

GASTON BERTIN'S COLOR CHORUSES

By George Stolz

Gaston Bertin not only takes photographs, he makes photographs. He creates collages of pieces of colored paper, and then photographs the collage with a carefully calibrated soft focus. The camera translates the color of the paper collage into the paper of the photograph, thus dematerializing the original object and re-materializing its essence: its color, Bertin's true material, medium and tool.

Bertin's work is nowhere a study: instead, it is a celebration. It is marked by its exuberance, its intensity, its vivacity.

This celebratory nature is even reflected in Bertin's preferred presentation of his work: he fills the spaces available to him, with work spilling off the wall and onto other available surfaces, even the floor, while shunning the grandiosity implied in the monumental hanging of single, isolated images. As a result, the final installation becomes a vast, eclectic yet unified collage; and by extension, it creates a powerful parallel to the original paper collage of paper from which the individual photographs were formed.

While partaking of many contemporary issues, Bertin's work differs in many ways from much contemporary photography. It avoids narrative. It does not attempt to channel through itself the force and common idiom of film or video or popular culture. It does not adopt a critical stance toward reality and our modes of representing reality. Gaston Bertin instead avails himself of the "wholly indiscriminate" and fundamentally depictive nature of photography in order to render abstraction, thus setting up a paradoxical bind involving a representation of the non-representative, a depiction of the non-depictive, a configuration of the non-figurative. As Bertin himself says of his artistic aims, he is a "photographer searching for things that do not exist."

Bertin, in attempting to capture the non-existent and non-physical within a physical photograph, places himself directly in the modern tradition of transcendent art, of art that attempts not only to attain but furthermore to communicate on a higher plane. However, unlike the ground-breaking painters, who could revel in the paradoxical activity of representing the non-representational via the non-representational means of pure material, Bertin, as a photographer, must represent the non-representational via pure, photographic representation – a challenging task.

Thus, as in the earlier tradition (and independent of coincidental aesthetic similarities, of which there are many), in Bertin's work object, color and essence come together in a complex web of interdependencies. But at the same time, in 'making' or constructing his photographs, Bertin partakes of a very different set of issues involving creation, representation and artistic reflexiveness that underlie much contemporary art. He effects a dual role, working on both sides of the camera, as both photographer and as collagist/sculptor. And in the finest Conceptual tradition, what is portrayed in the photograph – the fleeting, precarious collage -- is fundamentally ephemeral, a moment in time, captured by the camera's brief aperture. In addition, the blur often functions as a shading and modelling tool -- softening and rounding the edges, implying shadow -- with the result that Bertin's photographs frequently appear to portray solid objects, objects that possess a good deal of volume – which neither the collage nor the photograph in fact possess, and thus furthering Bertin's artistic goal of searching for “things that do not exist.”

Using the remarkable shimmering lushness that only the photographic process could achieve Gaston Bertin enhances the intensity of the simple colors of paper collages to orchestrates other-worldly choruses.

Abstraction, here, far from being a wholesale rejection of reality, is instead a privileged route toward reality's immaterial truth.