

THE ART OF FREDERICK SOMMER

BY LANIER GRAHAM

PART I: RECENT WORK, ELECTIVE AFFINITIES

When I wrote Part II of this essay, "Master of the Combinatory Arts, A Retrospective View," in 1986, I had not yet met Frederick Sommer. In 1989, when he invited me to visit him at his home in Arizona, I did not know what to expect. Although I had followed his work closely and collected all his monographs, his personality remained a mystery. I had wondered what kind of a person he might be ever since I saw his work reproduced in the *Aperture* monograph of 1962. In 1965, when I asked Edward Steichen, "What is Sommer like as a man?" he replied, "Sommer is from another planet. I have never known anyone who is so visually intense, yet so emotionally detached."¹ I received similar answers during the late sixties from my fellow curators at the Museum of Modern Art, Willard Van Dyke, John Szarkowski, and Peter Bunnell, as I continued to study Sommer's prints with astonishment.

In short, while driving from Phoenix to Prescott last year I tried not to expect anything. However, it seemed reasonable to assume that a man in his mid-eighties would be quite frail, very short on memory, and long past his prime as a creative artist. My assumptions proved to be incorrect on every point. When he showed me his recent work, I was stunned at the power of these works and at the continuing vitality of the artist.

At the end of our two-day conversation, I reflected on the fact that most artists peak early in their career and seldom generate important work late in life. As a rule, older artists tend to continue the direction of their earlier work without developing new dimensions. As I thought about exceptions to this rule, the names that came to mind were Titian, Rembrandt, Monet, Cézanne, Matisse, and de Kooning. Each enjoyed a rare "late flowering" of powerful creativity. In my mind, Sommer's name now joined that list.

When most people think of Sommer's work, they think of black-and-white photographs. Those who know the wider range of his work also know that he is an extraordinary colorist, when he is working both as Sommer, the maker of drawings and watercolors, and Sommer, the maker of calligraphic musical notations.²

One of the most remarkable features of Sommer's *Elective Affinities* is that in this set of works he has combined, in an unprecedented way, his power as a form-maker with his power as a colorist. Although he has made collages and assemblages most of his life, this is his first sequence of color collages. This suite of color collages and tonal photographs culminates a half-century of work as a master of the combinatory arts. The photographs are as remarkable as the collages, with richness of color reflected in richness of

tone. This exhibition provides a rare opportunity to see both sides of his work.

These collages were made from colored lithographic plates in a 19th-century textbook illustrating human anatomy. Each image is an accurate rendering of a portion of this astonishingly efficient and profoundly beautiful reality we call the human body—the body which Sommer (like Michelangelo and Rodin) regards as a "temple" of the human spirit. In nature, each organ is separate, as isolated as each function requires. Sommer's compositions, however, are celebrations of interrelatedness.

With the cutting and arranging of these anatomical elements, Sommer has composed highly provocative metaphors. In terms of visual construction, there is no central focal point, the eye is free to wander, but all the rounded edges re-direct us towards the center. Each portion of each element is "held" in place by an elaborate network of colored lines, and harmonic color fields, while the architectonic compositions as a whole reverberate with multi-dimensional associations.

Some of these works, such as "Villa Lante,"³ involve very close transpositions of other physical realities. These particular anatomical elements correspond directly with the architectural elements in the site plan for this well-known Italian villa built in the 16th century. "Maria am Gestade" also is the name of an architectural structure, a church in Vienna. Other works in this suite, such as "Through the Looking Glass," are points of departure for less precise associations.

Nevertheless, the design of the visual logic remains constant. No matter how widely his associations range, they are grounded in a mental grid of

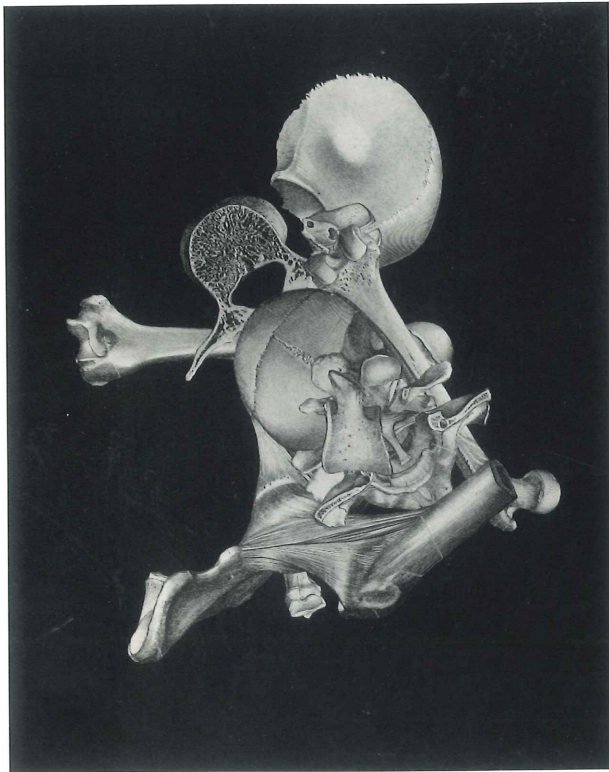


Fig. 2 ARCHIMEDES, 1989. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of Frederick Sommer.

parallel structures. At every point in these detailed compositions, there is a relationship between the visual structure of the anatomical illustration and the visual structure of the associated metaphor. In Sommer's words, the aesthetic grid determines position and occupier. This is the architecture of awareness.

To assimilate the full scope of Sommer's allusions often requires some probing. Emerging from a Surrealist background, Sommer makes use of free association and stream-of-consciousness techniques. The metaphors embedded in his iconography are as wide-ranging as those of James Joyce. Joyce, in his novels, draws on the entire history of Western literature for the symbolic structure of his elaborate verbal constructions. In a parallel manner, Sommer in his photographs draws on the entire history of Western architecture, painting, sculpture, drawing, and printmaking for the structure of his compositions. With interests as broad as those of Jacob Burckhardt, his favorite cultural historian, the sources Sommer uses for his content range from ancient philosophy to modern physics

and psychophysiology. When I asked Sommer to talk about his present work, this was his response:

L.G.

You said you thought that your latest series, *Elective Affinities*, might be even more influential than your earlier work. Why?

F.S.

It is important for all of us to know more about the relationship between what we are and what we see, between our biology and our perception. We are biological creatures who perceive. What we perceive and how we perceive it is the basis on which we build and arrange our lives. Most people are unaware of the biological basis of perception. This, in part, is why most people perceive in an unbalanced way.

The way most people perceive the world is with a very restricted vision. They tend to think in linear ways, and so perceive lines of relationships rather than patterns of relatedness. There was a time, when society was less complex, that people could get by thinking this way, but not anymore. In a world that is one continuous "information explosion" we cannot know the size and shape of every brick. No one can be aware of every related fact in any given situation. So, the most useful way to view a problem is to be able to perceive chunks of relatedness.

If certain mental faculties have not been developed, people can perceive in a linear way but not in an overall way. Modern scientists have moved a long way toward understanding the truth of this, but most of them are not there yet. The majority remain suspicious of aesthetic perception. The fact is, we cannot deal with scientific problems effectively unless we can perceive a situation with both scientific and aesthetic perspective. The reverse is also true. We cannot make works of art unless we are functioning both aesthetically and scientifically. Time is a sequence, a series of segmented sets. This kind of linear reality we can perceive with our logical faculties. But to perceive dimension requires distancing. Spatial interrelationships are seen through eyes that see aesthetically. This is true not only for artists but for everyone.

Artistic space is the universe of metaphor. Logical space, with tight lines of linear pathways, is the universe within which we can see the numerical

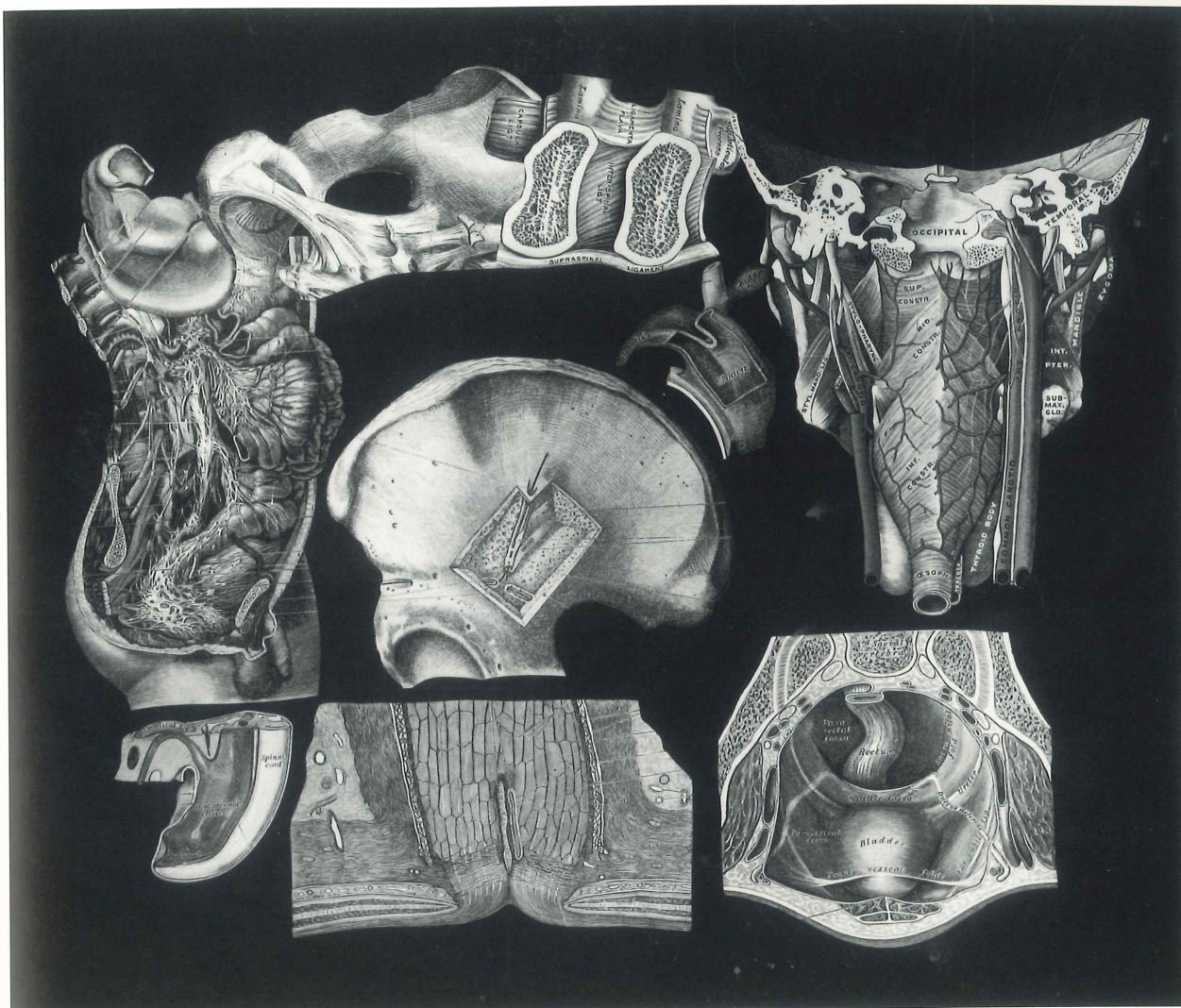


Fig. 3

L'ARC DE TRIOMPHE, 1990. Gelatin silver print.
Courtesy of Frederick Sommer.

units of birds or bees that are alike, or not alike, in a very specific way. Aesthetic space is not defined at its edges. It is open-ended. Looking into aesthetic space is not a mode of perception limited by assumptions. Here the mind is free to mix and match and sense relationships between parallel universes.

Going back to the Surrealists, they were highly aesthetic without being very scientific. The result is that their art tends to float without being grounded. The more an artist is able to work

with both worlds at once, the greater is the potential of his or her art. The more a scientist is able to work with both modes of perception, the greater is the potential of his or her science. Unless this realization gets built into our education system, our society will be in serious trouble.

My hope is that looking at these "elective affinities" and similar works will provoke people to use both sides of their potentiality. Otherwise, we cannot see reality.⁴