs, Sommer did not use the contact printing method nor are the resulting prints as small as the earlier works that I have discussed. Regardless of these differences, it is clear that questions of scale remained an important part of Sommer’s artistic process in this series. The negative for *Paracelsus* (1959) (fig. 1.7) a paint on cellophane work, for instance, is quite diminutive. Measuring at roughly 4 x 2 inches, this negative is smaller than the print of *Circumnavigation*. Using “dusty-rose-colored acrylic” on a rectangle of cellophane, Sommer manipulated the paint to create stippled texture,

⁵⁸ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, “Circumnavigation of the Blood,” online galleries, http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=126&piece_id=1058.

⁵⁹ Tom Maloney, “Frederick Sommer,” in *Frederick Sommer: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, ed. Sheryl Conkelton (Oxford, England: Clio Press, 1995), 39.

sweeping semi-transparent lines, and dark pools of smooth opacity.⁶⁰ Sommer's fascination and proclivity for work in miniature is revealed in this diaphanous painted creation. In fact, Keith Davis has even described the negative as a "delicate miniature painting."⁶¹ It contains infinitesimal, rich detail, serving as a blueprint for the enlarged photograph. For Sommer, it was important for the experimental negatives to function well at reduced proportions before enlargement. In contrast to Sommer's tightly cropped prints, in works like *Paracelsus* it is the negative that becomes the site of contraction.

Lastly, Sommer's insistent cropping and framing did not stop with the physical negative and print but were also realized through various printing techniques – most noticeably through dodging and burning. Another print from the *Arizona Landscape* series, from MoMA's collection (fig. 1.8) of 1943 demonstrates these techniques in action. The print has been carefully burned in at the center and dodged at the edges. Burning is a technique that allows more light to reach selected areas of the print during exposure, while dodging prevents areas from receiving additional light. Sommer's burning and dodging, in this *Arizona Landscape*, creates a dark perimeter (especially the top left and right-hand corners), in contrast to the brighter, center field.⁶² The dodged edges reinforce the print's taut, cropped border, doubly framing the image. Like the first landscape I discussed, this scene is loaded with various desert plants, small rocks,

⁶⁰ Center for Creative Photography, *Original Sources: Art and Archives at the Center for Creative Photography* (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 2002), 183.

⁶¹ Keith F. Davis, *Callahan, Siskind, Sommer: At the Crossroads of American Photography* (Sante Fe, NM: Radius Books, 2009), 19. Davis also comments on the *Cut Paper* series – large sheets of paper that Sommer cut designs into and then photographed – as works that are "miniaturized" through exposure and printing. (20) In the *Cut Papers*, the original design is reduced in scale through the photographic process, while paint on cellophane works like *Paracelsus* are designed at small scale and then enlarged for printing. (20)

⁶² Sommer did not make many prints from each negative, but when he did there was never an effort to maintain strict uniformity. He was known for saying: "Beautiful variations between prints are assets, not discrepancies." As a result, the various printings from the *Arizona Landscape* series vary widely. See: Sommer, "An Extemporaneous Talk," 379.

and boulders. Yet, Sommer's double frame aids the viewer in making sense of this otherwise disorienting landscape.

When Sommer's *Arizona Landscapes* were first exhibited, the most common response they generated was: "There's nothing to see."⁶³ Sommer, who was born in southern Italy and raised in the lush climates of Brazil, initially shared in the critics' puzzlement when he encountered the deserts of Arizona. As he described the encounter: "From not finding in the desert what I was accustomed to see in a landscape, I gradually had to realize that other things make up a landscape."⁶⁴ Sommer's photographs of the desert, animal remains, glass heaps, collaged objects, and painted abstractions are exercises in learning to see anew. They stand witness to the artist slowly gaining acceptance of his immediate surroundings and finding his way of seeing through it. We might say that his photographs replicate the visual discovery for us, drawing the viewer into their unfamiliar worlds. The dense compositions and tight cropping force the viewer to come to terms with the picture's packed contents, often exquisitely printed by direct contact with the negative. The subtle displacement of normative size in these works suggests Sommer's desire to implicitly point to his intervention, making his attentiveness and care for the work perspicuous to the viewer. Rather than chance, index or the arbitrary sign, I maintain that the above works thematize the ways in which chance can operate as a means through which order is achieved. If at first they seem to flaunt even the merest notions of finish and control, they ultimately solicit a kind of slow looking that encourages the viewer to acknowledge their careful, fastidious construction. As Sommer wrote in 1979: "Art is not arbitrary. A fine painting is not there by accident; it is not arrived at by chance. We are sensitive

⁶³ Kelsey, "Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature," 246. Sommer responds: "To a lot of people the way I was photographing landscapes it looked like there wasn't anything there. So if I hadn't paid attention to the design of the little bit I had, I wouldn't have had anything." (Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 212.)

⁶⁴ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 211.

to tonalities. The smallest modification of tonality affects structure. Some things have to be rather large, but elegance is the presentation of things in their minimum dimensions.”⁶⁵ No matter what the photograph represents, the outcome should be the tightest, most direct and intense statement that the artist can make. Or, in the artist’s words: “That is style: the most effective minimal means.”⁶⁶

Packing, Layering, Loading

“The more I got into [making collages] the more I could see that this was a graphic demonstration of how things come together.”

– Sommer, *The Constellations that Surround Us*

While the intensive cropping and lighting effects of Sommer’s prints draw us into these works, it is their dense, layered compositions that sustain our attention. Consider again *Circumnavigation* and a second photograph, *Pine Cone* (1947) (fig. 1.9). The occluded portions of both prints call attention to the works’ play between revelation and concealment, as the viewer slowly unravels but never undoes the fiction of the work. Shadows along a ripped edge next to the webbed fabric in *Circumnavigation*, for instance, raise curiosity about what lies just beneath this edge. A thin tear down the woman’s face at center draws the eye to the dark hatchings that show through from the image behind. This simultaneous build up, recession, and overlapping of parts within the image gives the perception that there are more layers than one can detect, at least on first glance. In its absorptive dynamic of hidden and seen parts, *Circumnavigation* closely resembles *Pine Cone*. The photograph presents a pine cone drawn inward, embedded within

⁶⁵ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, <http://www.fredericksommer.org>. Also found in Sommer’s “Linguistic & Pictorial Logic of General Aesthetics: A Discussion of the Ornamental Sense of Ideas” (A transcription of the Princeton seminars, taught by Frederick Sommer in 1979.)

⁶⁶ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 9, dated November 28, 1979. (Tape 17:8)

layers of natural and man-made debris. An opening in the layers reveals a partial view of the cone's scales. The low contrast lighting and deep pocket out of which the cone emerges draw the viewer in, imaginatively peeling back the dense strata. In *Pine Cone* and *Circumnavigation*, Sommer creates different facets in the image through the shifting relations of depth and relief. At the same time, he naturalizes the meeting of heterogeneous parts through tears or added layers that simultaneously join and divide, inviting further inspection.

This slow revelation makes visible Sommer's invention from found and made materials. Though "the sign is displayed in fragments already on the scene," Sommer notes, "the picture has to be put together."⁶⁷ In this section, I argue that the photographer's reordering and reanimation of found material constitutes an act of creative agency. In particular, I will focus on his reconstruction with man-made materials, in the collage and assemblage works. These works document man's encounter with nature, working it over into his own design. With the medium of photography, "you are limited to what you find," and the challenge of the photographer is to position himself in relation to the found world.⁶⁸ Sommer's layered, densely textured works, as a result, are indicative of their relationship with the environment, pointing to the greater contexts to which they belong and signaling the artist's work as an act of invention, layered upon previous creation. By positioning his work in relation to inherited materials with conviction, Sommer revivifies existing forms.

In descriptions of his early career, Sommer tied photographic invention to the artist's ability to cohere and transform disparate items that appear in front of his lens. Before he acquired an 8 x 10, large format camera, Sommer made small studies like *Untitled* (1936) (fig. 1.2), near

⁶⁷ Frederick Sommer, *The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics* (Stockton, NJ: Carolingian Press, 1972), Part Two (unpaginated).

⁶⁸ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 10, dated December 5, 1979. (Tape 19:5)

his home in Prescott, Arizona. In these works, he noted that he enjoyed discovering the juxtaposition of shapes on the forest floor, but “I had not yet learned how to relate what was on display to the ground on which it was displayed.”⁶⁹ After the arrival of his 8 x 10 camera, he retreated indoors, to better train his eye to see and describe the “interrelationship” between object and ground. Sommer largely did this work through his still life, *Chicken Parts* series (of 1938-39). These photographs sharply focus on discarded chicken pieces that he collected from the local grocery store, laid out in unusual combinations.⁷⁰ The white surfaces on which the chicken parts are placed verge on medical austerity, though most are conspicuously marked by residue. These spotted, unclean surfaces prefigure later collage and assemblage works, created over weathered backgrounds. Against the white surface, the chicken parts stand out in relief. In one photograph from 1939 (fig. 1.10), a chicken’s fragmented body pushes out from the white ground, as the anatomical details invite further scrutiny. Sommer here is interested in the relationship of the chicken to the ground, his head framed by the pool of liquid behind him, as well as a sense of internal layering present in the chicken’s anatomy. A translucent membrane is pulled over the chicken’s head and part of his beak, in an almost reverent gesture. This membrane covers but also reveals the eye socket and the outline of the chicken’s head underneath the veiny, viscous film.⁷¹

Through the *Chicken Parts* series, Sommer noted that he “began to have some feeling for the coherence of what was being shown.” “It was time,” he said, “to go back to nature.”⁷² In an early landscape photograph, *Champagne Rock* (1940) (fig. 1.11), Sommer’s sense of a more

⁶⁹ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 13, dated January 9, 1980. (25:8)

⁷⁰ Sommer, “The Constellations that Surround Us,” 210.

⁷¹ Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 229. Kelsey writes, in his description of *Chicken Parts* (1939): “It depicts the head, esophagus, and guts of a chicken, wrapped in a membrane that covers most of the head like a hood.”

⁷² FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 13, dated January 9, 1980. (25:8)

integrated figure and ground is expressed, uniting contradictions within the image. In *Champagne Rock*, Sommer has discovered a curiously shaped, freestanding rock. Standing in a small field of pebbles and strewn grass, the rock twists up out of the earth, balancing the weight of its large, square face on a small wrist-like pedestal. The sharp focus displays the variegated surface of the rock, from the flaking scales and fissures on its square face to the hollow indentations and openings to the right and below. In the upper register of his photograph, Sommer includes the dark mass of another rock formation, which serves as a contrast to the “champagne” rock in the foreground. While the two rocks do not physically touch, in the image they visually overlap. *Apache Trail* (fig. 1.12), made just a year later, expands to picture a large section of a rock wall, punctuated by variously colored bands of strata. This cut-away view depicts the horizontal bands interspersed with meandering trails and patches of shrubs and sand, creating a rich, variously textured surface. The diversity of rock shapes, in addition to the striations of the stone, accentuates the range and wealth of detail in the image. Unlike the contradiction and contrast of the two forms in *Champagne Rock*, here Sommer experiments with the integration of an all-over composition, the relationships of an expanded field.

Untitled, *Chicken Parts*, and the early landscapes show the artist’s labor as an activity of re-ordering and positioning himself in relation to what appears on the ground glass. As he explored the Arizona landscape, other scenes began to capture Sommer’s eye as new challenges, new visual possibilities. “Originally,” Sommer recalls, “I went around Arizona thinking of what nature did, what nature deposited at the places I visited. But after a while I found places that had been sort of invaded by man, or touched by man, were really more interesting. I began to get interested in these little leavings.”⁷³ *Trash Heap* (1940) (fig. 1.13) and *Glass* (1943) (fig. 1.5) are

⁷³ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 10, dated December 5, 1979. (19:17) The harsh Arizona light was also not conducive to photographing landscapes every day. By collecting discarded items from waste sites like *Trash*

two examples of the kinds of “leavings” that Sommer began to find. Here, he has turned a disorganized mass of material into a framed, structured image. These photographs demonstrate Sommer’s tendency to take on scenes that at first may appear meaningless or repetitious (like the *Arizona Landscapes*), cohering and creating formal relations between the objects pictured. In *Glass*, for instance, two perpendicular, large clear and dark capped bottles at lower right are juxtaposed while in *Trash Heap* black cylindrical shapes dot a white center field. The dense layers of *Trash Heap* and *Glass* hold our attention, as the chaotic mass takes on new shape in the photograph. For Sommer, the disarray was an advantage, a problem to solve, and the photograph documents the active negotiation between artist and environment. The dense matter pushes to the edges of the frame, putting pressure on the artist’s ability to make the scene legible.

Sommer gravitated toward man-made materials for their inherent richness of character, dense objects worked over by the hand of man and nature. He stated that the work of art is that which brings together “the work of nature and the work of man.” Photographs like *The Giant* and *Artificial Leg* demonstrate his interest in “the work of man” as “a chunk of nature ... that is highly encrusted by man.”⁷⁴ Rearranging found fragments into new, fantastical constructions, Sommer experimented with the “juxtaposition of unlikely or contradictory materials” as he worked to match figure against ground.⁷⁵ In *The Giant* (1943) (fig. 1.14), a paint-splattered, wood-paneled wall serves as the background for an assemblage construction of two highchairs, a small figurine, a badly worn baby doll arm and hand, and various other objects. The assorted fragments are culled together into a new arrangement. One might imagine the tractor operator positioned above the highchair to the right as a symbol for the artist, who holds the entire

Heap and *Glass*, Sommer could return with these to his studio and photograph indoors. (Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018).

⁷⁴ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 10, dated December 5, 1979. (19:17)

⁷⁵ Nordland, *Frederick Sommer*, 9.

structure together. *Artificial Leg* (1944) (fig. 1.15) shows Sommer similarly working to pair found object and background. In this construction, he has chosen a tattered, soiled wall to function as the backdrop for the artificial leg, made up of a ragged boot, modeled shin, and leather upper with holes for laces. *The Giant* and *Artificial Leg* both reveal how Sommer was considering the way he could bring his fragments into a new order, and how the layering of elements on a deliberately selected ground was central to this process. The “seasoning” of the objects also encouraged this unity. As the photographer stated: “If you juxtapose two surfaces that are unworn, they have nothing in common. But if you put two worn surfaces together, you may not have much of a match, but you have a beginning. They at least have some abrasions in common.”⁷⁶

Though close looking reveals the collage and assemblage works to be meticulously layered creations, they retain a sense of freshness and spontaneity even after objects are fossilized through the camera’s exposure. “The real match” of objects, Sommer says, “is something you cannot foresee. It has to have that kind of surprise, and that surprise has to survive into the photograph.”⁷⁷ Works including *The Giant* have that sense of precariousness, of items just held together. This precariousness puts the objects pictured in motion and encourages the viewer to track the unfolding spectacle of the image. The vitality of the original combination is preserved in Sommer’s well-known portrait of Max Ernst, a work produced with two once-discarded negatives that he recovered in his studio.⁷⁸ *Max Ernst* (1946) (fig. 1.16) is a result of a darkroom double exposure, where Ernst’s portrait was layered with a second exposed image of a peeled-paint wall. As with his early assemblage works, Sommer searched for the ideal

⁷⁶ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 10, dated December 5, 1979. (19:14)

⁷⁷ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 10, dated December 5, 1979. (19:14)

⁷⁸ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 10, dated December 5, 1979. (19:3-4)

integration of figure and ground for this image. In the portrait, Ernst's body – his face, arms, and torso – fuses with the wall through the double exposure, literally embedding him within the background. White splotches of paint streak down his hairline, forehead, and over his ear (and chest), his cheeks take on the rough surface of the wall, and dark stains extend onto his right shoulder and arm. Nails float above his head, which is framed between two vertical boards and one horizontal band, sunk in relief. By layering two images into one, Sommer gives Ernst's portrait a new character. As his skin takes on the mottled, chipped surface of the wall, the viewer contemplates his ambiguous status – is he human or inhuman? Ernst's sideways glance cuts through the upper horizontal band, affirming and animating his presence.⁷⁹

Few portraits exist in Sommer's corpus and the two for which he is best known – *Max Ernst* and *Livia* (1948) – integrate subject and background in distinct ways. *Livia* (fig. 1.17) pictures a young girl from Sommer's town in Prescott, Arizona, who is placed in front of a torn, two-panel background that replicates the swirls of a woodgrain surface.⁸⁰ Sommer composes the shot to show Livia directly at center, like Ernst framed by two darker, vertical panels that pass behind her shoulders, causing her white dress to stand out against the dark ground. However, in *Max Ernst*, not only does Sommer collapse subject and ground but he also narrows the tonal range (from *Livia*'s sharper contrast) to further encourage a sense of continuity between Ernst's body and the surface against which that body has been printed. The photographer's meticulous registration of the negatives and low-contrast printing exemplify his intentional, labored manufacture of the final image.

⁷⁹ Students comment on the photograph in a 1957 issue of *Aperture*. See: Minor White, "An Experiment in 'Reading' Photographs," *Aperture* 5, no. 2 (1957): 58-61. Many remark on the force of Ernst's gaze in the image, the "piercing expression of the eyes," as one student states. (59)

⁸⁰ Davis, "Living Art," 21. Davis provides an excellent biography of Sommer, the most extensive to date, particularly on Sommer's early life and influences.

Sommer gave new form to found materials not only through physical manipulation – in combining two objects or two negatives – but also through the addition of fictional titles, adding to and amplifying the meaning of the work. A photograph made in 1947 (fig. 1.18) exemplifies the interwoven relationship between title and image. As recounted in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, during this year, “In an abandoned miner’s cabin, Sommer finds pinned to the wall a collage of fragments from the Saturday Evening Post, which he photographs and titles *I Adore You*.”⁸¹ As with *The Giant* and *All Children*, in *I Adore You* Sommer has taken what he has found and made it his own, through the act of photographing and titling. The title of the photograph is drawn from dialogue in a novel by the French symbolist writer, Alfred Jarry, in an exchange between the main protagonist to his love interest.⁸² The resulting image points to multiple layers of creation embedded within the work, on which Sommer builds – from the miner’s original “collage,” to Sommer’s decision to photograph it, highlighting the male and female couple at center, and finally the title, which refers back to the original novel by Jarry. Within a single work, all of these stages of creative agency have been packed. These additions amplify the depth of relationships in the work, “a nest made of many, many layers.”⁸³

Circumnavigation and *All Children Are Ambassadors* emphasize the notion of the artwork as “a nest of many layers,” through a compact network of visual and metaphorical motifs. *All Children Are Ambassadors* (of 1950) (fig. 1.19) sustains and challenges the viewer through concealment and revelation, in both image and text. A display of the original objects, currently housed at the J. Paul Getty Museum (fig. 1.20), shows that Sommer combined two pieces of colored paper (one large, one small), a doll, and a wooden block into this

⁸¹ Watson, “Sommer Chronology,” 224.

⁸² Watson, “Sommer Chronology,” 224. The novel by Alfred Jarry is entitled *The Supermale*.

⁸³ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 8, November 19, 1979. (15:1)

composition.⁸⁴ Stacking the doll and block against the large paper, Sommer connects object and background with the small paper, which has been arranged around and behind the doll's waist. The doll hovers above but is still pulled back to the painted ground via this connective element. A wooden block that covers the doll's eyes gives the figure a sense of anonymity, allowing this doll to stand for the "all children" of the title. In *All Children*, the viewer is encouraged to look intensively, to unpack the image and its references one by one. Further, the viewer's discovery mimics the intensive nature of the artist's recovery and invention from found materials.

One of the better-known photographs of this period, *Moon Culmination* (1951) (fig. 1.21) amplifies visual drama in a combined collage/assemblage image. Like *All Children*, in *Moon Culmination*, Sommer relates the separate collage fragments through connective elements. The photograph is made up of three layers: wallpaper background, a discarded glass painter's palette, and, on top, two illustrated figures excised from a nineteenth-century magazine.⁸⁵ Although the palette has mostly been worked over by the painter's brush, in certain areas the creases and spots of the wallpaper are clearly visible. The illustrated figures have been carefully aligned on the palette with the existing (and perhaps added) paint marks, integrating the figures with their immediate background and further emphasizing Sommer's intervention as one that occurs upon the recycled workings of others. Even the crease in the wallpaper at top emphasizes the arc of paint and yields additional dynamism to the figures' upper bodies. Photographer and teacher, Robert Forth, comments on the photograph in a 1956 issue of *Aperture*: "The woman's arm extends out of the triangle area – no that's paint. So what, it works; she's now connected to the *paint*."⁸⁶ The paint animates the figures, billowing out from behind the woman's head and torso,

⁸⁴ Watson, "Sommer Chronology," 227. This display is reproduced in Watson's chronology.

⁸⁵ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, "Moon Culmination," online galleries, http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=126&piece_id=1059.

⁸⁶ Smith et al., "Fredrick Sommer," 110.

and providing a platform for her feet. Sommer has cut the illustration so that the moment of dramatic climax – the kiss – is pressed into the smallest point of the triangular incision. As with *All Children*, the connective features (the paint, the glass) ground the figures, which also seem to hover above the palette. The title – *Moon Culmination* – adds to the drama, suggesting the culmination of the kiss captured as the figures lift off the ground. While the “heads of the figures” are pulled back into the paint, Forth remarks, “the feet come out on top,” symbolizing the meeting of materials with various ages and histories in the photograph – which its maker referred to as a “history of forms and layering.”⁸⁷ In *Moon Culmination*, Sommer has brought these random parts into a decisive unity.

Like *All Children*, the objects from which *Moon Culmination* was made still exist, now residing in the Metropolitan Museum’s collection (fig. 1.22). The composition of cut-out figures on glass has been removed from its original wallpaper background in its current display. Framed by dark wood and placed on Masonite board, the glass palette and affixed illustrations are illuminated against a new dark ground. The original background yields greater texture and density to Sommer’s 1951 photograph, when viewed in comparison.⁸⁸ For one only familiar with the black and white photograph, the colors of the assemblage are jarring at first sight. Streaks of sky-blue paint in the upper left corner of the palette become dark striations through which the dotted wallpaper peeks through in Sommer’s photograph. The rusty, orange-white cloud of paint that expands behind the woman’s head is translated into a mottled, gray-white patch. Sommer employs the narrower range of black and white to further unify the various parts of his

⁸⁷ Smith et al., “Fredrick Sommer,” 110 and Sommer, *Words / Images*, 26. “The cohesion,” Sommer noted, “of *Moon Culmination* is the coming together of two things that are unknown to each other.” (Sommer, *Words / Images*, 27.)

⁸⁸ This original wallpaper is housed, alongside the objects for *All Children*, at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

assemblage construction. Simultaneously, the sharp focus of the 8 x 10 camera brings out the texture and detail of every part of the construction.

Moon Culmination is a photograph that forces the viewer to question what is presented in the photograph. We are encouraged to look close, to untangle its many layers. How was it made and how are we to understand the “culmination” – to use the photograph’s title – of the multiple, interlocking parts that form its variegated surface? The built-up material challenges the viewer’s ability to see all layers of the image. Yet, new meaning emerges from the packed detritus. Sommer’s use of the medium proves its capacity to take in a mass of material placed before the lens and disproves its sole use for means of clarification, documentation, or pure description. Additionally, it is through his compositional choices that order is created in the image.

Perhaps no photograph asserts the agency of the artist as emphatically as *The Thief Greater Than His Loot* (1955) (fig. 1.23). The assemblage for this photograph has been formed through the stacking of items on a multi-textured surface, where some items are obscured but others disclose the layers beneath them. Centrally placed on a rectangular panel is a dark skeletal figure, with the pathways of its major veins and arteries marked in white. The skeleton is placed on a cut-out, circular shape, above a white, chipped ground and woven gauze, but pressed behind a large, white “webby” form. Not fully opaque, the circle partially reveals the white ground beneath, and the skeleton’s head and limbs emerge from under the white form and several collaged plant illustrations at top. All of these layers are tacked down by a set of wooden sticks nailed to the top right corner of the panel. *Thief’s* title is central to its intended meaning. From junkyard to studio, Sommer collected and recombined raw material for his compositions. Incorporating at least six separate layers of found or constructed objects, Sommer as photographer here embodies the “thief” who has transcended the base materiality of his “loot,”

arriving at a novel visual statement. The folds in the top left edge of the panel additionally mimic the turning of pages, suggesting the possibility of even more layers and of the artist's capacity to unearth and rework future surfaces. *Thief* emphasizes the importance of taking what you find and "elaborating" it to make it your own.

Sommer's early works and particularly his collage and assemblage photographs put into practice his philosophy of "environmental relationship awareness," in developing a sophisticated artistic response to the fixed conditions of any given situation. Keith Davis describes the images as a combination of "synthesis and invention," while Henry Holmes Smith, Sommer's contemporary, characterized his works made from found objects as "accidents-become-artifacts."⁸⁹ The terms "invention" and "artifact" in these statements lend significance to the nature of Sommer's response, molding once discarded items into lasting impressions. Davis and Smith's remarks also point to Sommer's willingness to take on chaotic, difficult subjects. The more complex or elaborate a scene, or set of found objects, the better. From his background as a landscape architect, Sommer observed: "I had learned as a designer to make advantages from disadvantages. You cannot handle a design problem by throwing away the disadvantages, then you throw the problem itself away ... You build with what you have."⁹⁰ The layered density of these works – in their allover, stacked, and double exposed accretions – emphasize the artist's moves as an addition to, or an improvisation on, a preexisting landscape. These interventions harmonize the various aspects of the work but also, like the tight cropping, signal his hand in the process. Precisely scaled and heavily packed, photographs like *Circumnavigation* and *Thief* are images of incredible density, both in their visual display and, to recall Fried, in the "weighted decisions" of their manufacture.

⁸⁹ Davis, "Living Art: The Sources of Frederick Sommer's Work," 13 and Smith et al., "Fredrick Sommer," 104.

⁹⁰ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 209.

Working with found materials and pre-manipulated surfaces, Sommer both acknowledged his artistic inheritance and takes on the challenge of reanimating what he has acquired. Not only did he embrace this challenge, but the photographs indicate that it is only through full immersion into inherited, existing material that the artist emerges with something meaningful to say. On the topic of borrowing, Sommer noted: “All rare things should be lent away and I have borrowed very freely.”⁹¹ Opening himself multiple sources of influence, Sommer models a relationship to photography that takes advantage of the medium’s generosity while making his mark, positively posturing himself to what is found.

Although the collage and assemblage works are primarily studio creations, Sommer’s choice to introduce found objects demonstrates his willingness to let the world into his compositions. The layered surfaces and non-neutral backgrounds on which the collages and assemblages are built point to their composite origins, as well as the photograph’s inherent inclusiveness. His ground glass filled with an assortment of fragments, Sommer thought about how to “imaginatively graft on a few departures” on what he had found, staking his claim in relation to these given materials.⁹² Emmet Gowin, photographer and student of Sommer, wrote of the collages:

In a sense they are a combination of what he’s been involved with all along: the assembly of things that have somewhat lost their original purpose put back into an active configuration. Taking material from the world, which is generally mundane, and adapting a new beginning. He gives things an order, new combinations, new associations that were not obvious: shifting what was private and local to what is worldly. The collages take on all of our history, all of time, all of imagery.⁹³

Sommer’s densely layered works set up larger than life dramas awaiting their resolving denouements, held in suspense in the photograph’s emulsion for the viewer to discover. His

⁹¹ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 55.

⁹² Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 379.

⁹³ Gowin, “Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer,” 56-57.

random assortment of collected items turn from “accident” to “artifact,” to use Smith’s words, odd moments of originality emerging out of recycled rubbish. They are works that directly confront the viewer – they make us aware of the challenge of creating meaning from chaos, of positioning oneself to the world, and of acknowledging what exists while having the imaginative insight to lay claim to something new. Intense and strange, but totally meant, they visualize and demonstrate how “unknowns” can meet and “cohere” under the uniting force of the camera’s lens.⁹⁴

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Sommer’s photographs operate through a process of slow revelation. Through their tight cropping and printing, the photographs jolt the viewer, who is led through an extended unfolding of the print’s many layers. In this process of unfolding, the viewer is made aware of the rich, internal relations as well as the artist’s work to unify disparate elements within the photograph. Through his compositional decisions, Sommer’s agency becomes visible, giving shape and order to what is captured before the camera lens.

As Nancy Newhall’s comments reveal, Sommer’s photographic methods were novel to the medium at mid-century. In opposition to his contemporaries, who preferred straightforward, unmanipulated work, he took advantage of the absorptive nature of film, effortlessly loading his images to the brim. His photographs demonstrate that the best way to establish meaning in photography is to signal the artist’s intervention, here through packing, layering, loading, scaling, printing, and trimming. Though they often seem to be precariously held together, pushing to the brink of total disorder, it is through Sommer’s framing and positioning to his

⁹⁴ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 27.

found material that he most clearly establishes his agency. At a moment when the photographic medium had reached a crisis in its self-definition, captured in Berenice Abbott's 1951 "Photography at the Crossroads," Sommer put forward a compelling, if controversial, model of photographic autonomy.⁹⁵ His dense and difficult works simultaneously challenged and reanimated the medium, encouraging new forms of expression and engagement.

I conclude by pausing to note how the photographs enact not only a novel form of agency for photography but a new means of sociality. Sommer employs the photograph's inclusiveness, demonstrating how the world can be transformed into the work, which in itself offers new possibilities for perceiving and understanding the world. It is for this reason that his works are constructed to operate by forced shock and slow revelation. He asserts: "Only by staying and amplifying and looking again at what we already are, which is self-knowledge, can we take a step forward."⁹⁶ Sommer's cropped, richly printed, layered works are intended to show viewers how we might see and perceive the world in new ways. The work encourages this awareness and models the "elaborated" life through modes of picturing.

The works further emphasize their embeddedness in the social through the inclusion of man-made objects. Sommer signals his production as one of recovery and invention, reordering what he finds into an original construction. In noting that "you are limited to what you find," Sommer foregrounds the communal nature of artistic activity, the idea that what the artist creates is never fully new, but always recycled material. Through their layered density, the collage and assemblage works make transparent the invented fiction of art and life. The artist's "elaboration" is then be offered up as an interpretation to others – it becomes available to them as something upon which they can build.

⁹⁵ Abbott, "Photography at the Crossroads," 179-184.

⁹⁶ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 7, dated November 14, 1979. (13:2)

Shaping found materials into new compositions, Sommer's photographs enact individual and social agency through the "new combinations" they present to us. The photographer's ordering crucially demonstrates the way we make sense of the world. As Sommer notes: "Everybody is interested in aesthetics. Aesthetics is finally the care of the home where all of us live. We have to be interested in the cohesion of our survival."⁹⁷ Art thus gives an example of how life can be lived with cohesion and conviction. Ultimately, "the work of art is society."⁹⁸ Far from throwing their meaning to chance, Sommer's works instead rigorously negotiate and recover individual meaning within the social. As Emmet Gowin writes of the collages, they depict "all of our history, all of time, all of imagery." His photographs draw their material from a shared inventory, returning it reanimated, revealing how the work can bring "new insights" and new solutions to the social condition through the act of creative invention.

⁹⁷ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 4, dated October 10, 1979. (7:3)

⁹⁸ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 4, dated October 10, 1979. (7:4)

Chapter 2

Looking Close: War-Era Works

Introduction

Frederick Sommer's best-known works were produced during World War II, between 1939 and 1945. Sommer's main piece of photographic equipment was an 8 x 10 large format camera. Based in central Arizona, the artist was ideally situated to explore sites including the Grand Canyon, Painted Desert, and Petrified Forest National Park. The photographer's wife, Frances Sommer, a social worker for the state of Arizona in Yavapai County, dropped Frederick off at spots closer to their home in Prescott while she visited with clients.⁹⁹ During these trips within Yavapai, and through excursions to Painted Desert and the Grand Canyon, Sommer surveyed the Arizona landscape, making exposures of iconic places alongside more remote landscapes.

During the late 1930s-1940s, we witness the artist form a relationship with the Arizona landscape – its impenetrability, isolation, and brilliant natural wonders. Sommer's wartime work is at the center of the critical literature on the artist, with very little attention given to his extensive postwar production. Ian Walker, for instance, in a 2008 article for *Journal of Surrealism of the Americas* engages the wartime series, making an argument for the “ambiguous” nature of the pictures.¹⁰⁰ Walker characterizes Sommer's photographs by their “unfocused, undifferentiated composition.”¹⁰¹ John Timberlake, likewise, who produced a dissertation on Sommer in 2012 entitled “The Sapphic Sublime of Frederick Sommer,” states

⁹⁹ Ian Walker, “‘As If One's Eyelids Had Been Cut Away’: Frederick Sommer's Arizona Landscapes,” *Journal of Surrealism of the Americas* 2, no. 2 (2008): 201.

¹⁰⁰ Walker, “‘As If One's Eyelids Had Been Cut Away,’” 185.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

that the landscape photographs induce “fragmentation” and “immersion” on the part of the viewer.¹⁰² According to Timberlake, Sommer’s photographs challenge the normative depiction of “figure and ground,” a “tension” displaced on the “viewer.”¹⁰³ Finally, Robin Kelsey, in his recent book *Photography and The Art of Chance* (2015) considers Sommer’s Arizona Landscape pictures, placing them in stark contrast to Sommer’s West Coast colleague, Edward Weston.¹⁰⁴ While Weston’s photographs show “wholeness” and “unification,” Kelsey states photographs such as *Glass* (1943) depict “pictorial shattering.”¹⁰⁵ Walker, Timberlake, and Kelsey argue for the unsettled, chance-driven, and viewer-oriented nature of Sommer’s WWII-era photographs.

While various points in Walker, Timberlake, and Kelsey’s texts have validity, I wish to pivot to instead consider the impact of Sommer’s intervention on the depiction of landscape and to assert the strength of his deliberate, compositional efforts. I argue that Sommer’s *Arizona Landscapes* show the photographer contending with the seemingly impenetrable desert and ultimately taking on the landscape as a new photographic challenge, representing the Arizona desert as a site of life and death. The desert landscapes of Yavapai County were at once overwhelming but still accessible to the photographer, expressing both great richness and empty expanse. Sommer took on the role of mediator and translator, using his 8 x 10 camera as a tool with which to understand the great stretches of rolling hills, breathtaking valleys, and vast open expanse. The works from this series represent the significance of the balance of life and death, communicated through densely packed, tightly cropped photographs symbolizing wealth and barrenness. The scholars above have meditated on the intense composition many of the works

¹⁰² John Timberlake, “The Sapphic Sublime of Frederick Sommer” (PhD diss., University of London, Goldsmiths’ College, 2012), 3.

¹⁰³ Timberlake, 3; 9; 12.

¹⁰⁴ Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 214-248.

¹⁰⁵ Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 218; 217; 247.

share and tight cropping making Sommer's horizonless desert more severe than conventional landscape photographs. In his 1984 *Words / Images*, Sommer writes the following about the landscape of the West:

Climatic conditions in the West give things time to decay and come apart slowly. They beautifully exchange characteristics from one to the other. Great accommodations take place during the time that this is happening. In New Mexico and Arizona one can find filter systems that are built when twigs that have been carried by rain form structures that continue to collect from the flow. They vary as different kinds of matter contribute to their structure. They are models of the way cell life is built.¹⁰⁶

From "decay" Sommer notes, the very structure of new creation is found. The photographer confronts the Arizona landscape understanding the importance of evolution, change, and modification. The ability to survive was based, for this artist, on the ability to adapt to the unexpected, a willingness to change.

In my description of the landscapes I give a comprehensive picture of Sommer's development of the series and the WWII-era works in total, unpacking how the *Arizona Landscapes* fit into a larger understanding of the desert for Sommer and serve as a subject for a key set of photographic concerns. Unlike the above authors I will consider the *Arizona Landscapes* sequence as a whole as well as addressing their broader context of production. The period between 1939-1945 in his corpus constitutes a unique and still not fully explained moment that requires deeper evaluation to understand the impact of this series on his long career, on Sommer's photographic decision-making, and to an audience contending with the role of this series in the context of his WWII-era production.

Through this period, one sees the landscape as a focused subject in Sommer's work. One can see him testing out different photographic compositions in the 1940-42 works. Through the advancement of his camera technique, and as the understanding and relationship with Arizona

¹⁰⁶ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 27.

grows, the landscape is transformed in the prints. In 1943, Sommer made the dramatic decision to crop out the horizon from the landscape entirely. These works are those for which Sommer is best-known. He explored horizonless composition in a range of photographic encounters, making photographs of the desert, a heap of discarded and delicately balanced glass, the Colorado River, and even in a creek bed near his home in Prescott, Arizona. In these works, diverse subject matter fills the frame, creating dense patterns of texture, masterfully printed by Sommer. Like Weston, who shared chemistry and developing information with him, Sommer worked in the darkroom to produce prints with excellent tonal range and lustrous finish—giving everyday objects powerful visual force.¹⁰⁷ In 1945, Sommer photographed petroglyphs and a continued subject of focus: decaying desert animals. In these works, he contemplated the desert's traces of an ongoing cycle of life and death and attempted to capture the landscape as it reveals this cycle.

While Sommer's career was extremely diverse, the genre of landscape was one which he grappled with intensively at this moment in his career. As viewers we acknowledge this photographer's encounter with nature as a process of discovery, growth, and endurance. In the following discussion, it is my goal to disclose Sommer's understanding of the desert landscape. Arizona might be viewed as barren and unforgiving or as wild, rich, and beautiful. Sommer attempted to mine the photographic vistas before his lens for the pictorial possibilities they yielded. The photographs that result are testaments to the artist's efforts, initially as a foreigner, to understand the Arizona desert and to utilize the landscape as a source for his immediate photographic concerns.

In this chapter, I will consider the World War II-era works chronologically, putting his work in relation to Weston's and thinking about these works in relation to developments in "all-

¹⁰⁷ Edward Weston to Frederick Sommer, undated, Box 14, Folder 11, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

over” painting. Through comparison to the work of Weston and Jackson Pollock, Sommer’s work can be discussed in relation to art production more generally in the late 1930s and the 1940s. In letters between Weston and Sommer, for instance, the two photographers went back and forth about the difficulty of photographing with the film available in the late 1930s, and the technical compensations necessary for shooting landscape and sky, particularly under the bright Western sun. As Lanier Graham has observed the *Arizona Landscapes* predate Pollock’s all-over “drip paintings” by four years.¹⁰⁸ In my discussion I seek to posit my readings of Sommer’s World War II-era works against those given by Walker, Timberlake, and Kelsey. I will address each series—*Colorado River Landscapes*, photographs of Jerome, Painted Desert, and other sites across Arizona before 1942, *Arizona Landscapes*, and the 1945 desert animals and petroglyphs—building from one series to the next Sommer’s understanding of the landscape, considering the technical and artistic choices that guided his artistic production. As I do so, I will draw on the theoretical writings of Clement Greenberg as well as other contemporary critics to reconsider Sommer’s photographic challenge from 1939-1945.

1940-1942: *Colorado River Landscapes*, Painted Desert, and Yavapai

Between the years 1940-1942, Sommer photographed throughout the state of Arizona, California, and Utah. He photographed the Colorado River, Death Valley, Jerome, Arizona, Painted Desert, Petrified National Forest, the Vermillion Cliffs of Northern Arizona, Zion National Park, Utah, in addition to *Arizona Landscapes* in the rocky hills of Yavapai County. In these photographs, Sommer samples a variety of natural vistas and tries out both the exclusion and inclusion of the horizon. The photographer’s proclivity for all-over composition is clear in

¹⁰⁸ Graham, “The Art of Frederick Sommer Parts I and II,” 47.

these works. In a handful of images from this period, a strip of sky anchors the photograph at top, the intense Arizona blue translating merely as a white line in the print. In others, Sommer carefully adjusts compositional structure, depicting the landscape with a structured fore, middle, and background, expansive vista, or as a sheer vertical plane, facing the viewer. The 1940-42 years were a highly experimental and formative moment in Sommer's understanding of the landscape and in his own photographic expression. With the *Arizona Landscape* series, Sommer comes to terms with the desert through the 8 x 10, a relatively new camera for him and a new way of seeing.

In *Trash Heap* (1940) (fig. 1.13), piles of detritus now read as dark and light clusters in the photographic print. *Trash Heap* is packed with various items that together form the overall texture of the photograph before us. Wood pieces intermingle with white material and variously sized dark masses appear in the lower left and throughout the composition's mid to upper half. *Trash Heap* has an intense diagonal pull, with the white material (bags or cloth) positioned roughly at center. This photograph is a precursor to work that will follow from the 1939-1945 period in Sommer's corpus. While the early 1940s pictures are all highly variable in composition – Sommer has not systematized his style of capturing landscape yet – they reveal a few crucial tendencies in his work: the lean towards all-over composition, a painterly approach, and a desire to highlight texture over a recognizable subject, choosing to privilege composition over depiction. The more one looks at these photographs the more their internal structure leads you to the intricate abstract compositions created from found materials. As in *Glass* (1943) (fig. 1.5), in *Trash Heap* Sommer fills the frame with dense imagery. *Trash Heap* is not special, filled to the brim with castaway materials, but it is how he shapes this material and uses it as a source for pictorial composition through his camera that matters here. Works such as *Champagne Rock*

(1940) (fig. 1.11) are more selectively cropped, as he decides to intensely focus on one object. *Trash Heap* and *Champagne Rock* both fill the frame, and, in both photographs, Sommer is thinking about the richness of detail that can be displayed in an all-over composition versus in a more focused, detailed study.

1940 is the year Sommer first began photographing the Colorado River Landscape. In a photograph taken at Pima Point along the South Rim of the Grand Canyon (fig. 2.1), the twists and turns of the river and canyon wind through the image. Sommer crops out the canyon rim and sky, turning to a deep study of the canyon's internal structure. In another *Colorado River Landscape* (1940) (fig. 2.2) the sky is cropped, leaving its trace through the shadows of clouds hovering high above. Part of the canyon wall anchors the photograph at the bottom left corner. The Colorado River is spotted at center left, forging its way back through the image. Although the photograph (and this series) is named *Colorado River Landscape*, Sommer chooses to describe with his camera the river's surroundings (the canyon) more than the river itself. The photograph plays with what is pictured and hidden from view – the horizon in the latter *Colorado River Landscape* cropped but the clouds giving hint to what is above, the river portrayed subtly but largely understood as the natural force responsible for giving the canyon its shape and grandeur. As with many of Sommer's photographs, in the 1940 *Colorado River Landscapes* he experiments with the photograph as a pictorial form which draws the viewer in but does not make its meaning or deeper significance immediately legible.

Sommer also worked with landscape at Death Valley, Jerome, and Painted Desert. The Death Valley pictures, one taken from Dante's View (both dating to 1940) are sweeping overviews but ones that are also contained by a clearly articulated framing edge. *Death Valley from Dante's View* (fig. 2.3) resembles Ansel Adams's *Frozen Lake and Cliffs, Sierra Nevada*,

Sequoia National Park, California (negative date 1932) (fig. 2.4) in stacking the valley (in Adams's case – the frozen lake) between the crater at the bottom and the rising hills at the top of photograph. The critical difference in the comparison between Adams and Sommer's works is that, though they have a compositional affinity, Sommer confines Death Valley, compressing the valley space between natural formations that appear below and above the valley floor. Adams, by contrast, in *Frozen Lake and Cliffs* experiments with all-over structure, but although the photograph is banded by the frozen lake and reflection of stone in the water at bottom, Adams provides compositional relief through the vertical sweep of the rock wall. Presumably, this rock wall continues beyond our vision. Although Sommer and Adams both experiment with what is seen and not seen, Sommer takes the compositional strategy of all-over to a more intense level than Adams does in *Frozen Lake and Cliffs*. *Death Valley California with Bad Water at Bottom* (fig. 2.5) pictures the valley likewise framed by mountains at the top and bottom of the image. Though not Sommer's strongest print, lightly printed and less sharp, it is an important example. The line of "bad water" creates a diagonal through the image, beginning close to the top left corner. The valley is captured with a long view but is divided by the water and salt bottom. In his Death Valley photographs, Sommer structures the photograph by framing the valley with the rugged mountains above and below.

In Jerome, Sommer oriented his works around homes and businesses built into the hills. In these photographs, the manmade accommodates and adapts to the natural environment. The sky appears as a thin line at top again, above a mountain range, in one image (fig. 2.6). The lower half of this photograph shows houses clustered over a few hillsides. Above center a trail of smoke parallels the white band of the horizon and the mountain rim, tying natural and manmade elements together visually in the photograph. Like *Colorado River Landscape* (fig. 2.2) a

diagonal slope anchors the image on the bottom left. In another image of Jerome (fig. 2.7), Sommer captures groups of buildings from an aerial perspective. He excludes the horizon and brings more depth to the image through the distance depicted between his position above and the buildings below. The sharp drop from the bottom right corner gives a dramatic point of view to the photograph. Sommer traveled to Painted Desert, where he made multiple photographs in 1940. The repetitive geography of Painted Desert resembles the twists and turns of the Colorado River Landscape, and here Sommer continues to experiment with the inclusion and exclusion of the sky. In *Painted Desert* (fig. 2.8), for instance, the colorations of stone are captured in shaded light, and in high contrast, drawing the viewer's focus more intensely to the "painted" stone. Other photographs of Painted Desert in this year take a more sweeping view of this wondrous natural formation. In a photograph of the adjacent Petrified National Forest (fig. 2.9), a more expansive vista is portrayed, showing the painted desert on the righthand side of the photograph, other stone formations, as well as further layers of land and sky receding into the distance. In Jerome and in photographs of Painted Desert, Sommer considers the inclusion and exclusion of the sky and thematically posits the relationship between the untouched land and man's interventions into the desert landscape through their formal relations.

In several works from this experimental 1940-42 period, Sommer radically adjusts the compositional structure of his pictures. This experimentation is preceded by a work like *Sedona, Arizona* (1939) (fig. 2.10) with its highly organized front, middle, and background. *Sedona, Arizona* is populated with dense trees in the foreground. Neatly plowed fields at center serve as perspective lines, drawing the eye to patches of vegetation in the background. Sommer uses the natural coloration of the scene to lend tonal variety to the print, from the silvery marks of dark bushes in the background to the light-kissed trees in the foreground. Emmet Gowin's *The Hint*

That Is A Garden (1975) (fig. 2.11), dedicated to Sommer, also depicts a strict division of landscape. Gowin's photograph was shot in Siena, Italy and although Sommer's was taken in Sedona, Arizona they share a striking similarity. A master printer who experiments with bleaching and over-printing, Gowin expands the print's tone and virtuously prints with great depth, richness, and beauty.¹⁰⁹ It's important to note that Gowin's print has a central focus – the tree at center – but Sommer's photograph lacks a central subject. Gowin's landscape radiates out from the middle, while Sommer's remains bound by the sections of landscape at top and bottom.¹¹⁰ In other works made during this period frontality and layered presence are also explored. Examples of these include *Untitled (Vermillion Cliffs)* (1940), *Apache Trail* (1941), and *Zion National Park, Utah* (1941). In *Untitled (Vermillion Cliffs)* (fig. 2.12), Sommer points his camera to a cluster of large rocks in the foreground, and in place of the horizon a layered rock band fills the background. *Apache Trail* (fig. 1.12) depicts a sheer rock wall, its sides and horizon obscured. Instead what the viewer is confronted with is the impressive rock face of *Apache Trail*, its different stone layers filling the frame. A tight-cropped view of *Zion National Park, Utah* (fig. 2.13) resembles *Apache Trail*, showing Sommer's compositional consistency, the camera focusing in on the vertical rock, dotted with vegetation, while a dark niche lures the viewer in directly at center. All of these prints are tightly cropped in camera, removing the horizon. The 1940-42 years were a truly experimental and formative moment within the WWII-era period, where Sommer thought about how to center, structure, and anchor his images.

¹⁰⁹ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2019. See also: Lynne Warren, ed., *Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Photography* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 625.

¹¹⁰ Kelsey also discusses the “dispersion” of Sommer's photographs. See: Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 221.

Beginning in 1942 and 1943, Sommer started to dramatically cut his landscape photographs, cropping all without horizon and also composing each with an intense “all-over” structure. What might have been inspired by technical issues relating to film exposure became the key source of a new approach. In letters Sommer and Edward Weston exchanged between 1938-1939, as Sommer was turning his focus to the Arizona landscape, the two photographers converse about the technical difficulty and benefits of shooting with Isopan film. Weston writes: “Did you try the new fast Isopan? Beautiful emulsion – I have been making exposures as fast as 1/300 sec. on seastorms. Something new for me.”¹¹¹ Sommer replies: “Like the new Isopan except for the skys as they’re all streaked. What has been your experience?”¹¹² These technical glitches are likely the reason that Sommer experimented with the inclusion and exclusion of the horizon in the early 1940s. *Arizona Landscape* (1941) (fig. 2.14) shows several hills with a band of bright, clear sky above. A clear divide – made clearer by the Arizona light – is shown between land and sky, the outline of the hills marked against the bright, empty air. This photograph is never discussed as a precursor to later *Arizona Landscapes* even though it serves as a noteworthy moment in Sommer’s career. *Arizona Landscape* (1943) (fig. 1.1) is an example of a more extreme composition. Like Sommer’s aerial views of Jerome, in this *Arizona Landscape*, he completely eliminates the sky, which was likely poorly captured on the film. In the shift between these 1941 and 1943 *Arizona Landscapes*, Sommer starts to close down the frame, working through the problem of capturing the horizon with images that cut out this element of the composition entirely. In 1943, this cropping becomes a radical, complete decision for his work.

¹¹¹ Edward Weston to Frederick Sommer, November 19, 1938, Box 14, Folder 8, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

¹¹² Frederick Sommer to Edward Weston, April 10, 1939, Edward Weston Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

Before turning in depth to the 1943 works it is worth pausing to consider Sommer's *Colorado River Landscapes* of 1942. In 1942, Sommer returned to the Colorado River Landscape, making multiple photographs picturing canyon stone and the Colorado River, the swift-moving river often invisible, zigzagging down at the canyon's heart. From different points along the Grand Canyon, Sommer captured various perspectives of the river and the canyon's famously stunning limestone, sandstone, and shale layers.¹¹³ There is one thing the *Colorado River Landscapes* of this year share: their horizonless character. In these works, Sommer renders monumentality within the limits of the photographic frame. Certain images depict a more expansive view of the river and canyon, such as *Colorado River Landscape* (fig. 2.15), which the Sommer Foundation notes was taken from Lipan Point. Others focus on the repetitive pattern of stone, like rolling waves, as in *Colorado River Landscape* (fig. 2.16) from Hopi Point. Sommer studied the landscape and river from different perspectives. *Colorado River Landscape* (fig. 2.17), seems to be one of the most successful from this series, showing the weight of the stone, shadows in the back-upper half of the image, and through the canyon walls the river drawing the eye back through the image. In contrast to the 1940 Colorado River Landscape images, the 1942 prints are more weighted and focused on the structure of the stone. These horizonless works play with opposites – of vastness and containment, variation and uniformity, light and dark. As with other works from this period, Sommer frames the canyon at different points and depicts the layered stone as layered parts of the image, treating the canyon as a subject with multiple variations and permutations.

¹¹³ "Geology," National Park Service, Grand Canyon National Park Arizona, accessed October 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/grca/learn/nature/grca-geology.htm>.

1943: The *Arizona Landscapes*

With the exception of works like *Sahuaro Forest, Arizona* (1942) (fig. 2.18) – picturing a saguaro forest with a clear sky band at the top of the image and *Untitled* (1942) (fig. 2.19), in which a towering saguaro nearly fills the frame, yet is surrounded by negative space – 1943 marks the year of Sommer’s radical elimination of the horizon from his landscapes thereafter. Not only is the horizon eliminated but Sommer chooses “Rich Hill” as a sustained subject. Filled with a dense web of desert life, the hill was the ideal subject for these works. Rocks, saguaros and other natural formations fill the frame, covering every centimeter with pictorial detail. In the glare of the Arizona sun, “Rich Hill” forms a single fabric, the rocks and saguaros serving as a basis for Sommer’s invention.

As with the *Colorado River Landscapes*, the 1943 *Arizona Landscapes* were taken at different points, viewing “Rich Hill.” One *Arizona Landscape*, showing Rich Hill C, portrays boulders stacked like beads climbing up from the photograph’s lower left. *Arizona Landscape* (fig. 2.20) has a strong slope, emphasized by the line emerging from the bottom left and repeated by stones piled up to the top right of the image. This image was photographed in early morning or late afternoon light creating strong shadows to the right, giving definition to the stacked stone forms. This work is characterized by its dramatic all-over composition. However, Sommer pushes all-over composition to a more dramatic extreme with *Arizona Landscape* (1943) (Rich Hill A) (fig. 2.21). Bathed in the intense Arizona sun, and likely taken closer to mid-day or early afternoon given the lack of strong shadows, here rocks and saguaros fill the entire surface of Sommer’s photograph. Kelsey refers to this image as the “limit case” of the *Arizona Landscapes*,

its intensity and richness challenging the very limits of photographic reproduction.¹¹⁴ No sky is shown, instead Sommer explores the expansive power of “Rich Hill.” These *Arizona Landscapes* posit the photographic emulsion as site for all-over study and display, not just straightforward, documentary capture. Sommer’s inventive, avant-garde impulse is what put him at odds with the general photographic community at mid-century, in that he treated the photograph as a pliant art rather than a transparent window to the world.

The *Arizona Landscape* series is the one that receives the most attention out of all of those in Sommer’s corpus. The intensity of the works is what activates the curiosity of most commentators. In a 2008 article entitled “‘As If One’s Eyelids Had Been Cut Away’: Frederick Sommer’s Arizona Landscapes,” Ian Walker calls attention to the violent nature of these photographs, In his article, he writes of the meaningless or “ambiguous” nature of these works and puts Sommer in dialogue with the community of Surrealist artists who published his work in *VVV*.¹¹⁵ Walker characterizes the *Arizona Landscapes* through their “hallucinatory sharpness of detail” and “overwhelming, relentless accretion of sheer information.”¹¹⁶ He concludes: “What is important about Sommer’s Arizona Landscapes is that he precisely resists that assignment of meaning; the image is just what it is – a landscape in Arizona – and it has no other imposed meaning.”¹¹⁷ Walker creates a divide between Sommer, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston, noting that Sommer did not uphold the “fundamentally positive view of the American West” that their images depict.¹¹⁸ But Sommer’s *Arizona Landscapes*, I maintain, are not overly negative. It is my contention that the *Arizona Landscapes* are a visual expression of the artist coming to

¹¹⁴ Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 244. Kelsey writes: “In his wartime landscapes, Sommer undermines the privileged condition by eradicating the cues and structure that organize the genre. *Arizona Landscape* of 1943 is the limit case.”

¹¹⁵ Walker, “‘As If One’s Eyelids Had Been Cut Away,’” 183-184; 185 and 189.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 181-182; 190.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

terms with the totality of the landscape, his artistic practice serving as a means of survival. Of the *Arizona Landscapes* taken at “Rich Hill,” Walker remarks: “Into the frame is packed a density of detail that gives little hint of these surroundings, yet is in itself complex and challenging.”¹¹⁹ In this statement, Walker captures the richness present in these photographs. The *Arizona Landscapes* represent a quest for understanding the self and the environment in what first appeared to the artist to be a barren place.

John Timberlake’s dissertation addresses the *Arizona Landscapes* series as well. Timberlake suggests that these works are defined by “fragmentation and immersion.”¹²⁰ Timberlake sees in this series an irresolvable “tension” that evades meaning or understanding. He writes, later in the dissertation: “Immersion in the fragmented, often grotesque imagery of Sommer cannot leave one with a pleasurable sense of resolve.”¹²¹ While the photographs disrupt the normative relationship between figure and ground, initiating the “tension” Timberlake that invokes, Sommer’s meticulous framing suggests they were not intended to be disorienting or fragmented. Sommer sought out this site – as he did with upcoming works in the remaining years from this period – for its density and potential for all-over display. Standing before “Rich Hill,” one senses a struggle for meaning amid what is unknown.

In Kelsey’s discussion, he likens Sommer’s captures to that of “military photography.”¹²² Kelsey understands the formal dispersion of these images as undermining meaning and narrative, writing: “the landscapes captivate the eye but ultimately yield ... the finely discriminated irrelevance of empty terrain.”¹²³ Setting up a stark contrast between Sommer and Weston (like

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 201-202.

¹²⁰ Timberlake, “The Sapphic Sublime of Frederick Sommer,” 3.

¹²¹ Ibid., 105.

¹²² Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 246.

¹²³ Ibid., 246.

Walker), Kelsey attempts to posit the “integrity” of Weston’s prints against Sommer’s “photographic indifference.”¹²⁴ While the styles of these two photographers did diverge, as I show in the correspondence above they sustained an active, open dialogue. Kelsey rightly senses the intensity and disorientation of the work, but Sommer’s intention was to embody both the totality of desert, as a site of possibility and a place where life may perish. This is likely most evident in photographs he took of decaying animals, showing the desert as a location of death and rebirth.¹²⁵ Kelsey is one of the most insightful writers on Sommer to date, yet he excludes Sommer’s propensity for life, finding vitality where other artists would be resigned to see the desert as remote, miles of untouched, unpromising land. *Photography and the Art of Chance* shows the *Arizona Landscapes* as products of chance and “indifference,” not (as they were) hours of labor and careful composition.

I visited “Rich Hill” during a visit to the Sommer Foundation in 2018 (fig. 2.22) and sensed what Walker described about this “complex and challenging” site.¹²⁶ Standing before the rocky hill pictured in *Arizona Landscape* (1943), I could see that the hill’s natural concavity produces optical illusions of depth that are intensified in Sommer’s photograph through the exclusion of ground and sky. The context of “Rich Hill” and the *Arizona Landscapes* is remarkable not just for the hill but the surrounding area, which, Walker aptly comments, the photographs do not reveal. In making these pictures, Sommer positioned his view camera on the road facing “Rich Hill,” while behind him lay an open, desolate field. Since ground and sky are

¹²⁴ Ibid., 219.

¹²⁵ Kelsey discusses the “disintegration” of animal and earth with *Jack Rabbit* (1939) but comes to a different conclusion. Kelsey uses *Jack Rabbit* as evidence of the contrast between Weston and Sommer, stating that while Weston’s photograph of a rabbit (*Dead Rabbit, Arizona*, 1938) inhabits a “privileged condition,” Sommer’s rabbit “undoes” the “privileged condition” through formlessness and “decay”. Kelsey emphasizes the “flatness” and “disintegration” of *Jack Rabbit* over its renewal and reanimation. Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 222-227.

¹²⁶ Walker visited “Rich Hill” ten years prior, in 2008. Walker, “As If One’s Eyelids Had Been Cut Away,” 202.

removed from the 1943 *Arizona Landscapes*, it may be difficult to assess the orientation of these works. However, the pictures were made straight on, directly facing the hill. The initially unclear orientation of the *Arizona Landscapes* may be compared to works including the river landscapes of Georgia O’Keeffe. Alicia Inez Guzmán notes that these sketches and paintings were inspired by O’Keeffe’s travels by plane “from Albuquerque to New York.” Guzmán writes: “In 1941, she [O’Keeffe] described the landscape she saw below like ‘marvelous rug patterns’ or an abstract painting.”¹²⁷ For Sommer and O’Keeffe, the landscape formed a fabric, an “abstract” texture ripe for pictorial invention.¹²⁸ To even see “Rich Hill” one must travel down a dirt road past Congress, Arizona, southwest of Prescott, the town where Sommer lived. He could have made an exposure of the empty field but instead he photographed the hill, pictorially promising as a subject with its density, richness, and possibility.

Post-1943: The Landscape Expands

In 1943, following the production of the *Arizona Landscapes*, Sommer made horizonless photographs of a variety of subjects. Sommer transformed his horizonless composition from a focus on “Rich Hill” to other subjects across Arizona, showing remote, discarded, and unexpected subjects. *Constellation, Arizona* (1943) (fig. 2.23), not taken far from “Rich Hill,” depicts an all-over display of desert vegetation. Through the twists of a dirt path two structures are visible, both in varying states of disrepair. In the lower half of the image, a white house with a damaged roof sits anchored to the earth. At center right, a separate construction, only its

¹²⁷ “Georgia O’Keeffe and a Changing Landscape,” Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.okeeffemuseum.org/georgia-okeeffe-and-a-changing-landscape/>.

¹²⁸ A further comparison between Sommer and O’Keeffe could be made through works including Sommer’s *Apache Trail* (1941) and O’Keeffe’s *Red and Yellow Cliffs* (1940). Made within a year of each other, the photograph and painting both depict a completely (for Sommer) and nearly (for O’Keeffe) all-over view of the Southwest.

foundation remaining, stands out against the white dirt. This open space (the white dirt) constitutes a perimeter around the still standing vertical walls. Through the whites, greys, and blacks of the gelatin silver print, Sommer blends the natural with the man-made. These two structures become part of the image's all-over texture. This photograph is distinct from the simply titled *Arizona Landscapes* in that Sommer provides more visual focus through the two buildings and the title. The *Arizona Landscapes* are a unique moment in Sommer's photographic corpus in their extreme, all-over display. Constellation is also the name of a specific place in Yavapai County: Constellation Road.¹²⁹ By giving his work this title, Sommer indexes this place and represents the landscape as a "constellation" of interconnecting parts, giving the remote land a greater, symbolic meaning.

Gold Mine, Arizona (1943) (fig. 2.24), taken from above, also presents man's interventions into the landscape. A boulder anchors the image at bottom left, perhaps to give a sense of perspective and scale to the work. Sommer felt the four corners of the photograph functioned as the anchors for the composition.¹³⁰ In *Gold Mine, Arizona*, the boulder at the bottom left serves as a weight tacking the image back. Like Sommer's pictures of Jerome, this site is exposed from an aerial perspective, giving a comprehensive view of the subject. The gold mine is captured slightly off center, the uncovered ore to each side spreading like butterfly wings from the central point of excavation. Man's intervention is strongly sensed in this work, as Walker and Kelsey both discuss in their texts. Walker notes that "These intrusions interrupt the dense natural materiality of the desert landscape." He further describes the gold mine as an

¹²⁹ Walker, "'As If One's Eyelids Had Been Cut Away,'" 208, footnote 76. Walker also comes to this realization.

¹³⁰ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 211. Sommer writes: "The corners are the longest levers in the visual field. Unless you really know what is happening in those corners, you don't have any idea of what is going on in the picture. The diagonals cross the centrality of the field, but the centrality has to be imbedded in something. The imbeddedness [sic] in this field of action is one that goes all the way to the corners."

“aggressive” mark and quotes Mark Haworth-Booth on the subject as a ““scar, a vulva, and a new kind of landscape.””¹³¹ Kelsey also writes of this work as a landscape of destruction. “Goldmine, Arizona,” he writes, “depicts its subject as if it were a bomb blast.” Kelsey reinforces the “violence of aerial warfare” symbolized in this image (as with the *Arizona Landscapes*).¹³² Walker, Haworth-Booth, and Kelsey highlight the destruction over the discovery found in *Gold Mine, Arizona*. Through these images, Sommer considers the hidden treasures in the landscape and shows that in spite of the harshness of this climate there is a secret, natural bounty for those who are willing to search.¹³³

Glass (fig. 1.5), also photographed in 1943, is not unlike the *Arizona Landscapes* in its tightly bound, all-over composition. Here, Sommer transforms detritus to pictorial richness, asserting that meaning can be found even in what is discarded through its representation in the photograph. *Glass* and the *Arizona Landscapes* are loaded with visual detail, if they do pose a puzzle for interpretation. There is not one part of the photograph that is unoccupied by an object. In this work, variously colored and shaped bottles form the larger fabric of the image, just as with “Rich Hill.” Packed and perhaps “claustrophobic” like the *Arizona Landscapes*, the bottles and glass sheets in this image form a tight maze, constricted by the lack of horizon, and like the hills of the *Arizona Landscapes* here as viewers we can trace the undulations of the glass through the dense field. As discussed in Chapter 1, *Glass* presented a stark challenge to ideals of photographic vision at the time it was made. Sommer, in this photograph, is drawn to the optical texture of glass, further developing the raw material of his photographic vocabulary. In this unique construction, the artist finds reinterprets detritus into pictorial display.

¹³¹ Walker, ““As If One’s Eyelids Had Been Cut Away,”” 182-183.

¹³² Robin Kelsey, “The Wartime Decompositions of Frederick Sommer,” in *American Photography: Local and Global Contexts*, ed. Bettina Gockel (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012), 217.

¹³³ As with “Rich Hill,” the site of *Gold Mine, Arizona* still stands today, and can be viewed from route 89.

In two additional photographs made – one from 1943, the other the first one I will discuss from 1944 – the natural site becomes a fabric for Sommer’s photographic display. In these works, Sommer looks closely, considering the inner workings of his subject. *Little Colorado River Landscape* (1943) (fig. 2.25) dives deep into the canyon. Looking at the photograph one feels totally surrounded by its walls. Tightly focused, showing a compressed view, the river functions less dramatically than one might expect. A glimpse of the river is visible in the bottom center, but the focus of this work is more on the river’s traces on the rock wall, not the water itself. The rock walls in the foreground form the strong shape of a “V.” This compositional device has the dual function of dragging the viewer’s vision down to the river at bottom and also forcing one’s eyes up to show the texture of the stone above. Sommer questions the limits of landscape photography by confining the river to the bottom of the frame and concentrating instead on the erosion of the wall. Along the photograph’s upper band, the texture of stone is accentuated, the natural stain pattern not unlike a city sidewalk – foreshadowing the dripping and staining that would come to predominate visual expression in the medium of painting in the late 1940s. In this picture of the *Little Colorado River Landscape*, Sommer directs the camera into the canyon to understand the individual elements of the river’s geological structure. The image is divided horizontally, with the river at bottom, flat rock in the upper half, and diagonally by the intersecting shape of the “V,” cutting through the image. *Little Colorado River Landscape* represents a leap Sommer took with the genre of landscape that his peers would struggle with since it subverted traditional ideas of landscape and photographic display. Rather than giving a clear, open view of the landscape, Sommer decides to instead portray sharply excised, unexpected, and richly detailed views.

Untitled Landscape (1944) (fig. 2.26) is another cropped image that tests scale. *Untitled Landscape* alters the sense of scale depicted with a humbler subject. This photograph was taken in a creek bed near the Sommers' home in Prescott, Arizona.¹³⁴ Light dapples over the stones in the top left, recalling the "gleaming" chicken parts. Throughout the print, Sommer focuses on dark water turning past stones, wrapping them in a hazy, silky layer. Sommer's logic of anchoring photographs through the corners comes into play with force here. The image feels as though it is tacked down by rocks sitting in the creek at the print's edges. In the top right corner, oblong rocks form a tapered group. At bottom right three rocks sit together, just touching. One in this trio has been submerged while the others remain half wet. A small leaf sits on the dark side of the lower rock, mirrored by a dark streak of water exactly to its left. In the bottom left a pyramidal rock balances another on its point, both saturated with water from the creek. In both *Little Colorado River Landscape* and *Untitled Landscape*, Sommer contemplates scale and new perspectives. Immediately following the *Arizona Landscapes*, Sommer continued to work with all-over composition through many subjects, both natural and manmade. In these works, the density of the image's surface belies a hidden structure to be found in nature. These works are both about exhibiting the remote and rarely photographed as well as capturing known subjects through new, unique perspectives.

¹³⁴ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2019.

Sommer and Pollock: All-Over Composition

With *Constellation, Arizona, Gold Mine, Arizona, Glass, Little Colorado River Landscape*, and *Untitled Landscape*, we see the challenge of depicting the landscape encountered through diverse subjects. These works retain the all-over focus of the 1943 *Arizona Landscapes* and apply this approach with consistency to other scenes that the photographer selected. Sommer, in the above works, transitions from the starkness and incredible intensity of the 1943 works to those that follow. Perhaps 1943 was a moment of extremity, but it was a unique, limited period. By 1945, Sommer was on the brink of a transition – nonetheless landscape and all-over composition remained central to his practice. *Arizona Landscape* (1945) (fig. 2.27), the last Arizona landscape, is one final example. Taken at the end or beginning of the day, the shadows in the print are cast to the left at a sharp, 45-degree angle to ground. These shadows give form to the bushes and saguaros that fill the frame. The saguaros stand straight, forming a pattern resembling a skier's path, winding from front to back. Though the work is two-dimensional, Sommer gives it a subtle sense of perspective and depth, contrasting the hill in the foreground to the one in the top right corner. Cholla cacti and bushes lend diversity to this open landscape. *Arizona Landscape* (1945) is, in addition, reminiscent of Sommer's 1943 photographs of the same name, in which the hills together form a rolling rhythm and the saguaros fill the pictorial field. 1943 was a highly important date for the WWII-era pictures, establishing Sommer's avant-garde experimentation in photographs that near abstraction. The works following 1943 are less extreme but retain a kernel of this intensity and are all horizonless.

Before I discuss the final set of Sommer's WWII-era works, I pause to compare and contrast Sommer and Pollock, in terms of their all-over composition, the similarities and differences between photography and painting, and critical reactions to both. While Walker,

Timberlake, and Kelsey highlight the relation of the *Arizona Landscapes* to images of wartime destruction, none of these authors celebrate the powerful contribution of these photographs to the history of photography to the degree they deserve. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Lanier Graham observes the remarkable originality of “Sommer’s work with full-field imagery,” which he further notes “predates most of the painters by several years.”¹³⁵ Sommer, by Graham’s assessment, was significantly ahead of avant-garde developments in painting. By cutting out the horizon from his images, Sommer produced all-over prints that transform the landscape into an intensive study of surface, shape, light, and layers. In some ways this was a painterly move – at the very least it challenged conventional methods of making photographs at the time. The *Arizona Landscapes* of 1943, as I discussed in chapter 1, pushed ideals of immediacy and transparency so often associated with the medium of photography to their limits. In what follows, I consider the relation of these *Arizona Landscapes* to later developments in painting noting the pictorial significance of Sommer’s 1943 works for painting *and* photography and the way contemporary conversation by Walker, Timberlake, and Kelsey around the *Arizona Landscapes* in many ways mirrors historical dialogues around Abstract Expressionist painting. Examining the crosscurrents between painting and photography, I will foreground Sommer’s intent.

Michael Schreyach, in his 2017 *Pollock’s Modernism*, clearly highlights the pressing problems of this moment in art. In this book, Schreyach takes on five “terms”: “autonomy, anamorphosis, automatism, embodiment, and projection” and puts forward an undeniably “*interpretive account*” of Pollock’s painting from the 1940s-50s.¹³⁶ Like Sommer, Pollock’s paintings are often difficult to interpret.¹³⁷ Both artists press against the “conventions” of their

¹³⁵ Graham, “The Art of Frederick Sommer Parts I and II,” 47.

¹³⁶ Michael Schreyach, *Pollock’s Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 2.

¹³⁷ Schreyach, *Pollock’s Modernism*, 1.

“chosen medium,” testing traditional modes of picturing.¹³⁸ Schreyach above all gives “single works the type of attention that I believe is required to discern, acknowledge, and understand the structures of beholding Pollock wanted each of them to sustain.”¹³⁹ By studying Sommer and Pollock side by side, their deliberate interventions in photography and painting encourage, as Schreyach states, intensive engagement.

One of, if not the most, crucial commentators on painting in the 1940s, Clement Greenberg, articulates this transitional moment in painting. In his 1948 essay, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” Greenberg touches on the idea that modern painters are pushing the medium to its limits, as Sommer did with photography just a few years prior.¹⁴⁰ This movement began with the Impressionists, Greenberg argues, whose technique yielded “an evenly and tightly textured rectangle of paint that tended to muffle contrasts and threatened – but only threatened – to reduce the picture to a relatively undifferentiated surface.”¹⁴¹ Monet, Greenberg notes, introduced a “point of departure for a new tendency in painting” that would take off in the late 1940s. Modernist painting of the late 1940s, as it is classically known, is defined by its “all-over, ‘decentralized,’ [and] ‘polyphonic’” surface texture.¹⁴² This “all-over” painting is characterized by “similar elements” that “repeat” and in general “dispenses ... with beginning, middle, end.”¹⁴³ Modernist painting subsumes the traditional composition of the “easel picture” and is, ultimately, the cause of a “crisis” of “fatal ambiguity” in painting, muddling the boundary between

¹³⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁴⁰ Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 154-157. “The Crisis of the Easel Picture” was originally published in *Partisan Review* in April 1948, as cited in Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 481, footnote 83.

¹⁴¹ Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” 154.

¹⁴² Ibid., 155.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 155.

“decoration” and willful, artistic intervention.¹⁴⁴ Greenberg’s writing on late 1940s painting could just as easily be applied to Sommer’s interventions in photography in 1943 and it is precisely in a discussion of “ambiguity” where arguments by Walker, Timberlake, and Kelsey come to the fore. Charles W. Millard echoes Greenberg’s remarks on modernist painting in his comments on Sommer’s landscapes, in an exhibition review from 1965:

They rewarded careful looking with an endless revelation of detail and the constant recognition of familiar landscape elements in what at first appeared to be undifferentiated surface texture. The initial impression of lack of depth and tonal contrast enhanced the surprise of discovery one had on examining the photographs closely.¹⁴⁵

As with modernist painting, Sommer radicalized to reinvent the medium of photography. The same might be argued of the symbolic elements in Jackson Pollock’s paintings, with titles like *Cathedral* (1947) and *Lavender Mist* (1950). Though at the surface these examples in painting and photography push the limits of representation, they also reimagine a deeper meaning, an understanding of space and texture, concealed in the work’s dense layers. Pollock and Sommer are two artists whose works reward the labor of the curious onlooker, filled with an array of visual details. Although the histories of modernist painting and photography are often separated, much can be learned by thinking of these as concurrent, simultaneous histories.

Jackson Pollock’s all-over painting developed from his mural of 1943, the same year Sommer produced the *Arizona Landscapes*. This mural was exhibited at MoMA in 1947 in the exhibition “Large-Scale Modern Paintings.”¹⁴⁶ Sommer’s 1943 *Arizona Landscapes* verge on abstraction but remain grounded in the real. Working with paint, Pollock also indexes reality through the inclusion of cigarette butts and other grit, such as “nails” and “thumbtacks,” in his

¹⁴⁴ Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” 155 and 156.

¹⁴⁵ Charles W. Millard III, “Frederick Sommer: An Exhibition of Work from 1943 to 1965,” in *Frederick Sommer: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, ed. Sheryl Conkelton (Clio Press: Oxford, 1995), 63.

¹⁴⁶ In 1957, a retrospective of Pollock’s work was also shown at MoMA. “Jackson Pollock,” The Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 19, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1926?locale=en>.

paintings.¹⁴⁷ Both Sommer's *Arizona Landscapes* and Pollock's drip paintings share a "low relief." Sommer's implementation of all-over composition takes on a different aesthetic because the material is packed into such a small frame, creating a very concentrated, though not impenetrable surface for the viewer to assess. Like the 1942 *Colorado River Landscapes*, Sommer's horizonless photographs are grand but intimate, contained to a 7 x 9" rectangle. The photographer was known for obtaining the maximum effect from the most compact design. Detail in the *Arizona Landscapes* is not lost at a larger scale, and they do take on a powerful presence when enlarged. Pollock's painting, take *Lavender Mist* (1950) by contrast, spans 224.5 x 302.5 cm (over 7 ft. high and almost 10 ft. long), a monumental painting with a poetic, ethereal title. T.J. Clark, however, notes that Pollock also created a number of small paintings in 1950 that put the artist's vast works into perspective. Clark states Pollock's large canvases attempt to "overwhelm metaphor and put the world in its place," moving from the "virtual" notion of scale to the concrete size of the painting itself.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Pollock created the 1950s miniatures because "bigness needed smallness in order to register as such."¹⁴⁹ For Pollock and Sommer, no matter the size of the work, an intense effort is made to load every inch of the chemically developed or paint-dripped surface with intent. The creative act yielded intense artistic and self-discovery for both artists, as the outside world was comprehended through the camera lens or paint and canvas. Although he was criticized for the intensity and density of these works, it is clear, from a historical point of view, that Sommer was at the forefront of developments in all-over composition as evidenced by the production of *Arizona Landscapes*, even years before

¹⁴⁷ Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 50. Describing *Full Fathom Five* (1947), Varnedoe writes: "Clusters of nails, a key, a garland of thumbtacks (their points bristling outward, porcupine style), buttons, coins, paint-tube tops, and a cigarette are all prisoners intentionally sealed within this tar-pit surface."

¹⁴⁸ T.J. Clark, "Pollock's Smallness," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 17-18.

¹⁴⁹ Clark, "Pollock's Smallness," 20-21.

Pollock. In Pollock's painting and Sommer's photography, larger themes take on subtle stories told through densely woven surfaces.

1945: Desert Animals and Petroglyphs

In Sommer's WWII-era works, comprising the *Colorado River Landscapes*, photographs of Jerome, Painted Desert, the *Arizona Landscapes*, and works such as *Constellation, Arizona*, and *Gold Mine, Arizona*, the artist created densely textured works that advanced abstraction in photography, even before all-over abstraction was introduced in painting. During this period, Sommer traveled throughout the areas surrounding Prescott, coming to terms with his new home, attempting to find his place even in the isolation of the desert. In my descriptions, I have tried to build a more comprehensive understanding of the *Arizona Landscapes*, giving the works context and interpreting them in light of Sommer's overall production from 1939-1945. It is my aim to reevaluate claims put forward by recent authors including Walker, Timberlake, and Kelsey. While each of these figures advances a significant, new reading of Sommer's WWII-era works, none emphasize the richness embedded in the *Arizona Landscapes*. I argue that the encounter with the Arizona landscape was a persistent challenge for Sommer, though it was one that he completely embraced. Through the velvety gelatin silver print, he found wealth and beauty in the most surprising places, from a goldmine to a pile of discarded glass. Here, I consider works created in 1945, photographs of desert animals and petroglyphs. These works could be read in one of two ways: as a representation of destruction, death, and loss or as a natural aspect of life and death, a recurring cycle. The history of the past is made present, as in the petroglyphic marks Sommer captures. Rather than showing complete extinction, the final 1945 works depict the landscape as a layered tapestry, bearing the marks of those who have lived and died here. In

Sommer's WWII-era works, new life persists in the wake of death and the legacy of a centuries-old history still remains.

Coyote (1945) (fig. 2.28) depicts the mostly decomposed body of a coyote. Sommer exposed the coyote from above, as with the *Chicken Parts* pictures. The body lies in peaceful repose, the higher than usual contrast of Sommer's photograph highlighting the ribs, teeth, and femur bone. The coyote is nestled in a bed of small leaves, shrubs, and pebbles, framing the subject at the center. Typically, Sommer preferred low contrast, allowing a subtle transition between object and ground. In his photographs of desert animals, this furthered the notion that animals and earth are composed of the same matter, the decomposition spurring new life. Here, instead, the coyote is caught in relief against the bed of leaves, showing the predatory creature in a unique, artful form. Four skinned coyote corpses in *Coyotes* (1945) (fig. 2.29) fill the frame of this trimmed 8 x 10-inch contact print, each in varying states of decay – from the two lighter (in tone) and more intact at center and bottom right to the two darker and more disintegrated bodies at center and upper left. Sommer's composition resists parts in isolation, the overlapping coyotes presented in nearly inseparable relation. Lying back to back, the two heads of the coyotes just right of center almost appear to emerge from the same body. At perpendicular angles, the legs of the coyotes at top right tuck underneath each other, while the hind legs of the same coyote at top cross under the body of the one at bottom. Finally, the tail and leg of the corpse at far left make contact with both and complete the circle of intertwinement. The corpses remind one of fossils, soon to be absorbed in the earth beneath them. Printed at a slightly lower contrast than the single *Coyote* (1945), this photograph draws comparisons between the tufts of the white tail on the left and the dry grass below.

Horse (1945) (fig. 2.30), taken in bright light, casts the body of a horse into relief. However, natural debris has already begun to submerge the body. Composed with the same all-over structure as the *Arizona Landscapes*, here Sommer distorts conventional display by showing just the legs and torso of the horse. The two legs close to the bottom edge of the picture draw our gaze in, silhouetted against the rock-strewn ground. These two legs are echoed by a third in the top, upper half. Sun from the right illuminates the hide at top right. *Horse* is an image at once filled with violence and beauty, signifying the duality of desert life. *Mayer, Arizona* (1945) (fig. 2.31), a photograph with a very similar subject, shows the bones of cattle. The white bones stand out against the dark ground. It is difficult to make out body and bones from the rocks and stones interspersed in the landscape, an intentional analogy encouraged by Sommer's photograph. Less intensely, closely composed than the coyotes and horse, *Mayer, Arizona* shows the cattle scattered over an open, arid site. Although *Horse* and *Mayer, Arizona* are depictions of death they also reveal the symbiosis between animals and land, a recurring cycle of decay and rebirth. Sommer does not shy from these subjects, instead depicting all aspects of the Arizona landscape.

Two final photographs from 1945, both untitled (figs. 2.32 and 2.33), continue the idea that the traces of past life are preserved in the desert. *Untitled* (fig. 2.32), given the title *Petroglyph* by the Sommer Foundation, depicts a dotted pattern that stretches across the center of the photograph. Small, four-legged animals can be just barely distinguished, excised from the rock both above and below the dotted pattern. Sandwiched between rock layers, these marks signify the endurance of human life, the stone a surface for storytelling. The dry environment of the Arizona desert preserved these marks for hundreds of years, re-discovered through Sommer's camera.¹⁵⁰ At bottom right, another mark appears, capital letters that read "PAT. APPPLD FOR,"

¹⁵⁰ "Petroglyphs," National Park Service, National Monument New Mexico, accessed November 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/petr/learn/historyculture/what.htm>.

under the arc of a curved line. These markings denote the human control of natural forms. This single stone face demonstrates, then, multiple instances of marking, both old and new. *Untitled* (fig. 2.33) presents sandstone layers, photographed in an unknown location. In the image, no petroglyphs appear. Nonetheless, a sense of geological time is felt through the finely laid, stone layers. This photograph reveals the fascinating texture formed by the erosion of sandstone, both smooth and sharply delineated by the elements. Towards the center a two-pronged curve emerges and the rocks above are molded by shadows. At bottom right, a spindly weed appears, standing out against a dark shadow on the sandstone behind this plant. The weed lends balance to Sommer's rocky image, and hints at the persistence of all forms of life even in the formidable desert. Shooting up from the bottom right edge, the plant is delicate but has an electrifying force, a poetic gesture of renewal.

Conclusion

Sommer appreciated the following thought from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who remarks in "The Structural Study of Myth" on the figure of the "trickster of American mythology."¹⁵¹ In an exploration of the structure of myths, Lévi-Strauss notes that "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction."¹⁵² Myths consist of distinct parts that do not obviously add up. In addition, he states: "the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations* and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning."¹⁵³ Here, enters the "trickster," who

¹⁵¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (Myth: A Symposium Oct.–Dec. 1955): 440.

¹⁵² Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," 443.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 431.

Lévi-Strauss describes as a mediator of sorts, tasked with unpacking a set of “oppositions.”¹⁵⁴ “Thus,” he writes, “the mediating function of the trickster explains that since its position is halfway between two polar terms he must retain something of that duality, namely an ambiguous and equivocal character.”¹⁵⁵ It is my belief that Sommer felt an affinity with Lévi-Strauss’s trickster since he considered himself a trickster with a camera. Employing the photograph as his medium, Sommer sought to mediate – to use Lévi-Strauss’s terminology – the dual opposition of the Arizona desert, filled with possibility and terror. The camera aided Sommer’s goal of translating the totality of the landscape into the comprehensible shape of a 7 x 9-inch photographic print. “Trickster” as a term also yields additional connotations, and describes the work of the artist, who molds and reinterprets reality into a carefully crafted form. In a way, the photograph stands as myth, and Sommer as “trickster” or “mediator” of its underlying message. Although the myth and the “trickster” are both, to a certain degree, ambiguous, for Lévi-Strauss and for Sommer they still deliver meaning. Though this meaning is not immediately apparent, it may be unearthed through active interpretation.

Sommer’s WWII-era photographic work attempts to, if not resolve, then present the unrelenting contradictions of the Arizona landscape, which he came to know over the course of these years through travel with his wife, Frances, from Prescott, Arizona, to the region’s surrounding areas. In photographs of the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River, Painted Desert, the iconic 1943 *Arizona Landscapes*, and in his later 1945 desert images, the artist developed a comprehensive pictorial and thematic understanding of these spaces. In this chapter, I have worked to yield a systematic overview of Sommer’s WWII-era production, which has not been

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 440. “Mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 441.

fully explored in previous scholarship. For Sommer, reproduction of the Arizona landscape in pictures was significant to comprehending the land, for himself and for others. Sommer's Arizona is a place almost at the level of myth – a place of death and decay, but also of treasure and discovery. The photographs reimagine the emulsion as a surface for all-over display. By excising the horizon from his landscape photographs post-1943, Sommer challenged the classical notion of clarity in photography, instead preceding the moves of Abstract Expressionist painters, including Pollock. In opposition to other scholars, I contest that the WWII-era works are not chance-driven or consumed with violent symbols, but instead address, to use Lévi-Strauss's term, "contradiction." Sommer embraces the challenge of translating the extremity of the Arizona landscape into pictorial form.

Finally, I compare Sommer to his contemporaries, giving greater context to his production between 1939-1945. I relay the correspondence over film with Edward Weston and, with Jackson Pollock and Georgia O'Keeffe, the shared experimentation with all-over composition and abstraction.¹⁵⁶ By thinking about Sommer's developments as precedents to mid-century painting, the connectedness and originality of his work becomes much clearer. I have also drawn in the critical perspective of figures such as Clement Greenberg and a reviewer of Sommer's work in the 1960s. Comparing the historical conversation about Abstract Expressionism with Sommer's avant-garde photographs, it is apparent that common themes surface: ambiguity and anxiety over the de-stabilization of the picture. These themes become a springboard for contemporary discussions of Sommer.

¹⁵⁶ Lanier Graham notes "direct influence has yet to be established" between Frederick Sommer and Jackson Pollock. However, Sommer and O'Keeffe did meet when Sommer traveled to New York City to show his work to Alfred Stieglitz in 1935. Graham, "The Art of Frederick Sommer Parts I and II," 47 and Watson, "Sommer Chronology," 220.

In this chapter, I have given transparency to the works Sommer made during the war, arguing that these photographs reveal the rich fabric of the landscape and exhibit Arizona as a site of both decay and growth. With his camera in hand, Sommer employed his art to carve out meaning in the totality of the desert. Densely packed, these images portray a rich, layered landscape, one characterized by erosion and reinvention. In *Words / Images*, Sommer comments on what can be captured in an all-over display, writing here of images taken from space:

The beautiful photographs that were taken of the earth during satellite explorations show atmospheric formations and oceans all literally moving. They show us that layers have the right to move over other layers. Looking at the earth, we see how these great systems of climate and storms that are part of larger masses belong together; they are one. Seen from a distance, or thought about with enough perspective, they tell us that we have to do things in a much more comprehensive way. It isn't a question any more of how to divide what we have in the world. It is for all of us to stop and consider what is alive on this planet. Let us see what these things are and support them.¹⁵⁷

Photographing the desert was, for this artist, about discovering what was “alive” and considering the places he ventured to as “comprehensive” ecosystems. While contemporary critics strive to place Sommer’s WWII-era photographs in a category of ambiguity, in truth Sommer’s project of tackling the desert was one of confronting and “mediating” ambiguity. For those who choose to take on the challenge of interpreting a difficult place, nature rewards. Sommer took on the task and uncovered hidden beauty in the vivid tapestry of the saguaro strewn hills. Ultimately, works like *Jerome, Arizona* (1940), *Constellation, Arizona* (1943), and *Glass* (1943), show the variation of pictorial possibility in the found world. It was Sommer’s goal to take what he saw and transform it, through the camera, into something powerfully new.

¹⁵⁷ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 28.

Chapter 3 Competing Visions: *Aperture* and Collage

Introduction

Frederick Sommer's first appearance in *Aperture* occurred in a March 1955 issue, in Beaumont Newhall's belated report on "The Aspen Photo Conference" of 1951. Newhall lists Sommer as a participant and describes the photographer's "Photography and Painting" session at the conference. The following year, Sommer appeared again with *Max Ernst* (1946) on the front cover while the essay "Fredrick Sommer: Collages of Found Objects" appears inside. Then again, in 1957, "An Experiment in 'Reading' Photographs" was published, in which students from the Rochester Institute of Technology analyzed *Max Ernst*. Other images by Sommer reproduced in the magazine are *The Thief Greater Than His Loot* (1955) and *Configuration on Black* (1957), both included in a 1960 issue on abstraction in photography. This presentation of his work presents Sommer as a photographer unencumbered by tradition, testing straight photography by fashioning photographs from found collage and implementing double exposure. In what follows I will address these works in detail to suggest the kind of account being developed around Sommer's work. Further clarification of the *Aperture* account of Sommer is apparent when we consider his setting alongside the work of Minor White. Jonathan Williams's "The Eyes of 3 Phantasts" of 1961 provides rich comparisons to Sommer's contemporaries Wynn Bullock and Clarence John Laughlin. In 1962, *Aperture* published a monograph on Sommer, dedicating an entire issue to his work. A wide range of photographs were chosen, interspersed with pages of Sommer's writings. What Sommer's publication in *Aperture* in the years between 1955 and 1962 indicates was how central a figure he was for *Aperture*, challenging straight photography from within the journal's pages.

This chapter hinges on the concept of photographic manipulation and collage, considering Sommer's test to conventions of straight photography through studio and darkroom experimentation. In the years leading up to Aspen, beginning as early as 1947, Sommer combined found illustrations and detritus into collages and assemblages. These two and three-dimensional constructions were "a stage to becoming a photograph," as Sommer stated in a talk given at the Art Institute of Chicago, later published in *Aperture*.¹⁵⁸ The collage and assemblage photographs represent Sommer's general philosophy that a photographer always works with "givens."¹⁵⁹ In his text "The Constellations that Surround Us," Sommer summarized his artistic philosophy as follows:

Photography did a tremendous amount in helping me to understand interrelationships because of the fact that you were always confronted with a given. You don't invent what you photograph. You much more yield to what there is. Photography is aesthetics in a much wider sense. That is the real discovery.¹⁶⁰

Sommer's collage and assemblage photographs exemplify his philosophy that photography is not "invented" by the artist, but instead is generated with found material. What Sommer means by "aesthetics" is the act of responding to the artistic quality of the "given" world. Of course, what is most striking about Sommer's notion of the given, and aversion to invention, is that he is known above all for *manipulating* images in his collage, double exposure, and other extended technique work. What, then, could he mean by provocatively calling his work found and given? That is, what is at stake in the nature of his assimilation of the *language of straight photography* but turning that language toward a form of photography—collage—that was seen to be in opposition to it. In the discussion that follows, I examine the debates in mid-century photography that emerged from Sommer's test to photographic convention.

¹⁵⁸ Sommer, "An Extemporaneous Talk," 377.

¹⁵⁹ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 210.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

In addition to photographs that pressed the limits of photographic convention through their intensive, handcrafted manufacture, Sommer also gave his collage and assemblage photographs highly metaphorical, intellectual titles. These titles add to the physical layering of the print, providing another layer of depth and complexity. In 1951, the same year as Aspen, Ansel Adams wrote a letter to Sommer in which he criticized Sommer's use of metaphor and intellectual references. Adams wrote to Sommer:

I lean to a somewhat mystical appreciation of Nature as an objective reality of human significance [*sic*]; you seem to lean towards a very personal and mystical transplantation of Nature from significant [*sic*] reality to significant [*sic*] symbolism. Your work is profoundly esoteric; if it did not have great substance-strength it would be dangerously so.¹⁶¹

Adams' terms will dominate the reception of Sommer: mystical, esoteric, symbolic, above all, personal. Whatever value these terms hold they clearly disregard the more matter-of-fact and obdurately material dimensions of Sommer's practice. In these remarks, Adams elaborates on the tension between his photographs and those produced by Sommer. Sommer made collages which he then photographed, using techniques of straight photography on subjects generated through collage. Adams, on the other hand, adhered to previsualization, inscribing the composition in the negative and interpreting it through the print. Both present an argument about photographic intent, Sommer through the manual labor of collage and Adams via the visual effort of previsualization. In my examination of Sommer's works in *Aperture*, I will interpret Sommer's metaphorical titles, collage work, and will set his works alongside those by Adams from Aspen to further explore what they shared and, perhaps more importantly, how they differ.

Above all, Sommer established a new model of photographic expression at mid-century, suggesting his intent was most apparent through his interventions on the photograph's frame,

¹⁶¹ Ansel Adams to Frederick Sommer, February 10, 1951, Box 3, Folder 2, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

exposure, and internal contents. Impressing his hand on not only the forms that appear before the camera but also on the final print, Sommer challenged the long-held idea that the chance-driven or “given” nature of the medium cannot be shaped into a meaningful, artistic form, guided by his creative control. In his “Extemporaneous Talk” from 1970, he stated: “Arbitrariness is really a key thing because there is nothing in art that is arbitrary, as there is nothing in science that is arbitrary.”¹⁶² By stating that “nothing in art ... is arbitrary” and “nothing in science ... is arbitrary” Sommer means that an artistic work or a scientific theory, while it engages with many unknowns, must be shaped into a “logic[al]” work or formula to be understood by its audience.¹⁶³ Though Sommer acknowledged that the practice of photography was fundamentally driven by “givens,” this in no way prevented him from creating works saturated with his intent. The work of art, as Sommer defined it, was born out of dance between chance and choice. In his *Words / Images*, Sommer writes: “Choice and chance / structure art / and nature.”¹⁶⁴ The simultaneous courting of choice and chance sparked controversy for Sommer, as he tested concepts like previsualization yet managed to produce works that were intricately designed and masterfully executed. When he presented his work at Aspen, he baffled other photographers in attendance, including Adams and photographic historians, Nancy and Beaumont Newhall. Emmet Gowin noted, in his description of what happened at the conference, that Sommer

had come prepared. He brought along a piece of cardboard with little objects wired to it, and he had this little display of samples of the stuff he photographed, along with boxes of the things that he was using to make his pictures. And they [Dorothea Lange, Berenice Abbott, the Newhalls] simply couldn't believe that those were the same things that appeared in his photographs.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 378.

¹⁶³ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 17.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶⁵ Gowin, “Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer,” 53.

By displaying these constructions, Sommer proved to other photographers at Aspen that he could transform detritus into works of art. One of the constructions that Sommer may have exhibited is the assemblage for *All Children Are Ambassadors* (fig. 1.19). In the display, the viewer can see a large, torn painted piece of paper, and below this an object with a black handle, a doll wearing an ivory dress and black sachet, and a small, rusty-orange paper. In Sommer's photograph, *All Children*, the doll is placed directly at center. Cropped and tightly focused, the diminutive objects take on a metaphysical presence in the print. At Aspen, Sommer extended the straight photographic paradigm, exhibiting his collage and assemblage constructions to Adams and the Newhalls, who could not acknowledge Sommer's practice as a viable mode of straight photography. Sommer presented a radical form of photographic intent that challenged yet reimagined the limits of the medium.

Based on the photographs that Sommer exhibited at Aspen and through the reproduction of his photographs and writings in *Aperture*, this chapter will closely examine Sommer's philosophy and the *Aperture* account of his work. The first section will cover the Aspen conference of 1951, including Sommer's presentation "Photography and Painting," where Adams, Ferenc Berko, and White joined in a panel discussion. I will also discuss the photographs exhibited by White, Adams, and Sommer at the Aspen conference. The second section takes on Sommer's first appearances in *Aperture* magazine, developed at Aspen, and emerging with White as principal editor in 1952. I consider his work as it was published from 1956-1960 in this section, analyzing works such as *Valise d'Adam* (1949) and *Sumaré* (1951). Finally, in the third section I study the 1962 *Aperture* monograph, "the only *Aperture* that was designed by the artist," as Gowin noted.¹⁶⁶ Thirty photographs by Sommer show the diversity of his work, beside

¹⁶⁶ Emmet Gowin (artist and Professor Emeritus of the Council of the Humanities and Visual Arts, Princeton University), in discussion with the author, March 2019.

quotes. These writings reveal the core of Sommer's artistic philosophy, centered on the notion of "complexity." One of the quotes included is: "I like the simplicity that permits us to be more comfortably bedded in complexity."¹⁶⁷ For Sommer, "aesthetics is the many of what occurs singularly in art," both of these quotes meaning that the artwork concisely presents "complex" ideas into a refined, "simpl[e]" structure.¹⁶⁸ Sommer expresses a similar concept in a 1980 interview, stating: "I didn't spend a lot of time taking complexity out of things. I took things the way they were." He explains: "I did not pretend to make things more seeable by interfering with them. I just took them in totality."¹⁶⁹ Through the sections that follow, I investigate Sommer's fascination with "complexity" and how his dense constructions in collage pressed against straight photographic convention at mid-century.

Aspen

In 1951, Frederick Sommer (1905-1999) attended the Aspen Photo Conference, and displayed his recent constructions in collage to other photographers at the conference. Fellow conference attendees included Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, and Minor White, as Beaumont Newhall (who also participated) detailed in an October 1951 report on the proceedings.¹⁷⁰ Sommer spoke on "Photography and Painting," revealing his interest in combinations of various media as a method of articulating a "personal message."¹⁷¹ Newhall writes: Sommer "held that the photographer is the originator of imaginative reality; that he adds something to the experiences of the spectator." (APC) Newhall's quote signals Sommer's

¹⁶⁷ Frederick Sommer, "Frederick Sommer: 1939-1962 Photographs," *Aperture* 10, no. 4 (April 1962): 163.

¹⁶⁸ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 210.

¹⁶⁹ Frederick Sommer, Television interview, *AM Philadelphia*, May 1980.

¹⁷⁰ "The Aspen Photo Conference" by Beaumont Newhall, October 30, 1951, Frederick Sommer Archive.

¹⁷¹ "The Aspen Photo Conference" by Beaumont Newhall, October 30, 1951, Frederick Sommer Archive. Hereafter cited in the text as "APC."

connection, in his images, to the metaphysical and the symbolic, achieved through creative combinations of found items and captivating titles for his works. Though Sommer's photographs had been seen by Nancy Newhall, the conference gave wide exposure to a larger community of photographers working in the United States. According to Gowin, the Newhalls and Adams rejected Sommer's photographic approach, because it challenged previsualization and photographic realism—exceeding the limits of what modern photography, in their eyes, was meant to represent.¹⁷²

Newhall's report summarizes the issues emerging between the Newhalls, Adams, and Sommer at Aspen. He noted that at the center of the discussion "we talked about the place of photography, and particularly the photographer, in the world today." (APC) Newhall continues: "We did not ask if photography is an art; instead we tried to determine what kind of art it is, and we even asked ourselves what art is." (APC) The debate within modern, mid-century photography centered around "communication." A shared commitment did emerge from the conference, a "desire to make pictures meaningful," according to Newhall's report. "Experimental' and 'abstract' photography was challenged" by the photographers at the conference. Adams spoke critically of "obscure work which bewilders the spectator," characterizing this type of work as "experimentation." (APC) Adams feared "the intellectual dome which he [the artist] creates over the heads of his audience may be a bubble that will burst." (APC) White, Newhall writes, commented on "degrees of control over the photographic image." (APC) Newhall relays: "The photographic approach as opposed to the painterly is characterized, White felt, by the totality of the image, its tether to reality, its immediacy, and its

¹⁷² Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 53. "I imagine what frightened them was Sommer's ability to not only defend his work but also to place it within the context of art as a tradition. While photography was busy fighting for its place as a documentary genre and as a special art, he was arguing for its being linked to the historical tradition of the graphic arts."

lack of the mark of the hand.” (APC) As Newhall remarks, the “intellectual,” “painterly,” and “personal” nature of Sommer’s photographs led to fervent dialogue at Aspen. Overall, Sommer’s photographs press the boundary of direct “communication” and through manual labor and symbolic titles test White’s aversion to the “painterly” and express a more “personal” approach.

An exhibition was held at the conference in addition to the talks, displaying photographs by Adams, White, and Sommer.¹⁷³ Examining their works side by side exposes how distinctive each photographer was in his approach to the camera. Adams exhibited multiple landscape photographs, such as *Moonrise at Hernandez* (1941), *Winter Forest, Yosemite Valley* (1949), and *Grass and Burned Stump, Sierra Nevada, California* (1935). *Lake and Cliffs, Sierra Nevada* (1932) (fig. 2.4) shows Adams’s commitment to a “mystical appreciation of Nature.” In *Lake and Cliffs*, the ice on the water and cliffs above are isolated as separate tonal zones. Highlighting the rich black of the reflected water below and the cool granite of the cliffs above, Adams yields to nature, conveying its grandeur. As discussed in Chapter 2, the composition is structurally anchored by the black line at bottom. Although the subject occupies Adams’s entire frame, the photograph is bounded by this horizontal band under the layered, granite cliffs. Discussed alongside Sommer’s photographs of Arizona, the compositional differences between the two photographers are visible. Adams utilizes the Zone System to structure the tonality of his print and Sommer allows the desert landscape to fill his entire frame, working with very slight degrees of contrast to provide close values within the visual field.

White showed *Sequence Six* (1951) at the conference. A note in the “Catalogue of Exhibition Pictures” states: “These pictures should be viewed as the movements of a

¹⁷³ Aspen Institute Conference on Photography, Catalogue of Exhibition Pictures, September 26 through October 6, 1951, Aspen, Colorado, Series 6: Activities Files, Photography Organizations, 1949-1976, Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies 1951, Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum.

symphony.”¹⁷⁴ *Sequence Six* is comprised of the photographs *Potrero Hill, San Francisco* (1951), *Front Street, San Francisco* (1951), and *Twisted Tree (Cypress Grove Trail, Point Lobos State Park, California)* (1951), among others. What these photographs convey is White’s interest in the found photograph as well as his admiration for nature. Although he photographed seemingly dissimilar subjects, White searched for a universal, connective “spirit” in his disparate selections, writing in his “Six Cannons of Camerawork”: “Definition closes the same door that spirit keeps open.”¹⁷⁵ *Front Street, San Francisco* (1951) (fig. 3.1) is a subtly clever composition. The photograph captures what looks to be a burnt-out bulb in a lamp under an archway, in San Francisco. White has carefully structured the image, with the top of the door frame creating a horizontal cut running through the center of the photograph. Above hangs the crooked lamp, shot from below with the blackened rim noticeable to the viewer. The archway and the neck of the lamp are reflected in the glass behind both. In the bottom half of White’s split view, the top portion of two doors appear. On the glass of the door to the left the head of the lamp is reflected as a black shadow, and the material surrounding the glass peels away, weathered and neglected.

Contrast this photograph with *Twisted Tree (Cypress Grove Trail, Point Lobos State Park, California)* (1951) (fig. 3.2). *Twisted Tree* was photographed in nature, not on the worn streets of San Francisco. Here, the powerful seascape of Point Lobos serves as the backdrop as a shallow depth of field renders the rocks in the background somewhat indistinct, as if clouded by fog from the ocean. In the foreground, sharply captured, a two-pronged branch spirals upward, serving as a frame through which the rocks are viewed. The intertwined parts of the branch

¹⁷⁴ Aspen Institute Conference on Photography, Catalogue of Exhibition Pictures, September 26 through October 6, 1951, Aspen, Colorado, Minor White Archive.

¹⁷⁵ “Six Cannons of Camerawork,” 1960, Series 9: Memorable Fancies Files, 1931-1976, Memorable Fancies 1960-1963, Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum.

suggest a dualism, or a coupling, and one branch directly aligns with the peak of the rock mass in the sea below. The sun illuminates segments of the branch. The rocks in the background visually anchor the branch, its two arms stretching past the rock, the ends silhouetted against the grey sky. Both *Front Street* and *Twisted Tree* imbue “spirit” in the objects photographed, whether manmade or organic, “spirit” for White meaning an external effect that results from the photograph.¹⁷⁶ Although the two works are strikingly different, White humanizes, in the twisted arms of the tree and battered frame of *Front Street*’s door, and animates the forms depicted, demonstrating the aim of art was ultimately “as an affirmation of life,” validating and guiding the human experience.¹⁷⁷

By 1947, Sommer was making collage and assemblage photographs, and these collage and assemblage works were highlighted at Aspen. *Circumnavigation of the Blood* (1950) was on display, beside *All Children Are Ambassadors* (1950), *Valise d’Adam* (1949), and *Young Explorer* (1951), to name a few.¹⁷⁸ A multi-layered and heavily textured image, *Circumnavigation of the Blood* (fig. 1.6) combines the peeling paint of a wall—similar to the peeling door in White’s *Front Street*—with three separate figures at center right, juxtaposing ordinary surface and represented faces to build an enigmatic narrative. Sommer adds to the density of the image through compactness of size, as his print is just 4 1/16 x 5 11/16 inches. The title, *Circumnavigation of the Blood*, creates an elaborate dialogue between text and image, as the viewer considers the relationship between the three figures. The young child, woman, and

¹⁷⁶ “Six Cannons of Camerawork,” 1960, Minor White Archive. Under Canon 5, in a note dated 21 June 1961, White writes: “When the photo becomes a mirror of the world [in pencil, above, “man”] & the man a mirror of the world, spirit is invited to take over.”

¹⁷⁷ 30 December 63, Series 9: Memorable Fancies Files, 1931-1976, Memorable Fancies 1961 →, Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum.

¹⁷⁸ The full list of works exhibited includes: *All Children Are Ambassadors* (1950), *Circumnavigation of the Blood* (1950), *Sumaré* (1951), *Arizona Landscape* (1943), *Valise d’Adam* (1949), *The Wall* (1951), *Young Explorer* (1951), *Flower and Frog* (1947), *Die Floten der Ursteige* (date not known), *Sylvie and Brumo* (date not known), *The Milky Way* (1949), and *Moon-Culminations* (1951).

man above are possibly connected through familial ties, as the “circumnavigation” of the title suggests that something has been passed between them. Sommer referred to the title for this image in his 1970 “Extemporaneous Talk” at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he stated: “Circulation of the blood is always circumnavigation of the world.”¹⁷⁹ Resisting the idea of the photograph as a mere index of the world Sommer loads his image with heterogeneous material. With no single referent, the multiplicity of sources and allusions—to familial relationships and harrowing journeys—yields both the formal density and conceptual opacity of the image. The original objects Sommer builds with are transformed in the photograph, from color to black and white, as well as changes in scale, as they take on a two-dimensional form in the photograph. The illustrations that make up *Circumnavigation* are repurposed, altered from their weathered materiality to form a fantastic story in the image we see.

Flower and Frog (1947) (fig. 3.3) is an assemblage photograph by Sommer that was also on view. This photograph reveals a frog carcass lying on its back with one limb bent by its side, the other extended as if offering a hand to the “flower” by his side. The “flower” is crafted from an unknown material—possibly metal—“her” hands folded into her hips, considering the offer from the frog to her right. Sommer has not only drawn on uncharacteristic materials (frog carcass, metal dress) for the frog and flower but also affixes to their bodies a similar material resembling weathered petals for the flower and hair for the frog. Another layer is added with markings, providing eyes and a long tongue for the flower and a lined paper sheet for the face of the frog. Above the frog, to the left, a bee hangs from the cracked board that the objects are laid upon. The bee takes an unknown role in this drama, likely also a real insect although the wings appear to be inscribed like the faces on the flower and frog. While Sommer could show the

¹⁷⁹ Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 369.

Newhalls at Aspen that his photographs were indeed crafted from real forms, the utterly fantastical and overly manufactured nature of *Flower and Frog* clearly challenged the conventions of straight photography. In addition, by inscribing directly on the negative, Sommer went beyond the limit of straight photography, which ideally leaves the negative as unmanipulated as possible. Sommer displayed, with photographs such as *Flower and Frog*, that his intervention was not at the level of previsualization but rather post-production, working on the subjects he found to create a dramatic story that reanimates the conventional form of the straight photograph. *Flower and Frog* imagines a marriage between flower and frog, a twist on the tale of the princess and the frog.

Valise d'Adam (1949) (fig. 3.4), an assemblage photograph constructed from a doll, two arms, wooden legs, and a trapezoidal form, above which a lever and base sit, was hung alongside *Circumnavigation* and *Flower and Frog* at Aspen. Sommer recombined these out-of-use objects, giving them new life in the photograph, or as Gowin has stated, giving them a “new beginning” by setting up “new associations” in the image.¹⁸⁰ The title of the photograph in French means “Carrier of Adam,” according to the photographer Barbara Morgan.¹⁸¹ While the image has been generated from discarded, weathered and used objects, the title lends the lever-headed figure a powerful, spiritual embodiment, as the “Carrier of Adam.” By drawing on detritus, Sommer offers the possibility that the image can be fashioned from any subject—no matter how worn, tattered, beaten, or broken down. As White describes in his 1957 “Found Photographs,” an essay that reflects in part on Sommer’s work, a shattered item can function as “the birth of an object.”¹⁸² In other words, the broken object can serve as new material for the artist’s invention.

¹⁸⁰ Gowin, “Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer,” 56.

¹⁸¹ Smith et al., “Fredrick Sommer,” 115.

¹⁸² Minor White, “Found Photographs,” in *Photography, Essays & Images: Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 307.

In a second article from 1957, “Peeled Painted, Cameras, Happenstance,” White notes that there are certain “messages” that can be read in disintegrated objects, which over time lose the “personality” of their maker and become raw material for photographic use.¹⁸³ The photographer serves the purpose of identifying pictures from “out of the chaos of non-pictures.”¹⁸⁴ To give the background density, Sommer created marks in the negative as well. Reproducing the two negatives of *Valise d’Adam* Nancy Solomon shows that Sommer added an additional layer through paint. “He also painted Agfa Crocein Scarlet dye directly on the emulsions, adding density to different thin areas on each negative,” Solomon writes.¹⁸⁵ Manipulating the negatives for *Valise d’Adam*, Sommer questions previsualization and offers a model based on the intervention of the subject, negative, and finally, print. *Valise d’Adam* serves as a visual argument of Sommer’s process, maximizing multiple, “combinatory” elements in the production of the image.¹⁸⁶ The artist stated: “There is nothing wrong with photographing a preferred set of things; but once you have made a collection, you have to respect what is there as reality.”¹⁸⁷ The “collection” served as “evidence” that the photographer must ultimately respect, a statement for Sommer advocating for collage and straight photography as workable, fusible processes.¹⁸⁸

Although the collage and assemblage photographs occupy most of Sommer’s checklist, *Sumaré* (1951), *The Wall* (1951), and *Arizona Landscape* (1943), more traditionally straight images, were also exhibited. *Arizona Landscape* is one of Sommer’s best-known works, receiving the most attention in the 1940s and in current scholarship. *Sumaré* (1951) and *The Wall*

¹⁸³ Minor White, “Peeled Painted, Cameras, Happenstance,” *Aperture* 5, no. 1 (1957): 8–10.

¹⁸⁴ White, “Peeled Painted, Cameras, Happenstance,” 7.

¹⁸⁵ Center for Creative Photography, *Original Sources*, 181.

¹⁸⁶ Graham, “The Art of Frederick Sommer Parts I and II,” 31. Graham describes Sommer as a “master of the combinatory arts.”

¹⁸⁷ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, eds., *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 116. Quote originally from “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 375 (slightly reworded in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*).

¹⁸⁸ Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 375. “Evidence” used here, not in *The Art of Frederick Sommer* version.

(1951) were created in the same year as *Aspen* and demonstrate the philosophy for all of Sommer's photographs—that the image is fashioned from a “given” in the world. *Sumaré* (fig. 3.5) depicts, for instance, what looks like a mottled, painted wall. *Sumaré* is named after a city of the same name in São Paulo, Brazil. São Paulo is the place where Sommer's father landed their family when they moved to South America in 1913.¹⁸⁹ The photograph has an electric force, as if the white, gray, and black lines were scattered in a magnetically charged field. Minute particles form black patches diagonally at center, while more evenly blended tonal clusters appear to the right. White, vertical marks zip down at left, contrasted against a small, dark area at bottom right. Not unlike *Arizona Landscape*, in *Sumaré* the whole surface of the photograph is covered with these dense black and white patterns. The photograph was later included in exhibitions focusing on Abstract Expressionism, closely aligning its all-over composition with action painting.¹⁹⁰ In *Sumaré*, the wall is compressed in the 7 5/8 × 9 1/2 inch print. Yet it also takes on a metaphorically larger presence, the wall amplified in Sommer's print.

Finally, Sommer's *Arizona Landscape* (fig. 2.21) was exhibited too. Beaumont Newhall viewed Sommer's landscape photographs more favorably than other pictures by the photographer, noting in a letter to Edward Weston and Charis Wilson: “Frederick Sommer came in Monday. I was glad to see other of his prints than the chicken innards—has some nice things.”¹⁹¹ However, Nancy remarked on their mode of visual address: “The detail is so fine that the print should be hand held and the meaning is such that only a very sensitive person would be

¹⁸⁹ Watson, “Sommer Chronology,” 215.

¹⁹⁰ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, “Exhibition History,” <http://www.fredericksommer.org/exhibitions.php>. The Foundation notes that *Sumaré* was included in *Abstract Expressionism: A World Elsewhere* (2008). *Sumaré* also appears in Ann Temkin, *Abstract Expressionism at the Museum of Modern Art: Selections from the Collection* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 67.

¹⁹¹ Beaumont Newhall to Edward Weston & Charis Wilson, August 27, 1940, Box 14, Folder 9, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

apt to sense it.”¹⁹² *Arizona Landscape* (1943) teems with rocks and shrubs, stretched to the limits of the photograph’s frame. Similar to another print of the same subject, here the dark, maybe dodged corners at top turn our focus to the burned-in center of the image. Although many commentators on the work have suggested they are “empty,” “ambiguous,” or characterized by “fragmentation,” I suggest that these images create a formal tension between the wealth of information presented and the sharply cropped border that Sommer has imposed, calling attention to his framing and shaping of the material at hand.¹⁹³ The visual intensity of these prints is formulated by Sommer and is not immediately “available” to the impatient viewer. Writing of his experience photographing the landscape in Arizona, Sommer remarks:

I came to see that the landscape really works on two scales, the scale of things minute and repetitious, all the way down to the sand; and the outcroppings, geology at play in a big way. This supposedly dead matter, these dead rocks, were alive, the surfaces inhabited by all sorts of creatures. It’s endless. There is as much life there as in a jungle. It’s just not so available to us directly.

As Sommer describes it, the desert, the landscape may at first appear to be “dead” or as other scholars would state “empty,” however, the desert is filled with “life” and with rich expressions of creation. His experience of photographing the desert of Arizona was in a way about reframing his position to what at first looked lifeless, learning that the desert has its own complex ecosystem. *Arizona Landscape* reveals the richness and intensity of Sommer’s encounter with the desert landscape. Sommer emphasizes his artistic intervention in the desert as a subject, meticulously cropping the print once it is developed. Sommer translates the totality of the desert into the readable space of an 8 x 10 print. The desert scene is transformed into an artful composition through his careful intervention. At the same time, the abundant material he

¹⁹² Nancy Newhall to Frederick Sommer, August 2, 1944, Box 9, Folder 17, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

¹⁹³ Kelsey, “Frederick Sommer Decomposes Our Nature,” 246; Walker, ““As If One’s Eyelids Had Been Cut Away,”” 185; Timberlake, “The Sapphic Sublime of Frederick Sommer,” 3.

captures threatens to overcome the limits of the photograph's frame. Sommer over-crops the print to emphasize his framing of the material at hand, as I discuss at length in the first chapter of this dissertation.

A photograph from "Painting and Photography" (fig. 3.6) shows Adams, Sommer, Ferenc Berko, and White sitting together during what appears to be a question and answer. Adams looks out at the crowd, inquisitively. Sommer, to his right, almost seems to chuckle to himself; beside him, Berko listens, wide-eyed. White, at far right, is pictured deep in thought, perhaps considering the question posed. Adams, Sommer, and White—within the space of Aspen—demonstrate modernist photography has many "directions" it can take.¹⁹⁴ Newhall's report on the conference, with remarks from all three photographers concludes that Adams struggled with work that was too "intellectual," White too handcrafted, and Sommer too impersonal. With collage practices, symbolic titles, and imaginatively wrought compositions, Sommer argued, at Aspen, that the photograph best displays its intent through multiple layers and modes of intervention, beginning with the subject at hand and extending to the final trimming and mounting of the print. Although White and Sommer both drew upon found objects, they shaped these found objects in very distinct ways—with White importantly leaving the object as is. Adams and Sommer are best known for their photographs of the American West—though while Sommer opened up the widest possible range of tone and all-over composition, Adams mechanically organized and structured his prints according to his Zone System manual. The notes and photographs from the 1951 Aspen conference indicate that while the event served as a communal hub for new conversations on modernist photography it also functioned as a site

¹⁹⁴ Abbott, "Photography at the Crossroads," 179.

where novel debates surfaced over what route photography would ultimately take. Sommer's works were controversial, but they presented a powerful model for photography at Aspen.

Aperture, 1956-1960

Gowin has stated that Sommer's collages move from the "private" to the "worldly," "tak[ing] on all of our history, all of time, all of imagery."¹⁹⁵ Though at first they may seem inaccessible, Gowin gets us to look beyond the density and to a more inventive display, a more universal display that Sommer wanted to create. Sommer's collages, shown at Aspen, and soon after reproduced in *Aperture's* pages, encourage an inclusive view of photography that incorporates found and created material into the artist's frame. Collage and assemblage work in no way limited Sommer's practice, but instead allowed him to extend the range and type of subjects and concepts he explored in his images. Sommer stated: "More things are available if we ... make our picture complex enough."¹⁹⁶ To summarize his remarks, Sommer expresses that "many can share" when it's more "complex."¹⁹⁷ While the "personal" and "obscure" nature of Sommer's photographs perplexed the Newhalls and others at Aspen, as Gowin comments, these works were not intended to remain "obscure," but to lead the viewer to richer meanings, connecting him more meaningfully to himself and his surroundings. For the viewer willing to discover, the photograph held multiple possibilities of interpretation and engagement. In what follows, I examine Sommer's reproduction in *Aperture* from 1956-60, considering his works as they were examined and read by multiple authors. Through these "readings" of his photographs,

¹⁹⁵ Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 56.

¹⁹⁶ Frederick Sommer, radio interview with Studs Terkel, 1963, transcript, Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, Prescott, AZ, 23.

¹⁹⁷ Sommer, radio interview, 23.

commentators in the journal offer a model for viewing Sommer's work and corroborate the many, rich layers of meaning every image holds.

In 1956, Sommer was published in *Aperture* in the article "Fredrick Sommer: Collages of Found Objects." *The Sacred Wood* (date not known), *Found Painting* (1949), *All Children Are Ambassadors* (1950), *Moon-Culmination* (1951), *Sumaré* (1951), and *Valise d'Adam* (1949) appear. Multiple authors comment on these photographs, including Henry Holmes Smith, George Wright, Robert Forth, John Upton, and Barbara Morgan. Smith, Wright, Forth, Upton, and Morgan highlight the layered density of Sommer's images, their combinatory nature, intricate internal relationships, richness of content, and capacity to transform "accident" into "artifact."¹⁹⁸ The introductory paragraphs contain the following statement about Sommer's photography: "He packs every bit of picture space with significance of one kind or another."¹⁹⁹ This remark demonstrates the Arizona photographer's tendency to pack and layer content and concepts with his works, tying elaborate compositions to symbolic references. In their readings, each of these authors unpacks the many layers of these multifaceted works.

The first remarks are from Smith on *The Sacred Wood* (fig. 3.7). Echoing Gowin's description, Smith writes: "Without affection, that is directly, Sommer charges an ironic or absurd artifact (which I suspect he himself may have 'accidentally' put together) with the force of an ancient idea that lies deeply hidden and nearly forgotten in everybody." (CFO, 103) Smith makes the point that Sommer's photographs tap into universal emotions of love and anger, embedded in his intensively manufactured works. Analyzing *The Sacred Wood*, Smith observes: "The entire surface is richly textured with what seem to be deliberate or induced accidents." (CFO, 104) The separated legs and torso of the Christ-like figure at bottom invoke a feeling of

¹⁹⁸ Smith et al., "Fredrick Sommer," 104.

¹⁹⁹ Smith, "Fredrick Sommer," 103. Hereafter cited in the text as "CFO."

“violence.” “The rippling dark area, which arches above the lighter parts resembles a skin opened during a primitive dissection.” (CFO, 104) In this photograph “accidents-become-artifacts” comprise “one intense image of remnants.” (CFO, 104) The violent mystery of this photograph is created by Sommer’s hand and vision, transforming the objects pictured into “artifacts” in the image. Not merely taken up with the “commonplace” or the “ordinary,” *The Sacred Wood* reaches past simple recording. Smith states: “Nevertheless, one may ask ‘what is it? Whenever he is ready to see the tangible and inconsequential transformed into the intangible and consequential, which is a recurring miracle of art.” (CFO, 104) Read as an image of “violence,” *The Sacred Wood* according to Smith’s reading takes what is “inconsequential” and reshapes it into the “intangible and consequential,” returning to the concept of “accidents-become-artifacts,” the items before the camera transfigured into an eerie tale of destruction.

George Wright and students from the State Teachers College of New York and the Rochester Institute of Technology contribute their readings for *Found Painting* (fig. 3.8) and *All Children Are Ambassadors* (fig. 1.19). Commenting on *Found Painting*, Wright has a flippant response. He says: “The camera was used because it is mechanically ‘accurate’ rather than because it is used as a flexible, interpretative and expressive medium in its own right.” (CFO, 106) A large number of students agreed with Wright, but others gave different accounts for the photograph. One student remarked: “To me it resembles, objectively speaking, people walking in the rain. These people have on raincoats and umbrellas. Actually we do not see the people but rather their reflections in a huge puddle.” (CFO, 106) Another offers: “An underwater scene with the imaginary character King Neptune on a throne to the left.” (CFO, 106) If this latter response was made after seeing other works by Sommer, then this student was likely reacting to the fantastical elements in many of the photographer’s images, their crude materiality grounded in

the real, yet their layered, otherworldly objects and titles suggesting a more illusory dimension. A handful of students give their feedback upon seeing *All Children Are Ambassadors*. One says: “The background is the land from which the doll-ambassador comes.” (CFO, 109) A second student adds: “It is also a symbol of the collective unconscious that stamps children of man with the weight of the flesh. Blinds them to the world of light from which they come, as well as the world of darkness to which they are going. Yet the blindness makes innocence possible.” (CFO, 109) The student readings of *All Children Are Ambassadors* range from physical description—the background—to more involved analyses of the photograph’s composition.

Robert Forth carefully deconstructs *Moon-Culmination* (fig. 1.21). Commenting on the “title” of the work, he states: “This is no time to want one-to-one communication from maker to viewer; that can be last, a desperate hope, when my imagination runs out.” (CFO, 110) Here, Forth suggests Sommer’s photographs do not operate on a direct line of “communication,” but instead encourage multiple interpretations. “Viewing distance,” Forth notes, is quite significant in examining a photograph like *Moon-Culmination*. “What a variable, and how it makes the meanings shift,” he says. (CFO, 110) This statement recalls Nancy Newhall’s comment on *Arizona Landscape* (1943), which “should be hand held” because of its “detail,” indicating that Sommer’s photographs, with their dense compositions, change based on one’s perspective to the picture. Characterizing the contents of *Moon-Culmination*, Forth comments that it depicts: “Signs from man-past, some deteriorating and changing into configurations similar to those of the exhausted segments in the background.” (CFO, 110) In this comment, Forth implies that a transformation has occurred in the photograph, the illustrated figures melding with the background. However, the image also holds possibility for new “growth,” new forms emerging from the painted and spotted ground above which the figures are suspended. Forth says:

“Without deterioration, romanticism, sterility, one could not form the gestalt to perceive growth, experimentation, fertility. Is this the photographer’s message?” (CFO, 110) Forth’s analysis demonstrates that Sommer’s collage and assemblage photographs radically alter ordinary items, placing them within a larger narrative around themes of regeneration and rebirth.

John Upton contributes his opinions on *Sumaré* (fig. 3.5), discussed previously as a work shown at Aspen in 1951. He notes: “If the comparatively new and ambivalent term ‘abstract expressionism’ can be applied to a photograph, it can be applied to this one.” (CFO, 112) Upton suggests that this is a “rarity” for the photographic medium, which typically puts on view “literal and recognizable object[s].” (CFO, 112) Although the photograph is completely abstract, Upton interprets it as carrying an embedded, cosmic message. He remarks: “The photograph suggests a nostalgia of that unformed matter existing between heaven and hell—awaiting God’s hand.” (CFO, 112) The “unformed matter” is depicted with the “middle tones” of the photograph, in registers on the spectrum from “pure white” to “pure black.” According to Upton’s evaluation: “We see moments of pure white and pure black seemingly define the potential life of the middle tones; but nothing is decided.” (CFO, 112) The “title” for Upton provides another moment for in-depth interpretation of the photograph. “This [the title] may be treated as an anchor,” giving the viewer direction for his understanding and study of the image. Upton reads a deeper meaning into the photograph than the abstract textures and tones alone signify. He says: “If the Miltonic universe was formed from chaos, then the dreams of men are the proto-matter of man’s creation.” (CFO, 112) The subject matter of *Sumaré* is best displayed as raw material, interpreted by Upton as substance awaiting its formation under the “hand” of a creator.

Barbara Morgan delivers the final comments on Sommer’s assemblage photograph *Valise d’Adam* (fig. 3.4). Morgan describes the assemblage construction, which combines “the child’s

baby” and items from “rusty junkyards,” implying Sommer’s tendency to search in dumps to find new material for his collage and assemblage works.²⁰⁰ The assemblage figure at center, built from numerous worn parts and pregnant with “the child’s baby,” appears as an “old hieratic guardian spirit,” to Morgan. Ideas of rebirth around the photographs by Sommer in this article persist, including in Morgan’s own notes. She states: “Here, violated, desecrated, ravished, is still a sardonic testimony of scavenger’s need to reassemble the vestiges of procreation struggling against the anonymous machine culture image of desire.” (CFO, 115) This birth is not easy, instead Morgan says that transformation happens in spite of the “machine culture” that quells “procreation.” *Valise d’Adam* shows Sommer “comes to beauty down the path of agony,” typed at the bottom of Morgan’s comments. (CFO, 115) Unpacking the title, Morgan offers this translation: “Carrier of Adam – as against sons of disaster fertility persists.” (CFO, 115) Fighting “agony” and “disaster,” new life is still possible, or at least the artist argues it is, in *Valise d’Adam*.

The article concludes with a section entitled “A Note on the Working Methods of Fredrick Sommer.” In this note, the author explains the methods for constructing the collage and assemblage photographs reproduced in the article. Describing Sommer’s labored effort to create the constructions, the author writes that “Sommer is a cautious worker and one who takes infinite pains.” (CFO, 116) The collage and assemblage photographs are by no means haphazard displays, but often take the photographer a “long time” to imagine. Sommer includes what others would easily leave out—the detritus and discarded. “To an expert like himself the junk heaps of a city are an index to its tempor and tenor.” (CFO, 116) The author also remarks on what Sommer “transforms.” (CFO, 116) He writes that Sommer is fully “in control of its [the

²⁰⁰ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018.

camera's] mutations.” (CFO, 116) Through these statements, the author notes that Sommer “transforms” found items into carefully molded constructions, which are further translated in the process of going from collage or assemblage to photographic print. With this working method, Sommer finds ways to imbue these tattered objects with “life and significance” in his photographs. (CFO, 116) The author observes that Sommer “works with several” objects at once, emphasizing the combinatory aspect of Sommer’s project. (CFO, 116) The process is both “mental” and physical, as Sommer will conceive the design and then follow through with the objects at hand. “An afternoon spent coaxing two or three fragments into precise position he considers well spent,” this author writes. (CFO, 117) Obviously, the works presented with this text are highly, deliberately manufactured by Sommer. If a combination of objects was not complex enough, Sommer tossed it, because, he said: ““They are too easy!”” (CFO, 117) These notes, following the in-depth responses by Smith, Wright, Forth, Upton, and Morgan foreground the richness of these collage and assemblage photographs, the “quality of attention span” of Sommer’s labor yielding equivalently thorough reactions.

The cover image for the March 1956 issue in which “Fredrick Sommer: Collages of Found Objects” is published is none other than Sommer’s *Max Ernst* (fig. 1.16). The following year, this photograph is reproduced a second time, within the article “An Experiment in ‘Reading’ Photographs.” Similar to the responses in the above article, in the 1957 text multiple readings from students at the Rochester Institute of Technology are copied beside the image. These interpretations again show the range of reactions that Sommer’s photography invoked. Students comment on the technique of “double exposure” employed, Ernst’s “character,” the “piercing expression of the eyes,” Ernst as an artist, “Sommer’s attitude toward Ernst,” the “ambiguity” of body and “wall,” and the “transformation” occurring in the image, indicating the

dualism present in Sommer's works.²⁰¹ A "fourth-year student" observes the connection between the real and illusory in the photograph. The student says: "In this photograph, Fredrick Sommer reveals Max Ernst as an artist who does not record simply an accurate reproduction of nature, but who imposes something of his mind, and vision, and physical existence on the object to be interpreted and then to portray it."²⁰² One might say that Ernst and Sommer shared the quality of impressing an internal "vision" on an external "object" or natural setting. The connection between "inner" and "outer" is captured in the students' comments on the use of double exposure as well. "The double exposure is an obvious feature of the photograph, and seventeen students wrote that deliberate symbolism, or interpretation, or equivalence was thereby intended by the photographer and that he was specifically trying to show the inner and outer Ernst." (ERP, 58) Specific quantities of the types of responses are also measured, the article accounting for the range and variety of answers. For instance, it is noted that "nine students" reacted to the "nudity of the artist," as the "seventeen students" above remarked on double exposure. (ERP, 60) Sommer is quoted at the end of the student statements, describing his sentiment about the quality of their responses. He states: "I would be more interested in these readings if they came as the result of having had the photographs around for some time. As it is, it is not unlike opening a door and saying 'good morning', which tells very little about the weather or how we feel.... Yet I admit first impressions are also important." (ERP, 61) In this statement, Sommer calls for a more sustained level of engagement with his images, their intricately interwoven layers requiring committed interpretation.

On the February 1960 issue of *Aperture*, *The Thief Greater Than His Loot* (1955) (fig. 1.23) is chosen as the cover image. This image shows a figure above a gray circle, obscured by

²⁰¹ White, "An Experiment in 'Reading' Photographs," 57-61.

²⁰² White, "An Experiment in 'Reading' Photographs," 58. Hereafter cited in the text as "ERP."

an assortment of wooden sticks and a white, webby form. The covers *Max Ernst* and *The Thief Greater Than His Loot* sustain the representation of Sommer as a collage-based artist, interweaving multiple objects to create the final work we see. It is also significant that within a decade, Sommer appears on the cover twice, indicating his centrality to *Aperture*'s visual aesthetic. Within the pages of the 1960 issue, another photograph by Sommer is shown: *Configuration on Black* (1957) (fig. 3.9). This photograph is an early example of Sommer's paint on cellophane series, in which he painted directly on small cellophane rectangles.²⁰³ *Configuration on Black* depicts a figure standing in contrapposto, on a rich, black ground. The figure's head turns to the right, the right-angle of the nose captured in profile. Dense patches of paint on the negative appear in the print as bright, illuminated areas, defining the chest and waist. One of the figure's arms wraps behind, the other rests on his upper thigh. The 1960 article features the MoMA exhibition *The Sense of Abstraction in Contemporary Photography*, with selected works by Man Ray, Edward Weston, and Sommer. The inclusion of Sommer's *Configuration on Black* in this feature demonstrates his work in both abstraction and collage. Ultimately, the presentation of *The Thief Greater Than His Loot* and *Configuration on Black* shows Sommer flexibly transitioning from collage to paint-based works, expanding the conventional limits of photographic modernism. Working with a wide variety of media, Sommer asserts that the photograph is capable of reproducing a vast range of artistic processes, and that this capacity can be central to the practice of photography.

The Sacred Wood, *Max Ernst*, and *The Thief Greater Than His Loot* are quite different photographs yet all display Sommer layering and manipulating items at hand to create richly

²⁰³ Center for Creative Photography, *Original Sources*, 183. Sommer's *Paracelsus* (1959), his best-known paint on cellophane photograph, "was painted in dusty-rose-colored acrylic medium on cellophane and sandwiched between two sheets of glass" for printing.

dense, intricately fashioned works. In all of the photographs by Sommer reproduced in *Aperture*'s issues from 1956-60, his sustained intervention on straight photography is visible in these packed, multi-media images. The individual responses recorded in "Collages of Found Objects" and "An Experiment in 'Reading' Photographs" are evidence of the many types of feedback Sommer received in the journal. The quote from Sommer concluding "An Experiment in 'Reading' Photographs" implies his desire for the works to be studied seriously and with more engaged, deep analysis. While the symbolic imagery of Sommer's photographs posed a barrier to some, this imagery also offered rich insights to those who invested their time. Certain readers in the above responses just begin this work, as others quickly delve into the process of thorough examination. For Sommer, "quality of attention span" is a responsibility of the artist, who endeavors to give the best attention possible to his task. The same could potentially be expected of the work's audience, bringing that same "attention" to the work they see.²⁰⁴

"Words not spent today / Buy smaller images tomorrow": Sommer's 1962 *Aperture* Monograph

The 1956, 1957, and 1960 publications of Sommer in *Aperture* demonstrate his meticulously layered photographs, which appeared on the cover of issues Vol. 4, No. 3 (1956) and Vol. 8, No. 2 (1960). In the 1961 and 1962 publications of Sommer's work, he presents the inextricable relationship between words and images. In a later text, Sommer wrote: "Words represent images: / nothing can be said for which there is no image," explaining that through "art" individuals understand "nature."²⁰⁵ Here I will address Sommer as characterized by

²⁰⁴ Frederick Sommer, Television interview, *AM Philadelphia*, May 1980. Sommer was asked about the time spent on the collage photographs, to which he replied, in a roundabout fashion: "inventing and finding are exactly the same thing." He continues: "the important thing is quality of attention span and to use it for acceptance and not for negation."

²⁰⁵ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 32 and 9.

Jonathan Williams in his 1961 “The Eyes of 3 Phantasts.” In the article, Williams describes the imagination and violence in Sommer’s photographs, reproducing six of his most controversial works alongside the text. The section culminates in a close analysis of the Sommer monograph, designed by Sommer himself for *Aperture* in 1962. The monograph presented an opportunity for Sommer to assert his artistic philosophy—in words and images—to the larger photographic community. Sommer’s photographs of classical statuary and his title for the magnificent print *Paracelsus* invite comparisons to the history of art, as Gowin has stated. Central to Sommer’s argument in the 1962 monograph is the notion of rearrangement and flexibility, between words, images, media, and techniques.

Williams wrote the “The Eyes of 3 Phantasts” in 1961 and the article explores the photographs of Clarence John Laughlin, Sommer, and Wynn Bullock, three mid-century American photographers who are said to question reality in their fantastical photographs. Laughlin pictures “fantasy” and “symbols,” Sommer “‘larger’ than life” and “analog[ous]” relationships, and Bullock also “symbols” and “metaphor.”²⁰⁶ Sommer and Williams both emphasize the interwoven nature of subjective and objective experience, as humans shape their surroundings based on individual desires. Sommer’s terms are close to Williams, as when the latter noted: “*What* it is that *is* seems to be only what we care to inhabit. Certainly objects do not lie ‘out there’ in themselves. We see only ourselves there, but in things. Hence it is, that the camera is a third eye, equal to the personal ‘visionary’ eye of any poet.”²⁰⁷ Compare this now to Sommer who writes: “We underwrite feelings in other people and in other conditions which are congenial to us. You don’t ever see anything that is not already something of you.”²⁰⁸ Williams’s

²⁰⁶ Jonathan Williams, “The Eyes of 3 Phantasts: Laughlin, Sommer, Bullock,” *Aperture* 9, no. 3 (1961): 99, 106, and 115.

²⁰⁷ Williams, “The Eyes of 3 Phantasts,” 97. Hereafter cited in the text as “ETP.”

²⁰⁸ Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 369.

words advance another quote by Sommer, published a year later in *Aperture*: “Reality is greater than our dreams / yet it is within ourselves that we find the clues to reality.”²⁰⁹ Williams

continues:

Clarence John Laughlin, Frederick Sommer, and Wynn Bullock are three American photographers in their fifties, in the vanguard of those who have sought to push *beyond* the object, beyond the skin of materials. By ‘beyond the object’ one means a view of ‘things’ analogous to the poetics of Louis Zukofsky and Objectivism, defined best in his preface to *An “Objectivists” Anthology* ... The mind takes flight from a mustard seed and imagines a whole universe; i.e., *one thing leads to many others*. (ETP, 97)

Laughlin, Sommer, and Bullock look “*beyond* the object,” in their photographs searching for the metaphysical. The definition here of Objectivism likewise refers to Sommer’s aesthetics, and the idea that “the world is not a world of cleavages at all; the world is a world of bonds.”²¹⁰

The above quote seems crucial to understanding Sommer’s practice, as one of finding unity in disparity, building from detritus and outdated objects. Sommer asserted that his photographic project was one of creating “bonds,” however Williams emphasizes the “cleavages” or violence depicted in the photographs in his article. In his description of Sommer, Williams writes: “With Sommer we enter the world of the incredible and somebody locks the Doors of Perception behind us. It is almost as unbelievable a world as the one in which the SS officer, who has shot down the child for refusing to go into the gas chamber ‘nicely,’ is hypersensitive to poor tempi in the playing of Beethoven’s *Opus 135*.” (ETP, 106) Williams shockingly invokes wartime atrocity, in the example of the inhuman officer who is a connoisseur of late Beethoven, indicating that the violence of Sommer’s photographs threaten the “bonds” he seeks to forge. With their “Doors of Perception” fastened “behind us,” Williams also suggests the dream-like nature of Sommer’s photographs, which invite the viewer into an otherworldly

²⁰⁹ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, eds., *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 148. Originally in the 1962 *Aperture* monograph.

²¹⁰ Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 369.

dimension. Writing of *Fighting Centaur* (fig. 3.10), Williams notes: “It is ‘larger’ than life i.e., in nature it lacks the tonal range exposed by the camera and the emulsion.” (ETP, 106) The assemblage leads to multiple interpretations, Williams admits, stating that while the “phallic” is likely the most obvious association “that quality is hardly the end of it, because there is no end to the series of analogues” that Sommer’s works offer. (ETP, 106) Sommer’s highly imaginative images encourage a variety of interpretation, as noted in the previous section. Yet behind the dream in Sommer lurks the nightmare. Though Sommer’s life in Prescott is “benign,” Williams says, his “photographs are ‘horrible.’” (ETP, 110) Williams sustains: “Sommer can direct his camera at a stream in the Rocky Mountains; viz., the kind they use in advertising that pure, sparkling Coors beer, and he can scare you to death with it,” explaining the photographer’s capacity to transform comfort into sheer terror in his images. (ETP, 110) *Detail (Untitled)* (1939) (fig. 3.11) is reproduced here, a photograph of an amputated leg. Of the image, Williams states: “The use of the eye, seeing Everything in the object, rejects the anticipated revulsion. And Print 12, “Coyotes,” how can it be read in the context of *The Beautiful and/or The Ugly?*” perceiving that Sommer’s works both shock and contort conventional ideas of “beauty” and “ugliness.” (ETP, 110) Sommer’s photographs, according to Williams, contain both beauty and terror—and in spite of the terror beauty is still possible.

I argue Williams’s reading is problematic in that it amplifies the terror of Sommer’s images. In his own writings, Sommer never wrote of the works with this intent, though it is possible they did have a horrific effect on the audience. One reader wrote in “Letters to the Editor” in April 1961: “this particular foot in Print 11 was exploited by a mind that was PERVERTED. That is not humanitarianism [*sic*—the only proper motive for such a picture.”²¹¹

²¹¹ “Letters to the Editor,” *Aperture* 9, no. 4 (1961): 176.

Yet others saw beyond the violence, understanding Sommer's larger project to unify and congeal dissimilar forms, to learn their "logic."²¹² The issue was Gowin's first introduction to the work of Sommer. In response to Williams's article, Gowin noted, "The foot, the drawings, some of the fundamental ideas like skipreading ... seemed so original to me and so ... deep compared to what most photography-artists were saying."²¹³ The foot, or *Detail* from Williams's article, displays an amputated leg that was given to Sommer by a friend who worked in medicine.²¹⁴ In the photograph, we see the leg, opened, showing the anatomy beneath. Gowin remarked in an earlier interview: "When I first saw Fred's work in the 1961 Aperture *The Eyes of 3 Phantasts* I thought that the amputated leg was one of the greatest images I'd ever beheld. I immediately thought of Leonardo."²¹⁵ Gowin's comparison of Sommer to Leonardo da Vinci elevates the work to a study of anatomy. Alongside photographs, Sommer made drawings from 1943-1975, drawing serving as his first mode of production.²¹⁶ The photographs were privileged in *Aperture*, but it is in the drawings that one sees Sommer's training as a landscape architect flourish.²¹⁷ Finally, skipreading is a process that Sommer used to put texts into original formats, altering the words for his "skipread" construction. Jan-Gunnar Sjölin has described "skip-reading" as Sommer's invented technique in which the words of a text are simultaneously re-ordered as one reads, creating new combinations from the words on the page.²¹⁸ Sommer noted in his later

²¹² Sommer, *Words / Images*, 17.

²¹³ Emmet Gowin (artist and Professor Emeritus of the Council of the Humanities and Visual Arts, Princeton University), in discussion with the author, March 2019.

²¹⁴ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 211.

²¹⁵ Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 58.

²¹⁶ Lyons and Cox, *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 89.

²¹⁷ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 207.

²¹⁸ Leland Rice, Jane K. Bledsoe, and Constance W. Glenn, *Frederick Sommer at Seventy-Five: A Retrospective* (Long Beach, CA: The Museum and Galleries, California State University, 1980), 29. Sjölin likens the *Dürer Variations* to Sommer's practice of "skip-reading." The construction of the *Dürer Variations* resembles this process in that multiple woodcuts are combined to make a single image and, a variation on the original occurs where, "within each separate woodcut a choice was made to bring out certain vertical layers."

Princeton seminars: “You can test the aliveness of a translation by skipreading,” and would skipread from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Socrates, and John Ruskin.²¹⁹ Skipreading mirrored the photographer’s utilization of collage, drawing on found material for his photographic work.²²⁰

Ultimately, the 1962 monograph, following on the heels of Williams’s “The Eyes of 3 Phantasts,” exhibits the artist’s concept that: “Things that we would say before the fact have absolutely nothing in common still have a mathematical chance to meet and work together.”²²¹ His practice in some ways centered on how far he could stretch the differences depicted in the photograph, and yet still produce a unified work. In his *Memorable Fancies* White states the potentials and problems of Sommer’s photographic production. These notes were presumably made during a visit leading up to the *Aperture* monograph, dated “July 1-2-3.” White quotes Sommer who stated: ““I work the borderline media which people will ask, ‘but is it photography?’”²²² here alluding to his work with drawing and collage. White says of Sommer in these notes: “He is inwardly ‘tired’ weary from + with his dedication to a way of working regardless of opinion. And I feel his isolation has just about done all it can for him.”²²³ In this quote, White suggests that Sommer would benefit from feedback, that his “isolation” has reached a point of impasse, no longer sustaining his work. The *Aperture* monograph functioned as a way for White to encourage Sommer to receive criticism on his recent photographs. White completes the “July 1-2-3” entry with the following comment: “He makes me more angry than even with N[ancy]N[ewhall]’s philosophy of Museum showing. Taste before appropriate duty is disastrous to photography. So I will urge a one man show of Sommer to be simultaneous with the

²¹⁹ FSA, CCP. Transcript of Princeton seminar no. 11, dated December 12, 1979. (Tape 22:2)

²²⁰ Gowin, “Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer,” 57.

²²¹ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 27.

²²² “Fredric Sommer,” July 1-2-3 [1961?], Series 9: Memorable Fancies Files, 1931-1976, Memorable Fancies 1960-1963, Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum.

²²³ “Fredric Sommer,” July 1-2-3 [1961?], Minor White Archive.

monograph.” Stating that “taste before appropriate duty is disastrous to photography,” White indicates that Sommer’s emphasis on culture in his photographs (allusions to works of literature, art, and science) went against his “appropriate duty” to the medium of photography. White in many ways served as an “intermediary” for photographers like Sommer.²²⁴ White gave Sommer a position in *Aperture* because of their “disagreement,” giving Sommer space to articulate his philosophy. If Sommer’s philosophy of “cleavages” and “bonds” went too far for White, then this did not prevent him from showing Sommer’s work in *Aperture*.

The tensions around Sommer continued into the planning of the monograph. In a board meeting, tensions rose about the back cover of the monograph. Adams found Sommer’s photographs to be jarring, off-putting, and indecent. Adams is paraphrased saying the following: “AA says the work of FS is sick, sour, decadent and obscure. He fears FS as there are ‘some disturbing elements’. FS is ‘difficult and decadent’ and has ‘created some horrors’. AA is worried about the image FS would make.”²²⁵ Adams’s tone has changed from his 1951 letter to Sommer, in which he writes of his “profound respect for [Sommer’s] achievement, and a deep admiration for [Sommer’s] devotion to the precisions of craft and eye,” despite the “different” qualities of their work.²²⁶ I argue that this reaction is a direct result of the Williams article, in response to a photograph like *Detail*—which repulsed Adams, who, like the *Aperture* reader felt it was “perverted,” but piqued Gowin’s interest, its documentation revealing the “complex”

²²⁴ Peter C. Bunnell (David Hunter McAlpin Professor of the History of Photography and Modern Art Emeritus, Department of Art & Archaeology, Princeton University), in discussion with the author, March 2019.

²²⁵ Notes between Ansel Adams and Minor White on Sommer polaroid ad, Box 3, Folder 2, Ansel Adams correspondence, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. Looking at the monograph now, one can see that Adams won the argument (his polaroid occupies the back cover of Sommer’s monograph).

²²⁶ Ansel Adams to Frederick Sommer, February 10, 1951, Box 3, Folder 2, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

structure of the foot's anatomy.²²⁷ Perhaps understanding the backlash that could result from the photographs in the 1962 monograph (though importantly *Detail* here is not included), White formulates a thoughtful introduction, opening the monograph to the reader. The monograph is titled "Words not spent today / Buy smaller images tomorrow," suggesting that one must use one's words to cultivate powerful images. Gowin comments: "it was the only *Aperture* that doesn't have a picture on the cover," remarking on Sommer's interest in text with images.²²⁸ In his introduction, White foregrounds Sommer's expansion of photographic convention, saying: "From early efforts to understand the uniqueness of camera he has critically explored the incorporation of hand and man 'into the act' while remaining true to the medium."²²⁹ Sommer, as I have stated above, asserts his intent through his meticulously fashioned collage and assemblage works, testing and reanimating the medium of photography. White addresses the controversy of these images and quells his audience's fears with this statement: "Sages and Saints across all the skies of time nod approval at these images which disturb us and make us face our individual death our ultimate terror." (FS, 134) Whereas Sommer was captivated by the "structure" of subjects like the chicken parts and the leg, White reads the photographs through the lens of the spiritual, seeing these same images as intimations of "death" and despair.²³⁰

Perhaps to offset the shock of Williams's selections, which prove that a found photograph could range from collage to a luminously printed human limb, Sommer's design for his monograph begins—directly opposite of White's introduction—with a very recent work, a cut paper made on September 5, 1962. The cut paper is followed by several portraits, works for

²²⁷ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 211. In reference to the amputated leg and another photograph Sommer made of a "placenta," he said: "Those were about the best things. They were very complex shapes, very handsome shapes."

²²⁸ Emmet Gowin (artist and Professor Emeritus of the Council of the Humanities and Visual Arts, Princeton University), in discussion with the author, March 2019.

²²⁹ Sommer, "Frederick Sommer," 134. Hereafter cited in the text as "FS."

²³⁰ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 34.

which he was less known. A portrait of the artist's wife, Frances, made in 1943, appears in these first few pages of the monograph, suggesting her centrality to his work and success (Frances did financially support him when they moved to Arizona).²³¹ The portraits are followed by several of Sommer's collages and found compositions, like *Young Explorer* (1951) (fig. 3.12). This photograph, exhibited at Aspen, shows an illustration of a young boy, framed by curving shapes placed above his face, arms, and legs, and in the photograph's upper half. After *Young Explorer*, Sommer places a text (interspersed with the photographs), dedicated to Frances. He writes, here shortened: "the eye of the sun red in a springtime of flowers / the wind captive in my mind / the sensation of knowing more beautiful things / but where could it have been." (FS, 143) Sommer's words capture a sense of ephemerality and entrapment, the "sun" blazing "red" over the more innocent concept of the "springtime of flowers." "The wind" is held "captive," referring back to the hot, still air of the "sun" relentlessly beating over the "flowers." In this text, Sommer expresses a violent struggle and also a fleeting glimpse of "beautiful things," that are evaded in the last line. The poem may describe Sommer's challenge of making art in the seemingly desolate landscape of the desert, ultimately finding beauty in what others discard and have lost. Sommer nods to the reproduction of his photographs in the Surrealist magazine *VVV*, three pages later displaying two *Arizona Landscapes* stacked on top of one another.²³² In contrast to the *VVV* reproduction, which leaves only a thin black line between the two *Arizona Landscapes*, slightly separated, in the monograph's display, Sommer clearly emphasizes the frame between his two photographs.²³³ Directly following, Sommer juxtaposes *Coyote* (1945) (fig. 2.28) with *Mexican Bather* (1952) (fig. 3.13). Two distinct subjects, Sommer draws comparisons with *Coyote* and

²³¹ Watson, "Sommer Chronology," 219.

²³² Walker, "'As If One's Eyelids Had Been Cut Away,'" 183.

²³³ Ibid. Walker reproduces the spread with his text.

Mexican Bather. Both are shown in profile, the coyote's head turned to the right, the bather's to the left, and both are broken down, the coyote decomposing and the bather's legs chipped away and chest covered with holes, as if shot by bullets. After a page of text and another photograph (*Chicken*, 1939) two full pages of text appear. Here, Sommer writes: "There is in every painting, poem or print, / something of the long rolling undulation of the open sea. / Painter and poet inhabit this legato of breathing and silence." (FS, 153) The musical "legato" recalls Williams's writing about the SS officer and Beethoven, the "bonds" in Sommer's photographs threatened by violence but the "undulation" holding the disparate items together. Sommer's photographs inhabit that "legato," balanced in a state of decay and transformation, the dry desert extending the "legato" of death, decomposition, and regeneration.²³⁴ *Glass* (1943) (fig. 1.5) and *Taylor, Arizona* (1945) (fig. 3.14) are the last two photographs from Sommer's early work, in *Glass* a heap of bottles filling the frame and *Taylor, Arizona* representing a quiet moment, the lower half of the window and bottom part of the frame broken. In these works, and those above, Sommer explores themes of decay and reanimation, broken items serving as the material for an all-over photograph or, with *Taylor, Arizona*, a delicate dance carried out between the split windowpane and the unattached frame hanging below.

The remaining pages of Sommer's monograph include his most recent work. Out of focus pictures, like *Ponte S. Angelo* (1960) (fig. 3.15) and *Capitoline Museum* (1960) (fig. 3.16) are shown. *Capitoline Museum* animates a statue from the museum, the camera blur hinting that the legs beneath the beautifully draped gown are moving.²³⁵ To the left, *Galleria Borghese* (1960)

²³⁴ Sommer, *Words / Images*, 27.

²³⁵ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, "Capitoline Museum," online galleries, http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=127&piece_id=1063. "Frederick Sommer spent three months traveling in Europe in late 1960. The title of this photograph, 'Capitoline Museum,' comes from the name of the museum in Rome where this statue is located. Using a 35mm Leica, Sommer moved the camera straight down during the 1/5th second exposure, adding elemental action to the statuary."

(fig. 3.17) is presented, Sommer's camera movement causing the statue to appear in motion. Five pages of text accompany the early work that is reproduced (portraits, collage, and landscapes)—that same amount included with the 1959-62 photographs. Following the opening image (*Ponte S. Angelo*), Sommer includes two pages of text. On these pages, he states: "We work for that part of our vision which is uncompleted / taste is the gourmet among empiricists." (FS, 163) This quote emphasizes Sommer's acceptance of the "unexpected" and the "unknown," these works symbolizing his effort to further expand his photographic practice.²³⁶ In addition to Sommer's out of focus museum pictures he also selects one out of focus nude, *Figure* (1961) (fig. 3.18), for the monograph. The subject for *Figure* is the same woman who appears in one of Sommer's portraits at the beginning of the monograph; here she is transfigured into an anonymous figure, almost resembling a charcoal drawing, through the out of focus technique.²³⁷ Two *Smoke on Cellophane* photographs are printed as well. *Smoke on Cellophane #5* (1961), later renamed *The Golden Apples*, animates the cellophane ground with light and dark smoke-impressed lines. The 1959-62 works mark the beginning of a new mode for Sommer, departing from the straight negative and using cellophane, smoke, and blurred effects to construct images.

Sommer's 1962 monograph showcases a full range of the photographer's work and writings, giving a comprehensive summary of his achievement, bridging the divide between words and images through an elastic approach to the medium. In the works from 1939-52 that span the first part of the monograph, Sommer shows an interest in decay and renewal, utilizing illustrations and found scenes (i.e. *Glass*) to create photographs from abnormal forms.²³⁸ In *Glass*, the piles of shattered glass and stacked bottles threaten to undo the photograph's integrity,

²³⁶ Sommer, "The Constellations that Surround Us," 212.

²³⁷ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018.

²³⁸ *Photograph September 5, 1962* and *Lee Nevin* (1960) also appear in this section, but at the beginning.

yet Sommer skillfully arranges the objects, with the lighter sheets at bottom and darker bottles at top, a strong “diagonal” from the bottom left.²³⁹ The second half of the monograph, displaying photographs Sommer created from 1957-62, illustrates Sommer’s expanded practice with the medium. In his text, noting “we work for that part of our vision which is uncompleted,” Sommer shows his effort to push his practice to its limits. With works such as *Smoke on Cellophane #5*, Sommer tests his ability to make prints from the raw material of smoke and cellophane. *Smoke on Cellophane #5*, or *The Golden Apples*, features a light tic-tac-toe grid and a dark triangular arc sweeping through center, exemplifying Sommer’s newfound expansion with these materials. The monograph showcases Sommer’s work and writings, displaying his philosophy of photography. He states that photographs and text belong together, that “images have sources and antecedents,” and that the practice is essentially one of reorganizing what is found into the work of art. (FS, 150)

The 1961 “Eyes of 3 Phantasts” and 1962 monograph serve as two additional iterations of Sommer’s developing representation in *Aperture*, culminating with the 1962 monograph. Williams significantly ties Sommer to literary movements like Objectivism, Sommer’s philosophy of “aesthetics” as “the many of what occurs singularly in art” linked to the Objectivist concept that “*one thing leads to many others.*”²⁴⁰ Williams overemphasizes the terror of Sommer’s photographs (which White repeats in his introduction to the monograph), Sommer himself approaching subjects like the amputated leg and chicken parts from an interest in design.²⁴¹ Sommer would ultimately publish a collection with the Center for Creative

²³⁹ Sommer, “The Constellations that Surround Us,” 211. Here, he discusses the “diagonals” and especially the “corners” of the photograph.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 207 and 210. Sommer writes: “I have never dealt with anything that I was not interested in as a design relationship.”

Photography in 1984 titled *Words / Images*, building on his monograph's title "Words not spent today / Buy smaller images tomorrow," indicating the symbiotic relationship between the verbal and the visual. This combined philosophy of text and image is highlighted in the 1962 monograph, the thirty photographs accompanied by 10 text columns. Sommer draws on a wide range of material for the work reproduced, as Gowin has noted aligning photography with the history of art and especially the history of "the graphic arts."²⁴² As with his practice of "skipreading," Sommer constantly remolded and reshaped found material for his own compositions, testing an object's ability to be refashioned with the photograph's chemistry. Sommer, in the monograph, argues for photography's flexibility as a medium.²⁴³ The "sensitized surface" of the photograph allowed Sommer to explore the full range of expressions it could convey.²⁴⁴

Conclusion

By examining Sommer at Aspen, his publication in *Aperture* from 1956-1960, and his 1962 monograph with the journal, an account of his work which emphasizes the symbolic and the hand-worked aspects of his photography begins to emerge. At Aspen, Sommer revealed his new works with collage, works such as *Valise d'Adam* suggesting that even with the most weathered objects, fresh forms can emerge. In the texts "Collages of Found Objects" and "An Experiment in 'Reading' Photographs," Sommer's photographs are interpreted by multiple individuals, signifying the layers of response that the works encourage. The nature of these

²⁴² Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 53.

²⁴³ Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 56. This reading of Sommer draws on Gowin's interpretation of the collages as "the assembly of things that have somewhat lost their original purpose put back into an active configuration."

²⁴⁴ Sommer, "An Extemporaneous Talk," 375.

widely ranging responses directly correlates to the vast range of possibilities embedded in the negative and print—through “complexity” “many” could “share,” Sommer claimed. Finally, in the monograph “Words not spent today / Buy smaller images tomorrow,” Sommer asserts that images and words function as one, his photographs printed alongside his own poetry. From Aspen to the monograph, Sommer cultivates the “metaphysical,” constructs intricately made works that require equally intensive interpretations, and, in the 1962 monograph, publishes photographs and poetry side by side, creating two artworks in one.

Sommer’s representation provides a model for the medium of photography, challenging standards like previsualization. Through collage, Sommer proves photographs can be made from anything the photographer chooses to include. At Aspen, Sommer raised concern with Adams, who had recently written to Sommer in February troubled by the “profoundly esoteric” nature of Sommer’s work.²⁴⁵ The works Sommer brought to Aspen tested standards of direct “communication” and an aversion to “abstract” imagery. Exhibiting collage and assemblage photographs, tightly cropped, with difficult, metaphorical titles, Sommer strained “communication” in the works he presented. In *Circumnavigation of the Blood* (1950), *Flower and Frog* (1947) and *Valise d’Adam* (1949), Sommer fashioned works that require in-depth study of both the physical layers of the image and their symbolic titles. The title of his panel “Painting and Photography” emphasizes Sommer’s interest in the multimedia relationships photography could foster. At the 1951 conference, Sommer asserted his intent could be established at various moments in the construction of the photograph. Sommer’s model challenged yet reanimated standards of straight photography through handcrafted work.

²⁴⁵ Ansel Adams to Frederick Sommer, February 10, 1951, Box 3, Folder 2, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

Despite the controversy of the Aspen works, White reproduced them in *Aperture* in the 1950s. Following up on Sommer's Aspen presentation, Nancy Newhall wrote to White in January 1952, inquisitive about the work: "I would love to see what he was telling us at Aspen down in type! A real challenge and amazement. I suggest we schedule him not earlier than the third issue."²⁴⁶ Sommer's presentation at Aspen produced a range of responses, from bewilderment to curiosity, as Nancy Newhall's letter to White shows. Sommer complicated and questioned straight photographic ideology, making visible the intervention the photographer makes and erasing the distinction between "given" and "invented," showing the photographer always shapes the material at hand. Above all, Sommer's rigorous labor on the works is visible the longer one looks, as an interviewer once remarked: "you spend a long time creating one of your pictures."²⁴⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, the layered construction of the collages encouraged intensive reading. This reading I describe as an "unfolding" of the work's layers, one by one. In "Collages of Found Objects" and "An Experiment in 'Reading' Photographs," Henry Holmes Smith, John Upton, Barbara Morgan, and students from the Rochester Institute of Technology take on this interpretive work. Examining *All Children Are Ambassadors*, *Sumaré*, and *Max Ernst*, their readings indicate a transformation that occurs from object to photograph, through Sommer's interventions. These readings demonstrate Sommer's philosophy of "complexity," the artist considering that a work saturated with his intent will be "more available" to his audience. Additional possibilities for communication become "available" with each move the artist makes. The work should always have the capacity to be "read ... a little bit differently" with each viewing. "The secret of a fine work of art is that something always brings you back," Sommer

²⁴⁶ Nancy Newhall to Minor White, January 21, 1951 (I think this letter is actually dated 1952, since Nancy Newhall mentions Aspen, as I note in my text), Series 1: Correspondence Files, 1940-1976, From Beaumont & Nancy Newhall, 1951-1952, Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum.

²⁴⁷ Frederick Sommer, Television interview, *AM Philadelphia*, May 1980.

wrote.²⁴⁸ Once the work is finished, its dense layers require a “complex” level of response from its viewers, to understand the artist’s intent. The intentional, meticulously crafted work resists easy interpretation and always asks the viewer to take time to unravel its various parts.

“Complexity” resurfaces in the 1962 *Aperture* monograph, in Sommer’s statement: “I like the simplicity / that permits us to be more comfortably bedded in complexity.” “Simplicity” for Sommer related to the refined synthesis of the work of art, which unifies complex ideas and materials in a condensed form. The photographer’s description of “complexity” was founded in the idea that “complex” photographs yield the greatest interpretive reward. The richness of the monograph is produced by the poetry and photographs that are included. Sommer packs the pages with images but leaves space in the pages of the poetry that occur between the photographs he has selected. It is significant that Sommer chose poetry for text, the concise, weighted lines equivalent to his decisively cropped, loaded images. Sommer sets images against lines of verse, building on the metaphorical titles of the photographs. As with Sommer’s earlier reproductions in *Aperture*, here themes of regeneration and rebirth return, a work such as *Coyote* (1945) occupying a liminal space between decomposition and renewal. Or, in *Glass* (1943), a heap of discarded objects offers the perfect opportunity for Sommer to reframe and represent the glass in camera. Sommer demonstrates a willingness to push further into “unknown” territory with photographs like *Smoke on Cellophane #5* (1961). Crafted from smoke and cellophane, this work shows an abstract pattern formed by a smoke drawing transferred to the cellophane base, then enlarged and developed in the darkroom. The second half of the monograph is filled with smoke on cellophane, paint on cellophane, and out of focus pictures, exemplifying Sommer’s final test to the conventions of straight photography. In these works, he questions the status of the negative

²⁴⁸ Sommer, “The Constellations that Surround Us,” 210.

and print, asserting his intervention through camera-less photographs. *Galleria Borghese* (1960), *Figure* (1961), and *Smoke on Cellophane #5* (1961) signal a transition and evolution for Sommer's photography, in which he tested out new materials and techniques. Various methods are utilized to animate stone and flesh, as paint figures are illuminated under the enlarger light. The photographs chosen for the monograph emphasize the relationship between words and images. Sommer represents figures like *Paracelsus*, suggesting photography's connection to alchemy. As with his practice of skipreading, Sommer's collage and assemblage images reproduced in the monograph show his inclination to rearrange objects before the camera. Finally, the smoke and paint-based images display Sommer's innovation, testing new methods of production with lyrically rendered negatives.

Sommer's photographic project was one of expanding the limits of straight photographic convention as far as they could possibly go. Minimizing the distinction between "given" and "invented," encouraging photographic and interpretative "complexity," and suggesting that photographs and text are tightly intertwined, Sommer extends photographic practice. While not all photographers agreed with his approach, at Aspen and in the pages of *Aperture* Sommer presented a persuasive model of photographic expression. Even Adams, who resisted the "intellectual" nature of Sommer's photographs, later came around (the claim was conveyed by Gowin):

Take someone like Ansel Adams. He had no way of accepting things that Fred simply took for granted. If he had accepted them, he would have been going against his nature. But surprisingly, O'Keeffe recounts a conversation with him where she asked him if he had anything to do over, what he would do differently. And he said: "I would have made fewer pictures and I would have insisted that they be better." And then he gave as his example, "Take this guy Frederick Sommer, his whole reputation rests on a couple hundred pictures, and there's nothing in any of them which he doesn't relate to in a deep emotional way."²⁴⁹

²⁴⁹ Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 60.

Here, Adams implies a general philosophy to Sommer's entire practice: whether in photography or—in the monograph—poetry, Sommer pushed to create dense, intensively packed artworks. Commenting “there's nothing in any of them which he doesn't relate to in a deep emotional way,” Adams foregrounds the “deep” intentionality of Sommer's works. Loading photographs with found objects, Sommer demonstrates his ability to unify disparate items in camera. Testing the limits of the straight photograph, Sommer employs straight photographic techniques—contact printing and the use of an 8 x 10 camera—but to vastly different ends. For Sommer, there was no need to exclude painting, collage, or drawing from photography. Photography, instead, served as a tool for bringing these separate practices together. In sum, his effort to create continuities between “discrepancies” is apparent in his photographs which test what the negative can hold.²⁵⁰ Through works like *Valise d'Adam*, *Glass*, and *Figure*, Sommer shows the remarkable range of the medium, able to transform found objects and figures in the camera.

²⁵⁰ Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 374.

Chapter 4 The Reimagined Negative: Lens, Paper, Smoke, and Paint

Introduction

The fourth chapter of my dissertation examines Sommer's paint and smoke-based photographs, out-of-focus studies, and photographs designed from cut paper. These works, I argue, rewrite the limits of photographic expression and display Sommer's use of unusual techniques to create forms and shapes that are defined by their density, complexity, and difficulty. In photographs such as *Paracelsus* (1959), the photographer painted dye onto a cellophane base, creating a form resembling a torso. Other works, including *Smoke on Glass* (1962), are made through the meticulous process of transferring an impression of smoke-dusted foil onto a piece of greased glass. Sommer's out-of-focus pictures (*Galleria Borghese*, 1960 and *Figure*, 1965) give softness and life to stone and flesh. The distortion of *Figure* also distances the subject from the viewer and forces us to step back and carefully contemplate what we see. *Paracelsus*, *Smoke on Glass*, *Galleria Borghese*, and *Figure* are all multi-step works that combine photographic and non-photographic procedures in the making of the print. Through the course of the chapter, I hope to reveal that these innovative works demonstrate continuity within Sommer's photographic production, most of all asserting his notion that "elegance is the presentation of things in their minimum dimensions."²⁵¹ Although the late 1950s-early 1960s works employ expanded techniques, they are guided by the same density and intensity as Sommer's early works. The out-of-focus and paint or smoke-based photographs also show a shift

²⁵¹ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, <http://www.fredericksommer.org>. Also found in Sommer's "Linguistic & Pictorial Logic of General Aesthetics: A Discussion of the Ornamental Sense of Ideas" (A transcription of the Princeton seminars, taught by Frederick Sommer in 1979.)

in the photographer's mid-late career production, freeing his hand and opening the bounds of the medium further than before.

Sommer discussed his camera-less and later works in a 1963 interview. In the interview, Sommer described the photographic process as one defined by “uncertain[ty]” but one in which the photographer activates the materials at hand.²⁵² Writing of one of his photographs, he noted: “It is this uncertainty [this quality of the photograph] that gives us both life and a feeling of awe. We are caught, for it and we are not for it.”²⁵³ The uncertainty of the photograph—as, for instance, the distorted out-of-focus works—draws the viewer in but leaves many aspects of the work unanswered. It is the artist's responsibility to cultivate that uncertainty, framing and shaping it within the image. Sommer's photographs, above all, operate formally by expanding the techniques and limits of what the photograph can hold. With a photograph such as *Paracelsus*, Sommer introduces a new process and tests what can be rendered on a contained, 4 x 2-inch cellophane base. He noted that the artist must take in “the widest possible range” of experience, yet the photographs show that this “range” has been condensed by the physical bounds of the negative or print. (Terkel, 10) While the photograph courts chance, the artist always activates his found “inventory.” (Terkel, 2) Photography functions through “the human being as an observer” who forges new “relationships” between things seen, organized within the photograph. (Terkel, 2 and 19) For Sommer, the “accidental” and the “arrange[d]” are one and the same, they simply serve as different paths to the construction of the image. (Terkel, 20)

As discussed throughout this dissertation, central to Sommer's practice was the notion of complexity. The paint, smoke, out-of-focus, and cut paper works embody complexity by incorporating multiple processes into the final photographic work, demonstrating that the

²⁵² Sommer, radio interview, 18 and 27.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18. Hereafter cited in the text as “Terkel.”

photograph can be “sensitive” and open to other media. Sommer’s inclusive approach challenged straight photography’s medium specificity, proving that photographs and their subjects were not isolated but tied to a larger, interconnected history. In the 1963 interview, he stated: “The great gains in all fields are always made at the border of the field.” (Terkel, 21) Especially with the paint, smoke, out-of-focus and cut paper works, Sommer tests the limits of what the photograph can include. Sommer even questioned the idea of the limit, noting: “I set absolutely no limits. What I may find tomorrow I find because of what, to a certain extent, I already found today. And it will just be work for that margin of the unknown and the unknown is really much more friendly than we know.” (Terkel, 22) This quote recalls the idea of chance that the artist works to comprehend, overcoming uncertainty and “the unknown” through the act of photographing. The making of art, for Sommer, was a “day-to-day” process, contributing to an “aesthetic system” which is not built on the rules of “morality” but instead is accepting only of “the beautiful thing.” (Terkel, 23-24) Describing the works that I examine in this chapter, Sommer says:

I will investigate further the possibility of making negatives which will permit me to withhold or give access to light, to the sensitized surface, so that it will in more ways register greater varieties of things. In other words, what we’re really doing is in that case freeing the final image from the idea of a projection. (Terkel, 26)

Sommer used a wide range of methods to facilitate expanded forms of photographic expression. Overall, these later works reconsider the notion of medium specificity, giving Sommer flexibility and freedom in his photographic designs. He stated: “the inventiveness with which all of this will be accomplished to me is in no sense different from working on a canvas or a drawing. As a matter of fact, I am including drawing into these things.” (Terkel, 27) The paint on cellophane photographs are created from small paint drawings, fashioned by Sommer. He stated:

It’s terribly important to realize that if you’re working on a surface that, let us say, that [is] something like 2 ½ by 3 ½, that one has to work with a degree of finesse and smallness and consideration for small processes that are happening there which our

clumsy hands are not ready for. But let no one think that some of these things cannot be followed in your mind as you work them out either. (Terkel, 27)

Here, Sommer emphasizes the active work of the artist, shaping the photographic image—which, though “small” and difficult to shape, remains within his artistic control.

This chapter will investigate the concepts of density, complexity, and difficulty in Sommer’s paint, smoke, out-of-focus, and cut paper works, as he experimented with what a 2 ½ by 3 ½ negative or an enlarged 11 x 14 print could hold. The first section will focus on the paint and smoke-based photographs, made from negatives constructed on either cellophane or glass featuring abstract and figural designs. These works, I argue, gave Sommer a greater sense of facility and control, allowing him to incorporate his own drawings into his photographic corpus. Sommer began his professional career as a landscape architect and the practice of drafting quick “thumbnail” sketches deeply informed his diminutive negatives and prints.²⁵⁴ The second section examines Sommer’s out-of-focus photographs, which include cultural sites abroad and portraits from his studio in Prescott and were produced using two different exposure techniques. Sommer’s out of focus pictures animate and distort the figure, radically altering the viewer’s engagement with the subject. The third, final section, looks closely at the cut paper works, developed from sheets of Kraft paper, into which Sommer incised shapes. In these photographs—a handful of which were also photographed out-of-focus—Sommer uses the paper base as a new support to register free-drawn forms. All of these works involve multiple “stages” before the print is made and in some, visibility and legibility are intentionally challenged. From the beginning, Sommer implemented multiple processes—from contact printing to collage—to increase the visual intensity and density of his works. In works like *Galleria Borghese* and *Figure*, out-of-focus effects distance the work from the world, asserting their status as artworks.

²⁵⁴ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018.

Sommer spoke in favor of photographic processes that provided more control over the image design. He noted, at the time he made works like *[Untitled: Cut Paper]* (1963):

The important thing, as I see it now, is to really go the whole step like we did in the first place at one time ... it was considered necessary to have a photographic plate or photographic film to make a fine image. And my feeling is that we again have to face that fact that we'll need a plate, we'll need a support, and we've got to invent more ways of making supports that will permit us to do this filtering and to let only certain kinds of shapes and forms in degrees of increase or decrease in light hit the surfaces. (Terkel, 27)

Although here he is describing the paint on cellophane works, Sommer's words resonate with the late 1950s-early 1960s works as a whole. The challenge for Sommer was to see what the photograph could contain and how concisely and uniquely presented it could be.

Modifying the Negative: Paint and Smoke on Cellophane and Glass

In the late 1950s, Sommer began producing the works I will discuss in this section. These works were created from paint and smoke negatives and executed through a complex series of procedures. These works realize Sommer's vision of making more "surfaces" for various "shapes and forms" to fill the photographic frame. Applying paint directly onto cellophane or glass bases and generating contact impressions of smoke onto greased surfaces of glass, Sommer constructed new compositions with a mixture of painting, drawing, and photography. In the works below, Sommer establishes an approach to photography that is comprehensive and inclusive in scope, unlike the linear procedures of straight photography. Through expanded techniques, straight photographic methods are re-envisioned in Sommer's studio. In what follows, I specifically describe the smoke and paint-based photographs as one example of Sommer's expansion of straight photographic technique.

Paracelsus (1959) (fig. 1.7) is perhaps the best-known work from this period. The photograph was made from a design in paint on cellophane. Sommer hand fashioned each paint

on cellophane negative, quickly designing. Once he had selected a negative to print, he would place it in a Solar enlarger, which, according to Naomi Lyons, heated and flattened the negative.²⁵⁵ This would create a smoother print, as it directly translated from the negative. In an important radio interview with Studs Terkel in 1963, Sommer noted that photographs need not be a mere “record” of what the photographer sees. The photograph functions around “the human being” and his or her “involvement” or intervention in what he or she records. Sommer continues: “And, if it ever involves the man who took the picture and if by some little extra grace he is able to involve others, well to the degree that that is an extra grace, it also becomes fantasy.” (Terkel, 2-3) The photograph as art was a way to dream with others, and to, as Sommer stated elsewhere: “teach people that imagination is the finest order.”²⁵⁶ Alchemy, bound up in the notion of inexplicable, fantastical transformation, is apt for the light-based and metallic property of the form in *Paracelsus*. The photograph is named after a 16th-century Swiss physician and alchemist.²⁵⁷ The negative undergoes a profound alteration—and the magic of the print suggests the change is alchemical. Though working only with paint on the cellophane base, the artist achieves degrees of depth and relief in the painted and printed image. As with other works that will follow, Sommer obtains layering, depth, and shading through unusual materials.

Beginning in the year 1957, Sommer comprehensively shifted his practice. 1957 was also the year he taught at the Art Institute, subbing for Harry Callahan.²⁵⁸ Sommer was likely influenced by Aaron Siskind and the community at the Art Institute during his time teaching in Chicago. Since the founding of the Institute of Design, transplanted from the Bauhaus in

²⁵⁵ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018.

²⁵⁶ Frederick Sommer, *Words / Images* (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1984), 27.

²⁵⁷ Joseph F. Borzelleca, “Paracelsus: Herald of Modern Toxicology,” *Toxicological Sciences* 53, no. 1 (January 2000): 2-4.

²⁵⁸ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, “Frederick Sommer 1905-1999 – Chronological Summary,” <http://www.fredericksommer.org/chronology.php>.

Germany by László Moholy-Nagy, Chicago became the center of experimental practice in all areas of art.²⁵⁹ Moholy-Nagy was a pioneer in photography and made photograms, photographs developed by placing objects on photosensitive paper and exposing that paper to light, yielding a print that cut exposure in camera quite literally “out of the picture.” Sommer referenced the practice of making photograms in his 1963 interview with Terkel, just four years after he created the negative and print for *Paracelsus*. Yet, Sommer desired to take the photogram process further. He remarks: “why not design plates or negatives or different procedures in which this sensitized surface can be used again as a final registering medium, but which perhaps then will have been subject to a greater range of possibilities.” (Terkel, 26) He wanted the ability to use a glass or cellophane “surface” as the place where designs in paint or smoke could be imagined. (Terkel, 27) Following in the style of abstract and graphic photography that emerged in Chicago in the 1950s, Sommer’s smoke and paint-based images represent the furthest expansion of the limits of straight photography.

Hadrian’s Villa (1961) (fig. 4.1), from the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, located less than five miles from the Institute of Design on Federal Street, exemplifies Sommer’s wish to open the photograph “to a greater range of possibilities.” This print combines grit and grace, at once streaked with spray can-like lines and gesturally fluid. The image was created on a cellophane base, as the horizontal marks all-over belie. Bold, light-colored lines cover the field, rendered in smoke. The white lines are accented with dark, textured areas at the top right and center of the image. Sommer models the lighter lines with dark gray, all on top a background of black, fully exposed paper. *Hadrian’s Villa* is completely abstract, not unlike photographs by Sommer’s Chicago-related peers—Callahan and Siskind. Nonetheless, the title Sommer gives the

²⁵⁹ “Moholy-Nagy: Future Present,” The Art Institute of Chicago, accessed July 2020, <https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/2246/moholy-nagy-future-present>.

work poses a link between the abstract composition and Hadrian's Villa. One is intended—I imagine—to envision the white, graffiti-like lines in the photograph as the columns of this ancient site, arranged in an oval form around a body of water, which the murky, smoky center of Sommer's photograph does less to emulate. *Hadrian's Villa* shows the artist pulled in two different directions—to an ancient past and to a new future for photography. Imagining the history of art as a fluid continuum, Sommer found no problem with this duality.

A separate smoke-based photograph indicates the variety of effects Sommer gained with his new materials of smoke and paint. The smoke-based photographs were all produced on cellophane or glass. Sommer prepared the cellophane or glass by applying a thin layer of Vaseline on top. With *Smoke on Glass* (1962) (fig. 4.2), the first step for the artist was a drawing made with aluminum foil (fig. 4.3). Then, he applied soot to the drawing with a candle.²⁶⁰ After this, the smoke drawing was transferred to the greased glass, which became the negative for prints such as *Smoke on Glass*. The smoke on glass prints are clearer and lack the inherently streaky quality of the cellophane negatives. *Smoke on Glass* is another beautifully abstract design, this image showing the full range of what Sommer could express with this unique process. Silty black lines form the drawing at center, suspended above a light gray ground. Surrounding the form, smoke-blown inlets of light appear, providing contrast to the rich, dark form that occupies the center. Sommer noted of this smoke-based technique: "If all goes well (and it sometimes does), the definition is magnificent; there are no grain problems because soot can out-perform silver images any day."²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, "Samothrace, 1964," <http://www.fredericksommer.org/special-samothrace.php>. This is a different photograph, but the same process is used for *Smoke on Glass* and *Samothrace*.

²⁶¹ Center for Creative Photography, *Original Sources*, 183.

Images from the Frederick Sommer Archive at the Center for Creative Photography display the original smoke drawings, smoke on glass negatives (figs. 4.4 and 4.5), beside which I have included a print made from one of the negatives (fig. 4.6). In the first image, one can see the intaglio drawing, untouched by the smoking but surrounded by a dark mass of smoked foil. The delicate, smoke negatives reproduced here show two separate designs. As with the smoke foil drawing, these two negatives were drawn in intaglio—the drawing unsmoked, since it is recessed in the foil—while the un-incised foil collects the smoke deposit. Visible in the smoke drawing and these two negatives, the intaglio technique produces a design that, when transferred from foil onto the greased glass, is formed in white against the black smoked areas. Sommer also made drawings in relief that produce the opposite effect—yielding black lines and white surroundings on the negative. With both the recessed and raised foil drawings, smoked and carefully impressed onto greased glass, Sommer experimented with what is rendered as negative or positive, qualities inherent to printmaking and to reproductive photography. In *Smoke on Glass* (1965), made from the negative to its left, the tonalities of the white-line drawing of the negative are reversed in the photograph, showing a black-line drawing against a lighter grey area. Studying the smoke on glass negatives reveals the intensive, yet capricious nature of this process, the incised drawing designed by Sommer and given definition by the smoke technique.

Golden Apples (1961) (fig. 4.7), like *Hadrian's Villa*, is a photograph produced from a smoke on cellophane negative, as the streaks in the composition reveal. As with other smoke-based works, Sommer created multiple, translucent layers, taking advantage of the smoke's natural qualities. *Golden Apples* depicts two, dark, diagonal bands that meet at the top of the image, left of center. The photograph balances the chance markings of smoke against the highly structured drawing in foil. To the right of the dark, central shape, white lines form a set of

interconnecting rows and columns. Looking at the wide, central diagonal, this form almost seems to sit above the lighter drawing and pockets of black background behind. Here, Sommer shows that even with smoke, the process can be manipulated to achieve different, unique effects in the photograph. The design is abstract and yet the title, like *Hadrian's Villa*, alludes to an ancient tale. According to ancient Greek mythology, the golden apples appear in the story of Atalanta. She agrees to marriage on the condition that a suitor beat her in a race, which the suitor Hippomenes successfully does with the aid of three golden apples, given to him by Aphrodite.²⁶² Light-colored orbs in Sommer's photograph—suspended in the pattern on the right and appearing to the right and left at the apex of the diagonal bands—may represent the golden apples. Naming his photograph, *The Golden Apples*, Sommer transforms the work from a study in abstraction to a mythological reference. From the graphic layered drawing in smoke, new meanings emerge.

A third smoke on cellophane work further illustrates the diversity of the smoke compositions. The dense structure displayed at the center of Sommer's *Smoke on Cellophane #1* (1961) (fig. 4.8) is reminiscent of the photographer's later collage works, made up of intricate medical drawings that Sommer rearranged to generate new and unusual structures. This photograph also features a strong diagonal cut at center, surrounded on the left by pure black ovals, and on the right by smaller circles and irregular, dark smoky forms. One does not know if one is peering through a microscope, observing the structure of cells or looking at a network of celestial matter. Similar to *Golden Apples* and *Hadrian's Villa*, this photograph can be identified as a cellophane work due to the horizontal lines embedded within the composition. Not only is

²⁶² Luke Roman and Monica Roman, *Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Facts on File, 2010), 89. Original story found within: Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume II: Books 9-15*, trans. Frank Justus Miller and revised by G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 43 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), Book X, 104-117.

its dense, central form reminiscent of Sommer's heavily layered, collage works, but it also resembles a monoprint—a technique which Sommer briefly explored alongside his drawings, collage, and photography. Like a printmaker, Sommer works to attain a rich range of tones in *Smoke on Cellophane #1* to bring out and model his self-designed composition. The lighter areas function to outline the denser sections of the photograph. Between the pure black and lighter outline, shapes emerge from the softened gray at middle, twisting and spreading out from the sharp diagonal that anchors the composition at center. This photograph powerfully demonstrates Sommer's argument for the image as a "sensitized surface," a blank space where his designs could be created.

Sommer exhibits vastly different effects not only with the smoke-based photographs but with the paint-based works as well. Lyons noted that while Sommer rationed his film in the 1940s and 1950s, the inexpensive cost of cellophane allowed Sommer to produce a greater number of works, in a sense giving him more freedom.²⁶³ This sense of freedom is characteristic of the smoke and paint-based works as a whole, Sommer expanding his practice as much as the materials would allow. One example of Sommer's expanded work with paint is *(Paint on Cellophane)* (1957) (fig. 4.9). In this photograph, a high contrast shape appears against a black background. *(Paint on Cellophane)* was one of Sommer's first paint on cellophane photographs, and here one can see the photographer working to perfect the contrast and modeling of the painted form. The form depicted is loosely figural, vertically oriented with shortened legs and limbs extending out to its sides. The paint medium yields a variety of textures, from longer, striated strokes, to medium, smooth marks, and finally, the textured edges where pools of paint have collected. Keith Davis describes the innovation of these smoke and paint-based

²⁶³ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018.

photographs. He writes: “these works explore a fundamental process of transformation: the ‘translation’ of one technique of mark-making into another, radical manipulations of scale and the disembodiment of matter.”²⁶⁴ In his comment, Davis captures the remarkable changes that occur in a work like (*Paint on Cellophane*), from the painted cellophane negative to the gelatin silver print. With the smoke and paint works, Sommer demonstrated that any material could be incorporated for his photographic designs, as he earlier had done with detritus and the late 1940s-early 1950s collage-based works.

Works like (*Paint on Cellophane*) are quickly fashioned but intricately crafted, developing in skill from (*Paint on Cellophane*) to a work like *Paracelsus*. The paint on cellophane and smoke on glass and cellophane works reconceive the traditional photographic negative as a newly designed “surface.” The smoke on glass works draw fascinating connections to printmaking, printed in multiple “state[s]” from single foil drawings. The drawing, used to make several “impression[s]” served as the primary foundation of the image, incorporating an intermediate step in addition to simply printing from a conventional negative.²⁶⁵ The paint on cellophane negatives, by contrast, are all completely unique, more closely resembling a daguerreotype than a standard print. With his smoked and painted negatives, Sommer reinvents what aspects of the photographic process are unique and which are reproducible. At the same time, he merges printmaking and photography through repeated smoke “impression[s]” and recasts his painted negatives as one-of-a-kind photographs. Sommer pushed his practice to think of the numerous ways he could shape the negative, expanding his palette both in terms of technique and materials.

²⁶⁴ Keith Davis, “Triangulating an Era,” in *Callahan, Siskind, Sommer: At the Crossroads of American Photography* (Santa Fe, NM: Radius Books, 2009), 19-20.

²⁶⁵ Sommer Foundation, “Samothrace, 1964.”

A final work exemplifies Sommer's virtuosity with his newly fashioned paint on cellophane technique. *Stendhal* (1959) (fig. 4.10) was made in the same year as *Paracelsus*. *Stendhal* represents a striding figure, traversing a black ground. The figure is abstractly drawn, its torso a hollow cut like *Paracelsus*. Yet, while the other photograph shapes the paint into a smooth, almost metallic texture, *Stendhal* can be identified by its spackled, two-dimensional surface quality. Similar to (*Paint on Cellophane*), this photograph is rendered in high contrast. As with both (*Paint on Cellophane*) and *Paracelsus*, Sommer employs several methods of applying paint to yield different textures, from smooth to spackled. Sommer's painting method also recalls Max Ernst's technique of "decalcomania," where "ink, paint, or another medium is spread onto a surface and, while still wet, covered with material such as paper, glass, or aluminum foil, which, when removed, transfers a pattern that may be further embellished upon."²⁶⁶ As Gerald Nordland has written: "the mystery and poetry of the [Sommer's] work establishes a fantasy similar to the surrealist experiments with fumage, rubbings, and frottage."²⁶⁷ The title of Sommer's photograph names the abstract figure as Stendhal, a nineteenth-century writer known for "characters" that are "real, because they are complex, many-sided, particular and original, like living human beings."²⁶⁸ In naming his painted figure after Stendhal, Sommer aligns himself with an artistic tradition of complexity and originality. *Stendhal* illustrates what Sommer can invent and enrich from the paint on cellophane technique.

From *Smoke on Glass* to *Stendhal*, Sommer demonstrated the diverse ways he could form new compositions from simple materials of paint, foil, smoke, cellophane and glass. The enlarger light above *Smoke on Glass* illuminates an abstract but figural shape, feet at bottom and torso (or

²⁶⁶ "Decalcomania," Museum of Modern Art, accessed July 2020, <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/30>.

²⁶⁷ Nordland, *Frederick Sommer*, 13.

²⁶⁸ Roger Pearson, *Stendhal: "The Red and the Black" and "The Charterhouse of Parma"* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 6.

torsos of multiple figures) above. In *Smoke on Glass*, Sommer has utilized an incised foil sheet, smoked and transferred it onto glass, then suspended the glass negative in the enlarger to animate the impressed drawing through the chemistry of the photographic process. All of the works from this period undergo a multi-step process before they are realized as photographic prints. The smoke and paint-based works were made on both glass and cellophane bases, in *Golden Apples*, the cellophane's streaky marks a material aspect of the image. With titles like *Golden Apples* and *Stendhal*, Sommer referred to historic or mythological subjects that reframe the viewer's understanding of otherwise abstract imagery. Using cliché verre and decalcomania techniques, Sommer expanded the standard materials of straight photography.²⁶⁹ Fashioning works from soot and saturated, painted dye, Sommer showcased the technical and expressive range of his photographic methods.

Out of Focus Pictures

Following the 1950s paint and smoke-based photographs, in 1960, Sommer traveled to Europe and made photographs of cultural treasures. He made images of places such as the Galleria Borghese and the Capitoline Museum. Most of the photographs are captures of statuary—though Sommer exposed a textile at the Victoria & Albert Museum. These out of focus prints animate and energize the object before the artist's camera. Sommer's photograph of a figure on the Ponte St. Angelo appears to levitate, its wings reverberating against a cloudy white sky. The images of statuary were produced by Sommer with a 35mm camera, the out of focus occurring as he made the exposure.²⁷⁰ The statue in *Galleria Borghese* (1960) (fig. 4.11)

²⁶⁹ Gordon Baldwin and Martin Jürgens, *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2009), 17-18.

²⁷⁰ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, "Capitoline Museum," http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=127&piece_id=1063. The trustees of the

appears divinely lit. Its lower calf is illuminated by a lustrous white glow. The motion of the camera during Sommer's exposure of the statue causes it to look alive, running with its leg uplifted. A robe gently falls behind, while an arm extends to the front of the lifted leg. Just as light animates the paint and smoke-based images, in *Galleria Borghese*, a related mutation occurs from exposure to print, bringing into being this otherwise immovable, stone form.

Capitoline Museum (1960) (fig. 4.12) pictures a classical statuary from a well-known Roman site. Sommer's photographs of statuary are cropped to display only the statue's lower half, removing the head and highlighting the garments folded over the body. Even in *Ponte St. Angelo*, while the angel appears in full, the out of focus exposure blurs the face and body. By concealing or blurring the faces of the statues he photographs, Sommer was able to create a more uniform series, emphasizing instead the movement and dynamism of the statues through the out of focus effects. *Capitoline Museum* represents a female figure standing in contrapposto, or appearing to have one knee bent due to the out of focus blur, through which one can see the hard outline of the leg and to its left the veil-like draping of the fabric. As with *Galleria Borghese*, the camera blur softens the figure, yet here the gray background and even light provides less drama than *Galleria Borghese*, and perhaps more focus on the figure's stance. The figure stands at ease, the bunched fabric gathered by an unseen hand to the right, tucked around the waist, and falling gracefully from to the right and diagonally across the legs. The blur amplifies the sculptor's masterful carving, the elegant folds of fabric acting as a silhouette around the figure's form. In the top left, the figure's arm is fully blurred, and one might imagine she is gesturing to an unseen

Foundation note: "Frederick Sommer spent three months traveling in Europe in late 1960. The title of this photograph, 'Capitoline Museum,' comes from the name of the museum in Rome where this statue is located. Using a 35mm Leica, Sommer moved the camera straight down during the 1/5th second exposure, adding elemental action to the statuary." The process for producing *Galleria Borghese* was the same as *Capitoline Museum*.

interlocutor with this hand. In *Ponte St. Angelo, Galleria Borghese, and Capitoline Museum*, Sommer enlivens his subjects through rapid camera blurs, giving them dimension and character.

Out of focus was a technique that applied to another series of work, begun in 1961.²⁷¹ In his studio, Sommer began a series of nude pictures. In the pictures, a dark-haired woman takes an ethereal form, transformed from flesh to spirit. The out of focus nudes from this period were photographed in focus and printed out of focus, a post-production effect. A comparison of *Untitled [Out of Focus Nude]* (1962) (fig. 4.13) and *Figure* (1965) (fig. 4.14) show that Sommer experimented with various levels of focus for these works.²⁷² In *Untitled [Out of Focus Nude]*, Sommer's model is depicted from one side, her hair falling behind the diagonal of her arm, slightly blended through the blur. In the photograph, she is represented curled into the top corner. Her face is ghostly white, and the eye we see a black, hazy circle. The real woman that Sommer photographed is transformed into a concept, crossing from mere "record" to idea. The artist likely cropped the negative to have this tight composition—with the upper body of the model arced at a parallel angle to the top edge and the left shoulder, torso, and thigh framed with the picture's right and bottom edges. The torso and thigh anchor the image, the folds of the ribs and thigh unfocused. *Figure* shows the model out of focus, but to a less extreme degree. Now shown from the right, the model is still depicted in slight profile but pivots toward the audience, her elbow probing outward. Her left hand is rounded, and still, and the torso curves inward. The outstretched elbow appears foreshortened, giving the photograph a painterly effect. Here, the fleshy folds of the woman's body are traced in contrast to the dark gray background, against

²⁷¹ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, "Frederick Sommer 1905-1999 – Chronological Summary," <http://www.fredericksommer.org/chronology.php>.

²⁷² Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, "Untitled (Nude out of focus)," http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=127&piece_id=1066. "There was no formula to how much 'out of focus' each nude was printed. Fundamentally, the size of enlargement and the inherent contrast of the paper and developer affected the amount of out of focus necessary to successfully spread both the tones illustrating volume and delineating edges."

which the illuminated body is silhouetted. The elbow provides a sense of depth and relief, adding dimension to the model's form. In the out of focus nudes, Sommer transforms his subject from document to spirit, altering the normative concept of the nude in photography. Whereas in the out of focus museum pictures the photographed statuary transcend their stone, carved surfaces and are animated by Sommer's camera blur, the out of focus nude images turn a real figure into a spiritual form.

Sommer's first in focus photograph of Lee—the model in the out of focus nudes—dates to 1960. In the image, Lee is, as in *Untitled [Out of Focus Nude]*, depicted from the side. Her hair falls over an arm, bent, fingers to the left curled back toward her face. Sommer has likely lined up, by posing or asking her to sit in a particular position, the folds of her wrist with the line of a weathered door behind her. Also, as with *Untitled [Out of Focus Nude]*, Lee's torso and legs are framed by the long and short edges of the photograph, anchoring the print. In comparison to the above out of focus nudes, here Lee is clothed yet the framing is unchanged. For the nudes and portraits, Sommer often depicted the figure against a simple background, accentuating her form. Lee as a dynamic, human subject comes to life in the portraits. In *Lee Nevin* (1963) (fig. 4.15), an out of focus image, Lee is pictured intensely focused, holding a violin in her hands. The out of focus effect further distances her from the audience, her eyes directed away from the camera's invasive lens. In a sense, Sommer's technique elevated the subject, absorbed in her activity. Her eyes look down, transfixed, cradling her instrument in her arms. Her fingers, electrified by the out of focus exposure and high contrast drape over the fingerboard, her left hand placed on a string, possibly moving. The right hand is poised below, plucking the string or raised just after her pizzicato. Sommer captured her caught up in the act of musical expression. The out of focus puts her at a distance, yet the aliveness of the subject is generated by the camera

blur. The 1960 in focus portrait and *Lee Nevin* show multiple aspects of the model that Sommer worked with for years.

Sommer's use of the 35mm camera may have been influenced by the wider tradition of documentary photography in the United States prior to the production of these works. For documentary photographers such as Garry Winogrand, the 35mm camera was well-suited for capturing quick encounters and social events.²⁷³ 35mm rolls contain many exposures, giving the photographer flexibility in what he photographs. Its portable nature was ideal for photography in crowded settings. Sommer turned to cellophane sheets for his earlier paint on cellophane photographs to create more negatives at a time. Shooting with a 35mm for Sommer also offered the ability to produce a greater amount of negatives. This camera was an ideal choice for Sommer working in Europe, making exposures in multiple museum galleries. 35mm worked well for travel and as a piece of equipment provided Sommer with the swiftness needed to make his out of focus museum pictures. The late 1950 and early 1960s together represent Sommer opening up his practice, experimenting with new materials and the 35mm camera.

Although trained in methods of straight photography, primarily through the influence of Weston, Sommer maintained an inclusive, not isolating, approach to the medium. In addition, Sommer's process could be characterized as one of transformation rather than mere description, accepting the photographic process as "distortion in action."²⁷⁴ Comparisons to work by Weston make the distinction clear. In Weston's *Nude* (1936), for instance, the model is carefully seated on a piece of un-patterned cloth. Behind her, the background is cast in strong shadows. Weston uses the camera to distinguish and describe the shape of his nude, from the scars on her leg to the

²⁷³ Lisa Hostetler, "The New Documentary Tradition in Photography," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed July 2020, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ndoc/hd_ndoc.htm/The-New-Documentary-Tradition-in-Photography-Thematic-Essay-.

²⁷⁴ Gowin, "Emmet Gowin on Frederick Sommer," 53.

twists in her hair. Sommer, by contrast, in *Figure* (1961) depicts the nude through the unconventional technique of exposing the model in focus and printing her out of focus. Sommer's nude takes on an ethereal glow, the heavy blur distorting one's perception of her form. This technique sets the model at a natural distance, whereas the descriptiveness of Weston's image places his model at a strange proximity.

In out of focus photographs of sites in Europe, such as *Capitoline Museum*, and out of focus nude studies made in his studio in Prescott, Sommer morphed the subject using in camera and darkroom effects. The prints exposed in Europe—several taken in Rome—electrify stone figures, the smooth, carved statues vivified by Sommer's out of focus technique. *Ponte St. Angelo* appears to fly, *Galleria Borghese* to run, and *Capitoline Museum*, while the depicted figure is more at rest the rapid camera tilt emphasizes her S-shaped form. These pictures serve as studies for Sommer's work with Lee Nevin that followed, in the early to mid-1960s. Several photographs were taken of the model during these years, shown from contorted angles or abruptly cropped. Yet the photographs also have a sense of naturalness, the model caught yawning or absorbed in thought. Sommer refutes transparency and deliberately makes it difficult to see the model's face. He reimagines the conventional photographic nude, blurring, obscuring, and putting up barriers. Sommer engaged with the language of documentary and straight photography, reinventing the terms of these genres for his out of focus pictures. By employing a 35mm camera, Sommer was able to make rapid exposures in public settings, working quickly and discreetly. By photographing Lee with a 35mm, Sommer shifted from the traditional 8x10 camera, recommended for his use by Edward Weston. Sommer departed from the clear legibility of Weston's photographs in his blurred, darkroom manipulated photographs. The out of focus exposure effects, for Sommer, provided a greater range of photographic possibilities and

expressions. Unencumbered by strict focusing conventions, Sommer explored the animating and distancing effects these techniques could offer in photographs like *Galleria Borghese* and *Figure*. While these photographs challenge legibility, they nevertheless open up new ways of interpreting the subject. Through in camera and darkroom out of focus exposures, Sommer radically altered statues and figures, expanding the limits of straight photographic technique.

“A Display of Configurations”: Cut Papers

Sommer’s experimentation with out of focus served as a segue into a series of photographs that he produced from the 1960s to the 1980s: cut papers. The majority of the cut papers were photographed in focus, yet a few—mostly dated to 1963—are out of focus.

[*Untitled: Cut Paper*] (1963) (fig. 4.16) recalls the out of focus museum pictures and nude studies. Blurred forms twist and intersect, two shapes close to the top outlined by smudged, black lines. Two dark, semicircular disks in the bottom right are defined by the background, joined with the light-tipped point of the upper disk. As with the out of focus nudes, this cut paper is softened by the out of focus technique. Sommer focuses on modelling shape, form, with soft line and light. Continuing with the notion of transformation, the cut papers gently evolve from the out of focus nudes through singular cut papers, such as [*Untitled: Cut Paper*], as well as pictures the artist fashioned with models, typically out of focus, posed clothed in the cut paper. In Sommer’s photograph, *Untitled*, a male model stands, framed by the cut paper. His eyes are completely covered by a swirl of paper over his face, exposing only his forehead. The model animates the cut paper, draped over his body. Only a few cut papers show models, who soon drop away.

Keith Davis comments that Sommer’s cut paper photographs, as with the paint and smoke-based works, involve many steps. As the work changes from paper to photograph, the cut

design is re-presented in the photographic print. Davis writes: “Sommer’s cut-paper works involve several stages of creation and transformation, from drawing to sculpture to photograph. He used a utility knife to ‘draw,’ rapidly and intuitively, on large sheets of butcher paper. When each sheet was hung vertically, sections of partially cut paper draped forward or backward to create a three-dimensional form.”²⁷⁵ Here, Davis gives insight to Sommer’s process, cutting shapes into “large sheets” of Kraft brown “butcher paper.”²⁷⁶ The cut papers fuse drawing and sculpture, Sommer’s cuts immediately turning the two-dimensional surface into a “three-dimensional,” voluminous shape. Davis continues, describing how Sommer finished the works: “After carefully considering the lighting of this object, he returned this image to two-dimensional form—and miniaturized it—by recording it with his camera. The resulting photographic prints are elegant renditions of subjects that are at once real and virtual.”²⁷⁷ The act of condensing and densifying is central to Sommer’s practice, as Davis here notes. By drawing, draping, and finally developing his exposure of the cut paper, Sommer opens the medium to multiple processes, embedding them within the photographic print.

To produce these photographs, the artist would turn to his large library collection, with volumes on Surrealism, the printmaker Hercules Segers, and even books on music, and used works of art as inspiration for his shapes in the paper.²⁷⁸ *Cut Paper* (1974) (fig. 4.17) features an abstract, spontaneously cut design. Comparing *Cut Paper* (1963), *Cut Paper* (1974), and

²⁷⁵ Davis, “Triangulating an Era,” 20.

²⁷⁶ Finding aid, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. The finding aid characterizes the cut paper material as “medium-weight, brown Kraft paper ... cut with an X-acto type blade.” See also: Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, “Cut Paper, 1967,” http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=130&piece_id=1083. They state: “He [Sommer] used heavy brown butcher paper from a four-foot roll and began by cutting off a seven-foot long piece” to make the cut paper photographs.

²⁷⁷ Davis, “Triangulating an Era,” 20.

²⁷⁸ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2018 and Keith F. Davis, “Living Art: The Sources of Frederick Sommer’s Work,” in *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage*, ed. Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 24, footnote 81.

[*Untitled: Night Cut Paper*] (1981) (fig. 4.18), Sommer was clearly able to achieve a range of compositions with the cut paper-based prints. *Cut Paper* (1974) is in focus, smoothly lit. The subtle light creates a buttery fold to the paper, the cut shapes for the most part turned out to the viewer. [*Untitled: Night Cut Paper*] (1981), by contrast, is dramatically brought to life by a light shining behind the cut paper. Though generally abstract, two curved figures embrace at the center of this image. The darker, taller form on the right puts out his “arms,” the lower arm excised from the larger paper mass and shining, bright white. As with the smoke-based prints, Sommer tests out negative and positive image design, here the “figures” lit from behind. However, in *Cut Paper* (1974) the luscious, smooth paper has an overall light from the front. Depth in *Cut Paper* (1974) is also formed by a dark void whereas [*Untitled: Night Cut Paper*] (1981) receives shape with the background light shining through the cut lines. As the title of [*Untitled: Night Cut Paper*] (1981) suggests, these photographs were exposed both during the day and in the dark hours of the night. The lighting from *Cut Paper* (1974) to [*Untitled: Night Cut Paper*] (1981) changes the mood of the entire composition, determined by the light source and time the photograph was exposed. There is an intensity to [*Untitled: Night Cut Paper*] (1981), in contrast to *Cut Paper*’s (1974) even texture. A larger narrative emerges from the cut design, alluding to themes of romance or reunion bound up in the cut paper photograph.

The Frederick Sommer Archive at the Center for Creative Photography holds the original cut paper sheets. The paper sheets have been tightly rolled and when unfurled display a more constricted version of Sommer’s designs. As seen in the figure on the left, the original cut paper fills the space of almost an entire table, when fully stretched (fig. 4.19). Compared to the final photograph made at bottom, one can observe the “transformation,” as Keith Davis notes, that occurs as the paper is rendered in the 11x14 inch gelatin silver print. A date noted on the cut

paper's verso, in pencil, states it was made on "11 Feb 1974," aligning with the date for the photograph. It is numbered "#4," suggesting this is possibly the fourth cut paper Sommer made that day or possibly the fourth paper of this specific design. The Foundation has preserved the blade that Sommer used to incise forms in the paper (fig. 4.20). Naomi Lyons has remarked that Sommer cut around the table, letting the initial cut indicate the gestures and shapes that followed.²⁷⁹ The cut papers, like the paint on cellophane negatives, were meant to be composed quickly and spontaneously.²⁸⁰ Similar to the cellophane material, Kraft paper allowed Sommer freedom to make multiple papers. This series is the longest running series, in fact, of his artistic career.²⁸¹ Sommer tried out several designs in creating these works, as seen in the photographs reproduced above. *Cut Paper* (1974) is one example of the many paper rolls still held in Sommer's archive at the Center.

Sommer's cut paper photographs bear a striking resemblance to works by the American, early twentieth-century photographer, Francis Bruguière, made a half century prior. Bruguière's works, such as [*Cut-paper Abstraction*] (fig. 4.21), primarily date to 1927.²⁸² In [*Cut-paper Abstraction*], a light source shines from below, casting the delicately curved cuts into shadow. S-shaped and a few linear cuts are placed on the right-hand side of the paper and photograph. The cuts are methodically planned, a carefully laid system of low-crested, sloping arcs. While the

²⁷⁹ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author. See also: Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, "Cut Paper, 1967," http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=130&piece_id=1083. The Foundation states: "Always paying attention to the corners and edges, Sommer explored the possibilities with his first cut informing his next moves."

²⁸⁰ Ibid. Sommer did not want to pre-plan the cut paper photographs, working intuitively to create each composition.

²⁸¹ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, "Cut Paper, 1967," http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=130&piece_id=1083. The note that corresponds with this image states the cut papers were created from 1962 to 1985. The trustees of the Foundation further remark: "Because of the inexpensive nature of the brown paper, cut papers that did not hang together or intrigue Sommer visually, were easily discarded."

²⁸² The Getty Museum holds a robust collection of Bruguière's cut paper series.

light from below illuminates the perforations, giving them dimension and depth, the bottom left and right edges escape the light's bright glow, and the top edges of the cut paper are precisely cropped. The darkened top edges of the photograph frame the lit pattern, hemmed in by the less rigidly delineated but still gray-black corners at the bottom. Comparing a work like *Cut Paper* (1974)—by Sommer—to Bruguère's [*Cut-paper Abstraction*], the figural quality of Sommer's work stands out, in contrast to the purely abstract structure of Bruguère's photograph.

Examining the works side by side, one can see both photographers try out different lighting effects, yielding high drama or subtle contrast to their cut papers. Work by Bruguère was reproduced in *Aperture* 8:2 (1960) which featured works from the exhibition "The Sense of Abstraction in Contemporary Photography" at MoMA. Sommer's *The Thief Greater Than His Loot* is pictured on the cover, and given that the *Aperture* issue was published in 1960, Sommer may have seen Bruguère's work before he began making his cut papers.

Sommer's use of paper as the support for his cut paper works allowed him to expand his subjects, drawn with his "Defiance" blade. Carving figural patterns from paper, Sommer extended the material used for his photographic practice. Not unlike the paint and smoke works, with paper Sommer capitalized on the natural properties of the paper to enrich his photographic corpus. The Kraft paper, through the silver print, is rendered smooth and tonally rich. This material gave Sommer the ability to generate a complex array of patterns, several abstract yet with figural elements. The free-cut figures in [*Untitled: Night Cut Paper*] (1981), for instance, appear caught up in a twilight embrace, the dark lighting intentionally chosen to amplify this moment. Even *Cut Paper* (1974), on closer inspection, could possibly have two arms and two legs, an arched foot below the diagonal cut kicking to the right, while the right fingers of the figure almost disappear into the dark void behind. Of all three [*Untitled: Cut Paper*] (1963) is

the most abstract, Sommer in a transitional phase following the out of focus nudes and deciding how the cut papers would proceed. Original papers from Sommer's archive emphasize what Davis describes as the "transformation" of these works, from paper to photograph. Likewise, comparison to Bruguère's [*Cut-paper Abstraction*] demonstrates Sommer was likely inspired by an earlier, avant-garde tradition, but adapted the cut paper technique for his own purposes, adding figural motifs and employing out of focus effects. Sommer described the finished cut papers as "a display of configurations," and in these works the viewer is witness to the range of "configurations" Sommer presents. From Kraft paper, the artist formed captivating shapes and figures, developed and reanimated in the photographic print.

Conclusion

From the paint and smoke-based pictures, to the out of focus museum and nude pictures, and the cut papers, Sommer tested his capacity to invent new techniques and photographic prints. In works like *Paracelsus*, a texturally dense form emerges from a diminutive 4 x 2 inch negative. Named after the 16th-century physician and alchemist, Paracelsus, Sommer's photograph references a larger history of art and chemistry. *Hadrian's Villa* and *Smoke on Glass* also allude to historical references, fashioned with smoke on cellophane and glass. In 1960, Sommer chose to return to Europe and made pictures there. In pictures such as *Galleria Borghese*, he reorients the image with an unconventional technique. Moving the camera during exposure, Sommer animates the stone statues he sees on his trip, who appear to run or take flight in the photographs. Back in Prescott, he continued to make out of focus work. This time he produced out of focus nudes, in studio with a model. The woman in the photographs is transformed by the distorted printing, here through out of focus prints made from in focus negatives. Although these

photographs conform to the genre of the female nude, Sommer changed our normative understanding of this genre with the out of focus effect. Finally, the cut papers are a sculptural and photographic experiment that develop and then depart from the out of focus museum pictures and nudes. From out of focus to in focus cut papers, Sommer's range and investigation of depth and relief is present in these images. Visible with *Cut Paper* and *Untitled: Night Cut Paper*, a very basic substance—Kraft paper—is formed into captivating designs. With ordinary materials, Sommer created in all of these works profound shading, depth, relief, contrast and chiaroscuro. Through paint, smoke, and paper, Sommer fashions negatives and prints that extend straight photographic technique.

The post-1957 photographs are defined by contact and precision, qualities that Sommer upheld throughout his artistic career. Making works with paint, smoke, paper, and foil, Sommer expanded the “limits” and “possibilities” of photographic expression at mid-century.²⁸³ Masterful works such as *Paracelsus* demonstrate qualities of precision and direct contact, while reconsidering photography's “limits.” In *Paracelsus*, a metallic figure is meticulously crafted from paint, enlarged from the negative to the 11 x 14 print. Smoke works, including *Golden Apples* (1961) and *Smoke on Cellophane #1* (1961) feature abstract patterns, modeled in gray-blacks and hazy or high contrast whites. By choosing to draw on the foil sheet and transferring the smoked drawing onto cellophane or glass, Sommer opened up more ways of creating photographic negatives. The drawings on foil were made in relief or intaglio, sunken into the foil surface, generating a white or black-line drawing. These tones are reversed through printing, as one can see in a negative from the archive and print from the same negative, held in a private collection. The multi-step, intensive nature of these works exemplifies Sommer's labor and

²⁸³ Smith, “Photography in Our Time,” 99. Smith comments on the “limitations” and “potentialities” of photography.

active production of the image. Photographs such as *Golden Apples* show that with smoke, he has drawn “apples” that, like the paint in *Paracelsus*, appear to have a metallic, golden surface. To generate the paint on cellophane images, Sommer designed with paint on small pieces of cellophane. From these two materials, paint and cellophane, the artist created *Paracelsus* and other loosely figural characters, animated against a dark ground. The paint and smoke-based works show Sommer testing out different materials for his photographic corpus. With this series of work, Sommer expands the range of bases and applied elements used in his artistic practice.

While Sommer’s time in Chicago had an influence on his “synthetic” negatives, the “new documentary tradition” potentially impacted his decision to use a 35mm camera to make his next series: out of focus museum pictures and nudes.²⁸⁴ In these photographs, Sommer’s out of focus exposure—generated in camera or in the darkroom—alters the viewer’s perception of the photographed subject. Through out of focus effects, Sommer challenged legibility and ideals of photographic transparency. *Galleria Borghese* (1960) portrays a sculptural figure, the out of focus movement of Sommer’s Leica causing the leg to appear in motion. A second figure, *Capitoline Museum* (1960), softly sways, her knee slightly bent, as pleated folds of fabric cascade past her left arm and beside her left leg. The out of focus effect in *Galleria Borghese* and *Capitoline Museum* was produced by tilting the camera down during exposure.²⁸⁵ Sommer’s movement vivifies the stone figures, activated by his camera blur. Sommer decided to continue his out of focus exposures through a series of nude studies. These were inspired by the drawings

²⁸⁴ Davis, “Triangulating an Era,” 19 and Lisa Hostetler, “The New Documentary Tradition in Photography,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed July 2020, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ndoc/hd_ndoc.htm/The-New-Documentary-Tradition-in-Photography-Thematic-Essay-. Hostetler describes the “new documentary tradition” as emerging “in the late 1950s and early ’60s” when “American photographers reinvented the documentary tradition once again.”

²⁸⁵ Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, “Capitoline Museum,” http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=11&gallery_id=127&piece_id=1063.

of Seurat, who made softly modelled nudes with crayon and graphite.²⁸⁶ Sommer's out of focus exposures here were created by exposing Lee, the model, in focus and printing her out of focus in the darkroom. His intentional out of focus printing proves that the effect was a highly motivated one, meant to distance the subject and alter one's perception of the human figure. As with the out of focus museum pictures, in the out of focus nudes, Sommer "transforms" the subject through applied technical effects. *Untitled [Out of Focus Nude]* (1962) is printed heavily out of focus, forcing the viewer to pay attention less to the specific details of the body and more to the general shapes of the arms and legs. Printed moderately out of focus, the exposure of *Figure* (1965) distances the figure, emphasized by the right elbow pushed outward. In a portrait, *Lee Nevin* (1963), the same model is photographed holding a violin, the separation between the subject and the viewer profoundly felt with the model's absent glance. In the out of focus museum pictures and nudes, Sommer shifts conventional notions of photographic transparency to animate or distance his subjects. In works such as *Capitoline Museum* and *Figure*, the sculpted and human bodies undergo a metamorphosis, caused by the out of focus effect.

With the cut paper photographs, the final body of works I examine, Sommer returns to the tone reversal he initially explores with the smoke-based photographs. In the cut paper photographs, the negative/positive contrast is directly tied to the light source, which either highlights or casts the cut lines in shadow. This series of work developed from the out of focus nudes, evident in a photograph Sommer made with a blurred figure draped in cut paper. The inclusion of the figure and blurred effects are discontinued, Sommer choosing instead to accentuate the paper's inherently smooth properties through in focus exposure. While the model is removed, figural motifs return as abstract drawings in the cut paper photographs. *[Untitled:*

²⁸⁶ The Frick Collection, "Georges Seurat, *Female Nude*, c. 1879-81," accessed August 2020, https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/courtauld/georges_seurat.

Cut Paper] (1963) is an abstract cut paper, crescent shapes raised above the paper and cut-outs below. The out of focus exposure softens the perforations in the paper. *Cut Paper* (1974), photographed in focus, exhibits the paper's naturally rounded, even finish. In this photograph, one can trace the outline of Sommer's blade, leading to a loosely drawn figure, with outstretched limbs. Figural motifs are strongest in *[Untitled: Night Cut Paper]* (1981), two figures positioned together at the center of this backlit cut paper. The original cut papers, held in the artist's archive, show the vast difference in scale between the paper and the photograph, as Davis notes in his text. The cut paper is dated and at the Sommer Foundation, the "Defiance" blade Sommer used is still preserved. Featured in *Aperture*, photographs by Bruguière may have served as a source of inspiration for Sommer's cut papers. Bruguière's *[Cut-paper Abstraction]* (about 1927) displays a network of closely laid lines. He uses a light source to produce shadows, giving the paper depth and relief, which Sommer later did with his cut papers. As the last set of photographs I study, the cut papers present a wide variety of themes and patterns. The series was the longest running of his career, and one in which he re-shaped Kraft paper into intricate compositions.

In the radio interview with Studs Terkel from 1963—closely following the construction of *Paracelsus*, *Hadrian's Villa*, and *Smoke on Glass* and during the production of the out of focus nudes—Sommer noted that the photograph should have the following characteristic: "spontaneity." (Terkel, 12) While Sommer did not fully embrace Surrealist principles what he did take away from the group was the concept that "there are no good plans." He continues: "you cannot plan to meet something you have not really prefigured." (Terkel, 12) This quote summarizes Sommer's approach to his late work, expanding the range of materials and techniques used to achieve greater expressive effects. The artist, he believed, must be nimble, constantly learning and moving. He or she should remain "open," "flexible," spontaneous, and

alive to new ideas. Sommer sought to keep his “imagination” fluid and set to be “opened” by new experiences and chance occurrences that he could direct toward meticulously designed photographs. With these late career images, he tests the bounds of the medium beyond even his own previous work, encouraging photographic growth. My project gives visibility to the late photographs and to Sommer’s whole corpus, which has been largely overlooked and understudied. *Frederick Sommer: Photography At the Limits of Avant-Garde* provides insight to three decades of Sommer’s work, which challenged and expanded the “limits” of photographic production. At mid-century, Sommer re-wrote the boundaries of photographic form, reanimating its widely accepted uses and functions.

Conclusion

Beginning in the 1970s, Sommer began to receive significantly wider reception within the established photographic discourse. In 1969, the Museum of Modern Art acquired 25 prints by the photographer, a canon of significant works by the artist. In New York at Light Gallery, an exhibition of 60 photographs opened in 1972, generating feedback from artists like Bruce Boice.²⁸⁷ The gallery was founded in 1971 and, according to the Center for Creative Photography, “was the first art gallery that devoted itself to the retailing, exhibiting, and promotion of contemporary photography.”²⁸⁸ Light Gallery represented Sommer as well as Garry Winogrand, Aaron Siskind, and Harry Callahan.²⁸⁹ Demonstrating Sommer’s central place within photographic discourse and practice, when the Center for Creative Photography (CCP) was established in 1975 Sommer became one of its founding archives, alongside Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind.²⁹⁰ Finally, Sommer’s photography was promoted and celebrated by a generation of younger photographers and curators, including Peter Bunnell—who worked to collect Sommer’s prints for the MoMA collection—and Emmet Gowin, who first met Sommer at the Rhode Island School of Design and considered the older photographer a teacher in many ways.²⁹¹

Although Sommer’s photography was met with mixed reception at the Aspen conference in 1951, by the time he met Bunnell and Gowin the market for his work had changed. In the

²⁸⁷ Frederick Sommer Foundation, “Exhibition History,” accessed August 2020, <http://www.fredericksommer.org/exhibitions.php> and Bruce Boice, “Frederick Sommer [An excerpt],” in *Frederick Sommer: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, ed. Sheryl Conkelton (Oxford, England: Clío Press, 1995), 95.

²⁸⁸ Finding aid, Light Gallery Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

²⁸⁹ Finding aid, Light Gallery Archive.

²⁹⁰ Center for Creative Photography, “About Us,” accessed August 2020, <https://ccp.arizona.edu/about-us-0>.

²⁹¹ Peter C. Bunnell (David Hunter McAlpin Professor of the History of Photography and Modern Art Emeritus, Department of Art & Archaeology, Princeton University), in discussion with the author, March 2019 and Emmet Gowin (artist and Professor Emeritus of the Council of the Humanities and Visual Arts, Princeton University), in discussion with the author, March 2019.

decades following Aspen, his work was more widely accepted by galleries, museums, and his place secured within the larger photographic discourse. While his photographs were criticized by the leaders of the photographic establishment at Aspen for their symbolism, density, and obscurity, younger generations of artists, including Emmet Gowin and Richard Landis, took a special interest in these aspects of Sommer's work. Previous studies place Sommer in dialogue with theorists and practitioners of postmodern art like Marcel Duchamp and John Baldessari yet fail to consider his central position within debates of modernist, mid-century American photography, in closer discussion with photographers including Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.

Through an initial study of his early works, such as *Jack Rabbit* (1939) and *Chicken* (1939), Sommer formulates a visual language of density through restricted scale, cropping and meticulously trimming prints, as well as through procedures of layering, loading, and packing objects, frequently unusual ones—like chicken parts—into the photograph. In these works, the photographer establishes the foundations of what would follow: masterfully printed works, carefully scaled, and filled with as much detail as the photograph could manage. An analysis of the all-over, horizonless *Arizona Landscapes*, Sommer's best-known and most commonly studied works to date, follows. In the *Arizona Landscapes*, Sommer tests the limits of the 8 x10 gelatin silver print, fashioning works that challenge and reanimate the normative conventions of the landscape genre in photography. The decaying, dried bodies of the desert animals he photographed contested modernist conventions of purity and beauty, bringing a wider range of subjects into the medium than what the photographic majority wanted to accept. Sommer's presentation at the Aspen Institute in 1951 brought debates between his aesthetic and that of figures like Adams and Nancy and Beaumont Newhall to a head. Adams and the Newhalls found

Sommer's text-driven, heavily metaphorical work to be dense and difficult—too much so for the audience they wanted to cultivate at Aspen and in the pages of the soon-to-be-published *Aperture* magazine. After the conference and around the time he began teaching in Chicago, Sommer began a series of work created from smoke, paint, paper and foil. I argue that these works present the most extreme test to straight photographic convention, reconsidering how a photographic negative could be made and the range of materials it could include. I place Sommer in dialogue with individuals like Weston, Adams, White, and the Newhalls, asserting his centrality within photographic debates at mid-century. Ultimately, my project attempts to display the formal density of Sommer's work, which challenged and reanimated conventions of straight photography in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.²⁹² Including a wide array of disparate material including animal bodies, chicken parts, collected objects, a seemingly eventless desert landscape, collage and assemblage-created works, and cameraless negatives, Sommer from 1939-1962 with every series he made tested the limits and possibilities of photography during a highly charged time in the medium's history.²⁹³

A final look at two series of works Sommer made, in 1975 and in the 1990s, will close out this discussion. In the 1970s, Sommer created several musical scores, as in *Musical Score* (1970-75). To make the musical scores, Sommer drew with “pen and ink, glue color or pencil on various papers.”²⁹⁴ However, this score, along with a handful of others, was made “by drawing with Sodium Thiosulphate (fixer, simply hypo) on photographic paper and then developing.”²⁹⁵

²⁹² Smith, “Photography in Our Time,” 99. Smith states: “To distinguish the non-traditional kinds of photographs by their imagery and style, we should also have some idea of the nature of photography, both as to its accepted major limitations and its unexplored potentialities, which photographers break out of the tradition to work with.” Smith lists Sommer as a photographer who “depart[s] from ... tradition in quite different ways.”

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Frederick Sommer Foundation, “Untitled,” accessed August 2020, http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=13&gallery_id=115&piece_id=1109.

²⁹⁵ Frederick Sommer Foundation, “Untitled,” accessed August 2020, http://www.fredericksommer.org/gallery/?category_id=13&gallery_id=115&piece_id=1109.

In this work, light colored lines of frenetically drawn, connected phrases spread from the top of the black, exposed print to the bottom. Viewing the first (top) bracket, to the right several notes seem to fall outside the bounds of the measure line. In the bottom two lines, slurred notes dance across the surface, suggesting a highly energized, quickly moving passage. Some lines are more sparsely drawn, as in the fourth line, where Sommer seems to have indicated a pause in his lively notation. As with the photographs, the notes of his scores push at the edges of their boundaries, testing the set limits of the musical frame. Describing his musical scores, Sommer noted: “The value of a work of art or scientific formulation lies in the precision of positional relationships.”²⁹⁶ For Sommer, scientific theory and artistic creation were aligned in their basis on “structure.” Sommer first became interested in musical scores from the perspective of “the visual power” of their “display.”²⁹⁷

An interest in “display” also guided a set of works Sommer made at the very end of his life, in the 1990s. To create works such as *Untitled* (1991), Sommer combined excised illustrations from an old medical atlas.²⁹⁸ In the artist’s archive, several of the cut-out illustrations still exist, held in an old paper box. As with the musical scores, it appears that with the medical collages, Sommer sought to find the most captivating shapes to recombine into his collage works. *Untitled* shows the trapezoidal cut-out of a skull nested within a larger anatomical part, perhaps a brain. This work is a paper collage, although Sommer also photographed some of the medical collages.²⁹⁹ At 17 3/8 x 14 13/16 inches, the collage and paper are larger than many

²⁹⁶ Bruce Silverstein Gallery, *Frederick Sommer: Drawings in the Manner of Musical Scores* (New York: Bruce Silverstein Gallery, 2016), 3.

²⁹⁷ Keith F. Davis, “Living Art: The Sources of Frederick Sommer’s Work,” in *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage*, ed. Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 16.

²⁹⁸ Finding aid, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. The finding aid states: “Anatomical atlases purchased by Sommer in the 1990s and carefully cut up to furnish materials for collages exist in the archive as well as the negatives made of the finished collages.”

²⁹⁹ Davis, “Living Art,” 20.

of the early pieces. In the medical collages of the 1990s—the “last body work” Sommer made, according to Keith Davis—the photographer’s training as a landscape architect becomes clear.³⁰⁰ The collages are produced from anatomical parts but combine to create a kind of architecture of the body. One of the collages is even titled *The Architect* (1991), displaying a sandcastle structure built with anatomical parts and what appear to be shells. In *Untitled* and *The Architect*, Sommer experiments with re-invention from found items, collected into new and unusual formations. Following from his notion that the photograph is both “found” and “given,” the 1990s collage works demonstrate the photographer’s deep interest in using the medium for re-working what is “found” into an original composition.

In these last series of work, the photographer’s investment in incorporating both the “found” or “given” and “made” in his prints is evident. A crucial remark by Sommer helps clarify his position on collage, a set of principles that at once underlines his relation to postmodern themes and deflates the critical attitude associated with contemporary collage practices: ““What difference is there between what you find and what you make? You have to find it to make it. You only find things that you already have in your mind.””³⁰¹ Here, Sommer erases the difference between the found and constructed object in photography, arguing that both are laden with the photographer’s agency. The musical scores and medical collages also exemplify Sommer’s effort to make his works as rich and dense as possible. Scattered across the blackened surface of *Musical Score* (1970-75), the drawn notes form intricate passages, modeled after the scores Sommer studied in Los Angeles in 1934.³⁰² *Untitled* (1991) fuses two separate anatomical illustrations, the too-large brain placed behind the collaged skull which sits above.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ian Walker, ““As If One’s Eyelids Had Been Cut Away’: Frederick Sommer’s Arizona Landscapes,” *Journal of Surrealism of the Americas* 2, no. 2 (2008): 186.

³⁰² Davis, “Living Art,” 16.

These photographs embody Sommer's theory of complexity, the concept that—as he expresses it in the Terkel interview—“many can share” when the photograph is more “complex.”³⁰³

Sommer's inclusive approach to photography, combining painting, collage, and drawing with traditional camera methods, and his highly dense works questioned photographic convention by pressing them to newly deliver meaning, plying at the limits of the medium to discover what it could, and could not, contain. Sommer could be seen as asking himself this very question: “I work the borderline media which people will ask, ‘but is it photography?’” Although other photographers at mid-century attempted to refine and constrict photographic expression, Sommer sought to open the medium to multiple processes, techniques, ideas, and influences. Sommer saw the photograph as a “sensitized surface” which collects from the environment and reinterprets what is “found” is the photographic print.³⁰⁴ For him, it served as an ideal tool for bringing together several interests in one artistic form. At mid-century, Sommer challenged and reanimated avant-garde photography, introducing new techniques and modes of address. In the works from 1939-1962, Sommer reimagines the possibilities of the photographic medium, working “at the edge” of his chosen field and at the limits of modernist art.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Sommer, radio interview, 23.

³⁰⁴ Sommer, “An Extemporaneous Talk,” 375-76.

³⁰⁵ Naomi Lyons and Jeremy Cox, in discussion with the author, May 2019.

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.1
Arizona Landscape,
1943. Gelatin silver
print. 7 9/16 x 9 1/8
inches. Frederick
Sommer Archive,
Center for Creative
Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.2
Untitled, 1936. Gelatin
silver print. 1 9/16 x 2
inches. Frederick
Sommer Archive,
Center for Creative
Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.3
Jack Rabbit, 1939. Gelatin silver print.
7 ½ x 9 7/16 inches. Frederick
Sommer Archive, Center for Creative
Photography

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Fig. 1.4
Edward Weston, *Frederick Sommer*, 1944.
Gelatin silver print. Frederick and Frances
Sommer Foundation

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.5
Glass, 1943. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 x 9 1/2 inches. Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.6
Circumnavigation of the Blood, 1950. Gelatin silver print. 4 1/16 x 5 11/16 inches. Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.7
Paracelsus, 1959. Paint on cellophane negative.
Approximately 4 x 2 inches. Frederick Sommer
Archive, Center for Creative Photography

Paracelsus, 1959. Gelatin silver print. 13 ¼ x
10 3/16 inches. Frederick Sommer Archive,
Center for Creative Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.8
Arizona Landscape,
1943. Gelatin silver
print. 7 5/8 x 9 9/16
inches. MoMA
Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.9
Pine Cone, 1947. Gelatin silver print. 7 9/16 x 9 1/2 inches. Private
Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.10
Chicken, 1939. Gelatin silver print. 9 1/2
x 7 9/16 inches. Frederick Sommer
Archive, Center for Creative
Photography

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig 1.11
Champagne Rock, 1940. Gelatin silver print.
9 1/2 x 7 5/8 inches. Frederick Sommer
Archive, Center for Creative Photography

Fig. 1.12
Apache Trail, 1941. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 × 9 1/2 inches. J. Paul
Getty Museum Collection

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Fig. 1.13
Trash Heap, 1940. Gelatin silver print. Frederick and Frances
Sommer Foundation

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.14
The Giant, 1943. Gelatin silver print.
9 7/16 x 7 1/2 inches. Frederick Sommer Archive,
Center for Creative Photography

Fig. 1.15
Artificial Leg, 1944. Gelatin silver print. 9 7/16 x
7 5/8 inches. Frederick Sommer Archive, Center
for Creative Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.16
Max Ernst, 1946. Gelatin silver print. 7 1/2 x 9 7/16 inches.
Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.17
Livia, 1948. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 x 9 1/4 inches.
MoMA Collection

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Fig. 1.18
I Adore You, 1947. Gelatin silver print. 7 9/16 x 9 1/2 inches. Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.19
All Children Are Ambassadors, 1950. Gelatin silver print.
6 7/16 x 3 7/8 inches. Frederick Sommer Archive, Center
for Creative Photography

Fig. 1.20
J. Paul Getty Museum display of *All
Children Are Ambassadors*

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.21
Moon Culmination, 1951. Gelatin silver
print. 9 1/2 x 7 9/16 inches. Frederick
Sommer Archive, Center for Creative
Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.22
Moon Culmination assemblage, 1940s.
Paper, glass, paint on Masonite. 9 x 6 ½
inches.
Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 1.23
The Thief Greater Than His Loot, 1955.
Gelatin silver print. 9 ½ x 7 ¾ inches.
Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for
Creative Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.1
Colorado River Landscape, 1940. Gelatin silver print.
7 ½ × 9 ½ inches.
J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.2
Colorado River Landscape, 1940. Gelatin silver print.
Dimensions not known. Frederick and Frances Sommer
Foundation

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.3
Death Valley from Dante's View, 1940. Gelatin silver print.
Dimensions not known. Frederick and Frances Sommer
Foundation

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.4
Ansel Adams, *Frozen Lake and Cliffs, Sierra Nevada, California*, 1932, printed 1974. Gelatin silver print.
Dimensions not known. Metropolitan Museum of Art
Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.5

Death Valley California with Bad Water at Bottom, 1940.
Gelatin silver print. Dimensions not known. Frederick and
Frances Sommer Foundation

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.6
Jerome, Arizona, 1940. Gelatin silver print. Dimensions not
known. Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation

Fig. 2.7
Jerome, Arizona, 1940. Gelatin silver print. Dimensions not
known. Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.8
Painted Desert, 1940. Gelatin silver print. $7\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Yale University Art Gallery Collection

Fig. 2.9
Petrified Forest National Monument, Arizona, 1940. Gelatin silver print. $8 \times 9\frac{13}{16}$ inches. Museum of Modern Art Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.10
Sedona, Arizona, 1939. Gelatin silver print. $7\frac{5}{8} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$ inches. J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.11
Emmet Gowin, *The Hint That Is A Garden: Siena, Italy. Dedicated to Frederick Sommer*, 1975. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 × 9 5/8 inches. Princeton University Art Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.12
Untitled (Vermillion Cliffs), 1940. Gelatin silver print. Dimensions not known. Bruce Silverstein Gallery

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.13
Zion National Park, Utah, 1941. Gelatin silver print. Dimensions not known. Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.14
Arizona Landscape, 1941. Gelatin silver print. Dimensions not known. Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.15
Colorado River Landscape, 1942. Gelatin silver print. 7 ½ × 9 ½ inches. J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.16
Colorado River Landscape, 1942. Gelatin silver print. 7 9/16 × 9 9/16 inches. J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.17
Colorado River Landscape, 1942. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 × 9 ½ inches. J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

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Fig. 2.18
Sahuaro Forest, Arizona, 1942. Gelatin silver print.
Dimensions not known. Frederick and Frances
Sommer Foundation

Fig. 2.19
Untitled, 1942. Gelatin silver print. 9 ½ x 7
9/16 inches. Frederick Sommer Archive,
Center for Creative Photography

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.20
Arizona Landscape, 1943. Gelatin silver print. Dimensions
not known. Amon Carter Museum Collection

Fig. 2.21
Arizona Landscape, 1943. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 x 9 ½
inches. Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative
Photography

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.22
"Rich Hill," photographed by author, May 2018

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.23
Constellation, Arizona, 1943.
Gelatin silver print. 7 9/16 x 9
7/16 inches. Frederick
Sommer Archive, Center for
Creative Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.24
Gold Mine, Arizona,
1943. Gelatin silver
print. $7 \frac{5}{8} \times 9 \frac{9}{16}$
inches. J. Paul Getty
Museum Collection

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.25
Little Colorado River Landscape, 1943. Gelatin silver print.
Dimensions not known. Frederick and Frances Sommer
Foundation

Fig. 2.26
Untitled Landscape, 1944. Gelatin silver print. $7 \frac{5}{8} \times 9 \frac{1}{2}$
inches. J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.27
Arizona Landscape,
1945. Gelatin silver print.
7 5/8 x 9 1/2 inches.
Frederick Sommer
Archive, Center for
Creative Photography

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.28
Coyote, 1945. Gelatin silver print. 9 1/2 x 7 7/16
inches. J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

Fig. 2.29
Coyotes, 1945. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 x 9 1/2 inches.
Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative
Photography

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Fig. 2.30
Horse, 1945. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 x 9 1/2 inches.
Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative
Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.31
Mayer, Arizona, 1945. Gelatin silver print. Dimensions not
known. Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation

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Fig. 2.32
Untitled, 1945. Gelatin
silver print. 7 5/8 x 9 1/2
inches. Frederick Sommer
Archive, Center for
Creative Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 2.33
Untitled, 1945. Gelatin
silver print. $7 \frac{5}{8} \times 9 \frac{9}{16}$
inches. Frederick Sommer
Archive, Center for
Creative Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.1
Minor White, *Front Street, San Francisco*, April 15, 1951. Gelatin
silver print. $7 \frac{3}{8} \times 9 \frac{3}{16}$ inches. The Minor White Archive, Princeton
University Art Museum

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.2

Minor White, *Twisted Tree (Cypress Grove Trail, Point Lobos State Park, California)*, May 24, 1951. Gelatin silver print. $9 \frac{5}{16} \times 6 \frac{1}{2}$ inches. The Minor White Archive, Princeton University Art Museum

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.3

Flower and Frog, 1947. Gelatin silver print. $7 \frac{5}{8} \times 9 \frac{1}{2}$ inches. J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

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Fig. 3.4
Valise d'Adam, 1949. Gelatin silver print. 9
7/16 × 7 7/16 inches. J. Paul Getty
Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.5
Sumaré, 1951. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 × 9 1/2 inches. MoMA Collection

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Fig. 3.6
Ansel Adams, Frederick Sommer, Ferenc Berko, and Minor White at "Painting and Photography" panel, Aspen Conference 1951

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This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Figs. 3.7 and 3.8
The Sacred Wood, date not known
Found Painting, 1949

Published in "Fredrick Sommer: Collages of Found Objects,"
Aperture 4, no. 3 (1956)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.9
Configuration on Black, 1957

Published in "The Sense of Abstraction in Contemporary Photography," *Aperture* 8, no. 2 (1960)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.10
Fighting Centaur, 1952

Published in "The Eyes of 3 Phantasts: Laughlin, Sommer, Bullock," *Aperture* 9, no. 3 (1961)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.11
Detail (Untitled), 1939

Published in "The Eyes of 3 Phantasts:
Laughlin, Sommer, Bullock," *Aperture*
9, no. 3 (1961)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.12
Young Explorer, 1951

Published in "Frederick Sommer: 1939-1962
Photographs," *Aperture* 10, no. 4 (1962)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.13
Mexican Bather, 1952

Published in "Frederick Sommer: 1939-1962
Photographs," *Aperture* 10, no. 4 (1962)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.14
Taylor, Arizona, 1945

Published in "Frederick Sommer:
1939-1962 Photographs," *Aperture*
10, no. 4 (1962)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Figs. 3.15 and 3.16
Ponte S. Angelo, 1960
Capitoline Museum,
1960

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Published in "Frederick Sommer: 1939-1962 Photographs," *Aperture* 10, no. 4 (1962)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.17
Galleria Borghese, 1960

Published in "Frederick Sommer: 1939-1962 Photographs," *Aperture* 10, no. 4 (1962)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 3.18
Figure, 1961

Published in "Frederick Sommer: 1939-1962
Photographs," *Aperture* 10, no. 4 (1962)

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.1
Hadrian's Villa, 1961. Gelatin silver print. 26.5 × 34.2 cm. Art Institute of
Chicago Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.2
Smoke on Glass, 1962.
Gelatin silver print. 12 3/16 x 9
13/16 inches. J. Paul Getty
Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.3
Smoked foil drawing, prepared for
glass transfer, Frederick Sommer
Archive, Center for Creative
Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Figs. 4.4 and 4.5
Smoke on glass negatives, Frederick Sommer Archive, Center for Creative Photography

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.5
Smoke on glass negative, Frederick Sommer
Archive, Center for Creative Photography

Fig. 4.6
Smoke on Glass, 1965. Gelatin silver print. 13
3/8 x 10 7/16 inches. Private Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.7

Golden Apples, 1961. Gelatin silver print. 26.6 × 33.6 cm. Art Institute of Chicago Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.8

Smoke on Cellophane #1, 1961. Gelatin silver print. 23.7 × 33.8 cm. Art Institute of Chicago Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.9
(Paint on Cellophane), 1957. Gelatin silver print. 13 1/8 x
10 inches. Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.10
Stendhal, 1959.
Gelatin silver print.
33.9 x 26.4 cm.
George Eastman
Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.11
Galleria Borghese, 1960.
Gelatin silver print. 12 15/16 x 8
1/2 inches. J. Paul Getty Museum
Collection

*Also published in *Aperture* 1962
monograph, see Fig. 3.17

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.12
Capitoline Museum, 1960.
Gelatin silver print. 11 3/4 x 7
5/8 inches. J. Paul Getty
Museum Collection

*Also published in *Aperture*
1962 monograph, see Fig.
3.16

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.13
Untitled [Out of Focus Nude],
1962, printed 1962/67.
Gelatin silver print. 33.6 × 22.4
cm. Art Institute of Chicago
Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.14
Figure, 1965.
Gelatin silver print. 13 1/4 x 8 3/4
inches. J. Paul Getty Museum
Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.15
Lee Nevin, 1963.
Gelatin silver print. $11 \frac{15}{16} \times$
 $7 \frac{1}{16}$ inches. J. Paul Getty
Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.16
[Untitled: Cut Paper], 1963.
Gelatin silver print. $12 \frac{5}{8} \times 8$
 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. J. Paul Getty
Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.17
Cut Paper, 1974.
Gelatin silver print. 13
9/16 × 10 3/8 inches.
J. Paul Getty Museum
Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.18
[Untitled: Night Cut Paper],
1981. Gelatin silver print. 9
5/8 × 7 1/4 inches. J. Paul
Getty Museum Collection

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Figs. 4.19 and 4.20
Center for Creative Photography, Frederick Sommer Archive and
Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

This image has been omitted due to copyright considerations.

Fig. 4.21
Francis Bruguière, [*Cut-paper
Abstraction*], about 1927. Gelatin
silver print. 7 3/8 × 9 3/8 inches.
J. Paul Getty Museum Collection

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