

Arnold Kramer / Interior Views

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Washington, D.C.

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This exhibition presents 26 of a group of 41 photographs which make up the first consciously conceived series of photographs by the Washington, D.C. artist Arnold Kramer. Kramer has in the past made landscape and portrait photographs. From an early time, however, he has focused on what we might call the topography of furnished rooms.

Kramer trained not as an artist but as an electrical engineer; he obtained an advanced degree in this field at M.I.T. It was there that he met Minor White, who was to become his dominant mentor. Though at the time he had no demonstrable experience in photography save some prints made for his high school yearbook, which he showed to White, the teacher took him directly into an advanced class, since the beginning class was full. White taught him not just how to make photographs, but something about the commitment one might want to make through photography to a kind of gradually deepening vision of things in order to be an artist. Having gone through a rather typical series of vicarious apprenticeships, first to Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Alfred Stieglitz, later to Strand and Atget, Kramer began to see a danger in "using an obsession with fine print quality to an extent that it can become a substitute for vision. I try to strike a balance between commitment to craft and commitment to seeing."

The photographs in this exhibition were begun early in 1977. The idea for their subject dates originally to a recurring image formed in childhood of a particular room - a solarium in his paternal grandparents' house in Brookline, Massachusetts, where he felt always a sense of comfortableness and heightened sensitivity to light and the particularity of objects. When he moved ten years ago to Washington, Kramer rented an apartment on Capitol Hill that reminded him of this solarium.

The importance of the environment of everyday indoor life, and its meaning for "what it's like to be alive," have thus become a strong theme in all of his work, but only with this series has the theme been explicitly worked through. The project began at the Baltimore home of his wife's parents and spread through a network of family, friends, and acquaintances around Baltimore, Boston, and Washington. The quality of the seemingly ordinary spaces being photographed began to take on a charged component; Kramer realized he was photographing not only rooms reminiscent of his own background, but "spaces where very important, highly ritualized family events occurred . . . These places were soaked with the essence of intensely emotional experiences: children were punished and psyches were formed and people fought in these spaces." Kramer went on to say, "When I began this series I wanted to do something about myself. I grew up in a middle class suburban environment, and it seemed to me that it was a suffocating experience. I wanted to find a way to make photographs about that. So I thought, 'I'll look at suburban environments, and show how they limit your vision.' I started this project from a negative, rather cynical point of view-I wanted to expose this thing, to show how limited this life is, by very specifically documenting these spaces. I was looking at my own handicaps, metaphorically speaking. Gradually I realized that those experiences we feel encumbered by are also our strongest and most self-determining qualities. The way this is represented in the work is that these places transcend their own banality to become rather fabulously beautiful."

The photographs are flatly illuminated; objects seem almost to fall adventitiously into paradoxically self-conscious configurations inhabiting an atmospherically sterile field. This airless, tonally homogenized quality is very much intentional, and is in fact achieved by the use

of a bare bulb flash. The photographs are all shot with the same camera and lens, a Pentax 6 x 7; the lens is a wide-angle 55 millimeter. What results from both the use of the flash and the author's framing stance is the sense that the pictures are calculatedly composed in the way that they scrutinize the distribution of objects. A certain withholding of emotional bias and a strong formal clarity accompany their physical starkness of appearance. These prints are, however, singularly handsome in an abstract reading; they are large, clear, highly static, firm, intended pictures. Kramer eschews the tonal murkiness or compositional equivocation of so many photographs of unpeopled interior scenes; he is not interested in romantic bombast, à la C. J. Laughlin, or in shadowy, fragile luminosity. A certain rawness, tempered by the artist's subtle psychological

awareness, makes these photographs extremely intelligible in what they mean to depict, while being continually challenging. In their expansiveness, their broadness both of print size and interior organization, they remind one a little of Diane Arbus, but of course without Arbus' intensely insisted-upon human subjects. Kramer feels he shares with Arbus only "... an interest in confrontation. In this body of work there are no angular relationships to the main surfaces. This is what photography is all about-understanding the difference between photographing something head on and at an angle. That's so basic that no one seems to know how to talk about it.... In photography, the primary metaphor is space. Photographs are flat objects, but when we look at them we feel like we're experiencing space. It's an illusion. The photographer creates this illusion. I share myself with you by creating the space you perceive.... I try to teach my students not to crop, to respect their own vision. Frederick Sommer is right to insist that we do infinitely more damage to ourselves than anyone else can do to us."

The poignance of the way in which people arrange the "ornamental" appurtenances of their domestic habitats is greater perhaps than how they organize the more functional objects, and perhaps just as poignant as the way in which "artists" arrange the decorative elements in their environments. If you really look at the unselfconscious arrangements people make, you see an esthetic quotient more complex and more "difficult" than the most calculated composition of the artist. It is this automatic esthetic, as it were, that Kramer isolates with his camera. This peculiarly gratuitous, lurking realm of "fabulous beauty" in ordinary domestic surroundings constitutes for Arnold Kramer the raw material from which he fashions his subject.

Jane Livingston