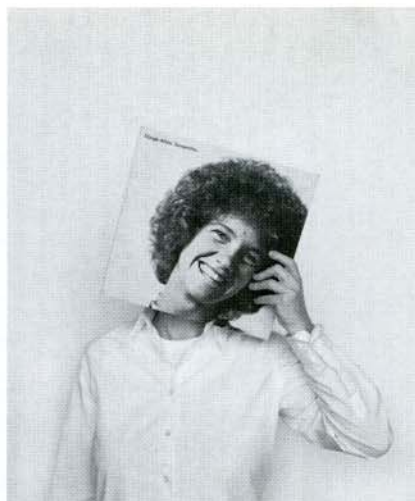


Sam Durant, *Jackson, Mississippi, 1963, 2004*, color photograph mounted on mirror, 56 x 75".



Anne Collier, *Songwriter, 2004*, color photograph, 37 1/2 x 32".

LOS ANGELES

SAM DURANT

BLUM & POE

Previously Sam Durant has satirically exploited the disjunction between the redemptive aspirations of modern art and design and the actual needs and wants of a public that has generally favored the nostalgic promises of pop over the rigors of "the new." Beyond Greenberg's assertion of a golden umbilicus binding even the grungiest bohemia to an elite patron class, questions of audience tend to constitute a willful blind spot at the very core of modernist ideology. As Durant has shown, the problem stems from the artist's own inherently fractured self-image: Rejecting one's (typically) middle-class roots, he or she yo-yos between the upper- and lowermost tiers of society. The persona of the resentful beer-guzzling handyman that he assumed early on was hardly a stretch; bad-mouthing the client and the job is a strategy for psychic self-preservation that artists know well.

Recently honored with a mid-career retrospective at LA MOCA, however, Durant is no longer a stranger to corporate and institutional power. On the plus side, this is a shift that his recent work earnestly reflects: Now wholly implicated with "them," he wields his newfound leverage in an attempt to benefit "us." Accordingly he fills his shows with conciliatory "antimonuments" proclaiming solidarity with those most excluded from their midst—most of all, the nonrich and nonwhite. This work is clearly

guided by the spirit of fair play; Durant is a genuine "nice guy," as everyone who knows him will attest. But how politically effective is "nice"? How, moreover, are the activist and aesthetic poles of this work to be integrated, if that is even the point any longer? These are all-too-familiar questions, yet Durant tends to evade them apparently on principle. In recent interviews, he could pass for a Ruscha, a Serra, or another member of the generation that his work has repeatedly sampled. He describes his practice in the most prosaic terms when, in actuality, it is anything but.

Durant's latest outing at Blum & Poe was denser than ever, requiring a familiarity with not only the work's multiple references to recent political history and culture, but also the various points of overlap between the theoretical arguments that frame them. Departing from a literal "misreading" of the Conceptual notion of the work as a demonstration, an attempt to prove an idea, Durant proceeded to furnish each of the gallery's three spaces with a distinct meditation on the culture of protest and its implications for art. In the first, we are shown a series of large-scale Lambda prints, printed in negative (and occasionally reversed) and mounted on mirrored supports, of agitated mobs, some members of which are caught in the cathartic moment of brick-hurling. To those in the know, this gesture will immediately call up the specters of Smithson and Bataille, entropy and the *informe*. The brick, literally a structural building block, is here deployed against both masonry walls and those improvised on the spot by antiriot police squads. Use-value is heroically thwarted along with instrumental reason; long live base materialism and the erotics of expenditure!

Of course there is more, much more, to it than this. The photograph is itself a brick, perhaps, pulled from the wall of emptied-out, historical time and "filled" with a new aesthetic agency. It so happens that this is a point that Durant makes most effectively at the formal level, by way of all his tinkering with the polarities of figure and ground, positive and negative, forward and backward, original and copy. In the next room, a cast boulder is precariously poised between four facing mirrors that reflect its image *ad infinitum*. A recursive wrinkle in Smithson's play between "site and nonsite," it projects the object of natural history, right along with its observer, into a fun-house of infinite recession. As with the drawings from news photographs that filled the last room, it is all about setting the political document and the aesthetic work into a kind of delirious spin. By placing the viewer within the installation itself, Durant obviously means to excite our connection-making faculties, yet this work never quite manages to cut its tether to academic cliché. The pleasure that we derive from following these well-worn theoretical pathways to their expected ends is ultimately that of the good student, which once again brings up the question of audience. What about those who haven't taken the class?

—Jan Tumlir