

LOS ANGELES

DON SUGGS

L.A. LOUVER

Entitled "Old Genres (photoworks)," Don Suggs' recent show included landscapes, still lifes, and nudes covering, with encyclopedic range and ambition, a fair portion of the world's terrain. In *Periscope (Balthusian Garden)*, 1992, an image of a landscape is repeated twice to recreate the scene as it appears when viewed through a panoramic camera, a juxtaposition that reproduces the effect of looking from the left and then the right. From a distance, the rounded sides, flat tops and bottoms of the image itself take on the appearance of two oversized razor blades. Amid the dense greenery are two running figures, who in their scale and sense of urgency bear a great deal of resemblance to those in the murder scene of Michelangelo Antonioni's film, *Blow-Up* (1966). The picture's stereoscopic vision amplifies the image's voyeuristic possibilities—assists one in imagining morbid scenarios as the vulnerable toy figures are lusciously smothered by the overwhelming beauty of the landscape.

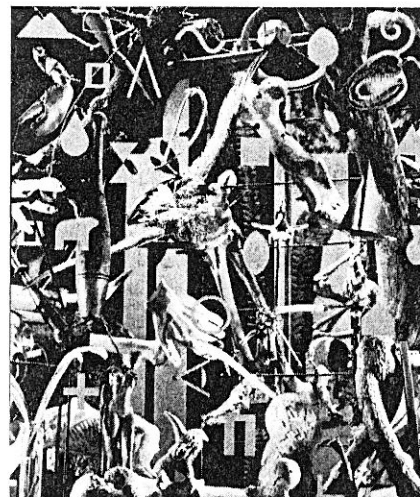
Reminiscent of a jumbled, two-dimensional Joseph Cornell box, the delirious and cheerfully macabre, *81 Objects*, 1992, pushes the still life to a new chaotic high. The elements of a pawn shop are assembled in a gloomy field of lights and darks against a gridlike scaffold, creating a miniature world of bones, sticks, feathers, toy birds, and human hands floating in a tight frame. As he does with several other pictures, Suggs annotates this photograph with a variety of markings—a curlicue, a jug, a cross, a teardrop, the silhouette of a bear—that further disorient the viewer.

The central material in the show was a set of five works called the "Berman Series," 1991-92, in which Suggs paid homage to that mystical California genius of photocolage, Wallace Berman. Instead of Berman's signature handheld transistor radio, Suggs slips in his career-long esthetic artery—the landscape. Avoiding Berman's raw, organically patterned, hallucinogenic scrolls (a vertical motif), Suggs opts for the horizontal, a left to right read, producing a language of pictures far less mystical, erotic, and violent than Berman's. Suggs' images appear as inserts within a field, the landscapes accommodate and rationalize every absurd and out-of-place photograph he serves up—X-ray of bones, serious man admiring large cone, pile of elephant tusks, etc.

The influence of Wallace Berman pervades and, finally, overwhelms most of the show. Berman's mega/metaesthetic is not easy to step around, and tipping one's hat can sabotage any good intentions. When Suggs gets erotic it's mild, merely suggestive of sex, lust, and flesh, and also of Papa Berman; he falls a mile short of the idlike, ultralusty images Berman produced (which cracked our skulls open). Suggs shows us a little too much of what we already know, formally and culturally. His work is only a demiexploration into how men relate to and represent women, and it ends up reading conservative and slow, like a standard finger wag.

Taken as a whole, however, Suggs' photoworks are strong and remarkably detailed, bringing out lush, curious evidence of the earth's ineffable surface. Especially brilliant when it comes to understanding landscape, he becomes a kind of king of the desert, mountain, and forest. He has playful and original ideas about what goes on in the great outdoors, its intangible hidden forces, the peculiar "utterances" of rock and leaf.

—Benjamin Weissman



Don Suggs, *81 Objects*, 1992, oil on gelatin silver print photograph, 42 1/4 x 34 1/2".